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## Amir attends Paris Olympics opening



## France welcomes the sporting world

QNA, Agencies Paris

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani yesterday graced the opening ceremony of the 2024 Paris Olympics held on River Seine in Paris as the French capital welcomed the world's athletes for the 33rd Summer Games.

Earlier yesterday, His Highness the Amir attended a special reception for the 2024 Olympic Games

at the Elysee Palace. The reception was hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron who later declared the Games open.

The reception was attended by a number of heads of state and representatives from the National Olympic Committees from around the world.

Qatar's medal hopefuls - led by global track and field star Mutaz Barshim - also featured in the athletes parade last night that was conducted atop boats carrying sporting representatives of more

than 200 countries and territories.

For the first time ever, an opening ceremony of the Olympic Games ventured beyond the confines of a stadium.

IOC president Thomas Bach delivered a moving speech at the end of the ceremony urging those watching live to 'dream big'.

Besides Barshim, the Qatari athletes delegation includes Abderrahman Samba, Abubaker Haydar, Bassam Hemeida, Ismail Dawood, Ammar Ismail, Saif Mohamed, and Shahad Mohamed in athletics, Saeed Abu Sharab and Rashid Saleh al-Athba in shooting, Fares Ibrahim in weightlifting, Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan in beach volleyball and Abdulaziz al-Obaidly in swimming.

Barshim, who won a silver medal at the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympics and a gold medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, will be aiming to retain his Olympic gold in what might be his last participation.

While the celebration of French culture, fashion, and history captivated the 300,000-strong crowd along the banks of River Seine, inclement weather yesterday prompted hundreds to depart prematurely from the ceremony held under grey skies.

"Despite the rain, the ceremony



was fantastic," Ohio resident Avid Pureval, 34, said yesterday. "It was refreshing to have it on the river instead of a stadium. It was unique and interesting," Pureval added.

Unprecedented security measures were implemented for the opening ceremony. A massive security perimeter encircling both sides of the Seine River was guarded by a combined force of over 77,000 personnel, including police, military and private security.

The show kicked off by presenting a fabricated storyline. A pre-recorded sequence showed French football star Zinedine Zidane carrying the Olympic flame on a high-speed dash through Paris, culminating in a unique metro journey. Michael Phelps and Martin Fourcade, the two most decorated Olympians ever, took centre stage to reveal the gold, silver, and bronze medals.

Paris is hosting the Olympic Games for the first time in a century, with over 10,500 athletes competing for 329 gold medals.

Some of the biggest sporting names to feature in the Paris Games include American gymnast Simone Biles, tennis star Novak Djokovic of Serbia, Jamaican sprint queen Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, sprint star Caeleb Dressel of the US, Kenyan long distance giant Eliud Kipchoge, American basketball icon LeBron James, Australian swimming superstar Katie Ledecky, Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka, Great Britain's skateboarding giant Sky Brown and Japanese gymnast Daiki Hashimoto.

The first gold of the Games will be awarded today (Saturday). The closing ceremony of the Paris Olympics is scheduled for August 11. **Page 12, Sport Pages 1, 2, 4**



General view of the iconic Eiffel Tower and a light show during the opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympics yesterday. (Reuters)

## Khan Yunis fighting displaces 180,000 Gazans in four days: UN

AFF Khan Yunis, Palestinian Territories

More than 180,000 Palestinians have fled fierce fighting around the southern Gaza city of Khan Yunis in four days, the UN said yesterday, after an Israeli operation to extract captives' bodies from the area.

Recent "intensified hostilities" in the Khan Yunis area, more than nine months into the Israeli war on Gaza, have fuelled "new waves of internal displacement across Gaza", said the UN humanitarian agency, OCHA.

It said "about 182,000 people" have been displaced from central and eastern Khan Yunis between Monday and Thursday, and hundreds are "stranded in eastern Khan Yunis".

The Israeli military on Monday ordered the evacuation of parts of

the southern city, announcing its forces would "forcefully operate" there, including in an area previously declared a safe humanitarian zone.

Witnesses and rescuers said heavy battles continued around eastern Khan Yunis yesterday. The Nasser Hospital said 26 bodies were brought to the medical site.

Israel's offensive has killed at least 39,175 Palestinians in Gaza, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry.

According to UN figures, the vast majority of Gaza's 2.4mn people have been displaced at least once by the fighting.

Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden spoke yesterday with Jordan's King Abdullah, discussing the push to reach a ceasefire in the devastating Gaza conflict, the two countries said.

"The president updated King Abdullah on his ongoing efforts



Displaced Palestinians from the eastern part of Khan Yunis, prepare to cook bread at a temporary camp set up in the grounds of a cemetery in the western part of the city, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday.

to secure a hostage release and ceasefire deal, and preparations for a surge in humanitarian assistance during a ceasefire period," the

White House said in a statement. Jordan's royal court confirmed the call, saying that King Abdullah "stressed the need to end the war

WHO sends a million polio doses to Gaza

The World Health Organisation (WHO) announced yesterday the dispatch of over one million doses of the polio vaccine to Gaza. The vaccines will be distributed over the coming weeks to prevent children from contracting the virus, following its detection in wastewater samples in the region. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that children under the age of five are particularly at risk, especially infants under the age of two, due to the disruption of regular vaccination campaigns caused by the ongoing conflict. **(QNA) Page 3**

on Gaza immediately and ensure the flow of sufficient aid through all crossings, while guaranteeing its delivery to civilians across the Strip without delay or hindrance."



## Development work at Dahl Al Hamam Park nears completion

Around 90% of the development works on Dahl Al Hamam Park has been completed in preparation for its imminent opening. Mohamed Rashid al-Kubaisi, member of the Central Municipal Council (CMC) told local Arabic daily *Arrayah* that a comprehensive development process has been carried out in the park, including green spaces, buildings, and all its facilities, including play areas.

He stressed that the development processes are currently in their final stages and almost ready for the opening. He noted that some new sections have been created within the park, including a special section for cultural events, arts and heritage.

Al-Kubaisi pointed out that Dahl Al Hamam Park is unique as it is the only park in the country that has a "dahl" (cave). He added that the park is also distinguished by its unique geographical location. It is one of the oldest parks that enjoy great popularity among many community members, as it is considered a tourist attraction for both residents of Qatar and visitors from abroad.

He noted that the park provided entertainment services for residents of the area and other places due to its recreational facilities for adults and children, considering it is as one of the most important entertainment destinations for many families.

He pointed out that Dahl Al Hamam Park, located on Arab League Street, used to include a platform for skating enthusiasts and an open-air theatre for hosting special events, in addition to green spaces, walking tracks, and restaurants, making the park an ideal spot for families to spend their weekly holidays amid natural surroundings.

He added that the park was opened in 2004 on an area estimated at 93,297sqm and includes various services such as water coolers, parking lots, toilets, cafeterias, children's play areas, an open-air theatre, an event square, basketball courts, football fields and a racetrack for quad bikes. The park is characterised by its large area and tranquillity, and it also includes the "dahl" from which the park took its name. The park contains various plant species, with approximately 105 plant species, in addition to dozens of trees, flowers, and seasonal plants.

The Ministry of Municipality had announced the closure of the park, which pertains to Doha Municipality, from September 23, 2021, for maintenance and rehabilitation works, and the park has remained closed since then until now.



## Zulal Wellness Resort launches 'Kids on Us' offer

Zulal Wellness Resort by Chiva-Som, is helping families use the school holidays to maximise bonding and develop healthy habits at its dedicated family offering, Zulal Discovery - including an exclusive 'Kids on Us' offer.

Zulal Wellness Resort encourages guests to embark on a cross-generational journey by offering an additional complimentary room and free dining for up to two children (under 16), when two adults book a full retreat each and one room.

The Discovery Reconnect retreat catalyses intergenerational connection and long-term health. Following a health and

wellness consultation on arrival, each family member will be provided with their own personalised plan, entwining individual activities and treatments with others designed to be enjoyed en famille. Drawn from a carefully curated list of over 400, activities could include anything from organic gardening, kayaking, SUP and adventure walks to falconry, meditation, music and dance. All guests enjoy three Wellness Cuisine meals per day, use of the resort's Discovery Oasis family wellness centre facilities, and one age-appropriate treatment per person day.

Within the Hedgehog Nursery, the youngest guests, aged up to three years old, are encouraged to open their minds to the wonders of creative play and discovery of the world around them, while The Fox's Den is designed for children between four and eight to build cognitive development through physical and brain training exercises, focusing on creativity through arts and crafts. Base camp for nine to 12s is The Falcon Studio, signifying wisdom, vision and protection, with activities crafted to support self-esteem, mental cognition and physical abilities. Conceived to support teens The



The Discovery Reconnect retreat catalyses intergenerational connection and long-term health.

Oryx Workshop incorporates music, indoor games and lounge areas and supports development, confidence and wellbeing during this important life stage.

The Discovery Oasis is supported by a team of qualified child and family psychologists, ensuring every family member is well looked after and experiences are crafted to truly support child development, parenting skills and familial bonds.

## Alpha Phi Omega-Qatar holds charity billiards tournament

Alpha Phi Omega Alumni Association - Qatar has organised the "3rd Billiards For A Cause" 9-ball tournament at Rendezvous Billiard and Bowling Centre recently, bringing together billiards enthusiasts and philanthropists with a shared goal: to support

vital community services in the Philippines.

In a press statement, Alpha Phi Omega Alumni Association - Qatar president Rafael A Valino Jr said: "The proceeds from the event will be directed towards a range of impactful initiatives, including feeding programmes

for children, donating essential medical supplies, and other community services. These efforts are aimed at addressing the immediate needs and enhancing the well-being of communities across the Philippines."

"We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all participants especially to Philippine Eagles-Qatar Black Gold Sapatilha, Scout Royale Brotherhood, Philippine Cue Masters Club and to the sponsors and volunteers who contributed to the success of this event. Your generosity and support will make a significant difference in the lives of many," he added.

The champion brought home a smart TV and a cash prize while the second placer took a brand new wrist watch plus a cash prize.

Alpha Phi Omega Alumni Association-Qatar is one of the most active Filipino organisations in the country, holding various events and activities for a cause.



Alpha Phi Omega Alumni Association - Qatar brought together billiards enthusiasts at its recently held the billiards for a cause tournament.

## Amir congratulates Maldives president

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent cables of congratulations to Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu on the anniversary of his country's Independence Day. (QNA)

## PM sends written message to Brazilian FM



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani has sent a written message to Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira, pertaining to bilateral relations. The message was delivered by Qatar's ambassador in Brasilia Ahmed bin Mohamed al-Shaibani, during his meeting with the Director of the Middle East Department at the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (QNA)

## QU study underscores unique Arab values in Qatari culture

Qatar University's (QU) College of Arts and Sciences has announced the results of a study focused on identifying and validating a unique set of Arab values within the Qatari cultural context.

This research, spearheaded by Maha Hussain al-Qahtani, bachelor of psychology with a minor in sociology, and under the supervision of Dr Youssef Hasan, research associate professor of psychology, the College of Arts and Sciences at QU, represents a significant advancement in understanding the intricate value systems that shape individual and societal behaviours in Qatar.

The study draws from three pivotal scales developed in different cultural contexts. The Asian Values Scale emphasises conformity with Norms, Family Recognition, Emotional Self-Control, Collectivism, Humility, and Filial Piety. The Latino Values Scale focuses on Cultural Pride, Sympa-



Maha Hussain al-Qahtani

thy, Family and Spirituality. The American Values Scale differentiates between Dignity, Face, and Honour, substantiating their cultural benchmarks.

The preliminary study administered a social representation questionnaire to 130 Qatari citizens. Participants listed and prioritised seven words that they associate with values, evaluating their emotional intensity. This process identified 13 prevalent values, forming the basis for developing

the scale items. The validation study distributed a comprehensive questionnaire, incorporating the Arab Values Scale, Asian Values Scale, and Latino Values Scale, to 186 Qatari residents. This phase aimed to establish correlations between the scales, enhancing the reliability and validity of the Arab Values Scale.

Correlations between the Arab Values Scale and the Asian and Latino scales were observed, particularly with customs and traditions. However, the bravery factor showed no correlation, highlighting its unique significance in Arab culture.

The research concluded a set of factors that constitute an Arab Values Scale in the Qatari environment. The Arab Values scale is distinguished by containing factors that were not included in the other scales, such as bravery and honesty, which indicates their importance as concepts connected to the Arab culture.



## ICC One Toastmasters Club organises 450th meeting

The ICC One Toastmasters Club held its 450th meeting recently at Club House of Royal Gardens.

The club is completing 21 years since its chartering on the October 30, 2003. The 450th meeting of the Club was celebrated with music, games and fun.

The club president Madhusoodanan Nair welcomed the district officials, founder members and guests. He emphasised on the 21 years legacy of the club, preserved by the members and upheld by the current group of members.

The meeting was inaugurated by MI Farid, founder president along

with members and guests. The celebrations started with a cake cutting. Farid gave an inauguration speech, and narrated the history of formation of the club and wished all the members to prosper on their Toastmasters' journey. Past presidents of the club were honoured at the meeting.



Palestinians protest the death of Mustafa Mohamed Abu Ara in Aqaba, near Tubas, in the occupied West Bank, yesterday.

# With nowhere else to hide, Gazans shelter in former prison

## Hamas leader dies in Israeli custody

AFP  
Jerusalem

A Hamas leader in the West Bank died in Israeli custody, Palestinian authorities and the group said yesterday.

Mustafa Mohamed Abu Ara, 63, died after being moved from a prison in southern Israel to a hospital, according to a joint statement by the Palestinian Authority's prisoners affairs body and the Palestinian Prisoners' Club watchdog.

"We mourn the passing of the leader and prisoner Sheikh Mustafa Mohamed Abu Ara and hold the occupation responsible for his assassination through

deliberate medical neglect," Hamas said in a statement.

Abu Ara was arrested in October while suffering severe health problems, the Palestinian body and the watchdog said.

During his detention he was subjected to torture and starvation, they added.

Israel's military did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Palestinian authorities accused Israel this month of waging an abusive "war of revenge" against Palestinian detainees since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

At the time, the Israeli military said it "rejects outright allegations concerning systematic abuse of detainees", adding that it acts within international law.

## US defers removal of some Lebanese, citing conflict

Reuters  
Washington

The United States is deferring the removal of certain Lebanese citizens from the country, President Joe Biden said yesterday, citing humanitarian conditions in southern Lebanon amid tensions between Israel and Hezbollah.

The deferred designation, which lasts 18 months, allows Lebanese citizens to remain in the country with the right to work, according to a memorandum Biden sent to the Department of Homeland Security.

"Humanitarian conditions in southern Lebanon have significantly deteriorated due to tensions between Hezbollah and Is-

rael," Biden said in the memo.

"While I remain focused on de-escalating the situation and improving humanitarian conditions, many civilians remain in danger; therefore, I am directing the deferral of removal of certain Lebanese nationals who are present in the United States."

Israel and Hezbollah have been trading fire since Hezbollah announced a "support front" with Palestinians shortly after its ally Hamas stormed southern Israeli border communities in the first week of October. The fighting in Lebanon has killed more than 100 civilians and more than 300 Hezbollah fighters, according to a Reuters tally, and led to levels of destruction in Lebanese border towns and villages not seen since the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war.

Reuters  
Gaza

After weeks of Israeli bombardment left them with nowhere else to go, hundreds of Palestinians have ended up in a former Gaza prison built to hold murderers and thieves.

Yasmeen al-Dardasi said she and her family passed wounded people they were unable to help as they evacuated from a district in the southern city of Khan Younis towards its Central Correction and Rehabilitation Facility.

They spent a day under a tree before moving on to the former prison, where they now live in a prayer room. It offers protection from the blistering sun, but not much else.

Dardasi's husband has a damaged kidney and just one lung, but no mattress or blanket.

"We are not settled here either," said Dardasi, who like many Palestinians fears she will be uprooted once again.

Israel has said it goes out of its way to protect civilians in its war with the Palestinian Hamas group, which runs Gaza and stormed Israel in the first week of October last year, that sparked the latest conflict.

Palestinians, many of whom have been displaced several times, say nowhere is free of Israeli bombardment, which has reduced much of Gaza to rubble.

An Israeli air strike killed at least 90 Palestinians in a designated humanitarian zone in the Al Mawasi area on July 13, the territory's health ministry said, in an attack that Israel said targeted Hamas' elusive military chief Mohamed Deif.

On Thursday, Gaza's health ministry said Israeli military strikes on areas in eastern Khan Younis had killed 14 people.

Entire neighbourhoods have been flattened in one of the most densely populated places in the world, where poverty and unemployment have long been widespread.

According to the UN, nine in ten people across Gaza are now internally displaced.

Israeli soldiers told Saria Abu Mustafa and her family that they should flee for safety as tanks were on their way, she said. The family had no time to change so they left in their prayer clothes. After sleeping outside on sandy ground, they too found refuge in the prison, among piles of rubble and gaping holes in buildings from the battles which were fought there. Inmates had been released long before Israel attacked.

"We didn't take anything with us. We came here on foot, with children walking with us," she said, adding that many of the women had five or six children with them and that water was hard to find.



Displaced Palestinians, who fled their houses due to Israeli strikes, look out from a window as they take shelter, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip.



Displaced Palestinians, who fled their houses due to Israeli strikes, take shelter, amid the ongoing conflict, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip.

She held her niece, who was born during the conflict, which has killed her father and brothers.

Hamas-led fighters burst into southern Israel from Gaza in the first week of October last year.

More than 39,000 Palestinians have been killed in the air and ground offensive Israel

launched in response, Palestinian health officials say. Hana al-Sayed Abu Mustafa arrived at the prison after being displaced six times.

If Egyptian, US and other mediators fail to secure a ceasefire they have long said is close, she and other Palestinians may be on the move once again. "Where should we go? All the places that we go to are dangerous," she said.

## UN puts 4th century Gaza monastery on endangered site list

AFP  
Paris

The Saint Hilarion complex, one of the oldest monasteries in the Middle East, has been put on the Unesco list of World Heritage sites in danger due to the war in Gaza, the body said yesterday.

Unesco said the site, which dates back to the fourth century, had been put on the endangered list at the demand of Palestinian authorities and cited the "imminent threats" it faced.

"It's the only recourse to protect the site from destruction in the current context," Lazare Eloundou Assomo, director of the Unesco World Heritage Centre, said, referring to the war sparked by Hamas's October first week storming of Israel.



File photo shows a worker walking on scaffolding at the archaeological site of the Saint Hilarion Monastery in Tell Umm Al-Amr close to Deir Al-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip.

In December, the Unesco Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict decided to grant "provisional enhanced protection" — the highest level of immunity established by the 1954 Hague

Convention — to the site.

Unesco had then said it was "already concerned about the state of conservation of sites, before October first week last year, due to the lack of adequate policies to protect heritage and culture" in Gaza.

## WHO sends over 1mn polio vaccines to protect children

Reuters  
Geneva

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is sending more than 1mn polio vaccines to Gaza to be administered over the coming weeks to prevent children being infected after the virus was detected in sewage samples, its chief said yesterday.

"While no cases of polio have been recorded yet, without immediate action, it is just a matter of time before it reaches the thousands of children who have been left unprotected," Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in an opinion piece in Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper.

He wrote that children under five were most at risk from the viral disease, and especially infants under two since normal vaccination campaigns have been disrupted by more than nine months of conflict.

Poliomyelitis, which is spread mainly through the fecal-oral route, is a highly infectious virus that can invade the nervous system and cause paralysis. Cases of polio have declined by 99% worldwide since 1988 thanks to mass vaccination campaigns and efforts



File photo shows a malnourished Palestinian baby being held while receiving treatment at the International Medical Corps field hospital, amid the conflict, in Deir Al-Balah in the southern Gaza Strip.

continue to eradicate it completely. Besides polio, the UN reported last week a widespread increase in cases of Hepatitis A, dysentery and gastroenteritis as sanitary conditions deteriorate in Gaza, with sewage spilling into the streets near some camps for displaced people.

## Rockets launched at bases hosting US troops in Iraq and Syria

AFP  
Baghdad

Several rockets were launched Thursday and yesterday against bases hosting troops from the US-led anti-militant coalition in Iraq and Syria, security officials and a war monitor said.

Such attacks were frequent early in the war between Israel and Hamas Palestinian fighters in Gaza but since then have largely halted.

"Four rockets fell in the vicinity" of Ain Al-Assad base in Anbar province, an Iraqi security source said.

Another security official said an attack occurred with "a drone and

three rockets" that fell close to the base perimeter.

A United States official said initial reports indicated that projectiles landed outside the base without causing injuries or damage to the base.

All sources spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorised to speak to the media.

At least one rocket also fell near a base of the coalition in the Conoco gas field in Deir Ezzor province of eastern Syria, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor.

The Observatory said a blast was heard in the area but there were no immediate reports of casualties.

The rocket was fired from



File photo shows a view of the Ain Al-Assad air base hosting US forces in Iraq in the western Anbar province.

"zones under the control of militia" groups, said the monitor which relies on sources inside Syria.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for either attack. Foreign-backed armed groups

international anti-militant coalition in Iraq. Foreign-backed groups have demanded a withdrawal.

The US Defence Department said Wednesday "the delegations reached an understanding on the concept for a new phase of the bilateral security relationship".

This would include "co-operation through liaison officers, training, and traditional security co-operation programmes".

On July 16, two drones were launched against Ain Al-Assad base, with one exploding inside without causing injuries or damage. A senior security official in Baghdad said at the time he believed the attack was meant to "embarrass" the Iraqi government

before the security meeting.

For more than three months, as regional tensions soared over the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, United States troops were targeted by rockets and drones more than 175 times in the Middle East, mainly in Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic Resistance of Iraq, a loose alliance of foreign-backed groups, claimed the majority of the attacks, saying they were in solidarity with Gaza Palestinians.

In January, a drone strike blamed on those groups killed three US soldiers in a base in Jordan. In retaliation, US forces launched dozens of strikes against foreign-backed fighters.

Since then, attacks against US troops have largely halted.



# SA police say 95 Libyans detained at suspected military camp

AFP  
Johannesburg

South Africa authorities rounded up 95 Libyans in a raid yesterday at a farm that appeared to have been converted into a military training base, police said.

The early morning raid was near the town of White River in the northeastern province of Mpumalanga, about 360 kilometres east of Johannesburg, they said.

"The place, which was initially designated as a training site, appears to have been converted into an illegal military training base," police said in a statement.

"The 95 individuals taken into custody are all Libyan nationals and are currently being questioned by the relevant authorities."

Newzroom Afrika television footage from the scene showed a heavy police presence outside the suspected camp, which included green military-style tents and sandbags.

It showed the detained men standing in groups and wearing civilian clothing.

Mpumalanga's safety and security minister, Jackie Macie, told local media the men had entered the country in April and claimed to be training to be security guards.

However they had "violated their visa", he said. Authorities were processing the group with the aim of sending them back to their country of origin.

"You can see that this is a mili-

tary base," he said, adding police were following up information that there were other similar camps in the area.

"The site was said to be a training camp for a security company but it is a military base by the looks of things," police spokesman Donald Mdhululi told AFP.

The owner of the security company was a South African national, he said. Police were investigating if he had permission to run the site as a military-style camp.

South African officials will be in touch with Libyan authorities about the group, most of whom were said to be on student visas, he said.

"We do suspect them of serious crime because we have had multiple complaints from the community for cases including physical abuse," Mdhululi said.

"We are not arresting them now but we are taking them in for questioning and will investigate any criminal activity."

The raid was launched two days after authorities received intelligence about the site in the province, which adjoins Mozambique and Eswatini.

Most of the men did not speak English and it was not immediately clear whether the Libyans were affiliated to any group, Mdhululi said.

No weapons or illegal substances were found on the site immediately but a search was ongoing, he told AFP.

"We take any threat to the security and stability of our province and country very seriously," Mpumalanga acting police com-

missioner Major General Zeph Mkhwanazi said in a statement.

There was no immediate threat to community safety, he added.

South Africa has porous borders and high corruption and criminality which experts say have made it fertile ground for criminal syndicates.

Its security problems have given rise to a huge private security industry.

The country has more than 15,000 security firms employing about 2.8mn guards, providing armed response and training services, according to the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority.

There are also concerns that the country may be a base for militant financing in Africa.

The United States Treasury Department announced Tuesday sanctions against what it said were two Islamic State (ISIS) operatives based in South Africa.

They used robberies and kidnappings for ransom to raise money, and one was a suspected ISIS trainer and facilitator, it said.

Libya is still struggling to recover from years of war and chaos after the 2011 overthrow of long-time ruler Muammar Gaddafi.

Although relative calm has returned to oil-rich Libya in the past four years, clashes periodically occur between its myriad armed groups.

Most are allied with either the UN-recognised government in Tripoli or the rival administration based in the east.

# Ethiopia declares three days of mourning after landslide tragedy

AFP  
Kencho Shacha Gozdi

Ethiopia announced yesterday three days of mourning following a devastating landslide in a southern remote part of the country where more than 250 people lost their lives.

Rescuers are continuing the grim search for bodies in the tiny locality of Kencho Shacha Gozdi, while distraught survivors bury

those who perished in the disaster, the deadliest landslide on record in the Horn of Africa nation.

UN humanitarian agency OCHA, citing local authorities, said on Thursday that 257 people have died and warned the toll could reach 500.

"The House of Peoples' Representatives has announced a three-day national mourning for the people who lost their lives in the landslide accident," Ethiopia's parliament said, adding that it

would start from today.

The period of remembrance would allow "comfort to their relatives and all the people of our country," added the statement, shared by the state-run Ethiopian Broadcasting Corp The Ethiopian Disaster Risk Management Commission said earlier Friday that humanitarian aid and rehabilitation was "well under way" in the region.

It said a "structure for emergency disaster response coordination and integration" had been established, putting the number of people needing to be relocated at 6,000.

OCHA had said more than 15,000 people need to be evacuated because of the risk of further landslides, including small children and thousands of pregnant women or new mothers.

Aid had begun arriving, it said, including four trucks from the Ethiopian Red Cross Society.

Officials said most of the victims were buried when they rushed to help after a first landslide, which followed heavy rains Sunday in the area that lies about 480 kilometres from the capital Addis Ababa.



Relatives and residents gather together to mourn the death of their beloveds in a collective ceremony close to the scene of a landslide in Kencho Shacha Gozdi, yesterday.

# Senegalese navy intercepts 200 migrants near coast

AFP  
Dakar

Senegal intercepted 200 "irregular migrants", the army said yesterday, just days after 90 people drowned off the coast of Mauritania while attempting the same crossing.

The Senegalese navy yesterday detained a boat near the northern city of Saint-Louis, the latest in a string of interventions over the last few months.

The West African country's army last week reported the in-

terception of a boat carrying more than 250 "irregular migrants" from a number of African countries.

At least 25 people died on Monday when a different vessel capsized near Mauritania's capital Nouakchott, according to the Sahelian country's state-owned news agency.

A Europe-bound boat carrying around 170 people that set off from Senegal capsized off the Mauritanian coast in early July, killing nearly 90 people.

The disaster prompted Senegal's Prime Minister Ousmane

Sonko to urge people not to risk the Atlantic Ocean's currents in overcrowded vessels that often are not seaworthy, and on which they do not carry sufficient drinking water.

But the route is increasingly used as authorities step up surveillance in the Mediterranean.

According to the Spanish NGO Caminando Fronteras, more than 5,000 people died trying to reach Spain by sea in the first five months of this year.

That represents the highest daily average toll since it began keeping records in 2007.

# Abidjan clashes as district demolished for new road

AFP  
Abidjan

Ivory Coast security forces battled hundreds of residents being expelled from an Abidjan district on Thursday to make way for a new road, an AFP journalist said.

A local official in the Adjame district of the west African country's main city said several people were hurt in the disturbances that lasted several hours.

Deputy director of public security Siaka Dosso said "there were no injured" in the operation that was needed for a one kilometre road to connect a highway to a bridge.

An AFP journalist saw hundreds of Adjame residents hurl stones at security forces who fired tear gas in response. At least one mechanical digger was set ablaze.

Dozens of homes were de-

stroyed leaving residents to dig for their belongings.

"We have lost a lot of things," said resident Adibo Tajou. One of his neighbours, Rosine Adou, said her jewellery and clothes had all been "stolen".

Adamje is one of many traditional villages in the city of 6mn people where "evictions" have increased since February in poorer districts of the city, especially those prone to flooding.

At least 24 people died in 10 days in floods earlier this year.

A special 300-strong urban disorder force was established in Abidjan on Monday.

President Alassane Ouattara "has instructed us to put the emphasis on the fight against urban disorder, the fight against unhealthy conditions, and the accelerated improvement of living and working conditions for people," said Abidjan governor Ibrahima Cisse Baongo at the launch.

# EU adds nine to sanctions list against DR Congo armed groups

AFP  
Brussels

The EU yesterday added nine individuals and one rebel coalition to its sanctions list against armed groups stoking the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The move targets several commanders for a number of groups and the coalition called the Congo River Alliance, taking the total number of entries on the EU sanctions list for the DRC to 31.

They were accused of "acts that constitute serious human rights violations and abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and for sustaining the armed conflict, instability and insecurity in the Eastern DRC," in a statement from

the Council of the European Union.

The listing of the Congo River Alliance - commonly known by its French name "Alliance Fleuve Congo", or AFC - came a day after the United States also hit that group with sanctions.

The AFC's main member is the March 23 Movement, or M23, an armed group active in the east of the Central African country.

The AFC's political leader, Corneille Nangaa Yobeluo, was one of the nine individuals sanctioned. Others included two M23 leaders: its executive secretary Benjamin Mbonimpa, and Brigadier-General Justin Gacheri Musanga.

Also hit were the commander and deputy commander of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda - Forces Combat-

tantes Abacunguzi (FDLR-FOCA), Gustave Kubwayo and Pierre Celestin Rurakabijem.

The M23 and FDLR-FOCA rebel groups were sustaining the conflict, the EU said. "In addition, they are responsible for serious human rights abuses, including killings, sexual violence and attacks on civilians, as well as child recruitment."

Amigo Kibirige, commander of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) - a group that started in Uganda and spread to the DRC, known for an "extreme level of violence against civilians" - was also on the list.

A commander and a spokesman for the CMC-FDP group that is part of the "volunteers for the defence of the homeland" that serves as auxiliaries to the DRC's military were also sanctioned. Also hit

by EU sanctions was a colonel in Rwanda's army, Augustin Migabo. An experts' report commissioned by the UN Security Council said that 3,000-4,000 Rwandan soldiers have been fighting alongside the M23 rebels.

DR Congo's mineral-rich east has been racked for 30 years by fighting between both local and foreign-based armed groups, going back to regional wars of the 1990s.

The situation has calmed somewhat since a humanitarian truce between M23 rebels and government forces was announced last week.

Those on the EU sanctions list face a travel ban, the freezing of any assets under European jurisdiction, and a ban on EU citizens or companies making funds available to them.

# Children at risk as mpox variant hits Congo displacement camps

Reuters  
Goma

Scars from the mpox pustules are still visible on 7-year old Grace Kabuo's face, as well as on a handful of her playmates at a camp for displaced people near Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Grace has otherwise recovered from the virus. Her mother Denise Kahindo says she is still unsure how her daughter was infected earlier this month.

"I just helplessly noticed the symptoms on her body," she said. For disease experts, Grace's case embodies a new concern about mpox, which was first identified over 50 years ago. Her infection was caused by a new variant that appears to be more capable of transmitting between people than previous strains.

Local doctors say they have seen 130 suspected mpox cases, almost entirely in children and adolescents, in the last four weeks at a nearby facility that treats dis-



Christian Musema, a laboratory nurse, takes a sample from a child declared a suspected Mpox case at the treatment centre in Munigi, following Mpox cases in Nyiragongo territory near Goma, North Kivu province, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

placed people from the camps in the last four weeks.

"Fifty percent [of the 130 cases] are even less than five years old," said Dr Pierre-Olivier Ngadjole, a medical advisor for Medair, a charity helping with treating and transporting patients from the camp near Goma to the nearby medical centre in Munigi. An estimated 750,000 people have fled

to the area due to fighting between the M23 rebel group and the Congolese government.

"You know the children, they play together...and in the displaced person camps, people are side-by-side," he added.

Mpox, a viral infection that can spread through close contact is usually mild but can lead to death in some cases. It causes flu-like

symptoms and pus-filled lesions on the body. The current mpox outbreak in Congo has already seen around 27,000 cases, and claimed more than 1,100 lives, most of them children, since the beginning of 2023. It began with the spread of an endemic strain, known as Clade I. But the new variant, known as Clade Ib, appears to spread more easily through routine close contact, as seems to be the case among children.

'PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM'

"Mpox is a public health problem - not only for endemic countries but also for others. So we must act now," said microbiologist Jean-Jacques Muyembe-Tamfum, head of Congo's Institut National pour la Recherche Biomedicale (INRB).

Another mpox variant, Clade IIB, prompted an international health emergency when it spread globally in 2022, mainly through physical contact among men. Public health officials in the United States and Europe launched campaigns to promote safe practices and vaccinated at-risk

populations to curb the spread. In Congo, there are no vaccines or specific treatments for mpox available outside of clinical trials. Stigma, regulatory hurdles, a lack of money, along with measles and cholera outbreaks in the displacement camps have made it a challenge for people to access medical tools, especially in the densely-packed locations.

Last month, the country approved the use of two mpox vaccines, but funding remains a significant challenge. Only a few countries have offered to donate shots to Congo and WHO approval regulations remain a hurdle for international vaccine organisations.

At the Munigi treatment centre, some children are assigned to isolation rooms used in past Ebola outbreaks, to help stop the spread of mpox. They too have lesions on their faces and bodies.

"She had rashes on her arms, abdomen, and even on her tongue," said Jacqueline Musengimana, mother of Sandrine Sibomana, 5, who is also recovered.

Doctors at the centre said they

have discharged 82 patients and not seen any deaths yet. Scientists have only sequenced a handful of the cases and found Clade Ib. There are also likely more cases going undetected, two experts said. Cris Kacita, head of the mpox response for the Congolese government visited Goma last week to assess the situation. "What we fear is that when investigations are not carried out properly...there is no follow-up of contacts of confirmed cases," he said.

Muyembe-Tamfum and other health officials said work was underway by INRB and others to access vaccines and to investigate the new variant's transmissibility and severity. The endemic Clade in Congo has a fatality rate of between 4% and 11%. The mortality risk for children posed by the new variant is not yet known. "Children will be exposed, they will be affected. At the moment they are few in number, but we wouldn't be surprised if that number grows," said Rosamund Lewis, mpox lead at the World Health Organisation in Geneva.

# Harris receives vital Obama backing in presidential bid

Reuters/AFP  
Washington

Former president Barack Obama and his wife Michelle endorsed US Vice-President Kamala Harris's presidential bid yesterday, the latest move by top Democrats to unite around a new champion against Republican Donald Trump in the November 5 election.

The Democratic establishment's most revered power couple waited until all the other heavy hitters had come forward, finally making their move in a video released early yesterday that shows Harris taking their call.

"Earlier this week, Michelle and I called our friend Kamala Harris. We told her we think she'll make a fantastic President of the United States, and that she has our full support," Barack Obama announced on X. "At this critical moment for our country, we're going to do everything we can to make sure she wins in November."

The Obamas' endorsement came five days after President Joe Biden, 81, dropped his re-election bid in the face of mounting opposition within his own party, and as a fresh wave of opinion polls show Harris starting to erode Trump's lead.

"We called to say Michelle and I couldn't be prouder to endorse you and to do everything we can to get you through this election and into the Oval Office," Obama told Harris in a phone call posted in an online video by the campaign.

Smiling as she spoke into a cellphone, Harris expressed her gratitude for the endorsement and their long friendship.

"Thank you both. It means so much. And



This picture taken in 2022 shows Obama with Harris during an event to mark the 2010 passage of the Affordable Care Act in the East Room of the White House in Washington, DC. -AFP

we're gonna have some fun with this too," said Harris, the first black woman and first Asian American vice-president, who would also be the nation's first female president if she prevails in November.

Barack Obama, the first black US president, and Michelle remain among the most popular figures in the Democratic Party, almost eight years after he left office.

A Reuters/Ipsos poll early this month showed that 55% of Americans - and 94% of Democrats - viewed Michelle Obama favourably, higher approval than Harris's 37% nationally and 81% within the party.

Obama has lent his support to Biden during big-money fundraisers, which were among some of the biggest blockbuster events of his campaign.

The endorsement could help boost support and fundraising for Harris's campaign, and it signals Obama is likely to get on the campaign trail for Harris.

The party has quickly coalesced around the vice-president, who gathered support from enough Democratic delegates on Monday to secure her position as the nominee.

Trump met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the former president's Florida resort yesterday, a day after Netanyahu sat down with Biden and Harris in separate meetings in Washington.

Trump greeted Netanyahu warmly and told reporters that they have a "very good relationship", dismissing any suggestion of tensions between them.

Harris struck a more forceful tone than Biden in her public remarks on Thursday, pushing Netanyahu to help reach a ceasefire in Gaza.

In a televised statement after their talks, Harris said: "It is time for this war to end" and expressed concern about the conflict's toll on Palestinian civilians.

Trump called her remarks "disrespectful".

The conflict triggered by the events of October 7 and Israel's assault on Gaza has killed more than 39,000, according to Gazan health authorities, and levelled much of the enclave.

The response has displaced most of Gaza's 2.3mn people and created a humanitarian crisis.

The Biden administration has drawn criticism from some Democrats for not pressing Netanyahu more to protect Palestinian civilians.

Trump has also called for a swift end to the war, telling Fox News on Thursday that Israel was getting "decimated with this publicity".

## Rival gangs sign truce in Haiti's largest shantytown

Two rival gang leaders signed a truce to end armed conflict in Haiti's largest shantytown, a community leader said on Thursday.

Haiti has long been rocked by gang violence, but conditions sharply worsened at the end of February when armed groups launched coordinated attacks in Port-au-Prince to overthrow then-prime minister Ariel Henry.

The gangs control 80% of the Caribbean country's main roads and are accused of numerous murders, rapes, looting and kidnapping for ransom.

Under the agreement between leaders of the G9 and G-Pep groups, roadblocks in the Cite Soleil (Sun City) shantytown of around 300,000 inhabitants were taken down, said Pastor Jean Enock Joseph, an influential figure in the commune.

"A new stage has just been reached," the pastor told AFP.

However, he added that a similar truce had been signed in July 2023 before falling apart a few weeks later.

Like much of Port-au-Prince, Cite Soleil residents were unable to move freely in the shantytown - divided into zones controlled by the rival gangs - for fear of being caught in crossfire.

The G9 and G-Pep gangs have not clashed since February, when they joined a coalition fomenting coordinated attacks to overthrow Henry, but they had maintained the divisions within Cite Soleil until Wednesday.

Jimmy "Barbecue" Cherizier, head of the G9 and one of the coalition's leaders, hailed the "courage" of Cite Soleil's gang leaders on Thursday.

Violence in Port-au-Prince has skyrocketed in recent months, sparking a serious humanitarian crisis.

Nearly 600,000 people are displaced in Haiti, according to the UN, a 60% increase since March.

Since the departure of Ariel Henry, transitional authorities have been set up to put the country back on its feet, with the support of a UN-backed multinational mission led by Kenya.

The task will be immense in a country ravaged by violence and corruption, and which has been without a president since the assassination of Jovenel Moise in 2021. -AFP

## Trump doctor disputes suggestion that shrapnel, not bullet, hit his ear

Reuters  
Washington

Donald Trump's former White House physician disputed yesterday a suggestion by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director that shrapnel, not a bullet, could have caused the injury to the Republican candidate's right ear during an assassination attempt in Pennsylvania on July 13.

The narrative that a bullet ripped through Trump's ear, and that he escaped death by just a quarter of an inch, has become a major element of his White House campaign.

Many of his supporters say the fact he survived was divine intervention, that God is looking after Trump, and Trump mentions his brush with death in his speeches.

"I took a bullet for democracy," Trump told supporters at a rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on July 20.

Ronny Jackson, Trump's doctor when he was in the White House, released a statement a day after Trump criticised FBI Director Christopher Wray for telling US lawmakers this week it was not clear yet whether Trump was hit by a bullet, or shrapnel or glass.



Donald Trump

"There is absolutely no evidence that it was anything other than a bullet," wrote Jackson, a close Trump ally. "Director Wray is wrong and inappropriate to suggest anything else."

Jackson, who said he served as a battlefield medic in Iraq and had treated many gunshot wounds in his career, has been monitoring Trump's wounded ear since the assassination attempt.

On Thursday, Trump took to his Truth Social social media account to blast Wray.

"No, it was, unfortunately, a bullet that hit my ear, and hit it hard. There was no glass, there was no shrapnel," Trump wrote, adding: "No wonder the once storied FBI has lost the confidence of America!"

Jason Miller, a Trump campaign spokesperson, told Reuters that any claims that Trump was hit by something other than a bullet was "conspiracy (expensive)".

## Brazilian dunes make Unesco heritage list

AFP  
Sao Paulo

Brazil's Lencois Maranhenses National Park, famed for its white dunes that fill with blue and emerald lagoons in the rainy season, was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site yesterday.

The vast park, named for the dunes' resemblance to a bedsheet spread across the landscape - "lencois" means sheets in Portuguese - is located in the northeastern state of Maranhao, in a transition zone between the Amazon, Cerrado, and Caatinga biomes.

The decision was taken during the 46th annual meeting of the United Nations World Heritage Committee, which is taking place in India's capital New Delhi.

Lencois Maranhenses is the 24th site in Brazil to make it onto the list of places of significant cultural or natural significance.

The national park was created in June 1981 and covers an area of 156,000 hectares, more than half of which offers a landscape of dunes and multi-colored lagoons, which attract more than 100,000 tourists each year.

According to Unesco, it is the largest expanse of dunes in South America.

The Lencois Maranhenses are a protected area "where the desert meets the sea, creating a unique landscape", Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said in a letter sent in early 2023 to Unesco to urge the site's inscription as a World Heritage Site.

The park has also hosted several Hollywood film shoots.

## Venezuela accused of blocking flight of ex-Latin American presidents

Panama's President Jose Raul Mulino has accused Venezuelan authorities of blocking a flight carrying a group of former Latin American presidents hoping to observe this weekend's elections. The Copa Airlines plane with former Panamanian leader Mireya Moscoso and other ex-presidents on board "has not been allowed to take off...due to the blockade of Venezuelan airspace", Mulino said on social media platform X. Former presidents Miguel Angel Rodriguez of Costa Rica, Jorge Quiroga of Bolivia and Vicente Fox of Mexico were also due to fly together to Venezuela from Panama City.

They are all strong critics of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government. Maduro is seeking a third six-year term at the helm of his crisis-hit South American country. He lags behind challenger Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia in voter intention ahead of the vote. The Venezuelan government has withdrawn an invitation to a team of European Union election observers. -AFP



This picture taken on April 25, 2000 shows a member of a team taking part in the Elf Authentique Adventure raid crossing the Lencois Maranhenses National Park in Maranhao State, northeastern Brazil. The Lencois Maranhenses National Park, known for its endless dunes and dazzling natural pools in northeastern Brazil, was declared a World Heritage site by Unesco yesterday. -AFP

## Reynolds, Jackman bring wildly popular superheroes to Comic-Con

AFP  
San Diego

Ryan Reynolds and Hugh Jackman kicked off celebrations at the giant Comic-Con pop culture gathering on Thursday with a special screening of *Deadpool & Wolverine*, their superhero mash-up movie expected to break box office records this weekend.

The Hollywood A-listers took the stage before 6,000 screaming fans - many dressed as spandex-clad heroes and villains - who had won a lottery to attend the hot-ticket opening night event in San Diego, California.

The film brings together two wildly popular characters from the Marvel superhero movies.

Reynolds' potty-mouthed *Deadpool* teams up with Jackman's grizzled *Wolverine*, from the *X-Men* movies.

It is widely expected to be one of the year's highest-grossing films.

"A *Deadpool & Wolverine* movie is quite literally something that I feel like I've waited my whole life for," said Reynolds, before introducing a surprise screening of the entire movie.

"We've been around the world with this movie, but the icing on the cake is right here, right now," added Jackman.

## Deadpool & Wolverine sets record on opening day

*Deadpool & Wolverine* grabbed \$38.5mn at US and Canadian box offices in the first screenings of the film on Thursday, distributor Walt Disney said. The early returns, a record for an R-rated movie, suggest Disney will enjoy its second hit in a row in a turnaround for its movie division.

The opening-day tally ranks as the eighth-highest of all time, behind films such as *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* and *Avengers: Infinity War*.

By tomorrow, *Deadpool & Wolverine* is expected to claim the largest domestic box office opening of 2024, according to industry analysts.

US and Canadian sales this weekend should hit between \$175mn and \$185mn, said Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst at Comscore. That would top *Inside Out 2*, Disney's animated Pixar movie that debuted with \$154.2mn in June.

*Deadpool & Wolverine* opened in international markets on Wednesday and has brought in \$64.8mn outside of the United States and Canada, Disney said. -Reuters

Out in theatres globally this weekend, *Deadpool & Wolverine* is expected to shatter the box office record for movies with an "R" rating - films that children cannot attend without an adult.

Reynolds' anti-hero frequently "breaks the fourth wall" by speaking directly to audiences, cracking jokes and sarcastically mocking the Marvel franchise and its studio Disney.

The film could gross as much as \$200mn in North American theatres on its opening weekend alone, trade magazine *Variety* suggested.

The current record for R-rated films is

held by the original *Deadpool*, which made \$132mn in its first weekend in 2016, after also getting a Comic-Con preview.

"I remember making that movie for you," Reynolds told the die-hard superhero fans who make the pilgrimage each year to San Diego. "And I remember how gratifying it was that everyone else liked it too."

One of the world's largest pop culture events, Comic-Con began five decades ago as a humble comic book-themed gathering in a hotel basement.

Today it draws A-list stars.

Also on Thursday, Chris Hemsworth attended a panel for animated prequel

*Transformers One*, while director Roland Emmerich promoted his racy new Ancient Rome-set drama *Those About To Die*.

It is a contrast to last year's edition, where Hollywood strikes prevented actors from attending, and quelled fan interest.

This time around, Comic-Con is expected to draw 135,000 attendees back to the southern Californian city.

Disney will host today a hugely anticipated Marvel presentation that is expected to unveil wider plans to reboot its mega-grossing superhero films, after recent high-profile missteps.

The Marvel movies dominated Hollywood and global box offices for years, with 2019's *Avengers: Endgame* briefly becoming the highest-grossing film of all time at more than \$2.79bn.

However, the past few years have brought more flops than hits, as fans complained about over-complicated plotlines and mourned the departure of favourite characters like Robert Downey Jr's Iron Man.

Disney's rival studio Warner will offer a glimpse at its Batman spinoff TV series *The Penguin*, starring Colin Farrell.

Amazon's Prime Video will lift the lid on the second season of its *Lord of the Rings* television series, which aims to improve on the mixed reviews for its hugely expensive debut season two years ago.

Comic-Con runs ends tomorrow.

## Two Sinaloa Cartel leaders face US charges after stunning capture

US President Joe Biden has welcomed the arrests of two notorious leaders of Mexico's Sinaloa cartel as details emerged of an elaborate ruse used to capture the drug kingpins.

Ismael Zambada Garcia, known as "El Mayo", co-founder of the cartel, and Joaquin Guzman Lopez, a son of its other co-founder, were taken into custody in El Paso, Texas, on Thursday, US officials said.

Biden described the pair as "two of the most notorious leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel" and said US authorities "will

continue doing everything we can to hold deadly drug traffickers to account and to save American lives".

"Too many of our citizens have lost their lives to the scourge of fentanyl," he said.

Attorney-General Merrick Garland, who announced the arrests late on Thursday, said the 76-year-old Zambada and Guzman Lopez, who is in his mid- to late 30s, would appear in federal court in the coming days.

Zambada faces charges for fentanyl trafficking, money laundering, firearms offences, kidnapping and conspiracy

to commit murder, Garland said, while Guzman Lopez is charged with trafficking cocaine, heroin and meth and other drugs.

Mexico said yesterday that it played no part in the arrests. "The government of Mexico did not take part in this arrest or surrender," state security director Rosa Icela Rodriguez said.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said he expected a "complete report" from the United States on how the men were taken into custody. -AFP



## COMMENT

**Arrest of anti-whaling activist long sought: Japan**

Japan said that it had long been pushing countries to arrest anti-whaling activist Paul Watson, who is in custody in Greenland facing possible extradition. Police in the autonomous Danish territory arrested Watson, the American-Canadian founder of activist group Sea Shepherd, on Sunday under an Interpol "red notice" issued by Japan. The 73-year-old is to remain in custody until August 15, while the Danish justice ministry must decide on whether he should be extradited to Japan. "Japan has long been making the necessary efforts to the relevant countries' authorities," a spokesman said in the government's first comments on Watson's arrest.

## CRACKDOWN

**Manila tells foreign workers in offshore gaming hubs to leave**

The Philippines has ordered foreigners working in offshore gambling firms to leave in two months' time, its immigration bureau said, following President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's decision to stamp out the operators. Marcos has banned Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators for their alleged links to crimes, human trafficking and financial scams, and gave the gaming regulator until the end of the year to shut down these businesses. Philippine immigration chief Norman Tansingco said in a statement foreign workers had 59 days to leave the country. Around 20,000 people are expected to be affected by the order, most of them Chinese citizens.

## INITIATIVE

**Regional security chiefs in Myanmar for talks**

National security chiefs from six South and Southeast Asian countries have arrived in Myanmar for regional talks, state media reported yesterday. National security chiefs from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Thailand and Sri Lanka arrived on Thursday, the *Global New Light of Myanmar* reported. The six countries, plus Myanmar, make up the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation group. Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing met BIMSTEC officials. They discussed "peace and stability... cooperation among member states in drug eradication, combatting terrorism, anti-human trafficking," the newspaper said.

## PROJECT

**Indonesia launches new phase of industrial park**

Indonesian President Joko Widodo yesterday launched the second phase of an industrial complex in Central Java intended to attract investors looking to diversify their supply chains away from China. Batang industrial park already hosts nearly 20 companies in 10% of its total area of 4,300 hectares, including South Korea's LG Energy Solution and glass maker KCC Glass, and they have started construction or have pledged to build factories there. Jokowi, as the president is commonly known, said companies have invested 14trn rupiah (\$860mn) so far. Now another 400 hectares will be offered for investors to will create manufacturing jobs, Jokowi said.

# Relations with Japan at a critical stage, says China

Reuters  
Vientiane

Relations between China and Japan are at a critical stage, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his Japanese counterpart yesterday as the pair discussed thorny issues including Japanese nationals detained in China, food import bans and semiconductor curbs.

Wang met Japan's Yoko Kamikawa on the sidelines of a gathering of foreign ministers hosted by the Southeast Asian bloc Asean in Laos, ahead of today's East Asia Summit and the security-focused Asean Regional Forum.

Relations between the neighbours have been testy in recent years over issues including territorial claims, trade tensions and Beijing's anger over Tokyo's decision to release treated water from the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant into the sea. But over the last few months, Chinese and Japanese officials have moved to resume several consultative talks for the first time in years, signalling ties may be on a steadier footing. "China-Japan relations are currently at a critical point: advance or be left behind," Wang told Kamikawa, according to a readout of the talks issued by the Chinese foreign ministry.

"China's policy towards Japan has always maintained stability and continuity. It is hoped that the Japa-

nese side will establish an objective and correct perception of China and pursue a positive and rational policy towards China."

In their first one-to-one talks in eight months, Kamikawa strongly urged the lifting of import restrictions Beijing imposed on Japan food products in the wake of the Fukushima water release.

She also called for the early release of Japan detainees in China. The arrest of a well-connected executive from Japanese drugmaker Astellas Pharma in China last year has had what some Tokyo officials described as a considerable chilling effect on business, contributing to a drop in foreign investment and an exodus of Japanese expatriates.

"It is extremely important to create an environment in which Japanese nationals and Japanese companies can operate in China with peace of mind," Kamikawa told Wang, according to a readout issued by Japan's foreign ministry.

Japan, a close US ally, has along with other G7 countries sought to wean off its economic links with China in strategic areas and aligned with the US in ongoing curbs to limit Beijing's access to advanced semiconductors.

Kamikawa told Wang Japan's semiconductor export restrictions were not aimed at any specific country, and Japan is willing to maintain constructive communication on the issue with China, according to China's readout.



Coast guard personnel load the skimmers to be used in the oil spill response, at a port in Limay, Bataan, yesterday.

# Philippines racing to clean oil spill to avoid 'catastrophe'

AFP  
Limay, Philippines

The Philippine Coast Guard yesterday raced to offload 1.4mn litres of industrial fuel oil from a sunken tanker and prevent an "environmental catastrophe" in Manila Bay.

One crew member died when the MT Terra Nova sank in rough seas nearly 7km off Limay municipality early Thursday after setting out for the central city of Iloilo.

An oil slick stretching several kilometres was detected in the waterway, which thousands of fishermen and tourism operators rely on for their livelihoods.

Coast guard spokesman Rear Admiral Armando Balilo said yesterday the spill was "minimal" and that it appeared to be diesel fuel used to power the tanker and not the industrial fuel oil cargo.

"No oil has been leaking from the tank itself, so we're racing against time to siphon the oil so we can avoid the environmental catastrophe," Balilo said.

The coast guard has set a target of seven days to offload the cargo and prevent what Balilo warned would be the worst oil spill in Philippine history if it were to leak.

Journalists at the Port of Limay in Bataan province watched coast guard personnel load oil dispersant and a suction skimmer onto a boat to be used against the slick.

Balilo said oil spill containment booms had also been deployed in preparation "for the worst case scenario" of the industrial fuel oil leaking before it could be offloaded.

Once the weather improved, coast guard divers would inspect the position of the tanker so the "siphoning operation" could get under way, he said.

The coast guard met with representatives of the MT Terra Nova's owner and a contracted

salvage company yesterday to discuss the timeline.

"There's nothing to be worried about for now, but we should not be complacent," Balilo said.

The incident happened as heavy rains fuelled by Typhoon Gaemi and the seasonal monsoon lashed Manila and surrounding regions in recent days.

After setting out late Wednesday, the captain decided to abort the journey to Iloilo due to rough seas.

Balilo said investigators were seeking to verify testimony from the crew that the vessel was damaged as it tried to turn back and had to be towed by another ship.

Somehow the tow line was cut and the MT Terra Nova "lost control" in the large waves and went down, he said.

"We will see if there were protocols violated or if there was a lapse in decision-making," Balilo said.

# Thousands evacuated as record rains pound Japan

Record heavy rain forced the evacuation of thousands of people across parts of northern Japan and killed at least two, as rivers burst their banks washing away bridges and cars, officials and media reports said yesterday. A rescuer is among the dead after the downpours in Yamagata and Akita prefectures on the main island of Honshu. Two other people, including another rescuer, are missing.

In Yamagata, where two rivers burst their banks, one police officer in his 20s who had been searching for a missing person was found "submerged" and later confirmed dead, a local police spokesman said.

Another police officer also tasked with a search operation, remains unaccounted for, the spokesman said.

In northern Akita region, one body was also found, media reports said, with police trying to ascertain whether it was that of an 86-year-old man earlier reported missing.



A residential area along Mogami river is submerged due to heavy rain in Tozawa Town, Yamagata Prefecture, northern Japan, yesterday.

# Typhoon lashes China after pounding Taiwan

Reuters  
Beijing

Typhoon Gaemi pummelled towns on China's coastal Fujian province yesterday with heavy rains and strong winds as the most powerful storm to hit the country this year began its widely watched trek into the populous interior.

The storm has affected almost 630,000 people in China's Fujian so far, with almost half of them having to be relocated, Xinhua news agency reported. Earlier this week, it killed dozens of people as it swept through Taiwan and worsened seasonal rains in the Philippines.

Gaemi was packing winds of up to 100.8kph near its centre, easing slightly from 118.8kph logged on Thursday night when it landed in the Fujian city of Putian.

While Gaemi has been downgraded to a tropical storm because of slower wind speeds, its vast cloud-bands remain a significant flood risk, particularly to rivers in central China already elevated due to summer rains.

Hours ahead of the typhoon's arrival, the Standing Committee of the Communist Party's politburo, helmed by President Xi Jinping, held a special meeting on flood control and urged cadres across the country to protect lives.

Efforts must be made to prevent breaches of major rivers and the collapse of large and key medium-sized reservoirs, Xinhua quoted a readout of the meeting as saying.

Due to the typhoon, 72 townships across Fujian recorded accumulated precipitation exceeding 250mm, with the highest reaching 512.8mm, local weather bureaus said.

# Climate change 'causing change in rainfall, fiercer typhoons'

Reuters  
Singapore

Climate change is driving changes in rainfall patterns across the world, scientists said in a paper published yesterday, which could also be intensifying typhoons and other tropical storms.

Taiwan, the Philippines and then China were lashed by the year's most powerful typhoon this week, with schools, businesses and financial markets shut as wind speeds surged up to 227kph. On China's eastern coast, hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated ahead of landfall on Thursday.

Stronger tropical storms are part of a wider phenomenon of weather extremes driven by higher temperatures, scientists say.

Researchers led by Zhang Wenxia at the China Academy of Sciences studied historical meteorological data and found about 75% of the world's land area had seen a rise in "precipitation variability" or wider swings between wet and dry weather. Warming temperatures have enhanced the ability of the atmosphere to hold moisture, which is causing wider fluctuations in rainfall, the researchers said in a paper published by the Science journal.

"(Variability) has increased in most places, including Australia,



A resident walks amongst debris of destroyed belongings next to her house at a village in Manila, Philippines, after heavy rains fuelled by Typhoon Gaemi and the seasonal monsoon lashed Manila and surrounding regions in recent days.

which means rainier rain periods and drier dry periods," said Steven Sherwood, a scientist at the Climate Change Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, who was not involved in the study.

"This is going to increase as global warming continues, enhancing the chances of droughts and/or floods."

Scientists believe that climate change is also reshaping the behaviour of tropical storms, including typhoons, making them less frequent but more powerful. "I believe higher water vapour in the atmosphere is the ultimate cause of all of these tendencies toward more extreme hydrologic phenomena," Sherwood said. Ty-

phoon Gaemi, which first made landfall in Taiwan on Wednesday, was the strongest to hit the island in eight years. While it is difficult to attribute individual weather events to climate change, models predict that global warming makes typhoons stronger, said Sachie Kanada, a researcher at Japan's Nagoya University.

"In general, warmer sea surface temperature is a favourable condition for tropical cyclone development," she said. In its "blue paper" on climate change published this month, China said the number of typhoons in the Northwest Pacific and South China Sea had declined significantly since the 1990s, but they were getting stronger.

# N Korean hackers stealing military secrets, say US, allies

Reuters  
London/Washington

North Korean hackers have conducted a global cyber-espionage campaign in efforts to steal classified military secrets to support Pyongyang's banned nuclear weapons pro-

gramme, the US, Britain and South Korea said in a joint advisory.

The hackers, dubbed Anadriel or APT45 by cybersecurity researchers, are believed to be part of North Korea's intelligence agency known as the Reconnaissance General Bureau, an entity sanctioned by the US in 2015.

The cyber unit has targeted or

breached computer systems at a broad variety of defence or engineering firms, including manufacturers of tanks, submarines, naval vessels, fighter aircraft, and missile and radar systems, the advisory said.

Victims in the US have also included the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa),

Randolph Air Force Base in Texas and Robins Air Force Base in Georgia, FBI and US justice department officials said.

In the February 2022 targeting of Nasa, the hackers used a malware script to gain unauthorised access to its computer system for three months, US prosecutors allege. Over 17 gigabytes of unclas-

sified data were extracted.

"The authoring agencies believe the group and the cyber techniques remain an ongoing threat to various industry sectors worldwide, including but not limited to entities in their respective countries, as well as in Japan and India," the advisory said.

Internationally isolated North

Korea, known formally as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), has a long history of using covert hacking teams to steal sensitive military information.

To fund their operations, the hackers used ransomware to target US hospitals and healthcare companies, US officials allege.

# N Korea economy surged in 2023 after years of contraction: Seoul

Reuters  
Seoul

North Korea's economy grew sharply in 2023 after shrinking for three straight years as trade with China increased after Covid-19 pandemic border controls were eased, according to estimates by South Korea's central bank.

Gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023 likely expanded 3.1% in real terms, the biggest percentage growth since 2016, the Bank of Korea (BoK) said yesterday.

The BoK's estimates are considered among the most reliable indicators of economic activity in the secretive North, which does not publish official data.

"Although economic sanctions remained, the economy grew on eased Covid-related restrictions, growth in trade with China and favourable weather conditions," a BoK official told reporters.

North Korea's economy contracted by 0.2% in 2022, 0.1% in 2021 and 4.5% in 2020 amid Covid restrictions and UN sanctions.

During the pandemic, humanitarian groups raised concerns about food shortages for many North Koreans, and as recently as January leader Kim Jong-un said a failure to provide people with basic living necessities including food was a "serious political issue".

"Most experts assess the rebound in 2023 to be temporary, but there are also positive factors, such as the possibility of further growth in trade with China and expansion in eco-

nomics co-operation with Russia," the BoK official said.

Pyongyang and Moscow agreed last month to expand co-operation in trade, economy and investment as they signed a mutual defence pact during Russian President Vladimir Putin's first visit to North Korea since 2000.

In 2023, North Korea's trade with China accounted for 98.3% of the total trade volume, according to the BoK.

The data showed industrial output jumped 4.9%, the fastest in seven years, led by production of metal items and wigs, and the construction sector grew by 8.2%, the biggest since 2002, on more housing projects. The agricultural sector increased by 1.0%.

The industrial sector accounted for 30.7% of the economy in 2023, while the agricultural and construction sectors accounted for 22% and 11%, respectively.

The North's trade volume rose 74.6% to \$2.77bn in 2023, after growing by a record high of 123.9% in 2022, when the North started to ease border controls from the pandemic.

The figure, however, was still lower than \$3.25bn in 2019 before Covid.

Its exports jumped 104.5% in 2023, led by shoes, hats and wigs, while imports rose 71.3% with a surge in demand for fertilisers.

North Korea's nominal gross national income in 2023 was estimated to be 1.59m won (\$1,147.56) per capita, equivalent to just 3.4% of the South's 47.25m won.

## Australia journalists strike in pay row



Journalists from *The Age* newspaper protest outside their offices in Melbourne yesterday, as some of Australia's largest newspapers launched a rare five-day strike, downing tools ahead of the Olympic opening ceremony due to a rancorous pay dispute.

# Sri Lanka announces first presidential vote since unrest

AFP  
Colombo

Sri Lanka's first presidential elections since an unprecedented economic crisis spurred widespread unrest will be held in September, the election commission said yesterday.

The election will be the first test of the public mood since the height of the 2022 downturn, which caused months of food, fuel and medicine shortages

across the island nation.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, 75, who took office after street protests forced his predecessor to flee the country, has filed his nomination as an independent candidate.

He will face at least two rivals campaigning against austerity measures his government imposed to satisfy an International Monetary Fund bailout package.

"We expect a very competitive election," Rohana Hettiarachchi of local poll monitor PAFTEL

said. "The important issue is the economic crisis."

Election commission chair R M A L Rathnayake told reporters that the election had been scheduled for September 21, a Saturday, to ensure a high turnout.

Economic issues are expected to dominate the five-week campaign announced by the commission as the country emerges from its worst-ever recession in 2022, when the GDP shrank by a record 7.8%.

Inflation has since returned to normal levels from its peak of 70% at the height of the crisis.

Wickremesinghe has also successfully negotiated a restructuring of Sri Lanka's \$46bn foreign debt with bilateral lenders including China, following a 2022 government default.

"At this time we need the leadership of this capitalist to get us out of the mess," human rights activist Nimalika Fernando, 71, said of Wickremesinghe's record.

## Japan nuke watchdog panel decides against restarting reactor

A panel of Japan's nuclear watchdog yesterday decided against restarting a reactor at the Tsuruga nuclear power plant citing seismic risks, paving the way for the regulator to keep the Japan Atomic Power plant shut.

The panel said it was difficult to determine the safety of the reactor, noting the proximity of a seismic faultline. Consequently, it said, the reactor was not deemed compliant with criteria for installation licensing.

"We will conduct an additional investigation. We are not considering decommissioning the plant," Mamoru Muramatsu, president of Japan Atomic Power, said after the panel meeting, according to Kyodo News Agency.

The government in Japan, one of the world's most seismically active countries, does not allow nuclear plants to be situated over active faultlines.

The panel is set to report its decision to the Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA) soon.

## Plane gets Nusantara logo



Indonesia's Minister of Public Works and Public Housing Basuki Hadimuljono (right) attends a ceremony organised to unveil a Garuda Indonesia Boeing 737 NG plane that had been painted with the logo of Indonesia's future capital city of Nusantara at Soekarno-Hatta International Airport in Tangerang yesterday.

## Thailand court to decide PM Srettha's fate on Aug 14

Reuters  
Bangkok

Thailand's Constitutional Court said it will hand down its verdict on August 14 in a case that seeks the dismissal of Prime Minister Srettha Thavasin for appointing to his cabinet a lawyer who served time in jail.

The case stems from a complaint from a group of former senators over the appointment of Pichit Chuenban, who has since resigned and was imprisoned briefly in 2008 for contempt of court over an alleged attempt to bribe court staff, which was never proven.

Real estate tycoon Srettha denies wrongdoing and says Pichit, a former lawyer for the politically powerful Shinawatra family, was thoroughly vetted and his appointment was above board.

The removal of Srettha could

plunge Thailand into uncertainty and would require parliament to elect a new premier, potentially pitting his Pheu Thai Party against coalition partners in what could result in a shakeup of the governing alliance and a realignment of cabinet and policies.

"The Constitutional Court has considered and finds the case is a legal matter and there is sufficient evidence to decide the case," it said in a statement.

The verdict will come a week after another major decision by the same court, which will decide the fate of the hugely popular opposition Move Forward Party, the biggest force in parliament.

The progressive, anti-establishment Move Forward is accused by the election commission of undermining Thailand's system of governance over its campaign to amend a strict law that forbids insulting the royal family, under which hundreds of people have been prosecuted.

# Bangladesh protest leaders taken from hospital by police

AFP  
Dhaka

Bangladeshi police detectives yesterday forced the discharge from hospital of three student protest leaders blamed for deadly unrest, taking them to an unknown location, staff said.

Nahid Islam, Asif Mahmud and Abu Baker Majumder are all members of Students Against Discrimination, the group responsible for organising recent street rallies against civil service hiring rules.

At least 193 people were killed in the ensuing police crackdown and clashes, according to an AFP count of victims reported by police and hospitals, in some of the worst unrest of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's tenure.

At least two of the three were being treated for injuries that they said were caused by torture in earlier police custody at a hospital in the capital Dhaka.

"They took them from us," Gonoshasthaya hospital supervisor Anwara Begum Lucky said. "The men were from the Detective Branch."

She added that she had not

wanted to discharge the student leaders but police had pressured the hospital chief to do so.

Islam's elder sister Fatema Tasnim said from the hospital that six plainclothes detectives had taken all three men.

The trio's student group had suspended fresh protests at the start of this week, saying that they had wanted reform of government job quotas but not "at the expense of so much blood".

The moratorium was due to expire earlier yesterday but the group had given no indication of its future course of action.

Islam, 26, the chief co-ordina-

tor of Students Against Discrimination, said from his hospital bed on Monday that he feared for his life.

He said that two days beforehand, a group of people identifying themselves as police detectives blindfolded and handcuffed him, took him to an unknown location.

Islam added that he had come to his senses the following morning on a roadside in Dhaka.

Mahmud earlier said he had also been detained by police and beaten at the height of last week's unrest.

Three senior police officers in

Dhaka all denied that the trio had been taken from the hospital and into custody yesterday.

Police on Thursday said they had arrested at least 4,000 people since the unrest began last week, including 2,500 in Dhaka.

Student protests began this month after the reintroduction in June of a scheme reserving more than half of government jobs for certain candidates.

With around 18m young people in Bangladesh out of work, according to government figures, the move deeply upset graduates facing an acute jobs crisis.

Critics say the quota is used to

stack public jobs with loyalists to Hasina's Awami League.

The Supreme Court cut the number of reserved jobs on Sunday but fell short of protesters' demands to scrap the quotas entirely.

Hasina has ruled Bangladesh since 2009 and won her fourth consecutive election in January after a vote without genuine opposition.

Her government is also accused by rights groups of misusing state institutions to entrench its hold on power and stamp out dissent, including the extrajudicial killing of opposition activists.



# Airbus shortlists locations for copter assembly line in India

Agencies  
Marignane, France

Production of European aviation major Airbus' commercial helicopter, H125, in India is likely to start in 2026, with the company proceeding to set up a final assembly line later this year.

The company has shortlisted eight sites in India for setting up its final assembly line.

The facility, which will be the fourth Final Assembly Line (FAL) for the single engine H125, will initially produce up to 10 helicopters annually and the capacity will be ramped up depending on the market demand, Airbus officials said.

"India is the market of the future for helicopters...at present, the market is extremely embryonic, it is very small compared to what the potential could be," Olivier Michalon, executive vice president, global business, Airbus Helicopters, said.

The ground breaking ceremony for FAL is expected in October or

November this year and the facility will be operational in 2026 and the delivery is anticipated to start towards the end of 2026.

"We have identified eight sites which we are currently assessing. We are still in the final assessment stage. We should be in a position to announce it shortly.

"We want to be attractive and

in an ecosystem that is best suited for industrial activities, logistics, employees and of course, regulations," Michalon said at a briefing at Marignane, France.

Marignane is the headquarters of Airbus Helicopters. For Airbus, H125 is the most-sold helicopter in India as well as the south Asia region.

Airbus has projected the demand for H125 helicopters in India and neighbouring countries at 500 over the next 20 years.

"We are targeting 10 helicopters per year and as the demand picks up we can ramp up," head of Airbus Helicopters in India and south Asia, Sunny Guglani, said at the briefing.

# China, India 'should work in the same direction'

Reuters  
Beijing

China Foreign Minister Wang Yi said it is hoped that China and India will work in the same direction and explore how the neighbouring countries can get along, according to a statement.

Wang, in talks with his Indian counterpart, said China-India relations have an important impact beyond the bilateral scope, according to the statement released by the Chinese foreign ministry.

**"It is in our mutual interest to stabilise our ties. We should approach the immediate issues with a sense of purpose and urgency"**

"It is in the interests of both sides to get China-India relations back on track," Wang said about the talks with India Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, according to the statement.

Jaishankar and Wang met on the sidelines of the Southeast Asian bloc Asean summit in Laos, just three weeks after their last meeting in Kazakhstan, India's foreign ministry said.

The two leaders agreed to resolve border issues as soon as possible.

The two countries share a long Himalayan border, much of it poorly demarcated, and relations between them have been sour since a military clash in July 2020 when at least 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese troops were killed.

"Agreed on the need to give strong guidance to complete the disengagement process. Must ensure full respect for the LAC (Line of Actual Control) and past agreements," Jaishankar said in a post on X.

"It is in our mutual interest to stabilise our ties. We should approach the immediate issues with a sense of purpose and urgency," Jaishankar added.

After their last meeting in Kazakhstan, Wang had said the two countries must handle and control the situation in the border areas while resuming normal exchanges in other areas.

Both nuclear-armed nations have fortified positions and deployed extra troops and equipment along the border since the standoff four years ago. The two countries have been uneasy neighbours for decades after a bloody border war in 1962.

India's foreign ministry said in a statement that both ministers agreed on the need to work with "purpose and urgency to achieve complete disengagement at the earliest".



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (centre) attends a ceremony to pay homage to soldiers who were martyred during the 1999 war on the occasion of Kargil Vijay Diwas at Kargil War Memorial in Drass.

# India pays tribute to fallen Kargil War heroes on 25th anniversary

AFP  
Drass

Indian soldiers and top brass gathered yesterday in the remote Himalayan foothills to commemorate the 1999 Kargil War.

Yesterday's ceremony marked the 25th anniversary of the conflict's end.

"Times change, seasons change, but the names of those who give their lives for the country live forever," Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who laid a wreath for India's fallen soldiers, told the crowd at a memorial for the conflict in the town of Drass. Modi's speech capped two

days of events showcasing India's military might at the border, with a flyover by air force jets and a choreographed performance by fire-breathing soldiers.

The high-altitude confrontation being commemorated began when militants crossed into Indian territory at Kargil, a remote outpost on the shared frontier with Pakistan.

At least 1,000 people were killed over the following 10 weeks.

Kargil is feted as one of India's greatest military triumphs. "We are stronger economically, militarily-wise and technologically," General Ved Prakash Malik, India's army chief at the time of the conflict, said.



Indian army personnel pay their tributes on the occasion of 'Kargil Vijay Diwas' or Kargil war anniversary, at the Punjab State War Heroes' Memorial and Museum in Amritsar yesterday.

## UK police officer faces criminal probe over airport incident

Britain's police complaints watchdog said an officer was under criminal investigation for assault over an incident at Manchester Airport where a policeman was filmed stamping on a suspect's head during an arrest. The clip, filmed by an onlooker, was posted on social media and showed a chaotic scene in an airport car park, in which several officers armed restrained two suspects who were arrested on suspicion of assault, assault of an emergency worker, affray and obstructing police. "We are conducting a criminal investigation into events at Manchester airport," the Independent Office for Police Conduct's regional director Catherine Bates said. The IOPC said the officer had been served a disciplinary notice to inform him he was being investigated for potential gross misconduct in relation to multiple alleged breaches of police professional standards during the arrest.

## Starmer visits Widnes



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer visits Hutchinson Engineering in Widnes, Cheshire, Britain.

## UK expected to reveal £20bn shortfall in public finances

AFP  
London

Britain's new Labour government will announce next week that the country's public finances have an additional hole of around £20bn (\$26bn), risking tax rises in an upcoming budget, media reported yesterday.

Finance Minister Rachel Reeves will make a statement on Monday having ordered Treasury officials to provide a spending audit following her centre-left party's general election victory this month, the Financial Times and other UK media said yesterday.

They added that Reeves, appointed chancellor of the exchequer by Labour leader and Prime Minister Keir Starmer, will also confirm that her first

budget will be in October.

The UK deficit - or difference between what the government receives in tax and what it spends - stood at around £120bn in the 12 months to the end of March, the country's last fiscal year.

Since being elected, Labour has ruled out immediate rises to income and corporation taxes - but has not ruled out changes to levies on capital gains and inheritance, which analysts have said could be targeted to fill holes in the public finances.

Asked about the £20bn figure, the Treasury said only: "The chancellor has commissioned officials to provide an assessment of the state of the government's spending inheritance which will be presented to parliament before the summer recess."

# Banks share data with UK officials in 'dirty money' crackdown

Reuters  
London

Barclays, NatWest and Lloyds are among seven banks to share customer data with the National Crime Agency (NCA) in the largest project of its kind worldwide to tackle criminal gangs, money laundering and "dirty money" flowing through the country.

Reuters revealed one year ago that more than six banks, including NatWest and Lloyds, were part of trials with law enforcement and government agencies that involved sharing intelligence on client ac-

counts which raised concerns about economic crime that posed a threat to Britain.

The NCA, a top investigator, says the project went live in May, included voluntary data sharing deals with Santander, TSB, Metro Bank and Starling Bank, and had already identified eight new crime networks that might be exploiting the financial system.

Britain has ramped up efforts to tackle economic crime, which lawmakers say costs the economy up to around £350bn (\$452bn) each year, after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine shone a spotlight on how kleptocrats and criminals used the country as a haven to launder, hide

and spend "dirty money".

Adrian Searle, director of the NCA's National Economic Crime Centre, said three crime networks had been passed to the NCA's intelligence division for further investigation.

The project has also uncovered new intelligence linked to 10 of the agency's biggest investigations. He did not divulge details.

"The fundamental purpose is to bring together the collective efforts of law enforcement, government, regulators and the private sector to combat economic crime," Searle said.

Singapore launched a digital customer data sharing platform

known as COSMIC (Collaborative Sharing of Money Laundering/Terrorist Financing Information and Cases) with six banks in April. But this was led by the local regulator, not law enforcement, Searle said.

Under the programme that is due to run until October, bank staff are seconded to the NCA to form a team of between 15 to 20 intelligence officers, data scientists and analysts to probe movement of money suggestive of criminal behaviour - and ensure legitimate customers are left alone.

Banks have long been wary of sharing customer data for fear of falling foul of European data pro-

tection and privacy laws, which could trigger litigation by customers whose accounts have been locked pending investigations.

But the NCA and the banks insist they only share account data with "multiple clear indicators of economic crime" on customers, people or businesses that meet a set of markers about potential criminal behaviour. Banks' lawyers have also ensured all data sharing meets an acceptable risk.

"We are deeply conscious of the issues around data privacy," one senior banking executive involved in the trial said.

"It's also clear that our terms and conditions as banks enable us

to share the information without notification to the customer because this is all ultimately to do with fulfilling our legal obligations to help detect crime and prevent financial harm," he added.

The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) regulator is observing the project. Without this, there would have been less appetite for the pilot, the banker said.

The initiative builds on a first pilot between the NCA, NatWest and Lloyds between October 2021 and February 2022. It tested the practicality and benefit of fusing bank and crime data to better identify and disrupt economic crime - and led to one arrest and charge.



## President of Italian region quits after arrest

The president of the north-western Italian region of Liguria resigned yesterday, nearly three months after his arrest in a vast anti-corruption probe involving port and beach operations.

Giovanni Toti, 55, has been under house arrest since May as part of an investigation that has also implicated nine others, including the former head of the Genoa Port Authority, one of the largest in the country.

Contacted by AFP, a regional civil servant confirmed media reports of the resignation of Toti, who had been suspended from his post since his arrest.

Toti, a right-wing former member of the European Parliament elected as Liguria's president in 2015 and again in 2020, has said he is innocent of accusations of bribe-taking.

Prosecutors allege he accepted €74,100 (\$80,000) in funds for his election campaign between December 2021 and March 2023 from two prominent local businessmen, Aldo Spinelli and his son Roberto, in return for various favours.

These allegedly included efforts to privatise a public beach and speeding up the 30-year lease renewal for a Genoa port terminal for a Spinelli family-controlled company, which was approved in December 2021.

Toti is a former journalist who was close to late prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

He is no longer aligned with a party but was backed by a right-wing coalition in the last election.

In a resignation letter published on the RaiNews website, Toti did not mention the accusations against him but instead listed his accomplishments as president and thanked his supporters.

"After three months of house arrest and the subsequent suspension from the office that the voters have entrusted to me twice, I have decided that the time has come to tender my irrevocable resignation," Toti wrote, according to RaiNews. "I leave a region in order."

Ex-port boss Paolo Emilio Signorini, who was also jailed after his arrest, is accused of accepting cash and gifts from Aldo Spinelli to help speed up the renewal of the family's port concession.

Prosecutors say the gifts included nearly two dozen stays in a luxury Monte Carlo hotel, a €7,200 Cartier bracelet and the promise of a 300,000-euro-per-year job after his tenure at the port ended.

The Spinellis themselves are accused of corruption, with Aldo – an ex-president of the Genoa and Livorno football clubs – placed under house arrest and son Roberto temporarily banned from conducting his business dealings.

In a separate strand of the investigation, Toti's chief of staff, Matteo Cozzani, was placed under house arrest accused of "electoral corruption", which facilitated the activities of Sicily's Cosa Nostra Mafia.

As regional co-ordinator during local elections in 2020, Cozzani is accused of promising jobs and public housing in return for the votes of at least 400 members of the Sicilian community in Genoa.

Toti had more than a year remaining in his tenure as regional president. According to the law, new elections will have to be called within three months. – AFP

## Judge insists Spanish PM testifies in person in corruption investigation

AFP  
Madrid

A Spanish judge has rejected Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's request to testify in writing in a preliminary corruption probe into his wife's business ties.

Judge Juan Carlos Peinado, who is leading the inquiry, maintained Sanchez's hearing for next Tuesday at 11am, according to a court filing seen by AFP.

He said he had summoned Sanchez as the spouse of Begona Gomez, not as prime minister – which would have allowed the Socialist premier to testify in writing as he had requested.

The judge is scheduled to question Sanchez at the premier's official residence.

However, Sanchez can testify at a later date in writing about "relevant facts of which he has had knowledge by reason of his position", the judge added.

The only other time a sitting Spanish prime minister had to testify in a judicial case was in 2017 when Mariano Rajoy was summoned in a graft case that led to the conviction of several members of his conservative Popular Party (PP).

Gomez is being investigated for alleged influence peddling and corruption following a complaint filed by an anti-graft non-governmental organisation (NGO) with links to the far-right called "Manos Lim-

## Portugal to hike army pay to tackle staff exodus

Portugal will increase military pay by 2026 to boost the attractiveness of a career in an army that is facing a persistent staff drain, Prime Minister Luis Montenegro said yesterday.

The Iberian nation's armed forces have lost nearly 20% of their personnel in recent years, falling from more than 29,000 professionals in 2015 to 23,220 in 2024.

The exodus prompted Defence Minister Nuno Melo to complain that "the armed forces have not been the priority of various governments".

Hailing the pay rises as a "historic day for soldiers", Montenegro said the measures were also intended to show "great respect" for those "bearing the weight of the national defence system today".

Under his centre-right government's plans, military personnel stand to benefit from an increase in several bonuses.

Those include the military status allowance which will gradually quadruple from €100 (\$109) to €400 a month in January 2026.

Since coming to power following general elections in March, the government has had to respond to the demands of various state employees, including for salary increases.

It has already reached agreements with teachers, clerks and the police.

Lacking a majority in parliament, Montenegro's administration will have to rely on the support of the centre-left Socialists or the far-right Chega party to pass the measures in parliament.

However, analysts agree that it is not in the opposition's interests to risk provoking new elections by blocking the 2025 budget it will vote on this autumn. – AFP

# French high-speed rail network hit

AFP/Reuters  
Paris

Arson attacks scrambled France's high-speed rail network for tens of thousands of passengers yesterday, after what officials called premeditated acts of "sabotage" just hours before the Paris Olympics opened.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility and no indication of whether the action was politically motivated.

"Everything leads us to believe that these were criminal acts," Transport Minister Patricia Vergriete told reporters at the Gare du Nord.

Yesterday's attacks were launched as the French capital was under heavy security ahead of the Games opening ceremony, with 300,000 spectators and an audience of VIPs expected at the event.

The fires that affected France's Atlantic, northern and eastern lines led to cancellations and delays at a time of particularly heavy traffic for summer holiday travel.

Around 800,000 passengers are expected to be affected over the weekend as the damage is heavy and labour-intensive to repair.

"Early this morning, co-ordinated and prepared acts of sabotage were perpetrated against installations of SNCF," the national rail operator, Prime Minister Gabriel Attal said.

"There are huge and serious consequences for the rail network," he added, while security services are hunting the culprits.

SNCF chief executive Jean-Pierre Farandou said that the attackers had started fires in "conduits carrying multiple (fibre-optic) cables" that carry "safety information for drivers" or control the motors for points.

"There's a huge number of bundled cables. We have to repair them one by one, it's a manual operation" requiring "hundreds of workers," he added.



This picture taken on July 24, 2013, shows rescuers tending to victims next to derailed cars at the site of a train accident near the city of Santiago de Compostela. – AFP



SNCF employees inspect the scene of a suspected attack on the high speed railway network at Croiselles, northern France. – AFP

Passenger services chief Christophe Fanichet said there were delays of 90 minutes to two hours on services between Paris and France's north and east.

"We ask people please not to come to the station, because if you haven't heard from us, your train won't be running," Fanichet told reporters.

One major branch of the network, the line to France's southeast, was spared.

Farandou said that railway workers doing night maintenance in central France spotted unauthorised people, who then fled when the workers called in police.

Multiple services between Paris and London via northern France were also cancelled, the Eurostar company said, with others suffering delays as they divert onto lines not meant for high-speed trains.

Paris's RATP transport network was also

operating under "increased vigilance" following the railway attacks, its chief executive Jean Castex said as he visited a control station.

The RATP has laid on a denser schedule throughout the day to bring spectators to and from the opening ceremony.

France's intelligence services were scrambling to determine the perpetrators of the sabotage, a security source told AFP.

The source added that the arson method used resembled past attacks by extreme-left actors.

In September, arson attacks on conduits holding railway cables caused travel chaos in northern Germany, with a claim of responsibility posted to an extreme-left website.

The attacks happened hours before the Olympics parade yesterday evening that

## Sicily authorities use navy tanker to resupply drought-hit areas

AFP  
Rome

Authorities in Sicily deployed a naval tanker yesterday to help move water from one side of the drought-hit island to the other, as another Italian region declared a water emergency.

The Italian navy tanker "Ticino" left Augusta on Sicily's southeastern coast on Thursday evening carrying 1,200 cu metres (42,400 cubic feet) of water bound for the parched southwest, local authorities said.

It arrived at the port of Licata yesterday afternoon with the aim of releasing the water into the network in Agrigento, home to the famous Valley of the Temples, a process that will take 25-30 hours.

"We are working hard to implement every initiative necessary to alleviate the effects of the drought that is affecting Sicily and many other Mediterranean areas," said the president of the Sicily region, Renato Schifani.

However, he said the issue required more efforts

to address years of "structural problems" in the Sicilian water network.

Sicily, which set a European heat record in 2021 at 48.8° Celsius (119.8° Fahrenheit), declared a drought emergency at the beginning of February, after a winter without rain.

The situation is becoming increasingly critical, particularly for farmers.

Across the Strait of Messina, the southern Italian region of Calabria declared a state of emergency yesterday following "a serious shortage of drinkable water" around the city of Reggio Calabria and the province of Crotona.

Civil protection authorities will now assess which "urgent interventions" are required to help local residents, a statement said.

Drought has struck across the Western Mediterranean, with severe impacts on northern Africa and parts of Spain.

Experts say climate change driven by human activity is boosting the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as heatwaves and droughts but also heavy rain.

will see up to 7,500 competitors travel down a 6km stretch of the river Seine on a flotilla of 85 boats.

It will be the first time a Summer Olympics has opened outside the main athletics stadium, a decision fraught with danger at a time when France is on its highest alert for terror attacks.

France's rail network was expected to be busy this weekend not only due to the Olympics but also as people return from or leave for their summer holidays.

At Paris's Montparnasse train station, passengers were waiting for information, with display boards showing delays of more than two hours.

SNCF said there would be no trains at all from Montparnasse before 1pm.

"Normal traffic is expected to resume on Monday, July 29," read one of the signs in the departure hall.

Graphic designer Katherine Abby, 30, clung to hope that her trip would only be delayed and not cancelled.

She booked her tickets for Biarritz, a popular southwest beach resort, weeks ago.

"It's my only vacation of the year," said Abby, who was travelling with her husband. "I've been waiting for this moment for a year, I would be pretty demoralised to have to cancel this trip, especially when you see what Paris looks like with the Olympic Games."

"We're pretty upset, it's a bad first impression" of France, said Ellie Scott, 24, an Irish tourist in Bordeaux hoping to reach Paris for the Olympics.

She and her sister Maya, 21, planned to refund their tickets and rent a car instead for a six-hour drive to the capital.

At the Gare de L'Est, traveller Corinne Lecocq said her train to Strasbourg on the border with Germany had been cancelled.

"We'll take the slow line," she said. "I'm on holiday so it's OK, even if it is irritating to be late."

## Spain train driver sentenced to 2.5 years in jail over deadly 2013 crash

AFP  
Madrid

A Spanish court has sentenced a train driver and a safety director to two-and-a-half years in prison over a 2013 crash that was the nation's deadliest rail disaster in nearly eight decades.

The eight-carriage train was travelling more than twice the speed limit when it derailed outside the northwestern city of Santiago de Compostela, killing dozens of people.

The court found the two men guilty of manslaughter, saying that they had "breached the duty of care imposed on them by their duties".

It also ordered them to pay €25m (\$27m) in compensation, an amount that will be covered by their employee insurance.

An inquiry of the July 24, 2013, derailment found that the high-speed Alvia 04155 train was travelling at 179kph (111mph), twice the speed limit for that stretch of track.

The train ploughed into a concrete wall, killing 80 people and

injuring more than 140 others in Spain's deadliest train tragedy since 1944.

Investigators said the crash resulted from a lapse in attention by the driver, Francisco Garzon, who ended a phone call with the on-board conductor moments before the train lurched off the rails.

When he took the stand, Garzon acknowledged he was distracted by the phone call but said the track should have had signals warning him to reduce speed before the curve.

He tearfully apologised to the relatives of the victims.

Garzon had already apologised to the relatives in a letter published on the first anniversary of the accident, saying he felt "a lot of grief and pain".

Andres Cortabitarte, a safety director at state rail operator ADIF, was accused of not having carried out a study of the risks of the bend where the accident happened.

He told the court the track where the accident happened was "100% safe".

However, the court ruled the accident would not have happened "not only if the driver had

been attentive, but also if measures had been taken to control the speed of the train in an area with a very high speed limit, or even to draw the driver's attention to his obligation to slow down in a more obvious way than was the case".

In its 530-page judgement, the court found the driver and the ADIF official directly responsible for 79 of the 80 deaths.

The 80th victim, who was injured in the accident and died 73 days later following a serious illness, was not considered by the court to have been directly killed by the accident and was instead counted among the injured.

Around 600 experts and witnesses took the stand at the trial, which was held in a cultural centre in Santiago de Compostela from October 2022-July 2023.

A pre-trial investigation concluded excessive speed was "the sole cause of the accident", with Garzon the only one charged.

However, its finding that ADIF bore no criminal liability was later revised following complaints by the victims' families.

As a result, the investigation was reopened in 2016 and Cortabitarte was also charged.

## Kremlin says Russian birth rate is 'disastrous'

The Kremlin said yesterday that it is "working hard" to reverse declining birth rates in Russia, warning that "disastrous" demographic trends were putting the country's future at risk.

Russia has faced a myriad of demographic challenges since the collapse of the USSR, including an ageing population, an outflow of men due to the conflict in Ukraine and the lowest fertility rate in 17 years.

"It is now at a terribly low level – 1.4 (births per woman). This is comparable to European countries, Japan and so on. However, this is disastrous for the future of the nation," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry

Peskov told a media festival.

"Anyone with many children is a hero. We live in the largest country in the world. And there are fewer of us every year. And the only way to cope with this is to increase the average birth rate," he said.

Russia had a population of about 148m at the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, a figure that now stands at around 144m after a protracted period of high deaths and low births in the 1990s.

The country's birth rate has not recovered since Soviet times despite President Vladimir Putin's government offering generous payouts and mortgage subsidies to large families. – AFP



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## Biden heat rule likely still years away as climate crisis worsens

President Joe Biden's administration is advancing a first-of-its-kind proposal to safeguard indoor and outdoor workers from the perils of extreme heat as the US swelters under record-breaking temperatures this summer.

But it will still likely take years to enact a federal rule that could be undone with the stroke of a pen should Donald Trump win the White House — or by a US Supreme Court that just dealt a major blow to the federal government's regulatory authorities. For the moment, workers are left at the mercy of employers, or the handful of states that have taken their own steps on the matter.

"Even in...a wildly optimistic, best-case scenario, it's still a couple years until this federal heat standard would take effect," said Terri Gerstein, director of the Labor Initiative at New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

In the meantime, a handful of states have moved forward with their own heat protection rules, while other states like Texas and Florida have blocked localities from setting standards on essentials like access to water and rest breaks that the new federal rule would address.

Florida's new law barring local governments from setting their own heat protections kicked in this month, as the heat index was forecast to top 110F (43.3C) in some spots in the Sunshine State.

**"The game is still very much in the states... The federal standards are a floor, not a ceiling"**

The heat index measures what the temperature feels like to the human body.

"We have a long road to travel," said Juanita Constible, an expert in heat and labour at the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council.

"The game is still very much in the states... The federal standards are a floor, not a ceiling. States can go past those, so

there's no need for worker-friendly states to just kind of wait and see what the federal government comes up with," she said.

The draft proposal from the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), unveiled this month, would implement control measures when the heat index hits 80F (26.7C) that include requirements to provide employees with cool drinking water and paid rest breaks if needed. The proposal provides additional measures at 90F (32.2C) like mandatory rest breaks of 15 minutes at least every two hours.

"Obviously we'll see some changes before the final (rule) and then enforcement will be a pretty key part of the picture," Constible said.

"It's clear that OSHA has been paying really close attention to what workers have been saying they need." In the wake of the deadly "heat dome" that saw crippling record temperatures in the Pacific Northwest in 2021, Biden initially announced his intention to put forward a rule in September 2021. Biden announced this week he would not seek re-election and endorsed Vice-President Kamala Harris to be the Democratic presidential nominee.

"Because of climate change, heat has risen to the top of the agenda," said Jordan Barab, a former senior OSHA official during the Obama administration.

"But OSHA is a very small agency. For them, it's actually been a very speedy process to get a proposed rule out in three years.

"But it'll be closer to two years from now before they can issue a final standard — and if there's a Trump administration, they will likely just kill it." For its part an OSHA spokesperson said there will still be an open comment period and public hearings as part of the rulemaking process.

"Working swiftly and responsibly to enact a federal heat standard that protects the American workforce is a top priority," the spokesperson said. — Thomson Reuters Foundation

## Will AI kill off money?

By Jean-Pierre Landau  
Paris

**W**e have forgotten the true virtues of money. We commonly view it in purely instrumental terms — as a device that facilitates exchange and stores value over time. Compared to bartering, coins and paper currency are profoundly convenient. But money is more than just an instrument. As Fyodor Dostoevsky famously observed, "money is minted freedom". It supports our existence as autonomous individuals in a decentralised economy.

The situation will be very different, however, if we someday live in a world governed by an artificial intelligence (AI) endowed with complete information and infinite processing capabilities. Under those conditions, there might no longer be any role for money.

To understand how money sets us free, consider any chain of transactions. When we receive money, we are in control. It is up to us to decide whether to hoard it or to spend it on whatever we choose. Only money gives us that capability. Money, moreover, is universal. It allows you to buy anything, anytime, from anyone — and that seller increasingly can be located anywhere. This specific freedom comes not from wealth, but from the

possibility of choice.

This choice must not be taken for granted, because payment instruments have always been susceptible to paternalistic interference. In the 19th century, some firms would pay their employees with scrip that was only accepted in company-owned stores. And nowadays, technology makes it possible to issue "programmable money" with a special purpose, limited use, and even a pre-emption date. Such digital tokens could be used to prohibit "non-virtuous" consumption (such as alcohol or tobacco) by recipients of public assistance.

We need money because we live in a market economy, not a preprogrammed world. Holding money protects us against uncertainty (it has an "option value" in economic parlance). The demand for money increases sharply during crises because people need to be prepared for all contingencies.

But now fast-forward to a future where machines organise, decide, and execute all economic activities. They transact among themselves, credit and debit reciprocal accounts, and automatically ensure discipline and the enforcement of contracts. There is no failure and no default. Do we still need money?

Such a world is already partly in view. A decade ago, Hal Varian, Chief Economist at Google, noted that "there is a computer in the middle

of each transaction" across our digitalised economy. Many of our daily acts are automated, algorithmic trading dominates in many securities markets, and payments are increasingly programmed.

If cryptocurrency advocates' vision of the future materialises, "smart contracts" will govern financial intermediation in a universe of decentralised finance. Some people even suggest that, in conducting monetary policy, sophisticated algorithms could replace central bankers.

For now, though, we merely use the machines. Humans still make decisions as free agents, expressing preferences and acting on them. Central banks do not blindly follow rules. They make judgments after considering difficult tradeoffs, especially in times of crisis or when facing negative supply shocks.

In fact, in an automated economy with human control, money is more necessary than ever. But it must adapt now that digitalisation has collapsed distance and time. Money, too, must be digital, taking the form of tokens on our mobile phones — an e-cash that can be transferred instantly across the world without having to transit through a complex web of accounts and counterparties.

A threshold will be crossed with AI. Some scenarios project a universe where AIs do not simply process information and execute commands, but also make decisions and even

determine their own objectives. They would be the "agents", acting on preferences that may not necessarily align with those of humans.

With these capabilities, an AI could take over the allocation of resources and the distribution of income. It would assess the millions of possible economic equilibria and identify the one it considers preferable. This vision of "techno-socialism" is very far from the model of a decentralised, free society. It would be a high-tech version of old-fashioned communist central planning.

Debates about the future of AI often refer to the "singularity," meaning the point when AIs will have the ability to improve and augment themselves, thus rapidly surpassing humans in all measures of intelligence. In this scenario, humans would no longer control their own destiny.

Will it ever happen? There are huge disagreements among AI experts, but money can serve as the ideal indicator. The best sign that AI has effectively taken over would be if money becomes irrelevant in economic life.

A moneyless world may be technically feasible. But whether it would be worth living in is another matter. — Project Syndicate

• Jean-Pierre Landau is Associate Professor of Economics at Sciences Po.

## Can central banks still go green?

By Lucrezia Reichlin  
London

**D**uring the years of low inflation and zero or negative interest rates, many central banks joined the fight against climate change and started experimenting with various tools such as special loans, asset purchases, and collateral requirements biased toward "green" investments. But with the return of inflation, monetary policymakers have grown more cautious.

Presumably, they are eager to demonstrate that price stability is their primary focus, implying that when inflation is persistently above target, climate policy matters less. But a firm commitment to price stability does not require central banks to drop green-oriented monetary policies altogether. Since today's central banks have more than one instrument at their disposal, hiking interest rates to fight inflation can, in principle, go hand in hand with targeted green policies. The question is how to do it now that central banks' balance sheets are supposed to be shrinking.

Moreover, the return of inflation does not alter the original case for green monetary policymaking. Central banks still have two good reasons to remain committed. First, they need to account for climate change in order to manage their own portfolio risk. With regulators and supervisors asking the financial sector to do this, it is only natural that central banks should do it, too.

Public authorities have drawn up new guidelines for the private sector because they recognise that climate risks are financially significant, and that limiting exposure to fossil-fuel assets is fully consistent with traditional risk-management criteria. This is especially true for larger portfolios, and notwithstanding the recent



decline in central banks' holdings, their assets worldwide still total around \$40tn.

The second reason is that in most countries central banks are mandated to support the general objectives of their governments in guaranteeing citizens' welfare, as long as doing so doesn't interfere with price stability. Supporting the green transition therefore should figure prominently within any framework that rigorously assesses the potential trade-offs between price stability and economic policymaking.

Central to this process is the concept of "double materiality", which holds that you should do what you can to have an impact, and not focus solely on mitigating your own financial risks. Although central banks are not in charge of industrial policy, they do have tools to allocate capital within their normal operations, and these are already in use in many countries.

When the Network for Greening the Financial System (NGFS) reviewed current policies for eight case studies in Asia and Europe, it found that most green measures

were motivated by the aim of mitigating climate change, rather than risk management. For example, in 2021, the Hungarian central bank loaned Ft300bn (\$825mn) to credit institutions at 0% interest on the condition that this funding be lent to households for the construction or purchase of new, energy-efficient residential real estate.

Similarly, in 2021, the Bank of Japan introduced a programme that provides 0% interest loans to financial institutions to fund investments or loans that contribute to Japan's climate goals. The People's Bank of China has also launched two targeted lending facilities to motivate emissions-reduction projects; and other major central banks, including the Bank of England and the European Central Bank, have rolled out special corporate-bond purchase programs that favour stronger climate performers.

The NGFS's findings point to an accumulation of valuable experience in green policymaking by central banks. Though there are relevant differences across these institutions,

they collectively represent a huge amount of fire power.

But won't central banks have to shrink their balance sheets, and won't that harm their green-related financing? Not necessarily, because with interest rates on reserves, a central bank can, in principle, increase rates to tame inflation while still maintaining a large balance sheet. The US Federal Reserve has already opted to maintain a system of ample reserves, and since its liabilities will remain large even when inflation is on target, these will have to be matched by large assets.

Under this framework, central banks that have adopted a double-materiality approach can aim for an asset portfolio that is consistent with their government's climate and industrial policies. In making the choice between larger or smaller balance sheets, they should consider the longer-run advantages of supporting green financing.

To be sure, some will object to any policy that encourages central banks to leave a large footprint in markets, or that tasks unelected officials with what looks dangerously close to an industrial policy. We have all heard the argument: "Central banks are doing too much and risking their independence."

But climate change is the existential problem for all of humanity. At a moment when the private sector is withdrawing resources from climate funds and public finances are constrained everywhere, the idea that central banks can play a larger role should not be discarded. The devil, of course, will be in the details. Transparency and careful management of trade-offs will be crucial. — Project Syndicate

• Lucrezia Reichlin, a former director of research at the European Central Bank, is Professor of Economics at the London Business School.

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# Nato finds gaping holes in defences of Europe

By Sabine Siebold, Matthias Williams  
Brussels

The war in Ukraine and the looming US presidential election dominated a Nato summit in Washington this month but, away from the public stage, the alliance's military planners have been focused on assessing the enormous cost of fixing Europe's creaking defences. Nato leaders agreed plans last year for the biggest overhaul in three decades of its defence capabilities, amid growing fears of Russian aggression.

Behind the scenes, officials have since been poring over the minimum defence requirements to achieve those plans, which were sent to national governments in recent weeks, according to one military planner, who spoke on condition of anonymity. The minimum requirements detail the shortfalls in Nato armies in key areas, providing a rough indication of how many billions of euros it could cost to fix, the military planner said. Nato aims to convert these requirements into binding targets for individual governments to provide for the defence of Europe by autumn 2025, when it holds a regular meeting of defence ministers.

Reuters spoke to 12 military and civilian officials in Europe about the classified plans, who outlined six areas the 32-nation alliance has identified as the most pressing to address.

These include shortages in air defences and long-range missiles, troop numbers, ammunition, logistical headaches and a lack of secure digital communications on the battlefield, the conversations with Nato officials showed. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss security matters more freely. Nato hasn't publicly given an estimate of the overall costs.

The findings show Nato faces a slog to achieve its goals at a time when its unity could be tested by budgetary constraints among senior European members, and differences over how hawkish its stance on Russia should be.

Crucially, this year's US presidential election has raised the spectre that Nato's preeminent power may be led by a man critical of the alliance — former president Donald Trump — who has accused European partners of taking advantage of US military support.

At the July 9-11 Washington summit, some European policymakers publicly acknowledged that, regardless of who wins November's election, the continent will need to hike its military spending.

"We need to recognise that for America, whatever the result of the presidential election, the priority is increasingly going to shift to the Indo-Pacific, so that the European nations in Nato must do more of the heavy lifting," British Defence Secretary John Healey said on the sidelines of the summit.

In response to Reuters' questions, a Nato official said the alliance's leaders had agreed in Washington that in many cases expenditure beyond 2% of GDP would be needed to remedy shortfalls. He noted that 23 members now meet the 2% minimum requirement, or exceed it.



US President Joe Biden, his wife Jill Biden, Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and his wife Ingrid Schulerud stand with other Nato allies and partners during a ceremony ahead of a dinner at the White House during Nato's 75th anniversary summit in Washington recently. (Reuters)

"Regardless of the outcome of the US elections, European Allies will need to continue to increase their defence capabilities, forces' readiness and ammunition stocks," the Nato official said.

Nato is at its highest alert stage since the Cold War, with its more pessimistic officials, including German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, warning that an attack by Russia on its borders could happen within five years.

While the Russian economy is already on a war footing, European governments may face resistance if they demand more money for defence spending from taxpayers reeling from a cost-of-living squeeze to prepare for a war that seems a distant prospect to many, analysts say.

"We may expect to see a political backlash materialise, especially if politicians try to explain away cuts elsewhere with increased defence budgets," Eurointelligence, a news and analysis service focused on the EU, said in a July 12 note.

Nato's first serious overhaul since the end of the Cold War will pivot the alliance back to the defence of Europe against a possible Russian attack, after years of more distant missions in the likes of Afghanistan.

Reuters has previously reported that Nato planners believe it will need between 35 and 50 extra brigades to withstand a Russian attack. A brigade consists of 3,000-7,000 troops, which would mean anywhere from 105,000-350,000 soldiers.

It means, for example, that Germany would need 3-5 extra brigades or 20,000-30,000 additional combat troops, the source said, effectively one more division on top of the three divisions Berlin is working to equip at the moment.

The defence ministry in Berlin

declined to comment on classified plans. Echoing US officials, many European policymakers — including Britain's Healey — are already saying that defence spending will have to top the alliance's current target of 2% of GDP.

Tuuli Duneton, undersecretary for defence policy in Estonia — one of Europe's most hawkish governments — suggested in an online briefing on July 2 ahead of the Washington gathering that next year's Nato summit should discuss raising the spending goal to either 2.5% or 3%.

The US is by far the largest contributor to Nato operations. According to Nato estimates published in June, the US will spend \$967.7bn on defence in 2024, roughly 10 times as much as Germany, the second-largest spending country, with \$97.7bn. Total Nato military expenditures for 2024 are estimated at \$1,474.4bn. Trump's selection in July of Senator JD Vance as his vice-presidential running partner — who opposes aid to Ukraine and has criticised Nato partners as "welfare clients" — stirred concern in some European capitals.

Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Dietz, a Pentagon spokesperson, said the US supported European allies' efforts to increasing defence spending to at least the 2% of GDP target, and noted they had already made significant progress in boosting budgets.

"Nato's regional defence plans involve enhancing readiness and flexibility across the Alliance. We remain committed to contributing significantly to these efforts," Dietz told Reuters.

Under the new defence plans, Germany will need to quadruple its air defences — not just the number of Patriot batteries but also shorter-range systems

— to protect bases, ports and more than 100,000 troops expected to cross the country on their way to the eastern flank in the event of severe tensions or a war, one security source told Reuters.

Germany had 36 Patriot air defence units when it was Nato's frontline state during the Cold War and even then it relied on support from Nato allies. Today, German forces are down to 9 Patriot units, after donating three to Ukraine since the Russian invasion in 2022 and need to drastically scale up.

The cost will be considerable. Berlin just ordered four Patriot units at a price tag of 1.35bn euros. In a sign of the budgetary challenges already weighing on Europe's largest economy, Germany is planning to halve its 2025 military aid to Ukraine. Berlin instead hopes Ukraine will be able to meet the bulk of its military needs with the \$50bn in loans from the proceeds of frozen Russian assets approved by the Group of Seven, Reuters reported.

Logistics planners are getting down to brass tacks, working out how to transport food, fuel and water to troops along a supply line, a senior Nato official said, with a second official pointing out that a reverse flow of wounded troops and prisoners of war will also have to be organised.

"They are developing the maps in granular detail with allies," the official said, making sure, for example, that bridges were sturdy enough to bear heavy military loads.

Another military planning source sketched out a scenario where enemy forces might target the US air base in Ramstein in southwest Germany, or North Sea ports such as Bremerhaven through which Nato forces would travel en route to Poland.

"How do I protect those masses so that they don't turn into valuable targets?" the source said. "Otherwise, they will be the first and the last Americans to deploy here." Whereas tens of thousands of Nato and Soviet troops faced off directly along the inner-German border during the Cold War, deploying troops now will take longer with the frontline of any conflict likely to be further east — up to 60 days, including the time to get a political decision, according to the first military planner.

Europe does not have enough rail capacity to move tanks, and railway gauges vary between Germany and ex-Soviet Baltic states, meaning weapons and equipment would have to be loaded onto different trains.

The first Nato planning official said cyber defences need to be strengthened to protect against a hacking attack that could affect possible deployments, for example, in Poland that could jam railways switches and halt troop movements eastward.

That makes speedy decision-making and a reliable checklist of red flags, indicating an imminent Russian attack, essential.

Nato planners have sharpened a double-digit number of early warning indicators of what might constitute the precursor to a full-blown Russian invasion, the first Nato planning source told Reuters, without providing further details.

Europe would need to be prepared to "bare its teeth" and move combat-ready troops right up to the potential frontline in response to Russian military movements if needed as a deterrent, but also to pick up the fight instantly should tensions turn into a war, the planning source said. — Reuters

By Kantaro Komiya  
Tokyo

## Taiwanese rocket startup may be early test of Japan's space hub plans

A Taiwanese startup aims to become the first foreign firm to launch a rocket from Japan by early next year, part of a plan industry advocates say will aid Tokyo's ambitions of becoming a space hub in Asia.

The planned suborbital launch by TiSpace has faced regulatory hurdles and delays amid questions over whether Japan should embrace overseas business as part of its effort to double the size of its 4tn yen (\$26bn) space industry over the next decade.

The private firm, co-founded in 2016 by current and former officials from Taiwan's space agency, has not had a successful launch. Its most recent attempt to fly a rocket, via its sister company AtSpace in Australia in 2022, failed because of an oxidiser leak. The rocket to be tested in Japan is a different design.

"This (planned launch) should be a very good case for the Japanese government," TiSpace chairman Yen-sen Chen told Reuters in an interview. "If that goes smoothly, then you will attract more customers from other countries." He said the firm is waiting on one last regulatory approval, a radio permit that will enable the launch of the company's 12m (39ft) sounding rocket, which he hopes will occur by early 2025. A sounding rocket can reach space but does not achieve orbit.

Some analysts have said launching a Taiwanese rocket in Japan might draw the attention of China, which claims Taiwan as its own over the strong objections of the government in Taipei, and monitors the island's advancements in missile-related technologies. But so far, Chen said, he had not heard any concerns.

China's foreign ministry said it was "not aware of the relevant circumstances" of the launch.

Japan's Cabinet Office said "free



A view of the Kestrel I Suborbital Launch Vehicle, operated by AtSpace, sister company of Taiwanese rocket startup TiSpace, at an AtSpace facility in Willawong, Queensland, Australia.

economic and research activities are guaranteed in Japan within the scope of laws and regulations." An official from Taiwan's de facto embassy in Japan met with TiSpace in March 2023 in what the embassy called a "courtesy visit" but the embassy declined to comment further, saying the launch was a private-sector matter.

TiSpace is the only Taiwanese company attempting launches. One of the company's other co-founders, Wu Jong-shinn, is now the head of Taiwan's space agency. The agency declined to comment on its relationship with TiSpace and said all its launch services are conducted through public tender.

The company's endeavour has won support among Japanese space businesses, especially in the remote agricultural town of Taiki, on the northern island of Hokkaido, which will host the launch. Officials and experts cite the benefits of inviting foreign companies.

Yuko Nakagawa, a ruling-party lawmaker representing Taiki and neighbouring communities, said TiSpace's project was "a symbol of Taiwan-Japan friendship" and a tailwind for an international business complex that local officials call a "Space Silicon Valley".

Japan wants its private space industry to be worth more than \$50bn by the

early 2030s, launch 30 rockets a year and become Asia's space transportation hub, according to the latest government plans.

Jun Kazeki, the top official overseeing Japan's space strategy in the Cabinet Office, declined to comment on TiSpace's plans. There may be "future possibilities to utilise overseas transportation technologies", but Japanese rockets are the government's priority, he said.

Government launches are typically carried out by Japanese-built boosters such as the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries H3. Private satellite operators often use foreign launch companies such as SpaceX and ArianeGroup outside Japan.

A senior Japanese official involved in the space sector cautioned that a foreign company launching orbital payloads from Japan would require close government scrutiny and high regulatory hurdles.

Because Japan's Space Activities Act does not govern sub-orbital launches such as TiSpace's, the central government does not need to give final approval for the launch. Tokyo plans to change that law to encompass suborbital flights and reusable rockets, but revisions are expected to take years.

Motoko Mizuno, an opposition lawmaker and former official at JAXA, the country's space agency, said she was cautious about Japan opening up to foreign companies, with which local launchers might not be able to compete on price.

Japan is negotiating a space technology safeguards agreement with the US that could also pave the way for US commercial launches in Japan.

Although JAXA has launched

domestically developed rockets for decades, the country's private rocket industry is nascent.

Space One, backed by Aerospace giant IHI, saw its rocket blow up during its inaugural launch in March. Taiki-based Interstellar Technologies in 2019 became the first Japanese firm to have a sounding rocket reach space but has not followed up with an orbital launch.

Yoshinori Odagiri, the chief executive of Space Cotan, which operates the Hokkaido Spaceport in Taiki, said a couple of European companies have expressed interest in its launch complex.

Tadashi Morimitsu, a local official in southwestern Oita prefecture, another budding space hub in Japan, which is partnering with US spaceplane company Sierra Space, said TiSpace's progress in Hokkaido encapsulates a "welcome phenomenon" of overseas space businesses using Japanese spaceports.

Globally, more than 50 spaceports are being built, but "they may end up with maybe five to 10 which can be truly successful and self-sustaining in the long term", said Boston Consulting Group principal Alessio Bonucci.

If TiSpace's test launch is successful, the company said it plans to expand its manufacturing capacity in Japan to serve Japanese customers.

One such potential client, Hokkaido-based Letara, has already inquired about whether TiSpace can carry its satellite propulsion system to space for testing.

"We don't ask if the company is domestic or foreign, as long as they can launch," said Letara co-founder Shota Hirai. — Reuters

# GLIMPSES OF PARIS OLYMPICS OPENING CEREMONY

