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SPORT | Page 1

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'No deal until Israel agrees to quit Gaza'

AFP
Gaza Strip

Israel pounded the Gaza Strip yesterday, killing at least 23 people according to rescuers, nearly 15 months into the war with Palestinian resistance movement Hamas.

The latest deaths come after Israel late on Saturday said indirect negotiations had resumed in Qatar for a truce and hostage release deal.

Hamas has approved a list of 34 hostages presented by Israel to be exchanged in a possible ceasefire deal, a group official told Reuters yesterday.

The official, who spoke on

condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, also reiterated that any deal is contingent upon reaching an agreement on an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and a permanent ceasefire.

Mediators Qatar, Egypt and the United States have tried for months to strike a deal to end the war. The latest effort comes just days before Donald Trump takes office as president of the United States on January 20.

Israeli negotiators were dispatched on Friday to resume talks in Doha.

An Israeli air strike on a house in northern Gaza's Sheikh Radwan area killed at least 11 people early yesterday, according to Civil

Defence agency spokesman Mahmud Bassal. He said the victims included women and children.

The Hamas-run territory's health ministry said a total of 88 people were killed over the previous 24 hours.

In one strike, five people died when the house of the Abu Jarbou family was struck in the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza.

Israel's military offensive has killed 45,805 people in Gaza, a majority of them civilians, according to figures from the territory's health ministry which the United Nations considers reliable.

Later yesterday, an Israeli airstrike hit a police station in Khan Younis in southern Gaza, killing five people.

Amir, DRC president discuss ways to enhance relations



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani met yesterday with President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Felix Tshisekedi, at the Amiri Diwan. The two sides discussed bilateral co-operation relations and ways to boost them across various fields and the key regional and international developments of common interest. The meeting was attended by HE Chief of the Amiri Diwan Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Khulaifi, HE the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz al-Khulaifi and several senior officials. Also present were senior officials, the members of the delegation accompanying President Tshisekedi. (QNA) Page 4

EAA to organise 'Walk for Education'

Education Above All (EAA) Foundation, announced that it will host the Walk for Education: CSR and Sustainability Fair, on Jan 24 in collaboration with the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA). Themed "Help Educate Children", the event aligns with the UN International Day of Education and aims to raise awareness and funds to support EAA's projects providing quality education to vulnerable and marginalised children worldwide. The fair is expected to bring together over 10,000 community members at MIA Park. Page 12

US Speaker eyes swift passage of mega-bill

The Speaker of the US House said yesterday he was pushing an "aggressive" time-frame for getting a multi-trillion-dollar bill addressing immigration, tax cuts and more to Donald Trump's desk by April, within his first 100 days in office. Speaker Mike Johnson and fellow congressional Republicans are eager to help the incoming president enact his campaign promises, including unprecedented border security spending, business deregulation, boosting energy production and raising the US debt ceiling.

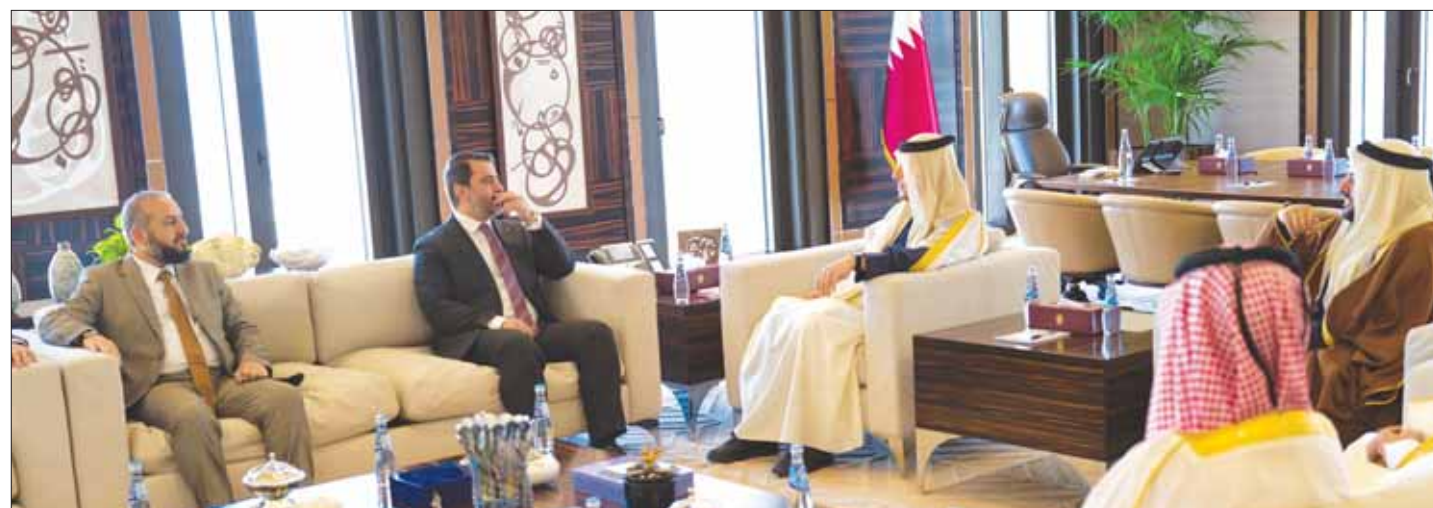
Meloni holds talks with Trump in Florida

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said yesterday she was ready to work with Donald Trump after making a surprise visit to Florida to meet the US president-elect. Meloni met Trump at his Mar-a-Lago residence late on Saturday. "Lovely evening with Donald Trump who I thank for the welcome," Meloni posted on social media, with a picture of her and Trump. Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said talks covered issues including Cecilia Sala, an Italian journalist detained last month in Iran.

Winter storm, snow disrupt travel in US

Blizzard and winter storm conditions blasted the Midwest early yesterday, as a massive weather system began tracking eastward across the United States, with authorities warning of some of the heaviest snowfalls in a decade and severe impact on transport. Snow and ice forced the grounding of dozens of flights in parts of Europe yesterday, disrupting the tail end of the busy New Year holiday travel season. Page 6

PM meets Syrian high-level delegation; assures Qatar's steadfast support



QNA
Doha

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani met yesterday with a high-level

Syrian delegation currently visiting Qatar. The delegation included Minister of Foreign Affairs in the new Syrian administration Asaad al-Shibani, Minister of Defence Murhaf Abu Qasra and Head of the Intelligence Service Anas Khattab. Talks during the meeting dealt with bilateral co-operation and

ways to bolster them. The two sides also discussed the latest developments in Syria, with a focus on enhancing Qatari humanitarian aid to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people. The discussions extended to a range of issues of mutual concern.

HE the Prime Minister and

Minister of Foreign Affairs reaffirmed Qatar's steadfast support for Syria's unity, sovereignty, and independence, emphasising the importance of fulfilling the aspirations of the Syrian people for a dignified life and the establishment of a state governed by institutions and the rule of law.

Minister of state for international co-operation meets new Syrian foreign minister

HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met yesterday with Foreign Minister of the new Syrian administration Asaad al-Shibani, who is visiting the country.

The meeting discussed bilateral co-operation relations and ways to enhance and develop them, particularly with regards to humanitarian work and development. Moreover, the two sides discussed the latest updates in Syria, increasing Qatari humanitarian aid to assist the brotherly Syrian people, and a host of topics of mutual interest.

During the meeting, HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation reiterated Qatar's call for intensified international efforts to increase humanitarian aid to the Syrian people. (QNA) Page 2

Follow rules to meet goals of NSD: committee

QNA
Doha

The National Sport Day (NSD) Committee has put forth conditions and guidelines that all private and public institutions should adhere to when organising events that mark the National Sport Day 2025, for their success and ensuring the intended objectives.

In a statement, the committee stressed that all ministries, government apparatuses, public authorities and corporations, along with operating bodies, including the private sector should submit their programmes and plans with respect to these events, through filling out the NSD's form on the official website www.msy.gov.qa

The statement outlined the criteria that should be upheld when selecting these events, foremost of which is the exclusive focus on kinetic and physical activities and steering clear of all flamboyant appearance of festivals. It called for the importance of focusing on awareness-raising activities that advance practising of sports as a daily healthy routine.



In addition, the committee stressed that it is imperative for such proposed sporting events to consistently fit all age groups by bearing in mind their health conditions, in terms of physical activities, as well as their duration to ensure avoiding stress and traumas. It noted that it has addressed government ministries and agencies, all public bodies and institutions, alongside state-operated entities, including the private sector on the importance of abiding by the aforementioned conditions to achieve the

The conditions that should be upheld included avoiding construction of tents and temporary sporting premises, with a strict adherence to safety and security requirements during these activities, the statement highlighted, indicating that it is paramount to capitalise on sporting facilities, parks and public places

intended goals set forth in the Amiri Decision No 80 of 2011, on NSD to consistently achieve the noble and sublime ends embodied by these events.

The conditions that should be upheld included avoiding construction of tents and temporary sporting premises, with a strict adherence to safety and security requirements during these activities, the statement highlighted, indicating that it is paramount to capitalise on sporting facilities, parks and public places.

The committee stated that adherence to providing healthy foods and refraining from serving fast food is very essential with the necessary avoidance of distributing gifts and free-of-charge food to the public, emphasising that the conditions include avoiding performance activities such as concerts that must be replaced with exercises and kinetic activities, since these

shows could prompt the public to prefer them over practising sports.

Head of the NSD committee, Abdulrahman bin Musallam al-Dosari, affirmed that the committee is receiving applications from all entities concerning events they intend to organise to be further evaluated and proactively familiarise the public with them, stressing the importance of distributing these activities throughout the country to help a substantial number of community members practise sports on fields and public parks.

Al-Dosari emphasised that NSD plays a profound role in enhancing public health and physical activity, pointing out that the Ministry of Sports and Youth has launched a first-of-its-kind prize simultaneously to mark this event, in pursuit of reinforcing positive competition among diverse institutions.

Al-Misnad meets Syrian, Canadian ministers



HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met yesterday with the visiting Foreign Minister of the new Syrian administration Asaad al-Shibani. (QNA)



HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met yesterday with the visiting Canadian Minister of International Development Ahmed Hussein. The meeting discussed ties between Qatar and Canada, and ways to enhance bilateral co-operation, particularly in the fields of development and humanitarian work. The meeting also discussed the latest developments in Syria, in addition to a host of topics of mutual interest. Acting Director of the Department of American Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Jassim Mohammed al-Asmakh attended the meeting. (QNA)

Ministry holds 2nd Career Camp for university students

In collaboration with the Career Development Student Association at Qatar University and the Qatar Career Development Centre (QCDC), the Ministry of Labour has launched the 2nd edition of the Career Camp for university students.

This initiative aims to empower graduating students and equip them with the skills necessary to excel in the labour market.

Assistant Undersecretary for National Manpower Affairs in the Private Sector at the Ministry of Labour Shaikha Abdulrahman al-Badi highlighted that the second edition of the Career Camp is part of broader efforts to prepare and qualify the national workforce for

the private sector labour market.

Al-Badi added that it also aims to establish a robust national talent pool in the private sector capable of driving significant progress towards a more productive and dynamic labour market across various economic sectors, while actively contributing to the nation's sustainable development goals. Furthermore, the strategy focuses on attracting highly skilled expatriate workers to enhance overall workforce quality.

Director of the Qualifying and Skills Development Department at the Ministry of Labour Mohammed Salem al-Khlaifi emphasised the importance of engaging directly with students nearing

graduation to better prepare them for entering the workforce.

Al-Khlaifi also highlighted that the second edition of the Career Camp provides an excellent opportunity for students to familiarise themselves with the most sought-after specialisations and essential skills needed during their university studies to boost employability and readiness for the job market.

President of Qatar University's Career Development Student Association Mohamed al-Hafiz explained that the number of participants had been increased to 60 students from various universities. He also noted that the field visits had been expanded,

dedicating the entire third training day to a visit to Qatar Science and Technology Park. This visit, he stated, aims to raise awareness of global and local trends in entrepreneurship and innovation.

As for Acting Director of QCDC Saad Abdulla al-Kharji, he commented on the collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, stating: "We value our partnership in supporting ambitious youth through the Career Camp. This initiative aligns with the Qatar Career Development Centres mission to prepare university students with the necessary tools and skills to thrive in the labour market and contribute to the nation's future." (QNA)

Amir congratulates Kuwaiti Amir and Bahraini king

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent cables of congratulations to Kuwaiti Amir Sheikh Mishal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah on his country's successful hosting and organisation of the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup.

● His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Deputy Amir and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs sent cables of congratulations to King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifah of Bahrain on the occasion of the Bahrain National Football Team winning the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup. (QNA)

Amir condoles with Saudi, Jordan kings

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent yesterday cables of condolences to Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia on the death of the mother of Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud.

● His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Deputy Amir also sent cables of condolences to Jordan's King Abdullah II ibn al-Hussein on the death of Princess Majda Ra'ad, the wife of Prince Ra'ad bin Zeid. (QNA)

Meeting with US envoy



HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad met yesterday with US ambassador to Qatar Timmy Davis. The meeting discussed the co-operation relations between the two countries and the latest developments in the region, particularly in Syria. Acting Director of the Department of American Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jassim Mohamed al-Asmakh, attended the meeting. (QNA)

34th Doha Book Fair slated for May

The 34th edition of the Doha International Book Fair (DIBF) is set to open at Doha Exhibition and Convention Center from May 8 to 17.

In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Culture highlighted that the event would feature a broad international participation, including hundreds of publishing houses from various countries of the world, along with a significant cultural participation of embassies of sisterly and friendly nations.

The DIBF is the longest-running book fair in the region, renowned for its strong reputation, bolstered by consistently high visitor turnout. It attracts attendees not only from Gulf and Arab countries but also from around the world. The event gives foremost priority to children and young people through dedicating capacious pavilions to publishers of children's books and organising interactive activities to highlight children's talents and encourage reading. Additionally, numerous cultural events are set to be held on the sidelines of DIBF that will tackle a multitude of topics that concern the public. (QNA)

Alecso conference of Arab education ministers gets underway in Doha

The 14th Alecso Conference of Arab Ministers of Education got underway in Doha yesterday.

The conference is organised by the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (Alecso) in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the Qatar National Commission for Education, Culture and Science, under the theme "Comprehensive education and empowering teachers: a strategic vision for education in the Arab world".

In his opening speech, HE the Education Undersecretary, Dr Ibrahim bin Saleh al-Nuaimi, said that conference serves as a unique platform that provides educational leaders with an opportunity to exchange experiences, review successful experiments, and learn about the latest educational developments. It also provides an opportunity to build effective partnerships, with countries with regional and international organisations, in the field of education.

He explained that in light of the challenges facing some Arab countries due to crises and conflicts, the importance of joint action to ensure the provision of quality and comprehensive education is growing, indicating that education is the enabling tool towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially the fourth goal, which stipulates ensuring inclusive and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Education is not just a means



of transferring knowledge, "but rather a foundation that enables individuals to reach their full potential and enhances the well-being of society as a whole", he said underscoring the importance of providing comprehensive education that reaches everyone, without discrimination, on bases of gender, race, disability, or economic status.

He added that comprehensive education requires the adoption of innovative strategies that transcend traditional classrooms, stressing the necessity of working to provide educational environments that support all students, including those who face special challenges. This helps in building strong and cohesive societies and contributes to promoting the values of tolerance and mutual respect.

He pointed out that the Third National Strategy of Qatar (2024-2030) emphasised providing a world-class education system that guarantees fair opportunities for all, by enabling learners to acquire the skills and competencies necessary to enhance their capabilities in building their societies and contributing to achieving a sustainable and knowledge based future.

He explained that the rapid science, technology and innovation

developments necessitate the provision of flexible educational systems capable of keeping pace with this progress while facing the challenges associated with the unsafe use of technology.

He stated that in 2022 the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in the State of Qatar launched the National E-Learning Strategy; a strategy featuring several important initiatives, including: the Qatar Education Platform, and Cybersecurity Curricula, to enhance digital transformation and ensure the safe use of technology.

Alecso's Education Department Director Dr Rami Iskandar hailed Qatar's leading role in supporting education issues at the national and Arab levels, through its qualitative initiatives and constructive partnerships in enhancing the quality of education and its development.

He added that the theme of the conference is a message that carries deep meanings reflecting common challenges and aspirations, noting that the selection of this title by the Arab ministers of education comes as an affirmation of its importance and the extent of its harmony with Alecso's education strategies to achieve sustainable development. (QNA)

Birla Public School to start shift operations from Jan 15

In compliance with the directives from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Birla Public School will commence double-shift operations starting Jan 15. The School announced that the decision has been made to align with the Ministry's enhanced safety regulations and to ensure a secure and conducive learning environment for all students. "Our commitment to providing quality education in a safe and supportive setting remains unwavering. Accordingly, all necessary arrangements have been

made to implement the double-shift system effectively, without compromising the quality of education we deliver," the school said in a press statement. KG 1 divisions and Grade V divisions from the Main School campus and Grade 1 divisions from both Primary 1 and Primary 2 campuses, will be transitioned to the second shift in the afternoon, which will be conducted at the Main School campus at Abu Hamour. KG1 will operate from 11.30am to 3.30pm and Grade 1 and Grade 5 will be from 1pm to 6pm.

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Old Doha Port to play key role in Shop Qatar: CEO

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Old Doha Port is set to transform into a retail and entertainment hub for Shop Qatar 2025, offering interactive games, luxury car displays, and exclusive discounts in its Mina District.

"The port is set to play a central role in Shop Qatar 2025, running from January 1-February 1, 2025, by transforming the Mina District into a dynamic hub of retail, entertainment, and cultural experience," Old Doha Port CEO Mohamed Abdulla al-Mulla told *Gulf Times*.

Apart from hosting major sporting and maritime events, he highlighted the port's efforts in positioning itself as a popular retail hub to attract residents and visitors.

According to al-Mulla, shoppers can look forward to interactive Redemption Booths, where people who spend QR200 or more at participating outlets can play "Pictionary" to win prizes. They can also enter into prize draws for luxury items, includ-



Mohamed Abdulla al-Mulla

ing high-value vouchers, cash rewards, and cars. For car enthusiasts, the Exceed Car stand will display a collection of luxury vehicles.

Themed "Your Shopping Playground", Qatar's biggest shopping and entertainment festival's 2025 edition kicked off on Jan 1 at Place Vendome and will run until Feb 1. The month-long event which takes place at 20 malls and locations offers a mix of retail therapy, cultural experiences, and fun for all age groups.

"By participating in Shop Qatar 2025, Old Doha Port underscores its commitment to



Old Doha Port participates in Shop Qatar 2025.

becoming a premier destination for retail and entertainment," al-Mulla said.

He added that the Mina District will host weekly parades featuring cultural performances, roaming entertainers, and vibrant displays. Retailers throughout the district will be offering exclusive discounts and promotions.

Old Doha Port hosts around 100 shops and boutiques, dozens of cafes and restaurants, and 150 hotel apartments, making it a diverse and convenient shopping destination. The colourful Box Park, a striking development

built from shipping containers, adds to the unique appeal of the venue.

Al-Mulla announced that Old Doha Port has a packed calendar of events for January 2025 coinciding with Shop Qatar, including the Kite Festival, set from Jan 19 to 25. It will feature spectacular kite displays, workshops, and family-friendly activities. Other activities planned throughout January also include play booths at Mina Cut, a Dragon Boat Race, Kayak Competitions, and joint Sailing Club initiatives, ensuring a variety of engaging options for all visitors.

QM's Dadu Gardens launches initiative for young car enthusiasts

Qatar Museums (QM) unveiled Dadu Gardens' new initiative, the 'Dadu Clubs programme', immersing young car enthusiasts in the world of automobiles while exploring Qatar's rich automotive heritage.

QM noted that each club provides eight sessions to spark children's creativity and curiosity with hands-on learning across a range of topics.

The programme kicks off with the Auto Club, in collaboration with the future Qatar Auto Museum, an engine for driving design, innovation, and research in new forms of mobility.

Children aged 8-12 will get a chance to take part in a series of interactive science, technology, engineering, and mathematics activities, including building solar-powered cars, designing their own traffic signs, and learning about the history of automobiles in a fun and engaging environment.



Children aged 8-12 get a chance to take part in STEM activities with Dadu Garden's new initiative.

Dadu Gardens' Project and Operations deputy director, David Taylor, said: "We aim to be a leading platform for educational and extracurricular activities in Qatar, and we are

pleased to start with the Auto Club and look forward to expanding with even more clubs in the future."

The collaboration with Qatar Auto Museum offers an unparalleled educational experience and marks a significant step in integrating education, culture, and hands-on activities for children in Qatar.

Located within Dadu Gardens, the programme aligns with Dadu's mission to nurture learning through interactive play. Future clubs, such as the Gardening Club, will offer additional educational topics.

Qatar Auto Museum director, AlKindi Aljawabra said: "This partnership offers young minds a unique opportunity to explore the fascinating world of automobiles and Qatar's automotive heritage".

With limited capacity per club, the programme ensures an intimate and personalised experience for each participant.

QIB welcomes Mercedes-Benz to its Auto Marketplace



Qatar Islamic Bank (QIB) has announced the addition of Mercedes-Benz to its recently launched Auto Marketplace. The cutting-edge platform, integrated with the QIB mobile app, revolutionises the car buying process by digitally connecting customers with car dealers seamlessly and efficiently.

The Auto Marketplace offers customers a seamless, end-to-end car-buying journey through the QIB mobile app. With this feature, customers can effortlessly browse a wide range of available luxurious vehicles from Mercedes-Benz, explore detailed listings, and select the car that suits their preferences. Once a vehicle is chosen, users can easily book a test drive directly through the app, ensuring a hassle-free experience.

Additionally, the Auto Marketplace simplifies the financing process by allowing customers to instantly secure financing options within the same platform. From browsing to financing and finalising the purchase, the entire car buying process is streamlined and accessible, offering unparalleled convenience and efficiency. D Anand, general manager of QIB's Personal Banking Group, said: "We are pleased to partner with Nasser Bin Khaled & Sons Automobiles to be part of our Auto Marketplace to transform

the car buying journey. This collaboration reflects our commitment to meeting the increasing demand for faster, more convenient digital solutions in the automotive sector. Together, we are offering a unified and efficient experience – all through the QIB mobile app."

Gary Pike, executive director of Nasser Bin Khaled & Sons Automobiles, said: "We are happy to be part of the QIB Auto Marketplace to provide our clients with a streamlined and integrated purchase experience. This collaboration with QIB underscores our commitment to leveraging innovative digital solutions to better serve our mutual clients and offer them more convenient solutions in the automotive industry." Available on App Store, Google Play, and Huawei AppGallery, customers can download the QIB mobile app and easily self-register using their debit card details. The app offers customers the ability to have full control of their accounts, cards, and transactions, and to fulfil all their banking requirements remotely. New customers can open their first banking account with QIB instantly. Existing QIB customers can open additional accounts, instantly get personal financing or a credit card, all via the QIB mobile app. For more information, visit www.qib.qa/en-automarketplace

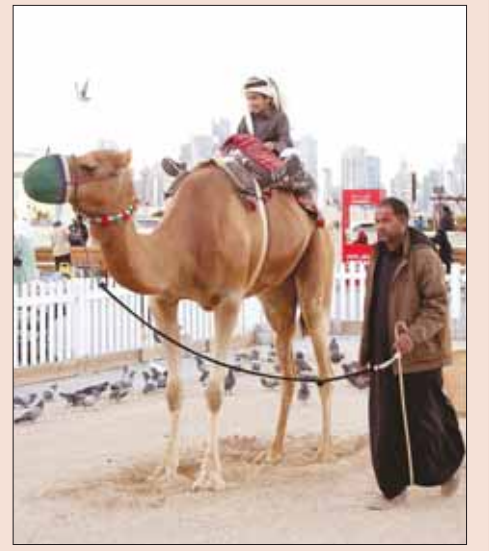
GCC tourists see Qatar as hot destination

Souq Waqif has seen a significant influx of visitors, particularly from the GCC countries who view Doha as a safe haven and a unique destination for vacations with friends or family, especially at such excellent weather conditions.

Speaking to local Arabic daily *Arrayah*, they expressed their admiration for Qatar's charm, rich heritage, modern achievements, diverse tourism programmes, and the wide variety of attractions and destinations it offers every time they come to the country. They pointed out that they consider Souq Waqif as one of Qatar's most important tourist landmarks, offering a glimpse into the heritage and traditional lifestyle, carrying the essence and beauty of the past.

Badr al-Azmi, a Kuwaiti tourist, expressed his delight during his first visit to Doha, stressing that it would not be his last. He admired Qatar's beauty, cleanliness, organisation, and the warmth of its people, as well as its respect for laws, customs, and traditions. He was particularly impressed by Qatar's tourist attractions and its preservation of its national and GCC identity while embracing development and modernisation. Naif al-Junaidi, a Saudi visitor on his fourth trip to Doha, noted that each of his visit of Doha reveals a more beautiful and impressive city. He said that Souq Waqif is his favourite destination due as it represents old heritage and the charm added by the horses and camels there. Sultan al-Shamari, a Saudi visiting Doha for the third time, described the city as a highly appealing

destination. He stressed that he feels at home among the hospitable and polite Qatari people while enjoying a modern city with sophisticated infrastructure and facilities. He was particularly captivated by Lusail Trail, Souq Waqif, and the luxurious Vendome Mall, recommending Qatar to friends as a must-visit destination. Saleh al-Shamari, a Saudi on his first visit to Doha, expressed his amazement at the city's advanced development and exceptional urban planning. Comparing it to other GCC cities, he noted that Doha enjoys a variety of attractions, from modern shopping centres to traditional markets, forts, museums, and stunning beaches like the Sealine and other coastal areas across the country.



PHCC, education ministry promote pupils' oral health

The Oral Health Promotion & Prevention Department at the Primary Health Care Corporation (PHCC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, participated in activities to promote oral health.

Seven teams of dental professionals, consisting of dentists, hygienists, and assistants, visited 14 of 16 spring activity centres across the country, serving more than 2,000 students.

Dr Najat al-Yafei, manager of the Oral Health Promotion and Prevention Department, said that a comprehensive schedule had been prepared, featuring lectures and various activities tailored to different age groups. These activities were specifically designed for young learners and adolescents to participate over two days.

Dr al-Yafei added that the schedule included an assessment of students' knowledge about oral health, an introduction to the



A group of school students at the programme.

structure and types of teeth, the relationship between oral health and general health, the impact of diet on oral health, and a drawing activity encouraging students to be role models themselves.

The second day was dedicated to practical training on using toothbrushes and miswak, introducing students to various fields of dentistry and applied fields. Students were then given the opportunity to role-play as dentists and patients, conducting dental checkups on each other using mobile dental units and single-use tools. The activities concluded with a best smile contest and the distribution of participation certificates.

Dr al-Yafei emphasised the importance of this initiative, pointing out that its primary goal is to instil healthy oral hygiene habits from an early age, raise awareness about the importance of preventing oral diseases among students, and build a generation equipped with sustainable oral health practices.

DRC president arrives in Doha



President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo Felix Tshisekedi arrived yesterday in Doha, on a visit to the country. He and the accompanying delegation were welcomed upon arrival at Hamad International Airport by HE the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Ahmed bin Hassan al-Hammadi, and ambassador of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Doha Valerie Lusamba Kabeya. (QNA)

Al-Hammadi meets Chinese ambassador



HE the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Ahmed bin Hassan al-Hammadi met yesterday with Chinese ambassador to Qatar Cao Xiaolin. The two sides discussed co-operation relations between the two countries. (QNA)

Awqaf organises Umrah for outstanding scholarship students

The Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs, represented by the Department of Da'wah and Religious Guidance, organised a week-long Umrah trip for 43 outstanding scholarship students from 17 nationalities, at the end of the first semester of 1446 AH/2024.


Director of the department Malallah Abdulrahman al-Jaber explained that this initiative aims to enable scholarship students to perform Umrah rituals, which contributes to strengthening their faith and educational aspects and supporting their psychological stability, noting that these students are expected

to be ambassadors of goodness and guidance after their graduation.

He pointed out that the Umrah trip programme also motivates students to excel academically to be among the distinguished in future Umrah programmes.

For his part, Head of the

Scholarships section at the Department of Da'wah and Religious Guidance, Yousef Hassan al-Hammadi said that a purposeful educational programme was prepared for the students participating in the Umrah trip, with guidance and illustration for each step until completing the Umrah. (QNA)



QatarEnergy

The General, Limited Tenders Committees and Supply Chain Department announces the following Tenders:

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Effective from 1st July 2023, bids submitted by a Local company (companies incorporated in Qatar) acting as Tenderer in accordance with this Invitation to Tender, will not be accepted by QatarEnergy without any further notification, if such companies are not in possession of an ICV score in the ICV portal (https://icv.qa/en-US) by the specified Original Tender Closing Date or Original due date for submission of COMMERCIAL Package in case of two stage Tendering as per ITT. However, any Local company that has been established within last two (2) years is exempt from this mandatory ICV certification requirement.

Sl. No	Tender Number	Tender Sale Period		Tender Closing Date	Tender Bond	Bond Curr.	Tender Fee	Fee Curr.
		Start Date	End Date					
1	GT25100600	09.01.2025	15.01.2025	23.02.2025	550,000.00	QAR	500.00	QAR

Title of Tender: EPIC FOR VARIOUS PIPELINE MOCS 2025

Mid-Tender Meeting Location: **To be advised if required**

Mid-Tender Meeting Date & Time: **To be advised if required**

* Tender documents can be purchased and downloaded from QatarEnergy Website -> Supply Management -> Tenders page during the Tender Sale Period mentioned above against each Tender. Request for issuance of Tender after the specified Tender Sale Period will not be entertained.

* Always refer to QatarEnergy Website (www.qatarenergy.qa) -> Supply Management -> Tenders page for up to date information on QatarEnergy Tenders. Subscribe to Tender Alert to receive notification in your email on new Tenders

* Changes to Tender Sale Period and Bid Closing Date will be updated in QatarEnergy website/Mushтары Portal only.

* Brief Scopes of Work for the above tenders are posted on the QatarEnergy website/Mushтары Portal.

* Suppliers and Contractors who are in possession of a valid SAP ID issued by QatarEnergy are instructed to maintain their Company Registration and Communication details upto date and valid via QatarEnergy Mushтары Portal on urgent basis.

* No queries will be entertained, or bids received, from entities who have not purchased tender documents in compliance with the above provisions.

* QatarEnergy invites all prospective Suppliers and Contractors interested to participate in QatarEnergy Tenders to register online and obtain a QatarEnergy SAP Vendor Code, a mandatory requirement for the issue of Tender Documents by QatarEnergy.

* Prospective Qatar based Suppliers and Contractors interested to participate in future QatarEnergy Tenders shall obtain an ICV score. Relevant information pertaining to ICV, ICV Scorecard, ICV Certification, and ICV Guidelines are available on the ICV Digital Portal - https://icv.qa/en-US

Don't share personal data online, warns MoI

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has warned the public not to share their personal data online while stressing the importance of data privacy. "Your data is your responsibility; keep your information private and protect yourself from risks," MoI said in an advisory on X.

"Your name, date of birth and address are information linked specifically to you. Your ID, passport and driver's licence are also considered sensitive personal information. Your account information such as e-mail addresses and passwords forms your digital identity. Your credit card information gives access to your money," the advisory said.

"Avoid responding to messages from unknown sources. Verify the identities of your friends on social media and only interact with people you know. Ensure age restrictions and content controls are enabled for young users," MoI earlier said in its advisory against phishing and financial fraud.

Phishing is a form of fraud used to obtain sensitive information by disguising as a reputable entity or person through e-mail or other communication channels. It often directs users to enter personal information on a fake website, the look and feel of which are identical to a legitimate site.

Phishing mostly steals banking information and data related to e-shopping accounts and social media accounts. By falling victim to such an attack, the users risk having their highly sensitive information stolen and/or their computers infected. Attackers make their e-mail look like it came from someone or some-



Data Privacy

What is personal information?
It's everything about you!

#StayAware

- Your name, date of birth, and address are information linked specifically to you.
- Your ID, passport and driver's license are also considered sensitive personal information.
- Your account information, such as email addresses, usernames and passwords, forms your digital identity.
- Your credit card information gives access to your money.


If you don't share it with others, don't share it online

thing you know, such as a friend or a trusted company you frequently use.

MoI has asked the public to be cautious of being victimised by phishing attacks that use e-mails or messaging services to trick or fool them into clicking on a link or opening an attachment

that contains malicious files.

MoI said that the public can alert the authorities by a direct visit or through Metrash 2 if such suspected fraudulent activities are noted. They can contact on 2347444 or hotline 66815757, as well as by e-mailing to cccc@moi.gov.qa



QAFCO

QATAR FERTILISER COMPANY

QAFCO ANNOUNCES THE FOLLOWING TENDER

TENDER NO.	DESCRIPTION OF WORKS	TENDER FEE (QAR)	TENDER BOND (QAR)	TENDER FEE RECEIPT SUBMISSION DATES	TENDER CLOSING DATE
RFQ-6000002256	SUPPLY OF MANPOWER TO BE ENGAGED IN THE QAFCO MAJOR PROJECTS: CCS, QTRM AND QATARENERGY UREA PROJECT. SUPPLY OF MANPOWER COVERING INTERNAL STAFF WHO ARE ASSIGNED TO THE MAJOR PROJECTS FRAME CONTRACT FOR FIVE (5) YEARS WITH OPTION TO EXTEND FOR AN ADDITIONAL 5 YEARS	500/- (Non-refundable)	4,080,000.00/- (four million eighty thousand only)	06.01.2024 07.01.2024 08.01.2024 09.01.2025 12.01.2025 13.01.2024 14.01.2024	TBA in Ariba

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

- During the period this tender is offered, the interested bidders shall first deposit appropriate Tender Fee amount in cash (Cheque will not be accepted) into Company's following Account at any QNB branch:
 - Account Name : **QATAR FERTILISER COMPANY (QAFCO)**
 - Account Number : **0013-025828-058**
 - IBAN : **QA51QNBAA00000000013025828058**
 - Bank Name : **QATAR NATIONAL BANK**
- The interested Bidders shall mention their company's name and Tender Number on the payment receipt provided by the bank and submit it as Tender Fee receipt.
- Besides the Tender fee receipt (which should have the Tender Number and bidder's name clearly mentioned on it), interested bidders shall also submit a copy of the valid Commercial Registration, an authorization letter from their company with the name, telephone, fax and e-mail ID of the focal point for this tender (**Very Important**), during the submission of Tender Fee Receipt for ensuring electronic receipt of the Tender Document.
- Tender Fee Receipt along with the specified documents shall be submitted to purchase@qafco.com.qa on the dates indicated above, after payment of Tender Fee (nonrefundable).
- After submission of the above documents to the above email, Tender Document will be provided through an electronic platform separately after the last date of Tender Fee Receipt Submission Date.
- For any queries related to non-receipt of the tender documents after the last date of Tender Fee Receipt Submission Date, you may contact at 'purchase@qafco.com.qa' or on 44227797
- Technical & Commercial details and Submission Procedures will be specified in the Tender Documents.
- The Company will not consider any offer without the enclosure of the Tender Bond.
- Bids shall be submitted at QAFCO Tender Office, between 09:30 - 11 :00 hours during the Holy month of Ramadan and 09:30 - 11:30 hours and 12:30 - 14:00 hours, of any working day of the Company, on/before the "Tender Closing Date".

Ashghal welcomes SDGs ambassadors at its office



The Public Works Authority (Ashghal) has welcomed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ambassadors participating in the winter camp at its office. This, according to an X post by Ashghal, is held as part of the collaboration between the authority and Qatar Scientific Club to support and empower Qatari youth. This is held in line with Ashghal's commitment to social responsibility. The visit included a tour of Ashghal's Research and Development Centre under the Quality and Safety Department. The guests were given a detailed overview of the centre's various laboratories and their role in advancing sustainability applications. The visit also highlighted Ashghal's pioneering role in supporting sustainable development efforts in the engineering sector.

Es'hailSat obtains WTA certification

Qatar Satellite Company together with World Teleport Association (WTA) yesterday announced that Es'hailSat has achieved Tier 4 certification of its Al Ghuwayriyah (Doha, Qatar) Teleport under WTA's Teleport Certification Programme.

The Al Ghuwayriyah certification marks the 69th issued since the programme was launched at IBC 2015, and another five teleports are currently engaged in the quality evaluation process. The programme provides transparent, independently verified standards as a means for teleports to differentiate themselves and for customers to choose the price-performance level suitable for their applications.

Certification is generally issued at a Tier number from 1 through 4, of which 4 represents the highest degree of excellence, and remains in effect for three years.

"Es'hailSat is proud to achieve Tier 4 certification of our state-of-the-art Teleport facility in Doha" said Ali al-Kuwari, President and CEO at Es'hailSat. "It underscores the high quality of service that we have been providing our customers from across the Middle East and North Africa region, be it on the broadcasting side or from our data connectivity portfolio," he added.

Executive Director at WTA Robert Bell stated that "WTA has now certified six teleports across the Middle East, all at our highest Tier 4 level".

He indicated that the region is becoming a key growth region for the commercial satellite industry, and WTA-Certified teleports are ready to supply the explosively growing demand for greater bandwidth. (QNA)

QRCS completes multi-specialisation surgical convoy in Sudan Northern State

The Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS) has completed a multi-specialisation surgical convoy in Northern State in Sudan, as part of its ongoing humanitarian initiative to support the affected communities.

In a statement yesterday, QRCS reported that the medical delegation from Doha performed 250 paediatric, urology, and general surgeries, in co-ordination with the Federal Ministry of Health (MOH) and Dongola Specialised Hospital, highlighting that the medical convoy helped provide treatment for poor displaced and local patients, as well as relieve pressure on the health system in Northern State, where such surgeries are much needed, according to statements by the states MOH.

Director-General of Northern State MOH, Dr Satti Hassan Satti, stated that the health system is heavily in demand due to overpopulation, therefore, such free, high-quality medical services are crucial for vulnerable groups,



emphasising that the medical convoy represents an invaluable support for the state.

Through its humanitarian organisations, Qatar plays an active role in providing health services for the people of Sudan, added Dr Satti, emphasising that this

surgical convoy represents one further step towards stronger collaboration between QRCS and Northern States MOH. (QNA)

Qatar Charity delivers winter relief to thousands in Bangladesh



Qatar Charity (QC), as part of its ongoing winter campaign "How Long", provided winterisation kits to sponsored orphans and their families in Bangladesh. This, according to an official statement from QC, benefits a total of 11,000 individuals. This effort, supported by the benefactors in Qatar, aligns with QC's global orphan care initiative "Rofaqa". The initiative aims to provide essential warmth and comfort during the cold winter, ensuring that vulnerable communities are protected from harsh weather conditions. The kits included blankets, jackets and hoodies and were distributed through QC's 13 orphan care centres reaching a significant number of students and their families in need. Local officials praised the winter kits for easing

hardship on vulnerable people during the harsh winter. Mahmudul Hasan Mridha, a government official, said QC has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to humanitarian causes, and this initiative is yet another example of its dedication to alleviating the suffering of those in need. The recipients expressed deep gratitude for the timely aid, highlighting how the initiative has made a tangible difference in their lives. "I am very thankful to Qatar Charity for providing us with these winter clothes. My children were struggling with the cold, but now they have warm jackets and blankets that will help them stay healthy throughout the winter," said Bilkis Akhter, mother of a recipient.

Qatari intellectuals and artists' ambitions in 2025



In 2025, the dreams of artists and creators in Qatar are renewed, carrying ambitions and aspirations that reflect their passion for developing the artistic and creative scene in the country. From fine arts to photography, drama, and theatre, artists express their hopes for achieving presentations that leave a mark and push their careers forward, while looking forward to a brighter and more vibrant year.

The Arabic daily *Arrayah* reported on the creative spirit that distinguishes Qatari artists and confirmed their pivotal role in enriching the cultural scene.

Artist Youssef al-Sada, chairman of the Qatar Fine Arts Society, expressed his ambition to advance local fine arts and make them part of the global creative scene. He pointed to the role played by the Qatar Fine Arts Society in supporting artists by organising Gulf and international art forums. He indicated that the new year will witness the organisation of art workshops presented by the society, through which the latest artistic methods and visions will be showcased, in line with developments in the global fine arts scene. He aspires for 2025 to be a year full of artistic achievements that contribute to enhancing the position of Qatari fine art on the global stage.

Artist and theatre director Faleh Fayez said: "In 2025, we have promising opportunities to enhance the cultural and artistic movement in Qatar."

He stressed the importance of enhancing local theatrical production by presenting works that reflect Qatari identity and heritage, while being open to contemporary issues, which contributes to enriching the local cultural scene. Fayez pointed out the importance of supporting artists and intellectuals to produce creative works that transcend local borders and strengthen Qatar's cultural position on the international stage.

He hoped that 2025 would be a year full of creativity, in which the efforts of intellectuals and artists would combine with the support of institutions to achieve a cultural renaissance that would inspire generations and highlight Qatar's cultural identity.

Visual artist Hessa Kalla expressed her aspiration to enhance the role of art and culture as a fundamental pillar of sustainable development, seeking to integrate them into the daily life of society. She emphasised enriching the local art scene with artworks that reflect the Qatari identity and highlight the rich cultural heritage, while being open to modern methods and techniques. She added: "We hope

that 2025 will be full of creativity and excellence in artworks that leave a clear imprint on Qatari culture and contribute to achieving sustainable development."

Director Mahdi Ali hopes the film sector in the region will see greater interest from young people in 2025 in the technical aspects that form the basis for the success of any film project, especially in the fields of production and financing. He stressed that opportunities for those who have the passion and desire to learn filmmaking techniques are now more available than ever, especially in light of the support provided by Media City, the Doha Film Institute, and the television sector.

These institutions provide an incubator environment for new talents, with resources and expertise that can serve as a real starting point for those aspiring to enter the field of film production and financing.

In this context, he hoped that modern technology would make filmmaking easier in terms of access to tools and resources. The Qatari director added: "I am excited to see how young people will contribute to this great development, especially in the areas of production and finance, which will form the cornerstone of the future of this industry in the region."

Defender confirms 3-year Dakar and FIA World Rally-Raid championship works programme



Defender will compete with a works team in Dakar – the world's most demanding off-road motorsport competition – as part of a full FIA World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC) entry.

Starting in 2026, the three-year Defender works programme will consist of a two-car entry across the full five-rounds of the W2RC, with a third car participating each year in Dakar – the Championship's halo event.

From 2026-2028, Defender vehicles will compete in the FIA's 'Stock' category – for production-based vehicles – within the Dakar Rally and the full W2RC. An update to the sporting and technical regulations in this important

category will be implemented for 2026, making it significantly more competitive and the perfect platform to demonstrate the extreme capability and durability of Defender.

A comprehensive Defender competition development programme is already underway which will culminate in a competitive test event during autumn 2025, followed by a full team launch ahead of Dakar 2026.

Mark Cameron, Defender managing director, said: "Dakar 2025 begins today. Defender is already here showcasing its capability and durability through our official car partnership, but to know that in 12 months we'll be back with a three-car Defender works team

entry at the beginning of a full FIA World Rally-Raid Championship campaign is incredibly exciting. We have chosen to compete in the 'Stock' category to showcase the toughness and dependability of the production Defender."

While Defender will not compete in Dakar until 2026, it will play a key role at the 2025 rally as the event's official vehicle partner. A fleet of 20 Defenders will support the event, which begins in Bisha, Saudi Arabia, and ends in Shubaytah, transporting race officials and VIP media. A further six highly specialised Defender race vehicles will be used by Dakar Rally organisers to plan the routes for the 2026, 2027 and 2028 events.

Syria caretaker govt to hike public sector salaries by 400%

Syria's finance minister said yesterday the government would hike salaries for many public sector employees by 400% next month after completing an administrative restructuring of ministries to boost efficiency and accountability. The increase, estimated to cost 1.65tn Syrian pounds, or about \$127mn at current rates, will be financed by existing state resources plus a combination of regional aid, new investments, and efforts to unfreeze Syrian assets held abroad. "This is the first step towards an emergency solution to the economic reality in the country," Mohammed Abazeed, the finance minister in Syria's caretaker government, told Reuters, adding that this month's wages for public sector staff would be paid out this week. These measures are part of a broader strategy by Syria's new caretaker government to stabilize the country's economy following 13 years of conflict and sanctions. Salaries of Syria's public sector employees under toppled President Bashar al-Assad's regime were around \$25 a month, putting them below the poverty line, along with the majority of the country's population, Abazeed said. The hike would follow a comprehensive evaluation

of up to 1.3mn registered public sector employees to remove fictitious employees from the payroll and would affect those with sufficient expertise, academic qualifications, and the necessary skills for reconstruction. Syria's state treasury is facing liquidity challenges emerging from a war. The majority of money available in the central bank is Syrian currency, which has lost much of its value. However, the new government was promised assistance from regional and Arab countries, the minister said. "The launch of investments in the country in the near future will also benefit the state treasury and allow us to finance this salary increase," he said, adding the central bank currently has sufficient funds to finance the next few months. The government expects to retrieve up to \$400mn in frozen Syrian assets abroad, which could co-finance the initial government expenses. Syria's caretaker government is also discussing exempting taxpayers, as much as possible, from penalties and interest and working on overhauling the tax system within the next three months to achieve tax justice for all taxpayers, with a first draft expected within four months.



NYC starts driver congestion charging despite opposition

AFP
New York

New York launched a controversial scheme yesterday to charge drivers entering parts of the city, a first in the United States, putting local authorities on a collision course with President-elect Donald Trump.

State Governor Kathy Hochul announced in November that drivers entering areas of Manhattan south of Central Park would pay a daytime toll of \$9.

That plan revives one, originally with a \$15 base fee, that she paused in June, saying that there were "too many unintended consequences for New Yorkers".

Republican lawmakers have called on Trump, a native New Yorker who has vowed to kill the programme if elected, to intervene to terminate it.

Areas neighbouring New York City have argued that a charge would hurt their businesses and impair their residents' ability to commute into Manhattan.

A judge denied an 11th-hour effort on Friday by neighbouring New Jersey state officials to block the tolling plan on grounds of its environmental impact on adjoining areas.

That denial cleared the road for the scheme, which had faced other legal challenges, highlighting the difficulty of charging drivers in a country where the car is king.



Cars pass under a congestion pricing warning sign on George Washington Bridge as congestion pricing takes effect in New York City. - AFP

The local MTA transit authority meanwhile posted an Instagram video showing its chief executive Jano Lieber unveiling a "congestion relief zone" sign ahead of the system's activation, to cheers from a small

gathering of spectators.

The conservative *New York Post* newspaper attacked the MTA's "cheery event" staged "hours before drivers are set to feel the pain".

The plan is intended both to reduce congestion and to help fund the New York subway system.

Hochul said it was revived after an assessment showed that it would work at a lower fee.

Some elected New York City borough officials as well as a powerful trade group representing haulers fought the project.

Taxi drivers' associations also opposed the plan.

Their members – both pre-booked ride-hail drivers and drivers of the city's iconic yellow cabs – will not pay the fee themselves, but affected customers will be hit by a surcharge.

The scheme will charge drivers for venturing below 60th Street in Manhattan, an area that encompasses the business districts of Midtown and Wall Street.

Some 700,000 vehicles enter the area every day, and gridlock means cars can travel just 7mph (11kph) on average, and even slower in some areas, officials say.

There are numerous exemptions to the base fee, as well as a low-income discount plan.

In addition, there are discounts for drivers entering the tolling zone more than 10 times per month.

Similar driver-tolling schemes have been operated for years in other megacities including London and Stockholm, but US cities will be watching closely to see what impact the New York toll has on both traffic and revenues.

More records found linking Credit Suisse with Nazi accounts, says US panel

AFP
Washington

An investigation by a US Senate panel has found that troubled investment bank Credit Suisse concealed information during previous inquiries into Nazi-controlled bank accounts during World War II.

Tens of thousands of documents discovered during an ongoing examination have provided new proof of the existence of account holders linked to the Nazis, the Senate Budget Committee said in a statement released on Saturday.

The bank did not reveal the existence of these accounts during previous investigations, notably in the 1990s, the committee said. Credit Suisse, now a subsidiary of investment bank UBS, agreed in 1998 to take part in a \$1.25bn settlement of lawsuits brought by Holocaust survivors, but it has been accused of not being completely open about its past dealings with Nazis.

The Senate committee said on Saturday that one set of newly discovered files, including 3,600 physical documents and 40,000 microfilms, was found to have a "high relevance rate" of Nazi connections.

It said the revelations stem from an interim report by former prosecutor Neil Barofsky, who was fired as an "independent ombudsman" by the bank in 2022 after being pressed to limit his investigative work.

Barofsky was reinstated in the role in 2023 "as a result of the Committee's investigation", and after UBS's takeover of Credit Suisse.

In a letter to the panel released on Saturday, Barofsky noted the "extraordinary level of co-operation that Credit Suisse, under the leadership of UBS, has provided" since he rejoined the company.

However, he said Credit Suisse had yet to share all the information it held.

The Barofsky team has discovered, among other things, accounts controlled by high-ranking SS officers, the *Wall Street Journal* reported.

In his letter, Barofsky highlighted "especially noteworthy" discoveries from a Credit Suisse research department.

"Numerous client files in the sample are marked with a stamp stating 'Amerikanische schwarze Liste' – meaning 'American Black List' – a list maintained by the Allies of individuals and companies that were directly financed by, or were known to regularly trade with, Axis powers," he wrote. "One file bearing this stamp relates to an entity that was involved in selling looted Jewish assets."

Contacted by AFP, UBS said it was committed to providing a complete record of the former Nazi-linked accounts in Credit Suisse's predecessor banks.

It said it would provide Barofsky with all necessary assistance in his work to shed light "on this tragic period".

The Senate panel's investigation is continuing.

Massive storm slams US with snow, ice, bitter cold

AFP
Washington

Blizzard and winter storm conditions blasted the Midwest early yesterday, as a massive weather system began tracking eastward across the United States, with authorities warning of some of the heaviest snowfalls in a decade and severe impact on transport.

Snowfalls of 15" (38cm) or more in some areas "will make travel extremely hazardous, with impassable roads", the National Weather Service (NWS) said in an update early yesterday.

That, combined with accumulations of up to a half-inch of ice in some areas – as well as widespread tree damage from powerful wind gusts – could lead to "prolonged power outages".

The first major storm of 2025 is already disrupting travel.

Video posted by the Weather Channel showed cars skidding off ice-coated highways in Kansas and tractor trailers jack-knifing dangerously.

The NWS issued blizzard warnings in Kansas and Missouri, with a belt of winter storm and ice storm warnings stretching all the way to the US capital on the East Coast, putting an unusually broad 1,500-mile (2,400km) swath under immediate threat.

American Airlines posted a travel advisory covering 46 airports from Kansas to New Jersey.

A mix of freezing rain, sleet and snow began hitting Kansas early yesterday morning. Storm chaser Brian Emfinger said on X that roads around Kansas City were "a skating rink".

However, the latest forecast from the



A vehicle travels westbound in blizzard conditions during a winter storm on Interstate 70 in Topeka, Kansas, US. - Reuters

NWS suggested the worst was yet to come, with "blizzard conditions" and winds up to 50mph (80kph) expected in the state.

As the storm accumulates through today, "the snow will significantly reduce visibilities", the NWS said.

A band of 8-14" of snow is expected to be dumped from northeast Missouri through the Central Appalachians, it said.

Areas around Washington could see up to 10" overnight into today, making "hazardous travel and closings" likely, the *Washington Post* reported.

That could complicate the task of US lawmakers, who by constitutional mandate must meet on Capitol Hill on January 6 to certify the winner of last year's presidential election.

"Whether we're in a blizzard or not," House Speaker Mike Johnson said on *Fox News Sunday*, "we cannot delay that certification ... I hope we have full attendance".

A joint session is to convene at 1pm (1800 GMT).

Nationwide, nearly 70mn people are under some sort of weather alert, according to broadcaster CNN.

With the jet stream diving southward, temperatures are expected to plunge, in some places to below 0° Fahrenheit (-18° Celsius), while strong wind gusts compound the dangers.

The mercury could sink tens of degrees below seasonal norms down to the US Gulf Coast.

Before then, severe thunderstorms are expected across the lower Mississippi Valley, the NWS forecast.

Another major concern is freezing rain and sleet.

A thick coating of ice could make travel hazardous, bring down trees and topple electricity lines.

The NWS predicted up to 0.5" of freezing rain over parts of the Middle Mississippi/Ohio Valley, and warned that "long-lasting power outages" could leave millions of customers without power from Kansas to the central Appalachian Mountains.

Conditions could prove especially perilous in Appalachia, where a deadly hurricane in late September devastated communities and ravaged multiple southeastern states including Kentucky.

The new storm "will likely cause significant disruption and dangerous conditions on our roads and could cause significant power outages just 24 hours or so before it's going to get really cold in Kentucky", Governor Andy Beshear told an emergency meeting.

The governors of Kentucky, Missouri and Virginia have declared a state of emergency in their states, and have taken to social media to warn residents to stay at home.

Bezos's Blue Origin poised for first orbital launch next week

AFP
Cape Canaveral

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos's company Blue Origin is poised to launch its first orbital rocket next week, marking a pivotal moment in the commercial space race currently dominated by Elon Musk's SpaceX.

Named New Glenn, the rocket is scheduled to lift off from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida as soon as 1am on Wednesday, with a backup window on Friday, according to a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) advisory.

While Blue Origin has not officially confirmed the launch date, excitement has been building since a successful "hot-fire" test on December 27.

"Next stop launch," Bezos declared on X, sharing a video of the towering rocket's engines roaring to life.

The NG-1 mission will carry a prototype of Blue Ring, a Defence Department-funded spacecraft envisioned as a versatile satellite deployment platform, which will remain on board the rocket's second stage for the duration of the six-hour test flight.

It will mark Blue Origin's long-awaited entry into the lucrative orbital launch market after years of suborbital flights with its smaller New Shepard rocket, which carries passengers and payloads on brief trips to the edge of space.

"The market is really orbital," analyst Laura Forczyk, founder of Astralytical, told AFP. "Suborbital can only take you so far – there are only so many payloads and customers for a quick ride to space."

The milestone will also escalate the rivalry between Bezos, the world's second-richest person, and Musk, the wealthiest, who has cemented SpaceX's dominance and is



This undated handout picture courtesy of Blue Origin shows the New Glenn rocket during a successful integrated vehicle hotfire at Launch Complex 36 (LC-36) at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, Florida. - AFP

now in President-elect Donald Trump's inner circle.

SpaceX's Falcon 9 rockets have become industry workhorses, serving clients from commercial satellite operators to the Pentagon and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa), which relies on them to ferry astronauts to and from the International Space Station (ISS).

Like Falcon 9, New Glenn features a reusable first stage designed to land vertically on a ship at sea.

The vessel, playfully named "So You're Telling Me There's a Chance", reflects the

challenge of landing a reusable rocket on the first attempt, Blue Origin chief executive Dave Limp said on X.

At 320' (98m), New Glenn dwarfs the 230' Falcon 9 and is designed to carry larger, heavier payloads.

It slots between Falcon 9 and its larger sibling, Falcon Heavy, in cargo capacity while burning cleaner liquid natural gas rather than kerosene and relying on fewer engines.

"If I were still a senior executive at Nasa, I'd be thrilled to finally have some competition to the Falcon 9," G Scott Hubbard,

Mali rebels say army, Russian fighters killed nine civilians

Reuters/AFP
Dakar

Nine civilians, including women and children, were killed in an attack on a vehicle in Mali's Segou region last week, a civil society group and a rebel coalition said late on Saturday, accusing the army and Russian mercenaries of being responsible.

The vehicle was travelling from the town of Niono to a refugee camp in Mauritania on Thursday when it came under fire, said Mohamed Elmaouloud Ramadane, spokesperson for the coalition of Tuareg groups that are fighting for an independent homeland in northern Mali.

He and local civil society association Kal Akal said Malian armed forces and allied fighters from Russia's Wagner private military contractor group had carried out the attack.

"A Hilux four-by-four vehicle...was heading toward a refugee camp in Mauritania when (personnel from) Wagner and the Malian army fired. At least eight civilians were killed" on Thursday, a local official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"All of the vehicle's passengers died. They were buried in a mass grave", a parent of one of the victims told AFP.

A local humanitarian source confirmed the incident, saying the eight civilians were "killed by bullets...between the localities of Niono and Nampala".

In a separate statement, the head of Kel Ansar, one of the largest Tuareg groups, called for an investigation but said that Malian troops were not behind the bloodshed.

The Malian army did not respond to a request for comment. Wagner could not immediately be reached.

Wagner fighters have been in Mali since the army seized power in two coups in 2020 and 2021 and kicked out French and UN troops.

They have been supporting Malian forces in their battle with Islamist insurgents and the Tuareg separatists.

In December, Human Rights Watch said Mali's armed forces, supported by Wagner, and Islamist armed groups had committed serious abuses against civilians in violation of the laws of the war.

The country is embroiled in a political, security and economic crisis, and has since 2012 been ravaged by different groups affiliated to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State group.

It also faces a separatist insurgency in the volatile desert north.

The Mali military seized power in back-to-back coups in 2020 and 2021.

Nasa's former "Mars Czar" now at Stanford University, told AFP, adding that increased competition could help drive down launch costs.

For now, SpaceX maintains a commanding lead, capturing the lion's share of the market while rivals like United Launch Alliance, Arianespace and Rocket Lab trail far behind.

Like Musk, Bezos has an enduring passion for space.

However, where Musk dreams of colonising Mars, Bezos envisages populating the solar system with massive floating space colonies.

Bezos founded Blue Origin in 2000 – two years before Musk started SpaceX – but the company has progressed at a far slower pace, reflecting a more cautious approach.

"There's been impatience within the space community over Blue Origin's very deliberate approach," Scott Pace, a space policy analyst at George Washington University and a former member of the National Space Council, told AFP.

If successful, New Glenn will offer the US government "dissimilar redundancy" – alternative systems that provide backups if one fails, said Pace.

This could prove vital as SpaceX plans to retire Falcon 9 by the end of the decade in favour of Starship, a prototype that relies on not fully proven technologies.

Musk's closeness to Trump has raised concerns about potential conflicts of interest, especially with private astronaut Jared Isaacman – a business associate of Musk – slated to become the next Nasa chief.

Bezos, however, has been making his own overtures, paying his respects to his former foe during a visit to the president-elect's Mar-a-Lago residence, while Amazon has said it would donate \$1mn to Trump's inauguration committee.

Blinken wades into political crisis with stop in South Korea

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is in crisis-riven South Korea where he will seek delicately to encourage continuity with the policies, but not tactics, of the impeached president.

Blinken arrived in the snow-covered capital yesterday on what will likely be his final trip as the top US diplomat before President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration.

He will meet his counterpart Cho Tae-yul today, the same day a warrant expires to arrest suspended President Yoon Suk-yeol who unsuccessfully tried to impose martial law on December 3.

Blinken is highlighting President Joe Biden's efforts to build alliances and will head afterwards to Tokyo, making it crucial in the eyes of his advisers not to snub South Korea, which has a fraught and often competitive relationship with Ja-

pan, also home to thousands of American troops.

Yoon had once been a darling of the Biden administration with his bold moves to turn the page on friction with Japan and his eye on a greater role for South Korea on global issues.

Yoon joined Biden for a landmark three-way summit with Japan's prime minister and - months before declaring martial law - was picked to lead a global democracy summit, a signature initiative for the outgoing US administration.

Yoon also memorably charmed his hosts on a state visit by belting out the song *American Pie* at a White House dinner.

Blinken may face some criticism from the South Korean left for the visit but should be able to navigate the political crisis, said Sydney Seiler, a former US intelligence officer focused on Korea now at

the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Blinken has a high enough profile to be above the fray, and can keep the focus on challenges such as China and North Korea, he said.

"Blinken can dodge a lot of these domestic South Korean landmines relatively easily and contextualise it not as trying to help the ruling party or artificially create a sense of normalcy where it otherwise isn't," Seiler said.

In a statement, the US State Department did not directly mention the political crisis but said Blinken would seek to preserve trilateral co-operation with Japan, which has included enhanced intelligence sharing on North Korea.

Blinken's visit comes at a time of change for both countries, with Trump returning to the White House on January 20.

Paradoxically, while Biden worked closely with the conservative Yoon, Trump in his first term enjoyed a warm relationship with then progressive president Moon Jae-in, who encouraged the US president's groundbreaking personal diplomacy with North Korea.

The Biden administration has emphasised since the crisis began that it is reaching out to South Korean politicians across the divide, amid the uncertainties on who will lead Asia's fourth-largest economy.

Progressive opposition leader Lee Jae-myung - who himself faces election disqualification in a court case - supports diplomacy with North Korea.

However, the former labour activist has also taken stances that differ from those of both Biden and Trump.

Lee has criticised deployment of US-made THAAD missile defences, which

Washington says are meant to protect against North Korea but which China sees as a provocation.

South Korea's left has long championed a harder stance on Japan over its brutal 1910-1945 occupation of the Korean peninsula.

US officials said they had no warning of Yoon's imposition of martial law, which brought masses of protesters to the streets.

Blinken, addressing reporters last month, said that the crisis showed the strength of South Korea's institutions built in the three decades since it embraced democracy.

"I think Korea is one of the most powerful stories in the world about the emergence of democracy and democratic resilience, and we'll continue to look to Korea to set that example," Blinken said. - AFP

Thousands line Suriname streets in homage to late dictator

AFP
Paramaribo, Suriname

Thousands of people lined the streets of Suriname's capital on Saturday for the funeral procession of Desi Bouterse, who led the country both as a coup leader and elected president before dying as a fugitive from justice.

The government of the former Dutch colony had ruled out a state funeral for Bouterse, who was sentenced in 2023 to 20 years in prison over the killing of opposition members in 1982.

He went into hiding rather than report to prison, and died late last month of liver failure at age 79.

The hearse carrying the uniformed body of the former president led a solemn cortege through Paramaribo, joined informally by cars, buses and motorcycles as it headed first to his residence and then to the headquarters of his National Democratic Party (NDP) for a memorial service.

Bouterse's closest supporters, also in military uniform, followed on foot.

His body was cremated later in the day in a private ceremony.

Even while on the run from the law, Bouterse remained popular among segments of the poor and working class for his policies introducing universal school meals, free healthcare and a minimum wage.

Admirers gathered on Friday evening at the NDP headquarters, many wearing the party's colours of purple and white, to sing, pray and remember the late president.

"Papa Bouta, I love you," shouted Dennis Keyzer, a party supporter. "We want Papa Bouta!"

While the government of President Chan Santokhi had ruled out a state funeral, flags were flown at half-staff at government buildings including the presidential palace.

Bouterse first came to power as a young army sergeant major after a coup in 1980, five years after Suriname, on the northeastern coast of South America, gained independence following three centuries of Dutch occupation and rule.

International pressure forced him to step down after seven years, but he returned after a second coup in 1990.

Bouterse left a year later, then was elected president in 2010 and governed for a decade.

In December 2023, Bouterse lost an appeal against a 20-year prison sentence for the 1982 execution of political opponents.

He was in hiding at an undisclosed location when he died, either on December 23 or 24, an autopsy said.

"He started out as a military man but he was a man who was able to rise and become one of the greatest political leaders," said Jennifer Simons, president of Bouterse's party, in her speech at the funeral.

Simons has previously referred to the former ruler as a "spiritual father".

Sandra, a funeral attendee who did not want to give her last name, waited for hours in her car with her family to have "a good place" from which to watch the funeral procession.

"He was and will be my president forever," said Harvy Lallibiarie, holding a photograph of Bouterse.

Thousands brave snow to protest as Yoon arrest deadline nears

Reuters/AFP
Seoul

Thousands of South Koreans braved a snowstorm yesterday to rally in support or opposition of President Yoon Suk-yeol, suspended over a failed martial law bid and resisting arrest a day before the warrant expires.

Yoon plunged the country into political chaos last month with the bungled martial law declaration and has since holed up in the presidential residence, surrounded by hundreds of loyal security officers.

An attempt to arrest him by investigators on Friday failed when a tense six-hour standoff with his presidential security service ended over security fears, with his supporters also camped outside.

Thousands descended on his residence again yesterday despite bitter snow conditions blanketing the capital - with one camp demanding Yoon's arrest while the other called for his impeachment to be declared invalid.

"Snow is nothing for me. They can bring all the snow and we'll still be here," said anti-Yoon protester Lee Jin-ah, 28, who had previously worked at a coffee shop.

"I quit my job to come to protect our country and democracy," she said, adding that she had camped outside the residence overnight.

"We have to re-establish the foundation of our society by punishing the president who has denied the constitution," said Yang Kyung-soo, leader of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, a major labour group that joined the protests. "We must bring down the criminal Yoon Suk-yeol and arrest and detain him as soon as possible."

Nearby, Yoon supporters held placards reading "We will fight for President Yoon Suk-yeol" and "Stop the Steal!", a phrase popularised by US President-elect Donald Trump's supporters after he lost the 2020 election.

Park Young-chul, in his 70s, said the snowstorm wouldn't deter him from showing up to back Yoon before the warrant expires at midnight today (1500 GMT).

"I went through war and -20° Celsius in the snow to fight the commies. This snow is nothing. Our war is happening again," he told AFP.

The rallies in the cold come as Yoon this week pledged to "fight" those trying to question his short-lived power grab.

He faces criminal charges of insurrection, one of a few crimes not subject to presidential immunity, meaning he could be sentenced to prison or, at worst, the death penalty.



Police stand guard, blocking the road in Seoul leading to the official residence of impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol as protesters gather. - Reuters

If the warrant is executed, Yoon would become the first sitting South Korean president to be arrested.

A prosecutors' report for his former defence minister seen by AFP yesterday showed that Yoon ignored the objections of key cabinet ministers before his failed martial law bid.

It said the country's then prime minister, foreign minister and finance minister all expressed reservations about the potential economic and diplomatic fallout in a cabinet meeting on the night of the decision.

The country's opposition Democratic Party called on Saturday for the dissolution of the security service protecting Yoon.

Their announcement followed scenes of high drama on Friday, when hundreds of Yoon's guards and military troops shielded him from investigators who eventually called off the arrest attempt citing safety concerns.

Yesterday presidential security service chief Park Jong-joon said that he had no intention of letting the investigators arrest

Yoon by today's deadline, because those under his charge were legally obliged to protect the country's sitting leader.

"Executing an arrest warrant amid allegations of procedural and legal impropriety undermines the PSS's fundamental mission of securing the President's absolute safety," Park, who has denied a police request for questioning, said in a speech.

"Please refrain from insulting remarks that the presidential security service has been reduced to a private army," he added, pointing out that it had provided security to all presidents for 60 years, regardless of political affiliation.

Late yesterday US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in Seoul, likely to wade into the crisis of a key security ally in talks today with his counterpart Cho Tae-yul (see accompanying report above).

Yoon's lawyers decried the warrant underpinning Friday's arrest attempt as "unlawful and invalid", and filed an objection to the Seoul court that issued it.

However, the court told AFP yesterday

that the objection case was dismissed, saying that the reasons could not be disclosed.

Yoon's lawyer said they would file another complaint against the head of the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) that tried to arrest Yoon.

The president's legal team "intend to hold those who committed illegal acts strictly accountable under the law", Yoon Kab-keun said in a statement.

The Constitutional Court slated January 14 for the start of Yoon's impeachment trial, which if he does not attend would continue in his absence.

However the suspended leader plans to appear at "an appropriate session" of the trial's five hearings, lawyer Yoon said yesterday.

South Korea's Constitutional Court has up to 180 days to determine whether to dismiss Yoon as president or restore his powers.

Former presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Park Geun-hye never appeared for their impeachment trials.



The 276kg bluefin tuna that was auctioned for ¥207mn (about \$1.3mn) is carried into an Onodera sushi restaurant after the first tuna auction of the New Year in Tokyo. - Reuters

The tuna wholesale area of Toyosu Market, where the first tuna auction of the New Year was held, is seen in Tokyo. - AFP



A sushi chef shows off a fillet from the 276kg bluefin tuna that was auctioned for ¥207mn (about \$1.3mn). - Reuters

Buyer splashes out \$1.3mn for Tokyo new year tuna

The top bidder at a Tokyo fish market said they paid \$1.3mn for a tuna yesterday, the second highest price ever paid at an annual prestigious new year auction.

Michelin-starred sushi restaurateurs the Onodera Group said they paid ¥207mn for the 276kg (608-pound) bluefin tuna, roughly the size and weight of a motorbike.

It is the second highest price paid at the opening auction of the year in Tokyo's main fish market since comparable data started being collected in 1999.

"The first tuna is something meant to bring in good fortune," Onodera official Shinji Nagao told reporters after the auction. "Our wish is that people will eat this and have a wonderful year."

The Onodera Group paid ¥114mn for the top tuna last year. However, the highest-ever auction price was ¥333.6mn for a 278kg bluefin in 2019, as the fish market was moved from its traditional Tsukiji area to a modern facility in nearby Toyosu.

The record bid was made by self-proclaimed "Tuna King" Kiyoshi Kimura, who operates the Sushi Zanmai restaurant chain. - AFP

Bird flu outbreaks confirmed at farms in northern Japan

Japanese authorities began culling some 50,000 chickens yesterday after a bird flu outbreak at a farm in the northern Iwate region. It is the 19th bird flu outbreak of the season in Japan, the agriculture ministry said. The latest farm reported increasing deaths of

fowl, and test results confirmed yesterday that bird flu was the cause, the ministry added. It prompted the culling of 50,000 chickens there, the regional Iwate government said. Iwate also banned the movements of 170,000 birds kept at two farms within a 3km radius.

Some 3.8mn birds kept within 10km of the infected farm are to stay inside the zone for now. On Thursday, another farm in Iwate and a firm in the central Aichi region were hit by the virus and began killing their 120,000 and 147,000 birds respectively. - AFP



Musk does a U-turn on support for Farage

AFP/Reuters
London

Elon Musk appeared yesterday to do a U-turn on his support for Nigel Farage, leader of Britain's anti-immigration Reform UK party, after the former Brexit figurehead publicly disagreed with the US tech billionaire.

"The Reform Party needs a new leader. Farage doesn't have what it takes," Musk said on his X platform, in the latest in a series of critical comments about UK politics.

Farage said recently that he was in talks with Musk over a potential big donation for his party, which helped Labour into power in July's general election by splitting the right-wing vote.

However, in a post on X on Thursday, Musk expressed support for jailed British extremist agitator Tommy Robinson, sparking a disagreement with Farage.

Robinson was imprisoned in October after he admitted committing contempt of court over a long-running libel case involving a Syrian refugee.

In one of his X posts, Musk asked why



Nigel Farage

Tommy Robinson was "in solitary confinement prison for telling the truth?"

He alleged that it was "for telling the truth" over a major grooming scandal that rocked Britain over recent years.

The affair saw groups of men, mostly of South Asian origin, convicted of the sexual abuse of vulnerable, mostly white girls in a

string of cities in the UK.

Musk said that Robinson "should be freed and those who covered up this travesty should take his place in that cell."

Weighing in on the row, Farage said that Musk saw Robinson "as one of these people that fought against the grooming gangs".

"But of course the truth is Tommy Robinson's in prison not for that, but for contempt of court," Farage said.

Farage said Robinson himself had encouraged a narrative that he was a "political prisoner...but it isn't quite true".

Farage added that Musk was "very supportive" of him and his party.

Hitting back at Musk's latest message yesterday, Farage said on X that he continued to disagree with the US businessman over his views on Robinson.

"Well, this is a surprise! Elon is a remarkable individual but on this I am afraid I disagree," Farage wrote. "My view remains that Tommy Robinson is not right for Reform and I never sell out my principles."

Robinson, a one-time football hooligan with a string of UK criminal convictions, is serving an 18-month jail term for repeated



Elon Musk

contempt of court breaches.

He has amassed a big online following after years spearheading an anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant movement.

The grooming scandal involving the widespread abuse of girls, which emerged more than a decade ago in a number of English towns and cities, has long stirred

controversy and racial tensions.

A series of court cases eventually led to the conviction of dozens of men.

Subsequent official reports into how police and social workers failed to halt the abuse in some cases found that officials turned a blind eye to avoid appearing racist.

The abuse scandals have been seized upon by far-right figures, in particular Robinson.

In his flurry of tweets last week, Musk also criticised Prime Minister Keir Starmer and the child welfare minister, Jess Phillips, over what he called "rape gangs".

Yesterday the UK health minister, Wes Streeting, defended Starmer and Phillips.

"It's all very easy to sit there and fire off something in haste and click 'send' when people like Keir Starmer and Jess Phillips have done the hard yards of actually locking up wife beaters, rapists and paedophiles," Streeting told the BBC.

Last month, Musk endorsed the Alternative for Germany (AfD), an anti-immigration, anti-Islamic party labelled as right-wing-extremist by German security services ahead of national elections in February.

Australia's southeast braces for extreme fire danger amid intense heatwave

Reuters
Sydney

Australia's southeast sweated in a heatwave that intensified yesterday, elevating bushfire risk and prompting authorities to issue fire bans for more parts of Victoria state.

Australia is in the grips of a high-risk bushfire season, with firefighters last week battling a large blaze that ripped through Victoria's Grampians National Park, razing homes and farmland.

The nation's weather forecaster warned that temperatures could reach 45° Celsius (113° Fahrenheit) in some parts of Australia's second most populous state of Victoria.

The mercury in state capital Melbourne was forecast to hit 38C (100F).

In the state's northwest, in the town of Mildura, where the temperature was predicted to reach 42C (107F), it was already 32.9C (91F) at 10.30am, surpassing the January mean maximum temperature, according to forecaster data.

The heat sparked total fire bans for three Victorian districts where authorities labelled the fire danger as "extreme", the second highest danger rating.

Bureau of Meteorology official Miriam Bradbury said temperatures would likely peak in Victoria.

"What that means for the fire dangers is we are seeing a spike across more districts," Bradbury told Australian Broadcasting Corp television.

The states of Western Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania were also under heatwave warnings yesterday, the forecaster said on its website.

On Saturday Bradbury said a wind change bringing a cool change to the country's southeast was expected.

Australia's last few fire seasons have been quiet compared with the catastrophic 2019-20 "Black Summer" of wildfires that destroyed an area the size of Türkiye, killing 33 people and billions of animals.



A child runs past oxen covered with warm blankets along a road on a cold winter afternoon in New Delhi. - AFP

Chill factor

A snow plough waits to help clear snow from around aircraft after overnight snowfall caused the temporary closure of Britain's Manchester Airport. - Reuters

Right: Pro-Yoon protesters attend a rally in support of impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, near his official residence in Seoul, on a snowy day. - Reuters



A child sits in a snow tube next to ice sculptures at the Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, China. - Reuters

FBI looking into New Orleans attack suspect's travel history

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is looking into past visits to Egypt and Canada by the suspect in the New Year's Day attack in New Orleans that killed 14 people after a truck was rammed into a crowd of revelers, an FBI official told reporters.

Shamsud-Din Jabbar, a US Army veteran aged 42 who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) extremist group, was the suspect in the attack and the FBI says he acted alone.

He was killed in a shootout with police after the rampage, which also injured dozens of people and has been labelled by the FBI as an act of terrorism.

"We have also tracked that Jabbar travelled to Cairo, Egypt, from June 22 until July 3 of 2023. A few days later he flew to Ontario, Canada, on July 10 and returned to the US on July 13 of 2023," Lyonel Myrthil, FBI special agent in charge of the New Orleans field office, said at a press briefing.

"Our agents are getting answers as to where he went, who he met with and how those trips may or may not tie into his actions in our city in New Orleans," he added.

The FBI also said that Jabbar made at least two trips to New Orleans in the months prior to the attack, one in October and the other in November.

The suspect stayed in a rental home in New Orleans during that time, the FBI said, adding he recorded videos with Meta glasses travelling through the French Quarter, the neighbourhood in New Orleans where the attack occurred on Bourbon Street. - Reuters

India press watchdog demands murder probe

India's media watchdog has demanded a thorough investigation after a journalist's battered body was found stuffed in a septic tank covered with concrete.

Freelance journalist Mukesh Chandrakar, 28, had reported widely on corruption and a decades-old Maoist insurgency in India's central Chhattisgarh state, and ran a popular YouTube channel "Bastar Junction".

The Press Council of India expressed "concern" over the suspected murder of Chandrakar, calling for a report on the "facts of the case" in a statement.

Chandrakar's body was found on January 3 after police tracked his mobile phone records following his family reporting him missing.

Three people have been arrested. More than 10,000 people have died in the decades-long insurgency waged by Naxalite rebels, who say they are fighting for the rights of marginalised indigenous people in India's resource-rich central regions.

India was ranked 159 last year on the World Press Freedom Index, run by Reporters Without Borders. - AFP

Chinese scientist names spider species after pop songs by his favourite singer

AFP
Beijing

A Chinese scientist has named 16 new spider species after songs by popular "Mandopop" musician Jay Chou.

Mi Xiaoli, a professor at Tongren University in China's southwestern Guizhou province, listed the newly discovered arachnids in a paper published in the academic journal *Zoological Research: Diversity and Conservation*.

The paper, published in December, has gone viral since being discovered by netizens this year, with a related hashtag on microblogging platform Weibo racking up over 26mn views since Wednesday.

Weibo users have since dubbed Mi, 44, the "Ultimate Fan".

One of the arachnids - the 3.5mm *Cyclosa xingqing sp. nov.* or "Starry Mood spider" - is named after a hit

love song from Chou's debut album *Jay* released in 2000.

Others are named after similarly beloved tunes, including "Rainbow spider", "Dragon Fist spider", and "Excuse spider".

Taiwan-born Chou, renowned for his dramatic romance ballads and pop beats, is one of the world's most popular Mandarin-language artists having sold over 30mn records.

The 45-year-old has been a household name on the Chinese mainland and beyond for over two decades.

Now his songs will be immortalised as the names of the eight-legged critters that Mi and his colleagues recently discovered in China's Yunnan province.

The Secret Code spider, a 2.36mm yellowish brown arachnid, is named after Chou's 2002 love song featured on his acclaimed album *The Eight Dimensions*.

It is unclear how the song, in which

Chou croons "Don't ever leave, you are missing the missing piece in my world", relates to the spider.

"Excuse Spider", a fuzzy brown and white critter, shares its name with a track from Chou's 2004 album *Common Jasmine Orange*, the best-selling physical album in China this century according to Guinness World Records.

Mi, who published the paper with fellow researchers Wang Cheng and Li Shuqiang, has been a Jay Chou fan since his undergraduate days, according to state media outlet Xinhua.

"Naming spiders after Jay Chou's songs brings scientific research closer to the public," he told Xinhua. "I hope more people will pay attention to scientific research and support ecological protection."

This is not the first time Chou's name has been used for scientific discoveries.

In 2011, astronomers in Taiwan named an asteroid after the singer.

Clash between Indian forces, Maoist rebels leaves five dead

AFP
New Delhi

Indian security forces battled yesterday with Maoist rebels in their forested heartland, police said, with at least four guerillas and one policeman killed.

More than 10,000 people have died in the decades-long insurgency waged by Naxalite rebels, who say they are fighting for the rights of marginalised indigenous people in India's resource-rich central regions.

Government forces stepped up efforts last year to crush the long-running armed conflict, with some 287 rebels killed in 2024, according to government figures.

Clashes broke out late on Saturday in Abujhmarh district of Chhattisgarh state, a key battleground in the insurgency.

"Four bodies of Maoists, who were in their battle uniform, have been recovered after an encounter with police forces," police inspector-general P Sunderraj told AFP, adding one police constable had also been killed. "Action is still on."

Mexico shooting leaves five dead and seven wounded

A shooting at a nightspot in southeastern Mexico left five people dead and seven wounded, authorities said yesterday, the latest in a series of similar attacks in the violence-plagued country.

A manhunt was launched for the perpetrators of the shooting on Saturday night in the city of Villahermosa, in Tabasco state, the secretariat of security and civilian protection said.

"Five people lost their lives and seven were injured," it said. "Analysis of video surveillance cameras is being carried out and elements of the state and federal authorities have deployed co-ordinated patrols to locate and arrest those responsible."

According to local media, unidentified gunmen burst into the La Casita Azul nightspot and opened fire at customers, leaving bloodied bodies strewn on the floor.

Tabasco, home to oil production facilities, has seen an increase in violent crime in recent months. - AFP

Ex-president Sarkozy on trial over Gaddafi pact

AFP
Paris

Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, already convicted twice in separate cases since leaving office, today goes on trial charged with accepting illegal campaign financing in an alleged pact with the late Libyan dictator Moammar Gaddafi.

The career of Sarkozy has been shadowed by legal troubles since he lost the 2012 presidential election. But he remains an influential figure for many on the right and is also known to regularly meet President Emmanuel Macron.

The fiercely ambitious and energetic politician, 69, who is married to the model and singer Carla Bruni and while in power from 2007-2012 liked to be known as the “hyper-president”, has been convicted in two cases, charged in another and is being investigated in connection with two more.

Sarkozy will be in the dock at the Paris court barely half a month after France’s top appeals court on December 18 rejected his appeal against a one year prison sentence for influence peddling,

which he is to serve by wearing an electronic bracelet rather than in jail.

The latest trial is the result of a decade of investigations into accusations that Sarkozy accepted illegal campaign financing – reportedly amounting to some €50mn – from Gaddafi to help his victorious 2007 election campaign.

In exchange, it is alleged, Sarkozy and senior figures pledged to help Kadhafi rehabilitate his international image after Tripoli was blamed for bombing attacks on Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 over Lockerbie in Scotland and UTA Flight 772 in 1989 that killed hundreds of passengers.

Sarkozy has denounced the accusations as part of a conspiracy against him, insisting that he never received any financing for the campaign from Kadhafi and that there is no evidence of any such transfer.

At a time when many Western countries were courting Gaddafi for energy deals as the maverick dictator sought to emerge from decades of international isolation, the Libyan leader in December 2007 visited Paris, famously



Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy speaks during a meeting with the readers of his book *Promenades* at a bookstore in Paris. (Reuters)

installing his tent in the centre of the city.

But France then backed the UN-sanctioned military action that helped in 2011 oust Gaddafi, who was then killed by rebels. Sarkozy has said allegations from former members of Gaddafi’s inner circle over the alleged campaign financing are motivated by revenge.

If convicted, Sarkozy faces up

to 10 years in prison under the charges of concealing embezzlement of public funds and illegal campaign financing. The trial is due to last until April 10.

Sarkozy “is awaiting these four months of hearings with determination. He will fight the artificial construction dreamed up by the prosecution. There was no Libyan financing of the campaign,” said his lawyer Christophe Ingrain.

Among 12 others facing trial over the alleged Libyan financing are heavyweights such as Sarkozy’s former right-hand man, Claude Gueant, his then-head of campaign financing, Eric Woerth, and former minister Brice Hortefeux.

“Claude Gueant will demonstrate that after more than ten years of investigation, none of the offences he is accused of have been proven,” said his lawyer Philippe Bouchez El Ghozi, denouncing the cases as amounting to “assertions, hypotheses and other approximations.”

For the prosecution, the pact started in 2005 when Gaddafi and Sarkozy, then interior minister, met in Tripoli for a meeting ostensibly devoted to fighting illegal migration. But Sarkozy’s defence counters that no trace of the illegal financing was ever found in the campaign coffers.

The scandal erupted in April 2012, while Sarkozy was in the throes of his re-election campaign, when the Mediapart website published a bombshell article based on a document purportedly from December 2006 it said showed a former Libyan official

evoking an agreement over the campaign financing.

Sarkozy has long contended that the document is not genuine.

An embittered Sarkozy would later narrowly lose the second round of the election to Socialist Francois Hollande.

Franco-Lebanese businessman Ziad Takieddine, a key figure in the case, had claimed several times that he helped deliver up to €5mn (\$5.4mn at current rates) in cash from Kadhafi to Sarkozy and his chief of staff in 2006 and 2007.

But in 2020, Takieddine suddenly retracted his incriminating statement, raising suspicions that Sarkozy and close allies may have paid the witness to change his mind.

In a further twist, Sarkozy was charged in October 2023 with illegal witness tampering while Carla Bruni was last year charged with hiding evidence in the same case.

Sarkozy’s second conviction, in another campaign financing case, was confirmed last year by a Paris appeals court which ruled he should serve six months in prison, with another six months suspended. This verdict can still go to a higher domestic appeals court.

France arrests two Algerian influencers for ‘inciting’ violence

AFP
Lyon

French authorities were yesterday holding two Algerians who have wide followings on social media platform TikTok on suspicion of inciting terror, after they allegedly published posts urging acts of violence in France.

The arrests of the two men – in Brest in the west of France and Grenoble in the southeast – come against the background of growing political tensions between Paris and its former colony.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said yesterday he had “doubts” over the commitment of Algeria to follow a roadmap set out by the two sides in 2022 to smooth post-colonial relations.

A video blogger known as “Imad Tintin” was arrested on Friday outside Grenoble after publishing a video that urged followers to “burn alive, kill and rape on French territory”. The post was taken down but hardline right-wing Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau published a video grab on his social media accounts, condemning the publication as “vile”.

“Nothing will go unanswered,” Retailleau warned. While prosecutors had asked he be remanded in custody, a judge on Sunday placed the 31-year-old blogger under judicial supervision, Grenoble prosecutors said. He is still due to appear today in a fast-track trial.

“Imad Tintin” entered France in December 2021 and applied for a residence permit in August 2023 after his marriage to a French woman. But his application was refused and he is also subject to an expulsion order.

He was arrested with his twin brother, according to a police source, who asked not to be named but who added that a search of their home revealed the sets used for the video which had more than 800,000 views. Prosecutors have not given details over the situation of the brother.

In a separate case, Montpellier Mayor Michael Delafosse and local authorities have reported to the public prosecutor another video published by an influencer based in the southwestern city, its prosecutors told AFP yesterday.

“Kill him, let him suffer,” said the author of the video,

also an Algerian national, referring to an Algerian anti-government activist.

The public prosecutor’s office asked Montpellier police to conduct “an investigation into charges of direct, public provocation, not followed by action to commit a crime”.

A probe has been opened, the Montpellier prosecutor’s office said. The prefect of the southwestern Herault department on X called the video “intolerable”.

The prefect’s office told AFP it was considering withdrawing the blogger’s residence permit and issuing an expulsion order.

“The intelligence services are examining these cases very closely,” a source from the interior minister’s entourage said on condition of anonymity.

In the other case, a 25-year-old Algerian identified as Youcef A. but known on social media as Zazou Youssef was remanded in custody on Friday in the western city of Brest, prosecutor Camille Miansoni said in a statement.

He will stand trial there on February 24 on a charge of “publicly advocating an act of terrorism”, she said. He faces up to seven years in jail and a €100,000 (\$103,000) fine if convicted, the statement added.

Zazou Youssef appeared in a video posted on TikTok on December 31, calling for attacks in France and violence in Algeria. The suspect was living in France on a temporary residency permit.

TikTok told AFP the account from which the video was posted had been banned for posting several videos that broke its rules on hate speech.

Tensions have surged between France and Algeria after President Emmanuel Macron renewed French support for Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara during a landmark visit to the kingdom last year.

Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony, is de facto controlled for the most part by Morocco. But it is claimed by the Sahrawi separatists of the Polisario Front, who are demanding a self-determination referendum and are supported by Algiers.

French-Algerian novelist Boualem Sansal, a major figure in modern francophone literature, has meanwhile been imprisoned by Algerian authorities since mid-November on national security charges.

Ukraine has launched ‘counterattack’ in Kursk region: Russia

AFP
Moscow

Russia said yesterday that Ukraine had launched a “counterattack” in the western border region of Kursk, where Kyiv’s forces began a shock ground offensive last August.

It was not immediately clear how much Ukraine had advanced in the region, but pro-Kremlin military bloggers reported earlier that a powerful new offensive was under way.

The assault comes at a critical juncture in the nearly three-year conflict, with both sides seeking to boost their negotiating hand ahead of US President-elect Donald Trump’s return to the White House on January 20.

“At about 9am Moscow time, in order to halt the advance of Russian troops in the Kursk direction, the enemy launched a counterattack,” the Russian defence ministry said.

Ukraine used two tanks, a dozen armoured vehicles and a demolition unit in the assault, which was headed towards the village of Berdin – about 15km northeast of Sudzha, it added.

“The operation to destroy the Ukrainian army formations continues,” it said.

Pro-Kremlin military bloggers admitted the Russian army had come under pressure but said Moscow was fighting back.

“The main events of the next attempted offensive by the Ukrain-

ian army are clearly still ahead of us,” influential pro-Russian Telegram channel Rybar said.

Images purportedly showing a column of Ukrainian armoured vehicles driving through the snow were shared by pro-Russia military blogger Dva Mayora on Telegram.

Ukrainian officials gave little detail on the new offensive, with a prominent lawmaker urging silence.

“I can’t understand why it is necessary to officially report on the Kursk region. Maybe better to do it afterwards when the operation is over?” Ukrainian MP Oleksiy Goncharenko said.

Other officials expressed their glee at the fightback, which comes almost three years since Moscow launched its full-scale military assault on Ukraine.

“Russia is getting what it deserves,” Ukrainian presidential chief of staff Andriy Yermak said.

The head of Ukraine’s Center for Countering Disinformation, Andriy Kovalenko, said on Telegram that defence forces were “working” in the area, without elaborating.

“In the Kursk region, the Russians are very worried because they were attacked from several directions, and it was a surprise for them,” he said.

Kyiv seized dozens of villages in the Kursk region shortly after its incursion started on August 6, 2024, but its advances stalled after Moscow rushed reinforcements to the area, including thousands of

troops from its ally North Korea.

A Ukrainian army source told AFP last November that Kyiv still controlled 800sq km of the Russian border region, down from previous claims it controlled almost 1,400sq km.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said last year the Kursk operation has boosted Kyiv’s “exchange fund” – its negotiating position on swapping prisoners of war – and diverted tens of thousands of Russian troops away from the eastern front.

He said Saturday evening that “up to a battalion of North Korean infantry soldiers and Russian airborne troops” had been lost in battles in the Kursk region on that day and the day before.

But Kyiv has so far been unable to halt Moscow’s advances in Ukraine, which were seven times higher in 2024 than the year prior, according to an AFP analysis of data from the Institute for the Study of War.

Both Russia and Ukraine have exchanged regular attacks since the year began.

Russia said Sunday it downed dozens of Ukrainian drones overnight in a barrage that damaged homes and triggered air alerts, while Kyiv said Moscow fired 103 drones into its territory.

Four Russian airports briefly suspended traffic early Sunday for “safety” reasons, forcing at least eight planes to divert course, a spokesperson for Russia’s civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia said.

Dozens of marine mammals dead after Russia oil tanker spill

More than two dozen marine mammals have been found dead since last month’s Russian oil tanker spill in the Black Sea, a dolphin rescue centre said yesterday, as authorities raced to contain the fallout of the disaster. The spill began on December 15, when two ageing Russian tankers were caught in a storm off the Kerch Strait linking Crimea to southern Russia.

One sank and the other ran aground, pouring around 2,400 tonnes of a heavy fuel oil called mazut into the surrounding waters, authorities estimate. Russia’s Delfa centre, which rescues and provides rehabilitation for dolphins, said it had recorded 61 dead cetaceans since the incident, 32 of whom “most likely” died due to the spill. Cetaceans are a type of aquatic mammal that includes whales, dolphins and porpoises.

“Judging by the condition of the bodies, most likely the bulk of these cetaceans died in the first 10 days after the disaster,” it said.

It said most of those killed were “Azov” dolphins – a type of harbour porpoise that look similar to dolphins but are more closely related to belugas and narwhals. Russia’s emergency ministry said yesterday it was working to eliminate the consequences of the incident, but that “strong winds and waves” had thrown oil onto some beaches. “More than 68km of coastline have been cleaned,” it said. Hundreds of volunteers have been deployed to scoop up contaminated soil from beaches in Crimea and along Russia’s southern coast. The type of fuel oil involved in the incident is particularly hard to clean because it is dense and heavy and does not float on the surface, Russian authorities say.

Reformist Greek ex-premier Simitis dies at 88

Costas Simitis, the reformist prime minister whose governments oversaw Greece’s eurozone entry, helped Cyprus join the EU and planned for the Athens 2004 Olympics, died yesterday at the age of 88.

The Greek government announced a four-day national mourning.

Current Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, in a statement, expressed his sadness at the passing of Costas Simitis and his respect for “a worthy and noble political opponent who accompanied Greece on its great national steps: the accession to the Eurozone and the Euro and the entry of Cyprus into Europe”.

Mitsotakis said Simitis was “a personality who, undoubtedly, leaves his own imprint on the development of the country, throughout the last decades.”

Mitsotakis concluded his tribute by saying Simitis’s legacy “still runs through the demands of our country today. Something that marks Kostas Simitis’ contribution to it. Allowing him, from now on, to maintain a special place in memory and history. My most sincere condolences to his wife Daphne, his daughters and his family.”

Simitis studied law in Germany and was a resistance fighter during Greece’s seven-year dictatorship, fleeing the country in 1969 to avoid arrest.

The former law professor was a founding member of the PASOK party formed in 1974 by socialist firebrand Andreas Papandreu, and a key cadre in the party’s three terms in government after 1981. As minister for economy and later industry, the austerity-minded Simitis repeatedly clashed with Papandreu’s freewheeling policies.



Former Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis smiles as he arrives at the EU Summit media centre in Porto Carras in 2003. (Reuters)

But when Papandreu lay near death in 1996, he was picked internally by the party to replace him as prime minister. Tensions with neighbouring Turkey spiked dangerously on two occasions under Simitis’s administration. In 1996, the historic rivals and Nato allies nearly went to war over a cluster of uninhabited islets in the Aegean Sea.

A naval showdown in the area was ultimately averted after the United States intervened. In early 1999, Greece was left red-faced when separatist Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan was revealed to have been hiding at the Greek embassy in Kenya, and was snatched by Turkish commandos. Three of Simitis’s ministers were forced to resign

over the diplomatic debacle.

A few months later, both countries were hit by deadly earthquakes and rushed to each other’s aid. Simitis used the opportunity to usher in a period of détente with Turkey under his foreign minister George Papandreu, which later became known as “quake diplomacy”.

Simitis narrowly won re-election in 2000 in a campaign tarnished by claims that his government had illegally naturalised thousands of ethnic Greek voters from the former Soviet Union.

In 2001, Greece joined the euro. In 2003, it held the European Union presidency that saw the bloc’s largest enlargement to date, with the accession of ten new EU states including historic ally Cyprus.

Working with Cypriot leaders, “he led Cyprus to its greatest achievement since 1960: the decision for Cyprus’s accession to the European Union, reached in December 2002 in Copenhagen,” said Cypriot President Nikos Christodouides in a statement yesterday, offering his “sincere condolences” to the Greek people and Simitis’s family.

Simitis’s second administration had its hands full preparing the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, which were dogged by serious construction delays to the finish.

But the Olympics were ultimately staged by a different government, led by the rival conservative New Democracy party. Simitis had already resigned as party leader before the 2004 elections as defeat loomed.

In later years, the legacy of Simitis’s governments was dimmed by probes into a major stock bubble and corruption scandals that saw two of his former ministers jailed.



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Shock therapy for multilateralism

No one doubts that US President-elect Donald Trump's administration will show little regard for multilateralism. Even more globally oriented appointees like Secretary of the Treasury-designate Scott Bessent believe that the purpose of engaging with international institutions is to "win" America should engage, but only so that its own interests do not suffer.

The typical American critique of multilateralism assumes that the existing order is fundamentally broken, and that a shock to international institutions is needed to remove threats to US interests or challenges to the American point of view. But what will come after the shock? There will need to be new ordering principles, and they will not come from simply demanding that everyone side with the US.

Admittedly, the diagnosis is not completely mistaken. The feebleness of recent multilateral efforts reflects a deeper intellectual and political fragmentation. While the International Monetary Fund was holding its annual Fall meeting in October 2024, the Brics (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, and four new members) convened 36 national leaders in Kazan, Russia, where the discussion centred around replacing the dollar-based international monetary order.

Around the same time, the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity was meeting in Cali, Colombia, and it was soon followed by a counterproductive climate summit in Baku, Azerbaijan, and then a futile G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro. If multilateralism was functioning well, these negotiations would all be joined up.

The pushback against the international order is not new, though. In the US, incoming Republican administrations in the early 1970s, early 1980s, and early 2000s all voiced contempt for multilateralism, demanding that America's freeloading allies pay more for the security umbrella that it provides.

Richard Nixon and his treasury secretary, John Connally, did not hide their disdain for international institutions, arguing that only dramatically disruptive unilateral action could change things. Their shock therapy began spectacularly in August 1971, when Nixon ended the dollar's convertibility

Shock therapy for multilateralism will bring disruption; but after that, it must bring more international co-operation

into gold and imposed a general levy on imports. Other countries were left to deal with a world in which their exports had become more expensive.

Similarly, in the early 1980s, Ronald Reagan's advisers were openly suspicious of the IMF; and many within George W Bush's orbit in the early 2000s argued that the recent financial crisis in East Asia had discredited the Fund, and that private

capital flows could meet all development financing needs anyway.

In each case, however, a severe financial crisis eventually forced a reconsideration. In the 1970s, the depreciating dollar led oil producers to push up prices, and many oil-importing developing countries had to be rescued by a newly created IMF Oil Facility. In 1982, a soaring dollar and higher US interest rates produced a general debt crisis, leading the IMF to reconfigure itself to meet the demands of the moment. By 1983, Reagan was referring to the Fund as the linchpin of the international financial system.

Finally, the 2008 global financial crisis began in the final years of the Bush presidency. Soon enough, governments had come together at the G20 and in other global bodies to contain the fallout and set new rules of the road.

Recent history aside, there is a more fundamental reason why multilateralism will remain essential. In a world that seems to be segmenting into rival blocs, most countries are rightly focused on protecting their own interests. And since those interests do not neatly align with those of America, China, or any other aspiring global power, governments want to maintain contact with every party in the looming conflict.

A similar dynamic lay behind the Cold War-era Non-Aligned Movement, which brought together countries that refused to choose between America and the Soviet Union. Likewise, Asean developed out of a concern that Indonesia should not have to take sides; rather, it could assert itself by forging stronger ties with its neighbours. The European Community, which evolved into the European Union, also emerged because Europeans, though aligned with the US, did not want to be an extension of it. By 2008, in the middle of a new financial crisis, Asean wanted to move in the direction of becoming an EU-style community.

Everywhere you look nowadays, the message is the same: We don't want to choose sides, and we shouldn't be forced to do so. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer rightly argues that it would be "plain wrong" for the United Kingdom to pick between Europe and the US. In response, Trump's adviser Stephen Moore suggests that Britons must choose European socialism or American-style free markets. But with every government now pursuing some sort of industrial policy, this juxtaposition is a chimera.

If a country as powerful as the US in 1945 still needed to win friends and influence people, today's America certainly must do so. Shock therapy for multilateralism will bring disruption; but after that, it must bring more international co-operation, because there is no alternative. - Project Syndicate

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Economic development in a protectionist world

By Raghuram G Rajan
Chicago

As apprehension grows in China, Europe, and Japan about a possible trade war triggered by the incoming Trump administration, one should also spare a thought for developing countries. Their tried-and-tested method of expanding beyond agriculture to achieve middle-income status has been to embrace low-skilled export-oriented manufacturing. How will these countries fare now?

Their prospects may be better than expected, especially if they choose alternative development paths. In the past, poor countries developed through manufacturing exports because foreign demand allowed their producers to achieve scale, and because abysmal agricultural productivity meant that low-skilled workers could be attracted to factory jobs even with low wages. This combination of scale and low labour costs made these countries' output globally competitive, despite their workers' lower relative productivity.

As firms profited from exports, they invested in better equipment to make workers more productive. As wages rose, workers could afford better schooling and healthcare for themselves and their children. Firms also paid more taxes, allowing the government to invest in improved infrastructure and services. Firms could now make more sophisticated, higher-value-added products, and a virtuous cycle ensued. This explains how China moved from assembling components to producing world-leading electric vehicles (EVs) in just four decades.

Visit a cell-phone assembly plant in a developing country today, however, and it is easy to see why this path has become more difficult. Rows of workers no longer solder parts onto motherboards, because the micro-circuitry has become too fine for human hands. Instead, there are rows of machines with skilled workers tending to them,

while unskilled workers primarily move parts between machines or keep the factory clean. These tasks, too, will soon be automated. Factories with rows of workers stitching dresses or shoes also are becoming rarer.

Automation in developing countries has a variety of implications. For starters, manufacturing now employs fewer people, especially unskilled workers, per unit of output. In the past, developing countries moved steadily to more sophisticated manufacturing, leaving less-skilled manufacturing to poorer countries that were just embarking on the export-led-manufacturing path. But now, a country like China has enough surplus workers to undertake all manner of manufacturing. Low-skilled Chinese workers are competing with Bangladeshi counterparts in textiles, while Chinese PhDs compete with German counterparts in EVs.

Moreover, given the declining importance of labour in manufacturing, industrialised countries have come to believe they can restore their own competitiveness in the sector. They already have the skilled workers who can tend the machines, so they are raising protectionist barriers to re-shore production. (Of course, the primary political motive is to create more well-paying jobs for left-behind high school-educated workers, but automation makes this unlikely.)

Taken together, these trends - automation, continued competition from established players like China, renewed protectionism - have already made it harder for poor countries in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America to pursue export-led manufacturing growth. Thus, while a trade war would be damaging to their commodity exports, it would not be as concerning as in the past. It may even have a silver lining if it compels developing countries to search harder for alternative paths.

That path could be paved with high-skilled services

exports. In 2023, global trade in services expanded by 5% in real (inflation-adjusted) terms, while merchandise trade shrank by 1.2%. Improvements in technology during the Covid-19 pandemic enabled more remote work, and changes in business practices and etiquette have minimised the need for physical presence. As a result, multinationals can and do serve clients from anywhere. In India, multinational firms ranging from JP Morgan to Qualcomm are hiring talented graduates to staff global capability centres (GCCs), where engineers, architects, consultants, and lawyers create designs, contracts, content, and software that are embedded in manufactured goods and services sold globally.

Every developing country has a small but highly skilled elite who can profitably export skilled services, given the high wage differentials vis-à-vis developed countries. Workers who know English (or French or Spanish) may be particularly advantaged, and even if only a few have these capabilities, such jobs add much more domestic value than low-skilled manufacturing assembly, thus contributing enormously to a country's foreign-exchange earnings.

Moreover, each well-paid service worker can create local employment through his or her own consumption. As more moderately skilled service workers - ranging from taxi drivers to plumbers to waiters - find steady employment, they will cater not just to elite demand but also to each other. High-skilled services exports only need to be the leading edge of broader job growth and urbanisation.

All job growth, however, requires improvements in the quality of a country's labour pool. Some "last-mile" training and upgrading can be done quickly; as long as engineering graduates have basic knowledge of their field, they can be trained in state-of-the-art design software that a potential multinational employer needs. But over the medium term, most

countries will need to invest substantial amounts in nutrition, health, and education to augment their peoples' human capital.

Fortunately, these investments can also create employment. With the right development-appropriate policies, governments can substantially improve learning and health across the population. This may mean hiring more high-school-educated mothers in daycares to help teach children basic literacy and numeracy at an early age; or training more "barefoot" medical practitioners to recognise basic ailments, prescribe medicines, or make referrals to qualified physicians when necessary.

Developing countries need not abandon manufacturing, but they must explore other paths to growth. Instead of benefiting one sector or another through industrial policy, they should invest in the kinds of skills that are important for all jobs.

Services are especially worth exploring, because developed economies are unlikely to erect protectionist barriers against them. As the world's largest service exporters in 2023, the European Union, the US, and the United Kingdom have much to lose from a trade war in this domain. Insofar as global services competition affects their own workforce, it would be felt most strongly by doctors, lawyers, bankers, consultants, and other high-income professionals, implying a boon for consumers of these services in developed countries and potentially even reducing domestic income inequality. Those would be worthwhile outcomes in themselves. - Project Syndicate

● Raghuram G. Rajan, a former governor of the Reserve Bank of India and chief economist of the International Monetary Fund, is Professor of Finance at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and the co-author (with Rohit Lamba) of *Breaking the Mold: India's Untraveled Path to Prosperity*.



Every developing country has a small but highly skilled elite who can profitably export skilled services, given the high wage differentials vis-à-vis developed countries, according to the writer.

New Orleans' planned new Bourbon Street barriers only crash-rated to 10mph

By Brian Thevenot and Chris Kirkham
New Orleans

Months before the deadly New Orleans vehicle attack on New Year's Day, the city modelled scenarios for how an attacker could enter Bourbon Street at various intersections in a crew-cab Ford F-150 similar to the one used to kill 14 people and injure dozens more.

Engineers found such a pickup could enter the crowded tourist strip at speeds ranging from 12-70mph - and yet city officials are now installing new street barriers that can only withstand 10mph impacts, according to an April city-contracted engineering analysis and city bid documents reviewed by Reuters.

Those new barriers, known as "bollards," had not yet been installed on Bourbon Street on New Year's but are planned to be completed by the February 9 NFL Super Bowl in New Orleans. The documents reviewed by Reuters, which have not been previously reported, make clear that the system won't be able to prevent vehicle attacks at moderate-to-high speeds.

In selecting the new bollard system, the city prioritised ease of operation over crashworthiness of the new bollard system because of chronic problems in operating the old one, according to the documents and a source with direct knowledge of the city's Bourbon Street security planning. Unlike some pedestrian-only zones, such as in New York City's Times Square, Bourbon Street is open to regular vehicle traffic for much of the day, requiring city officials to block parts of it off from surrounding streets each evening.

Since the New Year's Day attack, New Orleans officials have faced scrutiny over whether they left citizens vulnerable as crews were removing old bollards and installing new ones. But neither barrier system would have prevented the deadly attack, according to the source and a Reuters review of the city documents.

The city currently has no bollards at Canal and Bourbon streets, where the attacker entered, but the roadway was blocked by an SUV police cruiser parked sideways on New Year's.

Attack suspect Shamsud-Din Jabbar, a US combat veteran from Texas, exploited another vulnerability in the city's security planning: He squeezed his seven-foot-wide pickup onto an eight-foot-wide sidewalk between a drugstore wall and the police vehicle, stomping the accelerator and ploughing through the crowd at about 3:15am.

Jabbar died after the attack in a shootout with police. Federal authorities have said he had been radicalised and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State militant group.

The city's security modelling, in an engineering study conducted to help choose a new barrier system, had only considered scenarios where a vehicle entered Bourbon Street on the roadway - not the sidewalk. A vehicle could not enter most Bourbon blocks on its skinny sidewalks, which have other existing barriers such as fire hydrants or balcony and streetlight posts, the source said.

City officials would face "tough meetings" about the continuing vulnerabilities of the new bollards being installed now, the person said, which "wouldn't have made any difference" on New Year's.

New Orleans city officials did not respond to detailed questions from Reuters about their Bourbon-Street security planning and the decision to select barriers with a 10mph crash rating.

The person with direct knowledge of the city's security planning emphasised the difficulty all cities face in protecting against vehicle attacks while preserving



Memorials for people killed on Bourbon Street are seen on Friday in New Orleans, Louisiana. (AFP)



Women pray next to a makeshift memorial for the victims at Bourbon Street two days after a US Army veteran drove his truck into the crowded French Quarter on New Year's Day in New Orleans. (Reuters)

access to routine vehicle and pedestrian traffic, including accessible sidewalks for people with disabilities.

The source said officials chose a bollard system rated for 10mph impacts from a company called 1-800-Bollards Inc. City bidding documents, dated in August and September, sought an installer of the system, calling it the "RCS8040 S10 removable bollard". The city's April engineering analysis describes the same product as having an "S10" crash rating and explains it can stop a 5,000-pound vehicle travelling 10mph.

"Crash ratings are specified as S10 (10mph impact), S20 (20mph impact), and S30 (30mph impact)," the engineering analysis said.

The source said a barrier rated for 10-mph impacts could still slow or

significantly damage a vehicle travelling faster.

Representatives from 1-800-Bollards Inc declined to comment.

Two of the Bourbon Street attack scenarios modelled by city-contracted engineers involved entering the street in a straight line, without turning, after building up speed.

The study found a 2015 F-150 could achieve speeds of 50 mph by accelerating from the spotlight across Canal Street, a wide boulevard with streetcar tracks in the median. The same vehicle could hit 70mph entering from the opposite end of the section of Bourbon Street that is protected by bollards.

Jabbar drove a deadlier weapon than the truck used in the report's scenarios - a newer F-150 Lightning, a much faster,

heavier and quieter electric vehicle.

During major events such as New Year's or Mardi Gras, the source said, city security plans call for parking large vehicles at the ends of Bourbon Street that are most vulnerable to high-speed vehicle attacks. But such measures, the person said, are not practical on a daily basis in the crowded tourist zone.

Since at least 2020, city officials have studied how best to replace New Orleans' failing system of street barriers to protect against vehicle attacks, the source said. The city installed its first bollard system after coming under pressure in 2017 from federal officials to protect Bourbon Street following a string of vehicle attacks globally, including one in 2016 that killed 86 people and injured hundreds in Nice, France.

New Orleans initially chose a system called the Heald HT2 Matador that allowed workers to move the barriers into position along tracks in the street, according to city documents. The source told Reuters the system was selected in large part because it had already been bid and priced by the federal government, allowing the city to install it faster.

But the barriers proved problematic under the rigours of Bourbon Street - and often inoperable because the tracks became jammed with litter including Mardi Gras bead necklaces.

In addition, the mechanism to lock and unlock the barriers was embedded in the street and often became submerged in what the source called the mix of street grime, refuse, rainwater, spilled drinks and occasionally vomit that gives the tourist strip its signature stench.

"To unlock it, you have to dip your hand into Bourbon Street juice," the person said. "It was a disgusting job. You couldn't get anyone to do it."

Heald, the maker of the bollards, said in a statement that they had not been shifted into place to block Bourbon Street before the attack, "and, therefore, did not malfunction."

The system operates effectively, the company said, with "basic maintenance and cleaning."

Because of those problems, the city

prioritised factors including ease of operation and maintenance over crash safety ratings in choosing a new system, according to the source and an April 2024 report from Mott MacDonald, an engineering firm hired by the city to evaluate dozens of bollard options.

Representatives of Mott MacDonald did not comment.

The report outlined three different crash-rating standards for bollard systems. It concluded that the highest crash rating, which could withstand impacts from 15,000-pound vehicles travelling between 30-50mph, was "not compatible" with the city's needs to move the bollards every day.

"Specialised lifting equipment like a truck-mounted crane or heavy machinery would be necessary" to move such bollards daily, the report said.

The city chose the 1-800-Bollards Inc system with the 10mph rating, relatively lightweight stainless-steel posts that drop into street foundations, in part because the bollards could be installed and removed daily by a single city staffer, the source said. Those posts weigh 44 pounds, the engineering analysis said, whereas similar 20mph bollards weigh 86 pounds.

The same report included the attack-scenario modelling. In addition to those showing potential speeds of 50mph and 70mph, all other scenarios showed an F-150 could make turns onto Bourbon at between 12mph and 20mph without hitting a curb or running onto a sidewalk - exceeding the 10mph crash rating of the system the city chose.

The source said the primary concern of city officials, along with French Quarter resident and business representatives, was protecting pedestrians from vehicles turning onto Bourbon from side streets at lower speeds.

The report scored different systems on various criteria. The system ultimately chosen by the city received a deduction in its "safety rating" score because it did "not meet the project requirements specified."

It received higher marks for the weight of the bollards and their low costs.

Suspected underwater sabotage incidents in Baltic Sea

By Anne Kauranen and Nerijus Adomaitis
Helsinki

A Finnish court has denied a request for the release of an oil tanker suspected by police of damaging an undersea power line and four telecommunications cables in the Baltic Sea last week.

The incident was one of several since 2022 in which underwater critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea has suffered suspicious damage. Baltic Sea nations are on high alert and Nato has said it will boost its presence in the Baltic Sea.

Several police investigations are under way but no suspects have been brought to trial.

Dec 2024: Power and Internet cables

The Estlink 2 undersea power cable connecting Finland and Estonia was damaged on December 25 along with four telecoms lines.

Finland launched a sabotage investigation and on December 26 seized a tanker carrying Russian oil on suspicion it caused the damage by dragging its anchor.

Finnish authorities said the Cook Islands-registered Eagle S was part of a "shadow fleet" used to circumvent sanctions on Russian oil exports. The European Union said it condemns any deliberate destruction of Europe's infrastructure.

The Nato military alliance said on December 27

it would boost its presence in the Baltic Sea region. The Kremlin said the same day that the ship's seizure was of little concern to it, and Russia has previously denied involvement in such incidents.

Finnish police said on December 29 they had found tracks on the seabed where they suspect the Eagle S of damaging the cables.

The owner of the Eagle S, United Arab Emirates-based Caravella LLC FZ, on December 30 filed a request with the Helsinki District Court seeking the release of the ship. This was rejected on January 3, 2025.

Nov 2024: Baltic telecom cables

Two undersea fibre-optic communications cables located more than 100 nautical miles (about 200km) apart in the Baltic Sea were severed on November 17 and 18, raising suspicions of sabotage.

A 1,200-km Internet link between Lithuania and Sweden's Gotland island went out of service at about 0800 GMT on Nov 17, according to Lithuania's Telia Lietuva, part of Swedish Telia Company.

A 1,200-km cable connecting Helsinki to the German port of Rostock stopped working around 0200 GMT on November 18, Finnish state-controlled cyber security and telecoms company Cinia said.

Investigators in the countries involved have zeroed in on Chinese bulk carrier Yi Peng 3, which left the Russian port of Ust-Luga on Nov 15, and a

Reuters analysis of MarineTraffic data showed that the ship's coordinates corresponded to the time and place of the breaches.

China allowed representatives from Germany, Sweden, Finland and Denmark on December 21 to board the Yi Peng 3 along with Chinese investigators, after a month-long diplomatic standoff during which the ship sat still in a Danish shipping lane.

Swedish Foreign Minister Maria Malmer Stenegerd said on December 23 China had not heeded the Swedish government's request for a prosecutor to be able to conduct the preliminary investigation on board.

Oct 2023: Balticconnector gas pipe and cables

A subsea gas pipeline, the Balticconnector, which links Finland and Estonia under the Baltic Sea, was severed by what Finnish investigators determined was Chinese container vessel NewNew Polar Bear dragging its anchor in the early on October 8, 2023.

Estonian police suspect the ship of also damaging telecoms cables connecting Estonia to Finland and Sweden on October 7-8, before hitting the gas pipeline on its way to a port near St Petersburg in Russia.

China promised Finland and Estonia assistance with the investigations but Estonian authorities have said the Chinese did little to fulfil its promises.

Finnish and Estonian investigators have been unable to determine whether the Hong Kong-flagged vessel caused the damage by accident

or deliberately, and have not yet provided their conclusions in the cases.

Sept 2022: Nord Stream blasts

Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2, built across the Baltic Sea by Russia's state-controlled Gazprom to pump natural gas to Germany, were damaged on September 26, 2022.

Swedish seismologists registered several subsea blasts, some 17 hours apart, off the Danish island of Bornholm, that ruptured three out of four pipelines in the Nord Stream system, releasing methane into the atmosphere.

In the investigations, Sweden found traces of explosives on several objects recovered from the site, confirming it was a deliberate act, but Sweden and Denmark closed their investigations without naming suspects in 2024.

No one has taken responsibility. Some Western officials have suggested Moscow blew up its own pipelines, an interpretation dismissed by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Russia has blamed the United States, Britain and Ukraine for the blasts, which largely cut Russian gas off from the European market. Those countries denied involvement.

In August 2024, Germany asked Poland to arrest a Ukrainian diving instructor accused of being part of a team that blew up the Nord Stream pipelines. Poland said the man left the country before he could be detained.

EAA plans 'Walk for Education' in support of children's educational projects worldwide

The Education Above All (EAA) Foundation has announced that it will host the "Walk for Education: CSR and Sustainability Fair" on January 24, in collaboration with the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA).

Themed *Help Educate Children*, the event aligns with the UN International Day of Education and aims to raise awareness and funds to support the EAA's projects providing quality education to vulnerable and marginalised children worldwide.

The fair is expected to bring together more than 10,000 community members at MIA Park, including school students and representatives of private corporations,

featuring three symbolic walks, each led by corporate partners, in addition to football tournaments, cultural shows and workshops on Arabic calligraphy and fine arts.

Through the "Buy a Brick and Build a School" campaign, individuals can make donations to help build two schools for underprivileged and vulnerable children in Qatar, while for private companies, the event offers an opportunity to contribute through sponsorship categories ranging from QR5,000-200,000.

Director of Communications and Private Sector Partnerships at the EAA Foundation, Parintaj Ankleshvria, stated that

the Walk for Education Fair exemplifies the power of partnerships in driving quality education and sustainable development.

She emphasised that by uniting schools, private corporations, and the broader community, the EAA intends to create learning opportunities that empower underprivileged children to realise their potential.

The event will dedicate food and beverages kiosks in support of the EAA's projects in Qatar, thus underlining the importance of social solidarity in achieving an enduring and positive impact. - QNA



Competition heats up at Marmi 2025

Al Tala'a Championship saw strong competition yesterday among falconers from groups one through five.

The results led to the qualification of Barzan Team with two falcons from groups two and five, Khalid Omeir Mubarak al-Nuaimi from group three, and Mubarak Abdulrahman al-Nasser from group four, for the next round.

Al Tala'a Championship was launched yesterday as part of the 16th Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival (Marmi 2025), organised by Al Gannas Qatari Society under the patronage of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani and supported by the Social and Sports Activities Support Fund (Daam), at Sealine's Sabkha Marmi, until February 1.

Mohamed bin Mubarak al-Ali, head of Al Tala'a Championship, said that the competition distance, which separates the starting point and the location where the bustard is released, is around 2km.

He noted that the rules stipulate a 5-minute timeframe from the moment the falcons are unhooded.

If a falcon flies forward and captures the prey, the group's race ends.

If a falcon flies but fails to capture, its owner is eliminated, and the race is repeated for the remaining falcons with the clock reset to 5 minutes.

The same timing rules apply for up to three attempts.

He said that Al Tala'a is one of the most important competitions at Marmi, as it showcases falcons with exceptional hunting and speed capabilities.

In the evening yesterday group four of Haddad Al Tahadi Championship competed, where peregrine falcons presented outstanding performances against the homing pigeons.

The competition resulted in the qualification of Mohamed Taleb al-Nabet from Team Gharbia and Hamad Nasser Jamaan.

Metaib Mubarak al-Qahtani, director of the Marmi Festival, awarded the winners and finalists with cash prizes of QR100,000 each and a shield for advancing to the finals.

This brings the total number of finalists in Haddad Al Tahadi to four.

Shawi al-Kaabi, head of Haddad Al Tahadi Committee, praised the efforts of group four falconers, noting that out of 31 competitors, 26 participated, with three qualifying.

Meanwhile, in the shooting competitions, which complement the festival's activities, Ahmed Mubarak al-Kuwari, head of shooting at the festival, noted that this annual participation is aimed at promoting shooting sports in Qatar.

The event is divided into three competitions: one for those under 20 years old, another for the general public aged over 20, and a third for elite shooters registered with the Qatar Shooting Association.

Competitions featuring shotgun shooting at clay targets will begin next Saturday and continue weekly, offering valuable prizes to the winners.

The shooting activities are open to the public daily from 8.30am-12.30pm during the festival.

