

War-weary Gazans reel from '500 days of humiliation'

GAZA CITY: (News Desk) For 500 days since an unprecedented Hamas raid on Israel triggered the Gaza Strip's deadliest conflict, Mohammed Abu Mursa has grappled with "humiliation, suffering and bloodshed" in his fight for survival. Abu Mursa and his family have been displaced more than a dozen times since the war began, moving from place to place across the Palestinian territory in a desperate attempt to stay safe, he said. "It's been 500 days of humiliation, suffering and bloodshed," said the resident of northern Gaza, finally able to return home after a fragile ceasefire took hold on Jan 19. "I just hope the ceasefire holds," he added. "There is only destruction around us." Like the Abu Mursa family, nearly all of Gaza's 2.4 million residents have been displaced at least once during the conflict. More than 16 months later after the Israel-Hamas conflict broke out, vast swathes of the territory are in ruins. The Israeli military campaign by land, air and sea has killed at least 48,284 people in Gaza, the majority of them civilians, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry.

Trump dispatches real estate dealmaker Steve Witkoff to solve global crises

WASHINGTON/BRUSSELS: (News Desk) When US President Donald Trump wanted someone to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin last week to open negotiations for a potential deal to end the Russia-Ukraine war, he didn't dispatch his secretary of state. The man he sent to the Kremlin to handle a titanic geopolitical challenge does not even have a diplomatic background, the BBC reported. Instead, Trump picked his personal friend, golf buddy and billionaire real estate developer Steve Witkoff. The president has made Witkoff his Middle East envoy. But last week the Bronx-born businessman found himself in discussions about ending a conflict in Eastern Europe — having been "with [Putin] for a very extended period, like about three hours", in Trump's words. Witkoff was in Moscow to help facilitate a deal that saw the US and Russia swap prisoners, which was seen as signalling a possible thaw in relations between the two countries. Witkoff also played a part in brokering the current ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, for which both Trump and his predecessor Joe Biden took credit. Witkoff is now returning to the region — specifically Saudi Arabia — for the first US-Russian face-to-face talks over the war in Ukraine after Trump had his own call with Putin, according to BBC news. Top Russian, US officials to meet in Saudi Arabia today. So, who is Witkoff — dubbed by US media as "the man in the room", taking centre stage as more potentially consequential international talks take place? He was one of Trump's first picks for his top team after his presidential election win in November.

Israel, US 'cannot do a damn thing' against Iran, says Tehran

DUBAI: (News Desk) Iran said on Monday that US and Israeli threats against it were a blatant violation of international law and that they could not "do a damn thing" to hurt Tehran. The comments came after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met US Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Jerusalem on Sunday and said their countries were determined to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions and its influence in the Middle East. Netanyahu said Israel had dealt a "mighty blow" to Iran since the start of the conflict in Gaza and that with the support of US President Donald Trump "I have no doubt we can and will finish the job". Speaking at a weekly press conference on Monday, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei responded: "When it comes to a country like Iran, they cannot do a damn thing." "You cannot threaten Iran on one hand and claim to support dialogue on the other hand," Baghaei said, state media reported. Trump has expressed an openness to a deal with Tehran while also reinstating the "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran that was applied during his first term to stop Tehran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. While stopping short of renewing a ban on direct talks with Washington decreed in 2018, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has criticised Trump's previous administration for not honouring its promises. In 2018, Trump pulled the US out of Tehran's 2015 nuclear pact with world powers and reimposed sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy. A year later, Iran reacted by breaching the pact's nuclear curbs, accelerating enrichment of uranium to up to 60 per cent purity, close to the roughly 90pc of weapons-grade. It says its nuclear programme is solely for peaceful purposes. Despite spokesman Baghaei's defiant words, Tehran's influence throughout the region has weakened severely with its regional allies — known as the "Axis of Resistance" — either dismantled or badly hurt since the start of the Hamas-Israel conflict in Gaza and the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria in December.



An emergency responder works around an aircraft on a runway, after a plane crash at Toronto Pearson International Airport in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada on February 17

Iran says jailed British couple charged with espionage

Tehran (News Desk) Iran has charged British couple Craig and Lindsay Foreman with espionage, accusing them of collaborating with Western intelligence services, following their arrest last month, the judiciary said on Tuesday. Judiciary spokesman Asghar Jahangir said the pair were alleged to have entered Iran "posing as tourists" and gathered information before their

arrest in the southeastern province of Kerman. The judiciary's Mizan Online website quoted Kerman chief justice Ebrahim Hamidi as saying the couple's links to foreign intelligence services had been confirmed. "Additional investigations are still ongoing," Hamidi added. Jahangir was quoted as saying they had been taken into custody by Iran's

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on "espionage charges". The Foremans were accused of gathering "information from several provinces" and "cooperating with covert institutions linked to the intelligence services of hostile and Western countries", the spokesman said. The BBC had reported that the couple were in their early 50s and on a motorbike trip

around the world when they were detained in January. According to social media posts, they crossed into Iran from Armenia in December and were gradually making their way to Australia. Europeans held in Iran on Friday, Britain's Foreign Office said it was "providing consular assistance to two British nationals detained in Iran" and was in contact with Iranian authorities.

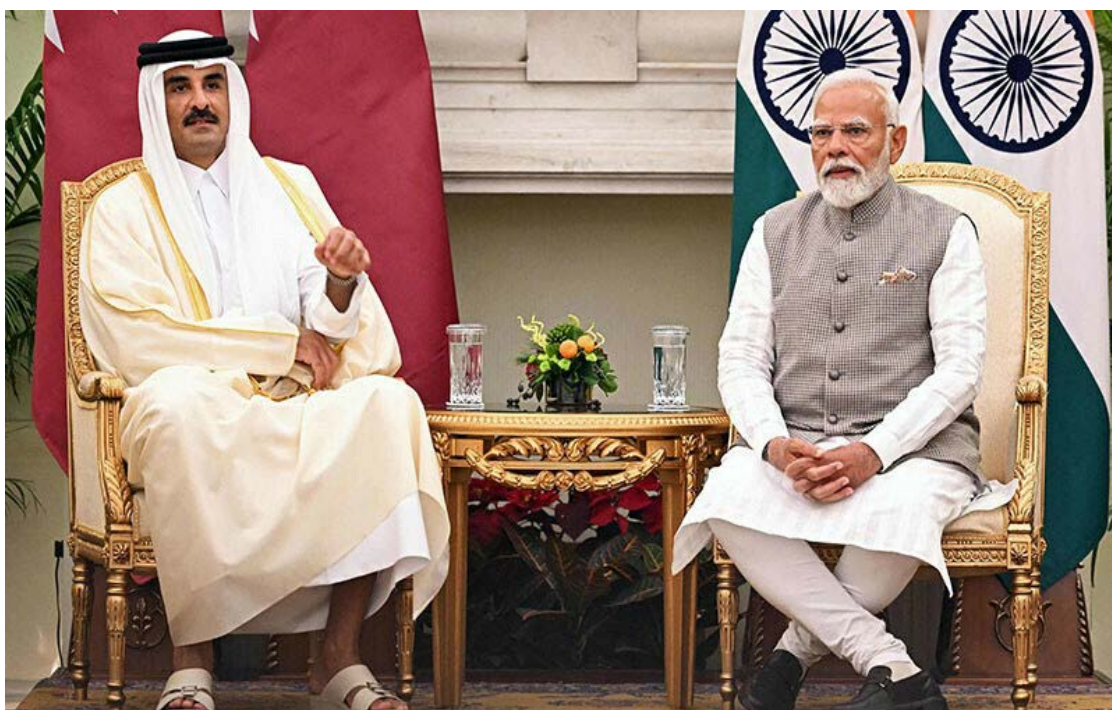
Delta plane flips upside down on landing at Toronto airport, injuring 18

Toronto (News Desk) A Delta Air Lines regional jet flipped upside down upon landing at Canada's Toronto Pearson Airport on Monday amid windy weather following a snowstorm, injuring 18 of the 80 people on board, officials said. Three people on flight DL4819 from Minneapolis-St Paul International Airport suffered critical injuries, among them a

child, a Canadian air ambulance official said, with 15 others also immediately taken to hospitals. Some of the injured have since been released, Delta said late on Monday. The US carrier said a CRJ900 aircraft operated by its Endeavor Air subsidiary was involved in a single-aircraft accident with 76 passengers and four crew members on board.

The 16-year-old CRJ900, made by Canada's Bombardier and powered by GE Aerospace engines, can seat up to 90 people. At least one of the two wings was no longer attached to the plane, video showed after the accident. Canadian authorities said they would investigate the cause of the crash, which was not yet known. Passenger John Nelson posted a video of the af-

termath on Facebook, showing a fire engine spraying water on the plane that was lying belly-up on the snow-covered tarmac. He later told CNN there was no indication of anything unusual before landing. "We hit the ground, and we were sideways, and then we were upside down," Nelson told the television network.



Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani (L) and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi attend the signing of memorandum of understanding (MoU) agreements at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi on February 18

India, Qatar aim to double trade to \$28bn in five years

Delhi (News Desk) India and Qatar are targeting doubling their trade to \$28 billion in the next five years and are exploring the signing of a free trade agreement, the Indian foreign ministry said on Tuesday. The announcement came after talks between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Qa-

tar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, who is on a two-day visit to New Delhi. The two sides also discussed ways to broaden energy ties, a foreign ministry official told reporters. The emir arrived in India on Monday and was earlier welcomed by PM Modi at the airport

in New Delhi, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said. "The visit will further strengthen the bonds of India and Qatar," he had said. Officials said the Qatari leader is accompanied by a high-level delegation and it would be the second visit of the emir of Qatar to India.

Thani had earlier paid a state visit to India in March 2015. The foreign ministry had said that the two countries have "deep-rooted historical ties of friendship, trust and mutual respect", adding that the ties between the two countries have continued to strengthen.

White House says Musk is not DOGE employee, has no authority to make decisions

Washington (News Desk) Billionaire Elon Musk's role in the Trump administration is as a White House employee and senior adviser to the president, and is not an employee of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and has no decision-making authority, the White House said in a court filing on Monday. According to a filing signed by Joshua Fisher, director of the Office of Administration at the White House, Musk can only advise the president and communicate the president's directives. "Like other senior White House advisors, Mr Musk has no actual or formal authority to make government decisions himself," it said. Fisher's filing, made in a case brought against Musk by the State of New Mexico, said that Musk was not an employee of the US DOGE Service, or the US DOGE Service Temporary Organisation, and added: "Mr Musk is not the US DOGE Service Administrator." DOGE has swept through federal agencies since Donald Trump began his second term as president last month.

Pakistan wants OIC to back Saudi initiative for Palestinian state

WASHINGTON: (News Desk) Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar on Monday urged the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to endorse a Saudi initiative seeking the establishment of a Palestinian state as an indispensable pre-condition for normalisation in the entire region. Speaking at an OIC meeting at UN headquarters in New York, Mr Dar underscored that Pakistan considers the OIC its "primary constituency" and that the Palestinian issue remains a top priority for both Pakistan and the Muslim world. He urged collective action to prevent Israel from annexing the West Bank and to ensure the recognition of Palestine as a full UN member. "We should clarify our common position of opposition to the plans of Israeli extremists to annex the West Bank," he said. "We must initiate concrete steps to secure the two-state solution." Dar calls on UN to recognise Palestine as a full member. The foreign minister strongly condemned the ongoing Israeli aggression in Gaza, warning that the humanitarian crisis was worsening. He called for continued diplomatic efforts to maintain the ceasefire and to ensure the full implementation of its next phases. "We must dissuade Israel and its supporters from reviving the war in Gaza and ensure adequate humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza, including by preserving the essential role of UNRWA," he said. He also warned against Israeli plans to forcibly expel Palestinians from their homeland.

Skipper Rizwan says team needs to improve awareness, professionalism to win trophies

Lahore (News Desk) Pakistan skipper Mohammad Rizwan said on Tuesday that the Green Shirts needed to improve their performance with awareness and professionalism if they were to tackle the ups and downs they experienced during ICC events. His comments come a day before the commencement of the Champions Trophy tournament, which features the sport's top eight sides in the ODI format, with the hosts up against New Zealand in Karachi. The tournament marks the first ICC tournament on Pakistan soil since it co-hosted the 1996 ODI World Cup. Pakistan won their last ICC event when they defeated India in the Champions Trophy final in 2017. Since then, Pakistan have managed to reach the T20 World Cup semi-final in 2021 and the tournament's final in the following year's edition. Other than that, the Green Shirts have unceremoniously exited every other ICC event in the group stages. "A global event has come to Pakistan after 29 years so I think the whole nation should enjoy this historic occasion," AFP quoted Rizwan as saying.

Australian squad arrives in Lahore for Champions Trophy

Lahore (News Desk) A 15-member squad of Australia, along with its support staff, arrived in here on Monday to participate in the ICC Champions Trophy, which is set to start with the match between hosts Pakistan and New Zealand in Karachi on Feb 19. The 2009 title holders Australia will open their campaign against archrivals England in the Group 'B' match at the Gaddafi Stadium here on Feb 22, the first match of the tournament at the venue. Australia will play South Africa in Rawalpindi on Feb 25 before returning to Lahore for their match against Afghanistan on Feb 28. Pakistan spent nearly a decade in the wilderness after gunmen attacked the Sri Lankan cricket team's bus in Lahore in 2009, wounding six players. Australia go into the Champions Trophy without the likes of captain Pat Cummins and fellow pacers Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc along with all-rounder Mitchell Marsh.

Batter Steve Smith will lead the side in Cummins' absence. While Starc has cited personal reasons to opt out of the tournament, Cummins is recovering from an ankle injury and Hazelwood is being treated for a hip problem. Marsh is out due to back issues. The abrupt retirement of all-rounder Marcus Stoinis has also come across as a blow for Australia. The national team, captained for the bulk of those years by Misbahul Haq, hosted its 'home' games in the United Arab Emirates and remained relatively successful until fixtures trickled back onto Pakistani soil in 2018. Aaron Hardie, Sean Abbott, Ben Dwarshuis, Nathan Ellis and Spencer Johnson will make up the side's seam attack while Tanveer Sangha will support seasoned spinner Adam Zampa. Australia squad: Steve Smith (captain), Sean Abbott, Alex Carey, Ben Dwarshuis, Nathan Ellis, Jake Fraser-McGurk, Aaron Hardie, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Spencer Johnson, Marnus Labuschagne, Glenn Maxwell, Tanveer Sangha, Matthew Short, Adam Zampa

Tesla begins hiring in India after Musk and Modi meet

Washington (News Desk) Electric vehicle maker Tesla has begun hiring in India, with the company of tycoon Elon Musk issuing advertisements days after US President Donald Trump's right-hand man met with India's premier. Tesla has more than a dozen job listings on its website, for both the capital New Delhi and economic hub Mumbai, including for a store manager and service technicians. The job listings were

posted on the employment website LinkedIn on Monday. Tesla's India push comes after Musk met one-on-one with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Washington, raising questions over whether the world's richest man was meeting the Indian leader in an official or business capacity. Musk has been seeking business opportunities in the world's most populous nation, with media reports last year suggesting it was scouting for fac-

tory and showroom locations. Musk has also sought to open his satellite internet service Starlink in India, with communications minister Jyotiraditya Scindia in November saying the company would be allowed to operate if it complies with "security" regulations. The potential launch of Starlink — with its network of low Earth orbit satellites capable of providing internet to remote and disconnected locations

— in the world's most populous country has been accompanied by fierce policy debates and alleged national security concerns. Musk was due to visit India in 2024, following suggestions that he would announce major investment plans, but later cancelled the trip due to what he said were "very heavy Tesla obligations". While India's electric car market is small, it still represents a growth opportunity for Tesla which is bat-

tling increased Chinese competition and its first slump in annual EV sales. India has long had steep import taxes for electric vehicles — Musk once complained they were among the "highest in the world" — which had prevented Tesla from making inroads in the absence of local manufacturing. But India last year cut import taxes on electric vehicles for global automakers that committed to invest \$500 million and start lo-

cal production within three years. New Delhi had offered quick tariff concessions ahead of Modi's Washington visit, including slashing duties on high-end motorcycles — a boost to Harley-Davidson, the iconic US manufacturer whose struggles in India have irked Trump. India has also already accepted three US military flights carrying more than 300 migrants as part of Trump's immigration crackdown.