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According to the report, the growth prospects for the microdrama industry in the GCC region through 2030 remain strong. However, the pace of growth is likely to slow slightly in the coming years because many of the most susceptible audiences have already been acquired for the microdrama user base.

Private school seats under MoEHE initiative rise 47% to 13,627

By **Ayman Adly**
Staff Reporter

Some 13,627 seats are now available in private schools and kindergartens across Qatar under the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE)'s Social Responsibility Project. The number has increased from 9,257 seats previously, representing a 47% rise following the inclusion of additional private schools and kindergartens in the initiative. The project offers a mix of fully funded tuition, reduced-fee places, education voucher-supported seats, and dedicated placements for students with disabilities, enabling more eligible families to access quality private education. Meanwhile, the MoEHE's Private Education Affairs Sector continues to roll out a broad range of initiatives to improve the

quality, accessibility and governance of Qatar's rapidly expanding private education sector. Officials said that efforts are underway to further expand the Social Responsibility Project by encouraging more private schools and early childhood education providers to participate, allowing more students to benefit in future academic years. The Department of Private Schools and Kindergartens also reported several achievements during the 2025-26 academic year, including the release of the second edition of the Student Admission and Registration Guidelines, which provides clearer enrolment procedures and promotes greater consistency across private educational institutions. The MoEHE also enhanced its digital services by upgrading electronic platforms and the compulsory education enrolment system, improvements aimed at stream-

lining administrative procedures, increasing transparency and making services more efficient and accessible for parents and guardians. As part of efforts to strengthen cultural and linguistic identity, the ministry organised the conference "Arabic Language in Private Schools and Kindergartens: Challenges and Opportunities", bringing together educators, academics and language specialists to discuss the current state of Arabic language instruction in private schools. Participants explored innovative teaching methods, curriculum development and the growing role of artificial intelligence in language education, with discussions focusing on improving Arabic language learning outcomes while reinforcing students' national identity. The MoEHE also continued implementing its "My Values Shape My Identity" initiative to cultivate ethical values and

strengthen students' sense of national belonging. Other programmes included the "Hand in Hand" forum, the "After Me" awareness campaign, and a series of student guidance and well-being initiatives, conducted in partnership with national institutions, to promote positive behaviour, support mental health, and foster safe and inclusive school environments. In recognition of academic excellence, the ministry organised the third edition of the "Proud of You" programme to honour students who achieved outstanding results in regional and international competitions. The Department of Educational Services and Training Centres also opened applications for the second cohort of the Qatari Trainers Localisation Initiative, following the successful completion of its inaugural phase. The first cohort attracted 322 appli-

cants, including Qatari nationals and children of Qatari women. After eligibility screening, 253 Qatari trainers and 15 children of Qatari women met the programme's requirements. Interviews for the second cohort are scheduled to begin this month. In addition, the ministry launched the second edition of the Professional and Ethical Charter for nurseries, kindergartens and private schools. The updated charter establishes a comprehensive national framework that promotes professionalism, integrity, quality, and innovation across the private education sector. It also defines the rights, responsibilities and ethical obligations of school owners, administrators, teachers, students, parents and school councils, while introducing new provisions on digital conduct and reinforcing inclusive education practices for persons with disabilities.

Israel carries out detonations near Lebanon's historic Beaufort castle

AFP
Beirut

Israeli forces carried out a series of powerful detonations overnight near the Unesco-listed Beaufort castle in southern Lebanon, Lebanese state media reported yesterday, with Israel saying that it destroyed tunnels used by Iran-backed Hezbollah group. "Israeli forces triggered very powerful explosions around midnight," specifically "in the area of the Beaufort fortress", Lebanon's National News Agency (NNA) said, adding that the blasts resounded over a large area, shattering glass in nearby villages. The Crusader-era castle, located in an area occupied by Israel, was added last week to Unesco's List of World Heritage in Danger. In a joint statement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Israel Katz said the army had destroyed "terror tunnels in the Beaufort area" using approximately 700 tonnes of explosives. Lebanon's culture ministry said the ex-

plosions struck "the area opposite the fortress", warning that "the vibrations from the explosions may have caused damage" in the castle's vicinity. It said technical teams were unable to conduct an on-the-ground assessment because "the site is under occupation". An AFP correspondent in a nearby village heard large explosions overnight and saw dust covering a swathe of forest area. AFP footage showed dust blanketing the mountaintop near where the castle sits. The Israeli army said that "the tunnel network served as a central command centre" for Hezbollah and consisted of "several underground levels that were built over the course of two decades". Lebanese parliament speaker Nabih Berri, a Hezbollah ally, condemned the detonations and said that they "must not be met with silence". Netanyahu and Katz said the explosions followed a "blatant violation of the ceasefire agreement" by Hezbollah, after Israel's army on Wednesday accused the group of launching an explosive drone at an Israeli military vehicle in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah has not claimed any attacks



This photograph taken from the southern area of Marjayoun yesterday shows silica dust covering the hills in the areas of Arnoun and Al Shaqif near the Beaufort castle, after Israeli forces carried out a series of detonations. (AFP)

since a ceasefire with Israel came into force on June 20 after a US-Iran memorandum of understanding over the regional war. While violence has declined in Lebanon since the memorandum and after a separate Lebanon-Israel framework deal agreed later in June, Lebanon continues to report Israeli strikes and artillery shelling on the south, as well as detonations of buildings in southern villages.

Iran-backed Hezbollah drew Lebanon into the wider Middle East war on March 2 with attacks on Israel. Israel retaliated with a massive bombing campaign and a ground offensive that Lebanese authorities say have killed more than 4,300 people. Israel's army continues to occupy areas of southern Lebanon extending about 10km into Lebanese territory along the border.

Aoun says Israeli blasts near castle 'direct threat' to recent pact

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun (*pictured*) said yesterday that Israeli army detonations near a Unesco-listed castle in the south were a "direct threat" to a recent deal agreed with Israel, which said its troops had demolished Hezbollah tunnels there. Lebanon's National News Agency (NNA) reported that "Israeli forces triggered very powerful explosions" overnight, specifically "in the area of the Beaufort fortress", a Crusader-era castle located in an area near the border occupied by Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Israel Katz said the army

had destroyed "terror tunnels in the Beaufort area" using approximately 700 tonnes of explosives. Aoun called the explosions "an extremely dangerous escalation and a clear violation of existing commitments", according to a statement from his office, as well as "a direct threat to the process which was launched as part of the framework agreement" reached with Israel during US-sponsored talks last month. Under the Israel-Lebanon deal, Lebanon's army is to disarm Hezbollah and the Israeli military is to withdraw from "pilot zones" where Lebanese forces will subsequently deploy.

The timing of the blasts ahead of another round of talks with Israel in Rome next week "sends negative messages and undermines international efforts aimed at consolidating stability", Aoun added. The NNA said huge blasts resounded over a large area, shattering glass in nearby villages, while an AFP correspondent heard large explosions and saw dust covering a swathe of forest area. Citing Lebanon's National Centre for Geophysics, Aoun's statement said the detonations "created ground waves equivalent to a 3.8-magnitude earthquake on the Richter scale". - AFP



Morocco court grants rapper's request for bail

A Moroccan court has granted the bail request of rapper Mehdi Black Wind, who has spent almost three weeks in jail on accusations of "undermining institutions", one of his lawyers told AFP. The 34-year-old artist, whose real name is El Mahdi Lyoubi, was stopped at the airport on July 10 just before boarding a flight to France, where he lives, and was told he was forbidden from leaving the country. He was summoned by judicial police three days later in Casablanca and had been detained ever since under a provision of the Moroccan penal code that punishes "defamation, insult or offence against the person of the king". Yesterday a judge ruled in favour of Lyoubi's request for provisional release, said Sara Soujar, one of his lawyers. He was released from custody in the afternoon. The next hearing in Lyoubi's trial is scheduled for October 2. - AFP

210mn-year-old dinosaur found in Zimbabwe

A newly discovered dinosaur from Zimbabwe is offering fresh clues to how the animals diversified, suggesting they spread across distinct ecosystems in southern Africa, scientists said this week. The discovery of the new species, named *Musango matusadonaensis*, is based on a skeleton excavated on the shores of Lake Kariba in northern Zimbabwe in 2018, and is the fifth dinosaur identified from the country, they said. It lived about 210mn years ago during the Late Triassic, when dinosaurs were beginning to spread across the planet but had yet to become the dominant land animals, said the international team of palaeontologists behind the discovery. Unlike the giant long-necked dinosaurs that evolved millions of years later, *Musango* was relatively lightly built, about 4.5m (15') long and weighing an estimated 222kg (490 pounds). The team's findings were published in the *Journal of Systematic Palaeontology*. - AFP

Ghana backs longer term for presidency

Ghana's government has accepted a proposal to extend the presidential term to five years and lower the minimum age for candidates to 35. Ghana, one of Africa's leading gold and cocoa producers, has maintained a stable democratic system since 1992. President John Dramani Mahama established a committee last year to review the constitution. The committee submitted its final report to him on Thursday. "The government has accepted the recommendation to extend the term of office of the president from four years to five years," Justice Minister Dominic Ayine told journalists. The committee said parliament's term should also be increased to five years to align with the presidency. Although the committee recommended lowering the minimum age for presidential candidates to 30, Ayine said the government would instead adopt 35. A national referendum in 2027 will be required to pass the changes, with strict voter turnout and approval thresholds. - AFP

Man shot during settler march through West Bank towns

AFP
Nablus

One Palestinian was shot and wounded during an Israeli settler march through several West Bank Palestinian towns yesterday that sparked clashes with locals, first responders, the army and an AFP journalist said. "Our crews in Nablus are treating a young man who was shot with live ammunition in the abdomen during an Israeli army and settler raid on the al-Junaid area," the Palestinian Red Crescent said. Israeli settlers organised a march yesterday morning in the northern West Bank in memory of two Israelis killed last week during clashes in the Palestinian town of Tell, near Nablus, during which four Palestinians were also killed. An AFP journalist at the scene



Israelis are seen illegally taking building materials from a Palestinian-owned home under construction, during an organised march between the Palestinian towns of Sarra and Tell, southwest of the city of Nablus in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. (AFP) said that between 100 and 150 settlers, including women and children, came near Tell from the west, the direction of Havat Gilad, the home settlement of one of the killed Israelis.

The settlers, roughly ten of whom were armed, marched through fields near Tell, through the town of Sarra and the Nablus neighbourhood of al-Junaid, while army troops stationed along the route periodically dispersed settlers and Palestinians when clashes occurred, the AFP journalist said. The journalist saw settlers raiding at least one building in Tell, and four in al-Junaid, where a clash broke out with Palestinian youth, before the army dispersed the crowd, firing tear gas. In a statement, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) said that in al-Junaid "Palestinians in the area hurled rocks at the Israeli civilians, and an Israeli civilian fired warning shots into the air". "IDF soldiers who had been deployed in the area ahead of their arrival responded to disperse the gathering and evacuate the civil-

ians from the area," the statement said. The army said a Palestinian was shot in a later incident in the area, when Palestinians threw rocks at soldiers. "The soldiers responded by initiating the suspect apprehension protocol, which included firing toward a primary instigator." Israel has occupied the West Bank since 1967, but in recent years the number of settlements in the Palestinian territory - which are illegal under international law - has soared. Excluding east Jerusalem, more than 500,000 Israelis live in settlements in the West Bank, home to around 3mn Palestinians. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced that, following the deaths of two Israelis in Tell, he would allow the establishment of more settlements in the region.

Sudan's El-Obeid a 'massive disaster' that keeps getting worse: UN

AFP
Geneva

The Sudanese flashpoint of El-Obeid and surrounding areas are experiencing a spike in malnutrition, gender-based violence and other issues, the UN's children's agency said yesterday. It said that the conflict was "a massive disaster that keeps getting worse". Now in Khartoum after visiting the area around the city, Unicef's Sudan chief Sheldon Yett told AFP in an interview that the rising price of basic necessities and limited access to clean water were causing the uptick in malnutrition. "People are getting sicker and not able to absorb nutrients," he said. The war between Sudan's regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that erupted in April 2023 has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions. Following a days-long advance across North Kordofan state, the army managed on Sunday to push the RSF west, off the highway that connects the capital Khartoum with El-Obeid. "Many of the people are fleeing from El-Obeid... those people who are able to leave are doing so. Many people are coming towards Khartoum," Yett said. "What we're seeing now is... supplies are able to get in" but "it remains a very precarious access. The main highway is constantly under attack," he added. After visiting El-Obeid two months ago,

Yett returned to its surrounding area between July 12 and 18. He said that he was concerned about the ongoing cholera outbreak in Kordofan, warning that with large displacements "you have the risk of even greater outbreaks of this disease". Without greater humanitarian aid, Yett feared there would be a "deterioration of an already severe nutrition situation" and a "deterioration of healthcare". "It's a massive disaster that keeps getting worse by the day," he said. The official said that during his recent visit, he was "struck by how massive the needs are compared to the response". Yett said the scale of the Sudan crisis was "shocking", with hundreds of thousands of people displaced, host communities under

pressure and too few humanitarian actors on the ground. "There are massive protection needs. We're seeing a huge upsurge of gender-based violence. We're seeing a huge upsurge of sexual violence... children being recruited by militia groups," he added. Now in its fourth year, the war has killed tens of thousands of people and forced more than 11mn from their homes. Yett condemned the lack of attention paid to the conflict in Sudan. "This is an emergency that is growing by the day. And unless we give it the attention it deserves, it's going to continue to grow," he said. "It's going to continue to ripple across borders, into Europe and into other countries," Yett warned.

DR Congo's Ebola outbreak tops 3,500 cases

AFP/Reuters
Kinshasa

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo)'s fast-spreading Ebola outbreak is now the world's second-largest on record, government data showed yesterday, as transmission continues to outpace efforts to contain the epidemic.

Medics have recorded more than 3,500 Ebola cases in several months in the DR Congo, topping the total from the deadliest outbreak between 2018 and 2020, official figures showed yesterday.

"It's the fastest-spreading Ebola epidemic that we have ever seen," Carl Skau, acting head of the UN World Food Programme, told Reuters this week.

"The world needs to pay much more attention," he added.

The central African country is battling its latest upsurge in the disease in the conflict-ridden east, a region scarred by more than three decades of violence.

Ebola, which spreads through contact with bodily fluids and causes haemorrhagic fever, has killed more than 15,000 people across Africa over the past 50 years.

Congo's Ebola outbreak started at least in January: report

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo)'s fast-spreading Ebola outbreak started in January, or even earlier, in the eastern Ituri province, a report published in the journal *Science* showed.

The report, based on interviews with 97 people, concluded that the outbreak had begun at least in January on the outskirts of the mining town of Mongbwalu.

Experts have previously told Reuters that infections started circulating weeks or even months before the outbreak, the DR Congo's 17th, was declared by Africa's top public health agency.

The report said that a group of researchers had identified more

than 500 suspected cases between mid-January and May 15, when the outbreak was announced.

"One transmission chain started with a 50-year-old woman identified only as 'A', who died on January 25 after vomiting blood. Her mother died six days later; her husband fell ill but recovered," according to the report.

Scientists interviewed nurses and doctors, community leaders, survivors, grieving family members, coffin-makers and cemetery caretakers, the report said.

They also reviewed photos, WhatsApp messages, doctors' notes, and even biographies read at funerals that mentioned the deceased's symptoms. - Reuters

The deadliest outbreak in the DR Congo killed nearly 2,300 people out of 3,500 recorded cases.

Less than three months since the outbreak began, the disease has killed five times as many people as previous outbreaks had by the same stage, according to Africa's top public health agency, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC).

And yesterday Congolese officials published data showing that 3,532 cases of Ebola had been confirmed across five prov-

inces, including 1,556 deaths.

Medics had recorded 2,000 confirmed cases on July 15, two months after the outbreak was declared.

The DR Congo's 17th Ebola outbreak is caused by the Bundibugyo strain of the virus, for which there is no approved vaccine or treatment.

A vaccine described by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as the "most promising" to fight the current outbreak will be developed by Singapore-based Hilleman Laboratories, it announced on Thursday.

Last week, a first volunteer received the first dose of a different Bundibugyo vaccine being developed by Oxford University under a clinical trial.

The centre of the current outbreak, whose true extent is still hard to assess, is northeastern Ituri province, which borders South Sudan and Uganda.

The virus has also been detected in four other provinces including North Kivu and South Kivu where provincial capitals and large swathes of land are controlled by the Rwanda-backed M23 armed group.

Uganda declared it was Ebola-free this week after the recovery of the last case of local transmission.

The WHO says the country remains at risk from the spread in its neighbour.

Angele Gapio, head of emergencies for the Caritas charity in the northeastern city of Bunia, said awareness campaigns were failing and frontline responders were exhausted and traumatised.

"The disease has now settled in the community," she told Reuters. "People continue to seek treatment from traditional healers, and the chain of transmission continues."

The WHO said last month that the true scale of the outbreak could be up to four times higher than official figures suggest.

Reuters reported this week that surveillance efforts are stretched due to shortages of vehicles, understaffing and community mistrust.

Africa CDC said in June that it would require \$1.4bn to contain the Ebola outbreak, three times its earlier estimate.

Figures presented this week by Africa CDC and the WHO showed the DR Congo's May-August response plan had secured \$213.9mn in declared funding, short of planned spending of \$242.4mn.

S Africa's migrant exodus leaves bosses short-handed

By Chris Makhaye with
Shakirah Thebus
AFP

Zimbabwean farmworker Aaron Majatamhe was heading home at sunset after a shift in one of South Africa's top fruit-producing regions, where bushes laden with bright unpicked citrus stood in rows.

"I see a lot of farm owners who are crying now... people have to harvest those naartjies but there is no one," the 33-year-old told AFP.

Naartjies are also known as mandarins and tangerines.

The same shortage, he said, is looming in the vineyards. "It's time to cut off the grapes and there is no one."

Similar scenes are playing out across South Africa as factories, farms and even ordinary households scramble for labour after thousands of foreign workers left in a matter of weeks to escape deadly anti-migrant protests and intensified immigration enforcement.

Fringe anti-foreigner groups had set June 30 as an unofficial deadline for undocumented migrants to go home, triggering the exodus of more than 160,000 people, according to an AFP tally based on figures from African governments repatriating their citizens.

Zimbabwe, which accounted for the largest share of those returning, said many had worked in South Africa's farming, domestic work and construction sectors.

The first cracks were felt almost immediately in KwaZulu-Natal's sugar belt.

One farmer on the north coast said he lost up to 80% of his cane-cutting workforce virtually overnight.

"Production and supply have deteriorated to the point where it is going to be difficult for the mills to stay open," he said, speaking anonymously because he feared retaliation.

Another grower near Mid-Illovo, a region of rolling hills south of Durban, said most cane cutters in his area came from Lesotho, the

tiny kingdom encircled by South Africa.

"There are fields we are supposed to be cutting, but there are just not enough people. Local people don't like this job because it is back-breaking and physical," he said.

That argument is fiercely disputed.

With unemployment above 33% - and far higher when discouraged job seekers are included - labour unions and researchers argue there is no shortage of South Africans willing to work.

Instead, they say, many employers favour migrant workers because they are cheaper, more flexible and less likely to demand formal contracts, benefits or legal protections.

"They are making a profit out of foreign nations," said Patrick Williams, a local organiser with the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union.

Foreign farmworkers, he said, routinely worked seven days a week, skipped lunch breaks to maximise piece-rate earnings and were often paid below the national minimum wage.

For employers, the challenge is not only finding workers, but replacing years of experience.

In Durban's Chatsworth industrial area, a manager at a clothing factory said the departure of skilled machinists from Malawi and Mozambique had left factories struggling to meet orders.

"We can barely meet our targets because most were forced to go," she said on condition of anonymity, adding it would take time for local workers to master the job.

The government has sought to respond to public anger over migration by promoting a "locals first" approach, while acknowledging that some industries rely on foreign skills and labour.

Last week it expanded its Trusted Employer Scheme that fast-tracks worker visas for companies that meet requirements including predominantly employing South Africans, investing in skills development and operating in priority sectors.



This picture taken on Thursday shows a woman reacting as protesters storm the Department of Home Affairs offices during a demonstration calling for the removal of undocumented immigrants in South Africa's Alexandra township. (AFP)

Industry groups are urging the government to create legal pathways for seasonal foreign labour, arguing that sectors such as agriculture have become dependent on migrant workers and cannot replace them overnight.

South Africa should consider a regulated seasonal worker programme similar to one in the United States, said Siyabonga Madlala, chief executive of the South African Farmers Development Association.

"There may be a need for a special dispensation allowing seasonal labour from SADC countries where local supply is insufficient," he told Newsroom Afrika, referring to the 16-member Southern African Development Community bloc.

More than 60% of South Africa's immigrants are estimated to

come from SADC countries.

Yet for many who left, the debate over labour policy has been eclipsed by fears for their safety after at least four foreigners were killed, according to police data.

Wayne Chimbadzwa Mutasa, a Zimbabwean national who had lived in Robertson since 2014, said that he left after foreign workers were targeted in door-to-door raids.

"The people who came into the houses of Zimbabweans were police officers saying that you are living here illegally," he told AFP as he prepared for repatriation.

His fellow national Majatamhe, the farm worker, has decided to remain for now.

"We are afraid to stay even in this place, but the problem is, we don't have enough money to go home," he said.

African leaders push to extend threatened AU mission to Somalia

AFP
Kampala

Leaders of countries making up an African Union (AU) military mission in Somalia insisted yesterday that they wanted to extend its mandate, despite Washington ending political and financial support.

Somalia has battled Al-Shabaab insurgents for around two decades but the Islamist group still controls vast swathes of the country.

The AU Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSOM) is the leading force supporting the Somali army, providing roughly 12,000 troops.

However, the United States has announced that it will end support to the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS), which crucially provides logistics to the mission, at the end of this year.

Washington - the main financial contributor to the UNSOS - said that it would also oppose any further UN logistical support to the AUSSOM.

In a July 1 letter, Washington accused Somalia's government of a lack of progress against Al-Shabaab and in addressing security and governance challenges.

Leaders in the Ugandan capital Kampala stressed the need for "an orderly, co-ordinated and phased exit of the AUSOM".

It should be supported by a UN Security Council-mandated mechanism for up to two years during which security would gradually be handed over to Somali forces, according to a statement read to reporters.

Analysts fear a similar scenario as in Afghanistan when US troops pulled out in 2021.

That could lead to the possible collapse of the government in Mogadishu which for two decades has had AU backing against the Islamist insurgency.

However, analysts said the chances of the mission continuing were slim given Washington's stance.

"I doubt that there is any viable possibility for sustaining this mission without reversal of the US decision on the UNSOS," Solomon Dersso, head of the Amani Africa think tank, said.

Washington's decision is "irreversible", a senior diplomat to the AU told AFP on condition of anonymity.

It is part of a wider fatigue among donors and partners of

Somalia in the face of what the US described as constant "internal rivalries and political infighting".

Somalia is deeply fragmented and currently in the midst of another political crisis.

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud had the constitution changed earlier this year, extending his term by a year after it expired on May 15.

Opposition parties and regional governments rejected the changes, leading to violent clashes in several parts of the country, including Mogadishu.

The summit urged Mohamud to convene a conference of leaders of the government, opposition and federal states.

The president responded that Somali political matters should not feature in the summit statement and must not be "internationalised".

Leaders in their statement also asked international partners "to consider the provision of additional resources to address the financial shortfalls" facing the AU mission.

The AU cannot cover the costs.

UNSOS operational costs - from troop rotation to food, fuel and medical equipment - were half a billion dollars this year, three times more than the AUSOM's budget, the Balqis think tank based in Mogadishu said in a recent report.

The European Union, traditionally the biggest donor to African missions in Somalia, has reduced its funding this year.

The AU "has no solution" and "now finds itself in a situation where it has to make a decision" quickly, the diplomat to the AU said.

"A complete exit... will have security consequences that the Somalia government cannot handle," warned Meressa Kahsu Dessu, of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS).

In comments on X, Abdisaid Muse Ali, a former Somali foreign minister, said the Kampala talks should force Somalia's leaders to confront what follows an AU drawdown.

"In Kabul, leaders came to treat foreign troops, donor money and diplomatic backing as permanent foundations of power," he wrote. "Patronage crowded out institution-building, corruption drained public authority, and political factions fought over offices while the security order weakened beneath them."

"Somalia now faces a similar danger," he cautioned.

Algeria bus crash kills at least 25

At least 25 people were killed and 44 injured yesterday after a passenger bus overturned in Algeria's Boumerdes governorate, the Civil Protection agency said.

The bus left the road near the coastal town of Boumerdes, east of the capital Algiers, for unknown reasons.

The agency said its teams responded to the accident around 9.40am local time (0840 GMT) to assist the victims of what is the deadliest accident in Algeria in recent years.

The Civil Protection agency said that the injured were being evacuated to nearby hospitals.

In August last year, a bus plunged into a ravine near Algiers, killing 18 people.

In December, 14 people died when their bus overturned in the southern region of Bechar.

Human factors including speeding are the main cause of crashes in the country, according to Algerian road safety authorities. In 2025, 3,838 people died and more than 37,000 were injured in traffic accidents, they said. - Reuters/AFP

Liberia sacks a dozen officials after mass drug busts

AFP
Monrovia

Liberian President Joseph Boakai has dismissed a dozen government officials and recommended a handful for investigation following massive drug busts in recent months that have generated a public outcry for more stringent action.

Boakai dismissed 12 officials, ranging from an airport operations administrator to law enforcement supervisors, according to a late-night statement released on Thursday.

Earlier this month, authorities conducted the largest drug bust in the west African nation's history, seizing nearly four tonnes of cocaine valued at \$317mn in an operation on the road leading to Roberts International Airport, which is about 30km (20 miles) from the capital Monrovia.

That followed on the heels of another massive seizure of approximately 238kg of cocaine worth some \$19mn that had been presented as ordinary commercial cargo, including Maggi seasoning cubes, at the airport in June.

West Africa is a transit point for

cocaine produced in Latin America and shipped to consumer countries in Europe, according to monitors.

Boakai's statement said he had ordered "the immediate dismissal, suspension and investigation of several officials of government and law enforcement personnel following his review of the latest status report on ongoing investigations into major narcotics trafficking cases".

Those dismissed included the airport's deputy director for operations; the police commissioner for criminal investigation, intelligence and Interpol; and the deputy director for administration at the National Security Agency (NSA).

Boakai also dismissed "all government employees and law enforcement officers indicted" in connection with the two massive drug seizures, the statement said.

Those individuals were the airport's director of security and the deputy commander of the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency at the airport, it said.

He further dismissed four employees across the NSA and ministry of gender, children and social protection, forwarding their cases to the Ministry of Justice for prosecution.



Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency officers celebrate after burning approximately 4.2 metric tonnes of cocaine, during a destruction operation in Monrovia, on Thursday. (Reuters)

Following the initial airport drug seizure in June, Boakai launched a co-ordinated investigation to ensure that "every individual found responsible is fully accountable under the law".

Since the busts, social media users, political commentators and media reports have placed an intense focus on the country's

drug situation, with demands for greater scrutiny of public officials and swift results in the investigation.

Several hundred protesters additionally took to the streets of Monrovia two weeks ago demanding quick action and rapid charges, in a protest organised by the civic group STAND.



FPEA celebrates milestone with successful 13th General Assembly

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Hundreds of hours of volunteer work and collaboration among Filipino engineers, sponsors and professional organisations culminated in the successful staging of the 13th General Assembly of the Filipino Planning Engineers Association (FPEA) at Andaz Doha on July 17, with organisers describing the event as one of the association's defining milestones.

Held under the theme, "Invite, Ignite, Unite: Elevating Filipino Planning Engineers to New Heights", the assembly celebrated leadership, volunteerism, professional excellence and collaboration while reaffirming FPEA's commitment to strengthening the Filipino engineering community in Qatar.

"Our 13th FPEA General Assembly will forever be remembered as one of the defining milestones in the history of the Filipino Planning Engineers Association," said Engineer Maria Cecilia Marcos Rosales-Baiao, FPEA first vice-president for FY 2025-2026 and chairperson of the event. "It was far more than a successful gathering. It was a celebration of leadership, volunteerism, friendship, professional excellence and our unwavering commitment to our shared vision."

Baiao attributed the success of the event to the collective ef-



forts of FPEA officers, committee members, volunteers, sponsors and partners.

"This achievement belongs not to any one individual, but to every officer, committee member, volunteer, sponsor, partner and member who willingly gave their time, talents and unwavering support," she said. "Our General Assembly stands as a powerful reminder that great organisations are not built by titles, but by people who choose to serve with humility, integrity and dedication."

During the event, Jeffrey Gabriel, an IC, LIMRA, and CII-certified insurance adviser, delivered an informative session highlighting the importance of life insurance and financial planning. He empha-

sised that proper protection is vital to building a secure future and encouraged participants to start planning early to safeguard their families and achieve long-term financial stability.

Meanwhile, Baiao also paid tribute to the association's board of directors, committee chairs and volunteers, highlighting their dedication and teamwork in organising the assembly. She also singled out second vice-president Engineer Danica for leading the programme and coordinating with media partners, resulting in the participation of Qabayan Radio 94.3's RJ Cody as master of ceremonies alongside Engineer Johanna Mae Escoba.

Baiao also acknowledged the contributions of members who

handled sponsorships, finance, technical operations, publications, logistics and event coordination, saying their behind-the-scenes work was instrumental to the programme's success.

She thanked the event's technical speakers — Dr Arlan Beltran, Dr Elvin D Fajutagana and Engineer Lofty — for sharing their expertise and inspiring members to pursue professional excellence.

The association thanked its sponsors and partners, including KIMS Health, Eye Focus Media, SIKa Qatar, MetLife, Berkeley, BMTC and Maharlika Restaurant, for supporting the event and helping advance FPEA's mission.

FPEA also recognised the continued collaboration of fellow professional organisations, including the Philippine Institute of Civil Engineers (PICE) - Qatar Chapter and the Filipino Association of Materials Engineers - Qatar (FAME Qatar), saying such partnerships continue to strengthen the Filipino engineering community in the country.

The organisers also commended Andaz Doha for its hospitality and support throughout the preparations and staging of the assembly.

Reflecting on the event, Baiao said the general assembly demonstrated the power of volunteerism and shared purpose.

"When people unite with a common purpose, respect one another and place service above self,



extraordinary achievements become possible," she said. "Leadership is not measured by position, but by the lives we inspire, the people we empower and the legacy we leave behind."

She encouraged members to continue embracing the organisation's "Invite, Ignite, Unite" vision by mentoring future leaders, strengthening the association and upholding the values of professionalism, integrity, humility and excellence.

BCFQ honours season's top performers at annual awards ceremony



Champions



Runner-up

The Bangladesh Cricket Fraternity Qatar (BCFQ) recently held its 2025-2026 season prize distribution ceremony at the Cayam Hotel, with Bangladesh ambassador to Qatar Hazarat Ali Khan attending as the chief guest.

The ceremony was presided over by BCFQ president Yasin Meah and hosted by general secretary Saif Khandaker. Among those in attendance were BCFQ vice-president Aziz Khan, CIP; advisers Abdul Matin Patwary, Mohammed Alamgir Hussein Ali, and Abul Kayes Ahmed; and members of the organisation's executive committee.

Distinguished guests included Engineer Anwar Hussain Akon, founding president of the Bangladesh Community Qatar (BCQ); Kamal Uddin, country manager of Biman Bangladesh Airlines; Nurul Kabir Chowdhury, CEO of Arabian Exchange; community leader Ismail Meah; Ashfaq Uddin Mamoon; and other prominent members of the Bangladeshi community.

During the ceremony, trophies and awards were presented to the season's top-performing teams and players. Cumilla United were crowned champions, while Greater Noakhali Express finished runners-up. Honorary mementoes were also presented to four Bangladeshi cricketers representing the Qatari national team — Faiz Ullah Sihab, Arif Nasir Uddin, Maqbul Ahmed, and Faisal Ahmed — in recognition of their achievements. Several other players were likewise honoured for their outstanding performances throughout the season.

In his keynote address, ambassa-



Bangladesh ambassador to Qatar Hazarat Ali Khan addresses the event.



A section of the guests.

dor Ali Khan highlighted the growing importance of sports diplomacy in contemporary international relations, describing it as a form of soft power that complements traditional diplomatic and political engagement.

BCFQ CEO Aminul Islam delivered the welcome address, while Engineer Anwar Hussain Akon and Noor Mohammed spoke on the role of sport in fostering cultural identity, preserving language, and strengthening community harmony.

Area 13 of District 116 Toastmasters International hosts Confluence Meeting

Area 13 of District 116 Toastmasters International hosted its Confluence Meeting, "The Legacy Continues", on July 21 in Doha, bringing together members from Leads Learning, WISQ, Al Khor Malayalam, West Bay, and Sri Lankan Toastmasters Clubs Qatar.

The event was graced by District director DTM Sherwin Olimpo; Programme Quality director DTM Ajaya Rogiye; Division D director Sanjaya Munindradasa, Immediate Past Division D director Sampath Samarasekara, and general evaluator DTM Surya Narayanan.

The programme featured prepared speeches, evaluations, table topics, and club spotlights, fostering learning and fellowship. Area director Dr Priyanka Poomani thanked the organising team, club officers, volunteers, and participants for making the event a success, reaffirming Toastmasters' mission of developing confident communicators and inspiring leaders.

The confluence concluded on a high note, leaving participants with renewed inspiration, stronger connections, and lasting memories.



Papawis QLAB marks pickleball's growing popularity with Ladies Night tournament

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Papawis QLAB celebrated the growing popularity of pickleball in Qatar by hosting its Ladies Night Pickleball Doubles Tournament in Doha, bringing together 32 female players in a one-day event that promoted fitness, inclusivity and community engagement.

The tournament featured 16 teams competing in the Beginners and Novice categories, providing women of different backgrounds and skill levels with an opportunity to experience one of the world's fastest-growing sports in a welcoming and supportive environment.

Organisers said the event was designed not only to encourage participation in sport but also to inspire healthier lifestyles, strengthen community ties and introduce more residents in Qatar to pickleball.

Founded on the belief that sport can unite people, promote wellness and build lasting friendships, Papawis QLAB continues to organise activities that encourage people to learn, compete and grow together.

Apart from the competition, organisers said the tournament sought to promote physical fitness and active living, encourage greater participation of women in sport, foster friendship, teamwork and sportsmanship, strengthen the Filipino community while welcoming participants from different nationalities, and expand awareness of pickleball across Qatar.

The event featured a series of closely contested matches, with participants displaying determination, respect and camaraderie throughout the competition. Organisers described the tournament as a celebration of sportsmanship



and friendship, supported by enthusiastic volunteers, sponsors and members of the community.

"At Papawis QLAB, our mission goes beyond organising tournaments. We strive to build a community where people can stay active, connect with others, and enjoy sports in a positive and supportive environment," founder Earvin Mondidu said.

Guided by the group's motto, "No Rules. Just Be Kind. Papawis Life!," Mondidu said the organisation

remains committed to staging activities that promote healthy living, inclusivity and meaningful social connections.

He also thanked the players, volunteers, sponsors and supporters whose contributions helped make the tournament a success, adding that Papawis QLAB plans to organise more sporting events that encourage participation, wellness and unity within Qatar's diverse community.

With pickleball continuing to

attract new players worldwide, Mondidu said community-led initiatives such as the Ladies Night tournament are helping expand the sport's reach in Qatar while providing more opportunities for women to participate in recreational and competitive sport.



Qatar Tec supports purple Saturday, reaffirms commitment to an inclusive society

Qatar Tec, a leading manpower and project supplies company in Doha, has joined the Purple Saturday initiative, reaffirming its commitment to advancing accessibility and inclusion for persons with disabilities in Qatar.

The company expressed its wholehearted support for the nationwide campaign led by the Ministry of Family and Social Development, which promotes the rights, accessibility, and full inclusion of persons with disabilities as part of Qatar's vision for a more inclusive society.

By participating in Purple Saturday, Qatar Tec has reaffirmed its commitment to corporate social responsibility and its belief that businesses have a vital role in building a society where every individual is respected, valued, and empowered.

Jeby K John, managing director of Qatar Tec, said that supporting



initiatives such as Purple Saturday goes beyond corporate social responsibility and reflects the true values of humanity.

"Supporting persons with disabilities is not merely a corporate responsibility; it is our moral responsibility. We have been blessed with countless opportunities, and the best way to express gratitude

for those blessings is by extending kindness, respect, and support to those who face greater challenges. A truly progressive society is one where everyone is given equal opportunities to participate, contribute, and succeed," he said.

John added that Qatar Tec has consistently supported humanitarian and charitable initiatives in

both Qatar and India and remains committed to programs that promote compassion, inclusion, and community welfare.

Purple Saturday has emerged as one of Qatar's most inspiring national initiatives, encouraging government institutions, private companies, and community organisations to create more acces-

sible workplaces, services, and public spaces for persons with disabilities. The campaign also aims to raise awareness about inclusion and inspire organisations to remove barriers and foster equal opportunities for all.

Mini Benny, advisory board chairperson of UNIQ, attended the function as chief guest. She lauded the commitment of Qatar Tec and congratulated the whole team for joining the noble cause.

A delegation of senior officials from Qatar Tec attended the event, reaffirming the company's commitment to social responsibility and inclusive community development. The delegation included Jinoj Mathew Thomas (Project Account manager), Laiju Varghese (Admin and Procurement manager), John Mathew (manager - Human Resources), Joby Kolkunnel John (manager - Sales and Marketing), Thomas Mathew (manager - Accounts), Sreeregha Parayilvalap-

pil (Accounts supervisor), Jeethu Varghese, Reeya Raju, Basil Joseph and Radhe Taru.

The representatives reiterated the company's commitment to supporting initiatives that promote accessibility, equality, and dignity for persons with disabilities, while contributing to the broader vision of an inclusive society.

As Purple Saturday continues to gain momentum across the country, Qatar Tec's participation reflects the growing commitment of Qatar's corporate sector to ensuring that no one is left behind and that inclusion remains a shared responsibility.

"When businesses choose compassion alongside excellence, they help build stronger communities. Purple Saturday reminds us that inclusion is not an act of charity - it is a commitment to justice, dignity, and equal opportunity for every member of society," the company said.

'Healing Hands, Caring Hearts': Medical mission puts OFW health in focus

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Recognising the growing prevalence of lifestyle-related diseases among overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), several community organisations in Qatar joined forces with a private healthcare provider to deliver free medical consultations and health screenings to dozens of expatriates during a medical mission.

Themed "Healing Hands, Caring Hearts", the initiative was held on July 24, bringing together the Supreme Elite Eagles Club - Official, BIMAK Qatar, GSSI and GABII in partnership with Brite Medical Centre to promote preventive healthcare and improve health awareness among members of the Filipino community.

"Our inspiration is rooted in service - strengthened by genuine brotherhood and guided by our deep love for our fellow OFWs," Supreme Elite Eagles Club president Eagle Mario Solang told *Gulf Times*.

He said the medical mission aimed not only to provide free healthcare services but also to en-



courage regular health monitoring and preventive care, stressing that "prevention is always better than cure."

The programme benefited 78 people out of 112 registered participants, offering a comprehensive range of free services, including body mass index assessments, blood pressure monitoring, blood sugar, cholesterol and uric acid testing, dental screening, consultations with general practitioners, paediatric and gynaecology specialists, as well as paediatric nutrition counselling for overweight and underweight children.

The screenings also revealed a growing burden of non-communicable diseases within the Filipino community in Qatar. According to Solang, elevated blood pressure, high blood sugar levels and increased cholesterol were the most common health concerns identified among beneficiaries.

He said the findings underscore the need for continuous health monitoring, early detection and preventive healthcare initiatives, while highlighting the importance of promoting healthier lifestyles and regular medical check-ups among OFWs, whose work de-



mands and daily pressures can increase their risk of lifestyle-related illnesses.

Solang highlighted the value of collaboration between community organisations and the private healthcare sector in extending medical services to expatriate workers.

"Service born from compassion and strengthened by collaboration reminds us that humanity thrives when we choose to care for one another," he said.

Following the positive response to the programme, the organisers plan to hold similar medical missions to reach more OFWs in Qatar.

"As we move forward, more OFWs will benefit - not only through medical care but through genuine human connection. In times of crisis, our compassion becomes the light that guides and heals us all," Solang added.



ICBF organises second Blood Platelet Donation Camp at HMC Centre



The Indian Community Benevolent Forum (ICBF), continuing its commitment to serving the expatriate Indian community in Qatar, successfully organised its second Blood Platelet Donation Camp in consecutive months in association with Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) at the Qatar National Blood Donation Centre.

The initiative was organised to raise awareness about the critical

importance of blood platelet donation and to encourage greater community participation in this life-saving cause.

Platelets are essential for patients undergoing cancer treatment, organ transplants, major surgeries, and for those suffering from blood disorders and traumatic injuries.

As platelets have a very short shelf life, maintaining an adequate supply depends on the continued

support of voluntary donors.

The campaign highlighted the invaluable role that voluntary donors play in saving lives and strengthening Qatar's healthcare system.

More than 60 volunteers from various Indian states came forward to donate blood platelets, demonstrating the Indian community's spirit of service and humanitarian commitment.

During the official function,



ICBF president Shanavas Bava delivered the presidential address and highlighted the significance of ICBF's unique initiative of organising regular blood platelet donation camps.

He appreciated the enthusiastic participation of the volunteers and emphasised the importance of sustaining such life-saving cam-

paigns through continued community involvement.

General secretary Deepak Shetty welcomed the gathering, while Health Wing in-charge Mini Siby proposed the vote of thanks.

ICBF Advisory Council chairman K S Prasad was also present at the event and appreciated the commitment shown by the volunteers

in supporting this noble cause.

The event was co-ordinated by secretary Jafer Thayyil, along with Managing Committee members Mani Bharathi, Neelambari Sushant, Amar Veer Singh, Khaja Nizamudeen, Shankar Goud, and Irfan Ansari, whose dedicated efforts contributed to the successful organisation of the camp.

SEEC, BIMAK Qatar organise bowling event to promote wellness, fellowship



By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Promoting wellness and stronger community ties through sport, the Supreme Elite Eagles Club (SEEC) and BIMAK Qatar brought together 30 teams for a bowling tournament at the Qatar Bowling Centre (QBC), where participants enjoyed a day of friendly competition and fellowship.

Held on July 24, the tournament drew members of the Filipino community for an event designed to encourage healthy recreation, teamwork and camaraderie, while providing a welcome break from the demands of work and daily life.

SEEC president Eagle Mario Solang described the event as a celebration of community spirit and collaboration.

"What an incredible achievement—and an even greater privilege—for BIMAK and SEEC to bring energy, excitement and non-stop laughter through the sport of bowling," Solang said.

He also commended the organising committees, officers, players and QBC for contributing to the tournament's success.

"Huge congratulations to the amazing committees, dedicated officers, passionate players and QBC for making this event a smashing success," he added.

BIMAK Qatar president Larc Uerba said the tournament demonstrated the value of teamwork in strengthening relationships within the Filipino community.

"Your teamwork and com-



mitment turned every moment into something truly unforgettable," Uerba said. "From strikes to smiles, every game was filled with fun, connection and pure good vibes—a perfect stress reliever for everyone."

He hopes the organisations would continue holding activities that foster friendship and community engagement. "Here's to more electrifying events, stronger bonds and endless moments of joy together," he added.

The bowling tournament is part of a broader effort by both organisations to promote community welfare beyond social gatherings.

SEEC, a civic-oriented organisation affiliated with the Fraternal Order of Eagles (Philippine Eagles), has been actively involved in volunteer and outreach initiatives benefiting overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in Qatar. In recent days, the club partnered with BIMAK Qatar, GSSI, GABII and Brite Medical Centre to conduct the Healing Hands, Caring Hearts medical mission, provid-



ing free health screenings and consultations while encouraging preventive healthcare among the Filipino community.

BIMAK Qatar has likewise supported various cultural, sports and charitable activities aimed at strengthening unity among Filipinos in the country.



Organisers said they hope the success of the bowling tournament will pave the way for more sports and wellness programmes that encourage active lifestyles, build lasting friendships and further strengthen the sense of community among Filipinos living and working in Qatar.



CARE Doha organises 'CV Clinic and Interview Masterclass'



Career Assistance, Research and Education (CARE) organised a CV Clinic and Interview Masterclass themed "First Impression Matters – Secrets to Interview Success and CV", aimed at equipping job seekers and professionals with essential skills to enhance their career opportunities.

The programme was inaugurated by Youth Forum vice-president Rashad Mubarak. In his inaugural address, he highlighted the importance of being well-prepared to face the challenges of the evolving job market. He emphasised that a professionally prepared CV, a strong first impression, and confident interview performance are crucial factors for career success. He also encouraged youth to continuously develop their professional skills and effectively utilise available opportunities.

During the Interview Masterclass, Shabeer Hameed shared practical guidance on

successfully navigating different stages of the interview process. Through mock interviews and interactive practical sessions, participants gained hands-on experience in handling common interview scenarios. He also addressed key areas such as communication skills, confidence building, personal presentation, and understanding employer expectations.

Shamseer Abubacker conducted a session on preparing professional CVs, explaining practical approaches and modern methods for designing effective resumes. The CV Clinic provided participants with individual reviews and valuable suggestions for improving their CVs. The interactive Q&A session was also highly beneficial for the attendees.

The programme was attended by job seekers, fresh graduates, and professionals from various fields. Participants appreciated

the practical knowledge, guidance, and training provided, which helped them improve their career readiness and build confidence to compete in the job market. CARE is an initiative actively working among the Indian community in Qatar in the areas of career development, education, research, and skill enhancement. Through career guidance programmes, professional training sessions, CV clinics, interview preparation workshops, and educational initiatives, CARE aims to empower youth and professionals and support them in achieving their career goals.

Raqueeb Melattur and Thameem Ameer led the co-ordination of the programme. The event was widely appreciated as a valuable initiative that provided practical knowledge, confidence, and career guidance for those preparing to enter the job market and those seeking professional growth.



Chinese military researchers tap US AI models to train defence systems

Reuters
Beijing

Chinese military researchers have used outputs from leading US artificial intelligence (AI) models developed by OpenAI and Anthropic to train domestic AI systems to advance China's defence capabilities, a Reuters review of 80 Chinese academic papers and patents revealed.

The previously unreported findings offer a rare glimpse into how military and security-linked institutions in China are leveraging cutting-edge US AI models as a shortcut to developing specialised systems of their own, despite Washington's efforts to restrict Beijing's access to advanced chips and other strategic technologies.

The documents show widespread use of a technique known as "model distillation," in which out-

puts from a powerful AI system are used to train smaller, specialised models that can be deployed locally without the enormous computing requirements needed to build frontier AI systems from scratch. Reuters' review, which included research compiled by the Washington-based Jamestown Foundation and shared exclusively with the news agency, showed distillation is widely used by researchers linked to the People's Liberation Army and other military institutions. The papers suggest Chinese defence institutions see leading US AI models as both a source of technical insight and a way to close the gap with American rivals.

The dispute centres on unauthorised extraction, not distillation itself, a widely used industry practice. The issue has emerged as a major flashpoint ahead of US-China talks on AI governance and safety. US officials have accused

some Chinese entities of using distillation to extract capabilities from American AI models, potentially undermining export controls and infringing intellectual property rights.

China has rejected the accusations, saying Washington is pursuing AI "hegemonism" while arguing that US firms have engaged in similar practices. Chinese developers refuted claims that their advances rely on foreign models. AI startup Moonshot last week denied allegations by US that its Kimi K3 model was built using distillation.

Sunny Cheung, a Jamestown fellow, said Chinese military scientists are systematically capturing the reasoning steps of Western models to adapt them for surveillance, cyber warfare and tactical decision-making.

"Teaching a model the right answer is one thing but teaching it the reasoning behind the answer

is much harder," said Cheung. "These papers show Chinese military-linked researchers are trying to transfer that expensive, proprietary reasoning from Western models into smaller systems they can control and deploy locally." Reuters verified the academic literature and identified an additional two dozen military-linked case studies.

One paper published last year by researchers in PLA Unit 96941, a military intelligence and cyber-warfare unit in Beijing, described using OpenAI's GPT-3.5 to process sensitive military source code.

The researchers said third-party models were unsuitable for handling classified information. To overcome that limitation, they used GPT-3.5 to summarize software code and trained a domestic model on those summaries to run entirely within Chinese military networks.

The White House, Pentagon, China's foreign ministry, the PLA and OpenAI did not respond to requests for comment.

Chinese researchers have used distillation for purposes ranging from content monitoring to military deployment, Reuters' and Jamestown's review of the papers showed. At the North University of China, which has close links to the country's weapons industry, researchers used Anthropic's Claude 3 Haiku to generate synthetic training data for a text classification model for social media monitoring and content moderation.

Anthropic said it does not provide commercial access to Claude in China or to Beijing-controlled firms and uses monitoring systems to detect policy violations.

The company added that distilled models may lose the original systems' safety safeguards, potentially allowing sensitive capabili-

ties to be transferred to models beyond its control.

A 2024 paper from the PLA's National University of Defense Technology described using distillation to shrink an image-processing model for deployment on unmanned aerial vehicles, allowing drones to analyse live video and support navigation and targeting decisions in real time even when communications are cut.

Similarly, researchers at China's Academy of Military Sciences used distillation to run a target-recognition model on tactical hardware during simulated maritime operations involving drones, ships and unmanned submarines, a study published earlier this year showed.

China has embraced distillation as it seeks to compete with the US in frontier AI while facing constraints on advanced computing resources due to Washington's export controls on high-end chips.

Lula unifies Brazil's left, but its future remains uncertain

Reuters
Brasilia

When Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva takes the stage at the country's Workers Party convention yesterday to accept his seventh, and likely final, nomination as a presidential candidate, at the age of 80, he will do so with the Brazilian left more united behind him than at any other point in his decades-long political career.

For the first time in nearly 40 years, Lula is the presidential candidate for all five major center-left parties. But that unity, forged in opposition to a rising far right, is also raising questions about who might lead the movement once the former union leader is no longer on the ballot.

"It won't be easy," said Juliano Medeiros, the former president of the Socialism and Liberty Party, one of the parties in Lula's coalition. "We'll have to debate extensively to see if we can maintain a convergence on the left." The growth of a coalition around Lula stems from a survival strategy, as Brazilians grow increasingly conservative.

According to researcher Felipe Nunes, the author of the book "Brazil in the Mirror" from 2014 to 2023, the share of Brazilians who consider themselves right-wing rose to 37% from 26%, while those who identify as left-wing fell to 23% from 29%.

The shift has supported the rise of far-right figures such as former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who last year was convicted for attempting to overthrow democracy.

Now, his son Senator Flavio Bolsonaro is running against Lula.

"The far right remains alive, and the popular democratic camp — which we represent — must unite," said Carlos Lupi, the head of the Democratic Labour Party, which had its own presidential candidate in the last election, in 2022. "We are at a very unique moment. The democrats will be on one side and



Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva speaks during his visit to the Bertolini shipyard in Manaus, Brazil. (Reuters/FilePhoto)

the offspring of the dictatorship on the other." Brazil was ruled by a military dictatorship between 1964 and 1985, a period that far-right former President Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters portray as an ideal era in Brazilian history, despite the political violence from the regime.

The shift is regional. Lula is one of the few leftist leaders leading a South American country, after the election of right-wing leaders in countries such as Chile, Colombia, and Argentina in recent years, following the economic stagnation that hit the region in the past decade.

Many on the left agree that beating the rightward trend without Lula seems unfeasible now. Political scientist Creomar de Souza of the consulting firm Dharma Political Risk and Strategy said the left's reduced political space is further enhanced by its difficulty in finding an effective narrative on social media, leaving parties with few good options to win.

"By joining Lula's election cam-

paign, they have the advantage of trying to anchor themselves in the political figure that Lula represents and in the electoral impact that figure currently has," he said. Lula currently leads opinion polls for both rounds of the election, with a small but consistent margin over Senator Bolsonaro, as the economy remains stable and inflation slows, but Lula is also supported by voters who reject Bolsonaro.

Eden Valadares, the communications secretary of the Workers Party, known as the PT, said he did not see a decline of the left but rather a polarisation, with the traditional right losing ground to the far right, and a maturing of the left in the face of that threat.

"The support of all these parties for Lula is not automatic," he said, adding the PT had to make concessions to secure support for Lula. "There is a mediation process in which everyone feels included." Normally reluctant to cede the leading role in state-level coalitions, this time — on Lula's instructions — his party decided to

change its stance and make room for allies to lead the ticket in some cases. Still, Lula, a constant figure on Brazilian campaign trails since 1989, will be 84 at the end of a new term, if elected, and has no clear successor.

Behind the scenes, politicians acknowledge that a power struggle is likely to begin during a potential fourth term for Lula.

Former ministers Fernando Haddad and Camilo Santana are emerging as possible successors, but neither has the standing on the Brazilian left, or internationally, that Lula currently commands.

Whoever wants to command the left in 2030, when the next presidential race is scheduled to take place, will have the daunting task of convincing the left to remain united.

"Today we are fortunate to have a figure like Lula, someone who has the ability to speak beyond the left-wing bubble," said Medeiros, the former party leader. "Between now and 2030, we'll have to debate a vision for the country, a shared strategy."

Supreme Court justice authorises probe into dealings of Lula's son

A Brazilian Supreme Court justice has authorised federal police to investigate the son of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva over suspicions he improperly helped a lobbyist in dealings with the health ministry, two sources with direct knowledge of the decision said.

Last week, federal police sought permission to open an investigation into Fabio Luis Lula da Silva, known as "Lulinha," for alleged influence peddling and corruption on behalf of businessman Antonio Carlos Camilo Antunes.

One line of inquiry likely to be pursued is whether Lulinha helped provide Antunes' businesses with access to health ministry officials in connection with a government deal involving a cannabidiol-based medication, one of the sources said. Fabio Luis' lawyer said in a statement yesterday that the defence was unaware of the investigation and had not reviewed any documents or its legal basis, but said the there were "suspicions of illegality." "An investigation is not an exercise in trial and error. That would amount to what we call a fishing expedition, which is unlawful and would lay bare

the political interests behind this unusual move," the statement said. Antunes' legal representatives could not immediately be reached for comment.

In an interview on Thursday, Lula said his son would be investigated like any other citizen and would not receive special treatment. "I will not use my position to protect him," Lula told the Inteligencia Ltda. podcast, adding that he would not interfere in the probe. The investigation into Fabio Luis has not yet been formally opened, a federal police source said.

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court justice, Andre Mendonca, also granted federal police permission to launch another investigation into Lulinha over allegations he received improper payments linked to a scheme involving irregular deductions from pensions administered by Brazil's National Social Security Institute (INSS), which also involved Antunes.

Asked about his son in a February interview with news outlet UOL, Lula said he had confronted Fabio Luis about the INSS case. "If you've done something wrong, you'll pay the price for it. If you haven't, defend yourself," Lula told UOL. (Reuters)

US-backed Venezuela talks to begin without opposition leader Machado

US-backed negotiations between Venezuela's interim government and a faction of the opposition are expected today in the absence of the country's most prominent opposition leader. The talks, aimed at remaking the country's political system ahead of eventual elections, highlight Washington's unprecedented influence over Venezuelan politics since US President Donald Trump's administration removed Nicolas Maduro in a January raid and installed acting President Delcy Rodriguez.

They will be led on the government side by Rodriguez's brother Jorge, the head of the National Assembly and a longtime negotiator at previous talks with the US and the opposition. The opposition delegation — which the US backs over efforts to overhaul the country's electoral council and top court to ensure free and fair elections — will be led by Dinorah Figuera. Three sources familiar with the matter said the US asked Figuera to lead because she is the head of an opposition-dominated national assembly cohort elected in 2015 that is still recognised by the US as the country's last democratically-elected legislature. (Reuters)

Trump's powerful but unofficial adviser for Venezuela leaves his role

Reuters
Washington

An unofficial adviser to the Trump administration who has played a leading role in shaping US Venezuela policy and multimillion-dollar deals to exploit the Opec state's vast oil resources has told Reuters he is no longer overseeing the portfolio.

In a role likened by current and former government officials and business sources in the US and Venezuela to that of a viceroy, Miami-based businessman Mauricio Claver-Carone reported to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who has spearheaded Venezuela policy.

Though he held no formal government position, he emerged as one of the Trump administration's most influential players on Venezuela since the January 3 US raid that captured President Nicolas Maduro.

He said his departure was voluntary, though multiple sources familiar with the matter say he was forced out in recent weeks.

During his tenure, Claver-Carone wielded heavy influence over decisions that could eventually be worth billions of dollars, from debt

restructuring to oil deals.

Maduro was replaced by former Vice President Delcy Rodriguez, who has worked closely with Claver-Carone and proved more compliant to US demands to open the country up to US business.

Behind-the-scenes talks by Claver-Carone, who served briefly as Trump's special envoy on Latin America early in his second term, were a large part of the Trump administration's approach to post-Maduro Venezuela. The US has taken a domineering role in determining the future of the country's energy sector while refraining from pushing for substantial political reforms or democratic elections anytime soon.

Claver-Carone was key to US firm Centerview Partners clinching a contract — worth more than \$150mn with no competitive bidding process — to restructure Venezuela's some \$200bn of debt. He also helped arrange talks between the Venezuelan government and opposition leaders scheduled for August 1 and weighed in on oil deals, including some cases in which companies were awarded potentially lucrative business, eight sources said.

"Just like in the first term and my



A Venezuelan flag waves as people search for the bodies of their loved ones beneath the rubble in Caraballeda, La Guaira. (Reuters)

service last year as Special Envoy, I was honored to provide advice and experience as a private citizen on Venezuela and to fill gaps early on ... to ensure President Trump's policy was successful," Claver-Carone said.

"I'm retired on Venezuela." Asked for comment, the State Department said he was not being removed from any formal role.

"Mr Claver-Carone is an expert

with contacts throughout our region and is a private citizen who does not currently have an official role in the Trump Administration," a spokesperson said. "Any insinuation that he is being forced out of any formal role is inaccurate." While Claver-Carone's supporters portrayed him as a deft operator capable of advancing the administration's agenda in a geopolitically complex environment, some

Trump allies had questioned if he was an appropriate figure to oversee a free-wheeling push by US companies to snap up Venezuelan assets as he was a nominally private citizen who controlled a private equity fund.

Claver-Carone said neither he nor his fund has any financial stake in Venezuela.

His heavy-handed involvement with business deals in Caracas has ruffled feathers within the State Department and among some investors, multiple sources told Reuters. Among those who had bristled at Claver-Carone's influence was Trump supporter, former ambassador and previous special envoy to Venezuela Richard Grenell, who spoke to Trump about Claver-Carone's influence in business dealings in Caracas in early July, according to several sources familiar with the matter.

Grenell did not respond to requests for comment. An administration official denied that Claver-Carone had "ruffled feathers at the White House." Some Trump allies and those close to the situation privately argued Claver-Carone was too close to some Venezuelan political operators.

One of those was Alejandro

Betancourt, one of Venezuela's best-known businessmen, who amassed a fortune through contracts linked to Venezuela's oil and electrical sectors during late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's rule, while facing years of scrutiny and investigations related to corruption and money laundering in various jurisdictions, including the US, which he has denied.

Claver-Carone acknowledged that he and others in the US government had used Betancourt as an intermediary with Rodriguez's government, noting the businessman had been helpful because he understood the oil business in both countries and could bridge the gap between the parties.

Neither Betancourt nor his attorney responded to requests for comment. The State Department did not directly address Claver-Carone's relationship with the businessman.

Claver-Carone, a Cuban American from south Florida with a history of opposition to the Communist government in Havana and a longtime ally of Rubio, served as the president of the Inter-American Development Bank in the first Trump administration before being ousted over misconduct.



Sniffer dogs search mall wrecked after Japan quake

AFP
Kumamoto

Sniffer dogs in Japan helped rescuers yesterday make a final sweep of a shopping mall wrecked by an explosion after a big earthquake, as the death toll from the tremor three days earlier hit 35.

“At the Aeon mall, 11 people were pulled out as of last night (Thursday), among them seven dead. To make sure that no one else is inside, we are finalising our confirmation with the assistance of professionally trained dogs,” government spokesman Minoru Kihara said.

Local media quoted the operator of the mall, which was evacuated before being ripped apart by the suspected gas blast over an hour after Tuesday’s quake, as saying that all employees were now accounted for.

At the other major disaster site, a paper factory, following the 7.1-magnitude jolt nine bodies have now been recovered and search and rescue operations were terminated, Kihara said.

Two survivors were also extracted from the site where a smokestack collapsed, he said,



People take shelter at the “Wing Matsubase” General Sports and Cultural Center in Uki, Kumamoto Prefecture, on Thursday. (AFP)

putting the overall death toll from the quake in the southwestern region of Kumamoto at 35.

Six others were in a critical condition, according to a local disaster management office.

The quake caused widespread damage, flattening homes, damaging bridges, triggering fires and leaving many without electricity and water in temperatures fore-

cast to approach 40C (104F) this weekend.

“Only the electricity is working at home. The gas and water are cut off, so I’m wondering when they’ll be fixed,” Kosuke Iwasaki, a 27-year-old professional volleyball player, told AFP.

“Drinking water is secured, but there’s very little water we can use freely” for example for laundry,

said Iwasaki, who moved to Yatsushiro City just a month ago.

Toilets also can’t be used if the water is cut off.

As of yesterday, 79,000 households had no water, but power cuts were resolved across the whole Kumamoto region, according to the land ministry and the utility.

More than 9,000, many of them elderly, evacuated to shelters.



People transport relief supplies into an evacuation shelter following the July 28 earthquake in Yatsushiro, Kumamoto prefecture, yesterday. (AFP)

Although the military airlifted 300 air conditioners to the region, local media reported that many evacuation centers – mostly in school gymnasiums – lack air conditioning.

One piece of good news was that 25 felines from a “cat cafe” inside the mall were rescued and transferred to Hiroshima, triggering widespread relief on social media.

Japan is one of the world’s most seismically active countries, sitting on top of four major tectonic plates along the western edge of the Pacific “Ring of Fire”.

Kumamoto itself was hit by two devastating earthquakes in 2016,

which killed 273 people and injured more than 2,800.

The archipelago, home to around 125mn people, typically experiences hundreds of jolts every year and accounts for about 18% of the world’s earthquakes.

The vast majority are mild, although the damage they cause varies according to their location and the depth below the Earth’s surface at which they strike.

Japan is haunted by the memory of a massive 9.0-magnitude under-sea quake in 2011, which triggered a tsunami that killed or left missing around 18,500 people and wrecked the Fukushima nuclear plant.

Starlink used by scam centres: Myanmar leader

AFP
Yangon

Myanmar’s leader Min Aung Hlaing publicly called out Elon Musk’s satellite Internet firm Starlink yesterday as one of the tools used by the country’s thriving online scam industry.

An AFP investigation last year revealed the use of Starlink devices had exploded in the industry, where scammers target Internet users with romance and business cons worth tens of billions of dollars annually.

In his first major speech to parliament since being made civilian president in April, ex-coup leader Min Aung Hlaing named Starlink as he insisted his government was cracking down on the fraudsters.

“Our government considers online fraud and online gambling as serious crimes committed against the public. Therefore, our government will not tolerate them at all and is severely cracking down on and suppressing them,” he said.

He claimed foreigners were mostly responsible, saying that “the communication equipment they use, including Starlink, as well as computer accessories, were imported illegally by foreign nationals.”

Min Aung Hlaing led a 2021 coup that deposed democratic

leader Aung San Suu Kyi and triggered an ongoing civil war. He was installed as civilian president following highly restricted elections.

Since the war began, sprawling fraud factories have ballooned in Myanmar’s border regions where governance has collapsed, often using workers trafficked from abroad.

The military-backed parliament approved a law this week authorising capital punishment for those who detain or violently coerce victims into working in online scam centres.

Myanmar’s junta has long been accused of looking the other way as the illicit industry grows, but has trumpeted a crackdown since February after being lobbied by key military backer China, experts say.

A UN report issued this month said law enforcement actions in the region have “displaced and dispersed” scam networks rather than dismantle them.

Starlink, part of Musk’s SpaceX company, dominates the global satellite communications sector with thousands of satellites in orbit and operations in dozens of countries.

In October last year, Starlink said it had cut services to more than 2,500 Internet devices at Myanmar scam centres.

AFP has contacted Starlink for comment on Min Aung Hlaing’s remarks.

Reuters
Beijing

China’s President Xi Jinping urged senior leaders of the ruling Communist Party yesterday to deepen the fight against corruption in the military and to advance the modernisation of national defence, state news agency Xinhua reported.

“The barrel of the gun must always obey the party’s command,” Xi said at a group session of the Politburo, China’s top decision-making body.

He also called for the establishment of an intelligent military system, including greater use of unmanned technologies and deeper use of cyber-information systems, Xinhua said. Xi “pointed out that in advancing the modernisation of national defence and the armed forces with high quality, the fundamental orientation and standard of evaluation is always combat effectiveness,” Xinhua reported.

Xi’s remarks and the Politburo session come ahead of today’s 99th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

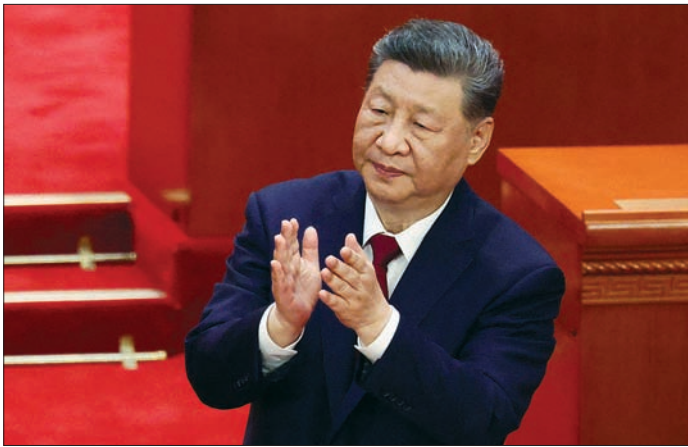
While some defence analysts

and military attaches say the anniversary is expected to be relatively low-key, it will effectively serve to highlight the looming centenary - a year in which the Communist Party has urged further progress in China’s military modernisation and combat readiness.

The anniversary comes amid ongoing military corruption purges that a report by a leading defence research centre, the London-based Independent Institute of Strategic Studies, said in February had hampered fighting readiness and left serious deficiencies in the PLA’s command structure.

“More than anything else, the foremost priority for the Communist Party leader and China’s politico-military leadership (is) who ought to be appointed into the Central Military Commission to lead the party-army into its next century,” said James Char, a China security scholar at Singapore’s S Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Char also noted the priority given to high tech modernisation in the study session, and said he believed “substantial resources” would be devoted to boosting military capabilities.



Chinese President Xi Jinping applauds during a ceremony marking the 105th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. (Reuters/File photo)

The Pentagon said last year that the US military believed China’s leaders wanted its military ready to be able to win a conflict over Taiwan by 2027.

More recent assessments from the US intelligence community say Beijing does not currently plan to invade Taiwan in 2027, and would prefer to achieve control of the island without the use of force.

China views democratically governed Taiwan as its own ter-

ritory and has never renounced using force to take it, deploying military ships and planes around the island on a daily basis.

At a reception held yesterday to celebrate the PLA anniversary, Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun told the gathering that the military must “serve as a solid trump card” for national reunification and thwart any form of “Taiwan independence” separatist plots and foreign military intervention.

Korea records highest-ever temperature as heatwave intensifies

Reuters
Seoul

Republic of Korea recorded its highest temperature yesterday since modern weather observations began, as a prolonged heatwave pushed temperatures above 40C (104F) for a third straight day in parts of the country.

The record was set in the southeastern city of Yangsan, where temperatures reached 41.4C at 1:40p, according to the Korea Meteorological Administration (KMA). The reading surpassed the previous national record of 41.0C set in Hongcheon in August 2018.

Yangsan has now recorded temperatures above 40 C for three consecutive days amid an intense heatwave affecting much of the country.



Children play in a fountain to cool off during a heatwave in Seoul, South Korea, yesterday. (Reuters)

The KMA has issued its highest-level heatwave warning for parts of

South Gyeongsang Province, including Yangsan, while heatwave

advisories and warnings remain in effect across most of South Korea.

“KMA data records using the ASOS observing system began in 1973, and the 41.4C measured in Yangsan is the highest temperature observed in our records since then,” a KMA spokesperson said.

The KMA said the extreme heat across the country was caused by the simultaneous influence of the North Pacific High and the Tibetan High pressure systems, which have covered the Korean Peninsula like a lid, trapping heat and allowing temperatures to build across much of the country while limiting cloud cover.

Forecasters are also monitoring Typhoon Dolphin in the western Pacific, whose eventual track could influence weather conditions over the Korean Peninsula next week, although its impact on the ongoing heatwave remains uncertain.

China says it rejects Philippine ‘baselines’ around shoal in SCS

China’s foreign ministry yesterday said it firmly opposed and would never accept the Philippines’ establishment of “baselines” around Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea (SCS), calling the move “illegal and invalid” and a serious violation of China’s territorial sovereignty. Scarborough Shoal, known in China as Huangyan Dao and in the Philippines as Bajo de Masinloc, is claimed by both countries. Manila earlier this week deposited its official nautical chart of Scarborough Shoal with the United Nations, a move it said reinforces the legal certainty of its maritime entitlements under international law. The chart depicts the normal baselines of Scarborough and the outer limits of its 12-nautical-mile territorial sea and 24-nautical-mile contiguous zone under the United Nations Convention on the Law of

the Sea (UNCLOS), the Philippine department of foreign affairs said in a statement yesterday. “Huangyan Dao is China’s inherent territory,” China’s foreign ministry said in a statement, adding that the Philippines’ territorial scope has been determined by a series of international treaties and the shoal has never been among them. The ministry reiterated Beijing’s rejection of a 2016 arbitration ruling that invalidated its sweeping South China Sea claims and accused Manila of provoking tensions around Scarborough Shoal. “China demands that the Philippine side earnestly respect China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and refrain from taking any infringing and provocative actions on Huangyan Dao. Otherwise, China will respond resolutely,” the statement said. (Reuters)

Singapore group will develop ‘most promising’ Ebola vaccine

AFP
Paris

A Singapore-based organisation announced on Thursday it will develop an Ebola vaccine dubbed the “most promising” to fight back against a deadly outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Nearly 1,500 people have died in the conflict-wracked African country from the Bundibugyo strain of Ebola, for which there are no vaccines or treatments.

But there are several different

efforts racing to develop a vaccine for the previously rare strain in the hope of stemming the escalating outbreak.

World Health Organisation experts have said a single-dose shot based on the rVSV platform is the “most promising” candidate.

This is because it uses the same platform as the only officially licensed Ebola vaccine Ervebo, which targets a different strain called Zaire.

The Singapore-based Hilleman Laboratories announced on Thursday it would advance the rVSV Bundibugyo jab so it can be tested

on humans during clinical trials.

The organisation is a joint venture between the US pharma giant MSD – known as Merck in North America – and the British charity Wellcome Trust.

“We’re racing to develop a Bundibugyo vaccine and make doses for clinical trials,” Hilleman Laboratories CEO Raman Rao said in a statement.

MSD developed and manufactured Ervebo and “will serve as a technical adviser” providing “expertise on the rVSV platform”, the statement added.

It was a joint statement with the

Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), which has pledged funds to the rVSV shot and other Ebola vaccine efforts.

If early trials are successful and the vaccine is authorised, CEPI and Hilleman said they hoped to “ensure rapid, affordable supply of doses in outbreak-affected countries and low- and middle-income settings”.

The Ervebo vaccine needs to be stored at ultra-low temperatures, however the new Bundibugyo jab is hoped to last for months in normal refrigerators, making it

cheaper and easier to deploy to remote areas.

In May, WHO experts cautioned it would likely take seven to nine months before the rVSV vaccine is ready to be assessed in a clinical trial.

The vaccine uses a modified version of the vesicular stomatitis virus, an animal virus, as a vector to deliver a protein from the Bundibugyo ebolavirus to the human immune system, triggering an immune response.

The announcement comes a week after the first dose of a different Bundibugyo vaccine being de-

veloped by Oxford University was injected into a volunteer during a rapidly launched clinical trial.

The epidemic in DR Congo is now the third-largest Ebola outbreak on record.

There have been 3,360 confirmed cases, including 1,487 deaths since May, with the outbreak heavily centred on the northeastern Ituri province.

Uganda, which borders Ituri, has seen 20 confirmed cases, including two confirmed deaths.

A viral haemorrhagic fever, Ebola spreads through close contact and infected bodily fluids.

India approves \$8.8bn offshore oil, gas exploration plan

AFP
New Delhi

India said yesterday it will provide \$8.8bn in financial support for offshore oil and gas exploration as part of its efforts to reduce its heavy reliance on energy imports.

India, the world's third-largest importer of oil and the second-largest buyer of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), has faced major disruptions due to restrictions on the Strait of Hormuz driven by conflict between the US and Iran.

To cushion the impact, New Delhi has expanded its pool of crude suppliers from 27 to 41 countries, including Venezuela, while increasing purchases from Russia and several African nations.

The cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved what officials described as a "very ambitious" push to explore vast offshore areas yesterday under India's jurisdiction for untapped oil and gas reserves.

"If exploration is carried out properly, India can achieve substantial production," Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnav

told reporters in New Delhi.

Modi first announced the offshore exploration mission during a speech marking the country's Independence Day in August last year.

India's Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri told AFP last month that the recent energy crunch had provided fresh impetus to India to expand its domestic supplies.

India currently meets only around 10% of its crude oil requirements through domestic production.

The cabinet also approved a separate plan to expand renewable energy generation, targeting 102 gigawatts of solar power capacity over the next five years through photovoltaic installations on reservoirs, canals and industrial water bodies.

India's installed solar capacity currently stands at about 162 gigawatts, among the highest in the world.

"This programme aims to prevent 10mn tonnes of CO2 emissions," Vaishnav said.

Energy demand in India, home to more than 1.4bn people, is expected to continue rising rapidly even as the government pursues its goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2070.

Police case filed against Meta India head over Modi videos

Reuters
New Delhi

Police in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad have registered a case against the head of Meta India, Arun Srinivas, over multiple videos posted on the company's Facebook platform that depicted Prime Minister Narendra Modi in an "abusive manner," a senior police officer said yesterday.

The videos spread as Modi contended with the biggest wave of youth-led protests India has seen in more than a decade, a movement over leaked papers in national ex-

aminations that has led to the resignation of his education minister.

Police are preparing to send a notice to Meta Platforms regarding the case, said V Aravind Babu, deputy commissioner of police for cyber crimes in Hyderabad. "We are in touch with the concerned agencies and are co-operating with them to resolve the matter," a spokesperson for Meta said.

It was not immediately clear why Srinivas had been named personally, a rare move against a senior executive of a global tech firm. India has tightened its content rules this year, narrowing the legal shield that protects platforms from liability for

what their users post and raising the exposure of the executives who run them. Since February, platforms must remove unlawful content flagged by courts or the government within three hours, down from 36, or lose that protection.

Holding someone personally responsible normally requires proof of "an active role and knowledge," said Akash Karmakar, a technology law partner at Indian law firm Panag & Babu. Meta has repeatedly drawn the ire of Indian government over content posted by its users, and faced criticism that it does too little to police hate speech and misinformation on Facebook and Instagram.

The case builds on a run of tensions between Meta and Modi's government over content tied to the prime minister. Modi has faced a barrage of online criticism, jokes and ridicule by protesters in recent weeks.

India's IT ministry summoned Meta executives this week after Facebook briefly restricted a Modi post, with a top official saying the government wanted the company to explain the matter at the highest level. A Meta spokesperson said at the time that the post, which was Modi's first where he addressed the massive student protests, had been blocked inadvertently.

UK court rejects challenge against new Chinese embassy

AFP
London

An English court yesterday threw out a challenge against planning permission for a Chinese "mega" embassy in central London, but residents seeking to block the contentious project vowed to fight on.

A campaign group of local residents and businesses had taken their case to the High Court, backed by opposition politicians and Hong Kong pro-democracy activists, asking for the government decision to be reexamined.

They argued the government had not listened to their fears about the impact of the vast new embassy next to the Tower of London, including the heightened risk of a terror attack, of espionage and the harassment of dissidents.

But after a hearing this month, two judges yesterday dismissed the claims, saying the housing minister had acted lawfully by granting planning permission in January.

The judgement only considered whether the government had acted lawfully, not the merits of the planning decision.

The Royal Mint Court Residents Association yesterday said it would apply for permission to appeal, hoping its case would reach the UK Supreme Court. It said it had relaunched crowdfunding efforts to fund legal costs.

"Beijing thinks this judgement is the final word. It isn't. The appeal is already in the works," Luke de Pulford, head of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, said in a statement.

"If they expect us to roll over and allow our own capital to become a CCP power centre, they have completely misjudged the strength of opposition to this mega embassy."

Former Conservative opposition leader Ian Duncan Smith, who has campaigned against the embassy, said yesterday he would raise "China policy" with new Prime Minister Andy Burnham. He said Beijing had pressured Britain to agree to the construction.

"The price we pay when we kowtow to China is in human lives," he said at a news conference organised by the claimants.

Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Chloe Cheung said the case was "not just about a building" but whether dissidents targeted by the Chinese authorities "can truly feel safe in Britain".



Pedestrians pass the site of the former Royal Mint in London, a site favoured by the Chinese authorities as a home for its new embassy. (AFP/File Photo)

Beijing bought the site of the historic former Royal Mint, next to the Tower of London, in 2018 for a reported \$327mn.

It plans to relocate its embassy there, and Boris Johnson, then foreign minister, granted diplomatic consent.

The 20,000-square-metre (235,000-square-foot) site is set to become the largest embassy complex in the UK by area.

The plan has been delayed by fierce opposition from nearby residents, rights groups and critics of China's ruling Communist Party.

In January, Keir Starmer's government finally granted planning permission shortly before visiting Beijing, prompting criticism from opposition politicians, rights groups and US President Donald Trump.

The design for the embassy by David Chipperfield Architects involves restoring and partially demolishing and extending existing historic buildings on the bank of the Thames.

The UK published planning documents showing the embassy's projected floor space would exceed 50,000 square metres.

This would make it London's largest embassy,

ahead of the new 12-storey US home around 5.1 kilometres (3.2 miles) to the southwest.

It would also make it the largest Chinese embassy in Western Europe, and likely the largest embassy of any country in the region, by floor space.

The Daily Telegraph said it had obtained unredacted plans that showed Beijing planned to construct a "concealed chamber" among 208 "secret rooms" underneath the embassy, which would be close to sensitive underground communications cables.

Yesterday's judgement said that while plans submitted to the UK authorities were redacted and not all rooms were identified, there was "no possible ambiguity as to the nature of the intended use of the premises".

Security minister Dan Jarvis told MPs in January that any risks were being "appropriately managed". He quoted intelligence chiefs as saying they had helped to develop a "range of measures" to manage any risks.

Beijing would also consolidate its seven current London sites into one, "bringing clear security advantages," he said.

Britain asks Cyprus to extradite man suspected of spying for Iran

Reuters
London/Nicosia

Britain has asked Cyprus to extradite a dual British-Azerbaijani national suspected of spying on a British air base on the Mediterranean island and passing his findings to Iran's Revolutionary Guards, London police said yesterday.

Rashad Sultanov, 44, from Islington in north London, is being held in custody by Cypriot authorities as extradition proceedings progress, the Metropolitan Police said in a statement.

The case marks Britain's first overseas National Security Act investigation, led by counter-terrorism police into incidents at Britain's RAF Akrotiri base in Cyprus between May 11 and June 22 last year, the statement said.

Police in Cyprus, where Britain has two military bases, said the suspect was first arrested in 2025 and had been in custody since then. An Israeli minister at the time said Cypriot authorities had thwarted an attack on Israeli citizens.

He was formally rearrested on

July 17 following Britain's extradition request, a Cypriot police spokesperson said.

The suspect allegedly conducted hostile surveillance on the base and is alleged to have then shared information with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the British police added.

"This case shows we are able to use the National Security Act overseas when British military bases are allegedly targeted by hostile state activity," Helen Flanagan, head of counter-terrorism policing in London, said in the statement.

The IRGC threatened earlier this month to attack any British military bases used by US forces to launch attacks on Iran.

An Iranian-type Shahed drone caused slight damage on March 2 when it hit facilities at Akrotiri. Soon afterwards, Britain said the base would not be part of its defensive agreement with the US over the use of UK bases.

Also in March, Iran was reported to have fired two ballistic missiles at a US-UK military base on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, though neither hit the target.

Burnham rolls out historic tax devolution



British PM Andy Burnham has a photo taken during a visit to a family centre in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, yesterday, for the launch of the biggest transfer of power from Westminster in a generation, which will allow English mayors to keep a share of the taxes collected in their area, giving communities greater control over the decisions that shape jobs, transport, housing and public services. (Reuters)

Several towns in Nepal under curfew after sectarian violence

Reuters
Kathmandu

Several towns in southeastern Nepal remained under curfew yesterday as the region grappled with lingering tensions after days of sectarian violence that erupted on Sunday and left at least three people dead, authorities said.

Twenty-five people were injured in a late-night clash on Sun-

day between Hindus and Muslims in Diwanganj, a town in Nepal's Sunsari district bordering India, with officials saying the violence was triggered by a dispute over loud music and religious flags during a Hindu event.

Two men were shot and killed in Sunsari on Sunday and a third death was reported in neighbouring Siraha district on Thursday as sporadic clashes continued in the area. Police spokesperson Abi

Narayan Kafle said the incidents were under investigation.

There was no violence yesterday, police said, but an indefinite curfew was in place in several towns to prevent any recurrence.

Nepal's Gen Z-backed Prime Minister Balendra Shah urged people on Thursday for calm and to remove the "cloud of turbulence" from the Himalayan nation.

"The government will conduct a fair and impartial investigation into

the violence and punish those responsible for the trouble in a transparent way," Shah said in a rare, televised address to the nation.

The country's Home Minister Sudan Gurung met the families of the two killed in Sunsari and agreed to provide about \$6,660 in relief to each late on Thursday, the government said in a statement. Gurung was also expected to go to Siraha yesterday and meet the family of the third person who was killed.



A woman injured during communal clashes is rushed for medical care in Siraha (Reuters)

Meta’s AI splurge lays bare its compute conundrum

Meta can simultaneously fuel its own AI ambitions and rent out its scarce computing capacity to bolster returns, CEO Mark Zuckerberg signaled earlier this week. The problem is: investors aren’t buying it. The Instagram owner is splurging billions to build compute — chips, servers, energy and data centers that power AI — leaving it with free cash flow of just \$784mn in the second quarter to run and grow its business. That collapse, of 91% from a year ago, drove its stock down more than 9% on Thursday.

Pressed by analysts for details on Meta’s plans, Zuckerberg framed compute as a scarce strategic asset that the company should keep and build around, rather than simply sell for short-term profit. But he acknowledged that the company had received a number of offers for its computing capacity from businesses that wanted to deploy their own AI plans “at a meaningful premium” over what it invested to build that capacity.

That tension sits at the heart of Meta’s challenge in diversifying its revenue stream. Renting out compute could ease Meta’s cash-flow squeeze, but would also divert scarce resources from its own push to build AI models and services. Having built its fortune selling ads on Facebook and Instagram, the company is now trying to take on larger rivals including Microsoft, Alphabet and Amazon that have deep ties to enterprises, an early and lucrative market for AI.

Microsoft on Wednesday showed how its AI bets were paying off even as its free cash flow fell 23%. The Windows maker breezed past expectations for growth in its Azure cloud unit and Copilot assistant thanks to a huge base of corporate customers and its early AI build-out, sending its stock up over 13%.

“We believe that there will continue to be a significantly higher margin on selling intelligence rather than selling compute directly, but we think that there’s a big opportunity obviously to sell

compute as well,” he said, as he painted a picture of what Meta hopes to build with its AI spending spree.

Zuckerberg argued that AI-powered personal assistants could become a mass-market product used by billions of consumers, while business agents could eventually help companies handle customer service, sales and marketing. But beyond broad references to subscriptions and enterprise services, he offered few specifics on how those businesses would justify Meta’s massive AI spending.

Responding to a question from J P Morgan analyst Doug Anmuth, who noted that Meta was also purchasing capacity from third parties while selling compute, Zuckerberg said Meta was intentionally investing ahead of demand.

“There is a lead time where we’re investing in building out these data centers now. They come online at some point in the future. You obviously are not getting value out of them until they’re online,” he said.

“Meta is spending like a hyperscaler without a hyperscaler’s business model,” said Josh Gilbert, online investing platform eToro’s lead APAC analyst, referring to large cloud companies.

“Microsoft, Alphabet and Amazon can point their data centre dollars at cloud businesses that sell compute straight back out the door, but Meta doesn’t have the same outlet, so every dollar of build-out leans on the ads business.”

Meta’s massive AI spending push has unnerved some investors, who are drawing parallels to the company’s costly pivot to the metaverse — a bet that racked up tens of billions of dollars in losses without becoming a large revenue generator.

Its free cash flow slump in the April-June quarter was the steepest since late 2022, when the metaverse bet attracted similar investor scrutiny. Still, Meta raised the low end of its capital spending forecast by \$5bn, lifting the range to between \$130bn and \$145bn. — Reuters

Experimental drug helps advanced cancer patients avoid bladder removal surgery

A new immunotherapy helped many patients with an aggressive form of bladder cancer avoid surgical removal of their bladders in a late-stage trial. The treatment kept many patients cancer-free for more than two years and caused mostly mild side effects, according to a report of the study in ‘The Lancet Oncology’.

The 115 patients in the study had high-risk bladder cancer that had returned despite standard treatment with bacillus Calmette-Guérin. Instead of surgery to remove the bladder — the usual next step — patients received cretostimogene grenadenorepvec, being developed by CG Oncology. Two years later, 81% of patients had not needed surgery to remove their bladder, the researchers found.

The treatment produced a complete response, meaning no detectable signs of cancer, in 75% of the patients, with roughly 60% of those complete responses lasting beyond two years, the researchers said. “Avoiding bladder removal can have a profound impact on daily living. Seeing patients remain cancer-free for years while keeping their bladder is exactly the outcome we’ve been hoping to achieve,” study leader Dr Mark Tyson of the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona, said in a statement. In one patient, the cancer has not returned for more than four years after completing

treatment. “For patients, this isn’t just about treating cancer. It’s about preserving quality of life,” Tyson said.

Patch for Parkinson’s

A fingertip patch that continuously tracks Parkinson’s disease medication levels through chemicals in sweat has the potential to greatly improve patients’ quality of life, new data suggest. Prescribing the right dose of levodopa — the gold-standard drug for managing the loss of motor control caused by Parkinson’s disease — is very challenging. Too little leaves patients unable to move, while too much triggers severe, uncontrollable jerking movements.

Doctors currently rely on patients’ diaries to adjust their doses, but the approach is imprecise.

As reported by the research team in ‘PNAS’ journal, the fingertip has a high density of sweat glands, and the patch contains an absorbent gel that acts like a sweat sponge to draw sweat out of the pores.

When levodopa in the patient’s sweat comes into contact with enzymes embedded in the patch, it triggers a chemical reaction, which in turn generates a small, measurable voltage. The voltage serves as an indicator of the patient’s levodopa level: lower voltage signals low levels, while higher voltage signals high levels. — Reuters

Cooling station



People walk in an old air-raid shelter being used as a cooling station after an orange alert for high temperatures was issued in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, China, yesterday. (Reuters)

By Mircely Guanipa, Tibisay Romero and Deisy Buitrigo
Punto Fijo/ El Palito

The Paraguana Refining Center in Western Venezuela once symbolized the country’s oil wealth and its ambition to turn vast crude reserves into fuels and export revenue. Today, the 955,000-barrel-per-day complex in Falcon state runs at a fraction of capacity, a decline decades in the making and unrelated to the strong earthquakes that struck Venezuela last month.

In the months before the quakes, Reuters visited the area surrounding the Amuay and Cardon refineries that make up the Paraguana complex, along with one of Venezuela’s other two active refineries, and interviewed four dozen workers, contractors, residents and experts. One worker at the 645,000-barrel-per-day (bpd) Amuay refinery said everything looks “ugly and rusty.” Open-air waste pits are nearly full. Residue seeps across pipelines and valve stations. Workers say years of underinvestment, equipment failures and shortages have left Paraguana struggling to produce the fuel Venezuelans need.

The reporting revealed festering decay and little ongoing maintenance at all three facilities, underscoring the monumental challenges Venezuela faces in restoring its oil infrastructure to the benefit of its citizens, even as President Donald Trump promises \$100bn in investments by foreign oil companies.

Venezuela’s refineries are at once among its most dilapidated assets and the most critical to Venezuelan consumers. Yet these refineries are among the least likely to see foreign investment any time soon, industry executives and analysts told Reuters. Recovery from the two earthquakes, which killed more than 5,000 people and caused widespread destruction, has further complicated the refineries’ outlook, said Oswaldo Felizzola, a Venezuelan energy analyst. “Right now, the priority clearly seems to be rebuilding and dealing with all the devastation the earthquakes caused across the country,” he said.

“Ugly and rusty,” Venezuela’s refineries are relics that will be difficult to revive

He said any major investments in refining would now likely be pushed into 2027 and beyond as the government focuses on oil production. Fully restoring refining capacity would require at least \$20bn, Felizzola said, an estimate echoed by other industry experts Reuters interviewed.

Some US and multinational oil companies have expressed interest in Venezuela this year after the US ousted socialist President Nicolas Maduro in a January 3 raid. But they have little incentive to rehabilitate local refineries when the US has its own refineries able to process Venezuela’s challenging heavy sour crude grades.

That leaves the government of interim President Delcy Rodriguez with little hope of raising money to restore refineries from foreign

oil companies or the refineries themselves, which provide fuel for the domestic market at well below operating cost due to longstanding policies deepened by socialist governments.

Conditions on the ground are dire. At the Amuay refinery, for example, a flexicoking unit that once turned heavy, low-value residue into better-quality low-sulfur fuel is idled and blackened, according to workers there and a recently retired engineer.

The engineer said the plant had been stripped for parts and was unsalvageable. “If we needed a pump, we looked for it there; if we needed a pipe or an instrument, we looked there,” he said.

Large oil companies remain wary of investing even in the more attractive sectors, such as crude and natural gas production. Exxon Mobil and ConocoPhillips

both left Venezuela in 2007 after then-president Hugo Chavez expropriated their projects there.

Many foreign oil companies have signed memoranda of understanding related to exploration and production projects, but negotiations with the government for the final contracts are progressing slowly after a reform of energy legislation. Asked about Venezuela’s refineries, a White House spokesperson said the US is not involved in rebuilding them and noted that Venezuela’s oil exports recently hit a seven-year high.

Legislation approved last month, building on the country’s recently reformed hydrocarbons law, created a licensing system allowing private companies to operate refineries -- until now the sole domain of state-run

PDVSA -- and sell the fuel they produce. But analysts said the model is not attractive enough to investors, in part because it also imposes a new tax of up to 5% on refiners’ gross income.

Despite sitting on some of the world’s biggest crude reserves, PDVSA has struggled over the last decade to produce enough fuel to meet domestic demand now standing at some 250,000 bpd. The Paraguana complex has had no major repairs this year, refinery workers and contractors said, after China’s Jiazhan Shaelion reduced its operations there. The company, one of PDVSA’s main refining contractors, is finishing one pending project but has not been able to agree on a new contract with PDVSA, a Jiazhan employee said.

As it extended US licenses this year to foreign firms aiming to expand or return to Venezuela, the Trump administration excluded companies from nations it considers adversaries, including Russia, China, Iran, North Korea and Cuba. Officials from PDVSA, the Venezuelan government and Jiazhan Shaelion’s Venezuela offices did not respond to comment requests.

At PDVSA’s smaller refineries, the 187,000-bpd Puerto La Cruz and the 146,000-bpd El Palito, local contractors have since last year repeatedly repaired a poorly operating catalytic cracker and power supply to the facilities, five separate employees there said. The last major repair at El Palito was executed through early 2024 by Iranian state firms.

Later work to secure enough power for the refinery to operate independently from the grid proved not enough to withstand an emergency when the quakes hit in June. A key power transmission line to the refinery failed, triggering its shutdown for about two weeks. The refinery restarted in mid-July, but will be halted for major maintenance in the coming weeks, including

post-quake inspections.

Some smaller repair projects had previously allowed El Palito and Amuay refineries to recover about 20,000 bpd of processing capacity each, PDVSA Refining Vice President Jovanny Martinez said at an April conference. The refining problems stand in contrast to crude-output gains. Since January, US control of oil sales proceeds has allowed crude production to bounce and exports to rise to about 1.2 million bpd from less than 800,000 bpd.

But there has been little focus on refining.

“In the current political environment, the US administration is going to be interested in seeing that oil exported,” said Eric Smith, associate director of Tulane University’s Energy Institute. Only when Venezuela becomes “stable and creditworthy” will larger projects get attention, including refinery upgrades, he said.

US Energy Secretary Chris Wright, speaking to reporters in June, touted the ability of US refineries to process Venezuelan crude. “A large amount of that Venezuelan oil is floating into US refineries,” he said. “When these refineries were built, Venezuela was the largest exporter of crude in the world. Our refineries are tuned to use that Venezuelan oil.”

One major obstacle to refinery repairs: cheap gasoline. Venezuela’s state-owned refineries supply state-controlled gas stations at prices set by its socialist government, resulting in some of the lowest gasoline prices on earth.

Revenue from domestic fuel sales could provide a lifeline for Rodriguez’s government, but only if she takes the unpopular step of raising prices. That is unlikely to happen anytime soon, with social tensions already at a boiling point because of what many feel was an inadequate response to the quakes. — Reuters



Infrastructure of the Amuay refinery, part of the Paraguana Refining Center, as years of underinvestment, equipment failures and shortages have hampered fuel production in Punto Fijo, Venezuela. (Reuters)



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Wildfires ease near Madrid, Bordeaux bringing respite

Reuters
Bordeaux, France, Athens/Madrid

France and Spain won some respite from days of devastating wildfires yesterday as huge blazes near Bordeaux and Madrid were brought under control, although fires continued to burn in Greece and western Spain.

Europe has been ravaged by wildfires this summer after successive record-breaking heatwaves, leaving vast stretches of drought-parched vegetation primed to burn, and forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes. In southwestern France, authorities began allowing people home after declaring that a major wildfire, which had burned for more than a week, was contained.

Evacuation orders were lifted in 12 districts west and south-west of Bordeaux, allowing 144,000 of more than 220,000 displaced people to go home, Gironde prefect Sophie Brocas said in a statement.

Europe is the world's fastest-warming continent, with recent scientific studies confirming that human-caused climate change has created the hot and dry conditions experienced across the continent in recent months, leaving no respite for emergency crews. Europe's average temperature yesterday was forecast to be 24.9°C, +3.3°C above what was typical from 1961-1990, making it the continent furthest from its historic norm.

The plumes of smoke and ash pumped into the atmosphere in recent weeks have exposed millions of people to health-damaging air pollution. Scientists have said they are particularly concerned about emissions of fine particulate matter, known as PM2.5, which is associated with cardiovascular diseases, lung cancer and respiratory problems.

On the Greek island of Crete, crews were still tackling persistent hot spots along a 15-km-long front and guarding against fresh outbreaks. A fire that broke out in central Crete on Wednesday forced the evacuation of hundreds of tourists and locals, including



Firefighters stand by a fire engine, while taking part in a tactical fire in Lege-Cap-Ferret, Gironde department, France yesterday. **(Reuters)**



A destroyed beach car following a wildfire at the village of Agios Pavlos in the Greek island of Crete. **(AFP)**

by boat from coastal communities. "We are fighting a huge battle to contain the blaze and hope to bring it under control by the end of the day," said Giorgos Tsapakos, deputy regional governor of Civil Protection of Crete.

Strong winds forecast until today evening with gusts of up to 115 kph were making the firefighters' job more difficult, he said.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies based in Geneva esti-

mated 2,000 tourists were evacuated from fires on Crete and said homes, farmland, olive groves and livestock had been destroyed.

Spain lifted its national emergency in Avila, central Spain, and Madrid on Thursday, returning control to regional authorities as conditions improved.

Fire crews remained on alert for flare-ups yesterday, while nearly 1,000 residents of seven developments in Pelayos de la Presa and San Martin de Valdeiglesias in the

capital region were still unable to return home.

Further east, a fire at La Vall d'Uixo in Castellon province remained active but had not spread for 48 hours. Some 7,000 residents are still displaced, although about 1,000 have returned home.

Strong winds hampered firefighters in Zamora's Arribes del Duero Natural Park near the Portuguese border. Fourteen villages were evacuated and two others told to remain indoors.

Magyar warns low Danube levels could keep nuclear plant shut for weeks

Reuters
Budapest

Hungary's Paks nuclear power plant, which generates nearly half the country's electricity, could be shut for weeks because water levels on the Danube river are expected to stay too low for it to operate safely, Prime Minister Peter Magyar said yesterday.

The shutdown threatens to increase Hungary's reliance on power imports during a heatwave that is expected to boost peak evening electricity demand by 20%, prompting the government to ask major industrial users to curb consumption.

Paks' four Russian-made reactors are operating at less than 50% of their combined 2 gigawatts capacity and are expected to be shut down completely on Monday for the first time in 44 years as Danube water levels are forecast to fall further.

Water from the Danube is used to cool the facility.

The reactors can be restarted once water levels recover sufficiently for safe operation, "but this is not expected to happen in the next weeks," Magyar said during a briefing at energy company MOL's Danube refinery in Szazhalombatta.

Magyar said on Thursday that Hungary could meet its energy needs through imports. However, the combination of lower domestic generation and higher demand could create a critical situation for the power system.

To ease pressure on the power

grid, Magyar reiterated his appeal to major industry companies, including carmakers and battery manufacturers, to reduce electricity and water consumption.

"I turn to the big companies with the message that we are still looking forward to receiving their plans for voluntary shutdowns," Magyar said.

He also said his party would ask parliament to postpone sessions scheduled for Monday and Tuesday to conserve energy. All state-run institutions will switch off decorative lighting by Monday at the latest.

Zsolt Hernadi said yesterday that the company was shutting down some facilities across the country to save energy. Magyar said that MOL, one of Hungary's biggest electricity consumers, was cutting its usage by 40%.

Samsung SDI said in an emailed statement that its battery plant in God, north of Budapest, was cutting water consumption by 50% and reducing electricity use by 10% during critical evening hours.

In neighbouring Romania, low water levels forced nuclear power producer Nuclearelectrica to shut down one of its reactors.

European Commission spokesperson Anna-Kaisa Itkonen told Reuters the Commission was closely monitoring the electricity supply situation in Romania, Hungary and the wider southeast European region.

There is no immediate security-of-supply concern and the Commission is ready to convene an ad hoc meeting of the European Union's Electricity Coordination Group if needed, she said.

Italy temporarily suspends Schengen agreement with Spain after Ceuta crisis

Italy has suspended its Schengen agreement with Spain, following the influx of migrants into the latter's Ceuta enclave in northern Morocco, Italy's Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said yesterday. "The temporary suspension of Schengen with Spain is a necessary decision to protect the security of our citizens and defend Europe's borders," Tajani wrote on X. Italy's interior ministry confirmed that Italy had closed to Spain its maritime and air entry points for a month starting today but cautioned it would not impact travel for Spanish and European citizens to Italy. A spokesman also said that following discussions with France, the two countries would reinforce land border controls that are already in place. On Thursday, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni called for Spain to be suspended from the Schengen area, describing the images from Ceuta showing thousands of arriving migrants as "shocking". Tajani yesterday said EU countries must "work together to prevent uncontrolled flows of migrants from entering EU territory..." **(AFP)**

Explosion at coal mine kills 34 in southern Pakistan

A blast at a coal mine killed at least 34 workers in southern Pakistan, the provincial disaster agency said yesterday, as rescuers searched for more missing miners.

The explosion, suspected to be caused by methane gas, tore through the mine near the capital of the resource-rich province of Balochistan on Thursday, sparking a rescue operation that ran through the night.

"According to information received from the deployed teams, 34... bodies have been recovered," southern Balochistan's provincial disaster management authority said in a statement in the early hours yesterday.

"The joint rescue operation is still underway to locate and recover the remaining trapped miners," it added, without specifying how many were in the mine when the

explosion took place.

Witnesses said that after hearing the blast, an unknown number of miners in the area rushed to try to reach workers inside.

"Other miners descended into the mine after the explosion for a rescue operation, but they also died," Ahmed Zada, a mine worker at the site, told AFP.

Relatives, rescuers, and miners gathered at the mine entrance in Sorange, around 50 kilometres from the provincial capital Quetta, as the rescue operations were carried out.

Rescuers and workers, some wearing hard hats but most in everyday attire, helped carry bodies out of the concrete tunnel, some covered in black soot.

They ferried them on stretchers to waiting vehicles and ambulances near the entrance to the mine. **(AFP)**

Four bodies of climbers found after avalanche: Police

Search teams in Pakistan found four bodies after an avalanche on one of the world's highest mountains, with six people still missing from an expedition led by renowned British-Nepali climber Nirmal Purja, police said yesterday.

A spokesperson for police in the mountainous Gilgit-Baltistan region said search-and-rescue teams had reached the location the avalanche had struck on Thursday, cutting off contact with the international expedition that had been in the area.

Four bodies have been recovered, the police spokesperson said in a statement on Facebook, later adding that the two of them, of a Nepali climber and an Omani, were being transported to Skardu city on board a military helicopter. The statement did not name the two climbers.

It added that the search operation ended for the day and will resume today.

The Alpine Club of Pakistan said the expedition comprised 10 people – including five Nepalese, a Pakistani, an Omani, an American, and a climber from China. Police did not mention an American citizen and said two British nationals – a man and a woman – were in the missing team.

The club said late on Thursday it had "received deeply concerning reports of an avalanche that struck a team of climbers on Broad Peak (8,047m)".

"The entire team has reportedly been out of communication since the avalanche," it said.

Purja, 43, who served with Britain's Brigade of Gurkhas before joining the Special Boat Squadron of the Royal Marines, has broken multiple climbing records since

becoming a full-time mountaineer and tour guide.

He climbed all 14 "eight-thousanders" (peaks above 8,000 metres, or 26,000 feet) in six months and six days between April and October 2019 – then a record.

In 2021, Purja completed the first winter ascent of K2 along with a team of nine other Nepali climbers.

China's foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said they were "urgently working to verify and understand the situation" and said Beijing was willing to provide assistance to Pakistan.

Rescuers equipped with geolocation devices have been sent to search for the missing climbers, the Alpine Club said.

"Through Global Positioning System (GPS), we have already traced the locations of four climbers," Ayaz Shigri, general

secretary of the Alpine Club, told AFP in the mountainous northern city of Skardu.

"For now, we can't say anything about what exactly has happened," he said.

Military helicopters were reinforcing efforts on the ground to find the climbers and boost the operation in the challenging high-altitude environment, according to the club.

Purja had written on X this week that he was close to becoming the first person to climb all 14 "super peaks" twice without oxygen.

"Broad Peak, I ask for nothing but safe passage up and back down," he wrote.

"I take zero mountains for granted. Not one. The moment my foot leaves basecamp, it's 100%. Always has been. Always will be. **(AFP)**

A rumour, a rush: Chaos erupts at Morocco border with Spain's Ceuta

AFP
Fnideq, Morocco

When Fatima Zahra heard the rumour of a rare border opening between Morocco and Spain, she joined thousands in rushing to attempt a perilous journey into the Ceuta enclave by land or sea.

AFP images showed people swimming around Ceuta's frontier fence and others clambering over barbed wire to reach European soil, as Moroccan riot police fired tear gas and water cannons at crowds after an apparent breakdown of border controls.

An AFP journalist on the scene witnessed the arrest of around 30 young people.

Ceuta, a Spanish territory of 18.5 square kilometres in north Africa, and the similar enclave Melilla, have Europe's only two land borders with its southern neighbouring continent.

Zahra was eventually turned away at the Moroccan border town

of Fnideq, but Ceuta's regional president said some 60,000 people had successfully entered the tiny territory of just 80,000 residents.

"I was in Tangier, where I was working. I woke up in the morning and heard that Ceuta had opened," Zahra told AFP.

"At that point, I told the people with me let's go there for work... let's try our luck too," she added, saying she wanted to leave for Europe because she works "under appalling conditions".

The square near Fnideq from which many had set out the day before was a scene of ruin on yesterday after the clashes, with more than a dozen cars burned out and rocks littering the ground as officers tried to push hopeful migrants back.

Ceuta's regional president said at least 34 people had lost their lives in the treacherous dash into the territory.

Footage of the border chaos has sparked a crisis for Spain's left-wing government.

Madrid has sent troops to boost



Moroccan security forces clash with migrants attempting to cross into Ceuta near Fnideq, on the Morocco-Spain border, yesterday. **(AFP)**

security, while France announced tighter checks on its border with Spain and Italy called for the country to be suspended from Europe's open-borders Schengen zone.

But for locals, the chance of a better life in Europe was worth the risk, even in the perilous currents of the Strait of Gibraltar.

Karim, another would-be migrant turned back, said news of some successful crossings emboldened many to make their own attempt.

"Suddenly they heard that the borders were open and that some young people had crossed, so everyone ended up here," he said.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez visited the enclave yesterday after the largest inflow of people into the autonomous city since May 2021. He said he would "characterise what happened... as an attack, a violation on Spain's territorial integrity".

The images of ebullient arrivals to Spain, a portion of them minors and some wearing only swimsuits and flip-flops, have spread far and wide, threatening a rupture in relations with Rabat.

While Spanish police in Ceuta appeared to do little to intervene, some jubilant migrants walked through its streets, calling out: "Bye bye Morocco, hello Spain." Local Spanish television station El Faro broadcast footage showing young people, including a 14-year-old girl, making the "V" for victory sign after crossing into the European nation.

At dawn, the Moroccan police response became heavier as dozens of officers used water cannons and tear gas to push back those trying to leave Morocco, with some elder-

ly women escorted from the scene of the clashes.

Members of the crowd responded by throwing stones and using slingshots, according to an AFP journalist.

Fires engulfed dozens of cars, including informal taxis in which some had arrived the previous day.

By the afternoon, the clashes had stopped and trucks were clearing away the burnt vehicles. AFP footage showed dozens of young people turned back from Ceuta scattering into the countryside.

Some had made long journeys from cities as far away as Marrakesh and Kenitra after hearing of a chance to reach European soil.

Abdelhakim, also turned back from the Spanish territory, said he walked 14 kilometres "through the mountains" to reach the Morocco-Spain border, which he also believed was open.

"Once we got here, we were told to cross by sea. I found myself completely submerged and saw two men die right before my eyes," he said.



Dates festival highlights growing appetite for homegrown produce

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

The 11th Local Dates Festival at Souq Waqif continues to attract large numbers of residents, with shoppers flocking to the venue to buy freshly harvested Qatari dates directly from local farms.

This trend, it is learnt, highlights a sustained public interest in homegrown produce and support for the country's agricultural sector.

Running until August 10 at Souq Waqif's Eastern Square, the festival has become a busy marketplace where visitors browse a wide selection of locally grown dates, compare varieties and prices, and purchase directly from growers.

The event, organised by the Ministry of Municipality in co-operation with Souq Waqif Management, brings together 125 local farms – the largest participation since the festival was launched in 2016 – offering varieties such as Khalas, Khunaizi, Shishi and Barhi, along with seasonal Qatari fruits including figs,



papaya, limes and almonds.

Since its launch on July 25, the festival has seen busy aisles, shoppers examining neatly packaged dates, and families exploring traditional displays decorated with palm fronds and fresh date clusters, highlighting its appeal as both a marketplace and a cultural attraction.

According to the Ministry of Municipality, the festival forms part of ongoing efforts to support local farmers, promote Qatari agricultural products and encourage consumers to pur-

chase locally grown dates.

It also provides producers with an opportunity to market their harvest directly to consumers, improving returns while strengthening links between farms and the public.

The festival comes as Qatar continues to strengthen domestic agricultural production. The Ministry of Municipality said national date production reached approximately 24,000 tonnes in 2025, supported by technical assistance, pest-control programmes, improved irrigation technologies and



The 11th Local Dates Festival at Souq Waqif's Eastern Square, running until August 10, showcases a wide variety of locally grown dates and seasonal fruits, supporting local agriculture and promoting homegrown produce.
PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality and productivity of date palm cultivation.

Dates remain one of Qatar's strategic agricultural crops and an important component of the country's food security strategy.

The ministry added that Qatari dates are promoted through local agricultural markets, retail outlets and annual events such as the Local Dates Festival, allowing farmers to showcase and sell their produce at competitive prices while

increasing consumer awareness of local products.

The festival's popularity mirrors the steady expansion of Qatar's agricultural sector.

From just 19 participating farms in its inaugural edition in 2016, the event has grown to 125 farms this year, reflecting increasing investment in local agriculture and greater confidence among producers in the annual festival as a marketing platform.

Previous editions have also

demonstrated strong public support.

The 10th Local Dates Festival attracted more than 90,600 visitors and recorded sales exceeding 170 tonnes of dates, underscoring the event's growing role in promoting sustainable consumption, preserving agricultural heritage and supporting Qatar's food security objectives.

Adult collectors help drive Qatar's growing collectables market

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Collectable toys and pop culture merchandise are no longer niche hobbies but a rapidly expanding retail segment in Qatar and across the GCC, according to recent market reports.

This was propelled by rising disposable incomes, a growing culture of fandom, and strong demand for licensed, limited-edition and designer collectables, reports said.

The trend is reflected at this year's Qatar Toy Festival, where premium figurines inspired by Disney classics, Pokémon, Super Mario, anime and designer art toys have taken centre stage alongside traditional toys, highlighting a shift in consumer preferences from children's playthings to display-worthy collectables.

A recent Qatar Collectibles Market Outlook (2025-2031) identifies toys and action figures among the country's key collectable categories, citing increasing interest in rare and unique items, higher disposable incomes and the growing popularity of exhibitions and events dedicated to collectables.

The report (6Wresearch) also points to expanding online trading platforms and increasing consumer willingness to invest in alternative collectable assets.

The broader regional outlook tells a similar story. According to the GCC Collectibles Market Report (2025-2030), the Gulf collectables market is valued at approximately \$1.3bn, supported by rising household incomes, demand for unique products and the rapid expansion of e-commerce and online marketplaces.

The report (by Research and Markets) notes that consumers are increasingly purchasing collectables for both emotional value and potential long-term appreciation, with toys, action figures, art and memorabilia among the categories contributing to market growth.

Another study, the GCC Pop Culture Merchandise and Collectibles Retail Market Report (2025-2030), estimates the regional market at \$1.2bn, attributing its growth to the rising popularity of movies, video games, anime and other entertainment franchises that continue to shape consumer spending across the Gulf.

Industry analysts say licensed



From anime and superheroes to Disney classics and video game icons, premium collectables on display at the Qatar Toy Festival highlight the growing appeal of hobby collecting in Qatar.
PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



intellectual property has become a major driver of the sector, with globally recognised characters from Disney, Pokémon and gaming franchises attracting collectors well beyond the traditional children's market.

The displays at the Qatar Toy Festival illustrate that evolution, featuring premium statues and limited-edition figurines inspired by Disney princesses, Winnie the Pooh, Alice in Wonderland, Pokémon and contemporary designer vinyl art toys. Many of the collectables are intended for display rather than play, reflecting

a global shift towards lifestyle and hobby collecting.

The reports (Research and Markets) also point to digital platforms as an important catalyst for growth, allowing collectors easier access to rare releases, limited editions and international brands while helping create online communities where enthusiasts can buy, sell and exchange collectables.

The momentum is expected to continue over the next several years as Gulf consumers increasingly seek products that combine entertainment, nostalgia



and exclusivity.

For Qatar, the outlook (6Wresearch) suggests that growing interest in collectables, together with specialised

exhibitions and expanding retail offerings, could further strengthen the country's position within the region's evolving pop culture and collectables market.

