

News in brief

◆ **US House Speaker** Mike Johnson expressed confidence Sunday that he has the votes to end by Tuesday a partial government shutdown triggered by the Trump administration's violent immigration sweeps in Minneapolis. The government entered the shutdown Saturday as a funding deadline passed without Congress approving a 2026 budget. The impact so far appears to have been minimal. The House is due to begin acting on the emergency Monday as it returns from recess to a snowbound Washington, addressing a Senate-backed deal to reopen the government. "Let's say I'm confident that we'll do it at least by Tuesday," Johnson said on NBC's "Meet the Press." The funding lapse followed a breakdown in negotiations driven by Democratic anger over the killing of two protesters in Minneapolis by federal immigration agents, which derailed talks over new money for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Trump says he welcomes Chinese investment in Venezuelan oil

leader Nicolas Maduro. Venezuela sits on the world's largest proven oil reserves and reformed laws this week to open the sector up to private and foreign investment. China had been the dominant buyer of Venezuelan oil under Maduro, whose January 3 capture by US forces drew condemnation from China's foreign ministry and made uncertain Beijing's future with Caracas. "China is welcome to come in and would make a great deal on oil. We welcome China," Trump told reporters Saturday on Air Force One. He noted Venezuela's Interim President Delcy Rodriguez on Friday agreed to an energy cooperation deal with India.

◆ **Indonesia will** restore access to Elon Musk's AI chatbot Grok after the billionaire's social media platform X promised to comply with the country's laws, a government official said yesterday. Grok has faced a global backlash after it emerged that its image creation feature allowed users to sexualise pictures of women and children using simple text prompts. Malaysia and the Philippines followed Indonesia in temporarily blocking access to the tool, which is integrated into X, over concerns about AI-generated sexual deepfakes. Alexander Sabar, a senior official in Indonesia's communication and digital ministry, said access was being restored "conditionally" after X Corp gave "a written commitment containing concrete steps for service improvement and prevention of misuse". Sabar said in a statement the ministry would continue to supervise and evaluate Grok and that it would take "corrective actions", including another suspension, if violations were found.



US House speaker sees swift end to government shutdown

Indonesia says it will restore access to Musk's Grok chatbot

SPOTLIGHT

New Epstein accuser claims sexual encounter with ex-prince Andrew: report

AFP | London, United Kingdom

A second Jeffrey Epstein accuser has alleged the late US sex offender sent her to Britain for a sexual encounter with former prince Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, the BBC reported.

A US lawyer for the woman told the broadcaster late Saturday the alleged encounter occurred at the ousted royal's residence on the Windsor estate, west of London, in 2010 when she was in her 20s.

The latest account emerged after the US Justice Department released a huge new batch of documents on the Epstein case, including photographs of Andrew kneeling over a woman lying on the floor.

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has said the disgraced royal should accept requests to testify before the US Congress about Epstein's crimes.

Brad Edwards, from the Florida legal firm Edwards Henderson, said that after spending the night with Andrew, the woman said she was given a tour of Buckingham Palace.

He added there were communications between his client and the former prince before the alleged encounter and that he is now considering filing a civil lawsuit on her behalf.

The lawyer, who reportedly represents more than 200 survivors of Epstein abuse, did not



This undated photo at an undisclosed location released by the US Justice Department as part of the Jeffrey Epstein files shows British former prince Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor kneeling over a woman lying on the floor.

immediately respond to AFP's request for comment.

Andrew could not be reached for comment but has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing linked to Epstein.

The claim comes more than a decade after sexual assault accusations against the ex-Duke of York by another Epstein accuser, Virginia Giuffre, first emerged publicly.

Giuffre, a US and Australian citizen who took her own life last year, has alleged she was trafficked to have sex with Andrew three times, including twice when she was 17.

After she launched a lawsuit against him, he paid her a multi-million-pound settlement in 2022 without making any admission of guilt.

Iran says progress made towards US talks **despite attack jitters**

US President Donald Trump confirmed the two sides were talking

● **Washington has deployed warships led by the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier**

● **Tehran has said it is ready for nuclear talks if its missiles and defence capabilities are not on the agenda**

AFP | Paris, France

Iran's top security official said Saturday that progress had been made towards negotiations with the United States, even as the Islamic republic's army chief warned Washington against launching military strikes.

US President Donald Trump confirmed the two sides were talking, while keeping the threat of an attack in the foreground.

Washington has deployed warships led by the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier off Iran's shores, after Trump threatened to intervene in the wake of Tehran's deadly crackdown on anti-government protests.

"Contrary to the hype of the contrived media war, structural arrangements for negotiations are progressing," said Ali Larijani, head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

He was speaking a day after the Kremlin said he held talks in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said Saturday a broader conflict would hurt both Iran and the United States.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has never sought, and in no way seeks, war and it is firmly convinced that a war would be in the interest of neither Iran, nor the United States, nor the region," he said in a call with Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, according to the Iranian presidency.

Later Saturday, Trump confirmed that there was a dialogue between Washington and Tehran.

"(Iran is) talking to us, and we'll see if we can do something, otherwise we'll see what happens... we have a big fleet heading out there," he told Fox News.

"They are negotiating," he added.

Qatar's foreign ministry said its premier Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, who also serves as foreign minister, held talks in Tehran with Larijani on Saturday to try to "de-escalate tensions in the region".

Fears of conflict

The arrival of the US flotilla has raised fears of a direct confrontation with Iran, which has warned it would respond with missile strikes on US bases, ships and allies -- notably Israel -- in the event of an attack.

Trump has said he believes Iran will make a deal over its



Iranian nationals arrive in Turkey through the Razi-Kapiköy border crossing, north-eastern Turkey

Iran protester Erfan Soltani released on bail: lawyer

Tehran, Iran

Iranian protester Erfan Soltani has been released on bail, his lawyer told AFP, after the United States warned he was due to be executed though Tehran denied he had been sentenced to death.

The 26-year-old "was re-

leased yesterday (Saturday) and received all of his belongings including his cellphone", said lawyer Amir Mousakhani, adding that a bail of "two billion tomans" (around \$12,600) was paid for his release.

Soltani was arrested on January 10 during recent nationwide protests in Iran.

He was held in a detention facility in Karaj outside Tehran, on charges of propaganda against Iran's Islamic system and acting against national security, the judiciary had said in January. The US State Department had said on its Persian-language X account that he had been sentenced to death.



18E Super Hornet attached to Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 151 launches from the flight deck of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72) as it conducts routine flight operations in the Arabian Sea

nuclear and missile programmes rather than face US military action.

Tehran has said it is ready for nuclear talks if its missiles and defence capabilities are not on the agenda.

Iranian army chief Amir Hataami has warned the United States and Israel against any attack, saying his forces were "at full defensive and military readiness".

"If the enemy makes a mistake, without a doubt it will endanger its own security, the security of the region, and the security of the Zionist regime," Hatami said, of-

ficial news agency IRNA reported. Iran's nuclear technology and expertise "cannot be eliminated", he added.

With tensions heightened, Iranian authorities rushed to deny that several incidents on Saturday were linked to any attack or sabotage.

They included an explosion in the southern Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas that local firefighters said was caused by a gas leak.

Naval exercise

On Friday, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said Iran's

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) would conduct "a two-day live-fire naval exercise" in the Strait of Hormuz, a key transit hub for global energy supplies.

CENTCOM warned the IRGC against "any unsafe and unprofessional behaviour near US forces", drawing a sharp response from Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

"The US military is now attempting to dictate how our Powerful Armed Forces should conduct target practice in their own turf," he wrote on X.