

Many animal ‘geomorphs’ under threat, study warns

PARIS: (News Desk) More than a quarter of our planet's natural “geomorphs” — animals such as beavers and hippos that, collectively, can reshape entire landscapes — are threatened or have shrinking populations, a new study says. The research, by Queen Mary University of London, found the scale of the impact these animals had on habitats — by building dams, trampling new river courses, excavating earth and other activities — rivals that caused by major floods. Yet “more than a quarter (28 percent) of zoogeomorphic species are vulnerable to future population decline or regional or global extinction,” the study's authors warned. Their research, published mid-February, identified more than 600 species of land and freshwater animals that worked to redesign their ecosystems. While beavers, of dam-building fame, and hippopotamuses and elephants, which in herds can flatten stretches of earth, are the best-known, there are many others — often overlooked.

Nasa telescope launched to study universe’s origins

Santa Barbara: (News Desk) A Nasa telescope was launched into space from California on Tuesday for a mission to explore the origins of the universe and to scour the Milky Way galaxy for hidden reservoirs of water, a key ingredient for life. The US space agency's megaphone-shaped SPHEREx — short for Spectro-Photometer for the History of the Universe, Epoch of Reionisation and Ices Explorer — was carried aloft by a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from Vandenberg Space Force Base in California. During its planned two-year mission, the observatory will collect data on more than 450 million galaxies, as well as more than 100 million stars in the Milky Way. It will create a three-dimensional map of the cosmos in 102 colors — individual wavelengths of light — and will study the history and evolution of galaxies. The mission aims to deepen the understanding of a phenomenon known as cosmic inflation, referring to the universe's rapid and exponential expansion from a single point in a fraction of a second after the Big Bang that occurred roughly 13.8 billion years ago. “SPHEREx is really trying to get at the origins of the universe — what happened in those very few first instants after the Big Bang,” SPHEREx instrument scientist Phil Korngut of Caltech said.

UAE buys world’s largest crypto exchange

DUBAI: (News Desk) Abu Dhabi-backed investment group MGX has made a \$2 billion cryptocurrency investment in Binance, the companies said on Wednesday, deepening ties between the world's largest crypto exchange and the United Arab Emirates.

The deal, which Binance called its first institutional investment, is one of the largest ever in the crypto industry. It will see MGX become a minority shareholder after making the investment in stablecoin — a type of cryptocurrency pegged to a fiat currency such as the dollar. These points pertain to planning, coordination and promotion of science and technology, monitoring and evaluation of research and development works, including scrutiny of development projects and coordination of development programmes, and promotion of applied research and utilisation of its results in the scientific and technological fields carried out at home and abroad.

A Binance spokesperson declined to comment on “the agreed governance rights” or the size of MGX's stake, or on which stablecoin was used for the investment. MGX also declined to comment. Binance, founded in 2017 in China by billionaire Changpeng Zhao, grew into the world's biggest crypto exchange after tapping into soaring demand for trading bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies. This also provides for the creation of NBFCs through the SECP but requires federal cabinet approval to move on. Under the Rules of Business 1973 relating to the Ministry of Finance, all financial matters — including those affecting the country on the whole, like currency, coinage, financial instruments, investment policies, taxes, negotiations Zhao, known as “CZ”, pleaded guilty to violating US laws against money laundering at Binance, and spent months in jail last year. The exchange has been growing its links with the UAE under CZ's successor Richard Teng, who was previously head of Abu Dhabi's Financial Services Authority. Binance said in Wednesday's announcement it had a “substantial footprint” in the UAE, employing around 1,000 of its 5,000 total staff there. The investment in Binance is the first public foray into crypto by MGX, which was established almost exactly a year ago “to accelerate the development and adoption of AI and advanced technologies” through partnerships, it said at the time.



DEFENCE ministers from four European countries take a walk before a meeting in Paris about Ukraine. (From left) Boris Pistorius of Germany, Poland's Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, Guido Crosetto of Italy and Sebastien Lecornu of France

US urges Russia to agree upon Ukraine truce ‘unconditionally’

SHANNON/PARIS: (News Desk) The United States said on Wednesday it was asking Russia to “unconditionally” agree to a month-long ceasefire in Ukraine, a day after US and Ukrainian officials agreed to put the plan to Moscow. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Kyiv had shown it was ready to embrace the deal to halt

the fighting and that the United States had indicated it would issue a “strong” response if the Kremlin refused. Tens of thousands have been killed in the three-year war that has raged since Russia's February 2022 invasion. The joint US-Ukrainian proposal marks the latest in a series of rapid developments in the search for a truce. It comes less than

two weeks after US President Donald Trump kicked Zelensky out of the White House and then halted all military aid and intelligence sharing with Kyiv. The US restarted supplies after Ukraine agreed to the truce proposal at talks in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the United States was now seeking Moscow's full agreement

to the proposal, without attaching any of its own demands. “That's what we want to know — if they're prepared to do it unconditionally,” Rubio said. “If the response is, ‘yes,’ then we know we've made real progress, and there's a real chance of peace. If their response is ‘no,’ it would be highly unfortunate, and it'll make their intentions clear.”

Sara Sharif case: Parents of murdered UK-Pakistani girl appeal life terms

Washington (News Desk) A UK court on Thursday will hear the appeals of the father and stepmother of a murdered British-Pakistani girl, who were jailed for life after killing the child following years of torture. The trial of Urfan Sharif and his wife Beinash Batool caused waves of revulsion in the UK as the horrific abuse suffered by the 10-year-old girl was re-

vealed in a London court. There was anger too at how the bright, bubbly youngster had been failed by all the authorities supposed to be in charge of her care. London's Old Bailey court heard that her body was found in her bed in August 2023 covered in bites and bruises with broken bones and burns inflicted by an electric iron and boiling water. Passing sentence in December after the trial,

judge John Cavanagh said Sara had been subjected to “acts of extreme cruelty” but that Sharif and Batool had not shown “a shred of remorse” They had treated Sara as “worthless” and as “a skivvy”, because she was a girl. And because she was not Batool's natural child, the stepmother had failed to protect her, he said. “This poor child was battered with great force again and again.” Most is-

troubling case Sara's father, 43, was sentenced to 40 years in prison, while her stepmother, 30, was ordered to remain in jail for at least 33 years. Both are now appealing their terms at the Royal Courts of Justice, along with Sara's uncle, Faisal Malik, 29, who lived with the family and was sentenced to 16 years after being found guilty of causing or allowing her death.



Local officials and navy personnel attend a joint Iranian-Russian-Chinese military drill in the Gulf of Oman, on Wednesday

Khamenei rejects idea of nuclear talks with US

DUBAI: (News Desk) Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday rejected the idea of holding negotiations with the United States over a nuclear deal, as a letter arrived from US President Donald Trump calling for such talks. Trump said last week he had sent a letter to Khamenei proposing nuclear talks but also warning that “there are two ways Iran can be handled: militarily, or

you make a deal” preventing Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The letter was handed over to Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi on Wednesday by Anwar Gargash, diplomatic adviser to the president of the United Arab Emirates. Khamenei said negotiating with the Trump administration, which he said has excessive demands, “will tighten the knot of sanctions and increase pressure on Iran.” In

2018, Trump withdrew the United States from Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers and reimposed sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy. Tehran reacted a year later by violating the deal's nuclear curbs. While leaving the door open for a nuclear pact with Tehran, Trump has reinstated the “maximum pressure” campaign he applied in his first term as president to isolate Iran from the global econo-

my and drive its oil exports towards zero. Separately, the Chinese foreign ministry said China and Russia will hold talks with Iranian officials in Beijing on Friday to discuss the Iranian nuclear issue. Threat of military action ‘unwise’ In response to Trump's letter that urged negotiations and warned of possible military action if Tehran refused the negotiations, Khamenei said that US threats were “unwise”.

Afghan opium prices soar after poppy ban

VIENNA: (News Desk) Opium prices in Afghanistan are soaring and handing “massive profits” to criminal groups following a poppy cultivation ban imposed by the Taliban authorities, the United Nations' drugs watchdog said on Wednesday. In 2024, opium prices reached \$750 per kilogram, a tenfold growth from \$75 per kilogram in 2022 when the Taliban government banned poppy growing, the Vienna-based UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said in a statement. Previously the world's biggest opium producer, Afghanistan has seen a steep decline in output since the ban. The move curbed trafficking, sending heroin and opium seizures down by 50 per cent in weight against 2021, while prices skyrocketed. “Despite the lower trade volumes, the high price per kilogramme ensures massive profits are still being made, primarily benefiting high-level traders and exporters in organised crime groups,” the UNODC said, adding prices are at “recent historic peaks”.

Trove of dinosaur footprints found at school in Australia

SYDNEY: (News Desk) A trove of fossilised dinosaur footprints has been found on a slab of rock gathering dust inside an Australian school, scientists said on Wednesday.

The rock went largely unnoticed for 20 years until the school, in Queensland's rural Banana shire, asked paleontologist Anthony Romilio to examine a cluster of three-toed track marks.

Romilio said the slab was stamped with dozens of fossilised footprints dating to the early Jurassic period some 200 million years ago. It showed “one of the highest concentrations of dinosaur footprints” ever documented in Australia, he said.

“It's an unprecedented snapshot of dinosaur abundance, movement and behaviour from a time when no fossilised dinosaur bones have been found in Australia,” said Romilio, from the University of Queensland. “Significant fossils like this can sit unnoticed for years, even in plain sight.”

“It's incredible to think that a piece of history this rich was resting in a schoolyard all this time.” Coal miners dug up the slab in 2002 and, noticing the unusual footprints, gifted it to a school in the small town of Biloela, where it was eventually displayed in the foyer. The slab was stamped with dozens of fossilised footprints dating to the early Jurassic period some 200 million years ago. The rock sat there until researchers started asking around for any dinosaur fossils discovered in the area. “Some of the teachers thought this was a replica rather than the real thing,” Romilio said.

ICC thanks Pakistan for ‘successfully hosting’ Champions Trophy

DUBAI: (News Desk) The International Cricket Council (ICC) on Wednesday thanked the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) for “successfully hosting” the recently concluded ICC Champions Trophy. In a press release, the global governing body of the sport also thanked the Emirates Cricket Board (ECB) for the staging of India's matches of the tournament. India played their matches in Dubai after the country's government refused to send its team to Pakistan, the original hosts of the tournament. Playing all their five matches — including a semi-final and the final — at the venue, Rohit Sharma's men claimed the Champions Trophy title for the third time after defeating New Zealand by four wickets on Sunday. The event, which took place from February 19 to March 9, saw Pakistan host their first global cricket tournament since 1996. The tournament was hosted across four venues: Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi in Pakistan and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. “We would like to thank and congratulate the Pakistan Cricket Board for successfully hosting the ICC Men's Champions Trophy 2025,” ICC chief executive Geoff Allardice said.

German hockey legend Blunck wants Pakistan to expand pool of players

ISLAMABAD: (News Desk) Impressed with present hockey talent in Pakistan, German legend Christian “Büdi” Blunck on Wednesday said that by increasing the pool of players and developing required facilities the country could regain its glory in the game. The 56-year-old Blunck, who was part of the gold medal-winning team at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and is currently on a short tour of Pakistan, insisted that the country's current hockey players had talent while adding that “lot of work is required to be done to enhance their skills, fitness and game awareness”. Germany's U-21 squad is currently on a tour to Pakistan on an invitation of the Pakistan Hockey Federation (PHF) for a four-match series with Pakistan's U-21 side.

The visitors have taken an unbeatable 3-0 lead in the series with one match to be played at the Naseer Bunda Stadium in Islamabad on Thursday (today). Caught up with Blunck at an Iftar dinner in Islamabad, which was hosted by German Ambassador to Pakistan Alfred Grannas for visiting German U-21 and Pakistan U-21 teams at the German Embassy.

“Pakistan should increase the pool of players by involving youth in the game and providing more facilities to them,” Blunck said.

Pakistan holds an extremely rich history in international field hockey. Besides winning the World Cup a record four times — 1971, 1978, 1982 and 1994 — the country clinched Olympic title thrice (1960, 1968 and 1984) besides bagging three Champions Trophy crowns in 1978, 1980 and 1994. The Green-Shirts during their days of glory also seized several titles in the Asian Games and Asian Cup hockey. However, Pakistan has faced an unprecedented decline in the game during the past two, three decades mainly due to poor administration that besides damaging the game caused gradual dwindling of resources for hockey. As a result, the youth in Pakistan, during the past several years have been losing interest in the sport. According to Blunck, Pakistan should expand the game by involving more and more young players in the game.

Muslim students pin hopes on US courts to halt deportations

WASHINGTON: (News Desk) Many Muslim students in the US, especially those involved in last year's pro-Palestinian protests, are increasingly worried about the Trump administration's efforts to deport foreign nationals linked to such demonstrations. These students are now hoping that the US judicial system will protect them from potential deportations as part of the administration's broader crackdown on political activism. Their hopes were strengthened this week when a federal judge temporarily halted

the deportation of Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia University graduate and prominent pro-Palestinian activist detained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). US District Judge Jesse M. Furman issued an order forbidding the government from deporting Khalil before a hearing scheduled for Wednesday. “To preserve the court's jurisdiction pending a ruling on the petition, petitioner shall not be removed from the United States unless and until the court orders otherwise,” said Judge

Furman, an appointee of former President Obama. Khalil, a green card holder, was arrested as part of a federal effort to target foreign nationals involved in protests for Palestine. Broader crackdown on students protesting against Israel instils fear among many Tazeen, a student, discussing the issue in a small group at the Turkish Diyanet Centre in Maryland, summed up the collective sentiment of fear and uncertainty. “Afraid they are, but they hope that the American judicial system will rescue them,” she

said. The Diyanet Centre, which hosts one of North America's largest mosques and offers free iftar, has become a key space for informal social gatherings. Although no one in this small group of students outside the mosque's cafeteria admitted to receiving deportation notices, many were aware of others in similar situations. “People are afraid,” said Yunus, who preferred not to give his full name. “Nobody wants to be deported. We hope the courts will help us.” Ashraf, another student, said the First Amendment of the

US Constitution “guarantees freedom of speech. We know our courts take this very seriously.” But the looming fear has led many students to remain silent about their participation in protests, despite the widespread support they received during and after the demonstrations. In response to the Trump administration's policies, students have begun organising. On Tuesday, dozens of Chicago varsity students and faculty rallied in support of Khalil, joining protests in New York. “We don't want our friends and

colleagues to be deported,” said Prof Callie Maidhof. An online petition seeking Khalil's release garnered 500,000 signatures, urging both US agencies and universities to intervene. However, the Trump administration has launched a “Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism”, which has visited varsities such as Columbia, George Washington, and Harvard. Also, the administration has introduced an ‘AI-fuelled Catch and Revoke’ initiative aimed at canceling the visas of foreign nationals believed to support Hamas.