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# GULF TIMES



SATURDAY Vol. XXXXV No. 13259

January 18, 2025  
Rajab 18, 1446 AH

www.gulf-times.com 2 Riyals

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SPORT | Page 1

Saudi Arabia's al-Rajhi takes maiden Dakar crown, Sanders wins in motorcycle category

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HE the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Dr Abdullah bin Abdulaziz bin Turki al-Subaie, being briefed on the capabilities of the marine research vessel 'Jenan'.

## Research vessel 'Jenan' vital tool for marine study, says minister

HE the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Dr Abdullah bin Abdulaziz bin Turki al-Subaie, has emphasised that the research vessel 'Jenan' serves as a vital tool in supporting marine research, praising the vessel's advanced technical capabilities and specialised studies conducted on board.

This statement came during his visit to the research vessel 'Jenan', one of the leading scientific platforms for marine research in the region. The visit is part of ongoing efforts to support scientific research and enhance collaboration among national institutions.

Accompanying the minister

were Undersecretary of the Ministry and several senior officials, who were received by the President of Qatar University Dr Omar Mohamed al-Ansari, and Vice-President for Research and Graduate Studies Dr Aiman Erbad, alongside other senior university officials and environmental research specialists.

During the visit, HE Dr al-Subaie commended Qatar University's efforts in environmental sciences, underscoring the importance of strengthening co-operation between the ministry and the university to achieve the objectives of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change's strategy, which aims to develop innovative

solutions for environmental preservation.

The minister was briefed on the vessel's capabilities, including its advanced field equipment, such as modern tools for measuring the physical and chemical properties of marine water and soil, and technologies used to study marine biodiversity.

The visit also included a field tour of the vessel's state-of-the-art laboratories, where mechanisms for conducting field experiments and analysing environmental samples were demonstrated, with a focus on research aimed at protecting and ensuring the sustainability of Qatar's marine environment. (QNA)

## PM calls for Gaza ceasefire deal to be 'fully implemented'

● In an exclusive interview with Al Jazeera HE Sheikh Mohammed shares details on Gaza truce negotiations and Syria talks

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani has called for the first phase of the Gaza ceasefire agreement to be fully implemented and said hopes the next phase will be final.

In an exclusive interview with Al Jazeera yesterday Sheikh Mohammed shared details on Gaza truce negotiations and Syria talks.

HE the Prime Minister said he now expects "the [UN] Security Council to issue a binding resolution to implement the [ceasefire] agreement."

On Wednesday, Qatar, Egypt and the United States announced that Hamas and Israel have reached a multiphased deal to halt the war in Gaza and exchange Israeli captives held in the Strip for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails.



"I say to the people of Gaza: forgive us if we fell short in fulfilling our duty towards you over the past months. His Highness the Amir and all the Qatari people are overjoyed with the agreement, just as we have seen the joy of the people of Gaza in the streets" — HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani

### Israeli security cabinet approves Gaza truce deal

Israel's security cabinet approved in a vote yesterday a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal that should take effect this weekend, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said.

The agreement, which must now go to the full cabinet for a final green light, would halt fighting and bombardment in Gaza's deadliest-ever war.

It would also launch on Sunday the release of hostages held in the territory since October 7, 2023.

Under the deal struck by Qatar, the US and Egypt, the ensuing weeks should also see the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

The justice ministry on Friday published a list of 95 Palestinians to be freed starting Sunday, "subject to government approval".

They include 69 women, 16 men and 10 minors. (AFP)

The mediators said the ceasefire in Gaza will go into effect on Sunday. The first phase of the agreement is spread over seven weeks and will see a surge in humanitarian aid, gradual withdrawal of Israeli forces, and the release of Israeli captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. The second phase is expected to begin in March, provided the first phase runs smoothly according to Israel.

The Israeli cabinet was expected to ratify the ceasefire deal later yesterday.

HE Sheikh Mohammed noted that Qatar and Egypt played an important role as mediators in the truce talks. He said the joint work of the outgoing Biden administration and members of incoming President-elect Donald Trump's team were decisive in reaching the ceasefire agreement in Gaza.

He stressed however that Qatar's position is only a mediator and said "the administration of Gaza after the war is a Palestinian matter." To Page 2

### UN chief hails Qatar's efforts to reach Gaza ceasefire deal



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has commended the dedicated mediation efforts undertaken by Qatar in co-operation with Egypt and the US, which resulted in the two parties to the conflict in Gaza reaching an agreement to exchange hostages and prisoners and to return to sustainable calm, which ultimately achieves a permanent ceasefire between the two parties.

In a statement, Guterres stressed that the UN is ready to support the implementation of the agreement and expand the scope of delivering humanitarian relief to the countless numbers of Palestinians in Gaza. "It is imperative that this ceasefire removes the significant security and political obstacles to delivering aid across Gaza so that we can support a major increase in urgent lifesaving humanitarian support," he said. Guterres urged the international community to support all efforts aimed at achieving broader goals, including preserving the unity and integrity of the occupied Palestinian territories to achieve lasting peace and stability, stressing the importance of ending the occupation and achieving a two-state solution through negotiations in line with international law, relevant UN resolutions, and previous agreements. (QNA)

### Trump inauguration moved indoors due to extreme cold

Donald Trump confirmed that his inauguration as US president on Monday will move indoors due to expected freezing weather, undercutting the Republican's hopes for a grandiose spectacle to kick off his second term. "There is an Arctic blast sweeping the country," Trump wrote on his Truth Social feed yesterday. "Therefore, I have ordered the Inauguration Address, in addition to prayers and other speeches, to be delivered in the United States Capitol Rotunda." (AFP) Page 6

### PA ready to assume 'full responsibility' in Gaza

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said yesterday the Palestinian Authority (PA) was ready to assume "full responsibility" in post-war Gaza, in his first statement since a ceasefire deal was announced.

"The Palestinian government, under president Abbas' directives, has completed all preparations to assume full responsibility in Gaza," including the return of the displaced, providing basic services, crossings management and reconstruction of the war-torn territory, a presidency statement said.

Hamas, which won the last Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, indicated earlier in the war that it was not seeking to govern post-conflict Gaza.

Hamas sources have told AFP they would be

ready to hand over Gaza's civilian affairs to a Palestinian entity.

Currently, Israel has no definitive stance on post-war governance beyond rejecting any role for both Hamas and the PA.

Israeli officials including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have repeatedly opposed Hamas or the PA ruling the Palestinian Territory. But US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said last week that the PA should be the one to run the coastal territory.

Palestinian leaders across factions have long said that Gaza's future is for them to decide, rejecting any outside interference.

Meanwhile, Israel's cabinet convened yesterday to vote on a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal that should take effect this weekend, Netanyahu's office said. (AFP)

## Old Doha Port gears up for more cruise ships, naval visits

By Joey Aguilar Staff Reporter

Old Doha Port plans to increase its event calendar significantly, hosting more naval ship visits and expanding cruise ship schedules, according to CEO Mohamed Abdulla al-Mulla.

This move, he pointed out, aims to further strengthen the port's position as a premier maritime hub, both regionally and globally, and comes on the heels of the successful inaugural Qatar Boat Show last year.

"The port plans to build on this success by hosting a wider variety of maritime events and increasing the frequency of naval ship visits and cruise ship schedules, in addition to the future editions of the Qatar Boat Show, further estab-



Mohamed Abdulla al-Mulla

lishing itself as a central hub for maritime tourism and activities in the region," al-Mulla said.

He noted that the event attracted more than 20,000 visitors and featured 495 exhibitors and



Old Doha Port's Mina District welcomes a large number of international visitors annually, especially during the cruise season.

brands. It also showcased 95 boats and watercraft, proving the port's capacity for large-scale events.

Citing its strategic location along the Doha Corniche and

state-of-the-art facilities, he highlighted the port's already established facility as a preferred stop for such vessels.

The CEO noted that the port's

terminal, recognised by *Forbes* as one of the most beautiful in the world, is designed for optimal efficiency. It can simultaneously accommodate two cruise ships, each carrying up to 6,000 passengers, and offers around-the-clock immigration and customs services.

He said the enhanced passenger experience includes a range of improvements, from expedited visa-free entry for eligible travellers to cultural attractions such as the City Gallery, featuring an aquarium and interactive exhibits.

"As the official seaport for Qatar, Old Doha Port plays a crucial role in welcoming international visitors, providing a seamless gateway to the country's cultural and tourist attractions," al-Mulla said, adding that its infrastructure enables it to host diverse events and large vessels. To Page 2

## Prime Minister discusses Gaza truce, Syria with Egypt, UAE FMs

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani yesterday held a phone call with Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Immigration and Expatriates Affairs Dr Badr Abdel Aati. During the call, they discussed bilateral relations and ways to support and enhance them, emphasising the continued co-ordination between the two countries within the framework of joint mediation to ensure that the

parties implement the ceasefire agreement in the Gaza Strip and the exchange of detainees and prisoners. The call also discussed the latest developments in Syria and the ongoing regional co-ordination to support the Syrian people during the transitional phase. HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs expressed Qatar's appreciation to Egypt for its efforts in the joint mediation that contributed to

reaching the agreement, noting that the ongoing co-ordination between the two countries had an effective impact in pushing the negotiations forward. He reiterated Qatar's position in support of Syria's unity, sovereignty and independence, and achieving the aspirations of its brotherly people for a decent life and building a state of institutions and law. HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs yesterday also held a phone call with UAE Foreign

Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan. During the call, they discussed co-operation relations and ways to further strengthen them. They also touched on the latest developments in Gaza and occupied Palestinian territories, particularly in light of the ceasefire agreement and the exchange of detainees and prisoners. Additionally, they reviewed the situation in Syria and addressed several other topics of mutual concern. (QNA)

## Qatar, Antigua and Barbuda sign air services agreement



Qatar and Antigua and Barbuda signed an air services agreement, allowing for the designated airlines of the two countries to operate unlimited and unrestricted traffic rights for both passenger and cargo flights. The agreement was signed by HE the Minister of Transport Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Thani and Antigua and Barbuda's Minister of Tourism, Civil Aviation, Transport and Investment Charles Fernandez. The pact comes in the context of connecting Qatar with more air services agreements that open airspaces for the national carrier to fly to more destinations around the world. In a meeting after the signing ceremony, the two ministers discussed bilateral relations in the areas of transportation, civil aviation, air transportation, and ways to enhance them. (QNA)

## Old Doha Port gears up for more cruise ships, naval visits

From Page 1

The 450-berth marina can accommodate vessels and private yachts up to 160m in length, and is complemented by the largest slipway in Qatar with a 60m width, according to the CEO.

He said the port also features specialised docking zones for larger yachts. Beyond its seafaring capabilities, he noted that it boasts areas such as the Containers Yard, Mina Parks and Mina District, which are designed for cultural and recreational events, hosting more than 50 restaurants, 100 retail outlets, and a scenic waterfront promenade. This design facilitates the seamless management of simultaneous aquatic and public events.



The port's terminal was recognised by *Forbes* as one of the most beautiful in the world, which can simultaneously accommodate two cruise ships, each carrying up to 6,000 passengers, and offers around-the-clock immigration and customs services.

## PM calls for Gaza ceasefire deal to be 'fully implemented'

From Page 1

HE Sheikh Mohammed also highlighted the importance of mobilising international support for Gaza and establishing mechanisms to support affected families.

"A humanitarian protocol has been reached regarding the mechanism for delivering aid to prevent blackmail," he said.

Besides negotiating a ceasefire deal in Gaza, Qatar is also focused on bolstering relations with Syria's new de facto administration led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, whose Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group led the opposition offensive that toppled Syria's long-time ruler Bashar al-Assad last month.

HE Sheikh Mohammed met al-Sharaa in Damascus on Thursday and called for sanctions imposed on Syria to be lifted.

"We have been making efforts to lift the sanctions from the first day of the [Assad] regime's fall, and we do not want Syria to collapse," Sheikh Mohammed said.

"The sanctions were imposed on the Assad regime and are not logical now. The new administration is not expected to address international concerns and work for its people under sanctions simultaneously," he added.

The US and European Union both imposed sanctions on al-Assad and his government for allegedly committing crimes during the war, which began after security forces cracked down on pro-democracy protesters in 2011. Washington and Brussels have not yet made a decision on lifting these sanctions but have begun signalling their interest in cooperating with the new Syrian administration.

Sheikh Mohammed also criticised Israeli moves to occupy the territory near the Golan Heights in southern Syria.

"We reject Israel's reckless act of incursion in the buffer zone in Syria. We talked with Ahmad al-Sharaa and affirmed the necessity of Israeli withdrawal and that the incursion should not create a new reality," he said.

Israel deployed military units last month to the buffer zone, which lies along the Golan Heights and separates Syria and Israel, after al-Assad was toppled. The area has been an officially designated demilitarised zone as part of a 1974 UN-brokered ceasefire.

## Ministry flags off soft opening of motorhome beach in Sealine

QNA  
Doha

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MoECC), represented by the Natural Reserves Department, announced the soft opening of a new beach dedicated to motorhome owners in the Sealine area, in a move that reflects its keen attention to enhancing the infrastructure that supports ecotourism.

The venue is equipped with electricity, water, sewage and lighting services. The beach allows each motorhome owner the opportunity to stay for only two nights, while providing a suitable environment that meets the needs of this category of visitors.

The project is scheduled to be officially opened next April as part of the ministry's efforts to develop entertainment options for motorhome owners from within Qatar and citizens of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries.

In this context, Director of the Natural Reserves Department at MoECC, Saleh al-Kuwari considered that the new beach in the Sealine area represents



a quality addition to the recreational infrastructure in the country, noting that the project experienced a great turnout of motorhome owners and their families, after it provided them with the opportunity to enjoy the picturesque nature in a comfortable and suitable atmosphere.

He explained that the beach is equipped with basic services including electricity, water and sanitation, in addition to designated seating areas near the motorhome parking locations, with screens to ensure the privacy of fami-

lies, in addition to providing the site with seats and umbrellas that allow visitors to enjoy nature in an atmosphere of privacy and comfort.

Al-Kuwari confirmed that the ministry is working to expand the scope of the project to include additional beach locations in the future, as part of its commitment to supporting ecotourism and enhancing entertainment options that meet the aspirations of citizens and visitors, calling on motorhome owners to visit the beach and benefit from the available facilities,

while adhering to the rules and regulations to preserve the environment. He also voiced the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change's welcome to comments and suggestions to develop services.

For their part, a number of motorhome owners expressed their appreciation for this initiative that provides them with a distinctive destination for camping during the weekend, stressing the project's contribution to the diversity of eco-tourism destinations in the country.



## Gulf Cybersecurity Forum calls for regional co-operation to achieve strategic goals

QNA  
Doha

The two-day Gulf Cybersecurity Forum 2025 concluded in Doha yesterday after extensive discussions and participation from experts, university faculty members, students, and enthusiasts across GCC.

The forum provided a platform for exchanging expertise and exploring the latest developments in

educational cybersecurity, featuring presentations and academic papers from experts in the region.

On its second day, a panel discussion titled "Cyber Legislation" brought together experts and academics from GCC to discuss recent legal developments and strategies to strengthen data and information protection frameworks.

Participants also presented research papers on advanced cybersecurity topics, showcasing innovation and depth in the field. The

event concluded with a dialogue session chaired by HE Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Dr Ibrahim bin Saleh al-Nuaimi, and attended by heads of delegations from GCC countries. The session focused on the future of cybersecurity and strategies for enhancing regional co-operation to achieve shared strategic objectives.

The forum also included training workshops tailored for university students, culminating in a cybersecurity simulation compe-

tion that highlighted the exceptional talent and competitiveness of teams from across the GCC. The first-place team included Abdullah Khalid al-Nuaimi (UAE), Zain Ismail (Bahrain), Sami Hazazi (Saudi Arabia), Al Zahraa Hamad (Oman), Abdullah al-Dosari (Qatar), and Issa al-Ayyoub (Kuwait).

The second-place team featured Hamed Marwan al-Ajmani (UAE), Hayat al-Nuaimi (Bahrain), Omar al-Khowaiter (Saudi Arabia), Reem Khalid al-Sanani (Oman), Mo-

ammed al-Naama (Qatar), and Mariam al-Mutairi (Kuwait).

The third-place team included Abdullah al-Asmawi (UAE), Alaa Munther (Bahrain), Lama al-Shaheel (Saudi Arabia), Nasri Hammoud al-Tamimiya (Oman), Hessa Ibrahim al-Kuwari (Qatar), and Ali al-Jedi (Kuwait).

Awards were also presented for the research poster competition, recognising outstanding contributions by Nada Nasser Badr Nasser (UAE), Mohammed Ibrahim Sharif (Bahrain), Hayat

al-Zahrani (Saudi Arabia), Noah al-Qasbi (Oman), Ali Issa al-Muhaizaa (Qatar), and Abdullah al-Makhayal (Kuwait).

Participants praised the forum's organisation and highlighted the importance of fostering collaboration among GCC countries to strengthen cybersecurity capabilities, develop training and educational environments, and equip future generations to address growing digital challenges, ensuring a secure and resilient future for the region.



## MES bids farewell to golden jubilee batch of Class 12 students

A total of 561 Class XII students from the golden jubilee batch of MES Indian School were honoured during the graduation ceremony organised at the school.

The school bid farewell to its 2024-25 batch amid jubilation and exultation of students at a glittering ceremony that marked the culmination of their schooling. The chief guest, Dr Najeeb K P president officiating and MES Governing Board congratulated the students on their successful completion and urged them to be ambitious about attaining goals in life.

The directors and the members of the school governing board gave away certificates of merit and mementoes to the best outgoing students of various streams of Class XII, who excelled in their respective domains. All the major student officials, prefects, club secretaries, members of Scouts and Guides, Campus Care Force and students who secured 100% attendance during the academic year 2024-25 were given meritorious certificates and mementoes.

Nandakishor Santhosh (Science), Riswin Mathew Wilson (Commerce) and Ahmadullah Arif (Humanities) were adjudged as the best outgoing students in the Boys' Section, while Angeline Maria Laxon (Science), Maliha Mumtaz Najeeb (Commerce) and Jiya

Maria Jude (Humanities) won the best outgoing student title in the Girls' Section of the school. Jenesh Satheesh Mathew (Boys') and Sheza Fatima were declared the best all-rounders. Jitheshadhitya N N (Boys) and Saavariya Arun Nambiar (Girls) won the Talent of the Year award. Ahmad Faisal (Boys) and Steffi Vargheese Mathew (Girls) were honoured with the title of best outgoing prefect.

Krishh Zenith (Boys) and Durra Mohamed Rafi (Girls) were adjudged as the Best All-Rounder in Sports. Mohammed Faneez (Boys), Gazal Jiju Abraham (Girls) were declared as the best Sports Talents of the year. Faizan Irfan Ahmad (Boys) and Fathima Hanna P K were adjudged as the best outgoing Scout and Guide respectively. Abdullah Beig (Boys), and Bains Zainab (Girls) were declared as the best outgoing Campus Care Force members. Kevin Saji and Jazaa Jasmin were declared as the best Band Leader.

The school Principal Dr Hameeda Kadar, congratulated the students.

DAS Rex, co-ordinator, Department of English delivered a speech on behalf of the teaching fraternity. Students' representatives, Aryan Unnikrishnan and Onaisa Rashid in their reflections expressed their gratitude to their alma mater.



Outgoing students with MES officials.

## Mesis hosts farewell ceremony for Class of 2025



MES Indian School Abu Hamour Branch (Mesis) hosted a farewell ceremony for the Class of 2025 in the school's multipurpose hall.

The event celebrated the achievements and memories of 72 graduating students. Chief guest, Ahmed Isham, general secretary (officiating), Ashraf Sharafudheen, director of academics, Faisal Mayan, director of transportation, Hashim N M, director of finance, Shahid, member of the Governing Board and Dr Hameeda Kadar, principal (MES) graced the occasion.

The programme featured a welcome by the head boy, Savitr Sudheer, speeches by students and teachers, and cultural performances, including a dance by Grade 11 students. Mohammed Ashraf appreciated the graduating students for their determination and hard work. School principal Pramila Kannan urged students to remember to carry forward the values and lessons they have learned.

Students were presented with mementoes as souvenirs, and special mention awards were conferred to the overall outstanding students in various domains. Un-

der the Best Outgoing category, Rania Ahmed Sheikh, Savitr Sudheer Shekhar, Rehan Abdul Gafoor Muslim, and Heiza Nousher were recognised. Nanditha Devan and Sruthi Rajani Abhilash were honoured as the Talents of the Year, while Muhammed Faheem received the title of Best Outgoing Prefect. Aditya Vivek was named the Best All-Rounder of the Year, Mitra Karthikeyan was awarded Best Outgoing Sports Person, and Razan Gafoor was recognised as the Best Academic Performer.

The head girl, Heiza Nousher, delivered the vote of thanks.

## DPS-Modern Indian School gets 5-year QNSA accreditation



DPS-Modern Indian School has become the first and only Indian school to receive QNSA accreditation for five years. The school management acknowledged the invaluable contributions of all teaching and administrative staff at a special event. The event was graced by DPS-Modern Indian School President Yasir Nainar, vice-president George Thomas and esteemed directors of the executive committee. Yasir Nainar congratulated the teachers and encouraged them to stay updated with advancements in AI. He emphasised adopting innovative, student-friendly approaches using AI to enhance the learning process and to make it more effective. Principal Asna Nafees expressed gratitude to the teachers, emphasising their crucial role in shaping the school's success.



A man walks past tents at a camp for people displaced by conflict in Bureij in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday.

## Displaced Gazans awaiting truce so they can go home

AFP  
Nuseirat

In a sprawling tent city in central Gaza, Palestinians displaced by war to other parts of the territory are all waiting for one thing: a ceasefire so they can go home.

Most of Gaza's 2.4mn people have been displaced at least once by the Israel-Hamas war to other parts of the territory.

With a long-awaited truce deal due to take effect tomorrow, they may finally be able to return to their neighbourhoods.

Umm Khalil Bakr has been living with her family in the Nuseirat camp, where displaced Palestinians have tried their hardest despite the war to lead a semblance of normal life.

There, they bake flatbread on clay ovens, play cards to pass the time when there are no bombings, and sweep the streets as an act of dignity.

If the ceasefire takes hold, people will start moving back to their neighbourhoods, though they are under no illusions as to what they might find.

"I will take my tent, remove the rubble from the house and place my tent on the rubble, where I will live with my 10 children," Umm Khalil said.

"We know the weather will be cold, and we won't have blankets for the bedding, but what matters is that we return to our homeland." Around her, young children gathered to watch their mother speak, bouncing idly on the tent sides.

Her determination to rebuild her life despite the utter devastation from 15 months of war was shared by her fellow camp residents.

Whatever the state of their homes, the hardships of life in the camp were far worse, said Umm Mohammad al-Tawil.

"We will return, and whatever hardships we might face, we will return," she said.



A boy runs with a Palestinian flag inscribed with the Arabic phrase "we sacrifice ourselves for the nation", past tents at a camp for people displaced by conflict in Bureij in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday.

"This is not life, and it is not our life."

A few kilometres to the south, in Deir Al-Balah, the Moqat family were packing their few belongings into cardboard boxes, ready to go back to Beit Lahia in the north of the Gaza Strip.

The family were looking for a truck to take them home, said Fatima Moqat.

"We will take the tent with us... and live in it just as we stayed here inside the tent," she said.

"There we will live in the tent until they find us a solution for reconstruction." With the truce not yet in effect, there has been no let-up in the violence.

Yesterday, Gaza's civil defence agency said at least 113 people had been killed by Israeli bombardment of the territory the announcement of the deal.

The scale of the destruction in Gaza wrought by month after month of air strikes, shelling and street-to-street fighting means reconstruction could last well into the next decade, international agencies have said.

The World Health Organisation said rebuilding the territory's health system alone would cost \$10bn and take five to seven years.

According to the UN, by December 1, nearly 69% of buildings in the Gaza Strip had been destroyed or damaged, with the UN Development Programme estimating last year that it could take until 2040 to rebuild all destroyed homes.

The Gaza war began on October 2023, when Hamas stormed Israel.

Israel's retaliatory campaign has left 46,876 people dead, the majority civilians, according to the health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza, figures the UN has described as reliable.

To Moqat, it was the grief over lives lost in the war that would be the hardest to overcome.

"Gaza was destroyed and rebuilt a hundred times before... Houses can be replaced, but people cannot be replaced," she said.

Back in Nuseirat, reclining on the floor inside his carpet-lined tent, Nasr al-Gharabli could not wait to return to his home.

"I am waiting for Sunday morning when they will announce the ceasefire... I will go to kiss my land," he said.

"If I die on my land it would be better than being here as a displaced person."

## Malayali Samajam marks 'Keralotsavam'

Malayali Samajam, an expatriate organisation of Keralites in Qatar, in collaboration with several other entities organised the 'Malayali Samajam Pratibha Sangamam - Keralotsavam 2024' recently.

The event honoured students and their teachers from Indian schools who achieved outstanding results in the Malayalam language in the 10th-Grade exams for the 2023-24 academic year, and Keralotsavam which showcased Kerala's rich art and culture.

The event's chief guest was Advocate Mathew Kuzhalmadan, MLA from Muvattupuzha constituency, Kerala. Malayali Samajam president Anand Nair presided over the function.

An inter-school Malayalam quiz competition was also held, focusing on Kerala, the Malayalam language, and literature, with participation from over 13 Indian schools in Qatar. In the quiz competition, Bhavan's Public School emerged as the winner, with Noble International School as the first runner-up and Ideal Indian School as the second runner-up.

This year, 120 students qualified for the Malayalam Pratibha Awards, an annual honour given by the Samajam, and certificates



and medals were awarded to the students. The event highlighted Kerala's cultural essence

through various stalls and traditional art forms, exhibitions and performances.



## Palestinian support gatherings in Jordan, Syria



People celebrate the news of a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, in Amman, Jordan, yesterday.



People attend a protest organised to celebrate the announcement of the ceasefire in Gaza, at Yarmouk camp in Damascus, Syria, yesterday.

## Putin, Iran's president deepen defence ties with 20-year pact

Reuters  
Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Iranian counterpart Masoud Pezeshkian deepened military ties between their countries yesterday by signing a 20-year strategic partnership that is likely to worry the West.

Under the agreement, Russia and Iran will boost co-operation in a range of areas including their security services, military drills, warship port visits and joint officer training.

Neither will allow their territory to be used for any action that threatens the other and will provide no help to an aggressor attacking either nation, according to the text, which also said they would work together to counter military threats.

But it did not include a mutual defence clause of the kind included in a treaty between Russia and North Korea, which the West says has seen North Korean troops deployed to fight in Ukraine, something Moscow has neither confirmed nor denied.

Nor was there specific mention of arms transfers, a topic of particular concern to the US and its allies, though the two sides said they would develop "military-technical co-operation".

Pezeshkian, on his first Kremlin visit since winning the presidency last July, hailed the treaty as an important new chapter in bilateral relations, while Putin said Moscow and Tehran shared many views on international affairs.

"This (treaty) creates better conditions for bilateral co-operation in all areas," said Putin, emphasising the upside for economic ties and trade, which he said was mostly carried out in the two countries' own currencies.

"We need less bureaucracy and more concrete action. Whatever difficulties are created by others, we will be able to overcome them and move forward," Putin added, referring to Western sanctions on



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian meet at the Kremlin in Moscow, yesterday.

both countries. Putin said Russia regularly informed Iran about what was going on in the Ukraine conflict and that they closely consulted on events in the Middle East and the South Caucasus region.

Russia and Iran were the main military allies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who fled to Moscow after being toppled last month.

The West also accuses Iran of providing missiles and drones for Russian attacks on Ukraine. Moscow and Tehran say their increasingly close ties are not directed against other countries.

Putin said work on a potential gas pipeline to carry Russian gas to Iran via Azerbaijan was progressing despite difficulties. He added that, despite delays in building new nuclear reactors for Iran, Moscow was also open to potentially taking on more nuclear projects.

Pezeshkian, whose words were translated by Russian state TV, said the treaty showed that Moscow and Tehran did not need to heed the opinion of what he called "countries over the ocean".

"The agreements we reached today are another stimulus when it comes to the creation of a multipolar world," he said, adding that

he hoped the war in Ukraine could be ended at the negotiating table.

"War is not a good solution to resolve problems and we would welcome talks and achieving peace between... Russia and Ukraine," Pezeshkian said.

Moscow has cultivated closer ties with Iran and other nations hostile towards the US since the start of the Ukraine war. It already has strategic pacts with North Korea and close ally Belarus, as well as a partnership agreement with China.

Moscow has made extensive use of Iranian drones during the war in Ukraine. The US accused Tehran in September of delivering close-range ballistic missiles to Russia for use against Ukraine. Tehran denies supplying drones or missiles.

The Kremlin has declined to confirm it has received Iranian missiles, but has acknowledged that its co-operation with Iran includes "the most sensitive areas".

Russia has supplied Iran with S-300 air defence missile systems in the past and there have been reports in Iranian media of potential interest in buying more advanced systems such as the S-400 and of acquiring advanced Russian fighter jets.

## Nearly 475 Palestinian children disabled monthly by ongoing Gaza assault: UNRWA

QNA  
Gaza

A report by UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) revealed that approximately 475 children per month have suffered disabilities that may last a lifetime due to the use of explosive weapons by the Israeli occupation during its ongoing assault on Gaza since October 7, 2023.

According to the report, based on an analysis published by Save the Children, an average of 15 children per day in Gaza were disabled by explosive weapons used by Israeli forces in 2024. The report emphasises that the fuel crisis remains a serious threat to the delivery of essential humanitarian operations in Gaza. According to the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, all partially operating hospitals have exhausted their fuel reserves and now rely on daily fuel deliveries from partners to maintain critical services.

In northern Gaza, the Israeli forces conducted a continuous

ground assault with an intensified siege for over 100 days, amid near-total disruption of humanitarian aid. Communication and Internet access remain severely restricted. The report indicates that some areas of northern Gaza have been under heavy siege for over three months, making access to these areas extremely difficult. Despite ongoing efforts by humanitarian partners to deliver aid, Israeli forces have significantly obstructed these efforts.

The report highlights that thousands of people are left without access to food, water, electricity, or healthcare, while the strip continues to witness mass casualties. It also reports that, between November 4 and December 16, 2024, a survey of 565 displacement sites in Deir Al-Balah and Khan Yunis revealed that 75% of these sites did not receive any humanitarian aid, and 87% lacked adequate food supplies. Over half of the sites (51%) had insufficient access to drinking water, and 82% of sites were unable to access health facilities.

The report also noted that tens of thousands of families are still

living in at least 80 shelters operated by UNRWA, and on January 12, Israeli forces issued evacuation orders affecting Nusrat area, where three UNRWA facilities are located, and 14 other facilities are in close proximity. As of January 14, around 80.5% of Gaza is under evacuation orders issued by Israeli military.

The report further states that at least 1.9mn people, or approximately 90% of Gaza's population, are displaced, with many facing repeated displacements, some as many as 10 times or more.

The report also outlines significant challenges in gathering essential humanitarian supplies at Kerem Shalom crossing in southern Gaza, including deterioration of law and order, ongoing conflict, and damaged infrastructure.

Since October 2023, Israel's assault on Gaza, by land, sea, and air, has resulted in the deaths of 46,788 Palestinians and the injury of 110,453 others. Thousands of victims remain trapped under rubble and in the streets, with rescue crews unable to reach them.

## ICC chief holds talks on supporting Syria on war crimes prosecution

Reuters  
Dubai

International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Karim Khan held discussions yesterday with Syrian authorities on how the war crimes tribunal could help in their efforts to prosecute crimes allegedly committed in the country, his office said.

Khan was invited to Syria by the transitional government, which took over after former President Bashar al-Assad was toppled in December.

Khan met with Syria's de facto ruler Ahmed al-Sharaa to discuss how the ICC prosecutors could support the Syrian authorities in their efforts "towards accountability for alleged crimes committed in the country", his office said.

The ICC, which has 125 member states, is the world's permanent court to prosecute individuals for alleged war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and aggression. Syria is not a member state, but could accept the ICC's jurisdiction as a first step, Khan told Reuters.

## Macron says will host aid conference to rebuild Lebanon

AFP  
Beirut

France's president said yesterday that Paris will soon host an aid conference to help rebuild Lebanon after the Israel-Hezbollah war last year, as he visited Beirut in a show of support for Lebanon's new leaders.

After a vacancy of more than two years, Joseph Aoun was elected president on January 9 and named Nawaf Salam as prime minister-designate. "In the middle of winter, spring has sprung," Macron said at a joint press conference with his Lebanese counterpart.

"You are this hope," he said, referring to Aoun and Salam.

The new prime minister faces the monumental task of forming a government to oversee reconstruction after the Israel-Hezbollah conflict ended in November, and implement reforms demanded by international creditors in return for a desperately needed financial bailout.

At the French embassy yesterday evening, Macron said he was convinced a government would emerge in "the coming days".

Salam, a former presiding judge at the International Court of Justice, separately said consultations with all political sides on potential cabinet line-ups this week had been "more than positive".

Earlier in the day, Macron had pledged to help drum up financial aid at an international reconstruction conference when Aoun comes to Paris "in a few weeks' time".

"The international community must prepare for massive support to the reconstruction of infrastructure," he said.

## Aid agencies ready Gaza push but warn of mammoth obstacles

AFP  
Cairo

An Israel-Hamas ceasefire deal expected to take effect tomorrow has sparked hope for life-saving aid to reach Palestinians, but aid agencies warn of obstacles from destroyed infrastructure, massive need and collapsed law and order.

Announcing the truce, US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday it would "surge much needed humanitarian assistance to Palestinian civilians".

The United Nations' humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher called it "a moment of hope and opportunity" but said "we should be under no illusions how tough it will still be to get support to survivors." On the ground in the territory, where nearly all 2.4mn people have been displaced at least once, aid workers worry nothing

will be enough to meet the need. "Everything has been destroyed. Children are on the streets. You can't pinpoint just one priority," Doctors Without Borders (MSF) co-ordinator Amande Bazerolle told AFP by phone from Gaza.

Speaking from the southern Gaza city of Khan Yunis, Mohammed al-Khatib, of Medical Aid for Palestinians, said local aid workers haven't stopped for 15 months even though they themselves are displaced. "Everyone is exhausted," he said.

In the hunger-stricken makeshift shelters set up in former schools, bombed-out houses and cemeteries, hundreds of thousands lack even plastic sheeting to protect from winter rains and biting winds, Gavin Kelleher, of the Norwegian Refugee Council, told AFP.

Even if the bombs stop, agencies like his have to focus on the



A driver stands next to trucks carrying aid lined up near the Rafah border, waiting to cross into the Gaza Strip, following the announcement of a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, in Al Arish, Egypt.

basics of emergency response, including bringing in "tarps, ropes and fixtures to close gaping holes" in buildings.

"At least until we stop seeing children dying of hypothermia," he said via text message from Gaza. By last week, hypothermia had killed at least eight people — four newborns, three infants and one adult — according to a health

ministry toll used by the World Health Organisation.

On Wednesday, Egypt's state-linked Al-Qahera News reported co-ordination was underway to reopen the Rafah crossing on the Gaza border. It was one of the main humanitarian entry points but has been closed since Israeli forces seized the Palestinian side in May. The truce is based on a

plan Biden presented in mid-2024 that foresaw a surge in aid to 600 trucks per day, or more than eight times the December average reported by the UN.

The World Food Programme said Thursday it had enough food for 1mn people "waiting outside Gaza or on its way".

On the Egyptian side of the border, a source in the Egyptian Red Crescent told AFP up to 1,000 trucks are waiting "for their entry into Gaza".

But with air strikes continuing to pound the territory, where aid groups and the UN have regularly accused Israel of impeding aid flows — which Israeli denies — aid workers were sceptical.

MSF's Bazerolle said the promise of hundreds of trucks a day "is not even feasible technically".

"Since Rafah has been destroyed, the infrastructure is not there to be able to cope with that level of logistics," she explained.

## Palestinian support rally in Somalia



Somalis attend a rally in support of Palestinians in Gaza after the news of a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, outside the Omar ibn al-Khattab in Mogadishu, yesterday.

## Nigerians decry another deadly air strike on civilians

Reuters  
Abuja

When vigilantes in northwestern Nigeria's Tungar Kara town prepared to go after an armed gang in a nearby forest last Saturday, residents cheered and prayed for their safe return.

But before they set off on their mission, the town was bombed in an air strike by the Nigerian Air Force (NAF), which it said targeted the armed gang but residents said killed 15 civilians — members of the vigilante group and other bystanders.

The army and air force have increasingly used aerial assaults against the growing threat in Nigeria's northwest and central region posed by armed criminal gangs, known locally as bandits, which kill villagers and carry out mass kidnappings.

But the campaign is exacting a heavy toll on Nigerian civilians and sapping their support for the

military, residents and analysts say.

Saliyu Usman, one of the vigilantes tasked with protecting the town from armed gangs, said he was praying when a jet roared in the sky. Then he heard a loud blast and found himself lying injured on the ground.

"Now whenever I see a military plane flying during daytime, I think it is a threat to my life," said Usman, who said his stomach was partly ripped open and has lacerations on his body.

"Bandits kill us and the military bombed us from the sky." The NAF did not respond to questions from Reuters. In a statement on Monday, the NAF denied it targeted civilians but said it would investigate Saturday's strike on Tungar Kara, a remote town in northwestern Zamfara state.

Haliru Attahiru, a 30-year-old farmer, said he did not believe the air strike was an accident.

"How do you come to bomb people in the town and not in

the forest? The bandits are there in the forest," he told Reuters by phone.

In December, an air strike killed 10 people in nearby Sokoto state, in an attack the state governor said had mistakenly targeted civilians. The strike continued a pattern of deadly aerial attacks by the military in which civilians have been killed, the subject of a Reuters special report in June 2023.

"If the people discover that they are not saved from the bandits and are fast becoming collateral damage through the air campaigns by the air force, it will affect their support for the military," Oluwole Ojewale, a researcher at the Institute for Security Studies, said.

Usman would not be returning to his vigilante group after his narrow escape. He says he now harbours a distrust for the military and even doubts that the air strike was a mistake. "I even suspect they collaborated to harm us," he told Reuters.



File photo shows Nigerian soldiers prepare to load weapons stored in boxes into a military plane before leaving for Mali, at the airport in Nigeria's northern state of Kaduna.

## UN: Over 230,000 flee eastern DR Congo violence since Jan 1

AFP  
Kinshasa

More than 230,000 people have fled surging violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo since the start of the year, the United Nations said yesterday, labelling it one of the world's "most alarming" humanitarian crises.

The resource-rich eastern provinces of North and South Kivu have been plagued by conflicts for three decades, with the Rwanda-backed M23 emerging as one of the most powerful armed groups in recent years.

Considered a "fighter movement" by Kinshasa, M23 has seized vast swathes of territory in eastern DRC since 2021 and earlier this month took control of the town of Masisi in North Kivu.

"Escalating clashes between non-state armed groups and the Congolese army in North and South Kivu provinces are inten-

sifying one of the world's most alarming yet under-reported humanitarian crises," Eujin Byun, spokeswoman for the UN refugee agency UNHCR, told reporters in Geneva.

The conflict, she warned, was "marked by widespread human rights violations and massive forced displacement".

Byun pointed out that the two provinces were already home to 4.6mn displaced people, making DR Congo "one of the world's largest hosts for people uprooted within their own borders".

Residents of two villages in the region, Kabingo and Ruzirantaka, told AFP by telephone there were clashes and explosions from heavy weapons yesterday.

Byun said intense fighting in the Masisi and Lubero territories had forced around 150,000 people to flee their homes between January 1 and 6 alone.

Many thousands had returned home during a temporary lull on January 4, but were forced to flee

again days later as fresh fighting broke out, the UN said.

In South Kivu's Fizi territory, the local government had asked for help from the international community and was warning that 84,000 people had taken refuge there.

Byun warned that civilians were enduring "indiscriminate bombings and sexual violence" and that children were also in the firing line.

"Already, dire humanitarian conditions are worsening rapidly, and access to these vulnerable populations is severely restricted by insecurity, roadblocks and the presence of violent armed actors," Byun said.

UNHCR said it was ready to provide assistance as soon as access was restored, but stressed more funds were needed.

The agency has said it needs \$226mn to provide aid in DR Congo this year. So far, less than 10% of that amount has been received.

## Wife of Ugandan opposition leader decries 'sham' trial

AFP  
Kampala

The wife of Ugandan former presidential candidate Kizza Besigye has called the trial against him a "sham", as he faces a court martial in the capital, Kampala.

Besigye is a former comrade-in-arms and personal physician to President Yoweri Museveni but has become a government target since he joined the opposition 25 years ago.

His wife, Winnie Byanyima, claims he was kidnapped while on a trip to Kenya in November and is now being prosecuted

with another man, Obeid Lutale, including for treason, which is punishable by the death penalty. When the trial resumed earlier this month, one of Besigye's lawyers was sent to prison for nine months.

"I do not expect justice," Byanyima, the executive director of UNAIDS, wrote late Thursday on X. "I will watch this travesty of justice at the sham military court."

The charges against Kizza Besigye and Obeid Lutale are political, President Museveni and his son run the army. The military court falls under them. Father and son are the accusers and the judges in the case against my husband," Museveni's

son Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who is head of the armed forces and tipped as his father's possible successor, is no stranger to controversy on X.

Last week, he announced he was quitting the platform so he could concentrate on his job, only to return several days later.

Late on Thursday, Kainerugaba posted that Besigye would be "hanged".

"Dr Kizza Besigye used to call me a clown and a coward... We will hang KB on Heroes' Day," he wrote, referring to the memorial on June 9 for those who died in the guerilla war that brought Museveni to power in 1986.

## The perils of South Africa's illegal mining sector

AFP  
Johannesburg

The derelict Stilfontein shaft, which became a hell hole for hundreds of trapped miners, is just one of 6,000 that have been abandoned by South Africa's gold extraction companies.

The vast Witwatersrand goldfield, where the Stilfontein mine is located, was the focus of a heady gold rush in the 19th century.

But the once-flourishing commercial gold-mining industry has gone.

Now the disused underground galleries attract clandestine workers from across southern Africa, who risk their lives to scrape the last meagre flakes of gold from the walls with hand tools.

Many of the undocumented workers who eke out a living in these perilous conditions are from Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Some are from gangs in Lesotho.

In 2015, there were about 30,000, according to a report by the authorities.

While artisanal miners are common across Africa, South Africa's case is unique in that they work illegally in industrial-scale commercial mine shafts that have been deserted for lack of profitability.

Until 2007, South Africa was the world's leading producer of gold. By 2022, it had dropped to 11th place, according to the US Geological Survey.

Mining accounted for 21% of South Africa's GDP in 1980, according to the national statistics



Metalliferous Mobile Rescue Winder operators look on as a cage is lifted from an abandoned gold shaft in Stilfontein.

department. By 2023, that had dropped to just 6.2%.

**MONTHS UNDERGROUND**  
Since August, police and rescue services have brought nearly 2,000 clandestine miners out of the disused shaft near Stilfontein, southwest of Johannesburg. Of those, 87 were dead.

Of the frail, emaciated men evacuated from Stilfontein, nearly 60% were Mozambican. Many others came from Zimbabwe.

"Most South Africans either are employed or have government subsidies... They don't need

to work in informal mining," explained Robert Thornton, professor of anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The gold deposits in the Witwatersrand basin are now so depleted that mining is back-breaking work.

"You're getting seven to 15 grammes of gold per tonne of processed rock," said Thornton, who has written studies on the clandestine miners.

Thornton said that, in general, artisanal miners usually stayed underground for around a fort-

night. Stilfontein's notorious shaft number 11, where the latest mining tragedy took place, was different.

The shaft is 2.6 kilometres deep. Such is the difficulty of accessing the galleries at the bottom that many workers stayed underground for "up to a year", according to Ayanda Ndabeni, a miner who resurfaced in November.

They can only obtain food and water if it is sent down to them, often through ventilation shafts, said South African journalist Kimon de Greef.



A general view of an abandoned gold shaft in Stilfontein.

When miners manage to glean some gold from their underground ordeal, they may lose their meagre pickings to criminal gangs anyway, Thornton said.

Lesotho, which is very poor, has no mining activity, so Lesotho gangs steal gold from the workers, Thornton explained.

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC), an NGO based in Geneva, said in a 2021 report on illicit gold markets in east and southern Africa that the sector was plagued by "violent gang and turf wars".

But contrary to an accusation commonly bandied about in South Africa, illegal mining is not exclusively the domain of

foreigners. Thornton said there existed a "sort of independent gold territory" around Barberton, near the eastern border with Eswatini, where the miners are "mostly Swazi and South Africans", not foreigners.

"They protect themselves with guns and militias," he said.

One of the key reasons the perilous informal mining sector survives is the connivance of established gold dealers.

GI-TOC said a "lack of transparency and regulation of supply chains" facilitated "gold laundering (and) VAT fraud".

"Once laundered, gold is exported or smuggled out of the country," it said, "primarily to the UAE".



# Supreme Court upholds law banning TikTok

Reuters/AFP  
Washington

The US Supreme Court upheld yesterday a law banning TikTok in the United States on national security grounds if its Chinese parent company ByteDance does not sell the short-video app by tomorrow, as the justices in a 9-0 decision declined to rescue a platform used by about half of all Americans.

The justices ruled that the law, passed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority in Congress last year and signed by Democratic President Joe Biden, did not violate the US Constitution's First Amendment protection against government abridgment of free speech.

The justices affirmed a lower court's decision that had upheld the measure after it was challenged by TikTok, ByteDance and some of the app's users.

"There is no doubt that, for more than 170mn Americans, TikTok offers a distinctive and expansive outlet for expression, means of engagement and source of com-

munity," the court said in the unsigned opinion. "But Congress has determined that divestiture is necessary to address its well-supported national security concerns regarding TikTok's data collection practices and relationship with a foreign adversary."

A statement issued by the White House suggested that Biden, in the waning days of his presidency, would not take any action to save TikTok before the law's deadline tomorrow for divestiture.

Republican Donald Trump, who opposed a TikTok ban, succeeds Biden on Monday.

"The Supreme Court decision was expected, and everyone must respect it," Trump said in a social media post. "My decision on TikTok will be made in the not too distant future, but I must have time to review the situation. Stay tuned!"

Trump also said he and Chinese President Xi Jinping discussed issues including TikTok in a phone call yesterday.

The court's unanimity underscored the acceptance by the justices of the national security risks cited by Biden's administra-

tion concerning China's potential to exert control over the app, which blunted apprehensions over free speech infringements.

"TikTok's scale and susceptibility to foreign adversary control, together with the vast swaths of sensitive data the platform collects, justify differential treatment to address the government's national security concerns," the court said in the opinion.

TikTok plans to shut US operations of the app tomorrow barring a last-minute reprieve, people familiar with the matter told Reuters on Wednesday.

TikTok chief executive Chew Shou-zi will attend Trump's inauguration on Monday, seated among other high-profile invitees.

TikTok did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Without a decision by Biden to formally invoke a 90-day delay in the deadline as allowed by the law, companies providing services to TikTok or hosting the app could face legal liability.

It is not immediately clear if TikTok's business partners including Apple, Al-

phabet's Google and Oracle will continue doing business with it before Trump is inaugurated.

The uncertainty leaves open the possibility of a shutdown by TikTok tomorrow.

The law bars providing certain services to TikTok and other foreign adversary-controlled apps including by offering it through app stores such as Apple and Google.

TikTok is one of the most prominent social media platforms in the United States, used by about 170mn Americans, including many young people.

TikTok's powerful algorithm, its main asset, feeds individual users short videos tailored to their liking.

The platform presents a vast collection of user-submitted videos, often under a minute in duration, that can be viewed with a smart phone app or on the Internet.

Trump's opposition to the ban represents a reversal in stance from his first term in office, when he aimed to prohibit TikTok.

Trump has said he has "a warm spot in my heart for TikTok", opining that the app

helped him with young voters in the 2024 election.

While Trump has vowed to "save" TikTok, many of his Republican allies supported the ban.

Speaking to Fox News on Thursday, Trump's incoming national security advisor Mike Waltz said the administration would put in place measures "to keep TikTok from going dark".

"The legislation allows for an extension as long as a viable deal is on the table," he said. "Essentially that buys president Trump time to keep TikTok going."

"It's been a great platform for him and his campaign to get his America first message out," he added. "But at the same time, he wants to protect (users') data."

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer on Thursday also called for a looming TikTok ban to be delayed.

"It's clear that more time is needed to find an American buyer and not disrupt the lives and livelihoods of millions of Americans, of so many influencers who have built up a good network of followers," Schumer said.

## Trump inauguration moved indoors due to cold

AFP/Reuters  
Washington

Donald Trump confirmed that his inauguration as US president on Monday will move indoors due to expected freezing weather, undercutting the Republican's hopes for a grandiose spectacle to kick off his second term.

"There is an Arctic blast sweeping the Country. I don't want to see people hurt, or injured, in any way," Trump said on his Truth Social platform yesterday. "Therefore, I have ordered the Inauguration Address, in addition to prayers and other speeches, to be delivered in the United States Capitol Rotunda."

The dramatic change of plan means Trump will not stand on the Capitol steps overlooking the National Mall, which traditionally hosts a large crowd to welcome new presidents.

Preparations have already been made in Washington for a huge influx of visitors, but many will now have to watch on television.

The last time an inauguration was moved indoors because of the bitter cold was in 1985 for former Republican president Ronald Reagan's second swearing-in when the afternoon wind chill fell into the range of -10° to -20° Fahrenheit (-23° to -29° Celsius).

The weather forecast for Washington on Monday predicts temperatures at the time of Trump's swearing-in to be around 19F (-7C), but will feel even colder with wind chill.

In his post, Trump said that "various Dignitaries and Guests" will attend the events inside the Capitol, including prayers, the inaugural address, and the singing of the anthem.



Trump has said that he will deliver his inaugural address in the Rotunda of the US Capitol.

However, the Republican, who has built a political brand around his staging of large rallies, said supporters could watch the event on a live feed in Washington's Capital One sports arena - and that he would go there after.

Trump - who at 78 will be the oldest person ever to assume the presidency - said that the ceremonies in the Rotunda "will be a very beautiful experience for all, and especially for the large TV audience!"

"We will open Capital One Arena on Monday for LIVE viewing of this Historic event, and to host the Presidential Parade," he wrote. "I will join the crowd at Capital One, after my Swearing In."

After his first inauguration in 2017, Trump was notably infuriated by reports that his crowd on the Mall was distinctly smaller than the number turning out for Barack Obama in 2009.

The switch this time means he will miss out on much of the time-honoured pageantry. This includes delivering the inaugural address to a sea of people stretching towards the soaring Washington Memorial.

However, as a former reality TV performer, Trump will likely embrace the potential for television-friendly theatrics, both in the elegant Rotunda and afterward in the arena.



Seats are arranged yesterday near the West Front of the US Capitol building, where the presidential inauguration traditionally takes place, in Washington, DC. - AFP

"This will be a very beautiful experience for all, and especially for the large TV audience!" Trump posted.

Capital One Arena, where the Washington Wizards basketball team and Washington Capitals ice hockey team play, has a seating capacity of around 20,000.

Before the decision to scrap the outdoors event, more than 220,000 tickets were distributed to the public via lawmakers' offices.

People braving the cold will still be able to catch a glimpse of the newly sworn-in president as he travels down Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol to the White House.

The White House, Capitol, and parts of the Pennsylvania Avenue parade route are already ringed by the eight-foot (2.4m) metal barriers.

And around 25,000 law enforcement and military personnel are converging on Washington, according to US Secret Service spe-

cial agent Matt McCool.

Bitter cold has had an impact on several past inaugurations.

William Henry Harrison, the ninth US president, delivered the longest inaugural address on March 4, 1841, in wet and cold conditions without a hat or overcoat.

That event and speech were thought to have contributed to his later succumbing to pneumonia. He died one month after taking office, making his presidency the shortest in American history.

During the second swearing-in ceremony for President Ulysses S Grant on March 4, 1873, several cadets and midshipmen standing outside without overcoats collapsed and gusting winds made Grant's address inaudible to even those close to him on the platform, according to a history published by the National Weather Service.

The morning low temperature of 4F (-15C) on that day remains Washington's coldest March day on record.

## Biden grants clemency to nearly 2,500 people, most ever in one day

AFP  
Washington

President Joe Biden commuted the sentences of nearly 2,500 people convicted of non-violent drug offences yesterday in what the White House called the largest single-day act of clemency in US history.

Those whose sentences were commuted were serving "disproportionately long sentences" compared to what they would receive today, Biden said in a statement.

He called the move "an important step toward righting historic wrongs, correcting sentencing disparities, and providing deserving individuals the opportunity to return to their families".

"With this action, I have now issued more individual pardons and commutations than any president in US history," Biden said, adding that he may issue further commutations or pardons before he hands over power to President-elect Donald Trump on Monday.

The outgoing president said those receiving clemency had received lengthy sentences based on now-discredited distinctions between crack and powder cocaine, which have disproportionately impacted the black community.

Historically, there have been considerably more crack cocaine convictions involving black offenders than whites and the disparate sentencing policy has been condemned as racist.

Kara Gotsch, executive director of The Sentencing Project, which campaigns for prison reform, welcomed the White House clemency action, saying that it would provide "relief for countless families who have endured punishments for loved ones that far exceed their utility".

"Cruel and excessive prison sentences that have overwhelmingly harmed black communities have been the cornerstone of federal drug policy for generations," she said in a statement. "American communities, disproportionately black and brown, have long borne the scars of the Drug War."

Biden commuted the sentences of nearly 1,500 people and pardoned 39 others last month.

Among those pardoned in December was Biden's son Hunter, who was facing a possible prison sentence after being convicted of gun and tax crimes.

Biden has meanwhile reportedly been debating whether to issue blanket pre-emptive pardons for some allies and former officials amid fears they could be targeted for what Trump has previously called "retribution".

In December, Biden also commuted the death sentences of 37 of the 40 inmates on federal death row.



Biden: With this action, I have now issued more individual pardons and commutations than any president in US history.

## US grounds SpaceX's Starship rocket following explosion

The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) grounded SpaceX's Starship yesterday pending an investigation by Elon Musk's company into why the rocket's upper stage dramatically disintegrated in a fiery cascade over the Caribbean during its latest test flight.

According to procedure, SpaceX will now be required to carry out a "mishap investigation" - including the identification of any corrective actions, which the FAA will review before determining the launch vehicle can return to flight.

Or, SpaceX may submit a request to return to flight before the probe is finished if it completes a filing that demonstrates it has taken preventative measures and that the mishap did not jeopardise public safety.

"The FAA is requiring SpaceX to perform a mishap investigation into the loss of the Starship vehicle during launch operations on January 16," the agency said. "There are no reports of public injury, and the FAA is working with SpaceX and appropriate authorities to confirm reports of public property damage on Turks and Caicos."

Starship is the biggest, most powerful rocket ever built, and is key to Musk's ambitions of colonising Mars.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) meanwhile hopes to use a modified version of the rocket as a human lunar lander for its Artemis missions to return to the Moon.

SpaceX chief executive Musk posted a video on X showing the debris field and said: "Success is uncertain, but entertainment is guaranteed!"

The failure came a day after Blue Origin, billionaire Amazon founder Jeff Bezos's space

company, successfully launched its giant New Glenn rocket into orbit for the first time.

Thursday's uncrewed launch was Starship's seventh orbital test, and the first involving a taller, upgraded version of the rocket.

SpaceX, which dominates the commercial launch market through its workhorse Falcon 9 rocket, underscored its technical prowess by catching Starship's first stage booster in the "chopstick" arms of its launch tower for a second time.

However, the triumph was short-lived when teams lost contact with the upper stage vehicle.

SpaceX later confirmed it had undergone "rapid unscheduled disassembly", the company's euphemism for an explosion.

The explosion forced airline flights over the Gulf of Mexico to alter course to avoid falling debris.

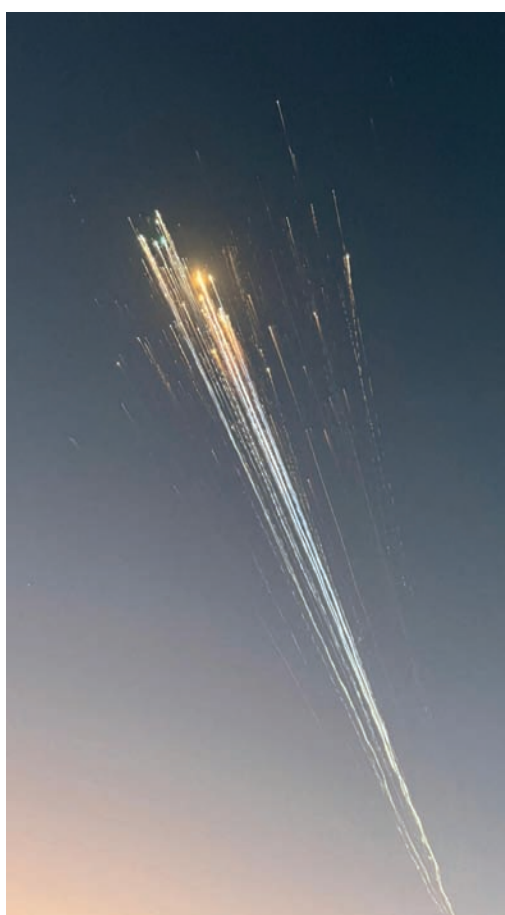
The FAA briefly activated a "Debris Response Area" protocol to slow aircraft outside the area where the debris was falling, or stop aircraft at their departure location. "Several aircraft requested to divert due to low fuel levels while holding outside impacted areas."

Dozens of commercial flights diverted to other airports or altered course to avoid potential debris, according to flight tracking website FlightRadar24.

Departures from airports in Miami and Fort Lauderdale, Florida, were also delayed by about 45 minutes, it added.

The FAA regularly closes airspace for space launches and reentries, but it can create a "Debris Response Area" to prevent aircraft from entering if the space vehicle experiences an anomaly outside the originally closed zone.

- AFP/Reuters



In this handout image courtesy of Greg Blee, debris from the SpaceX Starship is seen in the sky near Providenciales, Turks and Caicos. - AFP

## Mulholland Drive and Twin Peaks director David Lynch dies at 78

David Lynch - the singular and surreal director of *Mulholland Drive* and television's *Twin Peaks*, who depicted the darkness lurking beneath the wholesome surface of American life - has died. He was 78 years old.

An enigmatic artist who turned his hand to arthouse and blockbuster film, television, painting and music, Lynch was considered one of US cinema's great auteurs.

"It is with deep regret that we, his family, announce the passing of the man and the artist,

David Lynch," read a statement on his official Facebook page.

The cause and location of death were not specified. Lynch, who lived in Los Angeles, had suffered from emphysema after years of heavy smoking. - AFP

## LA fire evacuees told no return for at least a week

AFP  
Los Angeles

Tens of thousands of people ordered to flee their homes as wildfires tore through Los Angeles have been told that they would not be allowed back for at least a week, with fears over electrocution, landslides and exposure to toxic materials.

Frustration is mounting among evacuees, who are angry over rules that prevent them from returning - even to homes that survived the deadly blazes.

"There was a group chat where everyone was complaining, getting mad, saying, 'why do they keep on locking us out of our homes?'" Ronnen Miz told local broadcaster KTLA.

However, with 40,000 acres (16,000 hectares) burned in two ferocious fires, the situation is just too dangerous, officials said.

Electricity, gas and sewage lines are wrecked, there is toxic waste everywhere, and there is a growing threat of hazardous mudslides or landslips, officials said at a news conference.

"It's going to be a while," said Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna. "I'm going to say at minimum, at least another week,

and that's an estimate, but I believe it's going to be longer than that."

According to the latest coroner's tally, at least 27 people have died in wind-driven fires that ripped through the upmarket enclave of Pacific Palisades and the more mixed community of Altadena.

Luna said search teams were continuing to comb the rubble looking for victims, with the number of dead expected to rise. Authorities were also holding people back from some areas "because we believe there may be deceased victims", he said.

Teams from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began inspections on Thursday as they work to remove pesticides, fuel and lithium batteries from the wreckage before any debris clean-up can take place.

Los Angeles County Director of Public Works Mark Pestrella said apparently unaffected structures could be hit by landslides, and any substantial rain could be dangerous.

Photographs from the Pacific Palisades area showed one home - undamaged by the fire - that appeared to have broken in two after the flames were extinguished when part of a hillside collapsed.

## Two Cambodian deminers killed by anti-tank mine

AFP  
Phnom Penh

Two Cambodian deminers were killed while trying to remove a decades-old anti-tank mine from a rice field that was once a battlefield between government forces and Khmer Rouge soldiers, officials said. The two deminers were killed on Thursday by "an old brutal hidden killer" while clearing mines in northwestern Oddar Meanchey province, the government's Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) said in a statement.

"This is the loss of professional experts who have contributed to the cause of peace, security and the developing of Cambodian people and the country," CMAC said, identifying them as Pov Nopin and Ouen Channara. "The southeast Asian nation

remains littered with discarded ammunition and arms from decades of war starting in the 1960s.

The United States bombed swathes of Cambodia during the Vietnam War, a campaign that helped fuel the rise of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. During the nearly three decades of conflict that followed, millions of landmines were laid in Cambodia with tens of thousands of people killed or maimed over the years. Deaths from mines and unexploded ordnance are still common, with around 20,000 fatalities since 1979, and twice that number wounded.

In 2018, an Australian and a Cambodian were killed when war-era ordnance exploded during a demining training exercise in southern Cambodia. In August 2023, thousands of pieces of unexploded ordnance left over from past conflict were

unearthed inside a school in the country's northeast. Prime Minister Hun Manet on Thursday shared his condolences with the families of the victims who "actively participated in mine clearing operations... in order to ensure that people live with safety after the war era".

At an anti-mine conference in November held in the city of Siem Riep, Hun Manet said that since 1992 Cambodia has cleared more than 3,000sq km of landmines, destroying over a million anti-personnel mines and three million explosive remnants of war. More than 1,600sq km of contaminated land still needs to be cleared, he said, which leaves approximately a million Cambodians affected by war remnants. Cambodia, which previously aimed to be mine-free by 2025 has extended the goal by five years, CMAC's director general Heng Ratana told AFP yesterday.



People walk on the Thotsamarachan (Rama X) bridge (left) as vehicles drive past on the parallel Rama IX bridge, in Bangkok.

# Chinese, US users of RedNote find rare space for candid exchanges

Reuters  
Beijing

From economic pessimism to cynicism about Marxism and fears over the potential for war, Chinese and American users of RedNote took part this week in rare candid exchanges that tested the limits of censorship on the Chinese social media platform.

The app, also known as Xiaohongshu, or Little Red Book in China, has seen a surge of new US users at a time of heightened geopolitical tension between the two world powers.

The influx of nearly 3mn US users at the start of this week has been driven by a looming US ban on Chinese-owned TikTok, which is used by 170mn Americans, on national security concerns. The wave of American "TikTok refugees" provided China with a public relations win that state media seized upon. China's Foreign Ministry said Beijing supports people-to-people exchanges. *People's Daily* said American social media refugees had "found a 'new home'".

"Domestically (in China), a popular narrative has emerged: the idea that Americans coming to Xiaohongshu have broken out of their own echo chambers," said Rose Luqiu, a journalism professor at Hong Kong Baptist University. Many popular discussion threads on Xiaohongshu in recent days have touched on subjects that are normally taboo in China. "I feel lost. Trying to find the meaning of life. I don't like my job, but I need salary," wrote one Chinese user. Another Chinese user answered a question about fears over the future: "Probably not allowed to talk about it here but a lot of us worry about the potential war (over Taiwan)." Analysts have speculated

how much longer this rare loophole can stay open. The platform has been scrambling to boost English-language moderation capabilities, people familiar with the company have told Reuters. RedNote, a 12-year-old private company seen as a potential IPO candidate, has not commented on the exchanges since the number of American users surged this week.

Posts in recent days have ranged from the trivial to candid discussions of mental health, gender and sexuality, as well as China's current economic downturn, that are usually heavily censored on domestic Chinese platforms such as Weibo. China controls the internet through a system known as the "Great Firewall" and social media posts are routinely censored when deemed detrimental to national interests. Foreign social media networks such as Instagram and X are blocked, a system that has created a captive market for domestic alternatives.

One English-language post on Xiaohongshu asking Chinese people about their mental health attracted more than 4,000 comments before it was taken down Friday. "As an undergraduate who has just graduated, my peers are worried they can't find a job or are oppressed at work... in my high school, suicides happen every year," wrote one user.

Rush Doshi, an expert on China and a former senior Biden administration official, wrote on X that RedNote had become "almost a tunnel under the firewall to reach PRC citizens directly," a development he said poses a challenge to Beijing. Despite the candour to be seen in some areas, some US users complained on X of being unable to view certain content or having account restrictions after posting about politically sensitive topics. "Americans are used to very



A social media influencer films a video for his new Xiaohongshu, also known as RedNote, after leaving TikTok, in Times Square in New York City.

clear and transparent rules, and they cannot accept the censorship system within the Great Firewall," wrote former WeChat politics blogger Lao Zhou Heng Mei on X, adding that this was a "honeymoon period" for American users. Chinese users said they were aware the candid exchanges may be short-lived. "If there really is a force majeure that cuts off our contact again, we must remember our love and trust in each other at this moment," read one message widely shared on the app in English and Chinese.

"And in the future if there are defamatory insults against each other, we can firmly say to ourselves: 'what we saw is not like this.'"



## Jeju Air crash investigators find feathers in engines: media

AFP  
Seoul

Investigators probing the Jeju Air crash that killed 179 people last month have found feathers in both engines, according to South Korean media reports, with a bird strike being examined as one possible cause. The Boeing 737-800 was flying from Thailand to Muan, South Korea, on December 29 carrying 181 passengers and crew when it belly-landed at Muan airport and exploded in a fireball after slamming into a concrete barrier.

It was the worst aviation disaster on South Korean soil. "Feathers were found in both engines," the government-linked National Institute of Biological Resources told South Korean broadcaster MBN, without specifying who gave them the information. "We have completed the analysis of a total of 17 samples, including feathers and blood," it said.

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport declined to confirm the report when asked by AFP.

South Korean and US investigators are still probing the cause of the crash, which prompted a national outpouring of mourning with memorials set up across the country. Investigators have pointed to a bird strike, faulty landing gear and the runway barrier as possible issues.

The pilot warned of a bird strike before pulling out of a first landing attempt. The plane crashed on its second attempt when the landing gear did not emerge. Lead investigator Lee Seung-yeol told reporters last week that "feathers were found" in one of the plane's recovered engines but cautioned that a bird strike does not lead to an immediate engine failure.

"We need to investigate whether it affected both engines. It is certain that one engine has definitely experienced a bird strike," he said.

## Philippine navy holds exercise near China-controlled reef

The Philippine Navy said its warships held exercises yesterday in the South China Sea as part of its efforts to assert its sovereign rights over waters also claimed by Beijing.

China claims most of the strategic waterway despite an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis. Friday's exercises were held days after the Filipino coast guard expressed alarm over Chinese patrols moving closer to Manila's shores.

"While conducting sovereignty patrol in the West Philippine Sea, several offshore combat ships of the Philippine Navy held a unilateral exercise," a navy statement said, using the Filipino

name for areas of the South China Sea claimed by Manila. The "routine" exercise was "aimed at sustaining and improving the operational proficiency of both assets and personnel particularly in the vicinity of Bajo de Masinloc", it said, using the local name for a fish-rich reef called Scarborough Shoal.

This is "crucial in the fulfilment of the Navy's mandate of securing the seas and upholding the nation's territorial integrity". Seized by China after a 2012 standoff with the Filipino navy, the reef is a key flashpoint of escalating confrontations between the Chinese and Filipino coast guards. The confrontations have

sparked concern they could draw the United States, Manila's long-time security ally, into armed conflict with China.

Friday's manoeuvres involved some of the Filipino navy's largest ships - the frigate BRP Antonio Luna and the patrol vessels BRP Ramon Alcaraz and BRP Andres Bonifacio. A navy spokesman told AFP they trained "in the vicinity south of Bajo de Masinloc". The navy released video footage of uniformed crew firing a machine gun mounted on the side of a warship, and one of the vessels dramatically sweeping past a wall of white smoke that trailed a hail of bullets falling into the water. -AFP

# South Korea investigators seek to extend President Yoon's detention

AFP  
Seoul

South Korean prosecutors asked a court yesterday for a new arrest warrant for detained President Yoon Suk-yeol as he again refused questioning by investigators probing his failed martial law bid. Yoon threw the nation into chaos on December 3 when he attempted to impose martial law, citing the need to combat threats from "anti-state elements". His bid lasted just six hours, as the soldiers he directed to storm parliament failed to stop lawmakers from voting to reject the move. In the following weeks Yoon was suspended and impeached by parliament, before holding out at his residence protected by an elite presidential guard unit which resisted attempts by investigators to arrest him. Yoon was finally arrested in a dawn raid on Wednesday, but the warrant allowed investigators to hold him for just 48 hours.

They sought a new one yesterday that will likely extend his detention by 20 days if approved, giving prosecutors time to formalise an indictment.

A spokesperson for the Seoul Western District Court where the request was filed told AFP a hearing to review the warrant's ap-

proval was scheduled for 2pm local time Saturday.

In a statement shared by Yoon's lawyers with reporters Friday, the impeached leader said he was "doing well" in detention. "I take this time to gather my thoughts," Yoon said.

"I have heard that many citizens have come out into the cold to unite for our country. I am truly grateful for your passionate patriotism." Experts predicted Yoon would try to polarise South Korean society from detention. "Yoon Suk-yeol will likely reach out to his supporters while detained, including right-wing YouTubers, to rally behind him once again," said Shin Yul, a political science professor at Myongji University. "Instead of fostering stability, he continues to create anxiety among citizens."

Yoon, however, has refused to cooperate with investigators or answer questions. "He has sufficiently expressed his basic stance to the investigators on the first day," Yoon's lawyer Seok Dong-hyeon said yesterday.

The lawyer said the impeached president had fully explained his position to investigators and had no reason to answer questions. Yoon's supporters gathered yesterday outside the Seoul court to protest against the investigators where they filed the new warrant.

A new poll published yesterday suggested the approval rating of Yoon's People Power Party had improved despite his arrest.

Yoon is facing possible criminal charges of insurrection, which could see him jailed for life - or executed - if he is found guilty. In a parallel probe, the Constitutional Court is deciding whether to uphold Yoon's impeachment. If that happens, Yoon would lose the presidency and fresh elections would have to be held within 60 days.

A lawmaker from the ruling People Power Party yesterday described the final moments before Yoon's arrest, describing him as unfazed, even making sandwiches for his legal team.

"Yoon patted our backs to offer comfort," close ally Yoon Sang-hyun said in a YouTube interview. When prosecutors arrived with the arrest warrant, one of Yoon's final requests was to visit his pet dog.

Yoon's arrest has also caused economic rumblings in Asia's fourth-largest economy. Consumer sentiment fell to its lowest since the Covid-19 pandemic, the South Korean won plunged against the dollar and the country's unemployment rate spiked to the highest since 2021. Some experts have said if the Constitutional Court acts fast, the negative economic impacts are likely to be minimal.

## Disbarment complaint against Duterte

Members of a human rights alliance pose for a photo while showing the disbarment complaint against former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte before filing at the Supreme Court in Manila yesterday.





## Farmers protest in UK



Farmers take part in an event to highlight their opposition to the UK government's agricultural policy, which includes a budget measure expected to increase inheritance tax liabilities for some farmers, outside a supermarket in Shoreham-by-Sea, southern Britain, yesterday.



# UK white supremacist gets life for trying to kill asylum seeker

AFP  
London

A British man who had Adolf Hitler's signature tattooed on his forearm was jailed for life on Friday for the attempted murder of an asylum seeker, in what the judge called a "terrorist attack".

Sentencing Callum Ulysses Parslow to a minimum term of 22 years and eight months, Judge Ian Dove said the knife attack had

been motivated by his "extreme right-wing white supremacist ideology".

"You committed a vicious and unprovoked assault on a complete stranger, Nahom Hagos, who suffered devastating injuries as a result of your violence," the judge told him at Woolwich Crown Court in southeast London. "This was undoubtedly a terrorist attack," he added.

The court heard earlier that Parslow, 32, armed with a specialist knife purchased online,

travelled to a rural hotel in central England last April to stab "one of the Channel migrants" because he was "angry and frustrated" at small boat crossings. Nahom Hagos, originally from east Africa, was stabbed in the chest and hand as he ate a meal at the hotel.

Before his arrest Parslow had tried to send a post to X claiming he "just did my duty to England" by trying to "exterminate" his victim. Prosecutor Tom Storey said a police search of the former supermarket worker's flat led to

the recovery of a second knife in a sheath, an axe, a metal baseball bat, a red armband bearing a swastika, a Nazi-era medallion and copies of Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*.

Parslow was found guilty of attempted murder following a three-week hearing in October.

He was also sentenced to two terms of 18 months to be served concurrently with his life sentence for an unconnected sexual offence and two charges under the Malicious Communications Act.

Many asylum seekers are housed in hotels in the UK as the number of irregular migrants arriving on boats from northern France soared to over 36,800 last year. Both the number of arrivals and the cost of accommodating them in hotels have stirred controversy, and boosted the popularity of the anti-immigration Reform UK party. The new Labour government has pledged to reduce the number of hotels housing asylum seekers, with nine scheduled to close in March.

## UK to have third-strongest G7 growth in 2025, IMF forecasts

By Suban Abdulla  
Reuters

Britain is set to have the fastest growth among major European economies this year, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a boost to finance minister Rachel Reeves who is under pressure over a slowdown since her party came to power in July.

The IMF on Friday raised its forecast for British growth for 2025 by 0.1 percentage points to 1.6%, making it the third-strongest among the Group of Seven advanced economies after the United States and Canada. The IMF outlook for British gross domestic product growth in 2026 remained at 1.5%, again third-fastest in the G7 and unchanged from its October estimate.

Responding to the upgrade for 2025, Reeves said she would "go further and faster" to deliver economic growth.

The Bank of England forecast growth of 1.5% in 2025, partly reflecting a short-term boost to the economy from a temporary increase in public spending announced by Reeves on Oct 30. Last month, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development also raised its forecast for British economic growth to 1.7% from 1.2% previously. However, Reeves' spending plans are based on forecasts from the government's Office for Budget Responsibility which pencilled in growth of 2% for 2025 and 1.8% for 2026.

British government 30-year borrowing costs hit their highest since 1998 on Monday - the biggest losers in a global bond selloff driven by concerns about higher inflation and borrowing under the imminent presidency of Donald Trump. But British bond prices recovered later in the week after weaker-than-expected British and US inflation data and slower-than-expected GDP growth in November, the first month after Reeves set out her budget plan.

## British acting star Joan Plowright dies aged 95

AFP  
London

Oscar-nominated UK actress Joan Plowright, a legend of stage and screen and wife of the great actor Laurence Olivier, has died at the age of 95, her family said yesterday. "It is with great sadness that the family of Dame Joan Plowright, the Lady Olivier, inform you that she passed away peacefully on 16 January 2025 surrounded by her family at Denville Hall at the glorious age of 95.

"Her brilliant career will be remembered by many, her wonderful being always cherished by her children Richard, Tamsin and Julie-Kate, their families and Joan's many friends," they added. Plowright was one of the leading actors of her generation.

Her career was largely played out in the theatre, often opposite her husband, but following his death in 1989 she began to find more roles on screen.

Her later film and television work introduced her to new generations, with two films in particular that took her to Italy.

In the 1991 film *Enchanted*



Joan Plowright

*April*, set in the 1920s, she played the acid-tongued Mrs Fisher, for which she missed out on an Oscar to Marisa Tomei. The other film that took her to Italy was Franco Zeffirelli's 1999 film *Tea with Mussolini*, set in Florence in 1935, in which she teamed up with two other dames of the English stage, Maggie Smith and Judi Dench.

In 1993, she became one of the few actors to have won two Golden Globes in the same year, one for

*Enchanted April* and the other for the HBO TV series *Stalin*. She also appeared in films that attracted a younger audience such as *Demis the Menace*, *Last Action Hero* and *101 Dalmatians*.

Plowright suffered macular degeneration which gradually caused her to go blind, leading her to retire from acting in 2014. "It is a wrench," she admitted at the time. "But it is (a decision) that everybody has to make some time in

their life and when you have had a very good life and been lucky, which I have, well you say 'it's my turn now'."

Joan Ann Plowright was born in Brigg, a small market town in eastern England, where her father edited the local newspaper. "You're no oil painting, my girl, but you have the spark," said Plowright's mother, before she headed off to the Old Vic Theatre School in Bristol, adding "you have lovely eyes and thank God you have my legs and not your father's".

Plowright made her London debut in 1954 and two years later caught the critics' eye. One evening, Olivier came backstage to meet her with his then-wife Vivien Leigh. The following year, she played opposite Olivier in the original London production of John Osborne's "The Entertainer".

Soon after, she divorced her first husband Roger Gage and Olivier ended his 20-year marriage to Leigh, leaving the path open to their own marriage in 1961. "It was momentous, earth-shattering for me... a very, very strange experience," she said, of her marriage to Olivier, in the BBC documentary. "It was a great privilege to share in

his life, as well as a bit of a nightmare."

Never as glamorous as her predecessor, who had achieved cinema immortality as Scarlett O'Hara in "Gone with the Wind", Plowright said she had never been jealous of Leigh. "It wasn't as though I was competing with her. It might sound arrogant but I didn't really think much about it," she told *The Guardian* newspaper.

Plowright won a Tony for her performance in "A Taste of Honey" in 1961 but then began to adjust her career to accommodate her husband as he directed the Chichester Festival Theatre and then launched the National Theatre.

This included performing alongside Olivier - on stage she received plaudits for her Sonya in Olivier's *Uncle Vanya* - although she also took time off completely to have three children.

Plowright always rated her Saint Joan at London's Old Vic theatre in 1963 as her finest work. "That is the sort of part that all young women want to play," she told the BBC in 2018. "I would always say though that I enjoyed having played it but actually doing it was very hard work."

## Maruti announces charger boost at Indian auto show

Maruti Suzuki said yesterday it will install fast charging points in India's top 100 cities - one every 5-10 kilometres, and consider launching a battery rental service as it seeks to address infrastructure and cost challenges deterring consumers from buying electric cars. Fuel-guzzling cars still dominate the roads in India, the world's third-biggest car market, where EV sales are growing fast but still account for just 2.5% of annual sales.

Automakers are desperately trying to bolster sales of EVs, and Tesla has long-delayed its plans to enter India, where it has criticized high import taxes for such cars. As the companies flaunt their new EVs at India's five-day auto show in New Delhi which started Friday, Maruti unveiled plans to expand the charging network in cities and provide roadside assistance all over India if a battery runs out.

Customer anxiety over batteries draining without a charging spot in the vicinity in India is a key worry in the country.

"We will leverage our vast network to provide fast charging support," Maruti CEO Hisashi Takeuchi said at the auto show, where it also launched its first EV - the e Vitara SUV. Maruti is also considering battery rental services as a solution to address what many

experts view as a pain point that hinders EV adoption in India.

The move comes after India's Tata Motors last year started luring consumers with free charging and steep discounts, while rival MG Motor also launched a battery rental plan.

At the New Delhi auto show, electric vehicles will be centre stage, with models from new Vietnamese entrant Vinfast on display, alongside domestic brands Maruti and Mahindra & Mahindra, as well as global rivals BYD, Toyota and Hyundai.

India Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who also attended the auto show on Friday, courted investors by saying the government was willing to provide support for companies seeking to expand in the nation. "This is the right time for you for a large investment in this sector," he said. India's auto industry, which grew by about 12% last year, will expand further as a result of factors including its large youth population and rapid urbanisation, Modi said.

But there have been challenges. India plans to expand EV incentives to automakers and relax its policy which was originally designed following lobbying by Tesla, which has still not entered the market, Reuters reported in November. —Reuters

## Assailant who stabbed Bollywood actor still at large

Reuters  
Mumbai

An assailant who stabbed Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan remains at large and nobody has yet been detained in the case, an Indian newspaper cited police as saying yesterday, contradicting earlier media reports that police were questioning a suspect.

Khan was stabbed six times during a burglary attempt at his home in an upscale neighbourhood in Mumbai early on Thursday. Doctors who operated on him for wounds to his spine, neck and hands have said he is out of danger.

Indian television channels had earlier reported that police had detained and were questioning a suspect in the attack.

However, Indian Express newspaper, citing police, said: "The person brought to Bandra police station for questioning is not related to the Saif Ali Khan attack case. No one is detained in the Saif Ali Khan attack case as of now."

Bandra police station did not respond to Reuters' phone calls seeking information.

The India Today channel, among others, had earlier shown police escorting a man wearing a white T-shirt into a police-station and it identified him as the



Saif Ali Khan

suspect. However, police officer Dikshit Gedam, a senior investigating officer, declined to confirm the detention, telling Reuters: "There's no update from yesterday regarding what we said."

The previous day police said they had identified the perpetrator of the apparent robbery attempt, and had launched a



Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan's mother, Sharmila Tagore, and sister, Soha Ali Khan, leave Lilavati Hospital, where Saif underwent surgery after he was stabbed repeatedly by an intruder at his home, in Mumbai.

search for him. Khan, 54, one of Bollywood's most bankable stars, who has appeared in many films and television series, had walked into the hospital in blood-soaked clothes, accompanied by his six-year old son, Taimur.

"If the knife had penetrated any further, there would have been an injury to the spine," Niraj Uttammani, one of the doctors who treated Khan, told reporters, adding that the actor had escaped by a distance of just 2mm (0.08 inch). "He is very fortunate!" Another doctor, Nitin Dange, added: "He is able to walk, and he is stable." The attack on Khan,

who is the son of India's former cricket captain Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi and actress Sharmila Tagore, shocked the film industry and residents of the city, many of whom called for better policing and security. In a statement on social media, Khan's wife, Kareena Kapoor Khan, asked media to stop speculating about the case.

"It has been an incredibly challenging day... and we are still trying to process the events," the 44-year-old actor said on her Instagram profile.

The couple have two boys, in addition to Khan's two children from a previous marriage.



## Pakistan launches first home-made observation satellite

Pakistan launched its first home-made observation satellite yesterday from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in northern China, Pakistan's space agency said.

The PRSC-EO1 satellite will boost Pakistan's ability to monitor and manage natural resources, respond to disasters, and improve urban planning and agricultural development, the Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (SUPARCO) said in a statement.

This type of satellite uses electro-optical sensors to collect data and images of the Earth's surface by detecting and measuring reflected sunlight or emitted radiation.

China's Long March-2D carrier rocket also launched yesterday two other satellites, Tianlu-1 and Blue Carbon 1, into orbit along with the PRSC EO1, China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation said in a statement.

"Spearheaded by SUPARCO, this demonstrates our nation's growing capabilities in space science and technology," said Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

Currently valued at \$5bn, the earth observation satellite market is among the fastest growing sectors within the commercial space industry, with Novaspac predicting it to exceed \$8bn by 2033.

Countries including the United States, China and India have been building their own government and private satellite constellations to map the Earth.

Indian startup Pixxel this month launched the country's first privately built satellite constellation. - Reuters

## Russian court sentences Navalny lawyers to years behind bars

AFP  
Moscow

Russia has sentenced three lawyers who had defended Alexei Navalny to several years in prison for bringing messages from the late opposition leader from prison to the outside world.

The case, which comes amid a massive crackdown on dissent during the Ukraine offensive, has alarmed rights groups who fear Moscow will ramp up trials against legal representatives in addition to jailing their clients.

The Kremlin has sought to punish Navalny's associates even after his death in an Arctic prison colony in February.

Vadim Kobzev, Alexei Liptser and Igor Sergunin were found guilty of participating in an "extremist organisation" by a court in the town of Petushki.

Kobzev, the most high-profile member of Navalny's legal team, was given five and a half years, while Liptser was handed five and Sergunin three and a half years.

They were almost the only people visiting Navalny in prison while he served his 19-year sentence.

Navalny, Putin's main political opponent, communicated with the world by transmitting messages through his lawyers, which his team proceeded to publish on social media.

Passing letters and messages through lawyers is a normal practice in Russian prisons.

Navalny's exiled widow Yulia Navalnaya said the lawyers were "political prisoners and should be freed immediately".

Navalny's team has accused prison authorities of having secretly filmed Navalny's meetings with his lawyers, which are meant to be confidential.

His team published footage of the meetings on social media to support their claim.

The Netherlands said that pursuing the lawyers marked a "new low point in the already dire human rights situation" in Russia. Germany said that "even those meant to defend others before the law face harsh persecution".

Britain's foreign minister David Lammy posted on X: "Nearly a year on from Navalny's death, the Russian authorities continue to crush any dissent... the UK and our partners are clear: the Kremlin must release all political prisoners".

The men were sentenced after a closed-door trial in the town of Petushki - a town about 115km (72 miles) east of Moscow - near the Pokrov prison where Navalny was held before he was moved to a remote colony above the Arctic Circle.

"We are on trial for passing Navalny's thoughts to other people," Kobzev said last

week, *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper reported.

A statement from the court said they had "used their status as lawyers while visiting convict Navalny... to ensure the regular transfer of information between the members of the extremist community, including those wanted and hiding outside the Russian Federation, and Navalny".

It said this allowed Navalny to plan "crimes with an extremist character" from his maximum-security prison.

In his messages to the outside world, Navalny denounced the Kremlin's Ukraine offensive as "criminal" and told supporters "not to give up".

Navalny was himself a lawyer and was known for his tongue-and-cheek speeches in court, attempts to sue officials and long legal tirades defying prosecutors.

He had denounced the arrest of his lawyers in October 2023 as an attempt to further isolate him.

## Imran jailed 14 years in graft case



Supporters of former prime minister Imran Khan hold portraits of him during a protest in Peshawar yesterday. - AFP

Reuters/AFP  
Islamabad

A Pakistani court has sentenced former prime minister Imran Khan to 14 years imprisonment in a land corruption case, a setback to nascent talks between his party and the government aimed at cooling political instability in the south Asian nation.

The verdict in the case was delivered by an anti-graft court in a prison in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, where Khan has been jailed since August 2023.

Khan's wife Bushra Bibi was also found guilty and sentenced to seven years in prison.

She was out on bail but was taken into custody after the judgment was pronounced, Geo News reported.

Khan's party confirmed that Bibi was moved to a prison cell at the same jail as Khan, after a medical checkup.

"The accused Imran Ahmad Khan Niazi is hereby held guilty for commission of offence of corruption and corrupt practices," read the detailed court order shared by Khan's party, adding that his wife was also found guilty of "aiding, assisting and abetting" corrupt practices.

Omar Ayub, an aide of Khan, said that the party will challenge the verdict in higher courts.

A number of government ministers welcomed the verdict, calling it based on evidence.

The former premier, 72, had been indicted on charges that he and his wife were given land by a real estate developer during his premiership from 2018-2022 in exchange for illegal favours.

Khan and Bibi had pleaded not guilty.

The case is linked to Al Qadir Trust, a non-government welfare

body the couple set up when Khan was in office.

Prosecutors say that the trust was a front for Khan to illegally receive land from a real estate developer.

They said he was given 60 acres (24 hectares) near Islamabad and another large plot close to his hill-top mansion in the capital.

The court also ordered the land to be confiscated, according to the detailed judgment.

Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party says the land was not for personal gain and was for the spiritual and educational institution the former prime minister had set up.

A post on Khan's account on social media platform X, citing his message from jail, asked his supporters not to panic and called the conviction a "joke".

"I will stay in the prison cell for as long as I have to in the struggle against this dictatorship," the post said, adding: "We will not make any deals and will face all false cases."

The announcement of the verdict was delayed three times, most recently on Monday, amid reconciliation talks between PTI and the government.

The two sides have been at loggerheads since Khan was ousted from office in 2022.

Analysts believe the talks could entail Khan and his party being offered legal respite in exchange for stopping persistent protests, including against what Khan calls a rigged election last year.

Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar told reporters that the former cricket star could also file a mercy petition to the president of Pakistan.

The verdict is the biggest setback for Khan and his party since a surprisingly good showing in the 2024 general election when

the PTI's candidates - who were forced to contest as independents - won the most seats, but fell short of the majority needed to form a government.

Jailed since August 2023, Khan has been facing dozens of cases ranging from charges of graft and misuse of power, to inciting violence against the state after being removed from office in a parliamentary vote of confidence in April 2022.

He has either been acquitted or his sentences suspended in most cases, except for this one and another on charges of inciting supporters to rampage through military facilities to protest against his arrest on May 9, 2023.

His supporters have led several violent protest rallies since the May 9 incidents.

Since being ousted from power in 2022, the former cricket star has since launched an unprecedented campaign in which he has openly criticised Pakistan's powerful generals.

Analysts say the military's leaders are Pakistan's kingmakers, although the generals deny interfering in politics.

"The decision against Imran Khan was not made by any judicial judge but by a general," PTI activist Qadir Nawaz said at a protest in Peshawar in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Khan's powerbase.

"Such decisions cannot scare Imran Khan or his workers," the 54-year-old told AFP at the rally of around 150 people.

Khan maintains that all cases against him are politically motivated and designed to keep him from returning to power.

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

## PIA apologises over Eiffel Tower ad

Pakistan's embattled national airline apologised yesterday for an advert of a plane flying at the Eiffel Tower, published to mark the first flight to Paris after a safety ban was lifted.

The image posted by state-owned Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) to social media showed a plane aimed at the French landmark with the caption "Paris, we're coming today".

In thousands of comments online, users drew comparisons with the 2001 Al Qaeda attacks on New York's Twin Towers, when two planes were hijacked and flown into the skyscrapers, killing nearly 3,000.

"Unfortunately, this was blown out of proportion with connations and perceptions that were not intended," PIA spokesman Abdullah Khan told AFP.

"It might have triggered some negative emotion, for which we truly apologise."

He said there were around 60,000-70,000 negative reactions online, or less than 10% of engagement.

"Is this (an) advertisement or threat?" said one post under the advert, which has not been taken down.

"I'd have a word with your marketing department on this one chief," said another.

Finance Minister Ishaq Dar said the prime minister

has ordered an inquiry into the advert which "shows stupidity".

However, PIA's Khan said the response to the airline's return to Europe has been "extremely positive", with flights so far operating at more than 95% capacity.

Debt-ridden PIA was banned in June 2020 from flying to the European Union, United Kingdom and the United States, a month after one of its Airbus A-320s plunged into a Karachi street, killing nearly 100 people.

The disaster was attributed to human error by the pilots and air traffic control, and was followed by allegations that nearly a third of the licences for its pilots were fake or dubious.

In 2016, a PIA plane burst into flames after one of its two turboprop engines failed during a flight from the remote north to Islamabad, killing more than 40 people.

In November, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency announced it had lifted the ban, however it remains barred from flying in the UK and the United States.

At the time, it said it had "re-established sufficient confidence" in the Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority's oversight capabilities. - AFP

## Clashes between police and gang leave 11 dead in Brazil

At least 11 people have been killed in a week of clashes between Brazilian officers and one of the country's most powerful criminal groups in the Amazon region, according to a government report.

The wave of violence erupted after the murder of a military police officer on Sunday in the northwestern city of Porto Velho, a major state capital with one of the country's highest homicide rates.

In response, police launched an operation against the Comando Vermelho (Red Command) criminal group, which has spread from its base in Rio de Janeiro across the country and even beyond Brazil's border.

The Rondonia state security secretariat said in a report published on Thursday that four people were killed in shootouts with police, and 14 people were arrested.

At least seven civilians were killed in retaliatory attacks on the population by Comando Vermelho, the report added.

Brazilian media reported that more than 20 buses and other vehicles had been set ablaze in the state.

Involved in extortion, drug trafficking and other criminal activities, Comando Vermelho has major influence in the Amazonas region.

Earlier in January, a Comando Vermelho boss was killed in a police operation in Porto Velho, local media reported.

Rondonia state forms part of the Brazilian Amazon, where murder rates are 41% higher than the national average, according to a study by the Brazilian Forum on Public Security (FBSP) released in December.

The NGO said that criminal gangs now operate in a third of Amazon municipalities - half of them under the control of Comando Vermelho.

Brazil's other major criminal network, First Capital Command (PCC), is also present in the region, along with other smaller groups fighting for control in more than 80 municipalities. - AFP

## Brazil judge dashes Bolsonaro's final hope to attend Trump inauguration

A Brazilian judge has rejected an appeal by former president Jair Bolsonaro to have his passport returned to him so he could attend the inauguration of his hero, US President-elect Donald Trump.

The right-wing former leader had his passport seized in February 2024 as part of an investigation into his role in masterminding an alleged coup attempt to remain in power after losing elections in 2022.

Powerful Supreme Court Judge Alexandre de Moraes again refused to return the passport, a day after ruling Bolsonaro posed a flight risk.

In their appeal, Bolsonaro's lawyers argued that he had received a formal invitation to Monday's inauguration.

In an interview with the *New York Times* this week, Bolsonaro said he was "feeling like a kid again with Trump's invite. I'm fired up".

The man dubbed the "Trump of the Tropics" during his time in office said the polarising US president-elect was "the most important guy in the world". - AFP

## Portugal school keeps Unesco-listed equestrian art alive

By Levi Fernandes  
AFP

Stable hand Catarina Cabaca carefully braided the mane of a Lusitano thoroughbred in the distinctive Portuguese style that's just been added to Unesco's list of intangible cultural heritage.

She was weaving the mane at the prestigious Portuguese School of Equestrian Art in Lisbon, where dressage is taught as it was practised at the Portuguese royal court in the 18th century.

"We prepare them just like in the old days," she told the AFP while crafting a traditional three-strand plait, ahead of a dressage performance at the school.

Unesco, which added Portuguese traditional dressage to its list in December, called the practice a "source of collective identity" characterised by the rider's traditional outfit and position on the saddle.

One of the bastions of this practice is the school in Lisbon, where



Riders from the Lisbon School of Equestrian Art perform with a Lusitano horse during a show at Lisbon School of Equestrian Art in Belem, Lisbon. - AFP

equestrians ride on chamois or tapir skin saddles while dressed in burgundy velvet coats, high leather boots and black tricorn hats.

They perform choreographed exercises in the tradition of Portugal's centuries-old equestrian art.

"We are the guardians of this national art," said Luis Calaim, the administrator of Parques de Sintra, the public entity that runs the equestrian school.

For 46-year-old rider Carlos Tomas, who has been with the

school for nearly two decades, the recognition is "a responsibility" as "we play an important role in (this art's) preservation and transmission".

The harmony between the rider and animal is key, but so is the Lusitano horse, a long-standing thoroughbred originating from Portugal, widely admired for its strength and agile gait, but also its docility and obedience.

"It's a unique horse, different from all the other races. I see it as a Portuguese product of excellence, like olive oil, wine or cork," said Joao Pedro Rodrigues, squire at the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art.

Aside from the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art, this art continues to be practised thanks to the work of breeders, artisans and riders in Portugal and abroad.

With its addition to the Unesco list, Portuguese equestrian art joins other traditions of the Iberian country, such as fado, popular traditional songs imbued with melancholy, recognised in 2011.

## 30 die in Colombia violence, govt suspends peace talks

AFP  
Bogota

Thirty people have been killed in violence between rival left-wing groups near Colombia's restive border with Venezuela, authorities said yesterday, prompting the government to suspend peace talks with one guerrilla group.

President Gustavo Petro declared a pause in peace negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN), accusing them of committing "war crimes" during a fresh wave of violence.

At least 30 people were killed and 20 injured when members of the ELN seemingly targeted Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc) dissidents.

William Villamizar, governor of North Santander department, said the clashes began on Thursday and were caused by a "territorial dispute" linked to the cocaine trade.

Officials spoke of ELN gunmen going "house to house" around the town of Tibu in search of people it believed related to the Farc.

The ELN remains one of the biggest of the armed groups still active in Colombia.

While claiming to be driven by nationalist and leftist ideology, the ELN is deeply involved in the drug trade and has become one of the region's most powerful organised crime groups.

Public Defender Iris Marin said preliminary reports indicated that "dozens" of families had been displaced by the violence and more than 20 people were missing.

Colombian soldiers poured into the area,

spiriting some of the wounded out in helicopters and as the army's Second Division tried to reimpose some semblance of order.

The latest violence is a security challenge for Colombia's armed forces, who struggle to control all of the extremely rugged, mountainous and jungle-cloaked nation.

It is also a political setback for Petro, Colombia's first-ever leftist president.

He has tied his political fate on a policy of "Total Peace", launching peace talks with armed groups that are despised by many Colombians.

"We are suspending dialogue with this group, because the ELN shows no willingness to make peace," Petro said.

Although the Farc signed a 2016 peace deal that ended over 50 years of bloody insurgency, some guerillas have refused to put down arms.



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# AI alone won't save the planet

This year's annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, where participants will address the theme of "Collaboration for the Intelligent Age", comes at a critical juncture for the planet. Ecosystems are straining under the pressure of climate change, and the interconnected cycles that maintain freshwater availability, soil moisture, ocean health, and plant growth are spinning out of balance at an alarming pace.

At least 420mn hectares of forest globally have been lost to deforestation since 1990, causing biodiversity loss to accelerate and fuelling climate volatility. Freshwater resources have declined so precipitously – owing to rising temperatures, groundwater mismanagement, saltwater intrusion, pollution, land degradation, and increased population density – that demand is predicted to exceed supply by 40% by 2030. And wildlife populations in freshwater habitats fell by 85% between 1970 and 2020.

The paradox is that we continue to degrade the systems that sustain life on Earth despite knowing more about their fragility than ever before. In the search for solutions, we often look to technology – especially artificial intelligence (AI) – as a panacea. But AI alone cannot save the planet. Instead, we must ensure that AI complements, rather than replaces, human capabilities to realise its full potential.

While AI models can identify patterns, they often use incomplete or biased data, and thus lack important context. This is where "augmented intelligence" comes in. Augmented intelligence combines powerful algorithms with human knowledge and lived experience to ensure that these advanced tools account for cultural, economic, and ecological considerations.

For example, indigenous communities have learned how to manage resources sustainably by tracking nature's cycles and observing the environment for centuries. This expertise can help reveal subtle trends that data fail to capture, ensuring that technology serves real-world needs. Using both indigenous insights and scientific data has provided a more accurate picture of polar bear populations in Canada's Northwest Territories, while an AI-driven model that factored in such traditional knowledge has helped Inuit communities in the Arctic identify new fishing grounds amid changing climate conditions.

## Ecosystems are straining under the pressure of climate change

But indigenous populations are not the only ones with valuable insights. Local communities and private-sector actors, from smallholder farmers to multinational corporations, accumulate site-specific data when responding to droughts, adopting regenerative agriculture practices, investing in biodiversity projects, and decarbonising their supply chains. Sharing this knowledge, which reflects cultural traditions and economic realities and is enriched by human judgment, strengthens the data on which AI models rely. Humans and machines learn from each other, creating a feedback loop that leads to more effective solutions.

Greater openness fosters trust, which in turn accelerates the adoption and refinement of AI tools. Before long, the willingness to share data, insights, and innovations will be seen as a mark of leadership and prestige, rather than a risk. Those who advocate data sharing will facilitate collective progress, demonstrating the co-operation and wisdom needed to guide us toward a safe and healthy planet.

Augmented intelligence should be at the heart of global strategies for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation and adaptation. Policymakers can take steps to bridge the gap between digital innovators and local environmental stewards. Businesses can align their investments with nature-positive goals and share any resulting knowledge. Innovators can create accessible tools that take into account cultural contexts and input from communities – turning top-down interventions into agile, responsive, and collaborative efforts.

When political leaders and executives convene in Davos, they must acknowledge that technology is not a cure-all for climate change and biodiversity loss. Without human guidance – bolstered by our capacity for empathy, cultural understanding, and ethical reasoning – it will be impossible to unlock AI's potential. In the Intelligent Age, coupling advanced tools with lived experience will enable us to transcend the zero-sum mentality that pits people against machines. – Project Syndicate

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# Revealing an invisible health threat

By **Angela Bandemehr and Albert Park**  
Washington, DC/Manila

**L**ead is everywhere, often hiding in plain sight – in the water you drink, the air you breathe, the food you eat, your personal care products, and your children's toys. Despite being a useful metal, it is highly toxic and difficult to detect: its fumes and dust are odourless, and exposure to them does not immediately cause overt symptoms in most cases.

This is particularly worrying because exposure to and ingestion of lead can negatively affect almost every part of the body. Recent research finds that exposure contributes significantly to cardiovascular disease, killing millions worldwide. But while lead poisoning is responsible for more deaths annually than HIV/Aids and malaria combined, and more than tuberculosis, it receives a small fraction of the funding allocated to these better-known diseases.

The health effects are often irreversible and unequally distributed. For example, lead is especially harmful to children's cognitive development, leading to lower IQs and behavioural problems. Today, one in three children worldwide have dangerous levels of the metal in their blood, and nearly all of them live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This inequality in exposure accounts for more than 20% of the learning gap between high- and low-income countries.

Moreover, the annual economic losses from lead poisoning are enormous, amounting to around 6.9% of global GDP. Health care for those sickened by the toxin, coupled with additional financing for special-education services to address the developmental and behavioural issues caused by lead poisoning, costs millions of dollars each year in the US alone. Lead poisoning also reduces an individual's lifetime earning potential, leading to lost tax revenue.

This makes it all the more important to reduce and eliminate lead exposure. The good news is that it is possible to detect lead in

**Despite being a useful metal, lead is highly toxic and difficult to detect: its fumes and dust are odourless, and exposure to them does not immediately cause overt symptoms in most cases. The good news is that new x-ray technology makes it possible to detect lead in soil, spices, food, paint, cookware, and other solid materials**



soil, spices, food, paint, cookware, and other solid materials using a portable X-ray fluorescence analyser (pXRF), which provides near-instantaneous results and has already proven effective in many settings.

In Nigeria, health officials used pXRFs to help identify and clean up the source of a lead-poisoning epidemic that killed more than 400 children, ultimately saving thousands of lives. An assessment of lead levels in consumer goods and foods used the devices to test samples in 25 LMICs, finding that 45% of ceramic tableware, 52% of metallic cookware, and 41% of paint exceeded regulatory limits. The technology has enabled some governments to test the safety of toys and playgrounds, enforce lead-paint regulations in houses, and investigate whether lead exposure is the cause of health incidents. Researchers using pXRFs identified dangerous levels of lead paint – which is still sold in many LMICs – in schools and playgrounds in Guyana.

But very few LMICs currently use pXRFs to determine the sources of lead poisoning. In some cases, policymakers lack awareness that lead exposure is a major public-health issue. Perhaps most

importantly, these devices are expensive to buy and maintain, and training on how to interpret the data they produce remains limited.

What would it take to improve access to this valuable technology, so that LMICs can identify and eliminate the sources of lead poisoning that put their populations – especially their young people – at risk? To answer this question, a working group comprising global lead-poisoning experts, practitioners, policymakers, and funders gathered in "Room 3" – linked to Sustainable Development Goal 3 for Good Health and Wellbeing – within the 17 Rooms Initiative. In our discussions about how to make pXRFs universally available by 2030, we agreed that the recently launched Partnership for a Lead-Free Future (PLF), supported by the UN Children's Fund (Unicef), is best positioned to bring together stakeholders to support such an initiative.

Regional hubs, centrally coordinated by the PLF, could be established to provide pXRFs at low cost, training for authorised users, and technical support – both in terms of maintenance and data analysis – for governments, NGOs, and academic partners. With sufficient demand, the proposed

hubs can negotiate directly with pXRF manufacturers to lower prices and tailor device design to ensure cost-effective and accurate screening for lead in different sources.

The PLF could thus roll out this technology on a global scale – a breakthrough that would serve as a mechanism for international and local organizations to work together to raise awareness among LMIC governments about the importance of lead poisoning. This could include setting clear protocols and guidelines for using pXRFs to screen for lead in different sources and for acting upon the results.

When it comes to lead exposure, prevention is the only option, because there is no cure. Increased access to pXRFs could help us win the fight against lead poisoning, safeguard the health and future potential of millions of children and young people, and unlock billions of dollars in economic benefits. – Project Syndicate

• *Angela Bandemehr is International Environmental Protection Specialist focusing on Lead Pollution Capacity Building at the US Environmental Protection Agency. Albert Park is Chief Economist at the Asian Development Bank.*

# What AI means for growth and jobs

By **Philippe Aghion, Simon Bunel, and Xavier Jaravel**  
Paris

**S**ome prominent economists argue that the revolution in artificial intelligence (AI) – particularly the rapid development of generative AI – will have only moderate effects on productivity growth but unambiguously negative effects on employment, owing to the automation of many tasks and jobs. We disagree on both counts.

When it comes to productivity growth, AI's impact can operate through two distinct channels: automating tasks in the production of goods and services, and automating tasks in the production of new ideas. When Erik Brynjolfsson and his co-authors recently examined the impact of generative AI on customer-service agents at a US software firm, they found that productivity among workers with access to an AI assistant increased by almost 14% in the first month of use, then stabilised at a level about 25% higher after three months. Another study finds similarly strong productivity gains among a diverse group of knowledge workers, with lower-productivity workers experiencing the strongest initial effects, thus reducing inequality within firms.

Moving from the micro to the macro level, in a 2024 paper, we (Aghion and Bunel) considered two alternatives for estimating the impact of AI on potential growth over the next decade. The first approach exploits the parallel between the AI revolution and past technological revolutions, while the second follows Daron Acemoglu's task-based framework, which we consider in light of the available data from existing empirical studies.

Based on the first approach, we estimate that the AI revolution should increase aggregate productivity growth by 0.8–1.3 percentage points per year over the next decade. Similarly, using Acemoglu's task-based formula, but with our own reading of the recent empirical literature, we estimate that AI should increase aggregate productivity growth by between 0.07 and 1.24 percentage points per year, with a median estimate of 0.68. In comparison, Acemoglu projects an increase of only 0.07 percentage points.

Moreover, our estimated median should be seen as a lower bound, because it does not account for AI's potential to automate the production of ideas. On the other hand, our estimates do not account for potential obstacles to growth, notably the lack of competition in various segments of the AI value chain, which are already controlled by the digital revolution's superstar firms.

What about AI's implications for overall employment? In a new study of French firm-



level data collected between 2018 and 2020, we show that AI adoption is positively associated with an increase in total firm-level employment and sales. This finding is consistent with most recent studies of the firm-level effects of automation on labour demand, and it supports the view that AI adoption induces productivity gains by helping firms expand the scope of their business.

This productivity effect appears to be stronger than AI's potential displacement effects (whereby AI takes over tasks associated with certain types of jobs and workers, thus reducing labour demand). We find that the impact of AI on labour demand is positive even for occupations that are often classified as vulnerable to automation, such as accounting, telemarketing, and secretarial work. To be sure, while certain uses of AI (such as for digital security) lead to positive employment growth, other uses (administrative processes) do tend to have small negative effects. But these differences appear to stem from different uses of AI, rather than from inherent characteristics of the affected occupations.

All told, the main risk for workers is that they will be displaced by workers at other firms using AI, rather than by AI directly. Slowing down the pace of AI adoption would likely be self-defeating for domestic employment, because many firms will be competing internationally with AI adopters.

While our interpretation of the data

shows that AI could drive both growth and employment, realising this potential will require suitable policy reforms. For example, competition policy must ensure that the superstar firms that dominate the upper segments of the value chain do not stifle entry by new innovators. Our own study finds that AI adopters are predominantly much larger and more productive than non-adopters, suggesting that those already on top are positioned to be the biggest winners of the AI revolution.

To avoid increased market concentration and entrenched market power, we must encourage AI adoption by smaller firms, which can be achieved through a combination of competition policy and suitable industrial policy that improves access to data and computing power. To enhance the employment potential of AI and minimise its negative effects on workers, broad-based access to high-quality education, together with training programs and active labour-market policies, will be crucial.

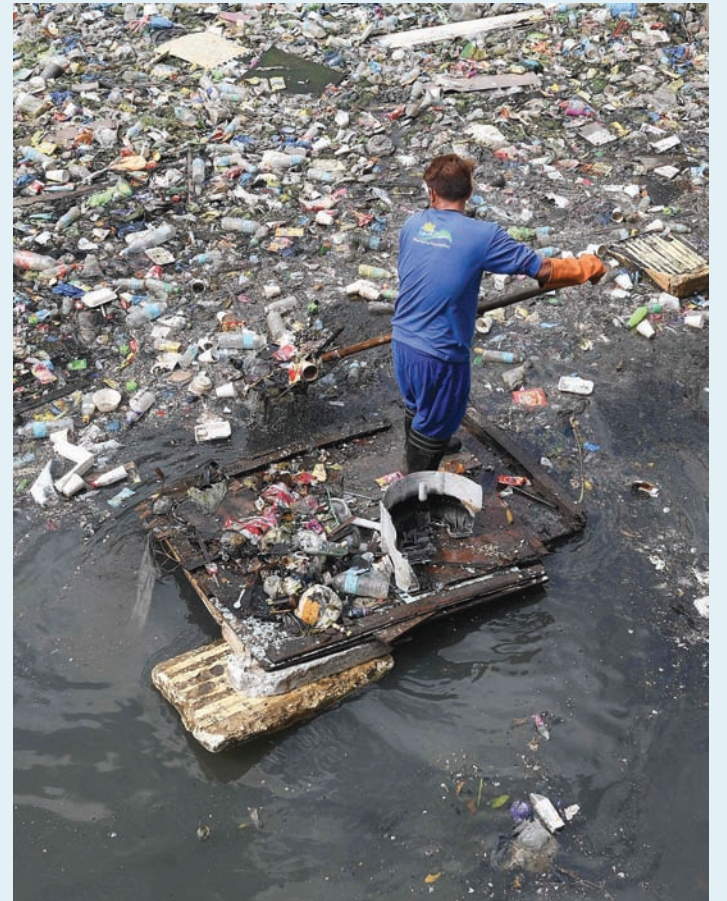
The next technological revolution is already underway. The future of entire countries and economies will hinge on their willingness and ability to adapt to it. – Project Syndicate

• *Philippe Aghion is a professor at the College de France, INSEAD, and the London School of Economics. Simon Bunel is an economist at Banque de France. Xavier Jaravel is Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics.*

# WORLD NEWS THROUGH THE LENS



A boy runs with a Palestinian flag atop a mound of rubble at a camp for people displaced by conflict in Bureij in the central Gaza Strip yesterday following the announcement of a Gaza truce agreement.



A worker scoops plastic trash along a creek near a shopping centre in Manila yesterday.



A local resident walks among damaged residential buildings in the town of Lyman, near the frontline in the Donetsk region, yesterday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine.



Snow is piled up on the West Front of the US Capitol building, where the presidential inauguration traditionally takes place, yesterday in Washington, DC. Trump said that his inauguration as US president on January 20 will be moved indoors due to expected freezing weather. Trump said he will deliver his inaugural address in the Rotunda of the US Capitol.



A dog clothed in a body warmer barks at its owner as he closes his stall for the day at Namdaemun market in Seoul yesterday.



People watching an EH216-S, a two passenger electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL) multicopter production model made by Guangzhou EHang Intelligent Technology Co Ltd (EHang), during its first public flight in Shanghai, at Longhua Heliport, east China's Shanghai municipality.



People cross the Suchiate river in Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas state, Mexico this week. As US President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office next week with a vow to crack down hard on illegal migration, gangs are using threats and extortion to exploit those trying to arrive in time.



# Doha Marathon: Ready, set, go!

The 13th edition of the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo took place yesterday. With a large number of participants, this year's event provided a vibrant atmosphere and exciting activities for everyone. Starting and finishing at Hotel Park, the marathon route was along Doha's Corniche ensuring a scenic and safe experience for both runners and spectators.

PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



Snapshots from the event yesterday.

