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TUESDAY Vol. XXXXVI No. 13332

April 1, 2025
Shawwal 3, 1446 AH

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SPORT | Page 1

Al Bidda's second triumph showcases consistency, cements legacy



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Russia committed over 183,000 war crimes in Ukraine'

President Volodymyr Zelensky called yesterday for Russia to be punished for more than 183,000 alleged war crimes documented by Ukraine since Moscow's 2022 invasion, saying justice was needed to prevent "evil from proliferating." He made his comments to a summit of European officials in Bucha, where Russian troops have been accused of atrocities including executions, rapes and torture while occupying it.

Trump tells Houthis to stop attacks

US President Donald Trump warned Yemen's Houthi rebels yesterday to halt attacks on shipping, or else they and their Iranian backers would face "real pain" from fresh air strikes. "Stop shooting at US ships, and we will stop shooting at you. Otherwise, we have only just begun, and the real pain is yet to come, for both the Houthis and their sponsors in Iran," Trump said on Truth Social.

Myanmar quake toll passes 2,000

Myanmar will mark a minute of silence today in tribute to victims of the country's devastating earthquake that has killed more than 2,000 people, as hopes dim of finding more survivors in the rubble of ruined buildings. National flags will fly at half-mast until April 6. As part of a week of national mourning, the junta announced the minute's silence to begin today at 12:51:02pm. **Page 7**

Le Pen convicted of graft, barred from presidential race

French far-right leader Marine Le Pen was banned from running for public office for five years after being convicted yesterday of embezzlement, a political watershed that rules her out of the 2027 presidential race unless she can win an appeal. The French court's ruling was a catastrophic setback for Le Pen, the National Rally (RN) party chief who has long been one of the most prominent figures in the European far-right and who had been the front-runner in opinion polls for the 2027 contest. **Page 11**

HH The Amir Sword's Arabian Camel Racing Festival begins today

QNA
Doha

The annual festival of pure-bred Arabian camels racing on the sword of HH the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani is set to commence today.

Taking place at the Al Shahaniya and Lebseer racetracks, the 15-day event will run until April 15, featuring broader participation from various riders across the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states.

The opening day will be hosted at the Al Shahaniya Camel Race-track, with 19 races covering 4 kilometres. The morning session will include 19 races, with 11 of them being contested in the early hours.

The organising committee has emphasised that all preparations have been completed to launch this event, which is regarded as the flagship festival in the Gulf region. It further stated that all sub-committees have successfully fulfilled their responsibilities in organising

this premier event for enthusiasts of the traditional sport.

The committee is committed to enforcing stringent regulations governing the races during the festival. This includes conducting pre-race doping tests, as well as mandatory doping and electrical checks for the top finishers. Additionally, the committee has

stressed that no camel is permitted to participate in more than one race.

Furthermore, no camel will undergo a fixation process unless its owner and lineage are verified, and the owner has sworn an oath. Those who have not registered for the races will not be permitted to participate in any event.

This year's festival offers significant monetary prizes, in addition to 44 trophies, including 16 gold trophies.

• This year's festival offers significant monetary prizes, in addition to 44 trophies, including 16 gold trophies, 28 silver trophies and 10 bronze trophies. A total of QR10.5mn will be awarded for one of the major heats.

mitties has decided to extend the final races over two days. A total of QR10.5mn will be awarded for one of the major heats, with QR5mn for the winner, QR2.5mn for second place, QR1.5mn for third, QR1mn for fourth, and QR500,000 for fifth.

Recently, the committee has placed significant emphasis on incorporating traditional camel races into the major festival activities, in a bid to preserve and promote this heritage sport.

This year, the festival will feature four races for human riders aged 18-45. Substantial financial prizes have been allocated for each race, with the first-place winner receiving QR100,000.

The prize gradually decreases, with QR3,000 awarded to the individual securing the fifteenth position. (QNA)



File picture (used for illustrative purpose).

Gazans flee Rafah after Israel issues evacuation order



People fleeing Rafah arrive in Khan Younis city in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday.

AFP
Gaza City

The Israeli military yesterday ordered residents in and around the southern Gaza city of Rafah to evacuate their homes, suggesting it could return to ground fighting in the area.

In a post on X, the Israeli mili-



A woman carries a child, as Palestinians flee areas around the southern city of Rafah, yesterday.

tary's Arabic-language spokesman Avichay Adraee addressed residents in areas covering all of Rafah and parts of nearby Khan Yunis.

"The IDF (military) is returning to fight with great force... For your safety, you must move immediately to the shelters in Al Mawasi, northwest of Rafah," he said.

TV footage from the city showed long lines of people fleeing their homes yesterday.

Some travelled by foot or by bike, while others pushed make-shift carts loaded with belongings.

Donkey-pulled carts rolled down streets next to trucks piled high with blankets, mattresses and other household items.

"A map was published today, entirely in red, indicating that all of Rafah must evacuate," Rafah resident Ali Mansour said.

"I am currently on foot, there is no transportation, and I do not have the fare for a car ride. As you can see, we have no luggage with us - we left all our belongings behind."

Najah Dahir, also from Rafah, was fleeing on foot with her nine-month-old baby. **Page 4**

Beaches, parks remain prime Eid destinations

By Shafeeq Alingal
Staff Reporter

Beaches and parks remain the major Eid al-Fitr destination for many residents in Qatar. With a captivating vibe and moderate weather, beaches drew thousands on the first and second days of Eid while parks were packed with huge crowds.

Sealine, Al Gharial and Ras Abu Abboud top the list of beachgoers' favourites. "These beaches are ideal for spending time with family and friends. On the edge of the desert, Sealine is a gateway to the desert and dunes. It's among my top priorities during the holidays," said Mohanned Hussein.

Many Doha residents opt to navigate the remote beaches to enjoy the whole night while swimming and barbecuing.

"Beaches outside Doha are also equipped with all the necessary amenities and facilities. With walking and bicycle tracks,



Parks around the country have been one of the favourite spots for families during the Eid festival. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

Many opt to drive there because they are more spacious and less crowded. Even driving to these places lends some enjoyment," said Gharrafa resident Abdul Rahim.

Ras Abu Abboud offers recreation among the most prominent destinations offering entertainment activities for families. With walking and bicycle tracks,

the beach has swimming facilities and swings. Also, volleyball and beach football playing areas are available. "We invite you to celebrate fun and relaxing times on our charming beaches. Don't miss the opportunity to relax and enjoy the best moments with family and friends," the Ministry of Municipality said in a X post.

To Page 12

Msheireb Downtown festivities draw crowds

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

Msheireb Downtown Doha (MDD) has been transformed into a vibrant hub of celebration for the Eid al-Fitr holidays, greeting Qatar residents and visitors with an array of live entertainment, engaging activities, and captivating attractions.

The second day of Eid festivities at Msheireb saw many spending time with loved ones, enjoying a variety of musical performances at different locations, which continue until April 5.

From the soulful melodies of a guitarist to the smooth sounds of a saxophonist, festival-goers had the chance to relax at Baraha



Msheireb in a welcoming and family-friendly atmosphere that captured the spirit of the holiday. Dubbed the largest courtyard in the region, it became a focal point for family fun, hosting traditional games alongside engaging shows.

Organisers noted that MDD carefully curated this year's Eid offerings, creating a unique programme for different age groups that seamlessly blends tradition with contemporary entertainment. **To Page 12**



Qatar Theatre Troupe to take part in SITFY Festival in Georgia

As part of the Ministry of Culture and the Theatre Affairs Center, the Qatar Theatre Troupe is participating in the first edition of the SITFY International Theatre Festival in Georgia with its play *Al-Zari*.

It is scheduled to be presented on April 4 as part of the festival's activities.

The play is written by Fulal al-Falkawi, directed by Mohammed al-Mulla, and assisted by Khaled Khamis.

The play stars Munther Thani and Asrar, with lighting by Omar Atrous, production management by Hussein Safar, and photography by Mohammed al-Obaidli, and under the general supervision of the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Qatar Theatre Troupe, Hamad Abdulrahman Abdulrahman.



Through this participation, the Qatar Theatre Troupe seeks to represent Qatar honourably and compete for the festival's award.

The competition is attended

by troupes from 15 countries including Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, Turkey, and Romania, in addition to three theatrical performances from Georgia.

Match Day success for WCM-Q students



Soon-to-graduate students of Weill Cornell Medicine - Qatar (WCM-Q) celebrated gaining places on residency programmes at some of world's leading healthcare institutions on another highly successful Match Day for the college.

Match Day is a key turning point in the career of every medical student as they discover where they will continue their training after they have completed their MD degree and graduated.

This year, final-year WCM-Q students met for a ceremony to hear members of their class had gained places on elite programmes at renowned institutions in Qatar and the US, including Hamad Medical Corporation, NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Centre, Case Western/ University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Centre, Virginia Commonwealth University Health System, UC Davis Medical Centre, and Johns Hopkins Hospital, among others. The students are due to graduate in May and will join their residency programmes in the fall.

WCM-Q achieved a 93% match rate for students who applied to US residency programmes, a level which far ex-

ceeds the average 59% match rate for international medical graduates, demonstrating the college's status as one of the world's leading destinations for international medical education. Five WCM-Q students matched to Weill Cornell Medicine-affiliated NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital campuses.

Deema al-Abdullah, who came through WCM-Q's one-year Foundation Programme before joining the college's Six-Year Medical Programme, matched with the orthopaedic surgery residency programme at Hamad Medical Corporation.

She said: "Being able to go to WCM-Q while remaining in my home country was a huge opportunity for me. It has been tough but with hard work anything is possible."

The medical specialities the soon-to-be doctors of the Class of 2025 will be pursuing once they receive their MD degrees are anaesthesiology, child neurology, dermatology, diagnostic radiology, emergency medicine, family medicine (osteopathic), general surgery, internal medicine, neurology, obstetrics/gynaecology, orthopaedic surgery, paediatrics, psychiatry, and preventive and community

medicine. Mohammad Yaghmour matched with the general surgery residency programme at Weill Cornell Medicine/NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital.

He said: "Studying at WCM-Q has really been the best of both worlds. You get to access the prestigious education system of the US while being able to stay around your own family, which is everything that I could have asked for."

Match Day is a highly competitive process, with many thousands of students in the US and all over the world vying for a limited number of places through a programme administered by the National Resident Matching Programme (NRMP) in Washington, DC. This year was the largest match in the NRMP's 73-year history, with a record 52,498 registered applicants competing for 43,237 available positions.

Dean of WCM-Q Dr Javaid Sheikh said: "All of us at WCM-Q are immensely proud of the incredibly high standards reached by our graduating class in their residency matches. They have shown exemplary commitment to the study of medicine and I have no doubt that they will go on to thrive in their new roles."

Amir sends condolences to Umm Al Quwain ruler

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent cables of condolences to Member of the Supreme Council of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Umm Al Quwain Sheikh Saud bin Rashid al-Mu'alli, on the death of his mother, Sheikha Hassa bint Hamid bin Abdulrahman al-Shamsi. (QNA)

Qatar Amateur Radio Society wraps up participation in global contest

The Qatar Amateur Radio Society (QARS) concluded on Sunday evening its participation in the CQ World Wide WPX Contest 2025, as part of its ongoing efforts to diversify its involvement in international events and exchange experiences with radio enthusiasts around the globe.

This contest is one of the largest annual international competitions in the amateur radio hobby.

In a statement, QARS emphasised its commitment to taking part in this contest, which is listed on the international calendar each year at the end of March. The so-

society aims to achieve high rankings both in Asia and globally, noting its goal of reaching at least 5,000 contacts for this year's contest, a significant increase compared to previous years.

Over the past years, the society has earned notable results in this competition, including last year, when it secured first place in Asia and tenth place globally.

For two days, QARS members participated through their personal radio stations from home. They co-ordinated to work as a unified team representing the society in this international event, using the

society's call sign (A73A) for the contest.

The Qatar Amateur Radio Society is dedicated to promoting amateur radio among citizens and organising its practice in accordance with local and international regulations. Additionally, the society fosters human and international relations between enthusiasts in Qatar and their counterparts abroad, helping to raise awareness of Qatar's development and contributing to the training of technical personnel who can provide humanitarian services during emergencies. (QNA)

Qatar gets ready to host Tamer Hosny, Adam concert

Music fans are in for a spectacular night as Arabic music superstars Tamer Hosny and Adam take the stage at Lusail Multipurpose Hall on April 25.

This highly anticipated concert, just days before Ed Sheeran's performance in Qatar at the same venue, continues the momentum of world-class entertainment in the heart of Doha.

The event promises an evening of electrifying performances, with Adam opening the night at 8pm followed by a special set from a supporting DJ at 9.30pm.

The excitement will peak when the legendary Tamer Hosny takes the stage at 10pm for a performance that will keep the audience on their feet until 11.30pm. Gates open at 6.30pm, and the event will conclude by 12.30am.

This concert adds to Qatar's rapidly growing reputation as a global entertainment hub, setting the stage for Ed Sheeran's highly anticipated show on April 30. With back-to-back world-class performances, Lusail Multipurpose Hall contin-



ues to attract music lovers. Presented in collaboration with AEG Presents, Visit Qatar, and the Supreme Committee for Deliv-

ery & Legacy, this event underscores Qatar's commitment to bringing top-tier entertainment experiences to the country.

QatarEnergy reveals fuel prices for April 2025

QatarEnergy announced yesterday the fuel prices for April 2025 in Qatar, with diesel prices remaining stable and the prices for Super Gasoline 95 and Premium Gasoline 91 decreased, QNA reported from Doha. QatarEnergy has set the price of diesel at QR2.05 per litre, Super Gasoline 95 at QR2.05 per litre, and Premium Gasoline 91 at QR2.00 per litre.

Workers' Support Fund holds Eid al-Fitr cultural programmes

The Workers' Support and Insurance Fund held an entertainment and cultural programme that spanned the first and second days of Eid in the Asian City.

The programme included awareness-raising and cultural activities, along with the distribution of gifts to members of the communities, in a move aimed at spreading joy and enhancing com-

munity interaction. The events included artistic performances by the communities, in addition to various recreational segments that reflected the cultural diversity of the community.

Approximately 10,000 people participated, reflecting the great demand for such events, which aim to support workers and enhance their integration into society through purposeful cultural

and awareness-raising activities.

The Workers' Support and Insurance Fund affirmed its continued commitment to organising initiatives that enhance the well-being of workers and communities, and looks forward to offering more programmes and events that contribute to improving their quality of life and strengthening their role in society. (QNA)

Ministry appeals for responsible enjoyment of beaches in Qatar

The beaches of the country are considered among the most favoured destinations for spending Eid holidays for almost all categories and age-groups of the residents of the country, with many of these highly developed and well-equipped to offer visitors all the necessary means of comfort and safety.

Most of these beaches are easily accessible and the roads to them require no special arrangement and can be accessed by any type of vehicle. While there are some family dedicated beaches, there are others open for all. Similarly, there is a limited number of paid beaches with added services while the most number of these are open free of charge.

Among the most popular are the Sealine beach, Khor Al Udaid, Semaisma, Al Wakrah beaches, Umm Bab, Al Maroona Beach, Fuwairit Beach, Al Ghariya Beach, Al



People at Sealine yesterday.

Kharaj Beach, Katara Beach, Doha Corniche and 974 Beach, which

entails an entry fee, in addition to other coastal places and sites that

display the magnificent scenery of the country, such as Bin Ghannam

Island (popularly known as the Purple Island).

Accordingly, the Ministry of Municipality called on the public to enjoy the beauty and magnificence of nature in the country during the holidays while avoiding any negative practices that could adversely impact the excellent infrastructure there and the well-being of the local environment.

The ministry stressed that maintaining the cleanliness and excellent facilities, is a shared public responsibility for every visitor.

In the meantime, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change stressed that it will continue its serious efforts to monitor and guarantee the well-being of the various components of the local environment during the holidays. Besides, public reports on any related violations will be received through the unified hotline 16066 around the clock.



Katara's vibrant Eid festivities attract crowds

On the second day of the Eid al-Fitr celebrations, the Katara Cultural Village continued to offer its impressive events, attracting large numbers of visitors who immensely enjoyed the festive atmosphere.

Katara Corniche hosted a variety of activities and events that added a special joy to the Eid celebrations. Among the standout events was the street play "The Adventures of Adnan the Pirate – The Mind is a Blessing". This children's play was written by Dr Hanan Sadiq, directed by artist Ali al-Khalaf, and performed by a group of Qatari actors, including Ali al-Sharshani, Shahd al-Jassem, and Faisal al-Jassem, alongside young talents and a team of performance artists. The music was composed by the Qatari group Neymar Music.

Dr Hanan Sadiq explained that the play continues Katara's tradition of presenting theatrical performances during Eid, aiming to reinforce the cherished values and principles in a creative and engaging way for children, while introducing them to the expressive power of theatre.

She noted that the performances have drawn large audiences of children and families, receiving enthusiastic interaction, which indicates the play's success. The first show takes place at 6.15pm on the Katara Corniche, while the second show starts at 8.45pm.

Another major attraction during Eid is Fereej Katara, which draws large crowds of visitors.

Saeed al-Kuwari from the beach management team explained that Fereej Katara is a traditional heritage village that recreates the authentic atmosphere of the past,



both in architecture and in the variety of activities it offers. These include children's workshops, competitions with prizes, and the participation of family-run businesses and craftsmen specialising in traditional arts, all designed to highlight Qatari culture and heritage.

The spectacular fireworks displays continue to captivate large audiences, with the final show scheduled for the third day of Eid at 8.30pm on the Katara Corniche. The sky will be lit up with vibrant colours, spreading joy and delight among attendees.

Another highlight is the Qatari Arda (traditional sword dance), which attracts spectators from various nationalities.

Participants form opposing rows and chant patriotic songs expressing pride in the country's leadership and heritage.

The Arda is a fundamental part of Qatari culture, combining poetry with synchronised movements in a powerful display of tradition. Among the prominent activities in Katara's Eid celebrations was the performance by the Police Music Band, where musicians delivered a captivating show blending rhythm and choreography, making it one of the most admired events.

Further, visitors enjoyed a range of Asian and African folkloric performances, featuring traditional dances and music from various African countries, along with vibrant showcases from Egypt and Syria.

These performances provided audiences with a rich cultural experience, forming a colourful and diverse artistic spectacle that was met with great enthusiasm. Visitors expressed their appreciation for the cultural diversity presented by Katara. Katara's Eid celebrations will continue until the fourth day of Eid, offering a rich and diverse programme that appeals to all age groups and social backgrounds.





Syria monitor says 12 killed in apparent sectarian violence

AFP
Beirut

A monitor of Syria's conflict said 12 civilians, mostly Alawites, were killed yesterday in separate incidents of apparent sectarian violence in coastal and central regions, after massacres earlier this month.

Security in Syria remains tenuous after rebel forces overthrew long-time ruler Bashar al-Assad in December following nearly 14 years of civil war.

Six civilians including a local official were killed in an attack on members of the Alawite sect in coastal Tartus province, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The Britain-based

monitor cited unidentified local sources as accusing the perpetrators of setting out from a military base used by forces belonging to Syria's new authorities near the city of Banias.

The Observatory, which relies on a network of sources inside Syria, said the attackers hurled "sectarian slogans and direct threats" before opening fire.

Hamas appeals to supporters to fight Trump's Gaza plan



People fleeing Rafah arrive in Khan Yunis city following new Israeli evacuation orders, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday.

AFP
Cairo

A senior Hamas official yesterday called on supporters worldwide to pick up weapons and fight US President Donald Trump's plan to relocate more than 2mn Gazans to neighbouring countries such as Egypt and Jordan.

"In the face of this sinister plan – one that combines massacres with starvation – anyone who can bear arms, anywhere in the world, must take action," Sami Abu Zuhri said in a statement.

Abu Zuhri's call comes a day after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered to let Hamas leaders leave Gaza but demanded that the Palestinian group disarm in the final stages of the war in Gaza.

Hamas has expressed a willingness to relinquish Gaza's administration, but has warned its weapons are a "red line".

Netanyahu said Israel was working towards a plan proposed by Trump to displace Gazans to other countries.

Netanyahu said that after the war, Israel would ensure overall security in Gaza and "enable the implementation of the Trump plan" – which had initially called for the mass displacement of all 2.4mn

people living in the Palestinian territory – calling it a "voluntary migration plan".

Days after taking office in January, Trump floated a proposal to move Gaza's population out of the war-battered territory, suggesting that Egypt or Jordan could take them in.

Both countries, along with other Arab allies, governments around the world and the Palestinians themselves, have flatly rejected the notion.

Trump later appeared to backtrack on the proposal, saying he was "not forcing" his widely condemned plan.

"No body's expelling any Palestinians," Trump said at the White House in mid-March, remarks welcomed by Egypt, Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).

Arab nations have since come up with an alternative plan for rebuilding the Gaza Strip without relocating its people, which would take place under the future administration of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority. For Palestinians, any attempts to force them out of Gaza would evoke dark memories of what the Arab world calls the "Nakba", or catastrophe – the mass displacement of Palestinians during Israel's creation in 1948. Israel's Defence Minister Israel Katz in February said that a special agency would be established for the "voluntary departure" of Gazans.

Public Announcement

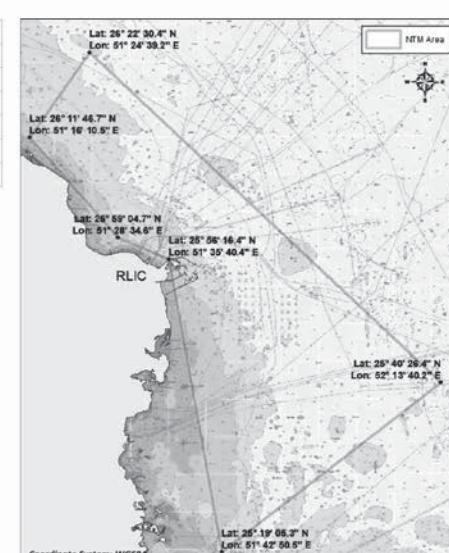
To all Ships, Fishermen and Mariners
Seismic Survey Acquisition by Vessels AOS Glory, Stanford Hawk, GMS Apollo, Voyager Explorer, BGP Innovator and Safa Searcher
Seismic Survey Works Offshore Qatar from 27th November 2024 – 27th November 2025

Pursuant to and under directives from the Department of Seafarers Affairs & Registration, Ministry of Transport, State of Qatar, this announcement is to inform all Vessels, Mariners and Fishermen that QatarEnergy LNG intends to perform Ocean Bottom Node Seismic Survey Works with Vessels AOS Glory, Stanford Hawk, GMS Apollo, Voyager Explorer, BGP Innovator and Safa Searcher in the locations bound by the coordinates shown in the diagram below.

All Vessels, Mariners and Fishermen are expected to keep clear of the survey locations during the operations.

QatarEnergy LNG takes no responsibility for any loss or damage caused to outside parties in association with this operation, following publication of this notice.

Point	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE
1	26° 22' 30.4"N	51° 24' 39.2"E
2	25° 40' 26.4"N	52° 13' 40.2"E
3	25° 19' 05.3"N	51° 42' 50.5"E
4	25° 56' 16.4"N	51° 35' 40.4"E
5	25° 59' 04.7"N	51° 28' 34.6"E
6	26° 11' 46.7"N	51° 16' 10.5"E



Any further inquiries should be addressed to: Tel. +974 44531797

Saudi tailor keeps robe-making craft alive

AFP
Hofuf

Saudi tailor Habib Mohammed's shop once made ornate hand-woven cloaks for royals, a time-honoured craft he is determined to preserve even as mass-produced garments flood the market, threatening his traditional business.

He makes "bisht", a long gown which for centuries has been a status symbol, worn by kings and princes – and ordinary men – and could take a week of meticulous work to create.

Now, with cheap Chinese-made robes taking a bite out of his business, the 60-year-old tailor is struggling to make a profit, and his only son wouldn't take over the beleaguered shop.

But Mohammed refuses to let the ancient craft die, searching for ways to hand down his knowledge.

"We've started training here at the shop and at home," he told AFP in his windowless atelier in the oasis city of Hofuf, with bishts hanging all around.

"I am teaching my grandchildren, be they girls or boys." In Mohammed's native Al-Ahsa governorate, it was "considered shameful for a man to go to a funeral or a market, or make a visit to anyone anywhere without wearing the bisht", he said. The bisht came to global attention in 2022 when His Highness the Qatar's Amir draped one over football star Lionel Messi after the World Cup final. Although Arabs across the Gulf still sometimes wear traditional garb, especially in formal settings, factory-made clothing has replaced tailor services in the oil-rich countries of the region.

At his workshop, Mohammed watched over his granddaughter Fajr, nine, and grandson Ghassan, 10, as they embroidered delicate gowns. For the veteran craftsman, who learned to weave when he was only five, this is "my entire life".

"I came into this world... seeing only bishts around me," said Mohammed, wearing the Saudi national dress of white robe and chequered red-and-white headdress. "I was born in (my father's) tailor shop and grew up watching my mother sew. I saw my brothers and cousins work with my father in the tailor shop," he added with pride. His wife was also a bisht seamstress, he said, skilled at collar embroidery. But his modest shop in an artisans' market in Hofuf has fallen on hard times.

"A sort of recession has taken hold," he said.

A high-quailty bisht could once have fetched up to 6,000 riyals (\$1,600), but machine-made cloaks sell for just a fraction of that price, Mohammed said.

"Pieces I would make for 1,500 riyals now go for 150 riyals.

Trump 'plans to visit Saudi Arabia in mid-May'

Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump plans to visit Saudi Arabia in mid-May on his first trip abroad since his second term began in January, four people familiar with the matter said yesterday.

Topics likely to be discussed include Russia's three-year-old war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza and investments, they said. "The goal is in the realm of mid-May," one person said.

The Gulf state has played a prominent role in US foreign policy, including hosting US ceasefire talks with Russia and Ukraine.

"An opportunity for international travel for the

president is something that is being looked at. We don't yet have a specific plan, and we will provide that information when it is official," a White House official said.

Trump has said he would likely travel to Saudi Arabia to seal an agreement for Riyadh to invest upwards of \$1tn in the US economy, including purchases of military equipment.

He has noted the first overseas trip of his first term was to Riyadh in 2017 to announce Saudi investments estimated then to be worth \$350bn. Last week, Trump vowed to add more countries to the Abraham Accords, the series of normalisation agreements his administration negotiated between Israel and some countries during his first term. Trump said more countries want to join the accords.

Khamenei warns of strong reprisal against potential US military action

Reuters
Dubai

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said yesterday the US would receive a strong blow if it acts on President Donald Trump's threat to bomb unless Tehran reaches a new nuclear deal with Washington.

Trump reiterated his threat on Sunday that Iran would be bombed if it does not accept his offer for talks outlined in a letter sent to Iran's leadership in early March, giving Tehran a two-month window to make a decision.

Iran handed a warning yesterday about Trump's threats to Switzerland's embassy, which represents US interests and acts as an intermediary between Washington and Tehran, state media said. In its warning, Tehran expressed determination to respond "decisively and immediately" to any threat.

"The enmity from the US and Israel has always been there. They threaten to attack us, which we don't think is very probable, but if they commit any mischief they will surely receive a strong reciprocal blow," Khamenei said.

"And if they are thinking of causing sedition inside the country as in past years, the Iranian people themselves will deal with them," he added.

Iranian authorities blame the West for recent unrest including 2022-2023 protests over the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a young woman detained for allegedly flouting hijab rules, and nationwide protests in 2019 over fuel price rises.



Last week, Iran responded to the US letter, with President Masoud Pezeshkan explaining on Sunday that Tehran would not enter direct negotiations with Washington but was willing to continue talks indirectly in line with an injunction from Khamenei.

"An open threat of 'bombing' by a head of state against Iran is a shocking affront to the very essence of international peace and security," Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Esmail Baghaei tweeted yesterday. "Violence breeds violence, peace begets peace. The US can choose the course and concede to consequences."

Zimbabwe cities empty, security tightened after protest call

Police were out in force and businesses and offices closed in key Zimbabwe cities after authorities warned against demonstrations called for yesterday to demand that President Emmerson Mnangagwa leave power, AFP reported from Harare. Security forces patrolled city centres after warning people to ignore a call by a faction of Mnangagwa's own ZANU-PF party to demonstrate against the president, who took power in a coup eight years ago. A small group of people tried to assemble at President Robert Mugabe Square in the capital Harare but were dispersed by police, videos on social media showed. "It was announced as a peaceful march but the police are already starting to hit people," one of the protesters at the scene told the CITE online media. But "we are not going anywhere... I'm staying here, if I have to die here, for the sake of my children," she said in a video posted on social media. The protests were called by a veteran of the ZANU-PF, in power since independence in 1980.

following moves by a faction of the party to keep Mnangagwa, 82, in power beyond the end of his term in 2028. "The task of removing Mnangagwa has already begun," Blessed Geza, who is in hiding and has been expelled from the ZANU-PF, said on social media last week. The main road in the centre of Harare was deserted and some retailers, including car dealers, had removed items from shop windows, an AFP reporter said. Schools were closed and commuter taxis suspended operations. "There are no people at all," a man said in Harare on condition of anonymity. "They are scared because of stories flying around (about the protests)." In the country's second city, Bulawayo, major retailers and offices were shuttered and only a few people were in the normally busy fresh produce market, an AFP reporter said. Police patrolled in vehicles and on horseback. Mnangagwa and his government have been accused of corruption and mismanagement that has left the southern African country in economic crisis.

Saudi tailor keeps robe-making craft alive

AFP
Hofuf

Saudi tailor Habib Mohammed's shop once made ornate hand-woven cloaks for royals, a time-honoured craft he is determined to preserve even as mass-produced garments flood the market, threatening his traditional business.

He makes "bisht", a long gown which for centuries has been a status symbol, worn by kings and princes – and ordinary men – and could take a week of meticulous work to create.

Now, with cheap Chinese-made robes taking a bite out of his business, the 60-year-old tailor is struggling to make a profit, and his only son wouldn't take over the beleaguered shop.

But Mohammed refuses to let the ancient craft die, searching for ways to hand down his knowledge.

"We've started training here at the shop and at home," he told AFP in his windowless atelier in the oasis city of Hofuf, with bishts hanging all around.

"I am teaching my grandchildren, be they girls or boys." In Mohammed's native Al-Ahsa governorate, it was "considered shameful for a man to go to a funeral or a market, or make a visit to anyone anywhere without wearing the bisht", he said. The bisht came to global attention in 2022 when His Highness the Qatar's Amir draped one over football star Lionel Messi after the World Cup final. Although Arabs across the Gulf still sometimes wear traditional garb, especially in formal settings, factory-made clothing has replaced tailor services in the oil-rich countries of the region.

At his workshop, Mohammed watched over his granddaughter Fajr, nine, and grandson Ghassan, 10, as they embroidered delicate gowns. For the veteran craftsman, who learned to weave when he was only five, this is "my entire life".

"I came into this world... seeing only bishts around me," said Mohammed, wearing the Saudi national dress of white robe and chequered red-and-white headdress. "I was born in (my father's) tailor shop and grew up watching my mother sew. I saw my brothers and cousins work with my father in the tailor shop," he added with pride. His wife was also a bisht seamstress, he said, skilled at collar embroidery. But his modest shop in an artisans' market in Hofuf has fallen on hard times.

"A sort of recession has taken hold," he said.

A high-quailty bisht could once have fetched up to 6,000 riyals (\$1,600), but machine-made cloaks sell for just a fraction of that price, Mohammed said.

"Pieces I would make for 1,500 riyals now go for 150 riyals.



It's not enough to make a living." Mohammed refuses to let the tradition die out, and he is far from alone. A bisht revival is taking shape in Saudi Arabia even as it opens up to the world, attracting tourists and foreign businesses. Last year, the kingdom ordered ministers and other senior officials to wear a bisht when entering or leaving the workplace or attending formal events. Saudi Arabia has named 2025 the Year of Handicrafts, when it will promote and support 10 crafts including bisht-weaving. And Gulf countries are trying to include the bisht on the Unesco list of intangible cultural heritage in a bid to preserve the craft.

Some of the bishts hanging on the walls of Mohammed's workshop are at least a century old, he said, proudly presenting a brown robe made from sheep's wool.

"Someone offered me 200,000 riyals for this, but I refused to sell it because it is dear to me as my life. It represents my country's history," he said. "I want to pass them down to my children and grandchildren, and I will instruct them never to sell them," he said, pointing to the pieces on the walls.

Mohammed also gives weekly bisht tailoring lessons at a nearby institute, mostly for young people. "We didn't give up," he said, training the younger generation "to revive an old heritage that was disappearing".

"We will bring it to life once more," said Mohammed.

Computer pioneer Microsoft turns 50

By Julie Jammot
AFP

Microsoft has been at the heart of computing for half a century, becoming a tech stalwart almost taken for granted as lifestyles embraced the Internet.

As the company, founded with a vision of putting computers in every home and office, celebrates its 50th anniversary on Friday, it is looking to boost its fortunes by being a leader in the fast-developing field of artificial intelligence (AI).

"From a storytelling standpoint, they've been a boring company and a boring stock," eMarketer analyst Jeremy Goldman said of the Richmond, Washington-based behemoth.

"It's funny because they have a \$2.9tn market cap, and that is huge," he continued, referring to Microsoft's value based on its share price.

The only company with a higher market cap is iPhone maker Apple.

Cloud computing is fuelling Microsoft's revenue with the help of its ubiquitous Office software, now hosted online and no longer released in boxes of floppy disks or CDs.

"It's not a very sexy infrastructure, but it's a very valuable one," Goldman said of Microsoft's data centres and software at the foundation of its cloud-computing platform.

Amazon Web Services (AWS) and Google are Microsoft's cloud-computing rivals.

Clouds were the stuff of weather forecasts rather than computing when Bill Gates and childhood friend Paul Allen founded what was first called "Micro-Soft" in 1975.

They launched the MS-DOS operating system that became known as "Windows" and went on to run most of the world's computers.

Microsoft Office programs including Word, Excel and PowerPoint became standard business tools, even fending off free Google Docs software.

"Microsoft had a lot of businesses that were weaker and challenged – the perfect example is Office," Goldman said. "That Office is still such a meaningful business for them says something about the way they were able to innovate."

Current chief executive Satya Nadella championed a Microsoft shift to making its software available on just about any device as subscription services hosted in the cloud.

The move likely saved Microsoft from seeing free services like Google Docs reduce their market share to zero, the analyst said.

Microsoft remains in the shadow of other US tech giants when it comes to offerings such as social networks, smartphones and the AI-infused digital assistants that have become woven into people's lives, but it is not for lack of effort.

Microsoft introduced Xbox video game consoles in 2001, steadily building up its stable of studios, making the blockbuster buy of Activision Blizzard two years ago and adding an online subscription service for players.

And despite its launch of the Bing search engine in 2009, Google still dominates that market.

Microsoft in 2016 bought career-focused social network LinkedIn, which has seen steady growth.

However, it still lacks the reach of Meta's Facebook or Instagram, or the influence of Elon Musk's X (formerly Twitter).

Microsoft is among those in the running to buy TikTok, which faces a ban in the United States if not sold by China-based ByteDance.

While Apple and Google have excelled at making it easy or even fun for users to engage with products, that has been an "Achilles heel" for Microsoft, according to Goldman.

"It's never been a strong suit of theirs," the analyst said.

Known for a focus on sales rather than innovation, Steve Ballmer, who followed Gates as chief of Microsoft from 2000-2013, has been faulted for missing the shift to smartphones and other mobile computing devices.

His successor, Nadella, took over with a vow to make Microsoft a "mobile-first, cloud-first" company and Microsoft has since invested heavily in AI, taking a stake in ChatGPT-maker OpenAI and building the technology into offerings including Bing, though to little avail.

Independent analyst Jack Gold believes that despite those investments and efforts, Microsoft lags in AI because it lacks its own chips or foundation model.

"They are not as advanced in that as AWS and Google, so they're still playing a little bit of catchup in that space," Gold said of Microsoft.

Google Cloud's revenue growth is on pace to overtake Microsoft's Azure for second place in the market in two years, the analyst said.



AFP/Reuters
Washington

President Donald Trump again downplayed risks that TikTok is in danger of being banned in the United States, saying that he remains confident of finding a buyer for the app's US business by a Friday deadline.

The hugely popular video-sharing app, which has more than 170mn American users, is under threat from a law that passed overwhelmingly last year and orders TikTok to split from its Chinese owner ByteDance or face a ban in the United States.

Motivated by widespread belief in Washington that TikTok is ultimately controlled by the Chinese government, the law took effect on January 19, one day before Trump's inauguration.

However, the Republican president quickly announced a delay that has allowed it to continue to operate; that delay is set to expire on April 5.

"We have a lot of potential buyers. There's tremendous interest in TikTok," Trump told reporters onboard Air Force One late on Sunday.

"We have a lot of people that want to buy TikTok. We're dealing with China also on it, because they may have something to do with it," he said, adding: "I'd like to see TikTok remain alive."

Any deal to divest TikTok from ByteDance will require the approval of Beijing, and Trump has said he may offer to reduce tariffs on China as a way to get Beijing's approval for the sale.

Trump, though he supported a ban in his first term, has lately become the app's greatest defender, seeing it as a reason more young voters supported him in November's election.

Blackstone is discussing joining ByteDance's existing non-Chinese shareholders, led by Susquehanna International Group and General Atlantic, in contributing fresh capital to bid for TikTok's US business.

The group has emerged as front-runners.

Dan Ives of Wedbush Securities told AFP that he believed cloud company Oracle would "play a major role" in such a deal and that "ByteDance will still control and own the algorithm" and

One of his major political donors, billionaire Jeff Yass, is also a major stakeholder in parent company ByteDance.

Several proposals for TikTok's US business have emerged since the law began to make its way through Congress last year.

However, according to the *New York Times*, citing people involved in coming up with a solution, the most likely fix would see existing US investors in ByteDance roll over their stakes into a new independent global TikTok company.

Additional US investors would be brought on to reduce the proportion of Chinese investors.

Trump at one point said the US government could also take a stake through a newly announced national sovereign fund.

Reuters reported on Friday that private equity firm Blackstone is evaluating making a small minority investment in TikTok's US operations, according to two people familiar with the matter.

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have seats at the board of the company.

Much of TikTok's US activity is already housed on Oracle servers, and the company's executive chairman, Larry Ellison, is a long-time Trump ally who was also floated as a buyer of TikTok's US activity in Trump's first term.

The arrangement would go against the spirit of the law, which is in part based on the premise that TikTok's algorithm can be weaponised by the Chinese against US interests.

However, University of Richmond School of Law professor Carl Tobias said that he did not expect opposition in the Republican-led Congress, or if Trump ordered another extension to the sale deadline.

"Lawmakers have expressed little opposition to Trump's actions (including ones) which federal judges have ruled violate the Constitution or congressionally-passed statutes," the expert said.

Other proposals include an initiative called "The People's Bid for TikTok", launched by real estate and sports tycoon Frank McCourt's Project Liberty initiative.

Artificial intelligence (AI) startup Perplexity recently expressed interest in buying TikTok as did a joint venture involving YouTube mega-celebrity MrBeast.

When the last deadline passed, in January, TikTok temporarily shut down in the United States, to the dismay of millions of users.

Musk gives away two \$1mn cheques to Wisconsin voters

Billionaire Elon Musk has handed out million-dollar cheques to two voters in Wisconsin and promised smaller payments to others who help elect a conservative candidate to the state's top court in a closely watched election.

The Tesla chief executive a top adviser to US President Donald Trump, handed out oversized checks at a rally in Green Bay as he sought to drum up enthusiasm for a state Supreme Court election that is already the most expensive judicial race in US history.

Musk said he would also pay supporters \$20 for every voter they recruit over the next two days.

He said he was spending the money to raise awareness of a race in which liberal Susan Crawford seems to be running ahead of conservative Brad Schimel.

"What's happening on Tuesday is a vote for which party controls the US House of Representatives," Musk declared, arguing that the federal congress was so evenly balanced that Wisconsin's seats could decide its majority.

"And whichever party controls the House... to a significant degree, controls the country, which then steers the course of Western



Musk giving the mock-up of a \$1mn cheque to an audience member during the rally in Green Bay, Wisconsin. - Reuters

civilisation," said Musk, who arrived wearing the "cheese head" wedge hat favoured by local football fans. "So it's like, I feel like this is one of those things that may not seem that it's going to affect the entire destiny of humanity, but I think it will."

"We actually are in serious danger of losing the election," he said. "We've got to pull a rabbit out of a hat."

The April 1 contest will determine the ideological tilt of the state's top court as it considers abortion rights, labour rights and possibly election rules.

Technically nonpartisan, the race is seen as an early referendum on Trump in a politically competitive state.

Musk warned that the court might redraw legislative districts in a way that could cause Trump's Republicans to lose seats in the US House of Representatives.

"I think this will be important for the future of civilisation. It's that significant," Musk said.

As of last week, groups affiliated with Musk had spent at least \$17.5mn to support Schimel, according to New York University's Brennan Centre for Justice – more

than one-fifth of the \$81mn spent in total on the race.

Musk's \$1mn giveaway echoed his tactics from the 2024 presidential election, when he gave cheques to voters who signed petitions supporting conservative causes.

Wisconsin's attorney-general, Democrat Josh Kaul, sued to block the giveaway but the state Supreme Court ruled it could go ahead, according to the *Washington Post*.

Musk spent more than \$250mn to help elect Trump last year, far more than any other individual, and his appearance in Wisconsin showed his willingness to get involved in downballot races as well.

Trump has deputised Musk to oversee an effort to slash the federal government that has effectively shuttered several agencies and fired tens of thousands of workers.

The liberal candidate, 60-year-old Crawford, was campaigning on Sunday the old-fashioned way, addressing a crowd at an antiques shop meeting on a rainy morning.

"So Elon Musk, folks, that guy, right? He has now spent more than \$25mn, it goes up every day," Crawford told the crowd. "He's working as the unelected right-hand man to the president. He's got an agenda."

Argentina's Kirchner appeals graft conviction to top court

Argentine ex-president Cristina Kirchner has launched an appeal against her corruption conviction and ban on holding elected office to the country's Supreme Court, her lawyers said.

Kirchner, 72, was sentenced to six years imprisonment in 2022 for the "fraudulent administration" in the awarding of tenders for public works during her 2007-2015 presidency.

The polarising leftist former president claims she is the target of a witch hunt by the political right.

An appeals court in November 2024 upheld her conviction.

If the Supreme Court rejects her appeal, her sentence will become final – but she could avoid jail because of her age and be placed under house arrest instead.

Kirchner rose to prominence as part of a political power couple with her late husband Nestor Kirchner, who preceded her as president between 2003 and 2007.

After two terms as president she served as vice-president from 2019-2023, in the last centre-left administration before President Javier Milei took power.

Milei campaigned as a cost-cutting, anti-establishment antidote to Kirchner's Peronist movement, which was accused of widespread corruption and economic mismanagement.

She has been a staunch opponent of his policies of deregulation and slashing public spending. - AFP

Canadian election candidates promise less reliance on US

By Marion Thibaut
AFP

A month before Canadians vote in an election dominated by threats from US President Donald Trump, leading candidates have pledged to build an economy that can thrive independent of its southern neighbour.

Prime Minister Mark Carney, who replaced Justin Trudeau earlier this month, appears to have revitalised his Liberal Party that just months ago looked headed towards a crushing electoral defeat.

Most polls show Carney's Liberals now leading the Conservatives, whose leader Pierre Poilievre has struggled, experts say, to adjust his message in response to Trump.

The US president has repeatedly spoken about annexing Canada while pushing an array of tariffs that could force America's northern neighbour and largest trading partner into recession.

Campaigning outside Toronto yesterday, Carney said that "Trump is trying to fundamentally restructure the US economy", which will force Canada to "reimagine" its own.

"We need to build a new Canadian economy, a more resilient economy that can succeed in what will be a drastically different world," Carney said.

Canada needs to be able to thrive "without any regard to what goes on in the United States", he added.



Pierre Poilievre

Poilievre built momentum over the past year by attacking an increasingly unpopular Trudeau and by promising to address core issues like affordability, notably soaring housing costs.

His campaign has maintained a focus on rising costs but with added emphasis on Trump.

"It is time to turn Canada into an economic fortress that puts our country first for a change," he said yesterday in the eastern province of New Brunswick.

"With Donald Trump threatening our country with tariffs, we need big projects that link our regions, east to west," he said.

"We need to be able to get our resources across Canada, bypassing America, so we can trade more with each other and sell our resources to the world."



Mark Carney

Political analysts increasingly believe that Canadians will vote on April 28 based on who they think can best stand up to Trump.

Ottawa voter Carol Salemi told AFP over the weekend that the next government will have to engage in "some sort of negotiation" with Washington and "we need a strong leader to do that".

Danielle Varga, 22, echoed that viewpoint, saying that Canada needs "someone that's strong against America".

"It feels like everyone's on that same page, which is good," she added.

Carney has argued his experience has prepared him to lead Canada through economic turmoil.

The 60-year-old is a former investment banker at Goldman Sachs, and later gover-

nor of the Bank of Canada during the 2008-2009 financial crisis.

He also led the Bank of England through the Brexit vote and its aftermath.

Trump said that he had an "extremely productive" first call with Carney on Friday, adding that the two leaders "agree on many things".

That was a stark change in tone from a US president who repeatedly mocked Trudeau as the "governor" of a US state.

However, Poilievre, 45, maintains that Carney is offering a continuation of Trudeau, whom the Conservatives accuse of poor economic management.

"President Trump has said he wants the Liberals back in power. We know why, because they will keep Canada weak and keep our investment flowing out of this country," he said at a campaign stop on Sunday.

Ottawa University politics professor Genevieve Tellier said that the election comes at a "truly exceptional time for Canada".

The country is "looking for a saviour", she told AFP.

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Australia pours billions into missile procurement amidst global shortages

Reuters
Avalon, Australia

The Ukraine war and increased European defence spending are likely to slow Australia's plans to develop its own missile components' capability as it pushes ahead with a multi-billion-dollar effort to acquire long-range strike missiles.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese pledged A\$74bn (\$47bn) last year for missile acquisition including A\$2bn to establish a Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance Enterprise in Australia, as his Labor government reshaped the country's defence strategy to respond to China's military buildup.

Hedging against global supply issues, Australia signed a flurry of orders with US and European defence companies, including Lockheed Martin, Kongsberg and Raytheon.

Lockheed Martin president for missiles and fire control Tim Cahill said that the US company was in discussions with Australia on "long term and short term solutions" for hypersonic missiles, which Australia wants to defend its northern borders.

"Long range strike and hypersonics - long range fast strike and very survivable strike - is clearly a priority," Cahill said in an interview at the Avalon Air Show.

Gathered at the event in the southern state of Victoria, defence executives said global missile component shortages and high demand, and the need to improve the capacity of Australian suppliers, meant Australian components would only gradually be built into local production.

Norway's Kongsberg plans to have a common supply chain between Europe, the US and the Indo-Pacific when new factories in Australia and the US open, with the workload distributed across the facilities, said its executive vice president of missiles & space Oyvind Kolset.

"Of course the demand is extremely high now, it's a challenge to ramp up at the rate we are doing now, but at least we have worked

on this for a number of years," Kolset said, referring to missile production for the Ukraine war.

Australia's defence department said the first guided missile production in Australia by Kongsberg, of its joint strike missile and naval strike missile, would start in 2027.

The company has also contracted 10 Australian suppliers for possible work on installations of its naval strike missile on the deck of Australian frigates, said Kongsberg Australia general manager John Fry.

Some parts of the missile supply chain require more industrial capacity than Australia currently has, he said.

"Making the missile from scratch with today's capability wouldn't be possible. We can't do that in Norway either, we rely on suppliers in the US and Europe," said Kolset.

Lockheed Martin, meanwhile, expects to produce guided multiple launch rocket systems (GMLRS) in Australia this year.

The supply of solid rocket motors needed for GMLRS in the US was "not sufficient", Cahill said in an example of global shortages.

Cahill said Australia's guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance Enterprise was strategically important and would bring high capacity production outside the US for the first time.

Although 60 local companies had been identified as potential suppliers, Australian content would be slowly brought in, he said.

Lockheed Martin has delivered the first two of 42 high-mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMARS) launcher vehicles ordered by Australia, even with the demand in Ukraine.

Australia has said army regiments with HIMARS can be transported by C-17 aircraft to neighbouring island states, which have defence agreements with Australia, in any regional conflict.

Australia will select a second order of land-based missile systems by the end of the year, with HIMARS and Kongsberg's Naval Strike Missile mounted on an Australian-made Bushmaster truck shortlisted.

Blossoms bloom



Visitors ride boats next to cherry blossoms in nearly full bloom at Chidorigafuchi park in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday.

Opposition warns of instability if Bangladesh polls delayed

Reuters
New Delhi

Bangladesh's main opposition party has warned of instability and "strong resentment within the people" if elections are not held by December, after the country's de facto prime minister said the poll could be delayed until 2026.

An unelected interim government led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus has been running the country of 173mn since August, after deadly student-led protests forced prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a long-time India ally, to flee to New Delhi.

The country's two biggest parties, Hasina's Awami League and rival Bangladesh Nationalist Party, had both wanted elections to be held last year, but Yunus said in a speech on Tuesday that a vote could be held between December 2025 and June 2026.

That would give time for reforms to conduct "the most free, fair and credible elections in Bangladesh", Yunus said. The opposition and some Western countries alleged widespread rigging in the previous elections by Hasina, which she denied.

Earlier this month, a former ministerial

colleague of Yunus, student leader Nahid Islam, said elections this year would be difficult as policing and law and order have not yet been fully restored.

But the opposition BNP wants a return to democracy this year, said Abdul Moyeen Khan, a member of the party's highest decision-making body and a former minister of science and information technology.

"We will try to convince them that the best way for them is to call an election as soon as possible and go for an honourable exit," Khan said, referring to the interim government.

"December is a generally agreed-upon schedule. Beyond December would make things more complicated," said Khan, speaking from Washington, DC where he is seeking meetings with US officials to discuss Bangladesh.

"There will be strong resentment within the people of Bangladesh. That means some instability maybe... Time will decide."

Khan is the first senior BNP figure to warn of consequences if elections are not held this year.

Hasina's Awami League has largely disintegrated with the prime minister and other senior leaders out of the country or on the run.

BNP's main rivals in the next election are

likely to be Islam's newly launched students outfit, Jatiya Nagarik Party or the National Citizen Party. Student leaders have said Bangladeshis are tired of the two established parties and want change.

But Khan said internal BNP surveys show the party would win an easy majority in any election held within the next year and that acting party chief Tarique Rahman would return to Dhaka from his self-imposed exile in London when elections are announced.

Several court orders against him and his mother, former prime minister Khaleda Zia, have been overturned in recent months, potentially allowing him to return.

BNP chairperson Zia, who suffers from liver cirrhosis and heart problems and has been recovering in London since January, is "far better now than how she was in Bangladesh", but unlikely to return to active politics, Khan said after a recent meeting with her.

Khan said the BNP had no plans yet to contest the election as part of any coalition, but once elected it would be open to working with other parties, including the students' Jatiya Nagarik Party.

"After the election, we'd be happy to form a government with everyone who is in favour of democracy," he said.

Japan estimates feared megaquake could kill 300,000

Japan's economy could lose as much as \$1.81tn in the event of a long-anticipated megquake off its Pacific coast, which could trigger devastating tsunamis, the collapse of hundreds of buildings and potentially killing about 300,000 people, a government report said yesterday. The expected economic damage of 270.3tn yen, or nearly half of the country's total gross domestic product (GDP), was up sharply from the previous estimate of 214.2tn yen as the new estimate accounted for inflationary pressures and updated terrain and ground data which have expanded anticipated flood areas, the Cabinet Office report showed.

Japan is one of the world's most earthquake-prone countries, and the government sees about an 80% chance of a magnitude 8-9 earthquake along a tremulous seabed zone known as the Nankai Trough.

Anger at impeached S Korean president



People take part in a demonstration against impeached South Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol in Seoul yesterday.

Tokyo hospital opens city's first 'baby hatch'

AFP
Tokyo

A Tokyo hospital yesterday became the Japanese capital's first medical institution to offer a system allowing the safe, anonymous drop-off of infants by parents unable to raise them.

Used for centuries globally, so-called baby boxes or baby hatches are meant to prevent child abandonment or abuse.

But they have been criticised for violating a child's right to know their parents.

Newborns within four weeks of age can now be placed in a basket in a quiet room with a discreet entrance at a hospital in Tokyo run by the Christian foundation Sanikukai.

The scheme, open 24 hours a day, is meant to be an "emer-

gency, last-resort measure" to save babies' lives, Hitoshi Kato, head of Sanikukai Hospital, told a news conference.

There are still "mothers and babies with nowhere to go," the hospital said in a statement, citing the "abandonment of infants in baggage lockers, parks or beaches".

Sanikukai is only Japan's second medical institution to open a baby hatch, after the Catholic-run Jikei hospital in southwest Japan's Kumamoto region opened one in 2007.

As of May last year, 179 babies and toddlers have reportedly been left at Jikei's baby hatch.

At Sanikukai in Tokyo, when a baby is put in the basket, a motion sensor immediately alerts hospital staffers to the drop-off, sending them rushing down-stairs to tend to the baby, project leader Hiroshi Oe said.

Japan-Australia flagship hydrogen project stumbles

AFP
Tokyo

Japan wants to become a hydrogen fuel leader to meet its net-zero goals, but one blockbuster project is hanging in the balance over questions about its climate credentials.

The Hydrogen Energy Supply Chain (HESC) is billed as a billion-dollar attempt to ship liquid hydrogen from Australia to Japan.

However, cold feet about the project in Australia means HESC will source hydrogen from Japan to meet a 2030 deadline for its demonstration phase.

Hydrogen sounds promising on paper: while fossil fuels emit planet-warming greenhouse gases, burning hydrogen creates only water vapour.

But it has not yet lived up to its promise, with several much-hyped projects globally struggling to overcome high costs and engineering challenges.

Hydrogen's climate credentials also depend on how it is produced.

"Green hydrogen" uses renewable energy, while "blue hydrogen" relies on fossil fuels such as coal and gas, with carbon capture technology to reduce emissions.

"Brown hydrogen" is produced by fossil fuels without any carbon

capture. The HESC project aims to produce blue hydrogen in the Australian state of Victoria, harnessing abundant local supplies of lignite coal.

With the world's first liquid hydrogen tanker and an imposing storage site near Kobe in Japan, HESC had been touted as a flagship experiment showcasing Japan's ambitions for the fuel.

HESC says it aims to eventually produce enough hydrogen to "reduce about 1.8mn tonnes per annum of CO2 from being released into the atmosphere".

Japan's energy sector emitted 974mn tonnes of CO2 from fuel combustion in 2022, according to

the International Energy Agency (IEA).

Japan's government pledged 220bn yen (now \$1.4bn) to HESC's current "commercial demonstration" phase, which has a completion deadline of 2030.

But to meet this deadline, the project will now source hydrogen in Japan.

That has been blamed on cold feet among Australian officials concerned about the project's environmental payoff.

A spokesman for Japan's Kawasaki Heavy Industries, one of the companies behind HESC, said the decision to shift production to Japan was taken "chiefly because of

delay in procedures on the Australian side".

The Victorian government did not respond to repeated requests for comment, though Australian officials have told local media that the move was a Japanese "commercial decision".

Australia's cooling interest in the project is due to "strong opposition" from environmental activists and energy experts opposed to carbon capture and storage, said Daisuke Akimoto of Tokyo University of Information Sciences.

"The main problem the project faces is the lack of approval of the blue hydrogen project by the Victorian government," Akimoto said.

Kawasaki said it has not yet decided what type of hydrogen it will procure in Japan and downplayed the project's challenges.

"We are very positive" about HESC and "there is no change" to the goal of building a new supply chain, the spokesman said, declining to be named.

However, sourcing the hydrogen locally leaves "a critical evidence gap at the middle of the project" - proving carbon capture and storage work - explained David Cebon, an engineering professor at the University of Cambridge.

That is "difficult and challenging and not being done successfully anywhere", Cebon said.

Fear of aftershocks forces patients into hospital car park

Hundreds of patients, including babies, the elderly and Buddhist monks, lie on gurneys in a hospital car park in the sweltering heat of Mandalay, a city still living in fear of aftershocks three days after a deadly quake struck Myanmar. Mandalay General Hospital - the city's main medical facility - has around 1,000 beds but despite high heat and humidity, most patients are being treated outside in the wake of the massive earthquake that killed more than 2,000 people in Myanmar and neighbouring Thailand. Friday's 7.7-magnitude quake was

followed by repeated aftershocks that rattled Mandalay, Myanmar's second-largest city, over the weekend, and patients are being kept outside in case more tremors cause damage inside. "This is a very, very imperfect condition for everyone," one medic, who asked to remain anonymous, said. "We're trying to do what we can here," he added. "We are trying our best." As temperatures soared to 39 degrees Celsius (102 degrees Fahrenheit), patients sheltered under a thin tarpaulin rigged up to protect them from the fierce

tropical sun. Relatives took the hands of their loved ones, trying to comfort them, or wafted them with bamboo fans. Small children with scrapes cried amid the miserable conditions, while an injured monk lay on a gurney, hooked up to a drip. It is not only the patients that are suffering. Medics sat cross-legged on the ground, trying to recuperate during breaks in their exhausting shifts. Although the hospital building itself has not been visibly affected, only a handful of patients who need intensive care, and the

doctors who look after them, remain inside. The rest crammed themselves under the tarpaulin, or a shelter close by with a corrugated iron roof surrounded by motorbikes. Fear of aftershocks is widespread across the city, with many people sleeping out in the streets since the quake, either unable to return home or too nervous to do so. Some have tents but many, including young children, have simply bedded down on blankets in the middle of the roads, trying to keep as far from buildings as possible for fear of falling masonry.



People queue for relief supplies near the earthquake's epicentre, in Sagaing, Myanmar, yesterday.

Watchdog had flagged concerns over Thai building that collapsed

An anti-corruption watchdog had flagged to authorities irregularities it found in the construction of a Bangkok skyscraper before it collapsed in an earthquake last week, killing at least 12 people, the head of the group said. Initial tests of materials gathered at the site, meanwhile, indicated the presence of substandard steel among the wreckage of the 30-storey structure, according to industry ministry officials, who added that further analysis was required. Rescuers were continuing search and rescue efforts yesterday for around 75 people feared still trapped under the rubble of the unfinished tower, which was being built for Thailand's State Audit Office by a Chinese company and a Thai construction firm. The government has announced an investigation into the cause of the collapse of the skyscraper, the only Bangkok building to completely crumble when a 7.7-magnitude quake struck central Myanmar on Friday and rattled neighbouring countries. Mana Nimitmongkol, president of the Anti-Corruption Organisation of Thailand, said it had informed the audit office about its concerns regarding the project. The government had threatened to cancel the project in January due to delays, he said. The audit office, which has said that it will investigate the cause of the building collapse, did not answer e-mailed questions.

(Reuters) including whether it had considered cancelling the contract. Construction of the building began in 2020 and is being carried out by a joint venture between Italian Thai Development PCL and China Railway Number 10 (Thailand) Ltd, a local unit of China's state-owned China Railway Group. Italian Thai Development and China Railway Group did not immediately comment on either the watchdog's comments or the industry ministry's steel tests. The tower was originally slated for completion by 2026 but was behind schedule. The deputy auditor general, Sutthipong Boonmishi, told reporters on Saturday that construction was only "30% completed" before it collapsed. Site visits to the project during construction by the anti-corruption group had raised concerns about delays, worker shortages and possible corner-cutting, Mana said, whose organisation scrutinises some 170 government projects around Thailand. "Sometimes the number of workers on site were much fewer than there should be, causing delays," he said. "Potentially there was a rush to complete the project towards the end, which could cause a drop in the standard of work." Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra ordered government agencies to investigate the root cause of the building collapse within one week.

Search for survivors intensifies, quake death toll exceeds 2,000

Reuters
Bangkok

Survivors were pulled out of rubble in Myanmar and signs of life were detected in the ruins of a skyscraper in Bangkok yesterday as efforts intensified to find people trapped three days after a massive earthquake in southeast Asia that killed at least 2,000.

Rescuers freed four people, including a pregnant woman and a girl, from collapsed buildings in Mandalay, the city in central Myanmar near the epicentre of Friday's 7.7-magnitude earthquake, China's Xinhua news agency reported.

Chinese rescue workers in red helmets carried one survivor, wrapped in a metallic thermal blanket, through heaps of shattered concrete and twisted metal at an apartment building in Mandalay, images carried by China's state broadcaster CCTV showed.

Drone footage of the city showed a huge, multi-storey building pancaked into layers of concrete.

One survivor in Mandalay said that after rescue workers pulled him out of the rubble of his restaurant, he had rented a bulldozer with his own money to try to find the body of one of his workers and make the building safe for his neighbours.

Civil war in Myanmar, where a military junta seized power in a coup in 2021, was complicating efforts to reach those injured and made homeless by the nation's biggest quake in a century.

"Access to all victims is an issue... given the conflict situation. There are a lot of security issues to access some areas across the front lines in particular," Arnaud de Baecque, resident rep-



A collapsed building in the aftermath of the strong earthquake in Mandalay, Myanmar.

resentative of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Myanmar, told Reuters.

One rebel group said Myanmar's ruling military was still conducting airstrikes on villages in the aftermath of the quake, and Singapore's foreign minister called for an immediate ceasefire to help relief efforts.

In the Thai capital Bangkok, rescuers pulled out another body from the rubble of an unfinished skyscraper that collapsed in the quake, bringing the death toll from the building collapse to 12, with a total of 19 dead across Thailand and 75 still missing at the building site.

Scanning machines and sniffer dogs were deployed and Bangkok's deputy governor Tavida Kamolvej said rescuers were urgently working out how to access an area where signs of life had been detected, three days on from the quake.

Realistic chances of survival diminish after 72

hours, she said, adding: "We have to speed up. We're not going to stop even after 72 hours."

Initial tests showed that some steel samples collected from the site of the collapsed building were substandard, Thai industry ministry officials said. The government has launched an investigation into the cause of the collapse.

"We will have to collect more samples and conduct more tests once we can," official Nonticha Likitaporn told a press conference.

In Myanmar, state media said the death toll had reached 2,065 with more than 3,900 injured and over 270 missing and that the military government had declared a week-long mourning period from yesterday. The Wall Street Journal, citing the junta, reported the death toll had reached 2,028 in Myanmar, while the opposition National Unity Government, which includes remnants of the government ousted in 2021, put the toll at 2,418 as of Monday.

Chinese state media said three Chinese nationals were among the dead.

Reuters could not immediately confirm the new death tolls. Media access has been restricted in the country since the junta took power. Junta chief General Min Aung Hlaing warned at the weekend that the number of fatalities could rise.

China, India and Thailand are among Myanmar's neighbours that have sent relief materials and teams, along with aid and personnel from Malaysia, Singapore and Russia.

"It doesn't matter how long we work. The most important thing is that we can bring hope to the local people," said Yue Xin, head of the China Search and Rescue Team that pulled people out of the rubble in Mandalay, Xinhua reported.

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Europeans will need permit to travel to the UK from tomorrow

AFP
London

In a shake-up of long-standing travel rules, European nationals heading to the UK will from tomorrow need a mandatory entry permit, which the British government says will strengthen border

security. The Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) can be bought online in the next few days for £10 (12 euros), but the price is rising swiftly from April 9 to £16.

It is similar to the ESTA system in operation in the US and will be mandatory for all European visitors to Britain from April 2, following its roll-out for US, Canadian and other

visa-exempt nationals in January.

"By digitising the immigration system we are paving the way for a contactless UK border," Migration Minister Seema Malhotra said earlier this month when the website was opened for the first applications.

"Expanding ETA worldwide cements our commitment to enhance security through technology and in-

novation." The permit allows visits of up to six months and is valid for two years. It is required for all travellers including minors and babies.

The application, which can be made on a smartphone app or through the government website, has been open to Europeans since the start of March. From tomorrow, nationals of some 30 European

countries - including all those in the European Union except Ireland - will need to carry the electronic permit to enter Britain, which left the EU in 2020. The applicant will need to provide a photo of their passport and their face. The process takes around 10 minutes, according to the Home Office. In most cases, an application decision is made within

minutes. However, the government recommends allowing up to three working days for the application. If successful, the ETA is digitally linked to the applicant's passport. Flight passengers transiting airdside without crossing the UK border are exempt from the scheme, after pressure from Heathrow which feared a loss of passenger footfall.

Bank of England proposes hike to deposit guarantee for savers

The limit has been set at £85,000 since 2017, and an increase would take into account inflation since then

Reuters
London

Britain's Prudential Regulation Authority has proposed raising the protection limit for savers in case a bank fails to £110,000 (\$142,300), the Bank of England (BoE) said yesterday.

The deposit protection limit is the maximum amount of money that is typically protected for savers should their bank become insolvent.

The limit has been set at £85,000 since 2017, and an increase would take into account inflation since then, the BoE said, adding that a change, if implemented, would apply from December.

A hike in the UK's guarantee would put deposit protection above that of the EU but below the US. In the EU the level of deposit protection is harmonised at 100,000 euros across member states, while in the US it is at least \$250,000 per depositor.

"Confidence in our financial system is an essential foundation for economic growth. We want to support confidence in our banks, building societies and credit unions by raising the amount that people can keep in their account," said Sam Woods, deputy

governor for Prudential Regulation and CEO of the PRA, which is part of the BoE.

The BoE considered an overhaul of the deposit guarantee scheme in 2023, media reported at the time, after the rapid collapse of Silicon Valley Bank raised questions about how to ensure faster access to cash when a lender collapses, and about the appropriate level of protection.

The BoE said yesterday it was consulting on other changes, including introducing rules needed for a new resolution tool designed to enable industry funds to be used to recapitalise failing firms.

The bank also wants to increase the limit for certain temporary high balance claims such as buying or selling a house to £1.4m from the current £1m.

"Raising the deposit protection limit is a sensible decision to support consumer confidence in the financial service industry," Rocio Concha, director of policy and advocacy at consumer group Which? said in the BoE statement.

"At a time when the government and regulators are going for growth, this decision is a reminder that strong consumer protections and economic growth go hand in hand."

UK Finance, an industry group representing banks, also welcomed the review of the limit. Eric Leenders, managing director for personal finance, said the scheme "underpins confidence in the UK's financial system".

UK 'expects to be hit by US tariffs this week'

Britain expects to be hit by US President Donald Trump's plans to impose global tariffs this week and the government has been preparing for all eventualities, Prime Minister Keir Starmer's spokesman said yesterday. Talks between Britain and the US to negotiate a new economic deal that would avert the tariffs are expected to continue beyond tomorrow, when Trump is expected to unveil the worldwide tariffs, the spokesman said. "We have been actively preparing for all eventualities ahead of the expected announcement from President Trump this week, which (we) would expect the UK to be impacted alongside other countries," the spokesman said. Trump is set to announce new reciprocal tariff rates on what he has called "Liberation Day" on April 2, after implementing levies on aluminium, steel and automobiles, along with increased tariffs on all goods from China.

Free bus rides in London



Vintage red buses give free rides through the heart of the city in London, Britain.

Far-right Reform UK party proposes 'British DOGE'

AFP
Birmingham, UK

Leader of anti-immigration party Reform UK Nigel Farage has proposed a possible UK version of the US' so-called department of government efficiency (DOGE) if the party was elected.

Farage was speaking at a rally to launch his party's campaign ahead of local elections in parts of the UK and the first major by-election test for Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer since he was elected.

"We need a British form of DOGE, as Elon Musk has got in America," he told the rally in

Britain's second city of Birmingham, referring to the unelected tech billionaire's new department which is part of Trump's cost-cutting drive.

Public sector spending had "grown out of all proportion" and must be cut, he said.

He added that the party would slash taxes, with no one paying income tax until they earned over £20,000 (\$23,900) a year.

"We are on the side of the worker, we're on the side of working people, we want to incentivise those on benefits to get off benefits and go back to work," he said.

Deputy leader Richard Tice also echoed the language of US President Donald Trump's presidential campaign by asking if the audi-

ence wanted to "make Britain great again".

Reform secured 14% of the vote at Britain's last general election on July 4, 2024, winning five seats in the 650-seat parliament - an unprecedented haul for a hard-right party in the UK.

One member has since been suspended and now sits as an independent.

Local elections will take place in 24 of England's 317 councils on May 1 alongside the by-election in the Runcorn and Helsby constituency in northwestern England where Labour secured more than 50% of the vote last year.

Starmer swept into power at the election on promises of delivering growth and slashing immigration.

Starmer meets Finnish president



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer meets with Finnish President Alexander Stubb at Downing Street in London, Britain, yesterday.

Netflix drama *Adolescence* to be shown in UK schools

AFP
London

The Netflix drama *Adolescence*, which has sparked widespread debate about the toxic and misogynistic influences young boys are exposed to online, will be shown in UK secondary schools, the prime minister's office and the streaming giant said yesterday.

"We're incredibly proud of the impact the show has made, and are delighted to be able to offer it to all schools across the UK," said Anne Mensah, vice president of UK content at Netflix, adding that the four-part series had "helped articulate the pressures young people and parents face".

The announcement came as Prime Minister Keir Starmer met the creators of the show

alongside charities and young people at his Downing Street office to discuss the issues raised in the series.

Starmer said that he had watched the drama - in which a 13-year-old boy stabs a girl to death after being radicalised online - with his own teenage children and that it had "hit home hard". "It's an important initiative to encourage as many pupils as possible to watch the show," he said. Minors aged 11-18 will be able to see the series at their secondary schools.

"Openly talking about changes in how they communicate, the content they're seeing, and exploring the conversations they're having with their peers is vital if we are to properly support them in navigating contemporary challenges, and deal with malign influences," Starmer added.

Starmer calls for co-ordinated fight against people smugglers

AFP
London

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer urged dozens of countries to collaborate to dismantle migrant smuggling gangs "once and for all" when he opened an immigration crime summit yesterday.

Starmer is seeking to crack down on would-be asylum seekers arriving in England on flimsy small boats and has brought together delegates from more than 40 nations for the two-day London meeting.

The interior ministers of France

and Germany were among those attending the Organised Immigration Crime Summit. China and the US also sent representatives.

The UK government is struggling to stop undocumented migrants embarking on dangerous boat journeys across the Channel from France.

"This vile trade exploits the cracks between our institutions... and profits from our inability at the political level to come together," Starmer said.

He argued that resources and intelligence must be shared and that governments need to "tackle the problem upstream at every step of the people-smuggling routes".

"There's nothing progressive or compassionate about turning a blind eye to this," Starmer added.

Britain's Home Office billed the gathering as "the first major international summit in the UK to tackle the global emergency of illegal migration".

Representatives from across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, as well as North America were due to attend.

In a video message played to delegates, Italy's far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni hailed her country's agreement with Albania to process asylum claims at detention centres in the non-European Union country.

She claimed that countries "criticised (it) at first but that then has gained increasing consensus".

Italian judges have repeatedly refused to sign off on the detention in Albania of migrants intercepted by Italian authorities at sea, ordering them to be transferred to Italy instead, and the European Court of Justice is reviewing Rome's policy.

The summit is designed to build on talks Interior Minister Yvette Cooper held in December with her counterparts from Belgium, Germany, France and the Netherlands.

The five countries signed a joint action plan designed to boost co-operation to dismantle migrant smuggling gangs.

Also attending were delegates from countries from where would-be asylum seekers set out, such as Vietnam and Iraq, and countries they transit, such as those in the Balkans.

It also brings together the heads of UK law enforcement agencies and their counterparts from Interpol, Europol and Afripol.

The Home Office said the summit would discuss the equipment, infrastructure and fraudulent documents that organised criminal gangs use to smuggle people.

They would also look at how supply routes work and discuss how to tackle the online recruitment of migrants, including with

representatives from social media platforms Meta, X and TikTok.

The UK announced on Sunday it was launching adverts on Zalo, the Vietnamese instant messaging system, to warn people of the dangers of people smugglers.

Vietnamese nationals are among the top nationalities making the perilous sea voyage across the Channel to Britain.

Similar UK campaigns have already been launched in Albania and Iraqi Kurdistan.

UK officials are also keen to speak to China about how it can stop exporting engines and other small boats parts used in crossings.

POLICY

India raises gas prices from April

India has raised the price of locally produced gas from oil fields by nearly 4% to \$6.75 per million metric British thermal units (mmBtu) for April, compared with \$6.50/mmBtu for the previous month. In 2023, India fixed a cap of \$6.50 per mmBtu for two years with a provision of an annual upward revision of 25 cents from the third year. India has also set the ceiling price for gas to be produced from difficult fields at \$10.04 per mmBtu for April-September, compared to \$10.16 per mmBtu in the previous six months, the website of the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell of the oil ministry showed.

DECISION

Indian government to hike stake in Vodafone Idea

The Indian government will increase its stake in Vodafone Idea to approximately 48.99% by converting Rs369.5bn (\$4.3bn) in outstanding spectrum auction dues into equity, a regulatory filing from the company showed. The ministry of communications has directed Vodafone Idea to issue 36.95bn shares at Rs10 each, the filing said, boosting the government's stake from 22.6%. The government is already the largest shareholder in the telecom company, according to LSEG data. Vodafone Idea said its initial investors will continue to have operational control despite the increased government stake.

CORPORATE

OpenAI, Meta in talks with Reliance for AI partnerships

OpenAI and Meta Platforms have held separate discussions with India's Reliance Industries over potential partnerships to expand their artificial intelligence (AI) offerings in the country, technology news website The Information reported. A possibility being discussed involved a relationship between Reliance Jio and OpenAI to distribute ChatGPT, according to The Information. OpenAI also discussed with employees cutting the ChatGPT subscription price to as low as several dollars instead of \$20 a month, according to the report, which added that it is not clear if OpenAI has discussed the idea of price reduction with Reliance.

DATA

India's infrastructure output growth slows in February

India's infrastructure output grew 2.9% on-year in February, its slowest pace in five months as the decline in oil and natural gas production accelerated sharply, government data showed. Infrastructure output, which tracks activity across eight sectors and makes up 40% of the country's industrial production, grew at a revised 5.1% in January, compared to the initial estimate of 4.6%. Infrastructure output last increased at a slower pace, of 2.4%, in September last year. Crude oil output dropped 5.2% year-on-year in February, much steeper than the 1.1% drop in January, while natural gas production declined 6%, compared with a 1.5% drop in January.

Indian banks' loan growth slows: RBI

The data showed that banks' credit increased by 12% year-on-year last month, slower than the 16.6% rise a year earlier

Reuters
New Delhi

Loan growth at Indian banks moderated for an eighth straight month in February, central bank data showed, due to a drop in personal and credit card loans following tighter rules by the Reserve Bank of India.

The data showed that banks' credit increased by 12% year-on-year last month, slower than the 16.6% rise a year earlier, excluding the impact of HDFC Bank's merger with parent Housing Development Finance Corporation.

Banks' personal loan growth more than halved to 8.4% year-on-year in February from 19.5% a year ago, excluding the HDFC Bank merger impact, while growth in outstanding credit card debt dropped to 11.2% from 31%, the data showed

Including the merger impact, loans grew 11% in February, compared with 20.5% in the year-ago period.

The loan growth rate slowed to 12.5% in January, excluding the merger, and to 11.4% including the merger.

India's banking sector saw rapid loan growth for several years, driven by retail demand for

unsecured loans.

However, the RBI intervened in late 2023, imposing stricter capital requirements on personal loans, credit card loans as well as credit to non-banking finance companies (NBFCs).

Concerned about potential bad loans, the RBI's tighter lending norms aimed to mitigate risk. Banks simultaneously reduced lending to optimise their credit-deposit ratio - a key liquidity metric - amid a scramble to raise deposits.

As a result, loan growth has slowed significantly over the past few months, with personal and credit card loans particularly affected.

However, the Reserve Bank of India relaxed its capital requirement rule last month, marking a significant shift since Sanjay Malhotra took over as governor in December.

Although analysts expect the change to positively impact the economy, they say that the effect will only become apparent in a few months.

Banks' personal loan growth more than halved to 8.4% year-on-year in February from 19.5% a year ago, excluding the HDFC Bank merger impact, while growth in outstanding credit card debt dropped to 11.2% from 31%, the data showed.

Credit growth in the services sector decelerated to 13% in February from 21.4%, primarily due to a drop in loans to NBFCs.

Meanwhile, loans to industries grew 7.3% last month, lower than the 8.4% a year earlier.



Eid al-Fitr prayers held at Taj Mahal

Muslims offer prayers during Eid al-Fitr, that marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan, inside the complex of the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, yesterday. Millions of Muslims across the country gathered in mosques and prayer grounds yesterday on Eid al-Fitr.

Local steel demand to offset EU import curbs, says India

Reuters
New Delhi

India's government is confident that strong domestic demand for steel will offset the European Union's plans to tighten steel import quotas from this month, a source with direct knowledge of the matter said.

The European Commission last week said it would tighten import restrictions on steel from this month in a bid to shield the ailing European steel sector from surging imports.

The EU will reduce import quotas, known as safeguards, limiting the amount of steel that can be imported into the bloc of 27 nations tariff-free. "There will be some impact but our domestic consumption is growing so

fast that the industry should be able to absorb," the source said, declining to be identified as India has not yet publicly responded to the EU's move.

India's federal ministry of steel did not respond to a e-mail seeking comments.

Among the EU's concerns were India's exports, as Europe is among the top destinations for Indian steel.

In the first 11 months of the financial year, India exported 2.03mn metric tonnes of steel to the European Union, which was 46% of the country's overall shipments.

However, Indian exports are typically small compared to local consumption inside the world's second-biggest crude steel-producing nation.

In 2023-24, India exported 7.5mn met-

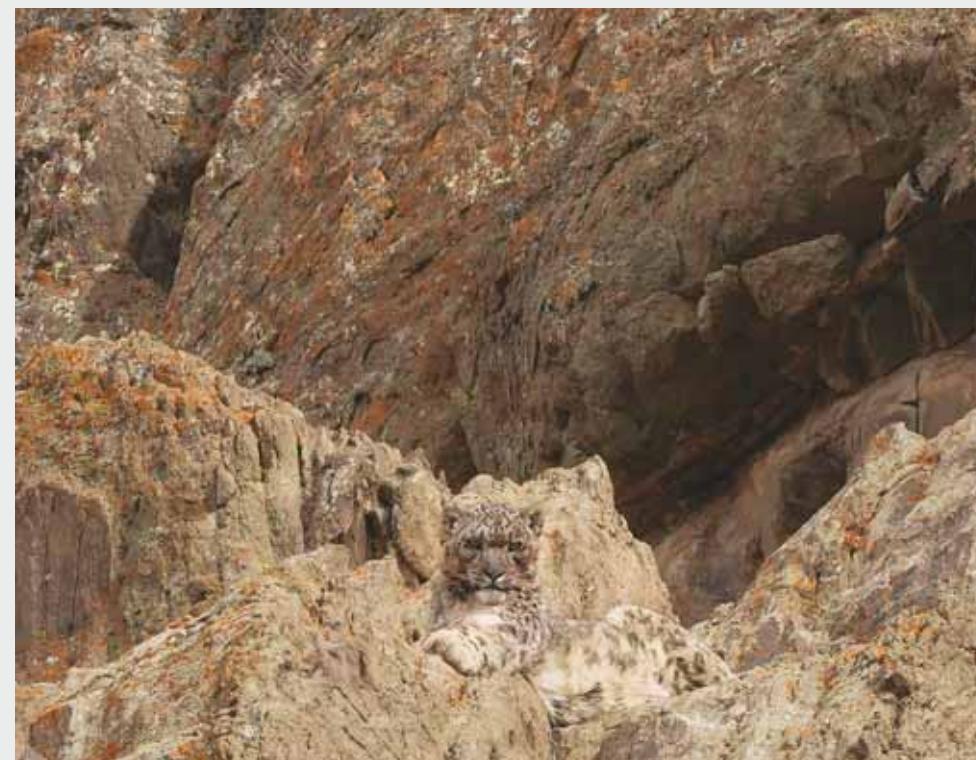
ric tonnes of steel, while consumption was 136mn metric tonnes.

The source also said there would be no impact from US tariffs on Indian steel, as exports to the US were "insignificant."

The source added that since Chinese exports to the US were small, there was less concern about diverted steel flows toward India, adding that China still remained the "biggest concern".

India shipped record quantities of steel from China, South Korea and Japan in the first 10 months of the financial year that started in April. The country also remained a net importer. Last week, India recommended a temporary tax of 12% on some steel products for 200 days, known locally as safeguard duty, in a bid to curb imports.

Hidden in plain sight



A snow leopard is sighted atop a hill near Gya village on the outskirts of Leh, India.

Quick commerce sector corners e-grocery orders

Reuters
New Delhi

India's quick commerce sector accounted for over two-thirds of all e-grocery orders last year, with its total market share growing about five times to \$6-7bn from 2022, a report by consultancy firm Bain and e-commerce giant Flipkart showed.

The industry, which is dominated by the likes of Zomato-owned Blinkit, also accounted for a tenth of overall e-retail dollars spent in 2024, according to the report.

These platforms deliver groceries to electronics within minutes, and its market share is expected to grow over 40% annually till 2030, driven by expansion across new categories, geographies and consumer segments, according to the report.

"The dramatic rise of quick commerce (i.e., delivery in less

than 30 minutes) has been one of the most defining hallmarks of India's e-retail market over the last two years," according to the report, which stated that the sector had over 20mn annual online shoppers and employed over 400,000 people.

However, these platforms could face some immediate challenges in expanding profitability, as they may struggle to grow into markets beyond large cities and also face stiff competition from larger e-commerce players including Flipkart.

To sustain profitable growth, "companies must adapt their business models for markets beyond major metros, manage rising competition, and optimise supply chains," it said.

The report comes at a time when players such as Flipkart Minutes, Mynta's M-now, BigBasket's BB Now, and Amazon's Tez have forayed into the sector with their respective quick commerce platforms.

RBI to cut rates again on April 9, then once in August: poll

Reuters
New Delhi

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will cut interest rates at a second straight meeting on April 9, with just one more cut expected in August, which would mark the shortest easing cycle on record, a Reuters poll of economists found.

With inflation in India easing to a seven-month low of 3.61% in February and the economy forecast to grow at 6.4% this fiscal

year, the weakest in four years, the central bank has room to cut rates further.

A strong majority of economists, 54 of 60 in the March 18-27 Reuters poll, expected the central bank to cut its benchmark repo rate by 25 basis points to 6% at the conclusion of its April 7-9 meeting.

One respondent predicted a 50 basis point cut, while the remaining five expected no change.

"There are not many strong growth drivers going into fiscal year 2026... they (the Reserve Bank of India) need to sustain their sup-

port to growth. Inflation has also created a lot of room for them to ease. So I think they should utilise that space and sort of recalibrate monetary policy," said Dhiraj Nirmal, economist at ANZ.

"They have injected liquidity, so that's covering some part of the liquidity deficit, that's good. But I think the rates also need to fall now because we have seen a palpable slowdown in consumption and investment and the real rates need to adjust from that perspective."

The RBI has injected about \$64bn of rupees into the banking

system over the last few months to increase money supply, which economists said was needed for rate cuts to work their way into the broader economy.

However, several economists in the poll said it would take a few more months for that to happen.

"If transmission needs to happen, especially in a rate-cutting cycle, (banking sector) liquidity needs to be on the positive side," said Indranil Pan, chief economist at Yes Bank.

Pan added liquidity will start to improve in the upcoming financial

year, beginning in April 2025, as government expenditures also pick up pace.

Median forecasts in the poll showed the Reserve Bank of India will keep interest rates at 6% in the June 4-6 meeting. However, a narrow majority of economists, 29 of 49, expected the interest rate to fall to 5.75% in the August meeting, a view unchanged from last month.

This is expected to be followed by a prolonged pause until at least the first half of next year. With a total of 75 basis points in rate cuts this cycle, it will be the short-

est easing cycle since early 2000, when the RBI began using the repo rate as its main policy tool.

"I think this is going to be a shallow rate cut cycle to begin with... Depending on what happens on the global front, drags of capital outflows and what the US Fed does," said Sakshi Gupta, principal economist at HDFC bank.

"We were always of the view that there will be a maximum of three rate cuts that the RBI will deliver... Beyond the cut this month, we remain divided between June and August."

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GULF TIMES

Will the world keep buying US Treasuries?

For decades, the US has enjoyed an unparalleled advantage in global finance, thanks to the dollar's status as the world's leading reserve currency. By running trade surpluses with the US, countries accumulated large dollar reserves, which they eagerly and overwhelmingly invested in US Treasuries. This constant recycling of global savings has enabled the US to finance persistent federal budget deficits – 6.4% of GDP in 2024 – without so much as a raised eyebrow from international investors.

This system long seemed unassailable. But cracks are beginning to show. Between September 2024 and January of this year, interest rates on 10-year Treasuries climbed by 100 basis points, even as the US Federal Reserve cut short-term interest rates by the same amount. The economists Rashad Ahmed and Alessandro Rebucci attribute these developments – which they call a "reverse conundrum" – to declining foreign official demand for dollar-denominated safe assets, driven by rising concerns over US sanctions and asset freezes.

This trend is particularly notable in China, the second-largest foreign holder of US debt after Japan. As China's trade surplus with the US has narrowed, its international investment strategy has shifted. Rather than stockpiling Treasuries, it has diversified into other dollar-denominated assets, such as direct equity investments (30.6% of total external assets in 2024) and debt instruments (25%).

As a result, China's Treasury holdings have fallen by about \$550bn since their 2011 peak, putting them at their lowest level since 2009. Moreover, Chinese investors' holdings of US sovereign debt fell to just \$759bn in 2024, down from \$1.27tn in 2015. China's total foreign reserves have also declined, from \$3.8tn in 2014 to \$3.2tn today.

Europe is quietly picking up some of the slack. UK holdings of US Treasuries – which totalled just \$207bn a decade ago – have more than tripled, reaching around \$740bn at the start of 2025. Likewise, EU countries' holdings grew from \$931bn to over \$1.5tn over the same period. Most of this increase in demand likely comes from private investors seeking higher yields.

Nonetheless, for countries outside America's fast-shrinking circle of allies, holding US debt is becoming less attractive. While the Treasury market and the US dollar have so far held up relatively well, further reductions in countries' US debt holdings could push Treasury yields higher, weaken the dollar, and threaten the stability of the international financial system. If global investors abandon US sovereign debt altogether, the dollar's status as the world's leading reserve currency would be in jeopardy (though the currency might still be used for international trade transactions).

And yet, for now, this scenario appears unlikely to materialise. Maintaining a stock of the world's top reserve asset remains an attractive proposition, and it becomes even more attractive as countries sell off Treasuries and drive up US interest rates, thereby helping to narrow the US trade deficit and improve the dollar's long-term outlook. As the dollar appreciates and Treasury yields rise, the opportunity costs of holding Treasuries falls, making them more appealing to investors.

In other words, reductions of countries' Treasury holdings are subject to a self-correcting dynamic, which limits the scale of any sell-off. This means that foreign investors are more likely to adjust their holdings gradually, rather than rush for the exit. So, while foreign holdings of US Treasuries may well decline, fears of an imminent collapse in demand for US Treasuries are probably not warranted.

While the costs of a rapid global shift away from the dollar are extremely high, this does not mean that the greenback's global primacy is invulnerable. China is actively promoting the international use of the renminbi, and both China and the eurozone are increasingly wary of excessive reliance on the US financial system, with its associated geopolitical risks. But, again, any realignment away from the dollar will not happen rapidly, much less abruptly.

Nonetheless, circumstances could change. As long as the US dollar remains the world's dominant international currency – facilitating trade and cross-border financial flows and serving as countries' main reserve asset – the convenience yield of holding dollar-denominated assets will likely forestall a large-scale sell-off. But this stability presupposes that US institutions remain strong and credible enough to preserve confidence in Treasuries. At a time of sharply rising political and institutional uncertainty, this is hardly a foregone conclusion. – Project Syndicate

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Diplomacy is the newest front in the Russia-Ukraine war

By Richard Haass
New York

The war between Russia and Ukraine continues unabated. Neither side is in a position to achieve its stated objectives through military force. But now there is significant diplomatic activity as well.

Ukraine has agreed to a 30-day ceasefire, in large part to patch up relations with US President Donald Trump's administration, which unravelled during a February 28 Oval Office confrontation between Trump and President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Russia rejected the ceasefire proposal, instead suggesting (but not implementing) a prohibition on attacking energy infrastructure. Both sides also indicated a readiness to accept a ceasefire in the Black Sea, but with Russia linking its support to a relaxation of sanctions, it is far from clear when – or even if – such a limited ceasefire would start, much less what it would encompass.

Such partial steps, if implemented, could be a way-station to something more significant. But it is at least equally possible that partial steps would not lead to a comprehensive peace agreement. Russia could prosecute the war even if the Black Sea were not an active theatre.

The biggest question remains US policy. The Trump administration has used a combination of pressure and incentives to persuade the

two sides to stop fighting. But its approach has been skewed toward offering benefits to Russia while bringing heavy pressure to bear on Ukraine.

To be clear, it is appropriate to offer Russia certain incentives. This could include a willingness to resume high-level contacts and restaff embassies, support for limited relaxation of sanctions if specified conditions are met, and to allow Russia to keep its long-term objectives for Ukraine on the table.

What is not acceptable is to embrace flawed Russian positions, such as its claims to Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and/or Zaporizhzhia based on the results of illegal referenda conducted by Russian occupation forces.

It is one thing for Trump's envoy to the Kremlin, the property-developer-turned-novice-diplomat Steve Witkoff, to characterise Russia's stance and quite another for him to adopt it as his own.

More broadly, there is no good reason to introduce final-status considerations at this point. The goal for now should be an open-ended ceasefire agreement, not a permanent peace treaty. In this instance, excessive ambition is likely to be the enemy of the possible.

To achieve a cessation of hostilities, the agreement ought to be as clean and simple as possible. Only two elements are essential for a viable ceasefire: a cessation of all hostilities, and a separation of forces, ideally with a peacekeeping contingent between them.

Everything else, including

the disposition of territory and populations, should be left for final-status negotiations.

For now, both sides should be allowed to arm or agree to security arrangements with third parties. Nothing should be done to preclude measures that would buttress a ceasefire. Russia should be permitted to retain North Korean troops on its territory; Ukraine could invite forces from European countries.

What is essential is for the US to continue providing military and intelligence support to Ukraine. Such support is the only way to convince Russian President Vladimir Putin that further stalling is not in his interest, and is essential to

Ukraine's ability to deter renewed Russian aggression even if there is a ceasefire agreement. But it need not be unlimited: such US assistance has totalled around \$40bn a year for three years – a level that is likely to suffice for the foreseeable future.

The goal should be to give Ukraine what it needs to deter and defend against Russian aggression, not to liberate its lands. To assert, as Witkoff did, that there is no reason to worry about renewed Russian aggression is not serious. After all, the current war is Russia's second invasion of Ukraine since 2014, when it illegally annexed Crimea. Given Putin's intentions, what matters are capabilities.

Matters could come to a head by summer, when the pipeline of congressionally-approved arms for Ukraine runs out. The Trump administration will have to decide (if it has not already done so) on the connection between

the security relationship with Ukraine and US diplomacy.

Trump should also keep in mind that abandoning Ukraine would not bring peace. Zelensky, who is more popular than ever at home (thanks in no small part to the infamous Oval Office meeting) would likely opt for no ceasefire or peace treaty rather than one that compromised Ukraine's core interests. It could fight on in one form or another for years using domestically produced arms and weapons imported from Europe and Asia – and, free of US restrictions as a condition of aid, it might even be tempted to act more aggressively in its choice of targets within Russia.

At the same time, Russia would most likely view US separation from Ukraine as an opportunity to press or even escalate militarily. Far from bringing peace, a US military cutoff of Ukraine could actually bring about an escalation in the fighting.

The stakes are high, and not just for Ukraine. What plays out with Russia will have a significant effect on the future of Europe, on whether China uses force against Taiwan, or North Korea against South Korea, and on how the US is perceived both by its friends and enemies around the world. – Project Syndicate

• Richard Haass, President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, is a senior counsellor at CenterView Partners, Distinguished University Scholar at New York University, and the author of the weekly Substack newsletter Home & Away.



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky and his wife Olena Zelenska carry candles to honour the memory of the victims of the Russian occupation at a memorial in the town of Bucha, northwest of Kyiv, marking the third anniversary of the liberation of the town from the Russian occupiers yesterday. (AFP)



President Emmanuel Macron delivers a speech during a two-day international event 'SOS Ocean' in Paris, ahead of the third United Nations Ocean Conference, scheduled for June 2025. - AFP

Macron vows to defend science as the host of UN oceans summit

French President Emmanuel Macron has vowed to defend science from attacks by "major powers" as he tried to rally global support behind an upcoming UN summit on ocean conservation.

The third UN Oceans Conference (UNOC) in the French city of Nice in June comes as the United States cuts funding for environment programmes and retreats from global efforts to combat climate change.

In a speech in Paris to set the summit agenda, Macron singled out Washington's funding cuts for environment research and said Nice would "reaffirm our commitment to scientific work".

"We are also living in a period where many major powers are halting their funding to public research organisations and contesting the validity of scientifically established results," he said.

"In Nice... no action regarding the ocean should be taken without being guided by science," Macron told national leaders, conservationists, and scientists at the SOS Ocean Paris Meeting ahead of Nice.

This included on the hot-button topic of deep-sea mining for critical minerals, Macron said, of which France has taken a "precautionary" view until the science around such exploration was better established.

The Nice summit, which dozens of heads of state are expected to attend between June 9-13, will be preceded by a conference bringing together 2,000 scientists from around 100 countries.

Macron outlined eight priorities for the main event in the French Riviera, including expanding ocean areas under international protection, tackling pollution and overfishing, and cleaning up marine transport.

Ahead of Nice, he also wants to grow from 21 to 60 the number of nations that have ratified a treaty on high seas governance so the agreement can finally come into force.

"We're not there yet... there's still a lot of work to be done," he said of the treaty aimed at plugging gaps in the governance of international waters.

Earlier yesterday the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released a report warning that the remarkable growth of the ocean economy over the past 25 years could stall without stronger international protections and governance.

It identified expanding marine territorial claims by nations, illegal fishing operations, and climate change as among the major threats to this future growth.

Diplomatic efforts to broker global agreements for the environment have struggled in recent months.

Many nations were left deeply unsatisfied with the outcome of the last UN climate meeting in November while negotiations for a treaty on plastic pollution - a major source of marine litter - have stalled.

Environment groups called on Macron to encourage nations to actually fulfil their existing conservation pledges before making new ones in Nice. - AFP

French court convicts Le Pen, bars her from running for president

Reuters/AFP
Paris

A French court has barred French far-right leader Marine Le Pen from running in the 2027 presidential election after she was convicted of embezzlement, in a seismic ruling that could fuel global tensions over judicial efforts to police politics.

The French court's ruling was a catastrophic setback for Le Pen, 56.

The National Rally (RN) party chief is one of the most prominent figures of the European far-right, and a front-runner in polls for France's 2027 contest.

The ruling could have wide-ranging repercussions on French politics, upending the race to succeed President Emmanuel Macron and placing additional pressure on his weak minority government enfeebled after months of consecutive crises.

It is also likely to exacerbate growing global anger among right-wing leaders over unelected judges meddling in their mandates.

In a prime time TV interview on TF1, Le Pen said she was innocent, and would appeal as soon as possible against what she described as a politicised ruling aimed at blocking her presidential bid.

She said she was currently out of the running for 2027, but would continue to fight for her future.

Le Pen slammed the ruling as a "political decision".

"I'm not going to let myself be eliminated like this. I'm going to pursue whatever legal avenues I can. There is a small path. It's certainly narrow, but it exists," she said.

Describing herself as the "favourite" to win the 2027 presidential elections, Le Pen characterised the judge who delivered the verdict as saying: "I do not want Marine Le Pen elected."

"I am going to appeal because I am innocent," Le Pen said.

"There are millions of French people who believe in me, millions of French people who trust me and I come to tell them that I have been fighting for you for 30 years and that I have been fighting against injustice for 30 years and consequently, I will continue to do so and I will do it until the end," she said.

"Tonight there are millions of French people who are outraged, outraged to an unimaginable degree, seeing that in France, in the country of human rights, judges have implemented practices that we thought were reserved for authoritarian regimes," she said.

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Billionaire Elon Musk, who has led calls



French far-right leader Marine Le Pen leaves the courthouse in Paris on the day of the verdict of her trial over accusations of misappropriation of European Union funds. - Reuters

to impeach US judges blocking President Donald Trump's agenda, while also lending his support to European far-right figures, alleged an establishment plot behind Le Pen's defenestration.

"When the radical left can't win via democratic vote, they abuse the legal system to jail their opponents," he wrote on X. "This is their standard playbook throughout the world."

Judge Benedicte de Perthuis said that Le Pen had been "at the heart" of a scheme to

misappropriate more than €4mn (\$4.3mn) of EU funds and use them to pay the far-right party's staff back home.

The lack of remorse by Le Pen and other defendants was among the reasons that prompted the court to ban them from running for office with immediate effect, de Perthuis said.

Le Pen's allies, as well as far-right leaders from Europe and around the world, joined in condemning the ruling as judicial overreach.

"Today it is not only Marine Le Pen who was unjustly convicted: It was French democracy that was killed," said Le Pen's right-hand man, RN president Jordan Bardella.

Former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, who was barred from office until 2030 for abuse of power, told Reuters that Le Pen's sentence was "left-wing judicial activism".

"Je suis Marine!" Viktor Orban wrote on X.

Le Pen has run three times for president and had said 2027 would be her final run for top office.

Arnaud Benedetti, a political analyst, said Le Pen's ban was a watershed moment.

"This is a seismic political event," he said. "Inevitably, it's going to reshuffle the pack, particularly on the right."

The RN and two dozen party figures were also found guilty of diverting European Parliament funds.

The party was ordered to pay a €2mn euro fine, with half the amount suspended.

Kremlin says it's working on Ukraine peace

Reuters/AFP
Moscow

The Kremlin said yesterday that Russia and the United States were working on ideas for a possible peace settlement in Ukraine and on building bilateral ties despite US President Donald Trump saying that he was "(angry)" with Vladimir Putin.

Trump told NBC News that he was very angry after the Russian leader criticised the credibility of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and the US president suggested that he could impose secondary tariffs of 25-50% on buyers of Russian oil.

Trump later reiterated to reporters he was disappointed with Putin but added: "I think we are making progress, step by step."

Asked about Trump's comments, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Moscow was continuing to work with Washington and that Putin remained open to contacts with Trump.

"We are continuing to work with the American side, first of all to build our bilateral relations, which were badly damaged during the previous (US) administration," Peskov said.

"And we are also working on the implementation of some ideas related to the Ukrainian settlement. This work is underway, but so far there are no specifics that we could or should tell you about. This is a time-consuming process, probably due to its complexity."

Peskov said there was no phone call scheduled between the two leaders, but that one could be "organised promptly" if deemed "necessary".

Putin earlier this month rejected a US proposal of an unconditional ceasefire in Ukraine - that Zelensky backed - and has upped his rhetoric on Moscow wanting to install new leadership in Ukraine.

Trump, who says he wants to be remem-



The man walks amongst displayed candles at the makeshift memorial for the Ukrainian and foreign fighters on the Independence Square in Kyiv. - AFP

bered as a peacemaker, has repeatedly said he wants the three-year conflict in Ukraine to end and has warned of the risks of it escalating into a world war between the United States and Russia.

Finland's President Alexander Stubb said

on Sunday that he had told Trump during a Florida meeting on Saturday that a deadline needs to be set for establishing a Ukraine ceasefire in order to make it happen.

"I came out with an impression that obviously he's the only person who can broker a

peace, a ceasefire, because he's the only one that Putin is afraid of and in that sense, respects," Stubb told Sky News in an interview yesterday. "We were talking a lot about the ceasefire, the frustrations he had that Russia was not committing to it."

Since taking office in January, Trump has shifted the US to a more conciliatory stance towards Russia that has left Western allies wary as he tries to broker an end to the war.

His comments about Putin on Sunday reflect his growing frustration about the lack of movement on a ceasefire.

"If Russia and I are unable to make a deal on stopping the bloodshed in Ukraine, and if I think it was Russia's fault... I am going to put secondary tariffs on oil, on all oil coming out of Russia," Trump said.

"That would be, that if you buy oil from Russia, you can't do business in the United States," he said. "There will be a 25% tariff on all oil, a 25- to 50-point tariff on all oil."

China and India buy about 80% of Russian crude exports. Chinese traders said they were unfazed by the threat, while Beijing said its co-operation with Russia was neither directed against, nor affected by, third parties. India declined comment.

Amid efforts by Trump to end the fighting in Ukraine, minerals co-operation has been floated by both Kyiv and Moscow, though Trump said on Sunday that Zelensky wanted to back out of a proposed deal.

Russia and the US have started talks on joint rare earth metals and other projects in Russia, and some companies have already expressed an interest in them, Putin's investment envoy, Kirill Dmitriev, said yesterday.

"There are no specifics here yet, but the interest is evident. The interest is mutual because we're talking about mutually beneficial projects," Peskov told reporters.

"The forthcoming draft campaign is in no way connected with the special military operation in Ukraine," the defence ministry said on social media.

Apart from its conscription drives, Russia has recruited hundreds of thousands of men for its offensive on Ukraine as paid contract soldiers, offering high salaries and massive sign-up bonuses.

Russia traditionally holds waves of conscription in spring and autumn, with men aged 18-30 eligible to be called up.

Putin raised the upper age limit from 27 in 2023.

The spring call-ups will run from April 1 until July 15, according to Putin's decree.

Despite pledging that conscripts do not get sent to the front, Russia drafted more than 300,000 "reservists" in 2022 for its Ukraine offensive in what it called a "partial mobilization".

That triggered hundreds of thousands of men to flee the country to avoid being called up. - AFP

Putin orders increased numbers in regular army draft campaign

Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered 160,000 servicemen be drafted by July 15, a higher figure than previous conscription drives as Moscow seeks to boost its army's size.

Russian men are eligible to be drafted for mandatory military service through bi-annual call-ups.

The Kremlin and defence ministry say they are not sent into combat and the call-ups have nothing to do with the Ukraine conflict.

However, Kyiv has said throughout the conflict that it has taken Russian conscripts captive and Putin admitted at the start that some had been sent to fight by mistake.

Putin outlined the plans for this year's spring conscription in a decree published yesterday.

The planned draft size was up to 160,000, from 150,000 in 2024 and 134,500 in 2022, when Russia launched its offensive on Ukraine, state media reported.

Putin last year ordered Russia to boost the size of its army to 1.5mn active servicemen - an increase of some 180,000 troops over three years.

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Spain coal mine explosion kills five, injures four

Five people died and another four were injured in a blast yesterday at a coal mine in Spain's Asturias region.

Two other workers at the Cerredo mine in Degana, some 450km (280 miles) northwest of Madrid, were unharmed in the accident, local emergency services said.

This is the deadliest mining accident in Spain since 1995 when 14 people were killed following an explosion at a mine in Asturias near the town of Mieres.

Initial indications were that the blast was caused by firedamp, a term referring to methane forming an explo-

sive mixture in coal mines, the central government's representative in Asturias, Adriana Lastra, told reporters.

"Police are already investigating what happened, they are already at the scene," she added.

The explosion occurred underground in the mine around 9.30am (0730 GMT) and as news of the blast spread, workers' families flocked to the site, which was surrounded by police and emergency services vehicles.

The five people who died were between the ages of 32 and 54, the regional government of Asturias said on X. - AFP

Europe plans for an even bigger particle collider

AFP
Paris

Europe's physics lab CERN is planning to build a particle smasher even bigger than its Large Hadron Collider to continue searching for answers to some of the universe's tiniest yet most profound mysteries.

The Future Circular Collider (FCC) has not yet received a political green light or funding.

Even if approved, the vast project would not start operations until the 2040s - or be completed until the end of the century.

CERN's Large Hadron Collider (LHC) is currently the world's powerful particle accelerator and is expected to have run its course by the 2040s.

These massive machines smash particles - such as protons which are inside every atom, or lead ions - into each other.

To do so, they use superconducting magnets to beam the particles at incredible speeds around giant underground rings, using detectors to capture the collisions.

This can expose new elementary particles of matter, revealing their true nature.

For example, in 2012 the LHC proved the existence of the Higgs boson, a long-theorised maker of mass. It is a key element of the standard model, which is our best understanding of how



Eid's all good

Eid is being celebrated with great mirth and fun, with people coming out in large numbers to celebrate Eid at various locations of the country.

PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam and Thajudheen

Beaches, parks remain prime Eid destinations

From Page 1

The Ministry of Municipality has made all the arrangements at the beaches by equipping them with amenities and recreational facilities.

Children's play areas, umbrellas, comfortable seating areas and restrooms are available with family beaches at Simaisma, Al Wakrah, and Al Farkia.

The ministry has also developed Al Mamlha Beach into a destination dedicated entirely to women, with secure gates, solar lighting and barbecue and recreation areas.

Some beaches have arranged jet skiing, kayaking and rowing to attract water sports enthusiasts.

The ministry has deployed trained rescue teams operating around the clock while providing clear signage.

The largest parks in Qatar, Al Bidda Park, Aspire Park, and MIA Park, remained the top destinations for families with wide open facilities and special Eid activities.

Oxygen Park, Sheraton Park and Katara Hills welcomed thousands with their natural beauty and lush greenery to offer a refreshing escape from the urban environment.

With Suhail and Thuraya – the two resident giant pandas at Panda House, Al Khor Family Park drew the crowds on the first two days of Eid al-Fitr.

"Parks are the preferred option for families because they provide space for children," said Al Wakrah resident Mohamed Azhar. "Qatar's parks are designed to be a space for kids to engage in entertainment and physical activities and an ideal spot for a family outing."

Katara Cultural Village continues its fanfare celebrations on the second day of Eid al-Fitr, hosting impressive events that have drawn record numbers of visitors to enjoy the festive atmosphere.

Meanwhile, the authorities have urged the visitors to adhere to the safety measures and keep the places clean while going to parks and beaches.



An art workshop in session. PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam



Msheireb Downtown festivities draw crowds

From Page 1

The festivities extend throughout the district, where Sikkat Al Wadi, known for its charming walkways and boutique shops, features roaming entertainment.

The thought-provoking Mindfulness Mirror Installation provides an interactive experience, encouraging reflection and contemplation amidst the celebratory atmosphere.

Egyptian expatriate Ahmed M told *Gulf Times* that his two children were enjoying the celebrations at the MDD and would spend more time exploring Msheireb throughout the Eid holidays.

"It's nice to see a lot of things happening here at Msheireb, and my daughter has just participated in a painting workshop since she

loves to draw and paint," he said, as he lauded the organisers. "This is amazing, and we hope to come back in the coming days."

Interactive games and activations – designed to entertain and stimulate creativity – proved popular, attracting many visitors who were seen playing with friends and colleagues.

Organisers noted that the MDD's Eid celebrations feature performers from diverse backgrounds who bring their unique talents to the stage.

This eclectic mix of artistry, combined with the live music and interactive shows, provides a truly memorable experience for festival-goers.

Those with a creative flair can also participate in a number of art workshops, allowing them to craft personalised Eid decorations to take home as a cherished memento of their visit.

Hosh Msheireb, the Company House Courtyard, hosts a range of games and challenges, as well as creative workshops.

This cozy retreat provides a perfect respite from the bustling crowds, giving visitors time to relax and recharge.

Adding to the authentic experience, Hosh Msheireb also offers traditional Qatari cuisine and beverages, ensuring that visitors can savour the flavours of the season. The courtyard is open from 4pm-11pm.

For food enthusiasts, the MDD is



Musicians serenade Eid festival-goers at Msheireb Downtown. PICTURE: Joey Aguilar

a must-visit destination this Eid, as the district boasts a variety of culinary offerings.

Visitors can embark on a delicious journey through the holiday's signature tastes.

From traditional Eid specialities to international delights, there is something to satisfy every palate.