



DCID participates in international conference in Malaysia



The Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) is participating in the 2026 International Conference on Peace Among Followers of Religions, being held in Malaysia's Malacca state, as a principal organising partner.

The conference's official proceedings are set to begin today.

The conference will focus on a theme of the state of Malacca and Malaysia as a meeting point for faith, culture, diversity, and harmony, toward building a cohesive society.

The DCID is participating as a principal organising partner for the second consecutive year, following its participation in the previous edition, hosted in the Malaysian state of Penang in 2025.

The conference aims to provide an international platform for exchanging expertise on promoting peace and coexistence, exploring the role of shared values in building bridges of understanding among followers of different religions and cultures, and producing recommendations that support the development of cohesive societies.

DCID chairman Dr Ibrahim bin Saleh al-Nuaimi said that the centre's participation as a principal organising partner reflects its commitment to expanding international partnerships and promoting dialogue among religions and cultures, in line with

Qatar's mission of fostering dialogue and mutual understanding among peoples.

He added that the DCID's efforts have expanded beyond the local and regional levels, establishing a broad international presence across Europe, the Americas, and Asia, thereby reinforcing Qatar's position as an active partner in promoting global peace.

The centre's delegation is headed by board member Dr Hamed bin Abdulaziz al-Marwani, who will deliver the keynote address on the transformative power of interfaith understanding in building communities, from diversity to acceptance.

The DCID will also participate in the conference's academic sessions, where senior researcher Dr Sekou Marafa Toure will deliver a presentation during the second plenary session on the obstacles to promoting peace and harmony, and on the role of the centre in supporting dialogue, resolving conflicts, and building peace.

The 2026 conference brings together around 150 participants, including religious leaders, government officials, and academics, to discuss mutual understanding among religions as a foundation for peaceful coexistence, respect for diversity and acceptance of others, and stronger co-operation between religious communities and civil society institutions in support of sustainable peace. - QNA

Amir congratulates Cote d'Ivoire leader

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani sent a cable of congratulations yesterday to Cote d'Ivoire's President Alassane Ouattara on the anniversary of his country's Independence Day. HH the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent a similar cable of congratulations to Ouattara.

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani meanwhile sent a cable of congratulations to Cote d'Ivoire's Prime Minister Robert Beugre Mambe on the occasion. - QNA

Qatar condemns bomb attack in Syrian city

Qatar has expressed its condemnation and denunciation of an explosion that targeted a minibus in the Syrian city of Jaramana, which led to injuries.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs renewed, in a statement yesterday, Qatar's firm position of rejecting violence, terrorism, and criminal acts, regardless of the motives, and expressed Qatar's wishes for a swift recovery for the injured. - QNA

Summer camps turn school holidays into a season of learning

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

More than 550 educational, cultural and sports activities are being offered across Qatar this summer under the Ministry of Sports and Youth's 2026 Summer Plan, providing many students with opportunities to develop new skills, stay active and engage with their communities during the school holidays.

The nationwide programme, delivered through youth centres and partner institutions, is transforming the school break into a season of learning, innovation and civic engagement.

It comprises 142 civic participation activities, 125 education, research and innovation programmes, and 118 health and wellness initiatives, alongside workshops on entrepreneurship, technology, environmental awareness and social responsibility.

Complementing the government's efforts is a growing network of camps organised by sports organisations, cultural institutions, museums, educational centres and private entities, offering activities tailored to a wide range of interests and age groups.

Sports continue to be among the biggest attractions.

Aspire Zone Foundation's long-running summer camp offered football, basketball, volleyball, swimming, gymnastics and self-defence training in world-class facilities.

Young equestrian enthusiasts can also develop their riding skills through specialised programmes at Al Shaqab and the Qatar Equestrian Federation, while inclusive sporting and recreational camps are expanding opportunities for children with disabilities.

"The summer camps are an excellent initiative where youngsters can meet friends, interact with their peers and use their free time constructively," said Mariam, an expatriate mother of three. "They also help working parents who might otherwise have to leave their children at home while they are at work, which could affect their physical and mental well-being."

She noted that the wide range of affordable - and in many cases,



free - summer programmes offered across the country helps keep children engaged throughout the holidays, reducing excessive screen time and encouraging them to develop practical skills that support their overall growth and development.

Science, technology and creativity also feature prominently in this year's programmes.

The Qatar National Library's annual summer camp combines STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education with storytelling, arts and interactive learning, while the Qatar Toy Festival summer camp introduces children to engineering, design thinking and problem-solving through hands-on activities.

At OliOli Children's Museum, youngsters explore science and creativity through immersive exhibitions and themed workshops designed to spark curiosity and imagination.

"The activities are diverse and cater to different interests while taking into account the needs of both boys and girls," said Hamid, a father of two boys. "Some children enjoy reading, painting and creative crafts, while others prefer team or individual sports, and these camps offer something for everyone."

He added that many of the high-quality camps are accessible to all eligible children and provide valuable opportunities to build confidence, develop practical skills and strengthen social interaction through group activities.

Culture and heritage remain central to the summer programme, with Katara Cultural Village organising specialised camps in Arabic language, creative writing, theatre,



photography, ceramics, astronomy and traditional crafts.

Inclusive programmes have also expanded in recent years.

Education City's Ability Friendly Summer Camp offers children and young people with disabilities adapted sports, swimming, horse riding, arts, cooking and gardening in an environment designed to promote independence and social interaction.

Similar specialist initiatives are also organised by organisations such as Step by Step Qatar.

Shopping malls, private schools and hotels are also contributing to the summer activity landscape through discounted programmes and recreational initiatives.

Some malls offer reduced rates for children's play zones on selected days, while certain private schools open their playgrounds for organised football sessions.

Several hotels also allow non-guests access to swimming pools and recreational facilities on designated days during the summer.

As a result, many families are increasingly embracing summer



The nationwide programme is transforming the school break into a season of learning, innovation and civic engagement.



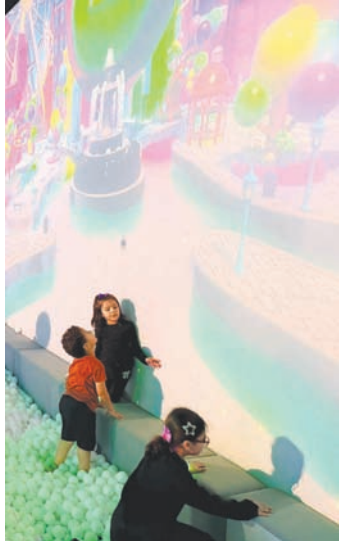
camps as a productive alternative to passive indoor activities, valuing the blend of education, recreation and social interaction they provide.

Organisers likewise report strong participation, with many families returning year after year,

reflecting growing public confidence in the quality, safety and developmental value of the country's summer programmes.

Research also highlights the benefits of such initiatives.

Studies involving camp participants found that 92% reported



positive personal growth, 76% acquired new practical skills through hands-on activities, and around 64% experienced improvements in physical fitness.

Between 70% and 85% also reported increased self-confidence following their participation.

QNL equips regional librarians for the era of artificial intelligence

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

The Qatar National Library (QNL) is expanding its efforts to strengthen the library profession across the region with two virtual training workshops this month, designed to

Virtual workshops to strengthen reading programmes, AI skills across Mena

equip librarians with the latest skills in reading programme development and artificial intelligence (AI).

Organised under the "Librarians for Libraries" initiative, the workshops are being delivered by the QNL in its capacity as the regional office of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) for the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) region.

The programme aims to enhance professional expertise while helping libraries adapt to the rapidly evolving information landscape.

Speaking to *Gulf Times*, library specialist Mohammad Abu al-Ghaith highlighted the growing importance of continuous professional development in an era

increasingly shaped by emerging technologies.

"Continuous training has become essential as the library profession evolves alongside rapid technological advances, particularly in AI," he said. "Librarians today must constantly develop new skills to meet the changing needs of readers while preserving the timeless principle that 'for every reader, there is a book, and for every book, a reader'."

"Through innovative programmes, we seek to inspire children and families to embrace reading while ensuring libraries remain vibrant centres of lifelong learning," al-Ghaith said. "The QNL has established itself as a dynamic knowledge institution, delivering year-round professional training

across Qatar and the wider region, while providing readers with seamless access to books, information and digital resources both on-site and online."

The programme opens tomorrow (August 9) with "How Can Libraries Design Reading Programmes That Inspire Children and Families?", an Arabic-language workshop to be held via Zoom from 4pm to 5pm.

The session will introduce practical approaches to designing engaging reading initiatives that encourage participation by children and families, drawing on successful experiences in organising reading events, school visits and community outreach activities.

A second workshop, "Generative Artificial Intelligence and Library

Services", will take place on August 18 from 1pm to 2pm, also in Arabic via Zoom.

The session will explore the transformative role of generative AI in modern library services, equipping participants with the knowledge and practical tools needed to integrate emerging technologies into their professional practice.

Through initiatives such as "Librarians for Libraries", the QNL continues to reinforce its role as a regional hub for professional excellence, fostering innovation, knowledge exchange and lifelong learning while supporting librarians across the Mena region in meeting the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly digital future.



Mohammad Abu al-Ghaith



Poster of the event.

Syrian president discusses regional developments with UK security adviser



Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa met with British National Security Adviser Jonathan Powell, who is visiting Syria, to discuss the latest regional and international developments. Both sides emphasised the importance of continued coordination to serve mutual interests and contribute to supporting security and stability in the region. The meeting also addressed ways to strengthen bilateral relations between the two countries, in addition to discussing a number of issues of common interest. **(QNA)**

Iraq PM to visit Riyadh

Iraqi Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi received an invitation to visit Riyadh, his office said yesterday, as Tehran-backed groups announced they would delay their response to deadly US-Saudi strikes in Iraq last month. Zaidi was supposed to visit Riyadh in late July, but the trip was cancelled due to the strikes which killed 20 militants, including five Iranians, on July 29. His media office said Zaidi met Saudi intelligence chief Khalid bin Ali al-Humaidan, who “conveyed a message from the Saudi leadership renewing the invitation for the prime minister to visit the Saudi capital, Riyadh”. The US-Saudi strikes came after Riyadh said its forces had intercepted drones targeting oil facilities, blaming Iran-backed groups in Iraq. They also followed growing US pressure on Baghdad to disarm pro-Iran armed groups. **(AFP)**

Qatar welcomes release of 15 detainees under Doha peace process for Eastern DR Congo

The State of Qatar has welcomed the release of 15 detainees by the Congolese authorities and the facilitation by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) of their transfer and handover to the Congo River Alliance/March 23 Movement (AFC/M23) on Aug 6 and 7, under the mechanism for the release of detained persons signed in Doha in September last year as part of the Doha Peace Process. Qatar affirmed that the release of the detainees represents an important step toward strengthening confidence between the parties and creating favourable conditions for achieving further progress toward peaceful and sustainable solutions, thereby supporting efforts to restore peace and stability in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The State of Qatar also commended the role of the ICRC in implementing the mechanism for the release, safe transfer, and handover of detainees in accordance with humanitarian principles, as well as the efforts of partners supporting the peace process. Qatar reiterated its commitment to continuing its efforts to facilitate dialogue between the parties, in line with its steadfast approach to supporting the peaceful settlement of conflicts and promoting regional security and stability. It also expressed hope that this step would encourage further confidence-building measures between the parties and help fulfil the aspirations of the Congolese people for peace, development, and prosperity. **(QNA)**

Explosion near Syrian capital: 2 dead, 14 hurt

By Yamaam al-Shaar and Firas Makdesi
Reuters

A bomb planted in a minibus wounded 14 people on the outskirts of Syria’s capital Damascus on Thursday night, with some of the injuries so severe that they were taken for fatalities, an official said yesterday.

Officials had said on Thursday that two people were killed in the blast. Health ministry head of media, Riad al-Sayed Hasan, told Reuters that assessment was based on the discovery of body parts at the scene which turned out to be those of some of the people severely wounded.

The blast occurred in the predominantly Druze area of Jaramana, outside Damascus. A security source told the state-run Ekhhbariya TV that the blast was caused by an explosive device planted on the vehicle, citing preliminary information.

Footage from the scene showed the blown-up husk of a white minibus being dragged away from the site of the blast.

Authorities have not blamed anyone for the attack, which took place in an area where there have

been clashes between the Druze and militants backing the authorities that took over after the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad in 2024.

Jaramana resident Samer Abbas was metres away in his clothing store when the explosion went off. A piece of shrapnel hit the storefront.

“It was a strong, unnatural sound,” he told Reuters. His son had been sitting outside. Fearing the worst, Abbas said he could not breathe until he confirmed he was safe.

“My blood dried up until I checked up on him, I saw him... until I heard his voice,” he said.

Over at the Mujtahid Hospital in Damascus, Bassel Imad said the bombing was “sadistic”. His cousin Safouh was driving the vehicle that exploded and lay injured.

The targeted street in Jaramana is narrow and includes shops and street vendors, Imad said, as people clamoured around him.

“What happened was very wicked,” he added.

A UN investigation in March found more than 1,700 people were killed in the southern Sweida province south of Damascus in July 2025.

Lebanon, Israel shortlist nations to verify Hezbollah disarmament

Reuters
Beirut

Lebanon and Israel have agreed a shortlist of countries that could send troops to verify the disarmament of Hezbollah under a US-brokered agreement, a Lebanese official said yesterday, with the United States due to pick countries from the list.

The official declined to identify any of the countries on the shortlist or say how many there were. Another Lebanese official and two foreign diplomats have previously told Reuters that Israel and the United States had vetoed France.

The list was produced during meetings between Lebanon and Israel at the US embassy in Rome this week, the latest round of talks on how to implement a June 26 deal that links Israel’s progressive withdrawal of troops from Lebanon to the disarmament of Hezbollah, which would be “verified” by a third party.

Hezbollah is not a party to the agreement and has refused to give up its arsenal.

“We have reached a short list of countries. We decided which parties were impossible for each and set the potential actors,” the Lebanese official said. “The Americans will now decide, and could pick more than one country.”



A motorcade arrives for round of talks between the Lebanese and Israeli delegations at the US embassy in Rome. **(AFP/Filephoto)**

There was no immediate response from Israel’s foreign ministry to Reuters questions on the shortlist. When asked about the shortlist, a State Department spokesperson said the talks were “productive on the technical and expert levels” but did not provide further details.

The United States has been trying to broker an end to fighting between Israel and the Iran-backed Lebanese armed group Hezbollah, which has raged since

March in parallel with the wider US-Israeli war against Iran.

Two days after the US and Israel attacked Iran on February 28, Hezbollah fired at Israel in solidarity with Tehran. Israeli forces responded with aerial bombardments and a ground assault, seizing a strip of land extending about 10km (6 miles) deep into southern Lebanon. More than a million Lebanese civilians were forced to flee their homes.

The Lebanese official said Beirut had rejected an earlier proposal for private security companies to play the role of third-party ver-

ifier of Hezbollah’s disarmament.

“All of the actors proposed are countries. We still need to discuss exactly how this would work, how many forces would be deployed and how they would work with the Lebanese army,” the official said.

A framework for the presence of foreign troops in Lebanon would also need to be agreed, possibly by housing them under a UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, whose mandate is due to expire at the end of this year.

The Lebanese official said that would require a new UN Security Council resolution, which the U.S. and Israel were now willing to consider in what he called a breakthrough. Other possibilities include housing the troops under a separate UN agency or through a memorandum of understanding with Lebanon.

The talks did not, however, produce an agreement on the next area from which Israeli troops would withdraw so that Lebanese troops could take control. Beirut had proposed Bint Jbeil and Khiam, two large towns that have been hit hard by air strikes and where Israeli troops have razed entire neighbourhoods.

The next round of talks is set for early September, the official said.

Unicef: Nearly 300 children die in Gaza since October

The United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef) has documented the reported deaths of at least 300 children in the Gaza Strip during the 300 days since the ceasefire came into effect last October. Unicef Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Edouard Beigbeder, stated that the ceasefire, which leaves, on average, one child dead every day, is failing children. He added that hundreds of other children have been injured, many of them seriously, and that Gaza’s children are still waiting for the promised end to the violence. Unicef said families are now confined to around one-third of the Gaza Strip, living

in unsafe conditions amid destroyed buildings, rubble, and accumulating solid waste. Across the Strip, children continue to face acute malnutrition, disease, unsafe drinking water, and damaged sanitation systems. Unicef called on all parties to uphold their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law. The agency stressed the need to protect children, ensure their access to essential goods and services, including healthcare, education, safe drinking water, and food, and facilitate safe, rapid, and unimpeded humanitarian access to children in need. **(QNA)**

AFP
Kampala

Uganda on Thursday authorised the deployment of soldiers to the Gaza Strip, as part of the International Stabilisation Force (ISF) under the disarmament agreement reached at the end of July.

This international force would be part of an initiative by the Board of Peace, an organisation created by US President Donald Trump and tasked, among other things, with preparing for the post-war period.

The Ugandan Parliament passed a motion supporting President Yoweri Museveni’s decision to “deploy the Uganda People’s Defence

Forces in the Gaza Strip for a peacekeeping mission”.

General Henry Matsiko welcomed the decision, telling parliament: “I’m very, very proud as Ugandans that Uganda People’s Defence Forces is viewed as the anchor of stability in a sea of turbulence, regionally and now globally.”

Four other countries have indicated they are willing to join the force — Morocco, Kosovo, Albania and Kazakhstan, a Board of Peace source told AFP in July.

They added that the ISF would be responsible for securing a “humanitarian zone” intended to accommodate tens of thousands of Palestinians subject to prior vetting.

Palestinians would then be able to move freely in and out of the area, the source said, although

the principle of closed humanitarian zones — discussed for several months — has raised concerns within the humanitarian community.

But while the Ugandan parliament passed the motion, there was some pushback.

“The matter of deploying our soldiers to a very risky place like Gaza, where Israel strikes every now and again, cannot be just casually passed here,” said MP Karim Masaba.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel had not accepted the latest road map for the Gaza Strip, even after receiving assurances that an Israeli pullout would only happen after Hamas disarms.

Uganda’s army chief Muhoozi Kainerugaba has repeatedly published messages of support for Israel in recent months.

Gaza beekeeper starts again on rooftop amid ruins of war

AFP
Gaza City

Perched on the edge of a rooftop high above Gaza City’s bombed-out landscape, Ibrahim al-Dabba lovingly tends his community of bees, cultivating a rare source of hope among the ruins of the Israel-Hamas war.

Al-Dabba and his sons, donning protective netted hats and wielding metal bee smokers, gently inspect the neat rows of teeming hives.

As each frame of honeycomb is lifted out, hundreds of bees buzz lazily above the shattered urban neighbourhood — an incongruous setting for an apiary, but one the veteran beekeeper had little option but to choose.

Al-Dabba, who heads the Beekeepers Cooperative in the Gaza Strip, said the war which erupted in October 2023 obliterated the Palestinian territory’s beekeeping culture.

“We had more than 40,000 bee-

hives and more than 450 beekeepers” before the war, he told AFP from the rooftop in Gaza City’s Tel al-Hawa neighbourhood.

“The situation was good, with more than 1,000 families making a living through the beekeeping sector,” he added.

“The war came and destroyed the beekeeping sector by more than 95% because most beekeepers were near the border areas,” he explained.

Al-Dabba himself lost some 400 hives, which he had kept in agricultural lands east of Gaza City.

He had no choice but to relocate his remaining 35 or so hives to the roof of a residential building, but admitted the situation was far from ideal.

“Bees are supposed to be in a safe, suitable agricultural area, but today the bees are suffering just as we are,” he said.

Al-Dabba explained that he could not move his bees back to their previous home because it had been destroyed and the land was now under the control of the Israeli military.



Ibrahim al-Dabba (centre), head of the Beekeepers Co-operative in the Gaza Strip, with his sons on the roof of a destroyed building in Gaza City’s Tel al-Hawa neighbourhood. **(AFP)**

“We cannot approach or enter,” he said.

“Just as we are displaced in the streets, the bees are also displaced on the rooftops.”

The devastating war in Gaza was triggered by Hamas’s October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, which resulted in the deaths of 1,221 people, according to an AFP tally

based on official Israeli figures.

Israel’s retaliatory military campaign in Gaza has killed more than 73,300 people, according to the territory’s health ministry, which operates under Hamas authority and whose figures are considered reliable by the UN.

Despite the ceasefire in effect since October, bloodshed has con-



The sons of Ibrahim al-Dabba (unseen), tend to beehives with their father on the roof of a destroyed building in Gaza City’s Tel al-Hawa neighbourhood, where the displaced family has taken refuge. **(AFP)**

tinued in the tiny territory, with the Israeli military continuing to target Palestinians they say are militants.

Israel says it now controls more than 60% of the Gaza Strip, up from about half when the ceasefire took effect.

The humanitarian situation also remains dire, with hundreds of thousands of people living in tents and Israel tightly controlling the entry of all goods into the territory.

“We lack essential supplies because importing beekeeping equipment from the other side

is not permitted,” al-Dabba told AFP, saying he had approached external organisations and ministries in Gaza and the occupied West Bank for help.

Despite the suffering and challenges of relocating his hives to an unfamiliar landscape, al-Dabba said he found “hope after seeing the bees coexist and adapt”.

“The bees now come and go and feel settled,” he said.

“So we hope that hope, goodness and living in peace and security will come, like in other countries.”



African youth narrates how he fell for Russian recruitment trap

AFP
Malabo, Equatorial Guinea

Daniel Angel Masie Nchama had no idea what he was getting into when Russian recruiters sent the young man from Equatorial Guinea into battle in war-ravaged Ukraine.

"I realised we were at the front when a missile struck us," he told AFP. Now back home at his parents' modest house in the capital Malabo, the 22-year-old former IT student recalled the freezing cold, hunger, fear and finally, flight — achieved with the help of his country's diplomatic efforts.

Dreaming of finding a life abroad, he was convinced by a Cameroonian named "Fabrice" to head to Russia.

He left in December 2025, believing he was going to undergo

military training, with the promise of work as a bodyguard.

On arrival, he and the other prospective recruits were asked to sign documents in Russian, a language none of them spoke.

"We said we couldn't sign documents we didn't understand. They insisted, saying it was too late to translate them," Nchama said.

When he took out his phone to try to translate them, a Russian soldier placed his weapon on the table. "It was a threat. So we had to sign," he said.

Their passports were then confiscated and never returned.

After two weeks of "basic training" — instead of the eight months initially promised — his group was transferred to Ukraine.

Another 45 days of intensive training followed, which ended with a late night departure in armoured vehicles towards the front

line. With him were "Colombians" and "many Africans", including "another Equatorial Guinean but also Cameroonians, Nigerians and Libyans", he said.

Ukraine estimates that nearly 1,800 Africans have been enlisted in the Russian forces.

In mid-February, the collective All Eyes on Wagner (AEOW) published the names of 1,417 Africans whom Moscow recruited between January 2023 and September 2025 to fight in Ukraine, more than 300 of whom have died.

AEOW, launched in late 2021, describes itself as an "investigative project (that) focuses on (Russian) Wagner mercenaries and legacy" and "other Russian paramilitary organisations".

Egyptians, Cameroonians and Ghanaians were reportedly the most numerous among the African contingent.

"I realised we were on the front lines when a missile struck our vehicle and killed two of my comrades," Nchama said.

Nchama was initially assigned to a battalion of 424 soldiers in Donetsk, in eastern Ukraine, all of whom were killed within two weeks. Nchama claims to be the sole survivor.

He was then assigned to another battalion, which he led, in Volnovakha, in the Donetsk Oblast region, for one month and nine days.

"Our mission was to capture six Ukrainian villages. Of the 566 recruits, only three of us were left by the end," he said.

Moscow has suffered the heaviest military losses in the war, with 400,000 to 450,000 deaths among its troops since February 2022, according to a study published in early July by the Center for Strategic and International

Studies (CSIS). Nchama described extremely harsh living conditions characterised by cold and hunger, including one nine-day period without any food.

"We killed a deer and ate it raw. That's how hungry we were," he said, adding: "Everything was done under duress. If they told you 'do this' and you didn't do it, they could send someone to kill you."

In March, he alerted his parents to his plight and they brought the matter to the media's attention.

His story went viral on social media and caused a stir throughout Equatorial Guinea.

The government of the west African country swiftly declared it would take "diplomatic steps" to secure his release.

He endured another 11 gruelling days at the front with relentless Ukrainian drone attacks that were only paused due to unexpected

snowfall. Back in Murmansk, in the Russian Arctic, the military leadership decorated him and dangled the prospect of a fully-fledged position in the army as well as a Russian passport. "They promised me a house, a car... I was going to be a Russian," Nchama said, showing off the three medals he received.

He eventually lied to his superiors to escape. "I said I was going to spend the weekend at a friend's place. I even made up a name."

"The Equatorial Guinean ambassador found me at the airport and took me to his home," Nchama said.

His father, who declared himself the "happiest man in the world" on his son's return, now urges young people who want to head abroad, as well as their families, to be very careful chasing vague promises.

"These promises are death guaranteed," he said.

WHO urges Ervebo vaccine trial to fight Ebola in DR Congo

AFP
Geneva

WHO vaccine experts yesterday recommended a full-scale human trial of the only existing approved Ebola vaccine to see if it offers cross-protection against a deadly strain spreading in the DR Congo.

The Ervebo vaccine has proved safe and efficacious against the more common Zaire strain of Ebola virus, and World Health Organisation experts said early data, notably from animal trials, showed it may also give some protection against the rare Bundibugyo strain exploding in the DRC.

The recommendation came as the number of confirmed cases in the Democratic Republic of Congo went past the 4,000 mark, now standing at 4,053, including 1,850 fatalities.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned again yesterday that the virus was spreading faster than response efforts can catch up.

The UN health agency's technical advisory group on candidate vaccine prioritisation (TAG-CVP) for the Bundibugyo outbreak response met last week to review data that has emerged since their meeting in May, in the days following the outbreak declaration.

"The members recommended Ervebo, the only licensed Ebola vaccine, be prioritised for inclusion in a randomised clinical trial in the context of the ongoing outbreak," a WHO statement said.

A spokesman told AFP it would be "a ring trial in the DRC", involving the circle of contacts around known cases.

The experts looked at several studies, including one which showed that three out of four non-human primates vaccinated with Ervebo survived Bundibugyo, compared with one out of



Red Cross workers disinfect Rwampara general hospital outside Bunia, Ituri province, Democratic Republic of Congo. (Reuters/File Photo)

four control animals.

They also looked at an unpublished study on ferrets which found that the research-grade version of Ervebo provided 100% protection against Bundibugyo, whereas all control animals died within 10 days.

Tedros called the findings "good news". The TAG-CVP experts unanimously agreed that there were no safety concerns about using Ervebo in a clinical research study vaccinating case contacts, noting that it is already licensed by regulatory agencies and has been given to hundreds of thousands of people in Africa.

"Expectations need to be managed about its likely protective effect if used in a Phase III ring vaccination trial as efficacy against symptomatic disease and transmission may not be high, whereas protection against a fatal outcome may be achieved," their report said.

Final-stage Phase III trials of potential drugs of vaccines typically involve hundreds to thousands of people.

Nonetheless, a specific Bundibugyo vaccine remains the preferred option for fighting the cur-

rent outbreak, they stressed.

Two potential Bundibugyo vaccines are in the early stages of clinical trials on humans, while a third is being worked on to bring it to that stage.

Ebola is spread by contact with bodily fluids and causes a haemorrhagic fever. Around 87% of cases in the DRC outbreak are in the northeastern Ituri province, with 11% in North Kivu.

The Gavi global vaccine alliance maintains a stockpile of 500,000 Ervebo doses. It said doses from the stockpile were to be made available for the trials, with some already in the DRC.

"This is already the largest Ebola outbreak in DRC's history, and could well become the largest outbreak ever," said Gavi chief executive Sania Nishtar.

"Given the terrible toll on communities and frontline workers, we are encouraged that the approved Ebola vaccine Ervebo... could help reduce severe illness and deaths."

Gavi said that around 55,000 frontline workers in Ituri and North Kivu have received Ervebo through previous preventive vaccination campaigns.

Senegalese influencers given jail for comments

Three Senegalese influencers who back ousted prime minister Ousmane Sonko have been sentenced to jail for comments targeting the president, in a case touching on free speech rights.

Their lawyer told AFP yesterday that the ruling set a "dangerous precedent for the justice system".

The three men are affiliated with an online media platform known as Feenal Digital, which supports Sonko's Pastef party. The case stemmed from a video posted on TikTok in which the men said they had prayed for "Senegal's greatest traitor" to be struck by paralysis, a stroke or to die.

Although the head of state was never named, the court interpreted the remarks as targeting President Bassirou Diomaye Faye. In May, Faye fired his former mentor, Sonko, whose support had carried him into office in 2024. Once in power, the pair fell out over a number of issues, including how to manage the crippling debt.

The influencers were sentenced to jail and fined for "insulting the head of state" and "speech contrary to public decency".

Mandoumbé Diop, who goes by the name Lamignou Darou, has half a million followers on TikTok, where his videos receive tens of thousands of views.

He was sentenced on Thursday to three months in prison and a 500,000 CFA (\$880) fine. Two others, Magueye Diaw (known as Oustaz Thiep) and Moustapha Ndiaye (known as Ndiaye Touba), received two months in prison and the same fine. "We are stunned by this decision, as we believe no criminal offence was committed," their lawyer Abdy Nar Ndiaye said.

"No insulting or disrespectful remarks were made against the president of the republic and his name was not mentioned even once", they said. According to Ndiaye, the video was a "satirical skit" in which the three influencers were "chatting among friends about the issue of betrayal".

"Senegalese democracy as it stands today does not allow for the arrest of people simply for performing a satirical skit about political figures whom they did not even explicitly name," he argued.

The influencers' lawyers would appeal against the decision. (AFP)

Celebrations in Ivory Coast



Ivory Coast's President Alassane Ouattara steps down from his command car upon his arrival for the celebration of the 66th anniversary of Ivory Coast's independence in Yopougon, a popular district of Abidjan yesterday. (AFP)

Kenyan court suspends its own election ruling

AFP
Nairobi

A Kenyan court ruled yesterday the general election should be held next week, supporting a petition challenging next year's scheduled date but then suspended its own ruling to avoid political chaos.

Kenya's next general election is scheduled for August 10 but that falls outside the date specified under the constitution, which says the "election of the president shall be held... the second Tuesday in August, in every fifth year".

The petitioners argued that the law "does not say after five years or at the end of five years".

"A declaration is hereby made that holding the next presidential election on any date other than the second Tuesday in August 2026 will violate and contravene... the constitution and will consequently be null and avoid," judge Mugure Thande said. However, Thande then went on to suspend her own ruling, "to allow the second respondent (the electoral body) to correct the defect" and permit the forthcoming ballot to proceed as planned.

"The constitution must always be interpreted according to its text, not political convenience," said lawyer Willis Otieno on X, representing one of the petitioners.

Otieno told AFP the ruling calls into question President William Ruto's legitimacy after August 11. He is seeking a second term in the next election.

"The court has merely extended the period within which IEBC is to conduct the elections but not the legitimacy or term of the incumbent," Otieno said, referring to the body overseeing the country's polls.

Constitutional lawyer Paul Muite told AFP the decision will effectively place the presidential term at four years, as its duration is not explicitly defined in law.

"If this judgement is not reversed by the Appellate Courts, those elected in next year's elections will go into office aware that the presidential term in Kenya is four years not five," Muite explained. "The judgement is correct in its interpretation of the constitutional provisions," he added.

Khelef Khalifa, a human rights defender and petitioner in the case, told AFP that the court's decision "might create a constitutional crisis".

How South Africa's migrant exodus is hitting short-handed employers hard

AFP
Durban

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.

The same labour 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 anti-migrant protests and intensified immigration enforcement.

Fringe anti-foreigner groups had set June 30 as an unofficial deadline for undocumented migrants to leave, 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 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," 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 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, adding it would take time for local workers to master the job.

The government has sought to respond to public anger whipped up 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 scheme fast-tracks worker visas for companies that meet requirements including predominantly employing South



Undocumented migrants at the Durban Drive In in Durban, where they were registered by South African Immigration Officers before their repatriation. (AFP/FilePhoto)

Africans, investing in skills development and operating in priority sectors.

Industry groups, meanwhile, 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 akin to the US, 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, re-

ferring to the 16-member Southern African Development Community bloc.

More than 60% of South Africa's immigrants are estimated to come from SADC. Yet for many who left, the debate over labour policy has been eclipsed by fears for their safety after killings of four foreigners.

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

"Police officers who came into Zimbabweans' houses said you are living here illegally," he said as he prepared for repatriation. His fellow national Majatamhe, the farm worker, has decided to remain for now.

Court order stalls Trump's White House ballroom project

Reuters
Washington, DC

A US federal appeals court ordered Donald Trump's administration yesterday to stop construction on a \$400mn ballroom on the site of the White House's demolished East Wing, dealing the Republican leader a major setback in a case testing his presidential authority. "Each President is a temporary tenant, not the owner, of the White House," and cannot fundamentally reshape it without congressional approval, the Washington-based US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit said in a 2-1 opinion.

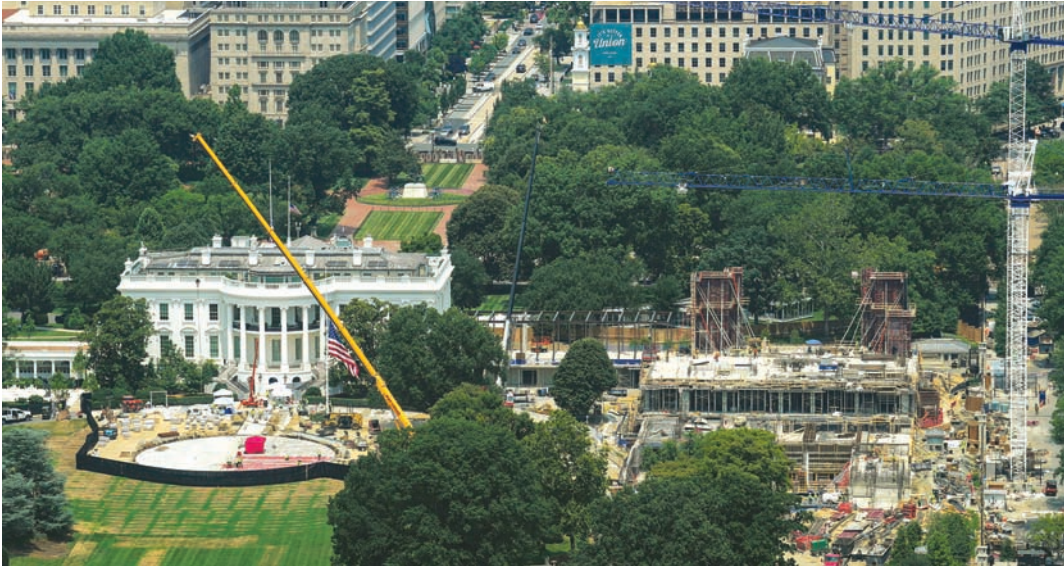
The order upheld a preliminary injunction won by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which sued last year after the administration tore down the East Wing and began building a 90,000-square-foot (8,360-square-metre) ballroom without seeking authorisation from Congress.

"Whether or not a massive ballroom should be constructed is for Congress to decide and is not a matter for Executive self-help," the panel's majority wrote.

The appeals court placed its ruling on hold for 14 days to allow the Trump administration to appeal to the US Supreme Court.

Trump, who has increasingly claimed that the ballroom project is a security necessity, referred to the structure as a "military centre" in a post on Truth Social yesterday and said the administration would appeal to the Supreme Court. He called the decision "horrendous" and politically motivated and said it left him, other White House officials and visitors exposed to attack.

"This unjust decision must be overturned by the Supreme Court in its entirety," Trump wrote. He said the ballroom plan includes



The White House and the ongoing Ballroom construction as seen from a window at the Washington Monument, in Washington, DC. (Reuters/File Photo)

bomb shelters, medical facilities, shielding from drones and missiles and other security features that are "all tied together as one big, expensive, and very complex unit."

National Trust President Brent Leggs said in a statement that the ruling marked "a great day for our country and for the American people's right to voice their opinions about the historic places they cherish, including the White House."

Trump appealed after US District Judge Richard Leon, an appointee of Republican former president George W. Bush, twice blocked above-ground construction on the site while allowing underground work to continue.

The ballroom plan, which the administration has described as necessary for large formal functions and to preserve the safety of the White House, is the grandest of several Trump efforts to reshape central Washington's landscape of government buildings and national monuments.

A judge in a separate lawsuit recently said Trump's name was illegally added to the exterior of the Kennedy Center performing arts venue and ordered its removal.

In the ballroom case, Justice Department attorney Yaakov Roth said during DC Circuit arguments on June 5 that the courts have no role in weighing the privately funded project.

He said the National Trust's "architectural preference" should not take precedence over national security concerns, claiming evidence that the former East Wing left the president and others in the White House vulnerable to attack.

The Democratic-appointed judges in the appeals court's majority — Circuit Judges Patricia Millett and Brad Garcia — said their order does not permanently bar construction of a ballroom, but halts above-ground work during the lawsuit and until the White House secures approval from Congress.

National security arguments "are not an automatic get-out-of-law-

free card," the opinion said. "The bold assertion that the Executive can act with utter lawlessness, destroying treasured national landmarks and harming the interests of individuals, and that no court can stop it flouts our constitutional order," the judges wrote.

Circuit Judge Neomi Rao, whom Trump appointed during his first term, said in her dissent that the trial judge's injunction blocking the project "is beyond the proper province of the federal courts" and that construction should be allowed to continue.

"The district court seized supervision of construction at the White House, and my colleagues affirm this judicial overreach," Rao wrote. Trump has defended his ballroom's price tag, which has doubled from initial projections. Trump said in a post on Truth Social in May that the cost rose because

"it is approximately twice the size, and a far higher quality, than the original proposal" and promised "it will be magnificent, safe, and secure!"

US federal judge allows deportation protections to end for South Sudanese

Reuters
Washington, DC

A federal judge yesterday cleared the way for US President Donald Trump's administration to end temporary protections from deportation that had allowed hundreds of South Sudanese nationals to live and work in the US.

US District Judge Patti Saris in Boston rejected a last-ditch effort by immigrant-rights advocates to maintain South Sudan's Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designation after the US Supreme Court in June allowed the administration to end similar protections for thousands of people from Haiti and Syria.

The Supreme Court's ruling, powered by its 6-3 conservative majority, curtailed the ability of lower-court judges to review the US Department of Homeland Security's efforts under Trump to end TPS for about a dozen countries.

That designation covers people whose home countries have experienced natural disasters, armed conflicts or other extraordinary events, providing eligible migrants temporary protection from deportation and work authorization.

DHS moved in November to terminate TPS for conflict-ridden South Sudan, saying the country no longer met the conditions for the designation, which was first issued in 2011.

The department's action would have led to the end of protections for more than 232 South Sudanese and at least 73 South Sudanese with pending applications. An earlier order by Saris had blocked that from happening.

After the Supreme Court's ruling, lawyers for a group of

South Sudanese nationals and the nonprofit African Communities Together urged Saris to once again block the end of TPS on new grounds that the justices had not addressed.

That included an argument that DHS lacked authority to terminate TPS because the statute that created the TPS programme in 1990 referred only to the attorney general as the official who had authority to extend and terminate the deportation protections.

DHS was established later, in 2002, after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Most of the US Department of Justice's immigration-related functions were transferred to it at that time. Saris, who was appointed by Democratic President Bill Clinton, concluded Congress had likewise transferred authority over TPS to DHS.

She said arguments to the contrary rested on a "self-contradictory, self-defeating foundation," since if DHS had no authority to terminate TPS for South Sudan it also never had the ability to extend protections in the first place.

"South Sudan's original TPS designation would thus be invalid by the same token as its termination," she said.

James Percival, DHS's general counsel, in a social media post on X urged other judges hearing similar TPS cases to follow Saris and lift orders preventing it from ending the protections for people from other countries.

"Every day these 'administrative stays' are in effect is a day the American people are denied what they voted for," he said.

Spokespeople for the plaintiffs did not immediately respond to requests for comment.



US President Donald Trump, with White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller, speaks during an event to sign executive orders related to birthright citizenship and the polysilicon industry, in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, DC. (Reuters)

Trump signs orders to limit US birthright citizenship

Reuters
Washington, DC

US President Donald Trump signed two executive orders on Thursday in a new but narrower attempt to curtail birthright citizenship, once again challenging a provision of the US Constitution even though the Supreme Court rejected his previous effort.

Limiting birthright citizenship has been one of the top priorities in the Republican president's crackdown on immigration, with the White House taking particular aim at what it calls "birth tourism," in which pregnant foreigners travel to the US to give birth. After his June 30 setback in the Supreme Court, Trump called on Congress to act, but on Thursday he opted for executive orders, which set policy but do not carry the same weight as laws passed by Congress.

The Supreme Court had struck down as unconstitutional Trump's earlier executive order, which targeted a wide swath of immigrants in the country illegally or temporarily. The administration argues the new directive falls outside the purview of the Supreme Court ruling, as it seeks to reinterpret the narrow, historical exceptions to citizenship at birth and expand who is ineligible.

"That practice of birth tourism is, as of the signing of this order, hereby banned," White House aide Stephen Miller said at the Thursday signing ceremony in the Oval Office. The Center for Immigration Studies, which supports lower levels of immigration,

estimated in an analysis in 2020 that between 20,000 and 25,000 mothers came to the US for birth tourism in a year-long period between 2016 and 2017.

There were 3.6mn births in the US in 2025.

The executive orders also limit the rights of children born to foreign government employees in the US and children of people who are classified as alien enemies.

The orders could also affect people born in US territories, should Congress enact a proposed law to end automatic citizenship there. Trump's new orders are likely to face legal challenge. Legal experts said it was unclear what effect the executive orders might have given the Supreme Court ruling, while immigrant advocates called it an attempt to evade the high court's decision.

The ACLU predicted it was doomed to fail in court. "Just five weeks ago, the Supreme Court made clear that birthright citizenship is not subject to a president's whims, it is a constitutional guarantee that has stood for more than 150 years."

Today's executive orders are nothing more than an attempt to get around that ruling," said Deborah Fleischaker, a former Biden administration official who is now with UnidosUS, a Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organisation.

Zain Lakhani of the Women's Refugee Commission said the executive orders could trample the rights of pregnant women seeking lawful entry "in one of the most vulnerable moments of their lives," and called on the government to establish guidelines honouring the Supreme Court ruling.

US Senate passes sweeping Russia sanctions bill

AFP
Washington, DC

The US Senate yesterday passed a sweeping sanctions package targeting Russia's energy revenues.

The legislation now heads to the House of Representatives, though a vote there will not take place until at least early September due to the congressional summer recess.

The package would impose sanctions on Russian officials, oligarchs, financial institutions and the so-called shadow fleet used to evade restrictions on Moscow's oil exports. It would also allow President Donald Trump to set tariffs of up to 500% on Russian imports, including gas and oil.

Crucially, the sanctions would enable Trump to impose tariffs of up to 100% on goods from major

purchasers of Russian oil and gas, including countries such as China and India.

Supporters say choking off energy income is essential to weakening Russian President Vladimir Putin's ability to finance the war in Ukraine, now in its fifth year.

If adopted into law, Putin himself would be among those targeted by the sanctions, as well as other top officials.

The bill was named after the late Senator Lindsey Graham, who died on July 11 after spending more than a year building support for it.

Shortly before his death, Graham announced he had reached an agreement with the White House on a revised version of the text, including the extension of existing sanctions authority aimed at restricting funding for Iran's energy and weapons sectors.

For the late senator's sister Dar-

line Graham, who replaced him in Congress, the final adoption of the bill will not only honour her brother, "but will also promote peace by cutting off the funding fuelling Russia's war machine."

Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen, a member of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, said the bill "hits Russia's energy and financial sectors very hard."

"Vladimir Putin only understands strength, and he only responds to pressure," Shaheen added. "This legislation represents our best opportunity to finally bring Russia's war machine to its knees and to force Putin to the negotiating table."

Russia's embassy in the US had condemned the bill, saying it "does the current US administration a disservice."

Moscow is also under increased European pressure, with the EU

last month agreeing to a new round of sanctions — albeit watered down from harsher earlier proposals.

The package — the 21st by the EU since Moscow's 2022 invasion — was held up by a raft of objections by member states to various proposed elements.

It focuses on freezing the level of an oil price cap to try and prevent Moscow from cashing in on a surge of oil prices due to the Iran war.

Diplomats said the final hurdle was overcome after Greece was granted an exemption allowing shipping firms to carry on transporting Russian liquefied natural gas from the Arctic.

The new package also targets Moscow's financial sector and crypto firms, and blacklists scores more Russian officials over the war.

However, a proposed sweeping visa ban was shelved.

Mexico, Peru re-establish ties after asylum spat

AFP
Mexico City

Mexico and Peru announced the restoration of diplomatic ties yesterday, following a months-long split over the asylum bid of a former Peruvian official accused of coup plotting.

The governments of leftist Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum and her newly inaugurated, right-wing Peruvian counterpart Keiko Fujimori patched things up "considering the historic bonds of brotherhood, friendship, and co-operation that unite" their countries, a joint statement read.

Sheinbaum later said at her daily press conference that the former official at the centre of the spat, ex-prime minister Betsy Chavez, was being flown yesterday aboard a Mexican military plane to Mexico. Fujimori's government had granted safe passage to Chavez as a gesture of "goodwill," Sheinbaum said.

Mexico and Peru have had strained relations for years, following the ouster of left-wing Peruvian leader Pedro Castillo in December 2022. He had been impeached and removed from office after attempting to dissolve Congress, and was arrested on his way to the Mexican embassy to seek asylum.

He and Chavez, his prime minister at the time, faced charges of plotting a coup over the bid to dissolve Congress.

While Castillo has been in jail since his arrest, Chavez was released on bail and sought asylum in the Mexican embassy in November 2025.

The move prompted a furious reaction from the Peruvian government and triggered a diplo-



Peru's former chief of staff, Betsy Chavez, in handcuffs being ushered by national police personnel upon her arrival at the Supreme Court of Preparatory Investigation in the Palace of Justice in Lima. (AFP/File Photo)

matic tit-for-tat, which included Peru's Congress voting to declare Sheinbaum persona non grata.

Peru's Foreign Minister Carlos Espa said he was "very happy" about restoring ties with Mexico yesterday.

Chavez's journey to Mexico had occurred "in a context of security and calm," Espa told the Canal N television channel.

Castillo is meanwhile serving a prison sentence exceeding 11 years, which Mexico continues to dispute.

"We are going to keep defending president Castillo," said Sheinbaum.

"The new government of Peru knows it, but it's a step," she added, referring to yesterday's reconciliation.

Fujimori, who narrowly won a runoff election in June, had said she hoped to mend ties with Mexico.

She took office in late July, becoming Peru's ninth president in a decade, including a series of interim leaders following Castillo's ouster.

Mexico has historically welcomed people who report political prosecution, and in recent years has granted asylum to figures including Bolivia's socialist ex-leader Evo Morales and former Ecuadoran vice-president Jorge Glas.

Venezuela’s political transition talks wrap first day in Caracas

AFP
Caracas

US-backed political transition talks between Venezuela’s interim government and opposition representatives began Thursday in Caracas, an AFP photographer in attendance observed.

The talks are taking place seven months after US forces seized president Nicolas Maduro and as interim leader Delcy Rodriguez governs under Washington’s watchful eye.

Venezuelans are hopeful the dialogue will eventually pave the way for holding elections in the crisis-hit South American country.

Notably absent from the talks is opposition favourite and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Corina Machado, who lives in exile and was not invited to join the discussion.

The opposition is instead being represented by Dinorah Figuera, who returned to Venezuela from exile on Wednesday.

Figuera heads the opposition bloc that won a majority in the 2015 National Assembly, the last legislature elected in a vote widely recognised by the international community.

National Assembly President Jorge Rodriguez, who is the inter-



Venezuelan National Assembly President Jorge Rodríguez (right) poses with former opposition lawmaker Dinorah Figuera during an official photo before the launch of Venezuela’s political dialogue process at the Conventions Centre in La Carlota neighbourhood, Sucre municipality, Caracas. (AFP)

im leader’s brother, is meanwhile representing the government.

“We are focused on the official opening this week of this dialogue process, which seeks the restoration of democratic institutions,” Figuera told TV station Telegen upon her arrival at the airport.

She has notably called for changes to the Supreme Court of Justice and the National Electoral Council, two institutions widely criticised for validating Maduro’s disputed 2024 re-election. The opposition rejected the result,

claiming victory and alleging widespread electoral fraud.

At the end of the first session, the parties reported that they agreed to good-faith negotiations and said they would seek a “political, peaceful, democratic and constitutional solution,” according to a statement posted to social media.

The US State Department welcomed Figuera’s delegation “for the start of in-person talks” with Venezuela’s interim government.

“These direct talks present a unique opportunity,” it stated,

urging “all concerned to support this effort to deliver tangible results for Venezuelans.”

It stressed the importance of achieving “stabilisation, economic recovery and political reconciliation, and a peaceful transition.”

Only photographers were granted access to the La Carlota military base, the venue of the talks.

According to the official agenda released by both sides, they will discuss the response to the twin earthquakes of June 24, which left more than 6,000 dead, as well as the strengthening of democracy and political rights.

Machado has said she will not stand in the way of the process.

“A democratic transition in Venezuela will restore our freedom and our prosperity,” she wrote on X, adding that it would create “a vital and reliable ally for the national security of the US and regional stability.”

“The Venezuelan people are eager and ready!” Machado said.

Despite her gifting her Nobel Peace Prize to President Donald Trump, the US leader has reportedly vetoed her return to Venezuela.

Washington denies the allegation.

Trump has meanwhile repeatedly expressed satisfaction with Rodriguez, who has opened up Venezuela’s mining, electricity and oil sectors to foreign and private capital.

Bolivia’s Paz defends unpopular economic recovery plan

AFP
Sucre

Bolivian President Rodrigo Paz on Thursday defended his conservative administration, which in its short lifetime has been the target of enormous protests against the worst economic crisis in decades.

Paz said the government was leading Bolivia out of the economic doldrums during his first address to the nation since taking office nine months ago.

The US-backed leader’s inauguration in November ended two decades of socialist rule in the Andean nation.

“They left us a devastated, dying homeland,” he said, blaming his leftist predecessors for bringing Bolivia to a position where it “could barely breathe.”

Paz, who was speaking from the city of Sucre on the country’s independence day, defended his “unpopular” but “necessary” economic policies.

His decision to scrap decades-old fuel subsidies that had drained the Treasury’s international dollar reserves caused prices to double, triggering widespread anger.

Deteriorating living conditions sparked protests, which escalated into an enormous movement that blocked roads nationwide and caused severe food, medical and fuel shortages in several cities.

Paz succeeded in quelling the months-long demonstrations, which began calling for his resignation, by declaring a state of emergency in June.

The measure allowed him to deploy the army and outlaw public gatherings.

His government accuses socialist former leader Evo Morales of fomenting the protests, with prosecutors issuing a warrant for his arrest last week.

“We have just overcome 53 days of resistance from the past that refuses to accept that a new Bolivia is being born,” Paz said, highlighting the diplomatic and economic opening up of the country.

He also noted government efforts to fight corruption and drug trafficking, including the expulsion of “17 leaders of criminal organisations who were living in Bolivia with protection and complete impunity.”

Meta ordered to pay \$567mn over ‘public nuisance’ child harm

AFP
San Francisco

A US state court has ordered Meta to pay \$567mn and limit some features for children on its Facebook and Instagram platforms, saying the social media giant had created a “public nuisance” that endangered young users.

The ruling in New Mexico on Thursday adds to a previous fine of \$375mn in the same case in March, when a jury found the social media giant liable for making youths vulnerable to predators on its platforms.

While Meta said it would appeal, the decision sets a precedent at a time when dozens of other US states are pursuing lawsuits alleging harms to children and their mental health, including a major trial against Meta set to open in California next week.

“Today’s decision is a victory for every parent who has worried about what social media is doing to their child and every child who deserves to grow up safer online,” New Mexico Attorney General Raul Torrez said.

“This case has always been about protecting children, standing up for families, and making sure that one of the world’s largest technology companies cannot profit from practices that endanger young people without consequence.”

It was the first time a US court has found a social media firm guilty of creating a “public nuisance,” amid thousands of lawsuits claiming Meta had put children at risk.

Around three-fourths of the \$567mn payment ordered Thursday will be earmarked for a mental health treatment fund, to be paid over five years.

The remainder will be allocated to programmes for “awareness and prevention” of potential dangers to youths and ensuring Meta implements the ordered changes.

Judge Bryan Biedscheid said in his ruling that teenagers were par-

ticularly susceptible to features designed to capture and boost engagement such as autoplay, infinite scrolling, “like” counts, push notifications and algorithmic recommendations.

He ordered Meta to limit push notifications and usage to 90 hours a month for users under 18, or around three hours daily on average, and to block certain notifications altogether during school hours.

It must also hide “like counts” and pursue efforts to ensure children in New Mexico who are under 13 are not allowed to join Facebook or Instagram.

Meta will also have to provide the court with updates twice a year regarding its efforts to comply.

“We disagree with the ruling and will appeal,” Meta told AFP in a statement.

It said it remained “confident in our record of protecting teens online and will continue to defend ourselves against claims that misrepresent the facts.”

During closing arguments, prosecutor Linda Singer told the jury that Meta had concealed internal findings about the risks to young people, even as its algorithms directed adults toward content posted by teens.

The company had already been found guilty in March of violating New Mexico’s Unfair Practices Act by misleading consumers about the safety of its products for children.

More than 30 US states are suing Meta over similar allegations.

In July, a US teenager dropped his lawsuit against Meta just days before the trial was set to begin after confidential settlements with it alongside YouTube, TikTok and Snap.

A first bellwether trial for social media harms on mental health concluded in March, when a Los Angeles jury ordered Meta and Google to pay a 20-year-old woman \$6mn.

In May, Meta, Snap, TikTok and YouTube reached confidential settlements with a Kentucky school district.

AFP
Cali

Colombian President-elect Abelardo de la Espriella takes office Friday, vowing to launch a war on drug-running guerrillas and usher in a new era of close ties with the US.

The flamboyant former lawyer brings a lurch to the right for the leftist-ruled Andean nation – vowing to bomb jungle cocaine labs, build “mega-prisons” and slash the size of the state.

After four years of diplomatic spat with the US, President Donald Trump will now have a keen ally in Bogota.

The 48-year-old President-elect, who holds dual US and Co-

lombian citizenship, has offered to launch joint military operations and even host US troops on Colombian soil.

In a break with tradition, his inauguration will take place in the tropical southwestern city of Cali, Colombia’s salsa capital, not at Congress in more buttoned-down Bogota.

Among the guests was a smiling Gianni Infantino, the beleaguered FIFA president who faces scathing criticism over his now shelved plan to open the World Cup and other competitions up to private investment.

The inauguration will also be attended by powerful right-wing figures, including Argentina’s President Javier Milei and Todd Blanche, President Donald

Hardline Trump ally De la Espriella to take office in Colombia

Trump’s acting attorney general, who will head a delegation filled with anti-drug policy officials.

Cali has been the scene of several guerrilla pipe bomb attacks in the last few years. Pockets of the countryside to the south of the city are still controlled by armed groups.

The authorities are launching a massive security campaign to protect the event, with 11,000 troops deployed, as well as an anti-drone system.

De la Espriella’s narrow victory in a June runoff ended four years of Colombia’s first-ever leftist government.

“We are beginning a new era!” he declared in his victory speech, after beating leftist rival Ivan Cepeda by less than a percentage point.

Supporters hope De la Espriella will bring an iron fist when tackling crime and dissident armed groups, after years of spluttering peace talks.

Calling himself “The Tiger,” and promising to be “firm for the homeland,” Colombia’s incoming leader regularly uses a military salute and has embraced military motifs.

“For Colombia I think it’s going to be good. We have to support him so there won’t be so much crime,” said German Angulo, a 63-year-old contractor.

“We need a complete change,” he told AFP.

Outgoing leftist leader Gustavo Petro tried and failed to negotiate peace with the country’s myriad armed groups.

Thousands protest private property legislation in Argentina

AFP
Buenos Aires

Protesters clashed with police as thousands of people braved stormy weather to demonstrate against a controversial private property bill outside the Argentine Senate on Thursday.

As the protest drew to a close, scuffles broke out on Congress Square with protesters targeting police with stones and other projectiles, and security forces responding with tear gas, rubber bullets and a water cannon.

The protesters mobilised by left-wing movements and unions were undeterred by earlier concessions removing one change that would have made it easier for foreigners or foreign entities to buy land in Argentina.

Demonstrators carried Argentine flags and banners reading “The homeland is not for sale,” an AFP correspondent observed.

The “Inviolability of Private

Property” bill being debated in Congress aims to make changes to property ownership in Argentina, such as streamlining eviction procedures, changing rural land use rules and making it more difficult for the state to take ownership of private property.

The government of libertarian President Javier Milei aims to use the bill to provide a legal framework that attracts investment.

Opposition and environmental groups firmly oppose the bill, denouncing a risk of “colonisation, fragmentation, fracture and balkanisation of the homeland.”

With only 20 seats in a 72-senator body, Milei’s party backed down and removed the chapter dealing with land purchases by foreigners, which would have raised the limit on land available for foreign purchase from 15% to 25%.

Nearly five % of Argentina’s territory – an area roughly equal in size to England – is under foreign ownership, according to a 2025 report from the University of Buenos



A riot police aims a shotgun during a protest outside the National Congress in Buenos Aires, as senators debate a bill on the inviolability of private property. (AFP)

Aires and other researchers.

But they note in some districts the percentage of foreign owners already exceeds the 15% limit, par-

ticularly in “territories endowed with water and mineral resources, or logistical advantages,” such as ports.

Erratic rains dictate menu at three-star Michelin restaurant in Brazil

AFP
Sao Paulo

Climate adaptation has reached the world of fine dining: At Tuju, a three-Michelin-star restaurant in Brazil, erratic rainfall keeps its owners on their toes.

Chef Ivan Ralston and his partner, gastronomic researcher Katherina Cordas, spent two years studying local ingredients, mainly from the state of Sao Paulo, but using them at their peak is a challenge.

In a region where summer storms bring chaos and reservoirs run dry in winter, it takes “a lot of flexibility,” said Cordas, 38, who runs a culinary research centre that the pair created for the restaurant.

Tuju is situated in gastronomic powerhouse Sao Paulo, a megalopolis of 12mn people. In April, it secured its third Michelin star along with another restaurant in the city, Evvai – becoming the first two



Cooks work in the kitchen of the Tuju restaurant, in Sao Paulo. The Tuju restaurant became the first restaurant in Latin America to receive three stars, the highest honour from the traditional Michelin Guide. (AFP)

locations in Latin America to earn the top culinary honors.

Tuju offers four menus a year – “Humidity,” “Rain,” “Gale” and “Drought” – but they are not tied to fixed dates.

Instead, they follow the rain.

“Sao Paulo is usually dry in July, but this year it stayed somewhat wetter because of El Nino, so mushroom season lasted almost twice as long. You always have to stay alert and adapt,” said Ralston.

Tuju’s 10-course tasting menu draws primarily on ingredients from small-scale producers across Sao Paulo state.

Sardines, pork, artichokes, chestnuts, grapes, guava, capers and more: the products are prepared “with the most modern techniques, emphasising creativity and the research work behind the scenes,” according to Michelin. The third star is “like a black belt for karate practitioners,” said Ralston, the son of restaurateurs who trained in some of Spain and Japan’s top kitchens.

But he insists the accolade has not gone

to his head: “The pursuit of perfection is superficial. What we promise is a genuine experience.”

Ralston leads a team of eight young chefs – mostly women – who work in silence and perfect synchrony in an open kitchen, dramatically lit at the centre of the minimalist dining room.

Cordas, mother of two of Ralston’s children, glides between the restaurant’s nine green marble tables, attending to diners, who pay 1,650 reais (about \$320) for the tasting menu. Ralston is frustrated by the fact that some diners come mainly in search of content for social media.

“Eating is a moment to pay attention to details. My advice would be: stop working on the marketing of living and enjoy life a little more!”

Ralston opened Tuju in 2014 and earned his first Michelin star just months later. A second followed. Then, the restaurant was forced to close because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Heavy rains drench Beijing as Typhoon Dolphin approaches; heatwave sweeps northeast China

Multiple districts in Beijing issued heavy rainfall warnings last evening with authorities warning residents of disasters including floods in the city centre and also mudslides and landslides in agricultural and mountainous areas.

The extreme rains come as China readies for Typhoon Dolphin, which is expected to make landfall along the country's eastern coast from Sunday to Monday.

Beijing's Dongcheng, Xicheng, Haidian, Chaoyang, Tongzhou and Pinggu districts all issued heavy rain warnings expecting hourly rainfall to exceed 50mm.

The highest rainfall occurred in Miyun district in northeast Beijing yesterday afternoon where precipitation reached 99.5mm.

Authorities said they have deployed more than 2,000 staff to help with the flooding around Beijing.

Typhoon Dolphin is expected to bring heavy to torrential rains to multiple regions, authorities said.

Heavy rains and floods in China's northwestern province of Shaanxi collapsed roads, damaged bridges, and power and communications infrastructure on Thursday, prompting the evacuation of thousands of people.

China's eastern and southern provinces have been preparing for Dolphin, suspending ferry routes,



Cars drive along a street during heavy rain in Beijing, yesterday. (Reuters)

halting construction and evacuating fishing boats.

Meanwhile, high temperatures are widespread with central and eastern regions. The latest heatwave has also swept through northeastern China and broken records on the nearby Korean Peninsula.

Yesterday, the first day of autumn according to the Chinese agricultural calendar, Dalian recorded a high of 38C (98.6F). That is nearly 10 degrees Celsius above the average August peak, according to the national forecaster's data from 1981-2010.

"Originally, we thought Dalian would be cooler, because it's in the northeast. But it turned out to be hotter than in Shanxi where we are from," said a 44-year-old mother of two, who gave her sur-

name as Miao, referring to her native inland province west of Beijing.

She was wearing a sun-protection jacket, face mask and a wide-brimmed hat, and said she had brought medicine for heatstroke.

Cao, a 62-year-old retiree who brought his grandson to the beach, said summer in Dalian was not as he remembered it.

"This year feels much hotter than usual. It was very comfortable in previous years, and the sea breeze was cool. This year, the sun feels a bit scorching, especially hot."

The State Grid Corporation of China said this week that high temperatures had driven up power demand to record levels in the northern, northeastern and eastern parts of China, with residents



A woman shields herself from the sun with a towel and an ice pad at the Xinghai Square, amid an orange alert for heatwave in Dalian, Liaoning province, China, yesterday. (Reuters)

cranking up their air conditioning.

"In past (summers), we could usually manage with air-conditioning for just two weeks, and sometimes we didn't even need it," said Feng, 57, at a waterfront spot where locals jump off a metal diving board into the sea. "But this year, we can't take it any more and have to use air-conditioning. It's essential." (Reuters)

Ministers clash publicly exposing differences within Lee government over North Korea

Reuters
Seoul

Republic of Korea's foreign and unification ministers publicly disagreed this week over how to engage North Korea, exposing differences within President Lee Jae Myung's government as it seeks to revive stalled contact with Pyongyang.

Foreign Minister Cho Hyun called North Korean engagement proposals unveiled by Unification Minister Chung Dong-young at a Wednesday policy meeting with Lee "idealistic" saying they had not received the backing of other ministries.

"Since Minister Chung was speaking in idealistic terms, I would ask you to discount those remarks somewhat," Cho told reporters. Chung responded in comments to local reporters on Thursday, saying that ideals were needed "to change reality."

Chung's proposals included launching four-party talks involving the two Koreas, the United States and China as a key initiative for the second half of the year.

Cho said the ideas had not been sufficiently discussed or found consensus within the government.

The disagreement comes as Seoul has been trying to persuade North Korea to respond to a series of conciliatory gestures since Lee took office.

His administration has shifted away from a "denuclearisation-first" policy toward a "peace-first" approach, while urging US President Donald Trump to seek a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to reopen dialogue.

The Foreign and Unification

ministries, when asked about the contrasting positions on Friday, said they would continue to coordinate policies and declined further comment.

The presidential Blue House said it did not have an immediate comment.

Analysts said any policy differences were likely to be watched closely by Pyongyang and could complicate Seoul's efforts to re-engage with the North.

The disagreement "exposed internal differences and weakening policy momentum surrounding North Korea policy," said Lim Eul-chul, a professor at Kyungnam University.

"Internal division and conflict would reinforce North Korea's perception that even if meaningful agreements are reached, they could easily be reversed within Korea."

Relations between the two Koreas have sharply deteriorated since the Covid-19 pandemic, with Kim announcing in 2024 that Pyongyang would no longer seek reunification and demolishing joint inter-Korean projects on its territory.

Dialogue has since all but halted, and tighter North Korean border surveillance has sharply cut defections. Just 63 North Koreans crossed south in the first half of 2026, compared with 1,047 in 2019.

Seoul has dropped measures it says could be seen by Pyongyang as hostile, including anti-North loudspeaker broadcasts, though North Korea has largely ignored such overtures.

Some rights groups have criticised Lee's approach, contrasting it with his conservative predecessor's more pressure-focused stance toward Pyongyang.

Thailand teen kills seven in rampage at home, school

AFP
Nonthaburi, Thailand

A 14-year-old boy in Thailand, described as "troubled" and "bullied" by a classmate, killed his grandparents before shooting dead five more people at a school yesterday, police said.

First he shot dead his two grandparents, using his grandfather's handgun, then went to a secondary school in Nonthaburi province, bordering Bangkok, and killed five school staff, national police said in a statement.

The 14-year-old perpetrator also died, the statement said, with a police official telling AFP he had killed himself.

Officials earlier gave a higher toll of eight dead, which had included the suspect, and initially said students were among the victims.

Dozens of police and emergency responders gathered outside the cordoned-off Debsirin Nonthaburi School, AFP journalists saw, while parents waited to pick up their children and tearful students and staff comforted each other outside.

"I was afraid that I would die, and I was scared that I wouldn't be able to pursue my dreams," said Pawarisa Maylissa, a grade 12 stu-

dent who hopes to attend medical school.

"I heard many gunshots very loudly because it seemed the suspect was on the floor directly above us," she told AFP.

Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul told reporters at the scene that "police interrogated his close friend who said the suspect had been under stress" related to his schooling.

"His actions also suggested that he had clearly planned" the assault, Anutin added.

"The gun was a registered firearm and was kept at a house, but somehow he gained access to it."

The prime minister said more than 30 people were injured, with around nine in critical condition.

The shooter was identified by local media as a student of the school.

Purin Khumchoo, 17, said he was among the students who had nearly been shot.

"He was my junior, but I had a feeling that he was a troubled kid. My group of friends who knew him said he was interested in the FBI and guns, and that he was bullied by many other students," Purin told AFP outside his school.

"When I saw him aiming the gun at me, I thought he looked very professional, as if he had been trained for a long time."

Photos published by local me-

US, Asean chair call for unconditional release of Myanmar's Suu Kyi

Reuters
Manila

The US State Department and the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) yesterday reiterated their calls for the unconditional release of Myanmar's detained former leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners. On Monday, Aung San Suu Kyi met with a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross after years of questions over her health and well-being following her detention in a February 2021 coup that ousted an elected civilian government led by her.

In separate statements, the State Department and Asean chair both welcomed the ICRC visit and said they hoped it was the start of regular access, including for medical care, to the 81-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner.

"We urge the further expansion of access to persons held in detention in Myanmar since February 2021, and reiterate our call for their release, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's complete and unconditional release," the Asean chair said in its statement.

In a post on X, the State Department said: "We hope this

visit marks the beginning of regular humanitarian access to Aung San Suu Kyi and serves as a pathway to greater access to all political prisoners", and called for her "immediate and unconditional release".

The State Department also called on Myanmar's military to engage in dialogue to end the conflict that broke out after the coup.

The Asean chair reaffirmed the role of the bloc's special envoy in engaging all parties in Myanmar in line with Asean's Five-Point Consensus peace plan.

It said it looked forward to the special envoy being granted access to visit Myanmar and meet all parties concerned, including Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Philippines is the chair of the 11-member Asean in 2026.



Aung San Suu Kyi. (Reuters/File Photo)



Police gather outside the house where a teenager is suspected of killing his grandparents before carrying out a school shooting in Nonthaburi province, north of Bangkok, yesterday. (AFP)



After the shooting incident, parents and students gather outside the school in Bang Kruai district, Nonthaburi province, north of Thailand's capital Bangkok, yesterday. (AFP)

dia show the suspect wearing a purple school uniform and carrying a black cross-body bag, with several bullet casings visible on the ground.

Education Minister Prasert Jantararuangtong pledged to provide mental health assistance to students and ramp up security measures at educational institutions.

"We haven't checked whether students have brought weapons to school. Our level of security is not that tight," he told reporters at the school.

Thongchai Thanakat, a motor-

cycle-taxi driver who has worked in the area for 20 years, said he was waiting to pick up passengers outside the school when he heard more than 10 gunshots and saw a stream of students rushing out.

"Some of them weren't even wearing shoes," he told AFP.

Anutin earlier called the shooting "a terrible incident", posing the question: "How could this happen in our country?"

Thailand has one of the highest rates of gun ownership in the region, with around 10mn firearms estimated to be in circulation — one for every seven inhabitants.

Malaysia Airlines to test all pilots after Indonesia arrest

Malaysia Airlines' parent firm announced yesterday mandatory drug screenings for its pilots, after one of them tested positive for a cocktail of narcotics and was arrested in Indonesia for smuggling.

Authorities at Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport arrested the 39-year-old pilot last month, shortly after arriving from Kuala Lumpur, for allegedly attempting to smuggle more than 70,000 ecstasy tablets in his suitcase.

Malaysia Aviation Group said in a statement yesterday that it would carry out tests "for all active pilots, beyond industry practice".

The group, which also owns budget airline Firefly, said the process would begin with 1,260 pilots from the national carrier, with tests to be completed by August 15.

Pilots who are not tested will "not operate flights" until they have been cleared, the company said.

The process would complement the aviation group's "existing random testing programme", it added.

"Operational safety and crew fitness for duty are non-negotiable," said the group's president and chief executive, Captain Nasaruddin A Bakar.

"We take any breach of our safety standards seriously and have acted swiftly to enhance mandatory drug screening across our active pilots."

The detained pilot faces the death penalty on conviction in Indonesia. Results of his urine test came back positive for drugs, according to Indonesian customs officials. (AFP)

Indonesia battles Mount Bromo wildfire as El Nino takes root

AFP
Malang

Indonesian authorities battled yesterday to contain a wildfire that has swept through Mount Bromo National Park on Java island, destroying more than 120 hectares as the country braces itself for an extreme El Nino-fuelled dry season.

The fire started Monday near Mount Bromo in East Java, one of Indonesia's most visited tourist destinations but now closed until further notice.

Local authorities deployed two water-bombing helicopters against the flames that have razed at least 127 hectares of national park land to date, fire official Bambang Setyo Antoko told AFP.

The destroyed area is equivalent to about 180 soccer fields.



A wildfire burns in Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park near Mount Bromo in Probolinggo, East Java province. (AFP)

"We're very dependent on wind conditions," Bambang said of the firefighting effort ahead.

National park official Rudijanta Tjahja Nugraha said the area on

fire was in a steep, cliffside region, making it difficult for firefighters to reach.

It was not known how the fire started, but Bambang said the park was extremely dry as El Nino

conditions take root in Indonesia. Mount Bromo, famed for its volcanic scenery, previously caught fire in 2023.

That blaze broke out when a couple lit a flare during a pre-wedding photo shoot and destroyed more than 500 hectares of land.

Indonesia's BMKG weather agency has warned that the 2026 dry season will be more intense and prolonged than usual, with a higher risk for wildfires and drought due in part to El Nino.

According to the Ministry of Forestry, more than 107,000 hectares of land burned in Indonesia between January and June this year — more than double the area destroyed in forest fires in 2023.

The last El Nino helped make 2023 and 2024 the two hottest years globally on record.

Floods in India kill nearly 100

AFP
New Delhi

Floods in India's northeast have killed nearly 100 people, according to an official toll update yesterday, with villages buried in mud after one of Assam state's worst deluges in years.

At least 97 people have died in the floods in Assam that have affected nearly 170,000, including thousands who have been forced into temporary shelters as swollen rivers inundate homes and farmland.

Floodwaters have submerged more than 14,000 hectares of cropland, an area almost one-and-a-half times the size of Paris.

An AFP journalist saw half-submerged houses, uprooted trees and vehicles buried under mud across the worst-hit district of Sivasagar.

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma posted a video yesterday of him consoling the parents of a 13-year-old boy who died while trying to rescue his pet dog from floodwaters.

"No parent should ever have to bid farewell to their child," he wrote.

Three dead, 23 injured, in Sri Lanka prison riots

Three prisoners were killed and at least 23 others injured in two prison riots in Sri Lanka, a senior official said yesterday, as unrest continued across the island nation's overcrowded prison system. One prisoner was killed and 10 injured in a riot that began late on Thursday at Colombo's New Magazine Prison. A second riot at Kuruwita prison, about 80km (50 miles) from the capital, left two prisoners dead and 14 injured, Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala told parliament. Police and special forces brought both disturbances under control, Wijepala said. Unrest at an open prison in Negombo, about 40km (25 miles) from Colombo, was also contained after police fired tear gas at protesting inmates, police sources told Reuters. Heavy police and riot squads were deployed at all three prisons and prisoners who had climbed onto rooftops or moved into open areas were returned to their wards, the



People wade through a water-logged road after heavy rains in Kolkata. (Reuters)

India's Health Minister JP Nadda, who visited the flood-hit region on Thursday, said the scale of the devastation was "so huge that it will take time" for normality to be restored.

"Village after village has been submerged," he told reporters.

Like most of the subcontinent, flooding is common in Assam during the June-September monsoon as the Brahmaputra — India's big-

gest river — and its many tributaries overflow.

However, experts say climate change, coupled with poorly planned development, is increasing the frequency, severity and impact of the disasters.

Residents and officials have blamed illegal coal mining in the neighbouring state of Nagaland for worsening the flooding, saying it has affected areas not histori-

cally prone to inundation.

Sarma has said he would raise the issue with the national government in New Delhi.

Advocacy group Climate Trends said the increasing severity of floods in the state was "driven by the interaction of global warming, changing river dynamics and growing human exposure, making them more frequent, more complex and more costly".

India to overhaul investment treaty framework to revive stalled trade pacts: official

Reuters
New Delhi

India is reviewing its model bilateral investment treaty and the country's cabinet will decide on changes soon, a senior finance ministry official said yesterday, as the Asian nation seeks to attract more foreign capital from partner nations.

The review comes as India negotiates new bilateral investment pacts with developed nations such as the United Kingdom, where progress towards an agreement has been slow in part due to some provisions in the nation's treaty framework.

For instance, the nation's 2016 bilateral investment treaty framework requires foreign investors to exhaust domestic legal remedies for five years before seeking international arbitration to resolve disputes.

"We are looking at what are red flags and we have a negative list. We will set that aside and see what is the maximum we can put out there," Anuradha Thakur, India's economic affairs secretary, said at an event in New Delhi.

"It is work in progress. Consultations are on," she said. Indian industry bodies have also been lobbying for faster dispute resolution for investors and easier working conditions for foreign firms to help the country compete for global capital.

India has received lower net foreign direct investment in recent years versus other Asian nations, at \$7.7bn in the year ended March 2026, compared to \$20.2bn for Vietnam and \$24.2bn for Indonesia in 2024.

In the last couple of years, India secured bilateral investment treaties with Israel and the United Arab Emirates, while talks with other nations continue.

Pacific ministers fail to agree on China missile response

Reuters
Suva

Pacific Island foreign ministers failed to agree yesterday to a joint response to China's missile launch in July, with further discussions expected at the Pacific leaders meeting at the end of August. China's test-firing of a missile into the Pacific alarmed regional powers but failed to spur a unified response from Pacific Island governments, underscoring divisions over how to confront growing strategic competition in the region.

Many of the foreign ministers and senior officials from the 18 countries represented at the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Suva expressed concern to Reuters about the missile test.

Pacific Islands Forum Secretary-General Baron Waqa said China's missile test was discussed by ministers "at quite some length". While everyone wanted a statement out, there were disagreements over what it should contain, he said.

"There are mixed feelings on how the statement should be formatted, whether just to make an outright statement particularly on that single incident, but there are other ideas that it should be a general statement covering any tests in the

Pacific," Waqa said at a media conference after the meeting.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters told reporters that two members had refused to sign on to the statement, without giving a clear reason. He would not name the two countries.

An official with knowledge of the discussions said it was Kiribati and Nauru. Kiribati moved to recognise China in 2019 and Nauru followed suit in 2024, severing ties with Taipei.

But Waqa said neither Kiribati nor Nauru blocked the statement.

"They just honestly placed their position so that others can consider and see how best they can all contribute," he said. "So it's not easy, but there's no blocking."

The ministers decided more time was needed to negotiate on the text that could be considered by leaders at the next Pacific Islands Forum leaders meeting in Palau, Deputy Secretary-General Esala Nayasi added.

As geopolitical tensions have increased in the region, leaders have called for unity in their response. Pacific leaders backed an "Ocean of Peace" declaration last year to maintain peace amid intensifying strategic competition. However, the lack of a statement shows divisions remain.

Peters said some countries were



Foreign ministers and top diplomats of the Pacific Islands countries pose for a family photo during a meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in Suva, Fiji, yesterday. (AFP)

being influenced by those outside the region. He would not name the country he believed was influencing Pacific countries to not sign the statement.

"The Pacific is a blue continent, peaceful, secure and that our job as the temporary servants serving these people is to make sure it stays that way," he said.

At the opening of the meeting, Rick Houenipwela, the foreign minister of the Solomon Islands

and chair of the meeting, told those gathered that the Pacific's agenda must continue to be "conceived by the Pacific, shaped by the Pacific and only by the Pacific".

Even as the strategic environment became more complex, Houenipwela added, the response should avoid fragmentation or division.

Instead, he said, it "should create regional solidarity, strong consensus, and continue confidence."

Lanka expands ban on gambling sites

Sri Lanka has added nearly 100 more online betting sites to a list of banned portals as part of a crackdown on unauthorised gambling, the Digital Economy Ministry said yesterday. Online gambling is legal in Sri Lanka, but operators must register with the authorities and pay a licence fee to the government. Another 98 sites were added to the list of portals to be blocked in Sri Lanka, two days after 24 major gambling sites were banned.

Those online gaming sites were operating without licences, the ministry said. It also warned Sri Lankans that investing in such sites was illegal. The banned sites include stake.com, bet365.com, betway.com and 1xBet.com. "All telecom service providers have been ordered to implement the ban with immediate effect," the ministry said in a statement. However, Internet users in Sri Lanka can still access the blocked sites using VPN software. (AFP)

Food security fears mount as UK farmers battle drought

AFP
Shimpling

Giant dust clouds rose from a green-red combine harvester as it crawled across a parched field, a sign that something was awry with UK farmer John Pawsey's land.

"It suddenly, completely dried out," Pawsey said. For weeks the drought "just seems to have gone on for ever" on his farm in the eastern county of Suffolk.

English farmers have been contending with the driest July ever recorded by the Met Office weather agency — unwelcome news for those like Pawsey who have only seen paltry yields of crops such as oats, wheat and vetch.

Concern over food security has gripped Britain's headlines amid a series of heatwaves this year.

"All of our fears were realised when we got our combines into the field and realised that actually the yield was ... between 25 and 30% down," Pawsey said.

His family has tilled the Suffolk soil since a Scottish great-grandfather moved there, one of many farm workers who flocked south following the late 19th century agricultural depression.

Like his ancestors, Pawsey, 62, is navigating a turbulent future.

"I am worried about the com-

ing years," he admitted.

The drought is the most recent weather-related challenge to hit the nation's farmers over the past five years.

Food growers must learn to adapt, Pawsey urged, adding dynamic farmers should view the changing climate as an "opportunity".

His organic farm has experimented with new crops, like fava beans and chickpeas more suited to hotter, drier climates, and techniques to build resilience such as pairing two different crops in the same field to force them to grow as they compete for space and nutrients.

The government needs to support farmers in "making a transition" towards using similar methods, Pawsey argued.

Food security expert Timothy Benton endorses farming less intensively, saying "a more circular, diverse farming system" would be more secure and less dependant on imports of such things as fruits and fertilisers.

"Climate impacts will become greater," Benton told AFP, adding "food systems will have to change." "We're not investing enough in the forms of technological innovation to address a larger crisis," he said.

Benton argued: "Food is not just food, it's what you grow, produce



A drone view of a dry field near Crouch Hill, with the City of London financial district seen behind, as drought weather conditions continue in London, yesterday. (Reuters)

and the products and processes needed to bring it to the general population."

Climate change could also force Britain to change its eating habits, said Nicola Cannon, professor at the Royal Agricultural College. She has been growing soya with the aim of introducing

it to more British farms.

Dinnertime staples have been hit especially hard by the drought. This year's pea yield was only "50% of what we wanted," Cannon said.

They had little chance to grow, as there has been "very little moisture since March," she added.

On Pawsey's Suffolk farm, an

entire crop of quinoa failed.

"We just had no rain," he said. "The only things that started growing were docks (leaves) and thistles."

Shortages of certain foods may result if drought conditions continue, National Farmers' Union president Tom Bradshaw told the BBC.

"Change will be much more expensive," he said, warning that "things are going to get worse in the decades ahead."

Pawsey said that if weather trends continue, "farmers will go out of business."

"It'll either mean higher prices or the government will have to continue to support farmers," he said.

Spain imposes border checks on Italy amid migrant showdown

AFP
Madrid

Spain announced yesterday it would introduce temporary border checks on travellers from Italy in response to Rome imposing similar measures after a mass migrant rush into Ceuta.

The checks, which come “amid the persistent irregular migration pressure” facing Italy, will start at midnight on Saturday and last until September 7, Spain’s interior ministry said in a statement.

Hours earlier, Spain threatened Italy with countermeasures if it did not swiftly lift its own border checks, drawing a rebuff from Rome.

The rare spat between the European Union and NATO allies came after tens of thousands of people crossed from Morocco to Spain’s North African territory on July 30-31 in an unprecedented, deadly rush.

The scenes infuriated EU members that back a hard line on irregular immigration, including Italy which imposed a one-month suspension of its visa free-travel Schengen deal with Spain.

The Spanish government slammed the measure Friday as “unfair, contrary to the EU’s interests and discriminatory for the Spanish population”.

Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares described it as “a torpedo fired at the hull of European unity.”

“We urge the government of Italy to rectify, put an end to the checks and treat Spaniards like other European citizens,” the government said.

He threatened “proportional measures” in response by Sunday if Italy failed to comply.

- ‘Creating rifts’ -

Within hours, the government of Italy’s far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said it “had no intention of revising the decision” before August 15, when it said Spanish authorities “expected a new wave of migration” to hit Ceuta.

“Italy does not accept ultimatums or impositions from abroad regarding national security and border control,” Meloni’s office said in a statement.

“Only when there is certainty that there are no security or terrorism risks to Italy, that no new wave is occurring, and that no irregular migrants are heading toward European territory, will the decision be reconsidered,” it read.

Spain’s interior ministry announced the reciprocal measures within hours.

Spanish police have been monitoring online rumours and social media about possible fresh arrivals in Ceuta in mid-August, according to local media. But authorities have not expressly said they expect a repeat of last week’s rush.

Border authorities would in the meantime “do their utmost to ensure maximum ease of movement for Spanish and European citizens” who are not affected by border checks, the Italian statement added.

Italy, which does not share a land border with Spain, introduced border controls at maritime and air entry points for third-country nationals arriving from the Iberian country.

The move announced on July 31 was an “extraordinary measure” intended to “safeguard national security and prevent possible repercussions for our nation,” Meloni said at the time.

She was among EU leaders who called for Spain to be suspended from the visa-free Schengen travel zone after the Ceuta incident, despite such a move being legally impossible.

Italy’s coalition government has sought to stop the tens of thousands of people who land in small boats on the country’s shores each year.

The Spanish government warned against “creating rifts and sterile conflicts driven by internal electoral motives” and said “we trust that pro-European sentiment, common sense and good faith prevail”.

Of the 72,000 people who entered Ceuta, 70,000 have returned to Morocco, according to official Spanish figures.

Spanish authorities said 80 people died in the crossings.

Moroccan rights groups however estimate the figure to be higher. The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) and the European Coordination for Human Rights in Morocco on Friday said at least 141 deaths were recorded and that the toll was likely to rise.

Morocco’s interior ministry has said 11 people died on its side of the border, all but one by drowning.

Those who remain in Ceuta – including hundreds of unaccompanied children – face dire living conditions with little access to food, water, and shelter.

Dry spell in Europe



A drone view of the Vistula river with its lowest water level ever recorded in Warsaw due to hydrological drought and a heatwave, in Warsaw, Poland, yesterday. (Reuters)

EU’s Von der Leyen welcomes US backing of Russia energy sanctions

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen welcomed yesterday the US Senate backing of Russian energy sanctions, advancing a long-delayed measure backed by the late Senator Lindsey Graham. “I welcome the US Senate’s adoption of the Graham Bill,” wrote von der Leyen on X. “Together, let us drain Russia’s means to continue a war it cannot win. With hard-hitting, complementary sanctions, Europe and the US can once again show what historic partners can achieve when we act together,” she added. (Reuters)

Germany holds security meeting over drone amid Russia protest

AFP
Berlin

Chancellor Friedrich Merz convened Germany’s national security council yesterday to discuss an explosive-laden drone found near a Ukrainian cargo plane and the mid-air collision of another aircraft with an unidentified object this week.

While Germany has not blamed anyone for the incident at Leipzig-Halle airport in the early hours of Wednesday, the Russian embassy in Berlin called the discovery a deliberate “provocation” set up to blame Moscow. Leipzig airport is a strategic hub for military and logistics transport and Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt has called the discovery “a hybrid attack” that spelled “a new level of danger”.

Dobrindt said a “foreign power” may have been involved in the incident that follows a campaign of sabotage, espionage and disinformation that security services blame on Russia.

Russia’s embassy dismissed the entire episode as a “hastily contrived provocation” that “serves only the interests of Kyiv and the militarist wing of the European political establishment”.

The airport in eastern Germany plays a key role in the transport of military goods by the German military forces and Nato allies. It also serves as a base for Ukraine’s Antonov Airlines. According to the Bild daily an airport employee saw the drone hovering near the Ukrainian plane and brought it to the ground until police arrived.

Officers then dispatched a bomb disposal robot, while air traffic was halted for several hours. The drone was eventually disarmed.

Prosecutors have said that the drone was equipped with “professional explosives and a detonator” and the only reason it did not explode was that the detonator was defective.

While authorities have not named the type of explosive, unconfirmed media reports have said it was Semtex, a plas-

Prosecutors say the Leipzig incident was “a serious attack on Germany’s transport and logistics infrastructure” which could have ‘threatened Germany’s external and internal security’

tic explosive with industrial and military uses.

Semtex has been used by militants and insurgents including the Irish Republican Army. In 1988 it was used to bring down a Pan Am Boeing 747 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 270 people in an act blamed on Libyan agents.

Prosecutors say the Leipzig incident was “a serious attack on Germany’s transport and logistics infrastructure” which could have “threatened Germany’s external and internal security”. The airport shutdown also prompted a cargo plane to abandon its planned landing.

That aircraft was then hit by an unidentified object in mid-air before it landed safely in Hanover, where “minor damage” to the aircraft was discovered. German police have searched the area near the site of impact for remnants of that object or any other clues, but so far without reporting any discoveries. Germany is Ukraine’s most important supplier of military equipment in its fight against Russia’s invasion.

While the government has not accused Russia over the latest incident, opposition politicians have pointed fingers at Moscow, with the Greens’ Katharina Droege telling Welt newspaper that it “could be an act of Russian state terrorism”.

The Russian embassy, however, contended in its statement that “the main danger facing Germany today is not the supposed ‘hybrid attacks’ from Moscow, which do not exist”.

The embassy – which said it was alarmed by “a new wave of anti-Russian hysteria in Germany” – said the danger was “politicians who are enthusiastically developing scenarios.”

Europe reeling with climate change readies for solar eclipse dip in power generation

AFP
Brussels

European energy operators are braced for next week’s solar eclipse to cause a temporary dip in power generation and have taken steps to keep electricity flowing to businesses and consumers, an industry body said Friday.

While the August 12 eclipse offers a rare spectacle for the general public, it presents a technical challenge for grid operators, which must constantly balance electricity supply and demand to guarantee secure power provision.

“Under clear-sky conditions, photovoltaic (PV) output could decrease by up to 9.7 GW across Europe, creating a rapid but predictable change in generation patterns between 19:15-21:30 CEST,” said the association representing Europe’s power grid operators, ENTSO-E.

It said operators were “ready to ensure the secure and stable operation of the electricity system throughout the event”.

They have activated a task force to coordinate preparations, monitor the situation and aid information-sharing before and after the eclipse.

Spain – where the Moon will



A ship passes the Tank Terminal of the river port of Bendorf during prolonged dry weather across Europe that caused the Rhine water levels to reach a historic low with massive consequences for German industry, near Koblenz, Germany. (Reuters)

completely cover the Sun in a total eclipse – is expected to experience the biggest solar power reduction, along with Germany, ENTSO-E said. The EU had about 406 GW of installed solar capacity at the end of 2025, said SolarPower Europe.

The European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity represents 40 operators representing 36 countries.

With solar now making up about 13 % of Europe’s electricity mix,

the group said, its members were “increasingly managing weather-related and natural phenomena that can influence generation patterns over short periods of time”.

Proactive steps included briefing control room operators and warning market participants about the expected dip in solar generation, while “avoiding planned grid outages during the eclipse period to maximise operational flexibility,” the body said.

“To support real-time decision-making, local system operators receive additional updated photovoltaic generation forecasts from weather service providers,” it added.

The total eclipse is the first visible in mainland Europe since 2006, with the “path of totality” as it is known passing from remote northern Russia over Greenland, Iceland, northern Spain and the northeastern tip of Portugal.

Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, who fled Nazis, honoured in London

AFP
London

With its grand facade, the 1930s London mansion block looks like countless others. But one flat hides a tale of one of the darkest chapters in 20th century European history.

Famed Austrian writer Stefan Zweig lived in flat number 71, at 49, Hallam Street, for three years until 1939 after fleeing his homeland as Nazi leader Adolf Hitler began his rise to power.

Largely forgotten by modern readers, Zweig – the inspiration for Wes Anderson’s 2014 film *The Grand Budapest Hotel* – was a major literary figure who during his lifetime was the world’s most widely translated author.

In the event of an invasion of Britain, the writer would have been among the highest profile targets of the Nazi’s so-called “black book”. SS units would have been directed to Hallam Street to detain and “neutralise” Zweig.

The address was included in the secret Sonderfahndungsliste GB (*Special Search List Great Britain*) which contained the names of around 2,820 politicians, writers, scientists, refugees, journalists and others considered enemies of the Nazi regime.

Ninety years after Zweig settled in Hallam Street, UK admirers including the late playwright Tom Stoppard and novelist Julian Barnes, have finally won their bid to have the address officially commemorated.

A round blue plaque, recently

‘His letters say how much comfort he gets from London, but the fact that the Brits are generally unbothered by the war – that infuriates him,’ – Historian Susan Skedd

mounted on the block’s exterior, now alerts passers-by to the building’s famous former resident.

“Stefan Zweig 1881-1942, Austrian Writer lived in flat 71, 1936-1939,” reads the marker erected as part of the English Heritage’s Blue Plaques programme.

The scheme, which has been running since 1866, aims to honour the link between notable figures and UK buildings where

they lived and worked.

Blue Plaques historian Susan Skedd said Zweig’s mental state appeared to fluctuate during his time in the capital, where he also lived at several other addresses.

“His letters say how much comfort he gets from London, but the fact that the Brits are generally unbothered by the war – that infuriates him,” she said.

Gathering material for his autobiography *The World of Yesterday* also caused him to dwell on the lost world of his past life in Vienna, she said. He left the city in 1933.

“He feels that civilisation is lost... which is profoundly sad,” she added.

In September 1939, as war in Europe broke out, Zweig delivered the funeral eulogy for fellow exile, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, at

London’s Golders Green Cemetery.

According to English Heritage, 30 other blue plaque recipients appeared on the Nazis’ list, but Zweig’s Hallam Street flat was one of only two locations to be explicitly given, the other being the home of English science fiction author HG Wells.

Zweig’s works included *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1922) and *Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman* (1927), which were translated into dozens of languages.

His later novel *Beware of Pity* (1939) was written and published during the time he lived in Hallam Street. Anderson said in a video message to mark the blue plaque that he had “never heard” of Zweig until he chanced upon a copy of *Beware of Pity*, prompting him

to immediately seek out another of his works, *The Post Office Girl*, published posthumously in 1982.

“I sort of stole elements from both these books for *‘The Grand Budapest Hotel’*,” he said, adding that Ralph Fiennes’ character in the film was largely modelled on Zweig. Although he did find refuge in London, there was to be no happy ending for Zweig whose later works drew on his own experiences of displacement and cultural loss.

He left for New York in 1940, and later set up home in Brazil. The worsening situation in Europe, however, left him profoundly depressed.

On February 23, 1942, the day after finishing his autobiography, *Zweig*, then aged 60, and his second wife Lotte, 33, each took a fatal dose of barbiturates.



Strong El Nino could push 49mn more people into acute hunger

A powerful El Nino weather event could push an additional nearly 49mn people into acute food insecurity across some of the world's most vulnerable regions by the end of next year, the World Food Programme said earlier this week. The UN agency said in a report that there was an 81% chance of a very strong El Nino event, with sea surface temperatures at their warmest levels since at least 1982 and potentially making it the strongest such event since 1950.

El Nino, a periodic warming of ocean surface temperatures in the Pacific, alters global weather patterns and is often associated with drought in Southern Africa, delayed monsoons in parts of Asia and erratic rainfall elsewhere. Forecasters warn it could peak by late 2026 or early 2027 as an unusually intense or record-strength event. The sharp warming in sea-surface temperatures is expected to drive a temporary spike in global temperatures, pushing 2026

close to or matching previous record warm years.

"These are events that in the past have triggered large-scale hunger," Jean-Martin Bauer, director of WFP's Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Service, told reporters. Based on an analysis of 45 countries deemed vulnerable to the adverse effects of El Nino, WFP estimates that the number of people facing acute food insecurity could rise by almost 49mn to a total of 274mn people, an increase of 22%, relative to the baseline population already experiencing crisis-level food insecurity or worse.

Central America and Southern Africa are expected to be among the hardest-hit regions, with the number of food-insecure people set to increase by 83% in Central America and nearly 75% in Southern Africa, the WFP report said.

Southern Africa as well as South America and the Caribbean could each see more than 12mn additional people fall into acute food insecurity. Bauer said global

food markets entered the El Nino period in a relatively strong position following good harvests in 2025, but warned that conflict in the Middle East and potential weather-related crop losses could put further upward pressure on prices.

While past El Nino events have not typically triggered major global food price spikes, regional shortages and higher prices could worsen food access for vulnerable households, he said. Funding cuts from US and European donors in 2025 were also hampering efforts to monitor the developing crisis, with Bauer describing a growing drought of food-security data used to assess the impact of El Niño.

WFP conducted about 1.1mn household surveys in 2024, compared with about 800,000 in 2025, while data collection has fallen further this year due to funding restrictions. "At a time when you have a risk like an El Niño, it is important to have high-frequency data collection," Bauer said, warning that reduced

monitoring could make it harder to identify emerging food crises quickly.

WFP said current forecasts point to rainfall deficits in parts of East Africa, the Sahel, Central America and the Caribbean, while flood risks could rise in Somalia and neighbouring areas.

Significant impacts are also projected across South and Southeast Asia, where drought risks, uneven monsoons and localized flooding could disrupt agricultural production, the report stated.

The agency stressed that the forecasts remain uncertain and that impacts will vary across regions, but warned that governments and aid agencies needed to prepare. Richard Choularton, director of WFP's Climate and Resilience Service, said the agency had scaled up anticipatory action programmes in 18 countries, reaching more than 1.3mn people so far this year with cash and other assistance to help in the event of extreme weather. — Reuters

Lowdown on New Zealand's MMP electoral system

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon said earlier this week he was open to a referendum on the country's electoral system, sparking vigorous debate, with critics saying any such move would be seen as a "power grab" by the larger parties. New Zealand currently has a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system, which has made coalitions the norm since it was introduced three decades ago.

New Zealand switched from a British first-past-the-post system, in which the top finisher in each electoral district wins the seat, to MMP on the recommendation of a commission addressing concerns that smaller parties were being left out. All governments under MMP have been coalitions of the centre-left Labour or centre-right National with the support of smaller parties, except in 2020 when the Labour government swept to power after successfully managing the early months of the Covid-19 outbreak. Originating in Germany, MMP has been adopted, sometimes with modifications, in countries including Bolivia, Lesotho, South Korea and Thailand.

Under MMP, voters cast two votes: one for their preferred constituency candidate and one for a party. The candidate with the most votes wins and becomes an MP, while the party vote decides how

many seats each party gets in parliament. The winning candidates of the country's 71 constituencies take their seats automatically, while the remaining seats are filled from party lists, allocated to match each party's share of the nationwide vote. A party or bloc can form a government when it secures a majority in the single-chamber parliament, usually at least 61 of 120 seats. There are expected to be about 49 list seats in this election, though that number can change.

Political parties must get at least 5% of the party vote or win at least one electorate seat to get any seats in Parliament. Parliament normally has 120 seats, but extra seats can be added when a party wins more electorate seats than its share of the nationwide party vote would otherwise entitle it to. This happened after the 2023 election, when Te Pati Māora won six electorates while receiving 3.1% of the party vote. Polls indicate this could happen again in 2026.

In the system, seven of the electorate seats are Maori electorates, reserved for voters who choose to enrol on the Maori electoral roll. Maori voters may instead choose to enrol in a general electorate. Since MMP was first used in New Zealand in 1996, minor parties have often played a decisive role in the formation of the government.— Reuters

Cyclosporiasis scare



People shop at the Union Square Greenmarket in New York City. Consumers are turning to local produce stands, farmers markets, and greenhouse grown produce, contributing to a more than 20% drop in sales of prepackaged salads at grocery stores and other retailers in mid-July compared with a month earlier, amid an outbreak of cyclosporiasis linked to leafy greens. (AFP)

By Matt Spetalnick
Reuters

With President Donald Trump's war against Iran now in its sixth month, this week's flurry of threats and diplomacy has underscored the ever-tighter bind he finds himself in as he tries to extricate the US from an unpopular conflict he originally claimed would last just weeks.

Trump is caught between an emerging interim deal being negotiated by Iran and Oman that would give Tehran control over the Strait of Hormuz it never possessed before the war, or following through on his warnings of sharp escalation, risking a more prolonged crisis.

The first option, analysts say, would grant Iran its biggest concession since the US and Israel attacked it on February 28 and formalize, at least for now, the Islamic Republic's supervision of the vital oil-shipping conduit, which the Trump administration had vowed to prevent. The second path, likely a fresh wave of airstrikes, could be fraught with political peril for Trump ahead of November's pivotal US midterm elections, while seeming to offer no better chance of success than the earlier bombing that failed to bring Tehran to its knees.

Trump could instead choose to maintain the uneasy status quo. That would mean maintaining a blockade of Iran's ports and periodically retaliating for any attacks on shipping. But this approach too would not offer Trump a face-saving way out of a conflict he had predicted would be over by mid-April.

"It's a menu of bad options but Trump may have come to the realization that he can't let this war go on endlessly," said Aaron David Miller, a former Middle East negotiator for Democratic and Republican administrations. "Something has to give, and that may be recognition of a new Iranian reality in the strait." Responding to Reuters' questions, a US official said on condition of anonymity that any "temporary" shipping routes would be "without any impediments," with no party overseeing transit.

Trump's Iran dilemma: Stuck in conflict with no end in sight

- Emerging Iran-Oman deal on Hormuz would offer major concession to Tehran
- Trump's political risks with midterms looming: high gas prices, low ratings



US President Donald Trump speaks to the media aboard Air Force One. (Reuters)

CHOKEHOLD ON SHIPPING

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has insisted that the strait, where Iran has had a near-chokehold on a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas shipments since the start of the war, must remain an open

international waterway not controlled by Iran and free of tolls or fees.

But Trump has previously contradicted some of Rubio's assertions about the war, and analysts say he could do so again. With US fuel prices high,

his own approval ratings low and the war deeply unpopular with the American public, the president's room to manoeuvre is increasingly limited, they say.

As the conflict has dragged on, Trump's talk has done little if anything to force Iran

to give ground, and analysts say it is looking more likely that the president could be the one making the biggest compromises.

Reopening the strait is seen as a prerequisite for a return to negotiations between Iran and the US, which the Trump administration wants to focus on Iran's nuclear program, the main declared target of the president's military campaign.

The question remains whether the US would be ready to accept any arrangement worked out between Iran and Oman, which sit on opposite sides of the strait.

The proposed terms would give Tehran some control over ships entering the Gulf through the strait, a senior Iranian source and two regional officials told Reuters. Trump has said a deal reopening the waterway is imminent, but Iranian officials have said details remain to be resolved.

Even if an Iran-Oman pact is sealed and US-Iran talks resume, experts are skeptical about the chances for a final peace agreement based on the memorandum of understanding the US and Iran signed in June but which quickly unraveled. That preliminary deal had also given Iran some sanctions relief from the start, which drew criticism from some of Trump's fellow Republicans.

Trump administration officials have increasingly accepted that the conflict likely will still be going on in some form by the time of the midterms, a White House official said on condition of anonymity.

In some states, early voting begins as soon as September. This would pose further political risks for Trump, who

campaigning for a second term on promises to avoid foreign interventions and focus on Americans' economic concerns, as his Republican Party struggles to keep control of Congress. The US official told Reuters that Trump's decisions on Iran are not guided by "fluid opinion polls."

MAIN WAR GOALS

Though Trump has regularly claimed victory for having killed many of Iran's leaders and degraded its military capabilities, most analysts agree that the president has been stymied on many of his goals for the war. He said last week he canceled plans for new large-scale attacks after Middle Eastern partners asked him to give diplomacy another chance, but at the same time he threatened to hit hard if the effort failed.

Some analysts suggested Trump's climbdown may have also been driven by concerns about depletion of US missile stockpiles. Trump, however, has denied the US is running low on munitions. Even so, Trump issued a new contradictory message to Iran on Wednesday. "I'd rather make a deal because I don't want to kill people," he told a rally in Las Vegas. "But at some point we're gonna."

Iran has warned Washington's allies that any new US strikes would trigger retaliation against their energy infrastructure, five sources with knowledge of the discussions said.

Jonathan Panikoff, former deputy US intelligence officer for the Middle East, said China, Russia and North Korea are watching closely. "They are learning what US limitations are going to be for years to come," he said.

Even some Iran hawks who have mostly backed Trump's war are advising caution. "The Islamic Republic is trying to force President Trump into a lose-lose proposition before November," Behnam Ben Taleblu of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a hardline anti-Iran think tank in Washington, wrote on X.

The Trump administration should avoid "rushing into anything" and recognize "where the US does and doesn't have leverage," he said.

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Russian nationalists seek out election ban on anti-war party

Reuters
London

Russia's Supreme Court said yesterday it would consider a lawsuit to bar Yabloko, the only officially registered party which opposes Moscow's war in Ukraine, from contesting parliamentary elections in September.

The suit was filed by Rodina, or Motherland, a small pro-Kremlin nationalist party whose leader Alexei Zhuravlev denounced Yabloko as a Western-backed movement bent on discrediting the elections and Russia itself.

In a video statement, Zhuravlev declared: "We are rooting out national traitors to ensure they have no place in our country. They belong neither in the State Duma nor in the country at all. We are firmly convinced of this. We will fight and defeat both the external and the internal enemy."

Even in the context of wartime Russia, where many Kremlin critics have been jailed or forced to flee abroad, the language being used against a registered political party was notably threatening. The case will be considered on Monday.

Yabloko accused Zhuravlev of making defamatory statements against it and said it would launch its own suit. "They want to remove us from the elections because we stand for peace, whereas they want to prolong the tragedy (of the war) indefinitely," Yabloko leader Nikolai Rybakov said on Telegram.

The dominant United Russia party, which backs President Vladimir Putin, is expected to win the elections easily. But the authorities have acted to curb voices



President Vladimir Putin chairs a meeting with the Security Council members in Moscow, yesterday. (Reuters)

opposed to the war at a time when they say Russia needs to be united in the face of a largely hostile West.

Boris Nadezhdin, a politician who had attempted to run for parliament on an anti-war platform, was designated as a "foreign agent" last month. He has since fled the country.

The language used by Zhuravlev to justify the suit against Yabloko was reminiscent of that used by Putin in the early months of the war when he warned Russians to be on their guard against "scum and traitors" in their midst and to spit them out like flies.

Leaders of other broadly pro-Kremlin parties, also expected to be returned to parliament in September, have joined the attacks on Yabloko in recent days.

The exiled movement of late Russian dissident Alexei Navalny has urged people to cast their votes for Yabloko. Navalny died suddenly in an Arctic penal colony in 2024, and Western governments say he was murdered with a rare poison, which the Kremlin denies.

Yabloko, once a leading liberal force in the post-Soviet period, now holds only a handful of seats in regional parliaments

and none at national level.

But the election campaign has provided it with a window to grab more attention than usual for its anti-war stance.

The party says it wants Russia to sign a ceasefire agreement and avoid an escalation that it warns could lead to nuclear war.

The Kremlin says Russia is ready to end the fighting only if Ukraine accepts its terms, which include ceding more land, limiting its armed forces and renouncing international military alliances such as Nato. Kyiv says that would be tantamount to capitulation.

Russia-linked group blamed for fake video about Merz resignation

AFP
Berlin

German security services believe that a Russia-linked group was behind a video recently spread online purporting to reveal plans for Chancellor Friedrich Merz's resignation, a source told AFP yesterday.

The video uses the branding of German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle and business daily Handelsblatt to claim that leaked documents from Merz's conservative CDU party showed he was planning to resign next week due to his poor poll ratings.

Both media organisations have said the video is a complete fabrication. A security source told AFP that the "creator is probably Storm 1516", an operation which has been linked to Russian military intelligence.

The same group is suspected of spreading disinformation during the last general election in February 2025, after which Merz took office at the head of a coalition with the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD).

According to France's Vignum agency, which tracks foreign disinformation campaigns, Storm-1516 was behind at least 77 disinformation operations targeting Western countries between late 2023 and March 2025.

Germany's domestic intelligence agency told AFP that the latest video "shows that the creators closely follow political developments in Germany and use these opportunistically".

The video claimed that Merz

The same group is suspected of spreading disinformation during the last general election in February 2025, after which Merz took office at the head of a coalition with the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD)

was planning to stand aside in favour of Hendrik Wuest, the CDU state premier of North Rhein-Westphalia.

German media did in fact speculate about such a scenario earlier this year, and doubts about Merz's future may resurface after state elections in eastern Germany next month in which the CDU is expected to perform poorly.

However the video contains an obvious mistake, referring to a "general federal election in September" when no such vote will take place.

The video uses a common disinformation tactic in which invented claims are falsely presented as reports from established media organisations.

It comes as German authorities point the finger at Moscow as being behind a campaign of disinformation and sabotage aimed at weakening Germany's support for Ukraine.

This week a drone was found near a Ukrainian cargo plane at Germany's Leipzig-Halle airport, though German officials have refrained from assigning blame for what they labelled as "a hybrid attack" scenario.

Spanish police dismantle Mediterranean migrant smuggling network

AFP
Madrid

Spanish police yesterday that they had dismantled what they called one of the largest criminal networks involved in smuggling migrants across the Mediterranean. The police has arrested 78 people and seized 18 high-speed boats.

The network allegedly used the vessels to transport synthetic drugs such as ecstasy from Spain to Algeria and, on the return journey, to smuggle migrants to Spain's Mediterranean coast and the island of Ibiza, police said in a statement.

Investigators believe the group was responsible for at least 64 migrant smuggling operations in which more than 2,000 people were brought to Spain, generating profits of more than €24mn (\$28mn).

Police stated that the sea crossings were "extremely dangerous", with migrants travelling "cramped together, at high speed, in rough seas".

"On some occasions, passengers were even tied up to prevent them from falling into the water during the journey," the statement said.

The network charged up to €12,000 per person transported, with some operations involving as many as 50 migrants per crossing, police said.

Among those arrested were four alleged leaders of the organisation. Authorities also seized 18 high-speed boats valued at more than five million euros.

The operation was carried out with the co-operation of Europol — the European Union's law enforcement agency — and police forces countries such as France, Portugal and Poland.

Most irregular migration to Spain by sea takes place along the Atlantic route from west Africa to the Canary Islands, one of the main entry points to Europe for people fleeing conflict, persecution and poverty.

While arrivals to the Canary Islands have fallen in recent months, irregular migration along the western Mediterranean route from Algeria to Spain has increased.

Ukraine's Zelensky arrives in Serbia for first visit

Reuters
Belgrade

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky arrived in Serbia yesterday for his first visit to the Balkan country expected to focus on economic co-operation and bids by both countries to secure European Union membership. Zelensky posted a video on Telegram showing his arrival ahead of talks with populist President Aleksandar Vucic and other officials.

"We will be speaking about expanding economic ties between our countries, relations with the European Union, and other things that can work for our peoples, as well as security issues," Zelensky wrote.

Zelensky's visit will likely sour ties between Serbia and Russia, its long-time ally and main natural gas supplier.

On Thursday, Vucic said the two leaders would discuss European Union accession bids as well as economic and energy co-operation.

Hungary expects Danube to rise but nuclear plant still facing output curbs

Reuters
Budapest

Water levels on the Danube river are expected to temporarily rise thanks to rains in Austria, but the situation at the Paks nuclear plant remains "difficult", Hungarian Prime Minister Peter Magyar said in a Facebook video yesterday.

The plant has been running at around 10% of its capacity since the end of last week due to a prolonged heatwave and record-low water levels on the Danube, stretching power supply capacity to its limits.

Last week Magyar asked companies and citizens to cut back electricity use in the evening hours and dimmed decorative lighting on Budapest's historic buildings to save energy.

Magyar said yesterday that temperatures were expected to drop and the country's energy and water supply were stable, which means there was no longer need for cutbacks in energy consumption and decorative lighting would be switched on yesterday night.

"We have never seen such national co-operation. According to the first surveys released, nearly



The shore of the Danube river in Budapest, opposite the Hungarian Parliament building in the Hungarian capital. (AFP)

all Hungarian families took part in savings and changed their energy and water use," Magyar said.

However, Magyar said the situation at the Paks nuclear plant remains "difficult", and that the government was working on solutions at Paks if low water levels in the Danube, which the plant uses as a coolant, become permanent.

"We expect the water level to rise a good 20cm in the next few days, however, as there is no rain expected again from tomorrow, this rise is expected to be temporary," Magyar said.

Magyar also said the govern-

ment will examine what investments were needed to make Hungary's energy and water supply more resilient.

"Climate change is already here, and we need to build a country that can adapt to this," the prime minister said.

Magyar said last week that Hungary will develop 4 gigawatts of wind energy capacity by 2030 to diversify its energy sources.

Europe, the world's fastest-warming continent, has been ravaged by record-breaking heat and destructive wildfires this summer, with France and Spain particularly hard hit in recent weeks.

Europe's would-be water bombers in race to tackle future wildfires

Reuters
Toulouse, France

Deep inside the carcass of a disused turboprop aircraft, engineer Jonathan Beck squeezes between rows of tanks as he demonstrates how his French startup plans to challenge ageing Canadair water-bombers in combatting European wildfires.

From the birthplace of Concorde to the laptops of a retired general in southern France or an architect in Belgium, designs for new or converted water-bombers have been fast gaining momentum after nearly 500,000 hectares burned across Europe this year.

A parliamentary panel warned last year that France's existing fleet of aerial firefighters faced a "major crisis" and called for European alternatives to the rugged water-scooping Canadairs, which have dominated the market for decades.

At first glance, the task looks daunting. A water-scooper is partly a seaplane, the art of which has eroded over the years.

"We will have eight tons of water inside this aircraft," former Airbus

engineer Beck, who heads design at Positive Aviation, told Reuters, pointing to Y-shaped pipes that would draw water from new floats designed to skim over lakes or sea.

The Toulouse-based startup is using the dismembered ATR-72 fuselage as an early demonstrator or testbed, and giving a new lease of life to the historic Hangar 16 that spawned Concorde.

A few miles away, Kepplair is receiving an ATR-72 to test its vision of a ground-loaded tanker to replace Canada's veteran Dash-8 on pre-emptive patrols to tackle initial outbreaks. "It's the difference between an uncontrollable fire and one that is halted quickly," said Kepplair founder David Joubert.

Europe's last serious effort to match Canadair by Germany's Dornier and Italy's Aeritalia in the 1980s, Advanced Amphibious Aircraft (AAA), never left the drawing board due to cost.

"Western nations... have lost their skills in professional seaplane design since the 1950s or even World War Two," said former AAA project chief Elmar Welczek, a German professor widely seen as a leading expert in the mainly for-



Canadair aircrafts work to extinguish a wildfire in the Corbieres massif near Montseret, south-western France on Thursday. (AFP)

gotten field of water flying.

Before they can quench a single flame, would-be water-bombers must scoop up significant amounts of capital to fund the R&D, certification tests and factories needed.

"What I think people underestimate is the time to go from design to delivery," said John Boag, CEO

of top private Canadair operator Avincis.

Estimates of development costs produced by entrepreneurs run from tens of millions for a simple conversion to \$1bn for a new plane and analysts warn that could go far higher.

Positive Aviation hopes to tap

a market for converting second-hand planes and be ready for 2028, company president Laurent Schmitt said. It has a provisional order for 10 planes from US-based Bridger Aerospace.

Kepplair is raising a new round of funding and aims to start deliveries next year, Joubert said.

At least three other firms are touting even bolder plans to design and build planes from scratch, while so far giving few details in public about their backers.

The most prominent so far is French startup HYNARO, which announced Latecoere — a pioneer of early boat planes and now an aerostructures supplier — as a provisional partner last week.

It says its Fregate-F100 scooper plane would hold 10 tons of water and cost the same as a Canadair — roughly \$80mn with support — but be twice as efficient in fighting fires. In Italy, 19-01 Holding has been promoting since 2011 what it calls an integrated firefighting and emergency-response system centred on a new amphibious plane, WF-X.

CEO Renato Sacchetti said assembly would start in Italy from

2031. He added it would have entirely private funding worth €1.2bn but declined to give details.

In Belgium, the amphibious Seagle is the brainchild of Gaetan du Four, an architect who aims to partner with industrial groups. He is candid about financial and industrial challenges.

"We are looking at the middle of next decade because we have to get funding. But I don't think any other (new) plane will fly before then," he told Reuters.

Startups must also compete with a new version of the Canadair, which resumed production this year subject to safety approval, after an 11-year gap.

Deliveries of the DHC-515 have been delayed three years to 2028, but owner De Havilland Canada argues alternatives carry more risk. "It's a lot of years and a lot of engineering," said Neil Sweeney, its corporate affairs vice-president.

Even so, Europe's aspiring water-bombers see a window of support as politicians debate firefighting capacity. "What worries me is that in four weeks' time, nobody will talk about it, either media or politicians," Schmitt said.

Qatar-Asean ties deepen as trade nears \$15bn after dialogue partner milestone

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Growing bilateral ties between Qatar and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) are strengthening economic co-operation, with two-way trade approaching \$15bn annually and fresh partnerships emerging in energy, fintech, digital innovation, and investment.

According to a statement issued by the Asean Committee in Doha (ACD), such momentum follows Qatar's elevation to Asean Sectoral Dialogue Partner status, a milestone expected to deepen engagement with the regional bloc.

Since acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in 2022, the ACD noted that Qatar has steadily expanded its engagement with Asean in development, humanitarian assistance, education, and connectivity.

The development comes as Asean marks its 59th anniversary under the Philippines' chairmanship, with the theme "Asean: Navigating Our Future, Together", highlighting the bloc's commitment to resilience, regional integration, and people-centred progress.

The occasion is also significant as it marks the first anniversary

of Timor-Leste's accession as Asean's newest member, bringing the grouping's population to more than 680mn people and its combined GDP to \$3.9tn.

According to the ACD, sustained high-level exchanges over the past two years have laid a solid foundation for deeper political and economic ties between Qatar and Asean member states.

Among the key engagements were Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's two visits to Doha in 2025, the visit to the Philippines by HE the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Secretary-General Ahmed Hassan al-Hammadi, and HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi's visits to Brunei Darussalam and Thailand.

The momentum continued this year with HE the Qatar Olympic Committee President Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani visiting Malaysia and the Philippines, Singapore's Foreign Minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan travelling to Doha, and HE the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Sheikh Saoud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani holding high-level meetings in Singapore before visiting Indonesia.

HE al-Muraikhi also represented Qatar at the high-level conference commemorating the 50th anni-

versary of the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Manila, where he held bilateral meetings with senior officials from the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, Viet Nam and the Asean Secretariat.

The stronger diplomatic engagement has been matched by expanding economic co-operation, with annual trade between Qatar and Asean nearing \$15bn across sectors including agribusiness, aviation, energy, healthcare, hos-



pitality, real estate and telecommunications.

The ACD noted that the Qatar Chamber has welcomed business delegations and officials from several Asean countries over the past year, including the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Viet Nam, Indonesia and Singapore, and has identified opportunities to deepen collaboration in agriculture, food processing, renewable energy, technology, innovation and private-sector partnerships.

Among the landmark initiatives was the strategic partnership forged in 2025 between the Qatar Development Bank, Qatar FinTech Hub and Singapore-linked Global Finance & Technology Network to establish a Global Centre of Excellence for Finance and Technology in Doha and develop a future Qatar FinTech Forum linked to the Singapore FinTech Festival.

In another major development, QatarEnergy and Malaysia's Petro-

and the Qatar Investment Author-

ity. According to the ACD, Asean investors are increasingly exploring opportunities aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030 and the country's Digital Agenda 2030, particularly in digital transformation, innovation and sustainability.

Digital innovation featured prominently during the Qatari-Philippine Business Meeting in Doha in November 2025, where smart-city solutions, technology and innovation were identified as priority areas for future collaboration.

The ACD said Asean's broader economic agenda under the Philippines' 2026 chairmanship complements Qatar's own development priorities.

These include strengthening trade and investment, supporting micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), promoting innovation and artificial intelligence (AI), and accelerating digital transformation.

A key milestone was the successful conclusion of negotiations on the Asean Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) in June this year.

Scheduled for signing in November, the agreement will establish common regional rules for digital trade, trusted cross-border

data flows, digital payments, electronic transactions and consumer protection, while enhancing digital interoperability across the region.

Beyond economic co-operation, the ACD highlighted Asean's support for Qatar during periods of regional tension, noting that Asean leaders consistently called for dialogue, restraint and adherence to international law in response to developments in the Middle East.

Asean member states also expressed solidarity with Qatar following the passing of His Highness the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani.

Ministers from several Asean countries travelled to Doha in July to convey their condolences to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and the al-Thani family.

Looking ahead, the ACD said Asean and Qatar are well positioned further to expand co-operation across political, economic and people-to-people exchanges.

"Built on shared values of dialogue, mutual respect and peaceful co-operation, and underpinned by growing high-level engagement, both sides are well placed to forge partnerships that create real opportunities for businesses, strengthen communities, and improve lives across both regions," the statement said.



Handmade crafts find new life in Souq Waqif

By Joey Aguilar
Doha

Behind the colourful displays of hand-painted ceramics, mosaic lamps and traditional figurines at Souq Waqif's handicraft section is a quiet effort to preserve centuries-old craftsmanship while adapting to the tastes of today's shoppers.

Once known mainly for selling souvenirs to tourists, many handicraft stores

are now attracting customers looking for distinctive home décor and meaningful gifts, reflecting a growing appreciation for handmade products.

"We notice that many customers are no longer looking only for small souvenirs," one vendor said. "They want something they can display in their homes or offices. They ask about the craftsmanship and the story behind each piece."

Shelves filled with intricately painted vases, bowls, cups and decorative plates, alongside colourful glass lamps and ornaments, have become popular with both residents and visitors seeking items that blend beauty with everyday use.

Another shopkeeper said customers are increasingly choosing handmade products over factory-made alternatives.

"Many buyers tell us they want something unique," the vendor said.

"Every handmade item has slight differences, and that's what makes it special," he added. "They appreciate the time

and skill that go into creating it."

The trend reflects a broader shift in consumer preferences, with handcrafted products gaining value for their authenticity and individuality at a time when technology and automated manufacturing have made mass-produced goods more widely available.

Vendors said many customers also want to understand the story behind what they buy, asking how pottery is painted, how mosaic lamps are assembled and whether the designs are inspired by traditional Arab and Islamic art.

"They want to know the background," another vendor said. "Some customers even choose a piece because they connect with the story of how it was made."

The handicraft section offers a wide selection of decorative items, including hand-painted ceramic vases, tea sets, bowls and mugs that are emblazoned with Qatar's name, colourful mosaic lamps, hanging ornaments and figurines inspired



by Gulf traditions and Bedouin life.

For many shoppers, these items have become more than travel keepsakes.

"Years ago, visitors mostly bought magnets or small gifts," a vendor said. "Today, many customers are decorating their homes. They look for larger vases, ceramic plates, lamps and artistic pieces they can keep for years."

The change has also boosted demand for handmade crafts as gifts for weddings, housewarmings and other special occasions.

Vendors said residents make up a significant share of their customers, particularly those seeking to add a cultural touch to their homes, while tourists often look for authentic pieces that reflect Qatar's heritage rather than conventional souvenirs.

Despite the popularity of online shopping and inexpensive imported décor, shopkeepers believe handmade crafts continue to stand out because they offer something machines cannot replicate.



Hand-painted ceramics, colourful mosaic lamps and traditional figurines are displayed at the handicraft section of Souq Waqif in Doha. **PICTURES;** Shaji Kayamkulam

Visitors from GCC praise Qatar's rise as premier destination for family tourism

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

Visitors from across the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) have praised Qatar's remarkable tourism transformation, describing the country as one of the region's leading family destinations thanks to its world-class infrastructure, year-round calendar of events and diverse blend of cultural, leisure and entertainment experiences.

Speaking to reporters during a visit to Souq Waqif, several GCC visitors said Qatar's continued investment in tourism and urban development, particularly following the successful hosting of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, has further strengthened its appeal as a destination that seamlessly combines heritage with modernity.

They noted that the country's safe environment, high-quality services and expanding portfolio of attractions have made it a preferred choice for families, young travellers and visitors seeking memorable experiences throughout the year.

Saudi visitor Mohammed al-

Travellers praise the year-round attractions, welcoming atmosphere and world-class infrastructure

Juhaimi said Qatar has earned a distinguished place among the Arab world's leading tourism destinations through its variety of attractions, ranging from traditional markets and beaches to shopping centres and cultural landmarks.

"Qatar offers a unique combination of authenticity and modern living," he said.

"Places such as Souq Waqif and Katara Cultural Village beautifully reflect the country's heritage and identity, while its family-friendly atmosphere makes every visit enjoyable," al-Juhaimi added.

"I encourage visitors from across the Gulf to experience Qatar's hospitality and discover its rich cultural traditions," he said.

Fellow Saudi visitor Mohammed Fahd al-Ajabi described Qatar as one of the safest countries in the region, making it an ideal destination for family holidays.

Despite travelling extensively, he said Qatar remains his preferred destination, with Old Doha Port,

Katara Cultural Village, The Pearl-Qatar and Souq Waqif among the places he makes a point of visiting each time.

Al-Ajabi added that Qatar's tourism appeal now extends well beyond traditional holiday seasons, offering visitors compelling experiences throughout the year.

Another Saudi visitor, Nawfal al-Qahtani, commended the country's modern infrastructure, saying that continued investment in hotels, public facilities and shopping destinations has significantly enhanced the visitor experience.

He added that destinations such as Lusail, Old Doha Port and Souq Waqif, together with a packed calendar of festivals and cultural events, provide entertainment options for visitors of all ages.

From Oman, Adel al-Shehri said Qatar has become an annual holiday destination for his family, citing its international sporting, cultural and entertainment events alongside activities such as desert



GCC tourists at Souq Waqif.

safaris and water sports that cater to every generation.

His compatriot Ali al-Ghamlasi attributed Qatar's growing popularity to its proximity, ease of access and constantly evolving tourism offerings, noting that every visit presents something new to discover.

Saudi visitor Meshaal Hamad al-Marri also praised the country's remarkable development since his previous visit, highlighting destinations including Lusail Boulevard, Msheireb Downtown Doha, Souq Waqif, Katara Cultural Village and Al Safliya Island.

He said Qatar's renowned hos-



pitality, coupled with its diverse attractions and world-class facilities, continues to reinforce its rep-

utation as one of the Gulf's most attractive destinations for family tourism.