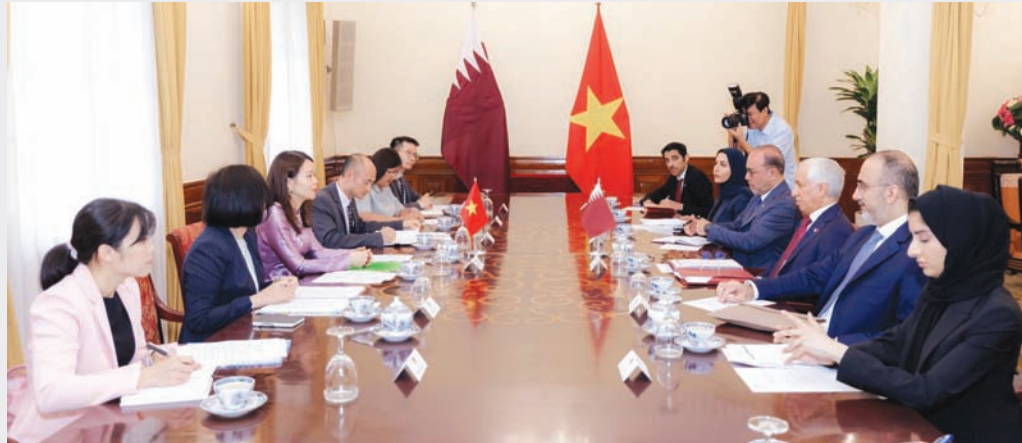


Qatar, Vietnam hold third round of political consultations



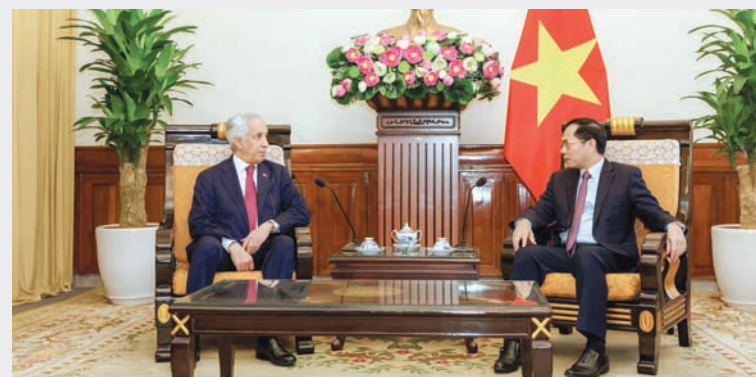
The third round of political consultations was held in Hanoi yesterday between the foreign ministries of Qatar and Vietnam. The Qatari side was headed by HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi, while the Vietnamese side was headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Minh Hang. The consultations dealt with discussing bilateral co-operation, in addition to a number of issues of joint interest. (QNA)

Vietnamese PM meets al-Muraikhi

Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh met in Hanoi yesterday with HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi. The meeting dealt with discussing bilateral co-operation between the countries, as well as several issues of joint interest. (QNA)



Al-Muraikhi meets Vietnamese FM



HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi met in Hanoi yesterday with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son. The meeting dealt with discussing bilateral co-operation between the countries, as well as several issues of joint interest. (QNA)

QFFD provides humanitarian assistance in South Sudan

QNA
Juba

A delegation from the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) and the Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) conducted a field visit to monitor humanitarian assistance activities in South Sudan from July 14-19.

The purpose of the visit was to assess the progress of the project implementation from the agreement signed on February 18, 2024, between QFFD, QRCS, in collaboration with ICRC. In this agreement, \$2,344,420 was allocated to support refugees and returnees in South Sudan, who are affected by armed conflict in Sudan as well as extreme flooding and harsh weather conditions in South Sudan.

Head of Disaster Management and Emergency Relief at QFFD Yousef al-Mulla said that "this initiative underscores QFFD's commitment to alleviate the hardships faced by vulnerable populations in South Sudan. By restoring family links, providing essential healthcare support, aiding the war-wounded, and ensuring access to safe drinking water, we aim to make a meaningful impact on the lives of refugees and returnees, offering them vital support during their challenging circumstances."

With the support of QFFD and QRCS, the ICRC has distributed 5,000 Essential Household Item (EHI) kits, 9,261 food rations, 2,000 kitchen utensils, vegetable seeds and gardening tools, to the affected people in Boro Medina, in Western Bhar el-Ghazal, Kuajok, Warrap state, Kaka, Upper Nile, including the upcoming distributions in Gok Machar, North Bahr el-Ghazal and Wadakona in Upper Nile.

Since the projects implementation, 3,303 phone calls were facilitated successfully, helping to maintain or re-establish contact between separated family members.

Moreover, healthcare services have been extended to 6,839 individuals, including 6,822 children, and 13,800 refugees and returnees (2,300 families) received emergency food aid and over 24,000 people now have better access to safe water.



AlKhater meets US ambassador



HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhater met with US ambassador of Qatar Timmy Davis. The meeting discussed the close strategic relations between Qatar and the US and ways to enhance co-operation, especially in the development field, in addition to the latest developments in the Gaza Strip, the occupied Palestinian territories, and joint mediation efforts to end the war on the Strip, as well as the latest developments in Afghanistan, alongside several other topics of mutual interest. (QNA)

AlKhater meets Korean First vice-minister of foreign affairs



HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhater met in Doha with Korea's First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kim Hong-kyun. The meeting dealt with discussing bilateral co-operation between the countries, especially in economy and technology, as well as developments in the Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territories, in addition to several issues of joint interest. (QNA)

Municipality ministry showcases key achievements of 2023

Doha Zoo and Al Khor Park zoo welcomed 265 new animal births among various species over the past year.

Some species in both zoos are part of a special breeding programme that focuses on comprehensive nutrition, temperature and humidity control to mimic their natural environments.

Recently, Doha Zoo witnessed the birth of rare and endangered species such as the owl monkey (*douroucoulis*), the black-bearded marmoset monkey, the Senegal bushbaby, the vervet monkey, the sika deer, and the barbary sheep.

Local Arabic daily *Arrayah* said that the report of the 2023 Achievements of the Ministry of Municipality revealed that the total number of treatments provided to animals and birds in Doha Zoo and Al Khor Park amounted to 455, with 93 surgeries performed.

Last year, the total number of public parks, plazas, and corniches in the country amounted to 144, with the per capita share of green spaces being 5.80sq m. Accordingly, the growth rate of public parks increased by 27%. Further, the area of public parks amounted to 3mn sq m, while the total green space area reached 16.8mn sq m. Watering green spaces with treated water rate

rose to 75%.
The report of the 2023 Achievements of the Ministry of Municipality revealed that the total number of treatments provided to animals and birds in Doha Zoo and Al Khor Park amounted to 455, with 93 surgeries performed

Meanwhile, the Joint Committee for the Removal of Abandoned Vehicles, Machinery, and Equipment in the country removed last year 11,598 abandoned vehicles, besides 12,913 abandoned vehicles that were disposed of, according to the same report.

Further, work is ongoing to update and develop the electronic system for abandoned vehicles. Efforts are also underway to redesign and classify vehicles within impoundment sites and to provide security personnel and means of protection. The report pointed out that the committee conducted 36 inspection campaigns to remove

such vehicles last year, with approximately four campaigns in each municipality, including the industrial area. The campaigns were intensified in both Doha and Al Rayyan municipalities.

The report stressed that the yards for selling local agriculture products amounted to around 13,456 tonnes for the 2022-2023 season, with the participation of 140 local productive farms.

The quantity of vegetables marketed through the "Premium Product Programme" reached about 3,026 tonnes for the 2022/2023 season, while the sales quantity through the "Qatar Farms Programme" amounted to around 22,392 tonnes for the same season.

Cuba's deputy FM receives copy of credentials of Qatar's envoy



Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Anayansi Rodriguez Camejo has received in Havana a copy of the credentials of Tariq Othman Abdulrahman al-Othman Fakhroo as Qatar's ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to Cuba. (QNA)



Palestinian support gatherings



Pro-Palestinian supporters gather at a demonstration organised by the Palestine Solidarity Film Screenings ahead of the Durban FilmMart festival in South Africa, yesterday.



People hold flags during a protest called by Hamas in support of Palestinians in Gaza, in Sidon, Lebanon, yesterday.

EU promises \$435mn in aid to Palestinian Authority

Reuters
Paris

The European Commission said yesterday it would provide the Palestinian Authority with 400mn euros (\$435.5mn) in emergency financial support in the coming two months amid concerns within the EU that the authority could collapse.

The money will be disbursed in the form of grants and loans in three payments between July and September, subject to progress in the implementation of the reform agenda of the Palestinian Authority, the Commission said in a statement.

It had earlier signed a letter of intent with the PA setting out a strategy to address its budgetary and fiscal situation.

"Together, we are laying the groundwork for economic and political stability in the West Bank," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said. The PA's finances have been in disarray for years as donor states have cut back funding that once covered nearly a third of its \$6bn annual budget, demanding reforms to tackle corruption and waste.

But Palestinian officials say the situation has worsened sharply since the Hamas group stormed Israel from Gaza in the first week of October last year, leading Israel to withhold a chunk of tax revenues it collects on the PA's behalf that are now its main source of financing.

The Palestinian government welcomed the funding, calling it "an important step to contribute to alleviating the stifling financial and economic crisis that our people are going through, which worsened after the Israeli aggression on Gaza". Basic in-

frastructure has worsened, government employees are being paid a fraction of their salaries, and health services are collapsing, officials say. These are signs of a deep financial crisis that has crippled the administration led by President Mahmoud Abbas in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, prompting questions over its future even as the US and other countries are pressing for a "revitalised" PA to run the Gaza Strip when fighting there ends.

"The financial situation of the PA is dire at this point in time and it's in nobody's interest if it collapses. It's clear they need more money," said a senior EU diplomat ahead of a monthly foreign ministers meeting in Brussels on Monday.

BRITAIN TO RESUME UNRWA FUNDING
Britain's new Labour government said yesterday it would resume funding to the UN Palestinian refugee agency UNRWA in the first major change in how it will approach the Israel-Palestinian conflict after winning power earlier this month.

Britain was one of several countries to halt their funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) following accusations by Israel that some agency staff were involved in the October first week storming by Hamas fighters of Israel.

British foreign minister David Lammy told parliament he was reassured that the agency, which provides education, health and aid to millions of Palestinians, had taken steps to ensure it has the "highest standards of neutrality", including improving vetting.

Lammy said the UNRWA is the backbone of aid operations in Gaza helping feed about half of the territory's population, and the government would provide

21mn pounds (\$27mn) in new funding to the agency.

Malnutrition in Gaza was now so severe that mothers could not produce breast milk for their children and the rates of diarrhoea were 40 times their normal rates and polio had been detected, Lammy said.

"Humanitarian aid is a moral necessity in the face of such a catastrophe, and it is aid agencies who ensure UK support reaches civilians on the ground," he said. "UNRWA is absolutely central to these efforts. No other agency can deliver aid at the scale needed." The government's change in policy comes after Labour's commanding election victory was dented by the loss of five seats to pro-Palestinian independent candidates.

Labour faced criticism after initially appearing to condone Israel's tactics in Gaza, including cutting off water and power, and only gradually shifting the party's position towards supporting an immediate ceasefire.

Israel has accused UNRWA of complicity with Hamas, saying the group was embedded within the UN agency's infrastructure.

A review, led by former French foreign minister Catherine Colonna, published in April said Israel had not provided evidence for its accusations that hundreds of staff are members of fighters groups. Other countries including Japan, Germany, Italy, Australia and Canada have resumed funding to the agency.

Asked if Britain would proceed with efforts to question whether the International Criminal Court has jurisdiction to issue arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, Lammy said the government was taking legal advice and still deciding its position.

Yemen's Houthis claim Tel Aviv drone attack

AFP
Dubai

Yemen's Houthi fighters claimed a drone attack on Tel Aviv yesterday that left one person dead, saying it marked a "new phase" in its operations against Israel.

The fighters fired a "new drone called 'Yafa', which is capable of bypassing the enemy's interception systems," their spokesman, Yahya Saree, said on social media.

It struck "one of the important targets in the occupied Jaffa region, what is now called Israeli Tel Aviv," he said, adding "the operation has achieved its goals successfully".

Israeli authorities said an explosion hit an apartment building in Tel Aviv at 3:12am (0012 GMT), killing one person and wounding four.

The Israeli army said the blast was "caused by the falling of an aerial target", based on an initial inquiry.

An Israeli military official who spoke on condition of anonymity said a "very big" drone had been detected but the alarm was not immediately raised because of "human error".

The Houthis pledged to turn Tel

Aviv into a "primary target" after months of drone and missile attacks targeting shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in response to the Gaza war.

A member of the movement's politburo, Hezam al-Asad, called the strike "unprecedented".

In an interview with the pro-Iranian channel Al-Mayadeen, he said the attack marked a "new phase" of operations against Israel which would increase in the coming period.

Another politburo member, Mohamed al-Bukhaiti, said the attacks would not stop until a Gaza ceasefire was reached.

"Our demand is fair: stop the genocide in Gaza, lift the siege on its residents, and we will stop our military operations," he said on social media platform X, sharing footage of the aftermath of the drone strike. Top Houthi official Mohamed Ali al-Huthi said the "first operation" to strike Tel Aviv marked a "qualitative shift" in the group's anti-Israel campaign.

The Houthis have previously claimed attacks targeting the southern Israeli resort of Eilat and port cities of Ashdod and Haifa, but yesterday's strike is the first operation claimed by the fighters against Tel Aviv.

The Houthis' military spokes-

man declared the Israeli commercial hub "an unsafe area" yesterday, saying it "will be a primary target within the range of our weapons". Saree said the Houthis "have a bank of targets" in Israel, including "sensitive military and security targets".

They "will continue...to strike those targets in response to the enemy's massacres and daily crimes against our people in the Gaza Strip," he said.

Later yesterday, the Houthis said they struck a Singapore-flagged vessel with missiles and drones because its owner had docked ships in Israeli ports.

The attack was confirmed by maritime security firm Ambrey, which said "a Singapore-flagged container ship was 'hit' by projectiles" southeast of the Yemeni port city of Aden.

Singapore's Maritime and Port Authority identified the container ship as the Lobivia, saying the attack caused a fire which had since been extinguished.

"All crew are accounted for and are safe," it said in a statement, adding the ship had sailed "under her own propulsion" to Berbera Port in the breakaway Somaliland region of Somalia to assess the damage and determine necessary repairs.

Hadid gets support after Adidas axes her from campaign over views

AFP
Berlin

Adidas said yesterday it had dropped vocal pro-Palestinian model Bella Hadid from an advertising campaign for retro sneakers.

The German sportswear giant recently relaunched the SL72, a shoe first showcased by athletes at the 1972 Olympics, as part of a series reviving old classic sneakers.

Hadid, who was born in the US but has Palestinian roots through her father, has been vocal about her support for Palestinian rights since the Hamas storming of Israel in the first week of October last



US model Bella Hadid.

year. Adidas said it would be "revising the remainder of the campaign" with immediate effect.

"We are conscious that connections have been made to tragic historical events - though these are completely unintentional - and we apologise for any upset or dis-

stress caused," the company said in a statement sent to AFP yesterday. A spokeswoman confirmed that Hadid had been removed from the campaign, which notes that the shoes were first introduced in 1972.

Pictures of the American model wearing the retro Adidas shoes had caused an outcry among some groups. A flood of social media posts meanwhile expressed support for Hadid, criticised Adidas for axing the model, and called for a boycott of the company.

The Gaza war was triggered by the October first week storming of southern Israel by Palestinian Hamas fighters. Israel's military retaliation to wipe out Hamas has killed at least 38,848 people.

Polio cases not detected in Gaza: WHO

AFP
Geneva

No cases of polio have been detected so far in the Gaza Strip, the World Health Organisation said yesterday after the virus was found in sewage samples.

Sewage now flows between the tents used by tens of thousands of displaced people across the besieged Palestinian territory.

On Tuesday, the Global Polio Laboratory Network isolated vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 in six environmental surveillance samples collected on June 23, WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier said.

The Israeli health ministry said it had made similar findings.

"This finding is extremely concerning," said Lindmeier, "and was sadly anticipated as the entire population of Gaza has been deprived of important public health interventions aimed at preventing and controlling the spread of diseases for over nine months" since the Gaza war began.

"The virus has been isolated from the environment only at this time," Lindmeier stressed, adding there had been "no polio cases detected so far".

Most often spread through sewage and contaminated water, poliovirus is highly infectious and can cause deformities and paralysis.

The Gaza war began with the October first week storming of Israel by Palestinian Hamas fight-



Palestinians walk on the rubble of buildings destroyed in previous Israeli bombardment, between two pools of stagnant water, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday.

ers. Israel's military retaliation has killed at least 38,848 people, also mostly civilians, according to data from the health ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza.

The WHO, other United Nations agencies and the health

ministry in the Hamas-run territory are working to conduct a risk assessment to decide the scope of poliovirus spread, Lindmeier said.

They will determine the responses necessary to stop any

further spread, including prompt vaccination campaigns, he added. "A timely response is critical," the spokesman said.

"The constraints to implement this response in the current operational context are monumental, and it is entirely within the occupying power's ability to facilitate before the impact spills over beyond Gaza.

"Currently, the risk of international spread of polio cannot be ruled out," Lindmeier said that polio vaccination coverage was "optimal" in Gaza before the war, at an estimated 89 percent in 2023.

Currently only 16 out of 36 hospitals in Gaza are partially functional, with around 45 of the 105 primary healthcare facilities operational.

Talks with Sudan warring parties 'encouraging': UN

Talks between a UN envoy and delegations from both warring parties in Sudan have proven an encouraging first step, the UN said yesterday as the discussions neared a close, AFP reported from Geneva. War has raged since April 2023 between the Sudanese regular army under Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, led by his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's personal envoy for Sudan, Ramtane Lamamra, invited delegations from the army and the RSF for talks in Geneva, focused on humanitarian aid and protecting civilians. The discussions have been taking place under the so-called proximity format, with Lamamra meeting separately with each delegation at a time.



Ruto retains former ministers in new cabinet appointments

Reuters
Nairobi

Kenyan President William Ruto yesterday mostly named holdovers from the cabinet he sacked last week to a new government meant to respond to the grievances of young protesters.

In a televised address, Ruto announced 11 appointments – six from the previous cabinet – with others to follow soon.

The mass firing last week was a concession to demands from youth-led protests that had already forced him to withdraw \$2.7bn in proposed tax hikes amid the biggest crisis of his two-year presidency.

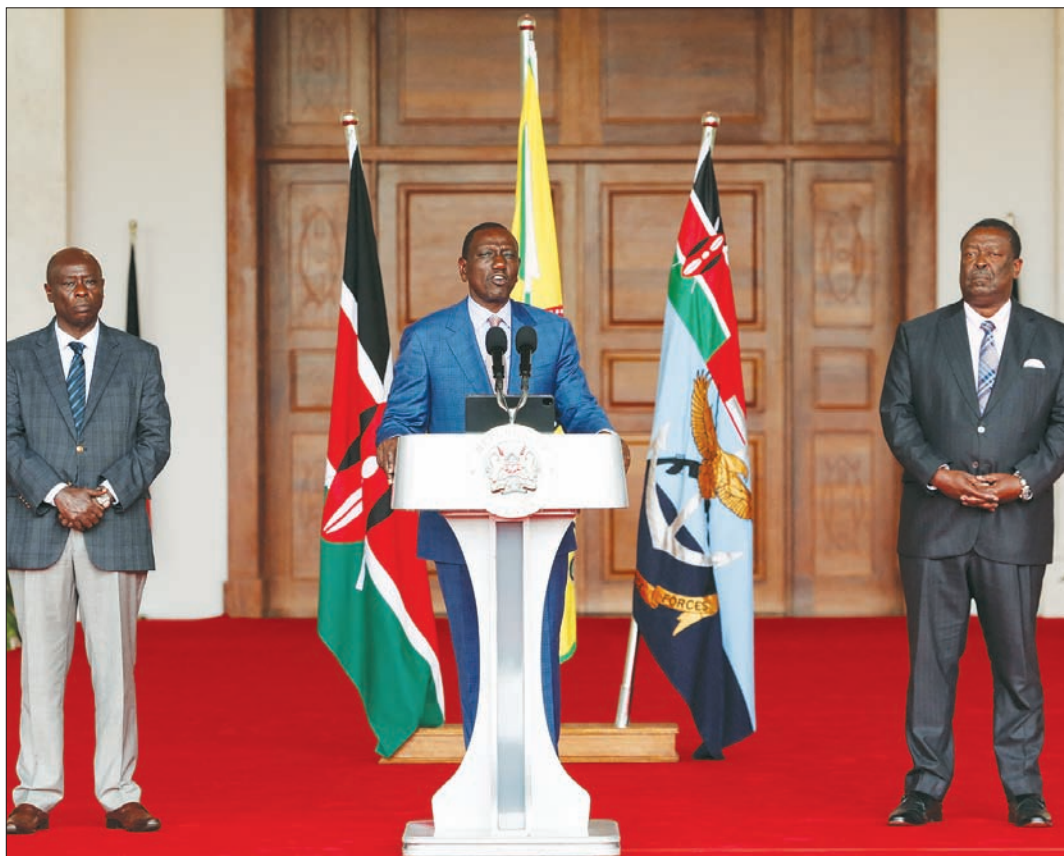
The protests have resulted in more than 50 deaths since mid-June, and many demonstrators are now calling for Ruto to resign. Large protests took place again this week despite the president's concessions.

Ruto re-appointed the ministers of interior, defence, environment and lands and changed the portfolios of two other ministers.

The appointee to be education minister, Julius Migos Ogamba, was the running mate of the outgoing education minister, Ezekiel Machogu, when Machogu stood unsuccessfully for governor of Kisii County in 2022, local media reports showed.

The nominees to be ministers of health, information, agriculture, water and education did not appear to have political backgrounds.

"I will be issuing next week a clear roadmap on the assignment that the new cabinet is going to



Kenya's President William Ruto flanked by Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua and Cabinet Secretary for Foreign Affairs Musalia Mudavadi addresses the nation to announce new Cabinet Secretaries in his government, in the wake of nationwide protests over new taxes, at State House in Nairobi, yesterday.

have, with clear timelines and deliverables," Ruto said.

Leading activists behind the protests, which have no official leader and reject the entire political class as corrupt, quickly panned the appointments.

One of them, Hanifa Farsafi, posted the list of nominees on X with the word "Rejected" stamped across it in red.

The protests have left Ruto caught between pressure from lenders to pay down high debts and a public reeling from high living costs.

The government has proposed austerity measures to narrow the deficit caused by shelving the proposed tax raises.

Kenyan media outlets had earlier reported that some members

of the political opposition were likely to be named to Ruto's new cabinet.

Protesters have opposed the idea of a unity government, saying a deal between rival coalitions would only perpetuate a tradition in Kenyan politics of leaders co-opting the opposition with jobs and perks while the population sees no benefits.

Namibia denies Ugandan king visa extension over 'kidnap' commotion

AFP
Windhoek

Namibia said yesterday it had declined a visa extension to a Ugandan king visiting for medical treatment after rumours he had been abducted sparked protests that put at risk Namibian diplomatic staff abroad.

Bugandan king Ronald Mwendwa Mutebi II was granted a 90-day visa upon arrival in April on a private medical visit, the ministry of home affairs said.

But some of his supporters alleged that the Namibian and Ugandan governments had conspired to abduct him, it said.

The "unscrupulous Subjects" organised demonstrations at Namibian embassies abroad to demand Mutebi's release, the ministry said. "This did not only put at risk the security of Namibia's personnel abroad but interfered greatly with the operations and

Namibia has said it had engaged with the Buganda family and Ugandan government but the "disruptive activities continued unabated"

security of Namibia's diplomatic missions," it said, without specifying in which countries the protests took place. Namibia said it had engaged with the Buganda royal family and Ugandan government but the "disruptive activities continued unabated".

Ugandan media reported that five Buganda clan leaders were briefly detained after travelling to Namibia to check on their king earlier this month.

This reportedly prompted a rebuke from President Yoweri

Museveni, who requested all Ugandans "to stop embarrassing" the country.

Windhoek said it was eventually pushed to decline a renewal when Mutebi's visa expired. The monarch's medical team, his palace and Ugandan authorities were "thoroughly briefed".

It was not immediately clear whether Mutebi, 69, who was receiving treatment for an undisclosed ailment, had already left the country. The Baganda make up the largest ethnic grouping in Uganda and their kingdom was granted considerable autonomy after independence from Britain in 1962. But independence leader Milton Obote outlawed tribal kingdoms and forced the king into exile. The bush war that brought Museveni to power in 1986 was successful largely due to support from Buganda.

Mutebi occupies a largely ceremonial role but has previously had run-ins with Museveni, Uganda's leader.

DR Congo conflict fuels forest loss

Reuters
Kibati

Under the denuded slopes of Mount Nyiragongo volcano in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, traders in Kibati town bartered over sacks of charcoal, a product of deforestation that an ongoing conflict has pushed to unprecedented levels, the UN says.

Motorbikes piled with freshly sawn planks zipped down the main road in Kibati, a community that has remained under Congolese army control even as a two-year insurgency by the M23 militia advanced in conflict-torn North Kivu province, displacing more than 1.7mn people.

"In the camp, we're dying of hunger. We've decided to make charcoal so we can feed our children," said displaced vendor Jacques Muzayi at Kibati.

The insecurity has worsened the pressure on the region's once densely forested hillsides and its protected Virunga national park, home to many of the world's last mountain gorillas.

"There used to be a forest here," said Bantu Lukambo, head of a local environmental organisation.

He was standing outside Kibati within the park in scrubland that was dotted with hacked-up tree stumps. Only a few trees around a nearby park ranger station had been left standing.

"It is since the start of the war that the combatants have been devastating Virunga," he said, describing how this paved the way for smaller-scale destruction.

Each morning in Kibati, crowds of local residents and people displaced by the fighting enter the park's territory in search of logs to burn to make charcoal for cooking. Others go deeper to cut trees for planks, or plant crops in the newly open land.

Forest loss in Nyiragongo and Rutshuru, two territories in the conflict zone and partly within the national park, has "reached unprecedented levels" since



File photo shows the volcanic Mount Nyiragongo stand within the Virunga National Park near Goma, the Democratic Republic of Congo, in this satellite image.

2021, when authorities declared martial law in the east in response to rising violence, a UN report said on July 8.

In areas they control in North Kivu, armed actors from all sides are profiting off the production or trade in wooden planks, while illegal and uncontrolled logging has led to "the destruction of significant swaths of virgin forest in protected areas of Virunga," the report said.

Data from Global Forest Watch, an initiative that uses satellites to track deforestation, showed that annual tree cover loss in Virunga rose over 22% to 6,804 hectares in 2021 and a further 7,255 hectares were lost in 2022 as the insurgency rolled on.

Virunga Park Director Emmanuel de Merode said that estimating the extent of forest loss and its causes was complicated, because of the many threats, including recent eruptions by some of the park's active volcanoes.

But "the conflict has greatly accelerated deforestation," he told Reuters, describing the area around Nyiragongo volcano as a particular area of concern.

"All the slopes of Nyiragongo have been completely deforested. I fly over these areas regularly, so I see it." For years, militia-linked insecurity has troubled Virunga, whose expanses of forest and savannah make it one of the most biodiverse territories on the continent with three types of great ape, bush elephants, and the endangered Okapi – nicknamed Africa's unicorn.

But De Merode said M23's occupation of parts of Virunga had greatly limited his rangers' ability to monitor and protect those areas.

"I want the authorities do everything possible to end this war," said Christoph Lewis, another displaced man in Kibati who earns up to 500 Congolese francs (\$0.18) unloading planks, some of which were hewn from trees felled within the park.

"It is the war that drives people to destroy the environment," he said.

Kenya Airways says booking system hit by outage

Kenyan flag carrier Kenya Airways said yesterday it was experiencing disruptions to its booking system, echoing widespread technical problems reported by companies across the globe, AFP reported from Nairobi. A major IT outage has caused havoc on computer systems worldwide, affecting airports and airlines, banks, television channels and other businesses. "We are currently experiencing a system outage that has affected our booking systems as a result of a global system outage," Kenya Airways said in a statement, without mentioning whether flights were also disrupted. "Customers are advised to expect slower than usual service," it said, adding that it would share further updates once the issue was resolved. Major Kenyan bank NCBA also informed customers that its card services were currently unavailable, but did not say if the issue was linked to the global outages. "We are working to resolve the issue," it said, adding that all other services remained available.

Sierra Leone rangers fight uphill battle against deforestation

AFP
Kenema

As the rainclouds descend on Sierra Leone's tropical Kambui forest, a handful of khaki-clad rangers assemble for their daily patrol in the fight to preserve the West African country's dwindling wilderness.

The team are from the National Protected Area Authority (NPAA) and are tasked with guarding the rainforest from encroaching illegal miners and loggers.

But with just 62 wardens to cover some 35,000 acres, it's an arduous game of cat and mouse.

"The devastation is getting worse every day," said Sheku Jusu, 36, the regional NPAA conservation officer. "When we are patrolling in the forest, every day we come across new sites that they have just started operating." Jusu's words became a reality no more than 30 minutes into the rangers' ascent, when a pile of fresh sand on the riverbank indicated that mining had just taken place.

"This is very recent, this was an hour or two ago," said Bockarie Kowa, 48, the NPAA regional coordinator.

"While we are sleeping, they come." By mid-morning it was al-



A National Protected Area Authority (NPAA) forest ranger stands near a fallen tree at an illegal logging and gold mining site in Kambui forest reserve outside Kenema, Sierra Leone. **Right:** Two suspected gold miners are briefly detained by forest rangers inside Kambui forest reserve outside Kenema.

ready 27 degrees Celsius with 96% humidity, and the group faced a long trek on unforgiving terrain.

Kambui Hills Forest Reserve lies in Sierra Leone's Eastern Province – an area bordering Guinea and Liberia with large reserves of gold, rutile and diamonds.

It was the trade of so-called blood diamonds which largely financed the country's brutal 11-year civil war, leaving some 120,000 people dead.

But along the rocky riverbanks of the Kambui forest, the miners are predominantly searching for gold. Mineral-rich Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, with the rangers blaming economic hardship for the esca-

lating exploitation of the natural landscape. The scars of land excavation were evident along the patrol route, with orange earth and stones piled next to the occasional deep pit of an abandoned gold mine. Rangers said that mining was causing trees to be uprooted, which were then being exploited by illegal loggers.

Midway through the patrol, a break in the dense tree cover gave way to a vast expanse littered with felled trees.

Sierra Leone has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world according to the Environmental Performance Index – put together by Yale and Columbia universities. Since 2000,

the country has lost over 35% of its total tree cover and 14% of its humid primary forests – some of the world's most ecologically significant habitats – according to Global Forest Watch, an online monitoring platform.

Kambui itself is home to a diverse range of mammal species including the western chimpanzee, the black and white colobus monkey, the brush-tailed porcupine, and Maxwell's duiker – a small antelope.

The lush forest also provides a habitat for threatened birds such as the white-necked rockfowl.

Over the past decade and a half, the government has stepped up its conservation efforts, with the

creation of the NPAA in 2012 and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change in 2018.

A diplomatic source, who requested anonymity due to their position, told AFP that economic interests largely fuelled Sierra Leone's environmental drive – with international climate finance supporting forest communities, and eco-tourism providing a much-needed cash boost.

But poor co-ordination between government ministries, enforcement problems, and a lack of community involvement in protecting the landscapes means that deforestation continues on a large scale, they added. Part of the NPAA's mission is to engage local

communities on the importance of preserving Sierra Leone's abundant flora and fauna.

But the unarmed rangers said that interactions with those they found in the forest could quickly turn sour. "Some of them are armed... they have axes, they have machetes. So if you try to arrest them, they chase you," said conservation officer Jusu.

Moments after spotting the riverside excavation site, the rangers apprehended two young miners who offered little resistance as their sand-covered hands were placed in cuffs. Regional co-ordinator Kowa said that such cases were usually sent to the police, after which they could face jail.

Mohamed, a 23-year-old sciences student, said he had been gold mining for two years and had little choice. "The job is really dangerous, but we have to get money for sustenance," he explained.

Conservation officer Jusu was well aware of the challenges in trying to change mindsets in an area where vast natural resources go hand in hand with extreme economic hardship.

"Some of these trees are very important, but (the miners) do not know the importance," he said.

"They spoil it along the way"



Trump speaks at the Republican National Convention on the fourth and final day of the event on Thursday in Milwaukee. - AFP

Trump accepts Republican presidential nomination

Donald Trump accepted the Republican presidential nomination with a marathon speech that began with an uncharacteristic call for national unity before veering into his familiar mix of grievance, bombast and apocalyptic warnings about the country's fate if he is not returned to the White House.

Trump's coronation before an adoring audience on Thursday stood in contrast to the turmoil roiling the campaign of President Joe Biden, his opponent in the November 5 election, who was "soul searching" about whether to abandon his re-election bid under pressure from fellow Democrats, a source said.

Speaking to his party's national convention in Milwaukee, Trump delivered a dramatic account of the attempt on his life at a Pennsylvania rally five days ago, describing how he put a hand to his ear after hearing a bullet whiz by and saw blood.

When he told the crowd that he was "not supposed to be here", the delegates chanted back, "Yes you are!"

With photos of a bloodied Trump projected behind him, he praised the Secret Service agents who rushed to his side.

Minutes earlier Trump took the stage to chants of "USA" from a crowd which has spent the week talking of him in near-divine terms.

"There was excitement, hope. He seemed tonight to be pretty energised," 64-year-old Terry Arnold from the Seattle area, told AFP at her first convention. "Earlier in the week he looked, understandably, a little weary to me. He's been through a lot."

Trump struck an unusually conciliatory tone during the speech's opening moments.

"I am running to be president for all of America, not half of America," he said, a marked shift

in tenor for the typically belligerent former president.

However, he quickly abandoned the message of unity he had promised in the wake of the shooting, pivoting to well-worn attacks on the Biden administration.

He claimed without evidence that his criminal indictments were part of a Democratic conspiracy, predicted that Biden would usher in "World War III" and described what he called an "invasion" of migrants over the southern border.

The meandering address capped a four-day event during which he was greeted with adulation by a party now almost entirely in his thrall.

Trump devoted much of his record-breaking 92-minute speech to attacking migrants, a theme that has always animated his campaigns.

"They're coming from prisons, they're coming from jails, they're coming from mental institutions," he said, before citing by name several Americans murdered by suspects in the country illegally.

There is no evidence foreign governments are intentionally sending such people to the US.

Academic studies show that immigrants do not commit crime at a higher rate than native-born Americans.

The speech broke Trump's own 2016 record for the longest delivered by a nominee, according to the American Presidency Project at the University of California in Santa Barbara. He also had the third longest, in 2020.

Biden campaign chair Jen O'Malley Dillon said in a statement that Trump "sought to find problems with America, not solutions".

With his grip on the Republican Party never tighter, Trump is in a much stronger position than in his 2017-2021 term to follow through on his agenda if he wins the election. - Reuters/AFP

Democratic calls mount for Biden to end re-election bid

Reuters/AFP
Washington

President Joe Biden vowed yesterday to continue his campaign for re-election even as seven more fellow Democrats in Congress urged him to end his floundering campaign, fearing that it could cost the party dearly in the November 5 election.

More than one in 10 congressional Democrats have now publicly called on the 81-year-old incumbent - who is isolating at his Delaware home with a case of the coronavirus (Covid-19) - to drop out following a disastrous June debate against Republican Donald Trump that raised questions about Biden's ability to win or to carry out his duties for another four years.

Biden remained defiant, saying he would resume campaigning soon.

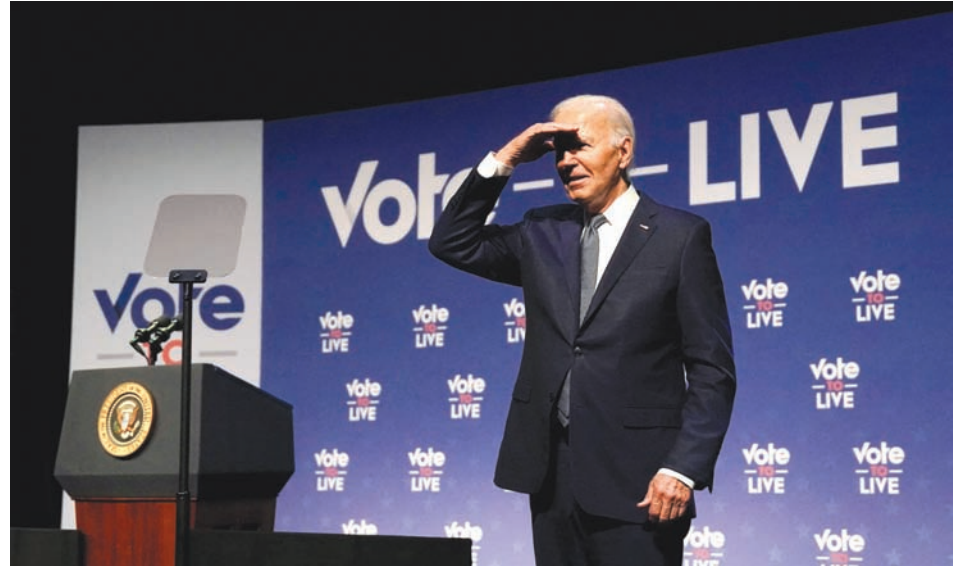
"I look forward to getting back on the campaign trail next week to continue exposing the threat of Donald Trump's Project 2025 agenda while making the case for my own record and the vision that I have for America," he said in a statement, referring to a policy plan developed by Trump's conservative allies.

The divide among Democrats stood in sharp contrast to the scenes that played out his week at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, where former party rivals united around Trump, who accepted the Republican nomination in a rambling speech that featured his familiar mix of grievance and bombast.

So far, 30 of the 264 Democrats in Congress have openly called for Biden to end his campaign, while other senior Democratic leaders have pushed him behind the scenes to do so, according to sources and media reports.

"We must face the reality that widespread public concerns about your age and fitness are jeopardizing what should be a winning campaign," Representatives Jared Huffman, Marc Veasey, Chuy Garcia and Marc Pocan wrote in a letter yesterday.

Three other Democratic lawmakers also separately called on Biden to drop out: Senator Martin Heinrich and Representatives Zoe Lof-



This picture taken on Tuesday shows Biden near the podium during the Vote To Live Prosperity Summit at the College of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas, Nevada. - AFP

gren and Greg Landsman.

Democrats are increasingly worried about a Republican sweep in the November 5 election that could leave Trump and his allies not only in charge of the White House but also with majorities in both chambers of Congress.

Former House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi is among those who have told Biden he cannot win in November, according to a White House source familiar with the matter.

After weeks of insisting he will remain in the race, sources say Biden is now taking calls to step aside seriously, and multiple Democratic officials think an exit is a matter of time.

Reports sourced to anonymous sources swirled in US media that Biden was making a plan for a dignified exit in the coming days, accepting warnings from senior Democrats that his time was up.

However, his campaign also pushed back, saying that while there had been some "slippage" in support, he was still the best candidate.

"Absolutely the president's in this race," campaign chairwoman Jen O'Malley Dillon told MSNBC's *Morning Joe* programme. "Joe Biden is more committed than ever to beat Donald Trump."

Dillon acknowledged that Biden faces a difficult path to re-election but said his support has not fallen significantly in recent weeks.

"We have a lot of work to do to make sure that we are reassuring the American people that, yes, he's old, but he can do the job and he can win," she said.

Though a Reuters/Ipsos poll earlier this week found Biden and Trump effectively tied, strategists from both parties say Biden's path to victory is narrowing as he trails in most of the battleground states that will decide the election.

Were Biden to step aside as a candidate, Vice-President Kamala Harris, 59, could fill the role.

Reuters/Ipsos polling shows her as performing marginally better against Trump in a theoretical head-to-head matchup.



Aerial view of a boat navigating in Patzcuaro Lake, Michoacan state, Mexico. - AFP

Mexico seeks to revive drought-stricken lake

AFP
Patzcuaro, Mexico

Mexican authorities are releasing thousands of juvenile fish and cleaning up freshwater springs as part of efforts to rejuvenate one of the country's lakes stricken by drought and heatwaves.

State workers this week freed 10,000 silverside fish native to Lake Patzcuaro, whose waters attract fishermen and tourists in the western state of Michoacan.

The aim is to release a total of 50,000 fish by the end of the year.

"Let's hope they reproduce," said fisherman Miguel Alba, 46. "People who live here by the lake live from farming and fishing. But as there aren't any fish anymore, people are having to leave."

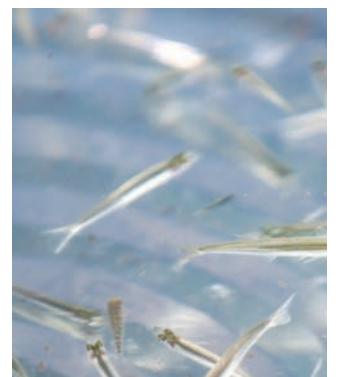
Drought, heatwaves and water theft have depleted Lake Patzcuaro's water levels.

Rainfall in Mexico in 2023 was 21% below average, making it the driest year since record-keeping began in 1941, according to the National Meteorological Service.

The situation has only worsened this year, with heat records broken in the capital and several other cities.

Another problem stems from avocado producers illegally extracting water from Lake Patzcuaro to irrigate their fields, according to local authorities and residents.

Michoacan is Mexico's main avocado-producing region, and the lucrative trade has attracted the attention of organised crime



Some of the 10,000 baby white fish to be released are seen inside a bucket in Patzcuaro Lake. - AFP

groups who extort farmers.

The Michoacan state government estimates that Lake Patzcuaro's surface area is barely half what it was 30 years ago.

Authorities are removing mud, plants and waste to rehabilitate local springs that supply water to the lake.

"We've exceeded our goals," said Julio Cesar Bernal, a biologist working for local authorities. "Fifteen new springs have been discovered that are producing a new quantity of absolutely crystalline, clean water, which flows directly into the lake."

Drought and pollution have led to the mass deaths of fish in a number of lakes and waterways in Mexico this year, most recently in the Santiago River in neighbouring Jalisco state.

The release of wastewater by companies located upstream was the suspected culprit in that case, according to municipal official Victor Lucio Alvarez.

Russia jails US reporter Gershkovich for 16 years

AFP/Reuters
Moscow/Yekaterinburg, Russia

US reporter Evan Gershkovich was sentenced by a Russian court yesterday to 16 years prison for "espionage", a verdict slammed as "despicable", "disgraceful" and a "sham" by Western governments and his employer.

Gershkovich was sentenced after just three court sessions in a secretive closed-door trial in the Urals City of Yekaterinburg, the city where he was arrested while on a reporting trip in March 2023.

After the sentencing, US President Joe Biden said Gershkovich was "targeted by the Russian government because he is a journalist and an American".

"There is no question that Russia is wrongly detaining Evan," he said.

"We are pushing hard for Evan's release and will continue to do so," he added in a written statement published by the White House.

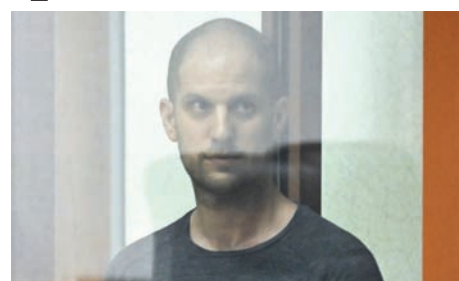
Both Washington and Moscow say talks over a prisoner swap are ongoing.

Russia has previously said its policy is not to trade people before they have been convicted, suggesting yesterday's sentence could pave the way for the 32-year-old journalist to finally be swapped in a deal.

In court yesterday, Gershkovich did not appear to react to the sentencing, standing in a glass defendants' cage in dark trousers and a T-shirt.

He waved to his journalist colleagues as he was led away.

Judge Andrei Mineyev said Gershkovich would be sent to a "strict regime colony" - a



Gershkovich stands inside a glass defendants' cage during the verdict announcement at the Sverdlovsk Regional Court in Yekaterinburg. - AFP

Russian prison camp notorious for harsh conditions and strict rules.

The *Wall Street Journal* correspondent, who pleaded not guilty, became the first journalist in Russia to be charged with spying since the Cold War when he was detained in 2023.

He has spent almost 16 months in detention on charges the United States government and his employer have always said are fabricated.

"This disgraceful, sham conviction comes after Evan has spent 478 days in prison, wrongfully detained, away from his family and friends, prevented from reporting, all for doing his job as a journalist," the *Journal's* publisher Almar Latour and editor-in-chief Emma Tucker said in a statement.

Washington believes he is being held as a bargaining chip to secure the release of Russians convicted abroad.

His trial has moved rapidly since the first hearing in late June, with the prosecution and defence teams giving their final arguments yesterday.

Other similar cases in Russia have dragged on far more slowly, with several weeks or even months between hearings.

The Kremlin has provided no public evidence for the espionage allegations, saying only that Gershkovich was caught "red-handed" spying on a tank factory in the Urals region while working for the US Central Intelligence Agency.

The prosecutor said yesterday that Gershkovich acted with "careful measures of secrecy".

Moscow and Washington have both said they are open to exchanging the reporter in a deal, but neither has given clues on when that might happen.

When asked yesterday, the Kremlin refused to speculate about the prospect of a prisoner swap.

"I'll leave your question unanswered," said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov when asked by Reuters yesterday.

Moscow's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Wednesday that talks between US and Russian special services over possible prisoner exchanges were ongoing, without naming any specific individuals.

Putin has implied he wants to see the release of Vadim Krasikov, a Russian convicted in Germany of killing a Chechen separatist commander.

Among other US nationals detained in Russia are reporter Alsu Kurmasheva and ballerina Ksenia Karelina, who are both dual US-Russian citizens, and former US marine Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year sentence for spying.

In his statement yesterday, Biden said he had "no higher priority than seeking the release and safe return of Evan, Paul Whelan and all Americans wrongfully detained and held hostage abroad".

He added: "Journalism is not a crime."

Panel studying US war in Afghanistan holds first public hearing

A commission created by Congress to conduct an independent review of the 20-year US war in Afghanistan held its first public hearing yesterday, pledging to be "unflinching" in examining how and why key decisions were made and who made them.

However, while accountability "is centrally important, our focus is less on assigning credit or blame ... than on extracting and applying its lessons" for future conflicts, said co-chair Colin Jackson.

The panel's first public hearing came just over a month before

the third anniversary of the chaotic final US troop withdrawal that ended America's longest war as the Taliban seized Kabul.

Some 800,000 US servicemembers served in Afghanistan following the US-led invasion triggered by the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States by Afghanistan-based Al Qaeda.

During the war, 2,238 US servicemembers died and nearly 21,000 were wounded.

Independent estimates put the number of Afghan security forces and civilians killed at more than 100,000.

The 16-member commission, set up over two years ago but began work less than a year ago, is to deliver its report by August 2026.

Jackson, a former Pentagon official who served as a civilian adviser to the US military in Afghanistan, noted that it was the first time that Congress has "called for a comprehensive in-depth study of an American war".

"This will mean taking a hard look at ... what we did right and what we did wrong," he told the hearing at the headquarters of the Veterans of Foreign War, an advocacy group.

"We need to ask hard questions, especially probing the key decisions in the war, how they were made, and why," he continued. "We will be unflinching in pursuit of answers."

The first witness, former US ambassador Ronald Neumann, urged an examination of how policy decisions were implemented.

A Vietnam War veteran, Neumann said "almost no valid lessons were carried" from that conflict to Afghanistan, including doing away with short tours for top officers, which stunt the transfer of knowledge to successors. - Reuters



Azerbaijan launches climate fund

Reuters
Washington

Azerbaijan, host of the UN COP29 climate summit, announced yesterday that it will launch a new climate fund that will aim to mobilise \$1bn to support developing countries' new national climate targets.

The climate summit host hopes the new fund, which will be housed in the capital city of Baku and overseen by a multi-national board of shareholders, will be capitalised with contributions from 10 fossil-fuel producing countries as well as oil and gas companies.

Azerbaijan had initially sought a levy on fossil-fuel production to raise funds

for tackling climate change, but changed course after facing resistance from some countries.

"Countries rich in natural resources should be at the forefront of those addressing climate change," said COP29 President-Designate Mukhtar Babayev. "We are calling on donors to join us so that we can fulfil the COP29 plan to enhance ambition and enable action."

The issue of finance is set to dominate the COP29 climate talks in Baku in November, where countries will try to agree a new global target for climate finance that rich nations will transfer to poorer countries each year from 2025.

Babayev did not say which donor countries or companies have been approached at a media briefing yesterday, but said Az-

erbaijan will be a founding contributor with an as-yet decided initial contribution.

The fund would receive annual transfers from its contributors, and would dedicate 20% of revenues generated from investments to a Rapid Response Funding Facility that would help the most vulnerable countries respond to climate disasters.

Azeri officials said the fund would be more nimble than multilateral development banks and other global facilities because shareholders would directly decide in which projects to invest.

In the coming weeks, Azerbaijan will launch a working group of economists and other experts to create a formula for potential donors to decide how much they will contribute and a process for how developing countries can access the fund.

Officials told reporters that the countries' new national climate plans that they must submit to the UN next year, known as NDCs, should be aligned with the Paris agreement goal to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5° Celsius but did not rule out funding certain fossil fuel projects.

Last year's UN climate summit in the UAE ended with a global agreement calling for "transitioning away from fossil fuels" to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

The UN's climate chief Simon Stiell said yesterday that success at COP29 hinges on progress around boosting climate finance.

"Progress in Baku isn't just about green new numbers. It's about improving climate finance delivery so that it meets developing countries needs now and in the future," he said.

Sanctioned Russia unscathed in global IT outage

Russian officials boasted yesterday that Moscow was spared the impact of the global IT systems outage because of its increased self-sufficiency after years of Western sanctions, though some experts said Russian systems could still be vulnerable.

Microsoft and other IT firms have suspended sales of new products in Russia and have been scaling down their operations in line with sanctions imposed over Russia's war in Ukraine, which Moscow describes as a special military operation.

CrowdStrike, a US cybersecurity company whose widely used Falcon Sensor software caused Microsoft Windows to crash, had no known customers in Russia.

The Russian market is dominated by local cybersecurity firms such as Kaspersky Labs.

"CrowdStrike has not provided any services in Russia, since February 2022 for sure," Mikhail Klimarev from the non-governmental Internet Protection Society told Reuters.

The Kremlin, along with companies from state nuclear giant Rosatom, which operates all of Russia's nuclear plants, to major lenders and airlines, reported no glitches amid the outage that affected international companies across the globe.

"The situation once again highlights the significance of foreign software substitution," Russia's digital development ministry said.

Russian financial and currency markets also ran smoothly.

"Everyone has long been preparing for the possibility of being cut off from Microsoft due to sanctions. The current incident is a test of how well we have prepared. So far, everything is fine, at least for the major players, and generally, there is no panic in the market," one currency trader, who wished to remain anonymous, told Reuters.

Russia's second-largest lender, VTB, has announced plans to increase the share of domestically developed software to 95% by the end of this year, up from 85% currently.

The bank said it invested 50bn roubles (\$571.46mn) this year alone in phasing out foreign software.

However, IT expert Eldar Murtazin said the risks posed by insufficient testing of new software updates were universal, and Russian software was not necessarily immune to future glitches like the one that hit CrowdStrike.

"Such issues can happen to any software, whether Russian or non-Russian, if there are no proper controls over new releases. If such an outage had occurred 3-4 years ago, a number of Russian companies would have been affected," Murtazin said. - Reuters

Spain busts key drugs route into Europe

AFP
Madrid

Spanish police announced yesterday the takedown of a major network transporting Latin American cocaine into Europe by boat in an international operation involving 50 arrests across eight countries.

The investigation was started by police in Spain and Britain in June 2020 but quickly expanded, drawing in forces from 11 different countries and backed by Europol, Europe's policing agency, a Spanish police statement said.

In total, they confiscated 1.5 tonnes of cocaine and seized eight vessels used for shifting their product from Latin American and Caribbean nations to Spain.

The narcotics were shipped from loading points in Brazil, Colombia, Guayana, Trinidad and Tobago, Santa Lucia, Barbados and Panama to Spanish ports in the Canary Islands, the southern region of Andalusia and the eastern city of Valencia.

The leader, who was arrested in Norway, is a veteran drug smuggler known as "The Professor", the statement said.

He has had "more than 20 years" in the business, winning him the "full confidence of the Colombian and Mexican drug cartels" with whom he coordinated the shipments, it added.

The network also included members of the so-called "Balkans' cartel" who were "living the high life" in Spain's southern Costa del Sol, the statement said.

However, there was also a spiritual element, police said.

"The criminal organisation would appeal to a santero (witch-doctor) to receive his blessing and for the success of its cocaine transportation operations between Latin America and Europe," it said.

Seeking a santero's blessing is a key element of Santeria, an Afro-Cuban belief system that fuses African religions with Catholicism and which is very popular in Latin America.

Of the detainees, 26 were arrested in Spain, among them 16 Norwegians - one of whom was a former bank robber, who also targeted armoured cash-in-transit vehicles and had spent 15 years behind bars for violence.

The other 24 suspected gang members were arrested in Bulgaria, Colombia, Norway, Panama, Portugal, Trinidad and Tobago, and the UK.

Most of the arrests took place on June 24, Europol said.

In Spain, one of the main gateways into Europe for Latin American cocaine, police regularly raid drug smugglers, with the last major raid in June involving eight tonnes of cocaine with 40 arrests.

Thousands protest military operation in Pakistan

AFP
Bannu

Thousands of people rallied yesterday against a planned operation by the Pakistan military to root out militants along the Afghan border, with at least one protester killed when gunfire broke out, officials and witnesses said.

More than 10,000 people waving white flags and calling for peace gathered for the rally in Bannu - 40km (25 miles) from Afghanistan - where a suicide bomber on Monday rammed an explosive-packed vehicle into an army enclave, killing eight Pakistani troops.

"Military operations have been ongoing for 20 years, yet peace has not been established," protester Jamaluddin Wazir told AFP. "Military operations can never be a substitute for peace."

Pakistan's government announced earlier this year, without giving details, that the military would launch a new campaign to counter violence in areas along the border with Afghanistan, which has surged following the Taliban government's return to power.

Yesterday's protest turned violent when crowds reached the walls of an army facility and gunfire broke out, witnesses and officials reported.

"They chanted slogans against the army, and some started throwing stones at the facility's wall. This led to firing in the air by the military, causing a stampede," an intelligence official in the nearby city of Peshawar told AFP on condition of anonymity.

At least one protester died, according to Pakhtun Yar, the provincial minister for public health, who was a speaker at the protest.



Protesters run as gunfire breaks out during a protest rally in Bannu against the military operation in Pakistan. - AFP

He accused the military of opening fire on the protesters.

"During the rally, shots were fired directly at me and the people standing near me. This wasn't just firing in the air - it was intended to kill us," Yar told AFP. "The shooting was carried out by those who want to destroy our peace. They want to spill the blood of our people, but the community is no longer willing to tolerate this."

For years the Pakistan Taliban - a separate group from the Afghan Taliban but with a similar ideology - waged a bloody campaign in the area, killing thousands of civilians and taking control of parts of the border region, before being pushed back by a military campaign that began in 2014.

The clearance operation displaced hun-

dreds of thousands of people and destroyed countless homes and businesses, sparking a local backlash calling for the rights of ethnic Pashtuns to be protected.

However, protests against the powerful military, which analysts say holds large sway over the government and foreign policy, are rare and often brought down quickly.

Violence has surged along the border since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, with Islamabad accusing Kabul of failing to root out groups taking shelter on Afghan soil while preparing assaults on Pakistan.

The Taliban government insists it will not allow foreign militant outfits to operate from Afghanistan, but Islamabad-Kabul relations have soured over the issue.

Al Qaeda leader arrested, say authorities

Pakistani authorities said yesterday that they had arrested a "close associate" of Al Qaeda founder and mastermind of the 9/11 attacks Osama bin Laden.

Counter-terrorism officials in the most populous province of Punjab swooped in on Amin Ul-Haq in the city of Gujrat, accusing him of planning "sabotage activities" and seeking to "target important installations" in the country.

"The arrest of Amin Ul-Haq is a major victory in the ongoing efforts to combat terrorism in Pakistan and worldwide," a statement from Punjab's Counter Terrorism Department said.

He was listed by the United States, the European Union and the United Nations as an associate of Al Qaeda and Bin Laden, the head of Punjab's counter-terrorism department, Usman Akram Gonadad, said in a press conference.

"He resurfaced after the withdrawal of western Nato forces (from Afghanistan). He visited Afghanistan in August and he began his efforts to reorganise Al Qaeda."

US troops backed by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) toppled the Taliban's first regime in 2001 for refusing to hand over Al Qaeda militants behind the 9/11 attacks.

Bin Laden was later discovered living in Pakistan and shot dead

in a nighttime US operation in 2011.

The Taliban took back power in Afghanistan in 2021, kicking out the foreign-backed government after two decades of fighting US and Nato troops.

Militancy has since surged along Pakistan's border, with Islamabad accusing Kabul's rulers of failing to root out groups taking shelter on Afghan soil while preparing assaults on Pakistan. - AFP

Court fines Italian journalist for mocking PM Meloni's height

AFP
Rome

An Italian journalist who ridiculed the small stature of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni online has been ordered by a court to pay €5,000 (\$5,440) in damages, she told AFP yesterday.

Giulia Cortese, who is freelance, had called the far-right leader "a little woman" in an October 2021 social media post, adding: "You don't scare me. Furthermore, you are 1.2m tall (3'9")."

The comment was a response to Meloni's announcement on Facebook that she was suing Cortese for having earlier posted a falsified photo of the premier sitting in front of a photograph of Fascist leader Benito Mussolini.

Meloni, leader of the post-fas-

cist Brothers of Italy party, was in opposition at the time.

Contacted by AFP yesterday, Cortese confirmed that the Milan court had ordered her to pay €5,000 to Meloni, a civil party in the case, for defamation.

"Italy's government has a serious problem with freedom of expression and journalistic dissent," Cortese wrote on X. "This country seems to get closer to (Viktor) Orban's Hungary: these are bad times for independent journalists and opinion leaders."

Cortese told AFP that a separate accusation over the Mussolini comparison was thrown out, as it did not constitute a crime.

Meloni, who took office in October 2022, has a history of suing journalists.

In the most high-profile case, she successfully took investigative

journalist Roberto Saviano to court for defamation.

In December 2020, Saviano - author of the bestselling book *Gomorra* about the Naples mafia - used a pejorative title on her on national television for her hard line on migrants.

Last October, a court handed Saviano a suspended fine of €1,000 in the case. Meloni had sought €75,000 in damages.

In 2021, Meloni also sued two journalists from newspaper *Domani*, in a case that is due to begin in November.

It concerns an article alleging that she tried to use her influence to get a member of her party a job supplying coronavirus (Covid-19) masks to Italy's healthcare system.

Il Messaggero daily has reported the height of Meloni as 1.63m, or 5' 3".



This picture taken on Thursday shows Meloni with Britain's King Charles III (right), Council of Europe Secretary-General Marija Pejcinovic Buric (left) and Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama during a reception for European Leaders, as part of the European Political Community meeting, at Blenheim Palace in Woodstock, southern England. - AFP



Volunteers Emilia Leon, 57, her daughter Elena Porcel, 31, and Angeles Urbano, 31, talk with a group of persons during a food and cold drink distribution campaign for people in need and homeless, in Cordoba, Spain. - Reuters

As Spain swelters, volunteers serve cold soup to homeless

Reuters
Cordoba

Red Cross volunteers handed out gazpacho soup, water and soft drinks to homeless people in the southern city of Cordoba as Spain braced for the peak of its first heatwave of the summer.

"A plate of food, our gazpacho, our milk - that's a lot to be thankful for," Jose Miguel Sanchez said, praising the helpers serving him and his partner on a street in the city centre on Thursday night.

The 59-year-old told Reuters that a

woman had let them stay in her home for a few days to keep out of the sun.

Weather service AEMET forecast the heatwave would cover its widest area across Spain yesterday, with temperatures hitting 40° Celsius (104° Fahrenheit) in most parts and reaching 43C in Cordoba and other parts of Andalusia.

Some areas along the Mediterranean coast could climb even further to 44C today, though thermometers would drop in most other regions, AEMET said.

In Madrid, authorities bussed in homeless people from across the capital to take shelter in an air-con-

ditioned centre with food, drinks and a washroom area.

Authorities issued health alerts and said there was a high risk of wildfires in most of Spain.

Large areas of Europe have been hit by increasingly damaging forest fire seasons that experts say are driven by rising temperatures fuelled by climate change.

Spain had almost 11,000 deaths attributable to extreme heat last year, according to research led by the national Scientific Research Council (CSIC) that tracked excess mortality rates alongside AEMET temperature data.

COMMENT

Taiwan 'must rely' on itself for defence against China: FM

Taiwan's foreign minister said the nation must rely on itself for defence after US presidential candidate Donald Trump insisted Taipei "should pay" Washington for defence in the event of a conflict with China. China claims Taiwan as part of its territory and has in recent years stepped up its military presence and sabre-rattling rhetoric towards the island. The US has stepped up military aid and weapons sales to Taiwan to counter China, but Trump said earlier this week the island "should pay" Washington for defence. In response Taiwan's Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung yesterday said Taipei took the former president's comments "very seriously".

DECISION

Singapore blocks social media accounts tied to businessman

Singapore has ordered five social media platforms to block users in the city-state from accessing 95 accounts mostly linked to exiled Chinese tycoon Guo Wengui. The direction was issued to X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok under the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act on accounts that published more than 120 posts between April 17 and May 10 on Singapore's leadership transition. The posts, published in a "co-ordinated manner", alleged Singapore was "in the pocket of a foreign actor, and that the foreign actor was behind the scenes in the selection of Singapore's fourth generation leader", the home affairs ministry said.

TRAGEDY

Heavy rains kill five, eight missing in northern China

Torrential rains have killed five people and left eight missing in northern China's Shaanxi province, state media reported yesterday. Heavy rain has pummelled swathes of northern and central China since Tuesday, sparking flash flooding and disrupting public transport. In Shaanxi province's Baoji city, heavy rains sparked landslides and mudflows, state news agency Xinhua said. Five people have so far died, it said, while eight are still missing. Over 2,000 people in the city have been evacuated, state media said this week, with services disrupted along some train lines. Neighbouring provinces of Gansu and Henan have also been affected by the downpour this week.

OBITUARY

Martial arts actress Cheng Pei-peï dies at 78

Cheng Pei-peï, an actress considered one of the first-ever woman action stars who got her start in Hong Kong's martial arts films before starring in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, has died at the age of 78, her family said yesterday. She passed away "peacefully at home surrounded by her loved ones on July 17" after she was diagnosed in 2019 with a neurodegenerative disease similar to Parkinson's, her family said. Actress Michelle Yeoh, who starred opposite Cheng in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Tiger*, expressed "heartfelt condolences to Pei Pei Jie's (sister) family, friends and fans". "We will miss your kindness and shining talent," Yeoh wrote on Instagram.

Three killed as Bangladesh protests widen

Reuters
Dhaka

Three people were killed in Bangladesh yesterday as police cracked down on unrelenting student-led protests against government job quotas despite a ban on public gatherings, local media said.

Police fired tear gas to scatter protesters in some areas. Many fires were lit across the capital Dhaka.

Telecommunications were also disrupted and television news channels went off the air. Authorities had cut some mobile telephone services the previous day to try to quell the unrest.

Bengali newspaper Prothom Alo reported train services had been suspended nationwide as protesters blocked roads and threw bricks at security officials.

Three people were killed yesterday, it said, after violence on Thursday in 47 of Bangladesh's 64 districts killed 27 and injured 1,500.

The total number of dead from the protests touched 105 yesterday night.

The US embassy in Dhaka said reports indicated more than 40 deaths and "hundreds to possibly thousands" injured across Bangladesh.

In a security alert, it said protests were spreading, with violent clashes being reported across Dhaka. The situation was "extremely volatile", it said.

The protests initially broke out

over student anger against controversial quotas which set aside 30% of government jobs for the families of those who fought for independence from Pakistan.

The nationwide unrest - the biggest since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was re-elected this year - has also been fuelled by high unemployment among young people, who make up nearly a fifth of a population of 170mn.

Some analysts say the violence is now also being driven by wider economic woes, such as high inflation and shrinking reserves of foreign exchange.

The protests have opened old and sensitive political faultlines between those who fought for Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971 and those accused of collaborating with Islamabad.

The former include the Awami League party of Hasina, who branded the protesters "razakar" - making use of a term that described independence-era collaborators.

International rights groups criticised the suspension of services and the action of security forces. The European Union said it is deeply concerned by the violence and loss of life.

"It is vital that further violence is averted and that a peaceful resolution to the situation is found as swiftly as possible, underpinned by the rule of law and democratic freedoms," it said in a statement.

Neighbour India said the unrest was an internal matter of Bangladesh and that all 15,000 Indians

in that country were safe. Indians studying in Bangladesh were returning by road.

Violence linked to the protests also broke out in distant London, which is home to a large Bangladeshi population, and police had to quell clashes between large groups of men in the east of the British capital.

Friday began with the internet and overseas telephone calls being crippled, while the websites of several Bangladesh newspapers did not update and were also inactive on social media.

A few voice calls went through, but there was no mobile data or broadband, a Reuters journalist said. Even text messages were not being transmitted.

News television channels and state broadcaster BTV went off the air, although entertainment channels were normal, he said.

Some news channels displayed a message blaming technical problems, and promising to resume programming soon.

The official websites of the central bank, the prime minister's office and police appeared to have been hacked by a group calling itself "THE R3SISTANC3".

"Operation HuntDown, Stop Killing Students," read identical messages splashed on the sites, adding in crimson letters: "It's not a protest anymore, it's a war now."

Another message on the page read, "The government has shut down the internet to silence us and hide their actions?"



The Singapore-flagged tanker Hafnia Nile on fire in Tanjung Sedili, near Singapore.

Oil tankers on fire after colliding close to Singapore

Reuters
Singapore

Two large oil tankers were on fire yesterday after colliding near Singapore, the world's biggest refuelling port, with two crew members airlifted to hospital and others rescued from life rafts, authorities and one of the tanker owners said.

Singapore is Asia's biggest oil trading hub and the world's largest bunkering port. Its surrounding waters are vital trade waterways between Asia and Europe and the Middle East and among the busiest global sea lanes.

The Singapore-flagged tanker Hafnia Nile and the Sao Tome and Principe-flagged tanker Ceres I were about 55km north-east of the Singaporean island of Pedra Branca on the eastern ap-

proach to the Singapore Straits, the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) said.

The 22 crew of the Hafnia Nile and the 40 on the Ceres I were all accounted for, the MPA said, which was alerted to the fire at 6.15am (2215 GMT).

The owner of Hafnia Nile confirmed the vessel was involved in a collision with Chinese owned Ceres I. Photographs released by the Singapore Navy showed thick black smoke billowing from one tanker and crew being rescued from life rafts and flown to hospital. The environmental authorities in neighbouring Malaysia said they had been told to prepare for potential oil spills.

Norway's Gard, one of Hafnia Nile's insurers, told Reuters it was too early to assess the environmental impact.

"We are supporting our mem-

ber as they are dealing with the incident," Gard said.

Navigational traffic had not been affected, although the status of the vessels or any pollution was unknown at present, a spokesperson at the UN's International Maritime Organisation (IMO) said. "No aerial surveillance has been conducted so far," the spokesperson said.

"Salvage and fire-fighting assets have been arranged by both vessel owners to support the fire-fighting efforts and subsequent towage of the vessels to safety."

The IMO spokesperson said a salvage team had been appointed and was en route to the area.

The 74,000 deadweight-tonnes capacity panamax tanker Hafnia Nile was carrying about 300,000 barrels of naphtha, according to ship-tracking data from Kpler and LSEG.

New Zealand calls for more 'compromise' in New Caledonia

More diplomacy, engagement and compromise are needed in New Caledonia, where deadly riots erupted in May over an electoral reform, New Zealand's foreign minister said yesterday. Speaking on the sidelines of a summit of Pacific island leaders in Japan, Winston Peters said the situation in the French Pacific territory had reached an "impasse". "In New Caledonia we hope to see more diplomacy, more engagement, more compromise," he said. "The situation has reached an impasse, and one not easily navigated given the violence that broke out, the democratic injuries that have reopened old wounds and created new ones." A wave of rioting and looting broke out in New Caledonia in mid-May over a planned expansion of the electoral roll. The territory's Indigenous Kanak people feared it would leave them in a permanent minority compared with French from the mainland, putting independence hopes out of reach.

Indonesia auto show

People visit the Gaikindo Indonesia International Auto Show 2024 at the Indonesia Convention Exhibition (ICE) in Tangerang, Banten province, showcasing the latest cars from 55 global automotive brands for 11 days.

Lanka scraps plan to sell loss-making airline

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka has scrapped plans to sell off its indebted national airline despite shortlisting three potential buyers, the government's privatisation agency said yesterday.

Colombo called for bids in September to sell SriLankan Airlines, a key IMF demand when granting a bailout loan to the country last year. Six firms had initially expressed interest in taking a stake in the airline, which owed more than \$2bn at the end of the 2022-2023 financial year.

The government announced in April a shortlist of three potential investors, including Malaysia's Air Asia. However, yesterday, the State-Owned Enterprises Restructuring Unit (SRU) said it had called off the sale. "The cabinet of

ministers at a meeting on July 9 decided to terminate the current bidding process with regard to the divestiture of SriLankan Airlines," it said in a brief statement without giving any reasons for the decision. It added that the government will follow an "alternate strategy" regarding the carrier.

The International Monetary Fund had singled out SriLankan for "restructuring" when granting the government a \$2.9bn bailout last year. The bailout came after the country defaulted on its \$46bn external debt in April 2022 as it faced an unprecedented shortage of foreign exchange needed for essential imports.

With nearly 6,000 staff, SriLankan Airlines is the biggest and most expensive of the cash-haemorrhaging companies that are draining the budget and compounding Sri Lanka's economic woes.

Vietnam's top leader Trong dies at 80 after long rule

Reuters
Hanoi

Vietnam's ruling Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong died yesterday after holding the country's most powerful position for 13 years during which he oversaw fast economic growth, a years-long anti-graft crackdown and a pragmatic foreign policy. He was 80.

Trong's duties have been temporarily assigned to President To Lam, a rising star within the party who could further consolidate his powers if he is allowed to keep the two roles.

Trong died in the early afternoon "due to old age and serious illness", the Communist Party said in a statement, without elaborating further on the nature of the illness.

The statement cited information from Trong's medical team, saying he died "after a period of illness, despite being wholeheartedly treated by the Party, the State, a collective of professors, doctors, leading medical experts".

Lam had taken over Trong's duties yesterday as the party chief was ailing. The party will now need to decide whether Lam will be formally appointed as acting party chief until the current term for the post expires in 2026, or whether it will

elect a new head before then from within its ranks.

Trong hosted both US President Joe Biden and China's leader Xi Jinping in Hanoi last year, boosting relations with both countries despite increasing tensions between the US and China. Biden expressed his condolences, saying he was a champion of deep ties between the US and Vietnam. The people of both countries "enjoy greater security and opportunity today because of the friendship between our two countries. That is thanks to him," Biden said, praising him for being the first Vietnamese party leader to visit the US.

Although Vietnam officially has

no paramount ruler, Trong was the country's most powerful figure as party general secretary and had been in the post since 2011.

He secured a third term in 2021 after a rule limiting holders to two terms as party boss was waived, demonstrating his strength and significant political clout in a party that has ruled unified Vietnam for nearly half a century.

But in recent months, he appeared fragile in public events and missed several top-level meetings.

A consolidation of power under Lam was seen by some business people and analysts as potentially positive to speed up decision-making in the Southeast Asian nation,

which is home to large factories of top multinationals, including Samsung, Intel, Canon and Apple's top supplier Foxconn.

A clear shift to Lam's leadership "could moderate political instability and factional infighting, at least in the short term," said Peter Mumford, an expert on Southeast Asia at the Eurasia Group, saying that would be beneficial to economic growth.

But some diplomats and activists saw also risks of a crackdown on civil liberties and a drift toward more autocratic, China-style rule, if Lam were allowed to concentrate more unchecked powers in his hands, in a break with the party's tradition of collegial deci-

sion-making. After Trong's death was announced, public events were cancelled across the country until July 25 while state-run websites had their banners turned black and white.

State broadcasters ran a documentary about Trong titled: "General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong: a steadfast, intellectual, exemplary leader".

Facebook users changed their profile picture into a national mourning flag.

Trong was educated in the Soviet Union and was regarded as a Marxist-Leninist ideologue, but he nonetheless nurtured ties with the US.



Ultra-wealthy entrepreneurs threaten to desert Britain over tax plan

Reuters
London

For ultra-wealthy entrepreneur Bassim Haidar, living in London has become an expensive indulgence he can no longer justify.

While new British Prime Minister Keir Starmer settles into No 10 Downing St, Haidar is searching for homes in Greece and Monaco, because a proposed inheritance tax revamp will make Britain a 'no go' zone for the rich, he says.

Starmer says the overhaul will make Britain's tax system fairer and raise funds for stretched public services.

While supportive of some reform, Haidar says the proposed changes could harm the economy if international business owners choose to quit Britain, or avoid moving here, undermining its reputation as an incubator for fledgling firms.

The recently ousted Conservative government outlined surprise plans in March to phase out Britain's centuries-old 'non dom' tax regime, which spares wealthy individuals from paying tax on income earned overseas.

But in the run-up to its July 4 election win, Starmer's left-leaning Labour party pledged to also scrap permanent reliefs 'non doms' born outside the UK could obtain if they put non-UK assets into a trust within 15 years of moving to Britain.

Now the dust has settled on Labour's return to power, Haidar wants Starmer and Finance Minister Rachel Reeves to rethink these plans, and to replace them with a new six-figure annual tax on people with net worth in excess of £5m (\$6.52 million).

Haidar estimates a £150,000 levy could raise an additional £4bn a year for the government, boosting state coffers without trigger-

ing an exodus of the non-dom wealthy.

"The notion that the UK is simply too good to leave is incorrect," the 53-year old Nigerian-born, Lebanese citizen said.

"To be taxed so heavily on wealth generated outside Britain, perhaps years before people even moved to the UK, is unfair," he said, urging the government to sit down with globally-mobile millionaires and discuss tax reforms that he said may put UK jobs at risk.

Organisations like Patriotic Millionaires UK are also campaigning to introduce annual wealth levies on the super-rich.

Setting a 2% tax at a threshold of £10m a year would impact around 20,000 people, but raise up to £24bn a year, the group estimates.

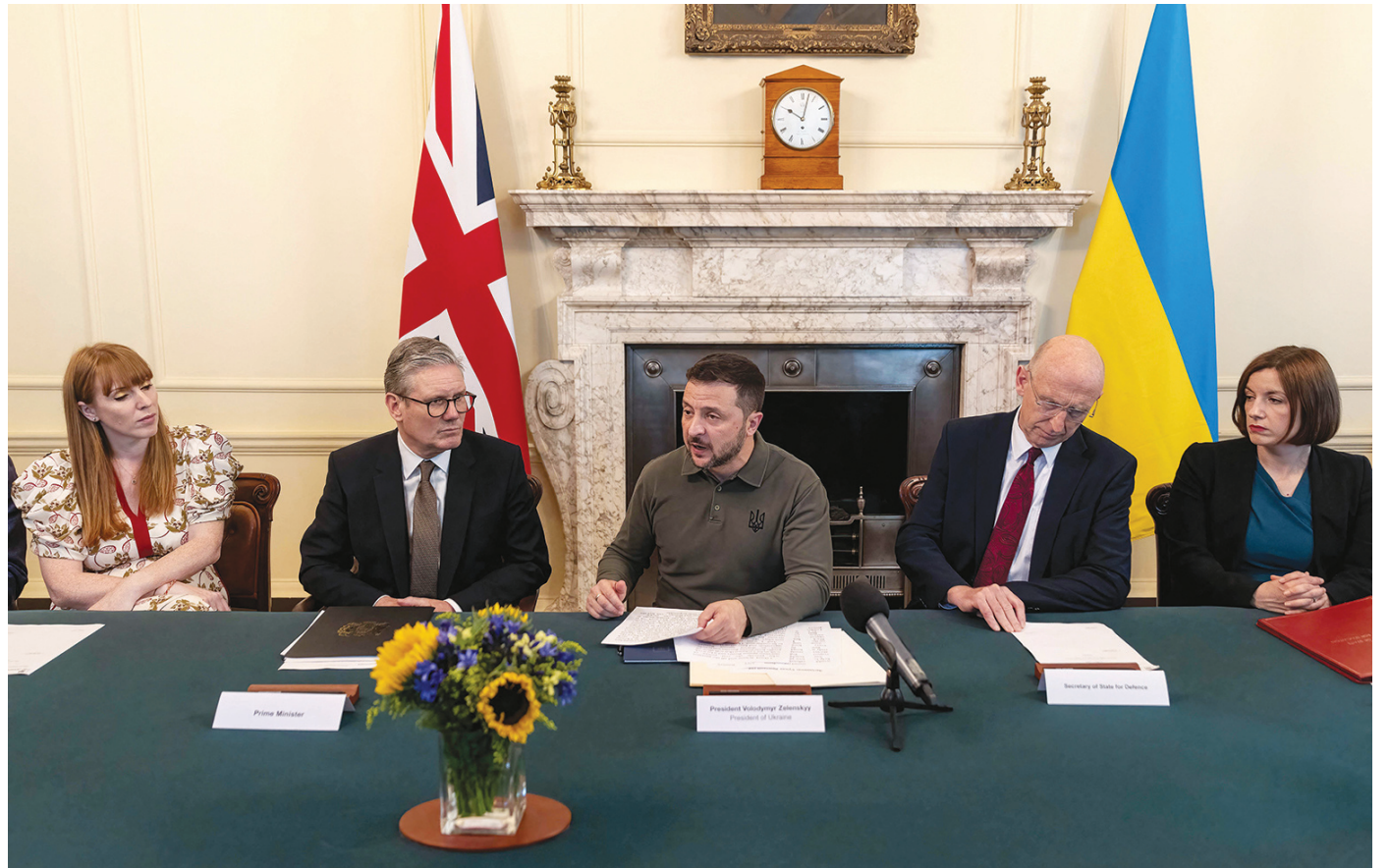
Investment firms, wealth managers and private bankers who provide financial services to around 70,000 UK-based individuals with 'non-dom' status are on high alert for when the historic tax overhaul might begin.

The Labour government reckons it can raise an extra £5bn a year by tackling domestic tax avoidance. Assessing how much more could be raised by changing tax perks on offshore trusts is more difficult.

"It is not possible to directly measure how much foreign income non-doms using the remittance basis have, and therefore what the potential tax base is," the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies said in a report published in March.

Inheritance tax raised £2.1bn between April and June, £83m more than the same period a year earlier, UK tax authority data published this week showed.

Britain has around 37,000 non-doms who opt to be taxed on a 'remittance basis'. This means UK taxes are not charged on their foreign income or capital gains unless they are remitted to the UK.



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky (centre), sits between Britain's Deputy Prime Minister and Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Secretary Angela Rayner (left), Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer (second left) and Britain's Defence Secretary John Healey, addresses cabinet ministers during an extraordinary meeting of the cabinet at 10 Downing Street in central London yesterday.

Zelensky attends UK cabinet, calls for long-range missiles

AFP
London

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday received a standing ovation from senior ministers as he became the first foreign leader to address the British cabinet in person since 1997.

Zelensky gave members of the new Labour government a rundown of the latest situation in Ukraine after a red-carpet welcome at Prime Minister Keir Starmer's 10 Downing Street residence and office.

He and Starmer had a one-on-one meeting beforehand, in which he thanked Britain for its sustained backing for Kyiv since Russian forces invaded in February 2022.

"Thank for the invitation, for the privilege, for me to be here," he told Starmer, who led Labour to victory in elections two weeks ago and has reaffirmed UK support for Ukraine "for as long as it takes".

Zelensky on Thursday urged European leaders to remain united against Russian aggression, as he seeks more military help, including much-needed air firepower to push back Russian troops.

At cabinet, dressed in his trademark army fatigues, and flanked on either side by Brit-

ain's Union flag and the blue-and-yellow flag of Ukraine, he renewed his call for help in boosting his country's "long-range capability".

"If the restrictions on using Western weapons against Russian military are lifted, we can strike further than just near the border," he told ministers.

That would allow Ukraine to "not only protect ourselves from any Russian offensives but also secure our frontline positions and cities from Russian bombs", he added.

Nato member states, including the UK, have been hesitant about Ukraine using Western-supplied weapons such as missiles on targets inside Russia, for fear of escalating the conflict.

Britain has signalled that Ukrainian forces could use UK-supplied Storm Shadow missiles for defensive strikes.

"We're providing weapons to Ukraine for their defence of their sovereign country. And that does not preclude them hitting targets in Russia," Defence Secretary John Healey told BBC radio.

"But that must be done by the Ukrainians, it must be done within the parameters and the bounds of international humanitarian law," added Healey, who visited Ukraine within days of his appointment.

The last foreign leader to address the British cabinet in person was US president Bill Clinton in 1997 after Labour's Tony Blair swept to power, also in a landslide win over the Conservatives.

"Ukraine is, and always will be, at the heart of this government's agenda and so it is only fitting that President Zelensky make a historic address to my cabinet," Starmer had said in a statement before the meeting.

Zelensky's "historic address", as Starmer called it, came as 44 countries and the European Union agreed to target Russia's so-called "shadow fleet" of tankers seeking to evade sanctions on Russian oil.

The 600 or so vessels - most of them old and unsafe - transport 1.7m barrels of oil per day, providing funding for the Russian war effort, but also allegedly carrying weapons.

On Thursday, Britain announced sanctions on 11 vessels used to transport Russian oil.

He also unveiled the Defence Export Support Treaty, to be signed by defence ministers, that will enable Ukraine to draw on £3.5bn (\$4.5bn) of export finance, to bolster both countries' defence industrial bases and boost production.

UK minister to discuss fighter programme with Italy and Japan

Britain's new defence minister will meet with counterparts from Japan and Italy next week to discuss a joint fighter jet programme, as the new Labour government stressed its importance even as it declined to commit to it ahead of a defence review. The three countries in December signed an international treaty to set up the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) - the first major defence industry collaboration merging the separate next-generation fighter efforts of the countries. The programme could be opened up to others at a later stage. Italy's defence minister said in January, with the likes of Saudi Arabia possible contenders to join the project. But there has been speculation that Britain's Labour Party, which won a July 4 election, might not recommit to the programme in light of a review it announced this week into its armed forces, which will report back in the first half of 2025.

Leeds unrest



A police vehicle lies on its side during unrest in Harehills, Leeds, Britain. The riots were a conflict primarily between a large crowd of people and the police, with debris from fires, rocks and rubbish being thrown at several police vehicles.

UK homes' prices fall 'as buyers await rate cut'

Reuters
London

Asking prices for British homes coming to the market fell this month, with signs that some buyers are waiting for the Bank of England (BoE) to cut interest rates, a survey from property website Rightmove showed.

The company said the average asking price was £373,493 (\$484,943) for property put on sale between June 9-July 6, 0.4% less than a month earlier.

The Rightmove data, which is not seasonally adjusted, often falls in July, although this decline was bigger than usual.

Compared with a year earlier, asking prices were 0.4% higher.

Other gauges of the housing market have shown slowing momentum, as expectations for an

imminent BoE rate cut have increasingly been pushed back because of strong wage growth and stubborn cost pressures.

Investors assigned a roughly 50% chance that the BoE will cut rates on August 1.

Rightmove said the certainty provided by the July 4 election - which resulted in a landslide victory for Keir Starmer's Labour Party - would probably prove positive for housing market sentiment.

But it described the potential for a cut in the BoE's Bank Rate as a "game-changer".

"A first Base Rate cut for over four years, together with the new political certainty, could set the scene for a positive autumn market, with improved affordability and a more confident outlook in the second half of the year," Tim Bannister, Rightmove director of property science, said.

Ex-SBTi employee files complaint with charity watchdog

The former employee wrote that SBTi's board of trustees acted "recklessly" in announcing plans in April to allow companies to use carbon credits in their targets

Reuters
London

A former employee of the Science-Based Targets initiative (SBTi) has filed a complaint with Britain's charity regulator accusing the non-profit, which the world's biggest companies use to audit their car-

bon emission targets, of acting against its mission.

In the complaint, which was submitted last month, the former employee wrote that SBTi's board of trustees acted "recklessly" in announcing plans in April to allow companies to use carbon credits in their targets, arguing they discourage companies from reducing their own emissions.

The SBTi had previously rejected the use of offsets in setting targets, and the U-turn sparked a backlash among its staff that led to its board saying it would not change the rules for now and would simply explore whether it should adopt carbon offsets.

Luiz Amaral, SBTi's CEO who the staff called to resign over the matter, stepped down earlier this month citing personal reasons he did not disclose.

The complaint with the Charity Commission alleges that SBTi's board trustees repeatedly breached company rules and ignored expert opinion in announcing it would seek to allow carbon offsets.

The former employee who passed on a copy of their complaint to Reuters requested anonymity, citing fear of potential retribution.

Reuters shared the contents of the complaint with SBTi and a

spokesperson said the non-profit could not comment without reviewing it itself. They reiterated that SBTi still does not allow carbon offsets.

"We will be providing more detail on this in due course, including an extensive consultation process, and we look forward to the contributions made from civil society, business and government," the spokesperson said.

Charity Commission spokespersons did not respond to requests for comment.

Companies under pressure to curb their emissions can buy credits from developers of projects that absorb carbon, such

as through reforestation. The market for offsets has remained small due to a limited number of projects that can verify their climate benefits.

The complaint claims SBTi's board did not consult staff or its advisers on moving ahead with carbon credits. It also alleges that several board trustees have ties to the carbon offset industry.

SBTi is partly funded by the Bezos Earth fund, a charity set up by billionaire Jeff Bezos that is a big investor in voluntary carbon markets, and the former employee wrote this creates a conflict.

If the Charity Commission decides to investigate a complaint,

its inquires can have a range of outcomes, from removing trustees to appointing interim managers or, in very rare cases, taking away charitable status, said Chris Priestley, a partner at Withers LLP specialising in charity law.

Holger Hoffman-Riem, a member of the SBTi's technical advisory group that advises SBTi on the development of standards and guidelines, said an investigation was warranted. "An external review should be in the best interest of the board, so that they can demonstrate compliance with principles of charity law and governance," he said.

Taxis, security escort help students flee violence-hit Bangladesh

Reuters
Guwahati, India

A fleet of taxis, a security escort, and a harrowing six-hour journey brought Asif Hussain and about 80 other Indian students back home yesterday from Bangladesh, where violence has erupted between

protesters and security forces. At least 20 people have been killed in the clashes this week - most of them in the capital Dhaka - with police firing tear gas and rubber bullets to scatter protesters who also torched vehicles and establishments. The protesters oppose a system of quotas for government jobs.

For Hussain, who studies at a

private medical college in Bangladesh's Manikganj district, about 50km from Dhaka, being cut off from his family in India was especially "stressful." "Our college was not affected by the violence but we heard there was trouble in the town (about 15 minutes away)," he said.

As news came in of students being killed in Dhaka, Hus-

sain and about 80 others from his college hired private taxis to travel to the border that Bangladesh shares with India's eastern state of West Bengal, about 170km away.

The Indian embassy in Bangladesh also provided the students with a security escort after they requested for it, Hussain said.

Leaving their college at

2.30am, the group reached the border six hours later but crossed it only in the afternoon after clearing immigration. For Hussain, the journey will continue for another day as he travels to his hometown, Dhubri, in Assam state. "It has been very scary...I have (still) not been able to speak to many of my friends in Dhaka," he said. Around 8,500 Indians

are studying in Bangladesh - many of them pursuing medicine - India's foreign ministry says, and about 15,000 Indians live in the country.

In an advisory, India urged its citizens in Bangladesh to minimise movement outside their residences. The foreign ministry said that all Indians in Bangladesh were safe.

Modi 'to focus on jobs, incomes in first budget after election setback'

Reuters
New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will seek to mend his relationship with voters in the federal budget to be announced next week, economic analysts said, citing possible steps to boost jobs and incomes as growth in the economy remains uneven and food prices continue to surge.

Modi's party fell short of reaching the half-way mark in the general election that concluded last month as jobs and the high cost of living overshadowed his high voltage Hindu nationalist campaign.

To stay in power, Modi is depending on two fickle regional allies, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Janata Dal (United), who control Andhra Pradesh and Bihar states, respectively. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will table the government's first budget of Modi's third term on July 23, which will provide the first glimpse of any change in the government's economic policies.

Interim budget estimates for the fiscal year 2024-25 that started on April 1 will be replaced by the new budget.

"We think the budget will balance economic imperatives with political

ones," said Shreya Sodhani, regional economist at Barclays.

"This would mean the government using the windfall from the RBI dividend and higher tax revenues to fund higher spending, rather than reducing the deficit," Sodhani said, referring to the central bank, the Reserve Bank of India.

A record \$25bn surplus transfer from the central bank will allow the government more room to spend without expanding the deficit. The fiscal deficit target will be retained at 5.1% of gross domestic product, a majority of economists polled by Reuters said. Over the last three years, the government has nearly doubled spending on long-term infrastructure projects as a way to push growth and generate jobs.

It plans to spend Rs11tn (\$131.61bn) on such projects this year and some economists expect an added push to manufacturing in the budget. "We expect the government to maintain its focus on promoting domestic manufacturing," Nomura economists said in a note, adding that they expect an increase in local procurement requirements and the extension of a concessional tax rate for new manufacturing facilities.

The government is expected to also bring in consumption boosting measures that were missing in the interim budget presented before the

elections. According to a Reuters report, the budget may lower personal income tax for some categories in the upcoming budget.

"The Indian middle class has been supporting Modi in a very determined way. But for years they have not got much relief," said political analyst Rasheed Kidwai. "The time has come for the government to give some kind of relief to them."

Alongside, the South Asian nation may increase state subsidies on rural housing and food.

Putting the government in a fix, the two key allies of the government have demanded \$6bn in funds for their states, which could give way to more such demands from others.

Before the election, many states, including those ruled by the opposition like West Bengal and Kerala, claimed they had not got a fair share of funds from New Delhi. The federal government has contested such claims. "I think that is opening a Pandora's box," Kidwai said, referring to the demands from the allies.

He said preferential treatment to the allies will lead to a "lot of heartburn".

However, one sop that could be offered to states could be an increase in interest-free long-term loans that the federal government offers for infrastructure projects from the current Rs1.3tn.

Accident site



A policeman stands near the derailed train in Gonda district of Uttar Pradesh yesterday. The train derailed and overturned several of its cars on Thursday, killing at least two people and injuring 24 others with rescue and relief efforts ongoing.

Outrage over discriminatory order to Uttar Pradesh eateries

AFP
New Delhi

The chief minister of India's most populous state backed a plan yesterday requiring restaurants and roadside eateries to display the names of their owners, despite criticism the move was aimed at dividing establishments by religion.

Yogi Adityanath, a saffron-robed Hindu monk who heads Uttar Pradesh state, said the diktat would be enforced along a route taken by Hindu pilgrims

during the month of Shraavan every year. Critics of the move said it was meant to stop Hindus from patronising eateries owned by Muslims.

Rights groups say hate crimes and violence against India's large Muslim minority have been on the rise since Hindu-nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014.

The restaurant order has sparked widespread outrage, with one opposition politician saying it was meant to stop Hindus from buying anything from a Muslim shop "by mistake".

"This was called apartheid

in South Africa and in Hitler's Germany it was called 'Juden-boycott'" lawmaker Asaduddin Owaisi said in a post on social media.

Uttar Pradesh has been governed by Modi's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party since 2017, when it appointed Adityanath as chief minister.

During his tenure, Hindu mobs have launched a spate of attacks over so-called cow protection - the cow being a sacred animal for many Hindus - and committed other hate crimes that have sown fear among the state's Muslim population.

Byju's faces complete shutdown if insolvency proceeds, warns CEO

Insolvency proceedings against ed-tech giant Byju's, once India's biggest startup valued at \$22bn, will likely force thousands of employees to quit and result in a total shutdown of its services, its CEO said in a court filing. Byju's has suffered numerous setbacks in recent months, including job cuts, a collapse in its valuation and a tussle with investors who accused CEO Byju Raveendran of corporate governance lapses. Byju's has denied any wrongdoing. Now Byju's is facing its biggest crisis after an Indian tribunal triggered insolvency proceedings following a complaint by the country's cricket board over an outstanding payment of \$19mn. Byju's assets have been frozen and its board has been suspended. The insolvency process will likely cause vendors who provide critical services to Byju's for the upkeep of online platforms to declare a default, "leading to a total shut down of services" and bringing the operation to "a grinding halt," Raveendran said.

Rains in Mumbai cause travel misery



People walk past a fallen tree on a rainy day in Mumbai, India, yesterday. Heavy downpour hit rail and bus services yesterday causing inconvenience to lakhs of office-goers.

Air India sends flight to Russia after passengers stranded

Reuters
New Delhi

Air India yesterday sent a plane with food and other essentials to pick up passengers stranded in Russia after the previous day's San Francisco-bound flight made an emergency landing there.

An Air India airplane flying from Delhi to the West Coast city made an emergency landing in Russia after the crew detected a potential issue in the cargo hold area, its second such incident on the route in just over a year.

In a statement, Air India said a team, including crew and security personnel, were on board the ferry flight and that it had set up a dedicated hotline for anyone wanting to reach out to passengers.

Many carriers, including US

and European Union airlines, avoid Russian airspace following the war in Ukraine, but Air India uses that route, giving it a flying time and cost advantage on US-bound flights.

The Indian embassy in Russia said on social media platform X that a team of three senior officials and an interpreter have reached Krasnoyarsk airport to assist the passengers.

The Boeing 777 aircraft, carrying 225 passengers and 19 flight crew, made a precautionary landing safely in the Russian region of Siberia at the Krasnoyarsk International Airport, the airline said in a statement.

The airport said the flight's crew had been moved to hotels, and passengers were in the international departure area, which angered some of those stranded, according to social media posts.

Indian family of Usha Vance known for academic prowess

Reuters
Hyderabad

Usha Chilukuri Vance, the wife of Donald Trump's vice-presidential running mate, has a great-aunt in southern India, aged 96, celebrated in local media as the country's oldest active professor.

Academic achievement marks the family of US-born Vance, notably Shanthamma Chilukuri, who still travels 60km most weekdays to university to teach physics.

"Most of our family is academically strong and education has

been a top priority," Chilukuri said in Visakhapatnam.

Usha Vance, 38, made her debut on the US national political stage on Wednesday when she introduced her husband, US senator J D Vance of Ohio, at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee.

"I got to know about Usha's husband being named as a vice president candidate and of course we are happy as a family," Chilukuri said.

In his memoir "Hillbilly Elegy", Vance calls his wife a "supersmart daughter of Indian immigrants" whom he met at Yale Law School.

The parents of Usha Vance moved to the US in the late 1970s and now teach engineering and molecular biology in San Diego.

While Usha Vance studied at Yale and Cambridge, her father and grandfather both taught or studied at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), India's premier engineering college. Her younger sister is a mechanical engineer with a semiconductor company in San Diego and an aunt a medical professional in the southern Indian city of Chennai.

The family is originally from a village called Vadduru in Andhra Pradesh state but moved to Chennai when Usha Vance's pa-

ternal grandfather, Ramasastry Chilukuri, went to teach at the IIT there around the time it was set up in 1959, members of the family said. The IIT now runs a student award in the memory of Ramasastry, who used to teach physics.

Usha Vance was a law clerk to US chief justice John Roberts and later became an attorney at US law firm Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP. She resigned after J D Vance was named as the Republican vice presidential candidate.

A close India-based family member who attended their wedding in Kentucky in 2014 attributed Usha Vance's success to "the mindset that one must accom-

plish something, have degrees from top institutes".

"Our family WhatsApp group is flooded with messages ever since J D Vance's name was announced," said the family member, who did not want to be named to avoid public attention as interest in the family spikes in the media. "I sent her a congratulatory message and conveyed my best wishes. She was also elated."

Usha Vance's parents and her sister in the US did not respond to requests for comment.

Indian media have hailed her as the latest among several Americans with roots in India rising to fame, including US Vice-Pres-

ident Kamala Harris, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, and former Republican presidential hopefuls Nikki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy, who was J D and Usha Vance's classmate at Yale Law.

In a 2020 Netflix movie based on J D Vance's memoir, Usha Vance's character describes how her father started from scratch when he first moved to the US.

"He came here with nothing," said the character played by Freida Pinto, an Indian actor who rose to fame as the female lead in Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*. "He had to just find his way."



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Trump tramples on party effort to give him image makeover

For four nights at Donald Trump's nominating convention in Milwaukee, a roster of speakers attempted to give one of the most divisive politicians in recent US history a makeover, describing him as a loving and caring family man whose near-assassination at a rally on Saturday had changed him.

Early in his speech on Thursday night, as he accepted his party's presidential nomination at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, it seemed Trump had bought into the carefully orchestrated effort to repackaging him as a humbler, unifying figure, more palatable to swing voters who will be crucial to winning the Nov 5 election.

Trump had told the Washington Examiner earlier in the week that he had torn up the original speech he planned to give in favour of one preaching national unity after his near brush with death.

And for the first few minutes of his speech, Trump sought to do that. He said he wanted to be a president for all Americans, including Democrats, and wanted to heal the divided country.

"In an age when our politics too often divide us, now is the time to remember that we are all fellow citizens," Trump said.

That new version of Trump lasted barely half an hour. Then the Trump more familiar to Americans – the bombastic thrower of insults who revels in demonising his opponents – re-emerged, trampling over the message of unity so painstakingly choreographed by the Republican National Committee this week.

"In an age when our politics too often divide us, now is the time to remember that we are all fellow citizens"

In a rambling 92-minute address that broke the record for the longest convention speech in history, Trump called Democratic President Joe Biden the worst president in US history and the former Democratic House Speaker "crazy Nancy Pelosi", and accused

Democrats of launching judicial witch hunts against him and creating a "planet of war". "The Democrat Party should immediately stop weaponising the justice system and labelling their political opponent as an enemy of democracy, especially since that is not true," Trump said. "In fact, I am the one saving democracy for the people of our country," he said.

Using familiar hyperbolic and divisive language, he said illegal immigration to the US was "the greatest invasion in history" and was leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans every year, though neither claim is supported by any data.

He painted a dark picture of a crumbling America, a nation in decline, its cities crime-ridden and economically depressed, a staple image of his stump speech in which he presents himself as the country's saviour.

"We had been told this was going to be a different Trump, a softer side," Mary Anna Mancuso, a Republican strategist and Trump critic, said afterward. "Trump's speech was not about unifying the nation. It was the same Trump that we've seen and there was no difference." To be sure, Trump avoided some of the harshest language often deployed at his rallies. He usually relishes mocking Biden as an enfeebled president, but only mentioned him by name twice.

Frank Luntz, another Republican strategist, said the speech was so long and started so late that many viewers would only have seen the first 30 minutes, which Luntz described as "perfect." He thought some of roughest elements of Trump's normal attacks were also toned down. "It was traditional, typical Trump without as many of the usual hard edges," Luntz said.

Trump returns to the campaign trail today for a rally in Michigan with his newly anointed vice-presidential pick, US Senator J D Vance, at his side. Those sceptical of his makeover by the party this week will watch to see which Trump will appear and how long any push for unity will last. – Reuters

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Rebooting the Sustainable Development Goals

By John W McArthur & Zia Khan
New York

It is a truism in the business world that vision without execution is a hallucination, and execution without vision is futile. The same principle applies to global policy: ambitions without solutions are just hopes, while solutions without ambition lead to stagnation.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 are a case in point. These 17 objectives and 169 underlying targets were unanimously adopted by all UN member states in 2015. They constitute an ambitious agenda to address global challenges like poverty, health, gender equality, labour, education, and climate change.

With six years remaining until the 2030 deadline, the world is far from achieving most of these goals. Despite significant improvements in some areas – such as a million more children reaching their fifth birthday each year – progress has been too slow in many others.

While financing gaps are rightly often cited as a key factor, the biggest obstacle to achieving the SDGs is the lack of systematic approaches to creating scalable solutions. Slow and steady gains can lead to significant advances over time, but if progress becomes too slow, the sense of achievement and hope for the future can dissipate.

Achieving systemic gains requires boldness. In 2015, the SDGs were launched with a call for transformation. But calling for transformative solutions is easier than developing them. Although markets are powerful drivers of innovation, we need solutions capable of tackling broader public interests. Progress often requires new forms of collaboration between public, private, scientific, and civil-society institutions, or even the creation of new ones. But many organisations have difficulties updating their goals or building partnership strategies. Siloed professional communities are difficult to unite, leaving vested interests and the forces of inertia to crowd out innovation. Consequently, partnership remains more an aspirational value than a skills-based discipline, and policy debates often prioritise ideology over practical solutions.

Against this backdrop, achieving the SDGs by 2030 requires new approaches that are audacious enough to inspire but also practical enough to be viable – concepts that capture the imagination while steering implementation debates toward tangible results. This could mean anything from a new global fund designed to ensure that



File photo: The Sustainable Development Goals Summit 2023 at UN headquarters in New York City.

digital cash transfers reach the world's poorest communities, or an "interspecies money" mechanism that leverages artificial intelligence to provide animals with a say on their own protection. It could also mean developing a public data tool to help investors identify and avoid companies that use forced labour.

New technologies, institutions, and approaches all have the capacity to mobilise energy and expertise to achieve common, quantifiable objectives. Crucially, the fresh approaches we have in mind must convince people to abandon current practices and pool their creativity and resources toward a greater goal.

But big ideas rarely emerge on their own. Our respective professional experiences and collaborative efforts have taught us that innovative SDG solutions must be encouraged, cultivated, and supported. As co-chairs of 17 Rooms, a partnership between the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation, we have worked with several dozen groups of extraordinary professionals around the world on initiatives related to all 17 goals. Having watched them experiment with various approaches, we have learned a few lessons about how to drive positive change.

First, venues for cross-sector co-operation on sustainable development remain too rare. We have been struck by the sense of novelty leaders from all sectors frequently express when encouraged to craft bold actions

together to achieve even individual SDG targets.

Second, how ideas are shaped matters. To create platforms for the best ideas to emerge, the world needs tools, processes, and systems that can bring together diverse views, and yet the lack of available tools for developing multi-stakeholder solutions is startling.

Third, the development and adoption of big ideas should be interlinked. Too often, experts devise new solutions without understanding the realities faced by those who would be responsible for implementing them. Conversely, policymakers often fail to seek out innovative ideas and are rarely held accountable for not doing so.

A fourth lesson concerns the need to determine early on who will pay and how. Regrettably, the SDGs were launched without sufficient agreement on funding, making even small amounts of money difficult to secure. Without adequate financing, big ideas will remain just that – ideas.

Fifth, there is no substitute for leadership. Institutions and systems are crucial for large-scale deployment, but the passion and dedication of individuals championing big ideas are much more important than a perfect strategy or project. Since roadblocks are inevitable in an age of technological disruption, policy entrepreneurs must be as agile as their counterparts in the business world in navigating constantly shifting terrain.

To be sure, some people may argue that the current geopolitical climate

is too challenging to pursue big ideas or develop systematic approaches to achieving the SDGs. We disagree. If anything, today's heightened tensions underscore the need to chart a better path forward. When the world seems stuck or off course, policy tweaks are unlikely to have a significant impact. New ideas, on the other hand, can foster a sense of opportunity and combat despair.

Lastly, private-sector and civil-society leaders are just as vital to generating big ideas as public officials. Big ideas can drive change at every level, from local councils to international forums. But achieving the SDGs requires new platforms that can foster innovation across sectors and empower relevant actors to advance solutions independently.

At 17 Rooms, we have learned from our successes and missed opportunities. With six years remaining until the 2030 deadline to achieve the SDGs, we are actively seeking big ideas. We hope others will adopt a similar approach and help all of us build platforms to facilitate innovative solutions. This commentary draws on insights generated through the 17 Rooms Initiative, convened by the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings and The Rockefeller Foundation. – Project Syndicate

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Is Greece's six-day work week a harbinger?

By Pinelopi Koujianou Goldberg
Athens

Growing up in Greece, one of my most joyous childhood memories was the announcement that the school (and work) week would shrink from six days to five. Since I also recall my compatriots being equally excited about the change, I was surprised to hear that under a new law, employers in several sectors may once again implement six-day schedules.

This change is surprising for many reasons. First and foremost, it seems to buck a general trend toward fostering work-life balance and allowing for more flexible work arrangements. Several governments in advanced economies (Belgium, Singapore, and the United Kingdom) have announced shorter work weeks, and others (Germany, Japan, Ireland, South Africa, and Spain) are contemplating similar changes.

Second, Greeks are known for appreciating work-life balance, and they already work more hours than other Europeans. The average Greek worker spends 39.8 hours per week on the job, compared to an average of only 36.1 hours across the European Union.

Third, although the current Greek government is pro-business and pro-growth, it has shown an appreciation for the rights and advancement of women, a group that is likely to be adversely affected by a longer, less flexible work schedule. This same government has also demonstrated a commitment to evidence-based policymaking, and the evidence to date suggests that shorter work weeks and a more balanced lifestyle contribute to higher employee satisfaction, better health, and ultimately greater productivity.

So, what explains this unexpected policy change? The government itself describes the move as an "exceptional measure," which we all know to be a euphemism for "policy of last resort." Like many high-income countries, Greece is facing an acute labour shortage. While its situation is particularly dire, owing to a substantial labour drain following the 2010 financial crisis (about 500,000 Greeks – 5% of the current population – are estimated to have left), it is not alone.



File photo: Seasonal firefighters participate in a strike against government's planned labour reforms, in Athens, Greece, on September 21, 2023.

The root of the problem lies in low fertility and an ageing population – demographic conditions that the Greek government rightly characterises as a "ticking time bomb." Coupled with well-founded demands for a higher quality of life and better work-life balance as people become wealthier, fewer working-age people constrains labour supply.

How should advanced economies address this problem? Four possibilities come to mind. The first is to embrace automation, on the assumption that machines, robots, and artificial intelligence could eventually take the place of missing workers. But not every job can be performed by a machine or a large language model. We still need humans to fill many of the least desirable low-skilled positions in construction or the food and hospitality industries.

The second option is to increase worker compensation. Basic economics teaches us that when demand exceeds supply, prices (in this case, wages) go up. But higher wages ultimately lead to higher prices for consumers, which tend to be unpopular, especially at a time when inflation is a primary concern. And in a small open economy like Greece, higher wages and prices would have detrimental effects on international competitiveness.

The third option is to ask workers in advanced economies to work more, as Greece has now done. While this move appears to be bucking the general

trend toward fewer work hours per week, it actually is not so different from increasing the retirement age, as several other countries (Denmark, France, Germany) have found it necessary to do. In both cases, the policy changes have been highly unpopular among workers; and in both cases, people sent a clear message that they would rather forego the higher income (in Greece's case, the sixth workday comes with a 40% wage premium) than work more than they are used to.

This leaves us with the fourth option, which is to increase the labour supply by harnessing controlled, legalized immigration. In regions plagued by refugee crises and illegal immigration (such as most of Europe and the US), properly designed immigration policies have the potential to kill two birds with one stone. Yet such policies currently seem out of the question. In the face of geopolitical fragmentation and national-security concerns, countries are increasingly closing their borders and turning inward.

One is reminded yet again that in a globally interconnected world, the distinction between foreign and domestic is tenuous. Problems originating in other parts of the world have important implications for domestic issues, and in this case for labour markets.

There is of course a fifth option, which is for people in richer countries to scale back their consumption and growth and rely on the fruits of the labour they are willing to supply. Doing so would provide the work-life balance they seek, as well as ensuring a sustainable future. But as of now, few are willing to accept this tradeoff.

Most people want to have their cake and eat it. But that isn't possible. To maintain their current quality of life, citizens of high-income countries must either open their borders to new immigrants or work more. Given the current global tensions, the pendulum seems to be swinging in the direction of more work, whether it comes through a higher retirement age or a longer work week. Greece may be more of a trendsetter than a trend breaker. – Project Syndicate

• Pinelopi Koujianou Goldberg, a former World Bank Group chief economist and editor-in-chief of the American Economic Review, is Professor of Economics at Yale University.



The US needs a techno-industrial strategy

By Liza Tobin and Addis Goldman
Washington, DC

In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008-09, practically everyone seemed convinced that China's economy would surpass that of the US by 2030. Today, China is facing a range of crises that could spell doom for its economic "miracle". In an effort to get back on track – and strengthen its strategic position – China has lately been seeking to position advanced industries, rather than real estate, as the economy's main growth engine. How the US responds will help determine the outcome of the two countries' strategic competition – and the future of the global economy.

America's economic dynamism remains robust, as the rapid recovery from the Covid-19 shock showed. One of the many factors underpinning this dynamism is US leadership in artificial intelligence, which is already creating economic value across industries and shows promising signs of boosting productivity. With US technology companies investing heavily in cloud infrastructure, the US innovation ecosystem is set to benefit from enterprise-scale AI capabilities. As 2030 approaches, these developments could accelerate innovation in "deep-tech" sectors like robotics and biotechnology.

For all its strengths, however, the US economy has one glaring deficiency: a lack of production capacity in the advanced industries, such as semiconductors and clean energy, that are crucial to America's economic competitiveness and national security. Since 1980, the share of the world's high-tech goods that are manufactured in the US has fallen from over 40% to just 18%.

While the US has undergone deindustrialisation, China has emerged as the world's manufacturing superpower, and moved from dominance in textiles and toys to leadership in advanced-technologies, such as networking components, electrical equipment, and machine tools. China now accounts for more than half of global electric-vehicle production, and through 2026, it will possess more than 80% of the world's solar-cell manufacturing capacity.

With President Xi Jinping having identified advanced



manufacturing industries as the main engines of China's future economic growth, the Chinese government is boosting its efforts to dominate these industries' value chains. In a sign of what is to come, Chinese net lending to manufacturing surged from \$63bn in 2019 to over \$680bn in 2023.

Worryingly, these investments are guided by mercantilist policies designed to entrench China's dominance over advanced industries by flooding global markets with subsidised exports. If this strategy is allowed to succeed, US firms in advanced industries will be wiped out, leaving the US increasingly dependent on China for critical goods.

But this outcome is hardly a foregone conclusion. Thanks to a rare confluence of factors, America's goal of reconstituting its industrial base aligns with key strategic objectives and domestic priorities, from defence to decarbonisation to supply-chain diversification. At the same time, the US has access

to emerging advanced-manufacturing processes – involving the application of technologies like robotics, AI, and 3D printing – that could considerably strengthen its ability to compete with China. To make the most of these advantages – and as part of a broader vision for competitiveness – the US must implement a techno-industrial strategy with three pillars: production, markets, and people.

Begin with production. To increase its capacity to produce advanced-technology goods at scale, the US must invest in manufacturing-innovation programmes and promote the adoption of advanced technologies by small and medium-size manufacturers (the backbone of the US industrial sector). It must also create incentives for investment in the "smart factories" of the future – facilities that capitalise on US software advantages to lower costs, increase flexibility, and accelerate innovation. More broadly, the US must devise new ways to use targeted infusions of government capital to

de-risk private investment in the industrial sector after decades of neglect.

As for markets, the US must ensure that its trade policy secures supply chains for key inputs such as Internet of Things modules, networking components, and industrial robots, and reduces dependence on China for production capacity. To this end, the US should make continued use of tools like tariffs, while negotiating strategic trade agreements with key allies and partners. US President Joe Biden should consider appointing a White House "czar" for economic security, responsible for co-ordinating such economic statecraft.

This brings us to people: a comprehensive techno-industrial strategy must include significant investments in human capital. As it stands, advanced industries in the US face crippling workforce shortages. One recent analysis found that China increased its share of top AI research talent from 11% in 2019 to 28% in 2022, while the share of top AI research talent working in the US dropped from 59% to 42%.

To overcome labour shortages and out-compete China for technical talent now and in the future, the US must ensure that all classrooms are AI-equipped by 2030. It must lower barriers to immigration for high-skilled workers. It must also develop a unified federal approach to the advanced-industry workforce. A good starting point would be to create national workforce frameworks to reflect the evolution of advanced-manufacturing industries, similar to how policymakers have approached cybersecurity workforce development.

The US economy is on a strong footing. But China's efforts to shift its economic model toward advanced industries threaten to enable it not only to surpass the US economically, but also to gain a powerful strategic advantage. That means an equally powerful US response is necessary. By driving investments toward advanced manufacturing, pursuing a strategic trade policy, and strengthening its workforce, the US can leverage its existing advantages to cement its leadership in the industries of the future. – Project Syndicate

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Fighting climate change requires a different mindset

By Sonia Guajajara
Brasilia

The climate disasters unfolding around the world – including unprecedented floods in Brazil, Africa, and China, heat waves in Asia and the Middle East, and persistent droughts in Europe and Latin America – show that the planet is at a critical juncture. Fortunately, we can still seize the opportunity to redefine our paradigms of economic and social development. Alongside preserving and restoring our forests, we must end our dependence on fossil fuels and embrace renewables.

With our ancestral knowledge and respect for nature, indigenous peoples are an invaluable asset in confronting this challenge. Despite comprising only 5% of the global population, our lands preserve more than 80% of the world's biodiversity. We know that when humans try to dominate nature, nature always responds. Today's climate tragedies reflect this dynamic. They show why we must transcend our individual experiences to reach a higher state of consciousness vis-à-vis nature.

To that end, we in Brazil are committed to combating deforestation and advancing the demarcation, protection, and environmental management of indigenous territories. Such measures are essential to preserve biodiversity, limit carbon-dioxide emissions, and avoid the point of no return for essential biomes like the Amazon. Brazil is also focusing on the energy we produce and consume, a challenge that involves complex debates and compels stark choices.

But climate change is a global crisis. Unsustainable economic models built on fossil-fuel energy disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations. By abandoning outdated development models based on the destruction of nature, we can embark on a path that is not only more sustainable, but also more just.

Despite the clear dangers presented by fossil fuels, significant investments in these energy sources continue to go unchallenged. A common justification is that burning fossil fuels yields economic benefits, but the oil industry is highly income-concentrating, yielding substantial gains only for a few, and negative externalities – not least pollution, corruption, and displacement – for the many.

Yet the human, financial, and environmental costs of our fossil-fuel fixation are increasingly clear. Consider the recent catastrophic floods in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, which killed hundreds of people and displaced many more; or the unprecedented drought that left thousands without water and food in the Amazon, home to the planet's largest watershed; or the fires in the Pantanal, the largest wetland in the world. While billions of taxpayer dollars are spent supporting recovery from these kinds of disasters, billions

more are still going to subsidize the fossil-fuel industry and its shareholders.

What will it take for governments to prioritise investments in climate-change mitigation and adaptation over these destructive subsidies? The G7 and other advanced economies have a responsibility to demonstrate more leadership on this issue. The effects of climate change are tangible threats that undermine growth and security everywhere. As heads of state and government – especially those from the G7 and G20 – prepare for upcoming climate meetings in Azerbaijan and Brazil, they should ask themselves how many more climate disasters they want to preside over.

We have the right to decide what kind of world we want to build. Do we continue on the path marked out by an exploitative logic that is increasingly turning against us, or do we seize this moment, change course, and start valuing ancestral knowledge? If we choose the latter option – as we must – we will need to secure the free, prior, and informed consent of all communities involved in any new projects, not only to protect rights but also to ensure more effective results.

The technology and knowledge for a just transition already exists. Many countries have already made significant advances in this direction, proving that a sustainable future is possible and economically viable. The tragedies unfolding around us ought to be a wake-up call for all countries to end fossil-fuel exploration, reduce usage as much as possible, and invest in renewable energy, the bioeconomy, and resilient infrastructure.

One big, outstanding issue is that financial flows still need to be brought into line with the targets set under the Paris climate agreement. Not only should annual investments in climate action increase substantially, but northern countries must take responsibility for mobilising climate financing to the Global South this decade. Only then can we ensure a just and accelerated energy transition and truly protect nature, allowing it to play its indispensable role in stabilising the planetary systems on which human life and prosperity depend.

The climate crisis is an opportunity to re-evaluate our choices and priorities. Nature has already given us many warnings, and it also offers us solutions. But mitigating climate change, eliminating fossil fuels, preserving and restoring forests, and protecting indigenous territories will not happen automatically. Each requires funding, concrete policies, and global co-operation. We will hear plenty of lofty, ambitious speeches in the months ahead, but if these are not backed by comprehensive implementation plans, they will amount to hot air. We already have more of that than we want. – Project Syndicate

• Sonia Guajajara is Brazil's Minister of Indigenous Peoples.



File photo: A view of a deforested area in the middle of the Amazon forest, near the BR-230 highway, known as Transamazônica, in the municipality of Uruara, Para, Brazil, on July 14, 2021.



File photo: Indigenous Mura people pose for a picture in a deforested area of a non-demarcated indigenous land in the Amazon rainforest near Humaita, Amazonas State, Brazil, on August 20, 2019.

Lack of job growth for Bangladesh's youth fuels campus protests

By Md. Tahmid Zami
Dhaka

Campus protests across Bangladesh against public-sector hiring quotas turned deadly this week, illustrating the severity of a jobs crisis in the world's seventh most populous nation.

Protesters are calling for reform of a quota system that reserves more than half of highly sought-after government jobs for certain groups, including women, the disabled and the descendants of veterans of the 1971 War of Independence.

The country's High Court last month reinstated the quotas, which the government had abolished in 2018.

The intensity of the student backlash, which has left at least 12 people dead in clashes between protesters and government supporters, lies in part in a faltering economy that has failed to create enough jobs for young people who make up more than a quarter of the population.

"The context of the quota reform movement is about precarity, or persistent insecurity about employment and income, faced by the young people," said Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir, a professor of development studies at the University of Dhaka and chairman of the economic research think tank Unnayan Onneshan.

Nearly one in five Bangladeshis between the ages of 15 and 24 are not in a job nor a classroom, according to official statistics from 2023.

University graduates face higher rates of unemployment than their less-educated peers, and about 650,000 graduates are among the more than 2mn young people entering the job market each year.

University libraries are filled with young graduates cramming for the civil-service exam, vying for scarce government jobs that promise job security, good income and prestige.

In last year's recruitment test, some 346,000 candidates competed for just 3,300 jobs, according to local media.

Blue-collar jobs are now also harder to come by, even as the textile and garment sector, Bangladesh's biggest employer, sees stellar growth.

Exports have jumped fourfold to \$40bn since 2008, according to data from industry group BGMEA, but employment across private sector jobs has stagnated.

"For a country that seeks to ride a demographic dividend – that is, the economic benefit of having a large, economically active youth – the job crisis faced by youth is a deadweight loss," said Titumir.

Large numbers of women have joined the campus demonstrations, and scores of female students were hurt when the protests turned violent this week.

Young women are in an especially precarious position when it comes to access to education and work, with government surveys showing 27% of women and girls aged 15-24 lack work or an education, compared with 10% of young men. Titumir said this leaves them more susceptible to domestic abuse and poverty.

A key source of contention is over the 30% of civil service jobs reserved for the children and grandchildren of "freedom fighters"



Students shout slogans during ongoing anti-quota protest in Dhaka on Thursday. Bangladeshi students pressed with nationwide protests against civil service hiring rules, rebuffing an olive branch from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who pledged justice for those killed in the demonstrations.

who fought in Bangladesh's liberation war against Pakistan. Protesters argue that far fewer jobs should be earmarked for grandchildren of fighters.

Farhana Manik Muna, a protest organiser in the city of Narayanganj, said activists want the government to form a commission to propose reforms to the quota system.

"We are not calling for a wholesale cancellation of all quota reservations. Rather, we want a reasonable approach towards helping disadvantaged groups," she said, including members of Bangladesh's small Indigenous communities and people with disabilities.

Protesters are demanding that more people are recruited based on merit.

Other activists said Bangladesh needs a far more comprehensive strategy to improve the employment market.

"We want reform in the recruitment for government jobs, but also a programme for creating employment throughout the economy," Nahid Islam, the coordinator of the quota reform movement, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Titumir described a "large mismatch" between what universities are teaching and the skillsets required for work that is in high demand, such as masons and electricians.

The lack of work has forced millions of low- and unskilled workers to find jobs overseas in order to send home small remittances, while Bangladesh faces a "brain drain" at the same time as qualified graduates settle in higher-income countries.

Meanwhile, companies and development organisations often recruit professionals from other countries for managerial and skilled technical jobs.

The government approved more than 16,000 foreign work permits last year, according to news reports citing the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority. It was not immediately clear how many of those permits were for skilled professions.

"We need to ask what skills would a Bangladeshi young professional need to climb to those managerial jobs," said Taibur Rahman, a professor at Dhaka University.

For activists like Islam, solving the jobs riddle is their best shot at a decent future for themselves and their families.

"Ultimately, what we need is fair opportunities and better skills for young people in the country," he said. – Thomson Reuters Foundation



Snapshots from the Qatar Toy Festival at the DECC. PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



More play, less screen, all fun for the children

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

The second edition of Qatar Toy Festival, currently underway at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (DECC), is promoting interactive play and reducing children's reliance on screens, according to parents at the event.

The event, organised by Visit Qatar, runs until August 14 and offers a wide array of live shows, unique activations, workshops, games, and educational entertainment for children and adults.

"Mainly we came for the kids, and my son is enjoying more than my daughter. He's five years old and loves number blocks. He never sits in one place, but he's been playing for 20 minutes now," Indian expatriate Tamil, who arrived in Doha two months ago, told *Gulf Times* yesterday.

"I see this event helping our children avoid spending too much time on their phones and mobile devices," he said.

Tamil noted that his son, familiar with popular cartoon characters from television, was excited to see them in person.

"He was happy to sit and see the blocks and do things, maybe he was watching on TV all the time," he noted.

"Now seeing things like all these characters come in front of them,

and that makes them really happy," Tamil added.

The festival has been expanded this year, occupying more than 17,000sq m of indoor space with 10 themed zones.

New additions are Anime, Movie Land, and Retail zones, joining returning favourites like Preschool, Girls, Boys, Family, Stage, F&B, and Theming Area.

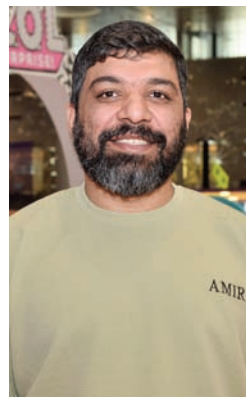
More than 50 international brands, including popular ones such as Barbie and Naruto, as well as newcomers like Mr Bean and Barney, are participating.

The festival features live shows on stage, dance performances, parades with stilt walkers, and mascot appearances.

"It is my first time visiting the place and my children are enjoying the numerous toys and the activations," said, Fareed, an Iranian who has been residing in Doha for 25 years. "It is a big area and a very good festival. It also has a lot of sections for painting and art workshops, many games ... this idea is exceptional."

Echoing Tamil's view, Fareed lauded the festival for creating an environment that encourages children to play actively away from mobile and electronic devices.

He plans to return to the festival with his family, saying: "We like the activities at this festival and we want our children to spend their free time here instead of playing games with their phones."



Fareed lauded the Qatar Toy Festival for its various activations that promote interactive play.

Left: Tamil with his daughter.

