

News in brief

◆ **Colombia's most** powerful cartel walked away from months-long peace talks on Wednesday, after Presidents Gustavo Petro and Donald Trump vowed a new offensive targeting three key cocaine trafficking bosses. At the White House, the two presidents agreed to joint military and intelligence actions against Colombian criminal capos who together produce and supply much of the world's cocaine. Colombian Defense Minister Pedro Sanchez said the two countries would target Ivan Mordisco, Colombia's most wanted rebel; Chiquito Malo, commander of the Clan del Golfo cartel; and Pablito, an ELN guerrilla leader operating on the Venezuelan border. The Petro-Trump pact upends years of spluttering Colombian efforts to negotiate peace accords with big criminal groups. Colombia produces about 70 percent of the world's cocaine, and the United States is by far the world's largest consumer.



Top Colombia cartel halts peace talks after Trump-Petro pact

Xi tells Trump can resolve issues with 'mutual respect': Chinese state media

◆ **China's leader** Xi Jinping told US President Donald Trump in a call on Wednesday they could resolve bilateral issues with mutual respect, Chinese state media said. "By tackling issues one by one and continuously building mutual trust, we can forge a right way for the two countries to get along," Xi said, according to state broadcaster CCTV. "Let us make 2026 a year in which China and the United States, as two major countries, move toward mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation," he added.

◆ **Russia yesterday** condemned the killing of Seif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of slain Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi, and called for a thorough probe into his death. "We strongly condemn this crime. We hope a thorough investigation will be conducted and the perpetrators will be brought to justice," Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement.

Russia condemns Gaddafi's son killing, wants 'thorough investigation'

Gaza health officials say strikes kill 23 after Israel says shots wounded officer

◆ **Gazan health officials** said Israeli air strikes on Wednesday killed 23 people, with Israel's military saying it struck after one of its officers was wounded by enemy gunfire. Despite a US-brokered truce entering its second phase last month, violence has continued in the Gaza Strip, with Israel and Hamas accusing each other of breaching the agreement. The latest bloodshed came days after Israel partly reopened the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, the only exit for Gazans that does not pass through Israel.

SPOTLIGHT

Iran formally allows women to ride motorcycles



A man transports a girl and a woman in a motorcycle in Tehran

AFP | Tehran, Iran

Women in Iran can now formally obtain a licence to ride a motorcycle, local media reported Wednesday, ending years of legal ambiguity surrounding two-wheelers. Previously, the law did not explicitly prohibit women from riding motorbikes and scooters, but in practice authorities refused to issue licences. Due to the grey area, women have been held legally responsible for accidents even when victims. Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref signed a resolution on Tuesday aimed at clarifying the traffic code, which was approved by Iran's

cabinet in late January, the country's Ilna news agency reported. The resolution obliges traffic police to "provide practical training to female applicants, organise an exam under the direct supervision of the police, and issue motorcycle driver's licences to women", Ilna said. For Saina, a 33-year-old advertising agency employee who has been commuting to work by scooter for six months, the change to the traffic laws comes "too late" because "women have been riding motorcycles for months already". "I don't think this is the main problem in our society," she told AFP, referring to the recent protests and Iran's economic challenges.

Rubio says US ready to meet Iran but must discuss missiles

Iranian state media said talks with the United States would take place Friday

◆ **Rubio did not confirm a meeting on Friday with Iran's clerical state**

AFP | Washington, United States

The United States is ready to meet Iran this week but discussions must cover its missile and nuclear programs, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said yesterday. Rubio did not confirm a meeting on Friday with Iran's clerical state, which has violently put down some of the most serious protests against its rule since the 1979 Islamic revolution. "If the Iranians want to meet, we're ready," Rubio told reporters. "They've expressed an interest in meeting and talking. If they change their mind, we're fine with that too," he said, after President Donald Trump ordered a sharp military buildup



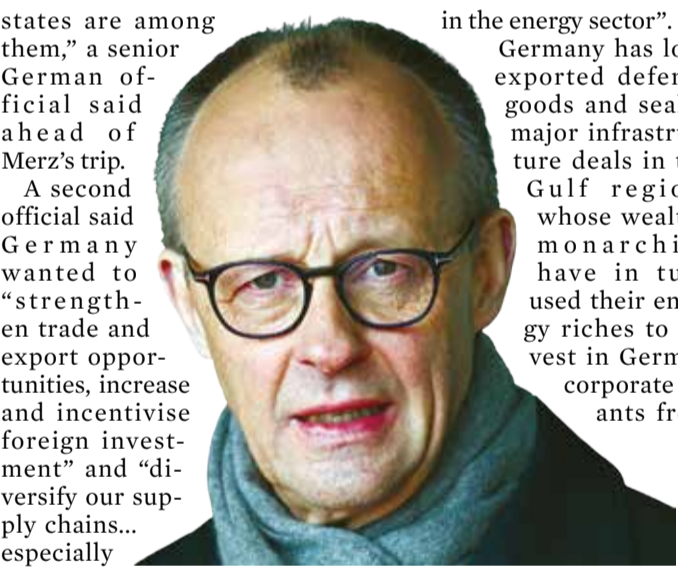
near Iran's coast and threatened actually lead to something meaningful, they will have to include

certain things, and that includes the range of their ballistic missiles, that includes their sponsorship of terrorist organizations across the region, that includes their nuclear program and that includes the treatment of their own people," Rubio said. Iran in previous talks on its disputed nuclear programme has ruled out discussions on its missiles, casting the weapons that can hit Israel as a tool of self-defense to which every country has a right. But Iran has been under growing pressure from the protests and after an Israeli bombing campaign last year. Iran has also lost key regional allies with Israel's severe degrading of Lebanon's Hezbollah and the fall of veteran Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Iranian state media said yesterday that talks with the United States would take place Friday in Oman, after diplomats earlier said the meeting would happen on Friday in Turkey.

Merz heads to Gulf as Germany looks to diversify trade ties

AFP | Berlin, Germany

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz headed to Saudi Arabia yesterday to kick off a Gulf tour as the biggest EU economy seeks to diversify its key trade and energy partnerships. Joined by a business delegation, the conservative leader will meet with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, then travel to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates on his whistlestop tour until Friday. "In the geopolitical environment in which we operate, we must intensify our partnerships with important and influential states in the world. The Gulf



states are among them," a senior German official said ahead of Merz's trip. A second official said Germany wanted to "strengthen trade and export opportunities, increase and incentivise foreign investment" and "diversify our supply chains... especially in the energy sector". Germany has long exported defence goods and sealed major infrastructure deals in the Gulf region, whose wealthy monarchies have in turn used their energy riches to invest in German corporate giants from Volkswagen to Deutsche Bank. When Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine led to sharply lower Russian energy supplies, Berlin turned to Doha to step up liquefied natural gas imports that got it through the following winter. Berlin has now accelerated efforts to lessen its reliance on American LNG and wants to increasingly bank on green hydrogen generated through clean energy to achieve its climate targets. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have meanwhile been moving to diversify away from oil and gas, investing heavily in sectors from renewables to tourism, logistics and AI.

Saudi Arabia to provide passports for kingdom's beloved camels

AFP | Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has announced plans to issue passports to the kingdom's millions of camels, to help better manage the country's prized herds. The ministry of the environment, water and agriculture promised the initiative would enhance the "productivity and efficiency in the sector and build a reliable reference database for camels". A social media post from the ministry on Tuesday included a picture of the document: a green passport stamped with the country's coat of arms and a golden image of a camel. The passport will "contribute to organising sales and trading operations by regulating commerce and transport, ensuring official documentation, protecting owners' rights, and facilitating proof of ownership," according



Camels with Saudi Open banners are paraded during the awarding ceremony of the Asian Tour Saudi Open golf tournament at the Riyadh Golf Club

ing state-backed broadcaster Al Ekhbariya. In 2024, the government estimated there were around 2.2 million camels in the kingdom. Camels have long been a vital mode of transportation in Arabia, conferring status on their owners and fuelling the rise of a lucrative breeding industry.

The kingdom also hosts beauty contests for camels at annual festivals, where Saudi enthusiasts spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on animal contestants -- and the unscrupulous sometimes seek an illegal advantage. Organisers have in recent years cracked down on cosmetic enhancements, a malpractice that has thrived amid stiff competition and despite heavy penalties. Methods to make the camels' lips droopier and their humps more shapely are particularly frowned upon by the authorities who want to encourage a natural look. Camels have been essential to life on the Arabian peninsula for millennia, with research published in 2021 suggesting life-sized carvings of camels and horses hewn into rock faces in Saudi Arabia could be around 7,000 years old.