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excited ahead of
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Strong 'dusty' winds forecast for today

Qatar will be affected from today by fresh to strong northwesterly winds, which may lead to reduction in horizontal visibility in some areas due to dust, the Met office said. The offshore forecast includes high seas too. The minimum and maximum temperatures are expected to be in the 7-15C and 20-24C range, respectively. Yesterday's minimum and maximum temperatures were in the 7-17C and 19-24C, range, respectively.

Trump threatens EU with tariffs

US President-elect Donald Trump said yesterday the European Union (EU) should step up US oil and gas imports or face tariffs on the bloc's exports that include goods such as cars and machinery. The EU already buys the lion's share of US oil and gas exports, according to US government data. No extra volumes are currently available as the US is exporting at capacity, but Trump has pledged to further grow the country's oil and gas production.

Republicans urged to avoid govt shutdown

There is still time to avoid a government shutdown, the White House said yesterday, but Republicans need to stick with a bipartisan deal to keep the government open. Republicans in the US Congress mounted a third attempt to avert a government shutdown yesterday with only hours to spare. (Reuters) Page 7

Darb Al Saai concludes today



More than 102,000 visitors from all walks of life have thronged Darb Al Saai headquarters in Umm Salal Area to take part in the Qatar National Day celebrations, which concludes today at 11pm. The venue opens at 3pm. Darb Al Saai, which opened on Dec 10, features different aspects of the original Qatari heritage, folklore, culture, tradition and history stressing the intrinsic values of the nation and its people.

PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam. Page 12

US held 'positive' talks with Syria's new leader

A senior US diplomat told Syria's new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa yesterday that Washington was scrapping a reward for his arrest as she welcomed "positive messages" from their talks.

Barbara Leaf, the top US diplomat for the Middle East, said she told Sharaa of the "critical need to ensure terrorist groups cannot pose a threat inside of Syria or externally, including to the US and our partners in the region." "Ahmed al-Sharaa committed to this," Leaf told reporters after the meeting in Damascus.

Leaf, part of the first formal visit by US diplomats to Damascus since the early days of the brutal civil war, said that Sharaa "came across

as pragmatic" and that their talks were "quite good, very productive, detailed." "We welcomed positive messages" from Sharaa, Leaf said.

Yesterday, thousands of Syrians held a celebration at Ummayyad Square in central Damascus, in an event called for by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) which toppled Bashar al-Assad regime on Dec 8. Speakers blared revolutionary songs, while people waved the newly adopted Syrian flag and chanted slogans in support of the government and against Assad.

The crowd was a mix of people from different walks of life and backgrounds: armed men in military fatigues, women - both with and without headscarves - and children.



Syrians attend Friday prayers at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus yesterday.

Qatar welcomes UN resolution referring UNRWA ban to ICJ

Qatar has welcomed the adoption of a resolution by the UN General Assembly requesting the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to issue a legal advisory opinion on the accusations by Israeli occupation authorities against the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) of terrorism, and their decisions to ban the agency's operations in the occupied territories.

In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs considered the adoption of the resolution, with a majority of 137 votes, as a reflection of the broad international rejection of the Israeli occupation authorities' decisions to ban UNRWA's activities in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The ministry reiterated Qatar's warning that banning UNRWA's activities will lead to severe humanitarian and political consequences, particularly depriving millions of Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria of its essential services, in addition to terminating the Palestinian refugee issue and their right to return to their homes and lands.

It reaffirmed Qatar's support for UNRWA, stemming from its steadfast position in backing the legitimate rights of the bro-

therly Palestinian people, foremost among them their right to establish an independent state along the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Meanwhile, the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) welcomed the UN General Assembly's decision to request an advisory opinion from the ICJ on Israel's obligations concerning the presence and activities of the UN, other international organisations and third states.

In a statement, the OIC stressed that all measures and plans enacted by the Israeli occupation - particularly legislation affecting the presence, operations and immunities of the UN, its agencies and bodies, including UNRWA, as well as other international organisations and third states in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem - constitute violations of the UN Charter and relevant resolutions.

These actions, the organisation warned, deprive the Palestinian people of essential aid and worsen the humanitarian crisis they face.

The OIC also welcomed the General Assembly's adoption of another resolution affirming the permanent sovereignty of the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, and of

the Arab population in the occupied Syrian Golan over their natural resources.

The OIC urged all states and international organisations, including the UN, its agencies, and bodies, to intensify efforts to end the Israeli occupation and enable the Palestinian people to exercise their legitimate rights, including their right to self-determination and establishing an independent state along the June 4, 1967, borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The Arab League also welcomed the UN resolution referring UNRWA ban to ICJ.

In a statement yesterday, Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul-Gheit expressed his appreciation and gratitude to Norway, which proposed the draft resolution, highlighting that it reflects Norway's consistent stance in defending Palestinian rights.

Aboul-Gheit considered that the large vote in favour of the resolution reflects international public opinion rejecting the Israeli authorities' decisions to ban UNRWA and terminate its role in Palestinian territories. He also noted that it specifically reflects deep concern over complete collapse of humanitarian response operations in Gaza Strip if Israel succeeds in ending UNRWA's role there. (QNA)

Israeli strike kills 7 kids from one family in Jabalia

Gaza's civil defence rescue agency reported that an Israeli air strike killed 10 members of a family yesterday in the northern part of the territory, including seven children.

"There are 10 martyrs... all targeted by an air strike on their home in Jabalia al-Nazla, southwest of Jabalia. All of the martyrs are from the same family, including seven children, the oldest aged six," civil defence agency spokesman Mahmud Bassal told AFP. Bassal said the strike injured 15 other people. Another Israeli strike killed at least eight Palestinians in an apartment in Nuseirat refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip yesterday, medics said. Palestinian health officials told Reuters that Israeli military strikes across the enclave had killed a total of 15 people yesterday.

Mediated ceasefire efforts have yet to secure a deal between Israel and Hamas after more than a year of conflict in the Gaza Strip. On Thursday, sources close to the discussions, told Reuters that the Arab mediators, Qatar and Egypt, had been able to hammer out some differences but some sticking points remained unresolved and needed more discussion. At least 45,206 Palestinians have been killed and



A wounded Palestinian child receives treatment at a hospital, in the aftermath of an Israeli strike in Nuseirat in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday.

107,512 wounded in Israel's military offensive in Gaza since Oct 7, 2023, the Gaza health ministry said in a statement yesterday. (Reuters, AFP)

More than 10% schoolchildren have vision problems: MoPH study

By Joseph Varghese
Staff Reporter

A study conducted by the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) about visual impairment (VI) among schoolchildren in Qatar has revealed that more than 10% suffer from abnormal visual acuity (VA) measurements.

The research done by the Department of Non-Communicable Diseases Prevention Programme was published on *Qatar Journal of Public Health*.

The study was conducted to assess the prevalence of VI among primary and preparatory school

students in Qatar as paediatric impairment has profound implications on the children's development, intellectual skills and quality of life.

The exercise has established a baseline data on VI among the target group, revealing that more than one-tenth of the students had abnormal VA measurements.

"However, further interventions are needed to improve screening strategies. Future research should focus on the causes of childhood VI and explore methods to reduce it, such as encouraging parents of visually impaired students to ensure that their children wear glasses regularly and

attend annual eye checkups," the study has recommended.

The Ministry of Public Health and the Primary Health Care Corporation recognised the urgency of a vision screening programme to detect visual impairment complications, highlighting Qatar's commitment to ensuring the eye health of children.

A school-based cross-sectional study was conducted among students in grades one, three, five, seven and nine in Qatar. School nurses conducted VA measurement using a Snellen chart placed 6m away, with an E symbol, in which the 6/6 line is the standard for normal vision. Each student's information was recorded in their

electronic health records or in Excel sheets depending on public or private schools.

A total of 330 schools participated in this survey, with 99,379 students divided into 45,670 from government schools and 53,709 from private schools. The study revealed a high prevalence of undetected VI in 93,356 students from 330 schools. The prevalence of abnormal VA among students was 10.4% in government schools and 12.6% in private schools.

There was no significant association between VI and gender or nationality, although VI was higher in grades five, seven and nine, but not statistically sig-

nificant. The proportion of visually impaired students diagnosed with refractive errors and wearing glasses or contact lenses during vision measurement was 14.7% in government schools and 27% in private schools.

The MoPH released vision screening guidelines as a basis VA measurement, role description, and location planning, taking all precautions to ensure a safe and healthy screening process. The school health team includes licensed practical nurses, school counsellors, and school psychologists. Nurses in government schools are recruited and supervised by the school health department of PHCC. Private schools

must have health personnel as part of the school clinic under support services.

According to the research team, the study has some limitations, including the lack of insights into the causes of abnormal vision among school children.

"Further study of low vision could help develop strategies to address the causes of low vision. Future research should focus on the causes of childhood VI and explore methods to reduce it, such as encouraging parents of visually impaired students to ensure that their children wear glasses regularly and attend annual eye checkups," the report concluded.

Police Academy celebrates graduation of 18th batch

The Police Academy, represented by the Police Institute, celebrated the graduation of the 18th batch of new police recruits on December 17, the Ministry of Interior said in an X post yesterday. A total of 855 recruits successfully completed the foundational training course, which aimed to prepare and qualify them according to the highest standards. The programme included military and physical training, along with providing them with the necessary police sciences and knowledge to perform their duties efficiently and effectively.



Official

Amir sends cables of congratulations to Kuwaiti Amir

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent cables of congratulations to Kuwait's Amir Sheikh Mishal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, on the anniversary of his assumption of power. (QNA)



Minister meets German special co-ordinator for Syria

HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met in Doha yesterday with Tobias Lindner, the German Federal Foreign Office Minister of State and Special Co-ordinator for Syria. The meeting discussed aspects of co-operation between the two countries and ways to promote and strengthen them, as well as the latest regional developments, particularly in Syria. Special Envoy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ambassador Faisal bin Abdullah al-Hanzab, and Qatar's ambassador to Germany Abdullah bin Ibrahim Abdulrahman Sultan al-Hamar attended the meeting. (QNA)

MoEHE's systems department obtains ISO/IEC accreditation

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE), represented by the Information Systems Department, has obtained the ISO/IEC 27001:2022 accreditation certificate for the information security management system.

This achievement comes within the framework of the ministry's commitment to raising the efficiency and quality of its services, and its keenness to apply the best international standards in protecting information assets, enhancing transparency in dealing with data, and maintaining the privacy of sensitive information.

Director of the Information Systems Department Dr Mona Salem al-Fadhli said that this achievement represents an important step towards improving the quality of government services, as it ensures the confidentiality and integrity of data, and enhances co-operation with the government and private sectors and international bodies in



the field of data exchange.

She noted that this certificate supports the ministry's efforts to accelerate digital transformation, while ensuring the highest levels of security in the digital environment.

Dr al-Fadhli praised the efforts made by the Information Security

Team and the co-operating departments, which contributed to achieving this accomplishment, noting that these efforts reflect effective co-operation and joint work within the ministry, expressing her hope that this accreditation will be the cornerstone for a series of future successes. (QNA)

MoI advisory for bikes

Metal Plates for Motorcycles


The Traffic Law requires metal plates to be installed on motorcycles.

Ensuring that motorcycles have metal plates, especially in camping areas, helps you avoid violations and demonstrates your commitment to regulations.

Article 12:

Each motor vehicle shall carry immediately after its registration and before its operation two number plates issued by the Issuing Authority, one of which shall be fixed to the front of the vehicle and the other to the rear. For a trailer or semi-trailer it is sufficient to fix one number plate to the rear with the same number as the towing vehicle.

The provision of the previous paragraph applies to vehicles exempted from registration pursuant to the provision of Article 2 of the present Law.



Ensuring that motorcycles have metal licence plates, especially in camping areas, demonstrates compliance with the law and helps avoid violations, the Ministry of Interior reminded in an X post yesterday.

In brief



QARS establishes special station to mark National Day

The Qatar Amateur Radio Society (QARS) has established a special station that carries the name of the Qatar National Day (QND), making it an international call sign (A71QND-2024), through which it transmits communications to global destinations worldwide. Having inaugurated this special station, Qatari radio amateurs embarked on transmitting their messages to the entire world through radio waves, thereby embodying values, precepts, as well as aspirations and hopes inspired from QND upon which the State of Qatar was built, expressing its identity, history, and deep-rooted legacy. (QNA)

Workshop on generative AI in reshaping labour market held

The Civil Services and Government Development Bureau's Institute of Public Administration, in collaboration with the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, represented by Qatar Digital Academy, has organised a workshop titled, 'Generative Artificial

Intelligence: Work and the Future of Jobs'. The workshop was held remotely using Teams platform, with the participation from employees of the public sector in the Gulf Co-operation Council countries. It focused on providing a comprehensive overview of generative artificial intelligence concepts and its

importance in reshaping the labour market, as well as the new roles and jobs that will emerge as a result of this technology. The workshop also covered various topics, including the definition of artificial intelligence and its fundamentals, and applications of deep learning such as natural language processing and

computer vision, in addition to discussing strategies for utilising artificial intelligence (AI).

The workshop highlighted the potential of generative artificial intelligence in enhancing various sectors such as healthcare, education, and industry, while also addressing the importance of ethical

frameworks and ensuring transparency when using these technologies.

The workshop is part of the initiative 'Innovative and Modern Training Solutions Aligned with Remote Learning and Training Trends', in co-ordination with the GCC General Secretariat. (QNA)

Katara festival celebrates facets of Arabic language

Katara - the Cultural Village's Arabic Language Festival began yesterday. The two-day festival features Arabic calligraphy, puppet theatre, storyteller, classical comedy, children's theatre, colouring Arabic letters, in addition to games, competitions, reading corner, story and drawing, Katara Library, which offers publications from more than 16 publishing houses. A lecture was held yesterday entitled 'In the love of Arabic... Conversations and Concerns' in which Dr Al-Siddiq Omar al-Siddiq spoke about the characteristics of the Arabic language and its relationship to other languages, Arabic in media and science platforms, localising Arabic at modern technology, and employing artificial intelligence techniques. A symposium is scheduled to be held at the conclusion of the festival today where linguist Dr Ahmed al-Janabi, author Ahmed al-Alawi, and journalist Mohammed Shabrawi will speak. It will be moderated by Mohammed al-Shahwani, Head of the Cultural Literature Department at the Cultural Affairs and Events Department at Katara. (QNA)



Three bodies found at site of Israel strike on Hezbollah chief

AFP
Beirut

Lebanese rescuers recovered three bodies from the rubble of a building struck by Israel in a September air raid that killed Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, state media reported yesterday.

The health ministry has not released a death toll for the strike, which flattened several buildings in Haret Hreik, a southern Beirut stronghold of the group.

Rescuers arrived at the site yesterday morning to search for seven missing people, the National News Agency said, adding they "retrieved the bodies of three martyrs". The remains were taken to

Rafik Hariri University Hospital in Beirut for DNA tests to confirm their identities, NNA reported. Search efforts were ongoing for others it said were still missing.

A truce between Israel and Hezbollah took effect on November 27, ending a conflict that killed more than 4,000 people in Lebanon, including Hezbollah's top leaders. The September 27 air strike targeted

Nasrallah in an underground bunker in the residential area.

Nasrallah was killed along with four others, including Hezbollah's southern Lebanon commander and a senior officer from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the group said.

He was buried at a secret location, for fear Israeli forces might target his funeral.

Hezbollah announced plans for "popular" funeral ceremonies for Nasrallah after the ceasefire but did not specify a date. Despite the truce, Israeli air strikes have killed more than 20 people in Lebanon since November 27, according to an AFP tally based on health ministry figures.

Both Israel and Hezbollah accuse each other of repeatedly violating the ceasefire.

Painful wait in Saudi for family of detained Syrian chess champion

AFP
Riyadh

As Syrians pour out of prisons that Bashar al-Assad used to cement his grip on power, the Saudi-based family of one detainee is desperate for any news, even if it confirms their worst fears.

Rania al-Abassi, a Syrian dentist and former national chess champion, disappeared into Assad's lethal network of detention facilities in 2013 along with her husband and their six children.

She had declined relatives' invitations to seek safety in Saudi Arabia, where she herself once lived for more than a decade, after the Syrian uprising devolved into civil war, thinking she would be safe because she was not involved in politics. For more than a week now, ever since a lightning offensive by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) rebels drove Assad from Damascus, Rania's sister Naila has been glued to television news reports.

"In the past few days, our hope has returned strongly. We thought that the rebels would enter Damascus, open the prisons and release Rania and her children," Naila al-Abassi, a gynaecologist, told AFP from her home in Riyadh.

Footage of the infamous dungeons and torture chambers of Saydnaya prison was especially distressing.

"We stopped the broadcast several times to examine a face, but to no avail," she said. Relatives in Damascus and elsewhere in Syria have visited the prisons of various security branches, sifting through left-behind files in search of clues. But for Naila and the rest of the family in Riyadh, there is nothing to do but endure the painful wait. "The more time passes, the less hope there is," Naila said, lowering her voice so her mother, clad in black, would not hear her. She denounced "an unprecedentedly brutal regime that arrests children and infants and kills them or hides them for years." Rania al-Abassi had a comfortable life as a dentist in Saudi Arabia but decided to return in 2008 to help people in the country where she grew up. Members of military intelligence descended on her family's home in a Damascus suburb in March 2013,



Najah Mardini (left) and Naila al-Abassi, the mother and sister of detained Syrian dentist and former national chess champion Rania al-Abassi, hold up a family picture of Rania at their home in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

taking her husband Abdul Rahman Yasin into custody first, according to Amnesty International.

The following night they returned "and looted money, jewelry, the family cars, and the paperwork for their properties and Rania's clinic," Amnesty said. A day later they came for Rania, Rania's secretary and Rania's six children, aged 14, 13, 11, eight, six and two. Such stories have haunted Syrians for years. "Countless children, women and men are still held arbitrarily in detention facilities under various authorities," UN special envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said in a statement last week.

"They must be immediately released." The Abassi family was not politically active and did not publicly oppose Assad. But her family suspects Rania's decision to give food baskets to families displaced by fighting put her and her husband Abdul Rahman on the radar of security forces.

Abdul Rahman was among those confirmed dead after a former Syrian army photographer known by the codename "Caesar" fled the country in 2013, taking with him some 55,000 graphic

images showing corpses tortured and starved to death in Syrian prisons. Before Assad fell, Rania's family paid thousands of dollars for information from people who claimed to know what happened to her, but the leads were fruitless. In January of last year Rania's story was included in the US State Department's "Without Just Cause" campaign highlighting political prisoners around the world.

The attention did not shed any more light on her fate. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor, more than 100,000 people died in detention from 2011 onwards, many of them under torture.

With prisons finally opening, Naila has taken a week off work to follow reports out of Syria, though she knows it is likely Rania is long dead. "We want a grave for them," she said of Rania and her family. "We have the right to at least know where their grave is." Their mother, 81-year-old Najah Mardini, is hoping for a better outcome. "No matter how long it takes," she said, "I have hope that they are alive and I will embrace them in my arms soon."

Palestinians accuse settlers of West Bank mosque fire

Reuters
Ramallah

Israeli settlers set fire to a mosque in the occupied West Bank, Palestinian residents said yesterday, and video showed "Revenge" and other slogans had been spray-painted in Hebrew on the building's facade.

Black burn marks were visible at the entrance to the Muslim holy site in the northern West Bank village of Marda. The fire was put out before it could spread much further.

Israeli police said they were collecting testimonies and evidence at the scene. Nasfat al-Khufash, head of the Marda village council, said: "On Friday, Marda awoke to a systematic terror attack by a group of settlers who set fire to Bir al-Walideen mosque." "These attacks by settler groups are continuous and systematic," he said.

The Israeli police and Shin Bet security services said in a joint statement: "We see this incident as extremely serious and will act resolutely to bring the perpetrators to justice for rigorous trial."

The Palestinian Authority foreign ministry assailed the attack as the latest in a series of violations and crimes by Israeli settlers and appealed to the United Nations Security Council for help protecting Palestinians.



A Palestinian inspects the damage done to a mosque, after a reported attack by Israeli settlers, in the town of Marda near the West Bank city of Salfit, yesterday.

The UN says more than 700,000 Israelis live among 3mn Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, lands Israel captured in 1967. Most countries deem Israeli settlements built on the captured land to be illegal. Israel disputes this and cites

historical ties to the land. Violence has surged across the West Bank since the Oct 2023 storming led by Hamas fighters on southern Israel, which triggered Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza and a wider conflict on several fronts.

World Food Programme says three staff killed in Sudan by aerial strike

Reuters
Cairo/UN

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) said yesterday that three of its staff were killed in war-torn Sudan's Blue Nile state on Thursday after an aerial strike on its compound.

"Any loss of life in humanitarian service is unconscionable. Humanitarians are not, and must never be, a target," WFP Execu-

tive Director Cindy McCain said. "I demand a thorough investigation and for the perpetrators to be held accountable."

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was outraged by the killings, his spokesperson said.

In a statement the Sudanese government expressed its condolences for the deaths, and condemned any attack on aid workers or the UN it said it would investigate the incident, but added that the army did not have any activities in the area. War erupted in

Sudan in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces ahead of a planned transition to civilian rule, triggering the world's largest displacement crisis.

"WFP remains committed to delivering humanitarian assistance across Sudan, including in Blue Nile State. WFP will stay and deliver vital food and nutrition aid across all locations in Sudan. This is what our fallen colleagues would have wanted," McCain said in statement.

Aleppo set for revival despite war scars to heritage

AFP
Aleppo

The historic Baron Hotel in Syria's Aleppo is dilapidated and damaged by years of war but still standing and ready for a revival, much like the city itself.

Aleppo's old city, designated a Unesco World Heritage site, was ravaged by the conflict that erupted after a government crackdown on protests in 2011.

Between 2012 and 2016, it became a battleground between Syria's military and rebels.

The army of now-ousted president Bashar al-Assad shelled rebels from the ground and struck them from the air, supported by Russian firepower.

Opposition groups, meanwhile, used mortars and artisanal rockets, as the fighting turned ancient streets into sniper alleys.

During the four years of fighting before the government recaptured Aleppo following a devastating siege, the city was virtually emptied. Now, after Assad's fall following a lightning rebel offensive led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, residents are looking forward to reconstruction.

"Unfortunately, more than 60% of the edifices in the old city, monuments of the old city



Fadel Fadel, a 61-year-old shopkeeper, poses inside his stall at a traditional market area in Aleppo, Syria.

of Aleppo, were devastated to ground zero," said Georges Edleby, a tour guide in the city for 35 years.

"Hopefully there will be a day that we see them again restored."

The ancient souks where Aleppo's famed olive oil soap is piled up in stacks for sale has been reduced in many places to little more than rubble.

Aleppo's medieval citadel, however, remains relatively intact.

Rebel fighters, one with a rose slipped into the barrel of his gun, stood guard outside the ancient ramparts, which Syria's army turned into a stronghold during the war.

Most of the damage in the citadel was caused by a 2023 earthquake, locals say. Below in the

old city, a few alleys of the souk — once the largest in the world with 4,000 stalls — have reopened after being restored, including with Saudi financing.

Jamal Habbal, 66, has spent all his life under the stone vaults of the old city and reopened his macrame and rope shop there a year ago. "We have so many memories here. It was a big market that was vibrant and lively. Girls used to come to buy items for their trousseaus. They could find everything," he said.

"And then suddenly, the crisis," he said, reluctant to even say the word war.

"We had to leave. I returned in 2018, but it's still difficult," he added, speaking in a dark and largely deserted alley.

Fadel Fadel has also reopened

his shop offering souvenirs, soap and mother-of-pearl inlaid boxes. "It was completely destroyed here," said the 51-year-old.

He is hoping to see Aleppo returned to its status as a "centre of commerce, industry and tourism." "We hope for a better life."

Outside, dusty streets wind between ruins that await reconstruction and revival.

The Baron Hotel once welcomed Agatha Christie, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and France's Charles de Gaulle. Visitors flocked to see the somewhat faded glory of its rooms, as well as its terrace and the unpaid bar bill belonging to one Lawrence of Arabia.

But now, several broken windows adorned with shutters hanging from a single hinge offer a view into a deserted building covered in dust.

The hotel's future is uncertain. Nearby, however, the National Museum of Aleppo is ready to reopen. Its courtyard was hit in shelling but its building and collection were spared.

Director Ahmed Othman said the museum "took lessons from the experience of our neighbours", including institutions in Iraq and Lebanon.

"We took the necessary measures to protect our collections," he said.

Erdogan says Turkiye expects allies to pull support from Kurds

Reuters
Ankara

Turkiye expects foreign countries will withdraw support for Kurdish fighters in Syria following the toppling of Bashar al-Assad, President Tayyip Erdogan said, as Ankara seeks to isolate Kurds who have long fought alongside US troops.

Speaking to reporters on the flight home from a summit in Egypt on Thursday, Erdogan said there was no longer any reason for outsiders to back Kurdish YPG fighters. His comments were released by his office yesterday.

The Kurdish YPG has been the main force in a US-backed alliance in northern Syria, but Turkiye considers the group an extension of the PKK, which has long fought the Turkish state and is banned as terrorists by Ankara, Washington and the EU.

In his remarks, Erdogan compared the US-backed YPG to Islamic State, and said neither group had any future in Syria.

"In the upcoming period, we do not believe that any power will continue to collaborate with terrorist organisations. The heads of terrorist organisations such as Islamic State and PKK-YPG will be crushed in the shortest possible time." The United States still has 900 troops on the ground in Syria working alongside the YPG-led alliance known as the Syrian Democratic Forces. The SDF played a major role on the ground defeating Islamic State fighters in 2014-2017 with US air support, and still guards IS fighters in prison camps.

Ankara, alongside Syrian allies, has mounted several cross-border offensives against the YPG-led SDF in northern Syria, while repeatedly demanding that its Nato ally Washington halts support for the fighters.

Hostilities have escalated since Assad was toppled less than two weeks ago, with Turkiye and Syrian groups it backs seizing the city of Manbij from the SDF on Dec 9, prompting the United States to broker a fragile ceasefire.



KWA's Qatar National Day gathering celebrates achievements, heritage

Kottar Welfare Association (KWA) - Qatar held a Qatar National Day meet in celebration of the country's achievements and heritage. The event presided by Mowlavi Imadutheen Umari was attended by vice-president Sheik Ahmad, general secretary Mohamed Shiffan Sameem and others. In his speech, Mowlavi Umari highlighted the significance of the occasion, the role of the expatriate communities in supporting Qatar's development and the strong relationship between Qatar and its diverse population.



IIQS Qatar chapter hosts CPD event



Indian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (IIQS) Qatar chapter, hosted a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) event recently. AG Consultancy director Phillip Sneed spoke on 'Expert determination and expert witness'. Earlier, chapter membership manager Ganesh Mahadev Kadam welcomed the attendees. Vice-

president Dayanidhi Dhandapany introduced the speaker. He discussed a wide range of complex matters arising from construction disputes, the way forward to deal with expert determination and expert witness mechanisms to enforce dispute resolution amicably. A Q&A session followed. President Kiran Kumar Podakanti presented a memento to Sneed.

Dhandapany presented a souvenir to vice president (finance) Venkat Reddy, in recognition of the completion of 10 years of voluntary services to the IIQS Qatar managing committee. President proposed a vote of thanks. Vice-president (CPD committee) Saravanan, public relations manager Basith and membership manager Aadith Somnath were present.

Doha College alumna wins Miss Bharat Fashionista title

India-born and Doha-raised Jannate Grover won the title of Miss Bharat Fashionista at the Ms Bharat USA Pageant, a statement said. A former student of Doha College, she moved to New York to pursue her education at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She is also the creator of @thefashionngyani on Instagram, where she shares her knowledge of fashion design, history and behind-the-scenes insights into the industry.



Sanskriti triumphs in ICC festival



The Indian Cultural Centre (ICC)'s AO (associated organisations) Festival, Kala Ke Rang 2024, witnessed over 750 participants in 18 competitions over four days at ICC and Bhavan's Public School. The overall champion was Sanskriti and Karnataka Sanga Qatar was the first runner-up. Shamita Adiga and Pooha Santosh won the Kala Thilakam title.

Super Dancer Season 3 contest concludes



The Super Dancer Competition (Season 3), organised by Doha Music Lovers in association with Emote Edition Dance Studio, concluded with a grand finale. Over three weeks, hundreds of dancers competed in the auditions, in classical, folk, cinematic, and western dance forms. From this talent pool, 80 participants were selected to perform in the finale, competing across four categories.

Weight loss challenge winners honoured

The winners of a weight loss challenge organised by the Center for Indian Community (CIC) Rayyan Zone were honoured at a ceremony. Shereef K B, Fayiz Abdulla and Rafeeq Soopi won the first, second and third prizes, respectively. Consolation awards were presented to Mohammed Rafi and Sameer Salih. Rashad Pallikandi, who received the ICBF Award for Social Service, was also felicitated during the event. President Sudheer T K presided. Secretary Abdul Jaleel M M welcomed the gathering and vice president Subul Abdul Aziz proposed a vote of thanks.





QATAR NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATIONS

IIS - EVENING SESSION



The newly launched evening session of Ideal Indian School (IIS) celebrated Qatar National Day, showcasing a range of activities that reflected its strong bond with the host nation. The students performed dance and songs and gave speeches, celebrating the rich traditions and cultural heritage of Qatar. Principal Shaik Shamim Saheb acknowledged the visionary leadership and remarkable progress of Qatar, highlighting their commitment to transforming the nation into a modern, dynamic state while balancing rapid development with the preservation of its rich cultural heritage. The event featured an array of performances by students from Kindergarten to Class 8. The programme commenced with a prayer by Asma A K, followed by the Qatar national anthem performed by the school choir. Students expressed their love for Qatar through speeches. Muaz Naseerulhaq spoke in Arabic and Muhammed Hamdan in English. Hanifa Khan welcomed the gathering and Daya Noufal proposed a vote of thanks. The programme was hosted by Khulood.



RAJAGIRI PUBLIC SCHOOL



Rajagiri Public School (RPS) commemorated Qatar National Day with a celebration that showcased the rich cultural heritage of the nation. The event was a testament to the school's commitment to fostering a sense of belonging and appreciation for the host country. The festivities kicked off with captivating Arabic dances performed by both boys and girls. A group song celebrating Arabic culture followed, accompanied by a visual display of Qatar's landmarks and landscapes. The highlight of the event was a skit titled 'My Values Shape My Identity', which delved into the importance of personal values and their role in shaping one's character. The performance resonated with the audience, inspiring them to reflect on their own values and aspirations. The event was co-ordinated by Davis Paul and Susan Binu.

CHALIYAR DOHA WOMEN'S COMMITTEE



Chaliyar Doha Women's Committee marked Qatar National Day with an event titled Arabic Night. Over 100 attendees, including women and children from various panchayats of Chaliyar Doha were present. The festivities began with children dressed in traditional Arabic attire singing the Qatar national anthem. A series of cultural programmes followed. Women's wing president Muhsina Zameel led the event, co-ordinated by Femina Saleem, Labeeb Thayyil, Dr Asheeka, Labeeb Ashraf, Rimshida, Febi, and Risana.

CIC Rayyan Zone

As part of the Qatar National Day (QND) celebrations, the Center for Indian Community (CIC) Rayyan Zone organised a quiz competition. The Ain Khalid Morning Unit, represented by Shajudheen and Bassam, emerged as the winners. The Umm Al Saneem Unit, represented by Subul Abdul Aziz and Sajir, secured the second position, while the Industrial Area North Unit, represented by Muhsin and Syed Ismail, won third place. The Al Waab Unit, represented by Abdul Wahad and Shafah, and the Abu Hamour Unit, represented by Abdul Salam and Aideed, received consolation prizes. Prizes were distributed by zonal executive members Mohammed Rafeeq Thangal, Siddique Vengara, Haris K, Subul, and Abdul Salam. M M Abdul Jaleel was the quiz master.



BPS students display talent at annual sports meet



The 21st annual sports meet of Birla Public School was held on December 14 at Al Rayyan Stadium.

Renowned Qatari hurdler Bassem Hemeida was the chief guest. School chairman Gope Shahani, director Lukose Chacko, management representative Chindhu Antony and Al Ahli Sports Club coach Adhil were present.

Principal Dr Anand R Nair, non-academics head Vinod Kumar, vice-principal Edna Fernandez, heads of various sections and teachers, and a gathering of parents witnessed the event. The programme commenced with a welcome address by Noby C C from the Physical Education Department.

The day unfolded with dance, gymnastics, and a tableau showcasing various sporting events. One of the key highlights was the march past, featuring the four houses - Mars, Neptune, Saturn and Jupiter, along with the Scouts and Guides.

Chairman Shahani declared the meet open. The torch was lit by



Hemeida, and handed over to the school sports captain, David Joash Jossan. The torch was then passed to the athletes who have represented the school in national and international events across India and Qatar. The flag-hoisting ceremony and the administration of the athletes' oath by the sports captain marked the formal commencement of the competitions.

In his inaugural speech, Hemeida emphasised the value of

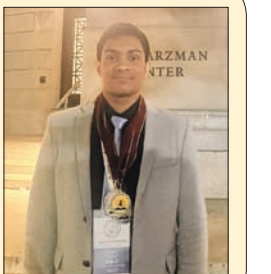
participation over victory and the importance of embodying the sportsman spirit. To further inspire the students, he even sprinted alongside the athletes. He presented medals and certificates to the winners.

Chindhu Antony in her address commended parents for recognising the significance of sports and games and for encouraging their children to take part in various events.



DPS-MIS student excels in World Scholars Cup tournament in US

DPS-Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) Grade XII student Edwin Daniel won four medals in World Scholars Cup Tournament of Champions at Yale University, US. He bagged gold in team quiz and individual writing, and silver in team writing and individual debate. The event brought together students from over 60 countries. Principal Asna Nafees has congratulated the achiever.



DPS-MIS bids farewell to Grade 12 students



DPS-Modern Indian School (DPS-MIS) bade a heartfelt farewell to the Grade XII graduating Class of 2024-25 at an event with the theme 'Farewell Memories: To Infinity and Beyond'.

Chief guest Rocky Fernandes encouraged them to embrace the future with curiosity and resilience, while upholding values like integrity, compassion, and perseverance.

Principal Asna Nafees commended their contributions to pioneering events such as Teenpreneur and Hackathon. Encouraging students to traverse life's challenges, she emphasised the importance of responsibility, kindness, and staying true to the school's motto, 'Service Before Self'. She urged parents to provide unwavering emotional support as their children

spread their wings and venture forth, embracing the world with courage and purpose. Vice-principal Soma Bhattacharjee encouraged students to embrace the final stretch with unwavering focus, seek guidance when needed, and face their exams with confidence. The ceremony was marked by captivating performances by the Grade XI students.

Head boy Abhimanyu Gupta, head girl Sansriti Sarraf, games captains Krishna Karthik A S, Kalash Vivek Raval, Disha Mitesh Patel and Anna Mariam John in their nostalgic speeches, expressed their gratitude towards the management, principal and the teachers. A video montage of the principal, vice-principals and teachers sharing words of advice and encouragement was the highlight of the day.



Tensions peak in Mozambique as results due in disputed vote

AFP
Johannesburg

Mozambique is braced for an escalation in protests after the announcement due by Monday of final results of a disputed election, a turning point in two months of unrest that has killed 130 people and caused major disruption. Opposition leader Venancio Mondlane has threatened "chaos" if the Constitutional Council validates the initial results that found he came second in the October 9 vote to the candidate of the ruling Frelimo party.

"The country is in your hands," Mondlane told the council Monday in one of his regular social me-

dia broadcasts from an unknown location abroad. "If we get the electoral truth, we will go towards peace," said the 50-year-old, who has been directing protests from self-imposed exile after leaving Mozambique weeks ago, saying he feared for his safety.

"If it is an electoral lie, we will bring the country down to a precipice, chaos and disorder," Mondlane said in the broadcast, which has been watched by around 2.4mn people. The council is, however, expected to sign off on the results of the election commission, which said that Mondlane won 20% compared to 71% for Daniel Chapo, the Frelimo candidate.

Mondlane says the count was rigged in favour of Frelimo and a

separate count shows that he won 53% to 36% for Chapo. The dispute has sparked an explosion of unrest in the impoverished southern African nation. Protests have brought city centres to a standstill, disrupted industry and power plants, and halted operations at the main border with South Africa, causing its neighbour major losses in exports.

Police have been accused of using live bullets against protesters, with at least 130 people killed, according to the local civil society group Plataforma Decide, whose figures have been cited by Amnesty International. The US government on Thursday raised its warning level against travel to Mozambique, saying protests can quickly

become violent. The country's largest industrial employer, Mozal Aluminium, said it was making contingency plans in case of civil unrest after the announcement. "I'm convinced that if Monday the Constitutional Council declares the election as free and fair, which I am 100 percent convinced it will, then the blood is going to flow," said Maputo-based political and security risk analyst Johann Smith told AFP.

The council has to deliver its ruling by Monday to allow President Filipe Nyusi to hand over power at the end of his constitutionally limited two terms on January 15. Mondlane said Wednesday he believed that Nyusi, 67, wanted to use the escalating tension to

declare a state of emergency and stay in power. Nyusi dismissed the suggestion in an address to the nation on Thursday. "I have always said that I have no intention of strengthening powers, and much less to serve a third term," he said. "I swore to respect the Constitution...and I want to make it clear that I will leave power in January 2025."

There are also major fractures within Frelimo, which has governed since independence from Portugal in 1975, analysts say, including between Nyusi and Chapo, 47, who is expected to take over from him.

The most likely scenario is that results will be approved but with some minor changes, for example,

to the handing of 195 of 250 parliamentary seats to Frelimo, says analyst Borges Nhamirre. "Mozambique doesn't have money to organise a new election," he said. "Protests have already been called for Monday. The main cities, including Maputo, will be under siege because of the fear of protests," he said.

"The whole game changes on Monday," said Smith, who is based in Maputo. "Until now, there were a few incidents, looting and so on but in the greater scheme of things, the protests were mainly calm and there weren't a lot of problems." "Everyone is recharging and preparing for the announcement on Monday. It will be a lot more intense and bloody."

Macron extends Mayotte visit, angry residents plead for water

■ **Death toll still uncertain**
■ **Rescue teams still to reach some shantytowns**
■ **Aid begins to arrive**

Reuters
Mamoudzou

Angry residents of a Mayotte neighbourhood damaged by Cyclone Chido heckled French President Emmanuel Macron when he toured it yesterday, complaining that potable water had not reached them nearly a week after the storm hit the Indian Ocean archipelago.

Officials in France's poorest overseas territory have only been able to confirm 31 fatalities from Chido but some have said they fear thousands could have been killed. Some of the islands' worst-affected neighbourhoods, hillside shantytowns comprised of flimsy huts that are home to undocumented migrants, have not yet been reached by rescue workers.

Macron visited the Tsingoni neighbourhood, where residents sweating in the heat decried a lack of provisions. "Seven days and you're not able to give water to the population!" one man shouted at Macron. Macron, who had extended his visit to Mayotte to spend more time surveying the damage from the worst storm to hit the territory in 90 years, responded that authorities were scaling up distributions. "I understand your impatience. You can count on me," he said.

Some in Tsingoni greeted Macron more positively, thanking him for coming to see them. A 70-year-old woman offered a blessing while patting him on the head. The previous evening, Macron replied testily to a jeering crowd that chanted for his resignation and

accused his government of neglecting Mayotte, which is located some 8,000km from metropolitan France. "You are happy to be in France. If it wasn't for France, you would be 10,000 times worse off," he said, using an expletive.

He told reporters yesterday that France had invested heavily in Mayotte but that its institutions could not keep up with arrivals of undocumented migrants. Concerns about immigration have helped make the territory a stronghold for the far-right National Rally, with 60% voting for Marine Le Pen in the 2022 presidential election runoff.

Macron later led a crisis meeting of officials before departing in the afternoon for Djibouti, where he will share a Christmas meal with French troops stationed there. Ali Djimoi, who lives in the Kaweni shantytown on the outskirts of the capital Mamoudzou, said Mayotte had been "completely abandoned" by the French state.

"The water running out the pipes - even if it's working you can't drink it, it comes out dirty," he told Reuters. Djimoi said eight people in his immediate neighbourhood were killed in the storm, two of whom were quickly buried close to a mosque.

Authorities have warned it will be difficult to establish a precise death toll, in part because some victims were buried immediately in accordance with Muslim tradition, before their deaths could be counted.

The many undocumented migrants from Comoros, Madagascar and other countries also complicate matters. Official statistics put Mayotte's population at 321,000, but many say it is much higher.

Three out of four people live below the national poverty line in Mayotte, which remains heavily dependent on support from metropolitan France. Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau said 80 tonnes of food and 50 tonnes of water were distributed on Thursday in nine of Mayotte's 17 communes and that the remaining eight would receive provisions on Friday.



France's President Emmanuel Macron holds hands of a local resident during his visit to a neighbourhood in Tsingoni, on the French Indian Ocean territory of Mayotte yesterday.

"Everything has been put in place to allow the distribution of 600,000 litres of water per day, or two litres per Mayotte resident," he said on X. Supplies were also on their way from Germany, Belgium, Sweden and Italy, including tents and beds for the homeless, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said.

Aboubacar Ahamada Mlachahi, a 34-year-old construction worker whose house was destroyed by the cyclone and is now squatting on a hillside near the freight port, was one of many people struggling to secure basic needs. "What matters first is water, for the children. Before fixing the houses, before fixing anything, the daily life... We need water," he told Reuters. The islands, close to the Comoros archipelago, first came under France's control in 1841. In 1974, Mayotte voted to stay French at the same time the three main Comoro islands opted to form an independent state. Chido also killed at least 73 people in Mozambique and 13 in Malawi after reaching continental Africa, according to officials in those countries.



People clean the debris around the destroyed houses in the aftermath of Cyclone Chido, in Mamoudzou, Mayotte.



Cyclone wreckage in the city of Mamoudzou.

Economic hub Abidjan turns into vibrant graffiti gallery

Reuters
Abidjan

Splashes of vibrant colours are reviving the urban canvas of Abidjan's Plateau district, the economic heart of the

Ivory Coast. Ivorians have previously viewed graffiti with disdain and graffiti artists were liable for prosecution. But that view is changing, and graffiti murals are increasingly common on city walls as the artform has gained acceptance.

Towering murals and intricate graffiti pieces now adorn the exteriors of international hotels and major thoroughfares. The inaugural "Ivory Graffiti Festival" attracted around 40 national and international artists who spent two weeks in November convert-

ing bland walls into 300m-long works of art.

Benjamin Le Lieve, president of festival organiser Graff Ivoire, said he was proud to have launched a new initiative. Passers-by admired the artists at work and expressed approval for their ef-

orts to revamp the urban centre. "It brings a change to the city of Abidjan," said Michael Bende, an Ivorian citizen.

South African artist Dabongz Mahlathi said: "The graffiti I've created isn't for me...it's for the people who will see it every day."



Graffiti and murals made by artists who came to participate in the first edition of Graff Ivoire, are seen on the facade of the Pullman hotel in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.



Dew One, a street artist from Lebanon who came to participate in the first edition of Graff Ivoire, paints a mural in a street in Abidjan.

UN extends peacekeeping mission in DRC

Reuters
United Nations

The United Nations Security Council voted to extend the mandate for a long-running UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for another year yesterday, further delaying an agreed withdrawal from conflict-torn eastern provinces.

The Congolese government has previously pushed for the force - known as MONUSCO - to leave, but a note to the Security Council by Congo's mission to the United Nations in New York shows that Kinshasa asked for the operation to be renewed.

"My government is in favour of a robust posture of the MONUSCO Force," the mission wrote in the note - titled a "vision for MONUSCO withdrawal and the renewal of its mandate" - which was seen by Reuters.

The renewal means nearly 11,000 peacekeepers will continue their deployment until at least December 2025, remaining a key part of security operations in mineral-rich eastern Congo, where many rebel groups fight over territory and resources. After withdrawing from South Kivu province, MONUSCO's planned departure from North Kivu and Ituri was paused in July. At the time, Congo said security conditions did not allow for it, blaming the presence of Rwandan troops in Congo in support of the M23 rebel insurgency. Rwanda denies backing M23.

The UN resolution "condemns support by any external party to M23 and any other armed group operating in the DRC, as well as direct unauthorized foreign military intervention in the territory of the DRC, and demands the cessation of such support and the immediate withdrawal of any such party from the DRC."

Ahead of the vote, deputy US ambassador to the UN Robert Wood was frustrated that "many council members are not willing to" specifically call out Rwanda.

Chinese men accused of running illegal gold mine in Congo

Seventeen Chinese men have been arrested on suspicion of running an illegal gold mine in Democratic Republic of Congo, authorities said yesterday, as the government pressed on with a crackdown on unlicensed extraction of its minerals. The men were brought into the press conference called to announce their detention in Bukavu, the main town in strife-torn South Kivu province. They sat on chairs without restraints and did not speak to journalists. The men were arrested after a government delegation made an unannounced visit to the mine site in the village of Karhembo on Thursday, the province's finance minister and acting mines minister, Bernard Muhindo, said. "We asked them to present us with the company's documents. There were no documents, zero. No certificate, no status, no national identification, nothing," Muhindo said. Around 60 Chinese nationals were at the site and officials detained 17 who appeared to be in charge, along with some people from Congo and neighbouring Burundi, he added. — Reuters

US gov't hours from shutdown

AFP/Reuters
Washington

US lawmakers raced yesterday to stave off a government shutdown set to bite within hours, after Donald Trump and Elon Musk sabotaged a bipartisan agreement that would have kept the lights on well beyond Christmas.

If no deal is struck, the government will cease to be funded at midnight, and non-essential operations will start to grind to halt, with up to 875,000 workers furloughed and 1.4mn more required to work without pay.

"Republicans blew this deal up. They did. They blew it up, and they need to fix it," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters.

Congress's setting of government funding is always a fraught task with both chambers closely divided between Republicans and Democrats.

However, the latest drama has been intense after Republican President-elect Trump and tech billionaire Musk, his incoming "efficiency czar", killed an original bipartisan agreement with almost no time to go back to the drawing board.

On Wednesday Trump ordered Republicans to drop the legislation after Musk had unleashed a blizzard of social media posts - many of them wildly inaccurate - trashing the deal.

Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson unveiled a Plan B - backed by Trump and Musk - to scrape out extra spending, fund the government and assuage Trump's demands that the package include a two-year suspension of the country's borrowing cap.

Lawmakers suspended the debt ceiling until January 1, 2025 - but Trump wants the contentious and time-consuming issue handled before he takes office next month.

Johnson's "Plan B" would have allowed the country's debt to rise by trillions of dollars unchecked, and 38 fiscal hawks in the Republican ranks rejected it, ignoring Trump's threats of backing primary challengers to those who defied him.



This picture taken last month shows Trump with Musk at UFC 309 in New York's Madison Square Garden. (AFP)

Most of the Republicans who voted down Thursday's bill come from safely conservative districts in states including West Virginia, South Carolina, Utah, Florida, Texas, Pennsylvania and Arizona.

"Republican obstructionists have to be done away with," Trump said in a Truth Social post.

With 10 hours to go until federal functions begin closing down, House Republicans were huddled in frantic meeting at the US Capitol to discuss a Plan C - breaking up the package into three separate bills.

This would mean a vote to fund the government at current levels through mid-March, another on providing \$100bn for victims of two devastating hurricanes and other disasters and a third to give economic assistance to farmers.

It would allow lawmakers who oppose the aid to still support the government funding.

The series would not include a vote on the thorny debt ceiling issue, which would be punted into 2025 and the plan does away with most of the unrelated spending that angered conservatives.

Whether Republicans can persuade enough Democrats to come to their side to make up for the rebels on their own benches remains to be seen.

Any deal in the House would have to be

rubber-stamped by the Senate in any case, a process that could take days under the rules governing the upper chamber if any individual member objects to fast-tracking it.

Patty Murray, the Democrats' top senator on budget issues said she was willing to stay in Washington "through Christmas" to ensure that the add-ons in the original bipartisan funding plan were reinstated.

Trump has been clear that he is happy for the government to shut down if he doesn't get his way.

With a shutdown for the weekend at least looking likely, the White House Office of Management and Budget was alerting agencies to prepare.

"Suspending the debt ceiling entirely at this point would allow Congress to add an unlimited amount of debt to our already \$36tn national debt for two years, with no reforms to rein in reckless spending," said Republican Representative Nancy Mace, one of the 38 who voted against the bill, which was also meant to avert a partial government shutdown that will begin today without Congressional action.

Trump has prioritised more tax cuts in his second term, which tax experts say could add another \$4tn to the US debt over the next decade.

Meanwhile, Musk's influence over the Republicans in Congress - and his apparent sway with Trump - has become a focus for Democratic attack.

"Elon Musk has Donald Trump in a vice," Democratic New York Congressman Dan Goldman told MSNBC. "And it is very clear that Elon Musk is now calling the shots."

Democrats have attempted to rile Trump - who is famously sensitive to being upstaged - by referring to "President Musk".

Congress adopted a limit on the amount of money the government can borrow in 1939, aiming to stem the rise of government's debt.

It has not achieved its purpose, with debt soaring, fuelled by Democratic-backed spending, Republican-backed tax cuts and the spiralling cost of the Social Security retirement programme.

Trudeau looks set to lose power after key ally vows to topple him

Reuters/AFP
Ottawa

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau looked set yesterday to lose power early next year after a key ally said he would move to bring down the minority Liberal government and trigger an election.



New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh, who has been helping keep Trudeau in office, said he would present a formal motion of no-confidence after the House of Commons elected chamber returns from a winter break on January 27.

If all the opposition parties back the motion, Trudeau will be out of office after more than nine years as prime minister and an election will take place.

A string of polls over the last 18 months show the Liberals, suffering from voter fatigue and anger over high prices and a housing crisis, would be badly defeated by the official opposition right-of-centre Conservatives.

The New Democrats, who like the Liberals aim to attract the support of centre-left voters, complain that Trudeau is too beholden to big business.

"No matter who is leading the Liberal Party, this government's time is up. We will put forward a clear motion of non-confidence in the next sitting of the House of Commons," said Singh.

The leader of the Bloc Quebecois, a larger opposition party, promised to back the motion and said there was no scenario where Trudeau survived.

The Conservatives have been calling for an election for months. A few minutes after Singh issued his letter, a smiling Trudeau, under growing pressure to quit after the shock resignation of his finance minister this week, presided over a cabinet shuffle.

The cabinet reshuffle came at the end of a chaotic week in Ottawa spurred by the surprise resignation of deputy prime minister Chrystia Freeland following disagreement with her boss over Trump's threats to impose sweeping tariffs on Canadian imports.

Her exit, after nearly a decade at Trudeau's side, marked the first open dissent against the prime minister from within his cabinet and has emboldened critics.

In Friday's reset, eight new ministers were appointed to replace those in the 35-member cabinet who have signalled they will not seek re-election, and to relieve others of their double or triple duties in government.

Four current ministers were also given new responsibilities. Freeland, who also quit her role as finance minister, has said she would seek re-election next year.

Trudeau's office was not immediately available for comment. Votes on budgets and other spending are considered confidence measures.

Additionally, the government must allocate a few days each session to opposition parties when they can unveil motions on any matter, including non-confidence.

Before Singh made his announcement, a source close to Trudeau said that the prime minister would take the Christmas break to ponder his future and was unlikely to make any announcement before January.

Liberal leaders are elected by special conventions of party members, which take months to arrange.

Singh's promise to act quickly means that even if Trudeau were to resign now, the Liberals could not find a new permanent leader in time for the next election.

The party would then have to contest the vote with an interim leader, which has never happened before in Canada.

So far around 20 Liberal legislators are openly calling for Trudeau to step down but his cabinet has stayed loyal.

The timing of the crisis comes at a critical time, since US President-elect Donald Trump is due to take office on January 20 and is promising to impose a 25% tariff on all imports from Canada, which would badly hurt the economy.

The premiers of the 10 provinces, seeking to create a united approach to the tariffs, are complaining about what they call the chaos in Ottawa.

Starbucks workers to start US strike: union

Workers at Starbucks will walk off the job in three US cities in a strike their union threatened could spread around the country in the busy run-up to Christmas.

The announcement, which will initially affect stores in Los Angeles, Chicago and the firm's home city of Seattle, comes as online giant Amazon was also hit by a walkout in the crucial final shopping days of the festive period.

Starbucks Workers United, which says it represents baristas at hundreds of outlets around the country, said its action was aimed at forcing the company to improve pay and conditions after months of negotiations that it said have gone nowhere.

"Nobody wants to strike. It's a last resort, but Starbucks has broken its promise to thousands of baristas and left us with no choice," a union press release quoted Texas barista Fatemeh Alhadjaboodi as saying.

The strike, which the union says will hit more outlets every day until Tuesday, comes as Starbucks grapples with stagnating sales in key markets.

Former Chipotle boss Brian Niccol was brought on board this year with a mandate to staunch a decline that saw quarterly revenue worldwide fall 3% to \$9bn.

"In September, Brian Niccol became chief executive with a compensation package worth at least \$113mn", thousands of times the wage of the average barista, said union member Michelle Eisen.

"We refuse to accept zero immediate investment in baristas' wages and no resolution of the hundreds of outstanding unfair labour practices," said Lynne Fox, president of Workers United. (AFP)

Biden urged to grant ByteDance 90-day reprieve

Democratic Senator Ed Markey and Republican Senator Rand Paul have urged President Joe Biden to extend by 90 days a January 19 deadline for China-based ByteDance to sell the US assets of its short-video app TikTok or face a ban.

The Supreme Court said on Wednesday that it will consider the legal challenge of TikTok and ByteDance, seeking an injunction to halt the looming ban or sale and will hold arguments on the matter on January 10.

"Given the law's uncertain future and its consequences for free expression, we urge you to trigger the 90-day extension before January 19," the senators wrote Biden.

The White House and TikTok did not immediately comment.

The challengers are appealing a lower court's ruling that upheld the law. (Reuters)

Biden cancels another \$4.28bn in student debt before leaving office

AFP
Washington

US President Joe Biden said yesterday that he was cancelling student loans for an additional 55,000 Americans, which would amount to wiping out \$4.28bn in debt in his final month in office.

The mass cancellation of debt is for "teachers, nurses, service members, law enforcement officials, and other public service workers who have dedicated their lives to giving back to their communities", he said in a statement issued by the White House yesterday.

With this new crop of beneficiaries, it would mean "nearly 5mn people" have been approved for debt relief during Biden's administration.

"From Day One of my administration, I promised to make sure that higher education is a ticket to the middle class, not a barrier to opportunity," the outgoing president said.

US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said in

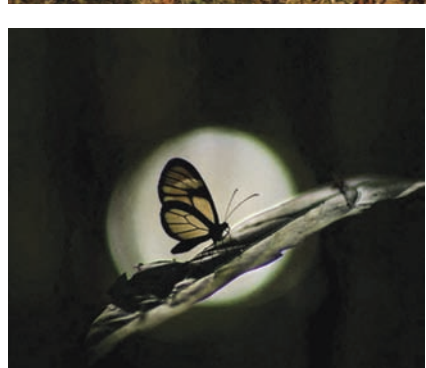
a statement that yesterday's approval brings the total amount secured during Biden's four years in office to "nearly \$180bn in life-changing student debt relief for nearly 5mn borrowers".

The Democratic president had instated a landmark forgiveness programme in 2022 to cancel hundreds of billions in student debt - which would have made certain borrowers eligible to receive \$20,000 in cancellations, while the vast majority were eligible for \$10,000.

However, the conservative-dominated Supreme Court overruled the programme last year, stating that given the large sum, the president had overstepped his powers.

In the United States, colleges can often cost anywhere between \$10,000-\$70,000 a year, leaving some graduates with crushing debt as they enter the workforce.

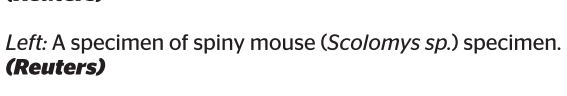
According to the Pew Research Centre, one in four American adults under 40 have student loan debt, with the median amount owed being between \$20,000-\$25,000 in 2023, varying by education level.



A clearwing butterfly (*Oleria sp.*) specimen. (Reuters)



A 'blob-headed' fish (*Chaetostoma sp.*) specimen. (Reuters)



Left: A specimen of spiny mouse (*Scolomys sp.*) specimen. (Reuters)



Right: A specimen of one of the 45 bat species documented on the scientific expedition in the Alto Mayo landscape of Peru. (Reuters)



A specimen of an arboreal opossum species. (Reuters)



A bristlenose catfish (*Ancistrus sp.*) specimen. (Reuters)



A Loreto White-lipped Frog (*Leptodactylus rhodomystax*) specimen. (Reuters)

'Amphibious mouse' among 27 species discovered in Peru's Amazon

Reuters
Lima

An "amphibious mouse" with partially webbed feet that eats aquatic insects was among 27 new species discovered during a 2022 expedition to Peru's Amazon, according to Conservation International.

Scientists also discovered a spiny mouse, a squirrel, eight types of fish, three amphibians and 10 types of butterflies, said Trond Larsen, head of Conservation International's Rapid Assessment Programme.

He added that another 48 species found by investigators were potentially new, but needed further study.

The new species were found in Alto Mayo, a protected area with several ecosystems, Indigenous territories and villages.

"Discovering so many new species of mammals and vertebrates is really incredible, especially in such a human-influenced landscape as Alto Mayo," Larsen told Reuters this week.

The expedition in June and July 2022 was made up of 13 scientists, along with local technicians and members of Indigenous groups.

"It was really fantastic to work so closely with the Awajun people. They have extensive traditional knowledge about the forests, animals and plants they live side-by-side with," Larsen said.

Among the new species, Larsen highlighted the spiny mouse that has stiff fur, the amphibious mouse, and a dwarf squirrel that measures 14cm (5.5").

"(The squirrel) fits so easily in the palm of your hand. Adorable and beautiful chestnut-brown colour, very fast," Larsen said, adding: "It jumps quickly and hides in the trees."

Another favourite discovery was the

blob-headed fish, a type of armoured catfish, he said.

A total of 2,046 species were recorded during the 38-day expedition using camera traps, bioacoustic sensors and DNA sampling.

Among them, 49 were classified as threatened, including the yellow-tailed woolly monkey and the tree monkey.

Larsen said that the discoveries reinforced the need to protect the area. "Unless steps are taken now to safeguard these sites and help restore parts of the landscape...there's a strong chance they won't persist in the long term," Larsen said.



South Korea police quiz acting president over martial law decree

Reuters
Seoul

South Korean police have questioned Prime Minister and Acting President Han Duck-soo as part of an investigation into the short-lived decision this month to impose martial law, an official at his office said yesterday.

The acting president was among

12 people present at a cabinet meeting on December 3 shortly before President Yoon Suk-yeol's shock late-night announcement on martial law. Nine of those people have been questioned by a special police unit investigating the case, the Yonhap news agency reported.

Han, a career technocrat, became acting president after Yoon was impeached last Saturday following a parliamentary vote. The

official at Han's office did not say when he was questioned, but said it took place before Han was appointed acting president.

He was being investigated as a suspect, Yonhap reported.

Earlier this month, the main opposition Democratic Party reported Han to police after accusing him of revolt. Police officials were not immediately available for comment.

Han has previously said he had

opposed the martial law declaration, which Yoon withdrew after barely six hours when outraged lawmakers rejected his decree.

Yoon faces a Constitutional Court trial on whether to remove him from office or restore his presidential powers following his impeachment.

He also faces investigations into whether the martial law declaration constituted revolt, one of the few charges for which a South Ko-

rean president does not have immunity from.

A team of legal representatives and opposition lawmakers who will take on the role of prosecutors in the impeachment trial met yesterday.

"We have gathered here to fulfil our historical duty of impeaching Yoon Suk-yeol," said lawmaker Jung Chung-rae, who chairs the parliamentary legislation and judiciary committee leading the

impeachment case. The team includes a former Constitutional Court judge who was part of the panel that deliberated in the impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye.

The joint investigation team including police and the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials summoned Yoon for a second time yesterday to appear for questioning on December 25, Yonhap said.

China lifts ban on Australia rock lobster imports

AFP
Sydney

China has lifted a ban on imports of Australian live rock lobsters, Canberra said yesterday, demolishing the final barrier in a broader, multi-billion-dollar trade war between the countries.

Beijing has banned or slapped retaliatory tariffs on more than US\$12bn worth of Australian exports during years of soured ties with Canberra.

The lobster trade, worth \$500,000 a year, was the last of a number of major Australian exports to remain under sanctions after months of Australian diplomatic efforts.

"China has confirmed that our live rock lobster exports can recommence into China," Agriculture Minister Julie Collins told reporters.

"This is great news for our live rock lobster producers and fishers here in Australia, and importantly, it means that they can now apply for import permits to go back into this market."

Lobsters were the "last of those trade impediments" imposed by China, she added.

China introduced a de facto ban on live rock lobster in 2020 while denying the move - and a raft of other punitive tariffs - were linked to the worst crisis in relations in decades.

Beijing was enraged by Canberra's crackdown on Chinese foreign influence operations, the decision to block tech giant Huawei from running Australia's 5G network,

and a call for an investigation into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said in October that Beijing would let the lobsters back in after a meeting with Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Laos.

Albanese said the confirmation of that reopening was the result of his government's "calm and consistent" approach with China since his Labor Party came to power in May 2022.

At the low point in relations, Australian exporters faced impediments on exporting barley, coal, cotton, timber logs, oaten hay, copper ores and concentrates and red meat, the government said.

"The removal of restrictions on lobster marks the resolution of all outstanding impediments to trade from that period," it said in a statement.

The reopening to lobster may also give Albanese a political boon.

The prime minister must call an election in the first half of 2025, and many lobster producers come from Western Australia, a key battleground state.

The centre-left leader has spent much of his time in office trying to improve the trade relationship with China, Australia's biggest trade partner.

At the same time, Australia is part of a loose US-led alliance that has aggressively pushed back against China's bid for primacy in the Pacific region.

Before the ban, an estimated 97.7% of Australia's rock lobster exports were sold to China, more than 1,600 tonnes a year.

New Macau leader sworn in



Chinese President Xi Jinping (right) shakes hands with newly sworn in Macau Chief Executive Sam Hou-fai following the inauguration marking the 25th anniversary of Macau's handover from Portugal to China, in Macau yesterday.

Australia boosts police support for Solomon Islands

Reuters
Sydney

Australia will provide over \$100mn to help the Solomon Islands, which also has security ties with China, expand its police force so it can reduce its reliance on external partners, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said yesterday.

The US and Australia have been racing to limit China's security ambitions in the Pacific Islands ever since the Solomon Islands' then-leader, Manasseh Sogavare, signed a security deal with Beijing in 2022.

Albanese told reporters in Canberra the four-year, A\$190mn (\$118mn) commitment

showed Australia was the Solomon Islands' "security partner of choice".

The move "responds to Solomon Islands' strong desire to build an enduring sovereign security capability, thereby reducing its reliance on external partners over time", Albanese and his Solomon Islands counterpart Jeremiah Manele said in a joint statement.

Solomon Islands has had a small Chinese police contingent since 2022.

Australian police had provided security from 2003-2017 at the request of the archipelago's government after internal conflict. They returned in 2021, helping to quell riots and supporting national elections this year.

Manele had asked Australia for funds to

double the size of the Solomons' police to 3,000 officers. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson told reporters: "No country should regard the Pacific Islands countries as its own backyard, but should complement each other's strengths..."

"We hope that the parties concerned will earnestly respect the independence and sovereignty of the island countries and refrain from interfering in their internal affairs."

Mihai Sora, director of the Pacific Islands Program at the Lowy Institute think tank, said the security sector in Solomon Islands remains "highly contested", and that the funding "keeps Australia in the game, but it won't slow the pace of the competition".

Taiwan lawmakers brawl over bills

Taiwanese lawmakers tackled and doused each other with water as President Lai Ching-te's party tried to block the passage of bills they say could harm the island's "democratic system". Scores of lawmakers from Lai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) had occupied the podium of the parliament's main chamber since Thursday night and barricaded themselves inside - piling up chairs to block entrances. The DPP parliamentarians were attempting to stop three legal amendments proposed by the opposition bloc, which would make it more difficult for voters to oust elected officials who they see as unfit. "Parliamentary dictatorship," some DPP lawmakers shouted to criticise the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) party and its ally Taiwan People's Party (TPP) for trying to pass the bills with their majority. "If the KMT forcefully passes the amendments... Taiwan's democratic self-checking and self-repairing mechanism will be gone," the ruling party said.

Marcos attends AFP anniversary



Philippines' President Ferdinand Marcos Jr delivers a speech during the 89th founding anniversary of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) at Camp Aguinaldo in Manila yesterday.

Japan inspects US base over chemical spill

AFP
Tokyo

Japanese authorities yesterday carried out an inspection of a US military base in Tokyo, a government spokesman said, after being informed by the American side of a chemical leak.

Japan's probe at the Yokota Air Base followed a US notice two months ago that water containing PFOS - classified by the WHO as "possibly carcinogenic to humans" - had spilled from the site. PFOS is part of a large group of man-made chemicals known as PFAS, sometimes called "forever chemicals" because they do not degrade easily, experts say.

The US military informed Tokyo in October that the PFOS-laced water had leaked from an area of the base where a firefighting drill was being carried

out, Fumitoshi Sato, deputy chief cabinet secretary, told reporters.

"This inspection was realised in response to the fears and concerns harboured by local residents, and we will continue to work together with the US side," Sato said. Officials including from the defence ministry and Tokyo's metropolitan government visited the site yesterday.

"PFAS is a shared concern applicable to military and civilian industrial activities across Japan regardless of nationality," the Yokota Air Base's public affairs office said. "We remain committed to protecting the health of our personnel, their families, and the surrounding communities in which we live and serve," it said, adding that it will observe all relevant agreements and obligations and closely co-ordinate with the Japanese government "towards sustainable solutions."

Malaysia to resume hunt for Flight MH370

Reuters
Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia has agreed to resume the search for the wreckage of missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370, its transport minister said yesterday, more than 10 years after it disappeared in one of the world's greatest aviation mysteries.

Flight MH370, a Boeing 777 carrying 227 passengers and 12 crew, vanished en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing on March 8, 2014.

"Our responsibility and obligation and commitment is to the next of kin," Transport Minister An-

thony Loke told a press conference. "We hope this time will be positive, that the wreckage will be found and give closure to the families."

Jiang Hui, whose mother was a MH370 passenger, welcomed the decision to resume the search, but said the process to get there had taken too long and would be better if more players could take part.

"We hope the Malaysian government can adopt a more open approach, such as offering a public reward system where anyone can participate in the search," he said.

MH370's last transmission was about 40 minutes after it took off from Kuala Lumpur for Beijing. The pilots signed off as the plane

entered Vietnamese air space over the Gulf of Thailand and soon after its transponder was turned off.

Military radar showed the plane left its flight path to fly back over northern Malaysia then out into the Andaman Sea before turning south, then all contact was lost.

Debris, some confirmed and some believed to be from the aircraft, has since washed up along the coast of Africa and on islands in the Indian Ocean.

Loke said the proposal to resume the search in the southern Indian Ocean came from exploration firm Ocean Infinity, which had conducted the last search for the plane that ended in 2018.

A contract would be signed to cover an 18-month period and the firm would receive \$70mn if wreckage found was substantive, he said, adding the search would be on the seabed of a new area covering 15,000sq km.

More than 150 Chinese passengers were on the flight. Others included 50 Malaysians as well as citizens of France, Australia, Indonesia, India, the US, Ukraine and Canada, among others.

Relatives have demanded compensation from Malaysia Airlines, Boeing, aircraft engine maker Rolls-Royce and the Allianz insurance group, among others.

Loke said Malaysia had assessed

new data on the possible location from multiple experts and Ocean Infinity was confident about the chances of locating the wreckage.

"The data has all been presented. Our team has gone through and they felt that it is credible," he said.

Malaysia engaged Ocean Infinity in 2018 to search in the southern Indian Ocean, but it failed on two attempts. That followed an underwater search by Malaysia, Australia and China in a 120,000 sq km area of the southern Indian Ocean, based on data of automatic connections between an Inmarsat satellite and the plane. The new arrangement would be on a no-find-no-fee principle, whereby

Malaysia would not be required to pay Ocean Infinity unless sufficient wreckage is found and verified. Asked about the prospects of locating all of the plane, Loke said it would be unfair to expect a concrete commitment.

"At this point of time, nobody knows for sure. It has been over 10 years," he said. A 495-page report into the disappearance in 2018 said the Boeing 777's controls were likely deliberately manipulated to go off course, but investigators could not determine who was responsible and stopped short of offering a conclusion on what happened, saying that depended on finding the wreckage.

High prices 'impinging on India's growth'

Reuters
Mumbai

High prices are the cause for demand slowdown in India, and aligning inflation to the central bank's 4% target is key to ensuring sustained economic growth, members of the rate-set-

ting panel said in the minutes of the December meeting.

"The policy priority at this critical juncture has to be on restoring the inflation growth balance," Reserve Bank of India governor Shaktikanta Das said in the minutes of his last monetary policy committee (MPC) meeting released yesterday.

Lower inflation will enhance

households' disposable income and increase their purchasing power, and this approach would support consumption and investment demand, Das said. The RBI kept its key interest rate unchanged earlier in the month, but cut banks' cash reserve ratio for the first time in over four years, effectively easing monetary conditions as economic

growth slowed. India's GDP growth rate fell unexpectedly to 5.4% in the July-September quarter, its slowest pace in seven quarters, while inflation remains well over 4%.

"The monetary policy stance is open to support growth, but it must await the ebbing of inflation on a durable basis or else the uneven progress made so far in disinflation

will get dissipated," deputy governor Michael Patra wrote.

External member Saugata Bhattacharya said both growth and inflation have worsened, and the risk of making a "policy error" was higher now compared to the October policy.

Four of the six MPC members voted to keep the repo rate on hold

but two external members - Nagesh Kumar and Ram Singh - had voted for a 25 basis points reduction.

"I believe that a rate cut would help in reviving economic growth without worsening the inflationary situation, which may soften with seasonal correction in prices," said Kumar, who voted for a rate cut at a second straight meeting.

Plea challenging Mumbai slum revamp contract to Adani rejected

Reuters
Mumbai

An Indian court yesterday dismissed a petition challenging the award of a contract to Adani Group to revamp one of Asia's largest slums in Mumbai, clearing one of the main legal challenges to the ambitious project.

The group led by billionaire Gautam Adani won a \$619m bid in 2023 to convert the Dharavi slum into a modern city hub, but Dubai-based SecLink Technologies Corporation, winner of a previous tender for the slum revamp, challenged the award of the contract to Adani in a petition in the Bombay High Court in July 2023.

The 594 acre slum, known as Asia's densest and featured in Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning 2008 movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, stands in contrast to India's development boom with its open sewers and shared toilets, close to Mumbai's international airport and business district.

"The grounds urged in support of the petition lack force and accordingly, the challenge...fails," the Bombay High Court concluded in the order. SecLink will appeal against the ruling in the Supreme Court, Suraj Iyer, a lawyer from Ganesh and Co representing SecLink, said. SecLink had alleged in its petition that Maharashtra state improperly cancelled an original 2018 tender for the Dharavi rede-

velopment, for which SecLink had bid highest, and restarted the process with new terms in 2022 so that Adani could win.

SecLink had also received a Mumbai court's permission to add Adani Group to its lawsuit last year in an ongoing petition against the Maharashtra government.

In an 809-page filing last year, the eight-member consortium had said that Maharashtra's modified bidding process was "politically motivated" and "tailor made to suit" Adani Group. But yesterday's court order, referring to the second tender for the slum revamp that Adani won, ruled: "It cannot be said that the tender conditions were tailor-made so as to suit only a particular bidder."

The Maharashtra government, led by Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies, and the Adani Group had denied all allegations in their response to the petition.

The Maharashtra government had said that its officials had followed the proper process in cancelling the earlier tender and Adani Group had argued that the case should be thrown out in the interest of development.

The Adani group is executing the Dharavi slum revamp via a joint venture with the Dharavi Slum Redevelopment Authority. It launched the project in March with a survey to determine the eligibility of slum residents for getting a free home.



Supporters and members of the Social Democratic Party of India hold placards during a protest in Bengaluru yesterday, condemning Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on Dr B R Ambedkar, India's social reformer and architect of its constitution, in Parliament.

Rahul faces police probe over parliament scuffle

Reuters
New Delhi

India's Rahul Gandhi is under police investigation over a scuffle between opposition members of parliament and those from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, which injured two lawmakers, police said yesterday.

Police were responding to a BJP complaint accusing Gandhi, the opposition leader, of pushing and shoving BJP lawmakers and causing injuries to two of them on Thursday as they protested outside parliament house against opposition parties.

Gandhi, the Congress party leader and scion of the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty that has produced three prime ministers, already has multiple cases filed against him.

He was briefly disqualified from parliament last year after a court sentenced him to two years' imprisonment in a defamation case. The Supreme Court suspended the conviction and he was reinstated as a lawmaker.

On Thursday, television channels showed one of the injured lawmakers being taken from

the spot in a wheelchair, with a woman pressing a cloth above his left eyebrow, which she lifted briefly to reveal a bleeding wound.

Gandhi denied the allegations, saying BJP members had pushed and threatened him and tried to prevent him from entering parliament during the scuffle.

Congress party also filed a police complaint on Thursday, alleging BJP lawmakers had misbehaved against Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge.

"The first information report (FIR) against Rahul Gandhi is being investigated," said a senior Delhi Police officer, who asked not to be named as he was not authorised to speak to the media. "We will be examining any footage of the incident," the officer said. "We have also received a complaint from the Congress and are examining it. Action will be taken as required."

The lawmakers were undergoing treatment at a hospital and were in "better condition" yesterday, doctors told news agency ANI.

Gandhi's sister, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who is also a lawmaker, said yesterday the latest police probe indicated the BJP's "desperation".

"The entire country is seeing...they have registered multiple cases against Rahul. They take

out new FIRs, lie...this shows their level of desperation," she told reporters.

Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, asked about the Congress complaint, told a press briefing: "They are lying, trying to mislead people."

Both houses of parliament were adjourned minutes after convening yesterday, ending a winter session disrupted several times as government and opposition parties accused each other of creating political controversies to hinder legislative business.

The arguments which led to the scuffle were triggered by claims of disrespect to India's independence icon and hero of the marginalised Dalit community, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.

Gandhi's Congress party this week accused Home Minister Amit Shah, a close Modi confidant, of disrespecting Ambedkar in a speech inside parliament.

Shah, Modi, and the BJP dismissed the charge and said the opposition was resorting to "malicious lies".

One of the key architects of India's constitution, Ambedkar is a revered figure for India's marginalised, who credit him for many key social reforms.

Ringo and McCartney reunite for trip down memory lane

Beatles drummer Ringo Starr was a surprise guest at the final gig of former band-mate Paul McCartney's London tour, with the pair reuniting to play some of the Fab Four's greatest hits. "I've had a great night tonight, it's been a great show," the 84-year-old drummer said late Thursday as he took the stage at London's O2 Arena on the final evening of McCartney's "Got Back" tour. They then ran through timeless hits including "Helter Skelter" and "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

"I'm off now, I've had a great night and I love you all," Starr told the packed crowd as he left the stage. Starr and McCartney have reunited several times since the Beatles break-up, including on McCartney's 2018-19 "FRESH UP" tour. Rolling Stones guitarist Ronnie Wood also joined McCartney for the song "Get Back", with the former Beatle playing his original Hofner bass for the first time in 50 years.

Small but mighty quick



Runners and riders in The Shetland Pony Grand National compete in the main arena at the London International Horse at the ExCel in London.

Two charged with assault over UK airport brawl

Reuters
London

Two men have been charged with offences over a high-profile violent incident at Manchester Airport in July that initially led to accusations of police brutality and then fuelled claims Britain had a two-tier justice system.

The two men were arrested in chaotic scenes at the airport, caught on video, with several officers armed with tasers restraining two suspects. The footage showed one man being kicked and stamped on by an officer as he lay face-down on the floor, with Prime Minister Keir Starmer saying he had seen the video and understood the public's concern about it. However further video clips obtained days later showed two female officers had

been knocked to the ground in the build-up to the arrest.

Britain's Crown Prosecution Service said two men, Mohammed Amaaz, 20, and Muhammed Amaaz, 25, had now been charged with assaulting the police officers. It added it had also considered possible offences committed by police officers but concluded none should face charges over the incident.

Frank Ferguson, Head of the CPS' Special Crime and Counter Terrorism Division, said the incident had attracted significant public interest and media coverage. "We have reviewed all the available evidence, including witness statements, video footage, expert reports and other material related to police use of force, to make an independent and objective assessment about whether it is appropriate to present charges for the court to consider," he said.

King Charles' cancer treatment progressing well

Reuters
London

King Charles' cancer treatment is progressing well and will continue into next year, a Buckingham Palace source said, as the British royals prepare for their annual Christmas get-together after a "brutal" year for the family.

In February, the palace revealed the 76-year-old, who became king in 2022, had been diagnosed with an unspecified form of cancer detected in tests after a corrective

procedure for an enlarged prostate.

While he was able to return to public duties two months later, the number of engagements has been limited on medical advice, something which the noted workaholic has found difficult.

"His treatment has been moving in a positive direction and as a managed condition the treatment cycle will continue into next year," the palace source said yesterday.

The palace source said there had been no change in Charles' health and the news that his treatment would continue in 2025 did not

represent any significant update.

But his busy pre-Christmas schedule, which concluded yesterday with a visit to the northeast London district of Walthamstow that staged a large counter-protest in August in response to nationwide rioting, was an indication of his determination to stay busy.

In October, Charles and his wife Camilla made a brief stopover in India where they stayed at a holistic health centre following his first major trip since being diagnosed with cancer to Australia and Samoa.



King Charles III is presented with a book by Hadrian Garrard during a visit to the Islamic World exhibition at the William Morris Gallery in London yesterday.



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The world needs ocean-based climate solutions

Following the recent 2024 UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Baku, we are confronted with one pressing question: What's next? With countries set to submit early next year their updated nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the 2015 Paris climate agreement, the world has an opportunity – and a responsibility – to take transformative action to address the climate crisis. The ocean must be central to this effort.

Nobody understands this better than small island developing states (SIDS) like Palau. For us, climate policy is not some abstract debate about hypothetical future risks; it is a fight for survival. Already, coral reefs are undergoing bleaching; storms are becoming increasingly frequent and destructive; and droughts are undermining food security. Rising sea levels threaten not just our land, but also our culture, our way of life, and our very existence.

To date, international support for climate action has fallen far short of meeting developing countries' needs. SIDS collectively receive less than 2% of global climate finance, even as they oversee 30% of the world's territorial waters. It is a striking imbalance, especially given the ocean's enormous untapped potential to help mitigate climate change.

The ocean is our planet's largest carbon sink, absorbing 25% of all carbon dioxide emissions and a staggering 90% of the excess heat generated by a warming atmosphere. According to a 2023 report, ocean-based climate solutions can get us as much as 35% closer to our emissions-reduction targets for 2050, on a pathway

The ocean is our planet's largest carbon sink, absorbing 25% of all carbon dioxide emissions

that limits the global temperature increase to 1.5C. And mitigating climate change is just the beginning; a healthy ocean plays a pivotal role in creating sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable communities worldwide.

Consider nature-based solutions like the restoration of mangroves, seagrasses, and coral reefs. Beyond sequestering carbon, these ecosystems

act as natural defences against rising seas and extreme weather, and they form the basis of local livelihoods. In Palau, marine protected areas safeguard biodiversity, support sustainable fisheries, and bolster the tourism industry.

So far, the ocean – including the ecosystems it supports – has largely been treated as an afterthought in global climate strategies, sidelined in favour of more visible priorities like renewable energy and curbs on emissions.

The High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy has revealed that many of its member countries – which together govern half the world's territorial oceans – have yet to integrate the ocean fully into their NDCs.

This omission represents a vital opportunity, which countries should seize as they prepare their NDC submissions before the February deadline. Putting the ocean at the centre of our climate strategies would transform it from a silent victim of global warming into an active force for mitigation and resilience-building.

The Blue Economy and Finance Forum takes place in June, one of the "special events" that will set the stage for the third UN Ocean Conference in Nice. The BEFF aims to unlock financing for ocean-based solutions.

The New Collective Quantified Goal on climate finance, agreed at COP29, offers an opportunity to set ambitious targets and leverage innovative mechanisms to unlock private investment at scale.

Despite its disappointments, COP29 delivered another reason for cautious optimism: the discussions taken there reflected growing recognition that ocean action is climate action. This idea, which began gaining traction in 2019 during the Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue at COP25, has evolved into a powerful movement. As a result, momentum is building behind ocean-based climate solutions.

But harnessing this momentum to deliver measurable action – such as the introduction of more marine protected areas covering mangroves and seagrass meadows or scaling up the decarbonisation of the shipping industry – will require collaboration across sectors and borders. And it will require far more financing. As we look ahead to the BEFF and beyond, we must make one thing crystal clear: investing in the ocean is investing in our collective future. – Project Syndicate

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Responsible mining can advance global environmental goals

By **Mauricio Cabrera Leal**
Bogota

Fuelled by the clean-energy transition and surging gold prices, demand for critical minerals and metals is rising at an unprecedented pace. This trend has supercharged mining activities, posing a serious threat to biodiversity and vulnerable populations, especially indigenous communities. To mitigate the impact and stave off the worst, co-ordinated global action is more urgent than ever.

To be sure, minerals and metals mining is vital for the energy transition and global economic growth. However, it also jeopardises the ecosystems that sustain life, leading to habitat destruction and fragmentation, deforestation, water and soil pollution, wildlife poisoning, food insecurity, and watershed loss. Indigenous and local communities often bear the brunt of this crisis, which threatens their livelihoods and their right to a clean and healthy environment.

At the same time, recent studies project that demand for critical minerals, largely driven by the accelerating pace of the green transition, will double by 2030 and quadruple by 2040. Meanwhile, falling interest rates, geopolitical uncertainty, portfolio diversification, and speculative investments are expected to push gold prices even higher.

Against this backdrop, Colombia has recently called for a binding international agreement to ensure traceability, transparency, and accountability across the entire minerals value chain – from mining to recycling – by next year's UN Climate Change Conference (COP30) in Brazil.

Unveiled during the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP16) to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in Colombia, this proposal follows the recommendations of the UN Secretary-General's Panel on Critical Energy Transition Minerals. It aims to bolster due diligence, promote corporate accountability, and establish a global market for essential clean-energy inputs. At its core is a commitment to promote the responsible extraction of minerals and metals without abandoning environmental and biodiversity goals. To that end, Colombia's proposal was accompanied by a joint voluntary declaration on responsible mining practices that outlined a series of concrete steps, including the formation of an ad hoc intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder working group.

It should not come as a surprise that Colombia, one of the world's most biodiverse countries, is



spearheading efforts to promote responsible mining practices. Illegal gold and mineral mining in the Colombian Amazon and along the Pacific coast – often controlled by armed criminal groups – has contaminated water sources with mercury and endangered local and indigenous communities. Rare-earth exploration in the Amazon-Orinoco region has further exacerbated these environmental and social shocks, with the industry's most vulnerable workers forced to endure precarious conditions verging on slavery.

Colombia's own history of armed conflict and internal displacement, along with the threat posed by criminal groups targeting indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local communities, underscores

the need for a human-rights-based approach to mineral extraction. With this in mind, the joint declaration advocates a just green transition that ensures dignified livelihoods for all.

Africa's experience offers valuable insights into how to achieve responsible resource extraction. Over the past decade, multiple African countries have adopted due-diligence requirements and traceability standards for tantalum, tin, tungsten, and gold, drawing on frameworks like the 2010 Lusaka Declaration. This landmark agreement, adopted by member states of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, introduced several accountability mechanisms,

including a regional certification system aimed at enhancing transparency and reducing illegal mining.

Similarly, the 2016 OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas provided companies that source raw materials from volatile regions with practical tools to identify and report human-rights violations and environmental harm. Subsequent frameworks, such as the OECD's 2018 Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct and 2023 Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct, urged firms to consider the broader effects of their activities, addressing issues like labour rights, sustainability, and ethical governance.

Regrettably, the application and enforcement of these measures remain largely confined to specific regions. By facilitating the cross-border exchange of knowledge and expertise, global policymakers could develop robust accountability mechanisms spanning the entire lifecycle of metals and minerals, from extraction and trade to recycling and disposal.

Multilateral co-operation is crucial for driving this transformation. Colombia's initiative, it is hoped, will mark the emergence of a new paradigm that spurs global climate action and paves the way for sustainable development. – Project Syndicate

• *Mauricio Cabrera Leal is Deputy Minister of Policy and Regulation at the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development in Colombia.*

Is there an echo, dear readers?

By **Rawda al-Amri**

In the far corners of this world, there are souls worn down by exhaustion, burdened by the weight of suffering, and sipping from the bitter cup of sorrow one drop at a time. Silent cries rise from these souls, whispers too faint to be heard beyond the crumbling walls of their shattered spirits. We see them, we sense them, and yet our hands feel tied – like trying to embrace smoke as it vanishes into the wind. How can we reach those whose cries we cannot hear and whose tears we cannot see?

Our predicament resembles that of a poet standing on the shore of a stormy sea, holding a fragile candle against the roaring wind. He knows its faint glow will not stop the waves, will not restore breath to those lost beneath the depths. Yet, he lights it. He lights it because it is a testimony to hope, a declaration of humanity, a refusal to surrender to darkness – even when it seems infinite. Is there an echo to this candle's flame, dear readers?

Somewhere, a mother cradles a child who cannot sleep – not because the child is unwilling, but because an empty stomach screams louder than the silence of the night. Somewhere, a man digs the earth with his bare hands, seeking the faintest promise of sustenance for his family. Somewhere else, a child leans against the ruins of a home turned to rubble by war, clutching memories that can no longer shield him from the cold.

These are not merely fleeting news stories or passing headlines; they are the heartbeats of lives struggling to stay afloat. They are voices waiting for someone, anyone, to hear them. But we, dear readers, are paralysed by helplessness. The pain carves deeply into our hearts like a thousand knives, and yet our hands feel empty. How can we save those swallowed by the abyss when we have no lifeboats to reach them? How can we extend solace to those whose names we do not know, whose faces we have never seen, but whose

A HEARTFELT DEDICATION



A painting created by the author.

I share with you a painting I created years ago, during a moment when I felt that war had begun to steal the very beats of my heart, unravelling the threads of hope within me. It was a moment of realising that pain knows no borders, and that the wounds of conflict extend beyond the land, reaching deep into the souls of those who witness it. I painted it with a heavy heart, yet one filled with a sincere hope that every heart might one day beat with compassion, and that goodness may prevail among all humanity. Let this new year, 2025, be a turning point for hope, a canvas for purity, and a renewed covenant with our shared humanity. Wishing you all a year filled with light that no darkness can extinguish.

presence we feel so profoundly?

One might ask: What good is a candle against an ocean's fury? What use is its flickering light in an endless darkness? But, the power of the candle lies not in its ability to conquer the sea, but in its steadfast refusal to succumb to the night.

Remember the words of Rabindranath Tagore: "Every time the winds extinguish a flame, it sparks anew elsewhere." The candle may not save everyone, but it can send a thread of hope – a whisper carried by the waves – to reach a hand that needs it, to touch a heart that waits in silence.

Is there an echo, dear readers?

When you light a candle, when you write a word, when you extend a hand – even if it feels small or insignificant – you are not only casting light into the lives of others, but also into your own. The echo of small acts is mysterious and immeasurable. A single word written here might reach a distant corner of the world, opening a window in someone's heart

and inspiring them to light their own candle.

This is how light begins its journey – quietly, steadily, and inevitably.

We are not called to save the entire world, but we are called to try. To carry our candles and light them, even when the winds rage. To write about peace in the face of war, about hope in the face of despair, about light in the face of darkness. This is what the pens of Gandhi, Tolstoy, and Rumi did – they turned their words into vessels of hope, sailing across time and space.

So, my dear readers, is there an echo to my candle's flame? Is there a hand that will reach out to carry this light with me? Let us all become small candles, illuminating paths in defiance of the shadows. For no matter how deep the darkness, it can never extinguish the light of a candle.

• *Rawda al-Amri is a seasoned author and creative artist, known for her captivating novels and unique storytelling that intertwines cultural heritage with contemporary themes.*

Pakistan province aims to collect weapons to stem clashes

Provincial authorities in northwestern Pakistan said yesterday that they planned to collect heavy weapons to stop sectarian clashes that have killed hundreds, but tribesmen in the historically lawless region said they would not give up their arms.

Kurram, a tribal district of around 600,000 near the border with Afghanistan where federal and provincial authorities have traditionally exerted limited control, has been a flashpoint for sectarian tensions for decades.

Fresh clashes between Sunni and Shia Muslims erupted last month, triggering a humanitarian crisis with reports of starvation, lack of medicine and oxygen shortages following the blocking of the main highway connecting Kurram's main city of Parachinar to the provincial capital Peshawar.

Mohammad Ali Saif, spokesman for the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial government, said that authorities had decided to dismantle private bunkers – observation posts used in the fighting by both sides – and collect heavy weapons from tribesmen in Kurram to stop the violence.

However, local tribesmen have refused to surrender their weapons, citing concerns about their safety.

"Our weapons are for self-defence, not against the state," said Jalal Hussain Bangash, a local tribal leader.

Another tribal elder, Zakir Hussain, warned that disarmament would leave the Shia community vulnerable to attacks.

"The government is ignoring ground realities in Kurram," he said. "We don't have medicine in medical stores and edibles in the markets. Previously we would use Afghanistan when the road was closed, but now the Afghan border is also closed for us after the Taliban took over the country."

Mehdi Hussain, a doctor at the District Headquarters Hospital in Parachinar, told Reuters that more than 80 people, including children, had died in recent weeks due to the lack of medical supplies.

The provincial government and Edhi Foundation have started sending medicines to the region via helicopters. (Reuters)

Italian authority fines OpenAI €15mn

Italy's data protection authority has said that it had fined OpenAI €15mn over the use of personal data by ChatGPT.

The Italian Data Protection Authority (GDPA) watchdog began an investigation in March 2023 when it temporarily blocked ChatGPT in Italy over privacy concerns, becoming the first Western country to take action against the popular artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot.

Announcing the conclusion of its probe yesterday, the GDPA said it had "imposed a fine of €15mn (\$15.6mn) on OpenAI, which was also calculated taking into account the company's co-operative attitude". (AFP)

Moscow and Kyiv trade accusations of launching deadly missile strikes

AFP
Kyiv

Russia and Ukraine accused each other yesterday of launching deadly missile strikes, with Moscow saying that at least six were killed by a missile strike on its Kursk border region after a dawn attack on Ukraine's capital killed one man.

Ukraine struck the small town of Rylsk in Russia's Kursk region, killing six including a child and wounding 10, said the governor, Alexander Khinshtein.

The border region is partly occupied by Ukrainian forces.

The Kursk governor accused Kyiv of firing US-supplied HIMARS rocket systems on civilian targets, saying the strike damaged buildings including a school and the dormitory of a pilot training college.

Videos on social media showed cars on fire, debris strewn on roads and buildings with windows blown out.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told Tass state news agency Moscow would raise the attack at a UN Security Council meeting.

Russia last year accused Ukraine of using cluster munitions to attack the town of around 15,000 residents located around 20

miles (30km) from the border.

The attack came hours after Russian missiles hit central Kyiv early yesterday, killing at least one person and damaging embassies.

Moscow claimed the dawn attack as retaliation for a strike using Western missiles on a chemical plant earlier in the week.

Ukraine's air force said Russia launched five Iskander missiles on Kyiv, all of which it managed to shoot down, but falling debris damaged several districts.

Russian aerial attacks regularly target the capital but rarely cause significant damage as Kyiv is well protected by air defence, nearly three years into Russia's invasion.

"There were explosions after explosions in a row," said 45-year-old Ksenia, who was staying at a hotel near the site of the wreckage.

The strikes killed a 53-year-old man and wounded 13 people, most suffering from shrapnel injuries, city officials said.

They also damaged a building housing the embassies of Argentina, Palestine, North Macedonia, Portugal and Montenegro, and Albania's diplomatic mission, the Ukrainian foreign ministry said.

"Another heinous Russian attack against Kyiv," European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen posted on X. "Putin's dis-

regard for international law reaches new heights."

In the absence of the Russian ambassador in Lisbon, the charge d'affaires of the Russian Federation has been summoned to be presented with a formal protest, the Portuguese government said.

"These are barbaric attacks on diplomatic institutions, this is crossing all possible red lines and international rules," foreign ministry spokesman Georgiy Tykhy was quoted as saying by Ukrainian agency Interfax.

The Kyiv National Linguistics University said on its Instagram account that its building had also been hit.

Air Force spokesman Yuriy Ignat said that Ukraine Patriot air-defence systems had been deployed to shoot down the missiles.

Moscow claimed responsibility for the overnight attack on Ukraine, carried out a day after Russian leader Vladimir Putin threatened to strike Kyiv.

"You know that such strikes on Russian territory have been carried out, and you know that the president has said that every time there will be a response," said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

The Russian defence ministry announced "a combined strike with long-range preci-

sion weapons" in response to Ukraine's earlier attack.

The ministry said it had targeted an office of the SBU security service and a defence industry site.

"All the targets have been struck," it added.

Russian attacks also killed two people in Ukraine's southern city of Kherson yesterday.

"Today Kherson woke up from numerous strikes of the Russian army. The occupants have created hell in the city," Governor Oleksandr Prokudin said.

He also said shelling had cut power to 60,000 homes in the region, under daily strikes since Ukraine liberated the city in November 2022.

Russian forces have been pushed back to the other side of the Dnipro river, but the city of Kherson is within range of Russian artillery.

A Russian sabotage group tried but failed to cross the Dnipro during the shelling, spokesman for the Southern Defence Forces Vladyslav Voloshyn told state-run Suspilne media.

Russian troops are on the offensive again, especially in the eastern Donbas region, where this week they captured two small villages near the city of Pokrovsk.

Pupil killed in knife attack at Croatia school

AFP
Zagreb

A seven-year-old pupil was killed and several others wounded in an unprecedented stabbing attack at a school in the Croatian capital Zagreb yesterday, with a 19-year-old male arrested as a suspect, authorities said.

Police sealed off Precko primary school after the attack, thought to be the first of its kind in Croatia. Parents and pupils expressed their shock and anger.

"A total of six people were injured of whom unfortunately one child has died on the spot after intensive efforts to revive them," Health Minister Irena Hrstic told reporters. "The deceased child is seven years old."

Interior Minister Davor Bozinovic said the suspect was a 19-year-old former student of the school.

Following the attack, the suspect fled and hid at a nearby healthcare centre, where he tried to commit suicide with a knife and was apprehended by police, the minister added.

The suspect had a record of mental disorders and a year ago had attempted suicide, Bozinovic added.

The minister said a preliminary investigation had indicated that the attack happened in a school hallway, not a classroom.

Parents quoted by state-run broadcaster HRT said pupils had just finished their school breakfast when they saw a young man beating a boy and then panic broke out.

"I heard from my sister that there was no one at the entrance and that the attacker entered, breaking into a first-grade classroom and then into a fifth-grade class," Filip, 14, told AFP outside the school.

He said his sister was a first-grade pupil. Filip – who attends the school in the afternoon – said that other first-graders leaving the scene had been "speechless from shock".

Others called for more security after the attack.

"We must have fences. Today there is everything, radars, detectors, cameras, analytics, artificial intelligence (AI)...but what do



People lay candles following a knife attack in a primary school in Zagreb. (Reuters)

we have? A man enters an open, unprotected school!" parent Marko Sikirica told reporters, looking visibly shaken.

All of the wounded were being treated at hospitals and were in stable condition, said the health minister.

The alleged attacker was also injured during the incident, she added.

"We are shocked, as is the entire Croatian public, at the horrible tragedy at the primary school," Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said at the start of a cabinet meeting.

Zagreb mayor Tomislav Tomasevic and Education Minister Radovan Fuchs also rushed to the school following the attack.

"We are appalled and heartbroken," Tomasevic told journalists.

The suspected attacker's mother told local media that he had been treated at a psychiatric hospital on several occasions.

"I begged the doctor not to release him because he was not fit for that," she said.

At midday, about a dozen police cars

with their lights on were parked in front of the school, an AFP reporter noted.

The area was sealed off and forensic experts dressed in white overalls were collecting evidence from the schoolyard.

The city authorities later published contact details for free psychological support.

"Children should be provided with psychological support," Marko Palada, a Precko community official, told AFP. "I met a neighbour whose child is in the fifth grade. The child...was in shock and couldn't say two coherent words."

Fatal attacks on the public are rare in Croatia.

In July, a gunman killed six people at a nursing home in eastern Croatia's Daruvar.

Last year, neighbouring Serbia was rocked by back-to-back mass shootings, including a massacre at a school in the capital in Belgrade in which 10 people were killed.

Croatian authorities said they planned to hold a national day of mourning today.

Italy's Salvini acquitted in migrant trial

A court has acquitted Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini of charges of kidnapping over 100 migrants aboard a boat he had blocked at sea for nearly three weeks in 2019, as part of a policy to curb irregular arrivals.

After a three-year trial, judges rejected a prosecutor's request to hand a six-year jail term to Salvini, the leader of the far-right League party, who is serving as transport minister in Giorgia Meloni's government.

"I'm happy. After three years, common sense won, the League won, Italy won," Salvini told reporters, saying that protecting national borders "is not a crime, but a right".

The verdict came against a backdrop of tensions between the government and the judiciary over migration, after a court questioned the legality of a flagship plan to send asylum-seekers to Albania, in cases now pending with the European Court of Justice.

Salvini had tried to prevent the Spanish charity Open Arms from bringing 147 asylum-seekers to Italy in the summer of 2019, when he was interior minister, as part of his policy of closing Italy's ports to migrant boats.

The not-guilty verdict was greeted with applause from League politicians who gathered in the court room to support their leader.

Prime Minister Meloni said it showed the allegations were "unfounded and surreal".

"Let us continue together, with tenacity and determination, to fight illegal immigration, human trafficking and to defend national sovereignty," Meloni wrote on social media platform X.

Before judges withdrew to consider their verdict, prosecutor Marzia Sabella told the court that Salvini had exceeded his powers in refusing to let the ship dock and there were no national security considerations justifying him in preventing the disembarkation.

Defence lawyer Giulia Bongiorno, who is also a League senator, said the boats had no automatic right to dock in Italy and the migrants could have been taken elsewhere if the charity had been genuinely concerned for their welfare.

The Open Arms' ship had picked up mainly African migrants off Libya over a two-week period and then asked to dock in an Italian port.

It turned down a request to sail to its home country Spain, saying those on board were too exhausted and needed immediate care.

Magistrates eventually seized the boat and ordered the migrants be brought ashore.

The case drew international attention.

Salvini received backing from far-right allies across Europe this week, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, and also from US billionaire Elon Musk, who is advising US President-elect Donald Trump.

Well over 1mn migrants have reached Italy by boat from North Africa over the past 12 years, seeking a better life in Europe.

The migration has boosted support for far-right parties, which have put curbing mass migration from Africa and the Middle East at the top of the political agenda. (Reuters)

Serbia schools to shut amid new protests over station collapse

AFP
Belgrade

Serbia's government has announced plans to close schools early for winter holidays, as teachers and students joined nationwide protests over the collapse of a train station roof that killed 15 people last month.

The decision to start the holiday break on December 24 – a full week in advance – comes as the government has been under pressure following demonstrations by university students in the wake of the tragedy.

Outrage at the deaths in the northern city of Novi Sad has not abated, with many protesters accusing the government of corruption and inadequate oversight.

Serbia's four education unions called yesterday on teachers and other staff to walk out to support the protests, resulting in some closures.

"Employees will stop work in solidarity and support of students in the fight for a better and fairer society," unions said in a letter to pupils' parents this week.



Protesters block a street in front of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade. (AFP)

The government had already released official documents on the building works at the station and bowed to student demands to raise higher education funding by a fifth in a bid to calm the anger.

"We fulfilled all the (students') demands. We do not accept additional ones," President Aleksandar Vucic said earlier this week.

Protesters are demanding the resigna-

tion of the prime minister and the Novi Sad mayor over the disaster, and want to see those found responsible prosecuted.

However, students continue to protest, saying that their demands have only been partially met.

Earlier yesterday students led their weekly protest across Serbia commemorating the tragedy with blockades at various roads.

In Novi Sad, high school students marched through the city's streets, calling on authorities to take responsibility.

Fourteen people, aged between six and 74, were killed at the scene on November 1 when the roof collapsed after major renovation works on the station.

A 15th victim died in hospital weeks later.

Seven weeks on, tensions remain high with violence breaking out at some protests, with students accusing pro-government football hooligans of targeting demonstrations.

A video widely shared on social media showed opposition leader Dragan Djilas scuffling with supporters of Vucic's party on Thursday night.

Greek former royal family members apply for naturalisation

Ten members of Greece's former royal family, which was deposed and exiled 50 years ago, have applied for naturalisation under the family name "De Greece", the government said yesterday.

However, their choice of surname – which means "of Greece" in French – has annoyed left-wing politicians.

The "request was made in accordance with the law", government spokesman Pavlos Marinakis told broadcaster Action 24.

The royal family has mostly lived in exile since 1974 when

the military dictatorship fell and Greece returned to democracy.

A referendum confirmed public desire to abolish the monarchy, whose head at the time was Constantin II, with the family then fleeing into exile.

A 1994 law introduced by the socialist government of the time stipulates that the royal family must recognise the 1974 referendum, give up any claims to the former throne, and respect the constitution, to be granted citizenship.

The royal family, now led by Crown Prince Pavlos, "has

no claims and recognises our country's democratic rules", said Marinakis.

However, the current left-wing opposition has been angered by the choice of surname.

"When they say that they are giving up their titles and any future claims (to the throne), by opting for this family name they create confusion," said the Socialist Party.

For the left-wing Syriza party, "the choice of family name is problematic...because the Greek legal order does not recognise titles and nobilities". (AFP)

Ministry of Awqaf concludes participation in Darb Al Saai

The Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs has concluded its participation in Darb Al Saai 2024 activities, which were held as part of the country's celebrations of the National Day.

At the end of its participation, the ministry held a cultural and educational symposium on the main stage entitled "Community Solidarity", in which it hosted Sheikh Dr Abdul Moein al-Qahtani, in collaboration with the organising committee for the National Day activities and the Ministry of Culture.

At the opening of the symposium, which was supervised by the Religious Guidance Division of the ministry's Department of Preaching and Religious Guidance, preacher Dr Yahya al-Naimi noted that community solidarity is a fundamental pillar for building a cohesive and secure society, where every individual in society works to provide aid and support to others with whatever money, effort or moral support he possesses.

It is, he said, a comprehensive concept that reflects the cohesion and co-operation of community members to support



each other, whether in the face of difficult circumstances and calamities or in daily life.

Dr al-Naimi indicated that this solidarity is embodied in helping the poor and

needy and caring for the weak and needy.

During the symposium, Sheikh Dr al-Qahtani underlined that community solidarity is one of the noble values that Islam has urged and encouraged through

zakat, charity, benevolence and co-operation.

It is an effective tool, he said, for achieving social balance, through the exchange of giving and assistance between individuals

and groups, and represents a fundamental pillar in building strong and interconnected societies and contributes to reducing social and economic disparities, and enhances the sense of collective responsibility.

Sheikh Dr al-Qahtani added that when solidarity is achieved in society, it is positively reflected in its stability and the cohesion of its members, and creates an environment of love, solidarity and co-operation.

He also touched on a real example of material and moral community solidarity during the era of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

The preacher added that it is a unique model of compassion and co-operation among members of society, established by the Prophet (PBUH) through his call to strengthen social ties among Muslims in the early days of Islam in the community of Medina.

At the last axis of the symposium, Sheikh Dr al-Qahtani noted that community solidarity remains a fundamental value that we must all work to strengthen and apply in our daily lives. (QNA)



Darb Al Saai, which concludes today, is open from 3pm-11pm. PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam

Darb Al Saai 2024 attracts more than 102,000 visitors

By Ayman Adly
Staff Reporter

More than 102,000 visitors have thronged Darb Al Saai headquarters at Umm Salal Area to take part in the Qatar National Day (QND) celebrations, which conclude today at 11pm.

The various venues at Darb Al Saai, which opened on December 10, feature different aspects of the Qatari heritage, folklore, culture, tradition and history stressing the intrinsic values of the nation and its people.

The Ministry of Culture has been keen to both entertain and educate the public visiting Darb Al Saai, with special focus on children and families, while the main themes of the celebrations focus on the one nation and the loyalty of its people to their country and its leadership.

Darb Al Saai is a cultural and heritage platform showcasing Qatar's history and traditions through various events blending cultural, heritage, entertainment, and educational aspects.



Throughout the duration of Darb Al Saai, the Ministry of Culture has been organising 15 main events with 104 activities that appeal to all categories of visitors while giving them a space to experience firsthand the local ways of life.

Among the attractions are the

Qatari House, the main stage, Liwan Al Fann (Art Pavilion), Al Bidaa, Al Maqatar, Al Ezbah, Al Shaqab, Darb Al Saai Track, Al Maseer, the Puppet Theatre, the Desert Museum, the Qatari Music Museum, Qatar Reads, interactive games area, and the marketplace.

The main stage at Darb Al Saai hosts a variety of daily activities, including three poetry evenings, three cultural and religious symposiums, three plays (each with three performances), a children's play, a children's chorus performance, four operetta shows, and a musical storytelling session.

There were also creative workshops for children, horse riding shows and a barn area, where visitors were able to experience camel riding.

A live cooking competition titled "Qatari Flavours" was conducted. Prizes were QR80,000, QR60,000, and QR40,000 for first, second, and third places, respectively.

Darb Al Saai 2024 will be open today from 3pm-11pm. The venue, spread across 150,000sq m, has advanced facilities and services to ensure the comfort and safety of visitors.

There are 80 shops, 30 restaurants and cafes, and five traditional games area, in addition to ample parking areas at its various entry points.

