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Alcohol should have cancer warning label: US surgeon general

The United States' top government doctor yesterday called for health warnings on alcoholic drinks to highlight that they cause cancer and urged a reassessment of daily consumption limits due to the risks. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said that the connection between alcohol and cancer has been known since the 1980s, with mounting evidence reinforcing the dangers. Yet, mandatory warning labels fail to address the health threat. "Alcohol is a well-established, preventable cause of cancer, responsible for about 100,000 cancer cases and 20,000 cancer deaths annually in the United States," Murthy said in a statement, emphasising that this toll exceeds the approximately 13,500 alcohol-related traffic fatalities each year. (AFP) **Page 6**

Trump complains over flags at half-staff

President-elect Donald Trump complained yesterday that American flags would still be lowered to half-staff in honour of the late President Jimmy Carter during Trump's Jan 20 inauguration. President Joe Biden ordered flags lowered to half-staff for 30 days from the day of Carter's death on Dec 29, as is custom when a US president dies. Trump took issue in a Truth Social post yesterday with the flags remaining in the mourning position during his swearing-in ceremony. "The Democrats are all 'giddy' about our magnificent American Flag potentially being at 'half mast' during my Inauguration," Trump said.

SKorean investigators quit bid to arrest Yoon

South Korean investigators abandoned their attempt to arrest impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol at his residence yesterday over a failed martial law bid, citing safety concerns after a stand-off with his security team. Yoon, who has already been suspended from duty by lawmakers, would become the first sitting president in South Korean history to be arrested if the warrant is carried out. The president, who issued a bungled declaration on December 3 that shook the vibrant East Asian democracy and briefly lurched it back to the dark days of military rule, faces imprisonment or, at worst, the death penalty. (AFP) **Page 7**

UN Council discusses Israeli attacks on Gaza health facilities

QNA
New York

The UN Security Council (UNSC) held a meeting to discuss Israeli attacks on health facilities in the Gaza Strip.

During the meeting, the Council heard testimonies from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the World Health Organisation representative in the West Bank and Gaza.

The meeting was held at the invitation of Algeria, which holds the presidency of the UN Security Council during the current month of January.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said in his statement to the Security Council that a human rights catastrophe continues in Gaza before the eyes of the world. He added that Israel's methods of war have led to the killing of tens of thousands of people and widespread displacement and destruction, raising serious concerns about compliance with international law.

Turk referred to a recent report issued by his office covering the period from October 7, 2023-June 30, 2024, which documented a pattern of attacks on hospitals, starting with Israeli air strikes followed by ground forces incursions and the detention of some patients and staff, leaving hospitals unable to function. He stressed that protecting hospitals during wars is of utmost importance and must be respected by all parties at all times.

The UN official referred to the destruction caused by the Israeli army attacks last Friday to Kamal Adwan Hospital, the last operating hospital in northern Gaza, and said that this reflects the approach of attacks documented in the report of the UN Human Rights Office.

He pointed out that some staff and patients were forced to leave the hospital, while others, including the hospital director, were detained amidst many reports of torture and ill-treatment.

Turk stressed the need for military operations to always distinguish between military targets and civilians, and to adhere to the basic principles of distinction between targets, proportionality, and taking precautions when launching attacks. He said that failure to respect these principles is a violation of international humanitarian law, adding that deliberately launching attacks on hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are treated - given that they are not military targets - is a war crime.

The Human Rights Commissioner added that committing these acts as part of a widespread or systematic attack on a civilian population may also amount to crimes against humanity.

For his part, WHO Representative in the occupied Palestinian territory, Dr Rik Peepkorn, summarised the situation in Gaza by saying that about 7% of the Strip's population has been killed or injured since October 2023. **To Page 3**



UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk appears in a video link to brief the first meeting of the UN Security Council of 2025 on the situation in the Middle East including the Palestinian question at UN headquarters in New York City yesterday.



Palestinian children salvage a blanket amid the destruction in the aftermath of an Israeli strike in the al-Maghazi refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip yesterday.

Israeli air strikes kill dozens in Gaza

AFP
Gaza Strip

Gaza's civil defence agency said around 30 people were killed in Israeli bombardments yesterday.

"Friday was a harsh day for the residents of Gaza, particularly in Gaza City, due to the continual Israeli bombardment," civil defence spokesman Mahmud Bassal told AFP.

He said several children were among the dead.

Seven people were killed in an Israeli strike in the Shujaiya neighbourhood of Gaza City, Bassal said.

The Israeli air force struck about 40 targets in Gaza over the previous 24 hours.

Bassal accused the Israeli military of "preventing food and drinking water from reaching dozens of medical staff, patients and wounded" at the Indonesian Hospital in the northern town of Beit Lahia.

He said the hospital had been sending out distress calls since Thursday, adding that it was now "just a pile of rubble and walls. There's no hospital".

On Sunday, a UN team visited the Indonesian Hospital.

"Around me there's nothing but rubble and destruction," UN aid official Jonathan Whittall said in a video released after the visit.

Israel's military has repeatedly accused Hamas of using hospitals as command centres, an allegation Hamas denies.

A report published by the UN human rights office on Tuesday said "insufficient information" has been made available to substantiate "vague" Israeli accusations of military use of hospitals.

As violence raged in the Gaza Strip, Hamas said indirect negotiations with Israel were to resume for a truce and hostage release deal.

Hamas said the talks would "focus on ensuring the agreement leads to a complete cessation of hostilities (and) the withdrawal of occupation forces".

Mediators Qatar, Egypt and the US have been engaged in months of back-and-forth talks between Israel and Hamas. A key obstacle to a deal has been Israel's reluctance to agree to a lasting ceasefire.

UN human rights experts said on Monday that the north Gaza "siege" appears to be part of an effort "to permanently displace the local population as a precursor to Gaza's annexation".

Bassal estimated that 10,000 people remained in the northern towns of Jabalia, Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun, down from between 150,000 and 200,000 before the war.

Israel's military campaign has killed at least 45,658 Palestinians in Gaza, the majority of them civilians, according to figures from the Hamas-run territory's health ministry which the UN considers reliable.

The UN yesterday decried that infants and others were freezing to death in Gaza, where it said an estimated 945,000 people still need help to shelter from winter conditions.

With children dying of hypothermia, the United Nations' migration agency said it was deeply alarmed by the "devastating impact" of winter rains and freezing temperatures on displaced Palestinians, which were "adding to the unparalleled humanitarian catastrophe" in the Gaza Strip.

Heavy rains and flooding have overwhelmed displacement sites and makeshift shelters, while families are left exposed to harsh conditions, struggling to repair tents damaged from months of use, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said. **Page 3**

'Most patients felt better after treatment by ambulance team'

Vast majority of patients have chosen not to go to the hospital after emergency procedures conducted by ambulance crew at the scene of the incident due to the significant improvement in their condition after receiving the initial treatment, a recent study has revealed.

The study employed a qualitative analysis method, conducting phone interviews with 210 patients who requested pre-hospital emergency care from Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) ambulance service between June 15 and August 1, 2023, but opted not to be transported to the hospital.

Participants in the study, which explored patient well-being following their decision not to be transported to the hospital after an emergency call, reported improvements such as pain relief, cessation of bleeding, stabilisation of vital signs, and overall symptom improvement. They also expressed a high level of satisfaction with the services provided by the ambulance service of HMC.

The study was published on the QScience platform, an online resource by Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press, specialised in pub-

lishing high-quality scientific research with global academic publishing standards.

Local Arabic daily *Arrayah* reported the study found that after declining to move to the hospital, over 73% of participants chose not to seek additional medical care and remained at home following such initial treatment. A small percentage (3%) called the emergency number 999 again after their initial refusal, indicating that their symptoms either did not improve or worsened, necessitating further attention. Around 20.5% of the participants sought other healthcare options, such as the primary healthcare centres or private clinics, using various transportation methods like private vehicles or ride-sharing services.

Regarding service satisfaction, the study reported that the vast majority (93.75%) expressed high satisfaction, with only a very small percentage (1.03%) expressing dissatisfaction. Language barriers were rarely an issue, with 90.63% of participants reporting no communication challenges, reflecting a generally smooth interaction with emergency services.

The study highlighted five key themes:

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motivations for using emergency services, reasons for declining going to hospital, subsequent steps after declining moving to the hospital, satisfaction with the service, and language barriers.

Common reasons for emergency calls included pain-related issues such as dental problems, headaches, abdominal pain, and musculoskeletal discomfort. Minor injuries, particularly those resulting from traffic accidents, falls, and cuts, were also prevalent. The study noted that these findings agree with the previous researches indicating that most emergency calls are related to low-risk cases. General health concerns like fever,

dizziness, and vomiting were less frequent but still notable, alongside rare but significant cases like pregnancy complications and renal colic.

Mental health issues, including anxiety, seizures, and dizziness, were also reported, reflecting the growing role of ambulance teams in the mental health care. Cardiovascular problems, such as high blood pressure and palpitations, were noted in some cases. Respiratory issues, including asthma and allergic reactions, were also common, supporting earlier studies indicating that respiratory problems are among the leading causes of emergency calls.

The study stressed that the ambulance service provides life-saving care to patients with critical conditions, including heart attacks, strokes, seizures, choking, chest pain, loss of consciousness, difficulty breathing, and severe allergic reactions.

The ambulance service receives around 1,200 calls daily, deploying ambulances from 57 base points. Statistics indicate that around 20% of calls received through the National Command Centre for ambulance services involve minor cases.



Participants in the programme.



Some of the presenters at the event.

QF students share stories of creativity, breaking barriers at TEDx-style event

Qatar Foundation (QF)'s Education City high school students presented nine inspiring talks through 'Ru'ya', a TEDx-style event showcasing their creativity, passion, and growth with impactful stories. Among the speakers, Grade 12 students Almayasa al-Wadaani and Hussein al-Lami shared their journey of starting businesses while still in school.

"People often say you need to wait until you're older to start something meaningful," said al-Lami. "But we're here to prove

that you don't need to wait for the perfect time. The time to start is now.

"Age is not a barrier; it's an opportunity. Being young means we bring fresh ideas and unique perspectives to the table. Don't let fear of failure stop you, it's part of the journey."

Reflecting on her own experiences, al-Wadaani said: "There were moments when people doubted us, saying we were too young to understand the complexities of business. But those doubts only fuelled our determi-

nation. Every challenge was a lesson, and every setback was a stepping stone."

Al-Wadaani added: "Entrepreneurship is more than just starting a company. It's about solving problems, thinking creatively, and pushing yourself to grow. These are skills that will serve you in school or any path you choose in the future." On the same stage, Grade 11 student Aleen Okour shared her journey of overcoming her fear of public speaking, saying: "Public speaking used to terrify me. The thought of stand-

ing on stage, making mistakes, or embarrassing myself was overwhelming. But I realised that fear was just a barrier I needed to break.

"Filling out the form to become a speaker at this event was the hardest part. My brain kept telling me I wasn't ready, but I knew I had to challenge that voice holding me back." Okour explained how fear often disguises itself as a protective mechanism. "Our brain interprets change as a threat, releasing stress hormones to keep us safe. But those feelings are just a sign

that something great is waiting on the other side."

Through visualisation techniques, Okour found a way to manage her anxiety. "I would take a moment before stepping on stage to picture myself speaking confidently and engaging with the audience. This helped me focus on my message rather than my fear."

For Okour, public speaking became more than just a skill – it was a journey of transformation. "It's not about being perfect. It's about sharing your ideas and con-

necting with people. Each challenge I faced made me stronger."

Encouraging others, Okour concluded: "The first step is always the hardest, but it's also the most important. You might surprise yourself with what you can achieve."

Ru'ya, a student-led initiative, provides a platform for students to exchange ideas, share experiences, and inspire one another.

By fostering meaningful conversations and connections, it empowers students to grow as individuals and leaders.



Dignitaries at the event.

Aligarh alumni association Qatar holds Sir Syed Day

Aligarh Muslim University Alumni Association (AMUAAQ), an associate organisation of Indian Community Benevolent Forum (ICBF) under the aegis of Indian embassy Qatar, celebrated annual Sir Syed Day recently.

Prof Naima Khatoun, the first lady vice-chancellor of AMU, graced the occasion as chief guest while Vipul, Indian ambassador presided over the ceremony. Other guests included Prof Mohammad Gulrez, former vice-chancellor of AMU; Moez Wajihuddin; Sophia Bukhari, patron of AMUAAQ; Mustafa M Hariyanawala; Yasir Nainar; Haroon Sataj Khan and Anwar Karim.

President of AMUAAQ, Dr Nadeem Zafar Jilani, welcomed the audience and paid trib-

utes to Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and remembered how Sir Syed travelled to England to study the British education system and established MAO College on the pattern of universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

He outlined the various social, philanthropic, sporting and skill development activities of AMUAAQ and urged all alumni residing in Qatar to unite under one team.

Speaking on the occasion, Prof Khatoun deliberated on the selected theme of the event "one team one dream". She lauded the love of alumni worldwide for their alma mater and its founder Sir Syed Ahmed Khan.

Ambassador Vipul congratulated Aligarians on the Founder's Day celebrations

and acknowledged the contribution of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan to the nation building. He appreciated AMUAAQ for the amazing work it is doing under the ICBF banner and reiterated the embassy's support and patronage. Other dignitaries who spoke on the occasion included Sophia Bukhari and Anwar Karim. Like previous years AMUAAQ also gave five achievement awards to eminent personalities.

Vice-President of AMUAAQ, Faisal Naseem presented a vote of thanks to sponsors and executive and advisory committee members of AMUAAQ. AMU Alumni from all walks of life joined the function with their families in large numbers. Many prominent residents of Doha also attended, including literary personalities.

Healthcare employees moderately follow health-promoting lifestyle behaviours: study

A study by a group of researchers from Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) has revealed that healthcare employees in the country moderately follow health-promoting lifestyle behaviours.

The study published on *Qatar Medical Journal* and featured on Qscience, part of Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press was conducted by Shamja Sofia Razzakh, Rajvir Singh, Bilal Uddin Khan and Nesriya Hassan, who work with various departments of HMC.

The aim of the study, titled 'The health-promoting lifestyle behaviours of healthcare employees in Qatar - A cross-sectional comparative study' was to compare the health-promoting lifestyle of at-risk and non-risk groups of employees working in HMC, the largest secondary and tertiary healthcare provider in Qatar.

This was a cross-sectional comparative research study of all categories of healthcare employees working in HMC facilities. Par-

ticipants with a body mass index (BMI) >30, smokers, or those with pre-existing non-communicable diseases were classified as the at-risk group, and individuals without any of these factors were classified as the non-risk group.

Data were collected through an online survey using an adopted scale, Adolescent Health Promotion Short Form (AHP-SF), after approval by the Institutional Review Board of HMC.

The age of the participants ranged from 22-69 years and the majority of them were female (64.07%).

Most of the respondents were overweight or obese, accounting for 42.99% and 26.68% of the sample, respectively. Interestingly, 87.64% of the participants were non-smokers and approximately 70% had no chronic diseases.

Five subdomains – nutrition, social support, health responsibility, exercise, and stress management – of the AHP-SF scale showed no significant statistical

differences between at-risk and non-risk groups. However, the "life appreciation" scale showed significant statistical differences between the at-risk and non-risk groups.

The AHP-SF scores varied significantly across the participants' regions of origin, with Americans having the highest score compared to other regions.

The study has revealed that the healthcare employees moderately practise health-promoting lifestyle behaviours. The lowest scores were in the exercise subdomain, suggesting that more interventions are required to improve these behaviours.

Healthcare organisations are ideal settings to implement comprehensive workplace wellness programmes and awareness campaigns that can motivate employees to take greater responsibility for their own health and influence the wider community to adopt health-promoting lifestyle behaviours.

Doha Festival City announces exciting events for Shop Qatar

Doha Festival City has unveiled its programme of festivals and events under its partnership with Visit Qatar as the Diamond Sponsor of Shop Qatar 2025.

To run until February 1, the festival promises family entertainment, fashion-forward events, experiential retail activations and rewards. "Doha Festival City will bring an exciting array of activities to visitors of all ages. These include the exclusive Care Bears bilingual daily live shows and the giant Barbie Dreamhouse, which customers get to enter after spending just QR100 in participating outlets.

Shoppers can also explore the bustling Bazaar at The Village, featuring six kiosks with curated offerings alongside a variety of food kiosks. Participants can enter weekly raffles by spending a minimum of QR200, with exciting prizes including four Exceed cars and cash rewards. The event will culminate with a grand closing



ceremony at The Village, showcasing the highly anticipated final raffle draw for incredible prizes, including a Tesla Cybertruck on display," a statement from Doha Festival City said.

"Our lineup of exclusive activities, from family-friendly entertainment to high-fashion showcases, underscores Doha Festival City's commitment to being the ultimate destination for unforgettable experiences, diverse retail offerings, and innovative events,"

Chris Barton, director – Asset Management, Qatar, Al-Futtaim Real Estate said.

Visitors can look forward to an exclusive three-day fashion show from January 23-25 at Centre Court, featuring a glamorous showcase of women's, men's, and kids' collections from renowned local designers and international brands. The mall will also host four redemption booths, located throughout the mall and The Village.

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Marmi 2025 enters third day with first capture homing pigeon

Falconer Hamad Mohamed al-Khaldi was able to make a breakthrough yesterday as it could capture a homing pigeon for the first time since the completions started on January 1 at Haddad Al Tahadi competition, part of the 16th Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2025).

Marmi 2025, held under the patronage of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani and supported by the Sports and Social Activities Support Fund, runs from January 1-February 1 in Sabkhat Marmi, the Sealine Area.

Al-Khaldi's falcon "Hdeeb" restored prestige to the hunting falcons group after their inability to catch the homing pigeons over the first two days. As participants in the third group were on the brink



of missing out, al-Khaldi, participant number 30, brought good news and opened the door wide for competitors in the remaining 20 groups.

Upon his victory announcement, Mutib bin Mubarak al-Qahntani, chairman of Marmi Festival, crowned al-Khaldi as

the winner and awarded him the Haddad Al Tahadi Championship Shield.

The champion of Haddad Al Tahadi receives a cash prize of QR100,000 and competes for either a Lexus car or an additional QR100,000 if victorious in the final. Accordingly, al-Khaldi ex-

pressed his joy saying: "We succeeded in winning and qualifying for Haddad Al Tahadi Championship in the third group. Credit also goes to the efforts of the youth in Al-Majd Team."

Other participants shared their excitement about the festival. Besides large crowds, including citizens, expatriates, and international tourists, flocked to the festival site last evening. Several visitors noted their amazement at the festival's atmosphere, vowing to return in future years, with some expressing interest in participating in upcoming editions.

Today (Saturday), the saluki dog race qualifiers will participate at a race distance of 2km using GPS. Salukis will chase a safely designed mechanical prey, promoting sustainability.



Lebanese Parliament Speaker meets Qatar's ambassador



The Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, met yesterday with Qatar's ambassador in Beirut HE Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani. Discussions during the meeting dealt with co-operation relations between the two countries. (QNA)

Israeli army threatens to bomb Al Awda Hospital in Jabalia camp

The Israeli occupation army threatened last night Al Awda Hospital in Jabalia camp in northern Gaza Strip with bombing, demanding those inside to evacuate it.

The occupation army threatened about 96 citizens from medical staff, patients, wounded and workers in the hospital, demanding them to evacuate it immediately, otherwise it will be bombed on those inside, which threatens to deprive 40,000 citizens of healthcare in northern Gaza Strip. The occupation army fired bombs from drones towards the reception and emergency departments, which led to the injury of a number of medical staff, and its artillery continued to fire towards the hospital courtyard and its gates.

Al Awda Hospital in the Tal Al-Zaatar area in Jabalia camp is the last medical stronghold in the northern Gaza governorate, as the occupation has been besieging those inside it for 90 days, amid catastrophic health and humanitarian conditions. Earlier, the occupation forces surrounded the Indonesian Hospital in the town of Beit Lahia, north of the Gaza Strip, and demanded that those inside evacuate it immediately. Local sources reported that the occupation forces surrounded the hospital and continued to fire in its vicinity and ordered those inside to evacuate it immediately, explaining that most of those trapped inside the hospital were children and women, in addition to patients, the

wounded and medical staff. The occupation forces' aggression against hospitals comes within the framework of targeting the health system in the Strip, as it had burned Kamal Adwan Hospital in the town of Beit Lahia, north of the Strip, which is one of the largest hospitals in that area, and provided its services to more than 400,000 people a few days ago. The occupation army then forced patients, the wounded and medical staff, including the hospital director, Dr Hussam Abu Safia, and the press crews to evacuate the hospital by force, in conjunction with the firing of shells and bullets towards it, as the fire destroyed the departments of operations, the laboratory, ambulance, emergency and reception.

UN Council discusses Israeli attacks on Gaza health facilities

From Page 1

He added that more than 25% of the estimated 105,000 injured suffer from life-changing injuries that will require extensive rehabilitation efforts and life-long medical technological assistance. Time and again, hospitals become battlefields, rendering them unable to provide their services and depriving those in need of life-saving care, he said. The Health sector in Gaza is being systematically dismantled and pushed to the point of collapse, amid a severe shortage of

medical supplies, equipment and specialists, Dr Peepkorn added. He pointed out that only 16 of Gaza's 36 hospitals are still partially functioning, with a bed capacity of only 1,822, far below what is needed to deal with the massive health crisis in the Strip. The UN official also spoke about the slow pace of medical evacuations, saying that more than 12,000 people need to be transferred outside Gaza for treatment, pointing out that the current slow pace means that their evacuation — including thousands of children — will take 5 to 10 years.

Despite the challenges, Dr Peepkorn said WHO and its partners are doing everything possible to enable hospitals and health services to continue operating. However, he touched on the obstacles and restrictions on the entry of supplies into Gaza and throughout the Strip. He said that only 40% of WHO's missions in Gaza during 2024 were facilitated, which directly affected the organisation's ability to provide supplies to hospitals, transfer patients from critical conditions, and deploy emergency medical teams.

French, German ministers in Syria for talks with new leadership

QNA/AFP
Damascus

Foreign ministers of France and Germany arrived in Damascus yesterday morning, marking the first trip by top European Union officials to Syria since the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime.

France's Jean-Noel Barrot and Germany's Annalena Baerbock will hold talks with leader of the new administration in Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and representatives of the transitional government, on behalf of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas.

Ahead of the one-day trip, Baerbock emphasised that her visit to Syria - together with her French counterpart, sends a clear signal that a "political new beginning" between Europe and Syria is possible.

The French and German foreign ministers called for a peaceful, inclusive transition in Syria.

Baerbock told Sharaa that the European Union stood ready to support the transition in Syria but warned that "Europe will not finance new Islamist structures".

"This is not only in our own security interests but also what I have heard time and again from very many Syrians in Germany... and here in the region," she said.

She called for "an inclusive, peaceful transfer of power, recon-



France's Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot (centre) and Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (left) walking with Syria's new ruler Ahmed al-Sharaa ahead of their meeting in Damascus yesterday.

iliation and reconstruction".

"This requires a political dialogue involving all ethnic and religious groups, involving men and equally women."

Barrot later posted that he and Baerbock had made progress in their talks with Sharaa.

"We obtained assurances from the provisional authorities that there will be broad participation in the political transition, notably among women," the French minister said.

HTS has sought to reassure minorities that they will not be harmed.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's interior minister said that Beirut was working to find a solution with Syria, after two security officials

said Damascus had imposed new restrictions on the entry of Lebanese citizens.

"Work is underway to resolve the issue of Lebanese citizens being prevented from entering Syria," Bassam Mawlawi told AFP.

He said Lebanon's General Security agency was in touch with "the Syrian side" to resolve the issue.

Lebanese nationals had previously been allowed into Syria without a visa, using just their passport or ID.

But a Lebanese General Security official told AFP yesterday that they were "surprised to see the border had been closed" to Lebanese citizens "from the Syrian side".

UN warns of shelter needs in Gaza after hypothermia deaths

AFP
Geneva

The UN yesterday decried that infants and others were freezing to death in Gaza, where it said an estimated 945,000 people still need help to shelter from winter conditions.

With children dying of hypothermia, the United Nations' migration agency said it was deeply alarmed by the "devastating impact" of winter rains and freezing temperatures on displaced Palestinians, which were "adding to the unparalleled humanitarian catastrophe" in the Gaza Strip.

Heavy rains and flooding have

overwhelmed displacement sites and makeshift shelters, while families are left exposed to harsh conditions, struggling to repair tents damaged from months of use, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said.

"Vulnerable people, including at least seven infants, have died from hypothermia, and these tragic deaths underscore the urgent need for shelter and other help to get to the people of Gaza immediately," said IOM director general Amy Pope.

The agency said access constraints had "severely hindered" aid delivery, with only 285,000 people receiving shelter support since last September.

As of mid-December, the Shelter Cluster — a co-ordination group of UN, international and local humanitarian organisations — estimated that at least 945,000 people still urgently needed winter assistance, IOM said.

There was a dire need, it said, for thermal clothing, blankets and tarpaulins to seal off shelters from the rain and cold.

The IOM said it had more than 1.5mm winter supplies such as tents and bedding kits ready at warehouses.

However, "severe access restrictions prevent them from reaching those in need".

"The people of Gaza deserve safety, shelter and dignity," it said.

Ethiopia backs new peacekeeping force in Somalia

AFP
Nairobi

Ethiopia yesterday announced that it will collaborate with a new African Union force against Al Shabaab insurgents in Somalia, which is set to deploy later this month. Somalia had previously indicated that Ethiopian troops would not take part due to strained relations between the two Horn of Africa countries, after landlocked Ethiopia signed a maritime agreement with the breakaway region of Somaliland to gain access to the coast.

But after months of wrangling,

the two neighbours last month agreed to a detente, in a deal brokered by Turkey. Ethiopian Defence Minister Aisha Mohammed led a high-level visit to Somalia on Thursday, meeting President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and delivering a message from Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. "The discussions reaffirmed the commitment of both countries to work together to ensure peace and stability in Somalia and the region," said a statement from the Ethiopian foreign ministry.

"The two countries agreed to collaborate on the AUSSOM mission and strengthen bilateral ties," it added, referring to the African

Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia.

Somalia's foreign ministry said it had "expressed its willingness to consider Ethiopia's request" on AUSSOM, without providing more details. "Somalia underscores the importance of these high-level bilateral discussions," the ministry said in a statement, adding that it was a key step toward "reaffirming respect for (Somalia's) sovereignty and territorial integrity".

Somalia had threatened to force Ethiopia to remove some 10,000 experienced troops from the shared border in the country's southwest, among the worst-impacted areas by Al Shabaab. Al Shabaab has

been waging a bloody insurgency against Somalia's fragile federal government for more than 17 years and has carried out numerous bombings in Mogadishu and elsewhere in the country.

Although driven out of the capital by AU forces in 2011, Al Shabaab still has a strong presence in rural Somalia. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) gave its green light late last year to the creation of a new AU mission in Somalia. Fourteen out of 15 council members adopted a resolution, with only the United States abstaining due to concerns about financing. The peacekeeping force is intended to replace the UN-backed African

Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). Until it was withdrawn on December 31, ATMIS could have up to 12,000 troops to counter the continued threat from Al Shabaab. Somalia and Ethiopia had been invited to take part in the UNSC meeting, without voting.

Somalia's representative used the occasion to explain that bilateral agreements in November provided for the supply of some 11,000 troops to AUSSOM from partner countries. The text adopted included the possibility of using a mechanism created by the UNSC the previous year for an AU force with UN backing and financed up to 75 percent by the world body.

Somalia's Foreign Minister Ali Mohamed Omar travelled to Addis Ababa last week to meet his Ethiopian counterpart Mesganu Arega, the day after deadly strikes in the border area of Doolow, to try to keep the fragile peace between the two countries. Somalia said that Ethiopian troops had attacked its forces stationed at an airstrip in the border town, located in the Somali state of Jubaland. But Jubaland state officials said the Ethiopian troops, who are also based at the airstrip as part of a mission against Islamist insurgents, had intervened to protect a group of local politicians when they came under attack from Somali federal forces.

Traders distraught as blaze destroys Ghana's largest used clothes market



A man tries to deal with the fire at the burned down secondhand clothing market at Kantamanto.

AFP
Accra

A raging inferno that swept through the bustling Kantamanto Market in the Ghanaian capital Accra has reduced the sprawling hub of the country's informal economy to ashes, officials said. The fire, which erupted late on Wednesday, consumed vast sections of the largest used clothes market in the West African country, displacing thousands of traders, disaster officials said.

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) deployed 13 fire tenders to put out the flames. But on Thursday morning, ruins smouldered where rows of stalls once bustled with activities. Goods worth millions of the local cedi currency have been destroyed, the GNFS said. "This is devastating," said Alex King Nartey, a GNFS spokesperson. "We've not recorded severe casualties, but the economic loss is enormous."

"Preliminary investigations suggest faulty electrical connections might have sparked the blaze, although we are not ruling out arson," Nartey told AFP. He added that efforts to completely extinguish the fire could stretch into Friday. Hundreds of traders, many specialising in the resale of used clothes, now face an uncertain future.

For traders like 45-year-old Fred Asiedu, the fire is a life-altering disaster. "Everything I own was

here - my wares, my savings, my future. Now, it's all gone," Asiedu said. "How do I start over? The government must step in. Without help, life will be unbearable."

Adjoa Amu, a 39-year-old mother of three, described the fire as a crushing blow. "I have been selling here for 12 years. This market feeds my children, pays their school fees. Now, I am left with nothing but ashes," Amu told AFP, also pleading for government support to rebuild.

Richard Amo Yartey, an official with the National Disaster Management Organisation (NADMO), said that probes into what prompted the incident had begun in collaboration with other agencies.

"The scale of destruction is heart-wrenching, but we are committed to identifying the root cause and providing immediate relief to affected traders," he said.

The president of the Traders Advocacy Group Ghana (TAGG), David Kwadwo Amoateng, urged the government to act swiftly, adding that the "market is a vital part of our economy". "The traders here need emergency funding to get back on their feet. Without immediate intervention, thousands of livelihoods are at risk," he told AFP.

Kantamanto Market, which is home to over 30,000 traders, has been a lifeline for many in Accra's Central Business District. The government is yet to announce a formal response to the tragedy.



People try to salvage items from the burned down secondhand clothing market at Kantamanto in Accra.



Lost boy survives five days in Zimbabwe park teeming with lions

AFP
Harare

A seven-year-old boy was found alive after being lost for five days in a reserve home to lions and other wild animals in northern Zimbabwe, the wildlife authority said yesterday. The boy wandered into the Matusadona National Park next to his village on December 27 and was found five days later and about 50km away, ZimParks spokesperson Tinashe Farawo said.

He had survived on wild fruit and water that he found by digging into a river bank, a technique known in Zimbabwe's drought-prone areas, Farawo said in a statement. "Remarkably, it is estimated that he walked through the harsh terrain of the lion-infested Matusadona National Park for 49km from his village to the point where he was found," Farawo said.

Rangers, locals and police launched a search for the child immediately after hearing that he was missing but their efforts were hindered by heavy rain. His footprints were spotted on December 30 and the boy, Tinotenda Pundu, was found early the following day, he said. The child was admitted to hospital and was frail but had no visible injuries, said lawmaker Mutsa Murombedzi, who is from the area. "It was a miracle that he survived," she told AFP.

"He was clever enough to... sleep on perched rocks so that lions and other wildlife could not get to him," she said. "Villagers helped with the search, playing drums hoping that he would follow the sound," the MP said.

But he was only found with the help of rangers who were able to go deeper into the wilderness to look for him. The Matusadona National Park, near Zimbabwe's Lake Kariba, is home to a range of wild animals including lions, leopards, elephants and buffalo, according to its website.

Ghana's parliament passes provisional budget, averts government shutdown

Reuters
Accra

Ghana's parliament has passed a provisional budget that allows the government to spend 68.1bn Ghanaian cedis (\$4.65bn) through March, the chamber's speaker said, narrowly averting an unprecedented government shutdown. Parliamentary Speaker Alban Bagbin said the parliament had approved the provisional budget in a sitting that stretched deep into Thursday night.

John Dramani Mahama is set to take office as the West African country's president next week after winning a Dec 7 election, staging a political comeback after serving as Ghana's president from 2012-2016. Outgoing President Nana Akufo-Addo was due to present his last state of the nation address later on Friday after eight years leading the gold- and oil-exporting nation.

A provisional budget is typically passed in November during election years to cover the gap until the president-elect takes office. But the presentation of the provisional



John Dramani Mahama

budget had dragged this time after an impasse over whether the outgoing New Patriotic Party (NPP) or the incoming National Democratic Congress (NDC) party has a majority of seats in the House.

Finance Minister Mohammed Amin Adam told the joint business and finance committees the late passage of the provisional budget would not affect government business. "It averts a government shutdown and (the) likelihood of worsening Ghana's ongoing debt default saga," Seth Terkper, a former finance minister, told Reuters.

Almost a third of the approved amount is earmarked for payments to energy-sector service providers, according to the provisional budget. Mahama, the president-elect, said last month that Ghana was going to face a critical situation in the energy sector, adding that preliminary estimates showed that arrears exceeded \$2.5bn at a time when the power supply was erratic. Mahama, who contested the election as the main opposition leader, is returning to power amid an economic resurgence from Ghana's worst crisis in a generation.

Ghana announces visa-free entry for African passport holders

AFP
Accra

Ghana's outgoing President Nana Akufo-Addo yesterday announced visa-free travel for all African passport holders from the start of this year, marking a step towards continental economic integration.

The announcement came during his final state of the nation address as he prepares to step down on January 6 after two terms in office.

"I am proud to have approved visa-free travel to Ghana for all African passport holders, with effect from the beginning of this year," Akufo-Addo said in his speech to parliament.

"This is the logical next step to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the workings of the largest trading bloc in the world," he said.

"All these are essential elements to the realisation of the AU's Agenda 2063, which envisages an integrated and connected Africa by 2063," he added, re-

Ghana had previously allowed visa-free access to citizens of 26 African nations and visas on arrival for travellers from 25 others, while only two African countries - Eritrea and Morocco - required a visa before entry

ferring to the African Union's development blueprint for a 50-year period. Ghana joins Rwanda, Seychelles, Gambia and Benin in offering visa-free entry to African travellers.

Ghana had previously allowed visa-free access to citizens of 26 African nations and visas on arrival for travellers from 25 others, while only two African countries - Eritrea and Morocco - required a visa before entry.

The visa-free policy builds on Ghana's efforts to strengthen its international reputation, particularly through initiatives like the 2019 Year of Return, which celebrated the African diaspora and commemorated 400 years since the transatlantic slave trade.

The campaign attracted thousands of visitors, including ce-

lebrities, to Ghana and led to some receiving citizenship, bolstering the country's global profile as a cultural and tourism hub.

Akufo-Addo also used his last address to trumpet economic progress under his leadership, citing an increase in Ghana's gross international reserves to \$8bn, from \$6.2bn in 2017, and significant GDP growth in 2024.

"Economic growth has returned to the pre-Covid trajectory," he said, projecting a 6.3-percent growth rate for 2025.

"I leave behind a Ghana that is thriving, one that has navigated significant global challenges with remarkable tenacity, whose economy is steadily rebounding, and whose institutions are operating effectively," he said.

The oil-and-gold-rich West African nation is one of the most stable democracies in Africa.

Since 2022, it has been battling one of its worst economic crises in decades and is currently under a \$3-bn International Monetary Fund relief programme.

The outgoing president hands over power to John Mahama, who won the December elections.

SpaceX's Starship to deploy mock satellites in next test

Elon Musk's SpaceX said yesterday that its upcoming Starship test flight would include the rocket's first attempt to deploy payloads in space by releasing 10 model Starlink satellites, a key demonstration for Starship's potential in the satellite launch market.

"While in space, Starship will deploy 10 Starlink simulators, similar in size and weight to next-generation Starlink satellites as the first exercise of a satellite deployment mission," SpaceX said in a blog post on its website.

The Starship flight from SpaceX's sprawling Boca Chica, Texas facilities, tentatively planned for later this month, will mark the seventh demonstration in a test-to-failure style of rocket development where the company tests new upgrades with each flight.

In October, Starship's "Super Heavy" first stage booster returned to its launch pad's giant mechanical arms for the first time, a milestone for its fully reusable design.

The rocket's sixth test flight in November, attended by US President-elect Donald Trump, achieved similar mission objectives - besides the landing of Super Heavy, which was forced to target a water landing on the Gulf of Mexico because of a launchpad problem.

Starship is the centrepiece of SpaceX's future satellite launch business - an area it currently dominates with its partially reusable Falcon 9 - as well as Musk's dreams to colonise Mars.

The rocket's power, stronger than the Saturn V rocket that sent Apollo astronauts to the moon in the last century, is key for launching huge batches of satellites into low-Earth orbit and is expected to rapidly expand the company's Starlink satellite Internet network.

SpaceX is under contract with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) to land US astronauts on the moon later this decade using Starship.

Musk, SpaceX's founder and chief executive, has become a close ally of Trump who has made getting to Mars a more prominent goal for the incoming administration. - Reuters

Apple agrees to \$95mn agreement to settle Siri eavesdropping lawsuit

Apple has agreed to pay \$95mn to settle a lawsuit accusing its digital assistant Siri of listening in on users' private conversations.

The proposed settlement detailed in a court filing accessed on Thursday came with Apple holding firm that it did nothing wrong. "Apple has at all times denied and continues to deny any and all alleged wrongdoing and liability," the tech titan said in the proposed settlement, which requires a judge's approval to be finalised.

A class action lawsuit filed five years ago accused Siri of listening in on private conversations of people with iPhones, iPads, HomePods or other Apple devices enhanced with the digital assistant.

The California-based tech giant has made user privacy a big part of its brand image, and one of the reasons it tightly controls its "ecosystem" of hardware and software.

Talk captured by "unintended Siri activation" were obtained by Apple and perhaps even shared with third parties, according to the suit.

A proposed settlement fund of \$95mn would be used to pay no more than \$20 per Siri device to US owners who had private conversations captured without permission, the settlement indicated.

The agreement also requires Apple to confirm it has deleted any overheard talk and make user choices clear when it comes to voice data gathered to improve Siri.

Apple did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In 2023, Amazon agreed to pay more than \$30mn to the US Federal Trade Commission to settle litigation accusing the company of violating privacy with its Ring doorbell cameras and Alexa digital assistant. - AFP

US hits JetBlue Airways with \$2mn penalty over chronic flight delays

Reuters
Washington

The US Transportation Department (USDOT) has imposed a \$2mn penalty on JetBlue Airways for operating four chronically delayed flights on domestic routes - the first time it has imposed such a fine on an airline for the prohibited scheduling practice.

The USDOT said yesterday that as part of a consent agreement with the airline, JetBlue will pay a \$1mn fine and the remainder will go to compensate customers affected by its chronic delays or any future disruptions within the next year.

As part of the deal, JetBlue has agreed to provide vouchers worth a minimum of \$75 for passengers for future flight cancellations or delays of three hours or more caused by the airline within the next year.

"Today's action puts the airline industry on notice that we expect their flight schedules to reflect reality," said Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg.

JetBlue, which did not admit liability, said in a statement that it appreciates "how important it is to our customers to arrive to their destinations on-time and work very hard to operate our flights as scheduled".

It criticised the USDOT for a persistent lack of adequate air traffic control staffing.

"We believe accountability for reliable air travel equally lies with the US government, which operates our nation's air traffic control system," the airline said.

The USDOT said at various points in 2022 and 2023 JetBlue operated chronically delayed flights between New York and Raleigh-Durham, Fort Lauderdale and Orlando along with a flight between Fort Lauderdale and Windsor Locks, Connecticut.

"Regardless of the cause of the delay (carrier, weather, national airspace, security) for any specific flight, JetBlue had adequate time to act to avoid the chronic delays," the USDOT said.

The airline said it spent tens of millions of dollars to address issues with air traffic control especially in the US Northeast corridor to as much as reasonably possible prevent chronic delays and made improvements last year in cutting travel disruptions.

The USDOT said there were 395 delays and cancellations across four chronically delayed flights in total, defined as US flights that are cancelled or arrive more than 30 minutes late more than 50% of the time over a month.

The department estimates JetBlue was responsible for over 70% of the disruptions for the four chronically delayed flights.

US agencies worry that New Orleans truck attack may inspire copycats

Reuters
Washington

US law enforcement and intelligence agencies are concerned about copycat vehicle-ramming attacks following the New Year's Day attack in New Orleans by a US Army veteran, according to a US law enforcement intelligence bulletin published yesterday.

The bulletin was issued a day after the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said that Shamsud-Din Jabbar, a 42-year-old Texas native, was "100% inspired" by the Islamic State (IS) group to drive a truck into New Year's Day revellers in New Orleans, killing at least 14 people and injuring dozens of others.

Jabbar, who flew an IS flag from the rear of the truck he had rented, subsequently was killed in a shootout with police.

The FBI, Department of Homeland Security and the US National Counterterrorism Centre "are concerned about possible copycat or retaliatory attacks", said the intelligence bulletin published by the three agencies and reviewed by Reuters.

Such attacks "are likely to remain attractive for aspiring attackers given vehicles' ease of acquisition and the low skill threshold necessary to conduct an attack", said the bulletin issued to US law enforcement agencies.

The bulletin noted that as of Thursday, the IS had not claimed responsibility for the New Orleans attack.

However, the group's online supporters celebrated it and a December 20 vehicle-ramming in Germany even though that incident did not appear to have been IS-inspired, it said.

Other online users have cited those attacks to make "general calls for violence against specific groups, such as immigrants or Muslims", the bulletin continued.

The IS has continued promoting its propaganda and recruiting adherents online despite suffering serious losses to a US-led military coalition that recaptured the "caliphate" the militants overran in Syria and Iraq in 2014.

The bulletin urged law enforcement personnel and private security firms to be aware that in many previous cases attackers who rammed vehicles into crowds were armed and continued their attacks with guns or edged weapons.

The January 1 incident in the packed French Quarter of New Orleans was the seventh attack in the United States since 2001 that was inspired by a foreign extremist organisation, the bulletin said.

The use of "edged weapons" and firearms has been more common in such attacks but vehicles could present a growing threat, it said.



A man reacts at a memorial on Bourbon Street after it reopened to the public. - AFP



Left: People walk past shops on Bourbon Street in New Orleans after it reopened to the public. - AFP



A band plays next to crosses with pictures of victims at a memorial on Bourbon Street after it reopened to the public. - AFP

Police positively identify driver of exploded Tesla Cybertruck

Reuters
Las Vegas

Officials have positively identified the person found dead inside the Cybertruck that exploded outside the Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas as a US Army soldier from Colorado, while the FBI said it was not yet clear if the blast was an act of terrorism.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said it had so far found no definitive link between the New Year's Day New Orleans truck attack that killed 15 people and the Cybertruck explosion in Las Vegas later on the same day, which left seven people with minor injuries.

The Cybertruck driver was identified as Matthew Livelsberger, an active-duty Army soldier from Colorado Springs, and police said he acted alone.

Livelsberger killed himself with a gunshot to the mouth, police said, citing a report from the Clark County Coroner/Medical Examiner, according to a post on X by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department.

Livelsberger was inside the vehicle when gasoline canisters and large firework mortars in the truck bed exploded, police said.

Police previously had told a press conference they believed the person found in the truck was Livelsberger, but because the body was burned beyond recognition, investigators were awaiting confirmation from DNA evidence and medical records.

Livelsberger shot himself just before explosives in the vehicle were detonated, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Sheriff Kevin McMahon told reporters. A handgun was found at his feet.

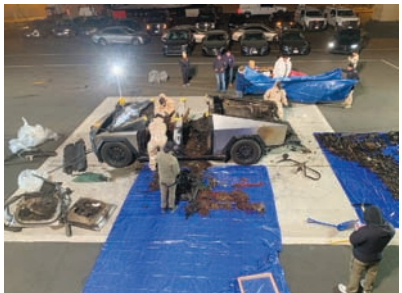
It was one of two semi-automatic handguns found in the Cybertruck, both of which were lawfully purchased by Livelsberger on December 30.

Law enforcement also found military identification, a passport, an iPhone and credit cards in the truck.

Livelsberger was assigned to the Army Special Operations Command and was on approved leave at the time of his death, an Army official said.

The Army Special Operations Command would not comment on an ongoing investigation, a spokesperson said.

A US official told Reuters that Livelsberger had been awarded a Bronze Star for valour and an Army commendation for valour, along with a Combat Infantryman Badge.



Investigators inspect the burned Tesla Cybertruck, which the police say was driven by Matthew Livelsberger, 37, an active-duty army soldier from Colorado Springs, after it exploded in front of the Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas. - Reuters

He completed five combat deployments to Afghanistan, the official said.

A close relative of Livelsberger, who asked that his name not be used because he did not want to be publicly linked to the suspect, told Reuters that Livelsberger had always wanted to be an "Army soldier, in Special Forces, even as a little kid. And when he achieved that, he was a soldier's soldier".

Livelsberger was a supporter of President-elect Donald Trump throughout the Republican's political career, seeing him as someone who loves the military, the relative told Reuters. "He thought Trump was the greatest thing in the world."

Videos taken by witnesses inside and outside the Las Vegas hotel showed the Cybertruck, an electric vehicle with a distinctive angular design, exploding and flames pouring out of it, as it sat in front of the hotel around 8.40am local time (1640 GMT) on Wednesday.

A Trump spokesperson did not return a request for comment on Thursday.

The Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas is part of the Trump Organisation, the company of Donald Trump, who will return to the White House on January 20.

Tesla chief executive Elon Musk was a key backer of Trump in his 2024 presidential campaign and is also an adviser to the incoming president.

"It's not lost on us that it's in front of the Trump building, that it's a Tesla vehicle, but we don't have information at this point that definitively tells us or suggests it was because of this particular ideology, or...any of the reasoning behind it," McMahon, of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, said.

FBI seeks new leads in 2021 pipe bomb attack attempt

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has released new surveillance video in a bid to reinvestigate its four-year-old hunt for a suspect who placed pipe bombs in Washington the night before the January 6, 2021, assault on the US Capitol.

The previously unreleased footage from January 5, 2021, showed an individual putting a bomb near a bench outside the Democratic National Committee building.

The suspect placed another bomb at the Republican headquarters.

Both sites are near the Capitol. Police deactivated the bombs and neither exploded.

Despite receiving more than 600 tips and offering a \$500,000 reward, the FBI has not been able to identify the suspect over the four years since the discovery of the bombs on the same day supporters of Donald Trump stormed Congress trying to prevent lawmakers it from certifying his 2020 election defeat.

"We're really hoping we can jog someone's memory," David Sundberg, assistant director in charge of the FBI Washington field office, said in an interview. "We do believe there are people out there who do know more than has been shared."

It is unclear if the bombs were linked to the Capitol riot, but their discovery nearby on January 6, 2021 diverted police resources and remains one of the enduring mysteries of the day.

President-elect Trump's 2024 election victory is set to be certified in Congress on Monday, before he is sworn in for a second term on January 20.

The FBI said the suspect was about 5' 7" (1.7m) tall and released a map of the individual's walking route that night.

The suspect's nondescript clothing, a gray sweatshirt and pants, and the 15-hour gap between the planting and the discovery of the bombs have impeded the investigators.

The FBI has previously released other video of the suspect, who wore distinctive black and gray Nike Air Max Speed Turf shoes.

In the January 6, 2021 melee at the Capitol, rioters surged past police barricades, assaulting about 140 officers and causing more than \$2.8mn in damage.

Trump has promised to pardon at least some of the nearly 1,600 people who have been criminally charged for participating in the riot. - Reuters

US-designated foreign terrorist organisations and "supporter media groups" had released videos, posters, and chants calling for attacks "during the winter holidays generally and New Year's celebrations specifically", the bulletin noted.

On December 30, "a pro-ISIS media unit" encouraged attacks against New Year's Eve celebrations in the US and coalition countries by "posting videos highlighting past ISIS attacks and instructing supporters to further incite violence", it said.

President Joe Biden's administration is keeping President-elect Donald Trump and his transition team apprised of the investigations into the New Orleans attack and an explosion the same day outside the Trump Hotel in Las Vegas, a source familiar with the discussions said.

A lack of security clearances among transition team members was not an issue, said the source, noting that much of what is known has been made public.

Marco Rubio, Trump's nominee for secretary of state and Mike Waltz, his incoming national security adviser, already have clearances as members of Congress who served on key intelligence committees.

Trump's incoming chief of staff Susie Wiles also has a clearance and can be briefed, according to a source familiar with the matter.

Two dead, 18 hurt in small plane crash in California

A small plane crashed into a commercial building in California on Thursday, killing at least two people and injuring 18 others, police said.

The crash took place early in the afternoon near Fullerton Municipal Airport, 25 miles (40km) southeast of Los Angeles.

The cause remains unknown. "There are two confirmed fatalities," Fullerton police said on X.

Additionally, 10 people were hospitalised and eight others were treated at the scene.

Investigators do not yet know if the deceased were plane passengers or if they were workers at the building where it crashed, a police officer told local station KTLA.

Television footage showed a gaping hole in the roof of the building, with smoke pouring out. "All we hear is like a loud noise, boom, and that's it. Then we started running out" of the building, Jerome Cruz, one of the workers who witnessed the scene, told CBS News. - AFP



Alcohol should have cancer warning label: US surgeon-general

AFP/Reuters
Washington

The United States' top government doctor has called for health warnings on alcoholic drinks to highlight that they cause cancer and urged a re-assessment of daily consumption limits due to the risks.

Surgeon-General Vivek Murthy said that the connection between alcohol and cancer has been known since the 1980s, with mounting evidence reinforcing the dangers.

Yet, mandatory warning labels continue to fail to address the health threat.

"Alcohol is a well-established, preventable cause of cancer, responsible for about 100,000 cancer cases and 20,000 cancer deaths annually in the US," Murthy said, emphasising that this toll exceeds the approximately 13,500 alcohol-related traffic fatalities each year.

"Yet the majority of Americans are unaware of this risk," he added, underscoring the urgent need for public education.

Introduced in 1988, the existing warning label only states that "women should not drink alcoholic beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects" and that "consumption of alcoholic beverages impairs your ability to drive a car or operate machinery, and may cause health problems".

Murthy called on Congress to modernise these labels to reflect the now well-established cancer risk, as other countries including South Korea and Ireland have.

He also called for the guidelines on alcohol consumption limits to be reassessed so that people can weigh the cancer risk when deciding whether or how much to drink.

"Alcohol consumption is the third leading preventable cause of cancer in the United States, after tobacco and obesity," Murthy's office said in a statement accompanying the new report, adding the type of alcohol consumed does not matter.

His advisory sent shares in alcohol companies including Diageo, Pernod Ricard, Anheuser-Busch InBev and Heineken down, in some cases over 3%.

Alcohol producers and industry associations, did not immediately share comments.

Alcohol consumption raises the risk of at least seven types of cancer, including breast, colorectal, liver, mouth, throat, esophageal, and laryngeal cancers.

For breast cancer alone, alcohol accounts for 16.4% of all cases.

However, public awareness is lagging far behind.

A 2019 survey found that only 45% of Americans identified alcohol as a cancer risk factor, compared to 91% for radiation exposure, 89% for tobacco use,



Beer cans are seen in a grocery store in Brooklyn, New York City. - AFP

81% for asbestos exposure, and 53% for obesity.

The new advisory also questioned the adequacy of US dietary guidelines, which recommend a daily limit of two drinks for men and one for women.

Alarmingly, 17% of alcohol-related cancer deaths occur among individuals who stay within these limits, suggesting the need for a reevaluation.

Healthcare providers also have a critical role to play, the advisory noted, by informing patients about the risks of alcohol, offering interventions and providing referrals for treatment as needed.

Alcohol contributes to cancer through four key mechanisms. It metabolises into acetaldehyde, which damages DNA; it induces oxidative stress, harming DNA, proteins, and cells; it disrupts hormone levels, including estrogen, which increases breast cancer risk; and it heightens absorption of carcinogens, including from tobacco.

It is unclear when or if the surgeon-general's suggestions will be adopted.

US President Joe Biden's administration is entering its final two weeks.

Murthy could be succeeded by Janette Nesheiwat, a director of a New York chain of urgent care clinics and President-elect Donald Trump's pick for the role.

Trump, whose brother died from alcoholism and who does not drink himself, has long warned about the risks of drinking.

Robert F Kennedy Jr, Trump's nominee for secretary of health and human services, has been open about his past struggles

with heroin and alcohol, and says that he attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

The decision to update the label will ultimately be made by Congress.

Murthy's advisory harks back to early US Surgeon-General action on tobacco, starting with a 1964 report that concluded smoking could cause cancer.

The report kicked off decades of increasingly strict regulations, starting with US laws on warning labels one year later and still ongoing today.

Analysts however pointed out that cigarette warning labels did little to curb smoking and ingrained habits are hard to change.

"Warning labels won't be an immediate deathblow to alcohol makers, but it will compound the long-term threats to the industry," said Blake Drosch, analyst with eMarketer.

Public health bodies like the World Health Organisation (WHO) are also increasingly turning their attention towards alcohol after making progress on stronger tobacco controls.

The WHO says there is no safe level of drinking and that even a small amount of alcohol can harm health - a position that has prompted tense debate around the impact of moderate drinking and its role in society.

Bruce Scott, president of the American Medical Association, welcomed the surgeon-general's effort to make the link between alcohol and increased cancer risk clear.

He said, coupled with a push to update warning labels, it could "bolster awareness, improve health and save lives".

Biden awards Trump critic Liz Cheney with medal

Reuters
Washington

Former Representative Liz Cheney, who bucked her Republican Party to strongly criticise President-elect Donald Trump and some of his allies, was one of 20 people awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal, one of the country's highest civilian honours, by President Joe Biden on Thursday.

The medal is given to Americans for their service to the country or its citizens, the White House said.

Biden, speaking in the East Room of the White House, praised the honorees for courage, leadership, service and empathy.

"I think it's pretty damn simple: Our democracy begins and ends with the duties of citizenship," he said. "Our work continues."

The presidential medals, which go through a less rigorous approval process than Medals of Honour or acts of clemency, give a president the opportunity to honour people who have fought for causes he championed.

Cheney is a one-time Republican member of Congress who served as vice-chair of the House of Representatives select committee that investigated the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol by Trump supporters.



Biden with Cheney and the Presidential Citizens Medal, one of the country's highest civilian honours, during a ceremony at the White House. - Reuters

She received a standing ovation at Thursday's ceremony.

In October, she urged Americans to reject Trump's "depraved cruelty" as she campaigned in support of Democratic presidential candidate Vice-President Kamala Harris, who later lost to Trump.

Media reports have said Biden is considering a pre-emptive pardon to protect her from retribution by the next administration.

Trump, who takes office on January 20, said last month that he backed a call for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to investigate Cheney over her role leading the congressional probe.

Other winners of the medal included Democratic Representative Bennie G Thompson who served as the January 6 House select committee chairman, attorney Mary Bonauro who argued the landmark marriage-equality case before the Supreme Court, women's rights activist Eleanor Smeal and Evan Wolfson, a leader of the marriage-

equality movement.

Veterans, healthcare advocates and former lawmakers with close, decades-long ties to Biden were also on the list such as former Democratic senators Ted Kaufman, Chris Dodd and Bill Bradley.

In a separate ceremony, Biden spoke of the 235 judges he nominated who were confirmed, including a record number of women and people of colour.

This followed the judiciary's ideological shift to the right during Trump's first term as president.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the confirmations would be one of Biden's "most consequential accomplishments".

"The good news is that these judges will be a barrier against attacks on our democratic institutions," he said. "These judges will have the first and often decisive impact on cases involving voting rights in elections and democracy writ large."

Google pays Canada media C\$100mn to use content

Google said yesterday that it had paid C\$100mn to Canadian news outlets to use their content on its platform, as part of a deal with the government to offset loss of advertising revenues.

Canada passed the Online News Act in 2023, joining Australia and a few countries in Europe in establishing policies to force tech platforms to compensate struggling news publishers.

Google and Meta, which together control about 80% of all advertising revenue in Canada, had been accused of draining cash away from traditional news organisations while using news content for free.

The Google funds (\$69mn) were transferred to the Canadian Journalism Collective, a non-profit set up to distribute the money, a spokesperson for the tech giant confirmed.

California-based Google also signalled to AFP that it planned to continue the arrangement that would see it make another payment at the end of 2025.

Paul Deegan, president of News Media Canada, an organisation of major publishers and broadcasters, said the landmark deal was "far superior" than similar arrangements in other jurisdictions, with Canadian news groups expected to get up to C\$20,000 per journalist.

The funding, he said, will give newsrooms a much-needed boost "to produce more high-quality coverage of our democratic institutions", while Google "benefits tremendously from the fact-based, fact-checked content our journalists produce".

The Canadian act aims to support the local news sector that has seen a flight of advertising dollars and hundreds of publications closed in the last decade.

Meta's Facebook and Instagram blocked news content in Canada to avoid having to compensate media companies.

Google had threatened to do the same before announcing the funding deal, which was approved by Canada's broadcast regulator in October.

Under the terms, broadcasters will get 30% of the Google funds, while the rest is to be shared by news publishers.

Google also made a deal last year with the US state of California to pay to help keep local news organisations afloat. - AFP

US announces \$306mn in new bird flu funding

President Joe Biden's outgoing administration announced yesterday that it will allocate \$306mn to bolster the nation's bird flu response before President-elect Donald Trump takes office.

The new funding will support national, state and local preparedness and monitoring programmes, as well as research into potential medical countermeasures against the H5N1 virus.

"While the risk to humans remains low, we are always preparing for any possible scenario that could arise," Health Secretary Xavier Becerra said in a statement. "Preparedness is the key to keeping Americans healthy and our country safe."

The United States has reported 66 human cases of bird flu since the start of 2024, though experts believe the true number could be higher, with cases potentially going undetected among cattle and poultry workers.

While the virus has not been found to spread from person to person, the amount of bird flu circulating among animals and humans has alarmed scientists, because it might combine with seasonal influenza and mutate into a more transmissible form - potentially triggering a deadly pandemic.

The funding announcement comes amid concern over how the incoming Trump administration will handle the threat.

The president-elect told *Time* magazine recently that he would abolish the Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response Policy established under Biden - though it is not clear if he has the authority to do so, since it was created by Congress.

His pick for health secretary, Robert F Kennedy Jr, is a vocal vaccine sceptic who has pledged to shake up the nation's health agencies and promotes raw milk, thought to be a vector for bird flu.

Biden's administration has also faced criticism for what some consider a subpar bird flu response.

The Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank, published a report last month citing an array of problems including "lagging data, incomplete surveillance, sluggish co-ordination, considerable mistrust, and insufficient planning and stockpiling of vaccines and therapies".

Adding to concerns, a virus sample from a critically ill patient in Louisiana has shown signs of mutating to better adapt to human airways, although there is no evidence it has spread beyond that individual, health authorities said last week. - AFP

Trump-backed Republican Johnson re-elected Speaker of US House

AFP/Reuters
Washington

Mike Johnson was returned as Republican Speaker of the US House of Representatives yesterday with the crucial backing of incoming president Donald Trump, after two party rebels dramatically reversed their initial "no" votes.

The 52-year-old Louisiana lawmaker needed a simple majority to be elected as Washington's top legislator, who presides over House business and is second in line to the presidency.

However, three Republican members initially voted for other candidates, and Johnson was only able to secure victory after protracted negotiations during which two finally switched their backing.

The lengthy vote highlighted persistent divisions among Trump's Republicans on Capitol Hill.

Johnson won re-election with 218 votes - the minimum number needed.

Republicans control the chamber by a razor-thin 219-215 majority.

The vote was an early test of the party's ability to hang together as it advances Trump's agenda of tax cuts and border enforcement.

It also tested Trump's clout on Capitol Hill, where a handful of Republicans have already shown a willingness to defy him.

House Republicans have been racked by internal divisions over the last two years.

Johnson was elevated to speaker after the party ousted his predecessor Kevin McCa-



US representatives applaud Mike Johnson after he was re-elected as the Speaker of the House on the first day of the 119th Congress at the US Capitol in Washington. - Reuters

rthy in the middle of his term.

Members of Congress milled around the chamber for more than half an hour after voting had concluded, while Johnson and his lieutenants could be seen trying to persuade the holdouts.

A Reuters photographer captured an image of Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who voted for Johnson, talking on her iPhone with the name Susie Wiles - Trump's incoming chief of staff - visible on the screen.

The House went through 15 rounds of voting over four days in 2023 before electing McCarthy speaker.

Johnson, a mild-mannered Louisiana representative, 52, was vaulted from obscurity into one of Washington's most powerful positions during three weeks of turmoil in October 2023.

Then, Republicans forced out McCarthy

and struggled to agree on a successor.

The conservative Christian lawyer emerged as a consensus pick, but has since struggled to keep his party unified.

He has sought to build a close relationship with Trump, who endorsed him on Monday following weeks of uncertainty.

"A win for Mike today will be a big win for the Republican Party," Trump posted online yesterday.

Trump returns to the White House on Inauguration Day, January 20.

In a role that is second in line to the presidency after the vice-president, Johnson will have a big job ahead.

In addition to taking on Trump's sweeping legislative agenda, Congress will need to address the nation's debt ceiling later this year.

With the federal government already more than \$36tn in debt, many congress-

sional Republicans are expected to demand significant spending cuts.

Republicans were also sworn into their new 53-47 Senate majority yesterday, with Senator John Thune as their new leader, succeeding long-serving Senator Mitch McConnell, who is stepping aside from leadership but remaining in office.

Johnson angered some conservatives by repeatedly turning to Democrats to provide the votes to pass critical legislation, like bills to keep government agencies operating.

He also faced a last-minute challenge late last month when Trump told House Republicans to scrap a government funding deal, demanding it also raise the nation's debt ceiling.

A revised version of that bill - not including Trump's debt-ceiling demand - passed the House only a few hours before the government would have shut down, and it received more support from Democrats than Republicans.

Congress is scheduled to meet on Monday to certify Trump's presidential election victory, a function it will be unable to perform without a speaker.

Johnson has also looked to make his path for the next two years easier, by changing a rule agreed to by McCarthy that allowed any one member of the House to call for the speaker's ouster through what is known as a "motion to vacate".

Johnson's proposed rules would require nine members of the majority to agree before forcing the type of vote that led to McCarthy's ouster.

Thai PM declares millions in watches, bags among \$400mn assets

AFP
Bangkok

Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra declared more than \$400mn in assets yesterday, her party said, including more than 200 designer handbags worth over \$2mn and at least 75 luxury watches valued at almost \$5mn.

Paetongtarn, the youngest daughter of telecom billionaire and ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, took office in September as the fourth member of the clan to lead a Thai government in 20 years.

Paetongtarn was obliged to declare her assets and liabilities to the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC).

She identified 13.8bn baht (\$400mn) in assets, a document posted on media websites

showed. Her investments were worth 11bn baht and she had another billion baht in deposits and cash, her declaration said. Her other assets included 75 watches valued at 162mn baht and 39 more timepieces, plus 217 handbags worth 76mn baht, as well as property in London and Japan among other holdings.

She also declared liabilities of nearly 5bn baht, according to the NACC document posted by local

media, giving her a net worth of 8.9bn baht (\$258mn).

A representative from the Pheu Thai Party confirmed to AFP that the figures reported by Thai media were accurate. Her father and predecessor Thaksin - who once owned Manchester City football club - has a net worth of \$2.1bn, according to Forbes, making him the 10th-richest person in Thailand.

Thaksin used the wealth gen-

erated by his Shin Corp telecommunications empire to propel him into politics, and his family has remained influential even during his years in exile following his ousting in a coup.

Analysts say there is a long-standing connection between wealth and power in the kingdom. "In a nation without a fully functioning democracy, money plays a crucial role in political activities," Yuttaporn Issarachai

of Sukhothai Thammathirat University told AFP. "This has often been the justification for military interventions, with claims of a lack of transparency."

Paetongtarn's immediate predecessor as premier, Srettha Thavisin, declared assets of 985mn baht when he was dismissed by Thailand's constitutional court in August - down from 1.02bn baht at the start of his term.

S Korea troops prevent arrest of Yoon after tense stand-off

Reuters
Seoul

South Korea's presidential guards and military troops prevented authorities from arresting impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol yesterday in a tense six-hour stand-off inside Yoon's compound in the heart of Seoul.

Yoon is under criminal investigation for insurrection over his Dec 3 martial law bid that stunned South Korea and led to the first arrest warrant to be issued for a sitting president. "It was judged that it was virtually impossible to execute the arrest warrant due to the ongoing stand-off," the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) said in a statement.

CIO officials and police evaded hundreds of Yoon supporters who gathered in pre-dawn hours near his residence yesterday, who adopted the "Stop the Steal" slogans popularised by US President-elect Donald Trump's supporters, to block the arrest.

Officials from the CIO, which is leading a joint team of investigators, arrived at the gates of the presidential compound shortly after 7am and entered on foot. Once inside the compound, the CIO and police were outnumbered by cordons of Presidential Security Service (PSS) personnel, as well as troops seconded to presidential security, a CIO official told reporters. More than 200 PSS agents and soldiers blocked the CIO officers and police, he added. While there were altercations and PSS agents appeared to be carrying firearms, no weapons were drawn, he said.

Yoon, who has been isolated since he was impeached and suspended from power on Dec 14, was not seen during the stand-off, he said. South Korea's defence ministry said the troops involved were under the control of the PSS.

The CIO called off the effort to arrest Yoon around 1:30pm due to concerns over the safety of its personnel, and said it "deeply regretted" Yoon's non-compliance.

The CIO said it would consider its next steps. The police, who are part of the joint investigation team, have designated the PSS chief and the deputy as suspects in a criminal case for obstruction of official duty and issued summons for them to appear for questioning on Saturday, Yonhap news reported.

Insurrection is one of the few criminal charges from which a South Korean president does not have immunity. Yoon's arrest

Some 200 presidential guards, troops clash with investigators

Arrest attempt suspended due to safety concerns - agency

Arrest warrant viable until Jan 6

warrant, approved by a court on Tuesday after he ignored multiple summons to appear for questioning, is viable until Jan. 6. In a statement after the arrest effort was suspended, Yoon's legal team said the CIO had no authority to investigate insurrection and it was regrettable that it had tried to execute an illegal warrant in a sensitive security area.

The statement warned police against supporting the arrest effort. The presidential office filed a criminal complaint against three broadcasters and YouTube channel owners for unauthorised filming of the presidential residence, which it said was "a secured facility directly linked to national security".

The current warrant gives investigators only 48 hours to hold Yoon after he is arrested. Investigators must then decide whether to request a detention warrant or release him. Kim Seon-taek, a Korea University law professor, said targeting the PSS leadership may allow the investigators to sap the service's ability to put up resistance so they can try again to execute the warrant, which is "a rough way" to proceed. A better way, he said, would be for acting President Choi Sang-mok to exercise his power to order the PSS to cooperate. Later on Friday, the CIO said it would ask Choi to give that order.

Choi's office issued no comment on the arrest attempt.

Yoon sent shockwaves through Asia's fourth-largest economy and one of the region's most vibrant democracies with his late-night announcement on Dec 3 that he was imposing martial law to overcome political deadlock and root out "anti-state forces". Within hours, however, 190 lawmakers had defied the cordons of troops and police to vote against Yoon's order. About six hours after his initial decree, Yoon rescinded it.

He later issued a defiant defence of his decision, saying domestic political opponents were sympathetic to North Korea and citing



Anti-Yoon protesters block traffic as they march towards impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's official residence yesterday.

uncorroborated claims of election tampering. Two South Korean military officials, including the martial law commander during the short-lived declaration, have been indicted on insurrection charges, Yonhap reported on Friday. Kim Yong-hyun, who resigned as Yoon's defence minister after playing a major role in the martial law decree, has been detained and was indicted last week on charges of insurrection and abuse of power.

Separate from the criminal investigation, Yoon's impeachment case is before the Constitutional Court to decide whether to reinstate or permanently remove him. A second hearing in that case was held on Friday and the court set the first oral arguments for Jan 14.

Yoon's defence team, in arguing that there was no grounds for impeaching him, in its submission to the court cited a July 2024 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that stated Trump had immunity for actions taken as president, Yonhap news reported.

North Korean state media published a detailed report on the political turmoil in the South, including the arrest warrant issued for Yoon, who it said "stubbornly refuses to be investigated, totally denying his crimes with sheer lies". North Korea has been harshly critical of Yoon, citing his hardline policy against Pyongyang as grounds in declaring the South a "primary foe" and announcing it had abandoned unification as a national goal.



A man carrying a placard with a comic depicting South Korea's impeached president Yoon Suk-yeol marches during an anti-Yoon rally in Seoul yesterday.



A pro-Yoon protester holds a placard reading 'Investigate election fraud' during a rally near Yeol's official residence.

S Korea begins lifting Jeju Air wreckage after fatal crash

AFP
Muan

Theo MATTIOLO South Korean investigators said yesterday they expected to find more human remains as they began lifting the wreckage of the Jeju Air jet that crashed on landing last weekend killing all but two of the 181 passengers and crew aboard. Flight 2216 from Bangkok to Muan broke up in a fiery ball of flames after colliding with a concrete installation at the end of the runway following a mayday call and emergency belly-landing.

The exact cause of the Boeing 737-800 crash is still unknown, but investigators have pointed to a bird strike, faulty landing gear, and the barrier at the end of the runway as possible issues. Using large yellow cranes, investigators began lifting sections of the plane's scorched fuselage yesterday, including what appeared to be an engine and the tail section. "Today, we will lift the tail section of the plane," said Na Won-ho, head of investigations for the South Jeolla provincial police.

"We expect there may be remains found in that section," he told a press conference at Muan International Airport, where the crash happened. "For all that to be complete and to have the results, we must wait until tomorrow." Because of the violent destruction of the aircraft, officials said some of the bodies suffered extreme damage, and it was taking investigators time to piece them together while also preserving crash site evidence. All 179 victims have been identified, however, and some bodies have been released to families for funerals to begin.

Police have vowed to quickly determine the cause and responsibility for the disaster, but the transport ministry said it could take six months to three years. Police on Thursday conducted a series of raids on the offices of Jeju Air and the Muan airport operator as they stepped up their probe. Police were securing evidence on the airport's localizer - a concrete wall housing an antenna array at the end of the runway - as well as communications between the control tower and cockpit before the crash, Yonhap reported.

Indonesia says 2024 was hottest year on record

Indonesia experienced its hottest year on record in 2024, the country's weather agency said Friday, matching several other nations which have reported similar rises in temperature. Indonesia still relies enormously on fossil fuel energy - which scientists say is a leading cause of global warming - and is listed as one of the top greenhouse gas emitters in the world. The average air temperature in 2024 was 27.5C, some 0.8C warmer than between 1991 and 2020, the country's meteorology, climatology and geophysics agency (BMKG) posted on its website Friday. It said the data was obtained from 113 monitoring posts across the country. Indonesia had its hottest April in more than four decades last year as extreme heat swept parts of Asia. The United Nations said Monday that 2024 was set to be the hottest year ever recorded worldwide. Both China and India have already said the year was their hottest in decades. (AFP)

Hanoi declared world's most polluted city, authorities seek action

Reuters
Hanoi

Vietnam's capital Hanoi has been covered in thick smog over recent weeks, putting it at the top of a list of the world's most polluted cities, as the government said it would push for more electric vehicles (EVs) to alleviate the problem.

Levels of hazardous small particles, known as PM2.5, were measured at 266 micrograms per cubic metre in Hanoi early yesterday, the highest reading among a list of most-polluted cities, according to AirVisual, which provides independent global air pollution information via a phone app.

The southeast Asian country, a regional manufacturing hub with one of the fastest-growing economies in Asia, has reported severe air pollution in its major cities for years, particularly in Hanoi.

The thick smog is mostly caused by heavy traffic, trash burning and industrial activities.



Residential buildings are shrouded behind heavy air pollution in Hanoi yesterday.

"We the elderly can feel it very clearly when we suffer from respiratory problems that lead to breathing difficulties," Luu Minh Duc, a 64-year-old resident of the city, said. "The situation seems to get worse recently." Young people are also complaining.

"At first I thought it was foggy... but later I found out that it is actually fine dusts that reduce my vision and make me feel like it is not healthy to breathe," said 21-year-old student Nguyen Ninh Huong.

Speaking at a meeting with the transport ministry on Thursday,



Motorists wearing face masks ride scooters along Long Bien Bridge amid heavy air pollution in Hanoi.

Deputy Prime Minister Tran Hong Ha called for an accelerated transition to electric vehicles (EVs) as part of the efforts to reduce pollution, state media reported.

So far Hanoi has a target for at least 50% of buses and 100% of taxis to be EVs by 2030. "This is

the responsibility of the state to the people, and there must be specific and timely actions," Ha was quoted as saying by the Tien Phong newspaper. The ministries of natural resources, environment and health did not immediately respond to Reuters' requests for comment.



UK govt launches huge social care reform

The UK government yesterday launched the biggest reform in decades of Britain's ailing social care system, aiming to help thousands struggling to look after elderly, sick or disabled relatives. Numerous past bids by different governments to shake up a system, which for years has been badly underfunded and overwhelmed by rising demand, have failed.

But Health Secretary Wes Streeting said he was confident the long-term reforms will be a "triumph of hope over experience". "We're trying to break that cycle of failure and build a new national consensus around social care, with cross-party talks starting next month," he told the Press Association.

Streeting, however, warned that the creation of a National Care Service – which he compared to the launch of the National Health Service in 1948 – would take time. And he high-

lighted how the cost of caring for the nation's elderly was set to double in the next 20 years due to its ageing population.

A new independent commission will start work on the issue in April, chaired by Baroness Louise Casey, a member of parliament's upper House of Lords, but it is not due to publish its final report until 2028. It will study how to provide better help for those with difficulties carrying out daily tasks such as washing, dressing or feeding themselves.

Currently only the most dependant people in the UK or those with the lowest incomes are eligible for some kind of public support, either via the NHS or local councils. But the burden of care for many of those in the greatest difficulty falls on relatives, and has seen families having to pay out huge sums they can ill-afford and dipping into assets to afford private carers.

Streeting said he wanted "to

see people protected from the catastrophic costs of upfront care that sees people forced to sell their homes and move out". And writing in the Guardian, he said the reforms would "finally grasp this nettle and set our country on the path to building a national care service that meets the urgent need of our generation".

He also announced the release of an extra £86mn (\$107mn) to help the elderly carry out improvements to their houses to allow them to remain living independently in their own homes.

An interim report will be published in mid-2026, but the final recommendations will not be ready until 2028.

That timeline triggered some criticism, on Friday, that it was too far away for a service that was already on its knees. It "feels far too long" to wait, Sarah Woolnough, the chief executive of the King's Fund health think tank, told the BBC. —AFP

London chill



A woman wearing winter clothing reacts at Primrose Hill in London, Britain.

Trump demands end to North Sea 'windmills' in swipe at UK policy

■ Trump says UK making 'a very big mistake'
■ Britain is increasing windfall tax on North Sea energy producers
■ Government aims to quadruple offshore wind capacity by 2030

Reuters
London

US president-elect Donald Trump yesterday criticised the British government's energy policy with a demand the country "open up" the ageing North Sea oil and gas basin and get rid of wind farms.

The North Sea is one of the world's oldest offshore oil and gas basins where production has steadily declined since the start of the millennium. At the same time, it has become one of the world's largest offshore wind regions.

"The UK is making a very big mistake. Open up the North Sea. Get rid of Windmills!" Trump said in a post on his social media platform Truth Social. Climate-sceptic Trump has long opposed wind farms. In 2015, he unsuccessfully fought plans to construct one near his luxury golf course in Scotland. His post on Fri-

The fall of North Sea oil and rise of offshore wind

The British North Sea is one of the world's oldest offshore oil and gas basins where production has been in steady decline since the early 2000s. At the same time, the region has become one of the world's largest and fastest growing offshore wind basins. US President-elect Donald Trump called to "open up" the British North Sea and get rid of what he called windmills in a post on his social media platform Truth Social yesterday.

Below are some facts about the North Sea:
OIL AND GAS PRODUCTION
Exploration for oil and gas in the North Sea started in the 1960s and commercial production started in 1975. The basin reached peak output of 4.4mn barrels of

oil equivalent per day (boed) at the start of the millennium. Production has since declined as reservoirs depleted, reaching around 1mn boed in 2024, according to the North Sea Transition Authority (NSTA) regulator. It said output is set to fall to around 660,000 boed by 2029.

TAXATION
In October, the British government increased a windfall tax on North Sea oil and gas producers to 38% from 35%, bringing the headline tax rate on the sector to 78%, among the highest in the world. The duration of the Energy Profits Levy (EPL) was extended by a year to March 2030. The government wants to use the revenue from oil and

gas to raise funds for renewable energy projects. A 25% windfall tax was introduced by the Conservative government in May 2022 following a surge in energy prices linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The tax was increased to 35% in November 2022, and extended by one year in March 2024.

INVESTMENTS
Oil and gas companies, including Shell, ExxonMobil and Chevron, have retreated from the North Sea in recent decades to focus on newer basins. Since the introduction of the EPL, producers have sold assets, merged operations and sought to diversify to other regions. Spending on oil and gas production in the North Sea is

expected by the NSTA to decline from 11.7bn pounds (\$14.5bn) in 2020 to 8.5 billion pounds (\$10.55bn) by 2029.

OFFSHORE WIND
Britain has almost 15 gigawatts (GW) of offshore wind farms around its coast and a target to quadruple this to reach 60GW by 2030. The North Sea is host to what will be the world's largest offshore wind farm Dogger Bank. The 3.6GW wind farm is being built by Britain's SSE and Norway's Equinor and Vargronn in three phases. When complete, it will create enough electricity to power around 6mn homes, and a fourth phase that could add a further 2GW is also being considered. — Reuters

day included a link to a report from last November about US oil and gas producer APA Corp's unit Apache's plans to exit the North Sea by year-end 2029. The company expects North Sea production to fall by 20% year-on-year in 2025.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Labour government won last year's elections with a pledge to build up Britain's low-carbon economy. The government aims to quadruple offshore wind generation capacity by 2030 to 60 gigawatts as part of goals to lower carbon emissions and improve air quality.

In October, the British government said it would increase a wind-

fall tax on North Sea oil and gas producers to 38% from 35% and extend the levy by one year. The government wants to use the revenue from oil and gas to raise funds for renewable energy projects.

Oil and gas companies have said the higher tax rate could lead to a drop in investments. Some companies have sold assets while others merged operations and sought to diversify to other regions.

The North Sea Transition Authority, Britain's offshore oil and gas regulator, declined to comment about Trump's post. Britain's energy security department did not immediately reply to a request for com-

ment. Claire Coutinho, the opposition Conservative party's shadow energy minister, said in a post on X in response to Trump's comments that "no other major economy is shutting down its domestic oil and gas production... It's totally mad".

Oil companies have been exiting the North Sea to focus on newer basins. Production has declined from a peak of 4.4mn barrels of oil equivalent per day (boed) at the start of the millennium to around 1.3mn boed now.

Britain and countries in mainland Europe have overseen major offshore wind farm development, but the sector's growth has stalled

as costs ballooned due to technical and supply chain problems as well as higher interest rates.

Some developers are reconsidering their investments in offshore wind, or have assumed impairments, due to the rising cost of building wind farms that can be more than 100km offshore.

Orsted, the world's biggest offshore wind farm developer, trimmed its investment and capacity targets last year. Britain has a target to largely decarbonise its power sector by 2030, which will mean reducing its reliance on gas-fired power plants and rapidly increasing its renewable power capacity.

India to monitor China's mega Tibet dam plan

AFP
New Delhi

India said yesterday it had raised concerns with China about a planned mega hydropower dam construction upstream in Tibet, saying it will "monitor and take necessary measures to protect our interests". If built, the dam would dwarf the record-breaking Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River in central China – with potentially serious impact for millions of people downstream in India and Bangladesh.

A report from China's official Xinhua news agency last month announced the project on the river – known as Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet and Brahmaputra in India – linking it to Beijing's carbon neutrality targets and economic goals in the Tibet region.

China "has been urged to ensure that the interests of the downstream states of the Brahmaputra are not harmed by activities in upstream areas", India's foreign ministry spokesman Randhir Jaiswal said yesterday.

Jaiswal told reporters that New Delhi "will continue to monitor and take necessary measures to protect our interests".

India has established rights to river waters and "consistently expressed...our views and concerns...over mega projects on rivers in their (Chinese) territory," he added.

"These have been reiterated along with the need for transparency and consultations with the downstream countries following the latest report."

Novelist David Lodge dies aged 89

AFP
London

British novelist David Lodge, who was short-listed for the Booker Prize twice, has died at the age of 89, his publisher said yesterday. The English author was best known for *Small World* and *Nice Work*, which were nominated for the prestigious literary award in the 1980s. He died "peacefully" on New Year's Day, Penguin Random House said, without giving a cause of death.

"His contribution to literary culture was immense, both in his criticism and through his masterful and iconic novels which have already become classics," Lodge's publisher, Liz Foley, said. Lodge's family said they were "very proud" of the writer, who was renowned for his plays, memoirs and TV scripts, as well as his books.

Small World (1984) and *Nice Work* (1988) came after *Changing Places* (1975) and made up his campus trilogy series about a fictional university called Rummidge. It followed professors Philip Swallow from England and Morris Zapp from the United States and the cultural challenges they face when they swap universities for six months.

Lodge garnered a worldwide following for his comical, cynical take on middle-class life in more than a dozen novels, many mining the worlds of academia and Catholicism. In 2008, the

Guardian newspaper described him as "one of Britain's best-loved comic writers", while *A Clockwork Orange* author Anthony Burgess called Lodge "one of the best novelists of his generation".

Lodge was born in southeast London on January 28, 1935, into a Catholic household. His father was a professional dance musician and his mother was a homemaker. A gifted student, Lodge read literature at University College London, where he met fellow student Mary Jacob, whom he married in 1959.

A year later he took a teaching job at the University of Birmingham and published his first novel *The Picturegoers*, a multi-character social exploration set around a local cinema.

With his third novel, *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965), Lodge hit his stride with a well-received comic story of the life of a procrastinating student trying to work – and being endlessly distracted – in the British Museum's reading room.

Ten years later, *Changing Places* introduced professors Swallow and Zapp. The novel – which was inspired by Lodge's own academic experience and a long study trip he had made to the United States – won the prestigious Hawthorn Prize and marked the beginning of his most popular and critically successful phase.

The *New York Times* called *Small World* an "exuberant, bawdy and wickedly satiric sequel". The novel and *Nice Work*,

which completed the trilogy, were both later adapted for television. The books missed out on Booker prizes to Anita Brookner and Peter Carey respectively. The *Times of London* described Lodge in 2018 as one of the prize's "most notable winners".

"Lodge will be read long after most of his peers for the simple reason that, in his early work, he captured Britain so perfectly," *The Guardian* wrote in 2008 about the witty and wicked portraits of 1960s liberalism. Lodge taught in the English department at the University of Birmingham between 1960 and 1987 before retiring to focus on writing.

As well as novels, Lodge wrote extensive literary criticism in academic journals, two fictional biographies – on authors Henry James and H G Wells – and two volumes of his memoirs. Lodge continued to draw from his own life for fresh inspiration for his fiction, including his late onset deafness which is at the heart of his 13th novel, *Deaf Sentence* (2008). "I have been rather cautious," Lodge told *The Guardian* in 2008, explaining how he had found the time to write when he had also been working full-time in academia.

"I've stayed in one place. Having a stable married life is important. People who get into divorce, remarriage, custody and all that. It's terribly consuming of time and energy." Lodge's wife died in January 2022.

Tourists in Beijing



People visit the Summer Palace, known locally as Yiheyuan, in Beijing.

Marcos removes VP Duterte from security council

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos has removed Vice-President Sara Duterte from the National Security Council, according to an executive order released yesterday, a month after she allegedly plotted to kill him.

The order, signed Monday by Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin, removed the vice president and all former presidents from the council which advises the president on policies affecting national security.

Bersamin said the move was "to reorganise and streamline" its membership, which now com-

prises key legislative, defence, foreign and cabinet officials. "At the moment, the VP is not considered relevant to the responsibilities of membership in the NSC," Bersamin told reporters, adding that the president was free to add other members or advisers as needed. The move comes as Duterte is facing an investigation over her alleged threat to kill Marcos and his family.

In late November, Sara – the 46-year-old daughter of former president Rodrigo Duterte – delivered an expletive-laden online news conference in which she

claimed to have told someone to kill Marcos if she was assassinated. She later said the comments were misinterpreted.

The vice president swept to power in 2022 in an alliance with Marcos that has unravelled spectacularly in recent months, with both sides trading allegations of drug addiction and extreme rhetoric ahead of this year's mid-term elections. Duterte is also subject of multiple impeachment complaints over her alleged misuse of millions of dollars in government funds. Duterte has yet to respond to AFP's request for comment. —AFP

Moldovan PM warns of security crisis after cut-off of Russian gas

Reuters
Kyiv/Moscow

Moldova faces a security crisis after its breakaway enclave of Transnistria was cut off from supplies of Russian gas, Prime Minister Dorin Recean said yesterday.

Flows of Russian gas via Ukraine to central and eastern Europe were halted on New Year's Day after a transit agreement between the warring countries expired, and Kyiv rejected doing further business with Moscow.

Recean said Moldova would cover its own energy needs with domestic production and imports but noted the separatist Transnistria region had suffered a painful hit despite its ties with Moscow.

Residents there have lost hot water and central heating, and all factories except food producers have been forced to stop production.

"By jeopardising the future of the protectorate it has backed for three decades in an effort to destabilise Moldova, Russia is revealing the inevitable outcome for all its allies – betrayal and isolation," Recean said in a statement. "We treat this as a security crisis aimed at enabling the return of pro-Russian forces to power in Moldova and weaponising our territory against Ukraine, with whom we share a 1,200km border."

Russia denies using gas as a weapon to coerce Moldova, and blames Kyiv for refusing to renew the gas transit deal.

However, Russian gas giant Gazprom had separately said on December 28 that it would suspend

exports to Moldova on January 1 because of what Russia says are unpaid Moldovan debts of \$709mn. Moldova disputes that, and has put the figure at \$8.6mn.

The southeast European nation of about 2.5mn people has been in the spotlight since Russia's invasion of neighbouring Ukraine at a time of mounting tensions between Moscow and the West.

Its pro-European President Maia Sandu won a second term in an election last year and has pledged to accelerate reform and consolidate democratisation.

Moldova plans to hold a parliamentary election this summer.

The mainly Russian-speaking territory of Transnistria, which split from Moldova in the 1990s, received Russian gas via Ukraine.

In turn, Moldova used to receive the bulk of its electricity from Transnistria but with Kyiv making clear it would stop gas transit from Russia, the Chisinau government prepared alternative arrangements, with a mixture of domestic production and electricity imports from Romania, Recean said.

He said the Moldovan government remained committed to helping the enclave.

"Alternative energy solutions, such as biomass systems, generators, humanitarian aid, and essential medical supplies, are ready for delivery should the breakaway leadership accept the support," the government said in a statement.

Transnistria's pro-Russian leader Vadim Krasnoselsky has said the region had gas reserves that could cover 10 days of limited usage in northern parts and twice as long in the south.

EU chief Von der Leyen cuts travel plans due to pneumonia

AFP
Brussels

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen has cancelled her travel plans until mid-January because of a "severe" case of pneumonia, her office said yesterday.

The German politician, 66, is carrying out her duties from her home city of Hanover and remains in close contact with her team, a spokesman for the commission said.

"The president has cancelled her external engagements for the first two weeks of January. She is dealing with a severe pneumonia," the spokesman said.

Among the events that Von der Leyen, who has led the commission since 2019, had to call off were a speech in Lisbon and a trip next week to Gdansk in Poland.

The latter, which was to mark the launch of the Polish presidency of the European Council, will take place at a later stage, the spokesman said.

Austria's govt coalition talks fail as liberals quit

AFP/Reuters
Vienna

Austria's three-way coalition talks to form a new government collapsed yesterday after a liberal party announced its surprise withdrawal from the negotiations.

The shock exit by the liberals came after the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) emerged on top for the first time in national elections on September 29.

The party won 28.8% of the vote but has been unable to find partners to form a national government.

The conservative People's Party (ÖVP) came second with 26.3%, while the centre-left Social Democrats (SPÖ) won 21.1%.

That led the outgoing conservative chancellor Karl Nehammer to pursue talks with the SPÖ and the liberal party NEOS to form a government.

However, in a hastily arranged press conference yesterday, NEOS head Beate Meisl-Reisinger said she had informed Austria's President Alexander Van der Bellen that her party "will not continue the negotiations", citing little progress on her party's requested reforms.

Meisl-Reisinger nonetheless offered parliamentary support to the conservatives and social democrats, saying that "we are not saying no to reforms, to the compromises that have already been reached".

After the surprise announcement, the ÖVP and the SPÖ, which together have a majority of just one seat, traded blame for the failed talks but later signalled that they were ready to continue their efforts to form a coalition.

A majority of just one seat in parliament is widely seen as impractically thin since a single lawmaker could tip the balance.

Whether the two could reach an agreement is unclear given their ideological differences on issues such as taxation.

The ÖVP has pledged not to raise taxes while the SPÖ's flagship policy is to tax wealth and inheritance, which the ÖVP rejects.

Nehammer said he "regretted" the decision by NEOS, while calling on the "constructive forces of the political centre" to join the conservatives on their path.

Later, Van der Bellen said both the ÖVP and the SPÖ had informed him about their willingness to work on a coalition, calling on them to form a government "without delay".

A three-party governing coalition would have been a first since 1949 in Austria, which faces a flagging economy as well as a ballooning budget deficit.

Nehammer had said that the coalition talks, which began in October – initially without the liberals – would be an uphill task.

It has taken an average of 62 days after elections to form a government in Austria.

Disaster-hit Chilean park sows seeds of fire resistance

By Pedro Schwarze
AFP

After a wildfire that devastated Chile's largest botanical garden, the century-old park has planted thousands of native trees that it hopes are less likely to go up in flames.

Last year's inferno – considered the deadliest in Chile's recent history – killed 136 people, razed entire neighbourhoods and destroyed 90% of the 400-hectare (990-acre) garden in the coastal city of Vina del Mar.

Park director Alejandro Peirano thinks it is only a matter of time before the wildfires return.

"One way or another, we're going to have a fire. That's for sure," he told AFP, standing under one of the trees that survived the flames.

With authorities predicting another intense season of forest fires due to rising temperatures, the park wants to make sure it is better placed to survive.

It established a new "battle line" with trees such as litre, quillay and colliguay that are native to Mediterranean forests found in areas with hot, dry summers.

"The idea is to put the species that burn more slowly in the front line of the battle...so that fires, which will happen, don't advance so quickly," Peirano said.

Summer heat and strong gusts of wind meant that the February 2024 fire ripped quickly through Vina del Mar, 120km (75 miles) northwest of Santiago, leaving 16,000 people homeless.

The Vina del Mar National Botanical Garden, first designed by French architect Georges Dubois in 1918, boasted 1,300 species of plants and trees, including native and exotic ferns, mountain cypresses, Chilean palm and Japanese cherry trees.

Some came from seeds that survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945.

The park was home to wildlife including marsupials, gray foxes



This aerial view shows the progress in the reforestation of an area affected by last February's wildfire at the Botanical Garden in Vina del Mar, Chile. – AFP

and countless birds.

Weeks ago on one of the garden slopes, volunteers began to plant 5,000 native trees that are watered through an irrigation system.

In two years, the foliage is expected to be large enough to provide shade and encourage the regrowth of other species around them.

The tree planting is part of the first stage of a plan to revive the garden through a public-private partnership.

The park is also expected to be reforested with species capable of adapting to "scarce rainfall and prolonged drought", said Benjamin Veliz, a forest engineer with Wildtree, a conservation group involved in the project.

Firebreaks are also being created on the park's edges and its ravines are being cleared of dry vegetation and trash that feed fires.

Unlike eucalyptus, an exotic species that burns quickly, some native trees are able to withstand or contain flames for longer, according to research by the Federico Santa Maria Technical University (USM).

Scientific experiments have demonstrated that quillay and litre, for example, are less flammable than eucalyptus and pine, USM researcher Fabian Guerrero said.

When the inferno erupted last February, there was little firefighters could do to stop it consuming most of the park in less than an hour.

However, nature is slowly healing: abundant rainfall in 2024 in central Chile – after more than a decade of drought – has already brought green shoots of recovery in the botanical garden.

The beauty of Sclerophyll forests resistant to summer droughts is that "trees that burn come back", Peirano said.

Spanish government rift over shorter working week breaks into the open

Reuters
Madrid

A split in Spain's left-wing coalition government over a plan to implement a shorter working week with the same pay broke into the open yesterday after the country's labour minister accused the economy minister of "siding with employers".

Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz, who leads the far-left Sumar party, told state radio broadcaster RNE that there were "manifest disagreements" with Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's Socialist Party over the plan, and appealed to colleagues to "respect the committee of experts" that drew it up. She took aim at Economy Minister Carlos Cuperpo, who suggested the plan should be delayed by a year to give small businesses time to adapt.

Cuperpo "must decide on whose side he is on, that of the workers of this country who ask to live a bit better, or that of employers", she said.

A source at Spain's economy ministry said the government remained committed to the plan and

implementing it was "a priority".

"We must continue to bet on an economic policy that works and one that guarantees the sustainability of our economic and social achievements," the source added.

Spain was one of Europe's top performers last year, with growth driven by a tourism boom, migration and a strengthening labour market.

Diaz, who is also deputy prime minister, made the plan to reduce working hours central to her party's support for Prime Minister Sanchez's minority government.

Her goal is to reduce working hours to 37.5 per week from the current 40, with no change in salary, before the end of 2025.

Spain's central bank and former economy minister have both warned that higher labour costs could fuel inflation and curb job creation.

Companies have also voiced concern. Spain's main employers' association CEOE argues a shorter working week should not be imposed by law but through collective bargaining with each company able to adapt it to its specific needs.

Bereaved orca seen carrying another dead calf in US waters

A bereaved female killer whale who carried her dead calf for more than two weeks in 2018 has again lost a newborn and is bearing its body, US marine researchers said.

Scientists say whales are among the world's most intelligent animals, exhibiting complex social behaviour including self-awareness and suffering.

The Washington state-based Centre for Whale Research said the endangered orca named Tahlequah, also known as J35, was spotted carrying her deceased calf in Puget Sound off Seattle on New Year's Day.

"J35 has been seen carrying the body of the deceased calf," the centre said in an Instagram post on Thursday.

"This behaviour was seen previously by J35 in 2018 when she carried the body of her deceased calf for 17 days," it said.

When Tahlequah was carrying her previous deceased newborn seven years ago she was seen sometimes nudging its body with her nose and sometimes gripping it with her mouth, US media reported.

"It's a very tragic tour of grief," Centre for Whale Research founder Ken Balcomb told public broadcaster NPR at the time.



This handout image provided by NOAA Fisheries shows killer whale J35 (also called Tahlequah) carrying a newly dead newborn calf in the Puget Sound off the coast of West Seattle, Washington. – AFP

The centre said the loss of the latest newborn was "particularly devastating" because Tahlequah has now lost two of her four documented calves.

"We hope to have more information on the situation through further observation," the post said.

The centre also said Tahlequah's pod had been joined by another newborn.

"The calf's sex is not yet known but the team reports that the calf appeared physically and behaviourally normal," the centre said.

Tahlequah and her pod mates are Southern Resident Killer Whales, a population listed as endangered in the United States.

There are only three pods in the population, numbering around 70 whales.

They spend several weeks of each spring and fall in the waters of Puget Sound.

Their numbers are dwindling owing to a combination of factors, including a reduction in their prey and the noise and disturbance caused by ships and boats, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Dutch police arrest man suspected of 'random' Rotterdam shootings

AFP
The Hague

Dutch police said yesterday that they had arrested a man suspected of shooting dead three people in the port city of Rotterdam in an apparently random spree that took place over two weeks.

The series of killings has struck fear into local residents and been headline news in the Netherlands, where armed violence is usually connected to organised crime groups.

Officers arrested a 24-year-old man of no fixed abode and a weapon was found at the scene.

There is no indication yet of a motive, chief prosecutor Hugo Hillenaar told reporters.

"It has been a nightmare for everyone living in Rotterdam but also for me personally and for all the professionals involved as someone was freely wandering around shooting random victims," said Hillenaar.

Hillenaar said the suspect was born on the Caribbean island of Curacao but grew up in the Netherlands.

He was known to police for petty crimes as a juvenile, such as shoplifting.

The spree started on December 21, when a 63-year-old man was shot in the head and later died of his injuries.

Nearly exactly a week later, a 58-year-old man was shot in similar circumstances in the same neighbourhood.

Rotterdam police chief Fred Westerbeke said his team quickly established a link between the two killings but were unable to prevent a third – an 81-year-old man was shot on Thursday.

Officers had actually questioned the suspect in a shop on Thursday evening, but could not match him to the grainy CCTV image circulating at the time, said Westerbeke.

Police took a photo of the suspect and his identity details and this allowed them to arrest him just before midnight on Thursday, added the police chief.

Authorities have not found any link between the three victims and so "we are assuming they were chosen at random", he added.



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GULF TIMES

Fintech must embrace 'universal inclusion'

The world has made remarkable progress in advancing financial inclusion in recent years. In the decade beginning in 2011, the share of adults with access to financial services rose a whopping 50%, to more than three-quarters. But we still have a long way to go in creating a truly inclusive financial system. Beyond expanding access to financial products and services, we must ensure that these products and services work for all people, including the 1.2bn people worldwide with disabilities.

The first generation of financial technology disrupted traditional banking by facilitating access for the underbanked (think mobile money and micro-loans). The next wave of innovation must go further, embracing "universal inclusion" as a basic design principle. Universal inclusion captures the idea that everyone deserves access to financial tools that genuinely meet their needs and improve their well-being.

We already have examples of what this might look like. Consider tap-to-phone technology, which enables merchants to accept payments using their smartphones – no payment terminal needed. This functionality has obvious benefits for all buyers and sellers, from convenience to safety. But it also enables blind or visually impaired individuals, who might struggle to count cash, to participate more fully in the digital economy. People with conditions affecting their mobility – such as arthritis, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, and cerebral palsy – might also rely on tap-to-phone technology.

The same goes for voice-activated payments: they are convenient for all, but crucial for individuals with visual impairments, limited mobility, or literacy challenges. This is universally inclusive design at its best – so practical that everyone, disabled or not, uses it. In fact, the widespread adoption of such technologies makes them even easier for those with disabilities to use. Since 62% of disabilities are

Everyone deserves access to financial tools that genuinely meet their needs and improve their well-being

invisible, asking for accommodations can be very difficult. But nobody will bat an eye about an "accessible" tool if they are already using it.

Despite some successes, however, the prevailing approach to financial-product development does not put nearly enough emphasis on inclusivity. This represents not only a moral failure, but also a missed economic opportunity. People with disabilities, together with their friends and family, represent a staggering \$13tn in disposable income. As lifespans increase, this group's numbers – and spending power – are set to rise.

Beyond the direct returns of tapping this large and underserved market, financial-services companies pursuing universal inclusion would become more attractive to other customers, especially younger generations. A 2018 study showed that 91% of Millennials (born between 1980 and 1994) would replace a product they normally buy with an alternative from a "purpose-driven" company. Gen Z (born between the mid-1990s and the early-2010s) is also strongly inclined toward brands that emphasise social values.

To make the most of universal inclusion, financial institutions should embrace a new innovation framework built on three pillars. The first is a universally inclusive design approach, in which accessibility considerations shape solutions from the start. This would represent a significant shift from today's compliance-based approach, in which adjustments are often made after the fact to meet minimum accessibility standards. Its success would depend significantly on ensuring that people with disabilities participate in every phase of the design process.

The second pillar of a new fintech framework is data. Measuring our progress on overall financial inclusion is important, but so is collecting detailed data that differentiate among groups or segments. Such data should go beyond access to cover the quality of services and changes in financial well-being that result from the industry's products.

Lastly, clear accountability and reporting standards are essential. Regulatory frameworks must include incentives for financial-services institutions to disclose their progress on universal-inclusion metrics, making these results as fundamental to their reporting as traditional financial indicators.

The benefits of universal inclusion extend beyond profit. The economy becomes more resilient and dynamic when all people can participate in it fully. – Project Syndicate

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Investing in global health enhances US national security

US President-elect Donald Trump has signalled his intention to withdraw from multilateral public-health initiatives, putting global stability and America's own security interests at risk. A true "America First" strategy would focus on leveraging health diplomacy to secure the country's industrial future

By **Walter O Ochieng and Tom Achoki**
Nairobi

US President-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House signals a potential break from decades of American leadership in global health. While Trump's isolationist "America First" agenda may resonate with voters eager to see their tax dollars redirected toward domestic priorities, a US withdrawal from multilateral public-health initiatives would carry serious risks.

To be sure, there is a strong case for health self-sufficiency. Operation Warp Speed, launched during Trump's first term, accelerated vaccine development and deployment, playing a pivotal role in controlling the Covid-19 pandemic and facilitating America's economic recovery. But the notion that isolationism could shield Americans from the effects of global health crises is deeply misguided. The 2014-16 Ebola outbreak in West Africa cost the \$1.1bn and 12,000 jobs, even with just 11 cases reported on American soil.

The ongoing mpox outbreak, which originated in Central Africa and has since spread to more than 120 countries, serves as a stark reminder of how quickly public-health threats can escalate into global emergencies. A true "America First" strategy would focus on investing in robust surveillance and containment systems.

Investing in global health also makes strategic sense. As US firms seek to diversify their supply chains away from China, they require alternative manufacturing hubs with healthy and productive workforces. Countries with robust health systems are best positioned to fill this role.

Moreover, strengthening health systems in developing countries reduces migration pressures – a key concern for US voters – by addressing the root causes of displacement. Consider, for example, the President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR), launched by then-President George W Bush in 2003. With \$110bn in overall funding, PEPFAR has saved 26mn lives and accelerated economic growth in recipient countries since its inception. Studies comparing data from 2004 to 2018 revealed that PEPFAR contributed to a 2.1-percentage-point increase in the rate of per capita GDP growth, leading to a remarkable 45.7% rise in per capita GDP compared to 2004 levels.

Beyond its direct impact, PEPFAR's disease-surveillance infrastructure has proven invaluable in managing subsequent health crises. It has also bolstered America's global standing, with countries receiving PEPFAR support consistently reporting higher approval ratings for the US.

But the traditional aid model is long overdue for a radical transformation. Across the developing world, particularly in Africa, market-driven solutions are revolutionizing health care. In countries like Kenya and Nigeria, entrepreneurs are pioneering innovative, profitable models that combine digital systems, standardised protocols, and strategically located clinics to provide quality healthcare to middle- and lower-income populations.



Such ventures present significant opportunities for US investors seeking to enter the growing market for accessible health care in emerging economies. With some adjustments, America's development-finance tools could facilitate the transformation of Africa's healthcare systems. The US International Development Finance Corp, which has \$60bn at its disposal, is well-positioned to de-risk private investments in health ventures and attract additional capital through various forms of financing.

Early experiments appear promising. Stichting Medical Credit Fund, for example, has provided more than \$100mn in loans to health-care facilities across the continent while maintaining a remarkable 96% repayment rate. Other innovative mechanisms, such as development-impact bonds, have shown that market incentives can improve health outcomes.

Nearly five years after the start of the pandemic, the world is grappling with several major health threats, from HIV/AIDS to malaria, which kills 619,000 people annually, most of them children. Critics may argue that eliminating these diseases is a pipe dream, but the same was once said about eradicating smallpox. If anything, Operation Warp Speed has demonstrated that American ingenuity, when harnessed effectively, can achieve the seemingly impossible.

The stakes are much higher than they may seem. In recent years, Africa has emerged as a key battleground in the escalating Sino-American rivalry. Through the "Health Silk Road" – an extension of its Belt and Road Initiative – China has funded 400 health-care infrastructure projects across the continent. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it sent medical experts to 17 African countries, using bilateral agreements to deepen trade and diplomatic ties.

America stands to lose far more than influence. To meet the needs of its growing population, Africa must finance massive investments in health infrastructure. The world power that fills this gap will not only reap financial rewards but also will gain preferential access to the continent's vast reserves of critical minerals – essential for clean-energy technologies and advanced manufacturing. Notably, in African countries and regions where US health programs have been curtailed, Chinese firms have quickly stepped in, building hospitals and providing medical equipment, often in exchange for mining rights.

As competition for these resources intensifies, health diplomacy will become increasingly vital for securing America's industrial future, a central pillar of Trump's economic agenda. By focusing on targeted investments in areas where its interests align with global health priorities, the US can generate significant returns while maintaining cost efficiency.

In an increasingly interconnected world where the next pandemic disease outbreak is only a matter of time, investing in global health security is a form of disaster insurance. The choice facing the incoming Trump administration is clear: reclaim America's health leadership or grapple with the far-reaching consequences of disengagement.

Persuading a sceptical electorate that investing in global health serves US interests will undoubtedly be challenging. But Trump has an opportunity to silence his detractors and create a health legacy that surpasses anything his predecessors achieved. – Project Syndicate

• *Walter O Ochieng is a physician and global health researcher at the Africa Institute for Health Policy. Tom Achoki, a former Sloan fellow at MIT, is Co-Founder of the Africa Institute for Health Policy.*

Successful industrial policy requires industry experts

By **Diane Coyle**
Cambridge

After decades on the fringes of economic debate, industrial policy has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years, with the US, the European Union, and China all ramping up their efforts to promote strategic sectors. Even the International Monetary Fund – once a vocal critic of industrial policy – has recently come around to endorsing it.

The reasons for this shift are obvious. The Covid-19 pandemic and geopolitical shocks, especially Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have disrupted global supply chains, causing shortages and fuelling inflation. Meanwhile, transformative breakthroughs in artificial intelligence and clean-energy technologies have triggered a race between major powers like the US and China for dominance in these rapidly evolving fields.

The bigger question is what it will take for today's industrial policies to succeed. After all, the late-twentieth-century shift toward market-driven economic policies was largely a reaction to the failures of state interventions in the 1970s. Back then, efforts to promote national "champions" often led governments to prop up uncompetitive industries or back technologies that proved obsolete. Why should this time be any different, given that politicians remain highly susceptible to corporate lobbying and influence campaigns?

To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, policymakers must resist the urge to pick winners, whether specific companies or favoured technologies. Sadly, politicians are often dazzled by wealthy and powerful executives, especially in an era marked by staggering fortunes and little-understood innovations like AI.



FILE PHOTO: Employees work on a drilling machine production line at a factory in Zhangjiakou, Hebei province, China.

Compounding this issue, many politicians today are less likely than their predecessors to have direct experience in business. Consequently, they may be insufficiently sceptical of the promises made by companies and executives seeking government support.

This ever-present risk underscores the importance of independent and robust antitrust enforcement. Although independent competition authorities have long been recognised as a safeguard against corporate lobbying, the rise in market concentration across OECD countries over the past few decades suggests that competition rules have been severely under-enforced.

But times have changed. Recognising the risks posed by increasing market power, US President Joe Biden's administration adopted a more aggressive antitrust policy, while the European Union and the United Kingdom have introduced new legislative frameworks aimed at regulating digital markets. With AI and green technologies set to transform the global economy, sustaining this momentum is crucial to ensuring

that new entrants and emerging companies have the space to innovate and grow.

Like competitive and open markets, industrial policies can play a vital role in boosting productivity and economic growth while helping governments resist undue corporate influence. But their success hinges on a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing specific industries.

Regrettably, the institutional expertise that characterized government agencies during the postwar era has steadily diminished since the 1980s. In the UK, for example, senior officials in the forerunners of the current Department for Business and Trade once had deep knowledge of key sectors like the auto industry. They were familiar with companies across the supply chain, maintained direct relationships with top executives, and were well-versed in the latest management practices and technical innovations. Many were engineers by training, giving them an invaluable perspective on the industries they oversaw.

By the 1990s, this expertise had largely vanished as industrial policies were abandoned. Many

experienced officials – their roles diminished in importance – left public service. Today, senior civil servants oversee a wide range of industries, leaving them with little, if any, sector-specific knowledge.

For industrial policies to be effective, policymakers must move beyond the vague rhetoric about national strengths that characterizes the current policy debate. Instead, they should focus on the specific products, services, and technologies for which their countries have a proven comparative advantage. This kind of industry-specific expertise is essential for any successful industrial policy.

Without these skills, today's industrial policies might fail to strike a "Goldilocks" balance between supporting strategically important industries and maintaining market competition. In other words, they could become overly influenced by corporate interests while lacking the specialised knowledge and technical understanding required to guide domestic industries effectively.

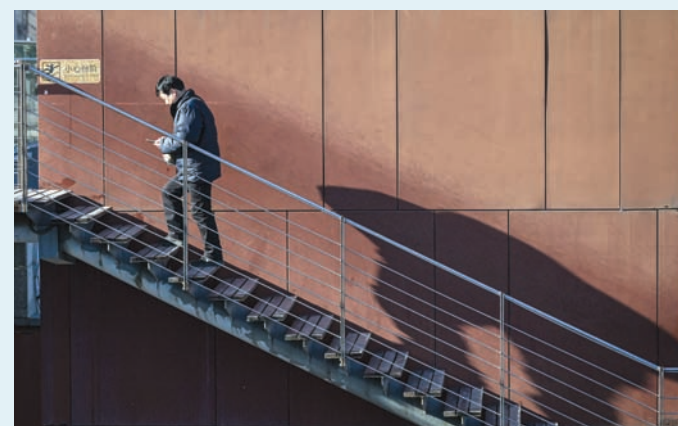
To be sure, acquiring the necessary know-how to craft effective industrial policies could be a long-term undertaking requiring significant commitment. But as the world moves beyond the outdated notion that markets and governments operate in isolation, policymakers must develop the know-how and skills needed to work collaboratively with domestic industries. While capacity-building is never a simple process, it is critical to ensuring that the new industrial policies succeed. – Project Syndicate

• *Diane Coyle, Professor of Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, is the author of Cogs and Monsters: What Economics Is, and What It Should Be (Princeton University Press, 2021) and the forthcoming The Measure of Progress: Counting What Really Matters (Princeton University Press, Spring 2025).*

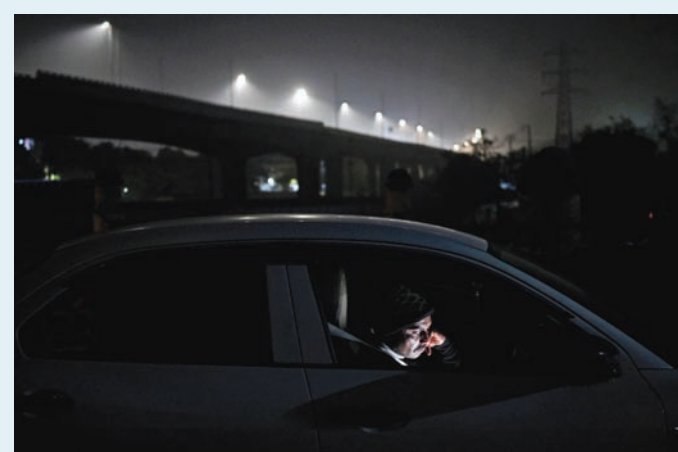
WORLD NEWS THROUGH THE LENS



Teams salvage an engine of the Jeju Air Boeing 737-800 aircraft, which crashed and burst into flames at Muan International Airport, in South Korea yesterday.



Upwardly mobile: A man walks upstairs as he checks his phone in Beijing yesterday.



A taxi driver uses his mobile phone in a car, parked along the street on a cold winter evening in New Delhi.



Competitors drive their cars on the Moreeb Dune, known locally as Tal Moreeb and is considered one of the world's highest sand hills, during the Moreeb Dune Cars Championship in the Liwa desert in the UAE on Thursday.



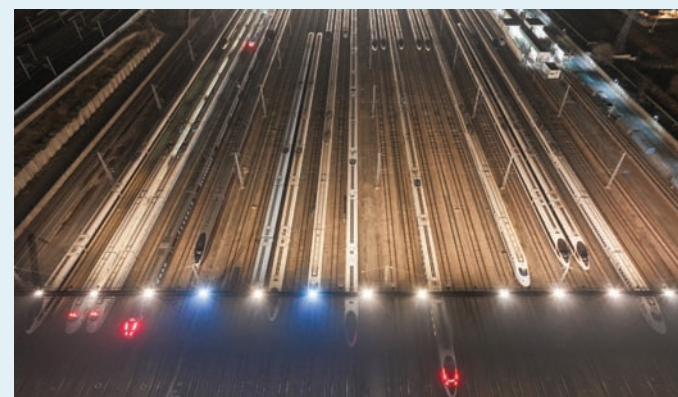
A man stands on plastic waste and other garbage washed ashore that has accumulated thickly at a beach in Kedonganan Badung regency, on the Indonesia resort island of Bali yesterday.



Indian army soldiers dance to the tunes of a military band as they take a break during rehearsals for the upcoming Republic Day parade on a cold winter morning in New Delhi yesterday.



Members of Indian Coast Guard band take a break during rehearsals for the upcoming Republic Day parade on a cold foggy morning in New Delhi yesterday.



This photo taken on Thursday shows high-speed trains on stabling tracks in Nanjing, east China's Jiangsu province. China aims to expand the length of its operating high-speed rail tracks to around 60,000km by 2030, up from 48,000km at the end of 2024, according to the country's railway operator China State Railway Group Co, Ltd (China Railway).



An Afghan vendor prepares local fritters known as 'pakawra' along a street, during the first heavy snowfall this winter in Kabul on Thursday.



A flock of pigeons flies amid dense fog on a cold winter morning at Lal Chowk in Srinagar yesterday.



A drone view of cars driving along a road near snow on the ground in Twin Bridges, California, on Thursday.



Kite flying activities for enthusiasts.

Left: The event features various acrobats performing on stage.

Sealine Season boosts Qatar's winter tourism

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Qatar's winter tourism campaign received a major boost yesterday with the launch of Sealine Season, a three-week multi-activity experience at Sealine Beach, aimed at attracting visitors with a diverse range of desert adventures, entertainment, and sporting events.

Running until January 27, the initiative is organised by Visit Qatar in collaboration with key government entities, including the Ministry of Sports and Youth, Qatar Sports for All, and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change.

"We are very happy that we are launching the Sealine Season," Visit Qatar's Media Relations and Communications senior manager, Dr Buthaina al-Janahi, told *Gulf Times* on the sidelines of the event. "What we offer is a variety of activities that has a lot to do with excitement, a lot to do with activation that is suitable for all ages."

"Not to forget that we are talking about two main musical concerts that will start officially from today," she said. "It includes fireworks that will start around 10pm."

Dr al-Janahi highlighted how the Sealine Season aligns with Qatar's broader tourism strategy, as it aims to further attract a large number of visitors from neighbouring GCC countries and beyond.



RC cars at the event. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam

Right: The sports area engages young visitors.

Left: Dr Buthaina al-Janahi at the launch of the Sealine Season yesterday.

Below: Free activities cater to all ages such as henna painting and calligraphy.



"Qatar is a very strategic location that hosts these kinds of activities and welcomes everyone, especially our visitors from the GCC region," she said.

According to Visit Qatar, visitors can choose from a range of paid and free activities: paid options include thrilling desert safaris, encompassing the popular Monster Bus Safari, as well as ATV Buggies, horse riding, boat trips, and a tethered balloon experience, while free activities cater to all ages and interests, with football, volleyball, and mini-soccer at the sports area, obstacle courses and face painting for children, and cultural activities such as falconry and calligraphy.

Weekend adventures feature paid fishing trips and free stargazing sessions while entertainment highlights include musical concerts that began yesterday and will be held again on January 10, 17, and 24, with

fireworks displays in the evening.

Visit Qatar noted that Muay Thai self-defence classes are offered every Thursday and Friday, while the "Chef on Fire" cooking competition showcases local culinary talents every Thursday, with awards ceremonies held on the main stage.

Other attractions are daily classic car displays by Mawater and the chance to see Qatar's national animal at the Oryx Barn.

The activation also hosts several food outlets for visitors to enjoy.

Dr al-Janahi said Qatar's tourism calendar continues to flourish as more activities and mega events set for this year, ensuring that the country remains committed to creating unique and exciting experiences for all visitors.

"There is something in the pipeline that we promise everyone to experience," she added.



The activation allows participants to have a close encounter with a falcon.



Oryx Barn at the Sealine Season.



Live entertainment performances at the main stage.



Classic car displays by Mawater.