

News in brief

◆ **The lives of more than 1.9 million displaced people in South Sudan are being put at risk due to aid funding shortages, the UN's migration agency said yesterday.** The International Organization for Migration (IOM) said humanitarian needs were dramatically outstripping resources in one of the world's most displacement-affected countries. "Critical funding shortfalls are putting the lives of over 1.9 million displaced people in South Sudan at risk," the agency said in a statement. South Sudan, the world's newest sovereign country, has been beset by civil war, poverty and massive corruption since it was formed in 2011. South Sudan is grappling with new arrivals fleeing the conflict in neighbouring Sudan, while dealing with its own displacement caused by years of conflict, flooding and instability, the IOM said.



Funding gaps threaten lives of 1.9 mn displaced in South Sudan: UN

◆ **US to ease Venezuelan oil exports to Cuba for humanitarian reasons**

◆ **The United States** said yesterday it will ease restrictions on Venezuelan oil exports to Cuba's private sector for humanitarian reasons, as the island reels from an energy crisis. The Treasury Department said in a notice it would allow "transactions that support the Cuban people, including the Cuban private sector," such as oil exports "for commercial and humanitarian use."

◆ **The astronaut** who faced a health issue prompting the first-ever medical evacuation in International Space Station history is "doing very well," he said in a statement issued by NASA yesterday. Mike Fincke, 58, said he's "doing very well and continuing standard post-flight reconditioning" at NASA's center in Houston. NASA had previously declined to identify which astronaut experienced the "medical event," the details of which they still did not disclose in Wednesday's statement. The health issue prompted NASA to cut short the mission of a quartet including Americans Fincke and Zena Cardman along with Russian cosmonaut Oleg Platonov and Japanese astronaut Kimiya Yui. Fincke said that his January 7 health mishap required "immediate attention from my incredible crewmates."



NASA astronaut recovering well after ISS medical evacuation

SPOTLIGHT

AI robot monk unveiled in Japan



AFP | Tokyo, Japan

Japanese researchers have unveiled a robot monk powered by AI that they say can dispense spiritual advice and maybe one day ease shortages of its human counterparts.

Trained on even the most esoteric Buddhist scriptures, the University of Kyoto says the machine can answer sensitive questions that people may feel hesitant to share with other humans.

In addition, "Buddharoid", as the diminutive two-legged humanoid is known, can offer a sense of presence at religious sanctuaries in addition to voice communications.

"In the future, it is conceivable that they may assist with or replace some of the religious rituals traditionally performed by human monks," the university said in a statement on Wednesday.

The robot is the latest offering from Seiji Kumagai, a professor at the university's Institute for the Future of Human Society.

Using AI models from Ope-

nAI and others, he has worked with engineering firms to develop religious AI chatbots like Buddha Bot and a catechism bot.

For his new creation, Kumagai installed his updated "BuddhaBotPlus" on a Chinese-made "Unitree G1" humanoid robot to create the AI robo-monk.

In a media presentation at a temple on Tuesday, Kumagai presented the robot -- as yet without a face -- wearing a simple grey garment.

It held its gloved hands together in a prayer form and walked around in front of reporters and performed other tasks.

As it sat on a chair, the humanoid gave advice to a young local journalist who confessed to thinking and worrying too much.

"Buddhism teaches that it is important not to blindly follow one's thoughts or rush headlong into things," it said in a soothing baritone to the journalist from national broadcaster NHK.

"One approach is to calm your mind and let go of the thought itself," it said.

Modi lands in Israel to 'strengthen cooperation'

Modi tells MPs in Jerusalem that India stands with Israel 'firmly with full conviction'

● **Talks opened in New Delhi for India-Israel Free Trade Agreement (FTA)**

AFP | Tel Aviv, Israel

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Israel yesterday for a two-day visit aimed at deepening ties with a key trade and defence partner.

It is Modi's second visit to Israel as prime minister.

He is scheduled to meet his counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu and President Isaac Herzog.

"Our nations share a robust and multifaceted strategic partnership," Modi said in a statement before leaving New Delhi, adding that he will address the Knesset, Israel's parliament, later on Thursday.

"Ties have significantly strengthened in the last few years."

New Delhi has steadily expanded cooperation with Israel across the defence, agriculture, technology and cybersecurity sectors, while balancing diplomatic interests in the Middle East.

Talks opened in New Delhi on Monday for an India-Israel Free Trade Agreement (FTA), India's government said in a statement,



Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2L) and his wife Sara Netanyahu (L) stand to receive India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) upon his arrival at the Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv

noting that merchandise trade reached \$3.62 billion in 2024-2025.

Modi said he would hold talks with Netanyahu to "discuss ways to strengthen cooperation".

Full diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1992. Ties deepened

after Modi took office in 2014.

Modi first visited Israel as prime minister in 2017, before Netanyahu made a reciprocal visit to India the following year.

Both right-wing leaders have called each other a "friend".

In September 2023, grand plans were unveiled in New Delhi for an India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor -- to link railways, ports, electricity, data networks and pipelines, including through Saudi Arabia and Israel. Those plans were stalled by Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, which responded with a devastating war in the Gaza Strip.

India's economic growth, Israel's innovation create 'natural foundation' for partnership

AFP | Jerusalem, Undefined

Continuing his address, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told lawmakers in Jerusalem yesterday that India's rapid economic expansion and Israel's strength in technological innovation provide a "natural foundation" for a deeper and more

forward-looking partnership. He was speaking in the Knesset during his two-day visit aimed at strengthening ties with one of India's key trade and defence partners.

"For the last few years, India has been the fastest growing major economy in the world... At the same time, Israel is a pow-

erhouse of innovation and technological leadership," Modi told MPs in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament.

"This creates a natural foundation for our forward-looking partnership. We are committed to expanding trade, strengthening investment flows and promoting joint infrastructure

development," he said.

"I see a lot of synergies in areas such as Quantum technologies, semiconductors and artificial intelligence. We are also working with Israel on creating cross-border financial linkages using our digital public infrastructure," Modi added.

Hezbollah official says will not intervene in event of 'limited' US strikes on Iran

AFP | Beirut, Lebanon

A Hezbollah official told AFP on Wednesday that the Lebanese movement would not intervene militarily in the event of "limited" US strikes on its backer Iran, but would consider any attack against supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei a "red line".

The US has repeatedly threatened Iran over its contentious nuclear programme, and Lebanese authorities fear Hezbollah could become involved if a potential US attack triggered a regional war. But the official told AFP on condition of anonymity: "In the event of limited US strikes on Iran, Hezbollah's position will be to not intervene militarily."

If the group determines, however, that the United States is trying to "provoke the downfall



French peacekeepers of the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) patrol at the entrance of the southern Lebanese border village of Sarada

of the Iranian regime or to target the supreme leader, Hezbollah will then intervene", they added. The official predicted that in a

hypothetical scenario where the US attempted to militarily unseat the Iranian government, US-ally Israel would "inevitably wage a

war against Lebanon".

US President Donald Trump has deployed warships and fighter jets near Iran to back up his threats of strikes should ongoing negotiations between the two sides fail to secure a deal.

Lebanon's foreign minister said Tuesday that the government feared Israeli attacks on civilian infrastructure if Hezbollah -- which still has an arsenal of ballistic missiles -- became part of a regional conflict between the US and Iran.

"What the Lebanese fear is a chain reaction: an American strike against Iran, a Hezbollah retaliatory strike against Israel, followed by a massive Israeli response," said a Lebanese official who requested anonymity.