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SPORT | Page 1

QSL: Al Gharafa
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A woman reacts as Palestinians inspect the damage at the Dar Al-Arqam school, where displaced people shelter, after it was hit by an Israeli strike on Thursday, in Gaza City, yesterday.

86 martyred in Gaza in latest Israeli attacks

QNA
Gaza

Eighty-six people were martyred and 287 others injured in the past 24 hours as a result of the ongoing Israeli bombardment across various areas of the Gaza Strip.

The ministry of health in Gaza reported that the death toll from the Israeli aggression on the Strip since October 7, 2023, has risen to 50,609 martyrs, the majority of whom are women and children. The number of injuries has also increased to 115,063.

The ministry added that the

toll from the renewed Israeli aggression on the Strip since March 18 has reached 1,249 martyrs and 3,022 injuries.

It also noted that a large number of victims remain under the rubble, and ambulance and civil defence teams are unable to reach them.

Israeli occupation forces continue their full-scale war on the Gaza Strip, which they resumed 18 days ago after violating the ceasefire agreement. They are launching dozens of airstrikes daily, demolishing homes, and simultaneously preventing the entry of food and medical aid. (QNA)

HE the Minister of Social Development and Family Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabri al-Nuaimi (pictured) said Qatar looks forward to hosting the Summit on Disability 2028, with the aim of building on the success of the current summit. The minister stressed in the final session of the current summit in Berlin that she was proud to participate in the prominent event. She praised the efforts of Germany and Jordan in organising the summit, which she considered a big achievement. The minister noted that the Amman-Berlin declaration is an important starting point towards reaching the hoped outcomes. She also stressed that the upcoming summit will continue to provide a platform for dialogue, building

partnerships, and enhancing co-operation to create real change that helps make real development in the life of people with disability.

The minister also spoke on Qatar's hosting of the Second World Social Summit in Doha next November,

noting it will be a pivotal event in global discussions on promoting

social development and will support

international efforts to implement

the goals of the 2030 Sustainable

Development Agenda. (QNA)

Qatar 'looking forward' to hosting Summit on Disability

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This visit has provided an opportunity to explore deeper collaboration, particularly in advancing WHO's health and climate agenda.

We also look forward to working with Qatar to expand expertise in health education and workforce development across the region, particularly when it comes to innovation and capacity-building."

During the visit Dr Balkhy's met with HE the Minister of Public Health Mansoor bin Ebrahim al-

reinforcing Doha's leadership in global health security.

"We highly value Qatar's commitment to addressing health challenges related to climate change, including air quality and urban sustainability," said Dr Balkhy.

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Speaker partakes in Arab parliamentary co-ordination meeting

QNA
Tashkent

HE Speaker of the Shura Council, Hassan bin Abdulla al-Ghanem, yesterday participated in the co-ordination meeting of the Arab Parliamentary Group, held in preparation for the 150th General Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which is set to commence today in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, and will run for several days.

The meeting addressed various items on the agenda of the upcoming IPU General Assembly. A briefing was delivered by the representative of the Arab Geopolitical Group on the IPU Executive Committee regarding the committee's recent activities.



The participants also exchanged views on the Arab Group's proposal to include an emergency item on the General Assembly's agenda concerning developments in the occupied Palestinian territories. In addition, the meeting discussed the Arab Group's nominations for vacant positions on the IPU's

standing and subsidiary committees. On the sidelines of the meeting, HE the Speaker of the Shura Council met with Speaker of the Council of Representatives of Bahrain, Ahmed bin Salman al-Musallam.

The two sides reviewed the bilateral parliamentary relations between the Shura Coun-



cil and the Bahraini Council of Representatives and explored avenues to further enhance co-operation, particularly within the framework of strengthening joint Gulf parliamentary action.

HE Ahmed bin Hitmi al-Hitmi, member of the Shura Council, also took part in the co-ordination meeting of the Gulf legis-

lative councils, which was held ahead of the fourth conference of the Parliamentary Network of the Non-Aligned Movement, scheduled to begin on Saturday. During the meeting, participants reviewed the final statement of the upcoming conference and discussed several key topics on the meeting's agenda.

Amir sends cables of congratulations to president of Senegal

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani sent cables of congratulations to Senegal President Bassirou Diomaye Faye on the occasion of his country's National Day. HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani also sent a similar cable to Senegal PM Ousmane Sonko on the occasion. (QNA)

Qatar, Uzbekistan discuss enhancing parliamentary ties

QNA
Tashkent

An official round of talks was held in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, between the Shura Council of Qatar and the Senate of Uzbekistan. The discussions focused on bilateral relations between the two councils, ways to enhance parliamentary co-operation, co-ordinate positions in regional and international parliamentary forums, exchange expertise, and support channels of parliamentary dialogue between the two sides.

The Qatari side was headed by HE Speaker of the Shura Council Hassan bin Abdulla al-Ghanem, while the Uzbek side was led by Chairperson of the Senate Tanzila Norbaeva.



Following the talks, both sides signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at strengthening joint co-operation in parliamentary affairs, exchanging legislative information and expertise, and

organising reciprocal visits to support the development of parliamentary work and coordinate positions on issues of mutual interest.

In a related context, HE al-

Ghanem also met with Speaker of the Legislative Chamber of Uzbekistan Nuriddinjon Ismailov. The meeting reviewed the parliamentary co-operation between the Shura Council and the Legislative Chamber, exploring ways to support and enhance it. A number of topics of joint concern were also discussed.

The talks also touched upon key items on the agenda of the 150th session of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) General Assembly, hosted in Tashkent from April 5-9. Both parties exchanged views on these topics. The session's agenda includes a range of issues related to current global challenges, foremost among them the developments in the occupied Palestinian territories, as well as matters of international



peace and security, environmental governance mechanisms to address climate change, and the activation of legislative frameworks to achieve social and economic justice.

Participants will also discuss

parliamentary initiatives aimed at accelerating progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at both regional and international levels, and will discuss the progress made in achieving these goals.

QFSW, Shafallah, Al Noor Center participate in World Disability Summit in Berlin

QNA
Berlin

Qatar Foundation for Social Work (QFSW), along with the Shafallah Center for Persons with Disabilities and the Al Noor Center for the Blind, participated in the World Disability Summit, held in Berlin, Germany, from April 1-3. QFSW's participation in the summit aligns with the foundation's commitment to the Qatar National Vision 2030, which focuses on human and social development.

It also reflects Qatar's commitment to supporting disability issues at the regional and international levels, as part of ongoing



figures in the fields of disability and social work. The foundation also participated in the summit's

accompanying exhibition, offering a comprehensive experience that highlighted its mission and efforts.

The foundation's pavilion was designed to introduce visitors to the foundation's efforts and centres in supporting and empowering people with disabilities.

Qatar Foundation for Social Work affirmed that it will continue to work to strengthen international and local partnerships with the aim of improving the quality of life for people with disabilities and ensuring that all future policies and practices contribute to achieving Qatar National Vision 2030, which emphasises sustainable and inclusive development for all members of society.

For his part, Executive Director of the Al Noor Center for the Blind, Meshal al-Nuaimi noted that this event is an important opportunity

to showcase Qatar's efforts in supporting the blind and to enhance co-operation with international organisations to develop services and programs that serve the blind and meet their needs in an innovative and effective manner.

In turn, Executive Director of Al Shafallah Center, Maryam Saif al-Suwaidei, said that innovation in the services provided to people with disabilities is a key focus of the centre's work. She noted that Al Shafallah Center is constantly working to develop innovative tools and programmes that enable people with disabilities to maximise their use of technology, contributing to improving their daily lives and enhancing their active participation in society.

Fishing violations spotted



The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change's Marine Protection Department has apprehended a number of Asian fishermen for using prohibited fishing gear. The use of such equipment violates marine fishing laws, which aim to protect the fish stocks from depletion and maintain ecological balance within the local waters.

Qumra '25: Over 250 industry experts attend this year's celebration of international cinema

The 11th edition of Qumra, Doha Film Institute (DFI)'s talent incubator for Arab and international cinema, opened yesterday with industry experts gathering to nurture emerging voices through bespoke mentorship sessions, masterclasses, and a curated screening series.

As 'A Space for New Voices in Cinema', Qumra 2025 welcomes over 250 industry experts from 50 countries – the highest participation to date. They will mentor 49 projects by filmmakers from over 20 countries, including 16 projects by Qatari and Qatar-based directors.

Welcoming delegates to Qumra 2025, DFI CEO Fatma Hassan Alremaihi said: "15 years ago, DFI was founded on a dream to nurture bold voices, champion untold stories, and create a space for filmmakers to inspire and be inspired."

"Along this incredible journey, we have seen stories from the Global South that were once whispers find their voice on the world stage, and witnessed the power of film to unite, to heal, and to remind us of

our shared humanity." DFI's artistic adviser, Elia Suleiman, said: "Cinema is not just the stories we tell, but the silences in between – the spaces where meaning lingers. At Qumra, these silences speak loudly, where emerging voices are amplified and nurtured with the support and artistic mastery of the Qumra Masters."

This year's Qumra Masters include slow cinema pioneer Lav Diaz (*The Woman Who Left, Evolution of a Filipino Family*), re-

nowned cinematographer Darius Khondji (*Amour, The Immigrant*), Oscar-winning director Walter Salles (*The Motorcycle Diaries, I'm Still Here*), celebrated costume designer Anna Terrazas (*Roma, Spectre*), and genre-defying filmmaker Johnnie To (*Exiled, Election*).

Qumra 2025 projects include 27 feature-length projects, 10 series projects, and 12 short films at various stages of development, production, and post-production. Among these, 37 are recipients of

DFI's Grants Programme and 21 are alumni of the Institute's year-round training initiatives. Public has access to Qumra 2025 masterclasses by the Qumra Masters and screenings of seven DFI-supported features at the Museum of Islamic Art Auditorium. In-person events take place until April 9, followed by online sessions from April 12-14. Qumra continues to build on its legacy of supporting nearly 850 films from more than 75 countries, a statement added.





PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam

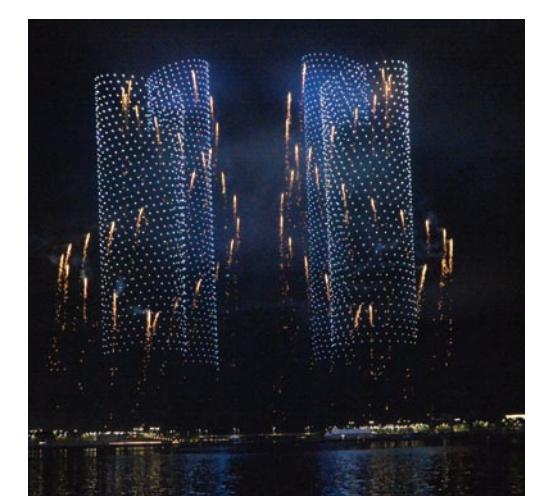
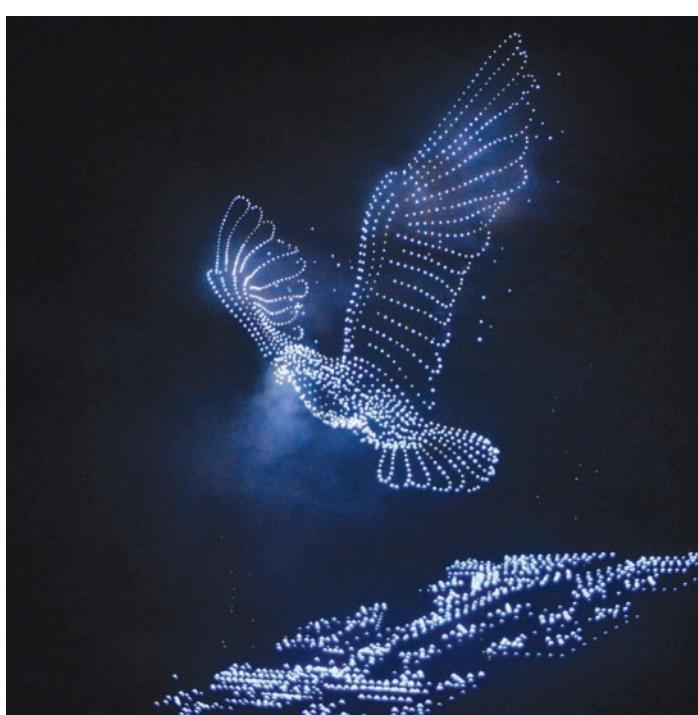
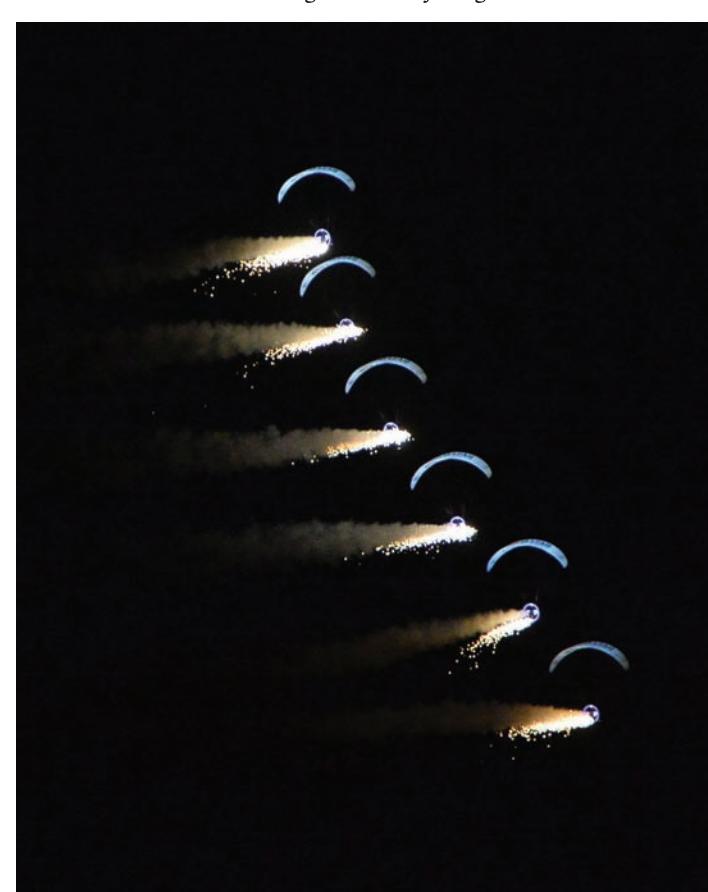
Lusail Sky Festival to end today

The Lusail Sky Festival, described as the largest event of kind in the region, will conclude today (Saturday) at Al Saad Plaza in Lusail City after its third day's run from 4pm-10pm. The Visit Qatar event, held in collaboration with Qatari Diar, has proved to be a crowd-puller.

Performances by Lekhwiya Parachute Jumpers, Europe's top-notch pilots, including the Scandinavian Airshow Wingwalk, the aerial acrobatics of Artur Kielak, Phoenix Paramotor Display Team, Bushcat Demo Team, airborne pyrotechnics, skywriting demonstrations by the Skytexter formation, and the Scandinavian Ragnarok Team Show are among the aerial highlights.

In between, the visitors are treated to dances, mini parade, and roving installations, as well as an exhibition showcasing classic airplanes. The night activities include the Poseidon waterscreen, the First Laser show, and Scandinavian Airborne Pyrotechnics. Touted as the largest event of its kind in the region, the inaugural Lusail Sky Festival will showcase today with a grand finale of fireworks, Poseidon waterscreen laser show, and laser show.

The spectacular drone show features over 3,000 illuminated drones and 150 pyrotechnic-equipped aircraft, creating captivating nighttime imagery. The visitors can also enjoy the food zone, which features 14 food trucks and carts for a wide range of culinary delights.





Ramadan event backs traffic safety awareness

The 13th Traffic Awareness and Ramadan Iftar Drive (Tirid) by the Qatar Living Volunteers group, saw as many as 3,850 Iftar packs distributed on March 29 to motorists at key traffic signals in Doha by 350 volunteers from the Philippines, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India.

Al Jaber Opticians is the sole sponsor of the annual initiative, which was initiated in 2010 and has been continuing except for the Covid-19 disruptions in 2020 and 2021, a statement said. The main

objectives are to promote traffic safety and safe driving to prevent accidents, provide Iftar meals and refreshments to motorists – especially those fasting during Ramadan – and to foster unity among community welfare advocates.

"I had the privilege of attending a volunteer community Iftar delivery programme. The experience was both humbling and fulfilling. It reminded me of the power of community and how small acts of kindness can make a significant difference in people's lives," said Mohammad Munjural Hasan.

The event concluded with a Volunteer Thanksgiving Dinner. Mildred B Ngoaban-Lloren said: "Organising this event reflects the benevolence of the host country towards its residents and citizens. It is a gesture of great appreciation."

The management of Al Jaber Opticians also recognised the co-operation of the motorists and commended the efforts of the Supreme Elite Eagles Club, Guardians Legion Qatar, Stone Guardians Brotherhood, and Qatar Volunteers for spearheading the event, and also thanked the volunteers.



Over 200 family members attend 'Samar Al Eid' event



The Kakkunnath family from Vadakara, Kerala, southern India, hosted a 'Samar Al Eid' in Doha event. Over 200 family members gathered for the event. KMCC Qatar state president Dr Abdul Samadi inaugurated the event and shared a message about how love within the family can bring peace, happiness and overcome difficulties. K P Harris presided. Global KMCC vice-president S A M Basheer gave the keynote speech. Islamic scholar, author and journalist Abadunazar Nadavi spoke on family awareness. M Shukkur, M V Siraj, Mukkolakal Hamza Haji, Abdullah Poomakoth, Ashraf K P, Shahid K K (Dubai) and Shabab K P (Dubai) also addressed the gathering. The event featured fun activities for children. K P Zubair welcomed the gathering and K P Samad proposed a vote of thanks.



Ramadan outreach initiative



Embracing the essence of Ramadan, Telangana Jagruti Qatar (TJQ) distributed Iftar kits to 250 workers at a labour camp in the Industrial Area. President Sudha Sriramoju and general secretary Praveena Lakshmi Mukala led the event, which was attended by community leaders.

Eid clothes distributed



In collaboration with the Telangana Welfare Association (TWA) and ITPN, the Center for Indian Community (CIC) Qatar - Rayyan Zone distributed new clothes to nearly 250 low-income workers as part of Eid celebrations. The distribution was carried out directly to the workers employed in farms and desert areas of Karana and Jeryan. The initiative was an extension of the daily Iftar kit distribution conducted throughout the holy month of Ramadan. TWA leaders K Nizam, Abdul Rauf, Mohammed Shoieb, Naveed Dastagir, Syed Bakhar, ITPN leaders Mohammed Faisal, Abulkalam, Ramees, and CIC Rayyan Zone leaders Abdul Jaleel M M, Fahad E K, and Muhammad Rafeeq, participated in organising and executing the distribution drive.

Palestinian support gatherings in Libya, Jordan



People gather after Friday prayers during a protest in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, in Amman, Jordan, yesterday. **Right:** Protesters take part in a demonstration in solidarity with Palestinians in the Gaza strip, in Misrata, Libya, yesterday.



Israeli army kills two Palestinians



Relatives of 42-year-old Palestinian Hussein Hardan mourn during his funeral in Jenin in the occupied West Bank, yesterday.

AFP
Ramallah

The Israeli army said yesterday that its soldiers shot dead a Palestinian near the occupied West Bank village of Husan, whose mayor said the boy was 17.

Husan mayor Jamal Sabateen said the army had opened fire on youngsters throwing stones in the village west of Bethlehem.

"The Israeli army opened fire on them — killed one and injured another. The army took them, and up until now, they haven't

been returned," Sabateen said.

The West Bank-based Palestinian health ministry reported the killing of the young man "by Israeli gunfire" and identified him as Yussef Zaoul.

Husan sits seven kilometres west of Bethlehem, in a region usually quieter than the northern cities of Jenin and Tulkarem, bastions of Palestinian fighters where the Israeli military has been operating for months.

Yet in recent weeks, Palestinian sources pointed to several Israeli raids and dozens of arrests in the area, including in

the city of Bethlehem.

The health ministry also reported the death of 42-year-old Hussein Hardan yesterday.

It said Hardan was killed "by Israeli gunfire" in Jenin at dawn.

The army did not immediately confirm whether it killed Hardan. Since the start of the Gaza war in October 2023, violence has soared in the West Bank.

Israeli troops or settlers have killed at least 917 Palestinians, including fighters, in the territory since then, according to health ministry figures.

Hamas 'commander' killed in Lebanon strike

AFP
Sidon

Israel said it killed a commander of Palestinian group Hamas yesterday in a strike in the Lebanese port city of Sidon that also killed his adult son and daughter.

Lebanese Prime Minister Nafaa Salam condemned the strike as a "flagrant attack on Lebanese sovereignty" and a breach of the November 27 ceasefire with Israel. "Overnight, the army and the domestic security agency Shin Bet conducted a targeted strike in the Sidon area, eliminating Hassan Farhat, commander of Hamas's western arena in Leba-

non," the Israeli military said in a statement. It alleged that Farhat had orchestrated multiple attacks on Israeli soldiers and civilians during the hostilities that followed the outbreak of war in Gaza in October 2023.

They claimed rocket fire on the Israeli town of Safed on February 14, 2024 that killed an Israeli soldier, the military added.

The strike on a flat in a residential area of Sidon killed the official and his adult son and daughter, a Palestinian official told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

An AFP correspondent saw the fourth-floor flat still on fire after the strike, which caused heavy damage to the apartment block

and neighbouring buildings and sparked panic in the densely populated neighbourhood.

Lebanese state media had reported the 3:45am (0045 GMT) strike on Sidon, saying at least three people were killed.

"A hostile drone raided a residential apartment... causing two successive explosions that led to a fire and extensive damage," the state-run National News Agency reported. Emergency workers rushed to the scene where they recovered "the bodies of three martyrs," NNA said. The Lebanese prime minister called for "maximum pressure on Israel to force it to halt these continual attacks which target various districts, many of them residential areas."

Abducted British missionary released in Cameroon

An 83-year-old British missionary and his assistant have been released some 48 hours after an armed group abducted them, his church group said yesterday. AFP reported from Yaounde. The Catholic Mill Hill Missionary said Hubert Welters and his assistant Henry Kang, were "brutally abducted" on Tuesday in the town of Bambui on their way to a project to build classrooms for underprivileged children in nearby Iiving. In a statement the group said they had been released on Thursday.

Baffled Lesotho seeks to engage with US on jeans tariffs

Reuters
Maseru

Lesotho scrambled to put together a delegation yesterday to head to Washington to engage with the US on tariffs that risk wiping out nearly half of its exports, its trade minister said, in what could be a death blow to its economy.

The 50% trade tariff on the tiny southern African mountain kingdom was the highest

levy on US President Donald Trump's list of target economies.

Trump on Wednesday hit America's global trading partners with tariffs, upending decades of rules-based trade that campaigners have long said is exceptionally favourable to rich countries like the US.

Lesotho's exports to the US, mostly textiles for popular brands such as Levi's and Calvin Klein, added up to \$237mn in 2024 and account for more than

a tenth of its GDP. "We never saw this coming," said Ricky Chang, director of the Nien Hsing textiles factory, which makes Levi's jeans, on the outskirts of the capital, Maseru.

The factory makes 440,000 pairs of jeans for Levi's a month, he said, as rows of workers sat at sewing machines stitching.

"It came as a shocker, an absolute disaster. We will have no choice but to lay off some workers should push come to shove," he said.



Workers perform their duties at the Nien Hsing Textile factory, a global manufacturer of Levi's jeans, on the outskirts of Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, yesterday.

Turkiye wants no confrontation with Israel in Syria: FM

Reuters
Brussels

Turkiye wants no confrontation with Israel in Syria, but repeated Israeli strikes on military facilities there are eroding the new government's ability to deter threats from enemies, including Islamic State, Turkiye's foreign minister told Reuters yesterday.

In an interview on the sidelines of a Nato foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels, Hakan Fidan said Israel's actions were fuelling regional instability by targeting Syria, where the government of President Ahmed al-Sharaa is a

close ally of Turkiye.

"We don't want to see any confrontation with Israel in Syria because Syria belongs to Syrians," Fidan said.

Turkiye, which shares a 911km border with Syria, has emerged as one of the most influential power brokers in Syria and allies of its new government. Ankara had for years backed the rebels who now

make up the bulk of the new government as they fought to topple former President Bashar al-Assad.

Israel has accused Turkiye of trying to turn Syria into a Turkish protectorate.

Asked whether Turkiye's plans for a joint defence pact with Syria were prompting Israel to intensify strikes on Syrian military bases, Fidan said Ankara was working with regional partners to form a joint platform with Syria to block the re-emergence of Islamic State and fight shared threats, including the banned Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). Undermining that effort, he said, risks dragging the entire region back into chaos.

Nato member Turkiye has fiercely criticised Israel over its attacks on Gaza since 2023, saying they amount to a genocide against the Palestinians, and has applied to join a case at the World Court against Israel while also halting all trade. Israel denies the genocide accusations.

The animosity between the regional powers has spilled over into Syria, with Israeli forces striking

Syria for weeks since a new administration took control in Damascus. Turkiye has called the Israeli strikes an encroachment on Syrian territory, while Israel has said it would not allow any hostile forces in Syria.

In this "transition period," Fidan said, Turkiye does not want to see Islamic State (ISIS) or the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militant group take advantage of "the absence of the regular forces, some absence of military capabilities" in Syria.

"Unfortunately Israel is taking out, one by one, all these capabilities that a new state can use against ISIS and other terrorist attacks and threats," he said.

However, if the new administration in Damascus wants to have "certain understandings" with Israel, which like Turkiye is a neighbour of Syria, then that is their own business, he added.

Turkiye has vowed to help rebuild Syria, from infrastructure to state institutions, and provided it with political support in international platforms.

Hundreds gather in Algiers for rare pro-Palestinian rally

AFP
Algiers

Hundreds of Algerians yesterday joined a rare demonstration in solidarity with Palestinians, authorised by the North African country's authorities, an AFP correspondent said.

At least 800 people gathered in front of the Algiers headquarters of the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), which had called the demonstration.

They massed in the capital's

Mouradia neighbourhood not far from the presidential palace just after the afternoon prayers yesterday, the correspondent said.

"Rage, rage, we're heading to the embassy," some protesters shouted, determined to make their way to the diplomatic mission of key Israel backer the United States, but held at bay by the police. Israel resumed on March 18 its offensive in Gaza after a short-lived truce, killing at least 1,249 people since then according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run Palestinian territory. The overall death toll in Gaza since the war

began was at 50,609 people, according to health ministry figures.

Though Algiers has been historically known for its stance in support of the Palestinians, demonstrations are seldom authorised.

"This vigil has been organised to break the oppression and silence," said MSP leader Abdellatif Hassani Cherif, calling on the authorities to "allow the people to express their position."

He later called on the crowd to disperse silently, saying "we don't want Algerians to clash, we want them to unite for the good of Palestine."

Violence kills dozens in Nigeria

AFP
Jos, Nigeria

A fresh bout of suspected intercommunal violence in Nigeria's north-central Plateau state earlier this week has killed more than 40 people, officials told AFP yesterday.

Attackers struck multiple vil-

lages Wednesday in the religiously and ethnically mixed state, where land disputes between Fulani herders and farmers are known to descend into deadly violence.

As of yesterday morning, Bokkos local government official Faridus Fuddang said 48 bodies had been recovered, sharply revising the earlier reported toll of 10.

"Yesterday alone we made a mass burial of more than 30 people," Fuddang said.

A Red Cross official said that the toll "surpassed 40, mostly women and children".

Though millions of Nigerians of different backgrounds live side by side, intercommunal violence often flares in Plateau state.

Abducted British missionary released in Cameroon

An 83-year-old British missionary and his assistant have been released some 48 hours after an armed group abducted them, his church group said yesterday. AFP reported from Yaounde. The Catholic Mill Hill Missionary said Hubert Welters and his assistant Henry Kang, were "brutally abducted" on Tuesday in the town of Bambui on their way to a project to build classrooms for underprivileged children in nearby Iiving. In a statement the group said they had been released on Thursday.

Baffled Lesotho seeks to engage with US on jeans tariffs

Reuters
Maseru

Lesotho scrambled to put together a delegation yesterday to head to Washington to engage with the US on tariffs that risk wiping out nearly half of its exports, its trade minister said, in what could be a death blow to its economy.

The 50% trade tariff on the tiny southern African mountain kingdom was the highest

levy on US President Donald Trump's list of target economies.

Trump on Wednesday hit America's global trading partners with tariffs, upending decades of rules-based trade that campaigners have long said is exceptionally favourable to rich countries like the US.

Lesotho's exports to the US, mostly textiles for popular brands such as Levi's and Calvin Klein, added up to \$237mn in 2024 and account for more than

a tenth of its GDP. "We never saw this coming," said Ricky Chang, director of the Nien Hsing textiles factory, which makes Levi's jeans, on the outskirts of the capital, Maseru.

The factory makes 440,000 pairs of jeans for Levi's a month, he said, as rows of workers sat at sewing machines stitching.

"It came as a shocker, an absolute disaster. We will have no choice but to lay off some workers should push come to shove," he said.



Workers perform their duties at the Nien Hsing Textile factory, a global manufacturer of Levi's jeans, on the outskirts of Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, yesterday.



Trump extends TikTok sale deadline by 75 days

President Donald Trump has extended the deadline for TikTok to find a non-Chinese buyer or face a ban in the United States, giving his administration 75 more days to find a solution.

"A transaction requires more work to ensure all necessary approvals are signed, which is why I am signing an Executive Order to keep TikTok up and running for an additional 75 days," Trump wrote on Truth Social.

"We hope to continue working in good faith with China, who I understand is not very happy about our reciprocal tariffs, he added, explaining why he was extending the deadline he set in January that was supposed to have expired today.

China now faces a 54% tariff on goods

imported into the United States after Trump announced he was hiking them by 34% this week, prompting China to retaliate yesterday.

Trump has said he would be willing to reduce tariffs on China to get a deal done with ByteDance to sell the app used by 170mn Americans.

Trump has said his administration is in touch with four different groups about a prospective TikTok deal.

He has not identified them.

A major stumbling block to any deal for TikTok's US business is Chinese government approval.

China has not made a commitment to allow a sale and Trump's comments suggested renewed Chinese opposition.

"We look forward to working with TikTok and China to close the deal," Trump wrote yesterday. "We do not want TikTok to 'go dark'."

Congress passed the measure last year with overwhelming bipartisan support, as lawmakers cited the risk of the Chinese government exploiting TikTok to spy on Americans and carry out covert influence operations.

Democratic then-president Joe Biden signed it into law.

Some lawmakers have said Trump must enforce the law, which had required TikTok to stop operating by January 19 unless ByteDance had completed a divestiture of the app's US assets.

Trump began his second term as presi-

dent on January 20 and opted not to enforce it.

The Justice Department earlier told Apple and Google that it would not enforce the law, which led them to restore the app for new downloads.

The new Trump order will set a mid-June deadline for a deal.

The White House-led talks on the future of TikTok are coalescing around a plan for the biggest non-Chinese investors in parent company ByteDance to increase their stakes and acquire the app's US operations, Reuters has reported.

The plan entails spinning off a US entity for TikTok and diluting Chinese ownership in the new business to below the 20% threshold required by US law, rescuing the

app from a looming US ban, sources have told Reuters.

Jeff Yass' Susquehanna International Group and Bill Ford's General Atlantic, both of which are represented on ByteDance's board, are said to be leading discussions with the White House, Reuters has reported.

Walmart is also considering joining a group of investors in a deal for TikTok, an ABC News reporter revealed on social media.

The big retailer, which had expressed an interest in investing in TikTok in 2020, did not immediately respond to a Reuters' request for comment.

TikTok did not immediately respond to a request for comment. - *Reuters/AFP*

Trump fires NSA director in national security purge

Reuters/AFP
Washington

US President Donald Trump has fired General Timothy Haugh as director of the National Security Agency (NSA) in a national security purge that sources said included more than a dozen staff at the White House National Security Council (NSC).

NSA director Air Force General Haugh, who is also head of US Cyber Command, was dismissed along with Wendy Noble, his deputy at the NSA, two sources familiar with the decision said.

Two other sources said at least 10 staff were let go at the NSC, along with four senior directors, including the entire International Organisation (IO) Directorate, which works with international and multilateral groups like the United Nations.

No reason was given for the firings, which took place after the Republican president had an Oval Office meeting with Laura Loomer, a far-right political activist known as a conspiracy theorist, who said on X that she had given Trump a list of officials she deemed disloyal.

Loomer, who is known for claiming that the 9/11 attacks were an inside job, is reported to have pushed for the dismissal of various senior US security officials, including NSA chief Haugh, putting her in an unprecedented position of influence over some of the most secretive and powerful parts of the government.



Trump sacked Haugh (above) after a meeting with conspiracy theorist Laura Loomer.

Loomer posted on X early yesterday – after Haugh's dismissal was reported – that he and his deputy Noble "have been disloyal to President Trump. That is why they have been fired."

"Given the fact that the NSA is arguably the most powerful intel agency in the world, we cannot allow for a Biden nominee to hold that position," Loomer wrote, adding, "This is called VETTING."

The White House declined comment and the Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Trump has said that he wants his administration staffed with those who support his positions.

"We're always going to let go of people – people we don't like or people that take advantage of, or people that may have loyalties to someone else," he told reporters aboard Air Force One on Thursday.

The IO directorate at the National Security Council works with international and multilateral groups, including the UN and Group of Seven.

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Kash Patel formerly served in the directorate.

In both terms, Trump has deprioritised his administration's participation in some of these groups, focusing instead on an "America first" approach to foreign policy.

The NSC firings included Daniel Gastfriend and Tim Sheeran, both directors with the health security and biodefence directorate, two sources said.

Media outlets including the *Washington Post* had reported Haugh's firing on Thursday night, citing current and former US officials, who said that they did not know the reason for Haugh's dismissal or Noble's reassignment.

Noble was reassigned to a job within the Pentagon's office of the Undersecretary of Defence for Intelligence, the *Post* said.

The NSA is part of the US Defense Department.

US Cyber Command deputy William Hartmann was named acting NSA director and Sheila Thomas, who was executive director at the NSA, was named acting deputy, the newspaper said.

Democrats criticised the firings, saying that they represented a threat to national security.

Representative Jim Himes, a Connecticut Democrat who is ranking member of the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee, denounced the firings and asked for an explanation.

"I have known General Haugh to be an honest and forthright leader who followed the law and put national security first – I fear those are precisely the qualities that could lead to his firing in this administration," Himes said.

"I am alarmed and angered that, at the insistence of a far-right conspiracy theorist, President Trump

dismissed one of the most skilled, accomplished officers in the US military," Senator Jack Reed, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in a statement.

"President Trump has given a priceless gift to China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea by purging competence from our national security leadership," Reed said.

Senate Intelligence Committee Vice-Chairman Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat, noted that, unlike some other top Trump administration officials, Haugh was not on a discussion of military plans on the Signal commercial messaging app that inadvertently included a magazine journalist, raising security concerns.

"It is astonishing, too, that President Trump would fire the non-partisan, experienced leader of the National Security Agency while still failing to hold any member of his team accountable for leaking classified information on a commercial messaging app," Warner said in his statement.

Trump, a Republican, has fired multiple nonpartisan top officials at US agencies and installed loyalists since beginning his second term on January 20.

In February, he fired Air Force General CQ Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was dismissed along with five other admirals and generals in an unprecedented shake-up of US military leadership.

Elon Musk, who is leading the Trump administration's effort to cut and streamline the federal government's workforce, visited the NSA last month to meet Haugh.

The NSA is one of the United States' premier intelligence agencies and uses top-tier, specialised technology and systems to collect and analyse intelligence.

US Cyber Command carries out both offensive and defensive operations and monitors the networks of the Department of Defense.

the co-founder still worked on Microsoft software.

Mehdi watched Steve Ballmer, Gates' eventual successor, chant "developers, developers, developers!" in a sweat-drenched shirt to rouse a crowd into the ".net" era.

Microsoft went from top of the pack to badly bruised in a high-profile lawsuit that US antitrust enforcers brought against it in 1998.

Years later, younger companies and startups, among them Alphabet and ChatGPT creator OpenAI, beat it to the punch on key AI developments.

Satya Nadella, Microsoft's current chief executive, is not standing still.

The leader who turned Microsoft into the No 2 cloud power-house challenged his executives at an internal summit this week, recalled Mehdi: "How do we rethink the way that we build the software?"

Nadella voiced a similar point at Microsoft's Redmond event yesterday, where he, Gates and Ballmer made a rare public appearance.

Ballmer reprised his "developers!" chant as well.

Nadella said the company was not simply celebrating its past 50 years.

"Our future will not be defined by what we have built, but what we empower others to build," he said.

Gates added: "We're on the verge of something even more profound than what came for those first 50 years."

Microsoft is iterating on its chatbot technology in a crowded field that includes Elon Musk's xAI and Anthropic.

It has added Copilot to its heavily used productivity suites for business while giving consumers a distinctive version.

"It's warm; it has that personality," said Mehdi.

Some users have taken to this, while others find it asks too many questions, he said.

"When we get to now be more personalised, we can start to get smarter," Mehdi said. "We're part way through that journey."

Microsoft, at 50, dials up Copilot to stay in AI game

By Jeffrey Dastin

Reuters

T

housands of people swooned in a dark conference hall that felt more like a rock concert when a Microsoft product manager demonstrated the company's latest feature: how to sum numbers in Excel, with the click of a button.

"It was literally like Mick Jagger walked out," said Yusuf Mehdi, Microsoft's consumer chief marketing officer, who started as an intern.

That was more than 30 years ago.

Yesterday, the day Microsoft turned 50, the company's leaders and staff gathered at its headquarters in Redmond, Washington, to remember the software maker's glory days while trumpeting what they hope will bring it into the future: more powerful artificial intelligence.

Copilot, Microsoft's artificial intelligence (AI) assistant, is gaining a host of new features to make it more proactive.

The version for consumers will start remembering personal facts about them. It will offer birthday reminders or support ahead of a presentation, or consumers can opt out, Mehdi said in an interview.

Copilot likewise will personalise podcasts and shopping recommendations, and it will let consumers task their AI to book events for them, or send a friend a gift while checking in for guidance.

"It frees you up," said Mehdi.

Microsoft is hardly first to roll out action-taking or "agentic" software.

As with rival systems, the AI will work best on popular sites where Microsoft has done some behind-the-scenes technical work, like with 1-800-Flowers.com and OpenTable, Mehdi said.

The official recalled days when Microsoft was smaller and growing.

He said chief executive Bill Gates could devour three books' worth of information from one day to the next, at a time when



Former Microsoft chief executive Bill Gates chats with actor Brenda Song during an event in Redmond, Washington celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Microsoft. - *AFP*

Trump administration shutters DC foreign policy think-tank Wilson Centre

Nearly all employees at the Wilson Centre, a non-partisan foreign policy think-tank in Washington, have been placed on leave, the *New York Times* reported on Thursday.

About 130 staff at the centre, chartered by Congress in 1968, were blocked from their e-mail and dismissed shortly after Elon Musk's government efficiency task force began focusing on the institution this week, the *Times* reported, citing an internal email and people with direct knowledge of the matter.

The centre's staff will be paid while on leave, but will soon be fired, as has happened at several federal institutions that Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) team has shuttered, the paper said.

Five employees – positions mandated by the centre's Congressional charter – will remain: a president, two federal employees and two researchers on fellowships.

A spokesperson for the Wilson Centre declined to comment.

DOGE did not respond to a request for comment.

A White House official confirmed that Mark Green, a former Republican congressman and the president of the centre since 2021, had "resigned voluntarily".

A new president, Natasha Jacome, had been appointed, the official added. - *Reuters*

Cuba looks to Sun to solve its energy crisis

By Leticia Pineda
AFP

Not far from the ruins of an unfinished nuclear power plant in the Cuban province of Cienfuegos, hundreds of workers are hastily installing 44,000 solar panels as the island seeks once again to reduce its reliance on oil to escape an energy crisis.

Forty years ago, the solution was thought to be Russian nuclear energy.

This time, it is the sun. With help from China.

Dozens of containers with Chinese inscriptions are lined up at the "La Yuca" photovoltaic park, where forklifts loaded with solar panels weave between the concrete frames that will hold them.

"We are laying wires, digging trenches and installing panels," a worker on the project, to be completed in May, explained of the frenetic activity.

Cuba, an island of some 10mn inhabitants, remains highly dependent on fossil fuels to operate its eight outdated thermo-electric power plants, most of them online since the 1980s and '90s and prone to frequent breakdowns.

The communist government has ap-

proved the construction of 55 solar parks by 2025.

Five of them will be in the central province of Cienfuegos, which also hosts an industrial port and a refinery, and was chosen in the 1980s to host a Soviet-funded nuclear power plant that was aborted half-built when the USSR collapsed.

Cuba's fragile electric grid has gone offline four times in the past six months, plunging the majority of the country into darkness, sometimes for days on end.

Most of the country faces near-daily outages blamed mainly on fuel shortages.

"More than half of all the fuel consumed by the country goes towards electricity production," Energy and Mines Minister Vicente de la O Levy recently told state-run newspaper *Granma*.

Most of the oil has come from Venezuela which, like Cuba, is under US sanctions and has seen the administration of President Donald Trump recently revoke licences that allowed transnational companies to extract crude there.

The country produces about a third of the fuel it consumes from domestic oil fields, and imports the rest.

De la O Levy has said solar parks are at the heart of Cuba's renewable energy goals because the "investments are cheaper,

they are built more quickly, and can be spread throughout the country".

The island, grappling with its worst economic crisis in decades, aims to generate 12% of its energy from renewable sources by the end of 2025 and 37% by 2030.

By the end of this year, it hopes to produce 1,200MW per day from solar energy – almost equal to its daily electricity deficit of 1,500MW.

The ambitious project requires investment of several million dollars, and with few Western friends, Cuba has gladly accepted support from what the presidency

Lead poisoning epidemic in Bangladesh due to battery boom

AFP
Mirzapur, Bangladesh

Bangladeshi Junayed Akter is 12 years old but the toxic lead coursing through his veins has left him with the diminutive stature of someone several years younger.

Akter is one of 35mn children - around 60% of all children in the country - who have dangerously high levels of lead exposure.

The causes are varied, but his mother blames his maladies on a since-shuttered factory that hastily scrapped and recycled old vehicle batteries, poisoning the air and the earth of his small village.

"It would start at night, and the whole area would be filled with smoke. You could smell this particular odour when you breathed," Bithi Akter said.

"The fruit no longer grew during the season. One day, we even found two dead cows at my aunt's house."

Medical tests showed Junayed's blood had twice the level of lead deemed by the World Health Organisation to cause serious, and likely irreversible, mental impairment in young children.

"From the second grade onward, he didn't want to listen to us anymore, he didn't want to go to school," Bithi said, as her son sat next to her while gazing blankly at the courtyard of their home. "He cried all the time too."

Lead poisoning is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, and the causes are manifold.

They include the heavy metal's widespread and continued use in paint, in defiance of a government ban, and its use as an adulterant in turmeric spice powder to improve its colour and perceived quality.

A great many cases are blamed on informal battery recycling factories that have proliferated around the country in response to rising demand.

Children exposed to dangerous levels of lead risk decreased intelligence and cognitive performance, anaemia, stunted growth and life-

long neurological disorders.

The factory in the Akter family's village closed after sustained complaints from the community.

But environmental watchdog Pure Earth believes there could be 265 such sites elsewhere in the country.

"They break down old batteries, remove the lead and melt it down to make new ones," Pure Earth's Mitali Das said.

"They do all this in the open air," she added. "The toxic fumes and acidic water produced during the operation pollute the air, soil and water."

In Fulbaria, a village that sits a few hours' drive north of the capital Dhaka, operations at another battery recycling factory owned by a Chinese company are in full swing.

On one side are verdant paddy fields. On the other, a pipe spews murky water into a brackish pool bordered by dead lands, caked with thick orange mud.

"As a child, I used to bring food to my father when he was in the fields. The landscape was magnificent, green, the water was clear," engineer and local resident Rakib Hasan, 34, said.

"You see what it looks like now. It's dead, forever," he added. "They've killed our village."

Hasan complained about the factory's pollution, prompting a judge to declare it illegal and order the power be shut off - a decision later reversed by the country's supreme court.

"The factory bought off the local authorities," Hasan said. "Our country is poor, many people are corrupt."

Neither the company nor the Chinese embassy in Dhaka responded to requests for comment on the factory's operations.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, who helms Bangladesh's environment ministry, declined to comment on the case because it was still before the courts.

"We regularly conduct operations against the illegal production and recycling of electric batteries," she said.

A landmine-hunting rat in Cambodia has set a new world record by sniffing out more than 100 mines and pieces of unexploded ordnance, a charity said yesterday.

Ronin, a giant African pouched rat, has tracked down 109 landmines and 15 other potentially deadly war remnants since his deployment to northern Preah Vihear province in August 2021, the Belgian charity APOPO said in a statement.

Five-year-old Ronin has been named the most successful Mine Detection Rat (MDR) in the organisation's history. "His exceptional accomplishments have earned him the Guinness World Records title for most landmines detected by a rat, highlighting the critical role of HeroRats in humanitarian demining," APOPO said. Ronin beat the previous record, held by hero rodent Magawa who found 71 landmines and 38 UXOs during his five-year service before retirement in 2021. Magawa, who was awarded a gold medal for heroism for clearing mines from about 225,000 square metres of land - the equivalent of 42 football pitches - died in 2022.

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Five-year-old Ronin has been named the most successful Mine Detection Rat (MDR) in the organisation's history. "His exceptional accomplishments have earned him the Guinness World Records title for most landmines detected by a rat, highlighting the critical role of HeroRats in humanitarian demining," APOPO said. Ronin beat the previous record, held by hero rodent Magawa who found 71 landmines and 38 UXOs during his five-year service before retirement in 2021. Magawa, who was awarded a gold medal for heroism for clearing mines from about 225,000 square metres of land - the equivalent of 42 football pitches - died in 2022.

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A landmine



Latest N Korean ship can carry dozens of missiles: analysts

Reuters
Singapore

North Korea's new class of warship can accommodate dozens of vertical launch cells to carry missiles its military has already developed, analysis of a satellite image showed, a step that

would give its navy more punch and create an export opportunity.

Little is known about the unnamed class of ships being built in the Chongjin and Nampo shipyards. In December, South Korea's military said they would displace about 4,000 tonnes, somewhat less than half the size of a US Arleigh Burke-class destroyer.

Images captured of the ship in Nampo in the last week of March, however, show cavities on its deck large enough to hold more than 50 missiles, depending on their type, said researcher Jeffrey Lewis.

"They're pretty big cavities," said Lewis, director of the East Asia Non-proliferation Program at the James Martin Center for Non-

proliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies in California.

"I would think 32 (missiles) in front and a few fewer in the back would be a very reasonable number. Or it could be a much smaller number of ballistic missiles."

Vertical launch systems (VLS)

allow ships to carry more missiles, and make launching and reloading easier.

Lewis said North Korea had developed several different types of missile that would be compatible with VLS cells, which Pyongyang had not fielded on any previous surface ship.

Such types include anti-ship

cruise missiles, land attack cruise missiles, air defense missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles, he added.

The new ship's armament seemed to hew close to South Korean navy standards, said Euan Graham, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

Hackers strike Australia's largest pension funds

Reuters
Sydney

Hackers targeting Australia's major pension funds in a series of co-ordinated attacks have stolen savings from some members at the biggest fund, according to a source with knowledge of the matter, and compromised more than 20,000 accounts.

National Cyber Security Coordinator Michelle McGuinness said in a statement she was aware of "cyber criminals" targeting accounts in the country's A\$4.2tn (\$2.63tn) retirement savings sector and was organising a response across the government, regulators and industry.

The Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia, the industry body, said "a number" of funds were impacted over the weekend. While the full scale of the incident remains unclear, AustralianSuper, Australian Retirement Trust, Rest, Insignia and Hostplus yesterday confirmed they suffered breaches.

AustralianSuper, the country's largest fund managing A\$365bn for 3.5mn members, said that up to 600 member passwords had been stolen to access accounts and at attempt fraud.

"We took immediate action to lock these accounts and let those members know," AustralianSuper's chief member officer Rose Kerlin said, urging all members to check their online balances.

Four AustralianSuper members had a combined A\$500,000 drained from their balances and transferred to other accounts that did not belong to them, according

to the source, who was not authorised to speak publicly about the matter.

AustralianSuper did not respond immediately to a request for comment.

Australian Retirement Trust, the second-largest fund managing A\$300bn for 2.4mn members, said it had detected "unusual login activity" affecting "several hundreds" of accounts. It locked impacted accounts as a precaution, though there were no suspicious transactions or changes made.

Rest Super, the default industry pension fund for retail workers, with A\$93bn of assets under management, said it suffered an attack that impacted around 20,000 accounts, or around 1% of its 2 million members.

Over the weekend of March 29-30, 2025, Rest became aware of some unauthorised activity on our online Member Access portal," Rest CEO Vicki Doyle said.

"We responded immediately by shutting down the Member Access portal, undertaking investigations and launching our cyber security incident response protocols."

Insignia Financial, which owns the pension fund MLC, said it detected "suspicious" login activity on 100 Expand Wrap Platform customer accounts. MLC Expand CEO Liz McCarthy said there had been no financial impact at this stage to members.

Hostplus, which has more than 1.8mn members and A\$115bn under management, also confirmed it suffered an attack. A spokesperson said no member losses had occurred but that it was still investigating the extent of the incident.

Australia to buy Darwin port lease from China firm: PM

Australia plans to buy back control of its strategic northern port of Darwin from the current Chinese leaseholder, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said yesterday. China's Landbridge group was granted a 99-year lease on the port in 2015, a widely criticised decision that led to stricter scrutiny of major infrastructure sales. The port is the closest to Australia's Asian neighbours and a base for US Marines who rotate in and out of the country. "We want it to be in Australian hands," Albanese told public broadcaster ABC radio, describing the port as a "strategic asset". The government preferred that an Australian firm acquire the port lease, and it had held informal talks with potential buyers including Australian pension funds, he said. But it was also prepared to intervene and use taxpayers' money to make it a state asset. Albanese, who faces a general election on May 3, said Landbridge had not invested sufficiently in the port to "bring it up to scratch".

Indonesia volcano erupts



Mount Marapi erupts, sending volcanic ash into the sky, as seen from Bukittinggi, West Sumatra, Indonesia.

Australia sweats through hottest 12 months on record

AFP
Sydney

Australia has just sweltered through its hottest 12 months on record, a weather official said, a period of drenching floods, tropical cyclones and mass coral bleaching.

Senior government climatologist Simon Grainger said the rolling 12-month period between April 2024 and March 2025 was 1.61C above average - the hottest since records began more than a century ago.

"This is certainly part of a sustained global pattern," he said.

"We've been seeing temperatures since about April 2023 that were globally much warmer than anything we have seen in the global historical record."

The previous hottest period was in 2019, Grainger said, when temperatures were 1.51C above average.

"That is a pretty significant difference," Grainger said.

"It's well above what we would expect just from uncertainties due to rounding. The difference is much larger than that."

The record was measured on a rolling 12-month basis - rather than as a calendar year.

Australia has also recorded its hottest-ever March, Grainger said, with temperatures more than two degrees above what would normally be seen.

"There has basically been sustained warmth through pretty much all of Australia," he said.

"We saw a lot of heatwave conditions, particularly in Western Australia. And we didn't really see many periods of cool weather - we didn't see many cold fronts come through."

From the arid outback to the tropical coast, swathes of Australia have been pummeled by wild weather in recent months.

Unusually warm waters in the Coral Sea stoked a tropical cyclone that pummeled densely populated seaside hamlets on the country's eastern coast in March.

Whole herds of cattle have drowned in vast inland floods still drowning across outback Queensland.

And a celebrated coral reef off western Australia has turned a sickly shade of white as hotter seas fuel an unfolding mass bleach-

ing event. The average sea surface temperature around Australia was the "highest on record" in 2024, according to a recent study by Australian National University.

This record run looked to have continued throughout January and February, said Grainger.

"We haven't seen much cooling in sea surface temperatures."

Moisture collects in the atmosphere as oceans evaporate in hotter temperatures - eventually leading to more intense downpours and storms.

Australia follows a slew of heat records that have been toppling

across the planet. Six major international datasets confirmed that 2024 was the hottest year on record.

Scientists are unanimous that burning fossil fuels has largely driven long-term global warming. Australia sits on bulging deposits of coal, gas, metals and minerals, with mining and fossil fuels stoking decades of near-unbroken economic growth.

But it is increasingly suffering from more intense heatwaves, bushfires and drought, which scientists have linked to climate change.

Everything I did was for country, says Duterte

AFP
The Hague

Philippine ex-president Rodrigo Duterte, facing International Criminal Court charges over his deadly narcotics crackdown, said "everything I did, I did for my country" his daughter told reporters yesterday.

Sara Duterte, who is also her country's vice-president, was briefing journalists at the detention centre in The Hague after a long conversation with her father interned inside.

She also relayed that her father wants proceedings against him to move as quickly as possible, with the 80-year-old fearful of dying in custody.

"Everything I did, I did for my country. (I don't know) whether that statement is acceptable or not, but I want it out to the world," said Sara, relaying her father's words.

The vice-president would not be drawn as to whether this amounted to an admission of responsibility for the crimes her father is facing at the ICC.

It was the first reported comments from Rodrigo Duterte since he appeared tired and dazed at an initial appearance at the ICC, which he attended by videolink and barely spoke.

In a video posted when Duterte arrived in the Netherlands last month to face the charges, he had said: "I will be responsible for all of this."

Duterte stands accused of the crime against humanity of murder over his years-long campaign against drug users and dealers that rights groups said killed thousands.

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

"Potentially tens of thousands of killings were perpetrated," the prosecutor alleged of the campaign that targeted mostly poor men, often without proof they were linked to drugs.

In an interview earlier yesterday, a lawyer for victims, Gilbert Andres, said loved-ones of those affected were seeking "truth and justice" from a potential trial.

New Zealand navy ship sank due to 'series of human errors'

Reuters
Sydney

A Royal New Zealand Navy vessel that ran aground and sank off the coast of Samoa last year was doomed by several errors, a government inquiry found yesterday, highlighting inadequate training of crew and poor leadership.

A final court of inquiry report said that the crew did not identify risks related to the survey task carried out by the ship and that the supervision was not adequate.

"The direct cause of the grounding has been determined as a series of human errors," the report said.

The Manawanui, a special survey and hydrographic vessel, grounded on a reef on the southern side of Samoa in October while conducting survey operations. All 75 crew members survived. An interim report released in November said the crew did not

realise the ship remained on autopilot and consequently thought its failure to respond to control inputs was the result of a thruster failure. The final report confirmed those findings.

New Zealand navy chief Garin Golding said the report "highlighted a gap between work as imagined and work as done", with a series of issues compounding the direct cause.

Golding said the navy had already begun implementing some recommendations in the report, while others would take more time. Defence Minister Judith Collins told reporters that the government would release "very soon" the country's defence capability plans, but did not give a timeframe on when it would happen.

The country's national security strategy in 2023 said the government needed to spend more money on its military as its armed forces struggle with ageing equipment and a shortage of manpower.

US tariffs set to cripple India's diamond industry, hit jobs, exports

Reuters
Surat, India

Awave of anxiety has gripped India's diamond polishing hub of Surat, as hefty US tariffs threaten to undermine the country's gem and jewellery exports, putting at risk the liveli-

hoods of thousands of workers.

The US, which takes more than 30% of the country's gem and jewellery exports, set a 27% reciprocal tariff on it on Thursday, at a time when demand is softening in other key markets such as China, the Middle East, and Europe.

"Tariffs will hit hard the demand for diamonds in the US and job

losses look inevitable, at least in the short term," said Dinesh Navadia, chairman of the Surat-based Indian Diamond Institute.

Surat, the second-largest city in Gujarat, the western home state of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, processes and polishes more than 80% of the world's rough diamonds, and India accounts for nine

in every 10 diamonds processed globally.

Business has ground to a halt in its teeming diamond market, where more than 10,000 traders and brokers gather each day, as the industry tries to figure out how matters will evolve in the coming months.

Conditions are worse than during the 2008 financial crisis, when the

industry was plagued by fears of a prolonged recession, said Mansukh Manglikya, a diamond trader for five decades.

A slowdown in the industry will hit all manufacturers, but smaller players will suffer most, said Sevanti Shah, chairman of Venus Jewels, adding: "Many smaller manufacturers will have no choice but to shut

down."

The US accounted for nearly \$10bn, or 30.4%, of India's annual gems and jewellery exports, totalling \$32bn in the fiscal year 2023/24.

Gems and jewellery are India's third largest export to the US, after engineering and electronic goods, and employ millions of workers, including artisans.



India PM aims for stronger energy, defence ties with Lanka visit

Reuters
New Delhi

India is looking to strengthen energy and defence ties with Sri Lanka and promote investments during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day state visit to the island nation, where New Delhi competes with China for greater influence.

"Prime Minister Modi's visit aims to strengthen the longstanding ties between Sri Lanka and India"

Modi, who arrived in Sri Lanka yesterday evening, is the first global leader hosted by Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake after he took office in September.

Sri Lanka is keen to attract foreign investment to stabilise its economy after a financial crisis in 2022, during which India provided \$4bn in financial assistance.

India is also one of Sri Lanka's key bilateral lenders, which agreed to restructure about \$1.36bn in loans after the island nation defaulted on its debt in May 2022.

"Prime Minister Modi's visit aims to strengthen the longstanding ties between Sri Lanka and India," the Sri Lankan president's office said in a statement.

The visit will see pacts signed on key sectors such as energy, digitalisation, security, healthcare, as well as agreements related to In-

dia's debt restructuring assistance for Sri Lanka, it added.

At their first meeting in New Delhi in December, the leaders discussed investments in Sri Lanka and plans for India to supply liquefied natural gas to Sri Lanka and help link power grids.

The talks also featured development of a regional energy and industrial hub in eastern Trincomalee. In January, Dissanayake said the two were in talks on building an oil refinery there as a joint venture focusing on exports, domestic media said.

When completed, the project would stoke competition between India and China, whose state energy firm Sinopec has signed a deal to build a \$3.2bn oil refinery in Sri Lanka's southern port city of Hambantota.

New Delhi-run Indian Oil Corporation is already the second biggest fuel supplier after state-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation.

India's foreign ministry did not comment on whether the proposed Trincomalee refinery will figure in this week's talks.

It told reporters in a briefing ahead of the visit that Modi would join in a ceremony to break ground for a 120-megawatt solar power project of the Ceylon Electricity Board and India's National Thermal Power Corporation.

The ministry said it hoped to wrap up an agreement on defence co-operation with Sri Lanka. December's discussions had envisioned provision of arms to Sri Lanka to boost its defence capability.

"Prime Minister (Modi) urged ... that any rhetoric that vitiates the environment is best avoided," India's foreign secretary Vikram Misri told

reporters.

"(Modi) reiterated India's support for a democratic, stable, peaceful, progressive and inclusive Bangladesh," Misri said, adding that the Indian leader had also stressed New Delhi's desire for "a positive and constructive relationship with Bangladesh based on a spirit of pragmatism".

Bangladesh described the 40-minute exchange between the two leaders as "candid, productive, and constructive".

Yunus told Modi that Bangladesh wanted to work with him to set the relationship on the right track for the benefit of both countries, Yunus's press office said in a statement.

Public opinion in Bangladesh has turned against India, in part over its decision to provide sanctuary to Hasina. New Delhi has not responded to Dhaka's request to send her home for trial.

The two leaders discussed Bangladesh's request seeking Hasina's extradition, Misri said, without elaborating further.

"She has consistently made false and inflam-

matory accusations against the interim government of Bangladesh," the statement from Bangladesh quoted Yunus as saying.

Yunus requested New Delhi take appropriate measures to restrain Hasina from making incendiary remarks while she remained in India, said the statement, adding that Modi said India did not support any particular party in Bangladesh.

India's Misri said Modi had asked Yunus to help maintain border security and stability, and expressed his hope that Bangladesh would thoroughly investigate all cases of "atrocities" committed against people from minority groups.

"The hope would be that this meeting would start the process of rebuilding some engagement," said Harsh Pant, foreign policy head at the Observer Research Foundation, an Indian think-tank.

"I think at this point, simply stabilising the relationship perhaps should be the priority."

With longstanding cultural and business ties, the two nations share a 4,000km border.

Modi urges Bangladesh leader to avoid rhetoric that mars ties

Reuters
Bangkok/New Delhi

India's prime minister urged Bangladesh's interim leader to avoid rhetoric that marred bilateral relations during their first meeting yesterday since the ouster of Bangladeshi premier Sheikh Hasina, India's foreign ministry said.

Relations between the South Asian neighbours, which were robust under Hasina, have deteriorated since she fled the country last August, in the face of massive student-led protests, and sought shelter in India.

Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Peace Prize winner who took over as the chief adviser of an interim government in Dhaka after Hasina's exit, met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday on the fringes of the BIMSTEC summit in Bangkok.

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"She has consistently made false and inflam-

Movie 'icon' Manoj Kumar dies aged 87

Indian actor Manoj Kumar, known for his roles in Hindi-language films with patriotic themes, died yesterday aged 87. The death of the man dubbed "Bharat" Kumar sparked tributes from across the country. Kumar, who was also a member of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governing Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), died in Mumbai due to heart-related complications. Modi led the condolences, calling Kumar an "icon" of Indian cinema, saying that his works "ignited a spirit of national pride and will continue to inspire generations".

Throughout his career, Kumar was known for acting - and at times directing - films that had a focus on unity and national pride. Born Harikrishnan Goswami, he renamed himself in Bollywood tradition - taking on the name Manoj Kumar. He was the recipient of several awards

King Charles plays musical carrot



Britain's King Charles III plays a carrot with the London Vegetable Orchestra during a reception to recognise those involved in community music across the UK, at Windsor Castle.

Minister's comment angers Indian startups

Reuters
New Delhi

India's commerce minister said his country's startups needed to emulate China by focusing on high-end tech and not quick grocery deliveries or fancy ice cream - harsh criticism that had entrepreneurs quickly pointing out the government's shortcomings.

Piyush Goyal told a startup event in New Delhi late on Thursday that too many were offering food delivery so that "the rich can get their meals without moving out of their house" and were "turning unemployed youth into cheap labour."

"Are we going to be happy being delivery boys and girls? (Making) fancy ice cream and cookies ... is that the destiny of India?" he said, showing a slide

titled "India vs. China. The Startup Reality Check".

He didn't name companies but his speech was seen as an apparent attack on quick commerce businesses like Zomato, Swiggy and Zepto that deliver food and groceries in as little as 10 minutes.

"What do the Chinese startups do? Work on developing electric mobility, battery technology ... look at what the other side is doing - robotics, automation, machine learning, preparing themselves for 3D manufacturing," Goyal said.

His comments prompted hundreds of posts on social media from startup founders and venture capitalists, taking the government to the task for failing to create high-quality infrastructure and jobs and not doing enough to support entrepreneurs.

UK spy agency MI5 reveals fruity secrets in new show

AFP
Kew, United Kingdom

For the first time in MI5's 115-year history, the famous secret service is revealing some of its secrets in a London show featuring confessions from double agents and James Bond-like gadgets.

Under the spotlight is Karl Muller, one of the first major enemies captured by the domestic intelligence agency in 1915, and his fruity demise.

Agents suspected Muller of being a German spy but it was a humble lemon, on show in the "MI5:

Official Secrets" exhibition, that brought him down.

Muller claimed he used the fruit, found in his coat upon his arrest, to clean his teeth.

But he had in fact used its juice as invisible ink on a seemingly ordinary letter intercepted by MI5, informing his superiors of British troop movements during the war.

He was executed shortly afterwards in the Tower of London.

MI5 had been founded a few years before amid fears of a German invasion and army officer Vernon Kell was its first head.

Today, more than 5,000 people work for the agency, cousin of the

MI6 foreign service made famous by James Bond.

"Having worked for MI5 for nearly 30 years I can tell you that the reality of our work is often different from fiction," MI5 director Ken McCallum said at a preview of the exhibition, organised with the National Archives, in Kew, west London.

"MI5 life is about ordinary human beings together doing extraordinary things to keep our country safe," he added.

The exhibition, which opens today, does not shy away from some of the agency's less glorious episodes.

The Cold War section displays a

passport and a personalised briefcase left in a London club by British diplomat Guy Burgess, a Russian double agent since World War II who fled to Moscow in 1951 as the net closed in on him.

The exhibition also features a note confirming that Queen Elizabeth II's private secretary had told the monarch in the early 1970s that Anthony Blunt, her art advisor, was a Soviet agent.

The queen reacted "all very calmly and without surprise", read the note.

Among the more recent objects on display include a mortar shell fired by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) into the garden of 10 Downing Street, the prime minister's residence, in 1991.

The exhibition is interspersed with commentary from anonymous MI5 agents.

"Agents continue to be one of the most important sources of intelligence used by MI5," one wrote in 2024.

But managing agents remains "complex", they added, listing essential questions that needed to be answered, such as "What is their motivation?", "Are they telling the truth?", "How do you assess if they're working for the other side?"

While intelligence was overwhelmingly male in its early days,

nearly 48% of MI5 employees were women in 2022.

Famous agent Maxwell Knight was one of the first to suggest that women could make good spies in the 1930s.

"A woman's intuition is sometimes amazingly helpful and amazingly correct," he wrote.

For those dreaming of an MI5 career, tests are on hand to answer the fundamental question: "Could you be a spy?"

One challenge visitors to take in as much information as possible in 10 seconds, while another mission tests code-breaking skills.

The free exhibition ends on September 28.

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GULF TIMES**Next up for markets: A crisis of confidence in the greenback**

In times of market panic investors tend to rush to the safety of the dollar, but when stocks swooned in response to US tariffs this week, they ran away from it. Investors say it's a sign that the greenback's global standing may be eroding.

The dollar, for decades a safe haven, on Thursday fell about 1.7% in its biggest daily drop since November 2022, after President Donald Trump imposed tariffs on imports at levels not seen since the early 1900s. Stock markets also tanked, as tariffs ignited recession worries.

Many investors and analysts pointed to the Trump administration for the anomaly. Its protectionist policies, upending of the global economic order in place since World War II, and a growing US debt pile have been chipping away at the dollar's appeal, they say.

Left unchecked, a crisis of confidence in the dollar could also undermine its position as the world's reserve currency, they added.

Any erosion of the dollar's standing as a safe-haven is bad news for investors and policymakers - at least in the near term.

For investors, who have piled trillions of dollars into buoyant US markets in recent decades, a sharp dollar fall could result in higher interest rates for longer. That's because price pressures at home could make it harder for the Federal Reserve to cut rates.

At the same time, a rapid strengthening of currencies against the dollar is a headache for other central banks navigating a weaker economic outlook, as it makes their exports more expensive and potentially harder for them to revive growth. The euro, for example, just had its best day against the greenback in more than two years.

The recent depreciation in the dollar showed that concerns about the currency's status had "left footprints in financial markets already," Sweden's central bank deputy governor Per Jansson said. "If (the dollar's status) would change, that would be a big change for the world economy ... and would basically create a mess," he said. "I really do not hope the US goes there."

To be sure, despite such growing worries, the dollar is still firmly positioned as the world's top reserve currency.

Trump has said he wants it to maintain that status and warned against attempts to undermine it, while signalling a weaker dollar would be good for exports.

The currency also has an inherent competitive advantage: It's backed by the world's largest economy, the deepest capital markets and an established rule of law. There is no real alternative in the near term.

In addition, its fall so far this year - the dollar has slumped about 6% against other major currencies - could ease if Trump is able to turn around sentiment on the economy through pro-growth policies such as tax cuts and deregulation.

Going into the year, investors had expected Trump tariffs to boost the dollar, as they believed his policies would spur growth.

So while investors expected tariffs to be inflationary, the consensus was it would hurt economies abroad more while leading to higher rates at home, strengthening the currency.

That's turned out to be wrong. His tariffs are so sweeping that investors now fear the US will be hurt the most by them as prices rise at home and growth slows. Several investment banks have raised the probabilities they give of a US recession.

The negative sentiment is reversing money flows into the US, thereby reducing demand for dollars. Foreign holdings of US assets had surged to \$62tn in 2024, from \$13tn a decade earlier as international investors flocked to outperforming American stocks, bonds and real estate, official US data shows.

But in a sign money is moving out of US assets to markets overseas, US stocks have slumped 8% so far this year, while German and Hong Kong shares have rallied roughly 12% each.

And the hit to the US as an investment destination could deepen. President Emmanuel Macron on Thursday called on European companies to suspend planned investment in the US in response to the tariffs imposed on the bloc.

Earlier this week, Deutsche Bank warned of the risk of a crisis of confidence in the US currency, while bond giant Pimco said it had turned more cautious on the dollar. Satori Insights founder Matt King said outflows from the US would likely continue.

As a result, the future of a currency often referred to as "King Dollar" for its strength and dominance in global forex markets suddenly looks uncertain. - Reuters

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Nowhere to hide: Trump tariffs leave trading partners cornered**Reuters**

Beijing/Berlin/Ottawa

US trading partners have few good options in their trade war with President Donald Trump, other than to sue for peace.

Hit by 10-50% tariffs on their exports to the world's dominant economic superpower, most lack the firepower to hit back or the political will to slug it out, say government officials, economists and trade experts.

This is why the vast majority of trading partners did not immediately retaliate and indicated a readiness to negotiate a face-saving compromise with Trump. Even among those that have taken counter measures, the door was left ajar to talks.

From China, which yesterday slapped extra tariffs of 34% on all US goods, to Canada, which has taken limited retaliation, nations are tipped to come to the negotiating table sooner or later, given US consumption is so important globally - two-thirds bigger than EU consumption, according to World Bank data.

Other than talks, governments have limited options to protect their export industries and broader economies. These include spending on state aid or on broader economic stimulus - Spain announced a €14bn (\$15.5bn) aid package on Thursday - or looking to greener trade pastures. German officials are eyeing up Mexico, Canada and India.

But for a world already deep in state debt after years of pandemic-era stimulus spending, it will be tough for some to fund the subsidies and other financial aid required to stave off economic growth downgrades, profit warnings and layoffs.

Economists expect Beijing to unleash more fiscal stimulus to support its economy, which sells goods worth more than \$400bn a year to the US. It will also try to develop other export markets, according to Chinese policy advisers.

"We need to strengthen our co-ordination with ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, EU and UK," said one Chinese adviser, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the issue's sensitivity. Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs took the tax imposed on Chinese exports since his January inauguration to 54%. Even with China's economic



US President Donald Trump holds a signed executive order, on the day he delivers remarks on tariffs in the Rose Garden at the White House in Washington, DC, US. (Reuters)

armoury - its financial might, domination of critical mineral and metal production for advanced industries and centrality to global supply chains - a negotiated truce is ultimately expected, the trade adviser said.

That could take a while, given the enmity between Washington and Beijing, though there is speculation that Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping could meet in the US in June.

Countries lacking China's power may reach the table sooner. India, hit with a 27% tariff, is already in talks and is not considering retaliation, said a government official. It had made concessions to Washington ahead of the latest tariffs and it is open to cutting tariffs on more than half of US imports worth \$23bn in a first-phase deal, government sources said.

Vietnam, too, is expected to prioritise negotiations, with limited scope for subsidies and trade diversification. It could try leveraging the exposure that some US manufacturers have to Vietnam to pressure the Trump administration, according to Leif Schneider, head of international law firm Luther in Vietnam.

But, he added: "Vietnam will likely prioritise negotiations to avoid an economic shock."

Hit by a 46% tariff, it ranks as the sixth-biggest exporter to the US, thanks to its success as an offshoring option for manufacturers diversifying away from China.

Southeast Asia in general has

nowhere to run. Its efforts to deepen trade with China, Japan and other big neighbours have led to an alphabet soup of trade groupings which facilitate trade but fall well short of compensating for a US trade shock.

Ahead of Trump's announcement, China, Japan and South Korea held their first economic dialogue in five years, seeking to boost regional trade.

But there is scepticism it will go far, not least because these three are exporting powerhouses, not net contributors to global demand.

The European Union, already feeling abandoned by the Trump administration over security, said the common market of 450mn people was ready to retaliate against Trump's 20% tariff against the bloc and also look to other markets.

"Forging alliances... is the order of the day," German Economy Minister Robert Habeck said, singling out Mexico, Canada and India where closer trade relations would make sense.

Trade deals can take time, though - time that Europe and others don't have. The EU and South America's Mercosur bloc talked for 25 years before unveiling a free trade deal in December. Trump's reciprocal tariffs take effect on Wednesday.

It also takes time to rewrite an economy to cope with global protectionism, which is what German economists say is the right response. Structural reform, such as more competition and tech investment, is preferable to state stimulus, they say.

"There is not much that either

fiscal or monetary policy can do in the short term to offset the trade shock," Deutsche Bank economist Robin Winkler said.

German bank Berenberg says a large part of the new US tariffs can be rolled back in negotiations, with Europe offering concessions such as more contracts to US defence firms.

Canada was spared additional tariffs this week but it is reeling from earlier, 25% US tariffs on its auto, steel and aluminium exports. Canada is splurging on subsidies, funded by its own retaliatory tariffs, but the pain is still being felt.

European carmaker Stellantis NV said it would pause production at a Canadian assembly plant. And companies have reported that they have already started layoffs and pivoting towards newer markets. Some nations have complained to the global trade referee, the World Trade Organisation, but that is judged a feeble option by trade experts, not least because Trump paralysed its top appeals bench in his first term. Nor is the Geneva body seen as a likely venue for renegotiating tariff disputes.

"If they keep pushing protectionism and sticking to this one-sided perspective, I don't see them coming back to the WTO for multilateral negotiations anytime soon," said Marco Molina, of consulting firm Molina & Associates and former deputy permanent representative of Guatemala to the WTO.

"And that's a real shame because the WTO was literally designed to address issues like these."

America's AI iron curtain**By Sona Muzikarova**
Boston

As we enter the second half of the 2020s, AI capabilities are increasingly becoming the key determinant of economic and military might. Hence, after years of ratcheting up US controls on exports of advanced semiconductors to China, the Biden administration, as one of its final acts in office, issued an "interim final rule" to establish a framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion.

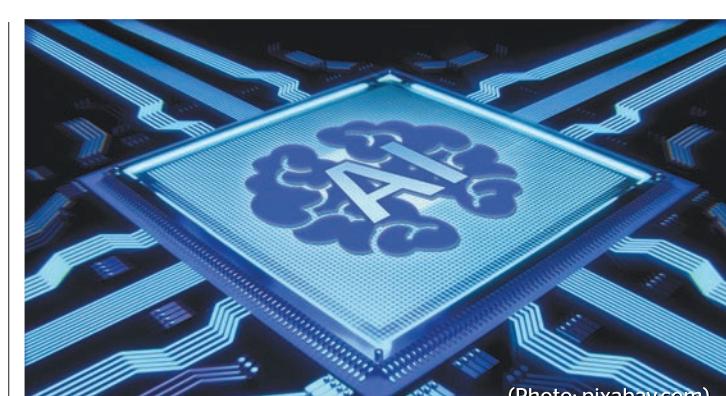
If this AI Diffusion Rule (as it is known) remains intact, the US inputs needed to develop frontier AI models will be accessible only to a tight circle of allies.

In fact, even most Nato and EU members would be sidelined from AI development - a prospect that ultimately could undermine America's own strategic objectives.

For example, Central and Eastern Europe - Europe's industrial powerhouse - needs access to frontier AI chips to remain economically competitive and militarily secure over the next decade. Yet if America is no longer a reliable partner and supplier, the region's economies could gravitate toward China.

Specifically, the AI Diffusion Rule creates a three-tiered hierarchy of access. The bottom tier comprises China, Russia, and the other usual suspects, which are effectively barred from the market. The most privileged tier comprises 18 trusted allies and trade partners, including the other members of the so-called Five Eyes - America's intelligence-sharing alliance with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom - and Asian technology powerhouses such as Taiwan and South Korea.

That leaves the middle tier, which includes most Nato and EU members. Despite being



close US allies, they face rigorous restrictions, including a cap on imports of high-end AI chips (50,000 per country through 2027).

Moreover, the rule extends beyond hardware to include things like model weights (which embody an AI's learned capabilities). Any country that wants to access such assets must pass through stringent, burdensome security protocols.

Without these hurdles, Central Europe would be well placed to build on its robust industrial base to drive technological progress for all of Europe. Poland, among the best capitalised economies in the region, recently launched a \$240mn initiative to help develop the first Polish large language model. Just days before the US tightened its AI chip restrictions, the Polish government announced plans to invest nearly \$1.2bn this year in AI-based technologies.

And in February, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk signed a memorandum of understanding with Alphabet (Google) CEO Sundar Pichai to speed up AI adoption in cybersecurity, health, energy, and other sectors.

By relegating Central and Eastern Europe to second-tier status, the US has threatened the region's economic future in at least three ways. First, the restrictions will make it more difficult to upgrade

legacy industries such as auto manufacturing at a time when Europeans need to press ahead with autonomous and self-driving vehicles, AI-augmented manufacturing, and predictive maintenance technologies.

Second, now that the region's AI aspirations depend on the whims of policymakers in Washington, long-term planning and many new investments are on hold. As import-dependent US companies are also recognising, there is nothing worse for business than persistent policy uncertainty.

Third, with high-performance chips out of reach, Central and Eastern Europe's budding AI startup ecosystem may be forced to migrate to tier-one countries, crippling a strategic sector before it has the chance to mature. If its startups leave or wither away, the region will be set back at least a decade. No wonder public discontent has rippled across European capitals, from Brussels and Prague to Riga and Warsaw.

Of course, US policymakers would say that they are making a calculated trade-off: safeguarding America's technological edge and national security interests, even if that means causing friction with long-standing allies. But the AI chip restrictions also risk fracturing Nato's cohesion and

stalling its military modernisation. The war in Ukraine has shown that combat increasingly revolves around AI capabilities - from cyber defences to drones. Given that the Trump administration wants Nato's European members to step up and do more, it makes no sense to maintain limits on Central and Eastern Europe's ability to develop these technologies.

True, most countries in the region cannot yet reach the quota imposed by the AI Diffusion Rule anyway, owing to a lack of computing power and other requirements. But as their capacities grow, they may begin to look for other partners. In 2023, Hungary alone absorbed 44% of Chinese foreign direct investment in Europe - eclipsing France, Germany, and Britain combined. Similarly, despite Poland's strong Western orientation, China is already one of its largest trading partners, and the broader Central and Eastern European automotive cluster has robust indirect supply links to China.

Given that these ties could facilitate a broader geopolitical realignment, the US would do well to devise a more targeted approach. Ultimately, AI leadership is not just about controlling the hardware and the software. It is also about setting global standards for the technology as it is developed, deployed, and governed.

By sidelining allies from the AI frontier, the US risks losing influence over the technology's trajectory. That cannot possibly be what America wants. - Project Syndicate

• Sona Muzikarova, a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a Mason fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, is a former economist at the European Central Bank, a former diplomat at the OECD, and a former senior adviser to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic.

Trump has not 'undercut' collective defence pledge: Nato chief

By Max Delany
AFP

Nato chief Mark Rutte insisted yesterday that US President Donald Trump has not undermined the alliance's Article Five collective defence pledge and said an American conventional presence would stay in Europe.

"Article Five, he has not undercut. He has committed to Nato, he has committed to Article Five," Rutte told AFP in an interview.

Trump has rattled allies by threatening to only defend those he thinks are spending enough on defence as he pushes them to ramp up their military budgets.

His administration has also raised the

prospect that it could look to shift forces away from Europe to focus on threats elsewhere like China.

"The agenda is not for the US to leave Nato or to leave Europe, the US is here. They will pivot more towards Asia, so that might, over time, mean that they have to rebalance," Rutte said. "But there is now and there will remain in Europe a nuclear and also a conventional presence of the United States."

European countries have said that if Trump does plan to withdraw forces from the continent, he needs to co-ordinate with them to not leave gaps in the face of Russia.

"I assume and I expect that will be done in the spirit of no surprises," Rutte said.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisa-

tion (Nato) head defended his own refusal to criticise the volatile US leader, insisting he saw "eye to eye" with Trump on efforts to bolster spending and bring the war in Ukraine to an end.

"When it comes to the issues I'm focused on, and that is Ukraine, that is Nato territory, we are really on one page," he said.

Rutte was speaking after a meeting of ally foreign ministers where US Secretary of State Marco Rubio demanded that they agree on a "realistic path" to spending 5% of GDP on defence.

That figure appears well out of reach for most allies and is even considerably above what the United States currently spends.

Rutte said he would now launch a "cont

ent-driven process" studying the military

requirements needed as the alliance looks to come up with a new spending target for a summit in The Hague in June.

"I think you now need to get to a number, potentially, be it in hard billions or a percentage, but then also a pathway together," he said.

Washington has sparked fears in Europe that it could be looking to draw closer to Nato's number one nemesis Russia as it has reached out to Moscow to end the war in Ukraine.

Rutte insisted that Moscow remained the main threat for all Nato – and not just Europe.

"Yes, to the whole of the alliance, as we have agreed," he said.

He said in addition that he viewed China as a "threat", a possibly controversial view



Rutte: The agenda is not for the US to leave Nato or to leave Europe, the US is here.

inside the alliance which still refuses to label Beijing a direct menace.

"If you ask me, personally, I would say there's also a threat. I know Nato language is a bit more careful," Rutte said. "But China, with the immense investments they are making in the military, more navy ships than the US has, a thousand nuclear warheads... yeah, it's really ramping up."

Incoming Greenland PM says talk of annexing island is 'unacceptable'

Reuters/AFP
Brussels

Greenland's incoming prime minister said yesterday that talk of annexing the semi-autonomous Danish island was unacceptable, after the US Secretary of State said Denmark should focus on the fact that Greenlanders do not want to be a part of Denmark.

The comments follow months of tension between Washington on the one hand and Copenhagen and Nuuk on the other, over US President Donald Trump's repeated declarations that the Arctic island should become part of the United States.

"We are human beings up here; we are not a piece of property that can be bought. Partnerships and co-operation can always be discussed, but talk of annexation is unacceptable," Greenland's incoming Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen told broadcaster TV2.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio had said earlier yesterday that Denmark should focus on the fact that Greenlanders do not want to be a part of Denmark.

Greenland is currently a semi-autonomous Danish territory.

"Greenlanders are going to make a decision," Rubio told reporters at a press conference after meeting other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) foreign ministers in Brussels.

Nielsen rebuffed Rubio's comments.

"He is not right that Greenland wants to secede tomorrow. He is right that Greenland does not want to be Danish, but Greenland certainly doesn't want to be American either," Nielsen told TV2. "We work every day to build a foundation so that we can stand on our own in the future, but we are not there yet. What he says doesn't hold water."

Polls show a vast majority of Greenland's 57,000 people want to become independent from Denmark but do not wish to become part of the United States.

Nielsen's new coalition is expected to formally take office on April 7.

Rubio also said yesterday that while Washington respected the self-determination of Greenlanders, it was not going to allow the resource-rich autonomous Danish region to become dependent on China.

"What we're not going to do is let China come in now and offer them a bunch of money, and become dependent on China," he said.

During a trip to the island last week US Vice-President J D Vance made it clear that Washington was going to "respect the self-determination of Greenlanders", Rubio said.

Both Nuuk and Copenhagen viewed Vance's visit as a provocation.

On Thursday, Rubio had reassured his Danish counterpart of the "strong" ties between the two countries, after a meeting on the sidelines of the Nato talks.

Russian strike kills at least 14 in Zelensky's home city

AFP/Reuters
Kyiv

A Russian ballistic missile strike on Volodymyr Zelensky's home city of Kryvyi Rih killed 14 people yesterday, including six children, the Ukrainian leader said.

The missile struck a residential area near a children's playground and wounded more than 50 people, according to the head of the city's military administration.

Unverified videos on social media appeared to show bodies lying on a street, while another showed a plume of smoke rising into the evening sky.

"It was preliminarily a ballistic missile attack. As of now, 14 people have been killed, including six children," Zelensky said on Telegram.

The rescue operation was ongoing, he added.

"There is only one reason why this continues – Russia does not want a ceasefire and we see it. The whole world sees it," he said. "And only the world's pressure on Russia, all efforts to strengthen Ukraine, our air defence, our forces – only this will determine when the war will end."

The Ukrainian leader was born in Kryvyi Rih, which had a pre-war population of around 600,000 people.

US President Donald Trump's administration has been pushing for a speedy end to the more than three-year war, holding talks with both Russia and Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin rejected a joint US-Ukrainian proposal for an unconditional and full ceasefire, while Ukraine has accused Moscow of dragging out talks with no intention of halting its offensive.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said earlier yesterday that Trump was not "going to fall into the trap of endless negotiations" with Russia over its three-year invasion.

"We will know soon enough, in a matter of



Zelensky leaves following a press conference in Kyiv following the deadly missile strike on his home city. - Reuters

weeks, not months, whether Russia is serious about peace or not," he said.

Kryvyi Rih, in Ukraine's central Dnipro-etsk region, is about 60km from the front line but has regularly been targeted by Russian drones and missiles.

A previous Russian ballistic attack on the city on Wednesday killed at least four people and wounded more than a dozen others.

Oleksandr Vilkul, the head of the city's military administration, said the missile landed near a children's playground.

Zelensky said the attack showed diplomacy was an "empty word" for Russia.

"A ceasefire could have been reached by now and it is Putin who rejects it," he said in his evening address.

Five apartment buildings were damaged, Interior Minister Igor Klymenko said.

He said police had blocked off the area to maintain order.

"The police are documenting the consequences of Russia's war crime and accepting statements from the victims," Klymenko added.

Social media video from the scene showed a car in flames.

Andriy Kovalenko, a Ukrainian official tasked with countering disinformation, described the missile involved in the attack as an "Iskander".

The Iskander is a Russian ballistic missile system that can have a range of up to 500km.

"This is a deliberate strike to kill a large number of people," Kovalenko said.

"We need to put an end to this terror, protect people, and force Russia into peace," said Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha.

Russian forces used a ballistic missile for the strike, human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets said.

Russia denies targeting civilians, but thousands have been killed and injured in its invasion of Ukraine since 2022.

The Kramatorsk aquarium: a calm oasis on Ukraine front

By Florent Vergnes and Khrystyna Zanyk
AFP

Piranhas, known for their predatory disposition, can be found in the freshwaters of Brazil or Ukraine's Kramatorsk, mere kilometres from the front line with Russian forces.

Despite the war that has ravaged eastern Ukraine, couple Roman Dubinin and Iryna Artyomova fund and run an aquarium with around 200 fish in a city that is regularly struck by Russian glide bombs.

"Here, there is no more war," said Dubinin, a 47-year-old enthusiast whose love for aquaria was passed down from his uncle.

The warm light, soft music and colourful fish at the facility are in stark contrast to the bearded soldiers, camouflage cars and broken windows that have become a feature of the city, which lies just 20km from the front line.

With a smile playing on his lips and wearing military fatigues, Dubinin feeds the fish while waiting for rare visitors – most of them internally displaced people who have fled from other parts of the region as the Russians advance.

The aquarium, which is free, opened in 2020 – six years after Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine and at the start of a conflict with Moscow-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, which cut off the most direct route for locals to access the sea.

It was closed for six months at the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 when the 41-year-old Artyomova and her child fled from Kramatorsk to the west of the country.

Now back in Kramatorsk even though the



Maryna Rosytska, a 35-year-old teacher, and her daughter Melania look at fish in an aquarium in Kramatorsk. - AFP

front line is moving towards the city, Artyomova said she is glad the aquarium can offer some respite from the daily realities of war to local children.

"They are constantly talking. They have strong emotions," she said, smiling.

Soldiers also sometimes come and visit to stare at the fish tanks "for hours", Dubinin said.

"They say: 'I forgot the war, I rested a bit... it's a psychological relief for them,'" he said.

Artyomova said: "For us too! We would not have been able to survive without this place."

"It gives us a responsibility, we know why we are doing it," she said.

Squeezed into her pink down jacket,

Maryna Rosytska's eyes open wide as her daughter Melania clutches her leg going round the aquarium.

Rosytska, a 35-year-old teacher, said she was struck by the "paradox".

"You feel like you're in another region, maybe even another country," said Rosytska, who has come to visit her husband, a soldier deployed in the region.

"It's inspiring to see what people can create" even this close to the front, she told AFP, as the reflections of the water played on her face.

She smiled widely in front of a surgeon-fish, a species which stars in the cartoon *Finding Dory*.

"It's like being under the sea," she said.

The Kramatorsk aquarium's bubble of

calm risks being burst at any moment and running a facility like this so close to the front is no easy task.

A missile fell nearby, another destroyed a restaurant a few streets away, killing 13 people and injuring 64 in June 2023.

Artyomova still remembers the screams and "the smell and the dust" of that strike.

She said she feels happy every day she wakes up and is "still alive".

Dubinin, who built up the aquarium fish by fish, lost many tropical specimens due to power cuts that affected the temperature and oxygen in the tanks.

"Every day, a new one died," he said.

Although he cried at first, after the 50th dead fish he said he finally "got used to it".

Some of the animals are themselves refugees, entrusted to the aquarium by local residents who were unable to take them when they fled the city.

These include a freshwater stingray, two turtles and around 40 birds in an aviary at the back of the premises.

With the war on the city's doorstep, the couple are thinking of evacuating and relocating their fish to Lviv in western Ukraine or Odesa in the south in a specialised lorry – a costly and complex logistical operation.

"We try not to think about it," Artyomova said.

However, she says that if the authorities announce the compulsory evacuation of children, as they have done in other towns close to the front line, that will be her cue to leave.

Dubinin gazed tenderly at his piranhas, impassive despite the sounds of war that keep Kramatorsk on edge every night.

"If I have to give them away, I'll give them away so they can live somewhere else," he said, adding: "But if Kramatorsk survives, then the aquarium will survive."

Two of the dead were brothers, he added.

Preliminary evidence indicates the damage to the warehouse "seems to be from a tornado", Toscano said.

Spain's national weather office Aemet issued an alert for much of the southern region of Andalucia yesterday due to the risk from strong winds and heavy rainfall caused by Storm Nuria which was also affecting neighbouring Portugal.

It was the fifth storm to hit Spain since the beginning of March, which received 2.5 times the average amount of rainfall for the month this year, according to the weather office.

The storms have been blamed for a total of 10 deaths, including the three who died yesterday.

Belgium charges eight people in EU parliament bribery probe

AFP
Brussels

Eight people have been charged in a probe into suspected corruption in the European Parliament involving

Chinese tech giant Huawei, Belgian prosecutors said yesterday.

Dozens of police officers launched raids in Belgium and Portugal last month, initially charging five people.

Two have since been released under conditions, while the other

three have been fitted with electronic tags.

Now the federal prosecutor's office has said three more suspects were charged between March 20 and 29, and they remain in prison.

The total does not include suspects arrested or wanted by Belgian authorities overseas, including an EU lawmaker's aide ar-

rested in Italy last month.

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Snapshots from the Eid al-Fitr festivities at Msheireb Downtown Doha (MDD) yesterday.

PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam

Curtains today for Eid al-Fitr festivities at MDD

The Eid al-Fitr festivities at Msheireb Downtown Doha (MDD), featuring an array of live entertainment, engaging activities, and captivating attractions, conclude today.

Baraha Msheireb, described as the largest courtyard in the region, had become a focal point for family fun, hosting traditional games alongside engaging shows that captivate everyone.

The festivities extend throughout the district, where Sikkat Al

Wadi, known for its charming walkways and boutique shops, features roaming entertainment.

Interactive games and activations – designed to entertain and stimulate creativity – proved popular, attracting many visitors.

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

This mix of artistry, combined with the live music and interactive

shows, provides a truly memorable experience for festival-goers.

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

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

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



The MDD's Eid celebrations feature performers from diverse backgrounds.

