The Peninsula
Local focus, Global vision

THURSDAY 4 JANUARY 2024 | 22 JUMADA II-1445 | QR2 WWW.THEPENINSULA.QA /PENINSULAQATAR /THEPENINSULAQATAR /PENINSULA_QATAR +974 55698797





Amir condoles with Iranian President

Qatar strongly condemns two explosions in Kerman province

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Amir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani expressed his sincere condolences to President of the Islamic Republic of Iran H E Ebrahim Raisi on the victims of the two explosions that occurred in Kerman province in Iran, asking Allah, the Almighty, to bestow upon them mercy and speedy recovery of the wounded.

This came during a phone call H H the Amir held Wednesday evening with the Iranian President.

H H the Amir underscored, during the call, the State of Qatar's unwavering position to reject violence, terrorism, and criminal acts regardless of the motives and reasons.

Also the State of Qatar expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of the two explosions that occurred near Kerman city cemetery in the Islamic Republic of Iran and led to deaths and injuries.

In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated the State of Qatar's rejection of violence, terrorism, and criminal acts regardless of the motives and reasons.

The ministry expressed the condolences of the State of Qatar to the families of the victims and the government and people of Iran, and wished the wounded a speedy recovery.



FOOD SECURITY

Homegrown agri-tech startup showcases innovative solutions

FAZEENA SALEEM
THE PENINSULA

A homegrown agri-tech startup is showcasing climate-resilient innovative food security solutions at Expo 2023 Doha. VFarms, a member company of Qatar Science & Technology Park (QSTP) – part of Qatar Foundation, is making waves for its high-tech indoor cultivation facilities which promote eco-friendly farming in Qatar.

Established in 2021 in response to Qatar's extreme climate, VFarms' technology enables farmers to grow crops without the use of external water supply by harvesting water from the atmosphere using solar energy.

VFarms' technology revolutionizes farming by enabling crop growth without relying on external water sources. Using solar energy, the system captures water from the atmosphere, featuring autonomous water supply generators and solar panels. This innovative approach facilitates year-round cultivation of crops, vegetables, berries, and other foods, irrespective of seasonal and climatic variations.

VFarms is exhibiting at the 'Investment Hub' pavilion set up by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry along with entities such as The Investment Promotion Agency Qatar (Invest Qatar) that echo Qatar's firm commitment to sustainability and spotlights initiatives in modern agriculture, innovation and technology.

Against the backdrop of recent global supply chain challenges, prioritizing food security has become paramount for nations. Qatar, guided by its National Vision 2030, emphasizes the search for sustainable alternatives to conventional water desalination, a process known for its environmental impact. VFarms' technology emerges as a solution that addresses key strategic objectives, allowing continuous food production in harsh climatic conditions without dependence on external water sources.

VFarms' technology revolutionises farming by enabling crop growth without relying on external water sources. Using solar energy, the system captures water from the atmosphere, featuring autonomous water supply generators and solar panels.



"After demonstrating VFarms' technological efficiencies to our partners at QTSP we decided to share the potential of addressing food security and water scarcity issues with all interested individuals and companies worldwide, said Andrey Martirosov, CEO and Founder of VFarms.

"As we are a Qatari tech company, there is no better place than here to showcase our solution. Qatar's needs align perfectly with our expertise, and we are proud to support the country's efforts," he added.

Martirosov credited QTSP for its support, commenting that the team acted not only as project consultants, but also provided the right conditions for the assembly of VFarms' prototype model on QTSP premises.

In addition to QSTP's support, Martirosov underlined that government support from Qatar and its vibrant entrepreneurial landscape has been especially encouraging for innovative tech start-ups to develop solutions for food and water scarcity. ➔P3

MOBILITY

Qatar advances in maritime, land, air transportation sector

DEEPAK JOHN
THE PENINSULA

Qatar has been on the global transportation map as it has achieved great strides in its transportation and mobility sector.

Ministry of Transport (MOT) stated on its X platform recently, that the transportation sector is progressing rapidly in all areas, affirming that the ministry will continue to develop plans and programmes to achieve sustainability in this vital sector to contribute to a prosperous future for the country's economy and future generations.

The latest advancements in Qatar's land, maritime and air transportation sector are evident in the integrated and eco-friendly transportation system, as well as the latest technologies and innovations in the realm of sustainable transportation.

Highlighting the achievements of the maritime sector, MOT noted on its X platform, for the second time in a row, Qatar was re-elected to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) Council under Category C, confirming the country's position at the centre of the international maritime legislature.

Qatar could uphold its position to the Council as Member States praised the country's endeavours to enhance the performance of the global maritime system and global maritime trade.

Qatar's main gateway to world trade, Hamad Port ranked 8th in the world and third in the Arab region on the Container Port Performance Index (CPPI) for 2022.

The ranking shows that Hamad Port keeps moving forward firmly towards more powerful position as one of the key ports in the Middle East and the region. It targets achieving a more efficient logistics services industry in Qatar and the transformation into a leading global trade hub, thus enhancing its economic diversification plans in step with the Qatar National Vision 2030.

Hamad Port shipping lines network includes 30 shipping lines that connect the port directly and indirectly to more than 100 maritime destinations around the world, seven of which were launched in 2022 and 2023. ➔P2

RAISING AWARENESS

QF students raise fund to support Palestine

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Since the attacks on Gaza began in October 2023, Qatar Foundation students have organised a host of initiatives and events to raise awareness about the Palestinian genocide and gather donations for aid – with their efforts collectively raising over QR20.4m.

Abeer Al Khalifa, President of Pre-University Education at Qatar Foundation (QF), said she has been deeply moved and inspired by the initiatives that QF students have undertaken to support the people of Palestine.

"Their drive to make a difference demonstrated through their creative and compassionate efforts to collect donations is a testament to the values we strive to instil through our educational system," she said.

"These young individuals are not just students; they are emerging leaders who embody empathy, global citizenship, and a profound sense of social responsibility. Their efforts, extending beyond the classroom, show education's role in developing caring and proactive individuals."

Al Khalifa highlighted that the solidarity and assistance shown by the students indicate they are not merely gaining knowledge about global challenges but are also proactively engaging in actions to better the world.

"Their actions in supporting our brothers and sisters in Palestine show great compassion and global awareness," she said. "This shows our students are more than learners; they are actively making a positive impact in the world, which makes me proud and underscores education's role in shaping change-makers."

Key initiatives and events organized by students from Qatar Foundation's Pre-University Education schools for Palestine include a student-led exhibition displaying more than 100 art pieces highlighting Palestine's rich cultural heritage. ➔P2



15th Marmi Festival finalists

Six new finalists in the Hadad Challenge tournament and one in Al Talaa will be competing in the 15th Marmi Festival happening until January 27 at Sealine. The festival aims to document and promote the heritage of falconry, which has been registered on the Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity according to UNESCO since 2010.

FARMERS ZONE

Festival for local agricultural produce begins today at Expo

SANAULLAH ATAULLAH
THE PENINSULA

A festival for local agricultural produce will begin today at the Farmers Zone of Expo 2023 Doha offering fresh vegetables and herbs from local farms in large quantities.

"Expo Festival for Qatar Agricultural Produce" will run until March 2024 from 4pm to 10pm.

The Ministry of Municipality represented by the Agricultural Affairs Department has announced the festival at a time when the agricultural season of Qatar is reaching its peak with almost all types of local vegetables reaching the market.

The peak agricultural season in Qatar is from December until February when all types of local vegetables including tomatoes will be available.

Local farms offer most of the seasonal vegetables including cucumber, leafy vegetables, pumpkin, and beans among others.

With the increase in the number of local farms, the seasonal markets are expected to offer 14,000 tonnes of vegetables this season, 20 percent more than the previous season.

By the beginning of November 2023, all five seasonal vegetable markets reopened for the agricultural season 2023-24 offering fresh vegetables and herbs from local farms in large quantities.

The Ministry of Municipality has announced the festival at a time when the agricultural season of Qatar is reaching its peak with almost all types of local vegetables coming to the market.



Over 140 local farms will participate in the markets which are called yards for selling local agricultural produce. The markets operating in Al Mazrouah, Al Khor-Al Thakhira, Al Wakrah, Al Sheehaniya, and Al Shamal offer agricultural products directly to customers without middlemen at competitive prices.

These markets provide a marketing platform for local farmers enabling them to sell their products to consumers directly without any middlemen. Prices of vegetables at these markets are lower than the daily bulletin prices because the farmers receive free marketing services.

The agricultural produce displayed at the market is under strict monitoring to meet the standards and required health conditions - the produce should be free from pesticide residues and of high quality.

The vegetable samples are taken to the laboratories to check the quality of the produce regularly.

The Agricultural Affairs Department of the Ministry readied the markets enabling local farmers to offer their produce.

The Department provided farmers with boxes for marketing vegetables, and stalls at the markets free of cost, enabling them to sell directly to the customers without middlemen to get good returns for their investments and hard work.

EDITORIAL ↘09

Family as pillar of society

QATARI society values the strength and cohesion of family as a basic pillar and foundation of society, and the state has been prioritising family welfare and wellbeing.

BUSINESS ↘ 11

Qatar takes over presidency of GCC Commercial Arbitration Centre

THE GCC Commercial Arbitration Centre has stated that, commencing January 2024, the presidency of the Centre will be undertaken by the State of Qatar.

SPORT ↘ 15

Elite horses set to dazzle at Doha International Arabian Horse Show



Labour Minister presides at Jusour board meeting

Minister of Labour and the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Qatar Manpower Solutions Company (Jusour), H E Dr. Ali bin Smaikh Al Marri chaired the periodic meeting of the Board of Directors. During the meeting, they deliberated on the firm's operational plan to bolster its initiatives in advancing Qatar's labour market. This involved drawing in a proficient labour force to aid economic growth in key areas, realising the objectives of national strategic advancement, and conforming to the Qatar National Vision 2030.

Cabinet approves exemption for national products from MoCI licensing fees

QNA – DOHA

Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs H E Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani chaired the Cabinet's regular meeting held at its seat at the Amiri Diwan yesterday.

After the meeting, Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs issued a statement.

The Cabinet considered the topics on its agenda and approved a draft decision of the Minister of Commerce and Industry regarding exempting national products from certain licensing fees performed by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry during promotional periods.

The Cabinet also approved a draft MoU for cooperation in youth field between Qatar and Philippines.

The Cabinet considered taking necessary actions to ratify the cooperation agreement in the fields of tourism and business events between Qatar and Uzbekistan.

It approved a draft memorandum of understanding (MoU) on cooperation in the youth field between Qatar and the Philippines.

The Cabinet approved to host the 11th meeting of Arab Committee of UN Experts on Geospatial Information Management from February 4 to 8, 2024.

Finally, the Cabinet reviewed several topics and took appropriate decisions regarding them including a draft decision by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change regarding regulating the manufacture, installation and monitoring of artificial coral reefs; the annual report of the Civil Service and Government Development Bureau; a report on the results of participation in the 33rd meeting of the Ministers of Justice of the GCC held in Muscat in October 2023; and a report on the results of participation in 27th Meeting of GCC Culture Ministers held in October 2023.

QF students raise fund to support Palestine

FROM PAGE 1

In a display of solidarity and unity with the Palestinian people, students organized a unifying Qunoot prayer at Minaretein (Education City Mosque). Students from 10 QF schools came together to plant 50 olive trees, symbolizing their support and solidarity for Palestine. These trees represent unity, resilience, and a deep connection to the land.

Also, Academyati students planted olive trees which represent the steadfastness of the Palestinian people; and they held a 'Stand with Palestine' event during Qatar National Day, raising QR6,881 through activities that promoted solidarity and awareness for Palestine.

Awsaj Academy held a Qatar National Day fundraiser for the Al Fakhoora school that was destroyed in Gaza, raising QR41,336 for Palestine.

Qatar Academy Doha (QAD) students organized a 'Stand with Palestine' event in the form of a friendly football match to raise donations and show their support for Palestine. This effort gathered nearly QR20m; QAD students organized a bake sale, uniting their community for Palestine and raising QR139,359; students led the event 'Qatar Academy Stands with Palestine', where they organized a series of impactful activities aimed at increasing awareness about the Palestinian cause and advocating for the rights of the Palestinian people; students planted an olive tree as a symbol of resilience and Palestinian identity between its Primary and Middle school campuses during the 'Qatar Academy Stands with Palestine' event; and other QAD awareness activities included hosting cultural events and teachers incorporating Palestinian-related topics into their classroom lessons to educate students about the Palestinian cause.

Qatar Academy Al Khor (QAK) students led the 'It Starts with a Step' event, a community event combining physical activity and social engagement, which raised QR13,478 for Palestine; and primary students at QAK showed their empathy and support to their brothers and sisters in Gaza by writing short messages and prayers to Palestine.

Qatar Academy Msheireb (QAM)' s Grade 2 Market raised QR11,697 through the sale of student-made products, supporting Palestinian children.

Qatar Academy Sidra (QAS) Primary School hosted 'Palestine Day' to support Palestine and its people, featuring a student performance about Palestine in the school assembly, a bake sale for fundraising, and Palestine-themed art class activities, raising QR33,871 for Palestine; and QAS Secondary School organized an assembly to show their solidarity with Palestine and arranged bake sales to raise funds.

Qatar Academy Wakra (QAW) organized a fundraising initiative called the 'One Body' campaign, gathering QR141,815 to support Palestine; QAW organized a peaceful march inside the school campus in solidarity with the Palestinian people; their Secondary School organized a grand bake sale to sell food, drinks, and merchandise for Palestine; and wrapping up a week of heritage celebrations, students performed 'And the Impact Remains', a play depicting Qatar's history from pearl diving to modernization, intertwined with its solidarity towards Palestine. The performance included Qatar and Palestine's national anthems and ended with the heartfelt song 'Peace for Gaza'.

Tariq Bin Ziad (TBZ) School initiated the 'Palestine's Duty' campaign to aid Palestine, raising QR5,441 through donations; the school assembly was organized to support the Palestinian cause and pray for the Palestinian people; and the school's scout team participated in the Etaam initiative with a campaign called 'Palestine in our hearts'. While an interactive fundraiser, 'From Qatar to Palestine, the Siraj Initiative', raised QR 32,085; and Siraj's team produced a short animated film about Palestine titled 'Yassin's Kite', which highlighted aspects of Palestinian culture and its people.

Qatar advances in maritime, land, air transportation sector

FROM PAGE 1

In the case of land transport, Qatar leads the region in zero-carbon emission public transit with 70 percent electric public bus operation in 2023. Qatar is ranked among the top 10 global markets in electric vehicle readiness and came 9th on the latest report on global Electric Vehicle (EV) mobility; The 'Global Electric Mobility Readiness Index (GEMRIX) 2023' by Arthur D Little (ADL).

The percentage of operating e-buses has neared 70 percent supported by an integrated infrastructure for electric charging. This positions Qatar among the leading countries in the world in terms of having a zero-carbon transportation sector, which, in turn, results in lower energy consumption, lower harmful emissions, lighter carbon footprint, and better quality of life.

Ministry of Transport provided innovative, ecofriendly mobility solutions that back all aspects of development in Qatar. This comes within the framework of a comprehensive, integrated strategy developed by the MOT with the aim of gradual transition of the public bus system to electricity to 100 percent by 2030. Last year also saw Qatar winning the post of chair of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)'s Technical Cooperation and Implementation Support Committee (TCC). It also highlighted the full management of the Doha Flight Information Region (FIR) and the launching of Long-rang L-band and S-band radar systems in line with Doha FIR strategic goals.

Sila which connects all public transportation in Qatar within an integrated network highlighted on its X account, several achievements in the public transport sector in the last year. These include the launch of the Education City Tram Green Line and the electrification of public buses reached 70 percent. Also, the setting up of 84 fully electric bus routes and 90 percent of Karwa taxis have been replaced with eco-friendly hybrid vehicles.





Amiri Guard Commander meets Turkish officials

Commander of the Amiri Guard Lieutenant General H E Hazza bin Khalil Al Shahwani held discussions with Secretary-General of Armed Forces of Turkiye Brigadier General Muharrem Eminoglu and Commander of the Turkish republican guard Colonel Fuat Donmez during separate meetings in Turkiye. The two meetings dealt with exchanging points of view on topics of common concern in military fields and ways to develop them. Qatari Military Attache to the Republic of Turkiye and senior officers from the Amiri Guard and the Internal Security Force attended both meetings.

Souq Waqif International Honey & Dates Exhibitions begins in Feb

JOELYN BALUYUT
THE PENINSULA

The Souq Waqif management announced the holding of its 5th International Honey Exhibition from February 10 to 15, and the 2nd International Dates Exhibition, scheduled from February 25 to March 5.

According to its official social media account, interested exhibitors can now register via exhibition.souqwaqif.qa, adhering to conditions such as a refundable security deposit of QR5,000. Participants are allowed shipments of 500kgs of honey and one tonne of dates, with a QR5,000 insurance deduction upon registration.

Unique incentives await participants, including special rates at Souq Waqif hotels, discounted shipping through Qatar Airways, and the facilitation of entry visas for participating countries.

Last year's honey and dates exhibition drew the participation of 160 farms and companies from 25 countries, showcasing 50 types of honey and 50 varieties of dates. Among the countries which participated are Oman, Tunisia, Libya, Palestine, Georgia, to name some. Noteworthy was the presence of 31 Qatari honey-importing companies and 26 local producers.

The International Dates exhibition returns after a hiatus since 2019, during which Souq Waqif focused on its local version. The 2019 edition included 150 exhibitors including 89 local and 59 foreign companies for producing, supplying and selling dates from ten countries.

Importantly, there is no entry fee for these exhibitions.

The public can expect a variety of dates and honey during the exhibits. Among the honey products may include Sidr, Wild Sidr, Manuka, Stingless Bee Honey, Acacia, Meadow, White Honey, Ginger Honey, and Mountain Flower Honey. While date products, Halawy, Mazafati, Medjool, Jordan Banks Dates, Milk Chocolate Date Almonds, and Dates with coconut.

On another note, the Souq Waqif Equestrian Festival is gearing up for next week, featuring competitions such as the 5th International Arabian Horse Show from January 13 to 15, the 13th Qatar International Arabian Peninsula Horse Show from January 17 to 19, and the Arabian Horse Auction on January 20.

Last year's festival achieved record-breaking success with QR6.4m in prizes and 58 horses from the GCC region. According to officials, the event is a great platform for horse owners and equestrian fans to meet and exchange views and experiences about their shared passion for horses.

Second Ummah symposium on family organised

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Islamic Research and Studies Department of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs has organised second symposium within the second season of the Nation Symposium.

The event was entitled: "Our values...the pillar of civilisation, and the path to advancement: the moral construction of the family." It discussed three main topics centred around the family, the observed targeting of its components, and how to confront this targeting

The educational and family adviser at islamweb.net Sheikh Dr. Ahmed bin Abdul Qadir Al Farjabi, the legal expert at the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Sheikh Dr. Muhammad bin Mahmoud Al Mahmoud and Head of the Islamic Culture Department at the Sheikh Abdullah bin Zaid Al Mahmoud Islamic Cultural Center Sheikh Dr. Ahmed bin Abdul Rahim Al Tahan attended the symposium.

The symposium discussed importance of family and that it is the basis for society and how the role of the mother serves as a solid pillar of family cohesion, and what the values of cohesion are in Qatari society.

Addressing the symposium, Director of the Islamic Research and Studies Department Sheikh Dr. Ahmed bin Mohammed bin Ghanem Al Thani said that the family is the pillar of society and the basis for building civilisation. Therefore, in this symposium, he said: "We tried to shed light on the targeting tools and the most targeted elements in the family to come up with possible means of prevention, in an attempt to advance society and its values."

Head of the Sharia Research Section of Islamic Research and Studies Department Mishari Ali Al Namlan presented the symposium.

He said that family in the Islamic values constitute the most important elements of possibility for a resumption of advancement, the most effective means of assistance to empowerment among nations, and the strongest reasons for leadership and leadership.

Al Namlan said that it is a family whose stability is necessary for a successful society and its progress.

He said that it was necessary to have theses that discuss these challenges, and the destructive shovels of this lofty pillar and sound edifice to preserve and preserve the most important pillars of the survival of societies.



Official during the symposium of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs.

The symposium discussed the fact that the family is the pillar of society and the ladder of cultural advancement, and that it is the basis for social giving, and how the role of the mother serves as a solid pillar of family cohesion, and what the values of cohesion are in Qatari society.

They also discussed the effective ways to confront targeting and prevent disintegration, and the factors for promoting the family in light of these increasing challenges.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family, the Family Counselling Centre (Wefaq), the Protection and Social Rehabilitation Centre (Aman), and the Police Academy participated in the symposium.



Qatar sends more aid for Palestinians

An aircraft of the Qatari Armed Forces carrying 37 tonnes of aid arrived yesterday in Arish City of Egypt. The assistance includes shelter kits and food items provided by Qatar Fund For Development to be transferred to Gaza, bringing the total number of planes to 58, with a total of 1,814 tonnes of aid.

Qatari students training at QFMA's Information Systems Department

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

A number of Qatari students from Carnegie Mellon University and Community College completed a comprehensive three-month training programme at the Qatar Financial Markets Authority (QFMA), which included the Information Systems Department at QFMA.

During the programme, the trainee students gained experience and knowledge that helps them in their studies in the fields of information systems, network engineering, computer engineering and cybersecurity.

They were also briefed on the new digital transformation strategy recently launched as part of the 3rd QFMA's Strategic Plan.

The students gained experience and knowledge that helps them in their studies in the fields of information systems, network engineering, computer engineering and cybersecurity.

The new QFMA's digital transformation strategy includes a set of initiatives, the most important of which are revamping the QFMA's website, creating an intranet portal, enriching the e-learning portal, establishing an IT Governance Framework, establishing change-advisory board to guide change initiatives, establishing a project management system, an inspection system and another to track insider information, migration to cloud computing and social media based artificial intelligence for disclosure, and establishing a Regulatory Technology Strategy and Developing its guidelines, and the implementation of Qatar's National Cybersecurity Framework.

QFMA provides a professional and training environment with international standards, which will attract ambitious young Qatari graduates who seek to develop their skills and abilities, refine their professional personalities, and obtain training that is consistent with their desires and meets the level of their prospects and aspirations.

Homegrown agri-tech startup showcases innovative solutions

FROM PAGE 1

"Projects of strategic importance for the country's development can only be successfully implemented with support from both the public and private sectors. Together, we want to create an infrastructure that will attract the brightest and most ambitious scientists from around the world and connect them with the academic, corporate and start-up communities here in Qatar," said Martirosov.

Having successfully delivered a proof-of-concept model, Martirosov said he is confident that VFarms will soon be heading into the commercial market and is proud to be showcasing the company's groundbreaking solution at the Expo 2023 Doha.

Planning and Strategic Initiative Director at QSTP, Ahmed Al Enazi said, "With sustainability among QSTP's foremost priorities, we take pride in providing a conducive environment for our member companies, such as VFarms, to leverage from our ecosystem, expand their research efforts, and pioneer sustainable solutions that are crucial to meeting national priorities."

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Sudanese Independence Day celebrations at Expo 2023 Doha

QNA — DOHA

Sudanese pavilion at the Horticultural Expo 2023 Doha celebrated the 68th anniversary of the glorious independence day, in the presence of a large number of the Sudanese community residing in Doha, and a group of members of other Arab communities who shared the Sudaneses joy on the anniversary of their country's independence.

Sudanese pavilion square at the International Zone of the exhibition featured performances by Sudanese folk groups, which reflected different styles of the Sudanese artistic heritage and rhythms from various states of Sudan.

This went down well with the large audience and visitors, who learned about the hospitality and traditions of the Sudanese in the open air.

Everyone enjoyed poetry recitals presented by a group of young poets, in an atmosphere that reflected the patriotic spirit of the communitys members and linked them emotionally to the homeland. The event included many participations that focused on historical value, discovering the authentic past, and showing it with a contemporary vision in order to enhance the national and cultural identity.

Every year on January 1, Sudanese people celebrate the glorious anniversary of independence and the departure of the British colonizers from their land. An opportunity to remember their journey from suffering and struggle from occupation to independence.

Sudan is participating in Expo Doha 2023 despite its exceptional circumstances. This stems from its belief that the slogan proposed for the exhibition is a priority for the country, especially since desertification is devouring millions of acres of fertile land, and its risks are exacerbated in the economic, social and industrial fields, and is wiping out tens of acres of the states agricultural lands.



Participants during the celebrations at the Sudanese pavilion.

Sudanese pavilion features topics that reflect the Expo slogan "Green Desert, Better Environment," in addition to a group of famous and basic horticultural and field crops in Sudan, with a glimpse of heritage and tourism topics and products, and samples of important types of seeds and fruits, such as gum, roselle, and senna, as well as multiple types of crops such as dates, Arabic gum, and others.

1,315 participants in 7th Katara Award for Qur'an recitation

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Cultural Village Foundation, Katara announced that the number of entries in the Katara Qur'an Recitation Award in its seventh session, which is held under the slogan "Adorn the Qur'an with your voices," has reached 1,315 entries, representing 64 Arab and foreign countries.

The total number of Arab entries in the award reached about 685 entries, representing 18 Arab countries, in addition to 630 entries from 46 non-Arab countries. The Maghreb countries topped the list of entries with 307 entries, followed by the countries of Egypt, Sudan and Somalia with 233 entries, then entries from the Levant and Iraq with 93 entries. While the number of participants from the Arab Gulf countries reached about 52 participants.

The screening committee will evaluate all entries and select the best 100 participants to qualify for the qualifying stage, which will be held in Doha. The 100 finalists will participate in the seventh round's qualifiers through 20 television episodes. In each episode, five participants compete, and one of them is chosen to compete in the semi-final qualifying stage, in which 20 contestants compete, in addition to five contestants from the reserve, through five other episodes, in which five people compete in each episode, and one participant from each is qualified. A competition ring in the final stage, and from the five finalists, the first three winners of the Katara Qur'an Recitation Award will be announced.

he total number of Arab entries in the award reached about 685 entries, representing 18 Arab countries, in addition to 630 entries from 46 non-Arab countries.

Nominations for the Katara Qur'an Recitation Award in its seventh session were opened during the period extending from October 1 to December 15, 2023.

The jury for the award consists of six members, three of whom are certified in recitations and the rules and rules of intonation, and three are specialists in maqamat, beauty and sweetness of the voice.

The Katara Award for Qur'an Recitation aims to encourage distinguished talents in reciting the Holy Qur'an, discover talented people, support them and introduce them to the world, honour distinguished and creative reciters, motivate emerging generations to adhere to their religion, and realise their duties towards their faith and Islamic message, and seeks to encourage Muslim children to turn to the Book of God - the Almighty - understanding, performing and contemplating.

The value of the prizes allocated for the award is QR900,000. The first place winner will receive QR500,000, the second place winner, QR300,000, and the third place winner, QR100,000.



Secretary-General of Ministry of Foreign Affairs meets Cuban Ambassador

Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs H E Dr. Ahmed bin Hassan Al Hammadi met Ambassador of the Republic of Cuba H E Alain Perez Torres. During the meeting, they discussed bilateral cooperation relations.

MHM School and College distributes books

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Annual text book distribution festival 2024 in line with Bangladesh was held on January 1, 2024 in Bangladesh MHM School and College, Doha, Qatar at school central Hall room.

Ambassador of Bangladesh to Qatar H E Md. Nazrul Islam inaugurated the book distribution ceremony 2024 and distributed the books among the students.

Embassy officers, Director of the Institution Lt Cdr (Retd) Md. Anwar Khurshid, MBA; Principal Md Zulfiker Azad, Vice-Principal, ATM Asadusjaman; faculty members, parents and students were present on this occasion.

QatarEnergy LNG
Tender Invitation

قطر للطاقة QatarEnergy LNG

No.	TENDER NUMBER / DESCRIPTION	TENDER ISSUE PERIOD	TENDER FEE (QAR)	TENDER BOND (QAR)	TENDER CLOSING DATE
1	LTC/C/MNT/6273/23 ONLINE LEAK SEALING SERVICES ON CALL-OFF BASIS	31/12/2023 to 14/01/2024	0	400,000	24/01/2024

Scope of Work:
Company requires Contractor to perform online sealing of leaking valves, flanges, pipefittings, pipeline and equipment on call-off basis for its Onshore and Offshore facilities. The Contractor shall be responsible for providing sealing materials, clamps, manpower and tools & tackles. The duration of the awarded Contract shall be five (05) years starting from July 2024 tentatively with a sole option for Company to extend it further for up to two (02) years.

Bid Validity: Bid should be valid for 180 calendar days from the Tender Closing Date.

Place for Tender Collection and Bid Submission:
ITT document for this tender will be available in QatarEnergy LNG website under Suppliers tab >Current Open Tenders. The bids shall be submitted through the QatarEnergy LNG online platform (SMART by GEP).

Note: Effective from 1st July 2023, bids received from Local Companies (established under the Laws of State of Qatar with local Commercial Registration) who are not in possession of an ICV score in the ICV portal by Bid Closing Date (or commercial bid submission date if separately mentioned/notified) will not be accepted. Local Company that have been established for less than 2 years and insurance companies are exempted from this requirement. For further details please visit ICV Digital Portal:- https://icv.qa/US

Rise in Jazeera Ambassadors initiative in 2023

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

In 2023, the Jazeera Ambassadors initiative of the Jazeera Media Institute, hosted 108 courses and workshops across 20 Arab and non-Arab countries.

Raghdah Jamal, overseeing the initiative, shared some impressive statistics for the year.

She noted that the number of participants in these sessions reached 2,460 trainees, marking a substantial 74% increase from the previous year.

The range of new topics expanded to include 50 diverse training titles, such as the Journalism in Laws course, Investigative Journalism in Times of War course, Scriptwriting course, Investigative Journalism course, Youth Story Writing, and Video Production for Social Media Platforms, and Mobile Photography.

Delving into the specifics of the courses, Raghdah mentioned that the initiative delivered 73 training sessions both in-person and remotely, along with 35 training workshops for youth, showcasing a 38% growth from the previous year.

The initiative's geographical footprint broadened to encompass Asia, Africa, and Europe, spanning countries like Switzerland, Bosnia, Turkiye, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Malaysia, Lebanon, Palestine, Oman, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Jordan, Azerbaijan, Nepal, and Qatar, according to Raghdah.

It's worth noting that the primary beneficiaries of this initiative include university students, young journalists, journalism enthusiasts, union members, and employees of independent media institutions.

The Jazeera Ambassadors initiative aims to convey the Jazeera Media Network's message and values, sharing the experiences and skills of its professionals through complimentary training courses to empower media talents both within and outside the Arab world. The initiative operates on a volunteer basis, with a select group of Jazeera Media Network journalists contributing their expertise to train and nurture a generation of proficient journalists.

DFI-backed film *The Mother of All Lies* shortlisted for Oscars

JOELYN BALUYUT
THE PENINSULA

The Doha Film Institute (DFI)-funded film, *The Mother of All Lies*, has achieved a significant milestone by making it to the shortlist for the 96th Academy Awards in the Best International Feature Film category.

This Moroccan film, directed, written, produced, and edited by Asmae El Moudir, joins 14 other films that will advance to the next round of voting.

The International Feature Film category, featuring entries from 88 countries and regions, reflects the global diversity and richness of cinema. DFI, in a statement on X, formerly Twitter, extended its heartfelt congratulations to the entire crew of *The Mother of All Lies*, with the hashtag #SupportArabCinema.



Among the distinguished films on the list are *Amerikatsi* from Armenia, *The Monk and the Gun*" from Bhutan, *The Promised Land* from Denmark, *Fallen Leaves* from Finland, *The Taste of Things* from France, *The Teachers' Lounge* from Germany, *Godland* from Iceland, and *Io Capitano* from Italy.

Also featured are films from Japan (*Perfect Days*), Mexico (*Totem*), Spain (*Society of the Snow*), Tunisia (*Four Daughters*), Ukraine (*20 Days in Mariupol*), and the United Kingdom (*The Zone of Interest*).

The Mother of All Lies has already amassed an impressive record with nine wins and nine nominations.

This Arabic-language documentary film has garnered acclaim at various international film festivals, including prestigious awards such as Un Certain Regard - Best Director and Golden Eye at the Cannes Film Festival.

According to DFI, *The Mother of All Lies* follows the director as she goes to her parent's house in Casablanca to help them move. In the family home, as she sorts out her childhood effects, she discovers a picture of children sitting in a yard.

"At the back, a little girl is sitting on a bench smiling shyly at the camera. It's the only picture she has of her childhood, the only souvenir her mother can give her. But Asmae is convinced that she is not that little girl in the photo.

"In the hope of getting her parents to open up, she manipulates this small incident to bring back other memories she suspects. The photo becomes the starting point of investigation in which she questions every small lie her family has told her. Gradually the memories of the entire neighbourhood are explored."

DOLPHIN ENERGY دولفين للطاقة

Dolphin Energy Limited

Invitation to Tender

Tender Number	Description	Tender Bond	Deadline for Submission, 12 Noon (Qatar Time) on
ITT-QC-TSU-1762	Call-Off Agreement for Engineering & As-Builting Services	USD 125,000/-	7th February 2024
ITT-QC-OPU-1765	Call-Off Agreement for Plate Heat Exchangers Refurbishments & Repair	QAR 25,000	28th January 2024

Dolphin Energy Limited (Qatar) is inviting companies to participate in the above Tenders.

Only companies registered in the State of Qatar with proven experience, the required facilities and technical knowledge as well as a demonstrated track record in the supply of the services required should apply.

How to Tender	Expression of Interest (EOI) Form and Scope of Services/Works can be downloaded from the company's website **www.dolphinenergy.com/procurement** Interested companies must complete the EOI Form and submit to company's email address within two (2) working days from the publication date of this advertisement. Following receipt of completed EOI Form, interested companies will receive a Request for Proposal (RFP) through Dolphin Energy's SAP Ariba to tender.

أملاك AMLAK

Tender Reference	Description	Tender Fee	Tender Bond Value	Bid Closing Date
EN/6017/12/2023	Provision of New Design and Build for Flybars, Stage Elevators, Automation Systems and Re-Certification of Rigging Points at QNCC Theatre.	QAR 1000	QAR 75000	08 February 2024

QATAR PROPERTIES HOLDING CO. FOR OPERATION AND MANAGEMENT (AMLAK) Procurement Department is inviting companies to participate in the above listed public tender.
Tender Fee: Interested bidders shall first deposit the respective non-refunddable tender fee as mentioned above into the following AMLAK's bank account:

Account Name : Qatar Properties Holding Co. Operations & management
Account Number : 100230199
Swift Code No : QISBQAQA
IBAN : QA69QISB011583620020100230199
Bank Name : QATAR ISLAMIC BANK

Tender Document Issue Date: From **04th January 2024 until** 14th **January 2024** between 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM except Friday and Saturday. The tender fees should be paid to AMLAK account before 14th **January 2024**, **12:00 PM.** Tender documents will not be issued if fees are paid after the above deadline.

Interested bidders shall request the tender document by providing clear copies of the following documents to AMLAK Procurement's email procurement@amlak.com.qa via a single email.

1) Bidder's tender fee receipt clearly highlighting "AMLAK Tender reference number" and "bidder's name".

2) Authorization letter on company's letterhead detailing the Commercial Registration number, full name, telephone, and email id of the company's focal point for all tender communications.

AMLAK Tender Committee will verify all the above documents and issue the tender documents to all bidders who have fully complied with above requirements.

The commercial bid must be valid for 120 days from bid closing date.

AMLAK tendering qualifications, terms and conditions shall apply as stipulated in the tender document.

FALCONRY

15th Marmi Festival continues at Sealine until January 27

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Falconers participating in the Hadad Al Tahadi Championship qualifiers extended their control in the second group, which took place during the morning period as part of the activities of the Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival in its 15th edition (Marmi 2024).

Marmi will continue until January 27. It is organised by the Al Gannas Association in Sebkha Marmi in Sealine.

Five falconers were able to win Abdullah Fakhro's homing pigeon and climb to the podium while awaiting the final of the Hadad Challenge Championship, which will be held on January 26, and will compete for two Lexus cars.

The finalists for the second group are: Saeed Abdullah Al Bakhit, Kurdi Talib Al Marri, the Christian team, the Mesaimeer team, and the Al Ramz team.

The immediate qualifier in the Haddad Challenge Championship will receive QR100,000, in addition to the qualification shield.

During the evening period, the brilliance of the Al Dhahabi team shone with the third group competitions, and it was announced that it is coming strong in this year's festival edition, within the Hadad Al Tahadi tournament, and its name was recorded as the ninth qualifier so far.

The Marmi Festival aims to document and promote the heritage of falconry.

On the other hand, the Talaa Championship qualifiers for groups 6 to 10 were held, the secrets of which were revealed by the qualification of falconer Shaheen Salem Shaheen Al Dosari, bringing the number of qualifiers to three falconers.

Ali bin Sultan Al Humaidi, Chairman of the Challenge Committee, said that the performance of the second group was strong, and the falconers demonstrated their diligence in training their falcons for this annual merit.

On the other hand, Mohammed bin Mubarak Al Ali, Chairman of the Tala' Committee, announced that the Organising Committee of the Marmi Festival



Participants launch their falcons into the challenge.

2024 has agreed to delay the start of the daily Tala' Championship qualifiers so that the group competition begins when the vision is completely clear, and the groups are delayed until after the sun breaks, which corresponds between the hours of a quarter past eleven and half past eleven, depending on weather conditions.

It is worth noting that the Marmi Festival aims to document and promote the heritage of falconry, which has been registered on the Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity according to Unesco since November 2010, as the State of Qatar was one of the first countries to make efforts to enhance the preservation of this world heritage, not only in Qatar, rather, in many Arab and foreign countries, thus contributing to the preservation of this global heritage.

The Marmi Festival is one of the largest festivals specialised in the field of falcons and hunting in the region and the world.

SHORT COURSES

VCUarts Qatar announces community classes schedule for Spring 2024

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar (VCUarts Qatar), a Qatar Foundation (QF) partner university, has announced its lineup for the Community and Continuing Education (CCE) short courses and taster sessions for 2024.

The courses cater to various age groups, and members of the public who would like to learn more about art and design or take their existing creative skills to the next level can sign up.

The courses and taster sessions are led by professional artists and designers, most of whom are VCUarts Qatar graduates themselves. Some of the taster sessions will be held at Café #999, at the Fire Station.

This year, the courses on offer range from sound design and digital illustration to interior design and branding.

Explaining the strategy behind the selection of courses on offer, Rasha Alkasab, Program Manager for VCUarts Qatar's Community and Continuing Education, said, "In 2024, we are set to unveil a series of innovative programs that are inspired by the introduction of the BFA in Kinetic Imaging program at VCUarts Qatar. Our ongoing commitment remains steadfast – to curate engaging and educational initiatives that cater to diverse community interests, while ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the fundamentals of art and design."

Among the teaser courses the online "Introduction to Bullet Journaling" a free one-hour session will be on January 4, a free one-hour session. On January 7, "Refresh your Home" free online taster session will be held. On January 10 "Mindful Painting" at Cafe #999 will be held from 5-7 pm for a fee of QR350. Floral Design taster session will be held on January 28 at Cafe #999, from 5-7 pm for a fee of QR 550.



The short courses include Portfolio Development Class E; Stop Motion Storytelling; Introduction to Interior Design; SoundLab: Intro to Sound Design and Crafting; Advanced Digital Painting: Fantasy Art; Adobe Illustrator: Manipulate and Customize Typography; Creative Painting: Building a Visual Mythos; Introduction to Branding and Design Theory; and Introduction to Interior Design.

The short courses include Portfolio Development Class E; Stop Motion Storytelling; Introduction to Interior Design; SoundLab: Intro to Sound Design and Crafting; Advanced Digital Painting: Fantasy Art; Adobe Illustrator: Manipulate and Customize Typography; Creative Painting: Building a Visual Mythos; Introduction to Branding and Design Theory; and Introduction to Interior Design.

To register, or for further information including course descriptions, times and costs, interested candidates can visit the university's website.

Over the years, VCUarts Qatar has steadily expanded its Community and Continuing Education programmes, regularly offering members of the public and alumni opportunities to consolidate their learning or pick up new skills.



MES Indian School Abu Hamour Branch Principal Pramila Kannan handing over funds to a Qatar Charity representative.

MES Indian School raises funds for Palestine

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

MES Indian School, Abu Hamour Branch (MESIS) organised 'Food Festival' for charity as part of Qatar National Day 2023 celebrations in solidarity with Palestinians.

The amount received from the charity was QR11,151.

The amount was handed over to an official from Qatar Charity, Mohammed Rais, by Principal Pramila Kannan and students.

The Food Festival held on the occasion of Qatar National Day and raised an amount of QR11,151 for Palestine.

The aim of the Food Fest was to support and empathise with the people of Palestine. The whole programme strived to make a positive impact on the lives of those affected by the ongoing challenges in the region.

2nd Visit Qatar Kite Festival at Old Doha Port from January 25

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The second edition of Visit Qatar Kite Festival will be held from January 5 to the February 3 in Old Doha Port.

Visitors will enjoy a spectacular display of giant kites flown by 60 participants from around the world.

The festival is organised with the support of its strategic partner, Qatar Tourism and its venue partner, Old Doha Port.

Safe Flight Solutions, the organiser of the popular Qatar Balloon Festival series, and asfary.com, its online platform for booking local activities and adventures, are bringing back this exciting event that had its debut in March 2023 and was warmly welcomed by the Doha community.

This edition's venue is Old Doha Port that was selected for its rich historical context, modern amenities, and a stunning backdrop of the West Bay skyline, encapsulating the essence of Doha's heritage and its modern-day allure.

As the event is taking place in front of the cruise terminal, Visit Qatar Kite Festival will be an extra attraction to the international passengers of ocean liners during the busy cruise season.

Captain Hassan Al Mousawi, the CEO of Safe Flight Solutions, shared his vision of community events and their role in making Qatar a better place for all.

"The first edition of Visit Qatar Kite Festival was welcomed warmly by Doha residents, and we decided to make it a yearly tradition that contributes to our country's long-term goal to build a strong and prosperous society that promotes cultural exchange and community bonding."

The festival will take place over ten days and feature multiple activities for children and families, such as flying displays of huge colourful kites, inflatables games area by Celebration Palace, food court with international cuisines and free-of-charge kite building workshops led by Iqbal Husain, a seasoned kite-flying professional who recently participated in the 4th edition of Qatar Balloon Festival.

Children will learn how to use eco-friendly biodegradable materials to draw, build, and paint their own kites, and then launch them into the air and fly them like pros.

Registration for kite-building workshops will be soon open on vqkf.com and is free of charge, however seats are limited.



مؤسسة قطر
Qatar Foundation

INVITATION TO TENDER

Tender Reference	Description	Tender Fee (QAR)	Tender Bond Value (QAR)	Bid Closing Date
QNL-RFQ-13	Building and Management of Exhibition Booths for Doha Book Fair 2024	500.00	N/A	5th February 2024, 2:00 PM

Qatar Foundation (QF) Procurement & Program Management Directorate is inviting companies to participate in the above listed public tenders. To receive the tender documents, please follow the below steps:

1) **Supplier Registration** It is mandatory to be registered as a supplier with QF in order to participate in the above tender(s). Only QF registered suppliers will be allowed to pay the tender fees online. Therefore, please visit QF website at https://www.qf.org.qa/supplier-registration to complete the Supplier Registration process.

   Tender Fee: Interested bidders can Sign in by visiting this link https://suppliers.qf.org.qa/abstract and pay the respective non-refundable and non-transferrable tender fee online.

   All Tender Fees are to be paid using credit cards only.

   Tender Fee Payment Dates: Payment of Tender Fee online will be from **4th until 10th January 2024**.

2) All bidders, who are registered and have paid the required tender fees online to QF, will then be granted access to download the Tender Document.

3) Technical and commercial bids need to be submitted and attached online in QF Supplier Portal as per instructions provided in the "Supplier Portal" work instruction.

- The commercial bid must be valid for **180 days** from Bid Closing Date.
- The commercial bid must be accompanied by a bank guarantee (tender bond) issued by a local bank in Qatar and should be valid for **180 days** from the bid closing date (where applicable as per the Tender documents).
- The successful tenderer will be required to submit a performance bond as prescribed in each of the above tender documents.
- Qatar Foundation special qualifications, terms and conditions shall apply as stipulated in the tender document.

Note: All work instructions for Supplier registration and Supplier portal can be found in below link: https://www.qf.org.qa/supplier-registration

DEADLIEST MILITANT ATTACK

At least 103 killed in twin Iran blasts

AP/ SPUTNIK — DUBAI / MOSCOW

Turkish and Russian Presidents were among the leaders to express condolences over the attacks.

Two bombs exploded minutes apart yesterday at a commemoration for a prominent Iranian general slain in a US drone strike in 2020, officials in Iran said, killing at least 103 people.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for what appeared to be the deadliest militant attack to target Iran since its 1979 revolution. The blasts shook the city of Kerman, about 820km southeast of the capital, Tehran, and sent shrapnel hurtling into a screaming crowd fleeing the first explosion. At least 211 people were wounded.

The gathering marked the fourth anniversary of the killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Revolutionary Guard's elite Quds Force, in a US drone strike in Iraq. The explosions occurred near his grave site as long lines of people gathered for the event.

Iranian state television and officials described the attacks as bombings, without immediately giving clear details of what happened. Ahmad Vahidi, the interior minister, told state television that the first bomb detonated around 3pm, with the other going off some 20 minutes later. He said the second blast killed and wounded the most people.

Images and video shared on social media appeared to correspond with officials' accounts, which said the first blast happened about 700 meters from Soleimani's grave in the Kerman Martyrs Cemetery near a parking lot. The crowd then rushed west along Shohada, or Martyrs' Street, where the second blast struck about 1km from the grave.

A delayed second explosion is often used by militants to inflict more casualties by targeting emergency personnel responding to an attack.

Iranian state TV and state-run IRNA news agency quoted emergency officials for the casualty figures, which rose rapidly in the hours after the explosions. Authorities declared today (Thursday) would be a national day of mourning.



People inspect damaged vehicles near the site where two explosions in quick succession struck a crowd, near the Saheb Al Zaman Mosque in Kerman, Iran, yesterday. (AFP)

Israel has conducted targeted assassinations in Iran, while extremist groups including the Islamic State group have conducted large-scale attacks in the past that killed civilians, though not in relatively peaceful Kerman.

Mohammed Abdel Salam, a Houthi spokesman, sought to link the bombings to Iran's "support for the resistance forces in Palestine and Lebanon." "All attempts by America and Israel to destabilise Iran's security will fail," Abdel Salam wrote online, though he did not specifically blame anyone for the attack.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan offered his condolences over the "heinous terrorist attacks." Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi had been expected to visit Turkiye today.

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his condolences to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi in connection with the tragic consequences of the terrorist attack, adding that the killing of civilians who visited a cemetery is "shocking in its cruelty and cynicism" and that Moscow condemns terrorism in all forms.

Houthis say they attacked ship heading to Israel

SPUTNIK — CAIRO

Yemen's Ansar Allah rebel movement, also known as the Houthis, said yesterday that it had attacked a Maltese-flagged container ship, which was heading to Israel.

"The naval forces of the Yemeni Armed Forces [Houthis] have carried out an operation, during which they attacked the CMA CGM TAGE ship, which was heading to the ports of occupied Palestine," the movement's spokesman, Yahya Saria, said.

The strike was carried out after the ship's crew refused to respond to the Houthies' warning, the spokesman added.

According to data published by the MarineTraffic ship tracker, the CMA CGM TAGE container was constructed in 2015 and flies the flag of Malta.

Earlier in the day, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) said that several merchant ships in the southern Red Sea had been attacked by ballistic missiles launched by the Houthis, adding that no damage had been reported.

Last week, the USS Gravely shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles in the Red Sea in response to a Houthi attack on the Singapore-flagged ship Hangzhou of Danish shipping company Maersk, CENTCOM stated. Later that week, the commercial vessel Hangzhou was again attacked by the Houthis, CENTCOM said, adding that US helicopters had sunk the attacking vessels.

Israel killed Aruri in Beirut with guided missiles: Lebanese official

AFP — BEIRUT

A high-level Lebanese security official said yesterday that Israel fired guided missiles from a warplane to killed Hamas number two Saleh Al Aruri in a Beirut suburb.

Lebanese authorities and Hamas accused Israel of killing Aruri in Beirut's southern suburbs on Tuesday, with Lebanese state media saying he died with six others in a drone strike. "Aruri was killed in strikes using guided missiles which were launched by an Israeli warplane," the official said, requesting anonymity because of security concerns.

"A drone could not have carried out such a precise strike," said the official with knowledge of the official Lebanese investigation into Aruri's killing.

According to the official, the guided missiles used in the attack weigh around 100 kilos (220 pounds), making them too heavy to have been fired by a drone. Six missiles were used in Tuesday's attack, four of which exploded, the official said. Two of the missiles that detonated pierced through two floors and exploded in a room where Aruri was holding a meeting with other Hamas officials, the source added.

A preliminary investigation by the Lebanese army indicates that remnants of those missile match those used by the Israeli army during cross-border exchanges with Hezbollah and other groups in southern Lebanon, the source said.

Aruri was killed in the southern suburbs of Beirut, a Hezbollah stronghold, and it was the first strike to reach the Lebanese capital since October 7. In a statement on Tuesday, Hezbollah warned that Aruri's killing "will not go unanswered or unpunished".

The near-daily cross-border fire between Hezbollah and Israel has left more than 165 people dead in Lebanon, most of them Hezbollah members but also more than 20 civilians including three journalists, according to an AFP tally.

On the Israeli side, at least four civilians and nine soldiers have been killed, according to figures from the military.

AI solutions to facilitate visitors to Grand Mosque

QNA -MAKKAH: The General Authority for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia has implemented various artificial intelligence technologies and digital technology methods in the Grand Mosque, including a robotic guide, to respond to the needs of pilgrims to the Grand Mosque. These can be in the form of handing brochures and publications that will help them to readily perform their rituals.

The robot can move around the Grand Mosque, with the ability to browse and share content via phone.

Fifty-two electronic screens were also provided inside and outside the Mosque.

Over 22,300 dead in Israel's Gaza bombardment

AGENCIES — GAZA

The health ministry in Gaza said yesterday at least 22,313 people have been killed in nearly three months of Israeli bombardment.

The toll includes 128 people killed over the past 24 hours, a ministry statement said, while the fighting since October 7 has also wounded 57,296. Israel's campaign has driven some 85% of Gaza's population from their homes, forcing hundreds of thousands of people into overcrowded shelters or teeming tent camps in Israeli-designated safe areas that the military has nevertheless bombed. A quarter of Gaza's population face starvation, according to the United Nations, as Israeli restrictions and heavy fighting hinder aid delivery.

World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus yesterday condemned "unconscionable" Israeli strikes on Al Amal Hospital in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip. On Tuesday, the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) said five people were killed and three others were injured in Israeli strikes on the organisation's headquarters and the surrounding area of Al Amal Hospital. "I deplore today's strikes on the PRCS-run Al-Amal hospital in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis, which severely damaged the Palestine Red Crescent Society training centre located within the hospital complex ... Today's bombardments are unconscionable," Ghebreyesus said on X.



A view of buildings destroyed by Israeli bombardment in the central Gaza Strip yesterday. (AFP)

Former Sierra Leone President charged with treason

AP — FREETOWN

Former President Ernest Bai Koroma has been charged with treason for his alleged involvement in a failed coup attempt in November, Sierra Leone's government said yesterday.

Koroma has also been charged with misprision of treason, which is the crime of concealing knowledge of treasonable acts, according to a statement from the ministry of information and civic education. On Nov. 26, dozens of gunmen launched an attack in the West African nation's capital of Freetown during which they broke into Sierra Leone's key armory and into a prison where the majority of the more than 2,000 inmates were freed.

At least 18 members of the security forces were killed during the clashes. More than 50 suspects, including military officers, have been arrested so far.

The charges against Koroma were announced a day after a dozen people were charged with similar offenses in connection with the failed coup. Although he has officially retired from politics, Koroma remains an influential figure within his political party and often hosts prominent politicians in his hometown of Makeni.



Arab League rejects any deal that breaches Somalia's sovereignty

QNA — CAIRO

Arab League yesterday expressed its rejection and condemnation of any memorandums of understanding that breach or violate the sovereignty of Somalia.

Arab League categorically rejects any attempt to take advantage of the internal fragile situation in Somalia or the faltering Somali negotiations between the people regarding the relationship of the country's regions with the federal government to carve up territories in contravention of the rules-based international order in a way that threatens the entire integrity of the Somali territories, spokesman for the Secretary-General of the Arab League, Jamal Rushdi said in a statement.

Rushdi stressed Arab League's full solidarity with the decision taken by the Somali Cabinet which considered the memorandum of understanding for partnership and cooperation signed on January 1, 2024, between Ethiopia and Somaliland as void, abrogated and unacceptable and in clear violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia, as well as the international law.

Sudan's RSF chief in Kenya amid truce efforts

AFP — NAIROBI

The leader of Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) held talks in Kenya yesterday amid regional diplomatic efforts to try to forge a ceasefire in the war at home.

Kenya is the latest leg of Mohamed Hamdan Daglo's first trip abroad since the fierce fighting erupted between the RSF and the Sudanese army in mid-April.

President William Ruto posted pictures on X of him meeting with Daglo, saying Kenya appreciated the commitment of the RSF and Daglo "in ending the conflict in Sudan through dialogue".

"The ongoing Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) talks should bring about a political settlement that would effect a lasting peace in the country," he added.

IGAD, an eight-nation East African bloc headquartered in Djibouti, is leading diplomatic efforts to broker a meeting between Daglo and his rival, Sudanese army chief Abdel Fattah Al Burhan.

The warring generals have not met face-to-face since the outbreak of the conflict that has killed more than 12,000 people by some conservative estimates, and forced millions to flee.

Daglo said his discussions with Ruto focused on latest developments in Sudan, "examining the root causes of the war and exploring solutions to alleviate the crisis and the suffering of our people".

"I presented our strategy to cease hostilities and start negotiations for a comprehensive resolution," he said on X, without elaborating. A scheduled press conference by Daglo in Nairobi did not take place.

The RSF leader has previously visited Djibouti, Ethiopia and Uganda on his regional tour and said he was committed to ending the conflict. "Next week, as chair of IGAD, Djibouti will also prepare the ground for Sudanese dialogue and will host a critical meeting," Djibouti Foreign Minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf said on X on Saturday when Daglo visited. Last Wednesday, Djibouti's foreign ministry said a meeting between the rivals planned for December 28 had been "postponed to early January for technical reasons".

400 INJURED

Japan quake toll rises to 73 as weather hampers rescue

AFP — ANAMIZU

Japanese rescuers struggled with heavy rain, blocked roads and aftershocks yesterday following a powerful earthquake that killed at least 73 people and left tens of thousands without power or running water.

Throughout the Ishikawa prefecture on the main island of Honshu sirens blared as emergency vehicles tried to navigate roads blocked by rocks and fallen trees.

The Noto Peninsula was worst hit by the 7.5-magnitude quake on January 1, with port towns such as Wajima and Suzu resembling war zones with streets of mud, flattened houses and sunken boats.

"I can never go back there. It's unlivable now," 75-year-old Yoko Demura said from a shelter in the city of Nanao where she went after her home was reduced to rubble.

"It makes me sad and I will miss it," she told AFP.

There were "almost no houses standing" in one town in the Suzu area, said municipal mayor Masuhiro Izumiya.

More than 33,400 people were in shelters, and at least 200 buildings had collapsed. Around 30,000 households were still without power in Ishikawa prefecture.

"About 90 percent of the houses (in that town) are completely or almost completely destroyed... the situation is really catastrophic," he said, according to broadcaster TBS.

The regional government confirmed 73 people are dead and nearly 400 injured, but the toll is expected to rise.

More than 33,400 people were in shelters, and at least 200 buildings had collapsed.

Around 30,000 households were still without power in Ishikawa prefecture, the local utility said, and over 110,000 households left without running water.

"More than 40 hours have passed since the disaster. We have received a lot of information about people in need of rescue and there are people waiting for help," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said after an emergency task force meeting.

The number of military personnel sent to the area was doubled, with more rescue dogs also deployed, he added.

Plenty of food and emergency supplies have arrived in the region, but delivery to communities was being hampered by road conditions, regional authorities said.

"Our lifelines have been cut off," said Yuko Okuda, 30, from an evacuation centre in the town of Anamizu, down the coast from Suzu.

"Electricity, water and gas -- everything. And as aftershocks keep happening, our house could collapse at any time," she told AFP.

The powerful quake, measured at 7.6 by the Japanese weather office, was one of more than 400 to shake the region through yesterday morning.

The main jolt triggered waves at least 1.2m high in Wajima, and a series of smaller tsunamis were reported elsewhere.



Vehicles sit piled up after being washed up by a tsunami in the city of Suzu, Ishikawa prefecture yesterday, after a major 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck the Noto region on New Year's Day. (AFP)

Japan experiences hundreds of earthquakes every year and most cause no damage, with strict building codes in place for more than four decades.

Earthquakes have hit the Noto region with intensifying strength and frequency over the past five years.

The high number of aftershocks is a result of the "complex" fault systems below the peninsula, Yoshihiro Ito from Kyoto University's Disaster Prevention Research Institute told AFP.

US, Philippines hold fresh sea drills amid China tensions

BLOOMBERG — MANILA

The Philippine and US militaries yesterday began their second maritime drills in the South China Sea in less than two months amid continuing tensions with China in the disputed waters.

"The two-day bilateral event will conduct passing exercises, communication checks, cross-deck exercises, joint patrols, Officer of the Watch maneuvers, and fixed-wing flight operations," the Armed Forces of the Philippines said in a statement.

The activity follows the resumption of joint patrols by the defense allies in late November after they were halted during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. Tensions between China and the Philippines have flared up in recent months, with their vessels facing off in contested wasters.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has bolstered defense ties with Washington, and other countries like Japan and Australia, as he pushed back against China's expansive claims over the waterway. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi last month warned that relations between Beijing and Manila were facing "serious difficulties" amid increased tensions in the South China Sea.

The Philippines deployed four Navy vessels, a multi-role helicopter and an anti-submarine warfare capable helicopter, while the US dispatched an aircraft carrier, a cruiser, two destroyers, and multiple combat aircraft during the drills aimed at enhancing their interoperability, according to the statement.

"Our alliance is stronger than ever, sending a message to the world. We are advancing a rules-based international order and a free and open Indo-Pacific region in the face of regional challenges," Philippine military chief General Romeo Brawner Jr. said.

"The second maritime cooperative activity marks a significant leap in our alliance and interoperability with the United States," he added.

US highlights criticism of Nobel peace laureate's conviction

AFP — WASHINGTON

The United States drew attention Tuesday to international condemnation of Nobel peace laureate Muhammad Yunus's conviction in Bangladesh in what his supporters called a politically motivated prosecution.

But the US stopped short of itself criticising Monday's ruling by a court that found Yunus, 83, guilty of violating labor laws.

Yunus is credited with lifting millions out of poverty with his pioneering microfinance bank but has earned the enmity of longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has accused him of "sucking blood" from the poor.

The US State Department noted Yunus's Nobel prize and other honours and said he made a significant contribution to fighting world poverty.

"We have been following the case against him closely and note the widespread international criticism of the verdict," a department spokesperson said on background.

"We have encouraged the Bangladeshi government to ensure a fair and transparent legal process, and will continue to follow any further developments closely," the spokesperson added.

Yunus and three colleagues from Grameen Telecom, one of the firms he founded, were accused of violating labour laws when they failed to create a workers' welfare fund in the company.

The four have denied the charges and were granted bail pending appeals.

Irene Khan, a former Amnesty International chief now working as a UN special rapporteur who was present at Monday's court session, told AFP the conviction was "a travesty of justice."

"A social activist and Nobel laureate who brought honour and pride to the country is being persecuted on frivolous grounds," she said.

Taiwan 'will resist' China interference in election: Lai

AFP — TAIPEI

The Taiwanese people "will resist" China's attempts to influence the island's January 13 election, frontrunner presidential candidate Lai Ching-te told AFP yesterday as he hit the campaign trial 10 days before the pivotal poll.

Beijing claims the self-ruled island as part of its territory, and rejects the stance of Lai's Democratic Progressive Party which maintains that Taiwan is "already independent".

Dubbed a "troublemaker" and a "separatist" by Beijing, Lai is up against two other candidates who have pledged closer relations with China if elected.

Speaking to AFP after a morning of greeting supporters at a busy Taipei intersection, he said that "the democratic camp is very concerned" about alleged election interference from China.

"This is Asia's first election this year, and China's interference in Taiwan's election is very, very serious," said the 64-year-old, who is also Taiwan's vice president.

But Lai has "confidence in the people because Taiwan has gone from the dark age of authoritarianism to where it is today." "Everyone cherishes Taiwan's democracy. I have confidence that the people will resist China's use of various forces to try to influence this election," he said.



Taiwan presidential candidate Lai Ching-te (centre), from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party, arrives at the Luzhou Lee Family Historic Estate as part of an elections campaign in New Taipei City, yesterday. (AFP)

Taiwan's January 13 election is being closely watched by policymakers from Beijing to Washington, as its outcome could reshape future relations with an increasingly bellicose China.

The other two candidates are Hou Yu-ih of Beijing-friendly Kuomintang (KMT), Taiwan's oldest political party, and Ko Wen-je of the emerging Taiwan People's Party -- which has performed above expectations.

Hou, a popular mayor of New Taipei City, had slammed Lai in a presidential debate last week on his pro-independence remarks, blaming him for the "great danger across the Taiwan Strait".

Chinese balloons have also for the first time been detected around Taiwan since December, with four moving directly above the island -- a form of "psychological warfare" to influence for more "pro-Beijing votes", one military expert said.

IN BRIEF

Dense fog in Pakistan's capital affects routine life

XINHUA—ISLAMABAD: A thick blanket of fog starting from Tuesday night in Pakistan's federal capital Islamabad and its twin city Rawalpindi affected the daily life of the residents.

Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD) in its latest report yesterday informed that due to a stable atmosphere, prevailing dense foggy conditions would continue over Islamabad and other parts of the South Asian country.

It added that with foggy conditions day temperatures are likely to drop three to five degrees centigrade in coming days.

The PMD told media that the visibility in the twin cities was reduced from 100 to 50 meters starting from night-time till the early morning.

The dense fog also resulted in road accidents, disrupted the flight and railway operations along with the occasional closure of the motorways connecting the twin cities.

Imran Khan indicted for insulting election officials

AP—ISLAMABAD: A Pakistani court yesterday indicted imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan in a contempt case for allegedly insulting election officials, his defense lawyer said. The indictment is another blow for Khan, who is serving time on a corruption conviction and has multiple other legal cases hanging over him.

It also comes days after election officials rejected Khan's nomination papers, blocking his attempt to contest parliamentary polls on February 8.

Khan is accused of calling the head of the Election Commission, Sikandar Sultan Rajaa, and other officials "personal servants" of former Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

Sharif replaced Khan in April 2022 after he was ousted from power in a no-confidence vote in Parliament by his political opponents. Since then, government agencies have pursued him in the courts.

The 71-year-old former cricketer is the country's most popular opposition figure.

Khan's lawyer, Naeem Haider Panjutha, said Khan was indicted at Adiala Prison in Rawalpindi.

He said during the court hearing, Khan pleaded not guilty when the charges were read to him.

Top India court clears Adani from more probes

BLOOMBERG — MUMBAI

India's Supreme Court ordered the country's markets regulator to conclude its investigation into the Adani Group within three months and said no more probes were needed, in a reprieve for the billionaire who cheered the verdict as the "truth" prevailing.

The three-judge bench yesterday also urged the federal government to implement an expert panel's recommendations to bolster the regulatory framework. But it didn't go further, drawing a line, at least domestically, under the year-long saga triggered by a US short-seller which alleged widespread corporate malfeasance by Gautam Adani's conglomerate.

The verdict "is in favour of Adani Group prima facie," said Kranthi Bathini, equity strategist at WealthMills Securities in Mumbai. While clarity is needed on pending probes from Securities and Exchange Board of India, or Sebi, he said the court had reiterated that scathing external reports against the Adani Group were "not triggers for an external investigation."

The ruling from India's apex court comes after nearly a year of intense scrutiny for the ports-to-power conglomerate, which had repeatedly denied Hindenburg Research's allegations of stock price manipulation and related party transactions among other charges in a bombshell report.

India's top court in March ordered Sebi to probe Hindenburg's allegations and submit the findings within two months. It also set up a six-member expert panel to assess if there were any regulatory lapses.

Japan probes plane inferno after 'miracle' escape

AFP — TOKYO

Japanese investigators yesterday probed a collision at Tokyo's Haneda Airport of a coast guard plane and a passenger jet that killed five people, with almost 400 others narrowly escaping a raging inferno.

All but one of the six people on the smaller aircraft were killed, but all 379 Japan Airlines passengers and crew escaped down emergency slides minutes before the Airbus was engulfed in flames late Tuesday.

The blackened husk of the airliner, still sitting on the tarmac yesterday, bore witness to just how dangerous their escape had been. Several hundred metres (yards) away lay the remains of the coast guard's DHC-8 aircraft.

The captain of the coast guard plane -- which had been bound for the New Year's Day earthquake zone in central Japan -- was its lone survivor but suffered serious injuries.

Footage on Tuesday showed a ball of fire erupting from underneath the airliner shortly after it landed and came to a halt on its nose when its front landing gear failed.

As people slid to safety, dozens of fire engines with blue and red flashing lights sprayed the flames, but the entire fuselage was soon ablaze.

It took eight hours to finally extinguish the fire.

"It was getting hot inside the plane, and I thought, to be honest, I would not survive," one passenger told broadcaster NHK.

"I thought we landed normally. But then I realised I was smelling smoke," a woman with a small child told NHK.

"I needed to protect my daughter. That was the only thing in my mind," she added.

Another passenger described surviving the crash as a "miracle".

"I bounced off my seat from the impact when we landed," the 28-year-old man told Nikkei Asia.

"We made it just in the nick of time. It's a miracle we survived."

Takuya Fujiwara from the Japan Transport Safety Board told reporters that the flight recorder and the voice recorder from the coast guard plane had been found, but those of the passenger jet were still being sought.

"We are surveying the situation. Various parts are scattered on the runway," Fujiwara said, adding that the authority planned to interview several people involved.

Asked at a briefing whether the Japan Airlines flight had landing permission, officials at the major carrier said: "Our understanding is that it was given."

But JAL and the land ministry declined to comment directly on exchanges between flight controllers and the two planes, citing the ongoing investigation.

LONGEST STRIKE

Thousands of doctors in Britain walk off job

AFP — LONDON

Hospital doctors in England yesterday began their longest consecutive strike in the seven-decade history of Britain's National Service (NHS).

Junior doctors — those below consultant level — started a six-day walkout at 0700 GMT, in a major escalation of their long-running pay dispute with the UK government.

The industrial action, which ends next Tuesday, comes at one of the busiest times of the year for the state-funded NHS, when it faces increased pressure from winter respiratory illnesses.

It also quickly follows a three-day strike held by doctors just before Christmas, part of a wider series of stoppages across several sectors sparked by high inflation and a cost-of-living crisis.

Striking doctors say their wages have gone down by a quarter in real terms under the current government, which has been in power since 2010.

On a picket line outside St Thomas' Hospital, across the River Thames from the UK parliament in London, medics held up signs calling for better funding for the overstretched health service.

Junior doctors — those below consultant level — started a six-day walkout at 0700 GMT, in a major escalation of their long-running pay dispute with the UK government.

Others read "£15/hour is not a fair wage for a junior doctor" and "Reduced pay keeps the doctor away", with a map of Australia, which has previously advertised for UK-based staff to move.

"A lot of doctors are moving to Australia, not just because of the pay but also the work-life balance is better," said one doctor, Georgia Blackwell, 28.

"Other countries understand that doctors aren't being paid adequately and they're offering much better packages," added Shivani Ganesh, a 23-year-old medical student.

UK Health Secretary Victoria Atkins warned that the latest strikes will have a "serious impact" on patients across the country.

More than 1.2 million appointments have been rescheduled since the start of the strikes, including more than 88,000 last month, she added.

"I urge the BMA Junior Doctors Committee to call off their strikes and come back to the negotiating table so we can find a fair and reasonable solution to end the strikes once and for all," Atkins said.

Junior doctors have gone on strike seven times since March.

The British Medical Association (BMA) announced the walkout in December after a breakdown in talks with the government.

The union said junior doctors have been offered a 3.0-percent rise on top of the average 8.8-percent increase they were given earlier this year. It rejected the offer because the cash would be split unevenly across different doctor grades and would "still amount to pay cuts for many doctors" after inflation.

The co-chair of the BMA Junior Doctors Committee, Robert Laurenson, accused the government of failing to broker new talks.

"Strike action is the only thing this government will sit down and listen to," he told AFP, warning of more strikes to come without a "credible" pay offer.

The NHS itself said the latest stoppage, which could see up to half of the medical workforce on picket lines, would have "a significant impact on almost all routine care".



People hold British Medical Association branded placards calling for better pay as they stand on a picket line outside St Thomas' Hospital in central London, yesterday (AFP)

"This January could be one of the most difficult starts to the year the NHS has ever faced," said its national medical director, Stephen Powis.

The NHS typically sees a rise in the number of people in hospital in the two weeks after Christmas, due to people delaying seeking treatment in order to spend the festive season with loved ones.

The service is already facing huge backlogs in waiting times for appointments and surgery, blamed on treatment postponement during Covid but also years of under-funding.

Julian Hartley, the chief executive of NHS Providers which represents hospital groups in England, said the effect of the strikes on patients would be "significant".

"The vast majority of planned operations, appointments, and so on, will have to be stood down," he told BBC television.

Consultants will cover for junior doctors and emergency and urgent care such as maternity and intensive care services will be operating.

But there are fears that Covid, flu and other seasonal conditions could also hit staffing.

"We're deeply concerned about the kind of impact over the coming days," said Hartley.

BATTLEGROUND

Russia and Ukraine exchange hundreds of prisoners

AP — KIEV

Russia and Ukraine yesterday exchanged hundreds of prisoners of war in the biggest single release of captives since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Ukrainian authorities said that 230 Ukrainian prisoners of war returned home in the first exchange in almost five months. Russia's Defence Ministry said that 248 Russian servicemen have been freed under the deal sponsored by the United Arab Emirates.

There was no immediate acknowledgment from the UAE, which has maintained close business ties to Moscow throughout Russia's war on Ukraine. Ukraine's Human Rights Ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, said it was the 49th prisoner exchange during the war.

Some of the Ukrainians had been held since 2022. Among them were some of those who fought in milestone battles for Ukraine's Snake Island and the Ukrainian city of Mariupol.

Russian officials offered no other details of the exchange.

Also yesterday, Russia said it shot down 12 missiles fired at one of its southern regions bordering Ukraine, as Kiev's forces seek to embarrass the Kremlin and puncture President Vladimir Putin's argument that life is going on as normal despite the fighting.

The situation in the border city of Belgorod, which came under two rounds of shelling yesterday morning, "remains tense," said regional Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov, writing on Telegram.

"Air defence systems worked," he said, promising more details about possible damage after inspecting the area later in the day, part of a New Year's holiday week in Russia.Ukraine fired two Tochka-U missiles and seven rockets at the region late Tuesday, followed by six Tochka-U missiles and six Vilkha rockets yesterday, the Russian Defence Ministry said.

The Soviet-built Tochka-U missile system has a range of up to 120km and a warhead that can carry cluster munitions. Ukraine has received some cluster munitions from the United States but the Tochka-U and Vilkha can use their own cluster munitions.

The Russian side of the frontier has come under increasingly frequent attack in recent days. Throughout the war, border villages have sporadically been targeted by Ukrainian artillery fire, rockets, mortar shells and drones launched from thick forests where they are hard to detect.

Lately, as Russia fired missiles and drones at Ukrainian cities, Kiev's troops have aimed at Belgorod's regional capital, which is about 100km north of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city.

Belgorod, with a population of about 340,000, is the biggest Russian city near the border. It can be reached by relatively simple and movable weapons such as multiple rocket launchers.

NATO to buy 1,000 Patriot missiles in face of Russia threat

AFP — BRUSSELS

NATO members in Europe have signed a contract for up to 1,000 Patriot missiles to bolster air defences in the face of the threat from Russia, the alliance said yesterday.

The announcement of the contract, estimated to be worth $5.5bn, comes as Moscow has unleashed repeated barrages of deadly missile and drone strikes against Ukraine in recent days.

NATO's procurement agency said the deal agreed by an initial group of countries including Germany, the Netherlands, Romania and Spain would see Patriot missile production stepped up in Europe.

Alliance chief Jens Stoltenberg welcomed the "timely announcement to invest in up to 1,000 new Patriot air defence missiles to bolster the alliance's security".

"Russian missile and drone attacks on Ukrainian civilians, cities and towns show how important modern air defences are. Scaling-up ammunition production is key for Ukraine's security and for ours," Stoltenberg said in a statement.

NATO allies including the United States and Germany have sent US-made Patriot systems to Ukraine where they have been used to shoot down attacks by Russia's hypersonic missiles.

But the deliveries of the missiles to Kyiv have sapped Western stocks and forced Washington to turn to allies such as Japan to help replenish inventories.

The NATO Support and Procurement Agency said the new contract would see a missile production facility set up in Germany by a joint venture between Germany's MBDA and Raytheon, part of the US group RTX.

IN BRIEF

EU targets diamond miner as part of Russia war sanctions

AP—BRUSSELS: THE European Union imposed sanctions on the world's biggest diamond mining company and its chief executive officer yesterday as part of what it called its "unwavering commitment" to Ukraine in the war against Russia.

The move targeted Alrosa, which accounts for about 90% of Russia's diamond production, and CEO Pavel Marinychev. The EU headquarters said the company "constitutes an important part of an economic sector that is providing substantial revenue" to Moscow.

It means Alrosa's assets in Europe will be frozen and EU citizens and companies will be barred from making funds available to the company. Marinychev, who was appointed CEO last May for three years, also faces a travel ban in Europe.

The EU had already banned the import, purchase or transfer of Russian non-industrial natural and synthetic diamonds and diamond jewellery from January 1. The measure applies to diamonds originating in Russia, exported from Russia, transiting through Russia and Russian diamonds processed elsewhere.

UK electricity from fossil fuels hits 1957 low: Study

AFP—LONDON: BRITAIN'S electricity production from polluting fossil fuels sank in 2023 to its lowest level in almost 70 years as the nation embraces renewables, a study showed yesterday.

Coal, gas and oil generated 104 terawatt hours of electricity, a total last seen in 1957, according to analysis from specialist website Carbon Brief, which added that it was 22 percent lower than 2022.

Electricity from fossil fuels has now fallen by two thirds since hitting a peak in 2008, caused by both a renewables boom and weaker electricity demand, it added.

Fossil fuels accounted for around one third of total UK electricity supplies last year, attaining the lowest ever share.

Low-carbon energy sources comprised 56 percent, with renewables on 43 percent and nuclear on 13.

Britain is targeting carbon neutrality by 2050 and aims to derive 95 percent of its electricity from low-carbon sources by 2030, with plans to fully decarbonise the sector by 2035.

However, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak last year softened policies aimed at the UK achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Extreme cold grips Nordic countries as rains cause flooding in western Europe

AP — COPENHAGEN

Europe experienced stark weather contrasts yesterday, with extreme cold and snowstorms disrupting transportation and closing schools in Scandinavia while strong winds and heavy rain in western Europe caused flooding and at least one death.

Temperatures fell below minus 40 degrees Celsius (minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit) in the Nordic region for a second day in a row yesterday. In Kvikkjokk-Årrenjarka in Swedish Lapland, the mercury dropped to minus 43.6 C (minus 46.5 F), the lowest January temperature recorded in Sweden in 25 years, Sweden's TT news agency reported.

Extremely cold temperatures, snow and gale-force winds disrupted transportation throughout the Nordic region, with several bridges closed and some train and ferry services suspended. Several schools in Scandinavia were closed.

Police across most of Denmark urged motorists to avoid unnecessary trips as wind and snow battered the northern and western parts of the country. Mild but wet and windy conditions prevailed further south, where a storm wreaked havoc in parts of western Europe.

In Britain, a driver died after a tree fell on his car in western England. Gloucestershire Police said the man died in the incident near the town of Kemble on Tuesday afternoon.


Tractors are seen clearing snow off a road in Viborg, central Jutland, Denmark, yesterday. (AFP)

The storm, which has been named Henk by the official weather services of Britain, Ireland and the Netherlands, has caused power cuts, transport troubles, property damage and disruption across the UK.

More than 300 flood warnings were in place across England and Wales yesterday, while 10,000 homes remained without power. A severe flood alert, meaning a danger to life, was announced for the River Nene in Northampton in central England. Several residents were evacuated from houseboats and caravans at the nearby Billing Aquadrome.

The UK's rail network was hit by flooding and power cuts, with many operators reporting ongoing issues for the yesterday morning commute into work.

The strongest gales in the U.K. were recorded on the Isle of Wight, just off the coast in southern England, where wind speeds reached 94 miles per hour (151 kilometers per hour).

In the Netherlands, police near the city of Eindhoven said strong winds may have played a role in the death of a 75-year-old man who fell off his bicycle late Tuesday as high winds lashed much of the country.

Parts of Germany were also grappling with flooding, which could be aggravated by more rain falling in the worst-affected northwestern state of Lower Saxony.

'Make Britain great': Right-wing upstarts threaten UK Tories

AFP — LONDON

A fringe right-wing political party founded by the eurosceptic populist Nigel Farage is once again posing a headache for Britain's ruling Conservatives before this year's general election.

Reform UK — formerly called the Brexit Party and whose current leader admires former US president Donald Trump — rails against immigration, net zero energy policies and "nanny state" government regulations. With slogans including "Let's make Britain great" and "Let's save Britain", Reform is trying to tap into disgruntlement among Britons struggling from the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades.

It is currently polling at around 10 percent in national surveys before a vote that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has said will be held some time this year.

Conservative lawmakers fear the group will help prevent an embattled Sunak from securing a fifth consecutive term for his party by splitting the right-wing vote in key constituencies.

With the main centre-left opposition Labour party currently enjoying double-digit leads over the Tories in most opinion polls, political scientists say those concerns are justified.

Reform's leader Richard Tice added to them yesterday by ruling out any pacts with the Conservatives, despite alleging that some Tories had pleaded with him not to stand candidates in certain areas. "The truth is the Tories are terrified," Tice told reporters, adding that he was "absolutely categoric" there would be no electoral deals with Conservatives "under any circumstances".

Tice, 59, insisted that Reform would put up candidates in every seat in Scotland, England and Wales, unlike at the last election in 2019 when the Brexit Party stood down in some areas to help Boris Johnson, who won a landslide.

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EDITORIAL

Family as pillar of society

QATARI society values the strength and cohesion of family as a basic pillar and foundation of society, and the state has been prioritising family welfare and wellbeing according to the Constitution of Qatar which states: The family is the basis of the society. A Qatari family is founded on religion, ethics, and patriotism. The law shall regulate adequate means to protect the family, support its structure, strengthen its ties, and protect maternity, childhood, and old age.

Qatar created the Ministry of Social Development and Family (MoSDF) in 2021, which has been striving to strengthen the mechanism for the welfare of families and provide social security services to eligible groups such as people with disabilities. The Shura Council recently hosted Minister of Social Development and Family H E Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser Al Misnad, who briefed the council about the ministry's programmes, achievements and future strategies.

The Minister highlighted programmes such as the "First Year of Marriage", a national programme for people who are about to get married as well as the newly-weds. The programme, which is implemented in partnership with Wifaq Family Consulting Center and the Social and Sport Contribution Fund seeks to support emerging families, strengthen their stability, provide essential family services to have a successful marriage, in addition to reducing divorce rates to achieve the MoSDF's objectives represented in the motto of "Qatar is strong with the cohesion of its families".

MoSDF has also launched "Watad" service which aims to offer family and educational consultations to help couples and families address challenges, while protecting privacy and confidentiality. The Minister stressed that MoSDF dedicates its efforts to strengthening the building of a cohesive family system filled with compassion and solidarity among family members to ensure the integrity of families.

Al Misnad also highlighted the government's efforts for the welfare of people with disabilities, including rehabilitating, training and empowering them to become effective members of community. MoSDF has also recently signed a cooperation document with Qatar Manpower Solutions Company (Jusour) to employ persons with disabilities.

The session also discussed the ministry's efforts devoted to supporting the social and cultural heritage of the Qatari community through adopting an array of initiatives such as Qatari Family Charter initiative, alongside the awareness campaigns that aim to bolster community's values and cohesion. Speaker and Members of the Shura Council lauded the government's support to families and provision of social security to all those eligible. They affirmed their keenness to support the Ministry's efforts in consolidating family's position in the community and safeguarding national identity.

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Watching the watchdogs: US media reporting from Gaza

RAMI G KHOURI — AL JAZEERA



Clarissa Ward was granted rare media access into Gaza. (CNN)

On December 14, I came across a report on the CNN website titled "Watch Clarissa Ward report from inside Gaza for the first time since war began", which grabbed my attention, as good headlines usually do. The subheading further heightened my interest – "CNN's Clarissa Ward witnessed the horror and humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza during a visit to a field hospital in Rafah operated by the United Arab Emirates".

American journalists had not reported from within Gaza – except a few embedded with Israeli troops – because Israel, as the occupying power in control of the Gaza Strip's borders, has been denying access to foreign journalists and putting pressure on Egypt to do so as well. So I was intrigued by how Ward had managed to gain access and saw her report as a chance to learn if such on-the-spot coverage would compensate for the broadly awful Western mainstream media coverage of the previous nine weeks. Over the previous two months, I had observed heavily pro-Israeli, distorted, and incomplete coverage, especially on American television.

I saw most news presenters and show hosts expressing strong bias for Israel, in their words, tone of voice, and editorial choices. The predominance of military analyses by retired US senior officers was equally slanted towards Israel and against Hamas. The flood of deeply human, personalised, warm, and emotional coverage of Israeli hostages and casualties contrasted with much shallower and fewer reports on the Palestinian victims and prisoners.

So I wondered, would the report from a field hospital in Gaza be better, more balanced, more human? So I clicked on the CNN story link to discover how it was reported from inside Gaza amid the mass murder and human suffering. What follows are a few observations of the strengths and weaknesses of the report. It is important to point them out as an example of the practices that plague the coverage of the Gaza war by most US media outlets.

The report's strength is that CNN and Ward and her team made the effort to enter Gaza, see its human and material conditions for themselves, and share with the world the images, words, and emotions of a handful of Gaza Palestinians. I salute and thank them, and hope they prompt other journalists to enter Gaza by any possible safe means.

The report also exposes the viewers to the range of human suffering, fear, and helplessness that now defines Gaza. It offers snippets of the stories of a number of casualties, including young children and one orphaned toddler. The video also captures the moment Israel bombs a location near the hospital; it demonstrates the frightening sensation of hearing and feeling the impact of a shell or bomb that Palestinians in Gaza experience on an hourly basis.

Ward maximises the powerful combination of images, quotes from people she interviews, and her own descriptions, which television at its best can do so well. She beautifully allows the viewer to feel what any visitor to the hospital would experience when she says that she feels "in every bed another gut punch", as I did when I watched her report. She rightly calls Gaza's mass suffering and non-stop death "one of the great horrors of modern warfare" and "a window onto hell". But elsewhere the report falls short of journalism's responsibility to give audiences a reasonably complete picture of the situation on the ground in Gaza. Here are a few examples of how an extra sentence, phrase, or just a few words more would have let viewers grasp the full context of these hospitalised young Palestinians' lives, amid the wider conflict's causes, casualties, and participants. Ward only mentions once, at the start, Israel's more than 22,000 military strikes and their "intensity and ferocity". But she fails to say that Israeli bombardment has been so indiscriminate and deadly that legal scholars consider what is happening in Gaza a genocide and there are several major legal cases in the US and Europe to stop it.

> Israel, as the occupying power in control of the Gaza Strip's borders, has been denying access to foreign journalists and putting pressure on Egypt to do so as well.

The report says that most patients are women and children, who also account for two of every three deaths. But it does not refer to the fact that Israel's bombardment has resulted in more than 80,000 dead, injured and missing Palestinians, most of whom are civilians killed at home, in hospitals or United Nations-run schools turned into shelters.

The report mentions that the UAE hospital is taking patients from other medical facilities, which are overcrowded, but does not say why that is – because Israel has systematically bombed and raided most of Gaza's hospitals to the point that they are out of service. It also makes no mention of the hundreds of medical workers Israel has killed, which has resulted in severe medical staff shortages.

The report points to the improvised tourniquet on one injured man rushed into the hospital, but it does not reveal that this is due to Israel blocking the delivery of life-saving and even basic medical supplies.

All the suffering humans who Ward interviews – with their amputated limbs, killed family members, broken bones, and disfigured faces – are mostly presented in passive, almost abstract, contexts that do not capture their full humanity or the full nature of the conflict. Consequently, most of the Palestinians we meet in the story seem like one-dimensional, caricature-like figures, expressing only fear, misery, and worry.

We the audience mostly feel sorry for the Palestinians, but we do not really know them, because no other emotions beyond pity link us to them. We are told that one of the patients – 20-year-old Lama, who lost her leg – was studying to be an engineer. But we are not informed that Israel has not only broken her body but her dreams, having devastated Gaza's universities, making it impossible for Gaza's youth to pursue higher education in the years ahead.

The report makes clear that Lama and her family fled their home upon Israel's orders, but then were bombed in the home where they sought refuge. But we are not told that 80 percent of Gaza's 2.3 million population have been displaced and are living in appalling conditions, made that much worse by Israel's full blockade that has cut off food, electricity, water, and medicine.

The report discusses Gaza in the context of other conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, but does not mention this as the latest episode of Israel's 75-year-long and ongoing ethnic cleansing, colonisation, and occupation of Palestinians. It does not refer to the fact that the majority of Gaza residents are refugees or descendants of refugees who were forced to flee their homes by Jewish militias in 1948 to avoid being killed. I raise the issue of poor media coverage of our region because in the United States, United Kingdom, and other Western countries, I've seen the damage it has caused by promoting Israeli and Western governments' views above all others.

Since the media is the public's main source of information on the Middle East, biased reporting over many decades has created a misinformed citizenry. Our common struggle to create a world of justice and peace goes on. We in the journalism world should step up quickly and forcefully to play a constructive role by using the tools we know so well to communicate truths across frontiers.

Rami G Khouri is Distinguished Fellow at the American University of Beirut, and a journalist.

This isn't just an election year, it's year of elections

THE WASHINGTON POST

For the United States, 2024 is an election year - a potentially historic one. Congress and the White House are at stake; former president Donald Trump is bidding to retake the presidency from President Biden, with all that could entail for the stability of US political institutions.

Perhaps less widely appreciated, but no less significant, is that this will be a year of elections for the world. In 2024, votes for president, a national legislature or both are set to take place in dozens of countries - including some of the world's most populous ones (India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mexico); some of those most closely aligned with the United States (eight European NATO members and, probably, Britain); and some 18 of Africa's 54 countries (among them Ghana and South Africa, where the African National Congress is at risk of losing its majority for the first time since the 1994 transition to democracy).

The Economist - whose count includes not only countries' national elections but also municipal ones, as well as voting in 27 European Union countries for the relatively powerless European Parliament - estimates that 2024 will be the biggest election year ever. Voters will cast ballots in countries accounting for about 4.2 billion people, or about 50 percent of global population.

It's difficult to specify the likely impact of all this voting, but it's surely unwise to underestimate it. By the time it is over, power might change hands between incumbents and oppositions in multiple nations; new political generations might come into their own. The shift from the left to the libertarian right in Argentina at the end of 2023 provides a preview of how dramatic such changes can be. Election results could transform key nations' foreign policies and relationships with the United States - whose own policies, of course, could take a radical new direction if Trump wins the presidency. The stakes might be highest in Taiwan, which votes on Jan 13. The Kuomintang (KMT) Party, which is relatively conciliatory toward Beijing, is bidding to replace the governing Democratic Progressive Party, whose roots lie in the island's human rights movement and which sees close ties with the United States as Taiwanese democracy's best guarantee against China. There is also a strong third-party contender. China is meddling, mostly by feeding pro-KMT propaganda to Taiwanese voters via social media.

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Taiwanese institutions so far seem capable of withstanding that pressure. Yet the quantity of 2024's elections is much easier to ascertain than their quality. In Mexico and India, the political process is imperfect in many respects but legitimate enough that the outcomes - in each case, probably, victory for an incumbent populist-nationalist party - will provide fresh mandates for the policy paths the two countries are already on.

In Russia, reelection for the incumbent - President Vladimir Putin - is the inevitable outcome of a rigged vote in March. Opponents of his war in Ukraine will have no meaningful opportunity to campaign. In tiny El Salvador, meanwhile, President Nayib Bukele has manipulated the system to allow for his reelection despite constitutional provisions that had appeared to prohibit it. The twist is that Mr. Bukele is so popular - based on his sweeping, legally questionable and, for now, successful crackdown on crime - that few Salvadorans seem inclined to resist his machinations.

El Salvador is one of six Latin American countries slated to hold presidential elections in 2024. This number includes Venezuela, though it is unclear if the deeply unpopular leftist authoritarian regime in Caracas will permit a free and fair process, as the Biden administration is pressuring it to do. If Venezuela votes legitimately, however, the result could be an inspiring democratic comeback for a country whose economic and political collapse has destabilized the hemisphere.

In short, 2024 will deliver masses of fresh data on democracy's prospects in the world. Many indicators, such as those published by Freedom House, show "backsliding," including in Hungary, India, Israel and, yes, the United States. Still, on one key objective metric - whether losing incumbents accept defeat and leave power - there has been little erosion worldwide over the past decade, according to a recent paper by political scientists Andrew Little and Anne Meng. Another reason for optimism: the backhanded compliment that autocrats such as Mr. Putin feel they must pay democracy by holding elections, even if they are a sham. Such exercises implicitly concede that, in the modern world, the people's votes are the only universally recognized source of political legitimacy. This norm is the hard-won achievement of centuries, one which the year of elections will surely test, but just might reinforce.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

Trump towers over GOP rivals in Iowa

THE WASHINGTON POST — DES MOINES

The Iowa caucuses have a long history of dramatic, late-breaking twists. Past winners such as Rick Santorum and Ted Cruz didn't rise in the polls until the final weeks, and no Republican candidate has won a contested race by more than 12 percentage points.



Former President Donald Trump speaks at a rally in Ankeny, Iowa. (The Washington Post)

Donald Trump has hundreds of Iowa "caucus captains" recruiting their neighbours to participate for the first time. Canvassers for Ron DeSantis are knocking a fifth time on the doors of their targets. Allies of Nikki Haley have surged their TV spending, outmatching their rivals in the final, pivotal weeks.

But the frenzy of activity in the last stretch before the Iowa caucuses on January 15 belies a growing sense among political veterans across this state that the basic outcome is set and a Trump victory is all but assured, even as the former president is campaigning much less aggressively than his rivals. Although the state has a history of photo finishes, and some warn against crowning Trump just yet, many Republicans have set their sights on subplots that underscore the unusual dearth of intrigue over who will win.

A closer-than-expected contest could still upend the race, throwing DeSantis a lifeline or elevating Haley as she heads to New Hampshire, where she polls closer to Trump. But resignation is already setting in among some Republicans who support Trump's challengers, without a single vote cast.

"I believe Donald Trump will be the Republican nominee no matter what I or anyone else does," said Will Rogers, an activist in the Des Moines area who plans to caucus for Haley and who used to lead the county GOP. "I just don't think there's a way to crack the code," Rogers said.

The Iowa caucuses have a long history of dramatic, late-breaking twists. Past winners such as Rick Santorum and Ted Cruz didn't rise in the polls until the final weeks, and no Republican candidate has won a contested race by more than 12 percentage points.

But this year's race has felt very different, with a lack of swings and surprises that has at times prompted a collective yawn in the state. Trump established himself as a dominant favorite here months ago, and Republicans on the ground say they have yet to see evidence of a major shift. Surveys show Trump expanding his lead to some 30 points, while DeSantis and Haley fight for second – setting the stage for an unusual and potentially historic start to the nominating process.

Iowa has been a poor predictor of who wins the Republican nomination in recent election cycles, with some insurgent candidates who built strong followings in the Christian conservative community here prevailing, only to flame out in contests later on. But the stakes are high for hopefuls such as DeSantis, the Florida governor. He has campaigned nonstop in the state and needs to pull significantly closer to Trump and away from Haley to revive his struggling bid, many Republicans said.

"Either it happens here or it doesn't happen at all," said Jeff Angelo, a conservative talk show host in Iowa and a former state lawmaker.

Other candidates such as entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy are also competing in the caucuses, in which Iowans gather at churches, school campuses and other community centers to hear brief pitches for the candidates and then declare their support.

Policy has often taken a back seat to stylistic contrasts, with Trump vowing retribution for his enemies, and opponents arguing they can advance conservative ideas with less baggage.

Haley, the former governor of South Carolina and U.N. ambassador, has a wider path after Iowa, holding a clear second place in her home state and in New Hampshire, which vote early in the calendar.

Impeachment push against Joe Biden's immigration chief

AFP — WASHINGTON

US Republicans announced impeachment proceedings yesterday against Joe Biden's homeland security chief over the worsening border crisis, as they seek to cement immigration as a major issue in November's presidential election.

Up to 10,000 migrants have been detained daily after crossing illegally from Mexico in what Republicans describe as a humanitarian disaster, while the White House and lawmakers have failed to agree on reforms to stem the influx.

Republicans in Congress, who concluded a probe into Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas in December, accuse the Democrat of creating a national security emergency.

"Our investigation made clear that this crisis finds its foundation in Secretary Mayorkas' decision-making and refusal to enforce the laws passed by Congress, and that his failure to fulfil his oath of office demands accountability," House Homeland Security Committee chairman Mark Green said in a statement. The border issue unites the fractious Republican Party, but finding the votes for impeachment could still be a challenge.

SpaceX launches first cell service satellites with T-Mobile

BLOOMBERG — CALIFORNIA

Elon Musk's SpaceX launched its first six satellites capable of offering mobile phone service as the company races to bring more connectivity to remote areas.

Operating like a cell tower in space, the Starlink satellites will work with users' existing phones, rather than using specialised equipment, to enable text messaging in areas where traditional cell signals are weak or nonexistent. SpaceX will later be able to offer voice and data, said Kate Tice, senior quality systems engineering manager, on a webcast for the launch Tuesday. SpaceX, formally called Space Exploration Technologies Corp., obtained US approval last month to run tests of the service called Direct to Cell.

The service "will allow for mobile phone connectivity anywhere on Earth," Musk said in a post on the social media site X, though he added that technical limitations mean "it is not meaningfully competitive with existing terrestrial cellular networks." Companies are vying to tap the market for satellite-enabled calls offering connections to normal consumer mobile phones. SpaceX is working with T-Mobile US, and AT&T has partnered with satellite operator AST SpaceMobile.

Apple iPhones let users send texts via satellite to first responders and report emergencies in areas without cellular coverage. SpaceX will work with other carriers in the rest of the world: Singapore Telecommunications's Optus in Australia, Salt Mobile in Switzerland, Rogers Communications in Canada, One New Zealand Group in New Zealand, Empresa Nacional de Telecomunicaciones in Chile and Peru and KDDI in Japan.

Starlink is expected to generate about $10bn of overall sales this year, eclipsing its rocket launch business and accounting for two-thirds of the total, Bloomberg News has reported. Musk is considering an initial public offering for the fast-growing Starlink satellite business as soon as late 2024, according to Bloomberg.

Mexican authorities search for 31 migrants abducted near border

AP — MEXICO CITY

Mexican authorities said yesterday they are searching for 31 migrants from five countries who were abducted over the weekend from a bus near the Texas border.

The National Guard, Army and Navy are participating in the search, but there have been few advances, Federal Security Secretary Rosa Icela Rodríguez said.

On December 30, armed and masked men stopped the bus on the highway that connects the border cities of Reynosa and Matamoros, Rodríguez said. They made all 36 people aboard get off and then took 31 of them away in five vehicles.

The abducted migrants were from Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Honduras and Mexico, she said. Colombian President Gustavo Petro said Tuesday that four Colombians were among the abducted.

Rodríguez said authorities had tried to track the migrants' cell phones, reviewed surveillance video from the bus and scanned the area by helicopter for signs of the missing.

The bus had left the northern city of Monterrey and had a final destination of Matamoros. It was intercepted near Rio Bravo.

New York governor pushes for reading education overhaul as test scores lag

AP — ALBANY

New York would join a national movement known as balanced literacy, which focuses on introducing children to books they find interesting.

New York Gov Kathy Hochul yesterday said she will push for schools to reemphasize phonics in literacy education programmes, a potential overhaul that comes as many states revamp curriculums amid low reading scores.

The proposal would require the state education department to draft guidelines centered on the so-called science of reading, a phonics-based approach to literacy education, that school districts would have to follow by September 2025.

The state Legislature would need to approve the plan before it could go into effect.

The change would see New York join a national movement away from an education method known as balanced literacy, which focuses on introducing children to books they find interesting – often at the expense of dedicated phonics instruction.

New York, like other states, has seen reading proficiency scores dip after the coronavirus pandemic shuttered schools and forced classes online. Last year, data show fewer than half of third grade students in New York read at proficient levels in state tests.

"Reading is the foundation of our education system, but New York State is currently not meeting basic reading proficiency levels," Hochul, a Democrat, said in a statement. "We cannot continue to allow our kids to fall further behind by utilizing outdated and discredited approaches to reading comprehension." More than 30 states have transitioned toward phonics-based science of reading programmes, the governor's office said. New York City has also implemented a similar programme.

Hochul's plan includes $10m to train teachers on science of reading instruction as well as an expansion of credentialing programmes in state and city public colleges for teachers focused on science of reading education.

The governor announced the proposal as part of her agenda for the state's Legislative session, which began yesterday and will end in June.

In remarks to reporters, Will Barclay, Republican leader of the New York State Assembly, appeared open to the governor's education plan but said he would wait until a bill is filed before taking a formal position.

IN BRIEF

US rejects 'irresponsible statements' on resettlement of Palestinians outside Gaza

THE PENINSULA—DOHA: The United States rejected the recent statements from Israeli Ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir advocating for the resettlement of Palestinians outside of Gaza.

"This rhetoric is inflammatory and irresponsible. We have been told repeatedly and consistently by the Government of Israel, including by the Prime Minister, that such statements do not reflect the policy of the Israeli government. They should stop immediately," a press statement said.

"We have been clear, consistent, and unequivocal that Gaza is Palestinian land and will remain Palestinian land, with Hamas no longer in control of its future and with no terror groups able to threaten Israel. That is the future we seek, in the interests of Israelis and Palestinians, the surrounding region, and the world."

US imam shot outside Newark mosque: Police

AFP—NEW YORK: An imam was shot outside a mosque not far from New York yesterday and is in a critical condition, police said.

Police in the city of Newark, New Jersey, did not give a motive for the incident.

Newark Public Safety Director Fritz Frage confirmed "police responded to a call of a male shot" yesterday morning.

Frage said the victim was taken to a local hospital and "is reportedly in critical condition." Officers confirmed that the man was the imam, and that the incident happened outside a mosque. An investigation has been launched.

Images published by the New Jersey chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) showed police vehicles deployed outside the Masjid Muhammad-Newark mosque, a two-story yellow and green complex.

"We are deeply concerned about this incident and pray for the speedy recovery of the imam. Anyone with information about the shooting should immediately contact local police," said CAIR New Jersey communications manager Dina Sayedahmed.

Mickey Mouse enters public domain, now he's a horror movie villain

THE WASHINGTON POST — NEW YORK

Director Steven LaMorte had long wanted to make a horror movie that was set on a boat. Being stranded in the water would only heighten the fear of running from a killer, he thought.

LaMorte announced Tuesday that he was producing that film, but the killer will be a character who typically brings smiles and laughs to children: Mickey Mouse.

His plans for the beloved cartoon rodent's dark turn were unveiled just hours after Mickey Mouse's iteration from "Steamboat Willie," a 1928 animated short film, entered the public domain after its copyright expired at the start of the year. LaMorte is one of two directors to announce they are producing horror movies with Mickey Mouse as the villain.

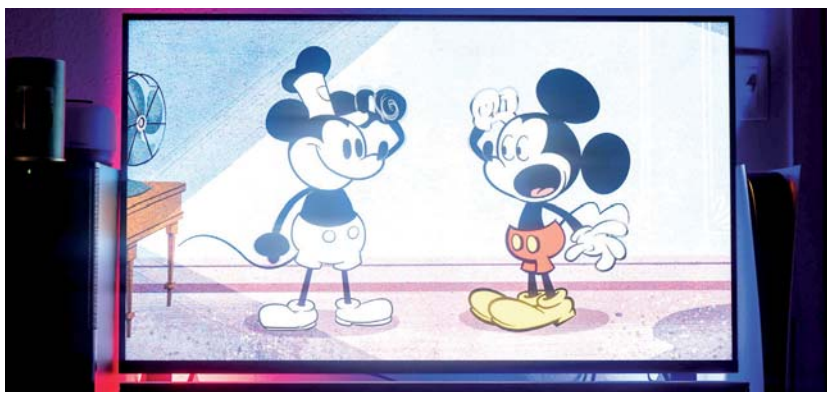
Production will begin on LaMorte's independent film in the spring in New York City. He told The Washington Post that he hopes the movie will reinvigorate adults' love for Disney's mascot.

"We still love these characters, but we're looking for a more age-appropriate way to engage with them," LaMorte said. "So it's something kind of cool to . . . find a new way to breathe life into a character." LaMorte's announcement came a day after Toronto-based director Jamie Bailey and actor Simon Phillips released a trailer for their own Mickey Mouse horror film, *Mickey's Mouse Trap*." The trailer shows a group of friends socializing at an arcade before an actor dressed as Mickey appears holding a knife.

This isn't the first time a cherished Disney character has starred in a horror movie. After entering the public domain in 2022, Winnie-the-Pooh was a villain in *Winnie the Pooh: Blood and Honey*, which grossed about $5m after its February release.

LaMorte, who hasn't named his movie, said he first heard near the start of 2023 that Mickey Mouse's *Steamboat Willie* design might enter the public domain. At the time, he was directing a horror and comedy movie about a character based on the Grinch called *The Mean One*. He didn't expect Mickey Mouse would actually become available. But as 2024 approached, LaMorte said he thought more about a movie featuring the typically friendly mouse.

As a child in the 1990s, LaMorte said he watched *Steamboat Willie* and other classic animated short films on VHS tapes. Growing up in Staten Island, LaMorte said he often rode boats and ferries to nearby Governors Island and to visit the Statue of Liberty on Liberty Island. That's when he began to imagine how he would produce a horror film on the water.


In a photo illustration, an episode of Disney's Steamboat Silly is seen on a television set on January 2, 2024 in Austin, Texas. (AFP)

LaMorte declined to say when he started working on his new movie, but he said by January 1, a pile of written ideas were already stacked on his desk in Los Angeles. The Mickey Mouse in LaMorte's movie, who will be named Steamboat Willie, can only appear similarly to the design from the 1928 short film, in which Mickey is entirely black-and-white and doesn't wear a shirt or his now-signature white gloves.