

A week in the life of the world | Global edition
7 AUGUST 2026 | VOL.215 No.6 | £6.50 | €9.95

The Guardian Weekly

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Eyewitness São Tomé and Príncipe

PHOTOGRAPH:
DANIEL BELOUMOU OLOMO/
AFP/GETTY

📌 Battle lines

Moorish and Christian characters prepare to face off in the Auto de Floripes in Santo António, on Príncipe Island. Every August, the entire island participates in the festival of theatrical performances inspired by European medieval tales, centred around the Emperor Charlemagne and his knights, the Twelve Peers of France.



The Guardian Weekly
Founded in Manchester,
England
4 July 1919

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7 AUGUST 2026



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On the cover Four years after Vladimir Putin sent tanks to seize Kyiv, the war in Ukraine has moved to the sky - turning into a battle of drones that is unprecedented in the history of warfare. As Ukraine has become the world's leading producer of unmanned systems, Luke Harding spent time with its elite drone strike force. Cover: Guardian Design; Vyacheslav Prokofyev/AFP/Getty

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Global report

Headlines from
the last seven days

GW

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Published weekly by
Guardian News &
Media Ltd,
Kings Place,
90 York Way,
London, N1 9GU, UK

Printed in the UK,
Belgium, the US,
Australia and
New Zealand

ISSN 0958-9996

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1 UNITED STATES/IRAN

Latest talks are 'last chance' to avoid war escalating

New talks between Washington and Tehran were the "last chance" for Iran to forge a deal and avoid an escalation of US strikes, Donald Trump said on Monday.

Trump said he expected negotiations this week to reopen the strait of Hormuz and create a pathway for Iran to address the US's concerns about its nuclear programme. Trump reiterated that he was running out of patience. "This is the last chance for them to sign a good document," he said.

Tehran's foreign ministry spokesperson said Iran had held discussions with Oman about the creation of a temporary route through the strait that would allow commercial shipping to resume, but that it had not yet revived talks with the US.

Trump claimed he had held off from launching the biggest strike on any country "since world war two" last weekend after Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, rang him to urge diplomacy. Trump said the cancellation was conditional on Iran reaching a deal quickly.

It was thought to be the 12th time in the war between the US and Iran that Trump has called off threatened strikes.

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2 SPAIN



Stronger EU borders needed, says Ursula von der Leyen

Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, called for action to strengthen Europe's borders after tens of thousands of people arrived and quickly left the Spanish territory of Ceuta, triggering a furious row between Madrid and other European countries. She praised Spain's swift handling of the crisis, after Spanish officials began installing a 500-metre-long floating barrier at the border with Morocco.

By Monday, Spain said about 69,500 migrants had returned to Morocco after arriving in the enclave in north Africa last Thursday. Authorities in Ceuta said 88 people had died trying to reach the territory, while at least 11 deaths were recorded in Morocco.

Spotlight Page 15 →

3 UNITED STATES

Trump's approval rating at 34% as midterms loom

Three-quarters of Americans believe Donald Trump is not paying enough attention to the country's most important problems, and two-thirds think he places himself above the needs of the US, according to a CNN poll, conducted by the market research company SSRS. The survey came less than 100 days before November's midterm elections.

Trump's overall approval rating was 34%, the poll found, matching his previous lowest immediately following the 6 January 2021 insurrection he incited trying to cling on to power after losing the 2020 presidential election.

4 HUNGARY/ROMANIA

Reactors shut down as Danube runs low on water

Hungary and Romania have been forced to shut down nuclear reactors cooled by the Danube for the first time, as record-low water levels deepen fears of an energy crisis across the region.

Romanian naval forces carried out a controlled explosion to help redirect vital cooling water from the drought-hit Danube to the country's last working nuclear reactor, while it was expected Hungary would this week need to entirely shut down its only atomic plant. The extraordinary measures underlined the scale of the climate crisis in Europe, where heat and drought have lowered river levels and raised concerns about water supplies and power generation.

In Serbia, record-low Danube levels have pushed the country's key hydroelectric plant to operate at only 20% capacity. Water levels are not expected to rise on the river, which passes through 10 countries, in the coming weeks as no significant rainfall is forecast. In some stretches it has fallen to levels never previously recorded, revealing rocks, shipwrecks, a second world war bomb and the remains of a woolly mammoth.

5 CANADA

Tourists head west or east rather than south to US

Canadians spent C\$3.3bn (\$2.3bn) less on travel to the US in 2025 than in 2024 as Donald Trump's hostile policies towards his northern neighbour continue to incur an economic cost, new government data shows. Total US travel spending in 2025 was C\$18.8bn.

The research also indicates that Canadians are not bucking travel overall. Visits to Europe increased by nearly 14% compared with 2024, while visits to Asia increased by almost 17%, in a rebuke to Trump's tariff regime and the president's continued musings on annexing Canada.

Spotlight Page 33 →

9 UNITED STATES

RFK Jr tells US parents to vaccinate against measles

Robert F Kennedy Jr, the US health secretary, on Sunday told American parents that they should get their children vaccinated against measles, as the surge in infections reached numbers not seen in the past 35 years.

Kennedy, a leading vaccination sceptic who has spent years amplifying misinformation about vaccines, including the shot that protects against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR), made his call on CNN's State of the Union.

His remark came as the US recorded 2,371 infections so far this year, surpassing 2025's tally of 2,289. The past two years have seen more measles infections in the US than the rest of the 21st century combined.

6 CANADA

**Call for national wildfire strategy as Ontario burns**

As more than 900 wildfires burn across Canada, prompting evacuation orders and pushing Ontario into its worst wildfire season on record, officials are renewing calls for the country to develop a national wildfire strategy through the creation of a federal agency. Canada is the only G7 country that does not have such an agency.

After July saw poisonous smoke travelling southward through the US, the provincial premier, Doug Ford, called for a countrywide response to the wildfire threat.

8 SPORT

**Gianni Infantino in peril after Fifa sell-off plan**

Pressure increased on the Fifa president, Gianni Infantino, after a mass withdrawal of support from European footballing nations for his re-election as head of the game's ruling body.

Infantino's reign is in severe peril after the collapse of his privately backed scheme to sell off chunks of the World Cup, which was largely scuppered when Uefa member associations threatened to boycott future Fifa competitions.

Infantino appears determined to stay on, and is believed to be lobbying individual member associations across the globe to ensure he retains their support.

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7 PERU

Thirteen dead after tourist plane crashes near Nazca

Police said 13 people, among them foreign tourists, were killed in a plane crash in southern Peru, near the Nazca Lines. Authorities in Nazca confirmed that 11 tourists and two pilots died when the Cessna Grand Caravan crashed in Pueblo Viejo, approximately 6km from the city of Nazca and roughly 12km from the Nazca Lines site.

The plane had departed the nearby city of Pisco at about 1pm local time (7pm BST) to fly over the pre-Columbian archaeological site where geoglyphs etched into desert sand cover an area of nearly 1,000 sq km, but minutes later lost contact with the control tower.

The cause of the crash is at present unknown.

10 UKRAINE/RUSSIA

Drone attacks on resort and Crimea kill 11, Russia claims

Ukrainian drone attacks on a Black Sea resort and the annexed Crimea peninsula killed 11 people, Russian officials said, after blaming Kyiv for another explosion that killed five people in a Moscow restaurant.

Seven people, including three children, were killed when "drone debris" struck a beach in Arkhipo-Osipovka, the crisis taskforce for Russia's southern Krasnodar region said on social media.

Another four people were killed in a strike on Crimea, the Moscow-installed governor, Sergey Aksyonov, said on Telegram.

Earlier, Russia blamed Ukraine for a bombing at a restaurant in Moscow that killed five people, amid speculation that a senior Russian military commander was the intended target.

The big story Page 10 →

11 PALESTINE/ISRAEL

Israel yet to accept Trump's Hamas disarmament plan

Israel has yet to respond to a proposed agreement that would lead to the disarmament of Hamas and the withdrawal of Israeli forces, after Donald Trump declared a breakthrough in negotiations via social media.

Trump said the agreement involved the "complete disarmament" of Hamas and was "a monumental step toward ending the fighting".

Israel has pointed to Hamas's failure to disarm as justification for its continued strikes, and for Israeli forces' edging forward from the demarcation line agreed in October.

14 KENYA

Cyanide linked to the deaths of 15 elephants

The deaths of 15 elephants in southern Kenya were likely caused by the animals ingesting pesticides used on tomato farms, the Kenya Wildlife Service said.

Erustus Kanga, the agency's director general, said analysis of samples collected from the carcasses had found traces of cyanide, a chemical compound used in farming as a predator control poison and a pest fumigant, which has also been used by poachers. "If elephants consume cyanide, they cannot survive a day or two," he said.

The deaths occurred in the Kimana sanctuary and Kuku Group ranch areas around Amboseli national park.

12 DR CONGO

Ebola death toll rises to 1,500 in fastest ever spread

The latest numbers of confirmed cases of Ebola has made this latest outbreak the fastest growing in the known history of the virus.

As medics recorded more than 3,500 Ebola cases as of 31 July, the disease is now affecting people in five provinces in the east of the DRC, with 1,487 deaths recorded. This represents an overall case fatality rate estimated at about 45%, according to Congolese health officials. Responses to the outbreak have been hampered by conflict in many areas.

Since officially declared by the Congolese authorities on 15 May, the Bundibugyo strain of the virus has spread faster than any of the country's 16 previous outbreaks.

13 IRAN



Prisoners stage hunger strike as executions soar

At least 1,500 death row prisoners at the country's largest jail, Ghezel Hesar, near Tehran, have sewn their lips shut in a mass hunger strike. In a series of videos shared by rights groups in exile, prisoners are seen sitting in a prison hallway, holding placards reading "No to Executions" and chanting "Be our voice".

It is the latest act of defiance in the prisoner-led campaign against executions, which began in January 2024 and has spread across prisons in Iran amid a sharp rise in the use of the death penalty.

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Global report

15 SOUTH KOREA

**Halt to outdoor work as city sees 40C heat for five days**

Authorities warned people to “immediately” stop all outdoor activities in areas affected by record-breaking temperatures. The south-eastern city of Yangsan saw the temperature reach 42.5C last Sunday, the highest temperature reported since modern weather observation began in 1904.

The city has been the centre of an ongoing heatwave, where temperatures exceeded 40C for a fifth consecutive day on Sunday, while many other cities are seeing temperatures in the high 30s. There have been 16 heat-related deaths recorded.

North Korea also endured temperatures soaring as high as 40C in some regions, state media reported. In Pyongyang, night-time temperature has exceeded 25C for a week.

17 JAPAN

Recovery of earthquake-hit sites hampered by heat

The prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, visited Kumamoto in the south-west of the country, where recovery efforts are being hampered by heat and a lack of water supplies, almost a week after a magnitude 7.1 earthquake killed 38 people, including one person who died of apparent heatstroke while taking shelter in a car.

More than 46,000 households remain without water and many also face sweltering heat. Temperatures were as high as 40C on Monday. More than 8,500 people remain at emergency shelters, many of which lack air conditioning.

Takaichi on Monday flew over the affected areas in an army helicopter and visited one of the area’s best-equipped shelters, triggering criticism on social media that her visit distorted reality.

The governor of Kumamoto, Takashi Kimura, in his meeting with Takaichi, stressed the “abnormal heat”. He said he sought further government support to improve the conditions at evacuation centres, claiming many of them lacked clean water and medical care.

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19 MYANMAR

Red Cross visits former leader Aung San Suu Kyi

Aung San Suu Kyi on Monday met a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the aid organisation has confirmed. The meeting followed years of questions over the wellbeing of the 81-year-old detained former leader, whose whereabouts and health condition have been largely unknown since the elected civilian government she led was ousted by a military coup in February 2021.

Myanmar’s military-backed administrations have repeatedly claimed she is in “good health”.

Her son, Kim Aris, who had recently demanded the ruling junta provide proof of life, said on social media that he hoped the meeting would lead to greater humanitarian access to his mother ultimately her release.



DEATHS



Franco Baresi
Italian international footballer who spent his entire club career with Milan. He died on 31 July, aged 66.

Vincent Pastore
American actor best known for his role as Salvatore Bonpensiero in the TV series *The Sopranos*. He died on 1 August, aged 80.

Glen Hansard
Oscar-winning Irish singer-songwriter. He died on 29 July, aged 56.

Vicki Wickham
British pop manager and producer of 60s TV show *Ready Steady Go!*. She died on 1 August, aged 87.

Nirmal Purja
Nepali mountaineer. He died on 30 July, aged 43.

Kazimira Prunskienė
First prime minister of the post-Soviet Lithuania. She died on 30 July, aged 83.

Wang Quanying
China’s last surviving female participant in the Long March. She died on 22 July, aged 105.

16 MALAYSIA

Growing number of ‘lost’ hikers prompts crackdown

The government is tightening hiking rules nationwide after a social media trend left increasing numbers of adventurers needing to be rescued. In the first five months of 2026, Malaysia saw 52 cases of lost hikers, an increase of nearly 30% compared with the same period the previous year, the Malaysian Fire and Rescue Department told local media.

The “hike-tok” outdoor influencer community, has popularised “compressed hikes”, shortened versions of demanding hikes. Other hikers carry minimal gear to appear like professional trail runners on social media.

18 NAOERO

Nauru officially changes its name to Republic of Naoero

The Pacific Island country of Nauru has changed its name to the Republic of Naoero, its president said, matching the spelling and pronunciation in the national language.

The country’s international code will change from NRU to NRO and its people will be known as dei-Naoero instead of Nauruan. Commonly known abroad by the pronunciation of Now-roo, the new name is spoken as Now-ero.

The move returns the remote South Pacific island nation to its traditional name, a statement posted on the government’s Facebook account said.

20 NEW ZEALAND

English given same status as Māori and sign language

Legislation recognising English as an official language has been passed by parliament, prompting derision from linguists and legal experts and a viral broadside from a Māori MP.

The English language bill gives English, which is spoken by 95% of the country, the same official status as te reo Māori (Māori language) and New Zealand sign language. Ministry of justice officials had recommended that lawmakers should not pass the bill, because there was “no evidence to support concerns about the use or status of English as an official language”.



POLITICS

Farage admission blurs his earlier account of £5m gift

Nigel Farage admitted he held talks about the possibility of returning as Reform UK's leader months before the 2024 general election, potentially undermining his own account of the circumstances in which he received a £5m (\$6.7m) gift from a crypto billionaire.

It was reported last weekend that Farage had struck a deal with the party's then leader, Richard Tice, and the convicted fraudster George Cottrell to return to frontline politics.

Farage had previously said he did not need to declare the £5m from Christopher Harborne or benefits in kind from Cottrell because he was not in politics at the time they were received. The House of Commons code of conduct states that new MPs must register all "registrable benefits" received in the 12 months before their election.

At a press conference on Monday, Farage said: "I had no intention about returning to politics, or as leader of Reform, but in the spring of that year I did talk to Richard Tice about what the liabilities would be if ... I was to come back to that position."

"You would be a bit of a mug if you were to walk into a job and not find out what the potential liabilities were, and they were substantial," Farage said.

A inquiry by parliament's standards watchdog into whether Farage broke the rules by accepting the £5m and not declaring has been paused after he triggered a byelection by standing down as the MP for Clacton. The vote will be held on 13 August.

The view from Clacton [Page 34](#) →

IMMIGRATION

Burnham will be 'relentless' on small boat crossings

Andy Burnham pledged to be "relentless" in tackling small boat crossings in the light of tens of thousands of migrants entering the Spanish territory of Ceuta, and he said "safe routes" for refugees were necessary to tackle trafficking gangs. The prime minister said the UK had to "deal with the issue rather than play politics with the issue" and make changes that would reassure the public.

Last Wednesday was the busiest day for small boat crossings across the Channel so far this year, with 752 people arriving in the UK. Official provisional figures suggest 14,526 have entered the UK so far this year. This is 43% lower than the number recorded by this time last year (25,436).

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WILDLIFE

Storks return to Derbyshire after 600-year absence

A trio of juvenile white storks has been released in Willington Wetlands in Derbyshire, and conservationists hope they will kickstart the return of the birds to the Midlands after an absence of more than 600 years.

"Our next aim is to get to the point where they're a sustainable population," said Katie Last, the living landscape officer for Derbyshire Wildlife Trust.



FOOD

Farmers warn of shortages as drought follows floods

Britain could face shortages of certain foods after punishing drought in parts of England, the National Farmers' Union warned, as a heatwave continued to affect much of the country.

Farms were affected by floods over the winter, making planting extremely difficult, and now in many areas they do not have access to water as irrigation is being restricted due to drought.

It is the third drought in five years and farming groups say this is the new normal for agriculture in Britain. England is seeing its earliest ever harvest as farmers battle to salvage what they can of their produce.



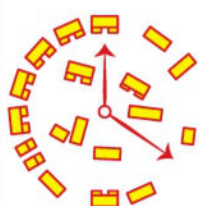
DIPLOMACY

London residents will fight plans for Chinese embassy

Construction of a controversial new Chinese embassy was given the green light after the high court dismissed a challenge from neighbours. The Royal Mint Court residents' association immediately announced plans to appeal against the decision in a move that could cause further delays to the project.

The debate over planning permission has been a sore point in British-Chinese relations over recent years. In January the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government gave permission for China to build the vast diplomatic outpost. It would be Beijing's biggest in Europe.

The decision was delayed for months after the planning application was taken out of the hands of the local council, Tower Hamlets, which had originally rejected it on security grounds. Senior spy officials later advised the government that the risks to UK national security could be controlled and dealt with.



20

The amount of time, in minutes, that a handful of visitors to Stonehenge will be allowed to get up close to the monument this month instead of from a distance behind a rope cordon. The lucky people will be chosen at random



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Reader's eyewitness

Misting over 'On the Waiheke commuting ferry to downtown Auckland, morning fog transformed an everyday crossing into an unlikely meeting of wildlife, surveillance and seascape.'
By Valia Papoutsaki, Waiheke island, Auckland, New Zealand



SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT



POLLUTION

Replacing gas stove with electric can help asthmatics

A US study has found a 70% drop in hospital admissions and days off from work or school when people with poorly controlled asthma had their gas stove and hob replaced with electric.

Ohio's publicly owned MetroHealth began the study in December 2024 but funding was terminated by the incoming Trump administration. To the surprise of researchers at Case Western Reserve University, benefits were detected when they shut down the project.

The average asthma score improved from 2.6 to 1.5 on a scale where a change of 0.5 is considered to be clinically significant. This included fewer days off school or work. They also found less wheezing, less use of inhalers and fewer people saying that their asthma had woken them during the night. Air pollution was measured in 44 of the homes. On average, nitrogen dioxide dropped 70%.

WATER

Rainclouds are travelling farther as world gets warmer

Research shows raindrops are travelling even farther than they used to. Warmer air can hold more water vapour, and that is changing not only how much rain we receive but also where it falls.

Travis Aeronson, of the University of Wyoming, modelled atmospheric moisture movements in the US over more than three decades. Their research showed that moisture in the atmosphere travels 50 to 80km farther than it did 35 years ago before falling as rain.

Their findings, published in Geophysical Research Letters, show that the trend will result in the water security of more countries and states falling increasingly outside their borders, requiring greater collaboration between neighbours.

MARINE BIOLOGY

Ships in strait of Hormuz pose 'super-spreader' threat

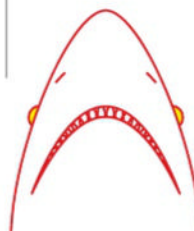
The closure of the strait of Hormuz since the outbreak of the US-Israel war on Iran has created conditions

for an extreme global biodiversity threat, with a team of marine biologists warning that thousands of stranded ships could spread invasive marine species across the world once they begin sailing again.

More than 1,500 commercial vessels have been stuck motionless in the Gulf since 28 February, their hulls becoming encrusted with marine life from microbes and algae to barnacles. The study, led by Prof Mario Tamburri, of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science, describes the situation as a potential marine "bio-invasion super-spreader event".

4.2

The length, in metres, of Contender, the largest tagged male great white shark in the Atlantic Ocean. The 30-year-old shark has been sighted on the US coast off North Carolina and Maine



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

AI labels to be compulsory on fake content under EU rules

New EU rules have been introduced to stem the flood of fake content.

Companies must ensure people know when they are interacting with an AI-powered chatbot or viewing a manipulated image or AI-generated text. "It's also a matter of democracy protection," the Green MEP Sergey Lagodinsky said. Companies are encouraged to label AI-generated content predating the rules, although this is not compulsory.

The big story

Domestic strife
Kyiv's political puzzle *Page 13* →

Trump's patriot games
Warming to Zelenskyy *Page 14* →

Ukraine war

By *Luke Harding* UKRAINE

Sparrows were cheeping as the sun set over a field of tall yellow sunflowers when a moped-like growl suddenly disturbed the evening calm. The noise rose, dipped, and rose again. Lt Col Ray – a Ukrainian commander with the 414th aviation brigade – took cover in a leafy ditch.

Seconds later a Ukrainian drone roared into a mauve sky. It jerked upwards at a 45-degree angle, orange flames fizzing, and then motored serenely onwards. The flying object resembled a sleek grey biplane with a wooden propeller and tail. It left behind clouds of billowing black smoke and a whiff of gunpowder.

Four and a half years after Vladimir Putin sent tanks to seize Kyiv, the war in Ukraine has moved from the earth to the sky, turning into a battle of drones. This contest – unprecedented in the history of warfare – features technology, innovation and rapid development.

“We are making history here. This is where democracy beats totalitarianism. It’s like George Orwell. But this time Big Brother loses,” Ray said, as the drone vanished over the horizon. Its destination was Crimea, a scenic Ukrainian peninsula of beaches and white chalk mountains, stolen by Russia in 2014, and militarised thereafter.

Next, two more long-range drones hurtled forward. They soared into the twilight, above a darkening steppe landscape. Each carried 50-100kg of explosives. Mission over, the Ukrainian soldiers packed briskly, winding up white cables. Within 10 minutes the men were gone. They disappeared down a tree-lined and potholed track.

Far away from the frontline, other crews were crisscrossing Ukraine, releasing drones according to a precise evening schedule. Operators sitting in front of computer screens nudged them towards enemy targets. The model can fly more than 2,500km, far enough to pummel anywhere in European Russia, and much of Siberia as well.

The journey made by Ray’s trio of drones was shorter. After four hours, at about 1am, the first →



‘Putin is afraid’

The drone strike force taking the fight to Russia

At a launch site in rural Ukraine, members of the elite ‘Magyar’s Birds’ brigade are turning Russia’s vast size into a weakness



📹 A member of Magyar's Birds checks an FP-1 deep-strike drone before its launch VALENTYN OGIRENKO/REUTERS

reached its endpoint: the holiday resort of Alushta on the southern coast of occupied Crimea. The drone weaved between grey apartment blocks and crashed into a 110kV electricity substation. Flames erupted, pricking the city's inky blackness.

These remote strikes on 21 July were part of what Ukraine has nicknamed the Crimean "switch off": a campaign to disconnect the region from its power and logistics networks. The same night, unmanned drones hit 13 electricity nodes. Several were located in the Russian-controlled parts of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson provinces, which the Kremlin says it has annexed.

Since 2022 Russia has carried out nightly attacks on Ukrainian cities and towns. It sends Iranian-designed Shaheeds as well as ballistic and hypersonic missiles. After Donald Trump returned to the White House last year, these swarms grew. They rain down chaotically, killing families in their apartments in a campaign of terror.

Once a recipient of western assistance, Ukraine has responded by developing its own military manufacturing base. After rapid growth, the country has become the world's leading unmanned systems power. The drones hurled last week at Crimea were built in Kyiv by a defence technology startup. The firm's representatives take part in operations.

Ray's battalion - named after Kairos, the ancient Greek god of opportunity, luck and the fleeting moment - has carried out hundreds of deep strikes against Russia. Targets have included oil refineries, warehouses and munitions depots. It has also struck ports and harbours, as well as routes used for army logistics such as roads and railways.

In 2026, Ukrainian drones have struck Moscow and Putin's home city of St Petersburg, embarrassing Russia's president and bringing the war home to ordinary citizens who have previously ignored it. "I think Putin is afraid," Ray suggested. "One of the justifications he gave for his war was to stop Ukraine from [potentially] bombing Moscow. It's happening now as a direct consequence of his actions."

Ray said he felt "revenge and justice" every time one of his drones ascended into the moonlit heavens. "We didn't start this war," he said. "We have no choice. We are fighting for our independence, for our people, for the memory of those who have died,



and for our future. This is a contest between slaves and free people."

Secrecy surrounds Ukraine's well-organised drone operation. An analytics department finds targets. Western partners provide some intelligence, but most is open source. Drone crews are given coordinates at the last minute. So far none of those who take part in launches have been injured or killed.

One person involved said: "You are making change on a global scale. Trump wakes up and sees the results. At the same time it's very solitary. You can't tell anybody about what you do, even your wife, or boast: 'Today we bombed Moscow.'" They added: "It's an important job. You feel the biggest satisfaction and a member of an elite."

Kairos is a part of "Magyar's Birds", a brigade named after the call sign of its founder, **Robert Brovdi, the head of Ukraine's unmanned systems forces**. In July Brovdi launched a campaign to destroy oil tankers and other vessels in the Sea of Azov and Black Sea. So far, more than 200 have been hit. The Russians were taken unawares, their boats unable to escape.

Since last month the brigade has been burning warehouses belonging to Wildberries, Russia's equivalent of Amazon, obliterating at least nine of them. Ukraine says the company sells military products. "The socio-psychological impact on society is greater than that of an oil refinery," Brovdi said.

He said Ukrainian long-range drones had "significantly thinned out" Russia's air defences.

"We have already destroyed the majority of them," he said. Three days earlier, air defence units were flattened in the Russian port of Yeysk on the Azov Sea, he added, bringing the number of systems knocked out to 305.

▲ Lt Col Ray - a commander with the 414th aviation brigade

ALESSIO MAMO



'It's an important job. You feel like a member of an elite'

Russia's enormous size has turned into a weakness. A panicked Kremlin has moved "a certain number" of air defences from the frontline to protect Moscow, Brovdi said. The commander said he wanted to stop Russia from using Crimea as a "springboard" to fire on Ukraine and to push out the nearly 1 million Russian residents or "colonisers" who settled on the peninsula after Putin's 2014 takeover.

Crimea now has so little fuel that Russian military groups are sometimes unable to fill up and launch drones. There are also frequent power cuts.

One brigade member, call sign Schweik, predicted food shortages would happen soon: "We will continue this pressure. They will be thinking about survival instead of assault operations," Schweik added: "The situation is humiliating for Russia. Crimea is symbolic... now everyone in the world understands that Russia is really weak."

Not all Ukrainian drones reach their targets. According to Ray, about a third are brought down over occupied territory. He admitted losses in the skies above Russia were considerably higher. Nevertheless, Ukraine's strategy - to pile pressure on the Russian economy - appears to be working. "Troops and resources must be exhausted, so that it becomes impossible for them to continue the war," Brovdi said.

The commander acknowledged that Russian troops were still advancing in the eastern Donbas region, with battles in the city of Kostiantynivka. "Their gains to date do not justify the price they're paying for them," he said. He continued: "At this rate, with their intention to seize half of Ukraine, are they planning to fight for 100 years?"

Back in the countryside, Ray's colleague "Panama" described the latest launch as a success. "It was 10 out of 10," he said, adding that he had been working with the current biplane-like model for a year and a half. "To begin with we used foreign drones. Sometimes things went wrong. Now we don't have problems," he said.

The only challenge came from mosquitoes. "We've become friends with them. They don't annoy me any more. They are also inhabitants of free Ukraine. They can do whatever they want," Panama said. "But if they irritate us we will launch them at the enemy. They can eat Russians."

LUKE HARDING IS THE GUARDIAN'S SENIOR INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENT

Home truths Reshuffle exposes cracks in Zelenskyy's wartime team

By Michael Segalov
and Luke Harding



◀ Andy Burnham
with Volodymyr
Zelenskyy during
his visit to the UK
SIMON JONES/AP

Another week, another diplomatic success for Volodymyr Zelenskyy. His first meeting with the new British prime minister, Andy Burnham, confirmed continuity in the UK's support for Ukraine. Then, in Washington, Zelenskyy and Donald Trump held a "positive and productive" meeting, as per the White House. The US Senate advanced a sweeping Russian sanctions bill. The hundreds of billions Zelenskyy secured in military and financial aid from the US, Europe and the UK is remarkable. But he returned to face a political crisis in Kyiv, where daily protests have been held since the dismissal of defence minister Mykhailo Fedorov.

What is the controversy surrounding Fedorov?

Since taking up the Ukrainian defence brief this January, the 35-year-old former digital transformation minister and deputy PM has been seen as a modernising, tech-savvy reformist, credited by many with cleaning up a defence ministry plagued by Soviet-era practices and alleged corruption. When Fedorov messaged Elon Musk on X to request satellite internet service Starlink be switched off for Russian soldiers, Musk obliged.

The contrast between Fedorov and Oleksandr Syrskyy - Ukraine's 61-year-old erstwhile army chief - couldn't be starker. They clashed. Last month, Zelenskyy announced a government reshuffle, including the removal of Fedorov.

It was a curious choice. Fedorov appeared to pose no political threat. He was a key ally and former aide, and a Zelenskyy loyalist. Now he is a potential successor.

Polling found 72% of respondents were against Fedorov's dismissal, with only 5% for. Late last month, under mounting public pressure, Zelenskyy changed course. Syrskyy was sacked and Fedorov invited back into government. Fedorov turned down alternative senior ministerial posts, and Zelenskyy has yet to reoffer him the defence job.

Has Zelenskyy's judgment been questioned before?

In July 2025, protests erupted in Kyiv and other cities in response to the government's proposals to strip two anti-corruption bodies of their independence. Zelenskyy signed the bill into law but backtracked under public pressure a few months later. One organisation (Nabu - the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine) then investigated Zelenskyy's chief of staff, Andriy Yermak. It led to his resignation.

Could there be elections in Ukraine?

Wartime martial law bans elections, so Zelenskyy has been in power since 2019, when he won a massive majority. Despite pressure from

Vladimir Putin (and at times Trump) to call a fresh election, polling shows appetite is low for a pre-peacetime vote, with 6 million Ukrainians now based abroad and Russian airstrikes ongoing. Still, reports suggest the government had explored options for holding a (ceasefire-dependent) election this year.

What is the state of the war?

While it's too soon to say that Ukraine is winning the war with Russia, it is rapidly regaining the initiative. Fedorov (and Syrskyy, who created Ukraine's standalone drone department) have shifted focus from ground to sky.

Russia continues to slowly advance on the ground, but at a price of 30,000 dead and wounded troops a month.

What happens next?

To many, the Fedorov/Syrskyy debacle represents something existential: a struggle between a younger western, progressive generation, and the Soviet-inflected, old guard that operates in handshakes and some corruption.

There is an alternative read on the public outpouring of frustration. Even as Russia's assault continues, with UN figures showing June as the deadliest for Ukraine's civilians in four years, it suggests that people are focused on constructing a decent, fair, modern, forward-looking society after victory.

MICHAEL SEGALOV IS DEPUTY
NEWSLETTERS EDITOR AT
THE GUARDIAN

A protester holds
a cutout of sacked
defence minister
Mykhailo Fedorov
SERGEY
DOLZHENKO/EPA



ANALYSIS
US/UKRAINE

Friends reunited Why relations between Trump and Zelenskyy are warming

By Robert Tait WASHINGTON



As leadership pairings go, Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelenskyy is not a match made in heaven. Yet from a calamitous start that saw Trump publicly ambush and then virtually expel Zelenskyy from the White House after an explosive meeting in February 2025, relations between the US president and his Ukrainian counterpart have taken an unexpectedly warm turn.

The thaw has coincided with the US-Israeli war with Iran - and appears to have sped up as Trump has struggled to end the conflict.

"There's no question that he's warmed up to Zelenskyy," said Charles Kupchan, a senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations and a former White House adviser on European affairs. "There have now been a succession of meetings that have gone well."

Last week, the pair met once more at the White House after Zelenskyy travelled to Washington for the funeral of Lindsey Graham, the Republican senator who had staunchly backed Ukraine in its war with Russia, even as Trump and his MAGA movement all but threw in their lot with the Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

The encounter followed another at last month's Nato summit in Ankara, when Trump praised Zelenskyy - whom he had once labelled a "dictator" - and said he would grant licences for Ukraine to develop its own Patriot missile interceptors. It also came on the heels of an arguably even more

remarkable occurrence: the meeting in Kyiv between Zelenskyy and Laura Loomer, the far-right social media influencer known to have sway with Trump, and who has previously vocally supported Russia.

After meeting the Ukrainian leader, Loomer said she had been "bamboozled" by Russian propaganda and admitted having believed "a lot of untrue things" about Ukraine. She also said she had followed the meeting with a phone call to Trump and that her change of view was affecting sentiment across the MAGA movement.

This sea change may have several causes, yet one potential factor stands out: the US's deepening difficulties in concluding the war with Iran's hardline Islamic regime that Trump launched, along with Israel, on 28 February.

Tehran's retaliation with drone attacks on US military bases and infrastructure in allied Gulf kingdoms has served to illustrate the shared interest between Kyiv and Washington. Ukraine, too, came under sustained attack from Iranian Shahed drones after Tehran supplied them to Moscow in the early stages of Russia's invasion of the country in 2022.

Ukraine has since responded by becoming a world leader in defensive drone technology, an innovation it has trumpeted to the US and its Gulf allies since they came under fire from the weapons as Iran responded to the military onslaught on its territory.

Zelenskyy told British MPs in March that 200 Ukrainian military experts had been dispatched to 11 countries across the Gulf - including the UAE, Saudi Arabia,

Ukraine's activity could have the effect of reframing the Iran war

▼ Volodymyr Zelenskyy with Donald Trump in Washington last week

APA/SHUTTERSTOCK



Qatar and Kuwait - to advise on how to combat Shahed drones.

Last month, Ukraine was accused of trying to merge the two conflicts after it struck an Iranian commercial vessel on the Caspian Sea. Kyiv justified the strike by saying that the ship was being used to transport arms to Russia. Iran said the strike had killed an Iranian sailor and threatened retaliation.

Preparing to meet Trump in Washington, Zelenskyy said Iran had "attacked" Ukraine by supplying weaponry to Russia. Zelenskyy also vowed to share Ukrainian intelligence that he said showed Russia giving Tehran help to hit US targets.

Kupchan, of the Council of Foreign Relations, said Zelenskyy was being a "good salesman" in persuading Trump that Ukraine was an ally worth supporting, by contributing help that the US needs - thus appealing to Trump's transactional instincts.

"The case for helping Ukraine is even stronger now, because Ukraine has demonstrated that it is not just a taker, but a giver," Kupchan said.

However, the US president's apparent vacillation over his Patriot missile pledge shows that cultivating Trump is always at the mercy of his mercurial nature.

Some analysts warn that Ukraine risks turning two local wars into a global conflict.

Sina Toossi, a fellow at the Center for International Policy, said Ukraine's intervention bolstered the view in Tehran that the Russia-Ukraine war, and Iran's confrontation with the US, are becoming a single, interconnected conflict. "Trump's apparent warming toward Zelenskyy only strengthens this perception," he said. "The likely implication is not an immediate missile strike on Ukraine, but a broader expansion of where Tehran believes it can legitimately impose costs."

Ukraine's involvement could have the effect of reframing the Iran war, so that it would no longer be perceived merely as serving an agenda set by Israel, but as helping to defend Ukraine.

ROBERT TAIT IS POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT FOR GUARDIAN US

FRANCE

Exhausting battle against 'megafire'

Page 24 →

Spotlight



SPAIN



Crossing chaos turns to limbo for Moroccans in Ceuta

By Okba Mohammad and
Javier Jennings Mozo CEUTA

Last week, Youssef El Abbas saw an opportunity to reclaim the life he had lost seven years earlier. News was circulating that about 400 people had swum from Morocco to the neighbouring Spanish enclave of Ceuta, approximately 20km across the strait of Gibraltar from mainland Spain.

Here was a chance for the 44-year-old Moroccan father of four to return to Spain, from which he had been deported when his residency expired after the loss of his job in Bilbao in 2019. El Abbas took a taxi and headed to the city of Tétouan, south of the enclave. While en route, he saw Facebook

posts and news reports claiming that the Moroccan authorities were allowing people to pass through their side of the border. That meant he could travel overland before a short swim across the border from Moroccan to Spanish territory to avoid the Spanish border controls.

He reached Tétouan to find the city completely overwhelmed. By the time a second taxi took El Abbas to Fnideq, the town bordering Ceuta, he realised that the usual blockades and checkpoints preventing people without European documents from even approaching the frontier had been removed. "The Moroccan police

▲ Migrants arrive at the Ceuta border, some on foot, others by swimming

MARIO MORAN/JNA/
ZUMA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Continued



were shouting at us: ‘Go, go, go! Run now, run into Spain,’” he said.

Despite the crowds, El Abbas noticed the police were only letting Moroccans cross over. “All the sub-Saharan migrants were being pushed back by force.”

He reached the border at 2.45pm on Wednesday. By 3pm, after a short swim, he was standing on Spanish soil. Not everyone was so lucky. “In just 10 minutes in the water, I saw four people floating dead in Moroccan waters,” he said. “People were pulling their bodies out.” They were among at least 88 people who drowned or were crushed trying to reach the Spanish territory.

El Abbas is just one of the 70,000 or so people to have crossed into Ceuta last week, in what Spain’s prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, described as “a violation of Spain’s territorial integrity”.

Madrid attributed the latest influx to “human-trafficking mafias” that have taken advantage of a decision by Spain’s supreme court, which recently ruled that those intercepted at sea while trying to enter Ceuta or Melilla – the other Spanish enclave on the north African coast – could not be summarily returned under special rules.

But there has also been speculation that the Moroccan authorities may have opened the border to signal their displeasure at Sánchez’s recent visit to Algeria, which supports efforts to free the disputed territory of Western Sahara from Moroccan occupation.

Morocco’s ambassador to Spain, Karima Benyaich Millán, said Rabat was not happy about the mass crossing, adding that it hoped those in Ceuta would return. Moroccan government sources told the Europa Press news agency that the surge of people entering Ceuta was down to “criminal organisations” and insisted that Rabat’s cooperation with Spain remained “exemplary”.

In May 2021, Rabat loosened border controls – allowing 10,000 people to cross into Ceuta over the course of two days – during a diplomatic stand-off triggered after Madrid allowed a Western Sahara independence leader to be treated for Covid-19 in Spain.

El Abbas said he had never stopped dreaming of returning to Spain, where he had worked for 14 years. Since being deported in 2019, he has lived apart from his wife and four daughters, who remain in Bilbao, while scraping by with occasional work. “I never stopped thinking about coming back,”



▲ Spanish authorities blamed the influx of migrants in Ceuta on ‘human-trafficking mafias’

MARCOS MORENO/
ANADOLU/GETTY

▼ Authorities in Ceuta last Friday, where thousands of people arrived by sea from Morocco

MARIO MORAN/JNA/
ZUMA/SHUTTERSTOCK

he said. “In Morocco, I was alive, but I wasn’t really living.”

El Abbas’s story is hardly unique. Although more than 69,000 people had crossed back into Morocco by Monday, hundreds were this week still sleeping in parks and on pavements, waiting for a chance to move on or to find somewhere to rest. It appears to be virtually impossible for migrants to leave Ceuta for mainland Spain.

Said, 17, from Casablanca similarly joined the Ceuta-bound crowds when he heard that the border was open. But the jubilation had given way to reality and all he had was a bottle of water and the carton of yoghurt a local resident had given him.

The teenager said he was taken to a centre for unaccompanied minors after he crossed, but there were no places, so he ended up back on the

streets. Said and the other teenagers with him said no one would sell them food or allow them into shops because they did not speak Spanish.

Three days after the influx, Ceuta was slowly trying to recover a sense of normality. Many of the remaining arrivals were being tended to by Ceuta locals, who walked the streets handing out bottles of water, blankets and clothes. Such shows of solidarity have been threatened by the arrival of far-right politicians and a neo-Nazi group, all keen to use the humanitarian crisis for their own ends.

Fatima Hamed Hossain, a member of Ceuta’s assembly, feared that the strain created by the crisis had deepened divisions within the city. “Everything we’ve lived through has created tensions between neighbours,” she said. “That’s exactly what feeds the far right.”

As a caravan of people returned back over the border, Said’s mind was on the future. His goal is simple: get a place in a protection centre, spend the next year learning Spanish and, once he turns 18, find work as a barber. What he fears most is ending up without legal documentation and seeing that plan collapse before it has even begun. Leaving is not on his agenda, however. “All I need,” he said, “is a chance.”

OKBA MOHAMMAD IS A JOURNALIST BASED IN SPAIN; JAVIER JENNINGS MOZO IS AN AUDIO-VISUAL JOURNALIST



EXPLAINER
MIGRATION

Border breach

How Ceuta became a flashpoint for migration

By Guardian reporters

What has happened and where?

Border controls between Morocco and the tiny Spanish territory of Ceuta appeared to break down last week, allowing tens of thousands of people to cross on to the Spanish side in chaotic and dangerous scenes that resulted in dozens of deaths.

The number of arrivals was more than two-thirds the size of the ordinary population in Ceuta. Spanish officials said on Monday that an estimated 69,500 people who had arrived late last week in Ceuta had returned to Morocco. As of Monday, about 2,500 people who had made the crossing were believed to still be in Ceuta.

Ceuta and Melilla, another Spanish territory 400km to the east along north Africa's Mediterranean coast, constitute the EU's only land borders with Africa.

In Spanish possession since 1580, Ceuta is home to a mixed population of Christians and Muslims, while its Spanish and Moroccan residents and day workers live in relative harmony. Morocco does not officially recognise Ceuta and Melilla as Spanish territories and often refers to them as occupied lands.

Why is Ceuta a migration flashpoint?

Spain is a main point of arrival into Europe for people seeking better economic opportunities or an escape from violence. Ceuta and Melilla are heavily fortified as they are seen as destinations for those trying to reach Spain from Morocco and other parts of Africa. Many migrants who reach Ceuta or Melilla are immediately turned back, but others are held in

migrant shelters while they apply for asylum in Spain.

To reach Ceuta, people often swim from the Moroccan town of Fnideq, about 5km away. Others attempt the crossing from the nearer town of Belyounech.

In 2022, 23 people were killed as about 2,000 people, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, attempted to cross into Melilla from Morocco, while in 2014 at least 14 people died off Ceuta when 200 people tried to enter by climbing the border fence or swimming around a breakwater.

Migrant arrivals to Ceuta and Melilla are generally much lower than those reaching Spain through the Canary and Balearic islands.

Spain's immigrant population has grown considerably in recent decades, with about 10 million people in the country of 50 million having been born elsewhere. Many are from Colombia, Venezuela and Morocco and work in key sectors including agriculture and tourism.

Since at least the mid-1990s, thousands of people cross the Mediterranean each year from north African countries and Turkey in search of asylum in Europe. According to figures from the International Organization for Migration, 35,153 migrant deaths and disappearances have been recorded in the Mediterranean since 2014, with 1,493 dead or missing during the first seven months of 2026.

Why were so many people able to cross over?

Spanish intelligence sources told El País that the roots of the influx probably lay in a hoax that had swiftly spread across social media after a Spanish supreme court ruling

Flashpoint

High death toll on crossings

35k

Number of migrant deaths and disappearances recorded in the Mediterranean since 2014

1,493

Number of dead or missing during the first seven months of 2026

Reporting team

Ashifa Kassam in Madrid; Okba Mohammad in Ceuta; Lisa O'Carroll in London; Angela Giuffrida in Rome

Across the water

How people attempt to reach the Spanish territory



that migrants arriving by sea could not be summarily deported. As the hoax gained steam online, Moroccan border surveillance dwindled to a minimum until it was completely lifted late last week, allowing tens of thousands of people through.

However, the crossing could be linked to the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, and a recent trip by the Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, to Algiers.

The last mass border crossing, in May 2021, took place after Morocco loosened border controls during a diplomatic row with Spain over the Western Sahara independence movement, the Polisario Front.

Morocco and the Polisario Front both lay claim to Western Sahara, which was under Spanish rule until 1975, when colonial authorities handed over the territory to Morocco and Mauritania. That diplomatic crisis ended in 2022 when Madrid backed Morocco's plan for Western Sahara - a move that had caused a rift between Madrid and Algiers, which supports the Polisario group.

Sánchez visited Algiers in July, marking a thaw in relations. Analysts have suggested this could have triggered a response from Rabat.

The leader of Ceuta, Juan Jesús Vivas, described the border crossings as an attack on Spain's territorial integrity that was seen as being "if not orchestrated, at least encouraged or permitted by Morocco". Spain's defence minister, Margarita Robles, also seemingly signalled Rabat's involvement.

How have governments reacted?

Across the EU, the crisis seemingly ushered in a moment of reckoning after a handful of EU countries responded to the crisis by calling for Spain to be suspended from the Schengen free-movement zone. Italy said it had suspended passport-free Schengen travel arrangements with Spain for one month, despite the fact that Ceuta is not part of Schengen, while France tightened its borders with Spain.

Before an emergency video meeting of interior ministers on Tuesday to address the crisis, Spain's foreign minister said the country would demand solidarity from EU members after several had, in his view, "fallen short" of what was expected.

ANALYSIS
IRAN

A crisis within

Is internal dissent more damaging than war?

By Patrick Wintour



Iran, in the midst of an escalating five-month war with the US, continues to stumble

from one internal crisis to another – whether it is over public executions, the rising cost of living or the alleged bias of the state broadcaster. But there is now a growing threat of a long diplomatic deadlock as the war broadens, forged by mutual distrust in which neither side believes the other will stick to any agreement.

Parts of the Trump administration and the Iranian opposition – including Reza Pahlavi, the son of the former deposed Shah – have never abandoned the belief that the Iranian government is on the brink of collapse.

Meanwhile, Masoud Pezeshkian, Iran's president, rarely tires of warning that the conditions that led to the bloody protests in January remain. At a recent meeting of the supreme judicial council, he argued: "Iran is engaged in a full-scale war. Today's war is not just a war of missiles ... if economic pressures cause social discontent to form and this discontent spreads, the enormous social capital that the people have created in support of the system will be lost."

Azar Mansouri, once a close reformist ally of Pezeshkian, warned last month at the annual meeting of the Iranian reformist front about a small but vocal group that seemed determined to portray negotiated agreements with the US as retreats or defeat. War, she warned, "is not just a confrontation between military forces and armies... ultimately, it threatens the future of the nation."

Similarly a "we do not want war" statement signed by 268 political activists last month said they believed the overwhelming majority of the population opposed the war, and this should be tested in a public vote. Another letter from 1,000 activists linked with the former president Mohammad Khatami warned "the contemporary experience of Iran is that war has no winners. Those who advocate negotiations should not be slandered."

Iranians are being forced to change their diets owing to the cost of fruit, eggs and chicken

▼ Missiles on display at Azadi Square, Tehran, last week

MAJID ASGARIPOUR/
WANA/REUTERS

What unites these initiatives is a fear that diplomats are losing, and Iran is being edged into a "forever war" that can be portrayed as an Iranian-Arab war, a war that would be to Israel's advantage.

In the next six months food rationing could become necessary, Majid-Reza Hariri, the head of the Iran-China chamber of commerce, warned last week. Gholamhossein Mohammadi, the deputy minister of labour, said more than a million jobs had been lost as a result of the war.

In a way, rationing – through food price inflation – has already started as Iranians are being forced to change their diets owing to the cost of fruit, eggs and chicken. Year-on-year food inflation reached 134% last month, meaning the average household's monthly food budget has more than doubled in a year. Overall inflation is at 84%.

The toll of the war on the economy has spread everywhere from the internet to tourism. Yet one of the biggest bombshells was detonated on national television when Zabihullah Khodayian, the head of the General Inspection Organisation, a national audit office, revealed the scale of foreign-exchange corruption among so-called trusts, highly secretive government-sponsored bodies.

These trusts, embedded in the Iranian political system for years, are entities set up to transfer Iranian oil income outside the network of US sanctions. It is self-evident that they act in an opaque way, and siphon off public money.

Khodayian confirmed as much, saying one trust was given \$200m, had not returned the money and had also left the country. He said a further 229 individuals owed the state a total of \$27bn, while the judiciary said cases were being opened against nearly 50 individuals.

It is still unclear on what basis these trusts were selected and how they are held accountable. But there is a growing chance that a major scandal is about to be revealed that could involve Iran's elite. If so, all the talk of social cohesion across the classes will start to look very hollow.

PATRICK WINTOUR IS THE GUARDIAN'S DIPLOMATIC EDITOR





JAPAN

◀ Emergency workers carry out search and rescue operations at a collapsed house in Hikawa, Kumamoto
KYODO/REUTERS

Quake hotspot
In April, the prefecture of Kumamoto commemorated the 10th anniversary of the 2016 earthquake that killed more than 275 people and caused widespread devastation. In that case, a 6.2-magnitude foreshock was followed two days later by a deadly 7-magnitude quake, something that was on the minds of tens of thousands across Kumamoto last week. The archipelago, home to about 125 million people, usually experiences hundreds of jolts every year and accounts for about 18% of the world's earthquakes.

Stories of survival and loss emerge after deadly earthquake

By Gavin Blair TOKYO

There was a voice coming from the collapsed house, and I could see a hand," Tomohide Nagata, a volunteer firefighter, told the Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun newspaper. "One of our senior members crawled in and pulled him out. He was bleeding from the head, but I'm so glad he survived."

Nagata had heard a noise coming from the home in the rural town of Hikawa, close to the epicentre of last Tuesday's 6.8-magnitude earthquake in southern Japan. The town was one of the areas hardest hit, with numerous older houses collapsing. Terrified of the ongoing aftershocks, many residents spent that night in their cars outside Hikawa's town hall, where staff distributed food and drinks.

At least 38 people were killed and hundreds injured after the quake hit the island of Kyushu. The prime

minister, Sanae Takaichi, briefly visited the area for the first time on Monday.

Iwaoka Shigemi, 79, and his wife, Michiyo, 77, had escaped from their house and spent the night sleeping in their car in Hikawa, according to the Mainichi Shimbun. With temperatures reaching 35C last week, they were worried about the risk of heatstroke.

Nearly 23,000 homes had no electricity and 75,000 had no running water, Kumamoto officials said. About 15,000 people had been evacuated to 400 shelters.

The defence minister, Shinjirō Koizumi, said that almost 5,000 Self-Defence Forces deployed to the region had airlifted coolers to shelters in Kumamoto, while SDF vessels were delivering water and food. "We're doing everything possible to make saving lives a priority, making efforts to deliver life-saving supplies, beginning with water," Koizumi said.

Suemi Nagata, 79, was unable to escape Hikawa by car because her garage had been destroyed but had made it to the town hall with her husband and older sister. "The lateral shaking was worse than *the Kumamoto earthquake 10 years ago*, and it was terrifying," she told the town's newspaper. "Just to have survived with my life is something to be grateful for."

Rescue workers searched the Aeon shopping centre in the town of Kashima, which was bustling with thousands of people when the quake struck. The company said about 3,000 customers were evacuated to a car park before a gas explosion occurred in another part of the shopping centre.

All those caught in the explosion were shop workers who had returned

to the building after the evacuation, Aeon said. The company's president bowed in apology at a press conference last Wednesday, saying Aeon had failed to anticipate the explosion, the cause of which was being investigated. A 16-year-old girl who got out with other shoppers moments before the explosion, told the Asahi Shimbun newspaper she "felt completely safe once she was outside", only to be left struggling to breathe by dust and smoke.

In Uki City, which also experienced shaking ranked at the maximum 7 on the Japanese shindo scale, residents told of lucky escapes and heartbreaking unsuccessful rescue efforts.

A woman in her 40s had managed to reach an evacuation shelter with three generations of her family after putting herself between falling furniture and her children. "I was pinned under a chest of drawers at home. I protected my children and then hurried to evacuate," she told the Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun from Toyono elementary school, which was being used as an evacuation shelter after the ceiling of the local disaster facility fell in.

Last Tuesday evening, as neighbours and relatives attempted to check in on each other, residents in the Asakawa district of Uki found one house flattened, with roof tiles scattered on the ground around where it had once stood. As family members looked on, a handful of volunteer firefighters attempted to rescue an elderly man trapped inside.

"The man is a childhood friend of mine," the visibly shaken 70-year-old head of the local district told the Kumamoto newspaper. "We tried to pull him out, but the aftershocks came one after another, so we had no choice but to give up."

As in Hikawa, many Uki residents slept in their cars, and local government workers handed out water and food. Unable to use the damaged disaster facility, the city set up a makeshift response headquarters in a car park.

In Yatsushiro, south of Hikawa, one man's life may have been saved by his schedule when his workplace, a single-storey wooden structure, collapsed. "It was a day off and I wasn't at work, so I escaped with my life," said the self-employed man, 63, who spent the night in a tent pitched in his garden. "Though I have no idea what I'll do starting tomorrow."

GAVIN BLAIR IS A JOURNALIST COVERING JAPAN

Eyewitness United Kingdom

Common goals

The 2026 Commonwealth Games drew to a close in Glasgow last weekend after 11 action-packed days. Around 3,000 athletes and para-athletes from 74 countries and territories battled it out for medals in sports from bowls to swimming. The next Games, in India in 2030, will mark the event's centenary.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM JENKINS



▲ England's Emily Campbell celebrates setting a new Commonwealth Games record and winning gold in the women's +86kg weightlifting competition

► Anderson Peters of Grenada, who came fourth in the javelin. Sri Lanka's Rumesh Tharanga Pathirage took the gold medal



► The Scottish runner Josh Kerr celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win gold in the men's mile final





◀ Georgia Godwin of Australia on the uneven bars in the women's all-around final in artistic gymnastics. The Australian team took gold ahead of Canada and England

▼ Joshua Liendo of Canada in the semi-finals of the men's 100m freestyle. He won gold in the 100m butterfly event



◀◀ Rakib Hossain of Bangladesh (red) secures a win over Clinton Tetekana of the Solomon Islands in their bantamweight boxing contest. Hossain was eliminated in the quarter-finals

◀ Peter Cusack of England and Tomas Klein of Australia battle it out during the final of the men's 3x3 wheelchair basketball. Australia beat England 19-13



UNITED KINGDOM

Will a flying start lead to sustained success for Burnham?

By Jessica Elgot

Andy Burnham spent his first fortnight as prime minister in a blitz of hyperactivity. From bus fares, business rates, energy bill cuts, defence, Ukraine and devolution - the new prime minister has been everywhere.

But at his speech last Wednesday at Jewish Care in north London, there was a stark reminder of how hard it can be for even the most energetic prime minister to win attention. One resident in the care home asked Burnham

if he was the local candidate, and was amazed when told there was - yet again - a new prime minister.

Despite that amusing hiccup, Labour MPs broadly feel a renewed sense of optimism in the "Burnham bounce" and in the party seizing its first polling lead since March 2025 in two polls released last week.

Is it a honeymoon or is it a sustainable trajectory? In new MRP polling of more than 10,000 voters - seen by the Guardian - Burnham received a bounce of six points in voting intention compared with mid-June, taking Labour to 26%, ahead of Reform on 23%. The poll puts Labour ahead on seats, though still some way short of a majority.

According to the poll, Labour would win 245 seats, with Reform on 174 seats, the Conservatives on 99, and the Liberal Democrats on 67. This would mean a hung parliament.

The poll from Convergent suggests the bounce comes primarily from droves of progressive voters lost to the Greens and Lib Dems returning to Labour (more than half of 2024 Labour voters who voted Green and Lib Dem in the May elections now say they would vote Labour again). In contrast, less than a fifth of those 2024 Labour voters who voted

▲ Andy Burnham being interviewed on ITV's This Morning with Dermot O'Leary and Alison Hammond
KEN MCKAY/ITV/
SHUTTERSTOCK

'The bounce is real but not yet big enough to put Labour back on course for a majority'

26%

Labour has received a bounce of six points in voting intention compared with mid-June, according to MRP poll

245

Number of seats Labour would win according to the poll, making it the largest party in a hung parliament

Reform in May have come back to the party.

Dylan Spielman, co-founder of Convergent, led Labour's data science team through the 2024 general election. He said: "The Andy Burnham bounce is real but not yet big enough to put Labour back on course for a majority. So far the recovery has mainly come from reuniting the progressive bloc.

"But Labour is making much less progress winning back Reform voters and Conservatives who are pivotal in marginal seats, and squeezed voters remain Labour's weakest group. Sustaining the recovery will depend on Labour continuing to demonstrate that its cost-of-living agenda is delivering, and broadening its appeal beyond progressives."

The analysis shows that Labour has regained most ground in the north of England, particularly the north-west where Burnham has his roots and Yorkshire and Humber. But the recovery is so far minimal in Wales and Scotland - where Burnham will spend some more time this summer after heavy losses to the SNP and to Plaid Cymru in May. Labour also lost control of the Senedd, the Welsh parliament, for the first time.

But uniting that bloc is a key first step, argues James Baggaley from UCL's Policy Lab, which has done significant work with the renowned Democrat pollster Stan Greenberg on Labour's progressive problem.

"What was striking from our polling before Andy Burnham entered Downing Street was the fact that despite media focus, a majority of voters outside of the north-west didn't have a clear idea of him. That meant the early days and weeks were both opportunity and a risk," said Baggaley.

"He's clearly hit the ground running, with a more hopeful and bold

message. But he is also tapping into a wider shift and alignment of progressive voters, bringing back into the fold Green and Lib Dem voters that Keir Starmer had lost.

“Of course, the big challenge will be when he grapples with the things that are spikier for progressives - welfare, for example, and obviously he hasn’t had an interaction with Trump yet. The president remains uniquely unpopular with possible Labour voters; how he stands up on key progressive values in those moments will be crucial in helping rebuild a winning coalition.”

Internally, Labour sources are thrilled with the choreography of the first fortnight, comparing it favourably with the 2024 arrival of Starmer when the summer was dominated by the winter fuel payment cut and the freebies row - as well as a speech in the No 10 rose garden that was widely criticised for being too negative and affecting business confidence.

Luke Tryl, the director of More in Common, said it was the first time in a long time he was encountering genuine optimism in focus groups, who have been impressed with the cost-of-living measures even when the sums have been relatively small savings for households.

“Burnham is absolutely dominating the attention economy. Everything, everywhere, all at once. It’s the combination of the substance, but also the messenger is better,” said Tryl. “Starmer led with the negative, saying it will then lead to the positive. I think by leading with some of the positives, Burnham is able then to address the trickier issues.”

In its most recent polling, More in Common found Burnham’s popularity has significantly increased, to +19 since he became prime minister, when previously many people had said they were reserving judgment. Farage has seen a significant rise in disapproval, including growing scepticism from those who previously approved of him, and he is now the lowest rated party leader.

Tryl said there was much that could still derail Burnham - migrant crossings in the Channel, rows over welfare. “But in terms of setting yourself up in the best possible way, from a public opinion perspective, it’s difficult to see how it could have gone better.”

JESSICA ELGOT IS THE GUARDIAN’S DEPUTY POLITICAL EDITOR

UNITED KINGDOM

Pot nurdles Thousands mobilise to pick up plastic

By Mark Brown

You’ve got a local community that really cares about the coastline,” said Alice Laverty, reflecting on the huge army of volunteers who had taken to crisis-hit beaches in north-east England with passion and only the most basic tools. “They’ve all got a dustpan, a brush, a bucket, a kitchen sieve.”

On beaches from Cambois in Northumberland to Seaburn on Wearside, up to 2,000 dedicated volunteers have been sifting through sand to find tiny, lentil-sized pellets of plastic.

The pellets, called **nurdles**, are being washed up on beaches after a ship collision on 19 July at the Port of Tyne, South Shields, led to a billion spilling into the water. Campaigners estimate there was up to 25 tonnes of them. The spillage has prompted anger and protests, and the north-east mayor, Kim McGuinness, has promised to make sure shipowners contribute to what she said was a “pollution emergency”.

Since the collision, nurdle drifts have been like soup on many beaches.

Laverty, a Whitley Bay bookshop owner, said: “I saw the horrendous pictures of millions of them floating down

▼ Volunteers have been gathering at beaches to help with the cleanup

MARK PINDER

A global problem
Nurdles are tiny disc-shaped plastic pellets that act as the raw material to manufacture most plastic products. Animals can easily mistake them for food with deadly consequences, campaigners say. The charity Fidra, which works to end plastic pollution, says nurdles are a global problem. Last year it found plastic nurdles at 84% of the UK’s sites of special scientific interest.

the Tyne and I went to the beach in the evening,” she said. “I was the only person on the beach with a dustpan and brush and I could see people looking at me going ... what is she doing?”

There is now an army of volunteers at beaches to help with the cleanup by sifting the sand or shaking seaweed.

The official advice from councils is not to handle the pellets, but Laverty said there was a greater cause. “There’s no nurdle fairy, this needs to be cleaned up now,” she said.

Helen Charlton, a business academic from Cramlington, said: “This is our home. I’m north-east born and bred and I’m incredibly proud of this region and I’m incredibly proud of the industry and commerce here as well. It’s not that we shouldn’t have shipping on the Tyne because we absolutely should. But the two have to coexist.”

Lou Shackleton, a life and work coach from Whitley Bay, said the nurdles brought multiple dangers. “Everything is interconnected. The people that are fishing need the fish to be there and healthy. The seals need the fish. I heard a boat broke down yesterday because of nurdles affecting the engine. It’s the summer holidays, there’ll be people in the sea, kids playing.

“I have a five-year-old; I don’t want him to be still finding nurdles on the beach in 10 years’ time.”

Amy Ash, a user experience designer, has created a web app to help organise and mobilise the volunteers. “I surf, I swim, I’ve got two kids,” she said. “It is absolutely devastating that these things are on the beach. I really do not want this to be forgotten about.”

Dozens of volunteers have sewn together mesh bags for collecting the nurdles using scaffolding fabric.

The Port of Tyne, HM Coastguard, the Environment Agency, local councils and specialist contractors are all involved in what has been called “a coordinated multi-agency effort” to clean up after the spill.

By last Sunday, about 3,000 volunteer hours had been logged and an estimated 285kg of nurdles had been recovered by the “people’s army”.

An open letter was due to be sent this week calling for trained local teams to be allowed to help clear nurdles directly from the rivers, not just the beaches.

MARK BROWN IS THE GUARDIAN’S NORTH OF ENGLAND CORRESPONDENT



The week the French battled a 'megafire'

Exhausted firefighters, foresters and volunteers wage 'war of attrition' against blaze that forced 200,000 people from their homes

FRANCE

By Jason Burke
LE PORGE

▲ A forester looks on from a road in Le Porge as a wildfire burns

STÉPHANE MAHÉ/
REUTERS

► A sign stands amid the smouldering forest

ALBERT LLOP/
NURPHOTO/
SHUTTERSTOCK

By noon it is time for a break. The temperature is about 35C, the smell of ash, cinders and burnt wood hang in the air. At tables laid out in the shrinking shade on the desiccated grass and sand outside the sports centre in Le Porge, 200 men and a handful of women have gathered. Firefighters, soldiers, police, gendarmes, officials, first aid teams, foresters and volunteers sit elbow to elbow, plates of sausages, steak and potatoes in front of them.

The village was evacuated just over 14 hours after the "megafire" - as it has become known in France - broke out 6km away last week. The blaze has consumed 42,000 hectares of mainly forestland west of Bordeaux. Though finally contained, there are outbreaks every day, pushing to the limit emergency services and the hundreds of volunteers who have come to their aid.

"We've turned a corner but we are very, very tired. We have gone beyond what we thought possible," said a senior firefighter in Le Porge, downing a litre of water in less than a minute. "We stared into an abyss."

Overhead, three planes carrying huge tanks of water and retardant flew low towards new fires. A drone

buzzed nearby, sent up by the fire brigade to detect with thermal cameras the creeping underground blaze - described by local media as a "zombie fire" - that threatens fresh chaos in the coming days, weeks and months.

Around the village, roads run straight through a smouldering, smoking and deserted landscape of charred but upright trees. In places, the forest is intact, the tall pines in their serried green ranks. In others, chosen at apparent random by the racing flames, it has been reduced to ash and cinders as far as the eye can see.

"Now we are all running on adrenaline, but the crisis is going to pass and

that's when it will be really hard. That's when we will weep," said Remy Bossion, 46, whose home was damaged in the fire and who is now spending his days helping to cut 200-metre-wide firebreaks through the remaining forest to slow any future outbreaks.

Last weekend, fires elsewhere in France were bringing similar, if less extensive, devastation, with around 200,000 people forced from their homes. In the Var region, George and Amal Clooney were forced to evacuate their home as a wildfire burned nearby. In the famous forests of Fontainebleau outside Paris; in Corsica and near Dijon, the flames still threaten.

Across Europe, emergency services are struggling. In the UK, 120 firefighters were tackling a blaze in Suffolk for days. In Spain, the cumulative number of fires in 2026 has set a new record for this time of year. In Greece, three firefighters died in Crete and thousands of tourists were evacuated from resorts.

The fire weather across the EU has broken records for this time of year, new data shows. Scientists say models of climate change have long predicted such extreme weather, though some disasters appear to be striking earlier and with more strength than expected.



"We still have a month or more of summer to go. We need rain, a lot of rain," said the senior firefighter in Le Porge, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he did not have authorisation to talk to the media.

Leaders in France have been seeking to reassure worried communities - and avert a political crisis. "We are gradually getting back to normal," said Sophie Brocas, the prefect of the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region and the Gironde department, which includes Le Porge, last Thursday. President Emmanuel Macron said it was not the time to analyse lessons to be learned while France was still in "full battle".

No one doubts the scale of the megafire but the question of its origins and the availability of resources necessary to fight it is bitterly contested.

Among the residents of Le Porge eating at the make-shift canteen was Nicolas Di Domenico, a local public works contractor who learned of the blaze when his electricians working near the village of Saumos called to say a spark from a faulty machine being used to clean a high-tension cable had just lit a fierce blaze.

Di Domenico, 46, said: "It was a short circuit or something of that nature and immediately everything went up because it's all so dry. The guys there tried to use a fire extinguisher but it was too intense. My guys ran for their lives and by the time the fire brigade turned up it was huge."

The blaze initially overwhelmed firefighters, who had difficulty accessing the deeper forest where it was spreading. Within six hours, it had travelled 6km to reach the outskirts of Le Porge. Very early the next morning, residents were in the streets, burning cinders were falling from a red sky and a decision was made to evacuate.

"The authorities should have stopped all work in the forest. Someone got their priorities wrong," said Di Domenico. Many in Le Porge and elsewhere in the region accuse the local administration of being "asleep at the wheel" before the fire, and then failing to commit resources fast enough. Many have asked why France's ageing fleet of firefighting planes had not been replaced or sufficiently reinforced.

"We feared this for a long time, and were warning about the planes specifically since 2017," said Sebastien Delavoux, head of the firefighting



section of the CGT union. "This summer has shown we have reached the extreme limit of what is possible for France's firefighters."

The mayor of Le Porge, which lost 20% of its homes, described an event that was impossible to predict, despite multiple warnings over the years.

"The conditions this year are totally exceptional. We've never seen anything like this," Martial Zaninetti said. "You can always say we've not got adequate resources but the scale is completely beyond anything we've seen before."

Last Wednesday evening, at a base on the edge of the zone worst hit by the fire, senior firefighters gathered around a map taped to the side of a fire engine for a briefing. Burnt red by the sun and with notebooks in hand, grizzled sector commanders stood to receive missions for the night, when lower temperatures and higher humidity make it easier to fight a blaze. Younger team members, still in their fire retardant overalls and covered in soot, watched as their superiors greeted each other with black humour and bags of Haribo sweets.

One said the struggle with the megafire was now shifting from a dynamic

▲▲ Firefighters prepare for a controlled fire operation in a forest in Le Porge

PHILIPPE LOPEZ/
AFP/GETTY

▲ Burnt-out cars after the megafire

FLORIAN LAUCHEUR/
AFP/GETTY

42k

The size of the area, in hectares, consumed by the 'megafire' that forced the evacuation of Le Porge, west of Bordeaux. The village lost 20% of its homes to the blaze

and dangerous "war of manoeuvre" to a long, slow "war of attrition".

"We were on the defensive at the beginning but now it's not spreading any more. There are still lots of individual outbreaks that have us running around and when everyone is exhausted, that is hard. So the mobilisation remains total," he added.

Instead of the usual tourist traffic on the roads through the Landes, there are convoys of fire trucks, ambulances, police cars and a motley collection of agricultural water tankers, lorries rigged with plastic containers and pickups carrying jerry cans connected to garden hoses. Some ferry water to the fire engines, allowing the crew to remain at an outbreak without leaving to replenish their tanks. Others spray roadsides or the new firebreaks that leave wide scars through the forest.

Last Friday, an exhibition hall in Bordeaux, the regional capital, began to empty of hundreds of evacuees, though many still awaited permission. Tens of thousands of others remained with friends, relatives or in hotels.

Frédéric Farrugia, a 55-year-old financial adviser who lives in the coastal village of Lège, watched on his home's security cameras as the fire brigade fought to save the building. Eventually, the flames were beaten back, though homes 50 metres away were destroyed. An image of the inferno taken by his wife, Severine, as she escaped with him and their cat after being woken by gendarmes at 2am led to an offer of temporary accommodation from a well-wisher.

"We were on the dual carriageway with these flames like a wall along one side. It was a bit like the apocalypse," Farrugia said. "I think that now the French will realise that the climate is heating up and that we have to react."

In Lacanau as elsewhere, many also talk about the obvious effects of the climate crisis. Anthony Legrand, a carpenter in the village, said he had seen massive change over the decades: tides that reduce the width of the stunning beach, green algae and, of course, repeated fires, including one in 2022 that devastated a swathe of forest not far from his home.

"You'd think that would be a warning but no one paid attention," he said. "It'll be the same this time. They've got memories like goldfish."

JASON BURKE IS THE GUARDIAN'S INTERNATIONAL SECURITY CORRESPONDENT



Extreme rainfall across Asia brings floods and typhoons

From Afghanistan to Taiwan, unprecedented deluge from weather conditions highlights the devastating impact of climate breakdown

CLIMATE CRISIS

By *Natasha May*
and *Jonathan Watts*

▲ People cross a street in heavy rain in Tokyo last month

YUICHI YAMAZAKI/
AFP/GETTY

It rained for 10 days and 10 nights, non-stop – I’d never seen anything like it,” said Anar Gul, a construction worker who lives in the remote district of Dur Baba in eastern Afghanistan.

The houses in his village are built from stone and mud, which makes them extremely vulnerable to heavy rains. After days of rain, Gul’s kitchen collapsed and his neighbour, Sayed Afsar Sadat, saw a large part of his house destroyed. “Rains like this are coming heavier and earlier each year,” said Sadat. “They are destroying the roads and washing away our crops. It’s impacting us directly.”

Last month, torrential rains and flash floods wiped out villages and

towns in Afghanistan, leaving at least 31 people dead and hundreds missing. It’s been a similar picture in neighbouring countries, with the monsoon rains sparking chaos across the region. India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have all seen erratic, sudden heavy dumps of water.

Jesmin Akter lived in the city of Chattogram, on the south-eastern coast of Bangladesh, which received a record 412.3mm of rainfall in 24 hours in early July, leading to the flash flood that swept through the Banshkhali district where they live.

Overnight the rains took the little they had; their poultry died, their paddy field flooded, their house collapsed and all their belongings in it.

Akter carried her six children through chest-deep water to her mother’s house.

“We have lost everything,” Akter said. They have gone back to the ruins of their home, but her children sleep on plastic sheets laid on the wet floor and she worries for their safety, especially that the unsanitary conditions will lead to disease.

As wildfires rage across Europe and North America, the unprecedented rains continue elsewhere. While South Korea swings between heatwave and downpour, in Japan and Vietnam torrential rain has led to landslides.

China, meanwhile, has seen bouts of extreme rainfall since the flood season began in April, according to the water resources ministry in mid-July. More than 600 rivers have since risen above warning levels – a 35% jump from the average for the same period over the past five years.

In the south-western city of Chongqing, a landslide after torrential rain killed at least 11 people and left 50 missing, with rescue efforts still ongoing. Separately, a flash flood at a camping spot in the north-central province of Gansu left 10 people dead and injured 23 others.

The flood season across the region has been exacerbated by successive storms. Typhoon Noul, the strongest to make landfall in China so far this year, prompted the evacuation of more than 890,000 people in Guangdong, according to provincial authorities. In early July, Typhoon Maysak inundated parts of Guangxi and swept through commercial snake farms, allowing hundreds of snakes to escape.

Forecasters have warned that more wet weather is on the way. Much of northern China, including Beijing, is expected to receive 20% to 50% more rain than usual, while four to six typhoons are forecast above the average of 4.2, according to the China Meteorological Administration.

Taiwan, an island that lies in the path of typhoons in the north-west Pacific, has also seen a rise in extreme rainfall. In June, repeated downpours caused more than NT\$330m (\$10.2m) in agricultural losses across Taiwan, according to the agriculture ministry, while the capital Taipei recorded its highest monthly rainfall in more than a century.

The extreme weather across the region can clearly be linked to climate change. Climate scientists have long

► Clearing up flooding in Guigang, China

CHEN GUANYAN/
CHINA NEWS
SERVICE/GETTY



predicted that large areas of Asia will disproportionately suffer from more intense heat, humidity and drought as a result of climate disruption caused by the burning of gas, oil and coal. The most recent report by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said rising temperatures raise the threat of "floods in monsoon regions in south, south-east and east Asia, and glacier melting in the Hindu Kush Himalaya region".

The year 2025 saw devastating storms and rainfall across the region. It also saw ocean temperatures rise to record heights. So far, this year has brought record-breaking heatwaves. Extreme rainfall is more common and more intense because of human-caused climate breakdown across most of the world, particularly in Europe, most of Asia, central and eastern North America, and parts of South America, Africa and Australia. This is because warmer air can hold more water vapour and flooding has most likely become more frequent and severe in these locations as a result.

"More intense rainfall is an expected consequence of us heating the planet by burning fossil fuels and building up more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. A warmer atmosphere can carry more water, so when it rains, it rains harder. Also hotter conditions cause air to rise faster and drive more intense thunderstorms," said Richard Betts, head of the climate impacts strategic area at the UK's Met Office Hadley Centre.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) helped the Guardian obtain interviews with those affected.

Dr Hosam Faysal, the head of IFRC's country delegation in Afghanistan, said "these are the very real, humanitarian effects of a changing climate ... becoming increasingly volatile".

Faysal urged governments to ensure there was more investment in locally led preparedness and mitigation in order to reduce the loss of life and suffering before climate-related disasters happened. "The coming forecast El Niño is a clear example," he said. "Waiting to respond to the extreme needs we can see coming only once they arrive will cost lives."

NATASHA MAY IS A BANGKOK-BASED JOURNALIST; JONATHAN WATTS IS THE GUARDIAN'S GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT WRITER

Research by Yu-chen Li



INDIA

▲ A farmer in Odisha, India
NEELIMA VALLANGI

Dry run

The farmers bracing for a super El Niño

By Neelima Vallangi

Kasturi Gamango and Pramila Sabar cannot contain their giggles as they explain one of the big attractions of the Raja festival, which they had attended a few days earlier along with 20 other farmer families in Laxmipur, in Odisha's Ganjam district.

"We do no work for three days during the festival," they said. "Our husbands cook and clean while we enjoy our free time."

Raja is a vibrant, agrarian celebration in the richly forested eastern Indian state of Odisha that celebrates fertility, womanhood and Basumati, the Hindu goddess of the Earth. Traditionally, the three-day event is held from 14 to 16 June to mark the start of the rainy season and the beginning of sowing crops. But this year the fields remained untouched, and the skies clear. **The monsoon did not arrive until the end of the month.**

June ended with a 40% shortfall in rain. The state has faced at least 19 droughts over the past 50 years.

Despite the dry conditions, farmers in Laxmipur cautiously sowed seeds in their paddy fields in the last days of June, hoping it would rain in time for germination. Mangala Sabar, 45,

Extreme weather
Global experts have officially declared that this year would see the onset of a "super" El Niño, an extreme version of the weather cycle, and would expect it to intensify rapidly from July to September. In India, El Niño years are usually associated with a weak monsoon, delayed and uneven rainfall, dry spells and extreme temperatures, leading to agricultural droughts, increased energy use and water shortages as reservoirs are depleted.

remembers the 2023-24 El Niño years "when the transplanting attempts failed twice in each year, and we lost the entire crop".

"Drought is not an unknown hazard for Odia farmers," said Chandni Singh, a lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and climate adaptation researcher at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, referring to farmers living in Odisha. However, at the heart of farming communities' wellbeing and long-term resilience against the climate crisis is water security and weather certainty, said Liby Johnson, executive director of Gram Vikas, a development organisation working with Odisha's rural communities.

Overlooking the hills of the Eastern Ghats, one of the 25 automatic weather stations installed by Gram Vikas stands on the roof of Mangala Sabar's house, at the entrance to Laxmipur village. The outer wall has been turned into a huge blackboard where a seven-day rain forecast is written in the local Odia language. He receives the processed weather forecast information via WhatsApp and updates the board.

The India Meteorological Department launched an initiative last year to provide accurate forecasts of the monsoon's arrival up to 30 days in advance. Tailored forecasts are now being delivered to more than 38 million farmers via SMS and phone calls, including in Odisha. Similarly, several El Niño-related advisories were issued by the government recommending farmers delayed sowing, choose low-duration or other less water-intensive crops, and adopt drought-resilient varieties.

However, uptake of this information remains limited. "The idea that data alone will influence a farmer's decision is flawed. People don't make decisions like that, especially farmers who are dealing with uncertainty every day," Singh said.

With bursts of heavy rainfall across some parts of the country last month, the overall monsoon deficit has narrowed to 21%. But there remains deep uncertainty as El Niño strengthens.

Farmers in Odisha, however, are pushing on. "How can we know if it will rain adequately or not? There is no point in worrying about that. We will sow the seeds regardless because we are farmers," said Mangala Sabar.

NEELIMA VALLANGI IS A WRITER AND DOCUMENTARY FILM-MAKER FROM INDIA

ARMENIA

Deep breath The asthma clinic that's buried down a salt mine

By Piotr Sauer YEREVAN

For most people, spending hours deep underground in darkness would seem an odd prescription for better health.

Yet every morning a handful of Armenians descend 250 metres beneath the earth into an active salt mine where they spend six hours in cavernous chambers carved from rock salt, hoping the air below ground will help them breathe more easily.

"I tried every possible treatment, and this is the only thing that worked," said Mikayel Torosian, an asthma sufferer. "I thought it was complete rubbish before, but I am a true believer."

Since 1987, patients have travelled to the Soviet-era mine for an alternative treatment, speleotherapy,

based on the belief that the mine's salt-saturated, allergen-free air can alleviate respiratory diseases.

But the clinic, one of the world's only hospitals in a deep salt mine, now hangs in the balance after Armenia withdrew state funding, raising questions about the state's role in supporting alternative medicine.

The journey into the hospital begins with a rattling industrial lift that drops patients deep beneath a residential district on the outskirts of Yerevan. A maze of tunnels stretches through the rock. The cavern looks more like a cold war bunker than a hospital. Behind curtains, patients nap on narrow beds. Others play billiards, pace around and do breathing exercises or sit in silence.

"After a few days, people begin to enjoy the peace," said Anush Voskanyan, a doctor who has worked at the clinic since 1989.

Voskanyan said the idea to start the clinic emerged after doctors noticed that workers in salt mines appeared to suffer unusually low rates of respiratory illnesses despite spending their lives underground. Researchers began studying the mines' microclimate, leading to the creation of specialised clinics across parts of the Soviet bloc.

Voskanyan attributes the health benefits to a combination of factors: salt-rich air, year-round 19C temperatures and the absence of allergens, pollution, noise and radiation. "This is the perfect climate to live in. You basically don't age here," she said.



'This is the perfect climate to live in. You basically don't age here'

Anush Voskanyan ▲
Doctor

▼ Patients in the underground clinic undertake activities such as pool and table tennis

SOFIA MARIA BERGMANN

Patients typically spend six hours a day underground over a three-week course of treatment. Doctors say the first week allows the body to adapt before the benefits begin to accumulate.

Thousands of patients descended into the Avan mine every year, many receiving treatment free of charge through Armenia's healthcare system.

"We used to admit 60 people at one time," Voskanyan said, looking around largely empty chambers. "Today, there are probably five."

The clinic's fortunes changed in 2019, when the Armenian government withdrew state funding, arguing that speleotherapy lacked sufficient scientific evidence to justify public support. Patients who once attended free of charge now have to pay for each treatment session at a cost of about \$26.

The decision came as Armenia began reforming its healthcare system and preparing for the introduction of universal health insurance, forcing officials to make difficult decisions about what treatments should be covered by the state.

"We're on the brink of closing down," Voskanyan said. "We're still operating, but just barely."

Voskanyan insists that the treatment works, particularly for children suffering from asthma and allergies. "There have been cases where asthma attacks stopped completely after just one course of treatment," she said.

While speleotherapy has been practised for decades across eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, relatively few large-scale studies have been conducted, and most clinics have since closed down. Many respiratory specialists view it as a complementary therapy that may ease symptoms but should not replace conventional medical treatment.

For supporters, however, the lack of definitive research does not negate decades of patient testimony. "If it didn't help, I wouldn't be coming back," said Alvard Alihanyan, who has repeatedly returned to the clinic over the course of 10 years from Russia.

For now, each morning, the lift continues its descent beneath Yerevan. Whatever the debate over its medical benefits, the mine offers something increasingly rare above ground: hours of complete silence, no wifi and a brief escape from the noise of the outside world.

PIOTR SAUER IS A RUSSIAN AFFAIRS REPORTER FOR THE GUARDIAN





CÔTE D'IVOIRE

◀ Artist Nuits Balnéaires in the courtyard of his studio in Grand Bassam
AÏCHA FALL

Artists find calm and inspiration in former capital city

By Eromo Egbejule GRAND BASSAM

By the poolside of La Fourchette de Rôze hotel in Grand Bassam, a Côte d'Ivoire city sandwiched between the Ébrié lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean, a birthday party was in progress. On the second-floor gallery, the artist Nuits Balnéaires stood by a huge painting in one corner and looked out through the window towards the billowing waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

"It's poetic ... that immense energy of the ocean, which also fuels my work," the Ivorian visual artist said. "The natural elements are the essence and foundation of my artistic practice," he added as he reflected on how his name, which translates as "coastal nights", matched the ambience.

Many families in Abidjan, the commercial capital of the west African country, have often drifted to Grand Bassam, just 45km to the east,

for Sunday relaxation, including Nuits Balnéaires, whose visits from childhood gave him a strong connection to the city. In July 2019 he moved there from his family home in Abidjan.

In the past decade, it has become a road well travelled. As rents continue to rise amid a cost of living crisis in Abidjan, people have been reconsidering their lives in the city.

"It [is] increasingly difficult for many artists to maintain studio spaces in the city," said the Abidjan-based art collector Ozong Agborsangaya-Fiteu. "They are seeking more affordable alternatives in places such as Grand Bassam, [which] itself is becoming more expensive, prompting some artists to relocate even farther out."

The biggest beneficiary of the exodus from Abidjan has been **Grand Bassam**, the country's first capital, where the colonial architecture was listed as a Unesco world heritage site in 2012. With its scenic beachfronts, fresher food, cheaper markets, proximity to the airport and a sense of nostalgia in abandoned buildings, the city represents a ready alternative to livelier and more chaotic Abidjan. For the Guadeloupe-born artist Elladj Lincy Deloumeaux, it is a "calm and soothing place, conducive to working and finding inspiration".

Evidence of Grand Bassam's renaissance abounds. Last year, the former colonial customs and post office building was reopened after a restoration project as La Maison de l'Art, a contemporary art museum with a sculpture garden and a cafe in the courtyard. At the launch, the culture minister, Françoise Remarck, said the collaboration between the private and public sector

to protect local history and shine a spotlight on the country's modern art was a "fresh breath of life" for the old city. "Today, we are doing much more than opening the doors of a space dedicated to art," she said. "We are taking an act of recognition and appreciation of African artistic genius."

Other organisations are following the same route. La Fourchette de Rôze, a boutique hotel, has become a creative hub: in January 2023, it began an artist-in-residence programme that has brought in more than two dozen artists and musicians from all over the globe, including Nuits Balnéaires. La Cocoteraie des Arts, a creative space with an open-air art atelier and gallery in Mondoukou, a few minutes outside the city, also offers artist residences.

Dozens of studios are popping up across Grand Bassam. This year the Ivorian-French photographer Aïcha Fall will add another to that number.

"I grew up in the French countryside, and I've always loved a place that is calm," said Fall, who moved to Grand Bassam on her return from Paris in 2023 despite an attachment to Abidjan, where she had spent her early years. "Bassam represents all of that. It offers you time for reverie, unlike Abidjan, which is always effervescent."

Some enthusiastic followers of the art scene are predicting that the city could upstage Abidjan as an art haven in the coming years, or at least rival it.

Not everyone in the industry is as optimistic. Most of Côte d'Ivoire's galleries and art institutions remain in Abidjan, as do many of the collectors, patrons and other elements of the ecosystem. Festivals such as Abidjan art week still bring people in from across the continent and are yet to be replicated elsewhere in the country.

"Rather than weakening the scene, this geographical shift has created a different dynamic," Agborsangaya-Fiteu said. "Artists benefit from more affordable and inspiring places to work while remaining close enough to the city to participate in exhibitions, openings and other cultural activities."

As he sipped his coffee, legs crossed, Nuits Balnéaires agreed before pointing out that the situation was a bit like having his cake and eating it. "One of the advantages is that in Bassam you can feel very disconnected, yet at the same time you're not that far removed from what's happening in Abidjan."

EROMO EGBEJULE IS THE GUARDIAN'S WEST AFRICA CORRESPONDENT

Trading places
Once a centre of cultural trade and tourism, Grand Bassam lost some of its appeal over the years as Abidjan became more cosmopolitan and opportunities in arts and entertainment increased. A jihadist attack in 2016 that left 19 people dead also punctured the town's reputation.

One supplier has claimed that smart lamp-posts could “double as a revenue-generating distributed AI datacentre”, drawing scepticism from policy and technical experts

ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE

Spies in the sky

The news that the a humble lamp-post could be used as surveillance tool for the good of society seems like progress - but who will shine a light on where all of this data goes?

By Zoe Williams

How would you feel if your neighbourhood lamp-posts could recognise your car, and also your face? Maybe you wouldn't mind, given how long we've had automatic number-plate recognition and CCTV. What about if that lamp-post could power itself through its own solar panels and find another use for any extra power generated - that would be good, right? This is what Conflow Power Group (CPG) claims for its iLamps, the first of their kind in the UK.

But what if lamp-posts also had the potential to incorporate new AI capability - gait analysis, suspicious behaviours - that you haven't even heard of? What about the data this would harvest - who would own it?

I'm in a hospital car park in Warwickshire, where some of these “smart” lamp-posts have been installed, hoping to answer a few of these questions. Not many people know that the iLamp is not just solar

powered but can “double as a revenue-generating distributed AI datacentre”, according to CPG, let alone what that means. And nobody knows how much of that potential functionality has been realised in the UK model - only what CPG has announced: that it has signed an agreement with the government of Katsina state, Nigeria, to supply it with 50,000 iLamps, which have additional surveillance potential for both vehicles and faces.

CPG's chairman, Edward Fitzpatrick, told the BBC World Service's Tech Life programme that iLamps could ultimately track down missing persons or fight crime, with the proviso that this would only be developed in partnership “with the relevant authority”.

The company doesn't take further questions, directing the media to its online material. As for the Warwickshire lamp-posts, the local authority directs all questions to the hospital, and the hospital doesn't respond. Fair play - it's a hospital.

At a nearby bus shelter, local residents were willing to chat. Karl, 52, spoke for almost everyone when he said: "The town centre is already full of cameras, and it's fine. You don't mind them being there unless you're up to no good." No amount of loaded questions – What if you were doing something that was legal today but illegal in a year? What if the surveillance became predictive rather than reactive? Don't you think you should at least have been asked whether you wanted it? – separated anyone from the view that facial recognition is tolerable for a right-thinking citizen.

Also at the bus stop was radiologist Tejal, 41. Seeing AI's capability in the medical sector made her anxious about AI as a whole. "I have anxieties for my children," she said. That they won't find entry-level jobs? "That, and that they'll lose the ability to celebrate and find joy from the things we used to." Privacy concerns do seem comparatively minor.

Policy and technical experts are sceptical about some claims made for smart lamp-posts. Jasleen Chaggar, senior legal and policy officer at Big Brother Watch, said: "We see this quite often, where local councils or other government agencies are ... 'swindled' is a strong word, but they're sold these tools as magic wands, when there are limitations to what they can actually do."

Prof Rabih Bashrouh, director of the Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Data Innovation at the University of East London, is blunt: "AI data-centres? There's absolutely no chance this will fly: the technology doesn't work, there's not enough power, the economics won't work ..." Solar power to run the iLamps off-grid might work in Nigeria, but in Britain the amount generated by the lamp-posts is "negligible", he said. Bigger claims for facial recognition are "just hype. Forget it – this has no legs."

If he sounds impatient, it's because he is. "It's getting more and more difficult to get an independent opinion on things, because a lot of experts are in the industry now, and their view would have to align with their organisation," he said. So a company might make a claim, including a few AI buzzwords; engineers don't contradict them, and local authorities don't understand them.

"Facial recognition is not just passively recalling something, unlike

CCTV, which you then check after the fact, said Chaggar. "What facial recognition does is real-time identity check: it's much more like a fingerprint or DNA. It's not like a passport – you can't get another face."

Another problem, Chaggar said, is that, "a lot of these technologies and infrastructures have capacity to add function later. Hammersmith and Fulham [in London] are updating their CCTV, and it's possible to embed facial recognition, monitor suspicious shopping behaviour, add aggression detection. So you can just turn the switch and it's all there overnight."

This throws up all the ageless privacy concerns, and it's interesting how many people will see CCTV as a fact of modern life but spontaneously raise how much they absolutely hate being listened to by their phone.

So how good are facial recognition algorithms at detecting aggression and suspicious behaviour? "A lot of the software is pseudo-scientific," Chaggar said. "A company might try to sell emotion detection, [claiming that] if people are walking through a train station, you can see if they're angry or they're about to be aggressive. There's very little evidence to suggest that it's accurate." But the real question local authorities and any agents of the state should ask themselves, Chaggar said, is: "Are you happy to have your political enemies having these capabilities? Because you're building an infrastructure that is here to stay."

The Home Office signed off on the use of facial recognition more than a decade ago, and the police have been "essentially using the public as guinea pigs for the past 10 years", Chaggar said. Earlier this year, Shabana

'Well, if you haven't got anything to hide, I can't see how it would be a problem, presuming they're actually lamps as well?'

Mahmood, the home secretary, said: "You can't enjoy any of your liberties in any country if you're not safe." This logic, in which all liberties are secondary to the state's rights as your protector, is chilling from a supposedly leftwing government. But the greater worry is that this doesn't feel like the right time to roll the dice on surveillance technology, basing our acceptance of it on the assumption that future governments will be pro-social and democratic.

Wherever there's data, it throws up the question of who owns it. Bashrouh used to work with the Internet of Things, the European Commission's attempt to "connect the physical world to a digital environment". "One of the challenges we saw was with a supplier [who was] basically collecting garbage from homes in the Netherlands then optimising truck journeys and planning based on habits. The council that ran the programme was very happy with it and tried to open the bidding a year later to get a more competitive price," he remembered. "The company said: 'Sure, but the data is ours.'" The contracts had been poorly constructed and the local authority lost the data.

If you want to see facial recognition go wrong, you just have to look at the retail sector, where it's widely in use to prevent shoplifting. "We've seen misidentification by the police," Chaggar said, "but in retail, when people are misidentified, it's Kafkaesque. You're just blacklisted from the store."

How much do people care if you're not allowed in a shop and you don't know why; if a private company has a contract with your healthcare provider, vaunting tech that isn't operational yet and might never work – but nobody told, let alone asked, you; if the home secretary thinks it's fine for the eyes of the state to be on you at all times?

The New Yorker essayist Ted Chiang wrote some time ago about the habit of projecting on to AI negatives that were actually not about tech but about economic systems, concluding: "Capitalism is the machine that will do whatever it takes to prevent us from turning it off." Am I projecting on to AI and surveillance tech anxieties that are really about authoritarian politics?

"Well, if you haven't got anything to hide," says Sarah, 55, "I can't see how it would be a problem. I'm presuming they're actually lamps as well?"

ZOE WILLIAMS IS A GUARDIAN FEATURE WRITER AND COLUMNIST



Policy and technical experts are also sceptical about some of the claims made for smart lamp-posts: "They're sold as magic wands, when there are limitations to what they can actually do."

SHOMOS UDDIN; OSELOTE/GETTY

EXPLAINER
FOOTBALL

How Fifa's plan to sell off the World Cup backfired

By Paul MacInnes

It was a week that rocked football. When reports first emerged last Tuesday that Fifa, world football's governing body, was to launch a vehicle to control the commercial rights to the World Cup, and would sell a stake of this company to investors, it caught even members of the Fifa Council, its central decision-making body, by surprise.

What was the problem?

The story was that Fifa planned to "sell the World Cup", with no consultation and a brisk timeline. Then there is the question of what the new vehicle, to be known as Fifa Forward Enterprise (FFE),

would actually do. A sales deck that bankers JP Morgan had put together with Fifa highlighted "a growing tournament portfolio", "third-party sources of capital and debt financing", and prioritising "high yield" partnerships and events. This was a dagger right at the heart of every other competition organiser in the sport.

What was Fifa's response?

The new venture, it said, would generate \$10bn in extra funding for its 211 member associations, although participation would be entirely voluntary. A stake would be sold to an investment group led by Joshua Kushner, the brother of Donald Trump's son-in-law, but they would have "only a minority stake ... and will not play any operational role". Gianni Infantino, the Fifa president, used his Instagram channels to insist that FFE was simply a proposal and that any furore was just part of a "democratic consultation process".

Who opposed the plan?

A growing number of stakeholders criticised the plans openly. The English FA attacked FFE and Uefa, the governing body of European football, convened an emergency meeting of its 55 members. Last Thursday they voted unanimously to boycott all Fifa tournaments should FFE go ahead. The following day the Asian Confederation (AFC)

Infantino now faces a rebellion from members of the Fifa council

and Concacaf, which governs football in North and Central America, also joined Uefa in condemnation, although they both stopped short of declaring a boycott.

What did Fifa do next?

In response to Uefa's boycott, Fifa initially doubled down. There would be no deviation from the plans, it said, and it blamed the media for any controversy. "We respect the feedback and concern aired in public and reaffirm our commitment to an open and democratic consultation," said Fifa.

Shortly after Fifa issued their "clarification" on the process, one of Infantino's most senior aides, the former Goldman Sachs banker Carlos Cordeiro, resigned from his role citing "unequivocal" opposition to the deal. More leaked documents revealed that Fifa had also commissioned - on 30 July - an expedited research project into expanding the men's World Cup to 64 teams in 2030, a plan which would fulfil one of the key ambitions of the JP Morgan briefing document.

The pressure was too much to bear and by the early hours of last Saturday morning Infantino's proposal had collapsed, with the Fifa president admitting the project had "created divisions of a nature that are no longer in the interest of the objective", amid widespread anger.

▼ Spain celebrate after winning the World Cup final against Argentina last month

CHRIS BRUNSKILL/
FANTASISTA/GETTY

Can Infantino survive now?

On Monday, the English FA formally withdrew its support for Infantino's re-election as Fifa president, having previously offered its endorsement. Their move came after the Welsh FA dropped its backing for Infantino's candidature. More European countries were expected to follow suit in an attempt to force his resignation.

Infantino also faces a rebellion from members of the Fifa council who are attempting to force an extraordinary general meeting that could develop into a full-blown leadership challenge. Under Fifa rules, a motion from 50% or 19 of the 37 council members can trigger an EGM. Of the council members, 14 are from Europe and North America so support from Asia will be required to put real pressure on Infantino.

PAUL MACINNES IS A REPORTER FOR THE GUARDIAN





◀ Donald Trump greets supporters at General Motors' Milford proving grounds in Michigan last week

ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY

ANALYSIS
UNITED STATES

Section 338 Trump may have found the killer weapon for trade wars

By Eduardo Porter

 Donald Trump may have found the killer weapon to punish countries at will: by imposing tariffs on their exports to the United States.

The president has been looking for a new tool since February, when the supreme court struck down tariffs he slapped on virtually all of the US's trading partners, based on the International Economic Emergency Powers Act (IEEPA) on the spurious grounds that the US faced a variety of national emergencies. It's become a parlour game among policy wonks to predict what new legal justification he would deploy to replace them.

The round-robin tariffs imposed on everybody last month, under the argument that America's trading partners unfairly undercut US

companies by importing products made with forced labour, has drawn a lot of attention. But those tariffs, imposed under section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, do not provide the carte blanche Trump wants. A blanket charge that every foreign country is enabling forced labour and thus hurting American business is unlikely to fly in court.

The truly menacing precedent comes from Trump's decision, made on 20 July before the worldwide forced labour tariffs came into play, to foist a 50% tariff on imports from Canada. The White House's pretext is Canadian discrimination against American dairy, booze and cars, which, paradoxically, came about as retaliation against Trump's original barrage of tariffs last year. The authority Trump invoked to attack Canada is ominous: section 338 of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, which is the law that choked global trade in the 1930s and helped sink the world into the Great Depression.

Section 338 offers cover for Trump to slap trade levies on whatever country he wants under some hazy arguments. Specifically, it grants the president authority to retaliate against countries that do anything to put the US "at a disadvantage compared with the commerce of any foreign country".

Until Trump, section 338 was mostly used as leverage, to guarantee that other countries treated US products the same as imports from anywhere else. If some country offered preferential access

Acting tough
A leader who loves tariffs

50%

The tariff imposed by Trump in July on imports from Canada, supposedly in response to Canadian discrimination against US products

150

The statutory limit, in days, on balance of payments tariffs

to a neighbour or ally, the US could demand the same terms, or else.

This principle is now called "most favoured nation treatment", which is central to multinational trade rules enforced by the World Trade Organization. Trump doesn't care about such niceties, though. He has a more destructive agenda in mind. He is determined to pursue his trade war. With such a sprawling mandate, he may be difficult to stop.

America's trading partners were elated in February when a 6-3 majority on the court, including two justices appointed by Trump, ruled against his use of the 1977 IEEPA to impose tariffs at will. It was close, though. The court has shown an almost unbelievable deference to the president. It didn't object to Trump's invocation of national emergencies: a "public health crisis" due to illegal drugs from Canada, Mexico and China; trade deficits that "led to the hollowing out" of American manufacturing; because Brazil jailed its ex-president Jair Bolsonaro for plotting a coup. The justices merely objected to his use of the statute to impose taxes, which are the preserve of Congress.

Though Trump lost, his menace remains. Since February his minions have trawled through legal statutes across US history to restore roadblocks to trade. Balance of payments crises no longer exist. Still, fresh from his supreme court loss, Trump imposed a 10% tariff on everybody by invoking section 122 of the 1974 act, which allows for tariffs to prevent such imbalances.

Fortunately, the balance of payments tariffs had a limit of 150 days. But Trump has tried other tactics. Section 301 has been used many times, including by Trump against China in his first term to penalise it for its industrial subsidies. Trump has also relied on section 232 of the 1962 Trade Expansion Act to put levies on steel, aluminium, lumber, semiconductors and autos on specific grounds about protecting national security.

None of these authorities, however, grant him the unrestrained blanket power that could be his under section 338.

EDUARDO PORTER IS A JOURNALIST FOCUSED ON ECONOMICS AND POLITICS

🇬🇧 **England made me** Clacton and its pier developed as a seaside resort after trains brought visitors from London





THE VIEW FROM CLACTON

Nigel Farage's Essex seaside constituency takes in genteel resorts and one of England's poorest villages. With a byelection later this month, what do its residents think about the Reform UK leader, his novelty challenger Count Binface - and the country in general?

By Tim Burrows

IF IT'S THE TIN MAN, THEN I SUPPOSE I'LL VOTE FOR NIGEL," says a Clacton resident, a retiree on a slow stroll towards the seafront, when I ask whom she will vote for in the forthcoming byelection. "I would sooner have Farage than the Tin Man!" As political slogans go, it is as good as any.

The sun is beating down but the sky is hazy, which accurately describes the mood of this constituency since the Reform UK leader quit as MP for Clacton on 7 July, forcing a byelection that sent shock waves through Westminster and confusion through Clacton, on the east coast of England. I am spending a couple of days here with the photographer Andy Hall, traversing the coast between Jaywick to the west and Walton-on-the-Naze to the east. An incessant wind is blowing from the North Sea, sending waves crashing on to Clacton beach. Nicky Friday, who at 11am is already handing out ice-creams from her aptly named kiosk, Seabreeze, isn't exactly exercised by the Reform leader's latest gambit. "This is going to sound terrible, but I'm so busy running this business and working here," she says. "I don't really do politics."

During summers past, many of us were like Friday. The months during parliament's recess are known as the silly season because usually nothing political happens, leaving journalists to chase flights of fancy. The most famous summer story from this constituency is perhaps that of the lion that was reportedly on the loose in St Osyth in August 2012, which was later scaled down to an admittedly large pet cat. That was until Farage decided



to “spend the summer arguing with a bin”, as the then chancellor, Rachel Reeves, put it.

Count Binface (AKA the satirist Jon Harvey) has contested high-profile elections since running against Boris Johnson in 2019. His election would be fanciful but not unprecedented: in 2002, a monkey was elected mayor of Hartlepool when Stuart Drummond, who worked as the local football mascot, promised, among other things, free bananas for schoolchildren. Binface is promising to “build at least one affordable house”. All in all, 34 candidates are contesting the seat - including three candidates from the Monster Raving Loony party and the leader of the Everyone is God party, which preaches sex positivism and criminalising rudeness.

When asked recently what he had done for Clacton, Farage replied that he had done his best to “put it on the map”. Clacton’s other celebrity, its 155-year-old pier, may beg to differ. “Clacton didn’t exist before tourism,” says Billy Ball, 45, the managing director of Clacton Pier, which he bought alongside his brother, Elliot, in 2009. “The first building in the town was the pier. The only way to get here was by steam. The railway came many, many years later.”

The Balls are from a long line of fairground folk. Their grandfather moved to Clacton in the 1940s, while his grandma’s brothers knew another Billy, Billy Butlin, whose resort may also have something to say about putting Clacton on the map. Once the railways were built, the seaside offered a quick fix to industrialised city life dominated by work. Londoners flocked here for cheap instant thrills: the bandstand to the east of the pier, the pierrot troupes that used to play on the West beach.

In his office above the main entertainment space of the pier, Ball tells me there were once four theatres on here, while the nightclub was the main draw in the raving 90s. Today, the site is teeming with choice: a bowling alley, a bar, a pub, a mini golf course, a soft play centre, a helter-skelter. It looks like the Balls have used every inch of space to help turn a profit. “Our biggest achilles heel was the size and scale of this pier, because there’s so much to maintain out over the North Sea,” he explains. “But it’s also one of our biggest attributes, because it allows us to put all of these different offerings in place.”

Ball says he has had interactions with all three MPs who have served Clacton during their stewardship of Clacton Pier, but “the only one that reached out to us on day one was Nigel Farage”. The less charitable might suggest Farage saw Clacton’s biggest tourist attraction as something he could use politically, but Ball was impressed by his public backing of seaside slot machines.

Outside on the pier, feelings are a little different. Ashley, a teaching assistant on an end-of-term trip with pupils from her school in north Essex, gives me her take on the byelection: “I don’t agree with it. Clacton should be famous in its own right for what it has to offer. And it has a lot to offer, and people do love coming here.” She feels as though Clacton is being used. “And then the whole country is, by all these politicians, and they don’t mean what they say ...”

Clacton has come a long way from the years when Butlin’s welcomed 6,000 new guests every week at its peak in the 1950s, with more than 1,000 staff; schoolboys earned money by carrying luggage

to and from the station. Most visitors stayed at least a week back then, but now the hotels are clinging on for dear life. If the quality of the offering can improve, Ball thinks, then so will the scale.

I walk down a sidestreet just minutes away from the Wetherspoons pub, where an Australian news crew is loitering, and am alarmed at the site of a burnt-out building and the shell of a van in the road. The building over the road has been smashed up by vandals. On the fencing that surrounds it is scrawled: “IT’S TIME TO TAKE OUT THE TRASH: VOTE BINFACE.”

“The van has been there for three weeks,” says Carol Pickett, 66, who runs the hotel next door to the burnt-out building. “It doesn’t look good, does it, to holidaymakers walking down there.” She grew up in Enfield, north London, but had fond memories of family visits as a kid and ended up moving here. Times were good until the past few years, when trade dropped off a cliff. The “No vacancies” sign outside is there to deter drunk people who miss the last train, she says; the hotel isn’t full by any means. “People coming from London walk through the square and it’s full of druggies and people fighting - it’s not a good advert, is it?”

She says Farage has been conspicuous by his absence during his time as MP. “He’s never been and visited any of these small businesses down here,” she says. Not even for a pint? “I probably wouldn’t give him one now. It’s too late!”

“If he’s willing to go on Cameo and say whatever you like for 80 quid, what’s he going to do for £5m?” asks Peter Hoare, referring to Christopher Harborne’s gift (\$6.7m) to Farage that caused the scandal that led to Farage resigning and triggering the byelection to “let the people of Clacton decide”. Hoare, 50, runs the World Food Aid charity shop in the centre of town and lives in a flat just off the beach. We walk to the shore and look up the coast towards the next settlement, Holland-on-Sea, where a boat carrying six people arrived last month - the first small-boat crossing ever reported in Farage’s constituency.

Despite the low level of migration here, immigration is the most widely responded to of Farage’s policies - you might say it’s his only policy. Hoare grew up in Leytonstone, east London. “I loved walking around the streets on Saturday morning and smelling the different dishes cooking in different houses,” he says. Hoare told me when I met him in 2024 that moving to Clacton was a culture shock - it is still one of the least ethnically diverse parliamentary constituencies in England. But there is, he says, “a growing community of different nationalities”, particularly in the centre of town. “I think a lot of people do notice it, as primarily Clacton is still a 96% white population. There has always been that divisiveness about immigration and ‘the boat people’, which I think Farage has been great at exploiting.”

Hoare’s family is divided when it comes to their politics: “Dad, Conservative; brother, a Reform supporter; I’ve always been Labour. But we can have a good conversation about our politics without it descending into name calling.” The rise of Reform worries Hoare. The party has swept through Essex county council and Hoare fears the care support for his mother, who has cerebral palsy, may be affected if it forms the next government.

IN JAYWICK, THE SETTLEMENT SOUTH-WEST OF CLACTON, 36% of people have a disability, more than twice the average in England. Many of the houses here were built as holiday chalets and are hard to maintain at the mercy of the North Sea. “It gets terribly damp,” says Linda, 76, who bought her property with money received after an industrial accident. She greets us with a smile in the sunshine outside her property alongside her husband, Roy, 70. “In the winter, it’s the coldest place you could ever live, and in the summer it can be really, really hot. Sometimes you can have a back door open, a front door open and still two or three fans going, which eats up your electricity.”

Jaywick became notorious in the 2010s when a documentary series,

‘People in Jaywick are really friendly if you know the right ones. There is such energy and drive’



Benefits By the Sea, turned deprivation statistics into gratuitous, cartoonish television that focused its narrative exclusively on addiction, criminality and destitution. More recently, TikTok content creators have been coming to film videos with titles such as “The worst town in England” for clicks. Jaywick’s plight highlights a political culture that has tolerated decline - and media that tolerate mocking those afflicted by the decline - without attempting to solve any of the problems, show any responsibility or even exhibit kindness.

But while the media often lament how little Jaywick has, they often miss what it has in abundance. “People in Jaywick are really friendly if you get to know the right ones,” says Linda, who has just come back from bingo at the recreation hall. “They’re smashing.” There is such energy, drive and purpose from people here, against the odds. Attempting to harness this is Sunspot, a community hub and event space with a brief to include affordable business units, a covered market, a cafe, public toilets and meeting rooms alongside a community garden and a bus shelter.

The jewel in the crown of Sunspot is Rainy Bakes, a thriving cafe, bakery and dessert parlour run by Lorraine Wildes, 63, and her partner, Mark Hammond, 58. Before Sunspot opened, she was a part-time cook in a care home and did a bit of baking on the side. When a shop became available, Wildes got a levelling-up grant to buy her ice-cream machine and a few other items. They have since moved into a bigger unit, and the business is going from strength to strength, doubling as a community hub where older residents can come to have a chat every Tuesday and a place young people can meet for a milkshake.

I meet Robert, 59, who is selling secondhand shoes in the market

▲▲ **Election fever**
Graffiti in the centre of Clacton expresses the voting intention of one resident

▲ **Sunshine spot**
Linda and Roy are fans of the spirit of Jaywick, if not always of the weather

▲▲ **Pier position**
Billy Ball, the owner of Clacton pier, has deep ties to the constituency

▲ **Frinton view**
Separated from Clacton by a golf course, Frinton is considered more genteel

outside Sunspot. He moved here from London 10 years ago because he thought the sea air would be better for his son. Robert has debilitating asthma, uses a mobility scooter and is recovering

from a stroke. He says politicians “come out with all the same stuff”; Andy Burnham “might be all right”, while he wonders what Farage has done for Jaywick, but he says he met him once and he “was a polite man. But then they’re all polite.”

What does he want from politicians? “More housing,” he says. “I was homeless myself; I know what it’s like in London.” It shocks him to see the amount of homeless people on the streets in the capital today.

Homelessness is never far from the conversation in Jaywick. It isn’t a theoretical problem but often a part of people’s lives, their history, with the relative affordability of Jaywick offering a second chance. “You don’t get moved off the beaches,” says Hammond at Rainy Bakes, who was also formerly homeless. He says that tents are always going up on the beach, particularly in dry and fine weather. “We had a gentleman - he was there for three weeks - I used to charge his power pack for his phone.” Hammond arranged for him to have a shower on the premises of Sunspot and money was raised to feed him hot meals. “You’d never know he was homeless.”

Hammond says he likes Farage for “his graft” and was impressed by him when he visited the cafe in 2024: “He came in to us and I leaned forward and I said to him: ‘I’ve got 36 flavours of milkshake,’” he says, referring to the times Farage has been attacked with one of the drinks. “And he went: ‘I don’t want a fucking milkshake.’”

“Jaywick is an amazing community,” says Hana Loftus, 45, the co-director of HAT Projects. She is an architect and



writer who is undertaking a project about Jaywick as it approaches its centenary. "So many people here, they're like: 'Don't call us deprived. We love where we live. We love it here. The community's great, the beach is amazing, all my friends and family are here.'"

Loftus meets us for dinner at Pera, a recently opened Turkish restaurant that rivals anything in north London. We talk about how the resort of Jaywick was the project of the property developer Frank Stedman, whose vision of a great housing estate by the sea came up against the realities of drainage (this was marshland, after all), which shifted the emphasis from houses to holiday chalets. It grew in popularity as a rival to Butlin's in Clacton and provided an interesting contrast: a collection of bungalows owned by holidaymakers as opposed to a camp with a high turnover of visitors making short lets.

When long breaks at the British seaside were overtaken in the 1970s by the foreign package holiday, Butlin's evaporated, but Jaywick survived and eventually became a residential area. That decade, it fought for its survival after a compulsory purchase order was sought by Clacton urban district council to knock down the Brooklands estate, where most of the chalet-style housing is, but the Freeholders Association took them on and won. The council was forced to modernise parts of it.

Since then, the residents say they have fought for everything, coming to the conclusion that if something needs to be done, they had better do it themselves. They raised money for their own sea wall. "That fight is sort of baked into the place as a kind of memory,"

▼ Never Labour

Alan Sainty sees Nigel Farage as the best choice for the future of the country

▼▼ Bleak view

A burnt-out building in the centre of Clacton greets visitors from London

says Loftus. "People basically still think that the authorities would like to raze Jaywick off the face of the Earth."

Loftus takes us to meet Danell Dreelan, 40, who lives in Brooklands Gardens, the heart of the estate - this was where much of *Benefits By the Sea* was filmed. She moved to Jaywick in 2009 from Edmonton, north London, when her mum and dad bought a series of houses on her street. Today, she works as a cleaner at a community centre and volunteers at the Never Say Die pub on a Sunday. She is helping her daughter, Bobbie-Jean Halls Smith, 19, who is organising Jaywick's first carnival with Dreelan's younger sister, 23-year-old Destiny, and is also the Essex county carnival queen.

The carnival is a way to fight back against assumptions about Jaywick, she says. "A lot of girls from here get treated like crap because they're from Jaywick," says Dreelan. "If you ask, 80% of the females here will never put Jaywick on their CV." Lacey Mills, 18, a carnival princess, arrives with the junior queen, Ellie Riley, 20. Mills says the carnival has helped her confidence after she was bullied at school. "We're all over TikTok. We're all over social media. We're all over BBC News," says Halls Smith. "Hopefully, the stories [about the carnival] they're going to show on TikTok or Facebook are going to be good."

We talk as the sun recedes and dusk becomes night. Dreelan's nine-year-old son, Sonny-Lee, was born prematurely with a serious congenital heart condition. Destiny and Halls Smith started a charity, Sonny's Army, when they were only 16 and 12, respectively, to raise money for families in a similar situation. Bobbie-Jean says Farage

▼ Carnival time

Lacey Mills, left, and Ellie Riley hope to create a good news story about Jaywick

▼▼ All front

Sarah Elizabeth Cox moved to Clacton after 10 years house-hopping in London

for families in a similar situation. Bobbie-Jean says Farage



'Nigel Farage has charisma. Nobody in their right mind would vote for a rubbish bag'

doesn't see this side of the Brooklands; she says he should come to the carnival's events so he can "meet the people - but he doesn't do that. He's not taking the time to actually get to know the way it works here."

I can't make the carnival, so I call Dreelan the week after to see how it went. It was "nothing short of crazy", she says. Every business from Rainy's to the Never Say Die did a roaring trade and Dreelan ended the day standing on a chair in the pub singing Freed from Desire into a microphone surrounded by joyous residents. At the end of our conversation, it occurs to me I haven't asked her yet if she is going to vote in the byelection. "I'm going to ignore it," she says. She tells me of the time during the 2024 general election campaign when she met Farage in the pub and asked him a question: "How are you going to make the future voters, being children now, believe in what you're going to do?" He looked at me and went: "I'll get back to you."

On my second day here, the wind has died down. The Clacton-based historian Sarah Elizabeth Cox, 39, is talking over a coffee about her forthcoming book on Victorian boxers, which includes Billy Ball's great-grandfather Alf. She moved here in December 2022, when she was sick of house hopping after 10 years in London. She chose Clacton to be closer to her nephew and then ended up having a child herself.

One of the things she loves about it are the long walks all the way to Walton, where her dad, Geoff Cox, used to come on caravan holidays as a child. Geoff, 74, is a journalist who worked on the local paper in Luton from the age of 17. He and his wife, Anne, moved to a cul-de-sac in Frinton-on-Sea, the resort next to Walton, to be near their grandchildren. It took him a long time to meet his neighbours. "They are friendly," he says. "They're just very, very reserved people." They bought a bungalow, but Geoff says many of his neighbours are widows who live in large four-bedroom houses, far bigger than they need.

IF CLACTON IS KISS ME QUICK AND BETTER DAYS and Jaywick is courage against a tide of assumptions, Frinton is lawns, clubs and carefully attended manners. Much more than the physical boundary of a nature reserve and a golf club separates Clacton and Frinton. Cox lives 15 minutes away from her parents in Frinton, but a world apart: "I live in a 1960s block of flats called Marine Court and there's a 1960s block of flats also called Marine Court in Frinton, right on the coast." She paid £187,000 for hers in 2022, while a comparably sized flat in Frinton's version could fetch about £350,000. "I would say my view is probably better," she says.

After finishing our coffee, we head for the taxi rank. Cab drivers are often portrayed in the media as salt-of-the-earth Reform voters, but judging from the evidence of Clacton this weekend, only one in four cabbies will vote Farage. Terry Chapman, a driver in his 70s, isn't a fan. "I think it will be a low turnout and I think Farage will win a lower majority," he says. He may vote Binface, "to take the mickey".

When we arrive in Frinton, the seafront is teeming with people enjoying the sun and the tide is coming in quickly. Kay has brought her family and friends to a beach hut they have rented for the day, travelling from the heart of Constable country near Dedham, which

sounds idyllic until she tells me she has come to the seaside as the River Stour is filled with sewage. They usually come to Frinton, or up to Southwold in Suffolk, or north Norfolk (but never Jaywick, perish the thought). Kay says she has no thoughts about the election, "other than wanting to vomit" at the prospect of another Farage show.

As we head west, we meet David Ketterer, 82, a retired recruiter who has lived in Frinton for 44 years. He says Farage has been "forced into" the byelection. His wife, Toni, agrees. "The Guardian," says Ketterer. "Everyone's been against him!" What about GB News or the Daily Mail, I ask. Surely he still has a few supporters? "Yeah, but that's it," he says.

Ketterer was a Conservative right up until Thatcher: he thinks she should never have spent the North Sea oil money on lowering taxes. He says Norway was much more sensible in setting up sovereign wealth funds. But isn't Farage a bit like Thatcher, with his plans of privatisation? "It's an alternative thing and I'm old enough to say: 'Let's try an alternative,'" says Ketterer.

It helps that the Ketterers have met Farage - at the tennis club. "He has charisma, which none of the others have," says David. That is surely selling Count Binface short? Do you know anyone who may vote for Farage's main challenger? "They're saying they are. But they won't," says Toni. "Nobody in their right mind would vote for a rubbish bag!"

We walk along the prom. The sun is high and the people we speak to are giving Farage a little more heat. "He's either got to come clean and say that he did make a mistake and stay as an MP, or just clear off completely," says Paul Andrews, 80, a retired engineer who is sunning himself by his hut with his wife, Lynn. "But I don't like what he says anyway, to be honest ... And Farage is saying an awful lot of stuff. And there's no way he's going to be able to do what he says."

Despite this summary, Andrews says he still voted for Farage in 2024. "What is the alternative?" says Lynn. "It's true," Paul agrees. "There's no alternative, is there?" They used to like Burnham, "but we've gone off him big time", says Lynn. They don't like the idea of No 10 North, for a start. "Up until a couple of weeks ago, he wasn't even an MP!" They would never vote Labour, anyway, certainly not since the party brought in 20% VAT for private schools, they say.

I meet Alan Sainty, 69, a semi-retired painter and decorator who is enjoying the sunshine outside his beach hut, having drinks with his wife and their friends. He was born in Walthamstow, east London, before moving to Frinton as an adult. His dad worked at the Ford factory in Dagenham. "My dad was 96 when he died last year. He always told me to vote Labour. But Labour went all skewwhiff when Tony Blair came in. So I've never voted Labour since." Instead it is "Nigel Farage all day long", he says.

Many of the people I speak to here think Farage is something to aspire to - he's successful; he doesn't mind making money. Would Farage's financial affairs and any wrongdoing affect Sainty voting for him in future? "Listen, they're all the same, right? Let's see what he can do." If he doesn't become our next prime minister, Sainty suggests, the country is done for. "Starmer's done nothing for us at all, has he?" Is Burnham any good? "Nah, not for me." He isn't that keen on any politicians. "Listen, I'm nearly 70 years of age. What has anyone done all my life?"

Have you ever had a political hero? "No, not really ... Definitely not Thatcher, because she took away the unions."

Sainty voted for Brexit, then Johnson; he says Farage is the last throw of the dice simply because, as he sees it, nothing else has worked. He mentions the high rent of his pride-and-joy beach hut and the fact that bored kids break into it from time to time without any repercussions from the police. This sense of a society adrift after so many years in the economic doldrums is crucial when reading politics in the UK today. To sum up why he thinks Farage may be the best choice for the future of the country, he says: "Someone's got to do something." ●

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IRAN USA

IRAQ'S IMPOSSIBLE PREDICAMENT

With the outbreak of this year's war between Iran and the US, Baghdad's balancing act between the two antagonists has collapsed, exposing a perilously fragile state

By Ghaith Abdul-Ahad



Night lights

An oil tanker burns after being hit by an Iranian strike near Basra, Iraq, in March

AP

ONE WEEK AFTER THE UNITED STATES AND ISRAEL killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and ignited a regional war, drones started flying over Basra in southern Iraq. They were targeting Iraq's oil industry. They hit an oilfield operated by BP as well as a cargo terminal at Basra airport and a large compound that houses foreign companies that service the oil sector. Another attack on 6 March hit the same compound, striking offices and warehouses used by Halliburton and KBR, two US companies that have been in Iraq since the 2003 invasion. The attack sparked a massive fire that lit up the night sky.

In the wider war, it was not a particularly notable day - but in Iraq the strikes laid bare just how weak the state had become and "how easily sovereignty could be violated", as one senior Iraqi security official put it to me. For 40 years, the US, Iran and Israel existed in an uneasy equilibrium of neither peace nor war. As this has come to a sudden, dramatic end, Iraq finds itself caught in the middle.

More attacks on Iraqi energy infrastructure were to come. On 11 March, an Iranian drone boat attacked two oil tankers off the port of Basra, setting them ablaze and killing at least one crew member. In the following days and weeks, a succession of drone strikes hit more oilfields operated by foreign companies. Hundreds of energy sector workers from American, European and Chinese firms left, many travelling overland because the country's airspace was closed. Thousands of Iraqi workers were sent home.

No one claimed responsibility for these attacks (apart from the strikes on the oil tankers, which Iran acknowledged). The central government in Baghdad and the local authorities in Basra were remarkably quiet, offering only empty official statements about sovereignty and the promise of investigations. The truth is that most of these attacks were not coming from Iran. They were undertaken by Iraqis acting on Iraqi soil - the work of factions of the country's powerful, Iran-backed Shia militias. "This is an act of treason," a visibly shaken senior official at the oil ministry in Basra told me.

Speaking confidentially, multiple officials told me the oil attacks had been carried out by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI), an umbrella group of Shia paramilitary organisations that were originally trained and equipped by Iran to fight the Americans after the 2003 invasion. IRI factions are also members of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) - a collection of Iran-backed, mainly Shia militias in Iraq that were brought together in 2014 to fight the Islamic State. The PMU is, in theory, subordinate to the Iraqi government but in reality follows its own agenda, with investments in construction and agriculture giving it a source of economic power.

While Iraq, which is majority Shia, may seemingly have a single, unitary government run from Baghdad, actually multiple groups with varying degrees of independence - formed in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion - exert huge influence. Today, there are two types of paramilitary militia in the country. Those that use their weapons to protect their economic interests - the state contracts and businesses that they have cultivated over the years - and



▼ Top table

Iraq's PM, Ali al-Zaidi, meets Donald Trump at the White House

ANDREW THOMAS/CNP



▼ Final journey

Ali Khamenei's coffin is carried by mourners in Najaf in July

ANMAR KHALIL/AP

'THE WAR HAS PROVEN IRAQ'S WEAKNESS. OUR AIRSPACE WAS USED BY BOTH SIDES'



those that are primarily driven by ideology, that are deeply committed to the Iranian project of defeating Israel and expelling the United States from the Middle East.

In 2026, this unstable balance has erupted into violence not seen for years. On the one hand, the US/Israeli war on Iran has spurred the hardline ideological paramilitaries to Tehran's aid, attacking not just Iraq's oil infrastructure but also US military bases and the US embassy in Baghdad. On the other hand, a new US-backed Iraqi prime minister, Ali al-Zaidi, has upped the ante by giving all of the country's militia groups a deadline of 30 September to disarm and incorporate their fighting divisions into the Iraqi state. This is to satisfy longstanding US ambitions to reduce Iran's influence in Iraq.

While al-Zaidi has had some success, the hardcore groups have refused to give up their weapons. As long as there is an American presence in Iraq, with Israeli jets flying overhead, the IRI will continue to fight.

Speak to Iraqi government officials and you hear nothing but anger and exhaustion about the attacks on their oil infrastructure. "The installations that were attacked were on Iraqi soil, paid for by Iraq, as was all the destroyed equipment," one told me. It was not the US companies that would be harmed – they would charge Iraq for the destroyed assets – but the Iraqi economy, the oil sector and the reputation of Iraq as a safe place to conduct business, he added. He also noted that the attackers had highly accurate intelligence, probably leaked from within, about where to strike and which building or warehouse to destroy.

He and other oil-sector officials in Basra told me that the aim of the attacks was to disrupt oil production, raise global prices and ramp up pressure on the US administration to stop its war on Iran. Within weeks of the war's start, Basra's output had fallen by two-thirds, with exports essentially halted. "Maybe they want to drive these western companies out to replace them with companies from countries more aligned to them," the official said.

What is clear is that consequences of the war in Iran, which have escalated dramatically after the collapse of the ceasefire, have been profound in Iraq, exposing the weakness of a state that is perilously divided between the war's two main antagonists.

I

N ONE OF BAGHDAD'S UPMARKET RESTAURANTS, a government adviser reclined on a sofa. Until recently, he said, the Iraqi government had managed to keep most of the country's militia factions under control. As the war in Gaza raged, and even during the 12-day war between Israel and Iran in 2025, they were kept at bay through dialogue and negotiation. But the killing of Ali Khamenei changed everything. "You can't ask the factions not to participate any more," he said. "This is an existential struggle and a religious duty."

The adviser could see why Iran and its supportive factions in Iraq were doing what they were doing. Iraqi airspace and US bases in Iraq were being used to pummel Iran with airstrikes. Iranian officials had told him that 40,000 Starlink devices, used to bypass the Islamic republic's internet clampdown, had been smuggled into Iran from Iraq during the recent anti-regime demonstrations. "We should be grateful they didn't use their full force and strike Iraq in retaliation, because they could easily have burned half the country," he said. "And what do we have to defend ourselves against them?"

In another part of Baghdad, I met with a high-ranking security official who had worked closely with the Americans for many years. He had little time to empathise with Iranian anxieties but echoed the analysis of Iraq's military ineptness.

"The war has proven the weakness of Iraq. I don't mean only militarily. Our country was violated by everyone, our airspace used by both sides." The state could not even protect "its own soldiers and officers when we came under attack by the militias", he said. "Everyone in the military command knows exactly who [the attackers] are. Maybe we don't know the name of the person who pilots the drone, but we know who gave the orders, the chain of command and where they were launched from."

He nodded towards a police car parked nearby, the police standing around it, and referred to all the cameras installed on street corners. "Some rockets and drones were launched from the centre of Baghdad. Who can travel with rocket launchers through the city? How can you pass all the checkpoints, or drive into the countryside and fire them as they show in videos, without being detected?"

By way of explanation, the conversation turned to corruption. There are honourable commanders in the Iraqi security forces, he conceded, but many of the highest-ranking posts are awarded to officers only after they make a payment to their superiors. "If you pay \$5m to take command of a force," he said, "the priority becomes protecting that investment by avoiding confrontation - and that is a disaster." The reason it is an investment is because a high-ranking security post is a way of making money - through fraud, embezzlement and accepting bribes. "When officers see their commander running their own schemes to siphon money, that affects the whole security forces."

Economics partly explains the division between the older militias, which have largely accepted the prime minister's decree that they be incorporated into the Iraqi state, and the newer hardline factions under the IRI banner. In late May, the highly influential Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr called for his militia to be placed under the command of the state, and two other factions followed suit. But the move was met with derision and disdain by the hardline paramilitaries, who declared that their weapons were sacred and would not be surrendered until the end times. In effect, they were saying that they were fighting for an ideological cause, while the older militias were merely looking out for their own economic interests.

On 7 April, Iran and the US agreed a two-week ceasefire. The next day, the IRI announced that it would also be suspending operations for the duration of the ceasefire. (Fighting continued, albeit at a low level.) On that same day, Iraq and Saudi technical teams were having an online meeting to explore the reopening of the Iraqi-Saudi pipeline, which has been closed since the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. They were looking for a new way for Iraqi oil to bypass the pinch point in the strait of Hormuz.

As the oil industry came to a near halt, long queues formed outside petrol stations, bringing to mind the worst days of chaos that followed the 2003 war. In a statement, the ministry of oil blamed the shortage on the shutdown of some refineries after foreign workers left the country and on its inability to export unrefined, heavy fuel oil.

For a country so dependent on oil sales, which underwrite the salaries of 4 million public-sector employees, the decision by Iran-aligned militias to attack their own economy might have looked suicidal. "Not necessarily," a civil rights activist in the city of Basra told me. "Many people believe that oil companies are exploiting the country and they find the attacks justified."

Basra is one of the most polluted cities in the world, where people breathe the toxins from the burning flares of oil wells and drink brackish water. At the same time, its citizens are surrounded by signs of oil wealth - car dealerships, fancy sushi restaurants, expensive real estate - that are available only to a few. It is not surprising that many shrug their shoulders when they hear of attacks on oil companies' assets.

How did postwar Iraq fail to make use of its immense oil wealth to deliver a better life for its people? On the eve of the US invasion in 2003, the country's oil infrastructure was in near ruin after decades of war and UN sanctions. The machinery was antiquated and production was kept alive only by veteran engineers. In the aftermath of the invasion, looting and sabotage nearly collapsed the industry altogether. Lacking the finances and capacity to rebuild the sector on its own, Iraq turned to international firms, signing contracts with major oil companies including BP, ExxonMobil and Shell. The deals inked were not the profit-sharing agreements that the foreign companies wanted - Iraq still takes huge pride in having nationalised its oil industry in 1972 - but less lucrative, flat per-barrel service fees. Baghdad had a stated ambition to pump about 12m barrels a day by 2017, a level that would rival Saudi Arabia. That target was never remotely met, peaking closer to 4.5-5m barrels a day in the late 2010s and hovering there.



RADUALLY, THE POSTWAR EUPHORIA around Iraq's oil potential cooled, and within a few years companies began to abandon their projects. The thin margins had made Iraq one of the least profitable places the firms operated, but the retreat was mainly driven by political instability, contractual disputes and massive delays in government payments. The delays occur because of multiple layers of bureaucracy, deployed ostensibly to prevent corruption but in practice functioning as bottlenecks where bribes are extracted to smooth the process. Multinationals that are bound by anti-corruption laws generally refuse to pay such bribes, and their fees are held up as a result.

Ministry officials and business insiders in Basra described to me a contracting system that - as elsewhere in Iraq - is dominated by political parties, clans and sometimes armed groups that line their pockets by exploiting agreements with contractors and subcontractors.

In late May, the deputy oil minister responsible for the country's refineries, Adnan al-Jumaili, was detained on corruption charges - part of the new prime minister's anti-corruption drive. Al-Jumaili was shown on television in a yellow jumpsuit, surrounded by dozens of machine guns and boxes of ammunition that were reportedly found at his home. Investigators said they also recovered \$10m in cash, 3bn dinars (roughly \$2.3m) and 1.5kg of gold. As the investigation expanded, security forces detained 47 people, including 13 MPs and senior officials, and seized hundreds of millions of dollars in cash and gold. Among those arrested in the same sweep was a second deputy oil minister who had already been sanctioned by the US for allegedly diverting Iraqi oil to benefit Iran.

It is no surprise that, for many Iraqis, the oil industry is less a symbol of the country's pride than all that is wrong with it.

This July, the funeral procession of the Iranian supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, took place in Iran - though it also crossed the border with Iraq, drawing 3.8 million people on to the streets of Najaf alone, according to official figures. Unlike in the choreographed ceremonies in Iran, massive throngs in Iraq pushed and shoved to get close to the coffin in the fierce summer heat. The white turbans of mullahs came undone as they jostled with the crowds; arms stretched forward, people wept, and those who could not get close enough threw their shawls and scarves at the casket to be blessed by it. Away from the crowds, the coffins, including a smaller one



for Khamenei's granddaughter, who was killed alongside him, were received inside the shrine of Imam Ali, a holy site in Shia Islam. Iraq's leaders, among them the new prime minister, Ali al-Zaidi, stood in solemn silence alongside the Iranian president.

Six days later, as if to perfectly illustrate the double-edged nature of Iraqi politics, that same prime minister sat next to Donald Trump in the Oval Office, beaming as he listened to the US president declare that the two men had "tremendous chemistry" and that Iraq was "very well represented". Al-Zaidi pledged, again, to disarm the militias and fight corruption, and invited US companies to invest in Iraq.

For many years, a well-connected government insider told me, the Americans sat down with Iraqi prime ministers and repeated the same demands about disarming the Iran-aligned militias and ending corruption. "This has been going on since God knows how long," he said. "They sat with Haider al-Abadi, with Adel Abdul-Mahdi, with Mustafa al-Kadhimi, with al-Sudani, with al-Maliki, with every prime minister. And during all those years, Iraq received a great deal of American support, but did nothing whatsoever to change its relationship with Iran. On the contrary, Iranian influence only expanded with time."

Why the seeming change this year, with al-Zaidi telling the Iranian-backed militias that they need to give up their arms? American

pressure coincided with the economic crisis. The closure of the strait of Hormuz and the attacks on its oil installations have brought Iraq to the brink of bankruptcy. Washington has also made use of the huge leverage it has over the Iraqi economy. In an arrangement dating back two decades, Iraq's oil revenues are held at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Physical shipments of dollars are flown from the US to Baghdad so the government can pay salaries and run the state.

In April, the US took the extraordinary measure of stopping these dollar shipments. The Iraqi government got the message: al-Zaidi ordered the pro-Iranian militias to give up their guns in June, and the dollar shipments resumed in July.



ONE SPRING EVENING IN BASRA, the corniche along the Shatt al-Arab River was packed with people walking up and down, enjoying the early-evening breeze: families with children holding balloons; young men in fitted dishdashas or jeans; women, some in black abayas, others in Gulf-style robes and headscarves, a few in trousers with their waist-length hair flowing. As music pulsed through the air, a line of photographers did brisk business as people queued to be pictured in front of the fountain installed in the river.

On the other side of the street, gazing down benevolently, was a massive portrait of the city's governor, Asaad Al Eidani, hung from a five-storey building. After taking office in 2017, Al Eidani initiated major public works: paving roads, extending the sewage network and securing Basra extended hours of electricity supply. (His detractors accuse him of benefiting from public contracts and awarding major projects to his inner circle, claims he vehemently denies.) He also built relationships with the neighbouring Gulf states, easing trade and travel to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, hosting a Gulf football tournament that drew thousands of regional visitors to Basra, turning the city towards its Arab neighbours and their lucrative markets while maintaining its cultural and political ties with neighbouring Iran.

Along the corniche stands the empty shell of the Kuwaiti consulate. It was stormed in April by locals at the instigation of militias in response to a suspected Kuwaiti airstrike that killed several Iraqis - this was itself retaliation, Iraqi officials said, for an earlier attack launched by militias from Iraqi soil. The abandoned structure stands as a reminder of the dashed hopes of Iraq maintaining close relations with both Iran and the Gulf states.

Walking through Basra, I found myself thinking about how implausible it was to imagine that Iraq's pro-Iran fighters would give up their weapons; that Iran, at a moment when it needs to marshal every asset it has to fight the US and Israel, would abandon its allies; and that the corrupt politicians and businesspeople who have spent two decades siphoning Iraq dry would relinquish their wealth at the behest of a new, inexperienced prime minister.

As I walked, I met one old man dressed in a white dishdasha with a knitted skull cap on his head. Iran, he said, was the last chess piece protecting Islam and defending Arab nationalism. It's our duty as Iraqis to support it, he added. When I asked him if he was worried that with no oil sales, the Iraqi economy might collapse, he said *la* (no): America will not abandon its project in Iraq. It will make sure our economy won't collapse. And there, in a few words, was Iraq's impossible predicament - dependent for life on two sworn enemies ●

GHAITH ABDUL-AHAD IS AN IRAQI JOURNALIST



▲ Flag day

Baghdad citizens welcome the ceasefire in April

AHMAD AL-RUBAYE / AFP/GETTY

'MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT OIL COMPANIES ARE EXPLOITING THE COUNTRY'



▲ Forced entry

Protesters storm the Kuwaiti consulate in Basra in April

ALI RAHIM/AP

EMMA BROCKES

Am I wrong to
want my kids to
go to university?

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Opinion



UNITED STATES

*Trump has blundered into a new
'forever war' that he cannot win*

Simon Tisdall



GUARDIAN DESIGN;
AARON SCHWARTZ/
AFP/GETTY

It's five years this month since the chaotic retreat of US forces from Kabul. The Nato-backed invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, launched after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington DC, is now widely regarded as a failure. It cost the lives of more than 2,400 US and 450 British troops, and tens of thousands of civilians (the exact number is unknown). Although al-Qaida terrorists were routed, their Taliban hosts reimposed repressive, misogynistic Islamist rule after regaining power in 2021. Afghanistan became a byword for ill-considered western interventionism and nation-building. It was the archetypal "forever war", a phrase first coined during Vietnam.

If this cautionary tale had any lasting value, it was as a deterrent to politicians and generals tempted to rashly embark on open-ended conflicts without just cause, defined, achievable aims, and an exit strategy. Dismayingly, the forever war lesson had to be learned all over again in Iraq, which the US and UK invaded in 2003 and departed, having caused huge harm for scant benefit, in 2011. "Never again!" was the passionate cry at the time and since. And yet, it seems, the same disastrous pattern is now repeating after Donald Trump's incomprehensibly foolish decision to attack Iran. A war he termed a "little excursion" is entering its sixth month and has been escalating rapidly. It, too, has a forever feel.

How can it be? Answers may be found in persistent US exaggerations and misconceptions about the level and extent of external threats, mixed up with political dishonesty, national hubris, naivety and misplaced idealism. Recalling the harrowing US experience in Afghanistan, Carter Malkasian, a National War College professor who served as a civilian adviser to US forces in Helmand and Kabul, suggests the basic premise for keeping troops in Afghanistan for 20 years - a belief the country would otherwise revert to being a safe haven for international terrorism - was fatally flawed.

"Nothing of the sort occurred. Over the past five years, not a single act of terrorism against the US was carried out by a group based in Afghanistan," Malkasian wrote. "Washington spent roughly \$1tn on the war. More than 775,000 American service members were deployed ... all to defend against a threat that turned out to have been exaggerated. Five years on, the greatest danger is not that a terrorist safe haven might once again emerge in Afghanistan. A graver threat comes from the risk of collective forgetting." In short, "fears of the moment" should not cloud memories of the long-term costs of

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Like Bush before him, Trump and Netanyahu have exaggerated the existential nature of the Iranian threat

endless forever war. If the Afghan war was prosecuted on the basis of a false assumption, so much more so was the invasion of oil-rich Iraq. George W Bush's claim in 2002 that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed stockpiles of readily usable chemical and biological weapons and was seeking a nuclear bomb proved untrue. Untrue, too, was the claim from the then vice-president, Dick Cheney, that Iraq "aids and protects" al-Qaida. The subsequent occupation and insurgency became part of an even larger forever war - Bush's "global war on terror".

It's easy to second-guess decisions about war and peace taken under the pressure of horrific events. The disingenuous pursuit of political, military and commercial agendas, and the manipulation of intelligence and public opinion, is harder to excuse. The US maintained it fought the Vietnam war to support democracy and halt the spread of communism - the discredited "domino theory". But it was also very much about US exceptionalism and global hegemony. In that sense, little has changed.

What else makes American politicians risk costly entanglements in foreign wars they can't control and usually lose? Insecurity - meaning fear - is a common denominator. Like Bush before him, Trump and Israel's leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, have greatly and knowingly exaggerated the immediacy and existential nature of the Iranian threat. Like Iraq in 2003, Iran possesses no nuclear weapons and there is zero firm evidence it is trying to acquire them.

Trump's overbearing hostility to weaker neighbours such as Venezuela, Cuba, Colombia, Panama and Greenland has a forever aspect, too. It is rooted in the foundational myth that the US has a unique mission - and right - to oversee the world. Likewise, greed is forever. Abandoning altruistic ideas of democracy promotion, Trump seeks to exercise economic as well as geopolitical dominance. He has tried to monetise the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. His focus on the strait of Hormuz shows how security policy and financial and commercial interests invariably intersect.

Lack of effective UN mediation and peacekeeping; the hollowing out of US diplomacy, which has accelerated under Trump's lickspittle secretary of state, Marco Rubio; and a stubborn refusal to accept the militarily inevitable all play a role in turning US-led conflicts into

intractable quagmires. In Trump's case, ego is also a factor. It seems he would rather kill thousands more civilians than admit he was wrong over Iran. Such extreme behaviour illuminates another pernicious aspect of forever war. Its utter pointlessness is fundamentally immoral. War without end is the death of hope.

One day, Trump talks about talks. The next, he hits out with massive, murderous violence. Implacable Iranian hardliners relish his dilemma and turn the screw, mounting militia attacks and global economy-spooking drone and missile strikes. Trump tries in vain to bomb his way out of trouble while desperate for a deal that can somehow be sold as a victory.

Neither option is going to work. The bloody stain, the blame and the shame, if not the war, will last for ever ●

* **Simon Tisdall** is a *Guardian* foreign affairs commentator

SOCIETY

I'm torn over hard hats, but still want my kids to go to uni. Is that wrong?

Emma Brockes



For a while now I've been having a conversation with friends that a few years ago would've been largely unthinkable. Partly, this is because of how sheltered we all tend to be when trying to imagine our kids' lives running on different tracks to our own. But it's also about the world changing. A brilliant young person I know left school, took up an internship, turned it into a job and now she's in her early 20s with no debt and a great position at a big fashion house. "Maybe I won't go to university, either," said one of my kids, eyeing me for a reaction, while I nodded thoughtfully and tried to ride out the panic.

Andy Burnham's announcement last week that university shouldn't be the single, aspirational goal of all of Britain's young people was perfectly timed, sensibly presented and shouldn't sound as radical as it does. It is, of course, a correction to existing norms that university-for-all is a proper national goal and the only personal determinant of ambition and success. By contrast, Burnham said last Tuesday, this country should "value the hard hat every bit as much as the graduation cap" as he spoke about tailoring technical and vocational training to meet local job needs and tackle youth unemployment.

The evidence suggests that a culture shift is already under way and that Burnham is simply validating an existing trend. I'm in the US at the moment, where the cost-reward ratio of going to college is so out of whack that student numbers have been dropping for years.

Smart people on podcasts direct young people towards their in-state universities, which charge a fraction of the cost of the prestigious private ones (not the Ivy Leagues, so much, which can subsidise any family making less than \$400,000 a year, but the smaller, liberal arts colleges that charge as much as \$80,000 in annual tuition and have been closing due to dwindling student numbers).

In the UK, too, for the last two years, university numbers have dipped slightly. This is partly a result of changing demographics – smaller families mean a smaller supply of school-leaving 18-year-olds – and partly to do with the cost.

The question is what this is doing to perceptions about the usefulness or otherwise of going to college, which, as we know, isn't just about earning potential. In both the US and the UK, being a graduate still delivers average median earnings that are higher than the earnings of non-graduates. But while middle-class people make jokes about how their plumbers probably earn more than they do, the fact remains that it is the other stuff – the cultural and social capital of going to college – that underscores this particular bias.

So it is that, while "low-value" degrees have been the target of derision for decades, when you dig down into why people want their kids to go to university, it has as much to do with social benefits as academic attainment. When will they meet the friends who will stay with them and godparent their children if not while sitting around watching mid-morning telly for three years as they slowly mature into adults? Are those friendships worth 10 grand a year? How, exactly, do you put a value on the non-academic stuff? I always think of a thing Don DeLillo said once about honouring a need to "drink coffee and look at the world" for a space of years, something that in the current economic climate sounds like an indulgence. And yet, for lots of 18-year-olds, it remains a valuable exercise.

But not all of them. The problem with current thinking about university is that it's so uniform, and the main takeaway from Burnham's speech is a reminder that there is more than one way of doing things. You can go to college, or not go to college, or go at 35 not 18, and all those things should be regarded as equal. Meanwhile, the whole conversation around college is just part of a larger one about changing work patterns in which, on the evidence so far, gen Z are proving reluctant to repeat the experience of their parents' generation by taking up office jobs – with additional pushback from gen X, who feel they came of age in office structures that taught them all sorts of useful things, such as how to work alongside people they found basically unbearable.

We all bring such biases to these questions of how to live life. I went to university and want my kids to do the same. My mum would have loved to have gone to university but had to leave school at 16 and I'm sure that's in the mix, too. But when the question of college education came up in our house, I tried hard to take myself off generational autopilot, stop being so hidebound by precedent, and properly consider the alternative ●



MEDIA

In the battle of Elon Musk v the press, truth must not be the loser

Jane Martinson

Elon Musk's long interview with the editor of the Economist is as good a representation as any of the current clash between two worlds. In one corner, the editor of an 182-year-old news organisation that promotes economic liberalism and freedom. In the other, the world's first trillionaire, who spreads misinformation to his hundreds of millions of followers on his own social media platform. The bout is a masterclass in the challenges journalists face in a new world of AI, fact avoidance and online aggression.

The flash points in Zanny Minton Beddoes' conversation with Musk start with definitions.

Musk says that the people Minton Beddoes calls "far-right" and "fringe" (she mentions Germany's AfD party) are in fact just "normal people". They clash over whether the speed of his cuts to USAID led to unnecessary deaths in developing countries - she believes that his claim that it didn't defies not only statistics but the evidence from her reporters on the ground. Asked if he is racist, he cites the fact he has four children with a woman who is "half Indian". In an awkward exchange, when asked by Minton Beddoes whether he is anti-Muslim, Musk says he is against "people coming to a country with antithetical views ... I'm against rape and murder."

The tone shifts when Minton Beddoes accuses Musk of spreading misinformation about Europe and particularly her home town, London, telling him that the statistics show that it is a safer place to live than most large US cities. She appears genuinely irritated that he rejects all evidence that violent crime is far lower than he says and grooming gangs are not terrorising the streets. After she asks if he understands why this makes people loathe him, it becomes a playground spat. Musk points out that with so many followers on X, he must be popular. Besides, "they hate you far more than they hate me". She admits to the media losing trust.

The exchange says a lot, not just about both participants, but also the state of our media ecosystem.

GUARDIAN DESIGN;
MANDEL NGAN/AFP/
GETTY

The interview appears to end with the two agreeing to disagree; they even continue to chat while Musk has his photo taken. When Minton Beddoes promoted the interview on X, Musk then reposted it, adding “zany interview with Zanny”. She liked this so much she reposted his repost. After some of his followers posted rude things about the media, he piled in on “the reality distortion nightmare mirror that is the legacy mainstream press”. By the weekend, he was calling her a “traitor to the west”. Last Thursday, she confessed to being “bemused” but not scared by the “more and more aggressive” response. She has learned not to look at online comments, she told BBC Radio 4. “If you scroll through them and read hundreds of things saying how awful you are, it’s not very pleasant, so don’t do it.”

It seems particularly timely to see what lessons can be learned from all this, given that the latest UK-government-backed investigation into the safety of journalists found that many admitted to self-censoring reports on contentious issues such as rightwing protest for fear of being attacked. Throwaway vitriolic comments about journalists are directly linked to increased aggression online and off, the report found. Female journalists bear the brunt of this aggression.

The shift to online and video journalism, the increasing celebritification if you will, has made more journalists identifiable, and therefore afraid for their safety. Again, Minton Beddoes is a great example of this

✳ **Jane Martinson** is an academic and Guardian columnist

given that the Economist, famous for the anonymity of its writers, has recently moved into far more video content. The Insider - the platform on which she interviewed Musk - is a weekly interview launched last September; guests have included

Benjamin Netanyahu and Tucker Carlson.

Musk’s view of truth is the reason the exchange feels more important than similar confrontations. Asking powerful people questions even when they react badly is the essence of what journalism is. In her short response to newsletter subscribers last week, Minton Beddoes promised to double down on the issues raised in the interview. She told them to look forward to new reports examining the facts surrounding the impact of shutting down USAID, the number of victims of grooming gangs in Britain and violent crime in European cities.

The news business has not always behaved as ethically as it should. But data and on-the-ground reporting are the only ways to beat misinformation. You can claim that it’s just too dangerous to walk around in Britain, as Musk did - despite having not visited for several years - or you can find the data that suggests homicide rates in general and even knife violence crimes are far lower than in major US cities, as the Economist did in a social video liked 73,000 times.

Ownership of his own platform and infinite riches may give Musk a loudspeaker, but this old-fashioned reporting is the kind of public service the world needs. Especially if Musk really is the Cassandra he says he is and AI is going to best humans within a decade, making it even harder to keep a firm hold on reality ●

Trump won’t like it - but states must seize the \$500bn prize of global corporate tax

Governments are told that public services must shrink because money is tight. Yet a new Tax Justice Network report says that countries could capture an extra \$500bn a year without raising corporate tax rates. The answer is to tax multinational profits where real economic activity happens - known as unitary taxation. No new profit is created. Revenue simply shifts from tax havens where profits are “booked” to the countries where workers produce and customers spend.

Making that principle a global tax standard depends on UN talks that opened in New York this week. Modelled on the UN climate regime, a fiscal framework convention would create the governing body and procedures, with protocols providing detailed rules. The UN wants agreement by late 2027. Donald Trump’s US walked out last year and urged others to follow. None did.

Rich countries gain most when firms pay tax where people work, not where profits vanish in havens. Britain would collect about £13bn (\$17.5bn) extra a year in tax receipts - two-thirds of the cost of an NHS-style social care system. EU governments could raise enough to quadruple climate-adaptation spending. And the report calculates that the global south would receive \$156bn in one year.

For the first time in decades, multinationals could be taxed where they actually do business. Rules built for the corporate world of the 1920s - when national industrial giants dominated - would finally confront today’s companies organised around

intangible assets and global supply chains. In 1929, General Motors made the equivalent of \$4.7bn. Apple’s profit last year was \$112bn. What the report calls “diversified” tax havens such as Switzerland and the Netherlands could offset losses by raising rates. Pure booking centres such as the Cayman Islands could not.

The talks suggest states are beginning to reclaim powers surrendered under globalisation to corporate lawyers and private tribunals. One protocol would let countries tax cross-border services without waiting for firms to establish domestic offices, blunting Mr Trump’s trade threats. A second could go further, shifting tax disputes from secretive investor-state arbitration into a more open, accountable UN-led system.

Ireland, which is facing an estimated \$11bn annual tax loss, has already begun putting aside part of its “windfall corporate tax receipts” - an admission the revenue won’t last. India and Nigeria have legislated so companies profiting from their economies should not escape the tax net just because they operate across borders.

Britain has belatedly backed a UN-led shift towards taxing real activity. The US can sit out the negotiations, but it cannot shield American companies from others’ rules. The success of these talks has largely been down to African nations insisting on consensus or majority rule. Backed by India, Brazil and other developing powers, an African-led coalition can now press a simple claim: countries should be free to tax value created within their economies ●

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It's time to get serious about the climate crisis

I see your article as one small step in getting serious about climate change (Busting the myths and lies about heatwaves, Spotlight, 17 July).

What is economic growth? A small increase in available income to be spent on luxuries - a huge proportion of economic growth goes into already well-lined pockets.

Yet it seems that what is good for the economy is bad for the environment. The planet cannot support more luxuries.

Neoliberal economics has no mechanism for dealing with climate change (or plastic in the ocean or deforestation) because dealing with it is measured as a cost, not a benefit.

Already it is becoming very expensive to adapt to climate change's effects, heatwaves, fires and floods. Mitigating climate change is going to be much more expensive.

If we are to mitigate climate change, buying electric cars and switching to wind power will not be enough. We will have to relinquish a lot of luxuries. War, for example. Consumerism, for example. (Both good

for the economy and bad for the environment.)

Getting serious about climate change means recognising we are in an existential crisis.

Edward Butterworth
Victoria, BC, Canada

There's more to England's north than Manchester

It is certainly refreshing to hear that the new British prime minister is trying to decentralise our London-centric government by opening a No 10 North in Manchester (You may scoff at cheap bus fares but Burnham knows what he's doing, Opinion, 31 July).

However, it appears that he identifies Manchester as "the north". He must realise that the north of England is much more than just the Manchester conurbation, and that replacing a single-centre approach with a double-centre one will not in itself achieve his aims of improving every postcode in the country.

Tom Carr
Newcastle upon Tyne,
England, UK

● Whatever you think about Andy Burnham's first days in the job, you have to hand it to him. How many people start a new role and immediately

move the office closer to their home? Respect.

Mary Foley
London, England, UK

The military use of AI needs urgent attention

Robert P Baird's article concludes by wondering whether AI might "prompt us to reconsider what it means to be human" (Morality and the machine, Feature, 10 July).

My greater concern is that it might prompt us to reconsider what it means to be inhuman. Although little mentioned, the AI arms race includes a literal arms race in military AI capabilities. How soon until bad actors, national, factional or terrorist, let loose AI-driven weapons on civilian targets and claim impunity because "It was the algorithm what done it"? How much easier will it be to commit war crimes, including genocide? And why is so little attention being given to the military use of AI?

Ant Donaldson
Mansfield, England, UK

Lessons for Lincolnshire from across the Atlantic

The article about rewilding at a farm in Lincolnshire says they hope nightingales will return there after an absence of

30 years (The business of rewilding, Feature, 24 July).

How appropriate that the company Nattergal (Danish for nightingale) should be involved. So far the efforts seem to have produced a lot of weed growth, including thistles, ragwort, dock and teasels.

In the wilds of British Columbia in the last century, a difference was noted between the flora surrounding the villages of First Nation peoples and that produced by European settlements; a proliferation of weeds, particularly ragweed, that brought a lot of hay fever.

Let us hope there is a difference between rewilding and re-weeding farmland. The beaver introduction should help.

Anthony Walter
Coldstream, BC, Canada

CORRECTIONS

The previous youngest chess player to beat a 2600+ opponent was not Judit Polgár but the all-time No 2 woman, Hou Yifan, who defeated Nikita Vitiugov at the age of 12 years and 11 months (Chess, Diversions, 31 July). Polgár's win was against GM Lajos Portisch's nephew Gabor Portisch.

BECKY BARNICOAT ON MILLENNIAL LIFE



MUSIC

When Wham!
made it big
in China

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Culture

Australian director
Benedict Andrews' new
London play fuses Sophocles
and Ingmar Bergman.
What can it tell us
about how we live today?

Hit and myth





By Mark Lawson
COVER
PHOTOGRAPH
Antonio Olmos/
Jet Swan/
Guardian Design

IN AROUND 420BC, Sophocles staged *Electra*, in which the title character avenges the murder of her father by her mother, Clytemnestra. In 1966, Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman premiered *Persona*, in which a psychiatric nurse, Alma, is caring for Elisabeth, an actor who has suffered a breakdown while playing *Electra*. These two dramas, written 23 centuries apart, are now sharing the stage in an alluring new National Theatre production.

In *Electra/Persona*, director Benedict Andrews has paired the stories before and after the interval, linked by a stunning coup de theatre at the end of the first half. “*Persona* is a pinnacle of modernist cinema, and Bergman is a north star for me,” says Andrews. “I’ve long been fascinated by the impossibility – in a good way – of staging *Persona*, because it is so much about the camera and the silence and the closeup: the face as a terrain. And I was always fascinated by why Bergman chose to have Elisabeth break down while playing *Electra*, so I wanted to put them together. I think it’s become clear in rehearsal that the whole evening is one cycle of grief.”

Early on, Andrews (Australian born, Iceland resident and identifying as “Ice-Stralian”) had the idea that Cate Blanchett and Nina Hoss would alternate the roles of *Electra* and Clytemnestra in *Electra*, and Elisabeth and Alma in *Persona* – whoever plays *Electra* in the first half reappears as Elisabeth, and Clytemnestra reappears as Alma. The original plan was for Blanchett and Hoss to toss a coin on stage at the start of the evening but Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, in which a coin lands heads 92 times in succession, made this strategy risky.

“Also,” says Andrews, “I said to Cate and Nina: ‘To play your best game, do you need to wake up in the morning and study your *Electra* or *Persona* text?’ And they said maybe. In the end they will have a schedule and swap night by night, but the audience won’t know who’s playing who until the first one walks in.” And if I say to the box office that I’ve seen one combination and want to see the other, they won’t tell me when? Andrews pauses. “No.”

Although he is known for staging radical new versions of classics – including Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* at

the Donmar Warehouse in 2024 and Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* on a rotating set at the Young Vic in 2014 – *Electra/Persona* is a bold project. Another writer-director, Alan Ayckbourn, once said that, while directing, he found himself cursing what the writer had given him to do. Did Andrews understand what it would be like effectively having to rehearse two plays twice each to prepare the various permutations?

“Yeah. Long rehearsal days,” he sighs with a laugh. “Yesterday, unusually, we stayed in *Electra* all day but I still did an hour on *Persona* at the end. I think it’s really important to do both every day. Although they require very different energies. It’s not a double bill; it’s one hinged work. There are perforations from Bergman in the first half and from Sophocles in the second half.”

By this stage, Andrews considers himself only a director: “We have this joke with the cast about there having been a writer. We call him Dominic. He was chained to a table for two weeks here to do rewrites but now we’ve put him on a trawler back to Iceland.”

I recently saw a hit show in which the understudy was on – they did an impersonation of the absent performer, which is standard in the circumstances. But will Blanchett and Hoss have a different interaction? “Absolutely. They



▲ **Swede dreams**
Bibi Andersson in *Persona*, the 1966 film directed by Ingmar Bergman

ALAMY

► **Being Blanche**
Gillian Anderson in Benedict Andrews’ London staging of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 2014

JOHAN PERSSON

are two actresses who are equally astonishing but play their instruments differently. Cate and Nina are good mates and had done the film *Tår*, in which Nina plays Cate's wife. So I thought it would be great to do something with them. They don't look the same, but there's an echo between them - they could be sisters. In rehearsal you see them thinking: 'Oh, they did that in that bit? Do I take that or do my own interpretation?' We're searching for something in which they each play the logic of the scene, but it may come out in different ways."

When I tell him that his Donmar Warehouse *Cherry Orchard* was completely different the two times I saw it, he nods enthusiastically, even though some directors would greet this with a public inquiry. "Good!" he says. "I saw the [romantic rejection] scene between Lopakhin and Varya dozens of times in rehearsal and then performance - and it was different each time. And I encourage that, because in the end you want the truth of that moment played each night. As a director, you have set up a perpetuum mobile that the actors can continue to develop."

ANDREWS IS HAVING AN ANCIENT GREEK PERIOD, his previous show being a version in Iceland of Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*, which shares characters with *Electra* including Clytemnestra, Orestes and *Electra* herself. So is there a big overlap between his back-to-back Greek tragedies? "Huge. I moved bits across between the two shows. I spent the bulk of last year doing my text for *The Oresteia*. Then there was a gap before rehearsals began - for it to be translated into Icelandic - in which I wrote *Electra/Persona*. Which I hadn't expected to be on so quickly. I hadn't expected to be living with this crazy fucking family for so long!"

Both shows are chamber pieces - five actors in Reykjavik, four in London - so apart from the role swapping in *Electra/Persona*, there is also role play, in which the back stories of offstage characters are acted out: "It's sometimes something like a Gestalt therapy game where you play your oppressor. And 'persona' is the word for masks, for the roles we play. The king and the judge put on those robes

It's one hinged work: Bergman in the first half and Sophocles in the second half



▲ **Sister act**
Cate Blanchett
and Nina Hoss

TOBIAS SCHWARZ/
AFP/GETTY

▼ **Bleak house**
The Oresteia,
directed by
Benedict
Andrews, at the
National Theatre,
Reykjavík, Iceland

OWEN FIENE

and play those roles. How does theatre critique all these power relationships? But in another way, how does theatre allow us to interrogate all those roles we play in our own lives, our psyche and our dream lives?"

From the meeting room at the National Theatre where we talk, it's a short walk to Christopher Nolan's film *The Odyssey* at the BFI Southbank or to Simon Stone's *The Oresteia* at The Bridge. If the descendants of the ancient Greek writers were on royalties, they would all have private jets. "Yes! I think they're coming back at the moment because in these times of big political and moral crisis, we need them. The reason we are digging in this Greek rubble and soil is that these plays were made in an imperial warring empire that was first triumphant and then later broke apart. And we are watching that with American imperialism now."

"We grew up with the idea that the US - our Rome, our Athens - was a military might but also a cultural might. And it's breaking apart. So we go back to a culture that lived through wars but also gave us philosophy and theatre and gave Freud the Oedipus myth for unpacking a family. And these plays should also make us question notions of law and justice."

There is an increasingly strong Australian directorial presence in London. As well as Stone, whose *Oresteia* follows his *Phaedra* and *The Lady From The Sea*, Kip Williams has frequently worked in the city - recently on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Dracula* and *The Maids*. Does Andrews have a WhatsApp group or reunion barbecues with his fellow expats? "Not really. But Kip was my assistant director. Simon acted in a production of mine, rotating in a glass box in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* We all know each other and have collaborators that we share."

Andrews, Stone and Williams all visually or structurally disrupt classic texts - is that an Australian thing? A sort of textual anticolonialism or republicanism? "When I did my first *Three Sisters* in Sydney, the [Chekhov] tradition was still lace and linen. I got letters saying: 'You've taken Coca-Cola and poured it into a vat of fine malt whisky.' Barrie Kosky was doing something similar, and we possibly were a battering ram against the conservatism of Australian state theatre then. But I'd worked a lot in Germany, where radical rethinking is what the director does, so it never made sense to me to be 'faithful' to classics. What does that even mean? I don't think of it as disrupting classics. I'm trying to access the mythic power in the piece, X-ray the inner meaning." ●

MARK LAWSON IS A GUARDIAN WRITER AND A BROADCASTER. *Electra/Persona* is at the National Theatre, London, from 19 August to 10 October

When pop's young guns went to China

In 1985 Wham! were the first western group to tour the People's Republic. Andrew Ridgeley recalls the trip and the original documentary

By Chris Tryhorn

▼ Make it big

'I think it counts as a historical event' ... Wham! at the Great Wall

PETER CHARLESWORTH/
LIGHTROCKET/GETTY

There has always been something surreal about Wham!'s 1985 trip to China. George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley looked like alien visitors on the streets of Beijing, their bouffant hair and flamboyant outfits setting them apart from the Mao jackets and drab uniforms of the Chinese people they encountered.

Now the full strangeness of the duo's brief trip, which made them the first western pop act to play in the country, is explored in a fascinating documentary film, *Wham! 10 Days in China*. Using previously unseen archive footage and featuring new interviews with many of the people involved in the tour, it shows the extraordinary impact Wham!'s two concerts had on their Chinese audience, as well as providing a snapshot of a country on the brink of great change.

Yet for Michael and Ridgeley, the tour was less about expanding cultural horizons and more about hardheaded commercial logic: as master-minded by their manager, Simon Napier-Bell, it was designed to create such an international sensation that they would be catapulted to top-tier status in the US without having to undergo the slog of a 90-date arena tour. "And it worked," says Ridgeley, now 63 and white-haired, when we meet on a warm summer's day in central London.

"When the idea was originally proposed to George and myself, I thought it didn't stand a cat's chance in hell ... but it did ultimately achieve our aim. We were on national news in the States, we were in the newspapers."

The film shows Wham! performing their hits in Beijing and Guangzhou, as well as dealing with the many other demands placed on them - having to make polite speeches at a banquet with Chinese officials, for example. Michael

clearly found it hard to put up with a reception at the British embassy - "the formality, the small talk, the artificial nature of the meeting", Ridgeley says. For his part, Ridgeley bridled at the demands of the press, refusing to take his sunglasses off at a photoshoot on the Great Wall.

There was certainly a strange atmosphere at the Beijing concert: the audience, who had little idea of what to expect, had been told to stay in their seats, and the band walked out to silence; while some people did get up to dance, one man was taken away by the police for getting too exuberant. Even playing their song *Freedom* could have been construed as a political act.

But for some Chinese fans, the tour provided revelatory exposure to western music. "I think it counts as a historical event," says Cheng Fangyuan, the singer who performed Chinese-language versions of Wham!'s songs on the tapes handed out to ticket holders. "It was like opening a window."

The reason there is so much original footage of the tour is because Wham!'s management had arranged for a documentary to be made about it. In one of the most peculiar hirings in film history, the man they chose to oversee the film was Lindsay Anderson, the high-minded director of *This Sporting Life* and *O Lucky Man!*, who was then 61 and at a low ebb in his career.

The partnership proved to be an unhappy one: Anderson and Wham! did not take to each other, and the director was fired six months later, when the band rejected the film he presented to them.

"I thought it was bloody ludicrous," says Ridgeley. "Someone like him, with his cinematic pedigree, was just not the right fit for Wham!. He only did it for the money - his letters on the subject make it very clear."

Anderson himself appears on camera in footage used for the new film. There is an excruciatingly revealing moment later on when Anderson, walking with a stick, approaches Michael from behind and claps him on the shoulder, while the star is holding court; Michael very conspicuously fails to turn round to acknowledge him.

The raw footage that Anderson's crew had shot lay in storage for decades. No one had reopened the 100-plus cans containing the original reels of Super 16 film until director Mike Christie started work in September 2024. He and his team discovered more than 20 hours of footage.

Wham! 10 Days in China is the third documentary about the band in recent years, following Netflix's *Wham!* (2023) and the BBC's *Wham!: Last Christmas Unwrapped* (2024).

Ridgeley hopes there can be further projects to keep Wham!'s music alive. "Fortunately we've got a really great catalogue of songs that assist us in that. All good music transcends generations and Wham!'s is no exception."

CHRIS TRYHORN IS A MEDIA AND
CULTURE JOURNALIST

Wham! 10 Days in China is on worldwide
cinematic release and on BBC iPlayer in the UK





'Ethio-jazz is a beautiful science'

Mulatu Astatke spent decades building his distinct, mesmeric sound. At 82, he's still finding new directions - and he wants recognition for his country's cultural output

By Geneva Abdul

▲ **Under a spell**
The 'father of Ethio-jazz' pictured in 2024

ALEXIS MARYON

► **Bass pleasures**
A session for the album *Mulatu* of Ethiopia in 1972

MULATU ASTATKE

Do you know the Metro club?" I feign recognition to the 82-year-old father of Ethio-jazz, Mulatu Astatke, who knows London's vanished haunts better than I do (the Soho venue closed down decades ago). By then he had immersed himself in the city's 60s jazz scene, befriending Ronnie Scott and the saxophonist Joe Harriott, with whom he occasionally jammed across Soho's clubs, as well as musicians from Africa and the Caribbean.

Audiences around the world have since fallen under the spell of his otherworldly music. We meet days after Astatke's performance at London's Royal Festival Hall in June, which is expected to be his last in the UK. Like much of his music, he's difficult to place at first. Dressed in all black, he blends into an armchair in the almost empty lounge of a north London hotel with art deco flourishes. It was beautiful to see the packed audience appreciating Ethiopian jazz, he tells me.

But it wasn't easy trying to do something new. The jazz he has built across more than a dozen albums is mesmeric, layering the distinct pentatonic scales of traditional Ethiopian music with western-style jazz and funk, and infectious Afro-Latin rhythms. He weaves in traditional instruments - the *krar*, *masenqo* and *kebero* - as

well as religious chants dating back to the fourth century. "Ethio-jazz is a beautiful science," he says, leaning back into his chair. "You can hear jazz, you can hear 12th notes, you can hear the 5th notes and everything all combined together."

Long before the Ethiopian giant honed his sound, he was sent by his parents to a boarding school in Wrexham, north Wales, at 16, set on studying aeronautical engineering. It was there he picked up the trumpet and was encouraged towards a career in music. Subsequent spells at London's Trinity College of Music and Boston's Berklee College of Music, as its first ever African student, followed.

Throughout the late 60s, Astatke shuttled between New York - where his group, the Ethiopian Quintet, recorded the albums *Afro-Latin Soul 1 & 2* - and Addis Ababa, where he began recording singles for Amha Records, the country's first independent label, in 1969. "I really wanted to be different, I wanted to be myself, I wanted to be Mulatu," he says of the years spent honing his sound. "Then once I created Ethio-jazz, I became myself."

His Ethio-jazz is rooted within the musical culture of a country that, unlike many of its neighbours, has enjoyed independence for most of the last 2,000 years (with the exception of a brief Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941). Astatke had returned to Addis with his own vibraphone and electric keyboards, to a golden age of nightlife and music under Emperor Haile Selassie's reign (think saxophonist Getatchew Mekurya, singer Mahmoud Ahmed and keyboardist Hailu Mergia, to name a few), which served as fertile ground for experimentation.

The era of a famously wild nightlife under Selassie came to an end when the emperor was deposed by a Marxist regime in 1974 and a repressive period followed for nearly two decades under the Derg, in which hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians were killed, jailed or exiled. My questions about Astatke's performances for Selassie - and life under Ethiopia's Communist junta - are met with reticence: "I have no involvement with the military, I have no involvement with politics, I have no involvement with nobody. I live peacefully." →



Astatke wants to ensure that Ethiopia's cultural contributions don't go unnoticed. Speak with the musician long enough and each conversation will inevitably bend to the country's "bush people".

In the 1990s, Astatke visited various Ethiopian indigenous communities - the Derashe in the south and Gambella, home to the Nilotic Anuak people. The high respect he holds for them is palpable: "The bush people created Mulatu, because I became a musician by listening to the *masenqo*."

His manager, sitting at the table with us, gets out his laptop and pulls up a joyous performance by Astatke with members of the Derashe tribe, one of the several communities he brought to the studio in the 1990s. A second video, from the 1970s, shows him performing with traditional musicians playing the *krar*. "I became a musician by listening to these people," he says, "they created me."

Astatke will soon return to Addis Ababa where he's expecting an audience at the African Jazz Village he opened in 2013, now run by his son. The

▼ Good vibes

Astatke in Times Square in 1972

COURTESY OF
MULATU ASTATKE

venue draws international visitors and spotlights local musicians. What's next? He toys with the idea of playing new music at the club in Addis. His most recent album, *Mulatu Plays Mulatu*, was a new arrangement of his classics with his UK band, but his next will feature musicians from "the bush" as well as those in Addis. But there is no name for the project yet, he insists - it is still a work in progress.

"Promoting Ethiopia, promoting our cultural people to the world, that's what makes me so great and happy," he says. "It took me years and years, but finally we made it." Only then, do I see a smile beneath Astatke's serious demeanour. "Give respect to Africa," he says again, "and the bush people."

GENEVA ABDUL IS A GUARDIAN NEWS REPORTER
Mulatu Plays Mulatu is out now on Strut Records



MUSIC

The Outlaw Cherie Lee & Other Western Tales

Shaboozey

(American Dogwood/Empire)

★★★★☆

If Shaboozey never released another note, his place in history would be assured. A guest appearance on Beyoncé's album *Cowboy Carter* was followed by his A Bar Song (Topsy) becoming the biggest-selling country single of 2024. Such success has led him to swing for the fences with this 20-track concept album - accompanied by a three-issue comic - featuring interstitial tracks: and narration by actors Jamie Foxx, Teyana Taylor and Sam Elliott.

While there is a pivot away from pop into country's heartlands, *Cowgirl* and *Born to Die* are charming attempts to replicate his biggest hit. *Bullets and Blades*, meanwhile, is a beautiful duet with R&B star Kehlani while *If I Was an Outlaw* has saloon-bar piano and *Sweet Revenge* goes country rock.

Part of Shaboozey's USP has gone with his decision to dial down the rap influence in his vocals; there's a leap in excitement from the hip-hop-inspired *Til Sunday*, but *The Outlaw Cherie Lee* sounds not like an artist destabilised by a huge hit but the work of an artist digging in for the long haul. *Alexis Petridis*

FILM

Spider-Man: Brand New Day

Dir: Destin Daniel Cretton

★★★★☆

Tom Holland is maturing in the role of Spider-Man. But is the role maturing with him? This film is a reset. At the end of the last movie, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, Peter Parker (Holland) erased everyone's knowledge that he is, in fact, Spider-Man, including his goofy best friend Ned Leeds (Jacob Batalon) and the love of his life MJ (Zendaya). So now he is simply back where he started.

Spidey has to tackle a sinister entity possessing the bodies of important people - such as the villainous Scorpion (Michael Mando) - with a view to infiltrating the department of Damage Control, run by Bill Metzger, played by the excellent Trammel Tillman (from TV's *Severance*). It coincides with new physical and mental health issues for Parker. Headaches appear to take our hero to what I can only describe as the David Cronenberg zone.

To tackle these crises, Parker/Spidey consults Black Widow (an amusing Florence Pugh) and an ageing Dr Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo), AKA the Hulk. And Spider-Man finds himself in a fractious frenemy-bromance with Frank "Punisher" Castle (Jon Bernthal).

Zendaya saves this film, rescuing it from silliness and the generic *deja vu* overfamiliarity that is always threatening to sink it. Her naturally relaxed style gives the proceedings a boost. Director Destin Daniel Cretton gets the best out of her.

Otherwise, things are the same in Spideyworld. And *Brand New Day*, like all MCU movies, gravitates towards apocalyptic but temporary destruction. It's an entertaining spectacle, but a more radical reboot is needed. *Peter Bradshaw*
On general release

Podcast of the week *The Positive Distraction Podcast*

While he is best known for his No 1 *Ladies' Detective Agency* novels, Alexander McCall Smith has a soft spot for short stories. His new series features short original works that he hopes will make listeners feel better about the world, beginning with a tale inspired by a friend's miniature helicopter landing pad. *Hannah J Davies*



COMMENTARY

Start a new chapter and learn to read again

We pick up fewer books than ever before – blame our smartphone habits – so could the answer be a couch-to-5k for reading?

By Naomi Alderman

▲ **Long read**
Put down your phone and pick up a book

ALINA RUDYA/BELL COLLECTIVE/GETTY

Do you feel that it's harder to read than it used to be? Not harder to read emails, texts and social media posts, of course. We're reading those all day long. Harder to sit down and lose yourself in a book? How long is it since you even sat down with a weekend newspaper and read it cover to cover? Do you feel that you used to have a life-sustaining reading habit, everything from fun popcorn novels to serious nonfiction, classic and contemporary, many genres and writers, but somehow it's gone away? It doesn't feel like a decision that you made. It just happened.

I feel like that. I'm a novelist and I present programmes about thinking on the BBC, and yet even I am finding that I'm reading less than I used to. I hate this feeling. I still have the habit of acquiring books, buying them, getting them from libraries, being sent them. And I do still read. Compared with many people, I probably read an enormous amount, but I know it's not as much as I used to read. And I know where the time has gone. It is, of course, the damn phones.

The other day I was sitting with a friend who is a doctor and an expert in public health – that is, large-scale interventions that might improve the health of millions of people by a tiny bit. I found myself saying: "I don't think it's a coincidence that smartphones are about the same size and shape as a packet of cigarettes." We talked about how the really massive public health crisis from tobacco was caused by the arrival of cheap mass-market cigarettes, which you could smoke endlessly without having to do the ritual of emptying, cleaning and refilling your pipe, and which were not as expensive as cigars. We talked about how people didn't know, when they started smoking those cheap mass-market

cigarettes during the first world war, how deadly they would be. It's not our fault.

In the trenches in the first world war, men smoked cigarettes to steady their nerves. During the pandemic, when we couldn't speak to each other in person, we all got glued to our smartphones. It's not our fault, but we are going to have to fix it now.

The problems of people not reading are well documented. Students are apparently arriving at university unable to read a whole book. A 2024 report by the OECD found that literacy has declined or stagnated in most developed countries. In his forthcoming book, *The New Dark Ages*, James Marriott traces the problems for society that are coming out of a lack of literacy. Marriott argues that when we're not reading, we're increasingly unable to follow complex arguments and find the problems with them. We tend to be more swayed by cartoonish figures with simple slogans we can repeat. We will believe gossip rather than thinking through intellectual ideas.

It's a public health crisis of intellectual health. I thought about a couch-to-5k programme for reading. When I mentioned the idea on my Substack newsletter, Whatever Works, readers bit my hand off with excitement. It suddenly seemed very urgent.

So I've designed a programme. Eight weeks, with three separate tracks. Over eight weeks, we are working ourselves back to reading half an hour every day, with two or three longer sessions during the week. There are also tracks for people who just want to be reading 20 minutes a day, and for readers who know that they are shying away from the more challenging stuff they want to be tackling.

The response has been extraordinary. After the first week, people already say they're finding their morning routine goes more quickly now they're not brain-fogged from scrolling first thing, that reading in stressful times is making them feel calmer, and that they can watch a long film without being tempted to look at their phone. They are rediscovering the simple joy of being gripped by a great book after as few as two or three days of working on this together. Fans have put together homemade digital and printable trackers to keep themselves motivated. Teachers are already asking me how to introduce this idea into schools.

It's really exciting to find out how easy it is to put this right. The programme is running right now, and you're not too late to join. Put down your phone, pick up a book, and read for 10 minutes. That's day one.

There is so much joy in books, and it's all still there waiting for us. All we have to do is take it back from the technology billionaires, one day of reading at a time.

NAOMI ALDERMAN IS AN AUTHOR, BROADCASTER AND GAMES WRITER

FICTION

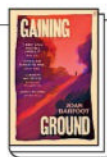
A cabin of her own Half a century on, this landmark novel of a runaway mother is thrillingly original

By Anne Enright

Book of the week

Gaining Ground

By Joan Barfoot



There is a growing literature of maternal flight: novels about women who leave not just their husbands but also the children they have made. In the real world, men are the more frequent deserters; the connection of the father to family life is seen as contingent, while motherhood is revered as an intrinsic state. This means that women who “un-mother” themselves are doing something impossible: the connection between a woman and her child is not just emotional, but also creational. Joan Barfoot understands the inside-out nature of the logic involved in maternal obligation: “she created these other people and their need for her,” says Abra, the abandoning mother of *Gaining Ground*, “and now she must fulfil them.” Abra neglects to fulfil her children or their needs. The novel is rigorously and meditatively about the business of separation, which is also the business of becoming a single and undivided self.

Gaining Ground came out in Canada in 1978, under the title *Abra*, before it was published in the UK under the current title by the Women’s Press in 1980. This was around the time Barfoot’s fellow Canadian Alice Munro began to write her adulterous, runaway women, whose instinct for freedom chimed so well with the feminism of the day. Abra is not sprung from domesticity by her desire for another man, however, nor does she return to her children, as Leda in Elena Ferrante’s *The Lost Daughter* does, after years spent regaining what she had lost. Abra is closer to the protagonist in Cathy Sweeney’s recent *Breakdown*, who has no single answer to the question of why she left her

former life: In Japan, Sweeney writes, “So many people disappear that there is a word for them – *johatsu*. It translates as evaporated people.”

These novels cannot fully resist the question of whether the bolting mother is a monster or a victim of societal expectation. *Gaining Ground* was written before any of them and, already, Barfoot was wise enough to refuse the terms of the debate: Abra never questions the morality of becoming her true self.

The novel begins with the arrival of a young woman at Abra’s cabin in the woods, nine years after she drove away from her old life. Abra can barely remember who the girl is, or who she herself used to be. Then, a moment of recognition – it is her 18-year-old daughter, Katie.

Katie’s arrival tips Abra into a recollection of her lovely, ordered home in Toronto; her marriage; and her two children. Her first baby, a son, provoked a fierce sense of attachment. Her second child seemed less of a miracle: “she was a baby, beautiful, and she was mine and Stephen’s and we had created her, but it seemed natural now”.

The story may be about maternal ambivalence, depression, the loss of meaning, but it always revolves around ideas of truth and pretence. Abra’s life does not feel “real”. Barfoot delivers about 16 different kinds of dissociation without going over her own footprints or saying the same thing twice. The build to Abra’s departure has a cumulative, relentless modernist effect, but she manages to keep it human, or within the human, and we are fully convinced, when Abra sees the cabin for the first time, that this is her “home”.

She has brought no clocks and no mirror, and is at pains to avoid talking to other people. On her first day of digging a vegetable garden her hair proves bothersome and so she lops it off, blind. Abra works to grow food, gather wood and keep herself alive through the long Canadian winter. She thinks only about what is in front of her. The descriptions of work, the natural world and the changing seasons recall the self-reliance of Annie Dillard or Thoreau, who write in a transcendent spiritual tradition. Abra’s revelation is not about God’s infinite majesty, however, but about a kind of unbecoming. She wants to make a life in which she can slowly lose “my name, my memory, the labels I’d



Audiobook of the week

Helm

By Sarah Hall

Helm is the name of a strong gale in the Pennines in northern England. Sarah Hall’s *Helm* is an ambitious novel that tells stories from the wind’s perspective, and from the people on whom, through the ages, Helm has wreaked chaos.

Those figures include a Neolithic tribeswoman and seer who is building a stone circle; a “wizard priest”; and a climatologist measuring microplastics in the atmosphere. Separated by centuries, their stories are woven together, each bonded by weather.

The actor Louise Brealey teases out Helm’s playful and poetic moments as narrator.

Fiona Sturges

used, and so my sense of all words”, to arrive at a place of joy.

When Katie arrives from a world where “there are motives and angers everywhere”, Abra tries to share what she has discovered about “blankness”. She considers the way she once saw her husband and wonders, “Did I make him up?” The answer is that she invented everyone: “I simplified them. And then I reacted to what I had made up, behaved as if what I had invented was real.”

It is hard to find an ending for a book that is trying to be about nothing, so it is considerably to her credit that Barfoot manages an affecting, dramatic conclusion to Katie’s visit. *Gaining Ground* is a wonderful slow burn of a book and Barfoot’s originality and control remain exciting, nearly half a century on. It is great to see this reissue put the novel at the centre of things, where it belongs.

ANNE ENRIGHT IS AN IRISH AUTHOR

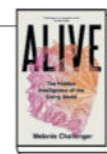
SCIENCE

Body positive An elegant look at how our fellow organisms relate to the world around them

By Edward Posnett

Alive: The Hidden Intelligence of the Living World

By Melanie Challenger



The eastern breakwater of Granton harbour is almost 1km long, and swimmers can follow its crooked finger, heading straight out into the Firth of Forth. One Thursday lunchtime, I thought: why not, let’s give it a go, and headed for its tip. I felt cold, but, as I progressed, I seemed to grow strangely warmer. I did not notice the complaints from my body: the creeping numbness that proceeded from my fingers to my elbow, nor the coldness of my pee. Only by the time I exited the water, club footed and claw handed, did it hit me that I was hypothermic.

The irony of this reckless exercise was that in my swim bag there was

a book by Melanie Challenger called *Alive: The Hidden Intelligence of the Living World*. It's an ambitious examination of the wisdom of bodies, a rhizomatic guide not just to our own, but also all the living forms around us: from bacteria to chimps. Her case is that we have ignored or misread the agency and purpose of bodies to our detriment; in a way it is a plea to listen to them. I wish I had read it before my ill-advised swim.

Challenger notes that her book was born out of "wild curiosity", and a sense that the "stories we were telling ourselves ... were both presumptuous and unconvincing". For her, our focus on souls, genes or minds is a distortion of reality, and we should instead direct our attention to our bodies, which have been marginalised, perhaps because they remind us of our own vulnerability and mortality. It is not that Challenger denies the importance of genes; what she questions is the lens through which we read the world.

Challenger is a poet, and her descriptions are often beautiful. She describes glacial ice as "blue sheened like an eyeball" and a Humboldt squid as "a lozenge of silver". By denigrating or ignoring bodies, she argues, we are blinded to the sophistication of other life forms, and do not afford them the respect that they deserve; we destroy habitats with little regard for the non-human life that resides there.

According to Challenger, it was Aristotle who first grasped the intelligence of bodies, though he lacked the science to support his intuitions.

I struggle to think of a book for whose subject I have felt more sympathy and excitement. But as a lay reader I found myself almost dizzied by the text. I desperately wanted to follow my guide, but I kept on feeling left behind, as the author charged into a dense thicket of ideas and scientific research.

When I got out of the water, corpse-grey and shaken, I was greeted by two women, experienced swimmers, who offered me a cup of tea and some sound guidance. I'm grateful to them and the way they could quietly read their own bodies, and mine, skilfully relating them to the world around us. In a way this book is an invitation to the reader to do something similar; to abandon the harmful readings that we have inherited, and sidestep our own self-destruction.

EDWARD POSNETT IS A WRITER BASED IN PHILADELPHIA

BIOGRAPHY

Rightward turn *A superb critical biography of Peru's Nobel laureate traces his political journey*

By Pratinav Anil

Mario Vargas Llosa
By Gerald Martin



At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?" Those words on the opening page of *Conversation in the Cathedral* announced the arrival of a writer who understood that national history could become the organising principle of fiction. At precisely the moment when Latin America was discovering the intoxicating possibilities of magical realism, Mario Vargas Llosa plumped for old-fashioned realism instead.

It was a question of sensibility as much as politics, Gerald Martin suggests in this chatty yet coolly analytical biography. He traces the path of a novelist who began by dissecting oligarchy with surgical precision and ended happily dining among its ranks, completing one of literary history's most spectacular political migrations.

Yet Martin's revisionist point is that Vargas Llosa crossed a shorter ideological distance than is often imagined. Beneath the guerrilla chic, Martin finds in Vargas Llosa an old patrician confidence in hierarchy. The "factory defect", as one university contemporary put it, was congenital: Vargas Llosa never ceased to be a "Lima posh boy".

After the 2010 Nobel prize, Vargas Llosa increasingly lent his prestige to the hard right, backing Peru's trigger-happy unelected ruler Dina Boluarte and Chile's anti-gay, anti-abortion crusader José Antonio Kast; denouncing feminism as literature's "staunchest enemy," and treating every leftward electoral twitch as a "return to caudillismo."

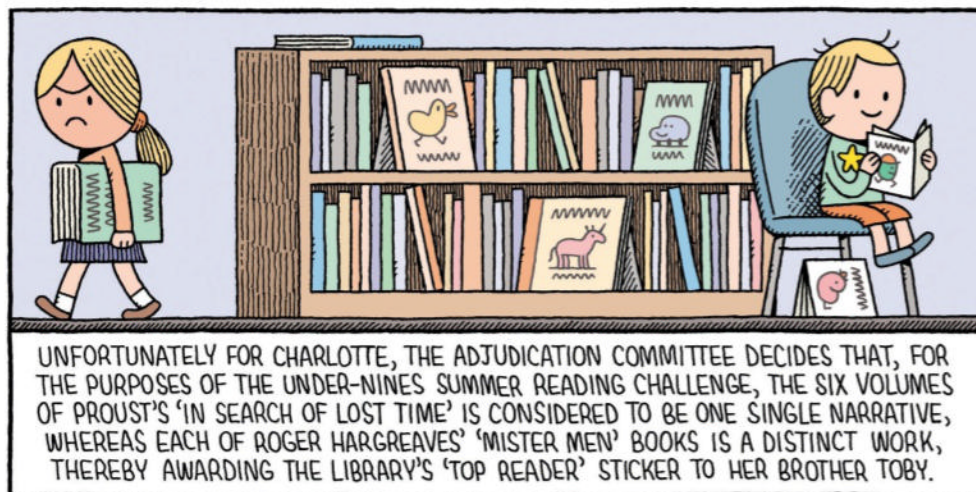
Gabriel García Márquez is the book's foil: the magician to Vargas Llosa's realist, the man who stayed on the left while his lesser rival abandoned it. Martin, now the biographer of both, is uniquely placed to reconstruct the most famous right hook in literary history. In 1976, Vargas Llosa floored García Márquez with a punch after allegedly accusing him of overstepping the mark by comforting his second wife, Patricia, during the collapse of their marriage. The punch marked more than a personal rupture. It sealed an ideological one. García Márquez later remarked that there were only "two soups on the menu": capitalism and socialism. Vargas Llosa spent the rest of his life gorging himself on the former.

PRATINAV ANIL IS A HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR



The perfect books for the beach
Authors reveal their holiday reading

TOM GAULD



THE ONE CHANGE THAT WORKED

By George Francis Lee

I gave up using shampoo and it transformed my hair

When I gave up washing my hair, the first two weeks were the worst. But I was determined to follow my barber's advice ...

In 2025 I'd not had a paid-for haircut in about five years, preferring to ask my ex to cut it with kitchen scissors in the bathroom. But now I was in my late 20s and single, and I decided it was time to look more grown up. Not knowing the first thing about looking after my hair, I felt that a trip to an establishment that offered something beyond a short back and sides – a trendy, gentrified place where a trim puts you back a cool \$50 – was sorely overdue.

"You need to stop washing your hair," my barber told me bluntly. As they ruffled through my shapeless, overgrown mop, I was warned about using too much shampoo, which can leave your hair dry, lifeless and coarse. I sat in the swivel chair feeling a bit embarrassed. My barber's words were less

a caution and more a diagnosis. I was instructed to drop shampoo immediately for at least two weeks. The dry variety was fine if I got desperate for a clean, and I could maybe use a bit of conditioner as a treat. But for the most part, water was my entire regime.

To my mum's delight and my teenage dismay, I have thick ginger hair. Years of heckling and having a name that starts with the letter G have made me and my gingeriness inseparable. For better or worse, my hair is usually the first thing someone will notice about me. I wanted to take some pride in my hair, and the knowledge that I'd unwittingly been sapping the life out of it was jarring.

Like most people, I found a daily squirt of shampoo to be as much of a ritual as brushing my teeth. It felt counterintuitive to forgo it.

The first two weeks were the worst. Advocates of the "no poo" method – ditching shampoo for water or homemade concoctions due to claims that commercial products cause repeated, unnecessary damage to your locks – often tell you that it gets worse before it gets better. There is a sort of dirty threshold you have to pass before reaping the benefits of poo-less hair, they say.

This was harder than I imagined. I would step into the shower, dunk my head under the water and reach for the bottle. A glob of apple-scented shampoo would ooze on to my scalp, then I'd have to scrape it off. A few



▲ 'Knowing I'd unwittingly been sapping the life out of my hair was jarring' ... George Francis Lee

days in and my head was crying out for a lather. But I was determined to follow my barber's advice.

I carried on, counting the days until I could wash my hair. But slowly I felt no need. Two weeks became three. Three became four. Eventually I lost track. "I can't remember the last time I washed my hair," I said to my best friend, who thought it sounded a bit gross. But my hair had never felt better. It was wavier, bouncier, glossier. The dirty, itchy feeling that had lingered during the first fortnight disappeared, and suddenly I felt as if my hair was finding a natural balance after years of endless shampooing. Until then, I hadn't realised just how dry my hair had been.

My scalp used to feel irritated, but it was one of those minor issues we all tend to leave unspoken unless they snowball into something more troubling. Shampoo seemed to have been stripping away the natural oils that were supposed to moisturise and protect my hair.

Obviously everyone's hair is different. I'm told people with fine or greasy hair don't last long without needing to shampoo. But for people with my hair type, it's not necessary.

More than a year later, my hair is shinier and curlier than ever. A wash at my quarterly haircut does me just fine, and I could probably go even longer. The apple-scented shampoo I bought a year ago remains untouched on my bathroom shelf.

GEORGE FRANCIS LEE IS A SCOTT TRUST BURSARY JOURNALIST

You have to pass a threshold before benefiting from poo-less hair

STEPHEN COLLINS



Stephen Collins



THE WEEKLY RECIPE

By Angela Hartnett

No 377

Gnudi with
roast tomato
sauce

Prep 10 min
Chill 8 hr +
Cook 1hr 10min
Serves 4

Ingredients

For the roast tomato sauce
 500g ripe plum tomatoes
 2 garlic cloves, peeled and lightly crushed
 A few thyme sprigs
 Sea salt and black pepper
 Extra-virgin olive oil
 1 small splash red-wine vinegar

For the gnudi
 250g good-quality ricotta, well-strained
 50g finely grated parmesan, plus extra for serving
 Fresh nutmeg
 250g semolina
 White pepper

To finish
 Basil leaves
 Good olive oil

To make the tomato sauce, heat the oven to 200C (180C fan)/gas 6. Put the tomatoes in a roasting tray with the garlic and thyme, season well and drizzle generously with good olive oil. Roast for 35-40 minutes, until the tomatoes collapse and lightly caramelize. Remove and discard the thyme sprigs, then blend or crush the tomatoes to your preferred consistency. Add a dash of vinegar to sharpen the flavour, then check the seasoning and keep warm in a bowl.

Meanwhile, to make the gnudi, beat the ricotta until smooth and light, then stir in the parmesan and grate in a little nutmeg to taste. Season generously, then chill for 30 minutes.

Spread half the semolina on an oven tray and the rest on a clean work surface. Roll spoonfuls of the ricotta mixture into short, roughly 1½cm-thick sausages, then cut into small pieces and shape gently into balls. Roll the gnudi lightly in the semolina on the work surface as you work, then arrange them on the semolina-covered tray.

When all the gnudi are on the tray, cover them generously with the remaining semolina, so they're almost buried. Chill overnight, if possible, or for at least several hours.

Bring a large pan of salted water to a gentle simmer, then, working in batches, drop in the gnudi and cook for three to four minutes, until they float to the surface. Lift out carefully with a slotted spoon and drain on kitchen paper.

Spoon the warm tomato sauce on to plates, arrange the gnudi on top and finish with basil leaves, more parmesan and a drizzle of olive oil.



Ready, set, go: what's the best vegetarian alternative to gelatine?

How do I substitute gelatine sheets for a vegetarian setting agent?

Sarah, Aberdeen

"The truth is, there's no exact substitute for gelatine, because it has an incredibly unique texture," says Richard Phillips, head of pastry at Timberyard in Edinburgh. There are plenty of plant-based gelling agents – "agar-agar [or just agar], gellan gum, pectin, carrageenan, locust bean gum, vege-gel... the list goes on," says Phillips – but the result will never quite be the same.

"The temperature you have to use them at is different [to gelatine]," says Philip Khoury, author of *Beyond Baking*, so his workaround is to formulate recipes that don't use gelling agents. "If, for example, I'm making a thick, pipeable cream, then I'll use cornflour," says Khoury, and manipulate it to get different textures. Let's take the panna cotta and creme brulee recipes in his first book, *A New Way to Bake*, as an example: "You get two very different textures from essentially the same recipe. The only difference being that if you pour the custard into a tray and chill it, it will set, whereas if you beat it with a whisk, it will turn into this luscious, creamy texture that's just set."

But one substitute doesn't fit all. "There are specific alternatives for specific things," says Phillips: "Reversible pectin for glazes; kuzu [root starch] to thicken sauces;

pectin to make jellies, using different dosages for different sets." Khoury, meanwhile, prefers agar for the latter. But don't expect the same result as you'd get with gelatine. As Harold McGee explains in his *On Food and Cooking*: "Agar forms gels at even lower concentrations than gelatine does, less than 1% by weight. An agar jelly is somewhat opaque and has a more crumbly texture than a gelatine jelly." A jelly made with agar won't have that joyous melt-in-the-mouth texture.

Even so, Reece Kallah, head pastry chef at Mount St Restaurant in London, uses agar in fruit puree gels, which feature in her set vanilla custard. "As a general guide, use 0.5% agar by weight of your liquid – for example, 5g agar per 1 litre of liquid." Kallah mixes the agar with a little sugar "to help it disperse evenly", before whisking it into the boiling liquid, pouring into a tray or ramekin, and leaving to set. "I still prefer gelatine – it has a softer, more delicate texture because of that lower melting point."

Stars don't always live up to their hype, and Khoury adds a word of caution. "If Sarah goes about this by saying: 'I want to swap gelatine for something else', then it won't work; if she wants success, then follow a recipe that doesn't contain gelatine." It'll likely be less faff, too.

ANNA BERRILL IS A FOOD WRITER
 Got a culinary dilemma? Email feast@theguardian.com





Notes and Queries

The long-running series that invites readers to send in questions and answers on anything and everything

QUIZ

Thomas Eaton

- 1 Which mountain range is home to the world's second-highest peak?
- 2 Which pioneer of conceptualism retired from art to play chess?
- 3 Who is the only Jesuit to become pope?
- 4 Which ancient shark grew to around 18 metres long?
- 5 Baseball is the national sport of which South American country?
- 6 Which global news organisation is based in Qatar?
- 7 In the aftermath of a scandal, who changed her family's name to Holland?



▲ What links golf balls, a corned beef sandwich and a harmonica?

ALAMY

8 Zener cards are used to test for what ability?

What links:

- 9 Banjul; Nassau; San Salvador?
- 10 Evert (5); Jaeger; Mandliková; Graf; Garrison?
- 11 Corned beef sandwich; golf balls; harmonica?
- 12 Altar Stone; Aubrey Holes; Heel Stone; Slaughter Stone; Station Stones?
- 13 Nimue and Viviane; Florence Nightingale; Elaine of Astolat for Tennyson; Bennett's Mary Shepherd?
- 14 1; 4; 3; 11; 15; 13; 17; 43?

PUZZLES

Chris Maslanka

1 Wordpool

Find the correct definition: MANJAK

- a) fruit akin to mangosteen
- b) Tom, Dick or Harry
- c) asphalt from Barbados
- d) last man standing

2 A Crucial Difference

Identify the words that differ in the letters shown:

O*** (ban)
E*** (the opposite of ban)

3 E pluribus

Rearrange the letters of A BIG THYLACINE to make a single word.

4 Cryptic

Auto biography? (3, 4)
Insect sport (7)
Herb gives flower to girl (8)

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Answers
1 Karakoram Range (K2). 2 Marcel Duchamp. 3 Pope Francis. 4 Megalodon. 5 Venezuela. 6 Al Jazeera. 7 Constance Lloyd (wife of Oscar Wilde). 8 Extrasensory perception. 9 Capitals of countries with definite article in name: The Gambia; The Bahamas; El Salvador. 10 Lost in Wimbledon singles finals v Martina Navratilova. 11 Smuggled into space on NASA missions. 12 Parts of Stonehenge site. 13 The Lady. 14 Number of letters in their names (3 to 10). Maslanka 1 (c). 2 PROSCRIPTION; PRESCRIPTION. 3 CHANGABILITY. 4 LOG BOOK, CRICKET, ROSEMARY.

CHESS

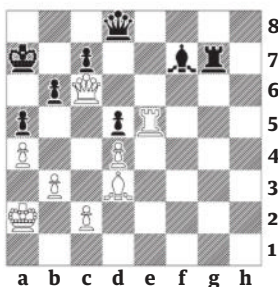
Leonard Barden

England's 11-year-old talent Bodhana Sivanandan fought her way to another world age record last Saturday. Sivanandan ended the Dole Trophy in Aix-en-Provence, France, with a historic first international master result.

Following her first round win against the reigning French champion Marc'Andria Maurizzi, she slipped to 2/5, against opposition that included two more grandmasters and an IM, before producing a late surge in the last four rounds.

Sivanandan's ninth and final round game against the rising US international master Samrug Narayanan proved to be an epic draw. A queen's pawn opening developed into a marathon rook and minor piece ending where Sivanandan was

4035 Fabiano Caruana v Ruslan Ponomarev, Dortmund 2014. White to move and win.



on the defensive. At one point the IM had a difficult win, but missed it. It took 99 moves and six hours to complete.

The minimum performance rating for an IM norm is 2450 and Sivanandan performed at 2463 against a 2420 field. She also surpassed the 2400 requirement for her second women's grandmaster norm.

A third WGM norm before age 12 years and four months would give Sivanandan the WGM title, breaking the age record set by Russia's Kateryna Lagno.

4035 1 Re7 Qxe7 2 Bb1 Kxax3 Qa8 mate

COUNTRY DIARY

ANNAGH MARSH

County Mayo, Ireland

On a sunny morning a few weeks ago, Dave Suddaby, the reserves manager with the conservation organisation BirdWatch Ireland, led me across the *machair* (plain) to where the fairy birds were nesting. "Fairy bird" is the name given to the red-necked phalarope by the Irish naturalist Robert Lloyd Praeger after he encountered the species in this area during the early 1900s.

As we walked, the habitat restoration that drew this diminutive wader back to breed here in 2015, after an absence of more than 30 years, was already casting a spell over me. The air was full of the sounds of lapwings, redshanks, corncrakes and snipes.

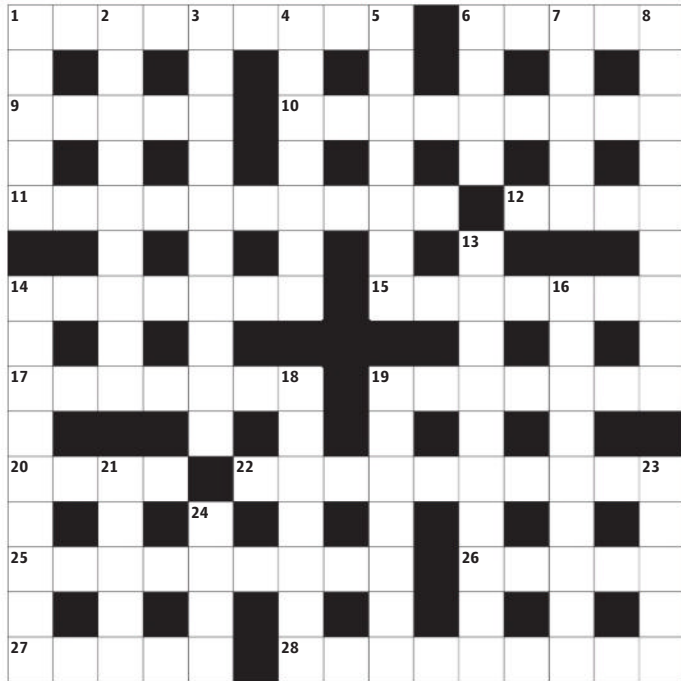
When the bird appeared, he flicked into the air and, in a blink, darted to the water. Buoyant as a cork, elegant as a dancer, the phalarope then swam in and out through the reeds, tweezer up invertebrates with his needle-like bill. After a few minutes, he flicked back to his nest hidden in the tussock sedge. As he vanished under cover, I breathed again. And waited.

It's little wonder that sightings of the fairy bird feel magical. The red-necked phalarope is a pelagic species, spending most of the year out at sea feeding on plankton. It generally nests on Arctic tundra - Annagh Marsh is its most southerly breeding location in the world. Unusually, females are the more brightly coloured sex, and males do all the parental care once the clutch is laid. Joining flocks that breed across the western hemisphere, the Irish phalaropes migrate south along the eastern seaboard of North America to the tropical Pacific.

"My" phalarope successfully hatched four chicks in late June. By now, his offspring will already be winging an ocean. *Mary Montague*



ILLUSTRATION: CLIFFORD HARPER



* All solutions published next week

The Weekly cryptic

No 30,070



By Pangakupu

Across

- 1 Rugby player lacking weight put in the shade (9)
- 6 Words to live by, not initially arse-backwards (5)
- 9 Joe, for one, allowed a padded jacket (5)
- 10 Call for monsoon? Mumbai resident dropping one in a hurry (4,5)
- 11 Tigress, with 'Yum!', mauled grumbler (6,4)
- 12 Some charity, perhaps, would be kind (4)
- 14 Showed desire to embrace one in make-up? (7)
- 15 US lawyer ready to accept thanks for information (7)
- 17 A goal almost entirely securing first place in league, in general (2,5)
- 19 Duke's decline largely involving unknown figure in French scandal (7)
- 20 Desire to lose, discarding diamonds (4)
- 22 Allowing style's suitable, but not fine (10)
- 25 Pompous Unionist blocking a timid one, mostly? That's of doubtful value (9)
- 26 Friend I'm backing to invest in a success (5)
- 27 Big noise in family group estranging nearly all? (5)
- 28 Drink in the past contributing to atmosphere in islands (9)

Down

- 1 How stamps are affixed? Crikey! (2,3)
- 2 Starry Parisian is one active in political group (9)
- 3 University brought in rare title, fantastic writing (10)
- 4 Book salvaged from rubbish daughter stored (7)
- 5 Peculiar warped wits hosted by talks provider? (7)

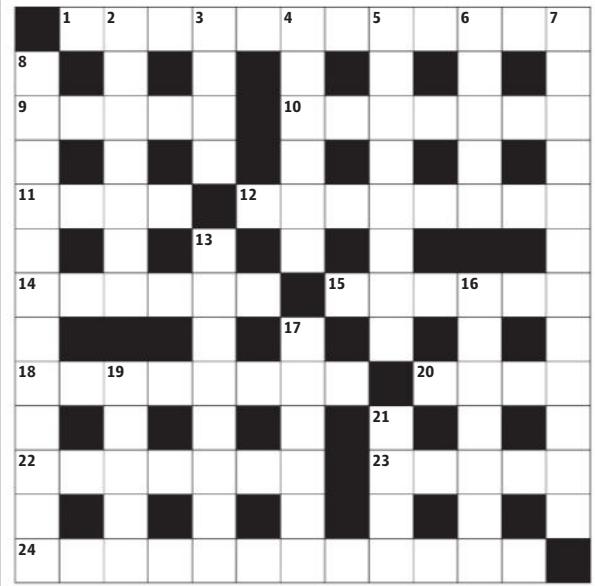
- 6 A way with meter and rhyme? (4)
- 7 Fish like the location where fish are readily shot? (5)
- 8 Stereo apt to distort musical works (9)
- 13 US actress swallowing whisky up - by the way, it's illuminating (6,4)
- 14 A chap is upset about scripture lessons being hypocritical (9)
- 16 Promoting us following cake decoration appearing to be enough (9)
- 18 Billionaire probing work unit soon (7)
- 19 Starring role involving some cut upset the old girl (7)
- 21 Government committee's firm support (5)
- 23 Unrefined Imperial measure? (5)
- 24 Eager to see name removed from a medal (4)

Solution No 30,064



Quick crossword

No 17,543



Across

- 1 Ability to endure - partying woes (anag) (7,5)
- 9 Lowest point (5)
- 10 Fake - credit card (7)
- 11 Count (on) (4)
- 12 Dangerous building (8)
- 14 What one aims for (6)
- 15 Vicar's standpoint? (6)
- 18 Direct (8)
- 20 Register - drumbeats (4)
- 22 Give apparent legitimacy to (dirty money) (7)
- 23 Evident (5)
- 24 Feeling(s) of misery (12)

Down

- 2 Little fish (7)
- 3 Long story (4)
- 4 Table cloth? (6)
- 5 Gradually stop using (something) (5,3)
- 6 Bed, buffalo or bill? (5)

7 To sum up (12)

8 Generally accepted, but not official, rule (9,3)

13 Occasional (8)

16 Accepted method (7)

17 Intense (6)

19 One may be pregnant (5)

21 Blue - feathers (4)

Solution No 17,537



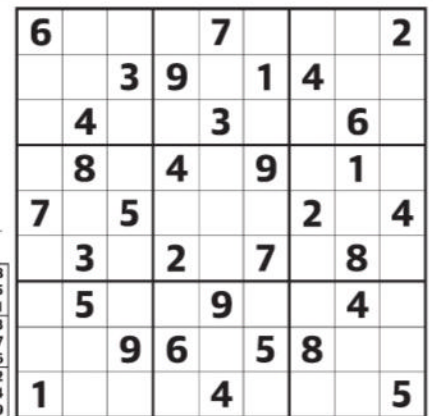
Sudoku

Easy

Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the numbers 1 to 9.

Last week's solution

6	3	2	4	5	1	7	9	8
8	7	1	6	9	2	3	4	5
5	4	9	3	7	8	2	6	1
9	8	6	7	2	4	1	5	3
4	2	3	5	1	6	9	8	7
1	5	7	9	8	3	4	2	6
7	9	8	1	4	5	6	3	2
3	1	5	2	6	9	8	7	4
2	6	4	8	3	7	5	1	9



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