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SPORT | Page 1

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Qatar Airways to start flights to Damascus from Jan 7

Qatar Airways has announced resumption of three weekly flights to Damascus, Syria, from January 7.

This marks a significant step in reconnecting the region and providing passengers with seamless access to Qatar Airways' extensive global network of more than 170 destinations.

The decision to restart operations to Syria reflects the airline's commitment to fostering regional connectivity and supporting passenger demand.

Qatar Airways said it "is working closely with relevant authorities to ensure that all necessary safety, security, and operational standards are met ahead of the re-launch."

Qatar Airways Group Chief Executive Officer Badr Mohammed al-Meer said: "We are pleased to resume flights to Damascus, a destination of great historical and cultural importance. This announcement underscores our dedication to fostering connectivity and facilitating travel for our passengers."

Passengers travelling to and from Damascus will benefit from Qatar

Flights to Abha resumed

Qatar Airways has landed its first resumption flight at Abha International Airport yesterday. The airline will operate two weekly flights to Abha, offering seamless connectivity on Qatar Airways' extensive global network of over 170 destinations. Qatar Airways' Group Chief Executive Officer, Badr Mohammed al-Meer, commented: "We are delighted to resume flights to Abha, our 11th gateway in Saudi Arabia. With over 140 weekly flights, we connect more than 36,000 passengers weekly between Saudi Arabia and Doha." **Page 2**

Airways' world-class service and access to Hamad International Airport, consistently ranked as one of the best airports in the world.

The airline's global network will offer travellers the opportunity to explore destinations around the world, via the airline's hub in Doha.

Syria's new rulers hold talks in Saudi

Ministers from Syria's transitional government held talks in Saudi Arabia yesterday on their first foreign visit since they toppled long-time ruler Bashar al-Assad last month. "Through this first visit in the history of free Syria, we aspire to open a new, bright page in Syrian-Saudi relations that befits the long shared history between the two countries," interim Foreign Minister Assaad al-Shibani posted on social media after arriving in Riyadh late on Wednesday. Syria's new leadership is eager for Saudi investment to help rebuild the country's infrastructure. **Page 3**



Palestinians gather to receive food cooked by a charity kitchen, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday.

Israeli strikes kill 54 in Gaza

Reuters
Cairo

Israeli air strikes killed at least 54 Palestinians across the Gaza Strip yesterday, including 11 people in a tent encampment sheltering displaced families, medics said.

They said the 11 included women and children in the Al-Mawasi district, which was designated as a humanitarian zone for civilians earlier in the war between Israel and Gaza's ruling Palestinian resistance group Hamas, now in its 15th month.

The director general of Gaza's police department, Mahmoud Salah, and his aide, Hussam Shahwan, were killed in the strike.

"By committing the crime of assassinating the director general of police in the Gaza Strip, the occupation is insisting on spreading chaos in the (enclave) and deepening the human suf-

Truce talks to resume in Doha

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday authorised Israeli negotiators to continue talks in Doha to secure a ceasefire and hostage release deal, his office said. "Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has approved the professional-level delegation of the Mossad (spy agency), the IDF (military) and the ISA (internal security agency) to continue the negotiations in Doha," a statement from his office said, referring to indirect talks brokered by Qatar, Egypt and the United States.

fering of citizens," it added in a statement.

Other Israeli air strikes killed at least 26 Palestinians, including six in the interior ministry headquarters in Khan Younis and others in

north Gaza's Jabalia refugee camp, the Shati (Beach) camp and central Gaza's Maghazi camp.

Israel's military offensive in the Gaza Strip has killed at least 45,581 Palestinians and wounded 108,438 since Oct 7, 2023, the Palestinian enclave's health ministry said yesterday.

"As the year begins, we got reports of yet another attack on Al-Mawasi with dozens of people killed, another reminder that there is no humanitarian zone let alone a safe zone (in Gaza)," Philippe Lazzarini, head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees UNRWA, said in a post on X. "Everyday without a ceasefire will bring more tragedy."

Later yesterday, separate Israeli airstrikes killed at least four people on Jala Street in downtown Gaza City and two in its Zeitoun district, medics said.

Most of Gaza's 2.3m people have been displaced and much of the tiny, heavily built-up coastal territory is in ruins.

Shop Qatar offers irresistible deals

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Shop Qatar's 2025 edition kicked off on Wednesday with a grand opening at Place Vendôme, featuring performances by renowned entertainers and attracting a large audience.

Themed "Your Shopping Playground", Qatar's biggest shopping and entertainment festival will run until February 1, offering a mix of retail therapy, cultural experiences, and fun for the whole family.

Lebanese singer Abeer Nehme took the centre stage for a live performance at the launch, followed by colourful parades and several family-friendly activities and competitions for shoppers. Engaging competitions and appearances by notable influencers contributed to a lively and entertaining atmosphere, setting a celebratory tone for festival-goers.

Visit Qatar noted that this latest edition of the festival is set to deliver an even more rewarding experience than previous editions, with exclusive offers from luxury, high-street, and local brands. Attendees have a chance to win huge prizes every Friday with a raffle draw, including luxury Exeed cars, cash prizes ranging from QR10,000-100,000, and a grand prize. Beyond shopping, residents



A tribute to Palestinians at the event.



and visitors can also enjoy a range of interactive activities such as games, roaming parades, and the opportunity to meet Spaceteon characters.

In a press statement, Visit Qatar's Festivals and Events director Ahmed Albinai said: "This year's edition of Shop Qatar reflects how this festival has become a cherished tradition in Visit Qatar's

event calendar. It offers an exceptional mix of shopping, entertainment, and community engagement, showcasing Qatar as a hub for memorable experiences."

Manager of Festival and Event Planning at Visit Qatar Abdulrahman al-Muftah emphasised the importance of the Shop Qatar festival in supporting and promoting tourism in Qatar, noting the great suc-

cess achieved by previous editions.

He added that this year's edition was diverse and suitable for all members of society who will enjoy a special atmosphere of fun and enjoyment, pointing to the increase in the number of participating brands and stores and the prizes offered during the festival.

The festival will take place at 20 locations across Qatar, including: Place Vendôme, Doha Festival City, Mall of Qatar, City Center Mall, Landmark Mall, Villaggio, Lagoon Mall, Al Hazm, Hyatt Plaza, Tawar Mall, Al Khor Mall, Msheireb Galleria, Lusail Boulevard, Doha Oasis, Gulf Mall, Abu Sidra Mall, The Doha Mall, Ezdan Al Wakra, The Gate Mall and Old Doha Port.

Visit Qatar highlights this annual shopping event as a major draw on the country's retail and entertainment scene, noting its significant growth over the years. This year, a key location is Old Doha Port, a lively destination offering around 100 shops and boutiques, numerous cafes and restaurants, and 150 hotel apartments.

The Port's Mina District, with its concentration of retail and dining options, is anticipated to be a popular spot especially during this season, while the Box Park, constructed from colourful shipping containers, provides a unique atmosphere. **To Page 3**

Al Jazeera deplores PA decision to close office

Al Jazeera Media Network has denounced the Palestinian Authority's decision to freeze its work and coverage in the West Bank and considers this decision nothing but an attempt to dissuade the channel from covering the rapidly escalating events taking place in the occupied territories, a statement issued by the Doha-based network yesterday said.

"This decision comes following the ongoing campaign of incitement and intimidation by parties associated with the Palestinian Authority against Al Jazeera's journalists and correspondents. The decision to freeze Al Jazeera's work and prevent its journalists from conducting their duties is an attempt to hide the truth about events in the occupied territories, especially what is happening in Jenin and its camps. And - unfortunately - such decision comes aligned with the previous action taken by the Israeli government, which closed Al Jazeera's office in Ramallah."

"Al Jazeera is shocked by this decision, which comes at a time when the war on the Gaza Strip is still ongoing, and the systematic targeting and killing



of Palestinian journalists by the Israeli occupation forces.

"Al Jazeera Media Network holds the Palestinian Authority fully responsible for the safety and security of all its employees in the West Bank. Al Jazeera also calls on the Palestinian Authority to immediately retract and cancel the decision taken by the relevant ministries and to allow it and its teams to cover freely from the West Bank without any threats or intimidation."

"Al Jazeera stresses that this decision will not deter it from its commitment to continue its professional coverage of events and developments in the West Bank" the statement added.

Another Qatari aid plane arrives in Damascus through air bridge

A Qatar Armed Forces airplane, carrying humanitarian aid (31 tonnes of food supplies and ambulances) provided by Qatar Fund For Development (QFFD), arrived at Damascus International Airport yesterday. This aid comes as a continuation of the air bridge operation carried out by the State of Qatar to provide relief to the brotherly people of the Syrian Arab Republic and contribute to addressing their humanitarian conditions. This is the second Qatari plane to land at Damascus International Airport, and the seventh within the Qatari air bridge, confirming Qatar's great interest and full support for the brotherly Syrian people. (QNA)



Take necessary steps to prevent fire accidents, MoI urges campers

By Shafeeq Alingal
Staff Reporter

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has urged winter campers to take necessary steps to avoid the risk of fire accidents. While attending the weekly 'Police With You' programme on Qatar Radio, MoI officials stressed the need to take prevention measures and adhere to the guidelines to avert accidents and warned of the danger of exposure to suffocation and inhaling carbon monoxide resulting from burning coal and firewood.

Brig Ahmed Khalid al-Khulaifi, director of the North Security Department, asked campers to be fully aware of the need to pay attention to thermal energy sources such as gas and to be aware of the preventive requirements against fire and suffocation. "The role of security departments in general in dealing with fire incidents is to collect evidence and follow up on any new developments by opening reports in addition to requesting experts to know the causes of the fire fully," he said.

Lt Hamad Mohammed al-Jaber, officer in the Operations Department of the General Directorate of Civil Defence, suggested the campers use powder extinguishers when dealing with fire incidents noting that they are suitable for dealing with all types of fires. He underlined the need to avoid mistakes that may endanger others such as starting fires in unprepared places,



A camping site.

Mol official urged the campers to install high-quality electrical extensions that are resistant to weather factors and to insulate electrical cables

neglecting electrical extensions and electronic devices, using extensions with weak power, leaving electronic devices running 24 hours a day without supervision or not equipping the camp with safety tools such as fire extinguishers and first-aid kits.

He urged the campers to install high-quality electrical extensions that are resistant to weather factors and to insulate electrical cables. He also noted that avoiding placing electrical generators inside or near tents is important and stressed the need to install electrical breakers that disconnect immediately in the

event of any malfunction.

"Place flammable materials in places far from camps such as inside a civilian container with extinguishers placed next to them so that they can be used immediately in the event of an emergency," he said, adding that the best way to ensure that coal or firewood is extinguished is to use sand.

"The department centres continue to work 24 hours. The Civil Defence centres are close to the campsites," he said. There are two centres in each of Sealine and Measeed to serve the southern region. There are also three centres



Lt Hamad Mohammed al-Jaber, officer in the Operations Department of the General Directorate of Civil Defence.



Brig Ahmed Khalid al-Khulaifi, director of the North Security Department.

to serve the northern region in Al Khor, Al Zubarah and Al Ruwais. In the western region, the centres are functioning at Al Jamiliya and Al Sheehaniya.

Maj Dr Noura Abdullah al-Yahri, Forensic Medicine Consultant and Head of the Technical Affairs Department at the Forensic Medicine Centre, said the first steps that must be taken in the event of suffocation or inhalation of carbon monoxide resulting from burning coal or firewood are to move away from the source of smoke or remove it. "After the person leaves or moves away from the source of smoke, he needs a few minutes as a recovery period to remove the amount of carbon monoxide gas that he inhaled from the blood to replace this percentage with oxygen," she said.



A demonstration of how to use fire extinguishers.

Katara exhibition showcases heritage, culture of Dhaka

QNA
Doha

The Cultural Village Foundation - Katara opened an art exhibition titled "City of Memories" by Bangladeshi artist Kazi Salahuddin Ahmed.

The exhibition opening was attended by Deputy General Manager and Director of Human Resources of Katara, Saif Saad al-Dosari; ambassador of Bangladesh to Qatar, Mohammad Nazrul Islam; and a number of ambassadors and representatives of diplomatic missions.

The exhibition, which will continue in Building 47 until January 7, offers a unique experience that takes visitors on a journey to the heart of "Old Dhaka" where the artist showcases its rich heritage and culture through contemporary artworks.

This exhibition is a reflection of the artist's experience of liv-



ing in Old Dhaka, the historical area founded in the 15th century. Through his paintings and artworks, Kazi Salahuddin Ahmed highlights the deep relationship between the residents and their architectural environment, reviving the spirit of community life characterised by harmony and integration.

On this occasion, the ambassador of Bangladesh said that the exhibition is held in co-operation between Katara and his country's embassy, adding that it comes on the occasion of celebrating 50 years of friendly relations between



Bangladesh and Qatar. He pointed out that this exhibition reflects the depth of cultural relations between the two countries.

The envoy thanked Katara for its continuous support for achieving cultural exchange, saying that it is a leading global platform that brings together cultures and arts from all over the world. Regarding

the exhibition, he said that it is not only a celebration of artistic creativity, but also a profound human message that highlights the strong ties between heritage and society.

For his part, artist Kazi Salahuddin Ahmed explained that the pieces in his exhibition contain elements inspired by his childhood memories and aspects of daily life



Dignitaries at the exhibition.

in the old city of Dhaka, creating a harmonious blend that expresses the rhythm of the city, with its music, smells and special texture.

He said that he aimed through his exhibition to break the stereotypes that are drawn about the lifestyle in old cities, stressing his belief that his city carries many

values that can inspire artists. He also pointed out that the city is marked by an exceptional urban culture, a distinctive local dialect, and a special lifestyle, in addition to the overlapping of boundaries between personal life and community activities, which is reflected in the works in his exhibition.

Qatar Airways resumes flights to Abha, Saudi Arabia

Qatar Airways launched resumption flight to Abha International Airport in Saudi Arabia yesterday. The national airline will operate two weekly flights to Abha, offering connectivity on Qatar Airways' extensive global network of over 170 destinations.

With the resumption of this route, Qatar Airways brings the total number of destinations it serves within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to 11, including: Abha, Al-Ula, Dammam, Jeddah, Medinah, Neom, Qassim, Riyadh, Tabuk, Taif, and Yanbu.

Qatar Airways' Group Chief Executive Officer Badr Mohammed al-Meer said: "We are delighted

to resume flights to Abha, our 11th gateway in Saudi Arabia. With over 140 weekly flights, we connect more than 36,000 passengers weekly between Saudi Arabia and Doha.

This highlights our commitment to enhancing connectivity, supporting tourism and strengthening economic and cultural ties between our two nations."

Air Connectivity Program CEO Majid Khan said: "The co-operation between the Air Connectivity Program and Qatar Airways is a significant step in enhancing the kingdom's air connectivity. This partnership not only connects our two countries but also opens doors for global visitors to explore the unique experiences

that the kingdom offers." Cluster 2 Airports Company Chief Executive Officer Ali Masrahi said:

"The commencement of direct flights between Doha and Abha represents a significant step forward in enhancing connectivity and promoting tourism in line with the National Transport and Logistics Strategy and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

"This new route will not only facilitate travel for tourists and business visitors, but also contribute substantially to the kingdom's National Tourism Strategy and National Aviation Strategy. By improving accessibility to the Aseer region, known for its natural beauty and cultural herit-

age, these flights will boost local economies, create employment opportunities, and showcase the kingdom's diverse offerings to a global audience."

Aseer Development Authority (ASDA) Chief of Tourism, Hatim al-Harbi, said: "The resumption of flights by Qatar Airways between Doha and Aseer marks a pivotal milestone in our vision to position Aseer as an all-year-round tourist destination at the heart of the GCC.

This initiative contributes significantly to our target of welcoming 9.1mn annual visitors in Aseer by 2030. This is more than just a route between two cities - it is a gateway to the future



of tourism in Aseer. It is just the beginning of many steps aimed at transforming the region into a thriving destination for visitors from across the world."

Qatar Airways began its services to Saudi Arabia with its inaugural

flight to Jeddah in January 1997. The airline's continued investment in the Saudi market highlights its commitment to providing exceptional travel experiences for passengers travelling to and from the kingdom.

Official

Qatar strongly condemns shooting incident in Republic of Montenegro

Qatar strongly condemned the shooting incident that took place in the city of Cetinje in the Republic of Montenegro, resulting in fatalities and injuries. In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's firm stance against all forms of violence, terrorism, and criminal acts, regardless of their motivations. The ministry expressed Qatar's condolences to the families of the victims as well as to the government and people of Montenegro, and wished a swift recovery to those injured. **(QNA)**

Soleimani anniversary in Tehran



The head of the Iranian Quds forces, Ismael Ghaani, greets the son of slain Revolutionary Guards commander Qasem Soleimani during a ceremony in the capital Tehran yesterday to commemorate the fifth anniversary of his killing in a US drone strike in Iraq.

Iran lifts restriction on WhatsApp

AFP
Tehran

Ardayan Yousefi has gotten so used to life under Iran's Internet restrictions that for him, a recent decision to lift a ban on messaging service WhatsApp went virtually unnoticed. "Oh wow, is it really removed now?" Yousefi, a cafe owner from the capital Tehran, said of the two-year ban on the popular application.

To be certain, he switched off his virtual private network (VPN) encryption service, which allows users to mask their locations and bypass firewalls, and sent a message. But while WhatsApp and Google Play services have been restored in a decision late week by Iran's Supreme Council of Cyberspace, many other platforms remain banned. "It doesn't change much, since I still need VPNs for Instagram, Telegram and other platforms," said 31-year-old Yousefi.

The cyber council's decision came as Iranians grapple with high inflation, a plunging currency, years of international sanctions and more recently, soaring tensions with regional rival Israel. In recent weeks, daily life has been disrupted by widespread closures of banks, government offices and schools due to energy shortages exacerbated by a cold wave. Air pollution has also worsened with the arrival of winter.

Amir Rashidi, director of digital rights and security at the US-

based advocacy platform Miaan Group, said lifting the WhatsApp ban "was aimed at creating minimal public satisfaction" in face of these woes. WhatsApp "is less popular in Iran" than other messaging apps like Instagram and Telegram, which remain blocked, said Rashidi.

Online app store Google Play "is not a platform for political dissent", and so authorities have lifted the ban on it too as it "does not pose a significant threat to the Islamic republic's stability", he added.

Iranian authorities blocked several apps and online services in the wake of nationwide protests triggered by the September 2022 death in custody of Mahsa Amini. Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd, had been arrested for allegedly violating the Islamic republic's strict dress code. The restrictions severely impacted many online businesses that used online platforms like Instagram to advertise and sell products or services.

The late leader Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's president at the time, accused the banned apps of fomenting unrest. He said the online services would only be restored in Iran if they had a legal representative in the country. Meta, the American tech giant that owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, has refused to set up offices in Iran, which has been under US sanctions. Facebook, YouTube, and X and its predecessor Twitter have been restricted since 2009.

President Masoud Pezeshkian, who took office in July, has pledged to ease the internet restrictions, but has faced opposition from lawmakers in the conservative parliament. Some of them have argued that easing the curbs could benefit Iran's enemies or insisted access should comply with "Islamic values and laws".

Critics have long argued the restrictions hinder communication and business, forcing Iranians to use costly VPNs. More than 80 percent of Iranians online use VPNs, according to Mehr news agency citing the telecommunications ministry. Mehr has also reported a plan to lift some restrictions on platforms like YouTube and Telegram that would allow access through "governable portals". The report gave no timeline for the move, which has not been officially announced.

Communication Minister Sattar Hashemi has called the decision to lift the ban on WhatsApp "the first step" towards broader internet freedoms. Amir Heidari, a 26-year-old software developer, said that "it's much easier now to reach my friends and family." While Heidari was not expecting further changes soon, he said reinstating WhatsApp was "still a good sign".

For Elaheh Khojasteh, a 31-year-old fitness trainer from Ahvaz in Iran's southwest, the decision made no actual difference. "There are much more important concerns that need to be solved," she said.

Shop Qatar offers irresistible deals

From Page 1

Shoppers can enter raffle draws by spending QR200 at any participating venue and redeeming their receipts at designated booths. Schedule of weekly draws are as follows: January 10 at Mall of Qatar, January 17 at Lusail Boulevard, January 24 at Place Vendôme, and February 1 at Doha Festival City.

Organisers noted that the event will conclude at Doha Festival

City with a raffle draw, revealing the winner of the Tesla Cyber Truck while shoppers still have the chance to win other prizes. Shop Qatar will also see special performances, surprise appearances, and the Mall & Retail Awards, recognising outstanding contributions to branding, customer experience, and team performance.

Visitors can look forward to engaging interactive games and contests, with vouchers and give-

aways distributed as prizes.

Participating retailers will present special discounts and promotions across various product categories, including fashion, electronics, toys, beauty products, and homeware.

In addition, exclusive activations will feature curated bazaars where renowned local and international brands will offer traditional items such as perfumes, abayas, and handcrafted accessories.

Syria forces launch security sweep in Homs city: media

Syrian security forces are conducting an operation in Homs city, state media reported yesterday, with a monitor saying it targeted two districts that are home to the Alawite minority of toppled president Bashar al-Assad.

"The Ministry of Interior, in co-operation with the Military Operations Department, begins a wide-scale combing operation in the neighbourhoods of Homs city," state news agency SANA said quoting a security official.

The agency said the targets were "war criminals and those involved in crimes who refused to hand over their weapons and go to the settlement centres" but also "hidden ammunition and weapons".

SANA later quoted a military official saying that the authorities were notified weeks ago that "remnants of Assad's militias" were still in parts of Homs.

Since the rebels overthrew Assad last month, the transitional government has been registering former conscripts and soldiers and asking them to relinquish their arms. Authorities have sent troops and "armoured forces" to search for "those who refuse to settle their affairs and hand over weapons" in Homs, SANA said. They have also imposed a curfew in parts of the city.

"The Ministry of Interior calls on the residents of the neighbourhoods of Wadi al-Dhahab (and) Akrama not to go out to the streets, remain home, and fully

cooperate with our forces," SANA said. A resident of Akrama who fled the district told AFP communications had been cut off in his neighbourhood, where he heard heavy gunfire and saw a tank entering in the morning.

"My father and my mother stayed at home, the situation is not good," he said, adding: "we heard they're entering and searching houses and that they've arrested young men inside homes".

Rami Abdel Rahman, who heads the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor, told AFP the two Homs districts of Wadi Al-Dhahab and Akrama are majority-Alawite - the community from which Assad hails. -AFP

Lebanese interior minister honours president of Qatar and Arab Police Sports Federations

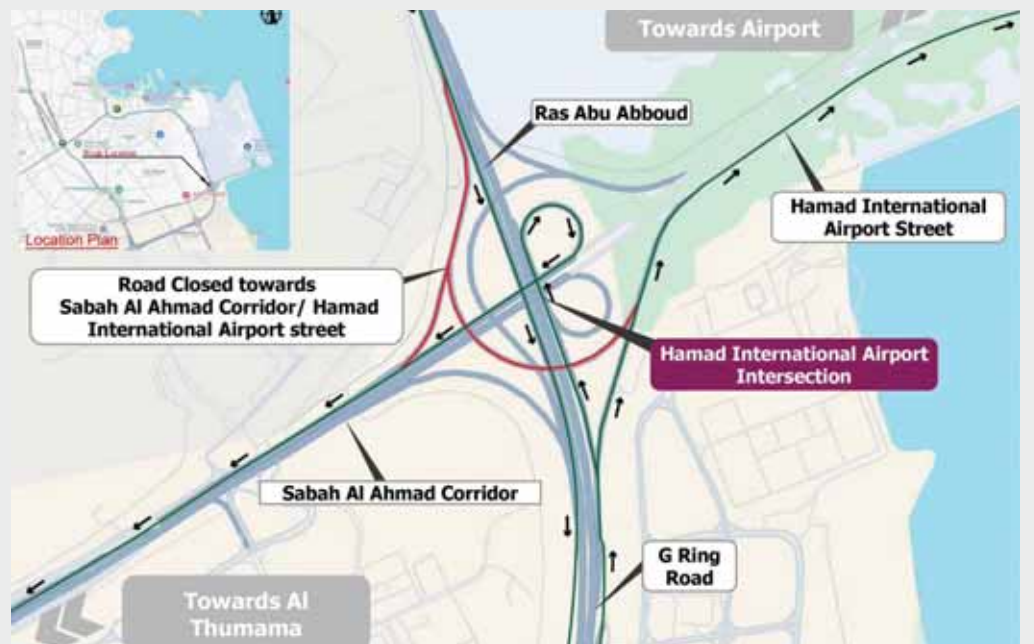


Minister of Interior and Municipalities in the caretaker government of Lebanon, Judge Bassam Mawlawi, honoured HE President of the Qatar and Arab Police Sports Federations, Major General Khalid bin Hamad Abdullah al-Attayah, during an official ceremony held in Beirut and attended by a number of dignitaries and officials. In a statement, the

Ministry of Interior stated that the Lebanese minister of interior and municipalities presented the Medal of the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities to Major General al-Attayah, in recognition of his contributions to the development of Arab police sports and the enhancement of co-operation among Arab nations. For his part, Major General Khalid bin

Hamad Abdullah al-Attayah expressed his sincere thanks and gratitude for this honour, which reflects the depth of fraternal relations between Arab countries, stressing that this honour is an incentive to move forward towards achieving more co-operation and joint work to develop police sports in a way that serves common ambitions. **(QNA)**

Temporary closure of Exit 7



The Public Works Authority (Ashghal) has announced a temporary closure of Exit 7 for those coming from Ras Abu Abboud Expressway towards Hamad International Airport and Sabah Al Ahmed Corridor from 12 midnight to 5am from January 7-10. The closure will be implemented in co-ordination with the General Directorate of Traffic to carry out road maintenance work. Road users can use adjacent alternative roads to reach their destinations as shown in the attached maps. Ashghal will install road signs advising motorists of the temporary closure and requested all to follow them and abide by the speed limit to ensure safety.

Syrian minister defends school curriculum changes after uproar

AFP
Damascus

Syria's education minister yesterday sought to minimise curriculum changes announced this week by the new authorities, after activists denounced them as "extremist" and potentially harmful to religious minorities.

The amendments were announced on Wednesday on the Facebook page of the interim leadership's education ministry, a little under a month since forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham toppled long-time ruler Bashar al-Assad.

The changes include scrapping poetry relating to women and love and references to "gods" in ancient history courses. The national anthem has also been removed from textbooks, with the ministry describing it as "the (Assad) regime's anthem".

And the nationalistic phrase "to sacrifice one's life in defence of his homeland" has been replaced with "to sacrifice one's life for the sake of Allah".

Education Minister Nazir al-Qadri, in a statement shared on Telegram yesterday, said the

Activist Khaleal lambasted the changes, warning that "education based on extremist ideologies may shape individuals whose ideas threaten regional and international security"

changes were only meant to scrap "glorifying" references to the deposed president and correct misinterpretations of the Holy Qur'an.

"The curricula in all Syrian schools will remain as is until specialised committees are formed to review and audit them," he said. "We have only ordered the deletion of parts glorifying the defunct Assad regime, and we have adopted pictures of the Syrian Revolution flag instead of the defunct regime flag," Qadri said.

"Incorrect" information has also been amended in the Islamic education curriculum where

"some Qur'anic verses were explained in the wrong way", he said. The changes have sparked controversy, with many taking to social media to express outrage.

Activist and journalist Shiyar Khaleal lambasted the changes in a Facebook post, warning that "education based on extremist ideologies may shape individuals whose ideas threaten regional and international security".

The new authorities face the daunting task of rebuilding state institutions shaped by the Assad family's five-decade rule, but some Syrians have voiced concerns that they may be overstepping their interim capacity. "Changing the curriculum under the supervision of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is not just an educational danger, but a long-term threat to the social fabric and future of Syria," said Khaleal.

Journalist Ziad Haidar described the changes as "educational executions" in a Facebook post, warning that "specific religious groups have been targeted".

Syria's new rulers have repeatedly sought to reassure minorities that they will not be harmed, with the international community also urging them to protect the country's diverse communities.

Fire burns down secondhand clothing market in Accra



A general view of people trying to salvage items from the burned down secondhand clothing market at Kantamanto in Accra, Ghana. The fire at the Kantamanto market began in the early morning hours yesterday, destroying a large part of the area and displacing thousands of traders.



27 African migrants lose their lives in shipwrecks off Tunisia

AFP
Tunis

Twenty-seven migrants, including women and children, died after two boats capsized off central Tunisia, with 83 people rescued, a civil defence official told AFP yesterday. The rescued and dead passengers, who were found off the Kerkennah Islands, aimed to reach Europe and were all from sub-Saharan African countries, said Zied Sdiri, head of civil defence in the nearby city of Sfax.

Tunisia, as well as neighbouring Libya, is a key departure point for irregular migrants seeking to reach Europe for a better life. Italy's is-

land of Lampedusa is only 150km from Tunisia. Totalling 110, the migrants were on board two makeshift boats that set sail off "the coast near Sfax on the night of December 31 to January 1," a National Guard official said on condition of anonymity.

Searches were still underway for other possible missing passengers, said the official. Sdiri said 15 out of the 83 rescued were taken to a hospital, without providing further details. The National Guard, which oversees the coast guard, later confirmed the death toll in a statement, adding that a baby was among the dead. It was the latest such tragedy off Tunisia over the past month.

On December 31, the National

Guard said two Tunisian migrants, one of them a five-year-old, died after their boat broke down off Tunisia's northern coast. Days earlier on December 18, the National Guard said at least 20 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa died in a shipwreck off Sfax, with five rescued. And on December 12, the coast guard rescued 27 African migrants near Jebeniana, north of Sfax, but 15 were reported dead or missing.

Each year, the perilous Mediterranean crossing is attempted by tens of thousands of people. Among them are also thousands of Tunisians seeking to leave their country which is grappling with economic woes marked by high inflation, unemployment, and slug-

gish growth. Under a 2023 agreement, Brussels has given 105mn euros (\$108mn) to debt-ridden Tunisia to help it curb irregular migration, in addition to 150mn euros in budgetary support.

The deal, strongly supported by Italy's hard-right government, aimed to bolster Tunisia's capacity to prevent boats leaving its shore, with some money also going to United Nations agencies assisting migrants. It has contributed to an increase in irregular migration interceptions off the North African country's shores and a marked drop in arrivals in Europe.

The Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) had counted "between 600 and 700" migrants killed or missing

in shipwrecks off Tunisia in 2024, compared with more than 1,300 in 2023. Overall, the United Nations children's fund, Unicef, said in a statement on Wednesday that, "The death toll and number of missing persons in the Mediterranean in 2024 have now surpassed 2,200, with nearly 1,700 lives lost on the central Mediterranean route alone." It added that the tally included "hundreds of children, who make up one in five of all people migrating through the Mediterranean. The majority are fleeing violent conflict and poverty."

Frontex, the EU's border agency, has said that irregular border crossings were down 64% last year through September for the central Mediterranean route.

UN hails Zimbabwe's death penalty abolition

AFP
Geneva

The United Nations yesterday welcomed Zimbabwe's abolition of the death penalty, and called on other countries to do likewise, or to at least impose a moratorium on capital punishment. Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa on Tuesday signed into law an act that will commute to jail time the sentences of about 60 prisoners on death row.

There has been a moratorium on executions in the southern African country since 2005 although courts had continued to hand down the death sentence for crimes including murder, treason and terrorism. "I welcome the signing by the president of Zimbabwe of a law officially abolishing the death penalty in the country," UN human rights chief Volker Turk said in a statement.

"The death penalty is profoundly difficult to reconcile with human dignity and the fundamental right to life. "All states that still maintain the death penalty should follow Zimbabwe's example and abolish it, or pending its abolition, impose a moratorium on its use."

Uganda plans third oil exploration licensing round in 2025/26, minister says

Uganda will launch its third petroleum exploration licensing round in the fiscal year starting July and has picked a winner for a tender to redevelop a large copper mine in the country's west, its energy and minerals minister said yesterday. In a briefing, Energy and Mineral Development Minister Ruth Nankabirwa said Uganda had opened up new areas and planned to conduct a "third licensing round for new oil and gas exploration licences in the 2025/2026 (July-June) fiscal year". Uganda discovered crude oil in the Albertine Graben basin near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo nearly two decades ago, but production has been delayed and is now projected to start this year.

In August, the country said government geologists were conducting preliminary surveys for oil in two new basins in the north and northeast. Nankabirwa did not say whether the exploration acreage in the new licensing round was in the two new regions or in the Albertine Graben. She said the ministry had picked a winner for a tender to revamp the Kilembe copper mine near the border with Congo. "We are now in the last negotiations...the process is almost complete," she said.

—Reuters

Ethiopia minister visits Somalia, in sign of detente

Reuters
Nairobi

Ethiopia's defence minister travelled to Somalia yesterday, a senior official in Mogadishu said, the first bilateral visit since relations nosedived a year ago over an Ethiopian plan to build a naval base in a breakaway Somali region. Somalia's state minister for

foreign affairs, Ali Omar, confirmed Ethiopian defence minister Aisha Mohammed Mussa's visit in a message to Reuters but did not say what she was there to discuss. Ethiopia's government spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.

Ethiopia has up to 10,000 troops in Somalia to fight militants from Al Shebaab, but Mogadishu has threatened to expel them if Addis Ababa did not renounce an agree-

ment it reached a year ago with the breakaway Somaliland region.

The preliminary deal called for Somaliland to lease a stretch of coastline for an Ethiopian naval base and commercial port in exchange for possible recognition of Somaliland's independence.

Somaliland has had effective autonomy since 1991 but its independence has not been recognised by any other country. Mogadishu

considers it an integral part of its territory and called its deal with Ethiopia an act of aggression. After months of escalating rhetoric and inconclusive international mediation efforts, Somalia and Ethiopia agreed on Dec 11, after talks in Türkiye, to work together to resolve the dispute and begin technical negotiations by the end of February.

The Ethiopian troops in Somalia are there as part of an African Un-

ion peacekeeping mission and on a bilateral basis. Regional powers fear their withdrawal would severely weaken the fight against Al Shebaab, an Al Qaeda affiliate that has been waging an insurgency since 2007. The dispute has also raised concerns about wider instability in the Horn of Africa, with Somalia responding to the Somaliland deal by drawing closer to Ethiopia's traditional rivals Egypt and Eritrea.

Mentally ill patients resort to lone psychiatric hospital in Mauritania

AFP
Nouakchott

The wall was tagged with graffiti above 22-year-old Sidi's bed in the lone psychiatric hospital in Mauritania, a country whose mental health system is as sparse as its desert landscapes. "Stress kills your neurons," said the message scrawled in room 13, one of just 20 beds available for psychiatric patients in the African country of 5mn people, which sits between the Atlantic and the Sahara.

Sidi's father, Mohamed Lemine, traced his son's mental health troubles to a frustrated attempt to emigrate to the US.

"His friends got him into these problems. They put the idea in his head of leaving the country, but the bank turned down his loan application," Lemine said. "After that, he became sad and started taking drugs." At a loss on how to handle Sidi's increasingly violent psychotic episodes, Lemine finally brought him three days previously to the Nouakchott Centre for Specialised Medicine, home to the country's only psychiatric ward, where he was admitted with a diagnosis of psychosis.

Lemine, a retired army officer with a neatly trimmed white beard, had installed a mat in his son's room to keep watch over him.

Like most patients, Sidi was expected to remain in the centre only a few days. Beds and staff are too



Doctor Mohamed Lemine Abeidi visits two patients in the psychiatry department of the CHS hospital in Nouakchott.

scarce for longer stays. "We need to increase the number of beds. Lots of patients travel long distances to come here, and there's no other psychiatric care infrastructure," said one of the centre's doctors, Mohamed Lemine Abeidi.

Family Affair

The centre's 20 rooms line a wide, turquoise-and-cream-coloured corridor that is filled with constant bustle: women bringing their children meals; a man visiting his brother; a worried uncle trying to calm his paranoid nephew. Non-violent patients are also allowed to stroll the hall, accompanied by relatives. They greet the head nurse, joke with the security chief, and talk to anyone who will listen about their concerns of the day, from politics and health problems to abnormal visions.

"Almost all the patients are accompanied by their families," said Abeidi, calling it a "cultural specificity" of Mauritania.

Outside the door to the ward, dozens of people were gathered, making tea as they waited. Like all Mauritania's mental health professionals, Abeidi, a psychiatrist, studied abroad, given the lack of training programmes in the country. "We're still quite limited, but there's been an improvement" in psychiatric care since the 1970s, he said with a smile, leaving his office after yet another day packed with appointments.

The 1970s is the decade when doctor Dia al-Housseynou first brought mental health care to Mauritania, an arid, predominantly Muslim country deeply attached to the Sahara, both geographically and culturally.



A young man rests in his room in the psychiatry department of the CHS hospital in Nouakchott.

Doctors in tents

Now 83, Housseynou lives in a bougainvillea-covered house in the centre of the capital, Nouakchott. As a young man, he studied abroad, completed internships in several European countries and wrote his thesis on family therapy before returning to Mauritania in 1975 and convincing authorities of the importance of mental health care.

He set up the traditional desert tents known as "khaimas" in the courtyard of the national hospital, where families could bring their loved ones for doctor's appointments.

Three years later, the hospital opened a dedicated psychiatric service. The Centre for Specialised Medicine was inaugurated in 1990. But Housseynou said he was nostalgic for the days of tents.

"Architecture is key in caring for the ill. When we build closed wards, everyone in their own room, it becomes a prison," he said, adding that Mauritania did not need "Western-style psychiatry".

Inside the psychiatric ward, many patients deemed violent are chained to their beds. "It's not hospital policy, but it's up to families whether to restrain their loved one or not," said chief security officer Ramadan Mohamed.

Sidi had a chain attached to his left foot. Hospitalisation is often the last resort for families, Abeidi said. "Most patients undergo traditional treatments before turning to psychiatry," he said.

"The patient sees a 'marabout' (traditional religious figure), and if the family and the marabout see that's not working, they refer them to the hospital."

South Korea police raid offices and airport over fatal crash

AFP
Muan

South Korean police raided the offices of Jeju Air and the operator of Muan International Airport yesterday as they step up their probe into the fatal crash of a Boeing 737-800 that killed 179 people.

The flight was carrying 181 passengers and crew from Thailand to South Korea on Sunday when it issued a mayday call and belly-landed before slamming into a barrier, killing all aboard except two flight attendants pulled from the burning wreckage.

Authorities yesterday carried out search and seizure operations at the Muan airport where flight 2216 crashed, a regional aviation office in the southwestern city, and Jeju Air's office in the capital Seoul, police said.

"The police plan to swiftly and rigorously determine the cause and responsibility for this accident in accordance with the law and principles," police said in a statement sent to AFP.

At Muan airport yesterday, soldiers, police and white-suited investigators were still combing the crash site, as orange-robed monks held prayer ceremonies nearby.

Inside the airport, the stairs were covered in colourful post-it notes left by mourners.

"Honey, I miss you way too much," one of them said.

"Even if you faced lonely and painful moments in death, may you now soar like a butterfly," another read.

Relatives also left flowers and food near the crash site including tteokguk — rice cake soup traditionally enjoyed in South Korea on New Year's Day — as they said their goodbyes, many in tears.

Star chefs featured in Netflix's megahit cooking competition show *Culinary Class Wars*, including Ahn Yu-seong, joined



An official from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport's Aviation and Railway Accident Investigation Committee takes part in the investigation at the site where a Jeju Air Boeing 737-800 aircraft crashed and burst into flames at Muan International Airport in Muan, some 288km southwest of Seoul, yesterday.

volunteers in Muan this week to prepare meals for the victims' families.

And people nationwide were remotely pre-paying for coffee at the airport's cafe so that victims' families, who have been camped out in the lounge since Sunday, waiting for news, could drink for free. More bodies were released Thursday to families to prepare for funerals, the land ministry said.

Officials initially pointed to a bird strike as a possible cause of the disaster, and have since said the probe was also examining the role of a concrete barrier at the end of the runway.

Dramatic video showed the plane colliding with it before

bursting into flames.

Yonhap reported the Muan airport warrant was approved on charges of professional negligence resulting in death, citing officials.

"Police are securing evidence related to the legitimacy of the airport's localizer," Yonhap said, referring to the concrete wall at the end of the runway housing an antenna array.

They are also seeking communication records between the control tower and the pilot shortly before the plane crash, it added.

Airports nationwide were being inspected to check other similar localisers, the land ministry said in a statement. Some experts

have suggested that the disaster may have been less deadly if the installation had been concrete.

BOEING INSPECTIONS
South Korea has also announced it will inspect all Boeing 737-800 aircraft operated by its carriers, focusing on the landing gear, which appears to have malfunctioned during the Sunday crash.

South Korea's acting president, Choi Sang-mok, said yesterday that "immediate action" must be taken if that probe uncovered any issues with the aircraft model.

Authorities have previously said 101 aircraft of the same model were in operation by six different airlines.

"As there's great public concern about the same aircraft model involved in the accident, the transport ministry and relevant agencies must conduct a thorough inspection of operation maintenance, education, and training," Choi said yesterday.

"If any issues are found during the inspection, please take immediate corrective action," he added.

The accident is the worst aviation disaster on South Korean soil.

South Korean authorities have completed the initial extraction of data for the cockpit voice recorder, but the flight data recorder was damaged and was to be sent to the US for analysis, officials said on Wednesday.

South Korea's Yoon, facing arrest over martial law, vows to 'fight until end'

Reuters
Seoul

South Korea's impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol has sent a letter rallying his supporters saying he would "fight until the end" as he faces an attempt by authorities to arrest him over his short-lived Dec 3 martial law, a lawyer said yesterday.

"I am watching on YouTube live all the hard work you are doing," Yoon wrote in the letter late on Wednesday to the estimated hundreds of supporters who have gathered near his official residence protesting his investigation. "I will fight until the end to protect this country together with you," he said in the letter, a photo capture of which was sent to Reuters by Seok Dong-hyeon, a lawyer advising Yoon. The opposition Democratic Party, which has majority control of parliament and led the impeachment of Yoon on Dec 14, said the letter proved Yoon was delusional and remains committed to complete his "insurrection." "As if trying to stage insurrection wasn't enough, he is now inciting his supporters to an extreme clash," party spokesman Jo Seoung-lae said in a statement.

A court on Tuesday approved a warrant for Yoon's arrest, which potentially would make him the first sitting president to be detained as part of investigations over allegations he masterminded insurrection by trying to impose martial law.

Insurrection is one of the few criminal charges from which a South Korean president does not have

immunity. The Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO), which is leading a joint team of investigators that include the police and prosecutors, has until Jan 6 to execute the arrest warrant. It was unclear when and how it will make the arrest and whether the presidential security service, which has blocked access by investigators with a search warrant to Yoon's office and official residence, would try to stop the arrest attempt.

Yoon Kab-keun, a lawyer for the impeached president, has said the arrest warrant was illegal and invalid because the CIO did not have the authority under South Korean law to request a warrant.

The lawyer yesterday warned that police officers would face arrest by "the presidential security service or any citizens" if they try to detain Yoon on behalf of the CIO, saying their authority is limited to crowd control and maintaining public order.

Separately, Yoon's trial on impeachment is being heard at the Constitutional Court. The court will hold the second hearing today. Yoon has been suspended from presidential duties and Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok has taken over as acting president until the outcome of the trial. If the court upholds the impeachment and Yoon is removed from office, a new presidential election will be held within 60 days.

The warrant for Yoon's arrest and also a search of his office and residence was issued after the conservative career prosecutor defied repeated summons by investigators to appear for questioning in the criminal investigation separate from the Constitutional Court trial.

Philippines recovers suspected Chinese submarine drone

AFP
Manila

A submarine drone suspected to be from China was recovered in waters off the central Philippines, police said yesterday, warning of "potential national security implications".

Three fishermen found the drone on Monday around nine kilometres off the coast of San Pascual in Masbate province, a police report said. The Philippines and China have for years clashed over maritime rights in the South China Sea as well as possession of reefs and islets. China claims almost the entire sea, brushing off rival claims from other countries and an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis.

The yellow drone marked "HY-119" was found floating at sea before being turned over to authorities, regional police director Andre Dizon said. It was about



This handout photo received from the the Philippine National Police (PNP) Bicol Region yesterday, shows a submarine drone suspected to be from China found by fishermen off the coast of San Pascual in Masbate province.

two metres long, and torpedo-shaped with fins.

"Based on our open-source research in the Internet... HY-119 refers to a Chinese underwater navigation and communication system," Dizon said.

2024 was China's hottest year on record: weather agency

AFP
Beijing

Last year was China's warmest on record, its weather agency said, as the world experiences a surge in extreme weather fuelled by climate change.

China is the leading emitter of the greenhouse gases scientists say are driving global warming, though Beijing has pledged that carbon dioxide emissions will peak by 2030 and be brought to net zero by 2060.

The average national temperature for 2024 was 10.92 degrees Celsius (51.66 Fahrenheit), 1.03 degrees higher than average — "the warmest year since the start of full records in 1961", the China Meteorological Administration said on its news site Wednesday.



File photo shows the sun rise behind high-rise buildings in Beijing.

day night. "The top four warmest years ever were the past four years, with all top ten warmest years since 1961 occurring in the 21st century," it added.

China has already this year logged its hottest month in the history of observation in July, as

well as the hottest August and the warmest autumn, on record.

The United Nations said in a year-end message on Monday that 2024 was set to be the warmest year ever recorded worldwide.

Global warming, driven largely by the burning of fossil fuels, is

not just about rising temperatures but the knock-on effect of all the extra heat in the atmosphere and seas. Warmer air can hold more water vapour, and warmer oceans mean greater evaporation, resulting in more intense downpours and storms. Impacts are wide-ranging, deadly and increasingly costly, damaging property and destroying crops.

In China, dozens of people were killed and thousands evacuated during floods around the country last year. In May, a highway in southern China collapsed after days of rain, killing 48 people. Residents of the southern city of Guangzhou experienced a record-breaking long summer, with state media reporting there were 240 days where the average temperature was above 22C (71.6F), breaking the record of 234 days set in 1994. Sichuan,

Chongqing, and the middle reaches of the Yangtze River suffered from heat and drought in early autumn.

Globally, 2024 saw deadly flooding in Spain and Kenya, multiple violent storms in the United States and the Philippines, and severe drought and wildfires across South America.

Natural disasters caused \$310 billion in economic losses in 2024, Zurich-based insurance giant Swiss Re has said.

The 2015 Paris climate accords aimed to limit global warming to well below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels — and to 1.5C if possible.

In November, the World Meteorological Organisation said the January-September mean surface air temperature was 1.54C above the pre-industrial average measured between 1850 and 1900.

Taiwan reports first Chinese 'combat patrol' of the New Year

Reuters
Taipei

Taiwan's defence ministry said yesterday that Chinese warplanes and warships had carried out the first "combat patrol" around the island of the New Year, after Taiwan President Lai Ching-te again expressed willingness to talk to Beijing.

China, which views democratically-governed Taiwan as its own territory, sends its military into the skies and waters near the island on an almost daily basis, and holds what Taiwan calls "joint combat readiness patrols" several times a month.

Taiwan's defence ministry said it had detected 22 Chinese military aircraft, including J-16 fighter jets, carrying out a "joint combat readiness patrol" around Taiwan in conjunction with Chinese warships starting yesterday morning.

It said the Chinese aircraft flew in airspace to the north, west, southwest and east of Taiwan, and that Taiwanese forces were dispatched to keep watch.

China's defence ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Lai, in his New Year's Day news conference, reiterated his desire for exchanges with China. He has repeatedly called for talks but been rebuffed. Beijing calls him a "separatist".

Lai and his government say only Taiwan's people can decide their future.

Taiwan political cartoonist, democracy 'fighter' dies

AFP
Taipei

Taiwanese political cartoonist Lin Kuei-yu, whose satire was hailed for helping the island transition from one-party dictatorship to democracy, has died, his wife said yesterday. He was 65.

Lin, whose pen name was Yufu, or Fisherman, succumbed to liver cancer on Monday, his wife Chen Wen-shu said when contacted by AFP.

"He had countless fans who admired, cared for, and loved him deeply," Chen said.

"We are deeply grateful to everyone who has supported him over the years." Regarded as a "pioneer of political commentary", Lin began publishing cartoons in the early 1980s when Taiwan was still under authoritarian rule, the semi-official Central News Agency (CNA) said.

After Chiang Ching-kuo lifted martial law in 1987, Lin created the first cartoon of the then president, depicting him as "Moses who parted the sea", CNA said.

Chiang was the son of former president Chiang Kai-shek, whose nationalist forces fled to Taiwan in 1949 after losing a civil war with Mao Zedong's communist forces.

China and Taiwan have been governed separately ever since.

Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung said cartoonist Lin's "simple and clear logic and sharp political views" helped many Taiwanese "break through the confinement of authoritarianism". "(He) gave society the courage to challenge the system, and also accompanied Taiwan's process of democratisation," Lin wrote on Facebook.

Huang Wei-che, mayor of the southern city of Tainan where Lin lived, told reporters the cartoonist "was a fighter for democracy".

Lin, who wore several professional hats including writer and television host, once said he wanted his epitaph to be "cartoonist".

"Cartoonist is eternal, something can be passed on to future generations," Lin was quoted by Taiwan Comic Base, an incubator for comic artists, as saying.

"The others are temporary. Cartoonist is the one I want to engrave on my epitaph."



Bangladesh rejects bail for monk on sedition charges

A Bangladeshi court has again denied bail to an outspoken Hindu monk advocating for the protection of the minority after religious strife in the mainly Muslim nation.

Chinnoy Krishna Das was arrested in November for allegedly disrespecting the Bangladeshi flag during a rally and faces charges of sedition.

Security forces ringed the court in the southern port city of Chittagong, wary after violence erupted following a previous bail hearing - with the monk's followers accused of killing a public prosecutor.

Das rejects the sedition charges, his lawyer Apurba Kumar Bhattacharjee said yesterday.

However, public prosecutor Raihanul Wajed Chowdhury said they had opposed bail because there was "much more to investigate". - **AFP**

Fiji probes alleged attacks on Virgin flight crew

Fiji police are investigating allegations of theft and sexual assault on two Virgin Australia crew members in the early hours of New Year's Day, the government said yesterday.

The alleged attacks took place on Wednesday in the nightclub area of the city of Nadi, home to the international airport, Deputy Prime Minister Viliame Gavoka said.

"The alleged incidents are regrettable," Gavoka said in a statement. "There were two separate alleged incidents, one being alleged theft and the other being alleged sexual assault, which affected two different crew members."

The crew members are at a local hotel used by the airline for layovers and they are set to return home this week after helping the police probe, the minister said.

Virgin Australia has sent representatives to Fiji to provide support for the affected staff.

The South Pacific island nation of Fiji is a popular tourist destination and received 76,845 visitors in November, mostly from Australia, New Zealand and North America, according to the country's tourism website. - **AFP/Reuters**

India clears toxic waste 40 years after Bhopal gas disaster

AFP
New Delhi

Indian authorities moved hundreds of tonnes of hazardous waste remaining more than 40 years after the world's deadliest industrial disaster struck the city of Bhopal, media reported yesterday.

Communities have for decades blamed a high level of sicknesses on contamination of the groundwater in the wake of the highly toxic gas leak from the Union Carbide factory in December 1984.

Some 3,500 people were killed in the im-

mediate aftermath of the chemical leak on the night of December 2, 1984, and up to 25,000 are estimated to have died overall.

Around a dozen trucks began carrying the 337 tonnes of waste - sealed inside containers and with a police escort - in a slow convoy to the disposal site some 225km (140 miles) away at Pithampur late on Wednesday night, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

"The convoy has been fortified with the highest security protocol ever witnessed in the movement of industrial waste in the country," said state gas relief and rehabilitation department director Swatantra Ku-

mar Singh, the *Times of India* reported.

He said that the waste will "undergo scientific disposal" through incineration.

In 1984, 27 tonnes of methyl isocyanate (MIC), used in the production of pesticides, swept through the city of more than 2m people after one of the tanks storing the deadly chemical shattered its concrete casing.

The order to clear the waste was made in December - after the 40th anniversary of the disaster - by the high court in Madhya Pradesh state, which set a one-month deadline.

"Are you waiting for another tragedy?"

Chief Justice Suresh Kumar Kait asked the authorities, in an order critical of the "inertia" by cleanup authorities, according to the *Times of India* and *Indian Express* newspapers.

Testing of groundwater near the site in the past revealed cancer- and birth defect-causing chemicals 50 times higher than what is accepted as safe by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Communities blame a range of health problems - including cerebral palsy, hearing and speech impairments and other disabilities - on the accident and the contamination of the groundwater.

UK government unveils new curbs on people smugglers

AFP/Reuters
London

Suspected UK people smugglers could face travel bans and swifter social media and mobile phone curbs, under government plans announced yesterday to reduce cross-Channel migrant arrivals by boat.

The interior ministry announced the plan to impose new interim Serious Crime Prevention Orders (SCPOs) on smugglers before they have been criminally charged, the day after figures showed soaring arrival numbers in 2024.

Around 36,816 people were detected crossing the Channel last year, a 25% increase from the 29,437 who arrived in 2023, according to provisional figures from the ministry.

Currently, imposing SCPOs on criminals, including people smugglers, involves "a complex and lengthy process" that the government said was "restricting the use of this powerful tool".

The planned interim orders - set to be included in draft legislation introduced in parliament in the coming weeks - would allow law enforcement agencies to ask a court to impose immediate restrictions while a full order is considered.

Suspects can be banned from using a laptops or mobile phones, accessing social media networks, associating with certain people, or accessing their finances under the orders.

Breaching an interim order could lead to up to five years in prison, the interior ministry said.

SCPOs have been used since 2008 typically to disrupt various types of serious criminality, including knife crime, slavery and trafficking.

The interior minister, Yvette Cooper, said that people smugglers "are profiting from undermining our border security and putting lives at risk" and "cannot be allowed to get away with it".



Inflatable dinghies and outboard engines are seen stored in a Port Authority yard in Dover, southeast England, that are believed to have been used by migrants who were picked up at sea whilst crossing the English Channel from France. - **AFP**

"We will give law enforcement stronger powers they need to pursue and stop more of these vile gang networks," she said.

However, the interim orders plan faced immediate pushback from some civil liberties campaigners.

Conservative MP David Davis, a former cabinet minister, told *The Times* newspaper that it "sounds unnecessarily draconian".

"We'll have to go through the fine text but there's a reason for the process for charging and arrest being properly sequenced before you can do other things and that's to protect the liberty of ordinary law abiding people," he said.

Meanwhile, the Refugee Council has criticised the UK government's efforts to curb cross-Channel migrant journeys, after last year saw the highest number of recorded deaths in its waters.

The charity said in a new report that the government's stepped-up enforcement efforts had made the crossings "even more dangerous" as smugglers respond by cramming more people "into less seaworthy boats".

"The government needs to take a different approach if it is to ensure everything possible is done so that 2025 does not see a repeat of last year's devastating loss," Refugee Council head Enver Solomon said.

At least 69 deaths were reported over the course of the year - more than the total between 2019 and 2023, the charity said.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer, elected in July, has prioritised tackling illegal migration by cracking down on the gangs who smuggle people across the English Channel, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, into Britain from France.

Poll: Most UK doctors suffer from 'compassion fatigue'

Seven out of 10 UK family doctors are worn out and suffering from "compassion fatigue", finding it hard to empathise with their patients, a poll published yesterday said.

The survey of 1,855 doctors across the UK carried out by the Medical and Dental Defence Union of Scotland showed a vast majority are physically and emotionally too exhausted to show much compassion to those seeking their help, the *Guardian* newspaper said.

Some 71% of GPs (general practitioners) and 62% of all doctors reported these findings, with those aged between 25-34 being the worst affected.

Family doctors are "particularly vulnerable" because of their "prolonged exposure to patients' suffering and trauma" and their heavy workloads, the union's chief medical officer John Holden told the newspaper.

The survey also found that 85% of GPs who had had suicidal thoughts blamed it on their working conditions which have deteriorated due to a lack of resources.

Almost half of those polled, some 44%, feared their increasing lack of compassion could lead them to make a medical mistake.

Holden warned "compassion fatigue" could have an impact on patient safety.

The new Labour government, elected in July, has made fixing the UK's creaking National Health Service (NHS) a priority - including tackling ballooning waiting lists for treatment and stemming an exodus of staff.

It has promised to release some £22.6bn (\$27.9bn) in extra resources by 2026 to help alleviate the crisis. - **AFP**

Secret lab is developing UK's first quantum clock: defence ministry

A top-secret lab in the UK is developing the country's first quantum clock to help the British military boost intelligence and reconnaissance operations, the defence ministry said.

The clock is so precise that it will lose less than one second over billions of years, "allowing scientists to measure time at an unprecedented scale", the ministry said in a statement.

"The trialling of this emerging, groundbreaking technology could not only strengthen our operational capability, but also drive progress in industry, bolster our science sector and support high-skilled jobs," Minister for Defence Procurement Maria Eagle said.

The groundbreaking technology by the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory will reduce reliance on GPS technology, which "can be disrupted and blocked by adversaries", the ministry added.

It is not a world first, as the University of Colorado at Boulder developed a quantum clock 15 years ago with the US National Institute of Standards and Technology.

However, it is "the first device of its kind to be built in the UK", the statement said, adding that it could be deployed "in the next five years".

A quantum clock uses quantum mechanics -

the physics of matter and energy at the atomic and subatomic scale - to keep time with unprecedented accuracy by measuring energy fluctuations within atoms.

Accurate timekeeping is crucial for satellite navigation systems, mobile telephones and digital TV, among other applications, and may open new frontiers in research fields such as quantum science.

Companies and governments around the world are keen to cash in on the huge potential benefits quantum technology could bring.

Google last month unveiled a new quantum computing chip that it said could do in minutes what it would take leading supercomputers 10 septillion years to complete.

The US and China are investing heavily in quantum research, and the US administration has imposed restrictions on exporting such technology.

One expert, Olivier Ezratty, told AFP in October that private and public investment in such technology had reached \$20bn during the past five years.

The defence ministry said future research would "see the technology decrease in size to allow mass manufacturing and miniaturisation, unlocking a wide range of applications, such as use by military vehicles and aircraft". - **AFP**

UK lawmakers summon Shein and Temu for questioning over labour practices

Fast-fashion online retailer Shein, which is hoping to list in London, faces a UK hearing on January 7 where a British parliamentary committee plans to question the firm, founded in China in 2008, about the rights of workers in its supply chain.

The cross-party Business and Trade Committee will also question Temu, the global online marketplace owned by Chinese e-commerce firm PDD Holdings, as part of an inquiry into employment rights opened in October.

The committee, chaired by former Labour minister Liam Byrne, is examining the government's flagship employment rights bill in the context of protections for British workers.

However, it is also looking at how to ensure adequate protection against importing poor labour standards, including concerns over forced labour.

Shein's general counsel for Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA), Yanan Zhu, has been called to be a witness, an update on the committee website showed.

Stephen Heary, senior legal counsel at Temu, and Leonard Klenner, senior compliance manager at Temu, have also been asked to give evidence.

Shein declined to comment on the hearing. Temu was not immediately available for comment.

Both platforms, which sell clothes, shoes, gadgets and accessories at rock-bottom prices, have faced allegations of poor working practices at factories in China that make the products, and of forced labour in their supply chains.

Shein has previously said it is committed to respecting human rights and has a zero-tolerance policy on forced labour.

Temu has also said it strictly prohibits forced labour.

Shein was founded in China but is now headquartered in Singapore.

Having grown rapidly in the US, Europe and the UK, it is awaiting regulatory approval from British and Chinese authorities for a London initial public offering (IPO) after filing papers with Britain's market regulator in early June.

Margaret Beels, director of labour market enforcement at the Department for Business and Trade, was also asked to speak at the hearing, along with Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner Eleanor Lyons, who last year raised concerns about Shein's London IPO.

McDonald's UK and Ireland chief executive Alistair Macrow, and Claire Lorains, quality technical and sustainability director at supermarket group Tesco, were also called to give oral evidence. - **Reuters**

Biggest dinosaur footprint site in UK

AFP/Reuters
London

British researchers have unearthed some 200 dinosaur footprints dating back 166m years in a find believed to be biggest in the UK.

Teams from Oxford and Birmingham Universities made the "exhilarating" discovery at a quarry in Oxfordshire in central England after a worker came across "unusual bumps" as he was stripping clay back with a mechanical digger, according to a new BBC documentary.

The site features five extensive trackways, with the longest continuous track stretching more than 150m (490') in length.

Four of the five trackways uncovered are believed to have been made by a long-necked herbivorous dinosaur, most likely a ceterosaurus.

The fifth set of tracks likely belongs to a 9m long carnivorous megalosaurus known for its distinctive three-toed feet with claws, according to the University of Birmingham.

The megalosaurus was the first dinosaur to be scientifically named and described in 1824, kick-starting the last 200 years of dinosaur science and public interest.

"It's rare to find them so numerous in one place and it's rare to find such extensive trackways as well," Emma Nicholls of Oxford University's Museum of Natural History told AFP.

"Scientists have known about and been studying megalosaurus for longer than any other dinosaur on Earth, and yet these recent discoveries prove there is still new evidence of these animals out there, waiting to be found," she said.

The area could turn out to be one of the world's biggest dinosaur track sites, Nicholls added.

The discovery will feature in the BBC television documentary *Digging for Britain*, due to be broadcast on January 8.

A 100-strong team led by academics from Oxford and Birmingham



A handout photograph taken by vertebrate palaeontologist Dr Emma Nicholls, and released by the Oxford University of Natural History yesterday shows members of the excavation team working on the footprints at the Dewars Farm Quarry. - **AFP**

excavated the tracks during a week-long dig in June.

The new footprints follow a smaller discovery in the area in 1997, when 40 sets were uncovered during limestone quarrying, with some trackways reaching up to 180m in length.

The researchers took 20,000 photographs of the latest footprints and created detailed 3D models of the site using aerial drone photography.

It is hoped the discovery will provide clues about how dinosaurs interacted, as well as their size and the speeds at which they moved.

"Knowing that this one individual dinosaur walked across this surface and left exactly that print is so exhilarating," the Oxford museum's Duncan Murdock told the BBC. "You can sort of imagine it

making its way through, pulling its legs out of the mud as it was going."

Richard Butler, a palaeobiologist from the University of Birmingham, said some chance weather may be the reason the tracks had been so well preserved.

"We don't know exactly...but it might be that there was a storm event that came in, deposited a load of sediments on top of the footprints, and meant that they were preserved rather than just being washed away," he said.

Quarry worker Gary Johnson, whose watchfulness triggered the excavation, said the experience had been spellbinding.

"I thought I'm the first person to see them. And it was so surreal - a bit of a tingling moment, really," he said.

Questions hover over probes into Musk empire

Last month, in the waning days of the Biden administration, the SEC set a tight deadline of several days for demanding that Elon Musk pay a settlement or face civil charges relating to alleged securities violations during his \$44bn takeover of Twitter in 2022. Musk broke the news himself in a social-media post: "Oh Gary, how could you do this to me?" he wrote, referring to SEC Chair Gary Gensler. He added a smiley-face emoji but attached a legal letter condemning the "improperly motivated" ultimatum: "We demand to know who directed these actions-whether it was you or the White House." An SEC spokesperson declined to comment on the incident. The White House did not respond to a request for comment. The SEC is not the only investigative agency Musk has defied and accused of political harassment. The billionaire has long railed against government oversight, portraying himself as a victim of bureaucratic zealots stifling his companies' potentially life-saving innovations. The White House will soon be occupied by Donald Trump — whom Musk spent more than a quarter-billion dollars to help elect — rather than Joe Biden, who appointed Gensler. Trump has already named a new SEC chair to replace Gensler, who plans to resign when Trump is inaugurated. Musk's potential to have extraordinary clout with the new administration raises questions about the fate of federal investigations and regulatory actions affecting his business empire, of which at least 20 are ongoing, according to three sources familiar with SpaceX and Tesla operations and the companies' interaction with the US government, as well as five current and former officials who have direct knowledge of individual probes into Musk's companies. The inquiries include examinations of the alleged securities violations; questions over the safety of Tesla's Autopilot and Full Self-Driving (FSD) systems; potential animal-welfare violations in Neuralink's brain-chip experiments; and alleged pollution, hiring-discrimination and licensing problems at SpaceX.

Musk, Tesla, SpaceX and Neuralink did not respond to comment requests. Before the election, Musk posted: "I have never asked for any favours, nor has he offered me any." A Trump-transition spokesperson called Musk a "brilliant" entrepreneur and said Trump's administration would ensure law and order, "treating all Americans equally." The Musk-related cases could languish or be dropped by Trump-appointed agency and department heads, the current and former US officials said. Trump's DOJ picks, for example, include lawyers who defended him in criminal and impeachment trials and a nominee for FBI chief whom Musk vocally supported and who has repeatedly vowed to pursue Trump's enemies, one current and three former DOJ officials said. Lower-level DOJ officials could also exercise prosecutorial discretion to avoid aggressively pursuing Musk companies in light of his relationship with Trump, said Barbara McQuade, a former US attorney in Detroit during the Obama administration who also worked as a federal prosecutor during the George W. Bush and Clinton administrations. "To the extent they want to please the boss, I think they know how to do that." Some legal experts downplayed the risk of political interference from Musk, noting that an investigation's lack of progress could signal insufficient evidence. It's also possible that prosecutors who believe they have strong cases will push forward regardless of Musk's role, legal experts said. "I don't think there's as much risk of Musk infiltrating to influence cases," said Robert Frenchman, a white-collar defence lawyer at Dynamis in New York. "Most prosecutors bring cases they think they can win." Representatives of the DOJ and all departments and agencies with pending inquiries into Musk or his companies did not comment on the probes or their ability to enforce regulations against Trump allies during his second term. The EPA and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) said they would continue fulfilling their legal and regulatory responsibilities.



Elon Musk (left) greets US President-elect Donald Trump as he arrives to attend a viewing of the launch of the sixth test flight of the SpaceX Starship rocket in Brownsville, Texas, in November last year. (Reuters)

Since the election, Musk has called himself Trump's "first buddy," frequented Trump's Florida Mar-a-Lago club, shared Thanksgiving with the president-elect's family and weighed in publicly on his cabinet appointments. Trump appointed Musk to co-lead a new "Department of Government Efficiency", a private entity advising on slashing budgets and regulations. It remains unclear what authority the role will carry. Musk has touted his newfound influence and given specific examples of how he might use it. Before the election, Musk said he would seek to use his efficiency-czar post to advance national driverless-vehicle regulations that would almost certainly benefit Tesla and eliminate "irrational" rules such as one resulting in a pollution fine against SpaceX. NHTSA officials have repeatedly scrutinised Tesla for nearly a decade, at times enraging Musk. During one 2016 call, he screamed profanities at regulators launching the first of several investigations into Tesla's Autopilot driver-assistance system after a fatal crash, according to two people familiar with the matter. There are currently five ongoing and open NHTSA probes covering driver-assistance technology

and other operations in Tesla vehicles. Tesla has blamed Tesla drivers in defending itself against lawsuits and investigations over accidents involving FSD and Autopilot, saying it had warned drivers to pay attention. A DOJ probe into whether Tesla and Musk exaggerated its vehicles' self-driving capabilities is among those where investigators have faced challenges. Prosecutors have grappled with demonstrating that Musk and Tesla crossed a line from legal salesmanship into knowingly making false claims that misled investors and harmed consumers. The probe had stalled before the election in part due to the legal hurdles, a person familiar with the investigation said. Another probe, by the US attorney's office in Manhattan, involves the driving range of Tesla vehicles and followed a Reuters investigation that found the automaker had rigged its in-dash displays to give drivers "rosy" projections about how many miles they could drive on battery power. It was unclear how far the probe has progressed. "To our knowledge no government agency in any ongoing investigation has concluded that any wrongdoing

occurred," Tesla said in quarterly SEC filings. Reuters was the first to report some Trump auto-policy advisors have recommended killing a requirement that automakers report data on crashes involving automated-driving systems, a measure that could cripple NHTSA's ability to investigate and regulate the emerging technology's safety. SpaceX already faces little regulatory scrutiny because the government has outsourced much of its space missions to Musk's rocket-and-satellite firm, according to two former SpaceX officials and a current government official familiar with the company's interactions with Nasa, the EPA and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). During a September summit, Musk labelled "insane" an EPA inquiry that resulted in SpaceX agreeing to a proposed \$148,378 fine for dumping pollutants, which Musk said were actually "drinking water". The FAA separately in September proposed fining SpaceX \$633,000 for allegedly failing to follow license requirements and not getting approval for changes during two launches in 2023. Musk called for FAA chief Mike Whitaker to resign in September, shortly after the FAA fined SpaceX and delayed one of its launches. Whitaker said last month he would step down before Trump's term. The *Wall Street Journal* reported in October that Musk has been in regular contact with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Three sources familiar with SpaceX's government interactions said any scrutiny into Musk's contacts with a US adversary would be unlikely under Trump, who has picked tech billionaire Jared Isaacman to run Nasa. Isaacman has financed and joined two private space missions involving SpaceX. Nasa declined to comment and Isaacman and a media representative for Isaacman's company did not respond to a request for comment. Musk did not respond to requests for comment regarding his reported contacts with Putin. In one instance, he responded with two laughing and crying emojis to a social-media post on X suggesting that Musk critics were attempting to portray him as a Russian agent.

US mulls potential rules to restrict or bar China drones

Reuters
Washington

The US Commerce Department said yesterday it is considering new rules that would impose restrictions on Chinese drones that would restrict or ban them in the United States citing national security concerns. The department said it was seeking public comments by March 4 on potential rules to safeguard the supply chain for drones, saying threats from China and Russia "may offer our adversaries the ability to remotely access and manipulate these devices, exposing sensitive US data". China accounts for the vast majority of US commercial drone sales. In September, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said the department could impose restrictions similar to those that would effectively ban Chinese vehicles from the United States and the focus will be on drones with Chinese and Russian equipment, chips and software. She told Reuters in November she hopes to finalize the rules on Chinese vehicles by January 20. A decision to write new rules restricting or banning Chinese drones will be made by the administration of President-elect Donald Trump, who takes over on January 20. Washington has taken a series of steps to crack down on Chinese drones over the last year. Last month, President Joe Biden signed legislation that could ban China-based DJI and Autel Robotics from selling new drone models in the US. A unspecified US agency must determine within one year if drones from DJI or Autel Robotics pose unacceptable national security risks. DJI, the world's largest drone manufacturer that sells more than half of all US commercial drones, said if no agency completes the study it would prevent the company from launching new products in the US. In September, the House of Representatives voted to bar new drones from DJI from operating in the US. In October, DJI sued the Defence Department for adding it to a list of companies allegedly working with Beijing's military, saying the designation is wrong and has caused the company financial harm. DJI told Reuters in October that Customs and Border Protection was stopping imports of some DJI drones from entering the United States, citing the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. No forced labour is involved at any stage of its manufacturing, DJI said. US lawmakers have repeatedly raised concerns that DJI drones pose data transmission, surveillance and national security risks, which the company rejects. Congress in 2019 banned the Pentagon from buying or using drones and components manufactured in China.

Ensure rights ahead of Maduro inauguration, urge UN experts

AFP
Geneva

Venezuelan authorities must respect people's rights to life, liberty and personal security in the run-up to the start of President Nicolas Maduro's third term on January 10, UN experts said yesterday. Venezuelan opposition leaders have called on their supporters to prepare mass protests in connection with Maduro's inauguration following contested elections last July. "We strongly call upon the au-

thorities to ensure that the rights to peaceful protest and free expression be exercised without fear of reprisal," Marta Valinas, chair of the UN's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela, said in a statement. "We remind security forces responsible for maintaining public order that they should adhere to the strictest international standards on the use of force," she said. "Any violations of rights must be promptly, thoroughly, and impartially investigated and prosecuted by independent courts, with full respect for due process."

New Orleans attack suspect acted alone, backed IS: FBI

Reuters
New Orleans

A US Army veteran who drove a truck into a crowd of New Year's Day revelers had pledged allegiance to Islamic State, but acted alone in the attack that killed at least 14 people, the FBI said yesterday. The suspect, who was shot dead at the scene after firing at police, has been identified as Shamsud-Din Jabbar, a 42-year-old Texan who once served in Afghanistan. He drove from Houston to New Orleans on December 31, and posted five videos on Facebook between 1.29am and 3.02am on the morning of the attack in which he said he supported IS, the militant group with fighters in Iraq and Syria, the FBI said.

In the first video, Jabbar explains he had previously planned to harm his family and friends, but was concerned that the media coverage would not focus on the "war between the believers and the disbelievers," FBI Deputy Assistant Director Christopher Raia said at a press conference. Jabbar also said in the videos that he had joined IS before last summer and provided his last will and testament, Raia said. "This was an act of terrorism," Raia said. "It was premeditated and an evil act."

New Orleans officials said the Sugar Bowl college football game that had been scheduled for Wednesday in a New Year's Day tradition was to take place yesterday afternoon. The city will also host the National Football League's Super Bowl next month.

The FBI said there appeared to be no link between the attack in New Orleans and the episode in Las Vegas on the same day in which a Tesla Cybertruck packed with gasoline canisters and large firework mortars exploded in flames outside the Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas, just weeks before President-elect Donald Trump returns to the White House on January 20. The injured victims in the New Orleans attack included two police officers wounded by gunfire from the suspect, taking place a mere three hours into the new year on Bourbon Street in the historic French Quarter. At least 15 people were killed, including the suspect, the FBI said. Among the victims were the mother of a 4-year-old who had



Law enforcement members work at the site yesterday where people were killed by a man driving a truck in an attack during New Year's celebrations, in New Orleans, Louisiana. (Reuters)



This undated and unlocated handout image released by the FBI shows a photo of deceased New Orleans attack suspect Shamsud-Din Jabbar. (AFP)

just moved into a new apartment after getting a promotion at work, a New York financial employee and accomplished student-athlete who was visiting home for the holidays, and an 18-year-old aspiring nurse from Mississippi. Witnesses described a horrifying scene. "There were people everywhere," Kimberly Strickland of Mobile, Alabama, said in an interview. "You just heard this squeal and the rev of the engine and this huge loud impact and then the people screaming and debris — just metal — the sound of crunching metal and bodies." Meanwhile, authorities in other US cities said they had boosted security, including at Trump Tower and Times Square in New York City, adding that there were

Trump slams border over attack despite US citizen being suspect

Donald Trump doubled down yesterday on linking the deadly New Orleans truck-ramming attack to President Joe Biden's border policies, even though the attacker was identified as a US citizen and military veteran. The Republican, hours after the attack early Wednesday morning, claimed to have been vindicated in saying on the campaign trail that "criminals coming in are far worse than the criminals we have in the country". Law enforcement later identified Shamsud-Din Jabbar, a 42-year-old Texan, as the driver of the pickup truck who ploughed into a crowd of New Year's revelers, killing 15. Biden described the attack as "despicable", and said Jabbar had posted videos online hours before "indicating that he was inspired by ISIS". Illegal immigration was a key issue for voters in the election, with Trump campaigning on a promise carry out the largest deportation programme in American history, often citing the unsubstantiated claim that migrants commit more crimes than US citizens. Early yesterday, Trump posted again on his Truth Social platform, lamenting that weak leadership and the country's "open borders" had made it a "laughing stock".

no immediate threats. In Washington, police also said they had increased their presence as the capital prepares to host three major events this month: Congress' January 6 certification of US President-elect Donald Trump's presidential election win, the January 9 state funeral for former president Jimmy Carter, and Trump's January 20 inauguration. The FBI said an IS flag was found on the trailer hitch of the rented vehicle involved in the New Orleans attack. US President Joe Biden con-

demned what he called a "despicable" act. Public records showed Jabbar worked in real estate in Houston. In a promotional video posted four years ago, Jabbar described himself as born and raised in Beaumont, a city about 80 miles east of Houston. Jabbar was in the regular Army from March 2007 until January 2015 and then in the Army Reserve from January 2015 until July 2020, an Army spokesperson said. He deployed to Afghanistan from February 2009-January 2010 and held the rank of staff sergeant at the end of service.



Dutch online archive identifies suspected Nazi collaborators

A Dutch project called "War in Court" has digitally released a list of names of nearly half a million suspected wartime Nazi collaborators after the expiry of a law that had restricted public access to the archive. The archive, consisting of 32mn pages, includes 425,000 Dutch people who were investigated for collaboration with German occupiers during World War II. The law restricting public access expired on New Year's Day. Only a fifth of those listed ever appeared before a court, and most cases concerned lesser offences such as being a member of the Nationalist Socialist movement. Although the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) protects personal data, it does not apply to those who have died - the vast majority of those listed in the archive. Initially, scanned files from the archive were set to be made available online yesterday, giving users access to dossiers of suspects, which also includes their victims and witnesses. However, following a warning from the Dutch Data Protection Authority, the decision was made last month to postpone the full release and instead publish only the list of names. - **Reuters**

Finnish authorities to search tanker over suspected Baltic cable cut

AFP/Reuters
Helsinki

Finland's transport agency said yesterday that it was inspecting a tanker suspected of being part of Russia's so-called "shadow fleet", which is believed to have been involved in the breakdown of an undersea cable.

The cable's operator, the national energy agency Fingrid, said it had requested that authorities seize the tanker.

"Fingrid has today (Thursday) filed a request with the Helsinki District Court to seize the vessel Eagle S in order to secure its claim for compensation for damages to the EstLink 2 connection," it wrote in a statement.

"Further investigations at the damage

site are expected to provide more information about the extent of the damages and enable more detailed planning and scheduling of the repair," Fingrid said.

The company said last week it expected the cable to come back into service in August this year.

Earlier in the day, the Finnish Transport and Communications Agency Traficom announced that it was launching a controlled inspection of the tanker, while a separate police investigation continued.

The Eagle S, flying the Cook Islands flag, is suspected of damaging the EstLink 2 submarine electricity cable between Finland and Estonia in the Baltic Sea on December 25, Christmas Day, putting it out of action.

Fingrid will begin a new inspection of the cable to determine the exact nature of the damage and begin repairs.

"We are starting tomorrow (Friday) to determine the scale of the damage and gather the information needed to repair it," Fingrid official Kimmo Nepola told AFP.

The Eagle S was seized and moved under escort to the harbour of Kilpilahti port, 40km (25 miles) east of the Finnish capital, Helsinki, where investigators are inspecting it and questioning its crew of about 20.

Seven sailors suspected of involvement have been prevented from leaving the country since Tuesday.

Russia's "ghost fleet" refers to ships that carry embargoed Russian crude oil and petroleum products.

Moscow has said that Finland's seizure of the ship is not a matter for Russia.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) announced last Friday that it would strengthen its military presence in the Bal-

tic Sea, after similar incidents there since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Energy and communications infrastructure in particular have been targeted as part of what experts and politicians call Russia's "hybrid war" with Western countries.

The Baltic is surrounded by a number of Nato member states.

Two telecommunications cables were cut on November 17 and 18 in Swedish territorial waters.

A Chinese-flagged bulk carrier, the Yi Peng 3, which was above the area at the time, is suspected of involvement.

The European Union has announced enhanced measures to safeguard undersea cables, by improving intelligence sharing and the use of new detection technology and repair capabilities.

Oil spill in Black Sea smaller than first thought: Russia

Russian investigators have determined that an oil spill from two tankers in the Black Sea last month was smaller than initially thought, the transport ministry said yesterday.

The oil leaked from two ageing tankers that were hit by a storm on December 15. One sank and the other ran aground.

More than 10,000 people have been working to shovel up viscous, foul-smelling fuel oil from sandy beaches in and around Anapa, a popular summer resort.

Environmental groups have reported deaths of dolphins, porpoises and sea birds.

The ministry said experts had established that approximately 2,400 metric tonnes of oil products had spilled into the sea.

"This is significantly less than the initial estimate, which was based on the account of one of the tanker captains," it said.

When the disaster struck, Russian state media reported that the stricken tankers, both more than 50 years old, were transporting some 9,200 metric tonnes (62,000 bar-

rels) of oil products in total.

The ministry said the spill involved heavy M100-grade fuel oil that solidifies at a temperature of 25° Celsius and, unlike other oil products, does not float to the surface but sinks to the bottom or remains suspended in the water column.

"There are no proven technologies in the world to remove it from the water column. Therefore, the main method is collection from the shoreline," the ministry said. - **Reuters**

Ukraine looks into reports that 'hundreds' went AWOL

AFP
Kyiv

Ukraine has opened a criminal probe into desertion and "abuse of power" after hundreds of soldiers were reported to have fled an army unit partly trained by France, investigators said yesterday.

The 155th Mechanised Brigade, dubbed "Anne of Kyiv", was one of several military groupings formed last year as Ukraine sought to boost preparations for possible new Russian offensives.

The unit was to be made up of 4,500 soldiers, with France training roughly half of them and providing equipment.

However, its development has been beset with problems including what one lawmaker described as poor management.

Prominent journalist Yuriy Butusov wrote in December that 1,700 soldiers had fled, or gone AWOL (absent without leave) from the brigade without going into combat, and that 50 had escaped while training in France.

Ukraine's State Bureau of Investigation said it had opened a criminal probe into abuse of power by a military official and desertion, without elaborating.

"The investigation is ongoing. It is too early to talk about any preliminary results," spokesperson Tetiana Sapian told AFP.

Lawmaker Mariana Bezugla said last month that the brigade had been effectively dismantled and redistributed across other units.

She blamed what she called a lack of "co-ordination of command structures".

"Even the French efforts to make the brigade specialised couldn't save it from the poor military decisions of our generals, which ultimately dismantled the unit," she said.

The Ukrainian army faces significant uncertainty in 2025.

Moscow is pouring resources into its nearly three-year invasion and uncertainty hangs over future US aid for Kyiv when President-elect Donald Trump takes office later this month.

Russia advanced by almost 4,000sq km (1,500 miles) in Ukraine last year, according to an AFP analysis of data from the Institute for the Study of War, as Kyiv's army struggled with chronic manpower shortages and exhaustion.

Fireworks accidents kill five in Germany

Five people died across Germany and a police officer was seriously injured from accidents linked to the powerful fireworks Germans traditionally set off to celebrate the new year, police said.

Germans celebrate New Year's Eve with a particularly intense usage of fireworks, which spurs a recurrent debate about outlawing the most powerful devices, given the high number of injuries each year, as well as the pollution and noise they cause.

Thirty law enforcement officers were injured, including one seriously wounded by an illegally manufactured firework, said police spokesman Florian Nath. Some 400 people were detained in the capital Berlin overnight, police said, adding that contrary to previous years, "there was no major violence or incidents". - **AFP**

12 shot dead in Montenegro rampage

Reuters/AFP
Cetinje, Montenegro

A man shot dead 12 people in a rampage in a small town in Montenegro before turning his gun on himself early yesterday, authorities said, in one of the Balkan nation's worst mass killings.

The attacker, named by police as 45-year-old Aco Martinovic, initially shot dead four people at a restaurant in Cetinje on Wednesday afternoon after an altercation.

He then shot dead eight people, including two children and his sister, at three other locations, police director Lazar Scepanovic told a press conference in the capital Podgorica.

"All the victims were his godfathers, friends ... he killed his own sister, with whom he had good relations and with whom he spent New Year's Eve," Scepanovic said.

He said police initially had misleading information about the site of the first shooting and went to a place 3km (two miles) away.

It was the second mass shooting in less than three years in the same town, 38km (24 miles) west of the capital Podgorica.

In August 2022, a gunman killed 10 people, including two children, before being shot dead.

After being cornered by officers near his home in the town, Martinovic tried to kill himself, then died of his wounds on the way to hospital in the early hours of yesterday, Scepanovic said.

"When commanded by officers to drop



Pedestrians are seen in the main promenade in Cetinje yesterday. - **AFP**

his weapon, he turned the gun against his body and fired," he said.

Police found an illegally owned handgun and 90 more rounds on Martinovic's body.

There were few people on the streets in Cetinje yesterday and all public venues were closed.

"It was dreadful. Such uncertainty, such fear among all the families in Cetinje. You didn't dare look through the window," 43-year-old resident Slavica Vusurovic told Reuters.

"When I...saw it on TV, I started crying," said Slobodan Matic, 64.

"To kill children...is completely senseless. That is not a crime, it is something

more than that," pensioner Danilo Zecevic told AFP in Cetinje.

In the evening, citizens started to gather in silence in the central part of Cetinje to light candles for the victims.

A similar gathering took place at Podgorica's main square on the evening.

Police said Martinovic had been drinking heavily.

In 2022, police found two airguns and a homemade bomb at his home.

He was sentenced to three months in jail but appealed and court proceedings were still ongoing at the time of the shooting.

He was also ordered to undergo psychiatric evaluation.

Spain's Canary Islands received record 46,843 migrants last year: ministry

A record 46,843 migrants reached Spain's Canary Islands illegally last year via the increasingly deadly Atlantic route, the second consecutive year of unprecedented arrival numbers, official data showed yesterday.

The landmark came as the European country received 63,970 irregular migrants last year, the vast majority in the Atlantic archipelago, up from 56,852 in 2023, the interior ministry said.

Spain has moved to the forefront of the European Union's migration crisis as tighter controls in the Mediterranean push more migrants to attempt the perilous trip from west Africa to the Canaries.

EU border agency Frontex has said irregular crossings into the bloc from January to November 2024 fell 40% overall but grew 19% on the Atlantic route, with Mali, Senegal and Morocco the most common nationalities.

Yesterday's figures confirmed data published in December that showed the record for annual migrant arrivals by boat in the Canaries had been broken for the second year running in November.

Last year's arrivals surpassed the 39,910 migrants who reached the islands off northwestern Africa by sea in 2023, a level that had smashed the previous record from 2006.

The national figure for 2024 fell short of the all-time record of 64,298 arrivals set in 2018 but exceeded the 56,852 migrants who reached Spain illegally the previous year.

A report last week by non-governmental organisation (NGO) Caminando Fronteras said at least 10,457 migrants died or disappeared while trying to reach



This picture taken in November last year shows a 'cayuco' boat from Senegal with 136 migrants onboard, including 40 women and 17 young children, after being rescued at sea by a Spanish Salvamento Maritimo (Sea Search and Rescue agency) vessel, at La Restinga port on the Canary island of El Hierro. - **AFP**

Spain by sea from January 1 to December 5, 2024.

Caminando Fronteras said it was a 50% increase on 2023 and the highest toll since its tallies began in 2007, attributing it to the use of ramshackle boats, dangerous waters and a lack of resources for rescues.

"The loss of a single life is a cause for sadness and we regret every one of them," the migration ministry told AFP in reaction to the report. "This government maintains a transversal policy that prioritises human rights and works in collaboration with other ministries and countries of origin and transit to promote regular and safe migration."

Local authorities in the Canaries say they are overwhelmed by the waves of arrivals, but Spain's

political parties have failed to agree on a plan to distribute thousands of unaccompanied minors nationwide to ease the burden.

Spain, a major gateway to Europe along with Italy and Greece, has emerged as an outlier on European migration policy despite the crisis.

Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez defends the necessity of migration to support the welfare state and workforce needs as Europe's population ages.

His successive leftist governments since 2018 have eased regularisation rules for illegal migrants in Spain, whereas far-right parties with anti-immigration platforms have surged in Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands and beyond. - **AFP**

EU migrant 'return hub' proposal could be pitched in March, says Sweden

Reuters
Stockholm

The European Union could submit a proposal as soon as March on the creation of so-called "return hubs" to expedite the removal of illegal migrants, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said yesterday.

He sketched out the potential timetable during a meeting in Vienna with Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer, a fellow conservative, in which both men urged the European Union to step up efforts to counter illegal immigration.

Growing support for hard and far-right parties across Europe has pushed immigration up the political agenda.

EU leaders said in October that they were considering a scheme under which migrants with no right to stay in the bloc could be sent to hubs in countries considered safe outside the EU.

Kristersson said he had discussed the scheme with the EU Commissioner for Migration,

Austria's Magnus Brunner, who had assured him a proposal would be forthcoming this spring.

That, Kristersson said, presumably meant sometime in March, according to the interpreter's translation of his remarks during a joint press conference with Nehammer.

"There is some momentum right now," Kristersson said.

Nehammer praised Kristersson for keeping immigration on the EU's agenda, and argued that there were now 18 countries within Europe's Schengen free travel area, including Switzerland and Norway, whose interests were aligned on curbing migrant flows.

The Austrian chancellor said that concerned governments had managed to "completely change" discussion around immigration so that countries with no external EU border, such as Austria, were now more involved in addressing the issue.

"Only when we recognise that the problem must be solved together do we have a chance of making progress," he said.

20 migrants missing as boat sinks off Italy

Seven migrants were rescued, but at least 20 are missing after their boat sank en route to Italy from Libya, the mayor of the Italian island of Lampedusa said on Wednesday. Amongst those saved was an eight-year-old Syrian boy, hoping to join his father who lives in Germany. He was accompanied by his mother on the perilous trip, but she has not been seen since the boat sank on Tuesday. Survivors, who were brought to Lampedusa, said the missing included five women and three children. "They didn't make it to shore. Knowing that these poor souls were so close, but couldn't make it is even more heartbreaking," said mayor Filippo Mannino. - **Reuters**



Speak kindly to the people

Islam encourages generosity, charity and competing in doing good deeds whether verbal or practical. Among the verbal good deeds is speaking kind words that do not harm. It is known that the words uttered by man are recorded and preserved in a book; My Lord neither errs nor forgets. This fact was stated in the Qur'an in the context of many situations and verses so that man may take himself to account and be mindful of his tongue. Allah The Exalted Says (what means):

- {Man does not utter any word except that with him is an observer prepared [to record].} [Qur'an 50:18]



- {Or do they think that We hear not their secrets and their private conversations? Yes, [We do], and Our messengers are with them recording.} [Qur'an 43:80]

There are many verses in this respect and the purpose is to make the slave realise that all that he utters is recorded - either for or against him. If he adheres to good words in all his conditions, nothing will be recorded in his book except goodness that pleases him on the Day of Resurrection and vice versa.

This is in compliance with the order of Allah The Almighty, Who Orders His slaves to select the best expressions and the most beautiful words as He Says (what means): {And speak to people good [words]} [Qur'an 2: 83], i.e. when you speak to one another in order to spread affinity, affection and the spirit of brotherhood and to remove the reasons of abandonment, severance and enmity. Yahya ibn Mu'aath Ar-Raazi, may Allah have mercy upon him, said: "Treat the believer in the following three manners in order to become among the good-doers; if you do not benefit him, do not harm him, if you do not please him, do not depress him and if you do not praise him, do not dispraise him."

Allah The Exalted Says (what

means): {And tell My servants to say that which is best. Indeed, Satan induces [dissension] among them. Indeed Satan is ever, to mankind, a clear enemy.} [Qur'an 17:53]

The prominent scholar 'Abdul-Rahmaan ibn Naasir As-Sa'di, may Allah have mercy upon him, said: "It is from the Kindness of Allah to His slaves that He ordered them to adhere to the best morals, deeds and words that bring about happiness in the life of this world and in the Hereafter. Allah The Almighty Says (what means): {tell My servants to say that which is best.} [Qur'an 17:53] This order encompasses all that may bring one closer to Allah The Almighty such as reciting the Qur'an, remembrance of Him, seeking and disseminating knowledge, enjoining good, forbidding evil and good gentle words to all creatures regardless of their different levels and ranks. If one is to choose between two matters, Allah The Almighty commands us to prefer the one that is the better of the two if it is difficult to combine both.

"Good words call to good morals and righteous deeds. He who is able to control his tongue is able to control all his affairs.

{Indeed, Satan induces [dissension] among them} means that Satan endeavours among slaves to corrupt their religion and life.

The only cure is not to obey him in speaking bad words that he calls them to and to soften their relations in order to suppress Satan, who induces dissension among them. He is their real enemy whom they should fight; he constantly calls on them {to be among the companions of the Blaze.} [Qur'an 35:6]

"Regarding their fellow Muslims, even if Satan induces dissension and seeks to spread enmity among them, they should strictly and firmly combat their enemy and suppress their souls that persistently enjoin evil through which Satan enters. In this way, they obey their Lord, their lives become upright and they are guided to the straight path." [Tafseer As-Sa'di]

The people most worthy of being treated with kindness and noble morals are one's parents, to whom Allah The Almighty enjoined dutifulness and kind treatment. This includes choosing good words when talking to them. Allah The Exalted Says (what means): {And your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age [while] with you, say not to them [so much as], "uff!" and do not rebel them but speak to them a noble word.} [Qur'an 17:23] Abu Hurairah, may Allah be pleased

with him, narrated that, "A man came to the Messenger of Allah, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam* (may Allah exalt his mention), and said, 'O Messenger of Allah! Who is the most entitled to my good companionship?' The Prophet said: 'Your mother.' The man said, 'Who is next?' The Prophet said: 'Your mother.' The man further said, 'Who is next?' The Prophet said: 'Your mother.' The man asked for the fourth time, 'Who is next?' The Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, said: 'Your father.'" [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]

In addition, 'Aa'ishah, may Allah be pleased with her, narrated that the Messenger of Allah, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, said: "I saw (in a dream) that I entered Paradise and heard in it a recitation (of Qur'an). I asked, 'Who is this?' And it was said, 'It is Haarithah ibn An-Nu'maan.' I said, 'This is (the reward of) kindness (toward parents); this is kindness.'" [Al-Haakim]

Many of our righteous predecessors were barely heard when talking to their mothers because they were keen to lower their voices out of politeness. How far removed were they from the young men and women nowadays, who treat their parents harshly, raise their voices at them, repel them and are unkind to them. They

harm them with their ill logic to the extent that whoever sees them without knowing that these are their parents may imagine that they are servants working for the children because of the harshness and the cruel words used by the children with their parents. We ask Allah The Almighty to guide them and us!

There is no doubt that soft words are needed also between spouses; as the base upon which houses are established is mercy and affection. Allah The Exalted Says (what means): {And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought.} [Qur'an 30:21]

Spouses must choose for the other the best words to communicate and express feelings of love and mercy towards each other. Consider this affectionate Hadith (narration) between the Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, and 'Aa'ishah, may Allah be pleased with her, the Mother of the Believers:

'Aa'ishah, may Allah be pleased with her, narrated that the Messenger of Allah said to her: "I know when you are pleased with me or angry with me? I said, 'How do you know that?' He said: 'When you are pleased with me, you say, "No, by the Lord of Muhammad," but when you are angry with me, you say, "No, by the Lord of Ibraaheem.'" Thereupon, I said, 'Yes (you are right), but by Allah, O Messenger of Allah, I leave nothing but your name.'" [Al-Bukhari and Muslim] What mercy is this and what great logic is this!

'Ubayd ibn 'Umayr said to 'Aa'ishah, may Allah be pleased with her, tell us about the most remarkable behaviour you saw from the Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*. She kept silent for a moment, then she said: "One night the Prophet, *sal-*

lallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said: 'O 'Aa'ishah, let me worship my Lord tonight! I said, 'By Allah, I love being near you and I love what pleases you.' He got up and purified himself. He stood up praying and he kept weeping till he wetted his lap, then he kept weeping till he wetted his beard and he kept weeping till he wetted the ground. Bilaal came to call for the prayer. When he saw him weeping, he said, 'O Messenger of Allah, why do you weep while Allah has forgiven you all that passed and all that is to come of your sins?' He replied: 'Should I not be a thankful slave? A verse was revealed to me tonight; woe to the one who reads it and does not reflect upon it, it is the verse (which means): {Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day are signs for those of understanding.} [Qur'an 3:190]" [Ibn Hibbaan] [Al-Albaani: Saheeh]

Dear brother and sister, make your tongue used to good words and know that Allah The Almighty does not allow the public mention of evil except in specific situations such as a genuine grievance. He Says (what means): {Allah does not like the public mention of evil except by one who has been wronged. And ever is Allah hearing and knowing.} [Qur'an 4:148] The Muslim should treat all people kindly, whether relatives or strangers, and get his tongue used to uttering good words and avoiding bad ones.

We ask Allah The Almighty and Exalted to help us obey and please Him, to guide us in all our words and deeds, to inspire us to utter the right words and protect us from errors in words and deeds out of His bounty and generosity.

Article source: <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/>



Thinking well of others relieves the heart

Nothing relieves the heart and makes one happy more than thinking well of others. It protects one from the harm of worrisome thoughts that disturb his peace of mind and exhaust the body. Thinking well of others leads to a sound heart, strengthens the ties of cordiality and love among the individuals of a community, and frees the hearts from hatred and rancour. The Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, said: "Beware of assumptions, for assumption is the falsest of speech, and do not be inquisitive, and do not spy upon one another, and do not vie with one another, and do not envy one another, and do not hate one another, and do not shun one another; be fellow-brothers and slaves of Allah."

If only the members of the Muslim community would adhere to this sublime behaviour, their enemies would never dare to attack them and their famous policy of "divide and rule" will never succeed because the hearts are united and the souls are pure.

Ways to think well of others

There are certainly many ways that a Muslim can think well of others; some of which are:

1- Supplication

Supplicating to Allah The Almighty is the gate to every goodness. The Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, would ask his Lord to grant him a sound heart.

2- Putting oneself in the place of others

If each one of us puts himself in the place of his brother when the latter does or says something, this will help him think well of others. Allah The Almighty directs His slaves to this meaning in the verse where He Says (what means): {Why, when you heard it [the falsehood against 'Ai'shah, may Allah be pleased with her], did not the believing men and believing women think good of one another?} [Qur'an 24:12] In another verse, Allah The Almighty makes the believers feel

as if they are one single entity, to the extent that when one of them meets his brother and greets him, it is as if he is greeting himself. Allah The Almighty Says (what means): {But when you enter houses, give greetings of peace upon yourselves - a greeting from Allah.} [Qur'an 24:61]

3- Interpreting the words of others in the best possible way

This was the habit of the righteous predecessors. 'Umar, may Allah be pleased with him, said: "Do not think ill of a word that your believing brother utters as long as it can be interpreted in a good way."

Imam Ash-Shafi'i, may Allah have mercy upon him, was ill once, and some of his brothers came to visit him; one of them said, "May Allah strengthen your weakness [He intended to supplicate to Allah in order to eliminate his weakness]." Ash-Shafi'i may Allah have mercy upon him said, "If Allah strengthens my weakness, it would kill me!" The man said, "By Allah, I intended nothing but goodness." Ash-Shafi'i, may Allah have mercy upon him, replied, "Even if you insulted me, I know that you sought goodness." Thinking well of others is true brotherhood.

4- Making excuses for others

When anyone says or does something that annoys or grieves one, he should try to find excuses for him and recall the status of the righteous who used to think well of their fellows and make excuses for them. They would say, "You should make seventy excuses for your brother." Ibn Seereen may Allah have mercy upon him said, "If you come to know that a brother has harmed you with either a word or a deed, you should make an excuse for him; if you did not find one, you should say, 'There may be an excuse that I do not know of.'" When you exert your utmost to make excuses for the words and deeds of others, you will save yourself the trouble of assuming and you will avoid blaming your fellows excessively.

5- Abstaining from judging the intentions of others

This is one of the greatest causes that help one think well of others. One leaves the intentions to the Only One who knows them: Allah The Almighty, for He did not command us to check each others' hearts and intentions, and thus we have to avoid harbouring ill-thoughts about others.

6- Recalling the harmful consequences of evil assumptions

The one who thinks ill of others lives in endless trouble and grief, to say nothing of the fact that he loses all those who socialise with him, even the closest people to him. It is natural that people make mistakes, even unintentionally. Accusing others along with thinking well of oneself is one of the evil consequences of thinking ill of others. This is one way a person may be guilty of ascribing purity to oneself that Allah The Exalted forbade in His Book. Allah The Almighty Says (what means): {So do not claim yourselves to be pure; He is most knowing of who fears Him.} [Qur'an 53:32] In another verse, Allah The Exalted criticises the Jews when they ascribed purity to themselves. Allah The Almighty Says (what means): {Have you not seen those who claim themselves to be pure? Rather, Allah purifies whom He wills, and injustice is not done to them, [even] as much as a thread [inside a date seed].} [Qur'an 4:49]

Thinking well of others requires extensive training and striving against one's self, particularly because the devil is inseparable from man like the blood that runs through his body. He never stops his attempts to sow dissension within the Muslims and stir up disputes among them. Thinking well of others is one of the greatest means to block this way before the devil.

Article source: <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/>

Are there meritorious characteristics specific to the month of Rajab?

Question: What is special about the month of Rajab? How authentic are the hadiths stating that actions are raised to Allah in this month?

Answer: Rajab is one of the sacred months about which Allah Almighty Says (what means): {Indeed, the number of months with Allah is 12 [lunar] months in the register of Allah [from] the day He created the heavens and the earth; of these, four are sacred.} [Qur'an 9: 36]

Rajab, which is called 'Rajab The Single', does not occur in sequence with the other three months that come in succession of one another (Thul-Qa'dah - Thul-Hijjah - Muharram). Rajab is also called 'Rajab of Mudhar' because the tribe of Mudhar used to venerate and respect it so much. It is narrated on the authority of Abu Bakrah, may Allah be pleased with him, that the Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, said: "Time has turned back to the same as it was on the day when Allah created the heavens and the earth. The year is 12 months, of which four months are sacred, three thereof come consecutively and these are Thul-Qa'dah, Thul-Hijjah and Muharram. Then, the fourth month is Rajab of Mudhar, which comes between Jumadah and Sha'ban. [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]

In Pre-Islamic era of ignorance, people used to offer sacrifices during this month as

an act of worship towards their idols. This type of sacrifice was called "Ateerah". When Islam came, it cancelled such a practice. The Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, said: "No Fara; No 'Ateerah!" [Al-Bukhari and Muslim] Also, there is no authentic evidence to support the observance of specific acts of worship in the month of Rajab, as believed by some people.

Shaykhul Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah, may Allah have mercy upon him, said: "There is no authentic statement by the Prophet, *sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam*, about the virtue of worship in Rajab. Rather, most of the *hadiths* in this regard are false." Ibn Hajar, may Allah have mercy upon him, says, "There is no authentic *hadith* that can be used as evidence of a special merit of the month of Rajab, of fasting it, of fasting certain days thereof, or of offering *Qiyam* (voluntary night prayer) prayer on a certain night thereof."

However, there is nothing wrong if a Muslim, during Rajab, observes the fasts that he regularly observes during other months. Examples include Mondays, Thursdays, the 13th, 14th, and 15th of every lunar month, and the habit of fasting every other day, provided that this is not done in this month in specific.

Allah Knows best.

Article source: <http://www.islamweb.net/emainpage/>

Reminders benefit the believers

When afflicted with fear or harm, a believer should compare between his fears and the favours and blessings of Allah The Almighty upon him -- whether religious or worldly.

When a person does such a comparison, he will certainly realise the blessings that he has and will see that the disadvantages seem negligible in comparison. As for one's fears and apprehensions, he should weigh the possibility of future mishaps not even occurring, and if this seems more likely, then he should not let the smaller possibility overtake the larger one in his mind. By doing this, one's fear and anxiety will disappear. If it seems like the evil that one

fears has more of a possibility of occurring than not, then one should prepare himself for it and strive to prevent it from occurring, or reduce its effects when it does.

A believer should realise verbal attacks will not hurt him, unless he allows himself to be affected by them. As the saying goes, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Indeed, the people who attack others in this manner are only harming themselves. Unless one pays attention to such people and allows them to hurt his feelings mere words will not harm anyone except the one who uses them to attack others; the best recourse in such cases is to ignore them.

Life is an extension of one's thoughts, so

if a believer's thoughts and ideas are those that bring benefit to him in this life and the Hereafter, then he will prosper and rejoice; otherwise, the opposite will be the case.

One of the most beneficial ways to get rid of grief is to train oneself not to seek appreciation from anyone except from Allah The Almighty.

Thus, when one is kind and generous to another person - regardless of whether that person is owed a favour or not - one should realise that he is in fact doing that particular action for the sake of Allah The Almighty (i.e., expecting reward from Him only), so one should be indifferent to receiving any appreciation in return for the favor. Allah The Almighty Says regarding

His close and special slaves (what means): {(Saying): We feed you seeking Allah's Countenance only. We wish for no reward, nor thanks from you.} [Qur'an 76:9] This applies even more when one is dealing with one's children, wife, or anyone else with whom one has a close relationship.

Remember that performing virtuous deeds brings comfort and joy, provided one performs that which he is capable of doing without overburdening himself to the extent that he cannot fulfil the deed.

Look at the bright side of any troubling issue and seek the silver lining instead of dwelling on the gloomy clouds.

Always have beneficial matters on your list of things to do, direct your attention

to them and strive to fulfil them. Stay away from harmful matters; by doing so one will keep himself from thinking about matters which will bring grief and sorrow.

Rest properly and concentrate on gathering your energies and thoughts before performing important tasks.

Finish your tasks on time and do not procrastinate or leave things to the last minute, because if tasks are not finished on time then they will keep getting added to those which need to be done in the future and accumulate to the point where they become a great burden.

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Ban solar geoengineering

We have grown up in a world where climate change is apparent everywhere. We see it in our stormy skies and in the floodwaters inundating our communities. We feel it in our throats and lungs when we inhale polluted air, and on our skin as we walk down the street during heat waves. World leaders would convene every year to make decisions and deals, compromises and commitments, always falling far short of delivering what was needed to mitigate and, increasingly, to adapt to climate change. This year's United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) was no exception.

All this inertia has spurred some to try to find a way around the hard work of ending harmful greenhouse-gas emissions, protecting critical ecosystems, and rethinking economic growth and development. One proposed "solution", being pushed by a small but vocal minority in the Global North, is solar geoengineering, which involves modifying Earth's atmosphere to create a reflective barrier against the sun's radiation. For today's youth and future generations, however, such interventions threaten to be as catastrophic as climate change.

Solar geoengineering can take many forms, including the release of huge amounts of sulphur particles into the stratosphere to create a reflective barrier against sunlight (stratospheric aerosol injection) and the injection of salt spray into shallow marine clouds (marine cloud brightening). But it never addresses the root causes of the climate crisis, and it involves modifying our planet's atmosphere in ways that cannot be adequately tested at scale, with effects that will last decades or longer.

Geoengineering research has always been controversial for precisely these reasons. Countless scientists and experts have warned that the approach could cause far-reaching unintended consequences. Studies show, for example, that it could disrupt climate and weather patterns, leading to severe droughts, hurricanes, and other extreme weather. These risks are unpredictable, and their effects would be unequally distributed.

Over 2,000 civil-society organisations and 540 academics have called for an International Non-Use Agreement on Solar Geoengineering

countries nurtured a deadly phenomenon, the burden of which is falling disproportionately on vulnerable communities, and now they propose a highly risky strategy that, even in the best-case scenario, would not solve the problem.

None of these objections has prevented millions of dollars from being funnelled – largely by tech and finance billionaires – into solar geoengineering initiatives. Proponents suggest that such initiatives are a temporary fix, a way to buy more time for mitigation and adaptation. To us, such statements sound like dangerous castles in the air – appealing but illusory.

It is far more likely that solar geoengineering would provide an excuse for the world's major emitters not to end their fossil-fuel addiction. This compounds the threat of a "termination shock": if solar-geoengineering efforts were abruptly halted, rapid warming would ensue. Future generations – including today's young people – would thus have to confront dangerous spikes in temperature and far more acute crises than those we face now.

If nothing else, we will be the ones footing the bill for the economic and societal transformation that climate change demands – a transformation that is not receiving adequate investment today. Advocates of solar geoengineering like to frame it as a "cheap" solution, but diverting resources from initiatives that we know work – and do not risk the health of our planet – cannot possibly be considered sound financial management. Instead, it amounts to offloading the hard work of addressing the carbon debt onto our generation and those that follow us.

That is why a full ban on solar geoengineering is in order. More than 2,000 civil-society organisations, including Fridays For Future, and over 540 academics have called for an International Non-Use Agreement on Solar Geoengineering. Countries on the front lines of the climate crisis, such as Vanuatu and others, have similarly opposed the use of such technologies.

Some loud – and, no doubt, well-funded – voices might accuse opponents of being closed-minded, suggesting that we should be more willing to engage in dialogue on the topic. But this is merely a ploy to dismiss a position backed by ample research. The small group of well-funded young individuals advocating research into solar geoengineering are often connected to organisations known for promoting these controversial technologies, raising the suspicion that they are being co-opted to give solar geoengineering the guise of youth support.

The last thing young people need is to be left shouldering the responsibility of yet another crisis we did not create. But that is precisely what solar geoengineering would most likely mean. Pursuing it amounts to a profound generational betrayal. – Project Syndicate



Why politics of hope stands out as best hope for people

By Ngairé Woods
Oxford

In a year in which political incumbents around the world were either voted out of office or forcibly removed from power, one statement, repeated in various forms by Mohammad al-Gergawi, the United Arab Emirates' Minister of Cabinet Affairs, stands out: "The role of government is to design a future which gives citizens hope." Looking ahead to 2025, political leaders should take this message to heart and shift their focus from constant crisis management to crafting a bold, hopeful agenda.

The global anti-incumbent wave has been breathtaking. In March, Senegalese President Macky Sall was decisively defeated after trying and failing to postpone the presidential election. In June, the African National Congress – which had ruled South Africa since the end of apartheid – lost its majority for the first time in three decades, forcing the party to form a coalition government. The same month, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) also lost its parliamentary majority.

This trend continued through the summer and fall. In July, the Labour Party won the United Kingdom's general election in a landslide, ending the Conservative Party's 14-year rule. In October, Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lost its majority for the first time since 2009. Then, earlier last month, Michel Barnier became the first French Prime Minister to be ousted by a no-confidence vote since 1962. A few days later, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost a vote

of confidence, paving the way for an early election, while Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sacked his finance minister, plunging his country into political uncertainty.

Other established leaders were ousted by popular uprisings. In August, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled the country aboard a military helicopter as protesters stormed her official residence. And, of course, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was forced to flee to Russia after his regime collapsed earlier last month.

Why are incumbents losing? One possible explanation is social media. Studies have shown that increased internet access often erodes trust in government and deepens political polarisation. In the United States, for example, Democratic and Republican-leaning voters have become increasingly polarised, with each side becoming more deeply entrenched in its partisanship.

Social media fosters connection between people who consume similar content, reinforcing their worldviews and amplifying the psychological effect known as "conformity". Social media algorithms act as powerful megaphones for simple, emotionally charged messages, making these platforms fertile ground for conspiracy theories and fearmongering.

But while early evidence suggests that social media bolsters support for far-right populists, recent election results show that this is not always enough to gain power. In Mexico, Spain, Greece, Ireland, the UK, Japan, and South Africa, incumbents or other mainstream parties emerged victorious, albeit significantly weakened.

Consequently, one clear takeaway from this historic election year is that governments must learn to use social media more effectively. A good place to start is to engage directly with voters' concerns. Earlier last year, two advisers to Keir Starmer visited the town of Grimsby in northeastern England and asked residents to describe the government in one word. The responses they received mirror what I have heard in many other countries: "irrelevant", "authoritarian", "distant", "elitist", "inaccessible", "self-serving", "unambitious", "untrustworthy", a "joke".

Another major takeaway is that to restore trust, leaders should focus on economic growth and citizens' empowerment. A comprehensive 2022 study of the political economy of populism highlights strong evidence that economic conditions, such as rising unemployment and cuts to social spending, have a profound impact on people's views of government.

This helps explain why voters in Spain and Greece in 2023, and Ireland last year, chose to re-elect incumbent leaders, while French voters rejected the ruling party. In 2022, Spain's economy grew by 5.7%, and Greece's by 6.2%. By contrast, in Germany, which will hold an early election after the government lost a parliamentary no-confidence vote, the economy shrank by 0.3% in 2023 and is expected to contract by 0.1% in 2024. France fared slightly better, with GDP projected to grow by 1.1% this year, after growing by 0.9% in 2023.

Beyond boosting short-term economic growth, political leaders must consider the future they are offering their citizens. Too many

politicians' and policymakers' plans are limited to annual budget cycles and focused largely on cuts. Meanwhile, voters – grappling with rising living costs, post-pandemic austerity, and a pervasive sense that they have lost control over their lives – need leaders who give them reasons for hope.

Budgetary constraints should not be an excuse for failing to envision a better future. Some of the boldest government initiatives have been conceived during times of economic hardship. Notable examples include US President Franklin D Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, Britain's postwar welfare state, Dubai's post-1958 infrastructure boom, and Singapore's rapid development after 1959.

Political leaders must draw inspiration from these bold programmes and be more ambitious in addressing the root causes of their citizens' frustrations. The good news is that every country and community has creative individuals – both in the private and public sectors – whose work requires them to think ahead and plan for the future. Leaders must identify and reach out to such visionaries, who are rarely included in policy discussions, and leverage their expertise.

Politics of hope is essential to restoring faith in democratic institutions. In Grimsby, local residents said they longed for politics that is "realistic", "meaningful", "passionate", "hopeful", and "empowering". A government that can fulfil these aspirations will prove itself worthy of its citizens' trust. – Project Syndicate

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Public guarantees would boost European green industry

By Doris Hafenbradl
Munich

Over the past two years, the European Union has made scaling up its cleantech sector a high priority. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has emphasised, the sector is essential to the bloc's economic competitiveness, energy security, and industrial leadership.

The EU has an innovation edge in several clean technologies, from green hydrogen to long-duration energy storage. But it is difficult to achieve commercial scale for these technologies on the continent. An investment gap of around €50bn (\$52bn) must be filled to manufacture, by 2030, at least 40% of the solar and wind devices, batteries, heat pumps, hydrogen electrolyzers, and carbon capture and storage technology the EU must deploy.

When he presented his recent landmark report on European competitiveness, former Italian prime minister Mario Draghi succinctly summed up the problem: "There are too many barriers to commercialising innovations and scaling them up in the European Union." In particular, the EU needs to develop new production methods and new methods of financing the construction of "first of a kind" plants, which require long lead



times, access to large amounts of capital, and highly skilled labour.

The US and China, recognising that green industries can generate jobs and prosperity, have channelled billions of dollars into these sectors. US President Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, which offers tax credits for domestic cleantech production, is expected to unlock upwards of \$3tn in private investment

over the next decade, according to analysis by Goldman Sachs. China, for its part, has heavily subsidized its solar industry, among others.

The EU lacks the fiscal firepower of China and the US. So, instead of building these industries through generous subsidies and tax incentives, European policymakers must use government funds in a way that will crowd in private

capital. That is where public guarantees come in.

Customers often expect companies selling technology that is unproven at commercial scale to issue extensive warranties in case the product does not perform as advertised. These warranties are backed by bank guarantees, for which firms are required to hold full collateral. But cleantech companies need

comparatively high levels of investment to develop and expand their businesses, and holding large amounts of cash as collateral locks up capital that could be better spent building additional facilities, hiring and training workers, and fulfilling customer orders.

To ease this burden, the public sector could provide counter-guarantees, promising to reimburse part of any payout that a bank makes to a customer. Industry experts have advocated this instrument as a way to decarbonise energy-intensive industries and derisk investments in clean technologies. It also featured prominently in Draghi's report, which calls on the EU to increase substantially "the use of guarantees...in support of strategic sectors of the economy."

Public guarantees have already proven effective in scaling up cleantech innovation in Europe. In 2022, Bpifrance, the French public investment bank, guaranteed €51mn of financing for Verkor, a French battery manufacturer. The guarantee helped Verkor secure private investment and a commitment from Renault to source electric-vehicle batteries from the firm, enabling it to break ground on its first gigafactory, in Dunkirk.

These guarantees are highly efficient, with each euro of public money unlocking up to thousands of euros of working capital for

innovators. For example, a €5bn guarantee facility created by the European Investment Bank for companies in the wind sector will support up to €80bn of new investment in this important renewable energy source.

Moreover, taxpayer money is spent only if a claim ends up being made, and the available evidence suggests that this is a rare occurrence. The International Chamber of Commerce estimates that the average loss rate for guarantees is between 0.2% and 1.7%. While the risk is higher for innovative technologies, it is a risk worth taking in order to support climate solutions that could reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and create green jobs and future tax revenues.

One positive development is that the EIB has proposed a €500mn counter-guarantee instrument for cleantech companies, pending approval by its board of directors in early 2025. If the EIB turns this pledge into a reality, some of the EU's most promising cleantech companies will likely achieve financial viability, which would benefit the bloc's economic competitiveness and be a boon for the planet. - Project Syndicate

• Doris Hafenbradl is Chief Technology Officer and Managing Director of Electrochaeta, a startup offering a power-to-methane solution for energy storage.

Inside luxury goods' broken audit system

By Elisa Anzolin, Emilio Parodi and Silvia Ognibene (Reuters)
Milan

LVMH-owned Dior's production arm in Italy, Manufactures Dior, relied on formal inspections to assess working and safety standards inside its supply chain in 2023. In some cases, such certifications missed glaring problems, a Reuters review of unpublished court documents has found. AZ Operations, a sub-contractor of Manufactures Dior tasked with the production of leather items and based near Italy's fashion capital Milan, was accused by Italian prosecutors in June of being a front for an operation that exploited workers.

However, AZ Operations passed two environmental and social inspections in 2023, in January and July, according to unpublished audit documents reviewed by Reuters. Widespread Milan investigations have uncovered malpractice inside the Italian luxury goods supply chain of Dior, Giorgio Armani and Alviero Martini last year, Reuters has previously reported.

The audit papers, along with court documents, Reuters interviews with more than two dozen luxury sector workers, auditors, supply chain managers, suppliers, lawyers, industry experts, executives and trade union representatives reveal the pervasiveness of ineffective checks of social and environmental standards inside Italy's sprawling luxury supply chain.

In the case of AZ Operations, a three-page assessment on letterhead from compliance management company Fair Factories Clearinghouse (FFC), carried out by monitor Adamo Adriano on Jan 18, 2023, stated that AZ Operations did not have sub-contractors. The audit listed no irregularities.

In July 2023, a further audit by Davide Albertario Milano srl, a large direct supplier of Manufactures Dior that worked with AZ Operations, also found "no non-conformities" and certified the work was carried out to a high standard and in accordance with contractual terms.

Despite passing the audits, a police investigation into its 2023 activities found AZ Operations was "de facto non-existent", according to Milan court documents.

Furthermore, police inspections in April 2024 alleged the company was a front for a separate business, New Leather Italy, that exploited undocumented workers in sweatshop-like conditions, the same documents showed. That discovery was one of the factors that prompted Milan's prosecutors to put Manufactures Dior under



A Dior sign is seen in a shop with the Church of Santissima Trinita dei Monti and the Spanish Steps in the background, in Rome.



A person walks with a Dior shopping bag and a dog in Rome.

court administration in June.

Dior and LVMH did not respond to multiple requests for comment about Reuters' findings, including the audits, and on the process to inspect external manufacturers in Italy.

In a July statement following revelations from the Milan prosecutors' inquiries, Dior said it firmly condemned illegal practices discovered at two of its contractors, saying such unworthy acts contradicted "its values and the code of conduct signed by these suppliers." "Aware of the gravity of the violations committed by these suppliers and the improvements to be made to its checks and procedures, the house of Dior is collaborating with the designated Italian administrator and the Italian authorities," the French brand also said at the time.

Dior added in the statement that its teams were working intensely to reinforce the existing procedures: "Despite regular audits, these two suppliers had evidently succeeded in hiding these practices." After this article was published, FFC-owner Worldly responded to Reuters queries saying it had never offered facility auditing services to Worldly or FFC users, adding it asks that customers enlist external verifiers to ensure impartial, transparent audits. "Regarding the letterhead in the court documents, this is a template available to customers within the FFC platform," Worldly added in its statement.

Adamo Adriano did not respond to Reuters attempts to reach them. Davide Albertario did not respond to queries by Reuters on inspections at AZ Operations. New Leather Italy did not reply to a Reuters request for comment.

Global luxury groups including LVMH usually outsource most of their production to a myriad of external contractors, industry experts say.

Many are based in Italy, famed for its artisanal skills and accounting for between 50% and 55% of the global production of



Yohana Retno shows her collection of luxury shoes and handbags in her home in Malang in East Java province, on March 8, 2012, in this file photo.

luxury clothing and leather goods, consultancy Bain calculates.

"No matter how many controls we do, there is always something we miss," Renzo Rosso, founder of Italian fashion group OTB, which makes Diesel clothing, told a business event in September, in reference to the complexity of overseeing Italy's supply chain.

Despite the risks, insiders and experts told Reuters relying on suppliers is a deliberate strategy to keep costs down and manage demand.

"The fashion business model is driven by cost-reduction tactics, leading fashion brands to switch suppliers," said Hakan Karaosman, Associate Professor at Cardiff University, whose research focuses on supply chain sustainability.

Even though Dior did not directly abuse workers, the mechanism of labour exploitation "was culpably fuelled by Manufactures Dior srl which...did not carry out effective inspections or audits over the years to ascertain the actual working conditions and environment," Milan prosecutors said in the June court documents.

Currently, there is no firm legal requirement in Italy for luxury groups to audit their suppliers. But poor oversight can clash

with sustainability claims made to investors and consumers over craftsmanship and corporate and social responsibility standards, leading to reputational risks and in some cases civil liability if workers' exploitation is found within the supply chain.

LVMH, for example, said in its 2023 Social and Environmental Responsibility Report it "endeavours to ensure its suppliers and their service providers uphold human rights and to support them with applying the best possible employment, health and safety conditions". The investigations into Italy's luxury supply chain have prompted some LVMH shareholders to ask the \$330bn behemoth, owned by French billionaire Bernard Arnault, to better monitor how its contractors treat workers.

LVMH told a group of investors in November it was auditing all of its direct suppliers and immediate contractors. In a subsequent statement to Reuters in November, LVMH said it had conducted more than 2,600 on-site audits globally this year. Italy's antitrust authority said in July it was investigating whether Dior and Armani have misled consumers.

In July, Armani expressed

and may not collect documents that are not spontaneously submitted by suppliers, two Italy-based luxury supply chain auditors told Reuters.

The time allocated for on-site inspections is often too short to examine documents and interview employees, these people said.

Five Tuscany-based luxury chain workers employed at separate workshops serving major brands confirmed to Reuters workshop owners knew in advance of the audits and would clear their premises and prep staff on what answers to give monitoring teams on the day of an inspection.

All declined to be named for fear of losing their job.

"We used to say we only worked four hours a day, as per our (formal) part-time contract," said Pakistani-born Abbas, who works in the leathermaking hub of Prato.

"But how could they think we were making 1,300 bags a day with 50 workers employed only four hours a day?" Abbas, who said he worked 14 hours a day, six days a week, added.

On the day of the audit, employees with part-time contracts were asked to leave as soon as they finished their formal shift, but had to come back and continue work after the auditors left, he added.

Another worker, also from Pakistan and employed at a separate leather workshop in the Florence area, said factory owners warned workers when the inspection would take place and asked them to lie about their working hours. Fabio Roia, President of the Court of Milan, told Reuters that companies don't invest enough in their control systems and don't normally question the extremely cheap prices contractors offer to provide goods or services. Small fashion brand Alviero Martini, famed for leather bags decorated with geographical map patterns, was also targeted by the Italian inquiries for allegedly sub-contracting work to Chinese-owned firms in Italy that mistreated workers. The Alviero Martini group was "careful in selecting direct suppliers... but the use of sub-suppliers was not actually checked properly", Ilaria Ramoni, who served as court administrator overseeing its operations until October, said in an interview.

The group, which is no longer under court administration, did not respond to a request for comment. It stated in September it was unaware of the illegal behaviour occurring within its supply chain.

Dior and Armani are still under special judicial oversight as part of the Milan's investigation into labour exploitation.

Al Jasra Cultural Club launches new digital platforms

By **Tawfik Lamari**
Staff Reporter

Al Jasra Cultural and Social Club, affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, has announced the launch of its new digital platforms at the beginning of 2025, as part of ongoing efforts to employ technology to promote Qatari heritage and interact with a diverse global audience.

The project highlights Qatari culture by

providing distinctive content on various aspects of local arts and Qatari heritage.

These digital platforms will enable the most wonderful Qatari cultural images to be displayed before global cultural institutions, contributing to enhancing cultural exchange and openness to other societies.

The project includes a number of axes, including broadcasting cultural weeks, in which the club revives, through its digital platforms, memories of cultural weeks that were held in global capitals and cities dur-

ing the 1990s, allowing the public to explore Qatari heritage in a new way.

This project, the club said, is an important step in transmitting Qatari culture from local forums to the international arena through the tools of the digital age.

Meanwhile, Al Jasra Cultural Club continues to present its intellectual content through its cultural salon, with a new lecture by Dr Sharif Shukran tomorrow on "Biological Communication through Silent Dialogue".



Sealine desert transforms into hub of family fun

By **Joey Aguilar**
Staff Reporter

The Visit Qatar Sealine season kicks off today, transforming the desert landscape into a hub of family-friendly activities – set against the backdrop of Qatar's stunning desert landscape and running until January 27.

According to Visit Qatar, the nearly month-long event is packed with diverse attractions, including live music concerts, a unique Kite Festival, thrilling drone shows, and a classic car showcase.

Visitors can embark on outdoor adventures such as ATV rides, safari tours, and horseback riding.

Those seeking a cultural immersion can participate in calligraphy workshops and falconry displays, while families will find plenty to explore in dedicated zones, competitions, and the breathtaking Friday night fireworks.

"The gorgeous Sealine will be transformed into a hub of family-friendly happenings that incorporate cutting-edge amenities and tailored experiences, offering



visitors a unique blend of adventure and comfort." Visit Qatar said, noting that the event is designed to allow visitors to connect with Qatar's Bedouin heritage while enjoying luxurious desert experiences.

Visit Qatar noted that the schedule is packed with events: concerts will take place on January 3 and 10, while fireworks will light up the desert every Friday, in addition to

daily shows, roaming entertainment acts, and DJ performances.

Food enthusiasts can enjoy "Chef on Fire" demonstrations every Thursday and Friday.

The Kite Festival will take to the skies on January 16-18, followed by drone shows on January 23-24.

Classic car aficionados can look forward to the car show on January 24.



The event is designed to allow visitors to connect with Qatar's Bedouin heritage while enjoying luxurious desert experiences. Visitors can also embark on outdoor adventures such as ATV rides, safari tours, and horseback riding. - Screenshots from Visit Qatar website

Beyond the entertainment, Visit Qatar added that this one-of-its-kind activation also features interactive cooking competitions and an environmental area presented by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, where visitors can learn about Qatar's national animal, the oryx.

For those seeking further adventure, fishing and boat trips, along

with hot air balloon flights, are also available.

According to Visit Qatar, the activation provides a unique chance to experience Qatari culture on the edge of the desert.

With a focus on creating tailored experiences and incorporating modern amenities, the Sealine activation is aimed at providing an unforgettable experience for fami-

lies and individuals alike.

The Sealine Village can be easily accessed by car: From Doha, drivers should follow Salwa Road (Route 55) southwest and continue until reaching the Mesaieed/Sealine Beach turnoff.

Merging onto Route 55A will lead through Mesaieed City, and following signs for Sealine Beach will direct them to the Sealine Village.



Haddad Al Tahadi championship continues

Pictured are some moments from the Haddad Al Tahadi Championship at the 16th edition of the Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2025). Held under the patronage of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani and supported by the Social and Sports Activities Support Fund, the festival runs until February 1 and is organised by Al Gannas Qatari Society in Sabkhat Marmi, the Sealine Area.



QF's Ability Friendly Programme and Qatar Paralympic Committee co-host swimming competition

Qatar Foundation (QF)'s Ability Friendly Programme (AFP), in collaboration with the Qatar Paralympic Committee, has hosted its first swimming competition for individuals with disabilities.

The inaugural competition, held at the QF, showcased the talents of 62 swimmers from the AFP.

The event provided a platform for participants to demonstrate their skills in a supportive and competitive environment, reinforcing the QF's dedication to fostering inclusion and personal growth.

"Participating in competitions not only enhances athletes' technical abilities and knowledge but also contributes to their social development and personal growth," said AFP sports coach Rodesa Comendador. "We are committed to supporting all AFP participants and providing more opportunities for them to excel in the future."

"The Ability Friendly Programme's goal is to advance the



accessibility movement across all sports," she said. "We offer competitive opportunities, host tournaments, and organise races."

"We've also enhanced our coach education programmes and engaged volunteers to support people with disabilities in our sports activities, aiming to prepare specialised coaches to meet

their needs in various disciplines," Comendador added.

In addition to swimming, the AFP offers football programmes and specialised camps, and is collaborating with partners to introduce more initiatives and activities.

Efforts are underway to expand into basketball, golf, equine

Some of the winners of the competition.



therapy, and a specialised sensory crafts programme.

The AFP is also preparing to host a nationwide competition for Qatar National Sport Day 2025, inviting clubs across Qatar to register their swimmers.

"This swimming competition is just the beginning," said Comendador. "As we continue to

grow, we are committed to creating more opportunities for individuals with disabilities to thrive in sports, both competitively and recreationally."

Through its ongoing expansion and dedication to fostering accessibility, the AFP is helping to create a space where everyone can excel, grow, and connect.

Recently, it expanded its reach, with classes now offered twice weekly in Al Khor and Al Wakra, alongside the six-day-per-week schedule at Education City.

The Ability Friendly Programme, a QF initiative, is committed to promoting inclusion in sports and creating opportunities for people with disabilities.