



Insurance  
made simple

Visit  
qic.online

QIC

QATAR  
since 1978

# GULF TIMES

WEDNESDAY Vol. XXXXVI No. 13333

April 2, 2025  
Shawwal 4, 1446 AH

[www.gulf-times.com](http://www.gulf-times.com) 2 Riyals



Get 3X roaming data  
with our Passport Packs



vodafone



## BUSINESS | Page 1

Qatar's Q1 maritime performance reflects strength of non-hydrocarbons



## Souq Al Wakrah Eid fireworks dazzle



The Eid Al-Fitr fireworks show at Souq Al Wakrah will conclude today 8pm after four days. The captivating spectacle has been attracting large crowds. A moment from yesterday's show.

PICTURE: Shaji Kayamkulam [Page 12](#)

## Sisi, Trump discuss mediation efforts

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and US President Donald Trump discussed mediation efforts to restore regional calm which would have a positive impact on Red Sea navigation and end economic losses for all parties, the Egyptian presidency said yesterday. The Iran-aligned Houthis have carried out more than 100 attacks disrupting global commerce.

## Mass US layoffs hit 10,000 health workers; USAID staff firing on

Mass layoffs began at major US health agencies yesterday as the Trump administration embarks on a major restructuring that will cut 10,000 jobs. Employees learned of their dismissal early yesterday by email or by having their access badges not working when they showed up to work. The layoffs affect the Department of Health and Human Services and the federal agencies it oversees. Elon Musk's cost-cutting team is finalising the dismantlement of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), ordering the firings of thousands of local workers and American diplomats and civil servants assigned to the agency overseas. [Page 5](#)

## 21 die in India firework factory explosion

An explosion at an illegal firecracker factory in the town of Deesa in India's Gujarat state left 21 people dead and several others injured yesterday. The families of the victims lived on the factory premises, an official said, which was operating without a licence. Fireworks are hugely popular in India, particularly during the festival of Diwali, as well as for use during wedding celebrations. [Page 9](#)

## US push for more Russian sanctions

Half of the US Senate - 25 Republicans and 25 Democrats - joined together yesterday to introduce sanctions that would be imposed on Russia if it refuses to engage in good faith negotiations for peace with Ukraine. The lead sponsors said they would impose primary and secondary sanctions against Russia.

## LIC unveils pre-event activations ahead of MotoGP grand prix

Lusail International Circuit (LIC) has unveiled a series of thrilling pre-event experiences at various locations across Qatar ahead of the Qatar MotoGP Qatar Airways Grand Prix of Qatar 2025, which will be held from April 11-13.

Fans of all ages can immerse themselves in the action with MotoGP simulators and interactive games, offering a taste of the adrenaline-fuelled racing action.

Lusail International Circuit revealed in a release yesterday that these engaging pre-event activations will take place at Old Doha Port, Place Vendome, and Doha Festival City until April 13.

Visitors can also test their racing skills and reflexes through two exciting experiences - Arcade and PlayStation, and Hands and Eyes Game.



Special weekend competitions will allow participants the chance to win exclusive prizes and demonstrate their racing prowess. Additionally, dedicated kids activities will ensure a fun-filled experience for the whole family. [QNA Page 3](#)

Qatar Table Tennis Association (QTTA) announced that tickets are on sale for the ITTF World Table Tennis Championships that Doha will host during May 17-25, 2025, for the second time after 2004. [Sport Page 1](#)

## Israeli strikes claim more Gaza lives

### ● Massacre toll mounts to 50,399

QNA

Gaza

Several Palestinians were martyred and others injured as Israeli air strikes continued to target homes and tents in various parts of the Gaza Strip.

Medical sources reported that five people were martyred in central Gaza, including three members of the same family, following an Israeli strike on a residential house near the Deir Al-Balah desalination plant. A farmer was killed in artillery shelling east of Al Maghazi camp, while a fifth martyr fell to Israeli gunfire near Wadi Gaza, north of Al Nuseirat camp. Additionally, three people were injured by Israeli army gunfire near Wadi Gaza Bridge.

Israeli artillery continued to bombard areas north of Al Nuseirat camp and east of Al Bureij camp.

In Gaza City, several Palestinians were killed or injured after an airstrike targeted a vehicle on Humaid Street in Al Shati camp, west of the city.

In the southern Gaza Strip, a child succumbed to injuries sustained two days ago in an Is-



A woman holds a child as Palestinians inspect the site of an Israeli strike on a house, in Khan Younis yesterday.

raeli strike that had targeted his family's home in Khan Younis, killing four family members at the time. Injuries were also reported following an Israeli attack near Al Qarara port, west of Khan Yunis.

Two individuals sustained injuries from Israeli drone fire in Kherbet Al Adas, north of Rafah city, while others were injured as drones dropped bombs on displaced civilians in the city centre.

Artillery shelling also persisted in various areas.

As of yesterday, the death toll from the ongoing Israeli aggression on Gaza has risen to 50,399 martyrs, with 114,583 injuries reported since Oct 7, 2023.

The Palestinian Ministry of Health stated that since the escalation of Israeli attacks on Gaza on March 18, 2023, 1,042 people have been martyred, and 2,542 injured.

## DRC, M23 to hold first direct talks in Doha on April 9

The Congo government and M23 rebels aim to hold direct talks in Doha on April 9, sources from both camps said yesterday, a potential boost to Qatar's efforts to end the central African country's worst fighting in decades. The meeting in Doha would be the two sides' first direct negotiations since M23 fighters captured eastern Congo's two largest cities in a rapid offensive that has left thousands dead and forced hundreds of thousands more from their homes.

One Congolese official said that talks were scheduled for



Policemen patrol a street in Butembo, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, yesterday

April 9 "unless the other side misbehaves". A source inside M23 confirmed the date and said it would present Kinshasa with its demands. Both sides have agreed not to publicly discuss the substance of the talks, the sources said.

Democratic Republic of Congo President Felix Tshisekedi and his Rwandan counterpart Paul Kagame held a surprise meeting in Doha on March 18. Qatar hosted a second round of talks between the two countries beginning on Friday and met separately with M23 representatives.

## Trump to go ahead with reciprocal tariffs

Reuters



US President Donald Trump prepares to sign an executive order in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, on Monday.

minium and steel imports and has increased duties on all goods from China. But he has also repeatedly threatened to impose other tariffs, only to cancel or postpone them.

Leavitt's announcement indicated that he plans to plough ahead this time. "The president has a



Vehicles cross the Ambassador Bridge, which carries about 25% of all trade between the US and Canada, in Windsor, Ontario, yesterday.

brilliant team of advisors who have been studying these issues for decades, and we are focused on restoring the golden age of America," she said at a press briefing.



According to the *Washington Post*, aides are considering a plan that would raise duties on products by about 20% from nearly every country, rather than target-

ing certain countries or products. The administration anticipates the new duties could raise more than \$6tn in revenue that could be sent on to Americans as a rebate, the paper reported.

A White House aide said any report ahead of tomorrow's event is "mere speculation". Trump's actions have raised tensions with the United States' largest trading partners.

Canada has vowed to respond with tariffs of its own. "We will not disadvantage Canadian producers and Canadian workers relative to American workers," Prime Minister Mark Carney said in Winnipeg.

US companies say a "Buy Canadian" movement is already making it harder for their products to reach that country's shelves. Other countries have threatened countermeasures as well, even as they have sought to strike deals with the White House to stave off the tariffs.



## Shafallah Center looks back at its journey on Autism Awareness Day

QNA  
Doha

**S**hafallah Center for Persons with Disabilities is set to observe the World Autism Awareness Day today, which annually falls on April 2 under the theme of a spectrum: a journey of understanding and embrace.

Executive Director of Al Shafallah Center for Persons with Disabilities Maryam Saif al-Suwaidi said the celebration is an important opportunity to spotlight the milestones Qatar has achieved in taking care of Individuals with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) and achieving further successes in including them in the community.

She pointed out that this year's slogan came to underscore the enhanced support and empower-

ment for individuals with ASD to actively engage in the community and largely spread the awareness about them while promoting their greater inclusion in society, noting that this comes through conducting an array of awareness-raising and media activities.

Qatar has given foremost priority to rehabilitate and include individuals with ASD in the community and has evidently set plans and initiatives that contribute to promote awareness among parents and professionals, in addition to providing comprehensive and integrated services that generate positive results toward bolstering the developmental and cognitive abilities of individuals with ASD, facilitating their daily lives, and supporting the role of their families, al-Suwaidi underlined.

Al-Suwaidi highlighted that Qa-



tar's National Autism Plan is based on the Qatar National Vision 2030 in securing the continuation of decent living for the people of Qatar, stating that ministries and concerned entities have made tremendous efforts in preparing an overall national plan to figure out the es-

sential needs, as well as trends and ambitions that would help achieve the intended goals and empower all community members, including individuals with ASD.

Shafallah Center's autism section receives individuals with ASD from both genders from birth to

three years of age and offers inclusive rehabilitation programs starting at six years of age and continuing until the age of 16. Thereafter, individuals transition to the vocational training and rehabilitation department to receive professional rehabilitation services and preparation for employment, al-Suwaidi said.

Al-Suwaidi added that the centre provides a wide diversity of rehabilitation and therapeutic services provided by a multidisciplinary team, with the diverse array of interventions delivered within the framework of individual sessions, each lasting up to 40 minutes.

These sessions are meticulously designed to address the specific needs and challenges of every single person, with participants receiving primary therapeutic

services, in terms of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and nutritional services.

In addition, individuals benefit from ongoing medical follow-up and pharmacological supervision provided by the medical unit, alongside psychological and behavioural monitoring for centre members with ASD, she noted. Al-Suwaidi stressed that persons with disabilities have equal rights like every single person in the community, including their right to work in an environment they freely choose, where they can easily engage, in addition to ensuring the protection of their rights in fair and suitable working conditions, on equal footing with others, such as equal opportunities and the receipt of equal compensation for work of comparable value.

## A cultural landmark inspired by traditional Islamic, ME artistry

By Joey Aguilar  
Staff Reporter

**T**he Souq Waqif Art Centre shines a spotlight on its vital role in Doha's art scene, showcasing unique works created by Doha-based artists this Eid al-Fitr holidays.

Featured artists include Hamad Alsaady, Sinchai Zonputh, Seena Anand, Ismail Bousba, Archana Bhardwaj, and Othman Belkadi, alongside sculptor Naser al-Sama-rae, among others.

The artworks present a rich mosaic of styles and mediums, reflecting the artists' individual perspectives and their connection to Qatari culture. Known as a cultural landmark inspired by traditional Islamic and Middle Eastern artistry, this art centre offers a vibrant space for festival-goers to immerse in a diverse collection of paintings, sculptures, and more.

Apart from traditional portraiture, many of the displayed creations pay homage to the Arabian horse, a potent symbol of Arab heritage and culture. These pieces capture the grace, power, and legacy of these magnificent creatures, celebrating their enduring significance.

Some of the paintings employ imaginative compositions, forming recognisable Qatari symbols and landmarks to create visually rich and engaging narratives on canvas.

Like Ramadan, the Eid al-Fitr celebrations brought a surge of visitors to the art centre, not only within Qatar but also from neighbouring GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. They meticulously examine the exhibited works, and even interact with the artists.

According to local art enthusiasts, this direct engagement provides a chance to gain insights into the creative process and appreciate the dedication behind each piece. Such



heightened interest underscores the institution's success in becoming a regional hub for artistic expression and cultural exchange.

The centre continuously fosters a direct and embracing relationship with the community since it opened on August 5, 2013 through a stream of art presentations, exhibitions, and public courses offered year-round.

Organised into five specialised departments (Sculpture, Painting, Arabic Calligraphy, Handicrafts, and Pottery), the art centre offers unique opportunities for learning and exploration.

The Arabic Calligraphy department offers introductory workshops focused on Islamic decorative art and Arabic calligraphy, teaching aspiring artists the techniques and special equipment re-



quired to create the intricate geometrical patterns and calligraphic dimensions characteristic of traditional Islamic art.



The Souq Waqif Art Centre offers a vibrant space for Qatar residents and visitors to immerse in a diverse collection of paintings, sculptures, and more. **PICTURES:** Joey Aguilar



The Painting department, meanwhile, conducts art classes covering various painting methods, introducing participants to different techniques and tools and building a strong foundation for their artistic skills.



Many of the displayed creations pay homage to the Arabian horse. The Handicrafts department organises a diverse range of workshops, including glass-painting, cold ceramic, paper art, and cross-stitch, while the Pottery department hosts introductory workshops that teach the techniques

used to create art murals and pottery. The centre also actively strives to engage and encourage young people to develop their artistic skills, broaden their imaginations, and empower them technically.

## Sidra's autism-friendly initiative to create more inclusive healthcare

**S**idra Medicine, a member of Qatar Foundation, has established an Autism-Friendly Hospital Initiative (AFHI) to create a more inclusive and supportive healthcare environment for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The programme addresses the unique challenges faced by children with ASD during medical visits, including sensory overload, communication difficulties, and anxiety, all of which can hinder optimal care.

Dr Finza Latif, senior attending physician and fellowship programme director at Sidra Medicine said: "We introduced this initiative to address the challenges children with ASD face in healthcare. Between 2023 and 2024, we saw a 14% increase in admissions, highlighting the growing need for tailored support. Sensory overload, communication barriers, and anxiety can make medical visits overwhelming. By creating an autism-friendly environment and offering specialised support, we aim to reduce these barriers and ensure every child receives the care they need".

Parents can provide key information on their child's sensory and communication needs, which becomes part of the child's medical record, ensuring healthcare providers are fully prepared. The programme offers sensory toolkits and communication aids such as picture boards and apps to help children with language deficits communicate more effectively.



The AFHI team at Sidra Medicine.

face-to-face training for staff, including clinicians, nurses, and support staff, to ensure that they are equipped to provide autism-friendly care. An autism programme specialist coordinates care and staff education, ensuring every child receives the support they need.

Prof Muhammad Waqar Azeem, chair of Department of Psychiatry at Sidra Medicine said: "From designated blood draw days with trained phlebotomists to sensory toolkits and fast-track pharmacy services, every step is designed to reduce stress and improve their experience.

We have even introduced dedicated parking to make hospital visits easier for families. Our goal is to create a truly supportive and inclusive environment for every child and their family coming to Sidra Medicine for care".

The AFHI team at Sidra Medicine is led by Prof Azeem, Dr Latif, Dr Alia Satti and Enas Hasab El Naby (Programme Specialist). The initiative is based on the successful model developed by Boston Medical Center and adapted to Sidra Medicine's needs through parent focus groups and staff feedback.

### Safety During Sea Trips

We recommend following the safety guidelines from the General Directorate of Coasts and Borders Security, including:



### Mol weather advisory on sea trips

The Ministry of Interior (Mol) has urged sea goers to check weather conditions before heading out. Mol, in its advisory on X, recommended a slew of guidelines from the General Directorate of Coasts and Borders Security to follow in order to ensure safety during sea trips. The guidelines include letting the family know the destination and expected return time before venturing into the sea, ensuring the availability of a marine compass on board, wearing life jackets and keeping life rings handy, setting up and using a VHF radio on international channel 16 and avoiding restricted areas and oil facilities. The guidelines also urged the sea goers to activate and maintain the Automatic Identification System (AIS) upon registering sea entry.

## QU project highlights need for AI integration to enhance special education

By Joseph Varghese  
Staff Reporter

Qatar University (QU) has published a systematic literature review investigating the applications of artificial intelligence (AI) in special education, with a particular focus on supporting students with disabilities.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of how AI technologies are being utilised to enhance learning outcomes, increase engagement, and address the unique challenges faced by students with disabilities in educational settings.

Prof Maha al-Hendawi, Professor of Special Education; Esraa Hussein, research assistant and academic adviser; and Menatalla Hussein, research assistant, master's programme in Special Education Col-

lege of Education-Qatar University; are involved in this project.

According to an article, "Towards Empowering and Enhancing the Capabilities of Students with Disabilities" on the latest edition of the QU Research Magazine, the integration of AI into special education represents a significant leap forward in the ability to provide personalised, adaptive, and inclusive learning experiences for students with diverse needs.

The research team notes that there are a number of key areas where AI is making a substantial impact. AI-powered tools offer customised educational content tailored to each student's unique needs, knowledge levels, interests, and abilities. This personalisation helps to optimise the learning process and improve academic performance.

The study notes that AI-driven assistive devices help students

with disabilities overcome communication barriers, fostering greater inclusion in the classroom and enhancing their ability to participate in educational activities. AI systems support the management of classroom behaviour and encourage positive social interactions, which is particularly beneficial for students with cognitive or behavioural challenges.

The study highlights that applications such as virtual reality and emotion recognition tools provide real-time feedback to assist students in regulating their emotions, an essential skill for many learners with disabilities. AI technologies, including robotic aids and smart prosthetics, enhance mobility and independence for students with physical disabilities, allowing them to engage more fully in educational activities.

The literature review has re-

vealed a significant gap in research on AI applications in special education within the Middle East. Out of the numerous studies examined, only three were conducted in this region. This underrepresentation highlights a critical need for increased investment in AI research and development, particularly in the context of special education, within Arab countries.

The limited research in this area suggests that the region may be at risk of falling behind in the global advancements of AI-driven education. This gap is particularly concerning given the potential of AI to address unique educational challenges faced in the Arab world. AI systems can be developed to address the specific linguistic and cultural needs of Arab students with disabilities, ensuring that educational content and support are culturally relevant and accessible.

This systematic literature review highlights the transformative potential of AI in special education. From personalised learning experiences to advanced assistive technologies, AI is opening new doors for students with disabilities, helping them overcome barriers and achieve their full potential. However, the lack of research in this field within the Arab world presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

It stresses that there is an urgent need for increased investment in AI studies and development in special education across Arab countries. This investment should focus on conducting rigorous studies to evaluate the effectiveness of AI interventions in local educational contexts; training educators and special education professionals in the use of AI technologies and fostering collab-



Prof Maha al-Hendawi

orations between educational institutions, technology companies, and government bodies to drive innovation in this field.



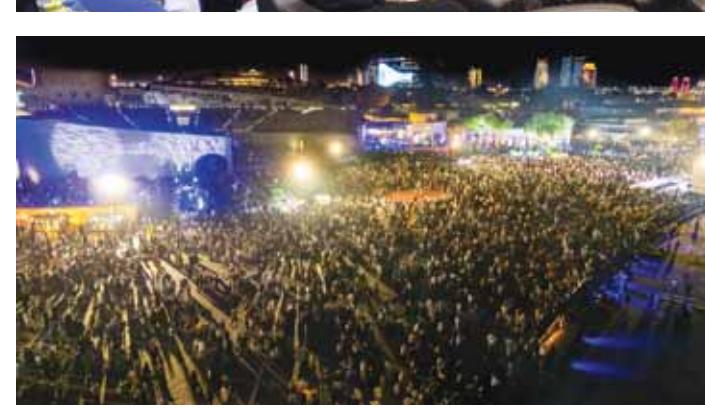
## Diverse Eid events draw crowds to Katara

Katara Cultural Village continued to present its distinguished events in celebration of Eid al-Fitr. The third day of festivities saw a large turnout of visitors from various age groups and nationalities, affirming Katara as a premier destination for celebrations.

Salem Mubkhou al-Marri, director of Public Relations and Communications at Katara, said: "The public has come to expect everything new and beautiful from Katara. So, we are keen to offer activities that suit all audiences with varied interests and backgrounds. We have musical performances that attract numerous visitors, besides theatre shows, competitions, and Katara's Eid gift distribution, which is particularly significant for children."

"Katara with all its facilities and open spaces has become a favourite destination for families throughout the year, especially during festive seasons. Visitors can enjoy various entertainment and leisure options, from the beach and hills to diverse restaurants and cafes spread across the entire cultural village. We strive to ensure that everyone has the best and most enjoyable experience, celebrating Eid in an atmosphere full of joy and happiness."

He also encouraged visitors to enjoy the other activities and performances, reaffirming Katara's commitment to providing experiences that bring happiness to visitors and enrich their cultural and entertainment experiences. One of the most notable heritage events



organised by Katara is "Fareej Katara". This event aims to revive Qatari heritage and introduce visitors from all backgrounds to the traditional Qatari life in the past. Through live scenes that reflect the authenticity of Qatari customs and traditions, the event recreates the atmosphere of old neighbourhoods in great detail.

For lovers of traditional cuisine,



Nights organised by the Katara Oud Center, drew lovers of music and traditional arts.

Many visitors of Katara expressed their delight with the vari-

ety of events, affirming that Katara has become the preferred destination for families to enjoy their time during Eid celebrations. Visitors also praised the excellent organi-

sation and the diversity of activities catering to different tastes and interests, making Katara an ideal place to experience the festive spirit of Eid.

## Exciting pre-event experiences ahead of Qatar MotoGP



Ahead of the Qatar MotoGP Qatar Airways Grand Prix of Qatar 2025, Lusail International Circuit (LIC) is revving up the excitement through a series of thrilling pre-event experiences daily until April 13 at Old Doha Port, Place Vendome, and Doha Festival City from 12noon to 11pm.





# Signature by Marza Restaurant to offer global cuisine

**S**ignature by Marza Restaurant is all set to offer 'a new premium culinary experience at affordable prices' for food enthusiasts in Qatar. The venture is part of the Marza Group of Companies, a well-established name for its hypermarket chain.

Described as 'one of the largest multi-cuisine dining destinations in Qatar, Signature by Marza Restaurant near the Midmac Roundabout on Salwa Road will open its doors at 4pm on April 4.

Renowned South Indian actor Asif Ali will be the guest of honour at the opening ceremony. The restaurant will officially begin operations from 11am on April 5. Signature by Marza Restaurant, which spans three floors including two dedicated dining floors, offers a diverse range of global cuisines.

The third floor features state-of-the-art banquet halls for grand occasions, including a 350-seater banquet hall, another for 100 guests and an exclusive 25-seater conference hall.

For added convenience, the venue also offers a dedicated bridal dressing room making it an ideal choice for weddings, corporate events and social and community gatherings.

Jafar Kandoth, founder and CEO of Signature by Marza Restaurant, said the eatery aims to redefine luxury dining while keeping affordability in mind. "Our restaurant may look premium, but we are offering the best prices in the market to ensure accessibility for all. Our mission is to provide an extraordinary culinary experience that balances luxury with value," he said.

One of the highlights of Signature by Marza is its 24-hour tea counter 'Chai Story' that offers an array of authentic South Indian delicacies.

Visitors can indulge in signature Thalassery snacks such as Irachippattil, Unnakkai, Kailipolla and much more paired with steaming hot Samovar tea.

Ashraf Kandoth, director of Marza Group, said 'Chai Story' will not only satisfy taste buds but also evoke a sense of nostalgia with every sip and bite. "It will be a place where new stories are brewed and cherished," he said.

Ansar M Thaza, general manager, said the restaurant is dedicated to ensuring quality in food and service. "From the finest ingredients to impeccable service, every detail at Signature by Marza has been meticulously crafted to create a memorable dining experience," he said.

Haris Kader, general manager of Marza Group, said the company is eyeing strategic expansion. "This marks our first step into the hospitality sector with an exceptional venue that will redefine Qatar's dining and event landscape," he noted.

Leading the culinary team is Rahman Muzhuppilangadi, executive chef, who brings a wealth of expertise: "Our menu is a celebration of global flavours, crafted with passion and precision. Whether it's a casual meal or a grand banquet, we promise an unforgettable gastronomic journey," he explained.

With its spacious banquet halls, top-tier facilities, and versatile event spaces, Signature by Marza is set to become Qatar's premier destination for weddings, corporate events and social celebrations.



Promoters and chefs announce the upcoming opening of Signature by Marza Restaurant.

PICTURE: Shaji Kayarkulam

Established in 1975, Marza Group has evolved from a pioneering retail brand into a diversified business conglomerate, spanning various consumer sectors in Qatar. With an unwavering commitment to quality, innovation, and community value, the group

continues to expand its presence, now making a remarkable foray into the hospitality industry, the promoters added.



A cultural event.

## 'Qatar sought-after destination for Gulf families during Eid'

**A** number of visiting Gulf citizens said that Qatar has become a preferred tourist destination for families during the holidays, given its advanced tourism facilities and services that suit the region's customs and traditions. They also added that common heritage, identity, and the moderate weather during this year's Eid al-Fitr holiday was an additional advantage.

"Qatar boasts a number of features that make it an ideal destination for families. It offers upscale tourism facilities, such as luxury hotels and family resorts that offer integrated services suitable for families. Including dedicated spaces for children and a variety of dining options that cater to Gulf tastes. The country is also known for its safety and privacy, making it a preferred choice for families seeking a comfortable and safe tourist experience," a tourist told Arabic daily *Arrayah*.

Another said that Qatar is keen to provide entertainment programmes and events that are in line with Gulf customs and traditions, making it an ideal choice for celebrating Eid al-Fitr.

Among the most popular destinations are heritage villages and traditional markets such as Souq Waqif as it combines Qatari heritage, shopping, and traditional restaurants in an atmosphere that reflects the authenticity of the re-



Hussein al-Maqbali



Salem al-Salti

gion. Family events are also held at Katara, where the Cultural Village offers heritage shows, children's competitions, and fireworks displays that create a wonderful festive atmosphere.

Family entertainment destinations such as The Pearl, Aspire Park, and Fun Ville offer high-end entertainment experience suitable for all family members. Qatar's beaches are also an ideal destination for families, offering safe recreational facilities, water sports, and traditional dhow cruises.

They noted that Qatar enjoys moderate weather in March-April, allowing tourists to enjoy outdoor activities such as visiting parks, desert safaris, or even spending quality time at coastal resorts. This makes the tourist experience more enjoyable compared to destina-

tions with high summer temperatures.

Salem bin Yaqoub al-Salti, from the Sultanate of Oman, said he greatly enjoyed the unique family atmosphere offered by Qatar, specifically mentioning the heritage events that highlight Gulf identity and reflect authentic customs and traditions. Hussein al-Maqbali, from the Sultanate of Oman, praised the distinguished events offered by various entities in Qatar emphasizing that it has become a major destination for Gulf families seeking an experience that combines entertainment and culture.

He explained that Qatar has succeeded in offering a variety of events suitable for all ages, strengthening its position as one of the most important tourist destinations in the region.

### All Gaza bakeries cease operations due to depletion of flour, fuel

**A**ll bakeries in the Gaza Strip were brought to a standstill on Tuesday due to the depletion of flour and fuel, following the Israeli month-long blockade that prevented their entry, raising further concerns about the potential spread of famine among the beleaguered Gazans.

Head of Gaza's bakery owners' association Abdel Nasser al-Ajrami said the war of starvation is looming as all bakeries subsidised by the World Food Programme (WFP) had been shuttered in the southern Gaza Strip on Monday, with bakeries of Gaza and the northern Strip ceasing their operations starting from Tuesday.

Al-Ajrami added that WFP officially informed all entities of the depletion of flour in its stock, implying that all bakeries that had been depending on WFP would entirely cease the operation of producing breads, leaving hundreds of thousands of families without a key source of food.

Gazans fundamentally depend on WFP-subsidised bakeries whose number is 18 distributed to multiple areas throughout the Gaza Strip and constitute the major lifeline for thousands of families who already suffer from food insecurity. However, after coming to a complete halt, the Strip is braced for an unprecedented men-

ace that could degenerate into a real humanitarian catastrophe, he warned. Al-Ajrami stressed that the situation is extremely dangerous, indicating that closing these bakeries means that thousands of families will never find breads, and the disaster will aggravate unless land crossings are immediately opened to deliver the fundamental materials.

He highlighted that bakeries can't be operated unless flour and fuel are secured, adding that this is not a bakery crisis, but rather a crisis that haunts the life of hundreds of thousands of people who count on bread as the key source of their nutrition. (QNA)

## Local agriculture yards resume normal schedule from Thursday



The Ministry of Municipality's Agriculture Affairs Department has announced that the yards selling local agriculture products at Al Mazrouah, Al Khor and Al Thakhira, Al Sheehaniya, Al Shamal and Al Wakrah will resume the regular working hours of 6am-3pm Thursday. These yards offer fresh agriculture and farm products at reasonable prices since they provide a direct link to the consumers.

موقع  
الساحات



## Syrians rejoice during first Eid after Assad's fall

**E**id al-Fitr in Syria was charged with newfound joy this year, as thousands freely celebrated the holiday for the first time after the fall of Bashar al-Assad. From the early morning hours, crowds of men, women and children flocked to pray at Damascus's historic Umayyad Mosque in the Old City.

"This is the first time we truly feel the joy of Eid, after getting rid of Assad's tyrannical regime," Fatima Othman told AFP. Following prayer, worshippers exchanged Eid greetings while street vendors sold colourful balloons and toys to children posing for photos with their parents. "Our celebration is doubled after Assad's fall," said Ghassan Youssef, a resident of the capital.

A few kilometres (miles) away, on the slopes of Mount Qasun overlooking Damascus - a site previously off-limits to Syrians until Assad was deposed on De-

cember 8 - a few thousand people gathered at Unknown Soldier Square for an open-air prayer.

Among them were members of the security forces and the army, dressed in uniform and armed. The road leading to the square was packed, according to an AFP photographer.

Some worshippers distributed sweets to celebrate, while the three-star Syrian flag, adopted by the new authorities, was waved in the air.

Under the previous government, access to the Unknown Soldier monument was typically restricted to Assad and his close associates, who would lay wreaths there during national ceremonies. The memorial, where a giant screen broadcast the Eid prayer, is near the presidential palace.

There, interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa prayed alongside Syria's new mufti Osama al-Rifai and several cabinet ministers

in the presence of a large crowd. He later delivered a speech emphasising the country faced "a long and arduous road to reconstruction but possesses all the resources needed to recover". This came two days after the formation of a new government, which faces daunting challenges in a country devastated by 14 years of civil war.

Wael Hamaniya, who had been in Sweden since the early days of the conflict, returned to Damascus to celebrate Eid with his family. "This is my first Eid here in nearly 15 years. I truly feel the celebration in its full meaning," he told AFP, beaming. "Everyone who has come is over the moon. This is the celebration of celebrations!"

The occasion was more sombre for some Syrians, who were able to visit the graves of loved ones that had been off-limits during Assad's reign, especially in former opposition strongholds. — AFP

# US begins mass layoffs at health agencies

Reuters/AFP  
Washington

The Trump administration began mass layoffs of 10,000 staffers at US health agencies yesterday, according to multiple sources familiar with the situation, with security guards barring entry to some employees just hours after they received dismissal notices.

The cuts, which affect several high-profile agencies under the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), including the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), are part of a broad plan by President Donald Trump and billionaire ally Elon Musk to shrink the federal government and slash spending.

Health Secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr has described the cuts as essential to streamlining a bloated bureaucracy.

However they have included the ouster of top scientists overseeing public health, cancer research and vaccine and drug approvals, raising concerns about how the US will respond to health emergencies, such as the ongoing measles outbreak and spreading bird flu.

According to US media reports, several senior officials from these agencies, including Jeanne Marrazzo, who had replaced Anthony Fauci as head of one of the NIH's branches, have been offered reassignment to isolated locations in Alaska or Oklahoma.

Departures at the FDA, considered the world's top drugs regulator, included Peter Stein, the director of the Office of New Drugs in its Centre for Drug Evaluation and Research division.

He resigned when faced with being fired, according to one source familiar with the matter.



Employees of the Department of Health and Human Services queue outside the Mary E Switzer Memorial Building in Washington, DC, after it was reported that the Trump administration fired staff at the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and at the Food and Drug Administration, as it embarked on its plan to cut 10,000 jobs at the HHS. - Reuters

Brian King, the head of the FDA's Centre for Tobacco Products division, was fired, according to an e-mail sent by King to FDA staff seen by Reuters.

That followed the ouster of Peter Marks, the FDA's highly regarded top vaccine official.

Staff have also been leaving and some employees reviewing products say they are struggling to meet their deadlines.

"The FDA as we've known it is finished, with most of the leaders with institutional knowledge and a deep understanding of product development and safety no longer employed," former commissioner Robert Califf wrote in a LinkedIn post.

"I believe that history will see this a huge mistake," he wrote. "It will be interesting to hear from the new leadership how they plan to put 'Humpty Dumpty' back together again."

An FDA employee said staff had to present their badges at the building entrance and those who had been fired were given a ticket and told to return home, according to one source.

People waited in line for hours not knowing what would happen when they reached the front.

The ticket, seen by Reuters, listed telephone numbers for 10 different departments for employees to call to retrieve

their "essential" equipment.

An FDA staff member said 17 employees in the press office were let go.

The FDA's chief information officer Vid Desai said he was also let go.

Fired staff received e-mails that said their terminations did not reflect on their service, performance or conduct, according to an e-mail seen by Reuters.

Cuts at the FDA's Centre for Tobacco Products (CTP) included the Office of Management and Office of Regulations in their entirety, said the centre's former director, Mitch Zeller, citing a contact still at the centre.

"I think that this makes it virtually im-

possible for CTP to regulate tobacco products," Zeller said.

A line of cars clogged the two main roads leading into the NIH's main campus in Bethesda, Maryland, where employees had been notified early yesterday morning that they were laid off, according to a source.

At the CDC, staff who were fired had worked at the National Centre for Environmental Health, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the National Centre for Immunisation and Respiratory Diseases, including at least one person working on the federal response to measles outbreaks, according to another source.

"What I think is clear and that people should understand is that HHS touches the lives of just about every American and a reorganisation and downsizing of this size would typically take months on months of work," said Kevin Griffis, who resigned on March 21 as CDC director of communications.

A health official said employees who worked directly for the HHS were also fired. HHS officials were not immediately available for comment.

The line to get into the Rockville, Maryland HHS building that houses the Health Resources and Services Administration, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, and the Indian Health Service stretched all the way to the parking lot, two sources told Reuters, with only two security guards on site screening everyone attempting to enter.

Including early retirements and so-called "deferred resignations", the total downsizing will reduce the department's workforce from 82,000 to 62,000 employees, according to an official statement last week, saving an estimated \$1.8bn annually – a tiny fraction of the HHS annual budget of \$1.8tn.

## 98 held over anti-govt protests in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean authorities remanded in custody yesterday 98 people arrested for taking part in demonstrations called to demand that President Emmerson Mnangagwa leave power.

The men and women were rounded up in the capital Harare during small-scale demonstrations on Monday and a ruling on their bail is due on April 10, the courts said.

A one-time veteran of the ruling ZANU-PF party called the day of protest to reject moves to keep Mnangagwa, 82, in power beyond the end of his term in 2028.

Most of the 98 people in custody were among around 200 who gathered at Harare's Freedom Square where they threw stones at security forces, police said.

They chanted slogans such as "Enough is Enough" and "Mnangagwa must go".

They had contravened laws against breaching the peace and participating in gatherings with the intent to promote public violence, police said.

Turnout at Monday's demonstrations was limited but shops, transport, schools and businesses were closed for the day in what many said amounted to a stay-away protest.

Police also arrested and briefly detained 10 journalists covering the demonstrations, the Media Institute of Southern Africa's Zimbabwe branch said.

A journalist who interviewed the veteran who mobilised the demonstrations, Blessed Geza, has been in jail since February 24.

Geza has become the public face of discontent against Mnangagwa, who took power in a coup in 2017 and has been accused of creeping authoritarianism that has crushed the political opposition, including through long jail terms.

A former member of parliament, Geza said he would deliver a "crucial" address today on the next course of action. -AFP

## SpaceX launches private astronauts on first crewed polar orbit

AFP/Reuters  
Cape Canaveral

SpaceX launched the first human spaceflight directly over Earth's polar regions on Monday – a privately funded orbital mission involving four astronauts.

Named "Fram2" after the famed Norwegian ship built in the 19th century for Arctic and Antarctic expeditions, the mission will feature a range of experiments including taking the first X-ray in space and growing mushrooms in microgravity.

It's hoped that the research will support future long-duration space travel to Mars.

The crew launched aboard a SpaceX Crew Dragon capsule on a Falcon 9 rocket at 9.45pm on Monday (0146 GMT yesterday day) from Nasa's Kennedy Space Centre in Florida.

Cheers rang out in the control room as the powerful rocket roared upward, lighting up the night sky with a long, orange plume of flame as the craft began its journey toward Earth's North and South Poles.

"With the same pioneering spirit as early polar explorers, we aim to bring back new data and knowledge to advance the long-

term goals of space exploration," mission commander Chun Wang said before the launch.

Wang, a Chinese-born Maltese adventurer and co-founder of crypto companies f2pool and skatefish, selected the rest of the crew: vehicle commander Jannicke Mikkelsen, a Norwegian film director; mission pilot Rabea Rogge, a robotics researcher from Germany; and mission specialist and medical officer Eric Philips, an Australian polar explorer.

The team trained for eight months in preparation for the approximately four-day trip, including a wilderness expedition in Alaska to simulate living in close quarters under harsh conditions.

Upon returning to Earth, the crew will attempt to exit the spacecraft without additional medical support – part of a study to help researchers understand how well astronauts can perform basic tasks after spaceflight.

Except for the Apollo lunar missions, Earth's polar regions have remained out of view for astronauts, including those aboard the International Space Station (ISS). Even on Apollo, they did not fly directly over the Earth's poles.

SpaceX has carried out five private astro-



A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket with the Fram mission astronauts aboard lifts off from launch pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Centre in Cape Canaveral, Florida. - AFP

naut missions to date – three in collaboration with Axiom Space to the ISS, and two free-flying in Earth orbit.

The first of these was Inspiration4 in 2021, followed by Polaris Dawn, which featured the first spacewalk conducted by private astronauts.

Both free-flying missions were chartered by e-payments billionaire Jared Isaacman, who has also been nominated by President Donald Trump to serve as the next National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) administrator.

Isaacman is also a close associate of SpaceX chief executive Elon Musk.

SpaceX and its Dragon craft have dominated the nascent market for private orbital spaceflight, an area in which a key source of demand originally came from a small field of wealthy tourists.

Dragon is the world's only privately built capsule routinely flying missions in orbit, as Boeing's Starliner capsule is held up in development.

In recent years, with Dragon flights costing in the region of \$55mn per seat, the spaceflight market – involving companies such as Axiom Space that contract Crew Dragon missions – has targeted more on astronauts from governments that are prepared to foot the sum mainly for national prestige and bolstering domestic spaceflight experience.

## Death penalty sought for accused killer of insurance CEO

Reuters  
New York/Washington

US Attorney-General Pamela Bondi has directed federal prosecutors to seek the death penalty for Luigi Mangione, the man accused of shooting and killing Brian Thompson, the chief executive of UnitedHealth Group's insurance division, in New York last year.

In a statement, Mangione's lawyer Karen Friedman Agnifilo called the decision to seek the death penalty "barbaric".

"While claiming to protect against murder, the federal government moves to commit the pre-meditated, state-sponsored murder of Luigi," Friedman Agnifilo said.

Mangione, 26, has pleaded not guilty to New York state charges of murder as an act of terrorism and weapons offences.

He could face life in prison without parole if convicted in that case.

New York does not have the death penalty for state charges.

Mangione faces a parallel federal indictment in Manhattan federal court over Thompson's killing, which is where Bondi said prosecutors will aim for the death penalty.

He has not yet been asked to enter a plea to the federal charges.

If Mangione is convicted in the federal case, the jury would determine in a separate phase of the trial whether to recommend the death penalty.

Any such recommendation must be unanimous, and the judge would be required to impose it.

Thompson was shot dead on December 4 outside a Midtown Manhattan hotel, where the company was gathering for an investor conference.

"Luigi Mangione's murder of



US Attorney-General Pam Bondi.



Luigi Mangione

Brian Thompson – an innocent man and father of two young children – was a premeditated, cold-blooded assassination that shocked America," Bondi said in a statement.

"After careful consideration,

I have directed federal prosecutors to seek the death penalty in this case as we carry out President

Trump's agenda to stop violent crime and Make America Safe Again," Bondi said.

The brazen killing of Thompson

and ensuing five-day manhunt captivated Americans.

Police officers in Altoona, Pennsylvania, found Mangione on December 9 with a 9mm pistol and silencer, clothing that matched the apparel worn by Thompson's shooter in surveillance footage, and a notebook describing an intent to "wack" an insurance company CEO (chief executive officer) according to a court filing.

While public officials condemned the killing, some Americans have cheered Mangione, saying that he drew attention to steep US healthcare costs and the power of health insurers to refuse payment for some treatments.

He is currently being held in federal lockup in Brooklyn.

Bondi lifted a moratorium on February 5 on federal executions imposed in 2021 by her predecessor Merrick Garland, the attorney-general under Democratic president Joe Biden.

## Kenyan police in Haiti suffer more casualties in clashes with gangs

Reuters

Nairobi

Two Kenyan police officers in Haiti have been seriously injured in clashes with gangs over the past week, three officers told Reuters, adding to the mission's growing list of casualties as it comes under increasingly frequent attack.

Kenya first deployed officers last June to the Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission, which currently has around 1,000 security personnel, about three-quarters of them from Kenya.

The mission, aimed at restoring enough security for Haiti to hold elections by February 2026, has faced morale issues almost

from the start and uncertainty about its possible expansion amid escalating gang violence.

It suffered its first fatality in February, and the MSS reported another Kenyan officer missing last week.

The three officers, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisal, said he was believed to be dead.

They said the two injuries came during routine patrols in and around the capital Port-au-Prince, which is mostly controlled by heavily armed gangs blamed for thousands of deaths since 2021.

MSS spokesperson Jack Ombaka confirmed two officers had been evacuated to the Dominican Republic for medical care.

"As in any mission, casualties are some-

times unavoidable," he said.

The three officers said the gangs were attacking them on an increasingly regular basis and complained that their equipment was inadequate.

They said one of the officers was shot in the head after a bullet pierced his helmet and the other was hit in the ear when a gunshot penetrated the walls of an armoured vehicle.

Twenty armoured vehicles have been grounded since this weekend after officers refused to use them, complaining that this was the second time a vehicle had failed to stop a bullet, the three officers said.

An MSS delegation plans to travel to Washington this week to present concerns over the quality of protective gear to US of-

ficials, two senior MSS officers told Reuters.

The United States has provided most of the funding and equipment for the mission, which has struggled to secure significant contributions from other countries.

Kenya's government has cited humanitarian reasons for its intervention in Haiti, though analysts say the deployment is also motivated by a desire to boost the country's international profile and win favour with the United States.

Asked about the equipment, Ombaka said: "MSS continues to receive increased logistical support from partners and stakeholders, with assurances that all equipment meets international standards."

The US State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

## Gangs free 500 inmates in fresh Haiti jailbreak

Armed men in Haiti released around 500 prisoners in the central town of Mirebalais, a national police spokesperson told Reuters on Monday, after reports the local police station had been set on fire by members of the Vif Ansam gang alliance.

Spokesperson Lionel Lazarre told Reuters that police had now taken control of the town, which lies some 55km (34 miles) west of the border with the Dominican Republic. - Reuters



# Window to find Myanmar quake survivors closing: UN

Reuters  
Naypyitaw

**A**id groups in Myanmar yesterday described scenes of devastation and desperation after an earthquake that killed more than 2,700 people, stressing an urgent need for food, water and shel-

ter and warning the window to find survivors was fast closing.

Myanmar's military ruler Min Aung Hlaing said the death toll from Friday's 7.7-magnitude quake was expected to surpass 3,000, having reached 2,719 as of yesterday morning, with 4,521 people injured, and 441 missing.

"Among the missing, most are

assumed to be dead. There is a narrow chance for them to remain alive," he said in a speech.

The quake, which struck at lunchtime on Friday, was the strongest to hit the country in more than a century.

It inflicted significant damage on Myanmar's second city Mandalay and Naypyitaw, the capital the previous junta purpose-built to be an impregnable fortress.

The earthquake was the latest in a succession of blows for the impoverished country of 53mn people following a 2021 coup that returned the military to power and devastated the economy after a decade of development and tentative democracy.

Myanmar's military has been accused of widespread atrocities against civilians in its attempts to maintain power and quell a multi-pronged rebellion that unfolded after the coup, and the civil war had displaced more than 3mn people long before the quake struck.

It has dismissed the accusations as misinformation and says it is

protecting the country from terrorists. The death toll rose to 21 in neighbouring Thailand yesterday, where the quake caused damage to hundreds of buildings. Rescuers pressed on searching for life in the rubble of a collapsed skyscraper under construction in the capital Bangkok, but acknowledged time was against them.

## Duterte's lawyer says 'compelling grounds to throw case out'

AFP  
The Hague

**D**uterte's lead lawyer said there was a "compelling" argument to throw out the International Criminal Court (ICC) case against the former Philippines president before it even comes to trial.

Nicholas Kaufman said he hoped to stop the case before the ICC confirms the charges against Duterte by arguing the court cannot exercise its jurisdiction.

He said the Philippines' withdrawal from the court had become effective well before an investigation was authorised.

Duterte, 80, faces a charge of crimes against humanity for murder over his "war on drugs" that claimed the lives of thousands of mostly poor men, often without proof they were linked to drugs.

British-Israeli lawyer Kaufman, 56, said: "Coming back to the jurisdictional point, obviously you don't need to be the dean of a law faculty to realise that that's going to be a huge issue at pre-trial."

"I think that the jurisdictional argument is compelling as defence counsel. I believe that it should succeed and I would be hugely disappointed if it doesn't succeed," he added.

"We hope to persuade the judges pre-trial that it (the court) cannot exercise its jurisdiction over

the case. There won't be a confirmation-of-charges hearing if the judges rule in our favour."

A confirmation of charges hearing, where prosecutor and defence first lay out their evidence, is currently scheduled for September 23.

The issue of jurisdiction is key in this case as the Philippines withdrew from the ICC in 2019.

However, when the court issued its arrest warrant for Duterte, it noted that the alleged crimes took place while the country was still an ICC member.

"As the alleged conduct has taken place between November 1, 2011, and March 16, 2019, on the territory of the Philippines, it falls within the court's jurisdiction," the ICC said.

The ICC chief prosecutor's application for his arrest said Duterte's alleged crimes were "part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against the civilian population" in the Philippines.

The families of victims of his war on drugs see the ICC case as a long-awaited chance for justice.

Another likely critical issue for the defence will be Duterte's arrest on March 11 and his rapid handover to the ICC in The Hague.

"I view it as a kidnapping, nothing more or less. It's an extrajudicial rendition. He was given no due process, just slung over to the Hague," Kaufman said.

"This was in complete contravention of Philippines law."

### S Korea baseball put on hold after fan dies at stadium

Matches across South Korean baseball were cancelled yesterday after a fan died when a piece of metal at a stadium fell off and struck her. The country's most popular sport was plunged into mourning when police said that the woman in her 20s had died of head injuries. The incident happened during a KBO League game between home team NC Dinos and the LG Twins at Changwon NC Park, in the country's southeast. A piece of aluminium installed outside the windows of a club office fell from about 60 feet, fatally injuring the fan and breaking the collarbone of her sister, reports and officials said. "KBO has designated April 1 to April 3 as a mourning period," the Korea Baseball Organisation said in a statement. All games in the KBO League and Minor League were cancelled yesterday, it said. It was not immediately clear whether they would be played at a later date.

Reuters  
Beijing

**A**tie-up between a Chinese research institute and tech company said it aims to implant its brain chip into 13 people by the end of this year, in a move that could see it overtake Elon Musk's Neuralink in collecting patient data.

The Beijing-based Chinese Institute for Brain Research (CIBR) and NeuCyber NeuroTech has inserted Beinao No 1, a semi-invasive wireless brain chip, into three patients in the past month and has

### Belgium royals visit Vietnam



Vietnam's President Luong Cuong (second right) and his wife Nguyen Thi Minh Nguyet (right) pose with King Philippe and Queen Mathilde of Belgium during a meeting at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi yesterday.

# Chinese brain chip project speeds up human trials

Reuters  
Beijing

**A**tie-up between a Chinese research institute and tech company said it aims to implant its brain chip into 13 people by the end of this year, in a move that could see it overtake Elon Musk's Neuralink in collecting patient data.

The Beijing-based Chinese Institute for Brain Research (CIBR) and NeuCyber NeuroTech has inserted Beinao No 1, a semi-invasive wireless brain chip, into three patients in the past month and has

10 more lined up for this year, said Luo Minmin, who is director of CIBR and NeuCyber's chief scientist.

State-owned NeuCyber has ambitions for an even larger trial.

"Next year, after getting regulatory approval we will do formal clinical trials that will include around 50 patients," Luo told reporters on the sidelines of the tech-focussed Zhongguancun Forum in Beijing. He did not elaborate on funding or the length of the trials.

The acceleration of human trials by CIBR and NeuCyber could make Beinao No 1 the brain chip with the

highest number of patients in the world, underlining China's determination to catch up with leading foreign BCI developers.

US BCI company Synchron, whose investors include billionaires Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates, is currently the global leader in terms of human trials with 10 patients, six in the US and four in Australia. Musk's Neuralink currently has three people with its implant.

Neuralink is working on wireless brain chips that are inserted inside the brain to maximise signal quality, while its rivals are working on semi-invasive chips, or brain-

computer interface (BCI) systems, which are placed on the brain's surface. While this sacrifices signal quality there is less risk of brain tissue damage and other post-surgery complications.

Videos published by state media this month showed patients suffering from some kind of paralysis using the Beinao No 1 brain chip to control a robotic arm to pour a cup of water, even transmitting their thoughts onto a computer screen.

"Since news of Beinao No 1's successful human trials came out, we have received countless pleas for help," Luo added.

Last year, CIBR and NeuCyber

had not even begun human trials, announcing instead that an invasive chip it had developed, Beinao No 2, had been tested successfully on a monkey, which was then able to control a robotic arm.

Luo said that a wireless version of Beinao No 2 resembling Neuralink's product was being developed and he expected it to be tested on its first human within the next 12 to 18 months.

Synchron recently announced a partnership with Nvidia to integrate the chipmaker's AI platform onto the company's BCI systems. Luo said that while CIBR and NeuCyber were actively in talks with

investors and eager to raise funds, companies looking to partner on Beinao would need to be "forward-looking" and not focused on making a quick profit.

"In the short-term when it comes to BCI, the stuff that can be sold is very limited," said Luo, adding that Beinao had no ties to the Chinese military and was focused on helping patients suffering from different kinds of paralysis.

NeuCyber is owned by the Zhongguancun Development Corporation, which generated more than 9bn yuan (\$1.24bn) in revenue in 2023, according to Chinese corporate records.

# China holds large-scale military drills around Taiwan

AFP  
Taipei

China yesterday sent its army, navy, air and rocket forces to surround Taiwan for large-scale drills Beijing said were aimed at practising for "precision strikes" and a blockade of the self-ruled island.

Taiwan dispatched its own aircraft and ships, and deployed land-based missile systems, in response to the ongoing exercises and accused Beijing of being the world's "biggest troublemaker".

The drills come after US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth said in Japan on Sunday that the US would ensure "deterrence" across the Taiwan Strait, and called Beijing "aggressive".

China opposes US support for Taiwan, which Beijing insists is part of its territory and has threatened to use force to bring it under its control.

Beijing has increased the deployment of fighter jets and naval vessels around Taiwan in recent years to press its claim of sovereignty, which Taipei rejects.

China deployed 21 warships around the island, including the Shandong aircraft carrier group, along with 71 aircraft and four coast guard vessels in the drills, Taiwan's defence ministry said.

No live fire had been detected, it said. It was the highest number of warships detected in a single day since May last year when 27 navy vessels were reported, and the most aircraft since the 153 detected in October, according to tally of the ministry's figures.

Tensions across the Taiwan Strait have escalated since Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te took office in May 2024.

Beijing's leaders loathe Lai, who last month called China a "foreign

hostile force" and proposed measures to combat growing Chinese espionage and infiltration.

Yesterday's exercises were aimed at sending a "stern warning and forceful deterrence" to alleged separatists in Taiwan, Beijing said.

They involved "sea-air combat-readiness patrols, joint seizure of comprehensive superiority, assault on maritime and ground targets, and blockade on key areas and sea lanes", said senior colonel Shi Yi, spokesman of the Chinese military's Eastern Theater Command.

Beijing's armed forces "close in on Taiwan Island from multiple directions", he said.

The drills also involved training for "multi-directional precision strikes", the Eastern Theater Command said in a statement.

A video shared by the military on X-like Weibo showed footage of weapons interspersed with animations of Sun Wukong, the legendary Monkey King from the classic Chinese novel "Journey to the West".

The video climaxes with Chinese forces appearing to use satellites to mark targets across Taiwan, before ending with a flurry of rocket explosions while multiple Monkey Kings attack a giant frog monster.

A graphic shared by the military depicted Lai as an insect being roasted over an open fire.

"(Taiwan) authorities' stubborn persistence with the Taiwan independence stance and their futile attempt to split the country from outside by seeking independence... is doomed to fail," foreign ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun told a regular briefing.

Taiwan's Presidential Office condemned "China's escalatory behaviour", and Premier Cho Jung-tai said "resorting to displays of military force is not what modern, progressive societies should pursue".



A Taiwan Coast Guard ship (front) and a Chinese Coast Guard ship (back) sail in waters off the Matsu Islands in Taiwan.

## Philippines 'inevitably' involved if Taiwan invaded: military chief

AFP  
Manila

The Philippines' military chief yesterday said his country would "inevitably" be involved if neighbouring Taiwan was invaded while warning China was working to infiltrate the Filipino military and other institutions.

General Romeo Brawner made the comments as Beijing's military surrounded Taiwan in large-scale exercises it said was practice for a blockade of the self-ruled island which China has vowed to one day bring under its control.

"Start planning for actions in case there is an invasion of Taiwan," he told troops in northern Luzon island.

"Because if something happens to Taiwan, inevitably we will be involved," Brawner said without naming the potential invader.

"As members of the armed forces of the Philippines, we should have that mentality

that we are already at war." Part of his soldiers' job would be "to rescue" a quarter million Filipinos working in Taiwan, Brawner said without detailing how the military would execute that mission.

The northern Philippines will play host to large-scale joint exercises with ally the US scheduled to begin April 21, Brawner told troops at Northern Luzon Command headquarters. "These are the areas where we perceive the possibility of an attack. I do not want to sound alarmist, but we have to prepare," he added.

Manila, which has a mutual defence pact with Washington, has been engaged in months of confrontations with Beijing over disputed areas of the South China Sea.

Beijing claims almost the entirety of the crucial waterway, despite an international ruling that its assertion has no merit.

US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth visited Manila last week and said that "friends need to stand shoulder to shoulder to deter conflict to ensure that there's free navigation" in

the South China Sea.

At this month's Balikatan exercises, US and Philippine troops will conduct a "full battle test" of "all of the plans, all of the doctrines, all of the procedures that we have developed in the past years", Brawner said.

"It's very important that we prepare for any eventuality," he added.

Brawner alleged that "communist China is already conducting united front works in our country".

"They are already infiltrating our institutions, our schools, our businesses, our churches, even our ranks in the military," he said without giving details.

He said the Philippines was also experiencing "cyber warfare, information warfare, cognitive warfare, political warfare".

The Chinese embassy did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The Philippines has in recent weeks made a series of arrests of Chinese suspects accused of conducting surveillance on military camps and Filipino naval and coast guard ships.

### Former Australian PM mocks Trump ahead of election

Former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull drew chuckles yesterday as he impersonated Donald Trump, urging the nation's political leaders contesting a general election next month to "stand up" to the US president. Turnbull, who was Australian prime minister when Trump first took office in 2017, briefly adopted a nasal American accent as he mimicked the US commander-in-chief during a speech. Political hopefuls contesting Australia's May 3 general election should not be scared of angering Trump, Turnbull said. "That's the challenge for our leaders - they've got to be able to stand up," he began. "If that means they get a brickbat or a Truth Social post saying 'You're weak and ineffectual. You don't know anything about China', Turnbull added, aping Trump's characteristic cadence. "If you're spooked by that you shouldn't be in the job," Turnbull finished while drawing laughs from the crowd. Former conservative leader Turnbull took a swipe at Trump earlier this year, deriding his return to office as "chaotic" and "erratic".

## 'Heartbreaking' floods swamp Australia's cattle country

AFP  
Sydney



Homes are inundated by floodwaters in the town of Windorah in central-west Queensland. Whole herds of cattle have drowned in vast inland floods seeping across the Australian outback, officials said yesterday.

plies the risk of natural disasters such as bushfires, floods and cyclones.

Flood waters stretched some 500,000 square kilometres across sparsely populated western Queensland, Perrett said, a landmass roughly equivalent to France.

Industry body AgForce told local media some cattle ranches may have lost almost 100% of their herd. The government Bureau of Meteorology said some towns had recorded as much as 20 inches of rain in the space of a week - their typical yearly total.

"Unfortunately, more rainfall is on the way," forecaster Dean Narramore said.

"The reason why we are so concerned about that is because we have numerous flood warnings current for much of Queensland."

Muddy livestock survived by crowding together on the few small hills cresting above the flood waters, photos posted to social media showed.

Queensland's fire department used helicopters to drop bales of fodder near surviving animals cut off from food. The state's primary industries department said some 4,000km of road had been flooded - a distance greater than the famed Route 66 connecting Chicago to Los Angeles.

## S Korea president impeachment ruling on Friday

AFP  
Seoul

South Korea's Constitutional Court will issue its long-awaited ruling on President Yoon Suk-yeol's impeachment on Friday, months after he was suspended for declaring martial law.

Yoon's December 3 attempt to subvert civilian rule plunged South Korea into political chaos, after he sent armed soldiers into parliament.

Lawmakers defied the troops to vote the measure down and impeached Yoon soon after, but the months of political instability have

hit South Korea's economy and left the country in leadership limbo, even as US President Donald Trump targets the region with tariffs.

The court has held weeks of impeachment hearings to determine whether to officially remove Yoon from office, and then took weeks to deliberate on the case, giving rise to a surge in speculation with some suggesting the justices must be experiencing intense disagreements.

"The president's impeachment case verdict will be on April 4, 2025 at the Constitutional Court," he said in a statement yesterday.

For Yoon to be removed from office, at least six of the court's eight justices must vote in favour.

Confirmation of his impeachment would trigger elections which must be held within 60 days.

Hundreds of thousands of South Koreans have been rallying for and against Yoon every weekend in central Seoul.

Yoon, a former prosecutor, was detained in January on revolt charges but was released in early March on procedural grounds. He has remained defiant throughout and blamed a "malicious" opposition.

He is also the first sitting South Korean president to stand trial in a criminal case, facing charges of revolt over the martial law bid.

"After four long months of wait-

ing, the Constitutional Court has finally responded to the people," the opposition Democratic Party's spokesperson said.

"We believe the court will demonstrate its firm resolve to defend the constitutional order and founding principles of the Republic of Korea by removing Yoon Suk-yeol from office."

Yoon's party said it welcomed the court's move to issue a ruling, saying it hoped the verdict would be "fair and impartial" and would not lead to further social unrest.

The People Power Party "will respect and accept the court's decision, and after the ruling, both the ruling and opposition parties...

must take the lead in easing public divisions and promoting national unity," Kwon Seong-dong PPP party floor leader said.

If the Constitutional Court decides to formally dismiss the president, it would trigger elections, which opposition leader Lee Jae-myung is currently frontrunner to win.

An appeals court last week overturned an election law conviction against Lee, potentially clearing the way for him to mount a presidential campaign.

But if it is reinstated on appeal before the election, he will be stripped of his parliamentary seat and barred from running for office

for five years, including the next presidential vote.

Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, said the ruling on Lee may have appeared "to many Koreans as being the political tea leaves".

"This is the judiciary trying to unwind the lawfare of the past three years to allow South Korea's political crisis to be resolved by an election rather than by the courts."

In a separate case, the Constitutional Court last week dismissed the impeachment of Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, reinstating him as acting president - a role he took after the president was suspended for declaring martial law.



## UK Supreme Court opens car loans hearing as banks risk huge bill

**AFP**  
London

The UK's highest court yesterday began a hearing to determine whether controversial car loans were unlawful, in a case that could cost banks billions of pounds in compensation.

Banks are appealing a landmark ruling by a Court of Appeal in November that deemed it unlawful for car dealers to receive a commission on loans without sufficiently informing borrowers. It is estimated that millions of drivers would be eligible for compensation should the Supreme Court side with borrowers in the

three-day hearing.

The loans, which were around for 14 years from 2007, incentivised car dealers to set higher interest rates in return for a bigger commission from the banks.

Britain's financial watchdog has made the commissions illegal.

The Supreme Court will consider two cases against South African

lender FirstRand bank and one against British bank Close Brothers.

Outside the Supreme Court yesterday, Desmond Gourde, a supervisor at a bus company, said he was there to support those who want to claim back money.

Gourde managed to receive compensation after he purchased a used Honda Jazz in 2018 for more

than £8,000 including interest - without knowledge of a nearly £800 commission for the dealer.

"I had no idea there was a commission. I just applied for the finance, signed the paperwork, but no one told me about the commission," the 56-year-old said.

In preparation for the ruling, British banks have set aside con-

siderable sums, including Lloyds Bank, which has earmarked nearly £1.2bn (\$1.6bn) at the start of the latest hearing.

Consumer group Which! estimated it could cost banks up to £16bn, while other analysts expect the sums to be higher, with those at HSBC suggesting it could hit £44bn.

## UK hopeful US tariffs will be reversed with economic deal

**Britain had sought to avoid Trump's global tariff plan by offering to more closely align with Washington on areas such as technology and artificial intelligence.**

**Reuters**  
London

Britain is still hopeful that any tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump will be reversed shortly, if the two sides can agree the outline of a new economic partnership, its business minister said yesterday.

Britain had sought to avoid Trump's global tariff plan by offering to more closely align with Washington on areas such as technology and artificial intelligence.

But Business Minister Jonathan Reynolds said Trump now appeared to want to impose levies on every country before discussing individual exemptions.

He said he hoped those levies, due to be announced today, would be removed once the two sides agreed terms.

"I believe that the framework of an agreement is certainly in place," he told the BBC. "We could sign heads of terms on that, and

then talk about the detail over a specific timescale that would be to the US's satisfaction going forward.

"Whether the US is willing to come to agreement with countries is a decision for the US, but I believe the work we have done has made that possible."

Prime Minister Keir Starmer described the talks as "well advanced".

Unlike the European Union and other major economies, Britain has not retaliated over US tariffs. Reynolds indicated again that London would try to avoid an escalation, saying British companies supported its "calm-headed approach".

As part of a deal, the government has considered softening the impact of its digital services tax on technology companies, as Trump has claimed this is discriminatory against US companies.

Britain has also adopted a light touch to AI regulation that is more closely aligned with the US than with the EU, a policy designed to attract investment from big tech companies and international investors.

Britain has the third-largest AI market globally, ranking behind only the US and China. It is home

to companies including DeepMind, owned by Google, and Be-voientalAI.

But Reynolds said there were red lines to the negotiations, highlighting "sensitive areas" that it would not discuss, such as food standards.

Reynolds said Britain had a higher chance than other countries of securing an exemption, and he remained hopeful that a deal would lead to tariffs being dropped in weeks or months, saying: "That would be my objective."

Downing Street said Starmer and Trump had discussed the "productive negotiations" towards what they called a UK-US economic prosperity deal on Sunday.

Asked by Sky News if he felt played by the US, Starmer said yesterday the two countries were very close allies, and would remain so.

Global markets have been roiled by Trump's plan, which has stoked fears of an economic downturn. Trump has said tariffs are needed to shrink a \$1.2tn global goods trade deficit.

Reynolds said it was not possible to give a timescale on when any reversal could come in, but warned London would have to consider retaliatory tariffs if it took too long.

Britain's Queen Camilla poses next to the "Green Humpty Dumpty Egg" painted by British artist Alice Shirley outside the King's Gallery at Buckingham Palace, in central London, yesterday. Painted by Alice Shirley, the egg was commissioned by Britain's King Charles III and Britain's Queen Camilla in their capacity as joint Presidents of Elephant Family. The egg is part of the charity's campaign "The Big Egg Hunt" in which over 120 large-scale egg sculptures form a trail across London.

## Harry hails travel initiative as charity row rumbles on

**Reuters**  
London

Prince Harry yesterday hailed the work of his travel initiative that he set up to make tourism more sustainable, as the fallout from a clash with the head of his African charity continues to make headlines.

King Charles' younger son is rarely out of the news, from his estrangement from the British royal family to coverage of con-

tent he and wife Meghan have produced for streaming service Netflix.

The latest issue to grab media attention is a dispute with the head of his Sentebale charity, set up in honour of his late mother Princess Diana to help young people with HIV and AIDS in Lesotho and Botswana.

Sentebale chair Sophie Chandaika has given interviews accusing him of "harassment and bullying at scale" after he and other trustees quit the charity,

while they in turn have disputed her version of events.

That quarrel looks set to overshadow the release of the "Five Year Milestone Report" by Travelyst, the not-for-profit scheme Harry set up in 2019 with the aim of helping travellers cut their carbon emissions, prevent over-tourism and develop local economies.

In a video message to accompany the report, Harry, 40, said not enough progress was being made towards sustainable goals.

## King Charles back to work after 'minor bump' in cancer treatment



British heptathlon athlete Katarina Johnson-Thompson poses with her medal after being appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire by Britain's King Charles III following an Investiture ceremony at Windsor Castle, yesterday.

King Charles III yesterday carried out his first public engagement since a short spell in hospital last week for side effects from his cancer treatment.

Charles, 76, on Thursday postponed all his appointments for the rest of the day and for Friday on doctors' advice after suffering some temporary symptoms, Buckingham Palace said.

Officials regarded the short hospital stay of a few hours as a "minor bump" in his medical journey.

In the first of his engagements for this week, Charles was all smiles as he handed out honours at Windsor Castle west of London to leading figures including reigning world heptathlon champion Katarina Johnson-Thompson who was recognised with a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for her services to athletics.

Johnson-Thompson said afterwards the monarch "seemed in good spirits. You know it's long, all day, because so many people are getting honoured today."

"So he seems in really good

spirits and I'm happy to see that he's fit and well."

Gardner and broadcaster Alan Titchmarsh, who received a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), also praised Charles's "boundless energy".

Other engagements later in the week will include the king's weekly meeting with Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

A small number of appointments, however, had been rescheduled ahead of a state visit that Charles and his wife Queen Camilla will make to Italy next week. Charles announced he had been diagnosed with an unspecified cancer in February last year.

He returned to work within two-and-a-half months and gradually ramped up his duties during the rest of 2024, including making several foreign trips which took him as far as Australia and Samoa.

Just six weeks after Charles's cancer announcement came the news that his daughter-in-law Catherine, Princess of Wales, had also been diagnosed with cancer and had begun chemotherapy.

## UK vows £20mn to boost drone, 'flying taxi' services

**AFP**  
London

The UK government yesterday said it had pledged £20mn (\$25.8mn) to help commercial drone services and "flying taxis" take off in Britain.

The drone delivery market has landed in several countries including the US, allowing customers to have online shopping dropped at their doors by fleets of flying robots.

There have been several pilot schemes in the UK too - from

island postal services to rapid blood sample transport - but commercial drone deliveries have been slower to get off the ground.

Earlier this year Amazon, one of the big companies dominating the field in the US, said it had chosen a town in northern England for its first UK drone parcel deliveries - though it is still not clear when the scheme in Darlington could start.

Announcing the UK government funding yesterday, the transport ministry said the money would help kickstart new technologies and streamline reg-

ulations, in a move it said would benefit companies but could also see drones used by firefighters and paramedics.

**"This is regulation that will unlock a raft of new commercial and public service opportunities for the use of drones"**

The ministry added the UK's Civil Aviation Authority would receive £16.5mn from 2025-26 to work on regulations for drones and electric air taxis - vehicles

which resemble a cross between a drone and a small plane, and can take off like helicopters.

The regulations "could see air taxis in use from 2028", the transport ministry claimed, adding a further £5mn would be used "to support industry to turn these new technologies into profitable business that benefits communities".

Critics have argued the government should focus its attention elsewhere, and have raised concerns about the use of drones and aerial surveillance by the authorities.

Unions are also worried about the risk to jobs, while earlier this

year the UK's prison watchdog warned gangs were using drones to deliver drugs and drop weapons to inmates inside jails.

Welcoming the new funding, Transport Secretary Peter Kyle said a "regulatory system that keeps pace" was needed for new technologies to succeed.

"This is regulation that will unlock a raft of new commercial and public service opportunities for the use of drones," he said.

He said drones would have to transmit their location to reduce the risk of crashes and the "highest safety standards" would be

maintained. Aviation Minister Mike Kane said he wanted "the UK to have the most advanced aviation technology ecosystem in the world." "That means creating a nimble regulatory environment and a culture of innovation, so everyone can benefit from cutting-edge transport," he said.

The UK has so far seen the deployment of an army of flightless shopping delivery robots in Milton Keynes, post delivered by drone on the Scottish isles of Orkney, and blood samples sent through the skies by a London hospital for urgent testing.

# India's burdensome import rules a trade barrier: US

Reuters  
New Delhi

The US has flagged concerns over India's increasing and burdensome import-quality requirements, among its many barriers to trade, in a report released two days before planned US

reciprocal tariffs take effect.

The Office of the US Trade Representative on Monday provided an encyclopedic list of foreign countries' policies and regulations it regards as barriers, calling out India's customs barriers, import curbs and licences, alongside high tariffs.

In the midst of President Donald

Trump's efforts to upend the global trade order and shift it in Washington's favour, India is one of the few nations working to lower tariffs and win over Trump.

Both countries have started talks towards clinching an early trade deal. Last month, it was reported that India was open to cutting tariffs on more than half of US im-

ports worth \$23bn, the biggest cut in years.

Still, Washington has concerns that some of India's import requirements are not internationally aligned, and that some are burdensome or lack clear timelines, the Trump administration said in its latest USTR report.

It wasn't clear if Trump's an-

nouncement on tariffs today would factor in the findings of the USTR report. Some of India's non-tariff barriers have also been a pressure point in bilateral trade ties.

Since 2019, India has made many Bureau of India Standards (BIS) standards mandatory for quality control in sectors including chemicals, medical devices, batteries, electronics, food and textiles, the USTR said.

India's standards certification authority, which has so far issued over 700 quality control orders in around 100 sectors, plans to issue 125 new orders in sectors covering chemicals, textiles, steel, aluminium, electric equipment, as per an Indian government statement.

## China and India should strengthen ties, says Xi

Reuters  
Beijing

China and India should work more closely together, Chinese President Xi Jinping told Indian President Droupadi Murmu, saying their relationship should take the form of a "Dragon-Elephant tango" - a dance between their emblematic animals.

The Chinese and Indian presidents exchanged congratulatory messages yesterday, the 75th anniversary of the start of their diplomatic ties, as tensions ease after a 2020 clash between their troops along their shared border in the Himalayas.

Xi said the neighbours should find ways to coexist peacefully and that he was ready to deepen communication and coordination in major international affairs, and jointly safeguard peace in border areas.

Meanwhile, Beijing's ambassador to New Delhi said China is ready to import more Indian products and strengthen trade co-operation. The ambassador was speaking ahead of US tariffs expected to take effect today.

The two countries are taking steps to rebuild their ties after a 2020 border clash on their Himalayan frontier soured relations.

"We are willing to work with the Indian side to strengthen

practical co-operation in trade and other areas, and to import more Indian products that are well-suited to the Chinese market," Chinese ambassador Xu Fei-hong told Chinese state-backed newspaper the Global Times in an interview.

"We also welcome more Indian enterprises to cross the Himalayas and seek opportunities for co-operation in China, sharing the dividends of China's development," the Chinese ambassador said.

In January, both sides said they would resume direct flights after they reached an agreement in October regarding patrolling their Himalayan border.

Xu added that China hopes India will create a fair and transparent business climate for Chinese companies and further expand their mutually beneficial co-operation.

India placed restrictions on Chinese investments in the country after the 2020 clash and has not yet lifted the barriers.

India is one of the few nations working to lower tariffs in an effort to appease US President Donald Trump, who has called the country a "tariff king" and "tariff abuser" and has vowed to reciprocate.

Both countries have started talks towards clinching an early trade deal and resolving their standoffs on tariffs.



People stand amid debris at the site of the firework factory in Deesa, Gujarat, yesterday.

## 21 killed in Ahmedabad fireworks factory blast

AFP  
Ahmedabad, India

An explosion at an illegal firecracker factory in western India left 21 people dead and several others injured yesterday, officials said.

The fiery blast sent chunks of rock, metal and body parts flying far from the factory complex in the town of Deesa in Gujarat state.

"There was a huge blast in the factory caus-

ing the concrete roof to collapse," government spokesman Rishikesh Patel told reporters, confirming many deaths and injuries.

"The number of people killed in the incident at the firecracker unit now stands at 21," police officer C L Solanki said. Top district government official Mihir Patel said that the "explosion was so powerful that body parts of some victims were found scattered in a farm 200-300 metres away." The families of the victims lived on the factory premises, Patel said, which was operating without a licence. Authorities

have launched a probe into the incident.

Fireworks are hugely popular in India, particularly during the festival of Diwali, as well as for use during wedding celebrations.

Explosions are common in firecracker workshops, with owners often disregarding basic safety requirements. Last year, 11 people died in a firework factory explosion in the central state of Madhya Pradesh. In 2019, at least 18 people were killed in a similar explosion in Punjab state, and another 10 were killed the same year in Uttar Pradesh.

### Chile president in India



Chilean President Gabriel Boric Font (left) pays respect after placing a wreath at the Mahatma Gandhi memorial at Rajghat in New Delhi yesterday.

### India 'likely to face' abnormally hot summer

AFP  
New Delhi

India can expect hotter-than-usual temperatures this summer with more heatwave days taking a toll on lives and livelihoods, the weather office warned.

The country is no stranger to scorching summers but years of scientific research has found climate change is causing heatwaves to become longer, more frequent and more intense.

Summer in India lasts from April to June, when temperatures often soar past 45 degrees Celsius at the season's peak.

This year, the hot weather season will see "above-normal" maximum temperatures over most parts of the country, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) said. The number of heatwave days, when abnormally

high temperatures several degrees above the long-term average are recorded, will also increase.

"Up to 10 heatwave days or even more can be expected, especially over east India," leading to heat stress, weather bureau boss Mrutyunjay Mohapatra told reporters. India is the world's third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, relying heavily on coal to generate power for its needs.

"Human activities, increasing population, industrialisation and transport mechanisms are leading to increased concentration of carbon monoxide, methane and chloro-carbons," Mohapatra had said last year. "We are endangering not only ourselves, but also our future generations," he added.

This year, states like Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha could see as many as 10-11 heatwave days, Mohapatra, added.

## China gains as India snubs Dhaka on medical visas

Reuters  
New Delhi/Dhaka

India is resisting pleas by Bangladesh to resume issuing normal volumes of medical visas, citing staffing shortages amid worsening ties, six sources said, giving China rare space to expand similar offerings and build people-to-people ties.

The bulk of India's visas for Bangladeshis in 2023 went to those seeking its affordable private healthcare and Bengali-speaking hospital staff, helping to cement ties between the neighbours and limit China's regional influence.

"When there is a vacuum, others will come and fill the space," one of four Bangladeshi sources, most of them diplomats, said. "Some people are going to Thailand and China."

Since August, India has handed out fewer than 1,000 medical visas each working day, down from a figure of 5,000-7,000, said the sources, who all sought anonymity, citing their terms of employment.

The numbers have fallen as relations have cooled after Bangladesh's interim government, led by Nobel peace laureate Muhammad Yunus, replaced India's long-term ally Sheikh Hasina.

Fleeing deadly protests that un-

seated her in August, Hasina sought refuge in New Delhi, and India has not responded since to Bangladesh's request to send her home for trial.

In 2023, India issued more than 2mn visas to Bangladeshis, most of them on medical grounds, government data from both countries shows. But its withdrawal since has opened an enticing gap for China.

Just last month, a group of Bangladeshi visited the southwestern province of Yunnan for treatment, in a bid to "explore the potential of the medical tourism market", said the Chinese ambassador, Yao Wen.

And at least 14 of its companies have invested more than \$230mn in Bangladesh since the interim

government took office, the most of any country in that period, Wen said.

Bangladesh's de facto prime minister, Yunus, visited China from March 26-29 and met President Xi Jinping.

China, with which India is only slowly restoring ties after Himalayan border clashes in 2020, is also considering opening a friendship hospital in Dhaka, the government of Bangladesh has said, and eased access for Bangladeshis seeking treatment there.

China is willing to work together with Bangladesh to continuously deepen and explore mutually beneficial cooperation, a spokesperson

of its foreign ministry said.

"The cooperation between China and Bangladesh is not targeted at any third party, nor is it influenced by third-party factors," the spokesperson added.

New Delhi evacuated many diplomats and their families from its missions in Bangladesh in August after public opinion turned against it for sheltering Hasina, with protesters in the Bangladesh capital attacking an Indian cultural centre.

The Indian government sources said they wanted Bangladeshis with medical conditions to secure access to treatment in India, adding that staff would be added to missions in the neighbouring country when

there is "stability in Bangladesh".

One of them also attributed the fewer medical visas to the finding that some were being misused by people looking to "try and escape difficult conditions in Bangladesh".

The visa bottlenecks come against the backdrop of Indian credit lines of more than \$7bn extended to Bangladesh for projects from rail links and Indian economic zones at two ports to nuclear power plant infrastructure and defence purchases.

Last month, India's foreign ministry said some of its projects in Bangladesh had been affected and the two sides had discussed "rationalising the project portfolio".

**CHAIRMAN**

Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Attiyah

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka

**Deputy Managing Editor**

K T Chacko

- P.O.Box 2888, Doha, Qatar
- editor@gulf-times.com
- 44350478 (News),
- 44466404 (Sport),
- 44466636 (Home delivery)
- 44350474
- facebook.com/gulf-times
- twitter.com/gulf-times\_Qatar
- instagram.com/gulf-times
- youtube.com/GulfTimesVideos

**GULF TIMES**

## Dollar-bears on the prowl amid Trump's isolationist agenda

A growing number of investors are turning negative on the dollar as data points to a cooling US economy at the same time as Europe ramps up spending.

The dollar has dropped against all but a handful of the 31 major currencies over the last three months, sending Bloomberg's dollar index down nearly 3%, its worst start to a year since 2017. But the price of gold – a rival haven – has surged to a record high of over \$3,000 an ounce.

By mid-March, speculative traders started betting against the dollar for the first time since President Donald Trump's election amid fears his policy shifts could drive the world's largest economy into a recession. Consumer confidence in the US fell in March to the lowest level in four years, according to new data released last week.

Speculative traders flipped to wagering against the greenback in the week ending March 18 after being the most dollar bullish in mid-January ahead of the inauguration, according to Commodity Futures Trading Commission data.

"As opposed to being the usual bastion of stability and first choice haven for foreign-exchange market operators, the greenback instead now stands as quite the opposite," according Michael Brown, a senior research strategist in London for Pepperstone, one of the largest currency brokers.

To be sure, the recent drop hasn't significantly eroded the strength of the dollar, given how much it had previously risen on the back of the nation's strong economy and elevated interest rates, and it could bounce back if worries about a global slowdown cause overseas investors to pile into US Treasuries.

It also remains solidly entrenched as the world's key currency, used for the majority of central bank reserves and for the purchase of commodities like oil, in large part because no significant alternative has emerged.

But Trump's actions are rekindling long-simmering discussions about whether overseas governments will accelerate efforts to lessen reliance on the greenback.

Trump has said he wants to maintain the dollar's central role globally, once threatening to retaliate against any country that tries to decouple its trade from the US currency. At the same time, during his campaign he indicated he'd welcome a weaker dollar because it would make US products more competitive.

That's spurred speculation that he could be using his trade war to strong-arm governments into cutting a grand bargain that would do just that, though the White House hasn't publicly floated any such plans.

Yet those goals – of either maintaining the dollar's standing, or persuading other governments to act in the interest of the US – seem out of sync with Trump's isolationist agenda and approach that has alienated allies.

Trump said he plans to start his reciprocal tariff push with "all countries," tamping down speculation that he could limit the initial scope of tariffs set to be unveiled today.

The market's focus is rapidly shifting to an outlook where recession is suddenly a possibility again, fuelling a retrenchment from risk and appetite for the safest assets ahead of Trump's so-called "Liberation Day." That's helped propel a 2.6% gain for US government debt this quarter, with Treasuries outperforming US equities for the first time in five years. Meanwhile, the S&P 500 is enduring its worst three-month period compared to the rest of the world since the 1980s, according to a Bloomberg report.

Despite warnings about long-term headwinds for the dollar, here's the undeniable reality: Dollar is the king, still.

The US currency is on one side of almost 90% of foreign-exchange transactions and accounts for two-thirds of international debt.

To be clear, no one would bet that the dollar's decline will be a straight line as Trump's tariffs policy continues to heighten tensions across the world and the threat of a US recession and geopolitical risks foster demand for havens.

**To Advertise**

gtadv@gulf-times.com

**Display**

44466621 44418811

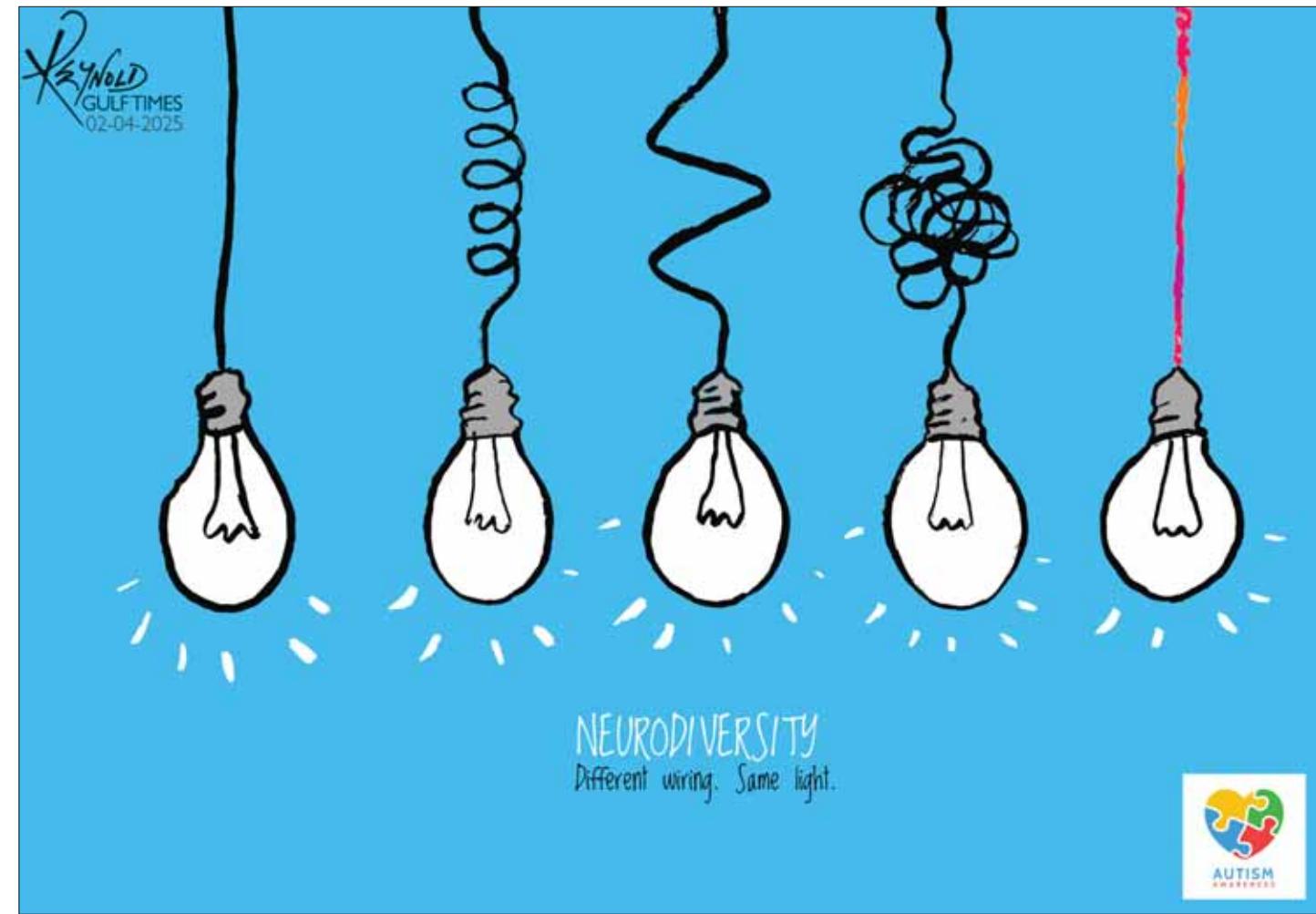
**Classified**

44466609 44418811

gtcad@gulf-times.com

**Subscription**

circulation@gulf-times.com



# Will AI close or widen the development gap?

By Shamika Sirimanne and Xiaolan Fu  
Geneva/London

**A** I is often presented as the next peak of human innovation, owing to its potential to revolutionise industries, transform economies, and improve lives. But will AI truly benefit everyone, or will it deepen existing divides? The answer depends on how the technology is developed, deployed, and governed. Without purposeful interventions, AI's potential will be harnessed for narrow gains by those who prioritise profits over people.

Encouragingly, the cost of AI development is beginning to decline. While OpenAI's GPT-4 cost \$100mn to train, the Chinese startup DeepSeek's comparable model apparently cost a fraction of that. This trend has promising implications for developing countries, which generally lack the massive financial resources that earlier AI innovations required but could soon be able to access and leverage these technologies more affordably. The choices we make today will determine whether AI becomes an instrument of inclusion or exclusion.

To ensure that AI serves humanity, we need to focus on incentives. AI development today is largely dictated by market forces, with an excessive focus on automation and monetising personal data. The few countries spearheading AI technologies are investing billions of dollars in labour-replacing applications that will exacerbate inequality. Making matters worse, government subsidies frequently focus on technical merits, which often target efficiency, without sufficient consideration of their direct and indirect societal impact.

Where jobs disappear, economic, social, and political instability tend to follow. Yet public funding continues to flow toward automation. Governments must realign incentives to encourage AI that serves social needs, such as enhancing education, improving health outcomes, and tackling climate challenges. AI should empower, not replace, human workers. Population ageing is a major challenge in some countries. Although household robots may help address some of the problems of an ageing population, the frontier of current development focuses on priorities such as dynamic performance (running, jumping, or obstacle avoidance) in outdoor environments, rather than functions centring on safety and practicality, daily living assistance, or chronic disease management.

The task cannot be left to venture capital alone, which funnelled \$131.5bn into startups in 2024, largely chasing overhyped and speculative technologies like artificial general intelligence. Narrower-purpose models can advance medical diagnostics, assist radiologists, predict natural disasters, and much more. Redirecting investments toward solutions that



A humanoid robot is pictured on stage during the opening of the Hannover Messe industrial trade fair for mechanical and electrical engineering and digital industries, on March 30, 2025 in Hanover, northern Germany. The fair began on March 31 and will be run until April 4, 2025. According to the Hannover Messe, "more than 4,000 companies will be acting as an interconnected industrial ecosystem and demonstrating how climate neutrality can be achieved through electrification, digitisation and automation". (AFP)

directly benefit society is essential to keeping AI development aligned with collective progress, rather than shareholder value.

It is also necessary to bridge the divide between developed and developing economies. AI's transformative potential remains largely untapped in low- and middle-income countries, where inadequate infrastructure, limited skills, and resource constraints hinder adoption. Left unaddressed, this technological divide will only widen global inequalities.

Consider what AI could do just for health care. It could broaden access to personalised medicine, giving patients in resource-limited settings tailored treatments with greater efficacy and fewer adverse effects. It could assist in diagnosis, by helping doctors detect diseases earlier and more accurately. And it could improve medical education, using adaptive learning and real-time feedback to train medical professionals in underserved areas.

More broadly, AI-powered adaptive learning systems are already customising educational content to meet individual needs and bridge knowledge gaps. AI tutoring systems offer personalised instruction that increases engagement and improves outcomes. By making it far easier to learn a new language and acquire new skills, technology could drive a massive expansion of economic opportunities, particularly for marginalised communities.

Nor are the uses confined to health care and education. The University of Oxford's Inclusive Digital Model (IDMODEL) demonstrates that equipping marginalised groups – especially women and young people – with digital skills allows them to participate in the global digital

economy, reducing income disparities.

But global co-operation is crucial to unlock these benefits. AI must be approached collectively, such as through South-South initiatives to create solutions tailored to developing countries' circumstances and needs. By fostering partnerships and knowledge-sharing, lower- and middle-income countries can bridge the technological divide and ensure that AI serves a broad range of constituencies beyond the dominant players.

Then there is the question of safety and ethical use. These issues also must be addressed globally. Without robust ethical frameworks, AI can be – and already has been – used for harmful purposes, from mass surveillance to the spread of misinformation.

The international community will need to agree on shared principles to ensure that AI is used consistently and responsibly. The United Nations – through inclusive platforms like the Commission on Science and Technology for Development – can help shape global regulations. The top priorities should be transparency (ensuring that AI decision-making is discernible and explainable); data sovereignty (protecting individuals and countries' control over their own data); harm prevention (prohibiting applications that undermine human rights); and equitable access. Multilateral initiatives to develop digital infrastructure and skills can help to ensure that no country is left behind.

This is not only an issue for policymakers and the private sector. Throughout history, transformative change has often started from below. Women's suffrage, the civil-rights movement, and climate activism all began with grassroots efforts that grew into powerful forces for change. A similar movement is needed to steer AI in the right direction. Activists can highlight the risks of unregulated AI and apply pressure on governments and corporations to put human-centred innovation first.

AI's social, economic, and political effects will not naturally bend toward inclusion or equity. Governments must steer incentives toward innovation that augments human potential. Global organisations must establish ethical frameworks to safeguard human rights and data sovereignty. And civil society must hold political and business leaders accountable.

The decisions made today will determine whether AI becomes a bridge or a chasm between the world's haves and have-nots. International collaboration, ethical governance, and public pressure can ensure that we make the right ones.



A robot is displayed at the booth of Federal Ministry of Research and Education, as preparations continue ahead of the opening of the Hannover Messe, one of the world's largest industrial trade fairs with this year's partner country Canada, which, like the European Union, is similarly affected by the new US tariffs, in Hanover, Germany, on March 30, 2025. (Reuters)

• Shamika Sirimanne is senior adviser to the secretary-general of UN Trade and Development. Xiaolan Fu is professor of technology and international development at the University of Oxford.

## Former world leaders urge EU to hold the line on climate

By Virginia Furness

Reuters

A group of former world leaders is urging Europe to keep pushing its green agenda even as trade wars and defence spending distract attention from climate issues, Ireland's former president Mary Robinson said yesterday.

The Elders, a group set up by late former South African president Nelson Mandela, are due to meet the EU and North Atlantic

Treaty Organisation (Nato) later this month amid moves to water down impending corporate climate disclosure rules in response to concerns around competitiveness.

Robinson, Ireland's president from 1990-1997, said that she is worried about the plans but that the bloc had an opportunity to seize leadership from the United States in the fast-growing market for clean technology and on climate policy more broadly.

"The crisis of a federal withdrawal in the United States from

everything to do with climate and science is an opportunity for the European Union, the United Kingdom, and frankly, the rest of the world," she said.

"Moving as fast as the EU can on the green transition is exactly how to respond... it's really important Europe sticks to its principles, sticks to its green industrial policy and doesn't renege at all," Robinson added.

The global market for clean technologies such as solar photovoltaic technology and wind turbines could grow from \$700bn in

2023 to more than \$2tn by 2035, close in value to the world's crude oil market, the International Energy Agency has said.

Robinson warned Brussels not to let Russia's war in Ukraine and trade wars and anti-climate rhetoric led by US President Donald Trump dictate longer-term thinking on climate issues.

She added that many companies across the bloc were willing and able to support the green transition.

Robinson, along with the former Norway prime minister

Gro Harlem Brundtland and international human rights campaigner Denis Mukwege will also urge Brussels to play a leading role on tackling the world's biggest threats and will be encouraging the EU to come up with a timely and ambitious climate action plan.

Set up in 2007, the Elders advocate for peace, justice, human rights and a sustainable planet.

The group includes former UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon and former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark as members.

## Russia can't accept US proposals on Ukraine in current form: minister

Reuters

Moscow

Russia cannot accept US proposals to end the war in Ukraine in their current form because they do not address problems Moscow regards as having caused the conflict, a senior Russian diplomat said, suggesting that US-Russia talks on the subject had stalled.

The comments by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov suggest that Moscow and Washington have so far been unable to bridge differences which President Vladimir Putin raised more than two weeks ago when he said US proposals needed reworking.

They come as US President Donald Trump appears to be growing increasingly impatient with what he has suggested might be foot-dragging over a wider deal by Moscow.

Trump in recent days has said he is "(angry)" with Putin and has spoken of imposing sanctions on countries that buy Russian oil if he feels Moscow is blocking a deal.

Ryabkov, a specialist in US-Russia relations, said that Moscow was not yet able to move forward with a deal however.

"We take the models and solutions proposed by the Americans very seriously, but



A tank turret is seen in a field near ruins of a building in the abandoned town of Marinka (Maryinka), which was destroyed in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict in the Donetsk region, a Russian-controlled area of Ukraine. -Reuters

we can't accept it all in its current form," Ryabkov was quoted by state media as telling the Russian magazine *International Affairs* in an interview released yesterday.

"As far as we can see, there is no place in them today for our main demand, namely to solve the problems related to the root causes of this conflict. It is completely absent,

and that must be overcome," he said.

Putin has said that he wants Ukraine to drop its ambitions to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato), Russia to control the entirety of four Ukrainian regions it has claimed as its own, and the size of the Ukrainian army to be limited.

Kyiv says those demands are tantamount

to demanding its capitulation.

Asked about Trump's latest remarks about wanting Putin to do a deal on Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters earlier yesterday that Moscow was "continuing our contacts with the Americans side."

"The subject is very complex. The substance that we are discussing, related to the Ukrainian settlement, is very complex," he said. "This requires a lot of extra effort."

Russia also said yesterday that it is fully complying with a US-brokered moratorium on attacking Ukraine's energy facilities.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told state TV that Defence Minister Andrei Belousov had briefed Putin on alleged Ukrainian violations during a meeting of Russia's Security Council yesterday.

Russia passed a list of the violations to US National Security Adviser Mike Waltz and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Lavrov said.

Before the weekend, Trump had taken a more conciliatory stance towards Russia that has unnerved the United States' European allies as he tries to broker an end to the conflict in Ukraine, now in its fourth year.

However, in recent days, and amid lobbying by Europeans such as Finland's president urging him to hold Russia to account, he has adopted a tougher tone.

## Finland to quit anti-personnel mine ban pact

Finland's prime minister said yesterday that the country plans to withdraw from the international treaty banning anti-personnel mines, the latest signature moving to ditch the ban over threats from Russia.

Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said a fundamentally changed security environment in Europe prompted the decision by Finland - a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) member bordering Russia - to pull out of the 1997 Ottawa Treaty.

"Finland and Europe need to evaluate all measures to strengthen our deterrence and defence capabilities, individually and in Nato," Orpo said at a press conference. "We also propose that Finland starts to prepare for withdrawal from the Ottawa agreement."

The announcement comes weeks after four Nato countries on the military alliance's eastern flank - Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia - took a first step towards also quitting the treaty.

All pointed to the increased security threat from Russia.

Finland's parliament needs to back the government's decision, with the withdrawal going into effect six months after parliamentary approval.

According to Iiro Sarkka, a senior researcher at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, the move from the Finnish government signalled that Finland - which became a Nato frontline country when it joined the alliance in 2023 - was ready to use all means to protect its national security, even if it meant compromising on international law.

"While it is not the optimal solution from the viewpoint of international law, it will maximise military capability, and it is a cost-effective solution that maximises Finland's security," she told AFP.

Finland shares a 1,340km (830-mile) border with Russia, and has been ramping up its defence and border security since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

In the wake of the invasion, the Nordic country dropped decades of military non-alignment and applied for Nato membership.

Finland shut its eastern border with Russia in mid-December 2023 after the arrival of around 1,000 migrants without visas, with Helsinki claiming the surge was orchestrated by Russia - a claim Moscow denied.

The Ottawa Treaty prohibits the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel landmines.

More than 160 countries and territories are party to the treaty, including Ukraine. Neither the US nor Russia are signatories. -AFP



Children enjoy rides at a carnival in Karachi during celebrations a day after Eid al-Fitr. -AFP

## Pakistan extends deadline for expulsion of Afghans

AFP

Islamabad

Pakistan has postponed a deadline for hundreds of thousands of Afghans to return to their country due to Eid al-Fitr holidays marking the end of Ramadan, a government official told AFP yesterday.

In early March, Islamabad announced a deadline of the end of the month for Afghans holding certain documentation to leave the country, ramping up a campaign to send Afghans back to their homeland.

"The deadline has been extended until the beginning of next week due to Eid holidays," the official said on the condition of anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to the media.

Afghans holding Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC) - issued by Pakistan authorities and held by 800,000 people, according to the United Nations - face deportation to Afghanistan after the deadline.

More than 1.3mn Afghans who hold Proof of Registration (PoR) cards from the UN refugee agency

UNHCR, are also to be moved outside the capital Islamabad and neighbouring city Rawalpindi.

The UN says nearly 3mn Afghans live in Pakistan, many having fled there over decades of war in their country and after the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan.

"Many have been living in the country for years and going back means going back to nothing," Pakistani human rights lawyer Moniza Kakar told AFP.

Ties between the neighbouring countries have frayed since the Taliban takeover, with Pakistan accusing Kabul's rulers of failing to root out militants sheltering on Afghan soil, a charge the Taliban government denies.

A delegation from Islamabad met with officials in Kabul in March, with Pakistan emphasising the importance of security in Afghanistan for the region.

The Taliban government has repeatedly called for the "dignified" return of Afghans to their country, with Prime Minister Hassan Akhund urging countries hosting Afghans not to force them out.

"We ask that instead of forced deportation, Afghans should be supported and provided with facilities," he said in an Eid message the day before Pakistan's original deadline.

Rights groups have condemned Pakistan's campaign.

Human Rights Watch slammed "abusive tactics" used to pressure Afghans to return to their country "where they risk persecution by

the Taliban and face dire economic conditions."

Afghan girls and young women would lose rights to education if returned to Afghanistan, as per Taliban authority bans.

Amnesty International condemned the removal of Afghans in Islamabad awaiting resettlement in other countries, saying that they would be "far from foreign missions who had promised visas

and travel documents, and risk deportation due to the increased difficulty in co-ordinating their relocation with missions such as the United States".

Following an ultimatum from Islamabad in late 2023 for undocumented Afghans to leave Pakistan, more than 800,000 Afghans returned between September 2023 and the end of 2024, according to UN figures.

## Greenland votes in local polls

AFP

Copenhagen

Greenlanders voted in local elections yesterday under the shadow of US President Donald Trump's threat to annex the autonomous Danish territory.

Trump argues that the United States needs the vast Arctic island for its security and has refused to rule out the use of force to secure it.

"We'll get Greenland. Yeah, 100%," Trump said on Sunday in an interview with NBC News.

However, the island's new Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen shot back: "The United States will not get Greenland. We don't belong to anyone else. We decide our own future."

Despite Greenland making international headlines, the council elections have been dominated by local issues like health, housing, tourism development and mining.

Palle Jeremiassen, the mayor of Greenland's third largest city Ilulissat, wished Greenlanders a "happy election" in a Facebook post.

Nielsen said last week that he understood Greenlanders feeling "uneasy" over diplomatic tensions, criticising US Vice-Pres-

ident J D Vance for joining his wife Usha's "private visit" to the island, which was then changed to a US military base there on Friday.

Vance used the occasion to criticise Denmark for not having "done a good job by the people of Greenland".

Coming less than a month after March 1's general election, researcher Signe Ravn-Hoigaard said yesterday's vote was "not about the future of Greenland, it's about school, (and) local issues".

"The municipality that (the capital) Nuuk is in, Sermersooq, is the world's largest, and is bigger than Spain," said Ravn-Hoigaard, who runs the think-tank Digital Infrastruktur in Nuuk.

Because of the sparse and spread out population, and "relatively little news coverage, social media is more important", the researcher told AFP.

While close-knit communities help limit the use of fake profiles, the reliance on social media can speed up the circulation of false or out-of-context information - something highlighted by Danish intelligence services.

According to them, the general election saw a high level of disinformation on social networks.

"There were examples of statements by



Electoral workers get ready at Godthaabshallen, where voting takes place in connection with the elections for the Greenlandic municipal councils, village councils, and parish representations in Nuuk. -AFP

Greenlandic politicians or private individuals that were used out of context to promote or reinforce certain points of view," Denmark's intelligence service PET said.

Ravn-Hoigaard noted that "in small interconnected societies" posts need only a few shares to be seen by virtually everyone.

No opinion polls have been conducted, but Nielsen's centre-right Democrats were

the big winners in the national poll last month.

"It's still going to be interesting to see whether the Democrats will be riding on that wave of surprise success," said Carina Ren, director of the Arctic programme at the University of Aalborg.

In 2021, almost 64% of eligible voters turned out to vote in the local elections.

They are accused of "an elaborate fraud with high-value food products, such as expensive cheeses and olive oil, as well as kitchen equipment for pizza production", said Eurojust, the EU's judicial agency, which co-ordinated the raids.

The suspects are also accused of other crimes including arson, drug trafficking and tax evasion.

The alleged food fraud took place in and around Stuttgart and involved suspects posing as representatives of German food companies who then targeted Italian firms, according to German prosecutor Joachim Dittrich.

They ordered large quantities of food and equipment in the name of a fake company but did not pay, leading to losses of hundreds of thousands of euros for the suppliers, he said.

The suspects then pressured Italian restaurants in and around the German city to buy the supplies, with the businesses agreeing to avoid possible reprisals.

Italian prosecutors said the victims were Italians from Calabria, the southern region of the country where the 'Ndrangheta is based.

The arrested police officer is accused of disclosing confidential information to help the suspects. -AFP



Snapshots from Souq Al Wakrah last night.



## Souq Al Wakrah fireworks show concludes today

The captivating fireworks show at Souq Al Wakrah, a key attraction of the Eid al-Fitr celebrations at the popular destination, will conclude today at 8pm after four days. The festivities from the first day of Eid al-Fitr have been attracting big crowds of both Qatar residents and visitors. There are numerous entertainment options for children as well as a number of food stalls offering various cuisines. Pictured are snapshots from yesterday's activities at Souq Al Wakrah. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam



Spectacular fireworks displays at Souq Al Wakrah last night.

