

EID STAYCATION DEMAND
LIFTS DOMESTIC TOURISM,
HOTEL BOOKINGS



EID RETAIL SURGE HIGHLIGHTS
SHIFTING CONSUMER
SPENDING PATTERNS



NEW ZEALAND DOMINATE
SOUTH AFRICA FOR 2-1
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EID REAFFIRMS
UNITY AND
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The Peninsula

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Eid Mubarak

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Amir performs Eid prayers, receives well-wishers

Amir congratulates citizens, residents; wishes prosperity, security and peace



DOHA: Amir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani performed Eid Al-Fitr prayers along with citizens at Lusail praying area yesterday.

The prayer was also performed by Personal Representative of H H the Amir H H Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al-Thani, H H Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa Al-Thani, H H Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa Al-Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs H E Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani, Speaker of the Shura Council H E Hassan bin Abdullah Al Ghanem, several of Their Excellencies sheikhs and ministers, members of the

Shura Council, and a number of their Excellencies ambassadors and heads Diplomatic missions in the country.

Sheikh Dr. Yahya Butti Al Nuaimi delivered the Eid sermon, in which he discussed the meaning of Takbeer, and that God Almighty is the Great, the Rich, the Strong, the King, in whose hand is the dominion of all things, and He is capable of all things.

He also pointed out that Eid Al-Fitr this year comes amidst exceptional circumstances in the region, praising the sincere efforts made by the security services to protect the homeland and preserve its resources in accordance with



I extend my warmest congratulations to our dear people and the residents of Qatar, and to all Muslims worldwide, on the occasion of the blessed Eid al-Fitr. I pray that Allah returns it to us all with goodness, prosperity, and blessings. This Eid comes as the men of our nation, foremost among them our armed forces and security services, stand vigilant and dedicated to the security and stability of Qatar. I pray that Allah protects our country, and may Qatar enjoy continued prosperity, security and peace.

the supreme directives, and praying to God to protect our country, its Amir and people, and all Muslim countries from all harm, and to repel the

schemes of the aggressors. He also affirmed that the signs of relief were near, that with hardship comes ease, and following distress comes relief.

After the Eid prayer, H H the Amir received a host of well-wishers at Lusail Palace.

His Highness received H E the Prime Minister, H E the Speaker of the Shura Council, Their Excellencies Sheikhs, Ministers, Undersecretaries, members of the Shura Council, and citizens.

Personal Representative of H H The Amir H H Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al-Thani, H H Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa Al-Thani, H H Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa Al-Thani, H E Sheikh Jassim bin Khalifa Al-Thani, and a number of Their Excellencies Sheikhs and ministers attended the reception. — QNA

Amir, UAE President exchange greetings on Eid Al-Fitr

DOHA: Amir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani received a phone call yesterday from President of the United Arab Emirates H H Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

H H the Amir and H H the UAE President exchanged greetings and congratulations on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr, praying to Almighty Allah to return it to the two countries and their peoples, and to the Arab and Islamic nations, with goodness, prosperity, and blessings.

During the call, they discussed developments in the region in light of the ongoing Iranian aggression against Qatar, the UAE, and several regional countries, and the serious repercussions resulting from it on regional security and stability, as well as its flagrant violation of state sovereignty and the principles of international law.

Both sides stressed the importance of an immediate cessation of all hostile acts, working to de-escalate, and intensifying regional and international efforts to find diplomatic solutions that ensure the security and stability of the region and safeguard the safety of its peoples and their resources, particularly with regard to the security of vital facilities and energy resources.

H H the Amir and H H the President emphasised the need to enhance coordination and joint consultation on various developments in a way that contributes to supporting the foundations of regional security and stability and fulfills the aspirations of the peoples of the region for peace and development. — QNA

QM to reopen museums, indoor cultural venues

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Qatar Museums announces the reopening of its museums and galleries to the public, welcoming visitors back to its indoor cultural venues across Doha from March 21, the second day of Eid.

During the Eid period, museums and galleries will be open daily to visitors from March 21 to 27, including on their regularly scheduled closing days. From the week following Eid, Qatar Museums' regular opening hours will resume across all sites. Museum indoor spaces such as galleries, cafés, and retail outlets are open in line with the approved operating schedule, while outdoor sites remain temporarily closed. → P3

We warned of consequences of targeting Iranian oil and gas facilities on other countries: Al-Kaabi

DOHA: Minister of State for Energy Affairs H E Saad bin Sherida Al-Kaabi (Pictured) revealed that the State of Qatar has warned the United States of America of the potential consequences for other countries should Iranian oil and gas facilities be targeted. He stressed that Washington has been urged to exercise restraint in its handling of the oil and gas facilities issue.

In a statement to Reuters, H E Al-Kaabi said, "We have consistently warned and spoken with executives from our partner oil and gas companies and with the US Secretary of Energy to alert them to the consequences and the potential harm this could cause us." He emphasized that they have been urged to exercise restraint in any action taken regarding the oil and gas facilities.

He explained that the damage inflicted on facilities that cost \$26bn to build will affect liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments to Europe and Asia for up to five years. He noted in this context that he had not received any prior warning regarding the attack on the Iranian Pars gas field.



Regarding the assessment of the damages, the Minister of State for Energy Affairs stated that Qatar Energy has not yet determined whether insurance will cover the losses incurred by the company in connection with the war. He noted that the attack on Ras Laffan not only halted 17 percent of Qatar's LNG export capacity but also caused repercussions that could last for up to five years due to the damage sustained at the site.

H E Al-Kaabi clarified that the attack resulted in no casualties, but pointed out that the delay in the Ras Laffan expansion project will affect gas deliveries scheduled to France, Germany, and China starting in 2027. This expansion was intended to increase Qatar's LNG production capacity from 77 million tons per year to 126 million tons by next year, further solidifying the country's position as a leading global LNG exporter.

H E Al-Kaabi also noted that the North Field expansion project would be delayed "for months, if not years or more," stressing that Qatar's energy production could only resume once hostilities ceased, "and until then, it will take at least three or four months to fully resume operations."

Regarding the war's repercussions, H E Al-Kaabi told Reuters, "The wider repercussions of the war will reverberate throughout the Gulf region's economies," adding that it had set the entire region back by between ten and twenty years. — QNA

Citizens and residents mark Eid with resilience and unity amid regional crisis

VICTOR BOLORUNDURO
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Eid celebrations across Qatar are unfolding in a spirit of resilience and unity, as citizens and residents come together to observe the festive occasion despite the backdrop of ongoing regional tensions.

Eid prayers, held indoors yesterday at designated venues such as the Education City Mosque and the Abdulla Bin Zaid Al-Mahmoud Islamic Cultural Center (Fanan), drew thousands of worshippers. Citizens and expatriates in flowing abayas, embroidered kurtas and traditional thobes lined up shoulder to shoulder, reciting takbir in unison.

The Ministry of Endowments

and Islamic Affairs (Awqaf) had limited prayers to enclosed spaces for safety, a precautionary measure reflecting the heightened security protocols across the Gulf.

While the regional situation has prompted heightened awareness, it has not dampened the essence of Eid, which remains centred on togetherness, gratitude, and charity. Many residents expressed a determination to maintain a sense of normalcy while staying mindful of developments.

Across Doha, festive activity has been evident in public spaces, shopping destinations, and cultural hubs. Areas such as Souq Waqif have been bustling with visitors enjoying traditional

cuisine, live performances, and the vibrant atmosphere that typically accompanies Eid.

Speaking to *The Peninsula*, Dr. Adnan Fahad Al Ramzani Al Naimi, a Qatari, said, "The current regional crisis has not diminished the spirit of the festival, and we are pleased to have celebrated another Eid following the successful conclusion of the holy month of Ramadan."

"We owe this to the wise leadership of Qatar, which has ensured the safety of the nation and the smooth continuation of events as anticipated. May we enjoy many more of these magnificent occasions in the future," he further remarked.

Pakistani expatriate Ahmed Khan, a long-time Doha resident



Worshippers from across Qatar gather in the spirit of solidarity, resilience, gratitude, and unity for Eid Al-Fitr prayer at Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab Mosque yesterday. PIC: RAJAN VADAKKEMURIYIL/THE PENINSULA

working in construction, described the morning as "a reminder of blessings we often overlook". "Back home, Eid is

about big family feasts and village gatherings, but here we adapted. We prayed at a nearby mosque, then shared sheer khurma and

dates with neighbours from India and the Philippines. Qatar gave us peace when the region faces uncertainty," he said. → P2

Amir performs Eid Al Fitr prayer



Amir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani performed Eid Al Fitr prayers along with citizens at Lusail praying area yesterday.

EDITORIAL

Eid reaffirms unity and hope

EID AL FITR in Qatar this year arrived with a dual significance: a moment of spiritual renewal and communal joy, set against a backdrop of regional uncertainty that has tested resilience across the Gulf. Yet, as the faithful gathered in large numbers at designated indoor venues across the country, the overriding sentiment was one of unity, gratitude, and quiet confidence.

In his message marking the occasion, Amir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani noted that this year's Eid comes "as the nation's men, foremost among them the armed forces and security agencies, remain vigilant, determined, and dedicated to safeguarding Qatar's security and stability, praying for the continued protection of the country and wishing Qatar ongoing prosperity, security, and peace."

Across the country, families gathered, communities connected, and acts of charity continued to define the occasion. The diversity of Qatar's population was particularly evident, as expatriate communities joined citizens in shared celebration, turning the occasion into a tapestry of cultures united by common values.

The regional situation has also reshaped behavioural patterns, particularly in travel and leisure. With many opting to remain in the country, the rise of staycations has provided a boost to the domestic hospitality sector. Hotels reporting near peak occupancy levels are not merely a commercial trend; it reflects a broader shift towards valuing convenience, safety, and the increasingly rich array of local experiences Qatar has to offer. In this sense, adversity has reinforced self-reliance and highlighted the country's growing appeal as a destination in its own right.

More importantly, the spirit of Eid has once again demonstrated its enduring power as a social glue. In homes, mosques, and public spaces, the emphasis on togetherness and generosity was visible. For citizens and residents, Qatar continues to represent not just a place of residence but a community where shared values are lived and celebrated.

As the festivities continue, this year's Eid stands as a testament to resilience. It shows that even amid uncertainty, the traditions that bind society, faith, family, and fellowship, remain unshaken.

Qatar condemns Israeli attack in Southern Syria

DOHA: The State of Qatar expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of the Israeli attack targeting military facilities in the southern Syrian Arab Republic, considering it a flagrant violation of its sovereignty and a clear breach of international law and the Charter of the United Nations.

In a statement issued

yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) affirmed that the continuation of such practices in the region without deterrence reflects a serious disregard for international law and undermines the foundations of regional security and stability, noting in this regard that the international community's inability to curb and put an end to these

violations has contributed to the worsening of the crisis facing the region.

The ministry reiterated the State of Qatar's firm position in standing alongside the sisterly Syrian Arab Republic, affirming its solidarity with its government and its support for all that would preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity. — QNA

Deputy PM, German Minister review latest developments

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defense Affairs, H E Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman bin Hassan Al-Thani held a phone call yesterday H E Federal Minister of Defense of Germany H E Boris Pistorius. The two sides reviewed the latest regional security developments and discussed aspects of joint cooperation and coordination in light of the current circumstances.

Arab Parliament denounces Iranian attacks on Gulf states

CAIRO: The Arab Parliament denounced Iran's attacks targeting oil and industrial facilities in several Gulf states, describing them as "blatant" and "dangerous" escalation and a highly serious development that threatens regional stability, while exposing global energy security to significant risks. Speaker of the Arab Parliament Mohamed bin Ahmed Al Yammahi, said that these hostile acts constitute a clear and explicit violation of the principles of international law and the United Nations Charter. — QNA

Eid staycation demand lifts domestic tourism, hotel bookings

JOEL JOHNSON
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Hotels across Doha are experiencing a notable surge in bookings for Eid Al Fitr holidays amidst ongoing tensions in the region, as citizens and residents increasingly opt for local staycations rather than travelling abroad.

Industry experts say the combination of time off, competitive hotel offers, and a growing preference for convenience has pushed occupancy rates close to peak-season levels.

Speaking to *The Peninsula*, hospitality operators emphasise that the Eid period has evolved into one of the busiest times of the year for domestic tourism, with families and groups choosing to celebrate within Qatar during the extended holiday period.

"Eid has become a key driver for the local hospitality market," said Varghese Mathew, a hospitality consultant in Doha. "With longer holidays and strong value-driven packages, hotels are seeing occupancy levels that rival some of the busiest travel seasons."

Several hotels have introduced a wide range of promotions to capitalise on this demand, bundling accommodations with dining, leisure, and family-oriented experiences.

Mathew noted that Qatar's hospitality sector has matured significantly in recent years, making it easier for individuals to find diverse experiences locally.

"There is now enough variety in the market for people to enjoy a local holiday without leaving the country. That is a major factor behind the rise in staycations during Eid," he said.

Qatar plans to spend \$45bn (QR164.5bn) to expand the local tourism sector by 2030, aiming for 7 million visitors annually, as per a report by Mordor Intelligence.

The hospitality market is highlighted as one of the highest growth rates, with tourism expected to contribute 12 percent to the country's GDP.

According to Mohammed Karim, a Qatar-based hotel manager, guests are no longer just booking rooms but are looking for a complete holiday experience.

"We are seeing a clear shift toward bundled offerings," Karim said. "Residents want everything in one place, from Eid dining to entertainment and relaxation, which has increased the appeal of staycations."

The trend also reflects broader changes in travel behavior, with individuals

prioritising ease and value during holiday breaks.

Family bookings are driving much of the demand, with hotels tailoring their offerings to include activities for children and group-friendly amenities.

This has resulted in particularly strong interest in resorts and larger properties that can accommodate extended families.

He noted that these packages are among the fastest to sell out. "Anything that combines accommodation with dining and family entertainment is performing exceptionally well this Eid," Karim said.

As the week-long holiday continues, market experts expect occupancy levels to rise further, especially across resort and luxury segments.

He further added, "We anticipate very high occupancy

Citizens, residents mark Eid with resilience and unity

FROM PAGE 1

Similar sentiments echoed among Filipino families. Amalia Santos, a mother of two employed in healthcare, had cancelled a long-planned trip to Georgia and Armenia due to flight suspensions. "We booked a staycation instead. The children are happy with mall activities and homemade feasts. In the middle of all this, Qatar feels like a safe haven," she noted, echoing the experiences of many overseas workers who form the backbone of the country's vibrant multicultural fabric.

From the bustling streets of Doha to residential neighbourhoods in Al Wakrah and Al Khor, the festive atmosphere remains vibrant as thousands of expatriates gather with family and friends to observe one of the most significant occasions in the Islamic calendar.

Shopping malls, traditional

souqs, and community centres have witnessed a surge in activity in the days leading up to Eid. Popular destinations such as Souq Waqif and Place Vendôme Mall have been abuzz with residents purchasing traditional attire, gifts, and festive delicacies, while restaurants prepare special menus catering to diverse cultural tastes.

For many expatriates, Eid in Qatar offers a unique blend of tradition and multicultural exchange. African, Asian, and Arab communities alike have organised gatherings that showcase their heritage through food, music, and communal prayers.

"We may be far from home, but Qatar has given us a place where we can celebrate together," said a Hakeem Ajibade, Nigerian resident in Doha. "Eid here feels like a meeting point of cultures."

Community organisations and embassies have stepped up efforts to ensure that

expatriates, particularly those without immediate family in the country, are not left out of the celebrations. Cultural associations have hosted Eid events featuring traditional dishes, performances, and activities for children, reinforcing a sense of belonging among residents.

At the same time, the ongoing regional crisis has subtly influenced the tone of this year's festivities. While celebrations continue, many residents expressed a sense of caution and mindfulness, with prayers and conversations often reflecting hopes for stability and peace in the region.

Retailers and hospitality providers have adapted to the circumstances, maintaining festive promotions while emphasising safety and comfort. Hotels and eateries have reported steady bookings for Eid brunches and gatherings, albeit with a more subdued atmosphere compared to previous years.

Authorities have also ensured that public spaces remain welcoming and secure, enabling families to celebrate without disruption. Parks and waterfront destinations, including the Doha Corniche, have seen families enjoying the holiday with picnics and evening outings.

For expatriates, the essence of Eid in Qatar lies not only in celebration but in community. Acts of charity, a cornerstone of the occasion, have been widely observed, with residents donating to local initiatives and supporting those in need.

"Eid is about giving and sharing," said Lukman Abdullah, an Indian expatriate. "Even in uncertain times, people here come together to support each other."

As Qatar continues to navigate regional developments, the spirit of Eid serves as a reminder of the country's social cohesion and cultural diversity.



'Joy of Eid' initiative launched

DOHA: The General Directorate of Endowments at the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs launched the Joy of Eid initiative to celebrate Eid Al Fitr by distributing 5,000 gifts to children across 20 major Eid prayer mosques in different areas of Qatar.

The initiative aims to spread happiness among children and strengthen the social impact of endowments

(Waqf). According to Director General Eng. Hassan bin Abdullah Al Marzuqi, the program reflects efforts to activate the role of waqf during religious occasions and promote positive social values.

The Family and Childhood Waqf Fund supported the initiative, highlighting its role in promoting family stability, child development, and community solidarity. — QNA

Amir receives Eid Al Fitr well-wishers



Amir H H Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani received a host of well-wishers on the occasion of Eid Al Fitr at Lusail Palace yesterday.



Minister of Awqaf joins worshippers for Eid prayers

Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs H E Ghanem bin Shaheen bin Ghanem Al Ghanim among worshippers gathered for Eid Al Fitr prayers at Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab Mosque yesterday. PIC: RAJAN VADAKKEMURIYIL/THE PENINSULA

Ministry of Transport issues urgent maritime safety advisory

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: The Ministry of Transport (MoT) has issued an important advisory to owners of ships and maritime vessels, urging them to strictly follow instructions from competent authorities to ensure the safety and protection of life and property amid current developments.

The Ministry emphasised that vessel operators should halt sailing until further notice, stay updated with the latest official announcements, and fully adhere to maritime safety guidance.

The MOT highlighted that

The Ministry emphasised that vessel operators should halt sailing until further notice, and stay updated with the latest official announcements.

following these instructions is a critical responsibility, underscoring that public and maritime safety remains a top priority.

Vessel owners and operators are advised to remain vigilant and comply with all directives issued by relevant authorities to avoid potential risks.

Civil Defence contains fire in Birkat Al Awamir warehouse



DOHA: The Ministry of Interior said that the Civil Defence had completely controlled a fire in a warehouse in the Birkat Al Awamir area, without any injuries being recorded.

This came in a post the ministry made on X. It had earlier said that Civil Defence was dealing with a fire in a warehouse in the area. — QNA

QM to reopen museums, indoor cultural venues

FROM PAGE 1

The safety and wellbeing of visitors and staff remain Qatar Museums' highest priority. Appropriate measures are in place across all sites to support a safe and comfortable visit, with staff on hand to guide and assist visitors throughout their experience.

Qatar Museums continues to provide access to art, heritage, and cultural experiences through its network of museums, galleries, public art installations, welcoming audiences to engage with its programmes throughout the Eid period and beyond.

Visitors are encouraged to check Qatar Museums' official website and social media channels for the latest information on opening hours, exhibitions, and visitor guidance.

Qatar Museums continues to provide access to art, heritage, and cultural experiences through its network of museums.

For the full schedule of exhibitions, public workshops, tours, and events are on the website: <https://qm.org.qa/en/calendar>.

According to the guidelines, most museums and galleries will welcome visitors from Saturday to Thursday between 9am and 7pm. On Fridays, operating hours will begin later in the day, running from 1:30pm to 7pm, in line with weekend schedules.

Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art will remain closed on Mondays, while the National Museum of Qatar (NMQ) and the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum will both be closed on Tuesdays, the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) will be closed for public on Wednesdays.

'Reliance on official, verified news crucial during regional tensions'

FAZEENA SALEEM
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: During times of regional geopolitical tension, relying on official and verified news sources becomes essential not only for personal awareness but also for maintaining public order and responsible civic engagement, according to Lecturer at the College of Law at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Dr. Khalid Mubarak Al-Kuwari.

Dr. Al-Kuwari said that the rapid flow of information during crises makes it increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish between facts, ongoing investigations, and speculation.

"In this informational age and in moments of armed conflict or severe regional tension, the flow of information becomes extremely rapid," he told *The Peninsula* adding that verified information "is not merely a matter of personal

awareness; it is a matter of public order and legal responsibility." He explained that official statements and credible journalism help create a shared understanding of events among citizens. "Official and verified sources help citizens distinguish between what has occurred, what remains under investigation, and what is pure speculation," Dr. Al-Kuwari said.

According to him, when the public relies on reputable journalism and documented evidence, it becomes easier to maintain "a common factual baseline for rational and collective civic discussion." Dr. Al-Kuwari also highlighted that this approach aligns closely with Qatar's broader policy framework during times of crisis. "From the perspective of Qatar's public policy, this is especially important because Qatar's official posture combines firm protection



Reliance on verified sources supports not only truth, but also the state's broader peace-oriented diplomatic strategy.
Dr. Al-Kuwari

of sovereignty with a continuing commitment to dialogue, preventive diplomacy, and mediation," he said.

"Reliance on verified sources supports not only truth, but also the state's broader peace-oriented diplomatic strategy." Addressing the dangers of misinformation, Dr. Al-Kuwari warned that false or unverified content can significantly distort public understanding during geopolitical crises. "Misinformation is dangerous because it alters both perception and behavior; it can

be used as information warfare or political manipulation," he said.

He explained that fabricated reports can exaggerate military developments, invent casualty figures, misattribute attacks, or even circulate fake official statements.

Such distortions, he said, can cause panic, erode trust in institutions, and push societies toward emotional reactions rather than thoughtful and legally grounded responses.

"In Qatar, where the government is simultaneously asserting its sovereign rights and advocating de-escalation, misinformation is particularly harmful," he said. "It may minimise a real attack and weaken public understanding of the seriousness of the violation, or it may inflame public opinion in ways that undermine diplomatic efforts." Dr. Al-Kuwari also provided practical advice for individuals seeking to

verify information circulating online. He outlined a simple approach that includes checking the source, the publication date, the supporting evidence, and whether the information is confirmed by other credible outlets.

"First, ask whether the claim comes from an official institution, an identifiable journalist, or a recognised news organisation," he said. "Second, check the publication date, because old footage or statements are often recycled during conflicts as if they were new." He added that individuals should also look for primary documentation such as official statements, press releases, or full interviews, while comparing viral claims with information from competent authorities and reputable international news agencies.

Dr. Al-Kuwari cautioned the public against trusting dramatic

screenshots, edited videos, or anonymous posts circulated on social media platforms. "People should be particularly cautious about content shared through anonymous Instagram, WhatsApp or X posts," he said.

Highlighting the broader role of academia, Dr. Al-Kuwari stressed that universities and researchers play a vital part in strengthening public resilience against misinformation. "Universities help produce an informed public capable of disciplined reasoning," he said. "In times of crisis, researchers and faculty members avoid amplifying panic and instead exercise rigor, proportionality, and ethical judgment."

He added that scholars can also help the public understand how evidence is evaluated and how international law frames issues such as sovereignty, self-defence and peaceful settlement of disputes.

Qatar submits official letter to ICAO on airspace situation amid Iranian attacks

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: The State of Qatar, through its Permanent Mission to the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), submitted an official letter to President of the Council of the Organisation, Toshiyuki Onuma addressing the current status of air traffic and flight routes in light of the ongoing developments in the region.

Civil Aviation Authority in a statement posted on its official X handle said that the letter stated that the attacks carried out against the State of Qatar by the Islamic Republic of Iran constitute a flagrant violation of the State's sovereignty and of the provisions of the Chicago Convention on International

Civil Aviation, while affirming that the State of Qatar reserves all its rights under international law.

The letter also reviewed the impacts resulting from the closure of the airspace, including the disruption to passenger travel and air cargo movement through the State of Qatar. It further outlined the measures and actions taken by the State to support passengers affected by flight disruptions, including the organisation of evacuation flights and the provision of necessary services.

In its letter, the State of Qatar emphasised the importance of expediting the reopening of airports, given the region's status as a global transit hub and its key role in the international air transport sector.

Eid Al-Fitr prayers at Education City Mosque



The Education City Mosque has hosted the Eid Al-Fitr prayers, bringing together worshippers from across Qatar's community to mark the end of the Holy Month of Ramadan, reflect, and demonstrate gratitude and unity. The prayer was attended by community members of all ages, with the gathering being hosted by QF's Minaretin Centre in coordination with the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs.

Gulf states intercept Iranian attacks, drones cause fire at Kuwait refinery

RIYADH/ABU DHABI/KUWAIT/MANAMA: The Saudi Ministry of Defense announced yesterday evening the interception and destruction of two drones in the airspace of the Eastern Province.

Major General Turki Al Malki, the official spokesperson for the Ministry of Defense, stated that two drones were intercepted and destroyed in the Eastern Province. This follows an earlier announcement yesterday regarding the interception and destruction of another drone in the same region.

The Ministry had also revealed yesterday morning that it had destroyed four drones in the Eastern Province.

The UAE air defence systems yesterday engaged four ballistic missiles and 26 UAVs launched from Iran, announced the country's Defense Ministry.

Since the onset of the blatant Iranian aggression, UAE air defences have engaged 338 ballistic missiles, 15 cruise missiles and 1,740 UAVs.

The Ministry affirmed its full preparedness to deal with

any threats, and firmly confront any attempts to undermine State security in a manner that ensures the protection of its sovereignty, security and stability, and safeguards its national interests and capabilities.

The Kuwaiti Ministry of Defense announced yesterday that its armed forces detected one ballistic missile in the past 24 hours, which was intercepted and destroyed, in addition to 25 hostile drones within Kuwaiti airspace.

This came in a statement by the spokesperson for the Kuwaiti Ministry of Defense, Colonel Saud Al Atwan, during a media briefing on current events and the latest field developments in light of the Iranian aggression against Kuwait.

Colonel Al Atwan said that air defense systems were able to destroy 15 drones out of the total number detected, while two drones targeted a refinery unit belonging to the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation.

He added that the attack resulted in a fire that was brought under control by specialised teams without any

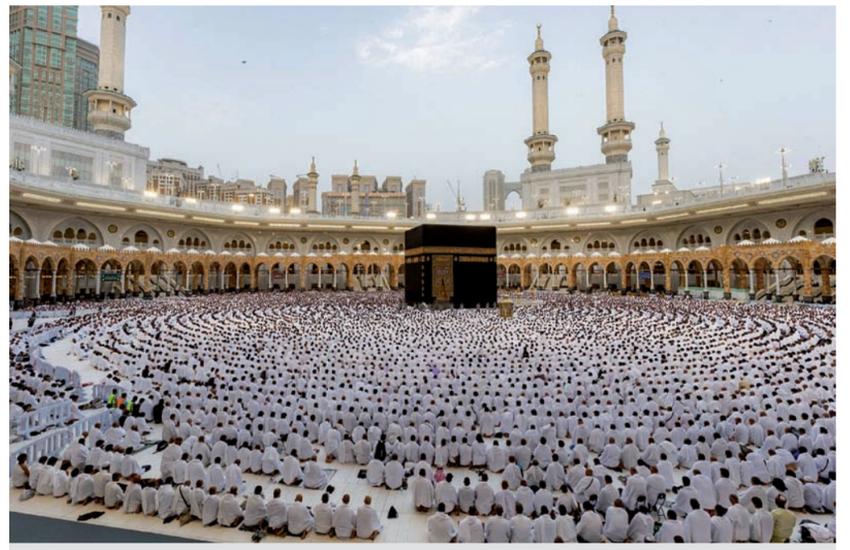
casualties. He explained that the remaining drones fell outside the threat area without posing any danger.

Meanwhile, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said that Mina Al-Ahmad Refinery came under drone attacks early Friday.

The attacks resulted in a fire in several units within the refinery but caused no injuries, according to preliminary assessments, the company said in a statement. It added that emergency response and fire-fighting teams were immediately deployed to the site to contain the fire. Some refinery units were shut down as a precautionary measure.

Bahrain's Defense Force said its air defense systems have intercepted and destroyed 141 missiles and 242 drones since Iran began targeting the kingdom.

In a statement, authorities described the attacks on civilian sites and private property as a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and the UN Charter, warning they pose a direct threat to regional peace and security. — *QNA*



Eid prayers at the Grand Mosque

People gather around the Kaaba at the Grand Mosque complex in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, for the Eid Al-Fitr prayers yesterday, marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan. (AFP)

Israeli airstrike targets military site in Syria's Daraa

DAMASCUS: Israeli warplanes carried out an airstrike yesterday on a Syrian army site in Daraa province, southern Syria.

Local sources reported that an office belonging to the 40th Division of the Ministry of

Defense in the Izraa area of northern Daraa countryside was targeted by an Israeli airstrike.

Initial reports indicate that the attack resulted in no casualties, and damage was limited to material losses at the

targeted site. Israeli warplanes routinely attack targets inside Syrian territory and violate its sovereignty with ground incursions, in clear violation of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement. — *QNA*

King of Bahrain and Indian PM review ties, regional developments

MANAMA: H M King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi discussed by phone yesterday the bilateral relations between the two countries and ways to enhance and develop them across various fields, in addition to the latest regional developments.

During the call, Modi expressed India's condemnation of the Iranian attacks on Bahrain and its complete rejection of all actions that would threaten peace and security in the region, affirming India's full support for Bahrain's security and stability, as well as its contribution to efforts aimed at ensuring the safety of maritime navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.

For his part, the King of the Kingdom of Bahrain affirmed that his country will play its role in international efforts aimed at securing navigation in the Strait of Hormuz in a manner that enhances maritime security and ensures the smooth flow of global trade.

Both sides also stressed the utmost importance of halting Iranian threats to freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, as an international waterway vital for energy supplies and global trade, considering the protection of maritime routes a shared international responsibility to preserve the security and stability of international navigation and the interests of the international community. — *QNA*

Israeli warplanes break sound barrier over Beirut: Media

BEIRUT: An Israeli warplane broke the sound barrier over Beirut yesterday morning, state media said, as AFP journalists heard loud booms reverberate across the city and in distant mountains.

Lebanon's official National News Agency said "a strong sonic boom, in two successive waves, shook the skies over Beirut and its suburbs" on the morning of the Eid Al-Fitr holiday.

The incident set social media abuzz. "On a day without shelling — so far — the Israelis are greeting the people of Beirut and its suburbs with two sonic booms," one internet user, Salah Halawi, wrote on X.

Last week Israeli warplanes also caused loud booms in the skies of the Lebanese capital, as they dropped propaganda leaflets on the city, terrifying residents. — *AFP*

Syrian President says working to keep country out of regional war

DAMASCUS: Syrian President Ahmed Al-Sharaa said yesterday he is working to keep his country away from conflict, against the backdrop of the Middle East war, stressing that his government is on good terms with all regional countries.

In a speech delivered after the Eid Al-Fitr prayer in the presidential palace in Damascus, Sharaa said: "We are calculating our steps with extreme precision and working to keep Syria away from any conflict."

"It is important to remember that Syria has

always been an arena of conflict and strife during the past 15 years and before that, but today it is in harmony with all neighbouring countries regionally and internationally," he said.

He added that Syria stood "in full solidarity with the Arab states".

War in the Middle East erupted after the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran on February 28, to which Tehran responded by targeting Israel and carrying out attacks on US embassies and interests, as well as energy facilities and civilian targets in Gulf states.



Syria's President Ahmed Al-Sharaa attending the Eid al-Fitr prayers in Damascus yesterday. (AFP)

The war spread to Lebanon, Syria's neighbour, with Israel conducting large-scale strikes in response to attacks by Hezbollah, and to Iraq, where bases of some Iraqi armed factions have been hit by air raids.

After Syria had been, for all the years of the conflict that ravaged it, an arena of competition for international powers, the country has thus far remained at a distance from the regional escalation.

Syrians are seeing the war from afar, while Israel intercepts Iranian missiles passing through the skies overhead. — *AFP*

Pregnant mother, five kids die in Turkiye fire

ISTANBUL: A pregnant Syrian woman and her five young children died when a fire ripped through containers housing agricultural workers near the southwestern Antalya resort, the governor and media reports said yesterday.

DHA news agency said the 27-year-old mother was seven months pregnant, with her husband fighting for his life after the blaze.

The tragedy occurred as Turkiye began celebrating the three-day Bayram holiday to mark the end of the fasting month of Ramadan.

Antalya Governor Hulusi Sahin said the fire ripped

through several containers where greenhouse workers were living in Kepez district, just north of Antalya.

"Three containers caught fire, and we lost a mother and five children aged between four and nine," he told reporters standing in front of the charred remains of a container and a burned-out car.

Five others were injured in the blaze, one of whom had sustained "life-threatening injuries", he said.

DHA said the fire broke out in the northern Gaziler neighbourhood at around 1:30 am (2230 GMT on Thursday), with local leader Suleyman Kaplan

saying the victims were from a family of Syrian agricultural workers.

"A fire broke out in the middle of the night in a container where Syrians were staying. Unfortunately, five children and their pregnant mother died. The children's father was also injured and is in intensive care," he told DHA.

Anadolu said four of the injured — one of whom was a two-year-old — had the same family names as the victims, while the fifth was the business owner. Although the cause was not immediately clear, Sahin said it appeared someone had been having a barbecue on a burner outside the containers.

"It seems they went to bed without extinguishing it. But for now, we cannot definitively say that's why it happened," he added.

Investigators were looking into the cause of the blaze and had arrested three people, he said. Kaplan said he and other neighbourhood leaders had repeatedly asked the authorities to set up a fire station in the area. "As a community, we've asked for a fire engine because the fire station is so far away and it takes the fire brigade too long to arrive," he said. "We urgently need a fire station." — *AFP*



The site of burned containers following a fire in Kepez district, north of Antalya, southwestern Turkiye yesterday. (AFP)

Fears of fresh war drive hundreds of Tigrayans to flee north Ethiopia

MEKELLE: It's deep in the night in Mekelle, the capital of Ethiopia's Tigray region, but dozens of young men with backpacks and suitcases are searching for a bus to Addis Ababa.

Abel, 23, fought for the Tigrayan Defence Forces during the civil war against the federal government of 2020-22 that killed at least 600,000 people. He worries a fresh conflict is imminent.

"It's not safe here anymore," said Abel, whose name has been changed to protect his identity. "I saw people die. I don't want to relive that, I don't want the war to catch up with me again."

While war sets much of the Middle East alight, just across the waters of the Red Sea, another conflict is looming in the Horn of Africa.

Federal and Tigrayan forces are once again massing at their shared border in northern Ethiopia. The peace agreement that ended the last civil war in 2022 was never properly implemented and relations have remained highly volatile, not helped by Ethiopia's worsening ties with Eritrea, which borders Tigray. There are no exact numbers, but hundreds are fleeing Tigray — a region that was home to around six million

people before the war — every day by bus or plane. Abel wants to join them but the buses are full for the 700-kilometre drive to the federal capital of Addis Ababa, one of the few areas of Ethiopia not facing some form of conflict or insecurity.

"There's nobody left here," he said. Shortages of basic products are worsening. Hawkers sell bottles of smuggled petrol at intersections and their prices are rising fast — from 300 to 430 birr (around \$1.90 to \$2.80) in just a few days, an AFP journalist said.

Federal authorities have cut subsidies to the region for

months. Many civil servants are no longer being paid and banks are running out of cash.

Heading to southern Tigray, a destroyed tank lies on the side of the road, a relic from the last war. Chercher, a town of around 50,000 roughly 150 kilometres south of Mekelle, is near the borders with the Afar and Amhara regions, where federal troops are reportedly massing.

In January there was a brief outbreak of fighting in the area, sparking fears that a full conflict was restarting.

Mahlet Terefe, 23, briefly fled to another town with her three-year-old son when she

heard the heavy artillery. She returned to run her stall selling alcohol and juice, but says business is almost non-existent.

"As you can see it's deserted, there is nobody around," she told AFP. "I want to leave with my boy before war starts. I'm very afraid." A local official in Chercher told AFP it was a matter of time. "There will be a new war," said Zinabu Gebredhin. "Federal forces have mobilised soldiers nearby." He said the main federal army base was 23 kilometres from Chercher and troops were positioned on hills just 10 kilometres away. — *AFP*

World in brief

Kuwaiti FM receives phone call from US counterpart

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah received a phone call yesterday from US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry stated in a press release that the call addressed developments in the region amid escalating military tensions. The statement indicated that the two sides discussed the repercussions of the Iranian attack on countries in the region and its potentially serious consequences for regional and international security and stability. — *QNA*

Lebanon deaths from Israeli attacks rise to 1,021

BEIRUT: The death toll from the ongoing Israeli aggression against Lebanon, which began on March 2, has risen to 1,021, with 2,641 wounded.

The Lebanese Ministry of Health, in its daily report issued by the Health Emergency Operations Center on the developments of the Israeli aggression against Lebanon, stated that among the dead are 118 children, 824 men, and 79 women. The number of wounded includes 370 children, 1,856 men, and 415 women.

The Ministry also clarified that among the victims are 40 killed and 119 wounded healthcare workers, noting that a number of hospitals and medical centers have been targeted. — *QNA*

Israeli forces bar Eid prayers at Al Aqsa Mosque

JERUSALEM: Israeli forces prevented Palestinians from accessing the Al Aqsa Mosque compound for Eid Al-Fitr prayers, as the site remained closed for the 21st consecutive day, forcing hundreds to pray in surrounding streets.

Witnesses reported the use of stun grenades and tear gas near Bab Al Sahira, while at least one arrest was made amid tight restrictions. Despite the measures, worshippers gathered at nearby points, performing prayers and chanting Eid takbirs in defiance.

Jerusalem authorities condemned the closure as a serious escalation and a violation of freedom of worship, calling for urgent international intervention. — *QNA*

Turkiye mobilising all resources for peace in region: Erdogan

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that his country is harnessing all its resources to achieve peace and stability in the region.

In remarks yesterday, Erdogan added, "We, as the Islamic world, are trying to overcome a path fraught with obstacles, traps, and conspiracies. Wherever we turn, we find pain and tragedy." He pointed out that the Israeli occupation continues to obstruct the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, kill innocent people, and destroy infrastructure.

He noted that Israel, exploiting the war with Iran, has closed Al-Aqsa Mosque to worshippers and accelerated its settlement activities in the West Bank and the occupied Palestinian territories.

The Turkish President added that Türkiye was mobilising all its resources to achieve peace and stability and to reactivate dialogue and diplomacy.

Erdogan affirmed that his government is taking all necessary measures to protect Türkiye from the widening circle of conflict, saying, his government will continue to

closely monitor events and take all necessary measures as needed.

Meanwhile, Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty and his Turkish counterpart, Hakan Fidan, warned in a phone call yesterday of the catastrophic and dangerous repercussions of the continued cycle of violence and escalating conflict in the region, which threatens regional and international peace and security.

The Egyptian Foreign Ministry stated in a press release that the call addressed the latest regional developments in light of the dangerous military escalation in the region, emphasizing the importance of de-escalation and prioritising diplomatic and political solutions to contain the situation. They also discussed ways to strengthen bilateral relations.

Regarding developments in Sudan, both sides stressed the need to respect the sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of the country, emphasizing the importance of advancing efforts to achieve calm and create a conducive environment for resuming the comprehensive political process in Sudan. — *QNA*

UAE President, Turkish FM discuss regional developments

ABU DHABI: President of the United Arab Emirates, H H Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Foreign Minister of Türkiye, Hakan Fidan met in Abu Dhabi yesterday to discuss the developments in the region.

During the meeting, the Turkish foreign minister reiterated his country's condemnation of the Iranian attacks targeting the UAE and other countries in the region, noting that they constitute a violation of state sovereignty and international law and pose a threat to regional stability. The two sides also discussed the ongoing military escalation in the region and its serious implications for regional and international security and stability. Both sides underscored the need to halt the escalation and prioritise dialogue and diplomacy to prevent further tensions and crises. — *QNA*

The Turkish FM reiterated his country's condemnation of the Iranian attacks targeting the UAE and other countries in the region.



UAE President H H Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan meeting Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in Abu Dhabi yesterday. (AFP)

UAE says it dismantled network involved in money laundering and terrorism financing

ABU DHABI: The UAE State Security Apparatus announced the dismantling of a "terrorist network" funded and managed by Hezbollah and Iran.

It confirmed the arrest of its members, who were operating within the country under fraudulent commercial cover to infiltrate the national economy and execute external agendas threatening the

national's financial stability.

In a statement, the apparatus explained that the network operated according to a pre-planned strategic scheme coordinated with external parties linked to Hezbollah and Iran.

Their activities involved violating economic and legal regulations, including money laundering and terrorism financing, to undermine

national security.

It emphasised that any attempt to exploit the national economy or civil institutions for terrorist or conspiratorial purposes would be met with firmness and force.

It further asserted that no external interference threatening the state's security or stability would be tolerated, regardless of its source or pretext. — *QNA*

Chinese FM urges efforts to prevent escalation in Middle East

BEIJING: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday that one of the top priorities at present is to contain the spread of the conflict and prevent further involvement of other countries.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks in a phone conversation with Emmanuel Bonne, diplomatic adviser to the French president, at the latter's request.

Wang elaborated on China's position, saying that the current situation in the Middle East is still deteriorating, with the conflict continuing to spread. This has not only undermined the stability of global energy supply but also led to a severe humanitarian crisis. Resorting to force will not solve the problem, and an unjust war should not be allowed to continue, he said.

In the face of the critical situation, China and France, as permanent members of the UN

Security Council, should strengthen strategic communication and coordination, firmly uphold the UN Charter and international law, and prevent the world from regressing to the "law of the jungle," Wang said.

He added that the other two top priorities are for the international community to speak with one voice in calling for an immediate ceasefire and to intensify efforts to advance peace talks, and for the United Nations and the UN Security

Council to play their due role in facilitating the early restoration of peace and stability in the region. Despite the difficulties, dialogue and negotiation remain the right path out of the crisis, Wang said, adding that China and France should work together toward this end.

For his part, Bonne shared his perspectives on the current situation in the Middle East, including developments in Iran and Lebanon. He said that France and China, as major

countries, both support the United Nations, abide by international law, and advocate resolving differences through dialogue. He said that the two countries should work together to explore solutions and contribute to easing tensions and resuming negotiations.

France is willing to enhance communication and cooperation with China to push for the early achievement of peace and stability in the Middle East, he added. — *XINHUA*

Tropical cyclone batters northern Australia

SYDNEY: A tropical cyclone lashed Australia's northern tip yesterday, hitting remote coastal towns with the strongest winds seen for a "long, long time", authorities said. Severe Tropical Cyclone Narelle made landfall at the northern point of Queensland state, battering the coast with strong winds, driving rain and pounding surf.

Australia's government weather agency said winds exceeded 200 kilometres (124 miles) per hour.

"In many cases it will be the strongest wind people have experienced in this part of the state for a long, long time," Queensland Premier David Crisafulli said.

The cyclone hit land as a category four storm system — the second strongest classification — but was soon downgraded to a category three. The Queensland Police Service said there had been no immediate reports of major damage, but urged residents to stay vigilant. Tracking maps showed the cyclone would miss most major settlements in the region, although several smaller towns were told to be on high alert. Cook Shire Council Mayor Robyn Holmes urged residents to fill bathtubs with water so they had an emergency supply if needed. "This is a serious weather event," she told reporters. "Residents should prepare for heavy rain, strong winds and possible flash flooding. "Conditions will worsen — it's not a matter of if or when, they will worsen."

Bureau of Meteorology forecaster Angus Hines said the winds would be "strong enough to strip or uproot entire trees". Researchers have repeatedly warned that climate change amplifies the risk of natural disasters such as bushfires, floods and cyclones. — *AFP*

At least 18 African migrants drown off Comoros, 30 found alive

MITSAMIOULI: At least 18 African migrants who were trying to reach the French Indian Ocean island of Mayotte have drowned off the Comoros, officials and rescuers said on Thursday.

Thirty people had been found alive after smugglers dropped the group off the coast of the town of Mitsamiouli at the northern tip of the Comoros archipelago's largest island, Grande Comore, a minister said.

Survivors said they were from the Democratic Republic of Congo and had been headed to neighbouring Mayotte, an attractive destination for migrants because of its relatively French infrastructure and welfare.

They had been dropped off-shore and many did not know how to swim, a young man who helped with the rescue told AFP.

"Last night, we found eight dead. The bodies were

recovered by the residents of Mitsamiouli, fishermen and authorities," interior minister Mohamed Ahamada Assoumani told reporters.

"This morning, we were able to recover nine bodies. At present we have 17 dead. The coastguard is searching for the four missing bodies," he said.

"They say they are Congolese, they come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo," the minister said. The

head of the Mitsamiouli hospital said later that the death toll had risen to 18 after another body was found. By late Thursday, the list of the deceased released by the Interior Ministry included two children aged three and 10, as well as two Burundians. Even though it is France's poorest department, Mayotte is a popular destination for migrants from the African continent and the poorer Comoros who are seeking a better life. — *AFP*



Autonomous transportation

A driverless vehicle is seen driving in Beijing economic-technological development area (also known as Beijing E-town) yesterday. (AFP)

Cameroon parliament to vote to extend sitting once more

YAOUNDÉ: Cameroonian lawmakers will vote next week to extend their time on the parliament benches yet again, a deputy told AFP yesterday.

Originally set to be dissolved on March 10, 2025, the central African country's current parliament will vote on Monday on whether to prolong its mandate until December 20, 2026, Samuel Moth, a lawmaker with the ruling RDPC party, told AFP.

Lawmakers, elected in the January 2020 ballot for what was meant to be a five-year-long term, have already voted to prolong their stay on the

parliament benches for a one-year period. "The bill has indeed been placed on our table. The rest is just a formality that will be carried out on Monday," Adamou Youmou Koupit, a deputy with the UDC opposition party, told AFP.

President Paul Biya, the world's oldest head of state at 93 years of age, had already hinted on February 10 at a "slight readjustment" of the timetable for parliamentary and local elections expected at the beginning of that month.

Biya's re-election last October for an eighth term sparked protests. — *AFP*

South African town in uproar over renaming after anti-apartheid icon

GRAAFF-REINET: A rebellion over the renaming of the historic country town of Graaff-Reinet has exposed deep-rooted fractures in South Africa as it grapples with its tormented history.

In a government decree published recently, the nearly 250-year-old town of white-washed Cape Dutch houses and red flamboyant trees was renamed after anti-apartheid icon Robert Sobukwe, born here and buried here.

It is one of around 1,500 geographical name-changes

since the end of apartheid in 1994, some targeting names that "still reflect colonial and apartheid legacies", according to a government document.

In the case of this normally calm oasis, deep in the semi-desert Karoo and about 650 kilometres (400 miles) from Cape Town, the renaming has sown discord among its population of 25,000, leading to protests, petitions and legal threats.

"There are now groups fighting each other," said Hands Off Graaff-Reinet movement activist Laughton Hoffman as

he went door-to-door to rally support against the change.

"The renaming is taking us back," he said, clutching stacks of objection forms, around 22,000 of which have already been delivered to the government. The town is the fourth oldest in South Africa and occupies a proud place in the history of the Afrikaner community, descendants of early Dutch settlers who landed at the Cape 300 years ago.

Established in 1786 and named after the Cape colony's then-governor — Dutchman

Cornelis Jacob van de Graaff — and his wife, Reinet, it became a launchpad a century later for the Great Trek when settlers left to escape British rule.

"What they're doing is to divide a community that was otherwise healthy and happy," another fierce opponent, lawyer Derek Light, told AFP in his office near an iconic neo-Gothic church. A 2024 survey of 367 people representative of the racial make-up of residents showed that nearly 84 percent did not want the name changed, he said. The debate has ignited

UN warns of UNRWA's collapse amid severe funding crisis

NEW YORK: Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), Philippe Lazzarini warned that the agency's continued operation is in doubt.

Lazzarini's warning came in a letter published yesterday, as the agency has been facing a severe funding crisis for several months, coinciding with the lack of a permanent successor before his term expires on March 31.

In a letter addressed to the President of the UN General Assembly on March 17, Lazzarini stated that UNRWA may soon be unable to continue its work, warning of far-reaching consequences for Palestinian refugees, given the escalating political and security challenges in the region.

He pointed to a number of challenges facing the agency, including repeated Israeli attacks, such as the destruction of its offices in East Jerusalem last December, as well as the killing of more than 390 of its staff members during the two-year war in the Gaza Strip. — *QNA*

Heavy rainfall lashes Malawi, killing 13

LILONGWE: Four days of heavy rainfall in Malawi have claimed at least 13 lives, with some killed by collapsing walls or while trying to cross flooded rivers, officials said. The largely rural southern African country was pummeled by strong rains that caused flooding between Sunday and Wednesday, the disaster management department said. After preliminary reports, "the department has recorded 13 deaths and 35 injuries," it said. The worst-affected area was the southern district of Chikwawa, where three people were killed and three evacuation camps had been set up, it said.

The district borders central Mozambique, which has also seen heavy rain, with disaster management officials warning of a risk of flooding.

More rainfall is expected in aid-dependent Malawi over the next few days, the weather service said. As an agriculture-dependent economy, Malawi is vulnerable to climate shocks, which have included a drought in 2024 and a devastating cyclone the year before that killed more than 1,000 people. — *AFP*

55 injured, 14 missing in S Korea's auto parts factory fire

DAEJEON: A large-scale fire broke out yesterday at an automotive parts manufacturing factory in Daejeon in South Korea, leaving 55 people injured and 14 others missing, local fire authorities confirmed.

Fire officials on site told *Xinhua* that, at around 10:30pm local time, an initial structural safety diagnosis was completed, and rescue teams had entered the building from the second floor to begin search operations.

Earlier, entry had been delayed due to concerns over possible collapse. Rescue workers were observed using cranes and drones to assess the structural stability of the damaged buildings in order to determine whether nighttime search operations can be carried out.

The blaze started at about 1:17pm local time at the factory, located about 140km southeast of Seoul. At the time of the

incident, around 170 employees were inside the facility, of whom 101 had been evacuated.

The number of injured has risen to 55, including 24 in serious condition and 31 with minor injuries. Some victims suffered from smoke inhalation, while others were injured after jumping from the burning building.

Less than an hour after the fire was reported, the National Fire Agency issued a nationwide mobilisation order, dispatching firefighting resources from across the country.

About 90 fire trucks and equipment, along with some 200 firefighters, have been deployed, while helicopters from the Korea Forest Service were also mobilised to help contain the blaze.

The factory consists of two prefabricated buildings connected by a walkway. One building has been destroyed,



Heavy smoke rises following a fire at a car parts plant in Daejeon yesterday. (AFP)

and flames have spread to the other. Authorities said

approximately 200kg of sodium

was stored inside the facility, raising concerns over possible explosions. — *XINHUA*

India's forex reserves drop by over \$7bn

NEW DELHI: India's foreign exchange (forex) reserves decreased by \$7.052bn to \$709.759bn during the week ended March 13, according to the weekly bulletin released by the country's central bank, the Reserve Bank of India, yesterday.

This was the second consecutive week when India's forex reserves had fallen. In the preceding week, they had dropped by \$11.683bn dollars.

According to the bulletin, the Foreign Currency Assets fell by \$7.678bn to \$555.568bn, while the Gold Reserves increased by \$664m to \$130.681bn.

The data further revealed that the Special Drawing Rights decreased by \$23m to \$18.697bn, while India's position in the International Monetary Fund weakened by \$15m to \$4.814bn. — *XINHUA*

Vietnam sees petrol prices shoot up overnight

HANOI: The cost of petrol rose more than 20 percent in Vietnam yesterday after the government announced an overnight hike amid fears of oil and gas shortages caused by the Middle East war.

Southeast Asian countries have borne the brunt of surging diesel prices following strikes against energy infrastructure in Iran and the Gulf states.

Just before midnight Thursday, the Vietnamese government announced an increase in the price of

95-octane gasoline by 20 percent from the weekend to 30,690 Vietnamese dong (\$1.20) per litre, while diesel was hiked nearly 34 percent to 33,420 dong.

The increase takes the prices of regular octane 95 and diesel in the manufacturing hub to more than 50 and 70 percent higher, respectively, since the conflict began in late February.

Vietnam's trade ministry said in a statement posted online that the hike was a result of the conflict in the Middle

East, Iran's control of the key Strait of Hormuz and the Russia-Ukraine war, which have influenced global fuel prices.

The government said Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh had held phone talks asking for fuel support from several countries including Qatar, Kuwait, Algeria and Japan.

The aviation authority has warned of a possible reduction in domestic flights because of potential fuel shortages. — *AFP*

Kazakhstan nears end of Azerbaijan Airlines crash probe

ALMATY: Kazakhstan is set to finalise the technical investigation into the Azerbaijan Airlines plane crash that killed 38 people near Aktau on Dec. 25, 2024.

The international commission, including Azerbaijan, Russia, and aviation experts, is reviewing equipment data from the aircraft, GPS, and navigation systems and summarising findings officials, said yesterday. — *XINHUA*



World in brief

Philippines accuses China of 'provocative' targeting

MANILA: The Philippines said yesterday a Chinese navy ship directed its fire control radar towards one of its vessels in the disputed South China Sea this month, slamming the "provocative" move.

The specialised radar provides precise targeting coordinates to a ship's weapons systems. Chinese and Philippine ships regularly clash in the crucial waterway. The BRP Miguel Malvar was patrolling the area when "a PLA Navy vessel, with bow number 622 approached and later directed its fire control radar toward the Philippine Navy ship," the Philippine Navy said yesterday. — *AFP*

Japan ski paradise faces strains of global acclaim

JAPAN: Beneath the powder snow at internationally popular Japanese ski resort Niseko, anxiety is mounting among residents over soaring prices and a massive influx of overseas workers.

At a time when Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is talking tough on immigration, upscale Niseko has never been more popular with seasonal workers, investors and skiers from across the globe.

Built in the 1960s on the northern island of Hokkaido, the resort began attracting foreigners. In Hirafu, one of the four resorts that make up Niseko, land prices jumped 70 percent between 2020 and 2025.

A plan to build housing for 1,200 foreign workers that was approved last autumn sparked outcry among locals.

And with births falling again in 2025 for the tenth year in a row in Japan, the country desperately needs foreign workers. — *AFP*

Indonesia's President calls acid attack 'terrorism'

JAKARTA: An acid attack that maimed an Indonesian rights activist was an act of terror, President Prabowo Subianto said in an interview, vowing accountability.

Andrie Yunus, deputy coordinator of Jakarta-based NGO KontraS, was riding a motorbike last week when he was approached by two men on a scooter, one of whom threw acid at him, according to the group. He suffered injuries to his face, an eye, hands and torso. "This is terrorism, isn't it? A barbaric act. We must pursue the perpetrators," Prabowo said in an interview published Thursday on his personal YouTube channel.

The former general vowed to "uphold the law" regardless of who was behind the attack. The military detained four soldiers from the armed forces' intelligence unit on Wednesday, suspecting their involvement. — *AFP*



Turkmenistan's 'Door to Hell' crater still burning

The Darvaza Gas Crater, widely known as the "Door to Hell," continues to captivate visitors and researchers alike in central Turkmenistan. Yesterday the fiery crater was seen burning intensely in the Karakum Desert near Darvaza. The natural gas field has been ablaze for decades, creating a dramatic and otherworldly landscape that has become one of the country's most recognisable landmarks. The crater was created in 1971 when Soviet geologists accidentally tapped into an underground natural gas cavern. (Xinhua)

China raises concerns over Mexico's review of Chinese investment

BEIJING: China yesterday expressed serious concerns over Mexico's possible "economic security review" of Chinese investment, according to the Ministry of Commerce.

"China consistently opposes all forms of unilateralism and protectionist measures, and it is against the politicisation, weaponisation, and instrumentalisation of economic and trade issues," a ministry spokesperson said in response to a media query regarding Mexican media reports saying that Mexico is considering launching such a review of Chinese investment.

In a statement, the spokesperson said that China has also repeatedly urged Mexico to correct its wrongful practice of unilaterally imposing tariffs, adding that the ministry had initiated an investigation into trade and investment barriers concerning Mexico's restrictive

measures related to China on September 25, 2025.

"The final findings of the investigation will be released soon, and corresponding measures will be taken in due course to resolutely safeguard China's legitimate rights and interests," the spokesperson revealed.

According to the spokesperson, mutual respect and mutual benefits are valuable principles that have underpinned the development of China-Mexico economic and trade relations. Moreover, the normal growth of bilateral economic and trade relations requires joint efforts from both sides.

China stands ready to work with Mexico to enhance communication and exchanges, properly manage differences, and jointly maintain the overall stability of bilateral economic and trade relations, the spokesperson said. — *XINHUA*

Australia approves major LNG project expansion

SYDNEY: The Australian government said yesterday that it has approved an expansion of a major liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in the state of Queensland.

Madeleine King, the minister for Resources, said that the approved expansion will enable

the Australia Pacific LNG project (APLNG) to build and operate gas infrastructure in Queensland's Surat and Bowen basins until 2081. The expansion will involve the construction of up to 1,695 new gas production wells with LNG production for domestic and export markets. — *XINHUA*

India to tackle global obesity with cheap fat-loss jabs

MUMBAI: A deluge of weight loss drugs is set to transform the global fight against obesity as India prepares to unleash low cost generic versions of injections like Ozempic after a key patent expired yesterday.

The move will dramatically widen access to treatments that have long been considered a luxury, especially in middle-income countries, where soaring demand has collided with steep prices.

At clinics across Mumbai, doctors say they are already preparing for an influx in new

patients. More than 50 people walk into endocrinologist Nadeem Rais's office every week seeking weight-loss injections.

"We have around 70 to 80 patients on active treatment right now," he told *AFP*.

"When generics come out and prices drop, that could go up to 200 easily." His colleague Sunera Ghai agrees saying that demand is "very high" but many "probably aren't taking it just because it is truly a luxury item at this point".

The breakthrough comes as patents on semaglutide the

active ingredient in drugs such as Ozempic and Wegovy expired yesterday in India, the world's largest supplier of generic medicines.

By the end of 2026, core patents on semaglutide will have expired in 10 countries that represent 48 percent of the global obesity burden, according to a study published earlier this month by researchers.

These include Brazil, China, South Africa, Turkey and Canada, the study said.

For India's drug giants, this marks the start of an

aggressive new race.

At least four major firms have already prepared generic semaglutide injections, regulatory filings and compliance documents.

"What we understand is, there will be more than 50 brands that will be launched in the market and there are more than 40 players who will be launching these drugs," Pharmarack's vice president Sheetal Sapale said.

The timing aligns with India's shifting health landscape. — *AFP*

New BTS album drops ahead of comeback mega-gig

SEOUL: K-pop megastars BTS released a new album yesterday, as buzz built ahead of their open-air comeback concert in Seoul that will go ahead despite leader RM being advised to rest his injured ankle.

The Saturday gig, expected to draw around 260,000 people, will be BTS's first after a hiatus of almost four years while all seven members served compulsory military service. It comes ahead of an 82-date world tour.

Yesterday BTS's management said that medical staff recommended RM, 31, wear a cast and "minimise all physical movement" for at least two weeks after hurting his ankle the day before in rehearsals.

But "the artist himself

expressed a strong desire to deliver a performance of the highest quality", Big Hit Music said.

"Consequently, we wish to inform you that RM's participation in certain performance elements, such as choreography on stage, will be restricted," a statement added.

Earlier, BTS released their fifth studio album, billed as reflecting the maturing boy band's Korean roots and identity.

Streaming giant Spotify said that fans pre-saved the album more than five million times, a record for a K-pop act.

The 14-track "ARIRANG" takes its name from a folk song about longing and separation that is often dubbed South

Korea's unofficial national anthem.

"We gave deep thought to our identity -- and how best to express ourselves authentically -- across the entirety of our music and performances," said BTS member Jimin, 30.

"As an extension of that process, we also revisited the significance of our background as a group comprised entirely of Korean members," he said in a statement.

Ces-Marie Hilo, 40, a fan from the United States, said she listened to the album while waiting to purchase BTS merchandise.

"We are still listening to the album and it's amazing so far," Hilo told *AFP*. "I can hear tidbits from their roots but the majority are new sounds from them and

a mix of different genres."

Excitement, meanwhile, grew in Seoul, with hotels long since booked out and thousands flying in from overseas, ramming home the immense popularity of a multi-award-winning act singing mostly in Korean.

Streets were festooned with purple-and-blue "Welcome BTS & ARMY" signs, referring to the group's fandom. BTS hoodies, wallets and figurines were on sale at new pop-up stores and convenience shops.

Mara Cristia Yao and Rodessa Ericka Bonon, fans from the Philippines, could not secure their tickets for the concert.

"We are just going to come to this area anyway. We are figuring out where to position ourselves tomorrow," Yao told *AFP*,



A woman poses for a photo in front of a truck promoting the comeback concert of K-pop boy group BTS in Seoul. (AFP)

taking pictures with each other near where the stage was being set up.

As well as those present in Seoul amidst a gigantic security operation Netflix will livestream

the show around the world.

"This is the biggest live musical performance Netflix has ever staged globally," Netflix executive Brandon Riegg said in Seoul yesterday. — *AFP*

FBI ex-agents sue director Kash Patel, allege fired over Trump case

WASHINGTON: Two former FBI agents filed a lawsuit on Thursday against agency director Kash Patel, alleging they were fired because they worked on an investigation into US President Donald Trump.

Trump was accused of trying to overturn the 2020 election where he lost to Joe Biden but the case was dropped in 2024, in line with a Justice Department policy of not prosecuting a sitting president.

In a 41-page complaint filed Thursday, the two agents alleged that Patel "terminated their FBI employment based solely on their assignment to Arctic Frost," the agency's codename for the Trump investigation, which they said violated their constitutional rights. Trump commented on Truth Social in January that FBI agents who took part in Arctic Frost were "Scum" and "Radical Left Lunatics", according to the lawsuit.

Patel replied to that post saying that the agency "found the corrupt actors and terminated their employment last year."

The agents, who were given pseudonyms, had received "exemplary" ratings and were never subject to disciplinary action until they were "summarily fired" by Patel between late October and early November, they said in their complaint. — AFP

Trump calls NATO allies 'cowards' over Iran

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump yesterday branded NATO allies "cowards" for not heeding his demand for military assistance against Iran to control the Strait of Hormuz shipping route.

Trump has recently veered between saying that Washington needs no help to secure the vital waterway for oil tankers, and then lashing out at other countries for failing to help.

"Without the U.S.A., NATO IS A PAPER TIGER!" Trump posted on his Truth Social network.

"They didn't want to join the fight to stop a Nuclear Powered Iran. Now that fight is Militarily WON, with very little danger for them, they complain about the high oil prices they are forced to pay, but don't want to help open the Strait of Hormuz, a simple military maneuver that is the single reason for the high oil prices. "So easy for them to do, with so little risk. COWARDS, and we will REMEMBER!"

The 79-year-old Republican, a long-term skeptic of the Western military alliance, has launched a series of diatribes against NATO in recent days. On Thursday, six major international powers, including Britain, France, Germany and Japan said they were ready to "contribute to appropriate efforts" to secure the Strait of Hormuz.

But they have not formally committed to



US President Donald Trump carries a football as he departs at the end of a ceremony to present the Commander-in-Chief Trophy to the Navy Midshipmen football team of the United States Naval Academy at the White House in Washington, DC, yesterday. (AFP)

any mission to work in the crucial waterway — while other allies such as Germany and Italy have ruled out doing anything before a truce in the Middle East war. None of the countries Trump has called on to help was consulted before the US-Israeli mission started. An effective Iranian blockade has paralyzed commercial shipping through the

crucial maritime chokepoint, which in peacetime sees a fifth of global crude oil and liquefied natural gas pass through it.

Global oil prices have spiked as a result of the war, which erupted on February 28 when the United States and Israel began bombing Iran, leading Tehran to retaliate with strikes across the Gulf region. — AFP

Trump gets approval for gold coin in his likeness

NEW YORK: An advisory commission hand-picked by President Donald Trump has approved the design of a commemorative gold coin featuring his image, officials said on Thursday, in a move slammed by Democratic opponents.

The US Commission of Fine Arts declined to comment when asked by AFP after several media outlets showed the proposed design in reporting on the approval.

The coin is supposed to mark the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States. One side of it shows a glaring Trump standing with his fists bunched on a desk, and the other features an eagle perched with wings spread on what appears to be a bell.

The coin does not have a monetary value and its sale price has not been disclosed, but similar commemorative coins sold by the US Mint can cost over \$1,000. — AFP

Brazil's Bolsonaro still in ICU after week of hospitalisation

BRASÍLIA: Former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro remains in intensive care a week after being hospitalized with pneumonia but is showing gradual improvements in his health, his doctors said yesterday.

Bolsonaro, who turns 71 on Saturday, was rushed to hospital a week ago from the Papuda prison in Brasília, where he is serving a 27-year sentence for an attempted coup.

The far-right leader, who governed Brazil from 2019 to 2022, was

The far-right leader, who governed Brazil from 2019 to 2022, was diagnosed with bilateral bacterial pneumonia.

diagnosed with bilateral bacterial pneumonia.

His doctors said he "maintains good clinical and laboratory progress," but that no discharge is scheduled yet.

The infection is a result of stomach

contents entering his lungs instead of his esophagus — one of many complications he has suffered since he was stabbed in the abdomen during a 2018 campaign event. Last year Bolsonaro was jailed for his role in a botched coup attempt after his 2022 election loss to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

His lawyers this week made a new request to have him serve his sentence under house arrest — a petition the Supreme Court has denied on multiple occasions. — AFP

Pentagon sends more warships, troops to Middle East

WASHINGTON: The Pentagon is sending three more warships and roughly 2,200 to 2,500 more Marines to the Middle East, marking the second deployment of Marines to the region within a week as the US-Israeli war with Iran escalates, multiple US media outlets reported yesterday.

US officials confirmed Friday that the USS Boxer and two other amphibious assault ships, along with Marines of the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit, have deployed from their home port of San Diego, California, and are heading to the Middle East, said the reports. — XINHUA

Switzerland suspends war materiel exports to US amid M E conflict

GENEVA: The Swiss Federal Council said yesterday that Switzerland has halted the export of war materiel to the United States during the ongoing conflict involving the United States, Israel and Iran.

In a statement, the Federal Council said that "exports of war materiel to the USA cannot currently be authorized," as the country is "involved in an international armed conflict."

"Since the escalation of the conflict on February 28, no new licences have been issued for exports of war materiel to the USA. No definitive licences for the export of war materiel to Israel have been granted for a number of years. The same applies to Iran," the statement said. — XINHUA

Spain announces measures to counter impact of Mideast conflict

MADRID: Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez yesterday announced a series of urgent measures to bolster the country against the economic effects of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and protect consumers from rising prices.

The measures, worth over €5 bn (\$5.75 bn), were laid out in two decrees. The first was aimed at supporting businesses, while the second focused on curbing rising housing and rental costs. Speaking to the press, Sanchez admitted that the measures "won't prevent the effects of this illegal war from reaching Spain," but promised that "at least they will make them less corrosive and somewhat more bearable." — XINHUA

Mexican President condemns deaths of migrants in US custody

MEXICO CITY: Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum (pictured) yesterday condemned the deaths of three Mexican nationals after they were taken into custody by US immigration authorities this year.

"This can't be happening," Sheinbaum told reporters, referring to the death of a 19-year-old at a detention center in Florida on Monday and two others who died earlier this year.

"The report says the young man killed himself," Sheinbaum said. "Nonetheless, we want a full investigation."

Royce Perez Jimenez was reported dead by US Immigration and Customs (ICE) at Glades County Detention Center in Florida. The cause of death was "presumed suicide" but remained under investigation, ICE said.

Other Mexicans reported dying while caught in President Donald Trump's crackdown on



illegal immigration included a 48-year-old man in California in March and a 34-year-old in Georgia in January.

The Mexican government said Thursday that "these deaths are becoming unacceptable" and that officials "won't hold back in using available legal and diplomatic tools to defend the rights" of Mexicans abroad.

"We're going to use all measures to make our protests and support the family in everything they need," Sheinbaum said. — AFP

Mideast war forces NATO to shift Iraq mission to Europe

BRUSSELS: NATO's mission in Iraq has been fully relocated to Europe because of the Middle East war, the alliance said, with the last staff from a non-combat force of several hundred leaving the country yesterday.

The mission was in an Iraqi military base in Baghdad's Green Zone near the US embassy, which has been targeted several times since the start of the US-Israeli war with Iran three weeks ago.

A statement from the alliance's European command said: "NATO Mission Iraq has adjusted its posture, safely relocating all its personnel from the Middle East to Europe."

NATO's mission in Iraq provides assistance, advice and training to the Iraqi security forces involved in counter-jihadist operations, aiming in particular to prevent any resurgence of the Islamic State (IS) militant group.

The mission will continue to operate from NATO's regional command in the Italian city of Naples, the alliance said.

General Alexus Grynkeiwich, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, offered thanks to the Iraqi government and allies "who assisted in the safe relo-

cation of NATO personnel from Iraq."

"I would also like to thank the dedicated men and women of NATO Mission Iraq, who continued their mission throughout this period. They are true professionals," he said.

NATO said earlier Friday it was "adjusting" its mission in Iraq, with a French military source confirming the force was being temporarily relocated because of the regional war.

Alliance spokesperson Allison Hart emphasised that "NATO and Iraq's political dialogue and practical cooperation, including through NATO Mission Iraq, will continue".

According to its website, the mission established in 2018 currently has several hundred personnel from NATO allies and from partner countries Austria and Australia. It has been headed since May 2025 by General Christophe Hintzy from France.

"A decision was taken to relocate them in line with NATO's posture regarding non-combat missions," a French military source told AFP. "Given the current threat environment, it is less relevant to keep them in place." — AFP

Russia plans to allow military to defend citizens prosecuted abroad

MOSCOW: Russia is moving to allow the use of its armed forces to protect citizens facing arrest or prosecution overseas, underscoring Moscow's hostility toward foreign courts pursuing cases against Russians.

Under the measure, military force could be deployed to protect Russians whose cases are in foreign courts or international tribunals whose authority Moscow doesn't recognize, according to draft legislation published on the parliament's website Thursday. Any decision to use the armed forces would rest with the president.

The speaker of the lower house of parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, said on Friday that lawmakers would prioritize the bill, according to

the Interfax news service. "The Western justice system has completely discredited itself," he said.

While the actual impact of the measure remains unclear, the threat of military force could give Moscow another tool to pressure governments abroad.

"This bill looks like a direct threat to the International Criminal Court and other international and foreign legal entities that may take up cases against Russia and Russian officials," said Ekaterina Schulmann, a political scientist at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin. "The message is pretty simple: if you try to detain any of our people, we can send in special forces." — THE WASHINGTON POST

Argentina declassifies first batch of dictatorship intel files

BUENOS AIRES: Argentine officials published on Thursday nearly 500 pages of intelligence documents dating to 1973-1983, including the seven-year period of the country's brutal military dictatorship.

The documents, published on the government's website, range from shopping lists to surveillance records of universities, labor unions, businesses and political organizations.

Some of the documents call for "strategic psycho-sociological intelligence," ordering the monitoring of news media with the goal of "determining the dominant themes, motivations, arguments, ideological characterization (political, religious, economic, philosophical, etc.), literary, etc." Others had instructions on how to operate under budget cuts to the



Portraits of the disappeared exhibited at the former clandestine detention, torture, and extermination center 'La Perla' in Cordoba, Argentina, on March 19, 2026. (AFP)

intelligence services, such as keeping lights off in unoccupied rooms to save on electrical expenses.

"The initiative is part of a policy focused on

strengthening the institution of the National Intelligence System and its responsibility to the public," the state intelligence secretariat (SIDE) said in a post on X. — AFP

France boards Russia-linked tanker in Mediterranean

MARSEILLE: The French navy intercepted an oil tanker sailing from Russia in the Mediterranean yesterday, as President Emmanuel Macron insisted France would press ahead with efforts to back Ukraine despite the Iran war.

This is the third suspected "shadow fleet" tanker intercepted by France in recent months.

"This morning in the Mediterranean, the French Navy intercepted and boarded another vessel from the shadow fleet, the Deyna," Macron said on X.

Several European countries have targeted Moscow's so-called "shadow fleet" of tankers used to transport oil in breach of Western sanctions imposed over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, now in its fifth year.

Local authorities said the navy intercepted the Mozambican-flagged vessel — which sailed from Murmansk in northwestern Russia — over its registration.

The operation was carried out in coordination with other countries, including Britain, "which participated in tracking the vessel," the maritime prefecture said. — AFP

Czech President slams 2026 budget failing NATO pledge

PRAGUE: The Czech president slammed the 2026 state budget over failing to meet a NATO defence spending pledge as he signed it into law yesterday.

The government of billionaire Prime Minister Andrej Babis, a Donald Trump fan in office since last December, has redrafted the budget it had inherited from the previous centre-right cabinet.

It has pledged to spend 155 billion koruna (\$7.3 billion) on defence in 2026, which is 1.73 percent of the planned gross domestic product (GDP). — AFP

US, Japan announce \$40 bn nuclear power project

WASHINGTON: The United States and Japan announced on Thursday a \$40 bn project to build nuclear reactors in Tennessee and Alabama, after a meeting of the two countries' leaders in Washington.

The talks between US President Donald Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi came after Tokyo agreed last year to invest \$550 bn through 2029 as part of a new trade pact with Washington.

Thursday's joint statement on the so-called small modular reactors (SMRs) also announced a \$33 bn investment in natural gas power generation facilities in Pennsylvania and Texas. The countries announced the first tranche of projects under the new investment fund in February, with \$36 bn in commitments in three infrastructure projects.

Thursday's statement said the projects would ensure security by

"accelerating economic growth of both countries, thereby paving the way for a New Golden Age of the ever-growing Japan-US Alliance."

It touted the SMRs, built by GE Vernova Hitachi, as providing "a tremendous next-generation stable power source, stabilizing electricity prices for American people and strengthening the Japan-US leadership in global technological competition." — AFP