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Macron appoints centrist Bayrou as PM

President Emmanuel Macron yesterday named centrist Francois Bayrou as prime minister, handing him the daunting task of hauling France out of months of political crisis. The 73-year-old head of the MoDem group which is allied to Macron's party, was appointed nine days after parliament ousted Michel Barnier's government in a historic no-confidence vote following a standoff over an austerity budget. "The president of the Republic has appointed Mr Francois Bayrou as prime minister and tasked him with forming a government," the presidency said. **Page 11**

Thousands of Syrians celebrate in streets, calling for unity

QNA/AFP
Damascus

Thousands of Syrians gathered in squares and public spaces across various cities to celebrate the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Ahead of Friday prayers, crowds of Syrians gathered in the courtyard of Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, with men, women, and children coming together in a rare sight in the heart of the Syrian capital.

The protesters waved the independence flag, used by the Syrian opposition since 2011, chanting slogans calling for Syrian unity.

Earlier yesterday, the leader of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group (HTS), Abu Mohammed al-Jolani — who now uses his given name Ahmed al-Sharaa — had urged people to take to the streets to celebrate "the victory of the revolution".

"We are gathering because we're happy Syria has been freed, we're happy to have been liberated from the prison in which we lived," said Nour Thi al-Ghina, 38.

"This is the first time we have converged in such big numbers and the first time we are seeing such an event," she said, beaming with joy.

"We never expected this to happen."

HTS fighter Mohammed Shobek, 30, posed for pictures with local children with a rose in the barrel of his Kalashnikov assault rifle.

"We've finished the war in Syria



Children pose with independence-era Syrian flags during a celebration of the ouster of president Bashar al-Assad at the Umayyad Square in central Damascus yesterday.

and started praying for peace, we started carrying flowers, we started building this country and building it hand in hand," he told AFP.

In 2011, Assad's crackdown on peaceful protesters triggered a 13-year civil war that tore Syria apart, killing more than half a million people and displacing millions more.

Exhilarated crowds chanted: "One, one, one, the Syrian people is one!"

Many held the Syrian independence flag, used by the opposition since the uprising began.

Dozens of street vendors around the mosque were selling the three-star flags — which none would dare

to raise in government-held areas during Assad's iron-fisted rule.

Pictures of people who were disappeared or detained in Assad's prisons hung on the mosque's outer walls, the phone numbers of relatives inscribed on the images.

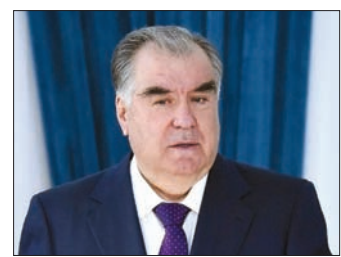
At the core of the system Assad inherited from his father Hafez was a brutal complex of prisons and detention centres used to eliminate dissent by jailing those suspected of stepping away from the ruling Baath party line.

War monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said in 2022 that more than 100,000 people had died in the prisons since 2011. **Page 3**

Amir, Tajik president mark 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon exchanged congratulatory messages on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries, celebrated this December.

In their messages, both leaders commended the strong friendship and fruitful co-operation that have defined their bilateral ties over the past three decades. They expressed their satisfaction with the current state of relations and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening and expanding co-operation in various areas to serve the mutual interests and aspirations of both nations and their peoples. (QNA)



Amir, Greek PM discuss regional developments

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani discussed with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis the most prominent regional and international developments, especially the latest developments in the region. This came in a phone call received by the Amir yesterday from the Greek prime minister. The call also dealt with discussing bilateral relations. (QNA)

PM receives phone call from UAE FM

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani received a phone call yesterday from UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan. The call focused on enhancing bilateral relations and exploring ways to strengthen co-operation between the two nations. They also discussed the latest developments in Gaza and occupied Palestinian territories, the situation in Syria, and other issues of mutual concern. (QNA)

33 Palestinians killed in Israeli attack on Nuseirat camp

Reuters
Gaza/Cairo

Dozens of relatives wept and recited verses from the Qur'an at a Gaza Strip hospital yesterday before burying some of the 33 Palestinians killed in an Israeli air strike on a post office where they had been sheltering.

Medics said families displaced by the 14-month-old conflict had sought refuge in the postal facility in Nuseirat camp. The attack

late on Thursday damaged several houses nearby.

Israel said it was targeting a senior Islamic Jihad member when it hit the structure.

Some of the bodies gathered at Al-Awda Hospital in Nuseirat were wrapped in white shrouds and others in blankets from home. The families accompanied them on a walk to their graves.

"They have killed the hope and optimism," said Suheil Mattar, whose grandchildren and daughter-in-law were killed.

"Every time things happen and we

say there will be a truce and we will rest... After that, they change their minds, they change their minds, we don't know why," Mattar said.

Nuseirat is one of the Gaza Strip's eight historic camps originally for Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war around the establishment of Israel. Today, it is part of a dense urban area crowded with displaced people from throughout the enclave.

"We've seen absolutely horrific images from the scene," Louise Wateridge, a senior emergency officer for the UN Palestinian relief

agency, told a UN press briefing in Geneva by video link from Nuseirat yesterday.

"There are parents looking for their children, children covered in dust and blood, looking for their parents, multiple injuries on top of the casualties reported and people still buried under the rubble," she said.

Yesterday, Palestinian health officials said at least 12 people were killed in separate Israeli air strikes across the enclave, including three in a tent housing a displaced family in Khan Younis and a local journalist in Gaza City.

Qatar condemns massacre in Nuseirat camp

Qatar has condemned in the strongest terms the heinous massacre committed by the Israeli occupation in Nuseirat camp in the Gaza Strip, which resulted in dozens of martyrs and wounded.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed, in a statement yesterday, the urgent need for urgent international action to provide protection for the brotherly Palestinian people in light of the brutal and repeated crimes of the occupation against them. It also underlined the need to reinforce regional and international efforts to

immediately end the Israeli aggression on Gaza, to avoid the fall of more innocent and defenceless people, and to seek to address the tragic humanitarian conditions in the Strip, and prevent the expansion of the circle of violence in the region.

The ministry reiterated Qatar's firm position on the justice of the Palestinian cause, and the legitimate rights of the brotherly Palestinian people, including the establishment of their independent state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. (QNA)

'Nightglow' balloons fascinate Doha



Katara - the Cultural Village's southern area witnessed a breathtaking display of illuminated hot air balloons last night, entralling thousands of spectators who thronged the second day of fifth Qatar Hot Air Balloon Festival. The 'Nightglow' event showcased balloons of various colours, shapes and designs, from across the world. The festival runs until December 21. **PICTURE:** Joey Aguilar **Page 2**

'Doha Global South Health Policy initiative makes great progress'

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

The Doha Global South Health Policy initiative launched in February 2024 by various Qatari stakeholders in partnership with Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is making steady progress focusing on primary healthcare in global south countries selected for the programme, disclosed a top official of the Gates Foundation.

"We had a roundtable with the participating countries in Africa during Doha Forum. It was clear in a number of the presentations, to potentially use some of the digital technologies to help improve pri-



Dr Chris Elias speaking to *Gulf Times* in Doha.

PICTURE: Thajudheen

mary health care in those countries." Dr Chris Elias, president of the Global Development Division at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation told *Gulf Times* in an exclusive interview.

"During the discussions, the countries have identified one or

two projects where Qatar could partner with them on strengthening the health workforce or improving the digital transformation within the primary health care system," he highlighted.

The official said that the focus will be on the underlying immunisation and maternal and child healthcare part for a strong primary healthcare system in these countries.

"So, there were a number of project ideas presented. I think the next step will be to see if there's a potential match on some of those projects where Qatar might support some of the countries directly and then actually try to disseminate the learnings," continued the official. **To Page 12**

Transport minister holds talks with Kuwait civil aviation chief

HE the Minister of Transport Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Thani met with Kuwait's Directorate General for Civil Aviation Chairperson Sheikh Humoud Mubarak Humoud al-Jaber al-Sabah. The meeting, on the sidelines of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) Security Week 2024 in the Sultanate of Oman, deliberated bilateral civil aviation relations and ways to boost them. The



meeting was attended by Acting President of the General Civil Aviation Authority Mohammed Faleh al-Hajri. (QNA)

PM, US official discuss Gaza, Syria



HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met yesterday with the visiting US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan. The two sides discussed the strategic relationship between the two countries, ways to strengthen and support it, as well as the latest developments in Gaza and occupied Palestinian territories, and the situation in Syria. They also addressed other topics of joint interest. Both parties stressed the importance of ensuring Syria's unity and pursuing a peaceful transition of power through an inclusive political process based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254, while enhancing efforts to protect civilians and combat terrorism. (QNA)

Qatar welcomes agreement between Somalia, Ethiopia

Qatar welcomed the announcement issued by Somalia and Ethiopia, regarding working to find common solutions to overcome outstanding differences, and conducting technical negotiations between the two parties, in a significant step that paves the way for a comprehensive and final solution to the conflict between the two neighboring countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs voiced Qatar's hope that the two countries will engage in technical negotiations and that they will culminate in reaching a result that contributes to opening a new page of constructive co-operation between the two countries, in a way that serves the aspirations of the two peoples toward stability and prosperity and enhances peace, security, and stability in the Horn of Africa region. The ministry also voiced Qatar's appreciation for the efforts of Turkiye and its important role in facilitating the achievement of this consensus between the two countries. (QNA)

Qatar Hot Air Balloon Festival's Nightglow enthralled thousands

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Katara - the Cultural Village's southern area witnessed a breathtaking display of illuminated hot air balloons last night, enthralled thousands of spectators who thronged the second day of fifth Qatar Hot Air Balloon Festival.

The 'Nightglow' event showcased the balloons' dazzling and unique glow accompanied by a music performance from the main stage. Visitors had the opportunity to capture the stunning display of colours, shapes and designs of balloons that came all the way from various regions of the world.

The Nightglow also created a unique, picturesque view of Katara, inspiring visitors to take photos and videos and post on social media.

"What makes this fifth edition of the festival special is we have a big number of uniquely shaped and caricature hot air balloons and they are very interesting," Hassan al-Mousawi, CEO of Safe Flight Solutions, told *Gulf Times* on the sidelines of the Nightglow event yesterday. "We have increased the participation from different countries, all the way from China and Japan to Europe and South America. We have a big delegation coming from Brazil, and a lot of special shapes too."

"We are also featuring stunn-



The 'Nightglow' event showcased the balloons' dazzling and unique glow accompanied by a music performance from the main stage. PICTURES: Joey Aguilar

ing laser shows, four times every night, and this is the first time that it is taking place in this event," he explained.

Apart from the hot air balloons, a group of roving performers also entertain families and their children, in addition to a dedicated kids' zone. It showcases an array of activations and engaging games, from carnival classics and team challenges to virtual reality experiences, as well as themed bouncy houses, and thrilling slides.

The festival also offers young visitors the chance to take part in

kite-building workshops, allowing them to design, decorate, and fly their own kites under the guidance of experienced instructors.

"Our aim is to grow this festival and we have a lot of support from Qatar Tourism," al-Mousawi said, as he also thanked partners and sponsors.

He expressed optimism that the number of participants will continue to increase, boosting Qatar's tourism sector, further attracting more visitors from different countries. The festival runs until December 21.



Hassan al-Mousawi at the Nightglow event.

Michelin Guide Doha 2025 features 33 restaurants

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

Qatar celebrated the launch of the first *Michelin Guide*, featuring 33 recommended restaurants, at an event held on Thursday at Raffles Doha. "We are delighted to announce the arrival of the first *Michelin Guide* in Qatar. Our anonymous observers have explored the city, sampled its restaurants and cuisines from all over the world and selected the best, across all price ranges and styles," said Gwendal Poullennec, international director of *Michelin Guides*.

"This first edition celebrates the best of Doha's dining scene and puts the city on the international culinary map."

"The selection of these 33 restaurants in the *Michelin Guide* is a testament to the talent of the many gifted chefs and culinary teams who have made Doha their home and who bring passion, creativity and respect for local traditions to their craft."

HE Saad bin Ali al-Kharji, Chairman of Qatar Tourism and Board of Directors of Visit Qatar, said that Doha's entry into the *Michelin Guide* rankings "confirms Qatar's position as an emerging global culinary destination, allowing visitors to explore our diverse culinary options and distinguished hospitality, ensuring they enjoy exceptional experiences and unforgettable stays."

Al-Kharji also pointed out that this achievement "celebrates the talents of the culinary teams that Doha has attracted, who appreciate the ambition of our capital and its commitment to the high-



HE Saad bin Ali al-Kharji and Gwendal Poullennec at the ceremony.

est standards of quality and luxury, which encourages them to innovate and develop professionally."

The Chairman of Qatar Tourism also touched on the distinguished position that Qatar has come to occupy in the tourism and travel sector, which reinforces the ambitious plans to reach 60mn visitors by 2030.

Regardless of the style of cuisine, concept or location of a restaurant, whether fine dining or street food, *Michelin Guide* inspectors use the same five criteria worldwide: quality of ingredients; mastery of cooking techniques; harmony of flavours; expression of the chef's personality in the kitchen; and consistency, both over time and across the entire menu.

Two restaurants receive their first one Michelin star: Jamavar and Edam by Alain Ducasse. Jamavar - This London-based restaurant offers a wide range of dishes from across India, all expertly and carefully prepared by head chef

Debesh Balaja. His specialties include Lal Maas, a lamb shank slow cooked for eight hours.

Edam by Alain Ducasse - While Alain Ducasse's signature style is evident here, Chef Fabrice Rousseau has managed to celebrate Qatari influences within the menu. Introducing spices using local ingredients adds a new dimension to the dining experience.

Four restaurants received Bib Gourmand awards - Isan, Jiwan, Argan, and Hoppers. Named after Bibendum, the official name of the Michelin man, the Bib Gourmand award is an award for restaurants that serve high-quality food at excellent value.

Isan - With its three open kitchens, the chef and her team prepare a variety of regional dishes as well as delicious Thai dishes.

Jiwan - At this restaurant located on the fourth floor of the National Museum of Qatar, guests can enjoy Qatari cuisine with a modern twist.



Awarded chefs from 33 Michelin Guides recommended restaurants in Doha.

Argan - Located on a pedestrian street on the edge of Souq Waqif, Argan offers its customers authentic Moroccan dishes at excellent value.

Hoppers - Where Sri Lankan and South Indian food attracts, is a branch of the original famous restaurant in London.

The Michelin Guide Special Awards aim to highlight and celebrate the incredible diversity of roles within the hospitality industry, as well as the most talented and inspiring professionals.

• Young Chef of the Year Award presented by Place Vendôme Qatar, goes to Sirigan Salli of Isan. The menu covers all of Thailand with three different cuisines, each specialising in a distinct cooking technique, which is a clear challenge.

• The Service Award goes to Paulo Bastos and his team at Morimoto. This manager has an expert eye, anticipating guests' needs, presence, knowledge, personality,



Raffles Doha hosted the *Michelin Guide in Doha 2025* ceremony.

charisma and humour. His team demonstrates equal levels of energy, passion, enthusiasm and fun. Every guest will leave feeling well taken care of.

• Robbie Rattan at Idam Alain Ducasse for his exceptional

cocktails. Robbie leads the team responsible for creating an imaginative and highly engaging range of non-alcoholic cocktails, using local spices, fruits and ingredients that enhance and elevate the overall dining experience.



Palestinian support gathering in Yemen



Houthi military spokesman Yahya Sarea delivers a statement as protesters, mainly Houthi supporters, rally to show support to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, in Sanaa, Yemen, yesterday.



Supporters of Yemen's Houthi group attend a rally in solidarity "with the people of Gaza" in the Houthi-controlled capital Sanaa, yesterday, amid the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip between Israel and Hamas.

Syrians explore Assad family's massive summer resort for first time

Reuters
Latakia

Syrian cyclist Bassel Soufi rode his bike 40km from the northwestern city of Latakia yesterday to visit the Assad family's private coastal resort as local residents strolled around the compound for the first time in decades.

After the family's brutal 54-year rule and a 13-year civil war, Syrian rebels ousted President Bashar al-Assad on Sunday in a generational change for the Middle East.

Since then, many of the properties belonging to Assad or his family have been looted or destroyed by Syrians looking to erase his legacy.

Among those was the family's massive summer resort in Burj Islam. The compound, boasting a white villa with balconies overlooking the Mediterranean, a private beach, several gardens, and a walking path, lay in disrepair yesterday after heavy looting and damage.

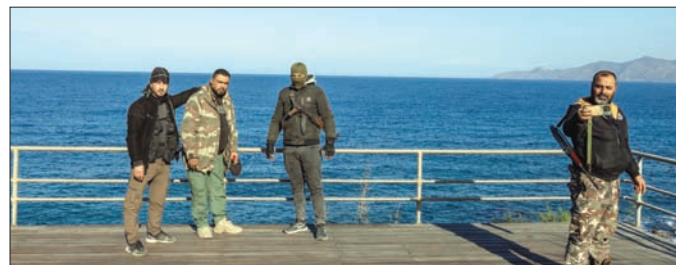
Windows were shattered and broken glass littered the floor, no furniture was left, while toilets, showers, lights and other items were all broken or smashed.

"I feel freedom for the first time in my life just to come here," Soufi, 50, said, arriving on his bicycle with his phone in hand to film the sea.

"I can't believe my eyes, they've built something that we didn't see anything like it in all my life," the former Syrian national team cyclist told Reuters, adding he believes the whole compound must now be for the people and not "for another president".

"Syrians, for a very long time, were unable to do anything they like. This is the first time for me," he said.

Following Assad's toppling, locals — mostly Syrian Turkmen driven out to nearby villages during the construction of the resort — entered the area for the first time since the As-



Fighters take selfies in front the Mediterranean view of the resort of ousted Syria's Bashar al-Assad in Burj Islam near Latakia, yesterday.



Cyclist Bassel Soufi visits the summer resort of the ousted president Bashar al-Assad as he tours a part of his daily training in Burj Islam, Syria, yesterday.



People visit summer resort of ousted Syria president Bashar al-Assad in Burj Islam near Latakia, yesterday.

sad family built it 50 years ago. "Everything he did he did with the people's money. If you look inside the villa it is ridiculous," said Sayit Bayirli, a fighter from the Free Syrian Army of Turkmen origin at the compound. He said the land on which the resort was built used to be olive groves.

"A few hours after Assad fell we came in... We don't want these views, these beautiful places to be damaged," he told Reuters, adding he wanted to see

the new government implement a system where the property is given back to those who originally owned it.

Bayirli said Assad had removed his valuables from the villa by sea using small boats and that FSA intelligence showed his children were at the compound this summer.

"It was an incredible excitement, everyone was so happy to see the place after years," Bayirli said.

Blinken makes surprise Iraq visit as part of Syria diplomacy push

Reuters
Baghdad

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made an unannounced visit to Iraq yesterday and met with Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani to discuss Syria's political transition, calling for a non-sectarian administration following the fall of Bashar al-Assad.

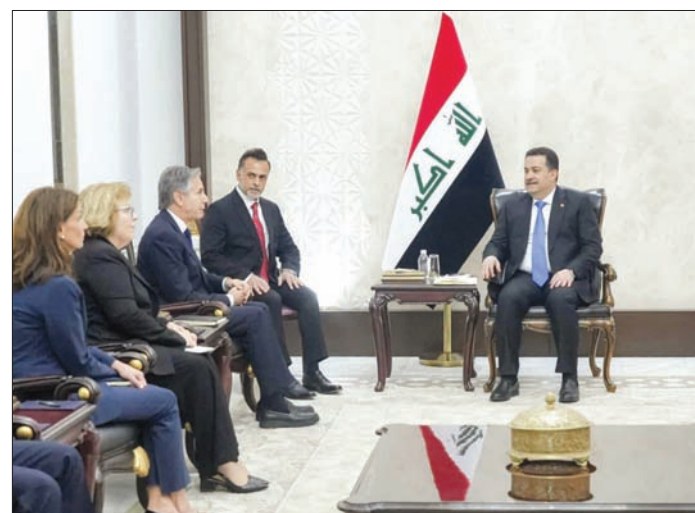
The top US diplomat is touring the Middle East to establish a united front with Arab and Turkish allies on the set of principles that Washington hopes will guide Syria's political transition, such as inclusivity and respect for minorities. Washington was taken aback by the shockingly speedy collapse of the Assad government after 13 years of civil war and the outgoing administration of President Joe Biden is urging the victorious rebels to create a government that eschews conservative factions.

Blinken visited the US embassy in Baghdad and said he spoke to Sudani about the situation in Syria.

"As Syria transitions from the Assad dictatorship to hopefully a democracy, it does so in a way that, of course, protects all of the minorities in Syria that produces an inclusive, nonsectarian government and does not become, in any way, a platform for terrorism," Blinken said at the US embassy in Baghdad.

"No one knows the importance of that more than Iraq, because of the ongoing presence of ISIS or Daesh in Syria, and we are determined to make sure that Daesh cannot re-emerge," he said, referring to the Islamic State group.

The Biden administration, along with governments in the region and the West has been trying to navigate the chaotic aftermath



This handout picture released by Iraq's Prime Minister's Media Office shows PM Mohammed S al-Sudani meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Baghdad, yesterday.

of Assad family's decades-long oppressive rule, and has begun engaging with the Syrian rebel groups including leading rebel faction Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). HTS is a group formerly allied with Al Qaeda.

Following Iraq, Blinken heads back to Jordan, where he will attend a meeting of Arab and Turkish foreign ministers to discuss Syria.Iraq, which is led by a coalition of political parties and armed groups close to Iran, is a major player in Tehran's so-called Axis of Resistance that includes Hamas in Gaza and Lebanese Hezbollah and has faced setbacks since Israel responded to Hamas' Oct 2023 storming of Israel. A US official told Reuters that Washington sees this moment as an opportunity to further push back Iran's influence in the region.

"I reaffirmed...our commitment to working with Iraq on security and always working for

Iraq's sovereignty to make sure that that is strengthened and preserved," Blinken said.

Iraq opted not to allow militias to intervene in Syria as the rebels advanced and ultimately seized Damascus last weekend, despite Baghdad's concerns that unrest could spill over.

Thousands of fighters crossed from Syria into Iraq after the 2003 US invasion and fuelled years of sectarian killing before returning in 2013 as Islamic State to conquer a third of the country.

Opposition factions in Syria led by HTS have disavowed Al Qaeda and Islamic State and say they have no ambitions in Iraq.

As the rebels in Syria advanced, Iraq had amassed on its border thousands of fighters from its conventional military as well as the Popular Mobilisation Forces, a security agency containing many foreign-aligned armed groups that previously fought in Syria.

RSF attacks main hospital in Sudan's Al-Fashir: health official

Reuters
Cairo

The paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) attacked the main still-functioning hospital in Al-Fashir, in Sudan's North Darfur state yesterday, killing nine people and injuring 20, according to a local health official and activists.

A drone fired four missiles at the hospital overnight, destroying wards, waiting areas and other facilities, said state health minister Ibrahim Khatir and the Al-Fashir resistance committee, a pro-democracy group that monitors violence in the area.

Images they shared showed debris scattered over hospital beds and damaged ceilings and walls. The RSF says it does not target civilians and could not immediately be reached for comment. Sudan's army and the RSF

have been locked in conflict for more than 18 months, triggering a profound humanitarian crisis in which more than 12mn people have been driven from their homes and UN agencies have struggled to deliver relief.

Al-Fashir is one of the most active frontlines between the RSF and the Sudanese army and its allies, which are fighting to maintain a last foothold in the Darfur region. Observers fear that an RSF victory there could bring ethnic retribution.

Nearby Zamzam camp, where experts say a famine is occurring among a population of more than half a million people, has also come under RSF artillery fire over the last two weeks, forcing thousands to leave the camp.

The army has responded with air strikes that have targeted Al-Fashir and surrounding towns. This week it staged one of the deadliest attacks in the war, kill-

ing more than 100 in the town of Kabkabiya. At the UN Security Council earlier this week, Sudan accused the United Arab Emirates of carrying out drone attacks for the RSF from Amdjarass in Chad, targeting al-Fashir and other cities in the north of Sudan as well as supplying weaponry and training. The UAE denies supporting the RSF and says it only carries out flights carrying humanitarian aid for Sudanese refugees in Chad.

Hospitals in Al-Fashir have frequently come under fire in the war, leaving Saudi Hospital the last major functioning facility in the area. The same has happened across the country's warzones. In the Khartoum state, nearly half of the hospitals have been damaged, severely hampering access to medical care, according to a report this week by the Sudanese American Physicians Association and the Yale School of Public Health Humanitarian Research Lab.

LEGAL

Sudan militia leader denies ICC war crimes charges

A Sudanese militia chief yesterday denied all charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court, saying that prosecutors had got the wrong man, AFP reported from The Hague. Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman was addressing the ICC as his trial on charges of rape, murder, and torture came to an end. Chief ICC prosecutor Karim Khan said he was a leading member of Sudan's infamous Janjaweed militia, also known by the nom de guerre Ali Kushayb, who participated "enthusiastically" in brutal war crimes. But Abd-Al-Rahman told the court: "I am not Ali Kushayb. I do not know this person... I have nothing to do with the accusations against me." He said he had handed himself in and claimed to be Ali Kushayb because he was "desperate." "I had been waiting for two months in hiding, moving around all the time, and I was warned that the government wanted to arrest me, and I was afraid of being arrested," he said.

IAEA says Iran agrees to more monitoring at Fordo enrichment plant

Iran has agreed to increased monitoring by the UN nuclear watchdog at its Fordo enrichment plant, following its plans to ramp up production of highly enriched uranium at the site, the agency said in a report seen by AFP yesterday, AFP reported from Vienna. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said last week that Iran had revamped its Fordo enrichment plant (FFEP), south of Tehran. The changes would "significantly increase the rate of production of uranium enriched up to 60%", the agency said — close to the 90% needed to make a nuclear weapon. The rate of production will jump to more than 34 kilogrammes of highly enriched uranium per month, compared to 4.7 kilogrammes previously, it added. The IAEA called on Iran to implement inspections urgently, while European powers pressed Tehran to "immediately halt its nuclear escalation". "Iran agreed to the agency's request to increase the frequency and intensity of the implementation of safeguards measures at FFEP," the IAEA said in a confidential report seen by AFP. Iran insists on its right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and has denied it is seeking a weapons capability. But according to the IAEA, it is the only non-nuclear-weapon state enriching uranium to 60% purity. Last month, Iran announced that it would launch "new and advanced" centrifuges in response to an IAEA board resolution that censured Tehran for its lack of co-operation with the agency. Iran's expansion of enrichment was "a clear message that they are responding to what they feel is pressure", IAEA chief Rafael Grossi told AFP last week. Britain, France and Germany on Tuesday "condemned" Iran's latest steps to expand its nuclear programme, "strongly urging" Tehran to reverse them.



HOPE Qatar celebrates 18 years with cultural extravaganza



HOPE Qatar Centre for Persons with Disabilities celebrated the completion of 18 years with a three-hour cultural extravaganza that brought on stage over 100 students with intellectual and physical disabilities who left the audience in awe.

Students studying at HOPE Qatar, representing 19 different nationalities, converged at the Awsaj Academy auditorium in Qatar Foundation's Education City this weekend in front of an audience comprising Qatari and expatriate communities, Bangladesh ambassador Mohamed Nazrul Islam, Indonesian ambassador Ridwan Hassan, Indian embassy first secretary Eish Singhal, parents, and other well-wishers.

The celebration was based on the theme 'Beats Across Borders' and conducted on a day after the International Day of Persons with Disabilities was celebrated across the world. The performance by the students included dances from across different countries including India, Bangladesh, Romania, Africa, Spain, Egypt, Portugal, Philippines, Indonesia, England, and Ireland.

Students in the 3-25 age range danced to various popular tunes often bringing the applauding audience to its feet. The students were also accompanied by HOPE

Qatar staff members in some performances. The faculty also performed a medley of dances including Tinikling (Filipino), Dabke (Arab), and Kalbeliya (Rajasthan) reflective of the diversity among the team consisting of representatives from over 16 countries. A solo song by Arth, a student, was received with a standing ovation from the audience for his soulful voice and rendition.

A special award ceremony honoured 19 differently-abled HOPE Qatar students who had transitioned into the mainstream schools during the previous academic year. The class teachers of such students who transitioned were also given certificates of appreciation.

Founder and chief mentor Dr Rajeev Thomas said the annual events enhance the confidence of the students, and also ensure they learn essential social skills while practising and performing.

"A heightened sense of discipline, and systematic learning is required by each participant to be able to co-ordinate all the movements and steps needed for such a show, and it becomes more challenging when children with special needs are involved.

"The team at HOPE Qatar has consistently enabled these children to demonstrate to the society that if given the right

opportunities at the right time, children and youth with disabilities can achieve great success in their lives."

Dr Thomas also called upon the educators, lawmakers, parents and the general public to come together to ensure the creation of support systems that are essential for individuals with disabilities to thrive in the community.

Bangladesh ambassador described HOPE Qatar as one of his favourite places in Qatar. "I am constantly surprised that each year the team comes up with something more than last year. It is such events that helps the individuals with disabilities to demonstrate their abilities in spite of their challenges," he added.

Indonesian envoy said the event has proven that individuals with disabilities have the potential, and wherever they are given an opportunity, they will shine. He recounted how his own daughter studying at HOPE Qatar has shown tremendous progress in her studies and has cleared the open schooling examinations and is gearing up for further studies.

"As we as the family and community grow to accept out differently-abled children, in addition to facilitating their academic, social and emotional



learning, we will also become more optimistic as we follow their development and growth to become their best selves," he said.

Singhal, who represented Indian ambassador Vipul, commended the efforts and enthusiasm shown by the students on stage. He applauded the HOPE Qatar team for integrating the children with such efforts, patience and enthusiasm.

Gabriella Galatanu, a Ro-

manian national and mother of Stefan, a student, spoke to the audience about the developments in her son's life after joining HOPE Qatar.

"With a heart filled with gratitude, and great appreciation for this incredible school and its staff, I acknowledge that Stefan my son has been a part of this community since 2019, and these years have been nothing short of transformative for him and our family," she said.

"As a parent, I always wanted an environment where he would not only learn, but also would feel included, feel understood, and also celebrated for who he is as a person. HOPE Qatar has provided exactly that and helped him to grow socially and emotionally, and nurtured his social skills in such a way that brings us so much pride," she concluded while thanking the teachers for their patience, understanding and attitude of never giving up.

Role of education in eradicating illiteracy stressed

The Edukening conference by Qatar Hadia, the alumni association of Kerala-based Darul Huda Islamic University, highlighted the need to disseminate literacy and eradicate illiteracy.

Organised in co-operation with the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies' (DI) Politics and International Relations Programme, the conference was on the title 'Role of Educational Movements in Illiteracy Eradication Policy'.

The conference, held at DI, heralded the upcoming ruby jubilee celebrations of Darul Huda. DI president and provost Dr Abdel Wahab El Affendi inaugurated. Darul Huda vice chancellor Dr Bahaudheen Mohamed Nadwi delivered the presidential address. He



Darul Huda Vice-Chancellor Dr Bahaudheen Mohamed Nadwi delivering the presidential address at Darul Huda Feeder Conference.

underlined the role of educational institutions in India in providing education for all while ensuring social empowerment.

Darul Huda registrar Dr Rafeeq Ali Hudawi presented a paper on 'Empowering Societies Through Education: The Case of Darul Huda Movement'.

DI's assistant professor of Politics and International Relations Programme at School of Social Sciences and Humanities Dr Abdelkarim Amengay presented a paper on 'Experience of Alphabetisation from Arab World' while noted research scholar Dr Mohamed Hudawi Madappally presented a paper on 'Post-intellectualism in pan-Indian context: Unveiling a grounded Darul Huda Movement'.

The event also featured a panel discussion. Abdul Malik Hudawi, Nizam Hudawi, Dr Bahaudheen Hudawi and Faizal Niyaz Hudawi



Darul Huda Vice-Chancellor Dr Bahaudheen Mohamed Nadwi felicitating the speakers at the Edukening conference.



Dignitaries attending Darul Huda Feeder Conference.

were present. The Feeder Conference by Qatar Hadia was earlier held at Sheikh Abdullah Al Ansari Complex at West Bay, as

a curtain-raiser of Darul Huda ruby jubilee celebrations.

Dr Bahaudheen Mohamed Nadwi, Jassim Salem al-Ansari,

Safari Group director and general manager Zainul Abideen, Dr Rafeeq Ali Hudawi and Abdul Majeed Hudawi attended.

Qatar University fetes graduates of honours programme

The Honours Programme, Deanship of General Studies at Qatar University (QU) organised a ceremony to honour its 2023-2024 graduates. General Studies dean Dr Saba Mansoor Qadi, Honours Programme director Dr Yousri Marzouki, council members, graduates, faculty members, and students attended. In her speech, Dr Qadi, noted that the programme supports the university's strategy for excellence in education. Dr Marzouki described the graduation of 60 students, comprising 12 male and 48 female, as a demonstration of QU's commitment to providing an inclusive, pioneering and diverse educational environment. Al-Dana Mohammed al-Sulaiti, a graduate and budget analyst at QatarEnergy, described her experience in the Honours Programme as pivotal in shaping her personality and developing skills.





DCICAI hosts career counselling session



The ICAI Doha (Qatar) chapter (DCICAI) conducted a Chartered Accountancy (CA) career counselling session for over 90 students of MIE-SPPU. Chapter chairperson Kamlesh Tibrewal and executive committee member Rajesh Singh highlighted the unparalleled opportunities and growth prospects of the CA profession while addressing students' queries. This initiative underscores the chapter's commitment to fostering the growth of the CA profession and shaping the leaders of tomorrow, a statement said. Members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India residing in Qatar and those aspiring to join the chapter can contact Tibrewal (55928942) or vice-chairperson Kishore Alex (55046010), for further information.

IIS students shine in kung fu contest



A group of Ideal Indian School (IIS) students excelled in the Umair Inter-Club Kung fu Competition. Rana Fathima (VIII-J) - received three medals: Gold - Taolu (Kung fu movements), silver - Sanda (Kung fu, Wushu fighting), silver - Taolu (group movements); Muhammed Rayan Noufal (V-E) - received two medals: Gold - Sanda (Kung fu, Wushu fighting), silver - Taolu (group movements); Ramin Omar (III-A) received two medals: Bronze - Taolu (Kung fu movements), silver - Taolu (group movements); Abdulla Riswan Manshad (IV) - Gold - Sanda (Kung fu, Wushu fighting); Muhammad Reyyan Manshad (V-E) - Gold - Sanda (Kung fu, Wushu fighting); Hayyaan Mohammad Shaino (V-D) - Gold - Sanda (Kung fu, Wushu fighting); Aizen Abdulla (III-A) - Gold - Sanda (Kung fu, Wushu fighting). Principal Shaik Shamim Saheb and the heads of sections congratulated the students.

DPS Monarch excels at world mathematics team championship



DPS Monarch International School showcased an outstanding performance at the World Mathematics Team Championship (WMTCC) 2024, organised recently by Qatar Foundation.

The event brought together 767 students in 138 teams across 18 countries, celebrating the theme 'Algebra and Balancing' in honour of Al Khwarizmi,

the Father of Algebra.

DPS Monarch participated with 48 students forming six teams, representing the junior, intermediate, and advanced levels.

The individual, relay and team-based contests tested participants' mathematical acumen and teamwork. DPS Monarch's two advanced teams and one intermediate team se-

cured top team awards, seven students earned individual silver medals, and 30 students were awarded individual bronze medals. Beyond the competition, the event featured cultural exchanges, speeches by past gold medalists, and showcases of student talent. It was a holistic experience that enriched participants academically and culturally.

MES student triumphs in Arabic competition

Sara Osama of MES Indian School won the first position in the Inter-school Arabic Story Telling Competition conducted by Bright Future International School under the initiative 'Safe Sailing - My Values Define my Identity' project, for students of Classes IV-VIII. Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar congratulated the achiever.



RPS triumphs in Insijamu Qatar Season 4

Insijamu Qatar Season 4, an inter-school quiz competition celebrating Qatar's rich history, concluded at Rajagiri Public School (RPS), Doha, with the hosts emerging champions. Shantiniketan Indian School and Birla Public School secured the second position. DPS-Modern School and Galileo International School also reached the finals. The competition drew participation from 15 schools. The grand finale had as chief guest, Dr Muntasir Fayed al-Hamad, a distinguished scholar in Comparative Semitic Languages and an expert in Middle Eastern history and faiths. He presented the winners with the prizes.



QU's Sanabel Student Club wraps up Charity Week events

The Sanabel Student Club, in the Department of Student Activities at Qatar University (QU), concluded its Charity Week (CW) activities in collaboration with the Education Above All (EAA) Foundation.

The event was part of a global annual initiative aimed at uniting efforts for charitable work to support orphans and children in need.

The CW featured various fundraising activities and partnerships with several student clubs at QU to consolidate student efforts. This year, QU raised a total of QR44,019, contributing to the nationwide total of QR349,864 for CW in Qatar.

Omar Ahmed al-Emadi, student organisations' adviser at QU, thanked the students and

clubs who contributed to the success of the event. Student Alia al-Abda, CW events co-ordinator, described the activities as most inspiring and unforgettable. Volunteer student Hussein Ahmed said it was inspiring to collaborate with the Sanabel team and its volunteers, and to see the impactful results of collective efforts.

The event included a variety of

activities for students, such as a henna exhibition, charity market, carnival, treasure hunt, cultural competition and a football tournament. The event also hosted several QU clubs, including the Otype Team, RC Aircraft Club, Chess Club, E-Sports Club, Artists' Corner Club, Elia Club, and Fine Arts Club. A number of local businesses also participated.



MPPAQ organises insurance campaign



As part of the insurance campaign organised by Moodsadi Panchayat Pravasi Association Qatar (MPPAQ) for its members, the application forms of those enrolled in the Indian Community Benevolent Forum (ICBF) Insurance Scheme were officially handed over to ICBF president Shanavas Bava. The handover ceremony was led by MPPAQ general secretary Shaji Peevees, vice-president Shanahas Edodi, and office-bearers Siraj Palur, Rasik K V, and Sunil M K. ICBF management committee members were also present.



Court rules Namibia opposition parties can inspect election data

Reuters
Windhoek

Two Namibian opposition parties that are seeking to challenge the result of elections last month won a court order yesterday allowing them to inspect election materials they had requested to see.

Namibia's ruling party SWAPO won both the presidential and parliamentary elections on Nov 27, extending its 34-year rule in the southern African state.

Opposition parties alleged the election was flawed and potentially invalid due to an extension

Opposition parties alleged the election was flawed and potentially invalid due to an extension of voting for several days, among other issues

of voting for several days, among other issues.

"There were clearly irregularities in the election. IPC seeks the information in order to...determine the extent of the irregularities," the Independent Patriots for Change (IPC), the largest opposition party, said in a court filing seen by Reuters.

"It also enables IPC to consider whether to launch proceedings

concerning the validity of the elections," it said.

Another opposition party, the Landless People's Movement, joined the IPC in its request. After a hearing on Friday morning, Namibia's electoral court ordered the electoral commission to provide the parties with election materials such as the number of votes cast and counted at each polling station on each day for

their inspection. It required the commission to produce the data next week.

The election was marred by ballot paper shortages and technical challenges, causing voting to be extended for up to three days in some places.

President-elect Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah dismissed allegations that the election was flawed in her victory speech last week, saying, "I am not even listening to those critics".

The electoral commission said that the vote was free and fair. Nandi-Ndaitwah is due to take office in March as the country's first female president.



A person votes in an extension of the presidential and national assembly elections after delays on the official election day in Windhoek, Namibia, in a file photo.

AU urges Somalia, Ethiopia to swiftly implement agreement

AFP
Addis Ababa

The African Union (AU) urged Ethiopia and Somalia to implement "without delay" an agreement aimed at ending tensions between the neighbours over Ethiopia's access to the sea, calling the deal an "important act".

The two countries have been at loggerheads since landlocked Ethiopia struck a deal in January with Somalia's breakaway region Somaliland to lease a stretch of coastline for a port and military base.

In return, Somaliland - which declared independence from Somalia in 1991 in a move not recognised by Mogadishu - said Ethiopia would give it formal recognition, although this was never confirmed by Addis Ababa.

Somalia branded the deal a violation of its sovereignty, setting international alarm bells ringing over the risk of renewed conflict in the volatile region. Following hours of Turkish-brokered talks, Ankara announced late Wednesday that an "historic" agreement had been reached between Somalia and Ethiopia. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he believed the agreement would help Ethiopia gain its long-desired access to the sea. Technical talks are set for next year.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud had flown into Ankara for the talks following two previous rounds that made little progress. Speaking in the Turkish capital after the agreement, Mohamud said the neighbours had "mutual interests in cooperating

together".

"We belong to a region where peace and stability is first priority for our people's lives," he said.

African Union Commission Chairman Moussa Faki Mahamat stressed the "important act" taken by the leaders to find a deal but emphasised the urgency to "implement, without delay, the relevant measures adopted". He did not give any indication in the statement, posted on social media platform X, of what measures had been agreed.

East Africa's regional bloc IGAD (the Intergovernmental Authority on Development) also welcomed the agreement as an "important step". It "demonstrates a commitment to resolving bilateral issues amicably", IGAD Executive Secretary Workneh Gebeyehu said.

According to the text of the accord published by Turkey, the parties agreed "to put aside differences of opinion and contentious issues, and to move resolutely forward in cooperation towards common prosperity".

They agreed to work closely together on commercial arrangements and bilateral agreements that would ensure Ethiopia's "reliable, safe and sustainable access" to the sea "under the sovereign authority of the Federal Republic of Somalia".

To that end, it said they would start technical talks no later than the end of February which would be completed "within four months", with any differences to be dealt with "through dialogue, where necessary with Turkey's support". Both top US diplomat Antony Blinken and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in separate



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan holds a press conference with Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Ankara, Turkiye.

statements, looked ahead to negotiations to finalise the accord.

Blinken said the agreement reaffirms "each country's sovereignty, unity, independence, and territorial integrity".

Guterres thanked Erdogan for his role and looked forward to "a positive outcome to the process", his spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. There was no detail in the text published by Turkey on how the agreement might impact the controversial memorandum of understanding between Somaliland and Ethiopia, which has never been

made public.

Ethiopian authorities did not immediately respond to AFP's requests for comment about the future of the agreement with Somaliland. A source close to the Somaliland government said nothing had changed regarding the agreement with Ethiopia, noting: "Agreeing to work together to resolve their dispute is not the same as walking away from the MoU".

While Abiy has repeatedly insisted that his country must have coastal access, he told parliament earlier this year that Ethiopia had

"no interest in getting involved in a war" over access to the sea.

In response, Mogadishu has strengthened its ties with Egypt, Ethiopia's long-time rival.

Somalia expelled Ethiopia's ambassador in April and said Ethiopian troops would be excluded from a new African Union peacekeeping force against Islamist Al Shebaab insurgents that is due to be deployed on January 1. Ethiopia, which has the second-largest population in Africa with 120mn people, lost access to the sea when Eritrea gained independence in 1993.

US 'welcomes' Ethiopia-Somalia agreement

The United States said it welcomed the accord reached by Somalia and Ethiopia to end regional tensions, sparked by Addis Ababa's push for maritime access. The two countries had been at loggerheads since landlocked Ethiopia struck a deal in January with Somalia's breakaway region of Somaliland to lease a stretch of coastline for a port and military base.

"The United States welcomes the December 11 Declaration between the Federal Republic of Somalia and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia reaffirming each country's sovereignty, unity, independence, and territorial integrity," top US diplomat Antony Blinken said in a statement. Blinken added Washington was looking forward to the "technical negotiations" that would spell out Ethiopia's sea access "while respecting Somalia's territorial integrity". The deal was also welcomed by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who thanked Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his role. Guterres "looks forward to a swift commencement of the technical negotiations and a positive outcome to the process", his spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a statement. After Ethiopia announced its original deal with Somaliland - which unilaterally declared independence from Somalia in 1991 - authorities in the region said Ethiopia would give their government formal recognition. The pledge was never confirmed by Addis Ababa. Somalia branded the deal a violation of its sovereignty, setting international alarm bells ringing over the risk of renewed conflict in the volatile region. Blinken also thanked Turkey for "facilitating" the new agreement. The statement came as he was in talks with Erdogan in Ankara on the situation in Syria. "We encourage Ethiopia and Somalia to intensify their co-operation on mutual security interests, particularly the fight against Al Shebaab" insurgents, Blinken said. (AFP)

DR Congo, Rwanda leaders to hold peace talks in Angola

AFP
Kinshasa

The presidents of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo will meet tomorrow in Angola for a fresh round of talks aimed at ending the conflict in the DRC's troubled east. Since its re-emergence in 2021 the M23 militia, which claims to defend ethnic Tutsis, has seized swathes of DRC territory, displacing thousands and triggering a humanitarian crisis.

In early August, Angola mediated a fragile truce that stabilised the situation at the front line, but both sides continued to exchange fire and clashes have intensified since late October. Angolan President Joao Lourenco, appointed by the African Union as a mediator, voiced hope Thursday that the summit in Luanda could lead to a peace deal.

"We are optimistic that this meeting eventually will produce all the signing or the decision for soon signing a long-lasting peace agreement between the two neighbouring countries," Lourenco said during a visit to South Africa. Kigali confirmed that Rwandan President Paul Kagame would attend the summit on Sunday, joined by his foreign minister Olivier Nduhungirehe.

The Congolese presidency also confirmed that Felix Tshisekedi would participate, despite the DRC's previous refusals to negotiate with Rwanda and its calls for international sanctions against its neighbour. "Our country con-



Paul Kagame and Felix Tshisekedi.

tinues to face persistent rebellions, including the aggression by the Rwandan army and the M23 terrorists," Tshisekedi said in parliament Wednesday, calling the militants and Rwanda "enemies of the Republic".

The capital of DRC's North Kivu province Goma, home to about 1mn people and another million displaced by war, is now nearly surrounded by M23 rebels and the Rwandan army. Early in November, the two central African neighbours launched a committee to monitor ceasefire violations, led by Angola and including representatives from both the DRC and Rwanda.

Kinshasa and Kigali a few weeks later approved a concept of operations document setting out the terms by which Rwandan troops will disengage from Congolese territory. A previous draft dated in August listed the dismantling of a militia created by ethnic Hutus involved in the Rwandan genocide in 1994 as a

precondition for Rwanda's withdrawal.

Often portrayed by Kigali as a threat to its security, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) is one of various disparate militias fighting alongside the Congolese army against the M23.

The August draft was rejected by the DRC, which demanded that the withdrawal occur at the same time as the FDLR's dismantling.

The final strategic document, seen by AFP, plans for a period of 90 days to "conclude the neutralisation of the FDLR and the lifting of Rwanda's defensive measures". The two presidents last saw each other in October in Paris but did not speak, though they have maintained dialogue through the mediation of Luanda.

Home to a string of rival armed groups, the mineral-rich eastern DRC has been plagued by internal and cross-border violence for the past three decades.

BBC vows to keep up reporting after Niger suspends radio

AFP
London

The BBC said yesterday it would continue to report on the Sahel region after the military junta in Niger suspended BBC radio for three months. It is the latest in a slew of Western media to be sanctioned by military juntas in the region of western and north-central Africa.

BBC radio was to be suspended "with immediate effect", the Niger leadership said, accusing the British broadcaster on Thursday of spreading "erroneous information likely to destabilise social peace

and undermine the morale of the troops". Popular BBC programmes including in the majority Hausa language are broadcast in Niger via local radio partners, reaching some 2.4mn people in 2024, according to the BBC.

"This directly impacts our ability to reach audiences with much-needed accurate and impartial news," a BBC spokesperson said of the ban. "We stand by our journalism and we will continue to report on the region without fear or favour."

Since seizing power in a July 2023 coup, the military government has banned several Western media outlets, including Radio France

Internationale (RFI) and France 24. Niger also announced on Thursday it was "filing a complaint" against RFI. On Wednesday, both the BBC and RFI reported that militants had killed 90 soldiers and over 40 civilians in Chatoumane, in the western Tera region bordering Burkina Faso teeming with armed fighters. Niger's junta dismissed reports of the attack and deaths as "baseless assertions" and a "campaign of intoxication".

Although AFP was unable to verify those numbers from an independent local source, a Western security source told AFP that 90-100 people died in Tuesday's attack.

Festive season safety parade in Cape Town



Cape Town learner law enforcement officers participate in a joint festive season safety parade between the City of Cape Town law enforcement and South African Police Services in Cape Town, South Africa.



This handout picture released yesterday by the Brazilian Vice-Presidency shows Lula with his neurosurgeon Dr Marcos Stavale. - AFP

Lula 'strong' after surgery, posts video

AFP
Sao Paulo

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has declared that he was "strong and steady", in a video of him walking around unassisted after emergency surgery earlier this week.

"Please rest assured. I am strong and steady! I am walking the halls...talking a lot, eating well and, soon, ready to return home and continue working and taking care of every Brazilian family," he wrote on X and other social media.

The video included in the post showed him walking a hospital corridor with his neurosurgeon, Marcos Stavale.

They were the first public images of Lula, 79, since Monday, when doctors detected intracranial bleeding related to a bad fall he had in October and rushed him to the Hospital Sirio-Libanês in Sao Paulo.

He underwent the surgery on Tuesday to relieve the pressure on his brain, with doctors conducting a trepanation - drilling through his skull.

Lula's medical team says he suffered no brain damage from the emergency and was doing well post-surgery.

In the posted video, Lula is seen walking and stopping to talk with Stavale and with his wife, First Lady Rosângela da Silva.

The president, in casual wear, sports a bandage on top of his head.

In the accompanying message, Lula thanked the public for the prayers and words from well-wishers, passed on by his wife, and said he looked forward to "many meetings in Brazil and around the world" in the coming year.

"Thank you for your affection and for all the dedication of the medical team. The love I receive keeps me always ready to move on!" he wrote.

He was taken out of intensive care yesterday, and was expected to be allowed to leave hospital early next week.

The hospital said in a public medical update that Lula remains "under semi-intensive care", which a presidency official explained meant monitoring at regular intervals, instead of around-the-clock, as in intensive care.

Despite the doctors restricting visits to family members and saying that the president needed to rest, Lula has been sporadically carrying out some of his duties while convalescing.

He has been speaking with officials and signing documents electronically, ministers said.

Lula's vice-president, Geraldo Alckmin, has been taking on some of the president's workload but the presidency has not officially tapped him to assume full presidential duties.

The latest medical emergency adds to a list of health problems Lula has suffered over the years, including treatment in 2011 for throat cancer, and a hip replacement operation last year.

On Thursday, doctors performed a follow-up procedure to the surgery by inserting a catheter to block blood flow going through an artery to the area of his head that was operated on, to minimise the risk of a haemorrhage reoccurring.

They also removed a medical drain that had been put in on Tuesday to remove blood from the problem area.

Lula's doctor, Roberto Kalil, has said there were no signs of any complications, and that the longer that persisted, the better for Lula's prognosis.

"Every week, every month plays in favour of a patient who has had a brain haemorrhage," he told a news conference on Thursday.

The Brazilian president's medical emergency this week started when he complained on Monday of a headache while in Brasilia.

An MRI scan found a haemorrhage between his brain and the dura mater membrane that protects it, prompting his swift transport to the Hospital Sirio-Libanês - the country's top medical facility - for the surgery.

After suffering his fall on October 19, Lula told an official from his Workers' Party that the accident had been "serious".

In the weeks following, the president skipped planned overseas trips.

However, from mid-November he resumed his active schedule, hosting a G20 summit in Rio and attending a Mercosur summit last week in Uruguay.

Left-wing Lula took up his current mandate in January 2023 after beating the previous, far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, in a tightly fought 2022 election.

US Congress races to avert Christmas govt shutdown

AFP
Washington

US lawmakers scrambled yesterday to reach an agreement on funding federal agencies through the New Year to avert a damaging government shutdown due to begin in just seven days.

Out of time to finalise a full-year package for the 2025 fiscal year, the parties look set instead to pass a stopgap patch known as a "continuing resolution" (CR) to keep services running on static budgets for the coming months.

Text of the bill is expected over the weekend or early next week to allow both chambers to get the agreement to President Joe Biden's desk before lawmakers leave town for the Christmas holidays.

Funding the government is often a contentious and chaotic affair as it requires the parties to agree on budgets that are subject to a 60-vote threshold in the closely divided 100-member Senate.

Failing to do so would mean the lights going out across government starting from December 20, with thousands of workers being sent home without pay and all sorts of government operations and services being hit, from airport security to national parks and border controls.

Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson and Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer have not even managed to arrive at an agreement on overall spending levels, let alone on how to distribute the money across the government.

While a shutdown isn't on anyone's Christmas wish list, there is disagreement about how long a short-term deal should last and concern on both sides about the text being jammed with controversial legislative extras - known as "poison pill" amendments.

"The only way we prevent a shutdown is through bipartisan co-operation, without any last-minute poison pills that only create controversy," Schumer said in a statement.

"We can't have that. It has never worked in the past, and adding poison pills at the 11th hour would only make the risk of a Christmas shutdown greater," he added.

Johnson is reportedly eyeing a CR until mid-to-late-March, allowing Trump to put his stamp on federal spending soon after his party takes control of the House, Senate and the White House in January.

However, that would bog down Congress early in Trump's presidency, taking valuable time from confirming his cabinet appointments

through the Senate and advancing his policy priorities.

Republicans plan their headline initiatives to be tough border security reforms and the second act of Trump's 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which lowered corporate and business levies while making temporary cuts to individual bills.

One sticking point has been federal disaster relief funding, with President Biden proposing tens of billions to help victims of two brutal hurricanes and other crises, but with conservatives pushing for a smaller sum.

Senate Democrats hold 51 seats for now, although the Republicans take over with 53 seats when the new session starts next month.

The stakes are particularly high for Johnson, whose bid to retain the House speaker's gavel in a January vote will be imperilled if he annoys even a small number of his backbenchers with a deal they oppose.

"In principle, we don't like continuing resolutions. But in this case - as a Republican, as a conservative - it does make the most sense," Johnson told Fox News. "And that's why all the conservative groups are in favour of that idea - because it allows us to make more of these key decisions in the new year, when we have the new Congress, new president, new Senate and House."

Milei given Italian citizenship during Rome visit



Meloni with Milei at Palazzo Chigi prior their meeting in Rome yesterday. - AFP

Italy's government has granted citizenship to Argentina's President Javier Milei on account of his Italian family roots, a source with knowledge of the matter said yesterday, confirming earlier media reports.

Milei is in Rome to meet Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and to take part in her Brothers of Italy party's annual festival today.

The source said the government had given Italian citizenship to the Argentine leader, declining to provide further details.

The news on Italian media triggered an angry reaction from some politicians and on social media from people protesting at citizenship being given to Milei when it is hard to obtain for the children of migrants born in Italy.

Italy's citizenship laws are based on blood ties, meaning that even distant descendants of an Italian national can obtain an Italian passport.

Requirements for foreigners born in

Italy or who migrate there, on the other hand, are much tougher.

Pro-migrant groups have proposed a referendum to ease them, but Meloni's right-wing coalition is against any relaxation.

Riccardo Magi, a lawmaker from the small opposition +Europa party, said that granting citizenship to Milei was an act of "intolerable discrimination against so many young people who will only get it after many years".

During a previous trip to Italy in February, Milei told a TV interview he felt "75% Italian" since three of his grandparents had Italian origins, and that he has "an incredible passion for Italian Opera".

Libertarian Milei and conservative Meloni have established a close relationship.

When they met in Buenos Aires last month, the Argentine leader gave his Italian guest a statuette of himself wielding his trademark chainsaw. - Reuters

Pelosi injured on Luxembourg trip

AFP/Reuters
Luxembourg

Former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has been injured while visiting Luxembourg to commemorate a key World War II battle and was admitted to hospital for treatment, her office said yesterday.

The 84-year-old Democrat was in the Grand Duchy with a bipartisan Congressional delegation to mark the 80th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, her spokesperson Ian Krager said in a statement.

"Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi sustained an injury during an official engagement and was admitted to the hospital for evaluation," he said.

Pelosi "is currently receiving excellent treatment", said Krager, adding that "she continues to work and regrets that she is unable to attend the remainder" of the delegation's engagements.

One of America's most influential Democrats and the first woman to become speaker of the House of Representatives, Pelosi stepped down last year from her second stint in the post.

She is still an elected representative from Cali-

fornia and retains considerable influence on Capitol Hill.

Pelosi had previously travelled in 2019 to attend the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, the last major German offensive on the Western Front during World War II.

The battle raged for six weeks across the Ardennes region between Belgium and Luxembourg - drawing in 600,000 American and 25,000 British troops against 400,000 Germans - until the Allies prevailed in January 1945.

Pelosi is the second senior member of Congress to suffer an injury this week.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, 82, sustained minor injuries after falling in the Capitol.

Like Pelosi, McConnell did not seek another stint as leader in party elections that were held following November's elections.

He will be succeeded when the new Congress is sworn in on January 3 by 63-year-old South Dakota Senator Jon Thune.

For several years now, ageing party leaders in the House and Senate have been under pressure to open the way for a new generation of younger office-holders.

Astro Bot wins highest award at Oscars of video games

AFP
Los Angeles

Video game *Astro Bot* - a family-friendly sci-fi adventure - was named 2024's "Game of the Year" on Thursday at the annual awards considered the Oscars of the digital entertainment industry.

The platform game featuring the adventures of a small space robot was also awarded "best family game", "best game direction" and "best action/adventure game" at The Game Awards 2024 in Los Angeles.

It has sold more than 1.5mn

copies according to Sony, which owns the 65-person Japanese studio Team Asobi responsible for the mega-hit.

Onstage at the Peacock Theatre, Team Asobi's French chief Nicolas Doucet praised the studio for designing a game that "put the user first".

"It was just about the kids," he said. "Especially because we had this huge, huge privilege to be potentially the first game to be in the hands of children."

As video games have exploded into the mainstream, The Game Awards have emerged as the industry's most prestigious prize for developers.

Last year's ceremony garnered 118mn global livestreams, according to organisers.

By comparison the movie industry's 2023 Academy Awards pulled in fewer than 19mn viewers, according to US media.

Mediaeval fantasy saga *Metaphor: ReFantazio* was another major winner on Thursday, taking the titles of "best role-playing game" and "best narrative".

The game was also produced by a Japanese studio - Atlus - and published by gaming giant Sega.

Poker game *Balatro* won "best mobile game" and "best independent game".

For their eleventh edition, The

Game Awards invited celebrities including actor Harrison Ford and rapper Snoop Dogg, who performed a song from his new album *Missionary*.

The ceremony also announced new games, including *Intergalactic* by Naughty Dog studio, the developers behind *The Last of Us*.

Hazelight Studios founder Josef Fares - whose previous title *It Takes Two* won the highest award in 2021 and sold more than 20mn copies - announced a new sci-fi and fantasy game *Split Fiction*.

Ceremony host Geoff Keighley also acknowledged the "sad reality" of widespread layoffs plaguing the industry.



A screenshot taken from the game *Astro Bot*.

"Over the last three years we've lost more than 34,000 jobs," he said. "This has consequences. You can't make great games without great people."

McKinsey to pay \$650mn to settle US criminal case on opioids

Consulting giant McKinsey & Company will pay \$650mn to settle US criminal charges that it collaborated with Purdue Pharma to intentionally misbrand opioids, according to a court filing yesterday.

McKinsey "knowingly and intentionally" conspired with Purdue to "aid and abet the misbranding of prescription drugs...without valid prescriptions", according to a US Department of Justice document describing a deferred prosecution agreement (DPA) that will expire in five years if McKinsey meets the conditions.

The DPA filed by US attorneys in the

Western District of Virginia also noted that a senior partner with the prominent consultancy "knowingly" destroyed and hid records with the "intent to impede, obstruct and influence" the probe.

"We are deeply sorry for our past client service to Purdue Pharma and the actions of a former partner who deleted documents related to his work for that client," McKinsey said in a statement.

"We should have appreciated the harm opioids were causing in our society and we should not have undertaken sales and marketing work for Purdue Pharma," it added.

The Department of Justice said it will

charge a former senior McKinsey partner with obstruction of justice.

Under the settlement, McKinsey will cooperate with ongoing investigations into opioids or obstruction of justice.

The company also agreed not to do any work "related to the marketing, sale, promotion or distribution of controlled substances", the filing said.

From 1999-2022, nearly 727,000 people died from opioid overdoses, according to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

In February 2021, McKinsey agreed to pay \$573mn to settle civil claims brought

by 47 states and five US territories that it contributed to the opioid crisis through its advice to pharmaceutical giants.

Media reports have focused on how McKinsey helped Purdue boost sales.

McKinsey advised Purdue on how to "turbocharge the sales engine" of the drug by up to \$400mn per year, according to a Massachusetts lawsuit, by emphasising that its opioids could reduce stress and make users more optimistic.

In September 2023, McKinsey agreed to an additional \$230mn in settlements with US municipalities, counties and public school districts. - AFP/Reuters

Ottawa orders 'time out' to postal strike ahead of Christmas

AFP
Ottawa

Canada's labour minister has intervened to effectively end a postal strike ahead of Christmas, determining that contract negotiations after four weeks had become deadlocked.

Some 55,000 Canada Post workers went on strike on November 15, disrupting millions of parcel shipments during the busy holiday shopping season.

"We're calling a time out," Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon told a news conference.

He said he did not see any prospect for a deal anytime soon as the two sides, "were at a total impasse".

And so "it was time to step in". If Canada's labour relations board reaches the same conclusion, the minister added, it is expected to formally order an end to the strike early next week.

The board would also be tasked with proposing fresh ideas to reach a deal over the coming months, while an existing worker contract is extended until May.

Over recent weeks, the strike has held up holiday gifts and cards, donations to charities, a bride's wedding dress and even a father's cremated remains, according to Canadian media.

In addition, the minister noted, 190,000 passports needed for Christmas travel, along with other government identification, have been stuck in transit.

Many small businesses reportedly turned to alternatives such as UPS or FedEx - only to face higher costs in many instances.

The union has sought significant wage increases, while Canada Post asked for changes to start offering seven-day-a-week parcel delivery as part of a proposed turnaround.

Canada Post has lost more than C\$3bn (\$2.1bn) since 2018, and just posted a C\$315mn loss in the third quarter of 2024.

In a statement, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers said in response to the minister's move that it "denounces in the strongest terms this assault on our constitutionally protected right to collectively bargain and to strike".

UK economy suffers first back-to-back declines since 2020

Reuters
London

Britain's economy shrank for a second month in a row in October in the run-up to the government's first budget, the first back-to-back falls in output since the onset of the Covid-19

pandemic, and a setback for new Finance Minister Rachel Reeves.

Gross domestic product contracted by 0.1% month-on-month in October, as it did in September, the Office for National Statistics said.

It was the first consecutive drop in monthly GDP - which is volatile and prone to revision - since

March and April 2020, when Britain enforced its first coronavirus lockdown.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast a monthly expansion of 0.1%.

The ONS said there was "mixed" anecdotal evidence from companies that turnover had been affected by companies waiting for the

budget statement, which imposed large tax rises on businesses. Others brought forward activity.

The services sector flatlined, while output in the manufacturing and construction industries declined in October's data, which measured the economy in the weeks before Reeves' budget statement on October 30.

Reeves and Prime Minister Keir Starmer - who made stronger economic growth the centrepiece of the Labour Party's election campaign this year - had warned that the budget would include painful tax increases.

Yesterday's data adds to a run of worse-than-expected figures for Britain's economy, with business

surveys and retail sales readings also falling flat. "While the figures this month are disappointing, we have put in place policies to deliver long-term economic growth," Reeves said in a statement.

The opposition Conservatives said the growth outlook was under serious pressure because of Labour's first moves in power.

China restates its hard line on Taiwan

Reuters
Beijing/Taipei

China's defence ministry yesterday broke its silence about days of military activities around Taiwan, saying it was entitled to stage exercises and the military would "not be absent" if required to fight separatist forces.

Taiwan's defence ministry on Monday went on alert and activated an emergency response centre after reporting a surge in Chinese military activity, both nearby and more broadly in the East and South China Seas.

China's military had not announced any manoeuvres. Beijing views Taiwan as its territory - a claim rejected by Taipei, which says that only Taiwan's people can decide their future.

In a statement responding to a question on Taiwan President Lai Ching-te's recent visits to Hawaii and the US territory of Guam, and whether or not China had held drills, China's defence ministry offered neither confirmation nor denial.

"Whether or not to hold exercises and when to hold them is a matter for us to decide on our own according to our own needs and the situation of the struggle," it said.

"Regardless of whether or not exercises are held, the People's Liberation Army will not be ab-

sent and will not be soft in its fight against independence and for reunification."

Any reliance on "foreign forces to seek independence" - the usual wording China uses to warn the US off supporting Taiwan - would be severely punished and was "doomed to failure", the ministry added.

"Whether or not to hold exercises and when to hold them is a matter for us to decide on our own according to our own needs and the situation of the struggle"

China has staged two rounds of war games around Taiwan so far this year, most recently in October, saying they were a warning against "separatist acts" and vowing to take further action if needed.

Taiwan's defence ministry yesterday said China's threat towards the island had been evolving since 2022, when it began staging the current round of war games, from "detering Taiwan" to "impacting the First Island Chain", an area that stretches from Japan through to Taiwan, along the Chinese coast and into the South China Sea.

"China's long-term goal of deterring regional parties and disrupting the rule-based international order will not be endorsed

by the international community," it said in a statement.

The US has repeatedly expressed concern about tensions in the Taiwan Strait, and once or twice a month sends military aircraft or warships on missions there.

Late yesterday, Taiwan's defence ministry said a US P-8A Poseidon reconnaissance and patrol plane had flown through the Taiwan Strait in the morning, the first such publicly acknowledged flight since November 26.

Security sources had expected China to hold drills to coincide with Lai's US trip, and also to send a warning to the incoming Trump administration about China's red lines.

On Thursday, the de facto US embassy in Taiwan said that Chinese military activity in the region was currently elevated but it did not see that as a response to Lai's US visit.

Later that day, Taiwan's defence ministry said it had disbanded its emergency response centre, signalling an end to the current round of Chinese military activities.

The ministry yesterday morning said the number of Chinese military aircraft operating nearby was down sharply.

Taiwan's coast guard said that nine Chinese coast guard ships off the coast had headed northwards after carrying out "undue" activities in recent days.

Filipina on death row in Indonesia waits to return home



Filipino drug convict on death row in Indonesia, Mary Jane Veloso, shows a batik design she created during her time at Yogyakarta Women Correctional Institution Class IIB in Wonosari, Yogyakarta yesterday. Veloso - in her first interview since Manila and Jakarta signed an agreement last week to repatriate her - said from prison that her planned transfer felt like a dream.

Manila has 'provoked trouble in S China Sea with US backing'

Reuters
Beijing

China yesterday accused the Philippines of having "provoked trouble" in the South China Sea with US backing, a week after Beijing and Manila traded accusations over a new confrontation in the disputed waters.

"The Philippine side, with US support and solicitation, has been stirring up trouble in many spots in the South China Sea," Wu Qian, a spokesperson for China's defence ministry, said on its official WeChat account.

"The Philippines is well aware that the scope of its territory is determined by a series of international treaties and has never included China's" Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal, he added.

Beijing and Manila have been involved this year in a series of confrontations at reefs and outcrops in the South China Sea, which China claims almost in its entirety. The Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam also claim parts of the sea. They are concerned China's expansive claim encroaches into their exclusive economic zones (EEZ), non-territorial waters

that extend 200 nautical miles (370km) from the coasts of a nation's land.

The Philippines' National Maritime Council and its National Security Council did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the latest remarks from Beijing.

Philippines officials said last week that Chinese coast guard vessels had fired water cannon and side-swiped a Manila fisheries bureau boat on the way to deliver supplies to Filipino fishermen around the Scarborough Shoal, a move that drew condemnation from the US.

Six rare giant catfish surface in Cambodia

Conservationists in Cambodia yesterday celebrated the discovery of six highly endangered Mekong giant catfish in the critical Southeast Asian waterway plagued by illegal fishing, habitat loss and plastic waste.

Fishermen smiled alongside officials from Cambodia's Fisheries Administration (CFA) as they held up the two-metre-long creatures - weighing up to 130kg each - before releasing them back into their river habitat.

The survival of the giant catfish - one of the largest and rarest freshwater fish in the world - underscores the urgent need to protect the river's free-flowing connectivity, a statement by the USAID-funded Wonders of the Mekong conservation group said.

Besides overfishing and plastic pollution, the Mekong River Basin has been degraded by upstream dams and climate change, which have had a major impact on water levels in the critically endangered catfish's aquatic home. Its current population is unknown but is thought to have declined by around 80% over the last 13 years, according to the IUCN Red List.



Scientists, officials and fishermen release a 300-pound giant freshwater catfish after it was tagged, into the Mekong River, near Kampong Cham province, Cambodia.

Three more jailed in UK's biggest drugs bust

AFP
London

Three members of a gang responsible for what is believed to be the largest drug smuggling operation ever detected in the UK were jailed yesterday.

A judge at Manchester Crown Court in north west England jailed Sohail Qureshi, 64, for 25 years after he was convicted of plotting to import heroin, cocaine and cannabis.

Khaleed Vazeer, 58, and Ghaz-anfar Mahmood, 53, received sentences of 20 years and three years and nine months respectively after being convicted of being part of an organised crime gang.

"These criminals supplied unprecedented amounts of drugs right across the UK," said Richard Harrison, regional head of inves-

tigations at the National Crime Agency (NCA).

"They don't care that they fuel horrendous problems such as children being sucked into dealing drugs...or innocent members of the public being hurt or even killed in the crossfire of turf wars," he added.

The network smuggled several billion dollars worth of heroin, cocaine and cannabis for drug dealers across Britain from 2015-2018, according to the NCA.

The operation was so extensive it required two criminal trials, with one lasting 23 months - a record in England and Wales. The other trial lasted nine months.

Reporting details about the case became possible after a judge at Manchester Crown Court in northern England lifted media restrictions earlier this month following verdicts in the second trial.

Second impeachment vote for S Korea president on knife edge

AFP
Seoul

South Korea's opposition leader yesterday urged ruling party lawmakers to side with the "people" and impeach President Yoon Suk-yeol over his failed martial law bid, a day before a second parliamentary vote that appears on a knife edge.

A week after a first attempt to remove Yoon for the martial law debacle foundered, the country's National Assembly will vote today around 4pm (0700 GMT) on whether to impeach the president for "acts undermining the constitutional order". Two hundred votes

are needed for the measure to pass, meaning opposition lawmakers must convince eight ruling People Power Party (PPP) colleagues to defect.

As of noon yesterday, seven ruling party lawmakers had pledged to support impeachment - leaving the vote up in the air. The leader of the Democratic Party, Lee Jae-myung, yesterday implored them to support the president's removal from office.

"What the lawmakers must protect is neither Yoon nor the ruling People Power Party but the lives of the people waiting out in the freezing streets," Lee said.

"Please join in supporting the impeachment vote. History

will remember and record your choice."

Two ruling party lawmakers supported the motion last week.

Lawmaker Kim Min-seok said yesterday he was "99%" sure the impeachment will pass.

Should it be approved, Yoon will be suspended from office while South Korea's Constitutional Court deliberates.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo will step in as the interim president during that time.

The court will then have 180 days to rule on Yoon's future. If it backs his removal, Yoon will become the second president in South Korean history to be successfully impeached.

There is also precedent for the court to block impeachment: in 2004, then-president Roh Moo-hyun was removed by parliament for alleged election law violations and incompetence.

But the Constitutional Court later reinstated him.

The court also currently only has six judges, meaning their decision would need to be unanimous.

And should the vote fail, Yoon can still face "legal responsibility" for the martial law bid, Kim Hyun-jung, a researcher at the Korea University Institute of Law, said.

"This is clearly an act of revolt," she said. "Even if the impeachment motion does not pass, the

president's legal responsibilities under the Criminal Code...cannot be avoided."

Yoon has remained unapologetic and defiant as the fallout from his disastrous martial law declaration has deepened and an investigation into his inner circle has widened.

Prosecutors yesterday said they had arrested a military commander who headed the Capital Defence Command.

Arrest warrants were also issued by Seoul Central District Court for the national police chief and the head of the city's police, citing "risk of destruction of evidence".

In a televised address on

Thursday, Yoon vowed to fight "until the very last minute" and doubled down on unsubstantiated claims the opposition was in league with the country's communist foes.

Thousands have taken to the streets of Seoul since Yoon's declaration to demand his resignation and jailing.

Yoon's approval rating - never high - has plummeted to 11%, according to a Gallup Korea poll released yesterday.

The same poll showed 75% now support his impeachment.

Protesters run the gamut of South Korean society - from K-pop fans waving glowsticks to retirees and blue-collar workers.

Adani port project to continue despite US charges: Lanka

AFP
Colombo

Indian conglomerate Adani Group's port project in Sri Lanka will go ahead despite US charges against its founder and sudden changes to its financing, the island nation said yesterday.

A bombshell indictment in New York last month accused billionaire tycoon Gautam Adani and several colleagues of deliberately misleading international investors as part of a bribery scheme. The charges sent Adani stocks into freefall.

But Sri Lankan Ports Minister Bimal Ratnayake said the allegations against Adani had no bearing

on the deep-sea container terminal project in the capital Colombo.

"The problem between Adani and the US...is not our concern," he told reporters during a tour of the port. "It is of high importance for us that western container terminal development by Adani goes ahead."

Ratnayake said the project was

necessary to generate revenue for the ailing Sri Lankan economy, still teetering after an unprecedented crisis and foreign debt default in 2022. The port project has an estimated cost of \$700mn and is located next to a similar Chinese-run facility. Ratnayake's comments came days after Adani Group withdrew its request for a US government-backed loan of

\$553mn in the wake of the New York indictment.

The loan agreement with the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) was finalised last year, with the project seen at the time as a means of countering Beijing's rising influence in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka sits astride the world's busiest shipping route, which

links the Middle East and East Asia, giving its maritime assets strategic importance.

Adani Group has said it will now finance the project from its own coffers. Sri Lanka opened an investigation into the conglomerate's local projects, including the port and a \$442mn wind power deal in the island's north, after last month's indictment.

Rosneft, Reliance 'agree on biggest ever India-Russia oil supply deal'

Reuters
New Delhi/Moscow

Russia's state oil firm Rosneft has agreed to supply nearly 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude to Indian private refiner Reliance in the biggest ever energy deal between the two countries, three sources familiar with the deal said.

The 10-year agreement amounts to 0.5% of global supply and is worth roughly \$13bn a year at today's prices. It would further cement energy relations between India and Russia, which is under heavy Western sanctions over its invasion of Ukraine.

Rosneft did not reply to requests for comments.

Reliance said it works with international suppliers, including from Russia, and deals are based on market conditions. The company declined further comment on commercial matters, citing the confidentiality of supply agreements.

The deal comes ahead of the planned visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to India and after US president-elect Donald Trump said he wants to push Moscow and Kyiv to stop the war as soon as he takes office in January.

Russian oil accounts for more than a third of India's energy imports. India became the largest im-

porter of Russian crude after the European Union, previously the top buyer, imposed sanctions on Russian oil imports in response to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

India has no sanctions on Russian oil, so refiners there have cashed in on the cheaper crude supply. Sanctions have made Russian oil cheaper than rival grades by at least \$3-4 per barrel. India's rising Russian imports have come at the expense of rival Middle Eastern producers. The Reliance-Rosneft deal would represent another challenge for competitors. Competition among oil producers for a share of the Indian market is hot because it is one of the fastest-growing energy markets, and is becoming more important as a driver of global demand as growth in top importer China slows.

Under the deal, Rosneft would deliver 20-21 Aframax-sized cargoes (80,000-100,000 metric tonnes) of various Russian crude grades and three cargoes of about 100,000 tonnes each of fuel oil each month, the three sources said.

The shipments will be supplied for Reliance's refining complex, the world's biggest, at Jamnagar in the western state of Gujarat.

Two sources said Reliance and Rosneft will review pricing and volumes every year under the deal to factor in oil markets dynamics.

In 2024, Reliance had a deal with Rosneft to purchase 3mn barrels of crude a month. Rosneft has been also selling crude to Reliance via intermediaries on a regular basis.

The new deal accounts for roughly a half of Rosneft's seaborne oil exports from Russian ports, which leaves not much supply available for other traders and middlemen, one source said.

From January to October, Reliance imported an average 405,000 barrels per day of Russian oil, up from 388,500bpd in the same period last year, according to tanker data obtained from sources.

The new deal between Rosneft and Reliance was discussed and approved during Rosneft's board meeting in November, two of the sources said.

Supplies will start from January and are set to continue for 10 years with an option to extend the deal for another 10 years, the three sources said. The pricing of the grades to be supplied on delivered basis is set at differentials to the average Dubai price of the loading month, according to the sources.

Premiums for the light sweet grades were set at around \$1.50 a barrel for ESPO, Sokol at about \$2 per barrel and Siberian Light at about \$1 per barrel against Dubai quotes for 2025, one source said.

Gukesh championship win fuels chess dreams in India

India's aspiring chess players and their parents woke up yesterday with big dreams after 18-year-old hometown hero Gukesh Dommaraju became the youngest world champion.

Gukesh stunned China's Ding Liren on Thursday when he seized upon an unfortunate blunder to win the last game of the World Chess Championship and clinch the title in Singapore.

As Ding faltered at the final hurdle of his title defence, an emotional Gukesh surpassed a record held by Russia's Garry Kasparov, who won the title at age 22.

He also became the second Indian to hold the title after five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand.

Fans in India hailed their new sporting hero while coaches said the win will pull in more talent.

"More people favour cricket in India but Gukesh's win will serve as a catalyst for parents to get their children into chess," Byomkesh, a chess coach, said.

A chess academy in capital New Delhi was buzzing with activity a day after Gukesh's triumph, with students still recounting his best moves. "Gukesh is a very hard-working guy who played the world championship very smoothly after the first game loss," 12-year-old Mahir Taneja said.

"I dream to see myself also as a world champion like him and follow his steps." Mahir's fandom proved infectious to his family.

"I'm also learning a lot of things and yesterday witnessing Gukesh win, I literally had goosebumps when my child came and told me each and every minute detail after every match that Gukesh and Ding had," said his mother Mani Taneja. "And obviously, it's a proud moment for all of us."

Gukesh was born to a doctor father



Indian school students congratulate the world's youngest chess champion Gukesh Dommaraju, in Chennai yesterday.

and microbiologist mother in the southern Indian city of Chennai. He became India's youngest grandmaster aged 12 years, seven months and 17 days - among the youngest in the history of the game.

In April, he became the youngest-ever winner of the prestigious Candidates Tournament, clinching his entry into the world championship.

The victory saw his name suddenly appear in the back pages of national newspapers alongside some of India's most recognisable sports stars, including Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma.

Students at Gukesh's school in Chennai waved placards and photos of their newly famous alumni yesterday to celebrate his world title.

"Gukesh, you have made us so proud, and you are inspiring us to dream big and work harder," 14-year-old Emily Judith Samuel said.

"You have checkmated the world... May success follow you everywhere you go."

Fellow student Bhavagna said Gukesh "will inspire and motivate the next generation of students to come. From the classrooms to his chessboard, he has taught us the true value of hard work".

According to Indian media, Gukesh left full-time schooling at the age of 10 to devote more time to chess training.

The southernmost Indian state of Tamil Nadu has declared a cash reward of \$590,000 for Gukesh, supplementing the \$1.35mn he won in Singapore. (AFP)

Gukesh Dommaraju celebrates with the World Chess Championship 2024 trophy during an award ceremony in Singapore yesterday. (AFP)

Police probing bomb threat to Reserve Bank

Police in India's financial capital Mumbai yesterday said that they were investigating a bomb threat to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) after it received an e-mail in Russian warning of an explosive attack.

The warning was sent to the official e-mail address of newly-appointed RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra, a senior Mumbai police officer said.

"We have registered a case, and the investigation is ongoing," the officer said.

Schools, railway stations, airports and airlines in India have been subject this year to hundreds of bomb threats that have turned out to be hoaxes.

At least 40 schools in Delhi received a bomb threat by e-mail on Monday, while airlines and airports in India got nearly 1,000 hoax threats until November this year, nearly ten times more than in the whole of 2023.



Actor Allu Arjun (centre) comes out of the Chikkadpally police station following his arrest by the police in Hyderabad yesterday.

Actor held after stampede death at film screening

AFP
New Delhi

An Indian actor was yesterday arrested after his appearance at a movie screening allegedly prompted a stampede by fans that crushed a woman to death, police and local media said.

Huge crowds had gathered at a theatre in the southern city of Hyderabad on December 4 to catch a glimpse of actor Allu Arjun as he arrived for the screening of his film *Pushpa 2: The Rule*.

The 42-year-old actor was arrested on suspicion of three offences, including voluntarily causing hurt by dangerous weapons or means, a police officer said, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak to media.

The officer added that seven other people had already been

arrested in the case. A video on social media platform X, shared by broadcaster TV9, showed the actor holding a coffee mug as he spoke to officers who arrived at his residence to take him into custody.

Later in the day, Arjun was granted interim bail for four weeks, media reports said.

The victim of the stampede was a woman in her 30s attending the screening with her son, who was also seriously injured.

The woman's family later filed a complaint against Arjun, his security team and the theatre management, media outlet *India Today* reported.

Arjun said he was "deeply heartbroken" two days after the accident. "While respecting their need for space to grieve, I stand committed to extend every possible assistance to help them navigate through this challenging journey," he wrote on X.

US hotels welcome Indian tourist boom to revive revenue

Reuters
New York

US hotels and travel companies are aiming to tap a surge in Indian tourists to boost revenue as domestic leisure spending falters and demand from East Asian countries remains below pre-pandemic levels.

Nearly 1.9mn Indian tourists visited the US in the first 10 months of 2024, a nearly 48% rise from 2019, according to data from the US National Trade and Tourism Office (NTTO). The surge was driven by a 50% jump in visas is-

sued for business visits and 43.5% increase for leisure, data showed.

The expanding Indian middle-class population, higher travel budgets and increased flight capacity are also behind the South Asian country's international travel boom.

In contrast, visitor volumes from China, Japan and South Korea dropped 44.5%, 50.8% and 23.9% during the same period, compared with 2019 levels, NTTO data showed.

Wealthy consumers from East Asian countries such as China have been travelling more within the region, especially to destina-

tions in Southeast Asia, avoiding long-haul trips to the US. European tourists have been returning to the US but visitation from countries such as the UK, Germany and France has remained below 2019 levels.

"Indian travellers are stepping up to fill part of the gap left by lower visitation from China, Japan, and South Korea"

Visitor volumes to the US vary: India exceeds 2019 levels, while China, Japan, and South Korea lag. The UK, Germany, France, and

Brazil show partial recovery but remain below pre-pandemic levels.

The US tourism industry has had a slow year, with companies such as Hilton and Airbnb bracing for weaker revenue as the post-pandemic travel surge normalises and persistent inflation forces Americans to cut back on leisure spending.

"Indian travellers are stepping up to fill part of the gap left by lower visitation from China, Japan, and South Korea," said Laura Lee Blake, CEO of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association, members of which own 60% of the hotels in the US.

"Their growing interest in ex-

ploring smaller cities and secondary markets is helping to spread the recovery across a broader range of destinations," she said, adding that they generally prefer budget and mid-scale hotels.

Some properties are also introducing details that may resonate with Indian travellers - from chai and samosas in the lobby to popular Indian TV channels in the guest rooms, she said.

Travel firm Viator, a TripAdvisor brand, has said US bookings made by Indian travellers jumped more than 50% in 2024 and have tripled from pre-pandemic levels in 2019.

"Over the past three years, we've

seen over a 45% increase in nights booked by Indians travelling to the US," said Dave Stephenson, chief business officer at Airbnb.

Scheduled flight capacity between India and the US rose 42.3% in 2024 compared with 2019, according to data from OAG Aviation.

Airline seating capacity between India and the US has risen to over a million seats in 2024, above 2019 levels.

"For 2025, I anticipate growth in occupancy rates and revenue, driven by a younger, experience-driven audience from India," said Grzegorz Kowalski, CEO of hotel-booking platform Tripoffice.com



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Worker shortages raise doubts over Britain's plan to build for growth

An acute shortage of construction workers could undermine the foundations of British government plans to get 1.5m homes built by 2029 in England to help drive economic growth.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Labour Party won July's election on a pledge to boost growth and improve infrastructure, as well as fix public services. Construction represents 6% of gross domestic product, but underpins growth in other sectors.

While developers welcomed details of his plans for overhauling Britain's planning system and freeing up more land for building, many say the ambitions of Starmer's government are not achievable unless worker and skills shortages are addressed.

These gaps have raised questions about whether Britain needs to rethink its post-Brexit immigration system, alongside better training to get more young people into the ageing workforce.

"We haven't really got enough workers to build the volume that we want to build now, let alone think that we're going to get to 1.5m homes over the next five years," said Lioncourt Homes CEO Colin Cole, adding: "So it's a big issue." Cole said Lioncourt's 1,000 workers, mostly sub-contractors, are working at full capacity to deal with the existing workload.

"We will struggle to get the numbers of contractors to satisfy this demand," said Cole, whose company is due to open its second-biggest housing site to date in the central English city of Worcester next month.

Lioncourt is aiming to increase its sales to 250 homes in the 12 months from March 2025-March 2026, from 165 in the previous 12 months, and to 500 over the following five years, plans which pre-date the new government's reform announcements.

Britain has long lacked candidates to fill jobs, a problem made worse by the 2016 Brexit vote and Covid-19, with vacancies higher than their level before the pandemic.

Its construction sector, as in many other countries, must also deal with many skilled workers nearing retirement age. The Construction Products Association predicts the sector is expected to lose 500,000 workers to retirement over the next 10-15 years, representing around 25% of the total workforce. Cole said 65% of Lioncourt's bricklayers are over 45 and around 45% older than 55. Less than 10% are aged 25 or below.

The government has announced 32 skills hubs to provide fast-track training for 5,000 more homebuilding apprentices a year by 2028 in trades such as bricklaying and scaffolding.

The Construction Industry Training Board – which represents infrastructure as well as homebuilding – said there were around 33,600 apprentices on longer-term training schemes in 2022-2023, short of the 50,000 needed every year to maintain activity.

One possible answer is for the sector to reflect the diversity of Britain's population. The Chartered Institute of Building said just 6% of workers come from a Black, Asian or ethnic minority background, compared to 18% of the general public. Meanwhile, only 15% of the workforce are women.

Finding workers to do the building might force Starmer to find a way to reconcile his promises to reduce record levels of migration with employers' needs.

Before Brexit, EU citizens had unrestricted rights to live and work in Britain. Firms now say the system to sponsor European workers makes it extremely difficult to fill shortages.

Steve Turner, executive director of the Home Builders' Federation, said the process for employers to sponsor foreign workers was not working, even after the previous Conservative government relaxed immigration controls for some construction roles including bricklayers, electricians, and carpenters.

"Housebuilders are not using the system at all because it is too complex, time-consuming and costly," Turner said.

The government says it wants to train people already in Britain, to reduce dependence on foreign workers. – Reuters

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How to end the scourge of maternal mortality

By Anne-Marie Slaughter and Mary-Ann Etiebet
New York/Washington, DC

No mother should give her own life to give life to another. Unfortunately, preventing maternal mortality remains a persistent global challenge. The third UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) commits countries to reduce their maternal mortality rate to less than 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030. At the current pace, the world is projected to fall far short of this target, resulting in more than 1m additional, overwhelmingly preventable deaths.

Ending preventable maternal deaths is surprisingly difficult. For starters, many different causes can occur at all stages of pregnancy, making it difficult to determine a policy intervention's success and its ability to effect lasting change. Second, annual maternal deaths number in the hundreds of thousands – not the millions. Given these circumstances, donors and policymakers prefer to invest in other public-health imperatives, where they can have a larger impact and receive more accurate and timely information about outcomes.

But that should not diminish the significance of maternal mortality. The loss of a mother can devastate her family, starting with the other children she may already have. She also likely cared for relatives or elders in her community, or played an important economic role as a farmer or trader. Her death could directly and negatively affect 10-20 people, or more, spanning multiple generations. Research suggests that children with surviving mothers are more likely to live past the age of ten and to stay in school longer.

Activists, practitioners, and policymakers have made remarkable progress combating maternal mortality in countries like Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania. To help other countries replicate this performance, we recently co-chaired "Room 17" – a working group linked to the SDG 17 for revitalising partnerships – as part of the 17 Rooms Initiative. We convened leading maternal-health practitioners and experts at the forefront of redesigning global institutions to discuss an "impact hub" approach to the problem.

An impact hub is an organisation that connects governmental and



(Picture: pixabay.com)

non-governmental actors to pursue a singular, measurable mission, with a focus on scaling up effective solutions, rather than starting from scratch. In the case of maternal health, several regional and global organisations, including the Global Financing Facility, the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, and AlignMNH, already perform some of these functions.

To complement existing efforts, the working group proposes a global impact hub focused on the goal of zero maternal deaths by 2030. To measure progress toward this goal, the hub would convene maternal-health practitioners to develop a reliable clinic-level metric such as "death-free days." Instead of focusing on the number of deaths, this approach – which has been trialled in Ethiopia and Sierra Leone – emphasises life, with clinicians and families celebrating a healthy birth for baby and mom.

Using a pay-for-performance scheme tied to this common metric would enable the impact hub to co-ordinate efforts across multiple partners and donors. It could also provide capacity-building programmes and training on tools and interventions that can holistically support maternal health. For example, policymakers could provide targeted digital cash transfers to overcome the financial barriers to delivery care, while implementing strategies to improve

prenatal and postnatal care and investing in a comprehensive maternal healthcare workforce.

Of course, such efforts must be adapted to local contexts. Communities vary greatly in terms of political and economic fragility, health-system resilience, cultural needs, and maternal-care priorities. Digital cash transfers may have a greater impact in economically fragile contexts, whereas training programmes that improve early detection of high-risk pregnancies are most effective in regions with resilient health systems. By linking funding to outcomes rather than prescribed approaches, the impact hub would be able to support a range of solutions.

Moreover, this global organisation would not only pool funding and other resources. It could also spawn a network of national and local impact hubs unified by their commitment to achieving zero maternal deaths by 2030 (and by their willingness to use the same measurement criteria). This would make it easier for development practitioners and funders to navigate the tension between giving communities the autonomy to develop strategies calibrated to local conditions and maintaining the global connectivity required for sharing knowledge, resources, and goals.

In addition to scaling up proven solutions, these hubs will also

incentivise bottom-up innovation and investment in new approaches. But the global alliance must consider potential problems, such as a healthcare "brain drain", whereby wealthier or more innovative communities attract midwives and other maternal-care professionals from poorer ones, as well as the challenges of integrating digital cash transfers into existing health-system infrastructure.

The proposed impact hub could foster a genuine global partnership, stretching from local providers to national health systems to international organisations, all committed to ending the scourge of maternal mortality. By connecting the community-oriented work that extraordinary people are doing on the ground to an overarching mission with targeted support and measurable milestones, we may finally be able to embrace the joy of new life without the shadow of death. – Project Syndicate

• Anne-Marie Slaughter, a former director of policy planning in the US State Department, is CEO of the think tank New America, Professor Emerita of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, and the author of *Renewal: From Crisis to Transformation in Our Lives, Work, and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2021). Mary-Ann Etiebet is President and CEO of Vital Strategies.

The AI revolution is at home in Africa

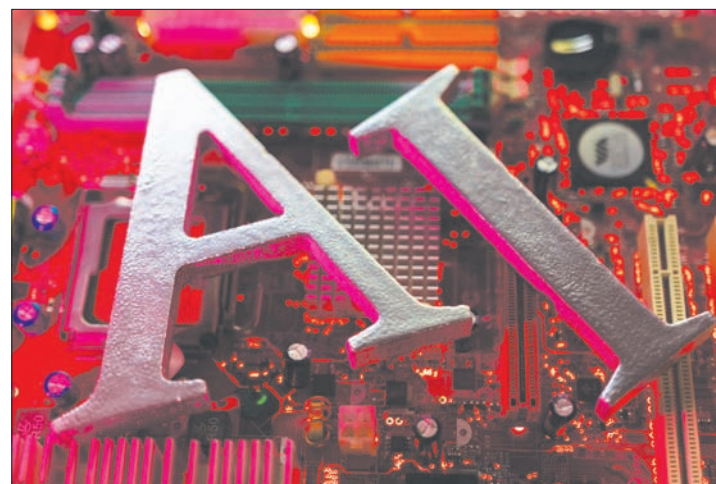
By Cina Lawson
Lomé

As the world enters an era shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are expected to capture just 10% of the economic growth generated by AI technologies. But by forming strategic partnerships and making large-scale infrastructure investments, LMICs can harness these technologies to foster inclusive, sustainable development.

Rapidly evolving AI systems have immense potential to revolutionise public-service delivery and alleviate poverty, unlocking economic opportunities for developing economies like Togo. But fully realising the promise of these new tools requires adequate infrastructure, such as a reliable electricity supply and broadband connectivity. Without these foundations, the world's most advanced technologies will remain out of reach for communities that could benefit from them the most.

On November 13-15, Togo's Ministry of Digital Economy and Transformation organised an international AI conference in Lomé, bringing together government officials, researchers, civil-society leaders, international experts, and students to discuss the potential of emerging technologies to improve public services in the developing world.

Togo is a prime example. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we launched Novissi, one of the world's first fully digital cash-transfer programs. Initially designed to support low-income urban residents, Novissi rapidly expanded to cover rural areas in Togo's 200 poorest cantons, enabling more than 920,000



informal-sector workers – roughly 25% of the country's adult population – to enrol.

By combining machine learning with mobile-phone metadata, satellite imagery, and phone surveys, the Novissi program ultimately identified and supported more than 150,000 households, demonstrating how data-driven approaches can help governments deliver essential services quickly and equitably.

And this is just the beginning. In recent years, we have leveraged data science and digital technologies to improve our emergency response capabilities and make government services more efficient, cost-effective, and responsive to citizens' needs.

Consider the agriculture sector, which employs two-thirds of Togo's population and accounts for 40% of its GDP. Using satellite imagery and machine-learning tools like Mosaiks, Togolese policymakers can forecast crop yields, anticipate poor harvests, and craft targeted agricultural policies. But the real strength of these technologies is their versatility: a single investment

enables policymakers to make evidence-based decisions on a wide range of issues, from electrification to deforestation.

By bolstering local ownership, African governments can drive inclusive growth. In Togo, we are working to build a sustainable ecosystem of local expertise through initiatives like the newly launched Togo Data Lab, a collaboration between the Ministry of Digital Economy and Transformation and the Center for Effective Global Action at the University of California, Berkeley. The project joins other prominent African institutions working to position Africa at the forefront of digital development, such as the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data.

In Togo, the Lab will assist the Togolese government in building sustainable data-science capabilities, thereby enabling us to use AI tools like large language models (LLMs) to accelerate progress toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Togolese data scientists trained at

the Lab will then collaborate with international experts, thereby ensuring that solutions are driven by local talent.

In its first year, the Togo Data Lab will focus on agriculture, training staff to use Mosaiks to measure crop yields more precisely. But we have much higher ambitions. We see the Lab as a scalable platform capable of addressing major challenges in health, education, and climate policy. We imagine a health-care system transformed by data science, with AI tools improving disease surveillance and enabling policymakers to predict outbreaks of preventable illnesses, and classrooms where LLM-assisted tutors handle administrative tasks, freeing teachers to do what they do best: teaching and connecting with students.

We have made remarkable progress, but there is much more to be done. For too long, African countries have been sidelined from the digital revolution due to limited technical capacity and inadequate infrastructure. That must change, and now is the time to change it.

I urge the international community to join this vital effort. By engaging the private sector and making targeted investments, Africa could become a leader in the global digital economy, not just a participant.

Investing in local capacity not only empowers policymakers in developing countries like Togo to make smarter, data-driven decisions. It also lays the groundwork for a vast global network of problem solvers, ready to harness cutting-edge technologies to tackle the world's biggest challenges. – Project Syndicate

• Cina Lawson is Minister of Digital Economy and Transformation of Togo

Macron names centrist ally Bayrou as PM

AFP/Reuters
Paris

President Emmanuel Macron has named centrist Francois Bayrou as prime minister, handing him the daunting task of hauling France out of months of political crisis.

The 73-year-old head of the MoDem group, which is allied to Macron's party, was appointed nine days after parliament ousted Michel Barnier's government in a historic no-confidence vote following a standoff over an austerity budget.

"The president of the Republic has appointed Mr Francois Bayrou as prime minister and tasked him with forming a government," the presidency said.

The announcement capped hours of drama that saw Bayrou summoned to a morning meeting at the Elysee palace - where he was reportedly told Macron would choose another figure - only for the presidency to finally announce he had the post.

Bayrou is the sixth prime minister of Macron's mandate, with his predecessor Barnier France's shortest-serving premier, having lasted only three months.

He is also Macron's fourth prime minister of 2024.

Bayrou faces an immediate challenge to form a cabinet that can survive a no-confidence vote in a divided parliament, and to thrash out a 2025 budget in a bid to limit economic turmoil.

At the traditional handover ceremony with outgoing prime minister Barnier, Bayrou declared that "no-one knows better than me the difficulty of the situation" with France facing a ballooning budget



Macron named Bayrou as the new prime minister following a meeting that sources say was a stormy affair.



Right: Barnier listens to newly-appointed Prime Minister and President of the Democratic Movement (MoDem) party Francois Bayrou speaks during the handover ceremony at the Hotel Matignon in Paris. - Reuters

deficit coupled with political instability. "I am fully aware of the Himalayas that loom ahead of us," he said of the budget deficit which is now 6.1% of GDP.

He also vowed to fight what he described as the "glass wall that has risen up between citizens and the authorities".

Handing over, Barnier told his successor: "Our country is in an unprecedented and grave situation."

Several sources told AFP that the morning meeting between Macron and Bayrou, far from marking the anointment of the new prime minister, had been a stormy affair, with the president leaning towards naming his loyal Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu as premier.

Losing his temper, Bayrou threatened

to break the alliance with Macron, who decided that it would be best to plump for Bayrou in the name of unity, the sources said.

"Sebastien Lecornu should have been the one named," said a source close to the talks, "but Macron "did not have the choice".

Mujtaba Rahman, Europe director at risk analysis firm Eurasia Group, commented: "In the long history of the Fifth Republic (founded in 1958), this may have been the first time that a prime minister chose himself."

Bayrou will be tasked with holding dialogue with all political forces except the far-right National Rally (RN) and hard-left France Unbowed (LFI) parties "in order to find conditions for stability and action", a

member of Macron's team said yesterday. "Francois Bayrou's name emerged in recent days as the most consensual" choice, said the source, asking not to be named.

Macron was first expected to name a new prime minister in an address to the nation last week.

In a sign of the stalemate, the president did not name Barnier's successor then and also missed a 48-hour deadline that he gave at a meeting of party leaders on Tuesday.

Macron has been confronted with a complex political equation since snap parliamentary elections in July: how to secure a government against a no-confidence vote in a bitterly divided lower house where no party or alliance has a majority.

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen, who teamed up with the left to topple the

Barnier government, said that her RN party would not automatically do likewise to Bayrou, but did not rule out exploiting such a "lever".

"I'm not threatening no-confidence motions morning, noon and night. I'm just saying that I'm not giving up on this tool," she said.

The LFI said it would table such a motion. Socialists quickly posed conditions for not supporting a no-confidence motion in an open letter to Bayrou.

He must agree not to ram laws through without a parliamentary vote and not to rely on support from the far right, the party's board said, adding that they would not accept ministerial posts.

Bayrou, the founder of the Democratic Movement (MoDem) party which has been a part of Macron's ruling alliance since 2017, has been the long-time mayor of the southwestern town of Pau.

His rustic roots are a key component of his political character.

The mixed reactions to Bayrou's appointment suggest he will likely be living day-to-day, at the mercy of Macron's opponents, for the foreseeable future.

Barnier's three-month premiership was the shortest in modern French history.

Macron will hope Bayrou can stave off no-confidence votes until at least July, when France will be able to hold a new parliamentary election.

Macron named Bayrou as justice minister in 2017 but he resigned only weeks later amid an investigation into his party's alleged fraudulent employment of parliamentary assistants.

He was acquitted of fraud charges this year.

Georgian parliament bans face masks and fireworks at protests

Reuters/AFP
Tbilisi

Georgia's parliament passed a law yesterday forbidding protesters to cover their faces and banning fireworks and lasers from demonstrations following clashes between police and civilians at pro-EU protests.

The law, which imposes a fine of 2,000 lari (\$720) for offenders, was passed unanimously, the Interpress news agency said.

Lawmakers also approved increases in fines for defacing buildings and blocking traffic.

Convictions for organising road blocks carrying fines of up to 15,000 lari (\$5,400).

More than 400 people have been arrested since protests began in late November after the government announced it would delay the South Caucasus country's bid to join the European Union.

The decision outraged many in Georgia, where the idea of EU accession is popular.

More than 100 serving diplomats signed an open letter in protest and several ambassadors resigned their posts.

Many demonstrators wear gas masks and improvised face coverings to avoid being identified and police in the capital Tbilisi have used water cannon and tear gas against them.

Some have hurled fireworks at police. Others have used lasers to try to dazzle po-



An anti-government protester waves the European Union (EU) flag during a demonstration against the Georgian government's postponement of EU accession talks until 2028, outside the parliament in central Tbilisi. - AFP

lice and CCTV cameras outside the parliament building on Tbilisi's main thoroughfare.

Dozens of people, including police officers, have been injured. Some 30 people face criminal charges, with two leaders of the

pro-EU opposition behind bars.

The EU ambassador to Georgia said this week the police's treatment of demonstrators was unacceptable and could trigger sanctions from Brussels.

Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has

defended the police's response and the interior ministry says more than 150 law enforcement personnel have been injured.

Rights groups have raised alarm about attacks on opposition politicians, activists and some journalists by gangs of masked men in black.

They say the crackdown is without recent precedent in Georgia, traditionally one of the more pro-Western and democratic of the former Soviet republics.

Georgia's parliament is set to elect a president today to replace Salome Zourabichvili, a pro-EU critic of the governing party.

The only candidate nominated is Mikheil Kavelashvili, a former governing party lawmaker with anti-Western views.

Speaking to AFP at a rally, Dariko Gogol, 53, said Georgian Dream "rigged the election, and they are just dragging us towards Russia".

"We need new elections," she said, adding that current President Zurabishvili "has to stay (as president) and somehow guide us in this really difficult situation".

Zurabishvili has refused to step down and is demanding new parliamentary elections, paving the way for a constitutional showdown.

"What will happen in parliament (today) is a parody - it will be an event entirely devoid of legitimacy, unconstitutional and illegitimate," she told a press conference yesterday.

German hospitals fear labour shortages if Syrians leave

AFP
Berlin

German hospitals and employers fear worker shortages if Syrian refugees return home after the fall of president Bashar al-Assad, a concern backed by a study released yesterday.

Healthcare providers have warned that more than 5,000 Syrian doctors work in German medical facilities, often in rural areas, and that they and other staff would be hard to replace.

Europe's biggest economy has taken in around 1mn refugees from war-ravaged Syria in an influx that peaked in 2015 under ex-chancellor Angela Merkel.

While they were initially greeted warmly, the mass arrivals sparked a backlash that fuelled the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

Since the fall of Assad, conservative and AfD politicians have called for Syrians to return to their homeland despite lingering insecurity there.

Many employers fear this could worsen fast-ageing Germany's labour shortages, a concern backed by a study of the Institute for Employment Research released yesterday.

Large-scale returns "could have noticeable regional and sector-specific effects - especially in those sectors, fields of activity and regions that are already suffering from a shortage of labour", said institute researcher Yuliya Kosyakova.

The study said that 287,000 Syrian nationals are employed in Germany, with many who arrived in recent years still enrolled in language and so-called integration courses.

Syrian men work mostly in transport and logistics, manufacturing, food and hospitality, health and construction, while women were more strongly represented in social and cultural services, it said.

News magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that 5,758 Syrian medical doctors work in Germany, citing data from the German Medical Association.

Austria offers Syrian refugees €1,000 to return home

Austria's conservative-led government said yesterday that it is offering Syrian refugees a "return bonus" of €1,000 (\$1,050) to leave and move back to their home country after the fall of Bashar al-Assad.

Conservative Chancellor Karl Nehammer reacted quickly to Assad's overthrow on Sunday, saying the same day that the security situation in Syria should be reassessed so as to allow deportations of Syrian refugees.

Deporting people against their will is not possible until it becomes clearer what direction Syria is taking.

For now, Austria's government has said it will focus on voluntary deportations. It has also stopped processing Syrians' asylum applications, as have more than a dozen European countries. Like many conservatives in Europe, Nehammer is under pressure from the far-right, with the two groups often seeming to try to outbid each other

on tough-sounding immigration policies. Syrians are the biggest group of asylum-seekers in Austria, a European Union member state.

"Austria will support Syrians who wish to return to their home country with a return bonus of €1,000. The country now needs its citizens in order to be rebuilt," Nehammer said in an English-language post on X.

How many Syrians will take up the offer remains to be seen.

With national flag-carrier Austrian Airlines having suspended flights to the Middle East because of the security situation, the Austrian bonus may not even fully cover travel.

An economy class one-way ticket in a month's time to Beirut in Lebanon, a common starting point for those heading overland to Damascus, currently costs at least €1,066.10 (\$1,120.58) on Turkish Airlines, according to the company's website. - Reuters

"We can understand that many of them want to return to their homeland and are urgently needed there," German Hospital Association chairman Gerald Gass told the magazine.

However, he warned that they

play an important role, especially in smaller towns, and warned: "If they leave Germany in large numbers, this will undoubtedly be felt in the staffing levels."

With many Syrians also employed as care workers, their de-

parture would deal a "serious blow to elderly care", Nursing Employers' Association director Isabell Halletz told news channel NTV.

See also Page 3

Switzerland eyeing ban on Nazi symbols

Switzerland is looking to ban the swastika, Hitler salute and other Nazi signs due to a rise in anti-Semitism, the federal government announced yesterday.

The Federal Council said in a statement that "banning symbols linked to the Third Reich has taken on a particular urgency due to the sharp increase in anti-Semitic incidents".

It proposes an immediate ban on "the use of Nazi symbols in public" and imposing a fine of about 200

Swiss francs (\$224) on anyone who breaks the law.

The Swiss penal code will be amended to punish anyone who uses "a racist, extremist, Nazi symbol or one that advocates violence in order to propagate the ideology it represents".

Switzerland also wants to go further than banning the most well-known Nazi symbols, extending it to more cryptic signs used by supporters of Nazi ideology.

As such, use of the "18" - the

first and eighth letter of the alphabet signifying Adolf Hitler's initials - and "88" - for "Heil Hitler" - will also fall foul.

"The context will play a decisive role in this case," the Council said.

Exceptions are provided for educational, scientific, artistic or journalistic purposes but "within the limits of what freedom of expression allows", it added.

Existing religious symbols identical or similar to Nazi symbols will not be affected. - AFP

Kyrgyzstan to change 'Soviet' national anthem

Kyrgyzstan has said that it would change its national anthem, deeming it too reminiscent of the Soviet era, in the latest move to update its state symbols and strengthen national identity.

The official Kabar news agency said a parliamentary commission had been formed to look into ditching the current anthem, which was adopted in 1991 and has the same melody as the old Soviet one.

President Sadyr Japarov said it glorified only independence, not a "fully constituted" state with a "5,000-year-old history".

He recently called for "an anthem that will inspire young people and future generations".

Parliamentary Speaker Nurlan Shakiev said the

new anthem, which should be "easy to sing for people aged 5-95", would be adopted by April next year.

Kyrgyzstan remains a Russian ally but has not fully divested itself of the symbols of its communist past, with statues of Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin still found across the country.

Like neighbouring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan retained the tune of the Soviet anthem but changed the lyrics, removing references to communism and Lenin or the "big Russian brother".

In recent years, Kyrgyzstan has renamed places with communist references and promoted the Kyrgyz language, even though Russian remains the official language. - AFP

Sweden to map scope of racism in society

Sweden's government has said that it is launching a project to chart the different types of racism in society and assess the level of Swedes' intolerance towards minorities.

Around 27% of Sweden's population, or more than 2.8mn people, were of foreign origin in 2023, meaning they were either born abroad or both their parents were, according to Statistics Sweden.

Presenting the government's plan, Gender Equality Minister Paulina Brandberg said that she wanted to focus in particular on the scope of the phenomenon in schools.

"Racism and discrimination affect Afro-Swedish students at school...young Roma don't dare speak out about their identity, and the (indigenous minority) Sami are victims of hate crimes," the minister told a press conference.

"Teachers say they hear students uttering verbal insults against people because of their skin colour, their religion or their ethnic origin," Health and Social Affairs Minister Jakob Forssmed said at the same press conference. "It's deeply worrying."

These acts of racism have a serious effect on children, he said.

"It's their very identity, their very existence, that is called into question and insulted."

The government therefore plans to map the scope of racism in Sweden, focusing primarily on racism against Muslims, Jews, black people, Roma and Sami.

The objective is to make "the vulnerability of some groups more visible, in order to combat it", Culture Minister Parisa Liljestrang said.

Sweden's minority right-wing government is supported in parliament by the far-right Sweden Democrats, with whom they have a joint political platform focused heavily on curbing immigration.

The war in Gaza has also led to increased racism in Sweden, the ministers said.

"We see Jewish students whose lockers in school are marked with swastikas, we see young Muslims facing hatred and threats on social media," Brandberg said.

According to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRA), 2,695 hate crimes were reported to police in 2022, of which 53% were of a racist or xenophobic nature. - AFP

Darb Al Saai a place to enjoy Qatari traditions

Darb Al Saai at Umm Salal has seen a large turnout of visitors since it was officially opened on December 10 for the Qatar National Day (QND) celebrations.

Many Qatar citizens and expatriates have been visiting this major national event, which will continue until December 18.

This year Darb Al Saai reflects the spirit of Qatari heritage through activities suitable for all age groups, blending entertainment with education.

The visitors in particular highly appreciated the exceptional organisation of this year's edition of the event, both inside and outside the venue.

Speaking to local Arabic daily *Arrayah*, a number of young Qatari men expressed admiration for the diversity of events, including the theatrical performances, folk arts, and the heritage exhibitions.

They said that these activities entertain the visitors while enhancing the Qatari values and traditions among the younger generation.

They noted that Darb Al Saai continues to be a key hub for QND celebrations, showcasing the depth of national heritage in a contemporary style appealing for all public preferences.

Abdullah Mohamed noted that this year's Darb Al Saai is different from his last visit three years ago.

He appreciated the well-organised event and the new activities, which included educational and entertaining programmes for children.

He also encouraged people and their families to visit the event to explore Qatari folk heritage and enjoy a rich and engaging experience.

Nasser al-Khelaifi said there are various distinctive activities that showcase the Qatari heritage with a modern vision.

He pointed out that the events highlight cultural symbols in an enjoyable manner suitable for all family members.

Ahmed al-Zaabi praised the quality of organisation, from the external facilities such as parking spaces to the internal ones, including spacious areas for children, theatrical performances, and cultural workshops.

He noticed there is a high level of safety for children, facilitated by the use of identification bracelets on minors with parents' contact numbers.

Abdullah Khamis remarked that



Darb Al Saai at Umm Salal hosts various activities until December 18. **PICTURES:** Shemeer Rasheed



this year's activities blend Qatari heritage with modern technology, adding a new dimension to visitors' experiences.

He added that some events, such as the 3D shows and interactive

games, present the local heritage in an exciting and interesting way for children, enhancing their understanding of the values and culture of the ancestors.

Tamim Mohammed said that

Darb Al Saai highlights the Qatari heritage through innovative and attractive means, such as the Qatari Archives House, which teaches children techniques for restoring old documents, and the Music Mu-

seum, which offers hands-on performance experiences to discover young talents.

Saleh al-Saadi, visiting Darb Al Saai for the first time, said the event offers a comprehensive ex-

perience that combines entertainment and education.

He expressed his admiration for the well-structured organisation of the activities, catering to all age groups.



The events and activities at Darb Al Saai highlight Qatari cultural symbols in an enjoyable manner suitable for all family members.



From Page 1

'Doha Global South Health Policy makes great progress'

The partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Middle East Council on Global Affairs was formed with the support of Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February this year to create an innovative platform that aims to leverage the experience and knowhow of senior public officials from the Global South.

The Qatari stakeholders are the Ministry of Public Health, the Qatar Fund for Development, Qatar University, Hamad

Bin Khalifa University, Qatar Charity, and the Qatar Red Crescent Society.

"The roundtable showed a tremendous amount of promise, as it brought forward some very important voices from senior technical people in a variety of countries to talk about their perspective on what their needs were and how the donor community could better co-ordinate with them," Dr Elias said.

"We had really insightful presentations from Somalia, Malawi and Burkina Faso,

Nigeria, Congo, and Mozambique," he added.

According to Dr Elias there were several important takeaways for the Global South countries from the meeting.

"They need to focus on workforce development, financing for critical health development initiatives and collaboration with the private sector," he added. "They also have to look at the potential for digital technology to be transformative in some of their programmes. The presentations

included their thinking across some of the key priorities on immunisation, maternal health, primary healthcare, and presented some specific ideas."

Dr Elias noted that Gates Foundation works in a very focused manner in a number of those countries.

"We also have other projects in Malawi and Somalia, as well as in Mozambique," he said. "So we work in all of those countries and in some of them more intensively."

"The one that we work in the most is Nigeria," Dr Elias continued. "In the last 18 months, Nigeria has prioritised primary healthcare and they have increased their domestic funding for primary healthcare."

"We have outlined a plan going forward that would involve having an annual convening, with the next in the fourth quarter of 2025 and in the subsequent years," he said. "In the meantime, there is going to be a community of healthcare practitioners in several areas among these countries."