The Peninsula
Local focus, Global vision
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Amir visits Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition

Amir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited yesterday the 20th Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition at Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre. During his tour of the exhibition pavilions, H H the Amir was briefed on the latest products from companies in the jewellery and watch sector. He also listened to an explanation about the highlights of the exhibition in its current edition and its local economic and cultural contributions. H H the Amir visited the pavilions dedicated to Qatari designers participating in the exhibition, where they showcased their products designed with Qatari, Arab, and Islamic identities.



Amir to meet Hungary's President tomorrow

QNA—DOHA: AMIR H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani will meet, at the Amiri Diwan tomorrow (Sunday), with President of Hungary H E Katalin Novak and the accompanying delegation.

H H the Amir and President H E Katalin Novak will hold talks on relations between the two countries and ways to support and develop them, in addition to discussing a host of issues of common concern.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS DISCUSSED

PM attends meeting on Gaza in Riyadh

QNA — RIYADH

Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs H E Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani participated in a consultative meeting to discuss the developments of the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip, held in Riyadh upon the invitation of H H Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah Al Saud.

Also, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan H E Dr. Ayman Al Safadi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates H H Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt Sameh Shoukry, and Secretary-General of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Civil Affairs Minister H E Hussein Al Sheikh participated in the meeting.

Their Highnesses and Excellencies the Ministers emphasized during the meeting the necessity to end the war on the Gaza Strip and achieve an immediate and complete ceasefire, ensuring the protection of civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law.

They also called for lifting all restrictions hindering the entry of humanitarian aid into the Strip, expressing their support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and urging all supporters to fulfil their humanitarian duties towards Palestinian refugees.

SEE ALSO PAGE 3

NEW ATTRACTIONS

Visit Qatar and QA promote Qatar as tourism destination

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Visit Qatar and Qatar Airways announced the launch of stopover flight packages in Doha as part of their joint efforts to promote Qatar and strengthen its position as a premier tourist destination to be added to passengers' targeted destination, during a press conference chaired by

H E Saad bin Ali Al Kharji, Chairman of Qatar Tourism, and Engr Badr Mohammed Al Meer, CEO of Qatar Airways Group, in the presence of a group of international media representatives as part of an extensive familarisation trip to Doha, at Msheireb Downtown Doha.

Visit Qatar plays a crucial role in promoting Qatar as a premier travel destination and preserving its cultural heritage. It actively collaborates with government entities to facilitate partnerships and encourage private sector investments to ensure the growth of the hospitality and tourism sectors. Aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030, Visit Qatar is dedicated to enhancing the country's tourism infrastructure, promoting sustainable development, and fostering cultural exchange.

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Commenting at the press conference, Al Kharji said: "The 'Stopover in Qatar' offering is an embodiment of continuity of the cooperation between Qatar Tourism and Qatar Airways providing travellers the opportunity to expand their destination experience and explore this remarkable country. Recognising the richness and diversity of Qatar's tourism, we believe that the 'Stopover in Qatar' package will be highly valuable for tourists with limited time."

"It is imperative to highlight that in 2023, the number of travellers and hotel room nights for stopovers in Qatar more than doubled compared to 2022 as a direct result of Qatar Airways flying to over 177 international destinations. ➔P2

HUMAN RIGHTS

Food Justice Conference crucial platform for tackling challenges

SANAULLAH ATAULLAH
THE PENINSULA

First Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) of Uzbekistan H E Prof Akmal Saidov has said that the International Conference on Food Justice has provided a crucial platform for global leaders, experts, and advocates to converge and tackle the multifaceted challenges related to food justice and security.

Speaking to *The Peninsula*, Saidov who is also Director of the National Human Rights Centre of the Republic of Uzbekistan said that the conference was very important in ensuring the right to food for everyone worldwide.

The International Conference on Food Justice from a Human Rights Perspective: Challenges of Reality and Future Stakes was organiswed by the Qatar's National Human Rights Committee (NHRC) in Doha last week.

"It provides an opportunity to share insights, experiences, and innovative strategies to address the pressing issues of hunger, malnutrition, and the inequities within the global food system," said Saidov.


H E Prof. Akmal Saidov

> It provides an opportunity to share insights, experiences, and innovative strategies to address the pressing issues of hunger, malnutrition, and the inequities within the global food system.

He said that by focusing on accessibility and eligibility rather than merely increasing food production, the conference aims to tackle the underlying issues of food insecurity, such as economic and social inequalities, organised violence, armed conflict, and environmental challenges.

"This approach emphasises the importance of establishing global food systems that are resilient, sustainable, and equitable, ensuring that everyone has access to sufficient, available, and affordable food," said Saidov. ➔P3

QF and Texas A&M University to conclude partnership

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Qatar Foundation's partnership with Texas A&M University – whose Doha-based campus has graduated over 1,500 engineers, formed vital collaborations with industry, and generated pioneering engineering and sustainability research – is to conclude after more than 20 years.

The conclusion of the partnership was announced following a decision by the Board of Regents of Texas A&M University. Qatar Foundation (QF) has confirmed its commitment to ensuring continuity of education for current students from Texas A&M University at Qatar (TAMUQ) – which was established in 2003 – and the continuation of engineering studies at its Education City campus.

"Through its long-term vision for its world-class ecosystem of education, research, and community development higher education vision, Qatar Foundation has formed long-standing partnerships with international universities," said Hend Zainal, Executive Director, Strategy, Management and Partnerships, within QF's Higher Education division.

"This has seen them establish campuses at QF's Education City and deliver undergraduate and graduate level programmes in fields aligned with the needs of Qatar and the region, alongside QF's homegrown Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU). ➔P2

EDITORIAL ↘08

Qatar as ultimate tourism destination

IN RECENT years, Qatar has emerged as a frontrunner in the global tourism landscape, positioning itself as the ultimate destination for travellers seeking unparalleled experiences.

BUSINESS ↘ 09

Retailers buoyant on steady market growth

QATAR'S retail mart owners have expressed delight in growing market demand this year. The majority of the retailers noted a surge in profits during January compared to the same period in 2023.

SPORT ↘ 01

The Peninsula's special coverage of AFC Asian Cup



CULTURE

KIAHF showcases heritage and artistry

JOELYN BALUYUT
THE PENINSULA

The Katara International Arabian Horse Festival (KIAHF) is not just a celebration of Qatari equestrian tradition; it's also a platform for artists to showcase their talents through various mediums. Among the diverse array of artists participating in the exhibitions and competitions are Mohammad Johar, Monika Bulanda, and Katarzyna Okrzesik-Mikolajek.

Mohammad Johar and Monika Bulanda are both taking part in the saddle painting competition. Johar, a Qatari artist and reigning champion, expressed his joy in participating and noted the importance of promoting Arabic horses as a tradition deeply rooted in Qatari culture. He thanked Katara for providing artists with the opportunity to showcase their talents and expressed gratitude for the support and motivation.

For Bulanda, a first-time participant from Poland, she said that being part of the festival is a privilege. Using her unique mixed media technique, she creates artworks that blend drawing, collage, and acrylics. While she typically works in a 3D digital format, she finds the experience of doing her art in a public space to be both special and interactive. Bulanda expressed gratitude for the opportunity to collaborate with local artists and praised Katara for supporting artists like her. She exhibited her artworks as part of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 celebrations last month.

Meanwhile, award-winning photographer Katarzyna Okrzesik-Mikolajek is exhibiting her collection of 30 black and white photographs of Arabian horses. These stunning images, captured during a photoshoot for a Sheikh last month, showcase the timeless beauty of Arabian horses against various landscapes and architectural backgrounds.

Okrzesik-Mikolajek explained the intricacies of photographing Arabian horses, stressing the need to highlight their unique qualities and integrate them harmoniously with their surroundings. "You have to really focus on the qualities of the horse, to see the beauty, like in a certain way of showing the head, the neck. Certain breeds have different qualities and try to focus on that, and also my main purpose is that sometimes to combine horses with their beauty on landscape or architecture which you can also see in my photos," she told *The Peninsula*.

Her collection reflects her passion in showcasing the beauty and historical significance of horses, which have contributed greatly to the human history. "Horses being part of our history since ages, and if not for them we will not be here, it [also] goes about the artwork, the transportation, many different fields in our lives, we rely on horses, and it's important to show people about that way and also for me, the artwork themselves and its beauty."

Amir visits Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition





Amir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visiting various pavilions at the 20th Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition at Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre yesterday.

CULINARY EXTRAVAGANZA

Food festival offers 'most entertaining cultural feast'

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Qatar Tourism's Qatar International Food Festival (QIFF) returns for its 13th edition. Held at the Family Zone at the Doha Expo 2023 this year at Al Bidda Park, QIFF 2024 spans over a colossal 61,600 meter squared concourse.

The event is geared up to offer the most entertaining cultural feast under one roof. This year's sponsors are Talabat and Ooredoo, while the Official Hospitality Partner is Katara Hospitality, and the Official Venue Partner is Doha Expo 2023.

Commenting on this year's festival, H E Saad bin Ali Al Kharji, Chairman of Qatar Tourism, said: "As we gather here today to inaugurate the 13th edition of the Qatar International Food Festival. This year, in acknowledgment of the Year of Culture, we embrace a cultural exchange between our brothers and sisters from Morocco, this festival promises to fortify ties and promote the rich heritage of both nations. We look forward to a successful and memorable festival that will continue to elevate Qatar as a global destination for strong legacy and culture. The festival has successfully become one of the most beloved and awaited events in the annual winter calendar organised by Qatar Tourism. I would like to invite all nationals and residents to come enjoy and create unforgettable memories with their families."

English football legend and philanthropist David Beckham attended one of the cooking workshops organised in partnership with the Dreama Orphan Care Centre. This year's edition will witness the presence of former famous football stars Ronaldinho, Claude Makelele and Pastore.

Commenting on the occasion, Francisco Miguel De Sousa, Managing Director of Talabat in Qatar, said: "We are thrilled to be sponsoring one of Qatar's biggest food extravaganzas for yet another year running, as a reflection of our dedication to elevating the rich culinary culture in the country. Talabat's presence in QIFF also reinforces our commitment towards creating memorable moments, fostering connections, and supporting the flourishing food community in Qatar. This is in line with our continuous efforts in shaping the future of dining experiences as a key player in the food and technology industry, and we welcome all visitors to join us in QIFF and enjoy the diverse range of delights this year."

Nasser Matar AlKawari, Chief Executive Officer of Katara Hospitality, said: "Katara Hospitality is honoured to partner with Qatar Tourism for the Qatar International Food Festival 2024 Edition,



Qatar Airways Group Chief Executive Officer, Engr Badr Mohammed Al Meer (left) and Chairman of Qatar Tourism Saad bin Ali Al Kharji during the opening ceremony of the 13th Qatar International Food Festival. PIC: RAJAN VADAKKEMURIYIL/ THE PENINSULA

reaffirming our dedication to honouring Qatar's vibrant culinary heritage and ever-evolving hospitality scene. Utilising our extensive portfolio of hotels in Qatar, we have enriched the culinary journey by presenting a diverse array of dining options. We are genuinely excited to contribute to this prestigious event, we are committed to orchestrating unforgettable moments and solidifying Qatar's status as a premier destination for both food aficionados and travellers."

The Official Market Partner of Qatar International Food Festival 2024 is the Torba Market, who have 10 kiosks celebrating the best of local artisan foods. Returning larger than its predecessors, QIFF boasts over 100 food stalls and kiosks from over 15 international brands, over 120 entertainment shows, 9 zones, and daily fireworks displays. This year, QIFF will host over 13 international celebrity chefs, and over 10 local and Qatar-based international chefs, who will be demonstrating their utmost talents through live cooking shows.

QF and Texas A&M University to conclude partnership

FROM PAGE 1

"QF's strategy for higher education takes into consideration the future of the system which, following Texas A&M University's decision to conclude our partnership, is now to be accelerated and implemented to ensure continuity of learning for students – including in engineering fields – as well as their personal development and academic research.

"The decision of Texas A&M University's Board of Regents to end its partnership with QF has been influenced by a disinformation campaign aimed at harming the interests of QF. It is disturbing that this disinformation has become the determining factor in the decision and that it has been allowed to override the core principles of education and knowledge, with no consideration to the significant positive impact this partnership has brought for both Qatar and the US. "It is deeply disappointing that a globally respected academic institution like Texas A&M University has fallen victim to such a campaign and allowed politics to infiltrate its decision-making processes. At no point did the Board attempt to seek out the truth from QF before making this misguided decision.

"However, decisions based on any consideration other than the best interests of students and their pursuit of education and knowledge will not impact on our vision for higher education at QF, and our strategy for realizing this vision." The process and timescale for formally concluding the partnership between QF and Texas A&M University is now under discussion. QF's Education City is home to six international partner universities – including TAMUQ – as well as HBKU. A seventh QF partner university, HEC Paris in Qatar, is based in Msheireb Downtown Doha.

15th batch of Gaza wounded arrives for treatment

QNA — DOHA

A Qatari Armed Forces aircraft landed yesterday in Doha carrying the 15th batch of Palestinians injured in the Gaza Strip to receive treatment in Doha, as part of the initiative of Amir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani to provide treatment for 1,500 Palestinians from the Strip.

The initiative is a continuation of Qatar's steadfast support and its ongoing efforts to alleviate the suffering of the brotherly Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip, in cooperation with various regional and international partners, on the backdrop of the difficult humanitarian conditions that the Strip is currently witnessing.

Ministry of Culture participates in 3rd edition of 'Me and My Child' festival

QNA — DOHA

The Ministry of Culture is participating in the 3rd edition of the "Me and My Child" festival organised by "Qatar Reads" initiative of the Qatar National Library devoted to families.

Commenting on the ministry's participation in the festival, Director of the Libraries Department at the Ministry of Culture Jassim Ahmed Al Buainain said he is delighted to see this participation in the festival which promotes familial values and cultural awareness among families.

The four-day event kicked off on Wednesday at the Ceremonial Court in the Education City.

Visit Qatar and QA promote destination Qatar

FROM PAGE 1

Qatar Airways aims to make Doha a must-see stopover destination with one-of-a-kind travel experiences. Visit Qatar and Destination Qatar's stopover packages offer five exciting options at over 100 hotels for travellers.

"January 2024, witnessed another remarkable achievement with over 700,000 visitors, setting a new monthly record, we are continuing this growth, with the aim of welcoming six million annual visitors by 2030. These statistics underscore the significant accomplishments and momentum of Qatar's tourism sector, solidifying its status as a leading premier international destination.

"Qatar will grow and improve assets and attractions as we will witness the unveiling of new attractions, such as the Meryal Waterpark and Ras Abrouq. Visit Qatar emphasises its keenness in providing overall Service Excellence for visitors to have a well-rounded Middle Eastern experience in one accessible, safe, and must-visit destination," he said.

Through Discover Qatar (DQ), Qatar Airways' destination management company, passengers can now choose one of the stopover flights, which enhances Doha's presence as an ideal stopover destination thanks to its abundance of tourist experiences and unique benefits.

Engr. Al Meer said, "Our 2024 network expansion offers a very exciting summer schedule, which includes our resumption to Venice and our new route to Hamburg, along with increased frequencies on various international routes. We are committed to creating unforgettable travel experiences which will transform transit time as well as the airport experience itself. Looking ahead to the future, I am confident that Qatar is set to become the top stopover destination globally."

Qatar Airways aims to make Doha a must-see stopover destination with one-of-a-kind travel experiences. Visit Qatar and Destination Qatar's stopover packages offer five exciting options at over 100 hotels for travellers embarking on their journey on Qatar Airways' network of over 170 destinations. All stopover packages include 24-hour check-in facilities so guests can make the most of their time in Qatar and can be tailored to add-on options including airport assistance, transfers and a range of tours and experiences to enhance their stay, such as City and Desert Tours.

HBKU conference to explore gender, technology, digital cultures in region

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Hamad Bin Khalifa University's (HBKU) College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS) is partnering with the London School of Economics and Political Science's (LSE) Middle East Centre to organise the second edition of its Middle East Conference under the theme "Gender, Technology, and Digital Cultures in the Middle East".

Taking place February 18 to 19, the conference will convene experts from the humanities, social sciences domain and beyond to explore the nuanced interplay between these three fields of study. Attendees can witness these discussions in-person at Minaretein, Education City, or online via YouTube.

On February 18, the event will feature panel discussions under the subject "Gender and Feminisms in Media Practices in the Middle East."

Presenters will analyse women's digital activism as well as the theories and practices of



feminism in the region and also discuss the methods and ethics involved in researching gender within digital contexts.

On February 19, conversations will revolve around the subject "Digital Insights and Challenges in the Middle East: Computational Text Analysis, Misinformation, and Hate Speech." These discussions will focus on how computational techniques can analyze media content in the Middle East, focusing on patterns, trends, and narratives and the importance of identifying and addressing the spread of misinformation in the region's social media channels.

Other topics include an examination of how social media analytics can be used to gauge political sentiment in the Middle East, and how advanced computational approaches aimed at processing the Arabic language can aid social media analysis in the region.

In support of the Palestinian people during the current crisis, many of the topics to be discussed throughout the two days revolve around the Palestinian struggle. The conference culminates in a special panel titled "Digital Activism and Storytelling for Palestine," which demonstrates the event organizers' and CHSS' dedication to amplifying and strengthening Palestinian voices.

Dr. Hoda Elsadda, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Cairo University, will deliver a talk on "Feminist Digital Archives for Change: The Story of the Women and Memory Forum."

The event will also feature two keynote speakers. Dr. Hoda Elsadda, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Cairo University, and Co-founder of the Women and Memory Forum, will deliver a talk titled "Feminist Digital Archives for Change: The Story of the Women and Memory Forum." Dr. David Kaufer, Mellon Distinguished Professor of English and Rhetoric Emeritus, Carnegie Mellon University, will hold a lecture named "Studying Arab Women Activism Digitally: The Case of DocuScope."

Commenting on the Middle East Conference's importance as a regional platform, Dr. Hassan Hakimian – Interim Dean, Professor of Economics, and Director of Middle Eastern Studies Department at CHSS – said: "The conference gives us an important opportunity to address interesting and multi-layered aspects of the challenges facing our region at a time it continues to under a global spotlight. With our partners at the LSE's Middle East Centre, we look forward to many robust conversations within multidisciplinary fields of humanities and social sciences. Events such as these enable CHSS to extend its network and to keep abreast of current trends in research and contribute to understanding them."

Food Justice Conference crucial platform for tackling challenges

FROM PAGE 1

Furthermore, he said that the conference's setting in Doha underlines Qatar's commitment to contributing to global efforts in ensuring basic human rights, including the right to food. "It allows for the exchange of ideas and promotes international collaboration, which is essential for creating sustainable changes in food policies and practices across the globe," said Saidov.

In essence, he said that this conference is a step forward in the collective journey towards a world where food justice is realised for all, making it an important event in the global human rights agenda.

He said that Qatar and the National Human Rights Committee's role in the global efforts to ensure basic rights, particularly through hosting the International Conference on

Akmal Saidov says Qatar and the National Human Rights Committee play a big role in supporting people's rights around the world, not just about food.

"Food Justice from a Human Rights Perspective," signifies a practical and influential contribution to the worldwide human rights agenda.

"This initiative places them at the forefront of addressing global challenges related to food justice, demonstrating their commitment to facilitating dialogue, sharing knowledge, and nurturing international cooperation," said Saidov. He said that Qatar and the National Human Rights Committee (NHRC) plays a big role in supporting people's rights around the world, not just about food.

"They organise important meetings, work with international groups, and support many different causes like education, work rights, and equality. Their work helps bring attention to these issues and find ways to solve them, showing their strong commitment to making sure everyone's rights are respected and protected everywhere," said Saidov. Through these efforts, he said Qatar and the NHRC contribute significantly to global efforts to ensure the basic rights of people, particularly the right to food, highlighting the country's dedication to humanitarian responsibility, world peace, and the resolution of conflicts that impact food security.



PM attends meeting on Gaza in Riyadh

Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs H E Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani; Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs H H Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah Al Saud; and other dignitaries attend a consultative meeting to discuss developments of the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, yesterday. The meeting emphasised the importance of taking irreversible steps to implement the two-state solution, recognising the State of Palestine along the lines of June 4, 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with relevant international resolutions. They affirmed that the Gaza Strip is an integral part of the occupied Palestinian territory and reiterated their categorical rejection of all forced displacement operations.

Qatar University unveils line-up of events to celebrate Sport Day

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

The Sports Affairs Department at Qatar University (QU) hosted a press conference to unveil the exciting lineup of events planned for Qatar's National Sports Day on February 13.

The speakers included Dr. Senaid Salem Al Marri, Director of Sports Affairs Department; Dr. Asmaa Al Naemi, Director of Sports Facilities Department; Dr. Alla El Awaisi, Director of Clinical Operations and Engagement; Eatidal Al Qatami, Director of Communications and Public Relations; Amina Al Kaabi, Section Head of Women's Athletics; and Lolwa Al Yafei, Teaching Assistant of Exercise Physiology.



Qatar University officials at the press conference.

Dr. Senaid Al Marri, Director of Sports Affairs Department at QU, highlighted the university's commitment to promoting health, economy, and education through sports, aligning with Qatar's visionary 2030 goals.

"The Sport Day originated in 2012, making Qatar the first country to dedicate a day to sports. Qatar, adopting sports as a vision, emphasises the three pillars of health, economy, and education, with sports as a fourth pillar. Our participation in the National Sport Day aligns with QU's belief in the importance of sports and our Islamic values encouraging physical activity.

"The day contributes significantly to raising awareness about the importance of exercise. In line with Qatar's 2030 vision for creating physically and mentally healthy individuals, the Sports Affairs Department at QU strives to position the university campus as the healthiest in the country. We take pride in providing high-level sports facilities and qualified trainers, offering numerous programs and activities. Our vision includes increasing extracurricular hours for students, aiming for their holistic development."

Regarding this year's events, Dr. Al Marri said: "We have various activities planned for both men and women in different fields. There will be evening tournaments, and our goal is to engage the maximum number of people on campus during this sports day. We are well prepared, and you will witness something remarkable. "More importantly, we aim to promote sports awareness, making the Sport Day not only about physical activity but also about changing lifestyle patterns for greater awareness. Therefore, you can expect informative and enlightening stations for employees, students, and female students."

For her part, Dr. Asmaa Al Naemi, Director of Sports Facilities Department, highlighted QU's efforts in sports activities, stating: "The Sports and Events Complex was inaugurated in 2020, including boys' padel sports, soon to be open for girls. The facilities adhere to global standards and are accessible to students, staff, faculty members, and QU alumni. Event stages will be selected for National Sport Day, held in university sports facilities."

Indonesians in Qatar vote in 2024 general election



Indonesians queue to cast their vote at a polling centre in Qatar yesterday. (PIC COURTESY OVERSEAS ELECTION COMMITTEE IN DOHA)

JOELYN BALUYUT
THE PENINSULA

Thousands of Indonesian citizens residing in Qatar participated in the 2024 Indonesia General Election, yesterday, February 9, ahead of the scheduled voting day in Indonesia on February 14.

The election aims to elect the president, vice-president, and members of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), including the House of Representatives (DPR), the Senate (DPD), and local legislative bodies.

With approximately 7,325 registered voters in Qatar, the Overseas Election Committee in Doha established two polling precincts: Qatar Sports Center in Doha and Al Dhahkira Sports Club in Al Khor.

Pri Handoko Saputro, a member of the committee, told *The Peninsula* that there was a high voter turnout due to extensive social media campaigns, community engagement efforts, and awareness promotions.

The voting process involved two sets of ballots — one for selecting the president and vice president and another for choosing parliament members.

Saputro clarified that the elections were conducted manually, and vote counting commenced immediately after the closing time. On February 14, the committee will transmit the vote tally for each candidate to their main office in Indonesia.

Saputro highlighted the significance of voting, stressing that it is a fundamental duty of every Indonesian citizen and a crucial aspect of democracy.

Moreover, he explained that the decision to hold the voting earlier in Qatar was to accommodate the majority of voters who had a day off on Friday, unlike the official voting day, February 14, which falls on a Wednesday, a working day. Voting took place from 8am to 7pm.

Comparing the 2019 voting, Saputro said that the number of voters are higher for this year.

The Indonesian diaspora in Qatar currently comprises around 22,000 individuals. In Indonesia, over 205 million are eligible to vote on February 14, making it one of the world's biggest election days.

People between 17 and over are eligible to vote in the Southeast Asian nation.

HEC Paris in Qatar and Expertise France host Agri-Food Innovation Panel

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

HEC Paris in Qatar recently hosted an insightful panel discussion titled 'Innovation, Investments and Entrepreneurship in the Agri-tech and Food-tech Sectors' in collaboration with Expertise France Group of the Agence Française de Développement (AFD, French Development Agency) and supported by the Economic department from the French Embassy. The event, held at the HEC Paris campus in Msheireb Downtown, in the presence of H E Jean-Baptiste Faivre, the Ambassador of France to Qatar, featured esteemed panellists representing diverse companies and experts in food security from Qatar, France and the GCC region.



Dean of HEC Paris in Qatar, Dr. Pablo Martin de Holan, speaking at the event.

Dr. Delphine Acloque, French expert and Food Security Advisor to the Ministry of Municipality of Qatar, and her colleague Mark Velders (food security department, Ministry of Municipality) moderated the discussion, which explored pressing issues such as technology transformation, climate change and global food security threats. Alumni from both HEC Paris campuses in Qatar and Paris, representing a diverse group of companies specialising in the food and agricultural sector in Qatar and beyond, participated in the event. Among these alumni and entrepreneurs were representatives from Baladna Food Industries, Enbat Holdings, Algama Foods, Agrico, Farm to Plate, Vital Food Technologies, and DiFFERs. Additionally, food security experts, who collaborate with various government entities in Qatar, France, and the GCC, made significant contributions to the discussion.

Panellists shared insights from their entrepreneurial journeys and discussed the role of the private sector in supporting government efforts to address food security challenges. The lively discussions emphasized the increased investments in agri-tech and food-tech businesses and pilot projects, highlighting the GCC countries as frontrunners in this field.

Reflecting on the event, Dr. Pablo Martin de Holan, Dean of HEC Paris in Qatar, said: "Qatar's remarkable progress in the food security domain is a testament to the power of vision and innovation. Qatar National Vision 2030 is being realized through the steadfast dedication of local enterprises like Baladna, Agrico, and Enbat Holdings, which leverage cutting-edge agri-food technologies and sustainable methods, positioning Qatar as a leading example of food security in arid regions. Our panel discussion highlighted the synergy among the government, private sector, and academic institutions to continue this momentum. We, alongside our alumni, are honored to contribute to nurturing these collaborations that bolster the nation and region's food security." Efi Frager, Head of the Economic Department at the French Embassy, highlighted in her concluding remarks the importance of fostering a "holistic approach to bring together entrepreneurs, innovators, and institutions to enhance sustainability across the entire food value chain". She added, "In a world where the population is growing rapidly, and resources are becoming increasingly scarce, the need for innovation and investments in agriculture and food production is a matter that concerns us all." Her speech outlined the solid cooperation between France and Qatar in the field of agriculture, which began 6 years ago and has already led to several significant partnerships.

HEC Paris in Qatar's commitment to fostering dialogue and development in vital sectors like food security, agri-tech and food-tech aligns with its mission of shaping the future of business education and research and supporting both the private and government sector through entrepreneurship. This event provided an opportunity for knowledge-sharing and networking as well as lay the groundwork for future collaborations and advancements in these crucial areas.

Seven DFI-supported films make splash at Berlinale

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Highlighting the global impact of films supported by the Doha Film Institute (DFI), seven DFI grantees have been selected to screen in key programming sections of the 74th Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) including the official in competition.

Regarded as one of the world's most prestigious film festivals showcasing the best of art house cinema, this year's representation of DFI-supported films is another testament to the Institute's success in nurturing independent voices in cinema from the Arab world and beyond.

Fatma Hassan Alremaihi, Chief Executive Officer of DFI, said: "We are exceptionally proud of the selection of DFI-supported films at the Berlinale this year, that celebrates independent and art house productions, and often sets new benchmarks that defines contemporary cinema. The diversity of the selection underlines our mandate to support important voices, especially by emerging talents from the region and the world. All seven films stand out for the power of their content and innovation in the filmmakers' cinematic techniques that will inspire audiences with their riveting narratives of humanity. Through our various initiatives, we continue to support compelling voices and powerful stories that have the potential to shape world cinema." Films in competition include "Who Do I Belong To" by Meryam Joobeur, and "Shambhala" by Min Bahadur Bham. And films in Panorama: "Brief History of a Family" by Jianjie Lin; "Diaries from Lebanon" by Myriam El Hajj; and "Rising Up at Night" by Nelson Makengo.

The film in the 'Encounters' section is "Demba" by Mamadou Dia. And, screening in the 'Generation' segment is "Disco Afrika: A Malagasy Story" by Luck Razanajaona.



A still from *Rising Up at Night*.

WAR ON GAZA

Strikes on Rafah as Biden calls Israeli actions excessive

AGENCIES — GAZA STRIP

Israel launched new strikes on the overcrowded Gazan city of Rafah yesterday, after President Joe Biden said Israel's response has been "over the top".

Concerns mounted as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he has ordered army to "prepare to operate" in Rafah, the last major Gaza city that its ground troops have yet to attack. The United States is Israel's main international backer, providing it with billions of dollars in military aid.

But the US State Department said it does not support a ground offensive in Rafah, warning that such an operation in a city sheltering more than one million displaced Palestinians risked "disaster". And in a sign of his growing frustration with Israel's leadership, Biden said its military retaliation for the October 7 attack had gone too far.

"I'm of the view, as you know, that the conduct of the response in Gaza, in the Gaza Strip, has been over the top," the US President said.

"There are a lot of innocent people who are starving... in trouble and dying, and it's got to stop." Witnesses reported new strikes overnight on Rafah, after the Israeli military intensified air raids on a city teeming with about half of the Gaza Strip's 2.4 million people.

More than 100 people were killed in overnight Israeli bombardment in Gaza, including at least eight in Rafah.

AFP images showed scenes of devastation in Rafah' streets, where people queued for increasingly scarce water.

The territory's health ministry said more than 100 people were killed in overnight bombardment, including at least eight in Rafah.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said three children were killed in a strike in Rafah, where many displaced are trapped in tents pushed up against the Egyptian border.

"We heard the sound of a huge explosion next to our house... we found two children martyred in the street," said Jaber Al Bardini, 60.

"There is no safe place in Rafah. If they storm Rafah we will die in our homes. We have no choice. We don't want to go anywhere else."

Israel's air strikes and a ground offensive have killed at least 27,947 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the Gaza Strip.

UN chief Antonio Guterres said news of the coming Israeli push into Rafah was "alarming", saying it "would exponentially increase what is already a humanitarian nightmare".

The United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, warned against a major Israeli operation in Rafah. "There's a sense of growing anxiety and growing panic in Rafah. People have absolutely no idea where to go after Rafah," said its chief, Philippe Lazzarini.

A Hamas source told AFP there had been "positive and good discussions" in the talks for a possible ceasefire so far and expressed hopes for more progress.



People assess the damage caused by Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. (AFP)

Lebanon's Hezbollah movement said yesterday it had fired dozens of rockets into Israel overnight in response to attacks in its south, including the city of Nabatiyeh.

It came a day after an Israeli strike on a car in Nabatiyeh seriously wounded a Hezbollah commander, sources on both sides of the border said.

US strikes Huthi missile positions in Yemen: CENTCOM

AFP — WASHINGTON

The United States military confirmed on Thursday its forces conducted multiple strikes against Huthi missile systems as the Yemen-based rebel group prepared to launch attacks that threatened US Navy and merchant ships.

Beginning early Thursday Sanaa time, US Central Command forces "conducted seven self-defense strikes against four Huthi unmanned surface vessels (USV) and seven mobile anti-ship cruise missiles that were prepared to launch against ships in the Red Sea," CENTCOM said in a statement posted on X, formerly Twitter.

"CENTCOM identified these missiles and USVs in Huthi-controlled areas of Yemen and determined they presented an imminent threat to US Navy ships and merchant vessels in the region," it said.

The statement came after CENTCOM said that it had also conducted strikes late Wednesday.

The strikes "will protect freedom of navigation and make international waters safer and more secure for US Navy and merchant vessels," it said.

On Wednesday the Huthis' news agency reported that the United States and Britain had hit targets in Yemen's Hodeida province.

The rebels, who control much of war-torn Yemen including the port of Hodeida, have been targeting shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

The Huthis began the attacks in November, saying they were hitting Israel-linked vessels in support of Palestinians in Gaza.

US and British forces have responded with strikes against the Huthis, who have since declared American and British interests to be legitimate targets as well.

On Tuesday the Huthi rebels said they had struck US and British ships in two attacks in the Red Sea, causing minor damage but no casualties.

The Red Sea attacks have raised insurance premiums for shipping companies, forcing many to avoid the Red Sea, a vital route that normally carries about 12 percent of global maritime trade.

Attack targets area near Syrian military airport: War monitor

AFP — BEIRUT

The area near a military airport west of Damascus came under attack yesterday, a war monitor reported, while the defence ministry said drones entered Syrian airspace from the direction of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said "the area of the Mazzeh military airport west of the capital Damascus was targeted", without saying who was behind what it described as a "missile" attack.

"Positions belonging to Lebanon's Hezbollah and other pro-Iran groups are present" in the area, added the Britain-based Observatory, which has a wide network of sources inside Syria.

The Observatory did not immediately report any casualties.

AFP correspondents in the capital reported hearing the sound of explosions.

A statement from the defence ministry meanwhile said that at around 2:10 pm (1110 GMT), "two drones violated Syrian air space from the direction of the occupied Syrian Golan".

"Air defence systems confronted them and they were shot down west of Damascus," the statement added. While neither source specified who was behind the incident, Israel has launched hundreds of air strikes on Syria since civil war broke out in the country in 2011.

Contacted by AFP, the Israeli army said: "We do not comment on reports in the foreign media." Israel has stepped up its strikes inside its northern neighbour since October 7.

At least 18 killed in bus-truck collision in Congo's capital

AP — KINSHASA

At least 18 people were killed yesterday when the bus they were travelling on collided with a truck in the Congolese capital of Kinshasa, authorities said.

The bus collided with the truck as it tried to make a turn along a highway leading to the N'Djili International Airport, said Anaddolu Nganga, mayor of Kimbaseke municipality where the accident happened. "All the bodies of the victims were taken to the morgue of the nearby hospital," Nganga said. Only two of the passengers survived with broken arms, he said. Freddy Dongo, the head of the local road traffic agency, urged drivers to avoid excessive speeding, which is believed to be the cause of the accident.

S Africa's Ramaphosa pledges jobs in key speech

AFP — CAPE TOWN

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said on Thursday that an end to crippling power cuts was "within reach" and pledged thousands of new jobs in a key speech ahead of knife-edge elections this year.

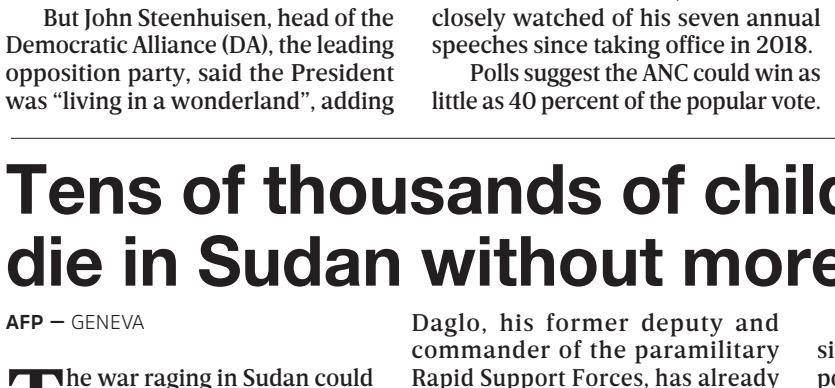
With his historically dominant African National Congress (ANC) party struggling in the polls, Ramaphosa used a state of the nation address to highlight steps taken to address the prolonged energy crisis that has vexed businesses and families alike.

"We are confident that the worst is behind us and the end of load shedding is finally within reach," he said, referring to the blackouts, in his speech to lawmakers at Cape Town City Hall.

"But we are not stopping there," he added, touting new reforms and investments including more than 14,000 kilometres (8,700 miles) of new transmission lines to accommodate renewable energy to be rolled out in the coming years.

"With our abundance of solar, wind and mineral resources, we are going to create thousands of jobs in renewable energy, green hydrogen, green steel, electric vehicles and other green products," Ramaphosa said.

Ramaphosa, 71, is facing an uphill battle to rally support behind the scandal-tainted ANC, which polls suggest risks losing its parliamentary majority for the first time.



South African President Cyril Ramaphosa (centre) gestures ahead of the state of the nation address at the City Hall in Cape Town on February 8, 2024. (AFP)

In power since the advent of democracy in 1994, the party of late anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela has been tainted by graft and mismanagement amid high unemployment and a slumbering economy.

Ramaphosa defended his record, saying his government "made significant progress on measures to grow the economy, create jobs and reduce poverty." "While we have set in motion the process of renewal and reform, there is more work to be done to see these reforms through to the end," he said.

But John Steenhuisen, head of the Democratic Alliance (DA), the leading opposition party, said the President was "living in a wonderland", adding that under his tenure the country had regressed across every single metric.

"It is not the lived reality of ordinary South Africans. Our country is desperate and I think those South Africans are very keen for the election," he told AFP outside the City Hall after the speech.

It was the third time Ramaphosa has had to give the address at City Hall after the nation's parliament was ravaged by arson in 2022.

But coming shortly before what is expected to be the most competitive vote in three decades, it was most closely watched of his seven annual speeches since taking office in 2018.

Polls suggest the ANC could win as little as 40 percent of the popular vote.



Tens of thousands of children could die in Sudan without more aid: UN

AFP — GENEVA

The war raging in Sudan could leave over 700,000 children severely malnourished this year, the UN said yesterday, warning tens of thousands could die unless aid was dramatically increased.

The United Nations children's agency Unicef urged the world to stop turning a blind eye to the catastrophe sparked by the 10-month civil war.

"The consequences of the past 300 days means that more than 700,000 children are likely to suffer from the deadliest form of malnutrition this year," spokesman James Elder told reporters in Geneva.

"We won't be able to treat more than 300,000 of them without improved access and additional support," said Elder, just back from a trip to Sudan.

"Tens of thousands will likely die." The war that broke out in April last year between Sudan's army chief Abdel Fattah Al Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, his former deputy and commander of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, has already killed thousands, according to UN experts.

That includes 10,000 to 15,000 people killed in a single city in the western Darfur region, according to UN experts.

The conflict has sparked a humanitarian disaster.

Around 25 million people — more than half the population — need aid, including nearly 18 million who face acute food insecurity, according to UN numbers.

Soaring malnutrition, coupled with the rampant spread of diseases like cholera, measles and malaria, mean children are already dying.

The Doctors Without Borders charity (MSF) said at least one child dies every two hours in the sprawling Zamzam camp for displaced people in Darfur.

The war has triggered one of the world's largest displacement crises. Nearly eight million people have fled their homes, half of them children.

"That's 13,000 children every single day for 300 days," Elder pointed out.

He said there had also been a "500-percent increase" in just one year in murders, sexual violence and recruitment of children to fight.

"That equates to terrifying numbers of children killed, raped or recruited. And these numbers are the tip of the iceberg," Elder said, reiterating the urgent need for a ceasefire, and for more aid.

The UN appealed this week for $4.1 billion to assist civilians inside Sudan and those who have fled abroad as refugees.

Of that, UNICEF requested $840 million to help reach 7.6 million of the most vulnerable children.

Elder said three-quarters of the agency's appeal last year went unfunded and urged donors to do more.

"The world needs to stop turning a blind eye," he said.

"Where is our collective humanity if we allow this situation to continue?"

NO CLEAR WINNER

Pakistan's Sharif says he will seek a coalition govt after trailing rival Khan

AP — LAHORE, PAKISTAN

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif changed tack yesterday and said he would seek to form a coalition government after his party trailed independent candidates backed by his imprisoned rival, Imran Khan, in parliamentary election results.

Sharif told supporters he was sending his brother and former premier, Shehbaz Sharif, to meet the leaders of other parties and invite them to join a coalition.

Sharif spoke after results showed candidates backed by Khan, also a former prime minister, leading in the election, a surprise given claims by Khan's supporters and a national rights body that the balloting was manipulated against him.

A former cricket star turned politician with a significant grassroots following, Khan was disqualified from running in Thursday's election because of criminal convictions. He contends his sentences and a slew of legal cases pending against him were politically motivated.

Of the 235 National Assembly results announced by Friday night, candidates backed by Khan's party had won 95 seats. The party of Nawaz Sharif had 66 seats.

Sharif had gruffly rejected the idea of a coalition, telling reporters after casting his vote Thursday that he wanted a single party running Pakistan for a full five-year term.

But yesterday he acknowledged, "we don't have enough of a majority to form a government without the support of others and we invite allies to join the coalition so we can make joint efforts to pull Pakistan out of its problems."

"I don't want to fight with those who are in the mood for fighting," he told supporters in Lahore. "We will have to sit together to settle all matters."

Khan's party's candidates were forced to run as independents after they were barred from using the party symbol — a cricket bat — to help illiterate voters find them on ballots.

Of the 235 National Assembly results — nearly 90% — announced by the election oversight body by Friday night, candidates backed by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, or PTI, had won 95 seats. The Pakistan Muslim League party of three-time premier Sharif, had 66 seats.

But with a third major party in the mix, nobody could declare outright victory. The lack of a majority did not stop Sharif's relatives and loyalists from appearing on a balcony at his party headquarters, waving to the crowds below. People threw rose petals on Sharif's car as he arrived to address party workers.

PTI chairman Gohar Khan told Pakistani news channel Geo that his party's count shows it securing a total of 150 seats, enough to form a government, though 169 seats are required for a majority in the 336-seat National Assembly, or lower house of parliament.

Observers had expected Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League to prevail and put him on track to another term as prime minister due to the disadvantages faced by Khan's party. Along with Khan being in prison and accruing more criminal convictions, election officials and police blocked his party from holding rallies and opening campaign offices, and its online events were blocked.

The PTI said the moves were intended to prevent them from competing and gaining momentum with voters. Sharif said he would approach the Pakistan People's Party of Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, the son of assassinated former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, as a coalition partner. The PPP has 51 seats. Final results were expected by midnight.



Supporters of Imran Khan's PTI party protest outside the office of a returning officer against alleged poll rigging in Peshawar yesterday. (AFP)

Indonesia frontrunner Subianto on course for majority: Poll

AFP — JAKARTA

Indonesian presidential frontrunner Prabowo Subianto is on course to secure a majority and win next week's election in a single round, a poll showed yesterday.

Nearly 205 million people are eligible to vote on February 14, with the winner set to succeed President Joko Widodo after he completes the maximum two terms ruling Southeast Asia's biggest economy.

Independent pollster Indikator Politik's survey showed Subianto — the country's defence minister and a third-time candidate — taking 51.8 percent of the vote with running mate Gibran Rakabuming Raka, Widodo's eldest son. Former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan polled at 24.1 percent while former Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo was in third at 19.6 percent ahead of the February 14 vote, the poll showed.

Less than five percent were undecided in the poll that surveyed 1,200 respondents between January 28 and February 4.

The winner of the election would need to secure more than 50 percent of votes in next week's election to automatically secure the presidency, or else face a runoff in June with the second-placed candidate.

Subianto is accused of rights abuses while serving as a military chief during Indonesia's dying days of the Suharto dictatorship a generation ago.



Indonesia's Defence Minister and presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto gestures to his supporters at an election campaign rally at the Gelora Sidoarjo Stadium in Sidoarjo, East Java, yesterday. (AFP)

Analysts say his vast wealth, nationalist verve in populist speeches and strongman credentials as chief of the influential military have all contributed to his lead.

He has also cultivated a "cute grandpa" image on social media, in a bid to win over young voters. The election has already been mired in controversy after Widodo's brother-in-law issued a ruling last year lowering the age for candidates, allowing the president's son to run for vice president. Raka, the 36-year-old mayor of Surakarta city, became Subianto's running mate in a boost for his election.

After appearing to support his son and Subianto, Widodo has been widely criticised for trying to create a political dynasty in a country long known for its nepotistic politics.

The next president will be sworn in next October.

Five dead after India madrassa demolition sparks religious clashes

AFP — DEHRADUN, INDIA

Five people were killed in India and dozens more injured after religious clashes sparked by the destruction of a madrassa, officials said yesterday, the latest in a spate of demolitions targeting Islamic structures.

Authorities in the northern state of Uttarakhand bulldozed the Islamic school and an adjoining prayer site on Thursday, claiming they had been built without permission.

Police said Muslim protesters threw stones at them in the protests that followed, prompting them to fire tear gas in response.

Five people had been killed in the clashes in Haldwani district, local official Vandana Singh told AFP. Singh earlier told reporters that dozens of others were being treated at "various hospitals".

"Orders have been given to shoot the rioters on sight," she said.

Footage of the clashes posted on social media showed Hindu residents of the district chanting anti-Muslim slogans and throwing stones at the crowd.

Authorities in Haldwani suspended internet services, closed schools, imposed a curfew and banned large gatherings after the violence broke out.

Philippines, US hold joint patrol in South China Sea

AFP — MANILA

The United States and the Philippines held their third joint sea and air patrol in three months off the Southeast Asian country's coast yesterday, the allies said.

The latest sea and air patrols in the South China Sea come as Washington seeks to strengthen its defence ties in the region in the face of an increasingly assertive China.

In separate exercises, the US and Japanese navies also held joint drills in the Philippine Sea this month in a show of force as tensions with China and North Korea rise.

Washington, which has a mutual defence pact with Manila, has denounced aggressive Chinese actions towards its ally and vowed to keep open the South China Sea, through which trillions of dollars worth of trade is shipped every year.

Beijing claims almost the entire waterway and has ignored an international ruling that its claims have no legal basis.

China also claims self-ruled Taiwan as its own and has vowed to seize the island, by force if necessary, ramping up pressure with major military drills in the Taiwan Strait.

Yesterday's sea and air patrols involved the US combat ship USS Gabrielle Giffords and an MH-60S Sea Hawk helicopter, along with the Philippine Navy's BRP Gregorio del Pilar warship and an AW109 helicopter.

The Philippine military said the patrol was held in its exclusive economic zone but did not provide an exact location.

"Sailing and operating together demonstrates our commitment to improving our interoperability and continued coordination," Captain Sean Lewis, commodore of US Destroyer Squadron 7, said in a statement.

Azerbaijan's Aliyev officially wins new term by landslide

AP — BAKU, AZERBAIJAN

President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan has officially won another term in office with 92.12% of the vote, the country's Central Election Commission said yesterday.

Election monitors, however, have expressed concern about the vote. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said Thursday that the election took place in a restrictive environment with no real political competition.

Aliyev has been in power for more than 20 years. He had called an early vote while he was enjoying a surge in popularity after his forces swiftly reclaimed the Karabakh region from ethnic Armenian separatists who had controlled it for three decades. He is now heading into another seven-year term in office. The election on Wednesday, "took place in a restrictive environment and... was marked with the stifling of critical voices," said Artur Gerasymov, special coordinator and leader of the OSCE group of election observers in Azerbaijan.

Aliyev was "not meaningfully challenged," and because of limitations on independent media, civil society and other political parties, the contest was "devoid of genuine pluralism," Gerasymov said Thursday. He added that the "near absence of analytical reporting" in Azerbaijani media hampered voters' ability to make an informed choice.

Analysts suggested that Aliyev moved the election forward to capitalize on his burst in popularity following September's blitz in Karabakh. He will be in the limelight again in November when Azerbaijan, a country which relies heavily on revenues from fossil fuels, hosts a UN climate change conference.

Aliyev, 62, has been in power since 2003 when he succeeded his father, who was Azerbaijan's Communist boss and then president for a decade when the country became independent after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Aliyev had declared that he wanted this election to "mark the beginning of a new era," in which Azerbaijan has full control over its territory. He and his family cast their ballots in Khankendi, a city that was called Stepanakert by Armenians when it housed the headquarters of the self-declared separatist government.

Azerbaijan regained parts of Karabakh and most of the surrounding territory in 2020.



North Korea marks military founding anniversary

Young students dance to mark the 76th founding anniversary of the Korean People's Army, at Arch of Triumph Square in Pyongyang, North Korea. (AFP)

Bird flu kills nine-year-old in Cambodia

AFP — PHNOM PENH

A nine-year-old Cambodian boy has died from bird flu, the kingdom's health ministry said yesterday, warning of a continuing threat from the virus that killed three other people last year.

The boy in northeastern Kratie province fell ill after eating poultry with his family, suffering fever, coughing and breathing difficulties before dying on Thursday.

The ministry said tests confirmed the boy died from the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of the virus.

"According to the evidence, five chickens and three ducks had died at the patient's home, and they cooked the chickens and ducks for food to eat," the ministry said in a statement.

It said health officials were investigating the source of the virus and searching for more cases.

"The ministry of health again reminds all people to be vigilant about bird flu because H5N1 continues to threaten the health of our people," the statement added.

Japan to attract more foreign workers as its population shrinks

AP — TOKYO

The Japanese government adopted plans yesterday to scrap its current foreign trainee programme, which has been criticized as a cover for importing cheap labour, and replace it with a system it says will actually teach skills and safeguard trainees' rights as Japan desperately seeks more foreign workers to supplement its aging and shrinking workforce.

Under the new programme approved yesterday at a meeting of related Cabinet ministers, people who arrive on a three-year trainee visa will be able to upgrade to a skilled worker category that would allow them to stay up to five years and possibly obtain permanent residency.

Japan's population of 126 million is rapidly aging and shrinking, and many short-staffed industries, including services, manufacturing and construction, rely heavily on foreign trainees and language students. Japan also grants visas to some white-collar professionals, often from the West.

The current Technical Intern Training Program, introduced in 1993 as a way of transferring skills to developing countries through youth training, has been criticized as a scheme for importing cheap labour under abusive conditions and unequal benefits. As of last June, nearly 360,000 trainees were participating in the program, with most from Vietnam, followed by Indonesia and the Philippines, according to government data.

The new plan, which still requires parliamentary approval, follows the recommendation of a government panel last year that the current system be abolished after reports of rampant abuses, labor rights violations and other maltreatment.

The new program will continue to restrict which types of jobs are available to foreign trainees, as the conservative governing party remains reluctant to allow a more open immigration policy. Japan's lack of diversity and inclusivity as well as its comparatively low pay has been making it less attractive to foreign workers, who are increasingly choosing other Asian countries.

CLASH OVER EU POLICIES

Farmers ramp up protests in Italy, Spain and Poland

AP — MADRID

Farmers in Italy, Spain and Poland demonstrated yesterday as part of ongoing protests against European Union farming policies and to demand measures to combat production cost hikes, reduced profits and unfair competition from non-EU countries.

Similar protests have taken place across the bloc in recent weeks. Farmers complain that the 27-nation EU's policies on the environment and other matters are a financial burden and make their products more expensive than non-EU imports.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, has made some concessions over the last few weeks, including shelving plans to halve the use of pesticides and other dangerous substances. Nonetheless, the protests have spread.

In Poland, where imports of cheap grain, milk and other produce from Ukraine have caused particular anger, farmers drove tractors across the country to slow down traffic and block major roads, some displaying signs that read "EU Policy is Ruining Polish Farmers." Access roads to border crossings with Ukraine in Hrebenne and Dorohusk, in the east, were blocked by tractors, with only a trickle of traffic being let through.

Farmers complain that the 27-nation EU's policies on the environment and other matters are a financial burden and make their products more expensive than non-EU imports.

In the western city of Poznan, the police estimated that some 1,400 tractors entered the streets and reached the office of the regional governor.

Protesters lit flares there and placed a coffin, symbolizing the death of Polish agriculture, as well as a manure-filled wheelbarrow with a EU flag stuck in it. There was no violence reported.

Agriculture Minister Czesław Siekierski said he understood the grievances and he would talk to the farmers, who said they were also protesting on behalf of Polish consumers.

Deputy Prime Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz called on the EU commissioner for agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski, Poland's former agriculture minister, to resign. There was no immediate reaction from Wojciechowski.

The organizers, the Solidarity Union of Individual Farmers, said EU policies triggered the protest.

"The protest is directed against the policy of the European Union, against the Green Deal and against the policy that allows for an uncontrolled inflow of farming produce from Ukraine," Adrian Wawrzyniak, spokesman for the union, told The Associated Press.

He said storage warehouses are filled with Ukraine grain, causing prices to fall 40% in 2023. Demand for Polish sugar, milk and meat has fallen: as a result, farmers are holding off on investments.

Farmers are also concerned that the EU's Green Deal, which calls for limits on the use of chemicals and on greenhouse gas emissions, will result in a reduction in production and income. They say that the EU's requirement for 4% of farmland to be devoted to biodiversity and landscape protection will also have a negative effect on their output.



Farmers are seen outside a government office in Poznan, Poland, as their representatives attend a meeting with the Head of the Greater Poland region yesterday. (AFP)

In Italy, a small convoy of tractors moved across Rome's historical center to the Colosseum, escorted by police patrols.

Farmers have been peacefully protesting outside of Rome and across the country for days to express their discontent Premier Giorgia Meloni has repeatedly said that her right-wing government has already addressed some of the farmers' key requests, but many of them feel neglected.

A meeting between a delegation of farmers' institutional organizations and Agriculture Minister Francesco Lollobrigida has been called for yesterday afternoon. Many Italian farmers say they don't feel represented by large sector associations, which they say are removed from their daily struggles.

Farmers in Spain staged similar actions in their fourth straight day of protests.

Besides EU policies, Spanish farmers maintain that a law aimed at guaranteeing that wholesale major supermarket buyers pay fair prices for their goods isn't being enforced while consumer prices soar.

Putin uses Tucker Carlson interview to press his Ukraine narrative

AP — MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin used an interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson to push his narrative on the war in Ukraine, urge Washington to recognise Moscow's interests and press Kiev to sit down for talks.

For more than two hours, a largely unchallenged Putin showered Carlson with Russian history and Kremlin talking points. Putin repeated his claim the full-scale invasion in February 2022 - which Kiev and its allies describe as an unprovoked act of aggression - was to protect Russian interests and prevent Ukraine from posing a threat to Russia by joining NATO.

Released Thursday, it was Putin's first interview with a Western media figure since the invasion. Appearing confident and at ease, he made occasional friendly jabs at Carlson, who appeared baffled by the history lecture and tried to interject questions, but the 71-year-old Russian leader stayed on topic for over 20 minutes.

Carlson didn't ask Putin about war crimes Russian troops have been accused of in Ukraine, or about his relentless crackdown on dissent. Putin said it's up to Washington to stop supplying weapons to Ukraine, which he called a US "satellite," and persuade Kiev to negotiate, saying a deal was the way to end the war.

"We have never refused negotiations," Putin said. "You should tell the current Ukrainian leadership to stop and come to a negotiating table."

Putin said the West won't succeed in inflicting a "strategic defeat" on Russia in Ukraine and rejected allegations that Moscow harbors plans to attack Poland or other NATO countries.

He said Russia is ready to negotiate a prisoner exchange for Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who was jailed in March 2023 on espionage charges he denies. He suggested Moscow wants the release of a Russian imprisoned in Germany.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby tried to minimise the impact of Carlson's interview ahead of its release, saying,

"Remember, you're listening to Vladimir Putin. And you shouldn't take at face value anything he has to say." Russian media yesterday gave the interview blanket coverage, with major broadcasters showing excerpts and one state news agency describing it as "a dagger blow through the curtain of propaganda of the dishonest media of the civilized world."

Asked why the Kremlin granted Carlson's interview request out of many from Western media, Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the former Fox host's position is different from a "one-sided" stance by other outlets.

Thousands of doctors in England to strike again

AP — LONDON

Thousands of doctors in the early years of their careers in England are to go on strike later this month for another five-day stretch as their long-standing pay dispute with the British government remains in stasis.

The British Medical Association, the union that represents the so-called junior doctors, said yesterday that the government had "failed to meet the deadline to put an improved pay offer on the table" and that they would go on strike from Feb. 24 to Feb. 28.

The junior doctors, who form the backbone of hospital and clinical care as they train up to be specialists in a particular field, have walked off the job on nine occasions over the past year and last month they went on strike for six days, the longest in the history of the state-funded National Health Service.

"We remain willing to carry on talking and to cancel the forthcoming strikes if significant progress is made and a credible offer is put forward," the BMA's junior doctors committee co-chairs Dr. Robert Laurenson and Dr. Vivek Trivedi said.

The union says newly qualified doctors earn £15.53 ($19.37) an hour — the UK minimum wage is just over 10 pounds an hour — though salaries rise rapidly after the first year. The BMA has been asking for 35% "pay restoration" as its starting position, but has said it is willing to negotiate.

The Conservative government has said it won't negotiate unless the union calls off the strike.

"We already provided them with a pay increase of up to 10.3% and were prepared to go further," said Health Secretary Victoria Atkins.

IN BRIEF

Germany shelves plan to drop 'race' from constitution

AFP —BERLIN: Germany has abandoned a plan to drop the term "race" from its constitution over legal concerns and reservations from the Jewish community, government sources told *AFP* yesterday.

The parliamentary groups of Germany's three governing parties have agreed to shelve the plans, the sources said, confirming a report in the Rheinische Post newspaper.

Josef Schuster, the head of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, had spoken out against removing the term, reasoning that it served as a reminder of the persecution and murder of millions of people, "especially Jews".

Germany's constitution known as the Basic Law has been in place since 1949 as a bulwark against dictatorships like the Nazi regime which championed racist politics.

Paragraph three states that "no person shall be favoured or disfavoured because of gender, parentage, race, language, homeland and origin, faith or religious or political opinions".

Debate around the term "race" in the constitution intensified after the killing of George Floyd in US police custody in 2020 and the associated Black Lives Matter protests.

Scientists warn of more volcanic activity in Iceland

AP —LONDON: A volcanic eruption in southwestern Iceland appears to have subsided, though scientists are warning that the area may experience further eruptions in the coming months.

Iceland's Meteorological Office said late Thursday that the eruption had decreased significantly. The eruption began at about 6 a.m. local time on Thursday in the area northeast of Mount Sýlingarfell, the Met Office said. It prompted the evacuation of the popular Blue Lagoon thermal spa and cut off heat and hot water to several communities on the Reykjanes Peninsula in southwestern corner of the island.

Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir said authorities hoped to restore hot water to the area by midday yesterday, national broadcaster RUV reported. The eruption site is about 4km (2½ miles) northeast of Grindavik, a coastal town of 3,800 people that was evacuated before a previous eruption on Dec. 18. The town wasn't threatened by Thursday's eruption.

Benedikt Ófeigsson, a geophysicist at the Icelandic Met Office, told RUV that the area can expect an eruption every month or so over the next few months.

"In the long term, it's very difficult to say, but in the short term, the next months, we will probably continue to see repeated magma intrusions and eruptions," he said.

Ukraine claims drone strikes on Russian oil refineries

AFP — KIEV

Ukraine fired drones at two separate Russian oil refineries overnight yeserday, sparking at least one large fire, a source in Kiev's security services told *AFP* yesterday.

Kiev has ramped up strikes on Russian oil and gas facilities over the past two months, part of what it has called "fair" retaliation on infrastructure used to fuel Russia's war.

Ukrainian drones hit two refineries in Russia's southern Krasnodar region at once, "not only the Ilsky refinery, but also the Afipsky refinery," the source said.

"These refineries are legitimate targets. Not only do they work for defence and provide fuel for Russian troops, but they are also important for the Russian economy," it added.

Videos shared on social media showed flames at the refinery in Ilsky, a small town about 50km inland from the Black Sea coast.

Local rescue services confirmed a fire had erupted overnight at the refinery, but did not say whether the blaze was caused by a drone attack.

Damage at the refinery in the nearby town of Afipsky was not immediately clear, the Ukrainian source said. Russia and Ukraine said yesterday they had fired a total of 35 drones at each other overnight, as both sides wage nightly attempts to strike targets behind the static frontline. Russia's military shot down 19 Ukrainian drones over four different regions and the Black Sea, the defence ministry said, while Ukraine said it shot down 10 of 16 drones Russia fired.



Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Oleksandr Syrsky (left) and Head of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, Lieutenant-General Kyrylo Budanov, during an awards ceremony for the military members by the Ukrainian President, in Kiev, yesterday.

Russia's defence ministry said its "air defences had intercepted and destroyed drones in the regions of Kursk (2), Bryansk (5), Oryol (4), Krasnodar (2) and over the Black Sea (6)." The drones in Oryol, some 170 kilometres from the border with Ukraine, were also aimed at energy infrastructure, regional governor Andrei Klychkov wrote on Telegram.

Ukraine's air force said Russia fired 16 Iranian-made Shahed drones from bases in the annexed Crimean peninsula and the western Kursk region. "As a result of combat operations, 10 Shaheds were destroyed in Mykolaiv, Kherson and Kharkiv regions," it said in a statement.

In recent months, Ukraine has upped drone attacks against Russian territory, mainly targeting border regions, but also the capital Moscow and the northern city of Saint Petersburg.

Prince Harry settles UK hacking lawsuit against *Mirror* tabloid

AFP — LONDON

Britain's Prince Harry yesterday settled a long-running lawsuit against Mirror Group Newspapers (MGN) but vowed to continue his legal battles with several other UK media outlets.

The Duke of Sussex sued MGN — which publishes *The Mirror, Sunday Mirror and Sunday People* tabloids — alleging its journalists were linked to deceptive and unlawful methods, including phone hacking. A High Court judge ruled in the prince's favour in December, concluding phone hacking had been "widespread and habitual" at MGN titles in the late 1990s and the duke's phone had been tapped to a "modest extent".

Judge Timothy Fancourt awarded him £140,600 ($177,300) in damages, after finding evidence of these practices in 15 of the 33 sample articles that Harry had submitted in the case.

Harry's legal claim had included a further 115 articles, and they might have become the subject of a further trial.

But following a High Court hearing yesterday, not attended by Harry, his lawyer David Sherborne confirmed a settlement had been reached with MGN to end the outstanding parts of his claim.

"Everything we said was happening at Mirror Group was in fact happening and indeed far worse, as the court ruled in an extremely damaging judgment," Harry said in a statement read out by Sherborne outside court.

"As I said back in December, our mission continues," he added.

"I believe in the positive change it will bring for all of us. It is the very reason why I started this and why I will continue to see it through to the end." MGN will pay him "a substantial additional sum by way of damages and all the costs of his claim", Sherborne revealed.

He said this included an interim payment towards the costs of £400,000.

Harry, the younger son of King Charles III, is one of seven high-profile people, including Elton John, bringing legal action against the publisher of the Daily Mail over allegations of unlawful information gathering.

UKRAINE-RUSSIA WAR

Scholz urges US Congress to approve Ukraine aid

AFP — WASHINGTON

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz urged the US Congress to approve a long-delayed, multi-billion-dollar aid package for Ukraine's military ahead of a White House meeting with President Joe Biden yesterday.

"Without US help, the situation in Ukraine would be very complicated," he told a press conference, urging Congress to act "very soon."

The Scholz-Biden meeting was likely also feature talks on escalating tensions in the Middle East, where Israel's war against Hamas shows no sign of let up and Washington has launched strikes on Iran-linked targets following attacks on American troops.

Biden could also bring up the issue of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who is imprisoned in Russia.

President Vladimir Putin hinted on Thursday that he was interested in a prisoner swap where the US reporter would be freed as part of a deal in which Germany would release a Russian convicted of assassinating a fugitive former Chechen rebel in Berlin.

Ukraine, however, is likely to dominate the Oval Office meeting. The pro-Western country is entering its third year of war against Russian invasion as the US Republican Party, led by presidential candidate Donald Trump, is increasingly turning its back.

The Senate is debating a bill to renew the flow of weapons, ammunition and other crucial help for Ukraine's battered army, but the bill -- if passed -- faces an even harder hurdle in the Republican-led House of Representatives. The United States is Kiev's biggest military backer and Germany its second.

> "Without US help, the situation in Ukraine would be very complicated," he told a press conference, urging Congress to act "very soon."

The Senate package would authorize $60bn in military aid for Kiev. In Europe, meanwhile, EU leaders last week finally overcame stalling by right-wing Hungarian leader Viktor Orban and gave the green light to €50bn ($54bn) in economic aid.

Ahead of his trip, Scholz wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* to warn that a Russian victory in Ukraine would "dramatically change the face of Europe" and "deal a severe blow to the liberal world order."

The Middle East was to be in focus at yesterday's talks. Regional tensions rose after the death of three American soldiers in Jordan at the end of January, marking the first US military losses to hostile fire in the region since the Israel-Hamas war broke out on October 7.

Germany has backed Israel but also repeatedly warned of the dangers of a wider conflict, while stepping up calls for more humanitarian aid to reach the war-ravaged Gaza Strip.

Biden sharpened his criticism of Israel in remarks late Thursday when he said that the military operation in Gaza "has been over the top."

Bolsonaro surrenders passport in Brazil 'coup' investigation

AFP — BRASÍLIA

Brazil's ex-president Jair Bolsonaro surrendered his passport on Thursday as police raids targeted him and his inner circle over allegations of orchestrating an invasion of government buildings last year.

Federal police said they were carrying out 33 search and seizure operations and executing four arrest warrants in an investigation of a "criminal organization involved in the attempted coup" -- a reference to Bolsonaro supporters' storming of the presidential palace, Congress and Supreme Court on January 8, 2023.

The raids were authorized by Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who also ordered that multiple suspects be suspended from public duties and surrender their passports within 24 hours.

That included Bolsonaro, whose lawyer and adviser Fabio Wajngarten confirmed in a statement on X, formerly Twitter, that the far-right ex-army captain's passport had been handed over to authorities.

Bolsonaro called himself the victim of "relentless persecution," in comments to a journalist for newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo. The former president, who was in the United States at the time of the riots, has repeatedly denied responsibility.

Four army generals were also targeted in the raids, including Bolsonaro's former defense minister and vice presidential candidate Walter Braga Netto, and one of the ex-president's closest advisors, Augusto Heleno.

The head of Bolsonaro's Liberal Party (PL), Valdemar Costa Neto, was also targeted.

Three people have been arrested so far in the operation, according to Brazilian media reports: two army officers and a former international affairs adviser to Bolsonaro, Filipe Martins.

The riots came a week after President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's inauguration following a narrow election win in October 2022 over Bolsonaro, who served as president from 2019 to 2022.

Tens of thousands of Bolsonaro supporters stormed the halls of power, trashing the premises and calling for the military to oust veteran leftist Lula, alleging, without evidence, that the election was stolen.

The episode drew comparisons to the assault on the US Capitol in Washington almost exactly two years earlier by supporters of Donald Trump, Bolsonaro's political role model.



US senators celebrate military aid policy

Senate Minority Whip Richard Durbin (centre) talks to reporters with Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Tim Kaine, Senator Chris Van Hollen, Senator Peter Welch and Senator Edward Markey during a news conference at the US Capitol to celebrate a new policy that demands recipients of foreign military aid adhere to international humanitarian law yesterday in Washington, DC. (AFP)

Chile bids farewell to ex-president Pinera in state funeral

AFP — SANTIAGO

Chile yesterday held a state funeral for former president Sebastian Pinera, who died this week when the helicopter he was piloting plummeted into a lake.

A military band in red conical hats played as Pinera's coffin, draped in the Chilean flag, was escorted to a cathedral in Santiago by guards on horseback for his funeral mass.

Pinera will later be buried in a private family ceremony attended by his widow, four children and grandchildren.

Former presidents and politicians from across the political spectrum attended the funeral ceremonies for Pinera, who ruled Chile from 2010 to 2014, and again between 2018 and 2022.

The 74-year-old billionaire returned the right wing to power for the first time after casting off the baggage of former dictator Augusto Pinochet. His first term saw him oversee the reconstruction after a major earthquake, as well as the gripping rescue of 33 miners trapped in the Atacama Desert, both in 2010.

Four of these miners -- whose 69-day plight had the world on the edge of its seat -- paid tribute to Pinera and served as guards of honor on Thursday as he lay in state at Congress.

"Our rescue was very difficult, and we can thank (Pinera) for the fact that we are alive," said Luis Urzua, who was shift chief when the mine collapsed at a depth of 700 meters.

He said he had previously gone on helicopter rides with Pinera, saying it was the former leader's "passion, his life." Pinera's helicopter crashed shortly after take-off into a lake on Tuesday where he and his family were on holiday some 920 kilometers (570 miles) south of Santiago.

Three other passengers survived the crash.

- Troubled second term -Pinera's second term was fraught with trouble as he faced social uprising, the Covid-19 pandemic and the worst economic crisis in decades.

Leftist President Gabriel Boric, who led the opposition against Pinera before succeeding him in 2022, admitted in a ceremony in Congress yesterday that "complaints and recriminations" against Pinera had sometimes gone "beyond what was fair and reasonable."

"I recognize and appreciate that he never shied away from providing help and advice, despite the public differences we had in the past," Boric said.

He said Pinera had phoned him the day before his death to discuss the deadly wildfires that left 131 dead in the coastal region of Valparaiso.

Former socialist president Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010 and 2014-2018) described Pinera as a politician who "both during the dictatorship and the (social) uprising, chose the institutional solution of giving a voice to the people through the ballot box."

Colombia, FARC dissident group to hold peace talks

AFP — BOGOTÁ

The Colombian government will hold fresh peace talks with one of the main dissident FARC guerrilla groups still active in the country, according to a document released yesterday.

The group is under the control of former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) senior commander Ivan Marquez who helped negotiate a key 2016 peace deal before taking up arms again in 2019.

An 11-point document signed by both the government and the group, Segunda Marquetalia, announced the start of "dialogue leading to the signing of a peace agreement."

The parties also agreed to "immediately develop preliminary agreements to de-escalate the conflict."

When Marquez appeared in a video in camouflage, carrying a rifle, and announced he was taking up arms again, it struck a blow to a national peace process begun in 2016 which allowed 7,000 fighters with the most feared guerilla group in Latin America to return to civilian life.

Segunda Marquetalia has around 1,600 men, according to military intelligence.

Colombia's first leftist president, Gustavo Petro, has sought to put an end to six decades of conflict between the country's security forces, guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and drug gangs.

Since he took office in 2022, he has launched peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN) — which has around 5,800 fighters — and the Central General Staff (EMC), another FARC breakaway, which numbers 3,500.

However, Petro's "total peace" process has faced multiple setbacks with the guerrillas, linked to drug trafficking, accused by rights groups of taking advantage of various ceasefires to expand their influence, seizing more territory and recruiting new members.

IN BRIEF

El Salvador President's imprisoned former security adviser passes away

AFP — San Salvador: A former national security adviser to Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele died in hospital while in custody on espionage charges, official sources reported Thursday.

After being arrested last August, Alejandro Muyshondt suffered a stroke that left him unable to speak or move at the end of last year.

His death on Wednesday night was confirmed by the Institute of Forensic Medicine which said pulmonary edema, a condition caused by too much fluid in the lungs, was the preliminary cause, according to the report, which was published in local media.

Following Muyshondt's arrest, Bukele accused him of being a "double agent" after he made accusations against a pro-government lawmaker. "During its investigations, the State Intelligence Agency discovered that Mr Muyshondt had been acting as a double agent since 2019" and had allegedly been working for scandal-plagued ex-president Mauricio Funes who led the country from 2009-2014, Bukele said.

Leader of Mexico missing persons group shot dead

AFP — Mexico City: The president of an organisation dedicated to searching for missing persons in Mexico was shot dead on Thursday, a local human rights commission said.

Angelica Leon, who led the group "Union and Strength for Our Disappeared," was killed in the town of Tecate, said the Human Rights Commission of the northern state of Baja California.

The rights body called on the Public Prosecutor's Office to "carry out the necessary investigations to determine the origin of this aggression and avoid impunity."

It added that it had opened its own investigation to examine the actions of authorities in the case, which it said was an "attack on a human rights defender". Leon's brother, Jose Juan Vazquez Leon, has been missing since June 27, 2018.

Trump wins Nevada's Republican caucuses

AP — LAS VEGAS

Former President Donald Trump won Nevada's Republican presidential caucuses Thursday after he was the only major candidate to compete, winning his third straight state as he tries to secure his party's nomination.

Former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, his last major rival still in the race, skipped the caucuses even though they are the only contest in Nevada that counts toward the GOP nomination. Haley cited what she considered an unfair process favoring Trump and instead ran in Nevada's symbolic state-run presidential primary on Tuesday, when she finished behind the "none of these candidates" option.

Trump will win most, if not all, of the state's 26 delegates. He needs to accrue 1,215 delegates to formally clinch the party's nomination and could reach that number in March.

From Nevada, the GOP contest pivots to the South Carolina primary in Haley's home state on Feb. 24. Trump remains popular in the deeply conservative state but Haley, who won two elections as South Carolina's governor, is hoping her local roots give her an edge. Trump is eyeing a massive delegate haul during the March 5 Super Tuesday contests, which would move him closer to becoming the GOP's presumptive nominee.

Trump, delivering a brief victory speech in Las Vegas, basked in reports of long lines in the Western state and told his supporters he was eager to declare victory in the upcoming South Carolina primary.

"We're leading everybody," he said. "Is there any way we can call the election for next Tuesday? That's all I want." Though Trump has been the front-runner, Nevada's caucuses were seen as especially skewed in his favor due to the intense grassroots support caucuses require candidates to harness around a state in order to win. Nevada's state party gave him a greater edge last year when it barred candidates from running both in the primary and caucuses and also restricted the role of super PACs like the groups that were key to Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' campaign before he dropped out.



Kathryn Burgum applauds as her husband Republican Governor of North Dakota Doug Burgum shakes hands with former US President and 2024 presidential hopeful Donald Trump during a Caucus night watch party in Las Vegas, Nevada, on February 8, 2024. (AFP)

Caucuses typically require voters to show up for an in-person meeting at a certain day or time, while elections can offer more flexibility to participate, with polls open for most of the day on Election Day along with absentee or early voting. Nevada Republicans said they wanted certain rules in place like a requirement that participants show a government-issued ID. Trump's supporters waited in long lines Thursday. At one caucus site at a Reno-area elementary school, a line of nearly 1,000 people stretched around the corner and down the street 20 minutes after the caucuses opened.

Voters in line, some of whom were wearing Trump hats and shirts, said they came out to back the former president in a contest that would give him a third straight win in the Republican presidential race. "I think it's about backing Trump up and giving him the support that he needs. And to let people know that we're supporting him," said Heather Kirkwood, 47.

Trump has long been immensely popular among Nevada Republicans, but he had other perceived advantages among the party's key figures. Nevada GOP Party Chair Michael McDonald and the state's Republican National Committeeman Jim DeGraffenreid were among six Republicans in the state indicted on felony charges that they were so-called fake electors who sent certificates to Congress falsely claiming Trump won Nevada in 2020.

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EDITORIAL

Qatar as ultimate tourism destination

IN recent years, Qatar has emerged as a frontrunner in the global tourism landscape, positioning itself as the ultimate destination for travellers seeking unparalleled experiences. With initiatives like the 'Stopover flight packages in Qatar' introduced recently by Visit Qatar and Qatar Airways, the nation is poised to elevate its status further and attract even more visitors from around the globe.

The collaboration between Visit Qatar and Qatar Airways underscores a concerted effort to showcase Qatar's rich cultural heritage, diverse attractions, and modern infrastructure to travellers transiting through Doha. H E Saad bin Ali Al Kharji, Chairman of Qatar Tourism, rightly pointed out that these stopover packages offer travellers the chance to expand their horizons and explore into the myriad experiences Qatar has to offer, even with limited time.

The success of these initiatives is evident in the impressive growth witnessed by Qatar's tourism sector. In 2023, the number of travellers and hotel room nights for stopovers more than doubled compared to the previous year, propelled by Qatar Airways' extensive network of over 177 international destinations. Notably, January 2024 marked a historic milestone with over 700,000 visitors, setting a new monthly record and showcasing the sector's exponential growth trajectory. With ambitions to welcome six million annual visitors by 2030, Qatar is steadfast in its commitment to becoming a top-tier global tourism hub.

Crucially, Qatar's tourism strategy aligns with its broader economic diversification goals, as outlined in the 3rd National Development Strategy 2024-2030. Recognising tourism as a key driver of sustainable economic growth, the strategy emphasises enhancing business event tourism, expanding meeting and exhibition activities, and leveraging the country's enhanced infrastructure to create unparalleled visitor experiences.

Qatar's stellar performance on the global tourism stage has been further affirmed by accolades such as being the best-performing destination globally in terms of tourist arrivals, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) World Tourism Barometer. This recognition underscores Qatar's resilience and adaptability in navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic, emerging as a beacon of recovery and growth in the tourism sector.

Moreover, the extension of initiatives like Hayya for existing cardholders and the relaunch of the Hayya platform have also contributed to bolstering Qatar's tourism appeal, making it easier and more convenient for travellers to visit. With visitors hailing from diverse corners of the globe, Qatar's allure transcends borders, offering a truly immersive and enriching experience for all who venture to its shores.

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'The war is ugly': Palestinian minister recounts 90 days in Gaza

HOSSAM EZZEDINE — AFP

Palestinian culture minister Atef Abu Seif was in Gaza on October 7 for a planned ceremony when the Hamas attack on Israel set off the war and left him trapped for 90 days.

During those painful months, Abu Seif said he witnessed unimaginable death and destruction and lost countless relatives and friends in the coastal territory where he was born.

Now back in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank after he managed to escape the war zone, Abu Seif, 50, talked to *AFP* about the traumatic experience.

"Gaza is no longer Gaza," he said. After the war ends, he added, "we will need a new Gaza".

The minister was in the territory on October 7, which marked Palestinian Heritage Day, for a planned ceremony at Al Qarara Museum in the southern city of Khan Yunis.

"I wanted to celebrate the launch of Palestinian Heritage Day from Gaza for the first time in history," he said. But it was not to be.

Israel, vowing to eliminate Hamas, launched relentless air strikes and a ground offensive that have killed at least 27,840 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in Gaza.

Abu Seif said the toll includes many of his friends and "more than 100 relatives, including my sister-in-law and her children".



Palestinian Culture Minister Atef Abu Saif (left) addresses a press conference in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Tuesday. (AFP)

During those painful months, Abu Seif said he witnessed unimaginable death and destruction and lost countless relatives and friends in the coastal territory where he was born.

Abu Seif said he spent the first 48 days of the war with his 17-year-old son and family members in the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza.

But then their home was hit by an Israeli strike, forcing them to flee, like half of Gaza's population of 2.4 million.

They headed south to Rafah, on the border with Egypt, which Israel now says is the next target of its military campaign.

From his days in Jabalia, Abu Seif has painful memories, including helping pull bodies from under the rubble after a strike hit a relative's home.

"We were shocked to find that a body which a friend retrieved belonged to his 16-year-old son," said Abu Seif. "The war in Gaza is ugly."

Abu Seif said he eventually managed to leave Gaza through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt to return to Ramallah via Jordan.

"I cannot imagine what my neighbourhood in the (Jabalia) camp looks like now," he said.

And what will happen, he said, when he returns one day to Gaza and does "not find half of my friends alive"?

"All the grief of the people of Gaza is postponed... because the sadness has no longer a meaning and is no longer useful in survival." Before the war, Abu Seif used to travel to Gaza from Ramallah on Thursdays to link up with his friends for the weekend.

He said now "almost half of them" have been killed.

His ministry says the damage has been immense to Gaza's cultural heritage.

Around 195 historical buildings, including mosques and churches, and 24 cultural institutes have been damaged or destroyed, it says.

The Al Qarara Museum, which was surrounded by 5,000-year-old Roman columns, and an ancient Phoenician harbour have also been destroyed, said Abu Seif.

Abu Seif criticised the UN's cultural agency Unesco "for keeping silent" on the destruction.

After his return home, Abu Seif urged Palestinian authors and academics living in Gaza to write about their lives there.

The result is a collection of stories from 24 authors called "Writing Behind the Lines".

One account entitled "The Donkey of Return" tells the story of Gazans forced to use donkey-drawn carts amid dire fuel shortages.

Others relate to the challenges of the internally displaced with titles such as "Seven times displaced" and "We hope to survive".

"It is important for Gaza's writers... to write about their lives," said Abu Seif. "We want the world to read them."

It's been a year since earthquake and Syrians feel forgotten once again

RASHA MUHREZ — AL JAZEERA

When the earthquakes hit Turkiye and Syria last year, claiming more than 50,000 lives, the question in the minds of many Syrians, myself included, was: "Could things get any worse?" Unfortunately, things did get worse. The majority of Syrians affected by the earthquake have not been able to move on from the devastation. I see this in my own family. My 16-year-old cousin Naya has been unable to get over losing her sister – my 18-year-old cousin Maya – who was killed along with four other family members when our family home in Jableh collapsed.

Her relentless grief is apparent in the steady stream of social media posts of all-black images and broken-heart emojis. On the earthquake anniversary, she wrote: "It's been a year, Mimi, and you are far away from us. We miss your voice. We miss your laugh. We miss you so much. There is nothing in the world to compensate for your absence from us."

We often ask ourselves if our loved ones could have been saved, if only the rescue teams had arrived on time, if only the world had not turned its back on Syrians, if only the war had never happened. My cousins' bodies were still warm when they were taken out of the rubble.

The earthquake ravaged an already suffering population. Syrians lost family members, homes, livelihoods, the little sense of stability they may have had amid the continuing war.

Over the past year, the number of Syrians requiring humanitarian assistance has surged from 15.3 million to 16.7 million, the highest since the start of hostilities about 13 years ago. And yet, the greater need has not been met with adequate funding; to the contrary, contributions have dwindled.

As humanitarian workers, we are told to prioritise – that is to make impossible choices. If the situation does not change, I fear there will be catastrophic consequences for Syrian children. Since the earthquake, the country has faced a number of challenges that have only exacerbated the situation, including renewed conflict, a severe economic crisis, and climate change-related disasters.

The most significant escalation in conflict in the past five years hit northern Syria in October, killing and injuring dozens and displacing at least 120,000 in opposition-held northwest Syria. Airstrikes in southern and central Syria in January have posed additional threats.

The ongoing economic crisis, worsened by sanctions, has made life unbearable for ordinary Syrians. In 2023, the Syrian currency lost nearly 60 percent of its value to the dollar. This was accompanied by skyrocketing inflation which transformed basic necessities into luxuries. A staggering 90 percent of households struggled to cover essential needs, leaving families to make tough decisions for their children.

Last year's earthquake devastated parts of Syria already ravaged by war. Since then humanitarian needs have gone up, but aid has dwindled.

"We are barely surviving... everything has become expensive," said Zaina*, a mother of six, living in an informal camp in Raqqa supported by Save the Children.

"I light a fire with wood, turning it into cinders [and bring it inside the tent to keep my children warm]. You know, it smokes a lot and it impacts their health," she told Save the Children staff. "If you go to the doctor, he says it is because of the smoke. Either smoke or cold. We do not know what to do."

Too many families, like Zaina's, face the agonising reality – deciding between the health of their children and heating their homes. It's an impossible choice amid a harsh winter.

The freezing cold came after a scorching hot summer marked by erratic rainfall, which triggered devastating wildfires across the country in July, affecting 73 villages and around 50,000 people.

Many children, like my cousin Naya, are reeling from the double blow of conflict and earthquakes. Returning to school after the loss of her sister, she has few avenues for support.

There's almost no mental health support available for young people, despite almost 70 percent of children struggling with sadness, according to a survey by Save the Children. Around one-third of Syrian households have children showing signs of mental distress, the UN reported.

Over half of healthcare workers, including qualified mental health professionals, have left the country over the past decade.

"I still feel the ground shaking," one eight-year-old boy in northern Syria told our staff, "It's not just the earthquake that scares me – dozens of bombs fell on our camp."

The boy's father died in a bombing before the earthquake. His mother lives off aid, with barely enough money to buy bread. She says he has become more and more withdrawn, living in constant fear for his life.

Before the earthquake, the education system in Syria was already struggling. According to the UN, more than 7,000 schools had been damaged or destroyed. Some two million children were not attending school and 1.6 million were at risk of dropping out.

The earthquake made the situation even worse, especially in northwest Syria, where 54 percent of schools were affected.

Many areas hit by the earthquake had been focal points of conflict in the last five years. The earthquake devastated communities already struggling to cope. It impacted people already at breaking point – mentally, physically and financially.

Just as needs have gone up, aid has gone down. The UN humanitarian response plan was only 37.8 percent funded in 2023. Late last year, media reports indicated that the World Food Programme (WFP) will stop much of its main food assistance programme in the country this year due to a lack of funding.

In parallel, international awareness of the crisis in Syria is also fading, prompting many to fear that the world is forgetting the Syrian people.

Following the tragic deaths in my family, I addressed the UN Security Council last year urging the international community to use the earthquakes as a moment to reevaluate its approach to Syria.

As both a Syrian and a humanitarian, I warned that the earthquake could push the country to the brink, leaving the next generation heavily dependent on aid.

I asked whether simply keeping children alive, without addressing the root cause of the humanitarian crisis would be enough. We urgently need to do things differently, but change is yet to come.

The path forward remains clear – we need to restore basic services in Syria. Beyond rehabilitating damaged or dilapidated infrastructure, we need to create safe spaces and schools for children, train teachers and pay them properly.

We need investment in sustainable projects focused on helping parents to access jobs that pay a decent wage, supporting farming so people are less reliant on food assistance, and reinforcing health systems so children can grow up healthy.

We have to ensure that children and their families can access proper mental health support so they can cope with everything they have been forced to endure.

Right now, there's nowhere near enough funding or support to achieve any of this.

Our work as humanitarians has never been harder. We need not only financial assistance, but also the space and security to operate and create change on the ground. We simply cannot keep doing the same things, with fewer resources and expect to see better outcomes for children.

The world is of course a more fragile place today than it was a year ago, and Syria is among a growing number of countries grappling with multiple crises.

But the international community has a responsibility to ensure that all children, wherever they are, can grow up in safety, dignity and hope.

Only through collective action, sustained support, and a commitment to meaningful change can we hope to build a better future for Syria.

As we remember the earthquakes that shook our world, let us not forget the ongoing struggle of the Syrian people.

Rasha Muhrez is Save the Children's Syria Response Director.

The Peninsula Local focus, Global vision

BUSINESS

SATURDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2024 | QSE: 9,960.70 -29.44 (0.29%) | FTSE 100: 7,574.97 -33.27 (0.44%) | DOW: 38,651.06 -75.27 (0.19%) | BRENT: $82.06 (+0.41)



Czech central bank cuts interest rates to help economy

The Czech Republic's central bank cut its key interest rate for the second straight time Thursday in an effort to help the struggling economy. ➔P10

Air Japan poised to start flights to Bangkok

Air Japan, a subsidiary of ANA Holdings Inc., will start flights between Narita Airport and Bangkok yesterday, to attract budget. ➔P10









STRATEGIC COOPERATION

Qatar-Turkiye Joint Economic and Trade Commission holds inaugural session in Istanbul

THE PENINSULA — ISTANBUL



The Minister of Commerce and Industry H E Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad bin Qassim Al Thani and HE Minister of Trade of the Republic of Turkiye Dr. Omer Bolat during the Qatar-Turkiye Joint Economic and Trade Commission (JETCO) in Istanbul, Turkiye.

The Minister of Commerce and Industry H E Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad bin Qassim Al Thani and Minister of Trade of the Republic of Turkiye H E Dr. Omer Bolat chaired the inaugural session of the Qatar-Turkiye Joint Economic and Trade Commission (JETCO) held in Istanbul, Turkiye.

H E the Minister of Commerce and Industry expressed his pleasure in participating in this meeting, which discusses many important topics of mutual interest, affirming his confidence that the outcomes of this meeting will contribute to enhancing and consolidating the frameworks of integrated strategic cooperation between the two countries. He pointed out that the Qatari-Turkish strategic partnership, built on solid foundations, leads both countries and serves as a model in the map of bilateral and regional alliances. He added that this partnership derives its strength and sustainability from the historical ties and spirit of solidarity between the two countries and their peoples.

H E Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad bin Qassim Al Thani clarified that the economic challenges and transformations witnessed by the world represent incentives to intensify joint work aiming to increase the volume of trade to levels that reflect the great potentials available in the markets of both countries. He noted the remarkable development in the trade exchange, which increased by 16.7 percent from $1.8bn in 2021 to over $2.2bn in 2022.

During the sessions of the Qatar-Turkiye Joint Economic and Trade Commission, the sides reviewed areas of cooperation in various sectors.

He expressed his anticipation for further steps to enhance fruitful cooperation mechanisms and exploit the available potentials and opportunities in various economic and investment fields to achieve the common interests of both countries and their peoples.

During the sessions of the Qatar-Turkiye Joint Economic and Trade Commission, the sides reviewed areas of cooperation in various sectors including trade, investment, manufacturing industries, logistics services, information technology, digital services, financial services, food, agriculture, healthcare, and education. Both sides agreed to take the necessary steps to advance the approach of strengthening trade and investment cooperation between the two countries, with the aim of increasing the volume of trade exchange and facilitating the flow of goods, services, and investments between them.

Retailers buoyant on steady market growth

JOEL JOHNSON
THE PENINSULA

Qatar's retail mart owners have expressed delight in growing market demand this year. The majority of the retailers noted a surge in profits during January compared to the same period in 2023.

The Peninsula spoke to a few shop owners in the residential areas across the country. Muhammad Najji, a shopkeeper in Al Wakra said: "It's been just the start of the year and we are yet to see a strong momentum in the market. However, compared to 2023 January, we have seen productive sales last month."

Najji explained that the increasing number of tenants could be a key reason for the rising customers and sales, while the rents in residential apartments have seen a substantial decline post-FIFA 2022 in Qatar. Another retail owner Sayed Abbas said that a "good turnout" of the number of individuals has been on the rise for the past few months, which gives a boost to the retail sector this year and beyond.

"As per our financial database, we are witnessing remarkable gains and the businesses are thriving. We also carry out free door-to-door delivery, which enables the customers to shop and buy products at their convenience."

Meanwhile, analysts at the international research group Mordor Intelligence state that Qatar's retail industry anticipates a promising growth of compound annual growth rate (CAGR)of more than 5 percent by 2028.

The report stressed that during the years COVID-19 emerged, the retail market was significantly affected in Qatar, as overall consumer spending dropped. However, the e-commerce industry saw an incremental rise during the lockdowns and restrictions on movement imposed by local governments across the world.

The report said: "Despite the worldwide slump, Qatar's retail sector performed well. Although stores had to close in the spring due to lockdown measures by governments worldwide to stop the spread of COVID-19, reopening started as early as that summer. Since then, several health regulations have been implemented at malls and retail establishments in Qatar to welcome customers." Albeit the decline in median monthly rents, a few new malls were opened in the base and the following years. It said that "Online delivery and minimal supply disruption during the pandemic helped grocery stores, mainly thanks to Qatar's pre-pandemic drive to increase food security and diversify trading."

Albeit the decline in median monthly rents, a few new malls were opened in the base and the following years. It said that "Online delivery and minimal supply disruption during the pandemic helped grocery stores, mainly thanks to Qatar's pre-pandemic drive to increase food security and diversify trading."

Experts outlined that Qatar's retail industry, however, is "fiercely competitive", with a small number of important businesses controlling the majority of the market share.

As numerous firms continue to expand their storefronts and consider the commercial possibilities in new regions, the organised retail market has been developing swiftly.

Qatar's impressive hypermarkets, supermarkets, and other retail chains are firmly replacing the majority of unorganized retail establishments.

A large-scale continuation of this is expected during the forecast period, contributing considerably to market growth. Some of the prominent players dominating the market include Chalhoub Group, Alshaya, and Al Tayer Group, among others.

Shipping giant Maersk's profit sinks, warns of Red Sea risk

AFP — COPENHAGEN

Shares in shipping giant Maersk dived on Thursday after it warned of an uncertain 2024 earnings outlook linked to an oversupply of container vessels and Yemeni rebel attacks in the Red Sea.

The downbeat forecast came after its 2023 earnings were hit by overcapacity in the shipping sector, which caused a drop in freight rates.

The group reported a more than sevenfold drop in its net profit last year to $3.8bn, compared to $29.2bn in 2022. Its revenue fell to $51bn from $81.5bn the previous year.

Maersk's stock price closed almost 15 percent lower on the Copenhagen stock exchange Thursday, also hurt by the company's announcement it was suspending its share buyback plan.

Freight rates had soared in 2022 due to capacity shortages amid high demand following the end of Covid pandemic restrictions.

"The high demand eventually started to normalise as congestions eased and consumer demand declined leading to an inventory overhang," Maersk said in its earnings report.

This "correction" resulted "in rapid and steep declines in shipped volumes and rates" starting at the end of the third quarter of 2022, it added.

The "oversupply challenges" in the maritime shipping industry are expected to "materialise fully" over the course of 2024, Maersk said.

The group lowered its 2024 forecast for its core profit -- earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation -- to a range of between $1bn and $6bn.

"High uncertainty remains around the duration and degree of the Red Sea disruption, with the duration from one quarter to full year reflected in the guidance range," Maersk said.

S Korean Conglomerates hesitant to hire

THE KOREA HERALD — SEOUL

South Korean conglomerates are becoming more reluctant to finalise their hiring plans this year or downsize the number of new employees as their business prospects are shrouded in uncertainty, a poll on job recruiters showed on Thursday.

Some 67 percent of conglomerates with over 1,000 employees confirmed that they have recruitment plans this year, falling for the third year in a row from 72 percent and 73 percent in 2023 and 2022, respectively, according to a report by online job portal Incruit.

Incruit surveyed 88 conglomerates, 134 mid-sized with 300-999 employees and 488 small-sized companies with less than 300 workers between Jan. 22-30.

Many have also not confirmed their hiring plans yet, the report added. Of the 710 companies that participated in the survey, 41.4 percent said they had finalised their hiring plans, while 29.9 percent said they had not decided on their recruitment plans.

"Incruit was able to confirm that companies are taking very conservative approaches to their hiring plans," Incruit CEO Seo Mi-young said. The size of conglomerates' recruitments is expected to shrink this year.

Of the 88 conglomerates, only 3.8 percent said they would hire more than 100 new employees. The proportion of conglomerates that will hire between 10-99 came to 67.3 percent, down by around 10 percentage points from a year ago. The conglomerates which said they would hire less than 10 new employees reached 28.8 percent as well.

In 2024, the overall proportion of companies with annual hiring plans also went down. This year, 71.3 percent of 710 companies that participated in the survey said they plan to hire new employees this year, dropping significantly from last year, when the corresponding number reached 79.3, after recovering from 51.9 percent in 2022.

Of the 710 companies that participated in the survey, 65.6 percent said they would hire less than 10 people this year, while 33 percent said they would hire between 10-99. Only 1.4 percent of the total said they would hire more than 100.

Mid and small-sized companies have downsized their hiring this year too, according to the report. The report said 73.9 percent of the 134 mid-sized companies and 71.3 percent of 488 small-sized companies have finalized hiring plans for this year, but the figures are both down from 75.5 percent and 81.3 percent a year ago.

Small-sized companies, in particular, may also face difficulties in securing new employees. "Small-sized companies may continue to face difficulties in hiring new employees as young people tend to prefer jobs at conglomerates," an industry source said.

US applications for unemployment benefits fall despite recent layoff

AP — NEW YORK



The number of Americans filing for jobless claims fell last week despite more layoff announcements from high-profile companies recently.

Applications for unemployment benefits fell by 9,000 to 218,000 for the week ending Feb. 3, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The four-week average of claims, which evens out some of the weekly volatility, increased by 3,750 to 212,250. Weekly unemployment claims are seen as a proxy for the number of U.S. layoffs in a given week. They have remained at extraordinarily low levels despite efforts by the U.S. Federal Reserve to cool the economy.

The Federal Reserve raised its benchmark rate 11 times beginning in March of 2022 in an effort to bring down the four-decade high inflation that took hold after an unusually strong economic rebound from the COVID-19 recession of 2020. Though inflation has eased considerably in the past year, the Labor Department reported recently that overall prices rose 0.3% from November to December and were up 3.4% from 12 months earlier, a sign that the Fed's drive to slow inflation to its 2% target will likely remain a bumpy one.

Norway's inflation falls to lowest Level in more than a year

QNA — OSLO

Norway's core inflation fell to lowest level in more than a year in January.

According to Statistics Norway (SSB), the core inflation which strips out changing energy prices and taxes, stood at 5.3% year on year in January, which is the lowest level since September 2022.

The rate is consistent with economists estimates, but lower than the expectations of the Norway's central bank which indicated 5.4%.

According to the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat) data, the pace of inflation in Norway is still among the fastest in the Western European countries due to the weakness of the local currency (the krone) which fuels the increase in import prices.

COMBATING INFLATION

Czech central bank cuts interest rates for the second straight time to help economy

AP — PRAGUE



People stand outside the Czech central bank in Paragues, Czech Republic. (AP)

The Czech Republic's central bank cut its key interest rate for the second straight time Thursday in an effort to help the struggling economy.

The cut by a half-percentage point brought the interest rate down to 6.25%. The bank also trimmed borrowing costs by a quarter-point on Dec. 21, which marked the first cut since June 22, 2022.

Between 2021 and 2022, the bank unleashed a series of rate hikes to try to combat soaring inflation. The last hike of 1.25 percentage points took the rate to 7%, the highest level since early 1999.

The Czech economy contracted by 0.2% in the last three months of 2023 compared with a year earlier.

Inflation declined to 10.7% in 2023 from 15.1% in 2022, according to the Czech Statistics Office, which is still well above the bank's 2% target.

The Czech bank's decision comes as major central banks around the world are discussing when to start bringing down borrowing costs. The European Central Bank left its benchmark rate unchanged at a record-high 4% on Jan. 25, saying it was premature to discuss cuts.

Last week, the U.S. Federal Reserve kept its benchmark interest rate steady, indicating that it needed to see more evidence that inflation is truly in check before making cuts. The Bank of England said similar that same week.

Hermes celebrates record profit with staff bonuses

AFP — PARIS

French luxury giant Hermes posted on Friday record annual sales and net profit, with plans to reward all employees worldwide with a bonus following strong growth in every region last year.

The group reported a better-than-expected profit of 4.3 billion euros ($4.6 billion), up 28 percent from 2022, on sales that surged 16 percent at current exchange rates to 13.4 billion euros.

"In 2023, Hermes has once again cultivated its singularity and achieved an outstanding performance in all metiers (businesses) and across all regions against a high base," executive chairman Axel Dumas said in an earning statement.

The group said its 22,000 employees worldwide would get a 4,000-euro bonus early this year as part of "its policy of sharing the fruits of growth with all those who contribute to it on a daily basis".

It will also propose an increase in dividends for shareholders.

Shares in Hermes rose by more than four percent to 2,618 euros in late morning deals at the Paris stock exchange, propelling the group above cosmetics giant L'Oreal in terms of market capitalisation.

L'Oreal's stock price fell more than seven percent to 420 euros after posting lower-than-expected results for the fourth quarter. Shares in LVMH, the world's largest luxury goods group, were down 0.3 percent to 802 euros, though it also reported record annual earnings last month.

Gucci owner Kering was up 0.7 percent to 412 euros, a day after reporting slumping profits.

Hermes said its sales climbed 14.5 percent in Japan and 12.9 percent in the rest of the Asia-Pacific region last year, with the group opening its 33rd store in China, a major market for luxury brands.

Japan and Asia-Pacific together were the biggest market for Hermes, with total sales of 7.5 billion euros.

Sales rose 19 percent to three billion euros in Europe and 17.1 percent to 2.5 billion euros in the Americas.

"Hermes is yet another company to confirm reviving momentum of the American consumers, on the back of resurgent confidence and lower inflation," said Luca Solca, an analyst at Bernstein.

In its outlook for 2024, the company said: "In the medium-term, despite the economic, geopolitical, and monetary uncertainties around the world, the group confirms an ambitious goal for revenue growth at constant exchange rates."

It said it would propose a dividend increase to 15 euros per share, up from 13 euros in 2022, at its next general meeting in April.

"In addition, an exceptional dividend of 10 euros per share will be proposed to the general meeting," it said.

"It's a show of confidence for the coming year," Dumas said.

Barclays buys bank unit of supermarket Tesco

AFP — LONDON

British bank Barclays yesterday said it had agreed to buy the retail banking operations of Tesco, as the supermarket giant concentrates on its core food business.

Barclays will pay up to £700 million ($884 million) for Tesco Bank -- handing it a portfolio of credit cards, other loans and deposits, according to statements from the two companies.

Barclays added that it would retain Tesco Bank's 2,800 staff, including senior management, as well as the brand representing Britain's largest retailer.

Tesco said it would return the majority of cash proceeds from the sale to its shareholders.

"Similar to our acquisition of Kensington Mortgages last year, this partnership with Tesco is a further demonstration of the investment we continue to make in our UK consumer business," Barclays chief executive C.S. Venkatakrishnan said in a statement.

Barclays will pay up to £700 million ($884 million) for Tesco Bank, handing it a portfolio of credit cards, other loans and deposits, according to statements from the two companies.

The deal is due to complete in the second half of this year, subject to regulatory approvals.

Tesco does not have bank branches but its supermarkets house ATMs, which Barclays said it would retain.

"The transaction will... significantly reduce our financial liabilities, in turn strengthening our balance sheet and allowing us to focus on continuing to grow our core retail business," said Tesco chief executive Ken Murphy.

In early London trading, shares in Tesco rose 1.3 percent and Barclays dipped 0.1 percent.

Untamed food prices eclipse Seollal

THE KOREA HERALD — SEOUL

A better-than-expected inflation report for January bolstered hopes that price hikes is near its end -- but consumers are still wary as the cost for some food items for Lunar New Year ceremonies continues to soar.

"I have visited two different discount stores and searched online shopping platforms to compare prices and buy cheaper fruits and other food items that I need for family gatherings during the Lunar New Year holiday," Lee, 63, a woman living in Gyeonggi Province said.

Among many products, prices of fruit produce increased dramatically, increasing the burden on consumers, particularly as they are often used to prepare the charyesang, the ceremonial table used in offering food to ancestors during the Lunar New Year holiday.

"Usually, people put top-quality fruit and other food on the table for the ancestral rites. However, due to the increasing prices of fruit, this year, people have been purchasing 'ugly' produce, which tends to be cheaper," an official from a local discount store operator said. "Ugly" produce refers to produce that is not up to regulatory standards due to aesthetic reasons such as uneven sizes, shapes and scratches, and thus sells for cheaper.


Pears are displayed at a fruit vendor in the Cheongryangri Fruit & Vegetable Market.

According to the data compiled by Statistics Korea, fruit prices last month jumped 28.5 percent compared to a year ago, marking the most dramatic increase since January 2011, when fruit prices went up by 31.9 percent on-year.

The number of shoppers at local traditional markets is also down compared to last year, merchants at local traditional markets said. "Usually, the street should get busy, particularly a week ahead of the Lunar New Year holiday as many people buy fruit and other food items for ancestral rites and family gatherings. But this year, not many delivery vehicles come in and go out, and only a few shoppers are dropping by to buy cheap fruit produce," a merchant at a fruit market in Seoul said.

Another merchant said, "Our sales have dropped by around 20-30 percent compared to the previous year." The merchant added that sales of other food products used to make sweet rice punch and pancakes have dropped this year. Increases in the prices of vegetables and fruit have also propelled a surge in the average price of preparing the charyesang. According to Korea Price Information, overall, the prices of fruits and vegetables this year have jumped by some 20 percent.

As a result, the budget required to prepare the charyesang for a four-member household has come out to 281,500 won when foods are purchased at traditional markets, up 8.9 percent from the previous year, the price information agency said.

The budget was 35.2 percent higher when consumers purchased at large supermarkets, reaching 380,580 won, also up 5.8 percent on-year.

As inflation pressure continues, the government recently decided to inject a total of 84 billion won ($63 million) to bring down the prices of major high-demand goods.

New budget carrier Air Japan poised to start flights to Bangkok

THE WASHINGTON POST — TOKYO

New budget carrier Air Japan, a subsidiary of ANA Holdings Inc., will start flights between Narita Airport and Bangkok yesterday, a major step in ANA's efforts to attract budget-conscious tourists who want to visit Japan.

Air Japan is the third airline brand under ANA's corporate umbrella, alongside its flagship carrier All Nippon Airways and low-cost carrier Peach Aviation. Based at Narita Airport near Tokyo, Air Japan will build up a network of medium-distance international routes in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

Industry observers are looking to see whether Air Japan can capture new demand amid the ongoing surge in visitors to Japan.

At an event that also showcased one of the airline's aircraft at Narita Airport on Tuesday, Air Japan President Hideki Mineguchi was encouraged by the initial response to the company's first flight route.

"Seats on the maiden flight have already sold out," Mineguchi said. "While our airline is still unknown overseas, many people have supported us."

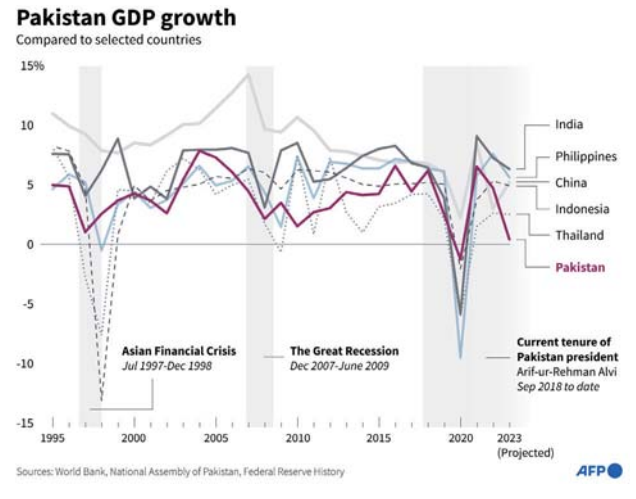
All seats on Air Japan flights are economy class and the same size as those on All Nippon Airways aircraft.

Maintenance and onboard customer service will be provided by staff shared with ANA. However, Air Japan plans to keep fares down by charging passengers for in-flight meals and checked baggage.

One-way tickets to Bangkok start from 15,500 yen.

Comparing fares in May, a round trip on ANA will cost between 110,000 yen and 120,000, yen while the same trip on Air Japan will cost about half that amount.

More affordable fares should be a major strength for Air Japan, which will start flights to Seoul on February 22 and to Singapore on April 26.



STOCK MARKET

Wall Street hangs near record to yet another winning week

AP — NEW YORK

Stocks are hanging near record heights, on track to close yet another winning week. The S&P 500 was up 0.1% early yesterday and could finish above the 5,000 level for the first time. The index is heading for its 14th winning week in the last 15.

The Dow edged down 15 points, and the Nasdaq composite was up 0.4% to pull closer to the record it set in 2021. Cloudflare was the latest company to soar after reporting stronger profit than analysts expected. The cloud-services company signed its largest new customer and its largest renewal on record.

Wall Street inched higher before the bell yesterday, with the S&P 500 above 5,000 which, if it holds, would be the first time that it has closed at such heights.

Futures for the S&P 500 rose close to 0.2% to 5,025.50 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average ticked up 0.1%.

Corporate earnings continued to be the driving force behind this week's gains, though there were plenty of losers before markets opened Friday.

PepsiCo dipped 0.5% after beverage and snack company missed sales targets and cut 2024 revenue guidance.

Cloudfare climbed more than 24% after it topped Wall Street's sales and profit forecast and issued a strong outlook for 2024.

Shares jumped to more than $112 in premarket and are up 180% since falling to $40 in May.

Take-Two Interactive, the publisher of "Grand Theft Auto" and other video games, tumbled 7.4% after it just missed sales and profit targets and cut its outlook.

Expedia was another loser early, falling 15.6% in premarket despite beating sales and profit targets. The online travel booker announced that CEO Peter Kern, its top executive since 2020, would be replaced by Ariane Gorin in May.



A file photo of an exterior view of the New York Stock Exchange in New York City, US. (AFP)

Digital pinboard and shopping site Pinterest skidded more than 8% after it missed revenue targets and issued first-quarter guidance below analyst expectations.

Elsewhere, trading was mixed in Asia, where many regional markets were closed for the Lunar New Year holiday.

Tokyo ended yesterday up less than 0.1% after touching a 34-year high earlier in the day. It closed at 36,897.42, helped by comments by a Bank of Japan official who said the central bank would likely stick to its lax monetary policy even if it raises its minus 0.1% benchmark rate above zero.

Wall Street inched higher before the bell yesterday, with the S&P 500 above 5,000 which, if it holds, would be the first time that it has closed at such heights.

In Europe, both Germany's DAX and the CAC 40 in Paris were flat at midday, while Britain's FTSE 100 ticked up 0.1%.

Markets in mainland China were closed and Hong Kong had a half-day session, where the Hang Seng shed 0.8% to 15,746.58. Markets in China will be closed next week.

China's securities regulator capped a week of measures aimed at shoring up wobbly financial markets by announcing it had punished dozens of people at one of the country's biggest brokerages for insider trading and other crimes.

Australia's S&P/ASX 200 added nearly 0.1% to 7,644.80. Thailand's SET edged 0.2% higher.

Benchmark US crude lost 16 cents to $76.06 a barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. Brent crude, the international standard, gave up 25 cents to $81.38 a barrel.

In currency trading, the U.S. dollar declined to 149.17 Japanese yen from 149.32 yen. The euro cost $1.0789, up from $1.0780.

Bitcoin rose 4.6%, hitting $47,000 for the first time in nearly two years. Bitcoin's rally broadly lifted other cryptocurrencies.

On Thursday, the S&P 500 inched up 0.1% and the Dow also set an all-time high, gaining 0.1%. The Nasdaq composite rose 0.2%.

QATARI GERMAN COMPANY FOR MEDICAL DEVICES (Q.P.S.C.)

FINANCIAL STATEMENTS AND INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2023

Chairman Message

To
The Shareholders
Qatari German Company for Medical Devices (Q.P.S.C)
Doha -State of Qatar

On this occasion, on my own behalf and on behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to all of you for accepting our invitation to attend the Ordinary and Extraordinary General Assembly Meeting for the fiscal year 2023

The company has been able to achieve a continuous decrease in its direct costs and accumulated losses from the end of the fiscal year 2020, stopping the bleeding of provisions and re-evaluating assets according to the approved international accounting standards.

Accordingly the company achieved net profit of QAR 1,335,981 with growth of 7.3% from the same period last year.

The company was able to raise its production capacity to about 90% of the company's capacity for the first time in its history, which prompted it to develop the quality of its industry to compete strongly in global markets, which resulted in a number of confirmed business deals and opened new markets in more than 46 countries worldwide, in addition to our cooperation with the World Health Organization (Paho) and UNICEF in completing and In meeting the countries' growing needs.

In conclusion, the Board of Directors extends its sincere thanks and gratitude to His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, for the decisions that support the national industry. We also extend our thanks to the honourable shareholders for their continuous support for the Company to achieve its objectives and for their confidence during the past period.

Ali Hassan Ibrahim Ali Al- Emadi
Chairman

Sharholders Invitation to attend the Annual Ordinary & Extra Ordinary General Assembly Meeting for Qatari German for Medical Devices Company (Q.P.S.C) For the year 2024

The Board of Directors of Qatari German for Medical Devices Co. (Q.P.S.C), is honored to invite the sharholder to attend the Annual Ordinary & Extra Ordinary Meeting for Qatari German for Medical Devices Co. (Q.P.S.C), which will be held as follows:

Basic Appointment:	**On Wednesday 21-febuary -2024**	**Time 6:30 pm**	
Reserved Appointment	**On Wednesday 28- febuary -2024**	**Time 6:30 pm**	**If the quorum is not completed on Basic Date**
Third Appointment	**On Sunday 31-March-2024**	**Time 9:30 pm (During Ramadan)**	**In case the quorum of the Extraordinary Assembly is not completed**
Meeting will be be held virtually through modern means of telecommunication electronicaly Via service provider Alpha Omega Company (Company Head Quarter)			

• The Agenda of the Annual Ordinary General Assembly Meeting is as follows:

1. Listen to Chairman Message in terms of the company's activity and its financial position for the financial year ended 31/12/2023 and Company Future Plan and approving it
2. Listen to the auditors' report for the financial year ended 31/12/2023 and approving it
3. Discuss the company's balance sheet and profit and loss account ended 31/12/2023 and approving it and Consider the recommendation of the Board of Directors not to distribute dividends.
4. Discuss corporate governance report for the year 2023 and approving it.
5. Discharge the Board members for the financial year ended 31/12/2023 and the announcement of no remuneration.
6. Election of the new Board members for the three Calendar -years term (2024-2026)
7. Appointment of external auditors for the financial year 2024 and determining their remuneration.

For a copy of the Company's Financial Statements for 2023, and External Auditor's Report for the same year please visit www.qgmd.com

• The Agenda of the Annual Extra Ordinary General Assembly Meeting is as follows:

1. Consider the recommendation of the Board of Directors to continue the operations of the Company despite company's accumulated losses reaches more than half of its capital.

Mr. Ali Hassan Al -Emadi
Chirman of the Bored of Directors

INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT TO THE SHAREHOLDERS QATARI GERMAN COMPANY FOR MEDICAL DEVICES Q.P.S.C.

Doha – State of Qatar

Report on the audit of the financial statements

Qualified Opinion

We have audited the financial statements of Qatari German Company for Medical Devices Q.P.S.C. (the "Company"), which comprise the statement of financial position as at 31 December 2023, and the statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income, statement of changes in equity, statement of cash flows for the year then ended, and notes to the financial statements, comprising a summary of significant accounting policies and other explanatory information.

In our opinion, except for the effects of the matters described in the Bases for Qualified Opinion section of our report, the accompanying financial statements present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position, financial performance and its cash flows for the year ended 31 December 2023 in accordance with International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRSs).

Basis for Qualified Opinion

- With reference to Note 9 of the financial statements, as of 31 December 2023, the Company's inventories include facemasks with carrying value of QR 7,923,536 which has been outstanding for more than one year. The management has not assessed the net realizable value of these balances under IAS 2 "Inventories". Consequently, we were unable to determine whether any adjustments to these amounts were necessary.
- Confirmations in respect of borrowings amounting to QR 127,132,816 from Qatar Development Bank have not been received by us. In consequence, we were unable to carry out audit procedures necessary to obtain adequate assurance regarding the full provision of liabilities, whether accruals or contingent at the end of the reporting year (Note 26). We were unable to quantify the adjustments that would be required, had the confirmations from the bank been received by us.

We conducted our audit in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (ISAs). Our responsibilities under those standards are further described in the Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Statements section of our report. We are independent of the in accordance with the International Ethics Standards Board for Accountants' Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants (IESBA Code) together with the other ethical requirements that are relevant to our audit of the Company's financial statements in the State of Qatar, and we have fulfilled our other ethical responsibilities in accordance with the IESBA Code. We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our qualified opinion.

Emphasis of Matter

We draw attention to Note 10 regarding the outstanding receivable amounting to QR 6,068,683 from third parties which is outstanding for more than three years. The management is of the position that the balance is fully recoverable.

We draw attention to Note 16 (b) regarding the borrowings. During the year, Qatar Development Bank filed a lawsuit against the Company, where the Supreme Judiciary Council - Investment and Trade court ruled to pay the plaintiff an amount of one hundred and twenty-seven million six hundred and eighty-two thousand, eight hundred and seventy riyals (QR: 127,682,870) with an annual profit return of 5% commencing from 12 June 2023 until the date of full payment.

Material Uncertainty Related to Going Concern

We draw attention to Note 1 of the financial statements, which indicates that the Company's accumulated losses amounted to QR 122,425,204 as at 31 December 2023 exceeding 50% of the share capital of the Company, and its current liabilities exceeded its current assets by QR 79,974,077 as of 31 December 2023. As stated in Note 1, these events or conditions, along with other matters as set forth in Note 1, indicate that a material uncertainty exists that may cast significant doubt on the Company's ability to continue as a going concern. The accompanying financial statements have been prepared on a going concern basis which is dependent on the shareholder's continuing financial support for the Company to meet its financial obligations as they fall due. Our opinion is not modified in respect of this matter.

Key Audit Matters

Key audit matters are those matters that, in our professional judgement, were of most significance in our audit of the financial statements of the current period. These matters were addressed in the context of our audit of the financial statements as a whole, and in forming our opinion thereon, and we do not provide a separate opinion on these matters.

Key audit matters	How our audit addressed the key audit matter
The Company's statement of financial position as of 31 December 2023 includes property, plant and equipment of book value amounting to QR 104,615,821 (2022: QR 106,451,000) and it represents 52% (2022: 54.8%) of the Company's total assets. The carrying value of buildings under property, plant and equipment amounting to QR 34,008,900 (2022: QR 35,694,600) represents 33% (2022: 34%) and machinery and equipment amounting to QR 69,536,262 (2022: QR 69,774,630) represents 66.5% (2022: 65.5%) of the total property, plant and equipment. Investment properties in the statement of financial position amounting to QR 12,484,000 (2022: QR 12,590,000) represents 6.21% (2022: 6.49%) of the Company's total assets. Estimating the fair value is a complex process involving number of judgements and estimates including key assumptions. Consequently, the valuation of the building and investment property is considered as a key audit matter.	Our audit procedures in this area included, among others: • Assessing the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the expert appointed by the management. • Agreeing the property information in the valuation by tracing a sample of inputs to the underlying property records held by the Company. • Assessing the consistency of the valuation basis and appropriateness of the methodology used, based on generally accepted valuation practices. • Evaluating the appropriateness of the assumptions applied to key inputs such as market prices, which included comparing these inputs with externally derived data as well as our own assessments based on our knowledge of the Company and the industry.

Other Matter

The financial statements of Qatari German Company for Medical Devices Q.P.S.C. for the year ended 31 December 2022 were audited by another auditor who expressed qualified opinion on those statements on 16 March 2023.

Other Information

The Board of Directors are responsible for other information. The other information comprises of Annual report for 2023, which is expected to be made available to us after the date of auditor's report. The other information does not include the financial statements and our auditor's report thereon.

Our opinion on the financial statements does not cover the other information and we do not express any form of assurance or conclusion thereon.

In connection with our audit of the financial statements, our responsibility is to read the other information and, in doing so, consider whether the other information is materially inconsistent with the financial statements or our knowledge obtained in the audit, or otherwise appears to be materially misstated.

If, based on the work we have performed on the other information that we obtained prior to the date of this auditor's report, we conclude that there is a material misstatement of this other information, we are required to report that fact. We have nothing to report in this regard.

Responsibilities of Management and Those Charged with Governance for the Financial Statements

Management is responsible for the preparation and fair presentation of the financial statements in accordance with IFRSs, applicable provisions of Qatar Commercial Companies Law and the Company's Articles of Association and for such internal control as management determines is necessary to enable the preparation of financial statements that are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.

In preparing the financial statements, management is responsible for assessing the Company's ability to continue as a going concern, disclosing, as applicable, matters related to going concern and using the going concern basis of accounting unless management either intends to liquidate the Company or to cease operations, or has no realistic alternative but to do so.

Those charged with governance are responsible for overseeing the Company's financial reporting process.

Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Statements

Our objectives are to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial statements as a whole are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, and to issue an auditor's report that includes our opinion. Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance, but is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with ISAs will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. Misstatements can arise from fraud or error and are considered material if, individually or in the aggregate, they could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of these financial statements.

As part of an audit in accordance with ISAs, we exercise professional judgment and maintain professional skepticism throughout the audit. We also:

- Identify and assess the risks of material misstatement of the financial statements, whether due to fraud or error, design and perform audit procedures responsive to those risks, and obtain audit evidence that is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion. The risk of not detecting a material misstatement resulting from fraud is higher than for one resulting from error, as fraud may involve collusion, forgery, intentional omissions, misrepresentations, or the override of internal control.
- Obtain an understanding of internal control relevant to the audit in order to design audit procedures that are appropriate in the circumstances, but not for the purpose of expressing an opinion on the effectiveness of the Company's internal control.
- Evaluate the appropriateness of accounting policies used and the reasonableness of accounting estimates and related disclosures made by management.
- Conclude on the appropriateness of management's use of the going concern basis of accounting and, based on the audit evidence obtained, whether a material uncertainty exists related to events or conditions that may cast significant doubt on the Company's ability to continue as a going concern. If we conclude that a material uncertainty exists, we are required to draw attention in our auditor's report to the related disclosures in the financial statements or, if such disclosures are inadequate, to modify our opinion. Our conclusions are based on the audit evidence obtained up to the date of our auditor's report. However, future events or conditions may cause the Company to cease to continue as a going concern.
- Evaluate the overall presentation, structure and content of the financial statements, including the disclosures, and whether the financial statements represent the underlying transactions and events in a manner that achieves fair presentation.

We communicate with those charged with governance regarding, among other matters, the planned scope and timing of the audit and significant audit findings, including any significant deficiencies in internal control that we identify during our audit.

Report on Other Legal and Regulatory Requirements

Further, as required by the Qatar Commercial Companies Law, we report the following:

- We are also in the opinion that proper books of account were maintained by the Company and physical inventory verification has been duly carried out.
- We obtained all the information and explanations which we considered necessary for the purpose of our audit except for the possible effects of the matters described in the Bases for Qualified Opinion section of our report.
- To the best of our knowledge and belief and according to the information given to us except as mention below, no contraventions of the applicable provisions of Qatar Commercial Companies Law and the Company's Articles of Association were committed during the year which would materially affect the Company's financial position and performance.
- The accumulated losses of the Company as at 31 December 2023 amounted to QR 122,425,204 contravening the provision of Qatar Commercial Companies Law. The said law states that should the Company's losses exceed 50% of the share capital of the Company, the shareholders should dissolve the Company or increase its capital.

Fathi Abu Farah
Partner Moore Stephens and Partners
License No. 294
QFMA Auditor's Registration No. 120189

08 February 2024
Doha, State of Qatar

STATEMENT OF CASH FLOWS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2023

	Note	2023 QR	2022 QR
OPERATING ACTIVITIES			
Net profit for the year		**1,335,981**	1,244,097
Adjustments for:			
Depreciation of property, plant and equipment	5	**5,344,390**	5,421,261
Impairment loss on investment property	7	**106,000**	–
Interest on lease liabilities	6	**2,621**	2,922
Depreciation for right-of-use assets	6	**9,293**	9,294
Reversal of impairment of property, plant and equipment	5	**(2,215,231)**	–
Provision for employees' end of service benefits	17	**45,589**	198,876
Finance cost		**2,754,814**	3,823,814
Operating cashflow before movement in working capital		**7,383,457**	10,700,264
Changes in			
Inventories		**2,853,057**	(517,363)
Trade and other receivables		**(17,858,344)**	(9,448,677)
Trade and other payables		**7,963,037**	2,019,430
Cash generated from operating activities		**341,207**	2,753,654
Employees' end of service benefits paid	17	**(140,160)**	(325,455)
Finance costs paid		**(2,754,814)**	(1,351,202)
Social and sports fund contribution paid		**(33,400)**	(29,521)
Net cash (used in)/generated from operating activities		**(2,587,167)**	1,047,476
INVESTING ACTIVITIES			
Purchase of property, plant and equipment	5	**(1,053,044)**	(251,728)
Net cash used in investing activities		**(1,053,044)**	(251,728)
FINANCING ACTIVITIES			
Net movement of borrowings		**(2,575,195)**	370,642
Repayment of lease liabilities	6	**(11,527)**	(11,527)
Net cash (used in)/generated from financing activities		**(2,586,722)**	359,115
Net (decrease)/increase in cash and cash equivalents		**(6,226,933)**	1,154,863
Cash and cash equivalent as at beginning of the year		**6,346,825**	5,191,962
Cash and cash equivalents as at the end of the year	12	**119,892**	6,346,825

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT DECEMBER 31, 2023

	Note	2023 QR	2022 QR
ASSETS			
NON-CURRENT ASSETS			
Property, plant and equipment	5	**104,615,821**	106,451,000
Right-of-use assets	6	**69,698**	78,991
Investment properties	7	**12,484,000**	12,590,000
Intangible assets	8	**10,329,937**	10,329,937
Total non-current assets		**127,499,456**	129,449,928
Current assets			
Inventories	9	**24,729,200**	27,582,257
Trade and other receivables	10	**48,583,900**	30,725,556
Cash and cash equivalents	12	**119,892**	6,346,825
Total current assets		**73,432,992**	64,654,638
TOTAL ASSETS		**200,932,448**	194,104,566
SHAREHOLDERS' EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			
EQUITY			
Share capital	13	**115,500,000**	115,500,000
Legal reserve	14	**30,807,629**	30,674,031
Revaluation reserve	15	**12,151,865**	11,910,929
Accumulated losses		**(122,425,204)**	(123,594,187)
TOTAL EQUITY		**36,034,290**	34,490,773
LIABILITIES			
Non-current liabilities			
Borrowings	16	**10,568,075**	92,488,710
Provision for employees' end of service benefits	17	**860,526**	955,097
Lease liabilities	6	**62,488**	71,705
Total non-current liabilities		**11,491,089**	93,515,512
Current liabilities			
Borrowings	16	**131,718,670**	52,373,230
Trade and other payables	18	**21,679,182**	13,716,145
Lease liabilities	6	**9,217**	8,906
Total current liabilities		**153,407,069**	66,098,281
TOTAL LIABILITIES		**164,898,158**	159,613,793
TOTAL SHAREHOLDERS' EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		**200,932,448**	194,104,566

These financial statements were approved by the Board of Directors on 08 February 2024 and were signed on its behalf by:

Mr. Ali Hassan Al-Emadi
Chairman of the Board of Directors

Mr. Mohammad Ali Al Ansari
Board member and Managing Director

STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2023

	Note	2023 QR	2022 QR
Revenue	19	**27,851,471**	42,655,693
Costs of revenue	20	**(18,660,448)**	(28,610,420)
Gross profit		**9,191,023**	14,045,273
Other income	21	**2,981,136**	2,519,918
Reversal of impairment of property, plant and equipment	5	**2,215,231**	–
Depreciation on property, plant and equipment	5	**(5,344,560)**	(5,421,261)
Selling and distribution expenses	22	**(398,560)**	(616,127)
General and administrative expenses	23	**(4,553,475)**	(5,456,970)
Finance costs	24	**(2,754,814)**	(3,826,736)
Net profit before income tax		**1,335,981**	1,244,097
Income tax expense		**–**	–
Net profit for the year		**1,335,981**	1,244,097
Other comprehensive income			
Items that will not be reclassified to profit or loss:			
Gains on revaluation of buildings	5	**240,936**	616,645
Total other comprehensive income for the year		**240,936**	616,645
Total comprehensive income for the year		**1,576,917**	1,860,742

STATEMENT OF CHANGES IN EQUITY FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2023

	Share capital QR	Legal reserve QR	Revaluation reserve QR	Accumulated losses QR	Total QR
As at 1 January 2023	115,500,000	30,674,031	11,910,929	(123,594,187)	34,490,773
Total comprehensive income for the year:					
Net profit for the year	–	–	–	1,335,981	1,335,981
Other comprehensive income	–	–	240,936	–	240,936
Total comprehensive income for the year	**–**	**–**	**240,936**	**1,335,981**	**1,576,917**
Transfer to legal reserve	–	133,598	–	(133,598)	–
Social and sports fund contribution	–	–	–	(33,400)	(33,400)
As at 31 December 2023	**115,500,000**	**30,807,629**	**12,151,865**	**(122,425,204)**	**36,034,290**
As at 1 January 2022	115,500,000	30,549,621	11,999,694	(125,388,182)	32,661,133
Total comprehensive income for the year:					
Net profit for the year	–	–	–	1,244,097	1,244,097
Other comprehensive income	–	–	616,645	–	616,645
Total comprehensive income for the year	–	–	616,645	1,244,097	1,860,742
Transfer to legal reserve	–	124,410	–	(124,410)	–
Transfer of depreciation of revalued asset	s –	–	(705,410)	705,410	–
Social and sports fund contribution	–	–	–	(31,102)	(31,102)
As at 31 December 2022	115,500,000	30,674,031	11,910,929	(123,594,187)	34,490,773



WEATHER TODAY

Misty to foggy at places at first becomes scattered clouds to partly cloudy with chance of scattered rain by night.

14°C Minimum

23°C Maximum

DOHA	RUWAIS	ALKHOR	DUKHAN	MESAIEED	ABU SAMRA
14	16	9	11	9	8
23	21	22	21	21	23

HIGH TIDE 5:04 - 16:02 LOW TIDE 12:45 - 23:34

Trending in QATAR

On *The Peninsula* social media platforms

Al Dabih star: Cold winds to persist in Qatar

The term "Dabih" was given to the star due to it being known in the old days as the star which brought about extreme cold that would cause cattle deaths.



Independent candidates backed by ex-PM Khan's party take early lead in Pakistan's national election

Independent candidates backed by imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan were leading in Pakistan's national election results yesterday.



Philippines, US hold third joint patrol in South China Sea

The United States and the Philippines held their third joint sea and air patrol in three months off the Southeast Asian country's coast yesterday, the allies said.



Senegal security forces disperse rally after protest call

Senegalese security forces yesterday used tear gas to disperse people attempting to gather in the capital after being urged to mobilise against a last-minute delay of presidential elections.



Canadian charged for trying to open Thai plane door on runway

Thai police said yesterday they have charged a Canadian who tried to open the door of an aircraft as it was waiting to take off, claiming someone was trying to kill him.



GLOBAL WARMING

NASA satellite blasts off to survey oceans, atmosphere

The satellite will spend at least three years studying the oceans from 676km up, as well as the atmosphere. It will scan the globe daily with two of the science instruments. A third instrument will take monthly measurements.



A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket lifts off from launch pad SLC-40 at the Kennedy Space Centre on NASA's PACE mission in Cape Canaveral, Florida, on February 8, 2024. (AFP)

AP — CAPE CANAVERAL

NASA's newest climate satellite rocketed into orbit Thursday to survey the world's oceans and atmosphere in never-before-seen detail.

SpaceX launched the Pace satellite on its $948 million mission before dawn, with the Falcon rocket heading south over the Atlantic to achieve a rare polar orbit.

The satellite will spend at least three years studying the oceans from 420 miles (676 kilometers) up, as well as the atmosphere. It will scan the globe daily with two of the science instruments. A third instrument will take monthly measurements.

"It's going to be an unprecedented view of our home planet," said project scientist Jeremy Werdell.

The observations will help scientists improve hurricane and other severe weather forecasts, detail Earth's changes as temperatures rise and better predict when harmful algae blooms will happen.

NASA already has more than two dozen Earth-observing satellites and instruments in orbit. But Pace should give better insights into how atmospheric aerosols like pollutants and volcanic ash and sea life like algae and plankton interact with each other. "Pace will give us another dimension" to what other satellites observe, said NASA's director of Earth science, Karen St. Germain.

Pace - short for Plankton, Aerosol, Cloud, Ocean Ecosystem - is the most advanced mission ever launched to study ocean biology.

Current Earth-observing satellites can see in seven or eight colors, according to Werdell. Pace will see in 200 colors that will allow scientists to identify the types of algae in the sea and types of particles in the air. Scientists expect to start getting data in a month or two.

NASA is collaborating with India on another advanced Earth-observing satellite due to launch this year. Named Nisar, it will use radar to measure the effect of rising temperatures on glaciers and other melting icy surfaces.

NASA's Pace project persevered despite efforts by the Trump administration to cancel it. "It has been a long, strange trip as they say," Werdell said before the launch.

World's biggest flying lab comes to Asia

AFP — CLARK, PHILIPPINES

NASA has kicked off a series of marathon flights in Asia with the world's biggest flying laboratory, in an ambitious mission to improve the models that help to forecast and fight air pollution.

Starting this week in the Philippines, the US agency's DC-8 is flying for up to eight hours at a time — sometimes just 15 metres (50 feet) from the ground — to swoop up air particles for study.

"We can provide direct measurements of how much pollution is coming from different sources. And that's one of the primary inputs to the air quality forecasting models," NASA's Barry Lefer told reporters on Thursday at Clark International Airport, around 80km north of Manila. Air quality forecasting relies on readings from ground stations as well as satellites, but both methods are limited in their ability to see how pollutants are spread in the air, according to experts. Readings from aircraft can help fill that gap, improve the interpretation of satellite data, and lead to more accurate models.

Combining the air, space and ground readings is necessary for policies "regarding public health, regarding industrial compliance, regarding... ecosystem preservation and conservation", said Maria Antonia Loyzaga, secretary of the Philippines Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

Packed with dozens of highly sensitive instruments, the NASA lab has flown twice so far this week in a figure-eight pattern over some of the most densely populated areas of the Philippines, including the capital region, according to the tracking site FlightAware. It has been accompanied by a smaller NASA Gulfstream jet whose instruments can create three-dimensional maps of pollutants in the air.

In the coming weeks, the jets will also conduct research flights over South Korea, Malaysia and Thailand.

Results from the study will be shared with the public after a year, NASA programme officials said.

The project, named ASIA-AQ, is a collaboration between the US agency and governments in a region with some of the highest air pollution-linked death rates in the world.

Manila Observatory scientist Maria Cambaliza told reporters Thursday that about a third of global air pollution-linked deaths are recorded in Asia. In the Philippines, she added, there are 100 such deaths per 100,000 people.

Women train to fight fire with fire in Portugal

AFP — PAREDES DE COURA

Women from around the world gathered in northwest Portugal this week to practise a traditional technique of deliberately burning land to prevent the kind of wildfires — intensified by climate change — that have killed hundreds across Europe.

In the hills above the Portuguese town of Paredes de Coura, women used drip torches to set fire to thorny patches of scrubland, creating grazing areas for livestock.

"What these women are learning here is essentially the use of traditional fire. The fire that our ancestors used to renew the pastures and also as a means of controlling combustible materials," says Cristina Azurara, northern regional coordinator for the Portuguese fire-management agency AGIF.

Wildfires killed more than 100 people in Portugal in 2017 and burned through hills covered in pine and eucalyptus trees. Across Europe, increasingly intense heatwaves have blackened thousands of acres of land over the past two years.

Compared to wildfires, the so-called prescribed or controlled fires have a "smaller impact on the earth while creating greater biodiversity", says rural fire specialist and trainer Emmanuel Oliveira. The technique identifies which trees to burn based on weather conditions, vegetation moisture and how well smoke disperses.

Some 40 firefighters and researchers came from 20 countries for Europe's first Women's Traditional Fire Training Exchange (WTREX), an initiative established in the United States in 2016.

WTREX also aims to increase the role of women in fire management, traditionally dominated by men.

"I come from a country where, for a long time, women were only allowed to work in confined spaces such as offices or in places that weren't outdoors," says Mexican student Laura Ponce, 39.

Prince William's prize heads to Cape Town

AFP — LONDON

Prince William's annual Earthshot prize, which supports solutions to the planet's biggest problems such as climate change, will be awarded in Cape Town later this year, organisers announced yesterday.

The initiative — in its fourth year — will hold five days of events in November, including the yearly awards ceremony, in the South African city.

Previous host cities include Singapore last year, Boston in 2022 and London in 2021.

The Singapore ceremony saw five eventual winners given one million pounds ($1.3m) each.

The same sum will go to this year's five winners.

November's prize events will "celebrate the groundbreaking work of fifteen global environmental solutions", organisers said.

"The nominations to The Earthshot Prize remind us that human ingenuity, grit and determination can turn the seemingly impossible into the new normal," the initiative's CEO Hannah Jones said.

A baby boom of African penguin chicks hatches at a San Francisco museum

AP — SAN FRANCISCO

A bounty of 10 African penguin chicks has hatched in just over a year at a San Francisco science museum as part of an effort to conserve the endangered bird.

The penguins began hatching in November 2022, ending a four year period without any new chicks, and continued through January of this year, the California Academy of Sciences announced Wednesday.

African penguins have dwindled to 9,000 breeding pairs in the wild, the academy said in a statement.

Threats such as overfishing, habitat degradation and oil spills have reduced colonies of the charismatic black-and-white birds, said Brenda Melton, director of animal care and well-being at the museum's Steinhart Aquarium.

Star Japanese conductor Seiji Ozawa dies at 88

AFP —TOKYO: Celebrated Japanese conductor Seiji Ozawa, who led world-renowned orchestras, died at his home in Tokyo aged 88, his management announced yesterday.

"Conductor Seiji Ozawa passed away peacefully at his home on February 6th, 2024, at the age of 88," his management said in a statement on its official Facebook page.

He died of heart failure and the funeral was attended by close relatives according to his wishes, the statement read.Ozawa was born in 1935 in the Chinese province of Manchuria, then a Japanese colony, and started learning piano at elementary school. But he broke two fingers as a teenager while playing rugby — another passion — and switched to conducting.

Katara's Asian Cup activities



Katara's busy programme of events accompanying the Asian Cup Qatar 2023 will run until today. The month-long celebration, which started on January 12, featured a diverse array of 46 events.