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# GULF TIMES



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Friendship'

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## Qatar condemns car-ramming attack in Germany

Qatar has strongly condemned the car-ramming attack in Magdeburg in Germany, resulting in casualties and injuries. In a statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's firm stance rejecting violence, terrorism, and criminal acts, regardless of the motives and reasons. The ministry expressed Qatar's condolences to the families of the victims, and to the government and people of Germany, wishing the injured a speedy recovery. **(QNA)**

## Qatar awarded membership in WTO programme

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has unveiled the results of its WTO Chairs Programme selection process, which received applications from over 100 academic institutions representing member states. Despite fierce competition, Qatar successfully secured membership in the programme through a joint project presented by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry through its office at the WTO in Geneva, in collaboration with Hamad Bin Khalifa University and supported by the Qatar Research, Development, and Innovation Council. **Page 12**

## Marmi registration begins today

The registration process for the 16th edition of Qatar International Falconry and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2025) will begin at the headquarters of Al Gannas Qatari Society in Katara - the Cultural Village today. Registration will continue until December 26, from 4pm-8pm. Marmi International Festival is one of the most important events organized by Al Gannas Qatari Society, especially after Unesco's approval in November 2010 to include "falconry" in Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. **Page 12**

## Bus-truck collision kills 30 in Brazil

A packed bus collided with a truck and burst into flames early yesterday in Brazil, killing 30 people, the fire department said. Minas Gerais state's fire department initially reported the bus, carrying 45 passengers, had a tyre blowout, causing the driver to lose control. **Page 7**

# Mental health services now available at PHCC clinics

Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC)'s Mental Health Service (MHS) and the Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC) have announced the expansion of its specialist, integrated mental healthcare clinics in 24 specialist clinics within primary healthcare facilities, building on a joint commitment to improving access to mental health services and reducing the stigma associated with it.

MHS, in collaboration with the PHCC will, this month launch additional specialist clinics within PHCC facilities, providing easier access to assessment, treatment and care for a range of mental health conditions for patients.

The health centres to launch the facility are Al Waab Health Centre, Al Sadd Health Centre, Al Mashaf Health Centre, Qatar University Health Centre and Al Wajba Health Centre.

Dr Majid al-Abdulla, chairman of psychiatry, HMC, emphasised the importance of this initiative: "Not only is this expansion a benefit to patients, it provides us with the opportunity to complete the redevelopment of our Hospital on Salwa Road. I held my first clinic at Al Sadd Health Centre and was delighted with the way I was received in the centre and the very smooth running of my clinic. My patients were very happy with the new arrangements, we are keen to continue to work together to build on the early success."

Dr Samya al-Abdulla, senior consultant family physician and executive director of operations, PHCC, explained: "By integrating Specialist Mental Health ser-

ices within primary care, patients benefit from a holistic approach to health. This model allows for simultaneous management of both physical and mental health issues, leading to better health outcomes. The expansion of clinics means that more individuals can access mental health care without the barriers often associated with such specialised services. Patients can easily receive timely assessments and interventions, reducing wait times and improving quality of care."

Dr Samya al-Abdulla also noted: "This expansion is a crucial step in our mission to provide accessible and comprehensive healthcare services. By integrating psychiatry into our primary care clinics, we are not only improving access to mental health services but, ensuring that our patients receive the care they deserve. The partnership between PHCC and HMC Mental Health Service has been instrumental in facilitating this expansion, ensuring that patients have greater access to essential services in a familiar and supportive environment."

Iain Tully, chief executive officer of HMC's Mental Health Service, emphasised the value of this collaboration: "Our partnership with the PHCC underscores our shared vision for integrated healthcare delivery. It ensures that patients continue to receive seamless, high-quality mental health care while fostering innovation and collaboration between primary and specialised services. We are grateful to our PHCC colleagues for the shared commitment in improving mental health care across Qatar."



Iain Tully



Dr Samya al-Abdulla



Dr Majid al-Abdulla

## Qatar, UAE share points in Gulf Cup opener



Qatar's Akram Afif celebrates after scoring a goal during their Group A match against the UAE on the opening day of Arabian Gulf Cup 26 in Kuwait City yesterday. The match ended in a 1-1 draw. **Sport Pages 1, 4**

## Progress in truce talks: Hamas

AFP  
Cairo

### Pope calls Gaza air strikes 'cruelty'

Pope Francis yesterday again condemned Israeli air strikes in Gaza, a day after an Israeli government minister publicly denounced the pontiff for suggesting the global community should study whether the military offensive there constitutes a genocide of the Palestinian people. "Yesterday, children were bombed," said the Pope. "This is cruelty. This is not war. I wanted to say this because it touches the heart." **Page 3**

Palestinian resistance movement Hamas and two other Palestinian groups said yesterday that a Gaza ceasefire deal with Israel is "closer than ever", provided Israel does not impose new conditions.

Last week, indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas mediated by Qatar, Egypt, and the US were held in Doha, rekindling hope of an agreement.

"The possibility of reaching an agreement (for a ceasefire and prisoner exchange deal) is closer than ever, provided the enemy stops imposing new conditions," Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine said in a rare joint statement issued after talks in Cairo on Friday.

A Hamas leader told AFP yesterday that talks had made "significant and important progress" in recent days.

"Most points related to the ceasefire and prisoner exchange issues have been agreed upon," he said on condition of anonymity as he was not authorised to speak publicly on the issue.

"Some unresolved points re-

main, but they do not hinder the process. The agreement could be finalised before the end of this year, provided it is not disrupted by (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu's new conditions." He said that if an agreement is reached it will be implemented in phases, ending with "a serious prisoner exchange deal, a permanent ceasefire and a complete withdrawal (of Israeli forces) from Gaza". On Wednesday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he was "hopeful" for a deal, but avoided making any predictions as to

when it would actually materialise. "It should happen. It needs to happen. We need to get people home," he said, referring to the release of hostages under a ceasefire deal.

Efforts to strike a truce and hostage release deal have repeatedly failed over key stumbling blocks.

Netanyahu has repeatedly stated that he does not want to withdraw Israeli troops from the Philadelphi Corridor, a strip of land cleared and controlled by Israel along Gaza's border with Egypt.

Another unresolved issue is the governance of post-war Gaza.

It remains a highly contentious issue, including within the Palestinian leadership.

Israel has said repeatedly that it will not allow Hamas to run the territory ever again.

### Massacre toll 45,227

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said yesterday that at least 45,227 people have been killed during more than 14 months of war between Israel and Palestinian fighters. It said 107,573 people have been wounded in the Gaza Strip since the war began on October 7, 2023.

# Ras Abrouq offers opulent desert tourism activities

By Shafeeq Alingal  
Staff Reporter

With an array of shows, iconic limestone rock formations, safaris and cuisine, Ras Abrouq is beckoning explorers to lend an experience of opulent desert tourism. Touted to be the first of its kind desert activation by Qatar Tourism, the Ras Abrouq landscape strikes visitors with the topography of unusual rock formations, plateaus and coastline. To run until January 18, the desert event activation at Ras Abrouq is recording visitors who are enthralled by the blend of cultural gala, cuisine, games and adventure.

"Ras Abrouq is captivating indeed. The desert off-driving while enjoying the natural surroundings gives a feel of immersing in the serene beauty of the desert. It's all



about experiencing the blend of adventure and tranquillity," said Mohamed Jaseem, who drove from Doha to Ras Abrouq on Saturday.

Located on the edge of the Unesco-protected Al Reem Biosphere Reserve, Ras Abrouq is the northernmost extension of the Zekreet Peninsula. With a beach, the prehistoric landscape has various archaeological sites with remains of ancient human occupation and the presence of semi-nomadic tribes.

The beautiful and iconic rock formations at Ras Abrouq draw many tourists as well as scholars. The unusual landscape of white cliffs with soft limestone layers impress the visitors. And the mushroom-shaped hills adore the much preserved archaeological sites here. Most parts of the peninsula are protected and are dedicated to a nature reserve for wild deer. **To Page 12**

## Awqaf launches two new projects to enhance endowment revenues

The Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs, represented by the General Directorate of Endowments, has announced the launch of two new projects in Umm Ghuwailina to achieve its strategic vision in advancing old endowments and enhance their revenues based on conditions set by stakeholders.

The project is part of the ministry's unwavering efforts to modernise old endowments through demolition operations and reconstruction, which would ultimately enhance their revenues, as well as the designated areas stipulated in

the stopping (Waqf) deeds and ensure their durability.

In a statement, the ministry highlighted that the initial project involves the conversion of an over 30-year-old property, spanning an area of 292sq m, into a modern residential building. The existing structure previously consisted of two traditional dwellings, each comprising only a ground floor.

Following the renovation process, the property emerged as a modern ground floor and four recurring upper floors. Each apartment occupies an area of 161sq m, with the ground floor being

designated for parking spaces and essential services, including storage rooms and pump facilities, the statement highlighted.

In addition, the ministry stated that the second project was established in lieu of an antiquated Waqf property, originally spanning 178sq m, adding that two commercial units have been constructed in its place, each with a ground floor and mezzanine level.

It added that the previous structure was a traditional two-storey dwelling, with the site now hosting a commercial building with a total constructed area of 196.36sq m,

following the renovation process.

Assistant Director-General of the General Directorate of Endowments, engineer Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Mir, indicated that the renovation underscores the ministry's commitment to optimising the utmost potential of Waqf assets through the strategic enhancement of their infrastructure and judicious economic utilisation, in alignment with the conditions set by original benefactors, underlining that the new initiatives are incorporated within an overarching framework designed to amplify the role of Waqf in serv-

ing the community while fostering the sustainable development.

Endowments are crucial sources to support various social, educational and health fields, as these projects are intended to provide an innovative model to invest in endowments funds, thereby fostering the positive impact of these resources in the community, highlighted al-Mir.

Over the past few decades, the General Directorate of Endowments has carried out multiple distinguished developmental projects, foremost of which was the notable Abilan Waqf project,

which had been converted from a collection of villas and traditional homes into nine modern residential buildings, complemented by a wellness club in Fereej Bin Mahmoud area.

Additionally, the At-Turja stopping (Waqf) for the Holy Qur'an is one of the largest Qur'anic endowments, consisting of two residential buildings that house 112 apartments, alongside sports facilities, benefiting over 26,000 male and female students enrolled in Qur'anic education centres that operate under the ministry statewide. (QNA)

## Artists highlight importance of art workshops in developing talents

Public and private sector institutions and centres in Qatar, concerned with the artistic and cultural aspects, rely on organising training workshops, classes, lectures, and seminars as a fundamental part of their programmes and projects. These efforts aim to develop the talents and capabilities of their affiliates, prepare future artists, and enhance their knowledge of the techniques and aesthetics of visual and plastic arts.

The Ministry of Culture, during the "Fereej Art and Design" festival held last month as part of the cultural season activities, showcased an outstanding model of utilising art workshops and training through the pavilions of its affiliated centres.

Additionally, the "Doha Photography Festival" held last month featured a series of workshops and lectures led by an elite group of photographers and creatives from Qatar, the Gulf, and around the world. These sessions covered topics such as nature photography, the use of artificial intelligence, underwater photography, wildlife photography, and capturing emotions in sports events.

Qatar Museums has organised numerous art workshops and interactive cultural activities over the years at the Museum of Islamic Art, the National Museum of Qatar, the Arab Museum of Modern Art, 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum, Qatar Museums Gallery - Al Riwaq, and the Fire Station - Artists in Residence. These activities, supervised by professional artists, aim to enhance the knowledge of talented individuals and amateurs in various

arts and techniques.

In the context of the 2024 Qatar International Art Festival, organised by Katara last month with the participation of 350 artists from 70 countries, a significant portion of the programme was dedicated to art workshops and cultural seminars to foster co-operation and exchange of experiences among creatives from Qatar and around the world.

Many artists and supervisors of art workshops and training, in special statements to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), emphasised the importance of these workshops in refining the skills of talented individuals and elevating them to a professional level, as well as discovering the potential of promising future artists.

Award-winning Qatari photographer Arif al-Omari highlighted the role of art workshops in enhancing the skills of photographers and enabling them to transition from hobbyists to professionals.

He said that the workshops and courses supervised by professional photographers represent a form of giving back to the community and the institutions that nurtured their talents and contributed to refining their experiences.

Al-Omari, who has trained over 2,000 people in Qatar, the Gulf, and the UK, noted that workshops have become an integral part of these art institutions. He pointed out that the Qatar Photographic Society, formerly, was keen on organising workshops to help photographers renew their skills and stay updated with the latest in photography and camera



The Doha Photography Festival featured a series of workshops and lectures led by an elite group of photographers.

technology. He emphasised that the Qatar Photography Center, under the Ministry of Culture, is committed to offering diverse courses and workshops to its members, focusing on a range of topics from photography basics and camera handling to various stages of specialization in photography arts. The centre also provides certificates and prepares participants to transition from hobbies to the professional market.

Al-Omari also noted that social media has created new opportunities for photographers, with food photography becoming a prominent field. This requires photographers to have a precise understanding of lighting aesthetics, composition, and food culture to market and visually express food effectively.

Iraqi visual artist Ismail Azzam emphasised the importance of training workshops for talented young

artists in Qatar, noting that their results are evident in their distinguished artistic productions and participation in individual and group exhibitions both domestically and internationally.

Azzam pointed out that visual art is fundamentally an individual creative endeavour that depends on the artist's effort to develop their tools and artistic skills. Public and private sector institutions, represented by the Ministry of Culture, museums, or private galleries, play a crucial role in providing support, spaces, materials, tools, and specialised trainers to encourage talented community members to engage in these courses and workshops. While talent is necessary, it needs to be honed with knowledge, education, serious practice, and continuous training.

He praised Qatar Museums' experience in organising training



The Qatar International Art Festival saw the participation of 350 artists from 70 countries.

workshops over several years at the Museum of Islamic Art, the National Museum of Qatar, in various arts under the supervision of specialists in drawing, sculpture, photography, decoration, Islamic arts, and Arabic calligraphy, benefiting talented Qataris, Arabs, and foreigners.

Azzam noted that the workshops he has offered with Qatar Museums over seven years, including an ongoing workshop at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, focus on portrait drawing. These workshops provide trainees with basic information and skills, allowing them to choose their style, school, and approach to their ideas and visions.

He emphasised the need for workshop participants and beneficiaries to have a minimum knowledge of the history of the art they practice and to believe in the role of art in societal development, culture, positive

psychological impacts, and instilling high ethical values.

Azzam, who has more than 25 years of experience teaching drawing through numerous workshops using various techniques, including traditional tools like pencils, charcoal, acrylics, and oils, as well as modern digital drawing techniques, highlighted the effectiveness of art and training workshops and lectures organised by cultural institutions in Qatar and most Arab countries. These workshops help refine the abilities of talented individuals in different artistic fields such as visual arts, ceramics, sculpture, design, printing, Arabic calligraphy, decoration, music, and theatre. These workshops continue to play an essential role alongside specialised academic art institutes in discovering and nurturing talents through continuous training. (QNA)

## Sony Middle East & Africa, Modern Home unveil cutting-edge products in Qatar

Sony Middle East and Africa, alongside Modern Home, its strategic and exclusive partner in Qatar, announced the release of the WF-C510 wireless earbuds, WH-1000XM5, and WF-1000XM5 headphones in Smoky Pink, the MDR-M1 studio monitor headphones, and the FE 85mm F1.4 GM II lens.

These exciting new launches cater to a wide range of consumers, from audio enthusiasts and photographers to creators and professionals. The new launches are available at Modern Home in Al Maha Centre on Salwa Road and Fnac stores in Lagoona Mall, Doha Festival City, and Place Vendome, in addition to other major retailers in town.

The WF-C510 wireless earbuds redefine convenience and comfort. Featuring Sony's smallest-ever closed-type design, these earbuds offer a stable and ergonomic fit, ensuring hours of seamless use. The compact, cylindrical charging case is pocket-friendly and provides extended portability.

The WF-C510 delivers powerful performance with up to 11 hours of playback time, while a quick five-minute charge gives an impressive 60 minutes of listening time.

Equipped with Ambient Sound Mode and Voice Focus, the earbuds allow users to stay connected to



with the introduction of Smoky Pink, a sophisticated shade designed in collaboration with K-Pop sensation LE SSERAFIM.

The Smoky Pink edition blends elegant undertones with a matte finish, elevating its appeal as both an audio accessory and a fashion statement.

Featuring Sony's best-in-class noise cancellation and 360 Reality Audio, these headphones deliver studio-quality sound engineered to perfection, ensuring music is heard the way it's meant to be.

As part of Sony's For The Music campaign, the headphones are inspired by LE SSERAFIM's chic aesthetic and their hit track 'CRAZY', making them a must-have for fans and trendsetters. Designed for maximum comfort and performance, these headphones seamlessly combine cutting-edge technology with style.

The MDR-M1 studio monitor headphones are Sony's latest innovation for creators, sound engineers, and music professionals. Designed in collaboration with industry experts like Mike Piacentini (Battery Studios) and Akihiro Nishimura (Power Station NYC), the MDR-M1 offers studio-quality



sound reproduction for professional use.

The headphones feature a closed acoustic structure for excellent sound isolation, ensuring precise monitoring in any environment. At the heart of the MDR-M1 is a uniquely developed driver unit that achieves ultra-wideband playback (5Hz-80kHz), combining a soft edge for low distortion and a hard dome for crystal-clear high frequencies.

Engineered for comfort, the MDR-M1 features low-resilience ear pads and a lightweight design, allowing for long listening sessions without fatigue. Two detachable cables, including a shorter, portable option, offer versatility for professional setups. Supporting Sony's 360 Virtual Mixing Environment (360VME), the MDR-M1



empowers creators to work in virtual studio spaces, delivering consistency and accuracy anywhere.

Sony's FE 85mm F1.4 GM II lens raises the bar for portrait and cinematic photography. This second-generation lens features two XA (extreme aspherical) and two ED (extra-low dispersion) elements to achieve outstanding resolution and clarity while suppressing aberrations. The hallmark of the lens is its soft, stunning bokeh, thanks to the 11-blade circular aperture and spherical aberration optimisation.

The autofocus (AF) capabilities are significantly enhanced, now up to three times faster than its predecessor, enabling precise subject tracking even during high-speed continuous shooting, such as with Sony's Alpha 9 III. The lens is also optimised for cinematic video production, minimising focus breath-

ing and providing flexible operability with customizable focus hold buttons and an independent aperture ring.

Weighing just 642 grammes, 20% lighter and 13% smaller than the first-generation model, the lens combines advanced technology with a lightweight, compact design, making it an essential tool for portrait, wedding, and travel photographers, as well as videographers.

Sony continues to set new standards with products that blend innovative technology, user-focused design, and uncompromising performance. From high-quality audio solutions to professional-grade lenses, Sony's latest launches cater to diverse consumer and professional needs. With the support of Modern Home, Sony reaffirms its commitment to delivering excellence and enriching experiences for customers in Qatar.

## Ooredoo highlights QU students' research contributions to Doha Marathon

Ooredoo has hosted a group of talented Master's students from Qatar University to showcase their innovative research on the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo. The event highlighted the students' pioneering ideas and valuable insights aimed at enhancing future editions of the marathon.

To acknowledge their significant contributions, Ooredoo awarded the students by presenting them with certificates of appreciation for their dedication and community-driven research efforts. Their findings are set to contribute to future marathons, further reinforcing the event's reputation for world-class athleticism and com-

munity engagement. Sabah Rabbiah al-Kuwari, director of Public Relations, CSR & Sponsorship at Ooredoo Qatar, stated: "We are delighted to collaborate with the next generation of leaders and change-makers from Qatar University. Their ideas and dedication reflect the innovative spirit of our community."

Their contributions will not only elevate the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo but also inspire future partnerships that nurture innovation and excellence."

Now in its 13th edition, the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo has once again retained the World Athletics Gold Label designation

for the second consecutive year, an achievement that underscores Qatar's commitment to hosting world-class sporting events. With more than 15,000 participants expected this year, the marathon has established itself as a key highlight of Qatar's sporting calendar, further positioning the country as a premier destination for athletics.

The Doha Marathon by Ooredoo remains a testament to Qatar's aspirations within the global sports community.

Ooredoo is committed to supporting initiatives that promote excellence in athletics, enhance community engagement, and unite people through the power of sport.



To acknowledge their significant contributions, Ooredoo awarded the students by presenting them with certificates of appreciation for their dedication and community-driven research efforts.

# GCC welcomes UN resolution on Palestinian rights

**QNA**  
Riyadh

The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) welcomed the UN General Assembly (UNGA)'s adoption of a resolution put forth by Norway, requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on Israel's obligations concerning the activities of the UN and other states in support of the Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories.

In a statement yesterday, GCC Secretary-General Jassem Mohamed Albudaiwi said that the resolution's adoption clearly reflects the international consensus on supporting and assisting the Palestinian people in facing challenges, affirming that it also supports the legitimate right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and

to build their independent state, in a way that meets all their legitimate rights.

Albudaiwi reaffirmed the contents of the final statement of the 45th session of the GCC Supreme Council regarding the centrality of the Palestinian cause, the need to end the Israeli occupation, and affirming support for Palestinian sovereignty over all occupied Palestinian territories, calling on all states to finalise their recognition of the State of Palestine, and calling for urgent collective action to achieve a permanent solution that guarantees the establishment of an independent Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, in line with the Arab Peace Initiative and international legitimacy resolutions.

The UNGA's resolution passed with 137 votes in favour, 12 against, and 22 abstentions.



People wave an independence-era flag bearing the image of late rebel fighter and famous chanter Abdel-Basset al-Sarout at Aleppo's Saadallah al-Jabri Square as they take part in the "Liberation Festival", celebrating the fall of president Bashar al-Assad, yesterday.

# Syria's new rulers name HTS official as defence minister

**Reuters**  
Damascus

Syria's new rulers have appointed Murhaf Abu Qasra, a leading figure in the insurgency which toppled Bashar al-Assad, as defence minister in the interim government, an official source said yesterday.

Abu Qasra, who is also known by the nom de guerre Abu Hassan 600, is a senior figure in the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group which led the campaign that ousted Assad this month. He led numerous military operations during Syria's revolution, the source said.

Syria's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa discussed "the form of the military institution in the new Syria" during a meeting with armed factions yesterday, state news agency SANA reported.

Abu Qasra during the meeting sat next to Sharaa, also known by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Golani, photos published by SANA showed.

Prime Minister Mohammed al-Bashir said this week that the defence ministry would be restructured using former rebel



People gather with pictures of 23 local Syrians who died in Saydnaya and other Assad-regime prisons during a memorial march for them in Jaramana in the Damascus countryside on the city's outskirts, yesterday.

factions and officers who defected from Assad's army.

Bashir, who formerly led an HTS-affiliated administration in the northwestern province of Idlib, has said he will lead a three-month transitional government. The new administration has not declared plans for what will happen after that.

Earlier yesterday, the ruling General Command named Asaad Hassan al-Shibani as foreign minister, SANA said. A source in the new administration told Reuters that this step "comes in response to the aspirations of the Syrian people to establish international relations that bring peace and stability".

Shibani, a 37-year-old graduate of Damascus University, previously led the political department of the rebels' Idlib government, the General Command said. Sharaa's group was part of Al Qaeda until he broke ties in 2016. It had been confined to Idlib for years until going on the offensive in late November, sweeping through the cities of western Syria and into Damascus as the army melted away.

Sharaa has met with a number of international envoys this week. He has said his primary focus is on reconstruction and achieving economic development and that he is not interested in engaging in any new conflicts.

Syrian rebels seized control of Damascus on Dec 8, forcing Assad to flee after more than 13 years of civil war and ending his family's decades-long rule.

US officials said on Friday that Washington would remove a \$10m bounty on his head.

The war has killed hundreds of thousands of people, caused one of the biggest refugee crises of modern times and left cities bombed to rubble and the economy hollowed out by global sanctions.

# Pope calls Gaza air strikes 'cruelty' after Israeli minister's criticism

**Reuters**  
Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday again condemned Israeli air strikes in Gaza, a day after an Israeli government minister publicly denounced the pontiff for suggesting the global community should study whether the military offensive there constitutes a genocide of the Palestinian people.

Pope Francis opened his annual Christmas address to the Catholic cardinals who lead the Vatican's various departments with what appeared to be a reference to Israeli air strikes on Friday that killed at least 25 Palestinians in Gaza.

"Yesterday, children were bombed," said the Pope. "This is cruelty. This is not war. I wanted to say this because it touches the heart." The Pope, as leader of the 1.4bn-member Roman Catholic Church, is usually careful about taking sides in conflicts, but he has recently been more outspoken about Israel's military campaign against Palestinian Hamas group.

In book excerpts published last month, the pontiff said some international experts said that

"what is happening in Gaza has the characteristics of a genocide".

Israeli Minister of Diaspora Affairs Amichai Chikli sharply criticised those comments in an unusual open letter published by Italian newspaper *Il Foglio* on Friday. Chikli said the Pope's remarks amounted to a "trivialisation" of the term genocide.

Francis also said yesterday that the Catholic bishop of Jerusalem, known as a patriarch, had tried to enter the Gaza Strip on Friday to visit Catholics there, but was denied entry. The patriarch's office told Reuters it was not able to comment on the Pope's remarks about the patriarch being denied entry. The Israeli military said yesterday the patriarch's entry had been approved and he would enter Gaza today, barring any major security issues. Aid from the patriarch's office entered last week, the military said.

Israel allows clerics to enter Gaza and "works in co-operation with the Christian community to make it easier for the Christian population that remains in the Gaza Strip - including co-ordinating its removal from the Gaza Strip to a third country," a statement from the military said.

## At least 10 killed in Iran as bus falls into ravine

At least 10 people were killed yesterday when a bus plunged into a ravine in Iran's western Lorestan province, state media reported, AFP reported from Tehran. "Aid and rescue teams have been dispatched to the area," Mohammad Ghadami, the provincial head of the Red Crescent Society, told state TV. Lorestan is around 350 kilometres southwest of the capital Tehran. Iran has a poor road safety record, with more than 20,000 deaths in accidents recorded between March 2023 and March 2024, according to local media citing the Iranian judiciary's Forensic Medicine Organisation.

# Yemen fighters strike Tel Aviv in pre-dawn missile attack

**AFP**  
Tel Aviv

A missile fired from Yemen by Houthi fighters struck Israel's commercial hub Tel Aviv before dawn yesterday, wounding 16 people in the second such attack in days.

The Israeli military said it failed to intercept the missile, forcing many residents to leave their homes in the early hours.

The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it used a ballistic missile directed at "a military target of the Israeli enemy".

The fighters have repeatedly launched missiles against Israel in solidarity with the Palestinians since the war in Gaza began more than a year ago. Most of them have been intercepted. In response, Israel has struck multiple targets in fighters-held areas of Yemen, including ports and energy facilities.

"Following the sirens that sounded a short while ago in central Israel, one projectile launched from Yemen was identified and unsuccessful interception attempts were made," the Israeli military said on its Telegram channel. In a later statement, the military called the missile strike "yet another clear example of Israeli civilians being deliberately targeted".

It stressed the country's "aerial defence is not hermetic" so Israelis should follow security instructions. Israel's emergency medical service, Magen David Adom (MDA), said 16 people were slightly injured.

"I was at home and heard a loud explosion. I immediately went to the scene and saw significant blast damage to nearby buildings," medic Yosef Kourdi was quoted as saying in a statement released by MDA.

"MDA teams provided medical care to 16 individuals who were mildly injured by glass shards from shattered windows in nearby buildings due to the impact of the strike," the statement said.

# No longer oppressive leader's mouthpiece, Syrian media face uncertainty

**AFP**  
Damascus

Syrian media outlets which trumpeted the glories of Bashar al-Assad's oppressive rule quickly adopted revolutionary fervour after his ouster, but uncertainty shadows the sector.

For decades, Syria's ruling Baath party and the Assad family dynasty heavily curtailed all aspects of daily life, including freedom of the press and expression.

The media became a tool of those in power.

When a rebel alliance led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group took Damascus on December 8, announcing Assad's overthrow after an 11-day offensive, confusion reigned and state news agency SANA, the government mouthpiece, went silent for more than 24 hours.

State television broadcast old programmes instead of the fast-evolving events. Then a group of men in the news studio read a statement from the "Damascus Conquest operations room". They announced "the liberation of the

city of Damascus and the fall of Bashar al-Assad".

Those words would have been unimaginable two weeks earlier.

For hours, the channel then broadcast a full-screen message on a red background announcing the "victory of the great Syrian revolution".

Foreign media - whose entry to the country was heavily restricted under Assad - flooded in as soon as he was toppled, rushing to notorious prisons and other sites that were out of reach under his paranoid rule.

After Syria's war erupted in 2011 with the government's brutal repression of pro-democracy protests, Assad tightened restrictions on independent journalism. He expected adherence to the government narrative.

Few reports of the fast-moving rebel offensive initially appeared on official media, and no military comment was allowed except from the army as rebels swept up government-held territory.

Upon Assad's ouster, journalists - particularly in state media - quickly changed their online profile photos to pro-revolutionary images and removed anything



Recent photo shows a man deliver a statement in front of the Syrian opposition flag at Syrian state television in Damascus, after the rebels declared they had taken the Syrian capital.

demonstrating their involvement with the former authorities.

SANA the following day changed its cover picture on messaging app Telegram to match the three-star flag symbolic of Syria's uprising. The agency began publishing news including announcements from the rebels' military operations room. Private pro-government publication Al-Watan - relatively critical compared to other outlets - on the day the rebels took Damascus published a statement defending itself.

"Syrian media and media workers are not guilty," it said.

Like other outlets, the daily was "only carrying out instructions and publishing the news (the government) sent us. Quickly it became clear it was false", wrote editor-in-chief Waddah Abd Rabbo.

Al-Watan, established in 2006, has since published news from the new administration, and Abd Rabbo said officials from the information ministry "told us our team could continue working".

"We hope in future that we can return to print, particularly because Syria is the only country that doesn't print a single newspaper," he said by telephone.

All Syrian newspapers halted print publication during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 'UNKNOWN FUTURE'

Some other local media platforms have been gradually returning to work or relaunching, including private television channel Sama, which was funded by Syrian businessman and lawmaker Mohammed Hamsho.

One employee, requesting anonymity due to security concerns, said civilian members of HTS - accompanied by armed rebels - entered the station and told employees to return.

Other outlets have not, including private radio station Sham FM, which initially said it was suspending news and information programming "until the general situation becomes stable".

Two days later the station, which launched in Damascus in 2007, announced it was ceasing production "following a decision from the Ministry of Information in the transitional government". "I have around 70 employees" who in turn have families, said founder and general manager Samer Youssef, adding that "thousands of people worked in the media"

under Assad. "An unknown future awaits us and all media who worked under the control of the old regime," he said.

Reporters Without Borders, a freedom of information watchdog, ranked Syria second-last on its World Press Freedom Index this year, ahead of Eritrea, and behind Afghanistan.

The new administration in Syria has not necessarily reassured the media. On December 13, the Information Ministry released a statement saying "media workers who were part of the war and propaganda machine of the fallen Assad regime, and contributed directly or indirectly to promoting its crimes," would be "held to account".

Bassam Safar, head of the Damascus branch of the anti-Assad Syrian journalists' union, which was previously based abroad, said no media worker can be held to account "unless it is proven that they took part in the bloodshed." That, he said, "is the business of the courts." For him, the Syrian people should reconcile with their journalists, to establish "a new media environment built on freedom" and human rights.

## Celebrating new beginnings



People walk past stalls at a street market in the town of Douma, on the outskirts of the Syrian capital Damascus, yesterday.



People visit a traditional souq in the Bab Touma district of the Old City of Damascus, after fighters of the ruling Syrian body ousted Syria's Bashar al-Assad, in Damascus, yesterday.

# How Assad's inner circle fled Syria after his fall

AFP  
Cairo

A lightning rebel offensive early this month caught Syria's ruling clan off guard.

President Bashar al-Assad fled to Russia on December 8, leaving behind many of his collaborators, some of whom sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

According to two sources, the ousted president, who fled to Moscow via the Russian military airfield in Hmeimim on Syria's coast, was accompanied by only a handful of confidants.

Among them were his closest ally, the secretary-general of presidential affairs Mansour Azzam, as well as his economic adviser Yassar Ibrahim, who oversees the financial empire of Assad and his

wife, Asma. "He left with his secretary and his treasurer," an insider who requested anonymity said, mockingly.

Bashar's brother, Maher al-Assad, commander of the elite Fourth Division tasked with defending Damascus, did not know about his sibling's plans.

Leaving his men stranded, Maher took a separate route, fleeing by helicopter to Iraq before traveling to Russia, according to a Syrian military source.

An Iraqi security source said that Maher arrived in Iraq by plane on December 7 and stayed there for five days.

Maher's wife, Manal al-Jadaon and his son briefly entered Lebanon before departing through Beirut airport, said Lebanese Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi, without disclosing their final destination. Another Assad government

heavyweight, Ali Mamlouk, the former chief of Syria's security apparatus, fled to Russia via Iraq, said a Syrian military source.

His son passed through Lebanon before leaving for another destination, according to a Lebanese security source.

The Iraqi Interior Ministry denied on Monday the presence of either Maher al-Assad or Mamlouk in Iraq.

Both are wanted men.

Maher — and Bashar al-Assad — are wanted by France for alleged complicity in war crimes over chemical attacks in Syria in August 2013.

The French courts have already sentenced Mamlouk and Jamil Hassan, former head of Syria's Air Force Intelligence, in absentia to life imprisonment for complicity in crimes against humanity and war crimes.

On Friday, the Lebanese authorities received an Interpol alert relaying a US request to arrest Hassan and hand him over to the US authorities, should he enter the country.

The United States accuses Hassan of "war crimes", including overseeing barrel bomb attacks on Syrian people that killed thousands of civilians.

A Lebanese judicial source told AFP that they had no confirmation of Hassan's presence in Lebanon, but assured that he would be detained if found.

Other prominent figures also made hasty escapes.

Bouthaina Shaaban, former translator for Hafez al-Assad - Bashar's father who founded the brutal system of government his son inherited - fled to Lebanon on the night of December 7-8.

Shaaban, Bashar al-Assad's

long-time political adviser, then travelled to Abu Dhabi, according to a friend in Beirut.

Kifah Mujahid, head of the Baath Brigades — the military wing of Syria's former ruling party — escaped to Lebanon by boat, a party source told AFP.

Other officials took refuge in their hometowns in Alawite regions, some of them told AFP. Assad hailed from Syria's Alawite minority.

Not all escape attempts were successful.

Ihab Makhoulf, Bashar al-Assad's cousin and a prominent businessman, was killed on December 7 while trying to flee Damascus. His twin brother, Iyad, was injured in the same incident, said a military official from the former government.

Their elder sibling, Rami Makhoulf, once considered Syria's

richest man and a symbol of the regime's corruption, managed to survive. Rami, who fell out of favour with the Assad regime years ago, is believed to be in the United Arab Emirates.

Several other figures close to Assad's government crossed into Lebanon, according to a security source and a source in the business world. These included Ghassan Belal, head of Maher's office, and businessmen Mohammed Hamsho, Khalid Qaddur, Samer Debs and Samir Hassan.

A former Lebanese minister with close ties to Syria said that several senior Syrian military officers were granted safe passage by the Russians to the Hmeimim airbase.

They were rewarded for instructing their troops not to resist the rebel offensive in order to avoid further bloodshed, he said.

## US authorises military sales of more than \$5bn to Egypt

AFP  
Washington

The United States government has authorised the sale of more than \$5bn in military equipment to Egypt, which has become an increasingly close partner in mediating the Gaza crisis despite serious human rights concerns.

The State Department informed Congress it had

approved the sale of \$4.69bn in equipment for 555 US-made M1A1 Abrams tanks operated by Egypt, \$630mn in 2,183 Hellfire air-to-surface missiles and \$30mn in precision-guided munitions.

The sale "will support the foreign policy and national security of the United States by helping to improve the security of a Major Non-Nato Ally country that continues to be an important strategic partner in the Middle East," according to a statement.

### INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN BARWA TENDER

BARWA REAL ESTATE COMPANY WISHES TO INVITE CAPABLE AND COMPETENT COMPANIES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE TENDER DESCRIBED BELOW:

TENDER REFERENCE	TENDER DESCRIPTION	TENDER BOND	NON-REFUNDABLE TENDER FEES	CLOSING DATE
BRE/RFP/GRED/005/2024	THE CONSTRUCTION AND COMPLETION OF BARWA HILLS - BUILDING A AT LUSAIL CITY - FOX HILLS (PLOT MU/J24)  CONSISTING OF RESIDENTIAL APARTMENTS AND RETAILS SHOPS (2B+G+M+5 FLOORS)	QAR 100,000	QAR 250	05 JANUARY 2025 12.00 P.M.

TO RECEIVE THE TENDER DOCUMENTS, A COPY OF THE TENDER FEE DEPOSIT SLIP AND VALID COMMERCIAL REGISTRATION OF THE BIDDER MUST BE FORWARDED TO THE FOLLOWING EMAIL ADDRESS: [DEVELOPMENT.TENDER@BARWA.COM.QA](mailto:DEVELOPMENT.TENDER@BARWA.COM.QA)

TO PAY THE TENDER FEE, IT SHOULD BE DEPOSITED INTO THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT:

BENEFICIARY : BARWA REAL ESTATE COMPANY  
BANK NAME : DUKHAN BANK, MAIN BRANCH, DOHA - QATAR  
ACCOUNT NO. : 200000008022  
IBAN NUMBER : QA04BRWA00000000200000008022

NO OFFERS SUBMITTED BEYOND THE CLOSING DATE WILL BE CONSIDERED

TENDER BIDS TO BE SUBMITTED TO:

TENDER COMMITTEE SECRETARY  
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ORYX GTL Limited is pleased to announce the following tender(s):

S. No.	Tender Ref.	Tender Title:	Tender Bond QAR	Bid Closing Date & Tender Bond Validity Period
1	STC-MT-068-24-MC	Supply of Battery Storage Racks.	45,500/-	5 Jan 2025 at 12.00 noon & 180 days

Companies wishing to register their interest and obtain Tender Document(s) for the above Tender(s) must pay a non-refundable registration fee and register with ORYX GTL as detailed below:

Tender Registration Fee	QAR 500/- (Non-refundable) per Tender
Payable to	ORYX GTL Limited
IBAN (29 Digits)	QA23QNBA00000000013010705001
Bank	Qatar National Bank - HQ or any branch (cash only)
Registration Dates	From 22 December 2024 to 26 December 2024
Registration Process and Requirements:	Write an e-mail to <a href="mailto:oryxgtltenders@oryxgtl.qa">oryxgtltenders@oryxgtl.qa</a> with the following attachments: 1. Copy of Commercial Registration (CR) 2. Copy of bank deposit slip of the Tender Registration Fee. 3. Copy of ICV Certificate

COMPANIES WHO HAVE PAID THE NON-REFUNDABLE REGISTRATION FEE BUT FAILED TO FORMALLY REGISTER AT THE DATE AND TIME STATED ABOVE WILL NOT BE CONSIDERED AS ACCEPTABLE TENDERER.

TENDER BOND SHALL BE ISSUED BY A BANK REGISTERED IN THE STATE OF QATAR.

Effective from 1st July 2023, bids from Local Suppliers and Contractors (companies established under the Laws of State of Qatar with local Commercial Registration) who are not in possession of an ICV score in the ICV portal by Tender Closing Date (or commercial bid submission date if separately mentioned/notified) will not be accepted. Local Company that has been established for less than 2 years are exempted from this requirement. For further details please visit ICV Digital Portal:- <https://icv.qa>

For more information about ORYX GTL and its tenders, please visit our website: <http://www.oryxgtl.com.qa>

# 10 Reasons why South Korea is the ultimate family destination for Qatari travellers



With its rich cultural history, stunning landscapes, and vibrant modernity, South Korea has become a favoured travel destination for families from Qatar and across the GCC. Often referred to as “The Land of Morning Calm,” South Korea offers much more than just calm mornings. It is a country where tradition meets innovation, and where every family member can find something exciting, enriching, and memorable to enjoy.

From its thriving K-culture scene to its world-class medical tourism offerings, South Korea’s allure continues to captivate travelers from the Middle East. Here are ten reasons why South Korea should top your family’s travel list:



Gangnam District, a fashionable district packed with upscale attractions, Seoul, South Korea.

**1. Safe and welcoming environment**  
Renowned for its safety and hospitality, South Korea provides a reassuring sense of security for families travelling from the GCC. The Korean culture values respect, warmth, and kindness, which creates a welcoming atmosphere for visitors. Whether you’re exploring bustling markets or strolling through tranquil parks, you’ll experience the generosity of the Korean people. Basic Korean etiquette, such as showing respect to elders and polite interactions with strangers, enhances the visitor experience and ensures that families feel comfortable and embraced.



The Songaksan Mountain on Jeju Island, a famous coastal drive with breathtaking scenic views, South Korea.

## 2. Natural beauty

The Songaksan Mountain on Jeju Island, a famous coastal drive with breathtaking scenic views, South Korea.

South Korea offers a diverse range of landscapes, perfect for families who appreciate nature. From the snow-capped mountains of the winter season to the vibrant autumn foliage, the country’s natural beauty is awe-inspiring. The eastern coast features beautiful beaches, ideal for a family vacation by the sea, while the western coastline offers expansive shores perfect for water sports and outdoor activities. Jeju Island, a UNESCO World Heritage site, boasts lush gardens and volcanic landscapes, making it a paradise for nature lovers. The changing seasons provide a variety of experiences, ensuring that every visit to South Korea offers something new.



A winter landscape with the roof of Gyeongbokgung and falling snow in Seoul.

## 3. Diverse seasons

The country’s four distinct seasons offer unique experiences throughout the year. In the summer, temperatures range from 23°C to 30°C, providing ideal conditions for sightseeing and outdoor adventures. The winter transforms South Korea into a winter wonderland, perfect for activities like skiing, snowboarding, and ice fishing. Spring and autumn bring moderate temperatures and stunning scenery, with

cherry blossoms in spring and brilliant fall colors making for unforgettable family moments. Whether you visit in the warmth of summer or the chill of winter, South Korea’s climate accommodates all kinds of travel experiences.



The scenery of the Jeongdongjin Sun Cruise Resort building seen from the seaside, South Korea.

## 4- Variety of accommodations

Accommodations in South Korea range from traditional Korean houses (hanok) to luxurious international hotels, offering a variety of experiences to suit every traveler’s needs. For a truly immersive experience, families can stay in a hanok, which allows them to explore Korea’s traditional architecture and lifestyle. Alternatively, modern hotels and guesthouses cater to international travelers seeking comfort and convenience. Whether you’re looking for a high-end experience or a more authentic stay, South Korea offers options that cater to families of all preferences.



Lotte World amusement park and cherry blossom of Spring, a major tourist attraction in Seoul.

## 5. Kids-friendly attractions

South Korea is packed with family-friendly attractions that cater specifically to children. Amusement parks such as Everland and Lotte World offer a wealth of exciting rides, parades, and themed attractions suitable for all ages. These parks also feature educational elements, combining fun with learning. Kids can dress up in traditional Korean hanbok, explore royal palaces, or visit museums like the Samsung Innovation Museum, which introduces young visitors to the world of technology through interactive exhibits. South Korea ensures that young travellers will have an enriching and exciting experience.



Korean speed train KTX traveling through green countryside, on its way to Seoul.

## 6- Public transportation

South Korea is known for its efficient and affordable public transportation system. The subway systems in cities like Seoul are world-renowned for their punctuality, cleanliness, and ease of use. Travellers can easily navigate the city using a rechargeable T-money card, which works for both buses and subways. The transportation system’s ease of use and widespread accessibility make it incredibly convenient for families to travel around the country. For added convenience, taxis are also readily available, including luxury taxis for a more comfortable experience.

## 7- Korean shopping

South Korea is a paradise for shoppers, offering everything from street markets to high-end malls. Myeongdong in Seoul is a bustling shopping district filled with fashionable boutiques, cosmetics stores, and street food vendors. For luxury shopping, districts like Gangnam feature high-end international brands and sleek modern malls. What sets South Korea apart is its combination of tradition and innovation—families can shop for both cutting-edge products and traditional



Myeongdong market, a popular place and district for shopping, dining and sightseeing.

Korean goods, K-beauty products, Korean fashion, and unique handicrafts are just some of the items you can discover while exploring the local shopping scene.



People enjoying their evening in a restaurant in Seoul.

## 8- Delicious food

Korean cuisine is a sensory experience that families can enjoy together. From spicy Tteokbokki (rice cakes) to savory hotteok (pancakes), Korean street food offers delicious flavors in every bite. Family-friendly restaurants serve a range of traditional dishes like bibimbap (mixed rice) and bulgogi (marinated beef), often accompanied by banchan, small side dishes that bring added variety to the meal. Food markets like Gwangjang Market and Jagalchi Fish Market provide an opportunity to savor authentic Korean delicacies while soaking in the vibrant atmosphere of local culture.



Seoul National University Hospital, Jongno-gu, Seoul, South Korea.

## 9- Medical and beauty tourism

South Korea is a leading destination for medical tourism, offering high-quality healthcare services at competitive prices. The country is renowned for its expertise in cosmetic surgery, dermatology, and advanced medical procedures. For families seeking medical care or wellness treatments, South Korea’s hospitals are equipped with the latest technology and staffed by skilled professionals. Moreover, the country’s beauty industry—famous for its innovative skincare products and treatments—attracts many visitors looking to experience the best in self-care and rejuvenation.



Beautiful cherry blossom festival at Spring Cherry blossom at Yeojwacheon, Jinhae, South Korea.

## 10. Year-round festivities

South Korea’s calendar is filled with vibrant festivals that celebrate the country’s rich cultural heritage. From the colorful Lantern Festival in the spring to the lively Dano Festival in the summer, there is always something exciting happening. In the fall, the Chuseok harvest festival brings families together to celebrate and share traditional foods, while the winter season lights up with festive events like the Seoul Christmas markets and the Jinju Namgang Yudeung Festival, where glowing lanterns light up the river. These festivals are an excellent way for families to immerse themselves in the culture and traditions of South Korea, with modern K-pop influences adding a dynamic edge to some of the celebrations.



## Halal Travel in Korea: A Guide to Muslim-Friendly Destinations

For tourists seeking an enriching and family-friendly adventure, South Korea also ensures that Islamic practices and needs are fully respected. That is why Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) is proud to present an array of Muslim-friendly services, making Korea an ideal destination for Muslim travellers who wish to explore the country.



### Halal dining and Muslim-friendly restaurants

South Korea has witnessed a significant rise in halal-certified and Muslim-friendly restaurants across major provinces like Seoul, Busan, and Gangwon-do. Renowned eateries, including EID Halal Korean Food and Makaan Halal Korean Restaurant, offer authentic Korean cuisine prepared in strict accordance with Islamic dietary laws.

In Seoul’s Itaewon district, Muslim travellers can savour iconic Korean dishes such as Bibimbap, made with halal ingredients, or enjoy street food like Tteokbokki at certified halal stalls. Areas like Myeongdong also offer a growing number of halal food carts, allowing visitors to experience authentic street food culture in a comfortable setting.

Through KTO’s dedicated resources, Muslim travellers can easily locate a diverse range of restaurants that cater to their dietary needs, ensuring a delightful and stress-free dining experience.



### Prayer facilities and mosques

Understanding the importance of maintaining daily prayers, South Korea provides numerous prayer areas and mosques throughout the country. The Seoul Central Mosque in Itaewon serves as a central hub for the Muslim community, offering not only a space for worship but also a centre for cultural exchange.

In addition to the Seoul Central Mosque, prayer rooms can be found in major shopping centers like COEX Mall and Incheon International Airport, making it easy for Muslim travellers to maintain their religious practices while exploring the city. Many of these facilities also provide ablution areas, ensuring convenience for prayer preparation. Moreover, many hotels, with the guidance of KTO, now provide prayer mats and Qibla direction indicators in guest rooms, allowing guests to comfortably observe their religious practices. A map of all mosques and prayer areas are provided on the KTO website.



### Wellness, beauty, and family-friendly activities

South Korea is a destination that effortlessly blends relaxation, beauty, and family-friendly entertainment while catering to the needs of Muslim travellers. Wellness seekers can explore Seoul’s world-class spas, such as the Muslim-friendly Sulwasoo Flagship Store, which offers rejuvenating treatments using halal-certified products inspired by traditional Korean beauty rituals. Families can enjoy vibrant attractions like Everland and Lotte World, known for their thrilling rides, or venture to the tranquil natural beauty of Jeju Island. The eco-friendly resorts, such as Ramada Plaza, provide halal dining options alongside wellness facilities, offering a serene escape for family bonding while respecting Islamic principles. To top it off, a cruise along the Hangang River provides breathtaking views of Seoul’s illuminated skyline, making for a memorable family outing in the heart of the city.



### Hallyu and Shopping: A Must-Experience for Visitors

The global phenomenon of Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, presents an exciting opportunity for visitors to dive into Korean pop culture. Fans can explore iconic locations featured in popular K-dramas, visit K-pop entertainment companies, and enjoy live performances. Shopping enthusiasts will be enchanted by Seoul’s vibrant districts such as Myeongdong and Gangnam, where luxury brands, K-beauty products, and unique Korean fashion are readily available.

In addition to Gangnam, visit the Dongdaemun Design Plaza, where Muslim-friendly cafes and rest areas are becoming more common. For those interested in Korean pop culture, guided tours are available that combine visits to K-pop entertainment companies with halal dining stops along the way.



### Korea: A Destination of Diversity and Hospitality

KTO is deeply committed to ensuring that Muslim travellers feel welcomed and thoroughly accommodated throughout their journey in South Korea. With comprehensive resources available online and travel guides, visitors can easily discover halal dining options, locate nearby mosques, and plan activities that align with their values and interests.

South Korea invites travellers to uncover the wonders of a nation where the past and present harmoniously coexist, where every detail is designed to provide a comfortable and enriching experience for all. From its rich traditions and historic culture to its diverse attractions, Korea is poised to offer an unforgettable journey that has something for everyone, including Muslim travellers.



# Liberia to begin war crimes trials in next five years: official

AFP  
Monrovia

The lawyer responsible for setting up Liberia's long-awaited war crimes court said that the first trials will take place in the next five years, more than two decades after the brutal civil wars that left around 250,000 people dead.

Justice has so far proved elusive for the victims of the back-to-back conflicts that raged in the small West African country between 1989 and 2003.

Despite years of international and domestic pressure, Liberia has yet to try anyone for crimes committed during the years of violence which resulted in massacres, mutilation, physical abuse and cannibalism.

"I do not think it is too late," said Jallah Barbu, who in November was appointed by President Joseph Boakai to manage the establishment of a War and Economic Crimes Court.

"We have a wonderful opportunity now to address our situation in the world and move forward," he added.

"In the six-year period of the administration of President Boakai, based on all of the commitments I have and the mo-

mentum I see, the court will have, long before the expiration of the six years, at least commenced its first trial, if not concluded" it, Barbu said.

Boakai, who took over the presidency at the start of this year, in May signed a decree creating an office responsible for setting up the special court, which will try those accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as economic crimes committed during the period. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2009 found that all parties in the conflicts were responsible for war crimes and recommended the establishment of a special court.

But the recommendations had until this year gone largely unheeded, particularly in the name of peacekeeping as a number of accused warlords remained influential in their communities.

One of those was Prince Johnson, a key militia leader in the civil wars and an influential senator until his death at the end of November.

Johnson, who was seen sipping beer in a video as his fighters tortured then-president Samuel Doe to death in 1990, was a leading opponent of the creation of the court.

He was one of eight warlords

that the TRC recommended be tried.

"We want to make sure that when we bring a closure to this process, the Liberian people will be happy, our country will be on a better trajectory, at least in terms of ensuring that respect for the rule of law is not just on the tongue, but it's in our conduct," Barbu said.

The lawyer said that the eventual court would be "of a hybrid nature" and established in Liberia, respecting both local and international laws.

He added that the office had been given a "very strong commitment from the government to support this process in terms of assurances".

"We've also received similar commitments from partners, especially the international community, that they will come to our aid," he said.

But Barbu admitted that in the two months he had been in his position, the office had "not received a penny from any source other than the UK government", whom he said gave \$5,000 to fund travel for a research trip to Sierra Leone.

While no trials have taken place within Liberia, a number of convictions have been secured abroad.

# Macron stresses Djibouti base as France loses Africa footholds

AFP  
Djibouti

President Emmanuel Macron yesterday stressed the importance of France's military base in Djibouti as his country loses strategic footholds in Africa.

Macron paid a brief visit to the Horn of Africa state for talks with its President Ismail Omar Guelleh and to see French troops ahead of the end-of-year holidays.

A number of African countries have recently ended military accords with France and ordered out its troops.

Macron said during talks with Guelleh that the French presence in Djibouti was key for the security of the Indo-Pacific trade routes between Europe and Asia.

"This presence in Djibouti is of course also oriented towards the Indian Ocean, the Indo-Pacific," Macron said.

He added that France's Indo-Pacific strategy "could not work without the French forces in Djibouti".

Macron told French troops on Friday that the base could take on a greater importance as it could be "reinvented" to become a launch point for missions in Africa.

"In several countries, we had



France's President Emmanuel Macron shakes hands with Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh as he arrives for a meeting, at the presidential palace in Djibouti, yesterday.

historic established bases. We have wanted to rethink that model," he said in the latest comments.

But he insisted that Djibouti was not part of these plans "as for decades the nature of our base here, our operations, is profoundly different".

Djibouti looks out onto a vast zone in the Indian Ocean — a re-

gion that includes India and China as well as sea routes that account for a huge proportion of world trade.

French troops left Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in 2022 and 2023 after the military juntas that took power in those countries broke defence accords with the former colonial power.

# At least 13 dead in two crowd crushes in Nigeria

Reuters  
Lagos

At least 13 people died in two incidents in Nigeria yesterday as crowds, mostly women and children, scrambled for charity, police authorities said.

In the state capital Abuja, at least 10 people died and many more were injured in a scramble to receive gifts of charity being distributed by the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Maitama district.

"This unfortunate event, which took place around 6:30am, resulted in a stampede that claimed the lives of 10 individuals, including four children, and

left eight others with varying degrees of injuries," said Josephine Adeh, a police spokesperson.

In Okija in Anambra state, southeastern Nigeria, a crowd crush occurred after a member of the community offered gifts including rice, vegetable oil and money. State police said three people were confirmed dead though eyewitnesses and Amnesty International Nigeria put the death toll at 20 with more injured.

In both incidents, the victims were mostly women and children who were trampled as crowds tried to reach the provisions being offered.

On Thursday, at least 32 people died in a similar incident at another religious high school in Ibadan, the capital of Nigeria's southwest Oyo state.

# Cyclone death toll rises to 76 in Mozambique

AFP  
Maputo

Cyclone Chido, which ravaged the French archipelago of Mayotte, has claimed 76 lives in Mozambique, the National Institute of Risk and Disaster Management said yesterday.

Chido made landfall in Mozambique on Sunday after tearing through the Indian Ocean island

of Mayotte where hundreds of people are feared to have been killed. The cyclone struck Mozambique at the northern Cabo Delgado province and destroyed nearly 62,000 homes, according to officials. "Shelter, food and Non-food items (NFIs) - particularly hygiene kits, dignity kits, soap and mosquito nets are identified as being the most urgent needs for the affected population," the International Organisation of Migration said in a statement.

# Chad's leader Deby elevated to marshal

AFP  
NDjamena

Chad's leader General Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno was in an official ceremony yesterday promoted to marshal, the same title held by his late father and former president.

The National Transition Council, dominated by the ruling Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS), had already overwhelmingly

voted in favour of elevating Deby to marshal and held a ceremony at the presidential palace to mark the occasion. Deby was "elevated to the designation of marshal for his services rendered to the nation and numerous military victories won inside and outside the country", according to a resolution adopted three weeks ahead of next weekend's legislative and local elections.

The December 29 polls, boycotted by the opposition, will be

the country's first parliamentary elections since 2011. Deby's father, Idriss Deby Itno, was similarly declared marshal in 2020 following a successful offensive against militant group Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region. He led the central African nation for 30 years before being killed by rebels in 2021.

The younger Deby swiftly seized power with support of the military junta, and was subsequently legitimised in a disputed presidential election in May 2024.

# Sierra Leone student tackles toxic air pollution

AFP  
Freetown

In his small Freetown workshop, engineering student James Samba tinkered with batteries and electrical parts he hoped could help clean up Sierra Leone's polluting public transport system.

Rush hour in the West African country's major cities is a frenetic medley of minibuses, mopeds, shared taxis and three-wheeled vehicles known as "kekehs" — each spluttering toxic emissions into the atmosphere.

Samba said that his uncle died from a respiratory illness after years of inhaling roadside exhaust fumes, spurring the 23-year-old to develop his own model for an



Self-taught innovator James Samba (right) drives an eco-friendly electric vehicle he made from scrap metals in Freetown.

electric kekeh. Assembled from recycled scrap metal and powered by batteries, the pink four-wheeled vehicle now roams the streets of

the capital. Although the project is still in its infancy, Samba aims to offer an eco-friendly alternative to traditional fuel-run models.

"I wanted to save others from dying of lung and respiratory disease due to air pollution...by manufacturing a prototype electric vehicle," Samba said.

Worldwide, an estimated 4.2mn premature deaths per year are attributed to outdoor air pollution, the World Health Organisation (WHO) says, with low and middle-income countries overwhelmingly impacted.

Vehicle emissions are also a leading contributor to climate change.

Like in much of West Africa, lengthy traffic jams in Sierra Leone's major cities and poorly maintained vehicles with inefficient exhausts exacerbate the emissions problem.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) says that in 2021, fine particle air pollution killed 1,200 people in Sierra Leone, a country of 8.5mn people.

Samba first ventured into engineering when he built an electric wheelchair for his uncle, who had

long struggled to access public transport.

He has since set up his own company, Sierra Electric, with the aim of eventually manufacturing a fleet of solar-powered kekehs and disability-friendly electric vehicles.

Lacking the immediate means to cover production costs, Samba has partnered with start-up NEEV Salome to develop a kekeh powered by a rooftop solar panel.

The Freetown-based firm already has a fleet of more than 100 solar tricycles, three charging stations and battery swapping cabinets for customers, according to co-founder and operations officer Emmanuela Sandy.

"Our e-kekeh products are thriving. We swap batteries to reduce waiting time for commercial riders and we have trained 60 university students from the mechanical engineering department on electric vehicle assembly and maintenance," she said.

The development of electric vehicles faces numerous hurdles in Sierra Leone, where the national grid suffers from chronic underperformance and frequent

outages, and a six-month rainy season hampers the functioning of solar panels.

Just over 20% of households have access to electricity via the national grid or mini-grids, according to a 2024 World Bank report.

NEEV Salome alternates between solar power, off-grid generators and the national grid to maintain supply to their charging points.

Samba says solar kekehs are cheaper to run than fuel-powered alternatives, as drivers face lower maintenance costs and no fuel bill.

The smallest of NEEV Salome's solar kekehs sells for 120,000 new leones (around \$5,270), a high price for those living in one of the world's poorest countries.

Despite the cost, some drivers have already converted to renewables in the face of rising fuel prices.

"The solar tricycle is comfortable and a profitable business. I no longer worry about fuel scarcity in the country," said 25-year-old driver Thomas Kanu.

"The solar kekeh is good for business and our environment."



Self-thought innovator James Samba collects scrap metals in Freetown.

## ANNOUNCEMENT

I, GIZELA ROQUE ZUCULA

holder of

MOZAMBIQUE Passport No. AB0794173  
QID No. 29450800005

hereby change my name

from

GIZELA ROQUE ZUCULA

to

GIZELA ROQUE ZUCULA TIVANE

Any objection, please contact  
**THE PERMANENT COMMITTEE FOR NATIONALITY AFFAIRS**  
within 15 days from the publication of this notice.

## ANNOUNCEMENT

I, MOHAMMAD AYMAN

holder of

INDIA Passport No. Y1068916  
QID No. 31135606913

hereby change my name

from

MOHAMMAD AYMAN

to

MOHAMMAD AYMAN BABA

Any objection, please contact  
**THE PERMANENT COMMITTEE FOR NATIONALITY AFFAIRS**  
within 15 days from the publication of this notice.

# US government shutdown averted

AFP/Reuters  
Washington

US President Joe Biden signed a funding bill yesterday, averting a Christmas-time government shutdown after negotiations in Congress went down to the wire overnight.

Last-minute legislative wrangling was brought about by President-elect Donald Trump, who along with influential billionaire Elon Musk, pressured Republicans to abandon an earlier bipartisan funding compromise.

Lawmakers then spent several days trying to hammer out another deal, with massive halts to government services hanging in the balance.

With the Friday midnight deadline already expired by minutes, senators dropped normal procedure to fast-track the new package to a vote, funding the government to mid-March.

"This agreement represents a compromise, which means neither side got everything it wanted," Biden said in a statement. "But it rejects the accelerated pathway to a tax cut for billionaires that Republicans sought."

The Democrats run the Senate, so there was never much doubt that the new funding package would get a rubber stamp after the party was crucial in helping the Republican majority in the House pass the bill earlier in the day.

However, with senators often dragging their feet over complex legislation, there were fears that the funding fight might spill into next week.

That would have meant non-essential operations winding up, with up to 875,000 workers furloughed and as many as 1.4mn more required to work without pay.

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

Trump and Musk, his incoming "efficiency czar", created much of the drama this time around by pressuring Republicans in an 11th hour intervention to renege on a funding bill they had painstakingly agreed with Democrats.



Tesla chief executive and X owner Elon Musk.

Left: US Speaker of the House Mike Johnson speaks with reporters at the US Capitol, in Washington, DC. (AFP)

Two subsequent efforts to find compromise fell short, leaving Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson at the last chance saloon as he spent much of the day on Friday huddling with aides to find a way to keep government agencies running.

If the funding bill had failed, non-essential government functions would have been put on ice.

Employees in key services like law enforcement would have continued working but would only have been paid once government functions were back up.

Many parks, monuments and national sites would have closed at a time when millions of visitors are expected.

Lawmakers avoided all that holiday-season pain by funding the government until March 14 in a package that includes \$110bn in disaster aid and financial relief for farmers.

Congress did not act on Trump's demand to raise the debt ceiling, a politically difficult task, before he takes office on January 20.

The federal government spent roughly \$6.2tn last year and has more than \$36tn in debt, and Congress will need to act to authorise further borrowing by the middle of next year.

However, stripped from the original

funding bill were pharmaceutical reforms, congressional pay raises and tightened restrictions on US investments in China – the removal of which some Democrats tied directly to Musk, the chief executive of Tesla.

"Musk's ties to China and Tesla's significant investments in the country raise significant questions as to why he urged House Republican leadership walking away" from the original bipartisan deal, Representative Rosa DeLauro said in a letter to congressional leadership.

The influence of Musk, the world's richest man, over the Republicans – and his apparent sway with Trump – has become a focus for Democratic attack, with questions raised over how an unelected citizen can wield so much power.

There is growing anger even among Republicans over Musk's interference after he trashed the original funding agreement in a blizzard of posts – many of them wildly inaccurate – on his social media platform X.

"Last time I checked, Elon Musk doesn't have a vote in Congress," Georgia House Republican Rich McCormick told CNN. "Now, he has influence, and he'll put pressure on us to do whatever he thinks the right thing is for him. But I have 760,000 people that voted for me to do the right thing for them!" Trump had been clear that he was will-

ing to see a shutdown if he did not get his way, and the passage of funding legislation without his priorities included demonstrated that even his great influence over Republicans in Congress has limits.

A travel industry trade group warned that a government shutdown could cost airlines, hotels and other companies \$1bn per week and lead to widespread disruptions during the busy Christmas season.

Authorities warned that travellers could face long lines at airports.

However, Johnson put a positive sheen on events, telling reporters after the House passed the funding package that January, when Trump returns to office, would mark a "sea change" in Washington.

"President Trump will return to DC and to the White House, and we will have Republican control of the Senate and the House," Johnson told journalists, adding: "Things are going to be very different around here."

The federal government last shut down for 35 days during Trump's first White House term over a dispute about border security.

Previous fights over the debt ceiling have spooked financial markets, as a US government default would send credit shocks around the world.

## Google counters bid by US to force sale of Chrome

Google has countered a US call to sell its Chrome browser, suggesting that a judge address antitrust concerns by barring the firm from making favourable treatment of its software a condition of licensing.

Google filed a 12-page proposed order banning the Internet giant from requiring favourable distribution or treatment of its software on mobile devices as a condition of licensing popular apps like Chrome, Play or Gemini.

In contrast, the US government in November asked a judge to order the dismantling of Google by selling its widely used Chrome browser in a major antitrust crackdown on the company.

The US Department of Justice urged a shake-up of Google's business that includes banning deals for Google to be the default search engine on smartphones and preventing it from exploiting its Android mobile operating system.

Determining how to address Google's wrongs is the next stage of the landmark antitrust trial that saw the company in August rule a monopoly by US District Court Judge Amit Mehta.

Google has proposed that Mehta bar it from using the licensing desirability of its applications to compel mobile device makers to pre-install its search software or make it the default offering, a court filing showed.

"Nothing in this Final Judgment shall otherwise prohibit Google from providing consideration to a mobile device manufacturer or wireless carrier with respect to any Google product or service in exchange for such entity's distribution, placement on any access point, promotion, or licensing of that Google product or service," the proposed order stipulates.

Calling for the breakup of Google marks a profound change by the US government's regulators, which have largely left tech giants alone since failing to break up Microsoft two decades ago.

Regardless of Judge Mehta's eventual decision, Google is expected to appeal the ruling, prolonging the process for years and potentially leaving the final say to the US Supreme Court.

The case could also be upended by the arrival of President-elect Donald Trump to the White House in January.

His administration will likely replace the current team in charge of the Justice Department's antitrust division.

The newcomers could choose to carry on with the case, ask for a settlement with Google or abandon the case altogether.

The trial, which concluded last year, scrutinised Google's confidential agreements with smartphone manufacturers, including Apple.

These deals involve substantial payments to secure Google's search engine as the default option on browsers, iPhones and other devices.

The judge determined that this arrangement provided Google with unparalleled access to user data, enabling it to develop its search engine into a globally dominant platform. (AFP)

## School in Toronto hit by gunfire for third time this year

A Jewish school in Canada's biggest city Toronto was hit by gunfire for the third time this year, though no one was injured in the latest incident, police said on Friday.

Shots were fired in the early hours of Friday at the Bais Chaya Mushka elementary school for girls, in the city's North York neighbourhood. "No physical injuries were reported as the school was closed at the time," Toronto police said of the incident, which comes amid persistent tensions linked to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

The same school was targeted in similar attacks in May and October. A man and a teen were arrested and charged in October.

Parents are concerned, frustrated, in fear. Students are afraid, staff are afraid, and no one should be afraid to come to school," Rabbi Yaacov Vidal, the school's principal, told reporters.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called the incident a "hateful, anti-Semitic attack on Toronto's Jewish community" in comments on X.

For Toronto Mayor Olivia Chow, "enough is enough. Anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic attacks have no place in Toronto".

On Wednesday, a synagogue was set ablaze in Montreal.

A report issued in May by the Jewish organisation B'nai Brith Canada said that the number of anti-Semitic acts had more than doubled from 2022-2023. (AFP)

## Mexico returns territory to Indigenous people

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum has issued a decree returning more than 2,000 hectares to two communities of the Tarahumara Indigenous people in the northern state of Chihuahua, on the border with the United States.

"Today is a historic day because we are returning a land, a territory to its owners," said the president, detailing the restitution of two sections of 1,485 and 693 hectares each at a ceremony held in the Spanish and Tarahumara languages.

The Tarahumara people – also known as the Raramuri – live in the Sierra Tarahumara region, which is criss-crossed by seven gorges, some of them deeper than the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

Recognition of Indigenous peoples is a commitment of Sheinbaum's ruling Government for National Regeneration (Morena).

In Mexico, about 23.2mn people – or 19.4% of the population – self-identify as Indigenous, according to the National Statistics Institute. (AFP)

# More than 30 dead in Brazil road crash

Reuters/AFP  
Sao Paulo

A packed bus collided with a truck and burst into flames early yesterday in Brazil, killing more than 30 people, the fire department said.

After removing all of the victims from a major highway near the town of Teofilo Otoni in Minas Gerais, the state's fire department reported that of the 45 people on the bus, 38, including the bus driver, had been confirmed dead.

In a video released yesterday morning, Lieutenant Alonso Vieira Junior, with the Minas Gerais fire department, said a crane would be needed to clear the wreckage, and that "there are still more victims to be removed".

However, a spokeswoman for the fire department told AFP by phone that "it was not yet possible to specify the exact number due to the state of the bodies".

The other passengers remained in critical condition after being transported to a local hospital.

The truck driver fled the scene, and three occupants of a car that collided with the truck and became trapped underneath survived the accident, said the fire department.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva stated on social media that the government was ready to provide whatever assistance was needed, and that the Federal Highway Policy was at the site.

"I deeply mourn and extend my prayers to the families of the more than 30 victims of the accident in Teofilo Otoni, Minas Gerais. I pray for the recovery of the survivors of this



This handout picture released by Minas Gerais fire department shows a truck on top of a car on the site of a crash in Teofilo Otoni, Minas Gerais state. (AFP)

terrible tragedy," he wrote on X.

A forensic investigation will be required to determine the accident's cause, as differing accounts were gathered from witness testimonies, said the local fire department.

Initially, firefighters reported that the bus experienced a tyre blowout, causing the driver to lose control before colliding around 4am local time, with an oncoming truck on the BR-116 federal highway, a major route that connects Brazil's densely populated south-

east to the poorer northeast.

However, witnesses also reported that a granite block the truck was transporting came loose, fell on the road and caused the collision with the bus, said the fire department.

"Only the forensic investigation will confirm the true version," said the fire department in a statement.

The bus departed from Sao Paulo and was headed to the state of Bahia.

# Thousands rally at US embassy in Cuba against trade embargo

AFP  
Havana

Thousands of Cubans joined a protest on Friday in front of the US embassy in Havana that was led by President Miguel Diaz-Canel and ex-leader Raul Castro against Washington's long-standing trade blockade.

"We are marching now to tell the US government to let the Cuban people live in peace. Down with interference!" Diaz-Canel told a crowd that had gathered a month before Republican Donald Trump returns to the White House.

Communist Cuba is enduring a worsening economic crisis that the government blames on US sanctions that have been in place since 1962 and were tightened during Trump's first term.

"If we didn't have the blockade, we would not be facing difficulty

like this," said 85-year-old retiree Faustino Miranda.

The Caribbean nation faces a lack of food and medicine, frequent blackouts and a wave of emigration.

Rogelio Savigne, 55, head of transport at a state-owned company, told AFP: "We need them to open the doors for us to be able to trade with all countries."

Authorities said that 700,000 people marched in the capital on Friday.

AFP was not able to independently verify that number.

Former president Castro, despite being aged 93, stood at the head of the march along with Diaz-Canel, who earlier had blamed the US embargo for making this year "one of the most difficult" for Cuba.

On Tuesday, the country's deputy foreign minister reiterated its willingness to enter into a dialogue with Trump, who will take



Former president Raul Castro and President Miguel Diaz-Canel walk during a protest in Havana against the trade embargo on Cuba by the US. (Reuters)

office on January 20.

During his first term, Trump halted an easing of relations between Washington and Havana that began in 2014.

He implemented 243 measures

that reinforced the embargo, including the reincorporation of the island into the US blacklist of "countries that sponsor terrorism", alongside Iran and North Korea.

Current US President Joe Biden has kept Cuba on that blacklist.

However, discussions with Havana have resumed on counter-terrorism and combating illegal migration.



## Covid anniversary in Wuhan



An aerial view of the P4 laboratory on the campus of the Wuhan Institute of Virology in Wuhan in China's central Hubei ahead of the fifth anniversary of China confirming its first death from the Covid-19 coronavirus.



People walk along the East Lake in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province.

# Strong quake strikes off battered Vanuatu

AFP  
Sydney

A magnitude 6.1 earthquake struck off the coast of Vanuatu early today, the US Geological Survey said, just days after a deadly 7.3-magnitude quake hit near the same island in the Pacific archipelago. The nation's main island, Efate, is still reeling from the Tuesday quake, which killed 12 people as it toppled concrete buildings in the capital and set off landslides. The latest quake on Sunday occurred at a depth of 40km and was located some 30km west of the capital Port Vila.

Unlike the earlier quake, no tsunami alerts were immediately triggered by the latest tremor, which struck at 2:30am. Mobile networks remained knocked out from earlier in the week, making outside contact with Vanuatu difficult early Sunday.

In addition to disrupted communications, the first quake has damaged water supplies and resulted in halted operations at the capital's main shipping port. The South Pacific nation declared a seven-day state of emergency and a night-time curfew following the first quake, and had only announced yesterday it would lift a suspension on commercial flights, in an effort to restart its vital tourism industry.

Rescuers on Friday said they had expanded their search for trapped survivors to "numerous places of collapse" beyond the capital. Australia and New Zealand this week dispatched more than 100 personnel, along with rescue gear, dogs and aid supplies, to help hunt for trapped survivors and make emergency repairs.

There were "several major collapse sites where buildings are fully pancaked", Australia's



Royal Australian Air Force C-17A Globemaster III bound for Vanuatu from RAAF Base Amberley in Queensland.

69-strong rescue team leader Douglas May said in a video update provided by Canberra on Friday. "Outside of that, there's a lot of smaller collapses around the place," he said. "We're now starting to spread out to see whether there's further people trapped and further damage. And we've found numerous places of collapse east and west out of the city."

In Port Vila, rescuers have focused on two disaster areas from Tuesday's earthquake: a four-storey building housing a supermarket, hotel and garage in the north in which the ground floor was flattened, and a two-floor shopping block in the city centre that crumbled into a flat pile of concrete. More than 1,000 people were displaced as a result of the first quake - many now with other households or in evacuation centres, the latest UN report said, citing Vanuatu disaster management officials. Vanuatu, an archipelago of some 320,000 inhabitants, sits in the Pacific's quake-prone Ring of Fire.

Tourism accounts for about a third of the country's economy,

**Rescuers say they have expanded a search for survivors in quake-rocked Vanuatu to "numerous places of collapse" beyond the stricken capital**

according to the Australia-Pacific Islands Business Council.

Rescuers say they have expanded a search for survivors in quake-rocked Vanuatu to "numerous places of collapse" beyond the stricken capital. The 7.3-magnitude earthquake struck off the main island on Tuesday, toppling concrete buildings, setting off landslides, damaging water supplies and knocking out mobile networks.

It has so far claimed 10 lives in Port Vila, according to government figures relayed Thursday by the United Nations' humanitar-



Australian Defence Force personnel assisting Australians off a C-130J Hercules at Brisbane Airport following an earthquake which struck Port Vila, Vanuatu. Rescuers say they have expanded a search for trapped survivors in quake-rocked Vanuatu to "numerous places of collapse" beyond the capital, after the death toll climbed to at least 10.

ian affairs office.

Two of the dead were Chinese and one French, their countries' embassies have confirmed. About 80,000 people have been directly affected by the earthquake in the archipelago of 320,000 people which sits in the Pacific's quake-prone Ring of Fire, the UN said. More than 14,000 of them are children.

There are "several major collapse sites where buildings are fully pancaked", Australia's rescue team leader Douglas May said

The quake also wrecked a building housing the US, French, British, Australian and New Zealand diplomatic missions. The ground floor along half of that

four-storey structure was flattened, but no deaths were reported. The government has declared a seven-day state of emergency and a night-time curfew.

"One concern now is that there are reports of 900 people displaced out of their houses and who have been sleeping outside for the last few days and nights, without proper access to water and sanitation facilities," said Philippe Guyant, a World Health Organisation medical officer in Vanuatu. Vanuatu has usually been able to set up refuge for disasters such as cyclones, he told AFP. "But this time there was no evacuation centre, and people have stayed out for so long. There

is a mix of people, some fearing to go back to...their houses destroyed in the earthquake."

Ivan Oswald, owner of the Nambawan Cafe in the city centre, was serving coffee and food to rescue workers. "Water and power is back at most places. They are testing water today, so we will know about the water quality and the power company is doing a fantastic job," Oswald told AFP.

"Construction crews are out. People want to come into town but it is blocked off. There are still people around - once the government lets us operate again, that will be the next thing for us. It will be business as usual."

## Rival protests over South Korea's impeached president held in Seoul

Reuters  
Seoul

Demonstrators supporting and opposing South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol held rival protests several hundred metres apart in Seoul yesterday, a week after he was impeached over his short-lived declaration of martial law.

Yoon's presidential powers are suspended but he remains in office. He has not complied with

various summonses by authorities investigating whether martial law, which he declared late on Dec 3 and rescinded hours later, constituted insurrection.

He has also not responded to attempts to contact him by the Constitutional Court, which decides whether to remove him from office or restore his presidential powers. The court plans to hold its first preparatory hearing on Friday.

Yesterday's pro- and anti-Yoon protests were held in Gwanghwa-

mun in the heart of the capital. There were no clashes as of 4pm. Tens of thousands of anti-Yoon protesters, dominated by people in their 20s and 30s, gathered around 3pm, waving K-Pop light sticks and signs with sayings such as "Arrest! Imprison! Insurrection chief Yoon Suk-yeol!" to catchy K-pop tunes.

"I wanted to ask Yoon how he could do this to a democracy in the 21st century, and I think if he really has a conscience, he should step down," said 27-year-old Cho

Sung-hyo. Several thousand pro-Yoon protesters, chiefly older and more conservative people opposing Yoon's removal and supporting the restoration of his powers, had gathered since around mid-day.

"These rigged (parliamentary) elections ate away at this country, and at the core are socialist communist powers, so about 10 of us came together and said the same thing - we absolutely oppose impeachment," said Lee Young-su, a 62-year-old businessman.

## Chinese astronauts finish record-breaking spacewalk

Reuters  
Washington

Two Chinese astronauts this week completed a world-record spacewalk of more than nine hours, according to a statement from China's Manned Space Agency, marking another milestone for Beijing's rapidly expanding space programme.

The spacewalk, carried out by Cai Xuzhe and Song Lingdong outside the Tiangong space station in low-Earth orbit on Tuesday, was at least four minutes longer than the last

record set by Nasa astronauts James Voss and Susan Helms in 2001.

The two astronauts of China's Shenzhou-19 mission donned their Feitian spacesuits to carry out an array of tasks on the station's exterior, including the installation of space-debris protection devices, China's space agency said. "They successfully completed all the planned tasks and felt very excited about it," Wu Hao, a staffer from the China Astronaut Research and Training Center, told China Central Television, a state broadcaster.

The former Soviet Union in 1965 became the first nation to carry out

a spacewalk. Since then, Russia and the United States have conducted hundreds of such missions, primarily outside the International Space Station for tasks ranging from solar panel installations to materials research. The first spacewalk by a Chinese astronaut occurred in 2008.

China's spacewalking milestone this week comes amid a flurry of other recent cosmic achievements that have boosted Beijing's competitive footing with the United States. China landed its first rover on Mars in 2021 and earlier this year became the first country to retrieve rock

samples from the moon's treacherous far side in its Chang'e-6 mission.

Beijing is targeting 2030 to land its first astronauts on the moon to become the second country after the US to put humans there. Beijing has courted roughly a dozen countries for its International Lunar Research Station program, an effort to build a moon base on the moon's south pole.

That program rivals Nasa's Artemis program, which aims to return US astronauts to the moon for the first time since the final Apollo mission of 1972.

## Sri Lanka president to visit key lender China

AFP  
Colombo

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake will travel to the island's largest bilateral lender China for talks in January, he said yesterday, days after completing a long-delayed foreign debt restructuring.

China accounted for more than half of Sri Lanka's bilateral debt at the time of the 2022 economic crash, when Colombo ran out of foreign exchange to pay for essential imports such as food, fuel and medicines.

Its economy is recovering after receiving an International Monetary Fund rescue package and imposing austerity reforms aimed at repairing the government's ruined finances.

Leftist Dissanayake came to power in September on a pledge to fight corruption and tightened his grip after his party won a landslide in snap parliamentary polls. "I will be going to China mid next month", he told reporters, without setting an exact date.

Dissanayake's first overseas visit as head of state was to neighbouring India, where he was given a red-carpet welcome by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 16.

Regional powerhouse India is competing fiercely with China

**Leftist Dissanayake came to power in September on a pledge to fight corruption and tightened his grip after his party won a landslide in snap parliamentary elections**

for influence in the Indian Ocean region. Sri Lanka sits astride the world's busiest shipping route, which links the Middle East and East Asia, giving its maritime assets strategic importance.

New Delhi has been concerned about Beijing's growing foothold in Sri Lanka, which it sees as being within its sphere of geopolitical influence.

Fitch Ratings upgraded Sri Lanka's long-term foreign currency issuer default rating to CCC+ on Friday.

Fitch said that while debt restructuring had "reduced the government's debt service burden and liquidity risks", it noted that the "general government debt/GDP and the interest/revenue ratio are likely to stay high in the medium term".



# Britain, Mauritius agree to reach Chagos deal 'quickly'

AFP  
London

The UK and Mauritius vowed to reach a historic treaty as soon as possible to hand control of the strategic Indian Ocean Chagos Islands to the Mauritians. The two sides have held "a series of productive, ongoing conversations and exchanges" to finalise the deal "as quickly as possible", a joint statement said.

They were committed to agreeing a treaty to "ensure the long-term, secure and effective operation of the existing base on Diego Garcia", it added. The statement seemed to be seeking to allay concerns after the new prime minister of Mauritius said on Tuesday

he had some doubts about the treaty.

While Mauritius "is still willing to conclude an agreement with the United Kingdom, the draft agreement which was shown to us...would not produce the benefits that the nation could expect from such an agreement," Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam said.

After decades of negotiations, Britain agreed in October to hand over the remote island chain to Mauritius, a former colony, on condition that a UK-US military base can remain on the largest island, Diego Garcia. But MP Nigel Farage has warned that there is "very deep disquiet" in the incoming team of US president Donald Trump over the base's fate.

October's agreement came after nearly two years of nego-

tiations and marked a significant turnaround after decades of British dismissals of Mauritian sovereignty claims. The two countries said in October that the final treaty would guarantee the continuation of the military base on Diego Garcia "well into the next century".

Britain decided in 1965 to separate the Chagos Islands from Mauritius and set up the military base, which it leased to the United States. In doing so, it evicted thousands of Chagos islanders who have since mounted a series of legal claims for compensation in the British courts. The military base has played a key strategic role as a hub for long-range bombers and ships, notably used during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

## Holiday shoppers hit Oxford Street



Shoppers walk in Oxford Street in London, Britain.

# UK appoints Labour veteran Peter Mandelson as ambassador to US

AFP  
London

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer confirmed the appointment of veteran Labour politician Peter Mandelson, a former minister and EU trade commissioner, as the next ambassador to the United States. Mandelson, 71, will take up the post "early next year", Downing Street said, just as US president-elect Donald Trump returns to the White House for a second term.

"The United States is one of our most important allies and as we move into a new chapter in our friendship, Peter will bring unrivalled experience to the role and take our partnership from strength to strength," Starmer said in a statement.

Mandelson's appointment comes amid reported unease within the UK government about the prospects for London's so-called "special relationship" with Washington during Trump's second presidency. The US president-elect's threat to impose blanket tariffs on all imports is a particular concern for Starmer's new Labour government, which has vowed to boost Britain's sluggish economic growth rates of recent years.

The UK leader has been criticised heavily this year by Trump confidant Elon Musk. Mandelson will replace Karen Pierce, the current ambassador in Washington, who has been credited with forging

strong links with the many staffers and advisors in Trump's team.

But in a sign of the likely fraught nature of transatlantic ties under Trump, the choice drew an immediate rebuke from a senior figure within his presidential election team. Campaign co-manager Chris LaCivita took to X to note Mandelson's previous description of the Republican leader as "little short of a white nationalist and racist". "This UK govt is special - replace a professional universally respected Ambo with an absolute moron - he should stay home! SAD!" he posted.

The stinging criticism follows Trump's campaign team accusing Starmer's Labour party of interference during the recent US election over claims party staffers were helping his Democratic rival Kamala Harris. Meanwhile, Mandelson's critique of Trump is reminiscent of disparaging remarks made by Foreign Secretary David Lammy, who previously called the incoming US president a "tyrant" and "xenophobic".

Lammy on Friday praised Mandelson's "wealth of experience in trade, economic and foreign policy from his years in government and the private sector". "He will arrive in Washington, DC as we deepen our enduring alliance with the incoming United States administration, particularly on growth and security," he added.

Mandelson, an EU trade commissioner from 2004-2008 who also co-founded the international



Peter Mandelson (centre) attends annual Labour Party conference in Liverpool, north west England, in a file picture.

public policy advisory firm Global Counsel, called his appointment "a great honour". "We face challenges in Britain but also big opportunities," he added. "It will be a privilege to work with the government to land those opportunities, both for our economy and our nation's security, and to advance our historic alliance with the United States."

Mandelson is the first political appointment for the US envoy role in decades. Britain typically picks seasoned diplomats to be ambassadors. In his statement, Starmer thanked Pierce "for her invaluable

service for the last four years, and in particular the wisdom and steadfast support she has given me personally since July".

"She made history as the first woman to serve as UK ambassador to the US," he noted, adding that she had been "an outstanding representative of our country abroad". Mandelson's return to a prominent government role represents a remarkable comeback for a politician who was last in the UK government when Gordon Brown was prime minister in the late 2000s.

A key architect in rebranding the

Labour party in the 1990s after it had spent nearly two decades out of power, he went on to become one of the country's most divisive political figures. A close ally of ex-prime minister Tony Blair, Mandelson headed several UK government departments between 1998 and 2001, but twice resigned after becoming embroiled in scandals. He then made a surprise 18-month return to government in 2008.

More recently, he has served as a member of Britain's unelected House of Lords, the upper chamber of parliament.

## Controversial UK ex-civil servant given House of Lords seat

AFP  
London

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer appointed his controversial ex-chief of staff Sue Gray to the House of Lords, as his government unveiled the latest picks for parliament's unelected upper chamber. Gray, who quit as Starmer's top Downing Street staffer in October amid reported internal tensions, became something of a household name in Britain after leading the probe into the so-called Partygate scandal.

Her 2022 report into unlawful parties in Downing Street during the Covid lockdowns contributed to then-prime minister Boris Johnson resigning several months later, subsequently making her a persistent target for criticism in some quarters. Gray, a veteran civil servant, then raised eyebrows by quitting her public sector job the following year to become then-opposition leader Starmer's chief of staff.

Her resignation from Starmer's government just over two months ago followed media reports of infighting between Gray and several political advisers, and revelations that her salary was higher than the prime minister's. Friday's appointment means that she will now sit in the Lords indefinitely as a life peer.

The chamber, which primarily scrutinises government legislation, currently comprises around 800 members, most of whom are appointed for life by sitting or outgoing prime ministers. Appointments can also be suggested by opposition political parties and others. The new Labour government, elected in July, is currently in the process of axing 92 seats reserved for peers who inherited their position as a member of an aristocratic family.

It is the most significant reform of the Lords in more than two decades, although as recently as 2022 Labour was contemplating a more radical plan to abolish the entire chamber. However, the party scaled back the proposals, which envisaged a "reformed upper chamber" to replace it, ahead of the general election in July.

Former deputy prime minister Therese Coffey and Toby Young, the founder and director of the Free Speech Union, were among those also nominated to become life peers on Friday. Ex-Labour MP Thangam Debbonaire, who lost her seat unexpectedly at the election, also made the list.

# Leading UK greens quit oldest animal charity over cruelty claims

AFP  
London

Two of the UK's leading environmentalists yesterday quit as president and vice-president of the world's oldest animal welfare organisation over claims of cruelty at its approved abattoirs. Wildlife TV presenter Chris Packham and former Green Party MP Caroline Lucas resigned as president and vice-president of the RSPCA after campaign group Animal Rising released footage from abattoirs as part of an investigation into the charity's "Assured Scheme", which certifies humane best-practices at slaughterhouses.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824, and is the oldest and largest animal welfare organisation in the world. Its "Assured" labels are supposed to inform shoppers that food being sold on the shelves has been produced to higher welfare standards.

"In one slaughterhouse 85 percent of animals were stunned incorrectly, leaving animals conscious during slaughter, and in another 96 percent of cows were prodded with an electric goad, a practice banned by the RSPCA," said Animal Rising. "There was also frequent verbal and physical abuse from workers, and animals watching in terror and panic as other animals were killed or stunned in front of them," it added. The RSPCA said it took the al-

**The RSPCA's "Assured" labels are supposed to inform shoppers that food being sold on the shelves has been produced to higher welfare standards**

legations "incredibly seriously". Packham told the BBC yesterday that he had "sadly and after much contemplation...resigned from the RSPCA". He said the charity was "beleaguered with the Assured Scheme" which he called a "millstone" around its neck. Lucas, the country's first ever Green party MP, said in a separate statement that "the recent horrific revelations of abuse at RSPCA-approved slaughterhouses, filmed undercover by Animal Rising, were the final straw for me. "The systemic cruelty exposed was unbearable to witness," she added.

The RSPCA said in response that it disagreed with the pair on how best to address farmed animal welfare. "It is simply not true that we have not taken urgent action," it said in a statement. "We are the only organisation setting and regularly monitoring animal welfare standards on farms. We have pioneered change through RSPCA Assured, which has led to improvements throughout the industry," it added.

## Modi in Kuwait



Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister, Defence Minister, and Interior Minister Fahad al-Yusuf Saud al-Sabah (right) welcoming India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi upon his arrival in Kuwait City.

# Accused pleads 'not guilty' in Kolkata murder trial

AFP  
Kolkata

An Indian man on trial for raping and murdering a 31-year-old doctor has pleaded not guilty, his lawyer said Saturday, a crime that appalled the nation and triggered wide-scale protests. The discovery of the doctor's bloodied body at a government hospital in the eastern city of Kolkata on August 9 sparked nationwide anger at the chronic issue of violence against

women. Sanjoy Roy, 33, the lone accused in the case, pleaded not guilty before the judge in a closed court on Friday in Kolkata, his lawyer Sourav Bandyopadhyay told AFP.

"I am not guilty, your honour, I have been framed," Roy told the court, Bandyopadhyay said, repeating his client's words.

Roy, a civic volunteer in the hospital, was arrested the day after the murder and has been held in custody since.

He would potentially face the death penalty if convicted. The

court began hearings on November 11, listening to evidence from some 50 witnesses, but it was on Friday that Roy took the stand.

"Judge Anirban Das questioned him with more than 100 questions during the six-hour-long in camera deposition, that continued until late in the evening," Bandyopadhyay said.

Roy had earlier proclaimed his innocence to the public while screaming from a prison van outside the court before a hearing in November.

Doctors in Kolkata went on

strike for weeks in response to the brutal attack.

Tens of thousands of ordinary Indians joined in the protests, which focused anger on the lack of measures for female doctors to work without fear.

India's Supreme Court has ordered a national task force to examine how to bolster security for healthcare workers, saying the brutality of the killing had "shocked the conscience of the nation".

The next hearing is set for January 2, 2025.



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**GULF TIMES**

## IMF hails Qatar's 'strong reform momentum'

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has hailed Qatar for the "strong reform momentum", which the IMF said should continue to build a knowledge-based, private sector-led, and sustainable economy.

Achieving Qatar's vision to shift from a state-led growth model to a more knowledge-based and private sector-driven one requires enhancing human capital and economic complexity.

Strong reform momentum created by the Third National Development Strategy (NDS3) is encouraging, IMF said and noted the success hinges on proper prioritisation and enhanced inter-agency coordination in reform implementation.

Priorities are to build a highly skilled labour force, foster innovation, promote trade diversification, foreign direct investment (FDI) and domestic knowledge spillovers, and further enhance business efficiency.

Qatar is well positioned to benefit from AI adoption and broader digitalisation while due attention is needed to monitor their labour market impact.

A concerted effort among stakeholders is critical to fulfil Qatar's climate goals. Enhancing data availability and quality would support the path forward.

Qatar's economy has shown signs of a gradual rebound from the post-World Cup growth moderation, IMF said. Near-term real GDP growth is expected to reach 2%, and the medium-term outlook is more favourable, supported by the significant liquefied natural gas (LNG) production expansion and intensified structural reforms.

### Qatar is well positioned to benefit from AI adoption and broader digitalisation

Broad fiscal prudence and progress in strengthening fiscal institutions in recent years are commendable. Sustaining fiscal discipline and accelerating revenue and expenditure reforms, underpinned by a medium-term fiscal framework, would help ensure fiscal sustainability and support economic transformation.

Qatar Central Bank (QCB)'s diligent policies have helped to safeguard banking sector stability.

QCB has broadly maintained the monetary policy in line with the US Federal Reserve, consistent with the currency peg to the dollar. Its progress in enhancing liquidity management is commendable, and continued efforts are important to further strengthen the effectiveness of the monetary operational framework.

The banking sector remains healthy, thanks to robust buffers, diligent QCB supervision and ample hydrocarbon liquidity.

However, continued vigilance to address pockets of vulnerabilities is important. Maintaining the momentum in deepening domestic financial market is also crucial, guided by the Third Financial Sector Strategy.

Strong reform momentum following the launch of the Third National Development Strategy should continue to build a knowledge-based, private sector-led, and sustainable economy.

The Third National Development Strategy for the State of Qatar 2024-2030, prepared under the guidance of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, has outlined the plan for the next phase of Qatar's development journey towards realising the Qatar National Vision (QNV) 2030.

The Third National Development Strategy defines bold and transformative initiatives and reforms designed to achieve the remaining QNV 2030 goals.

By implementing NDS3, Qatar will provide its citizens with the necessary skills required for them to succeed, with meaningful and fulfilling careers, in the workforce of tomorrow.

Through this strategy, Qatar seeks to sustainably develop its economy to remain competitive amidst a turbulent and rapidly changing global landscape.

This will entail diversifying through priority economic sectors and creating a leading investor and business-friendly environment, making Qatar a favoured destination for foreign investment and skilled talent.

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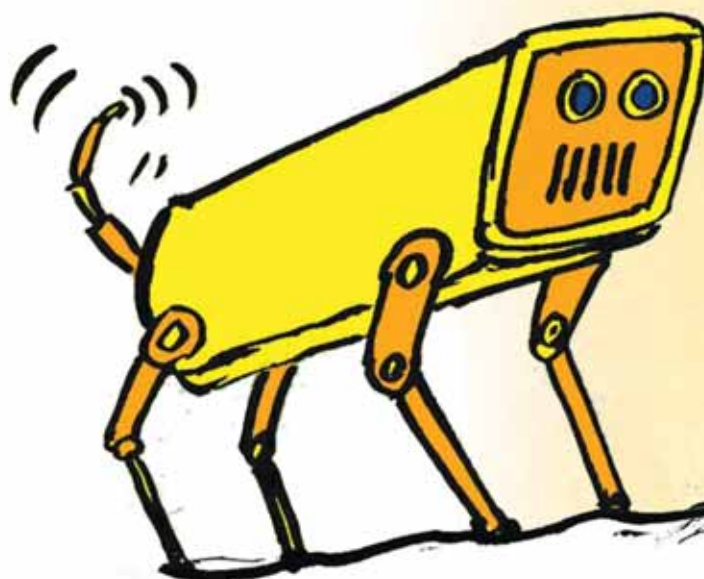
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*RYNOLD*  
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"Let me guess...  
You need Wi-Fi to hunt?"



# Can industrial policy revive manufacturing?

**Though US President Joe Biden's massive industrial-subsidy programmes have fuelled a construction boom, they have failed to revive US manufacturing output - a goal that Donald Trump's tariff-based approach will also fail to achieve. In the US and the EU alike, resisting the secular trend of "de-manufacturing" may well be a losing battle**

By Daniel Gros  
Milan

The US has decisively outperformed most other advanced economies over the last decade or so. As many - including former European Central Bank president and Italian prime minister Mario Draghi in his influential report on European competitiveness - have recognised, the US owes its "exceptional" performance largely to the dominance of large American companies in high-tech sectors. US manufacturing, however, has been struggling.

The basic facts are not in dispute. Though the US economy has grown at a healthy clip over the last decade, US industrial production (comprising manufacturing and construction) has not increased: the industrial-production index remains at almost exactly the same level - about 100 - today as in 2017 and even 2014.

US President Joe Biden's administration sought to change this by introducing major subsidy programs, including the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the CHIPS and Science Act, both of which were passed in 2022. Since then, construction activity, especially in industrial structures, has surged, with non-residential construction spending reaching record highs

in 2023. OECD data show that, since 2015, US construction activity has increased by about 80%, compared to less than 20% in the EU.

Such figures tend to be the focus of official evaluations of the IRA and the CHIPS Act by the Biden administration. They might point out, for example, that non-residential construction is now running 30% higher than before the pandemic. But they make little reference to manufacturing output or employment.

The reason is not difficult to discern: manufacturing output has remained flat in the US since 2015, even as it has increased by (an admittedly tiny) 4% in the eurozone and 8% in the European Union as a whole. Likewise, manufacturing employment has not grown since the post-pandemic recovery ended in mid-2022, and it has continued to fall as a share of overall employment. So, while hundreds of billions of dollars in manufacturing subsidies can buy a construction boom - especially when they reward the construction of new facilities, as most of the subsidy programs in the IRA and the CHIPS Act do - they do not necessarily bring about a manufacturing resurgence.

One might be tempted to argue that surging construction of new structures will lead to higher output; it just takes a while. But past surges in US

construction activity, such as directly preceding the 2007-08 financial crisis and in 2018, were not followed by strong industrial output growth. If things were different this time around, output should already have started to rise. The fact that much of the new investment over the last two years has gone toward data centres, not factories, further reinforces the impression that it will not lead to a manufacturing renaissance.

The failure of the Biden administration's subsidy programmes to lift the manufacturing sector, even slightly, might help to explain why so many US workers cast their votes for Donald Trump, not Vice-President Kamala Harris, in last month's presidential election. In any case, it should serve as a warning to anyone who believes that other economies, such as the EU, should be following America's lead in implementing a more active industrial policy.

As it stands, most industrial subsidies in Europe, like those in the US, support the construction of new factories. But if production costs are too high to justify a factory, subsidizing its construction will not translate into higher industrial output.

Could Trump be more successful than Biden at boosting US manufacturing? While it is unclear whether he will follow through on this

pledge to repeal the IRA on his first day in office - not least because many IRA subsidies go to Republican-led states - there is no doubt that he prefers tariffs to subsidies. The problem, as economists like to point out, is that a tariff amounts to a production subsidy and a consumption tax.

If Trump imposes the kinds of sweeping tariffs he has promised, he would effectively be subsidizing most of US manufacturing - far more than Biden, whose subsidies focused on a few selected sectors. But someone has to pay for these production subsidies. Tariff advocates claim that foreign suppliers will foot the bill, because they will be forced to lower their prices. But most of the burden of the tariffs Trump introduced during his first term was borne by US consumers, who were forced to pay higher prices for imported goods. Why would this time be any different?

Trump is unlikely to be any more successful than Biden in reviving US manufacturing. Attempts by the EU to emulate either his or Trump's approach will probably also fail. In Europe no less than in America, resisting the secular trend of "de-manufacturing" is a losing battle. - Project Syndicate

• Daniel Gros is Director of the Institute for European Policy-Making at Bocconi University.



## France's most powerful nuclear reactor comes on stream

France has connected its most powerful nuclear power reactor to the national electricity grid in what leaders hailed as a landmark moment despite years of delays, budget overruns and technical setbacks.

The Flamanville 3 European Pressurised Reactor in Normandy started providing electricity to French homes at 11.48am (1048 GMT) yesterday, the EDF power company's chief executive Luc Remont said in a statement.

"Great moment for the country," President Emmanuel Macron said in a statement on social network LinkedIn, calling it "one of the world's most powerful nuclear reactors".

"Re-industrialising to produce low-carbon energy is French-style ecology," he added. "It strengthens our competitiveness and protects the climate."

The French-developed European Pressurised Reactor project, launched in 1992, was designed to relaunch nuclear power in Europe after the 1986 Chernobyl catastrophe in the Soviet Ukraine, and is touted as offering more efficient power output and better safety.

The EPR, a new generation pressurised water reactor, is the fourth to be finished anywhere in the world.

Similar design reactors in China and Finland came online ahead of it.

The launch is welcome news for the heavily indebted state-owned energy company EDF after multiple problems extended construction to 17 years and caused massive budget overruns.

Remont of EDF called the event "historic".

"The last time a reactor started up in France was 25 years ago at Civaux 2," he said, referring to the Civaux power plant in southwestern France.



This picture taken in 2022 shows operators working in the steam circuit sector at the third-generation European Pressurised Reactor project (EPR) nuclear reactor of Flamanville, Normandy. (AFP)

The connection was initially scheduled to take place on Friday.

It is the most powerful reactor in the country at 1,600MW. Ultimately, it should supply electricity to upwards of 2mn homes.

The connection to the grid "will be marked by different power levels through to the summer of 2025" in a months-long testing phase, the company has said.

EDF said that starting up a reactor was "a long and complex operation".

The plant will be shut down for a complete inspection lasting at least 250 days, probably in the spring of 2026, the company added.

Construction of the Flamanville reactor began in 2007 and was beset by numerous problems.

The start-up comes 12 years behind schedule after a plethora of technical setbacks which saw the cost of the project soar to an estimated €13.2bn (\$13.76bn), four times the initial €3.3bn estimate.

The start-up began on September 3, but had to be interrupted the following day due to an "automatic shutdown". It resumed a few days later.

Generation has been gradually increased to allow the reactor to be connected to the electricity network.

Nuclear power accounts for around three-fifths of French electricity output and the country boasts one of the globe's largest nuclear power programmes.

That is in stark contrast to neighbouring Germany, which excited nuclear power last year by shutting down the last three of its reactors.

"This morning marks the culmination of a titanic effort that has finally paid off," Agnes Pannier-Runacher, the outgoing minister for ecological transition, said on X. "We are drawing all the lessons from this to make a success of the nuclear revival that we decided on with the President of the Republic."

Macron has decided to ramp up nuclear power to bolster French energy sustainability by ordering six new-generation reactors and laying options for eight more, that could cost tens of billions of euros.

In 2022, he called for a "renaissance" for the country's nuclear industry to transition away from fossil fuels.

"What we have to build today is the renaissance of the French nuclear industry because it's the right thing for our nation, because everything is in place," Macron said at the time. (AFP)

# Pakistan military courts convict 25 of pro-Khan unrest

AFP  
Islamabad

Pakistan military courts have convicted and sentenced 25 people for involvement in pro-Imran Khan unrest last year, the armed forces said, with the majority handed decade-long jail terms.



Former prime minister Khan (pictured) was arrested in May last year after being ousted from office and mounting an unprecedented campaign of defiance against the nation's powerful military leaders.

His detention over graft allegations sparked nationwide unrest, some targeting armed forces installations, and prompting rare prosecutions of civilians in military courts.

Amnesty International called the move "an intimidation tactic, designed to crack down on dissent" and said it was "contrary to international law".

Military courts are largely opaque, but after months of confidentiality the military public relations wing named 25 people who have been prosecuted.

All of the convicted are men and 14 have been sentenced to a decade of "rigorous imprisonment", the military said with the remaining 11 set to serve lesser prison terms.

"All sentences announced by the military courts are disproportionate and excessive," said a spokesman for Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. "These sentences are rejected."

The verdicts were announced just three weeks after the capital Islamabad was gripped by fresh unrest, as tens of thousands of Khan supporters flooded in to demand his release.

The government said at least five security personnel were killed whilst PTI allege at least 10 of their own were shot dead by security forces before crowds retreated.

A military statement did not make clear what crime each person had been convicted of or when, listing only the location of their offence.

The shortest sentence meted out was two years.

During the May 2023 unrest Pakistan "witnessed tragic incidents of politically provoked violence and arson at multiple places", the military statement said.

"These blatant acts of violence not only shocked the nation but also underscored necessity of checking this unacceptable attempt of political terrorism," it added.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said "no civilian should be tried in a military court under any circumstances".

"This contravenes the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Pakistan as well as the international human rights obligations to which Pakistan is a state party," the organisation said in a statement on social media platform X.

Former cricket star Khan served as prime minister from 2018-2022, when he was ousted by parliament in a no-confidence vote.

He blamed the then-head of the powerful military establishment for his downfall.

Pakistan's generals are considered the country's political kingmakers and have directly ruled the nation for decades at a time.

Khan's May 2023 detention lasted a matter of days but he was re-arrested three months later and has remained imprisoned since, facing a parade of court cases he claims are politically motivated.

Meanwhile, the PTI was targeted by a sweeping crackdown following the unrest, with thousands of grassroots supporters and senior officials arrested.

The 72-year-old was barred from running in February elections.

The PTI defied the crackdown to win more seats than any other party, but a coalition of parties considered more pliable to military influence formed a government and shut them out of power.

A United Nations panel of experts found in September that Khan's detention "had no legal basis and appears to have been intended to disqualify him from running for political office".

## Pakistan dismisses US official's warning over missile programme

Pakistan's foreign ministry has dismissed as unfounded and "devoid of rationality" assertions by a senior US official that its missile programme could eventually pose a threat to the United States.

Earlier this week, US Deputy National Security Adviser Jon Finer said that Pakistan's development of long-range ballistic missiles made it an "emerging threat".

Finer's comments, which came a day after Washington announced a new round of sanctions related to the ballistic missile programme, underscored the deterioration in once-close ties between Washington and Islamabad since the 2021 US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Addressing Finer's remarks, Pakistan's foreign ministry said the perception of an alleged threat was "unfortunate".

"These allegations are unfounded, devoid of rationality and sense of history," the ministry added in a statement.

The ministry said its strategic capabilities were solely for defending its sovereignty and maintaining regional stability, and should not be perceived as a threat to any other country.

It also highlighted Pakistan's long history of co-operation with the US, particularly in counter-terrorism efforts, and reiterated its commitment to engaging constructively on all issues, including regional security and stability. (Reuters)

## Pakistan Taliban claim raid killing 16 soldiers

Sixteen security personnel were killed in northwest Pakistan in an attack claimed by religious militants early yesterday, a senior police official in the South Waziristan region said, as insurgents step up their assaults on the security forces.

Another eight personnel were injured in the attack on a security forces post, which took place at 2am (2100 GMT on Friday), police deputy superintendent Hidayat Ullah told Reuters.

"A search operation is under way in the area," he added, saying the attackers had used light and heavy weapons.

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistan Taliban, claimed responsibility for the attack, giving a higher figure for the number of security personnel killed.

"At least 35 security personnel were killed and 15 injured in the attack," the group said in a WhatsApp channel broadcast.

It did not say whether any of its fighters had been killed.

The group claimed to have seized a hoard of military gear, including machine guns and a night vision device.

The TTP has carried out more frequent attacks in recent months, mostly targeting members of the security forces.

An umbrella group of various Sunni militant groups, it has long been fighting in a bid to overthrow the government and replace it with a strict Islamic-led system of governance.

It is separate from the Afghan Taliban movement, but pledges loyalty to the Islamist group that now rules Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US-led international forces in 2021.

Pakistan has been battling a resurgence of militant violence in its western border regions since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.

Last year saw casualties hit a six-year high, with more than 1,500 civilians, security forces and militants killed, according to the Islamabad-based Centre for Research and Security Studies.

Islamabad accuses Kabul's rulers of failing to root out militants staging attacks on Pakistan from over the border.

Kabul's new rulers have pledged to evict foreign militant groups from Afghan soil.

However, a UN Security Council report in July estimated up to 6,500 TTP fighters are based there. (Reuters/AFP)

## Iceland Social Democrats present new govt

Iceland's Social Democratic Alliance presented yesterday a three-party coalition government, vowing to stabilise the economy after emerging as Iceland's biggest party in November's elections.

The Social Democratic Alliance beat out the governing Independence Party to win the snap election, called after the left-right coalition collapsed in October over divisions on the handling of immigrants and asylum-seekers.

Kristrun Frostadottir, leader of the Social Democratic Alliance, was asked to form a government by Iceland's president in early December.

Frostadottir will assume the office of prime minister and lead a government consisting of her own party together with the Liberal Reform Party and the People's Party.

"These three parties have been given a very strong mandate," she told a press conference yesterday.

At 36, Frostadottir will be the youngest ever prime minister in Iceland's modern political history.

Healthcare, economic issues and housing were top concerns for a majority of voters in the election where the Social Democrats got 20.8% of the vote, securing 15 seats in the 63-seat parliament.

Leaders of the parties forming the new government said yesterday that housing security and poverty alleviation were among their priorities.

With Iceland battling inflation and high interest rates, the incoming government said one of their first major tasks was to stabilise the economy.

They also said they were planning to hold a referendum on resuming Icelandic EU accession talks - which were halted in 2013 - by 2027.

The Independence Party of outgoing Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson came second in the election, with 19.4% of the vote and 14 seats, its worst ever showing.

In third place was the Liberal Reform Party with 15.8% and 11 seats, while the People's Party earned 13.8% and 10 seats. (AFP)

# Ukraine drone hits Russian high-rise 1,000km from frontline

AFP  
Moscow

Kyiv has staged a major drone attack on the Russian city of Kazan, 1,000km (620 miles) from the frontier, the latest in a series of escalating aerial attacks in the nearly three-year conflict.

A drone smashed into a high-rise apartment building in Kazan, a city of more than 1.3mn, damaging a skyscraper but leaving no victims, local officials said.

Though attacks so far into Russian territory are rare, Kazan and the surrounding oil-rich region of Tatarstan have previously been targeted by Ukrainian drones.

Such strikes are seen as embarrassing for Russia, almost three years into its military offensive on Ukraine.

"Today Kazan suffered a massive drone attack," Rustam Minnikhanov, the head of Tatarstan, said in a post on Telegram. "While before industrial enterprises were attacked, now the enemy attacks civilians in the morning."

Videos on Russian social media networks showed drones hitting high rise buildings and setting off fireballs.

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that two drones hit a 37-storey apartment block.

She said that Ukraine had been targeting an unspecified industrial facility, but that it suffered no damage.

Ukraine, which has staged regular attacks on targets inside Russia since the start of the full scale military offensive in February 2022, did not immediately comment.

Russian civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia temporarily closed Kazan international airport, one of the country's busiest.

Some residents were evacuated, but authorities did not provide figures, and all major public events in the area were cancelled as a precaution.

Alongside the two drones that hit the apartment block, three drones were shot down and three were suppressed by air defence systems, Zakharova said.

In a post on Telegram, she said that Kyiv was taking out its "anger for tangible military defeats on the peaceful population of Russia".

Russia's defence ministry said yesterday that the army had captured a new village near the key city of Kurakhove in eastern Ukraine where Russian forces have made major advances in recent months.

The attack on Kazan comes a day after Russian strikes on the Ukrainian capital Kyiv killed one and wounded 13, and after five were killed by a Ukrainian attack on the Russian border region of Kursk, where its troops have been staging an offensive since August.



A view shows a damaged multi-storey residential building in Kazan following an alleged Ukrainian drone attack in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict. (Reuters)

# Albania bans TikTok for one year following the killing of teenager

Reuters  
Tirana

Albania has announced a one-year ban on TikTok, the popular short video app, following the killing of a teenager last month that raised fears over the influence of social media on children.

The ban, part of a broader plan to make schools safer, will come into effect early next year, Prime Minister Edi Rama announced after meeting with parents' groups and teachers from across the country.

"For one year, we'll be completely shutting it down for everyone. There will be no TikTok in Albania," Rama said.

TikTok did not immediately respond to a request for comment outside normal business hours.

Several European countries including France, Germany and Belgium have enforced restrictions on social media use for children.

In one of the world's toughest regulations targeting Big Tech, Australia approved in November a complete social media ban for

children aged under 16.

Rama has blamed social media, and TikTok in particular, for fueling violence among youth in and outside school.

His government's decision comes after a 14-year-old schoolboy was stabbed to death last month by a fellow pupil.

Local media had reported that the incident followed arguments

between the two boys on social media.

Videos had also emerged on TikTok of minors supporting the killing.

"The problem today is not our children, the problem today is us, the problem today is our society, the problem today is TikTok and all the others that are taking our children hostage," Rama said.

# Registration for Marmi Festival 2025 opens today



Registration for the 16th edition of Qatar International Falconry and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2025) will begin today at headquarters of Al Gannas Qatari Society in Katara – the Cultural Village. Registration will continue until December 26, from 4pm-8pm. The Marmi Festival is one of the most important events organised by Al Gannas Qatari Society, especially after Unesco's approval in November 2010 to include "falconry" in Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This is part of efforts to preserve cultural and emotional values of this traditional sport inherited from ancestors, as well as its significance in Arab literature and Arab popular heritage, particularly in Gulf region and Qatar. The director of competitions at Al Gannas

Qatari Society and Marmi Festival, Muteb al-Qahtani, said that registration for Hedd Challenge Championship will take place from December 22-26. Registration and inspection for Al Dau and Tal'ah Championships will be from December 24-26, with online registration for Al Dau and Tal'ah available from December 20-25. Registration for Saluki Race Championship will be on December 22-23. Al-Qahtani added that registration for Young Falconer Championship will be held at festival's headquarters in Sabkhat Marmi in Sealine. The schedule for young falconers' participation will be determined after the registration of all participants in the festival and a draw for all competition categories, with the organising committee aiming to involve the

largest number of youth and offering valuable prizes. The Marmi Festival includes major competitions including Tal'ah, which involves falcon hunting of houbara; Al Dau, a speed race between falcons with multiple heats; the Hedd Challenge, which features a contest between falcons and pigeons; the Saluki Hedd Championship, and Young Falconer Championship, among other competitions eagerly awaited by public annually. The festival's organising committee had previously opened early registration for the Hedd Challenge Championship at Al Gannas Qatari Society in Katara, from October 29-31 and from November 14-17, to alleviate registration pressure starting today, especially given that the competition sees record participation from falconers. (QNA)

# Qatar awarded membership in WTO Chairs Programme

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has unveiled the results of its WTO Chairs Programme selection process, which received applications from over 100 academic institutions representing member states. Despite fierce competition, Qatar successfully secured membership in the programme through a joint project presented by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry through its office at the WTO in Geneva, in collaboration with Hamad Bin Khalifa University and supported by the Qatar Research, Development, and Innovation Council. This achievement aligns with Qatar's commitment to advancing scientific research in line with Qatar National Vision 2030.

The Qatar project addresses industrial policy challenges related to digital development and includes research on digital transformation and sustainability. It also explores the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and the regulation of legitimate anonymous web browsing. The WTO Chairs Programme is an initiative that is designed to develop educational curricula by promoting trade-related academic activities within universities and research institutions in developing and least-developed countries. The programme also promotes a deeper understanding of the global trade system among academics and policymakers by providing edu-

cational support to develop and deliver training courses on trade policy and WTO-related issues. The programme also aims to strengthen research on trade-related matters and raise awareness about the importance of trade cooperation through disseminating information related to international trade. Academic institutions selected for the WTO Chairs Programme receive financial, academic, and technical support for four years to develop curricula, conduct research, and promote outreach activities. Upon completing this period, these institutions remain part of the WTO Chairs Programme network.

## MIA launches 2nd edition of challenge camp for children

The Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) has announced the launch of the second edition of the challenge camp for boys and girls, in collaboration with government bodies to inspire Qatari youth to embrace leadership, cultural awareness, and spirit of discovery. The camp for boys is scheduled from December 21-25, while for girls it is from December 29-31, at the MIA premises. Focusing on national values and Islamic teachings, the camp offers a holistic experience combining education, entertainment, and skill-building within a safe and engaging environment. The programme features a range of activities, including workshops, scouting events, and sports programmes, to nurture leadership qualities, foster cultural appreciation, and encourage participants to explore the history of Islamic arts. The deputy director of learning and outreach at the MIA, Salem al-Aswad, said that the programme aims to combine education, entertainment, and sports in a safe environment, to ultimately prepare a generation that is not only proud of its heritage but also ready to contribute positively to the society. The challenge camp, he said, serves as a platform to cultivate a generation empowered to face future challenges. Additionally, the camp underscores the MIA's dedication to supporting national identity and Islamic values through meaningful initiatives. (QNA)



Ras Abrouq desert activities offer visitors an exceptional experience of desert tourism with cultural gala, cuisine, games and adventure.

## Ras Abrouq offers opulent desert tourism activities

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With the activation of the event, the destination offers relaxation and cultural experiences. Visitors can enjoy wellness activities, dining, music and cultural activities at affordable prices. Visitors can explore immersive zones, including Our Habitas Resort, The Desert Escape, Film City, Wildlife Park, and the Glamping Zone. Highlights range from hot air balloon rides, which are scheduled weekly, to daily camel parades. The QT has also incorporated cultural installations, live performances and educational workshops enabling the visitors to connect with Qatar's heritage. With a coffee shop, gift shop and an exhibition, the Film City offers a variety of family-oriented activities. Wildlife park rides, camel, pony, and horse rides are also available. Along with children's workshops, traditional Qatari installations such as the Al Hosh majlis and live performances, mystic storytelling and the Desert Mirage Dance are also lined up. The Wildlife Park offers safari-like experiences with camel and horse routes allowing guests to explore the animal zones while the Glamping Zone provides a luxurious family-friendly desert camping experience. The zone has relaxation facilities, tents and outdoor lounges. The Desert Escape features a variety of activities, including hot air balloon rides, trampolines, archery, and stargazing. Acrobatic shows and falcon demonstrations, roaming parades and kids' treasure hunts are among the highlights. Our Habitas offers a variety of affordable packages, including options for weekdays, weekends, half-day passes, one-day passes, and wellness passes. Specialised packages featuring stargazing, hot air balloon rides, and more are also available.

