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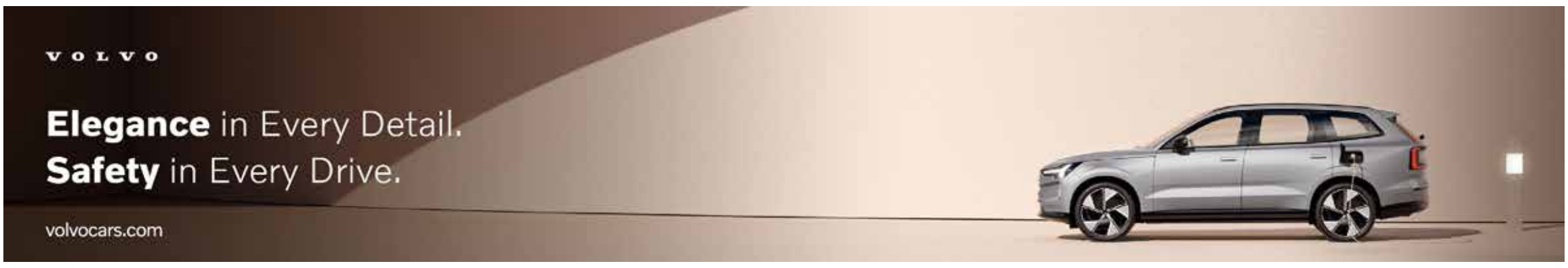

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IRAN TARGETS KUWAIT INFRA

Power, desalination plants, oil facilities hit • Soldiers, firemen, workers injured

KUWAIT: (Left) Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi chairs a meeting of the ministry's top officials and the central emergency committee. (Center and right) Minister of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy Dr Sabeeh Al-Mukhaizeem visits power generation and water desalination stations targeted by Iranian strikes. — KUNA photos

- Kuwait condemns Iranian aggression
- Fire force puts out multiple blazes
- Kuwait Airways reschedules flights
- Minister inspects damaged station
- Minister visits injured servicemen
- Army leadership checks on wounded
- Kuwait, Pak FMs discuss developments
- MoH affirms healthcare readiness
- MEW appreciates power conservation

(Left) Defense Minister Sheikh Abdullah Ali Abdullah Al-Sabah visits an injured member of the armed forces. (Center) Chief of Staff Lt Gen Khaled Al-Shuraian visits an injured serviceman. (Right) Health Ministry Undersecretary Sheikh Dr Salman Khalifa Al-Sabah visits an injured person.

KUWAIT: Kuwait on Saturday strongly condemned Iranian criminal aggression after missile and drone attacks targeted vital facilities, including another power and water desalination plant, oil sector installations and other key infrastructure, causing fires, extensive damage and injuries.

The ministry of foreign affairs said the repeated targeting of vital facilities reflects a "systematic aggressive approach" aimed at civilian objects and basic infrastructure, endangering the lives and safety of civilians in violation of international law, international humanitarian law, the UN Charter and UN Security Council Resolution 2817. The ministry held Iran fully responsible for the attack and its consequences, demanding an immediate halt to such assaults. It reaffirmed Kuwait's right to take all necessary measures to protect its security, territory and vital facilities in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

The defense ministry said the armed forces detected and intercepted ballistic missiles and hostile drones inside Kuwaiti airspace from early Saturday, adding that Iranian attacks also targeted military and security facilities as well as civilian infrastructure. Spokesman Col Saud Al-Atwan said the attacks caused fires and major damage to oil, electricity and water facilities. He added that debris from intercepted threats fell in several areas, causing material damage but no casualties.

Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said one of its vital oil facilities was repeatedly targeted, resulting in significant material losses and some injuries. The injured were evacuated and the incident was being handled in coordination with relevant state authorities. Kuwait Fire Force said several firefighters and an oil sector employee were injured while battling fires caused by the attacks. Five firefighting teams, supported by oil sector firefighting units, responded to one site, while three teams handled another. The Fire Force also dealt with three separate fires that broke out as a result of falling shrapnel in a number of residential areas.

The ministry of electricity, water and renewable energy said another power generation and water desalination station was hit, causing a fire in one of its components. Emergency procedures were activated, including temporarily shutting down some generation units as a precaution to protect the facility and workers.

Electricity Minister Dr Sabeeh Al-Mukhaizeem inspected the damaged station, accompanied by ministry officials, to review emergency response efforts and technical measures. He was briefed on the six-hour firefighting operation, which successfully brought the blaze under control, and on ongoing damage assessments and rehabilitation work.

Al-Mukhaizeem had also visited the site of an earlier attack on another power and water facility, where he reviewed damage assessment, emergency measures and plans to restore affected units. He praised firefighting, engineering and technical teams for their rapid response and stressed the continuation of repair work to restore full operational capacity.

Spokesperson Fatima Johar Hayat said on Saturday that the commitment and cooperation of citizens and residents to rationalize electricity consumption has enabled the ministry to overcome the difficult phase witnessed by the electricity system on Saturday and Friday.

She said the commitment and cooperation of citizens and residents to rationalize electricity consumption has also had a significant impact on reducing electricity consumption from the expected levels and contributed to supporting the efforts of the technical teams to maintain the stability of the system and the continuity of service, thanking citizens, residents, all government agencies, state institutions, the media and the private sector for their cooperation in spreading awareness messages to rationalize consumption.

Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi affirmed the readiness of the country's healthcare system, including hospitals, primary healthcare centers and medical facilities, to deal with current developments, stressing that services continue normally with adequate supplies of medicines, medical equipment and strategic reserves.

Dr Al-Awadhi made the remarks while chairing an expanded meeting at the health ministry's crisis center, attended by Undersecretary Sheikh Dr Salman Khalifa Al-Sabah, ministry officials, key department heads and members of the central emergency committee. The meeting reviewed the latest developments, healthcare preparedness, emergency response plans, coordination mechanisms and precautionary measures to ensure rapid action and uninterrupted medical services.

Meanwhile, Defense Minister Sheikh Abdullah Ali Abdullah Al-Sabah visited injured members of the Kuwait armed forces who were wounded in attacks targeting military installations. He was briefed by medical teams on their condition and the treatment being provided. Chief of Staff Lt Gen Khaled Al-Shuraian and Deputy Chief of Staff Maj Gen Sabah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah also visited the injured servicemen, expressing appreciation for medical teams and wishing them a speedy recovery.

Health Ministry Undersecretary Sheikh Dr Salman visited several people injured in the Iranian attacks to review their condition and the medical care being provided. He was briefed by medical teams on treatment procedures carried out since the injured arrived at hospitals. The health ministry said medical teams were providing comprehensive care to those injured in the attacks, with emergency, surgical, orthopedic and intensive care departments responding under established contingency plans.

The General Staff of the Kuwait Armed Forces said air defense systems were continuing to confront hostile missile and drone attacks, warning residents that any explosions heard were caused by interception operations and urging the public to follow official safety instructions. Kuwait Airways announced the temporary suspension of takeoff and landing operations at Kuwait International Airport and the rescheduling of most flights, urging passengers to follow updates through official channels.

Foreign Minister Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah also held a phone call with Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar to discuss regional developments, efforts to reduce escalation and diplomatic initiatives to preserve regional security and stability. – KUNA

GOAT and kid: Messi, Yamal come full circle

EAST RUTHERFORD: When Lionel Messi and Lamine Yamal line up against each other in the World Cup final on Sunday it will mark the closing of an incredible full circle moment that has been two decades in the making. In 2007, a 20-year-old Messi and Yamal, born in July of that year, posed together in a photo organized by UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), the global agency which provides humanitarian and development to children and mothers worldwide.

Yamal's family had entered and won a raffle to pose with a Barcelona player for a 2008 UNICEF calendar. In one photo from the shoot, Messi is seen helping Yamal's mother, Sheila Ebana, give the smiling five-month-old boy a bath in a blue plastic tub. "The photographer, Joan Monfort, has said that Lamine Yamal stole Messi's heart because he was always smiling," UNICEF Catalan's Laia Ruich said on the organization's website.

Fast forward nearly 20 years, and now Messi and Yamal are sharing football's greatest stage. Spain star Yamal, the teenage prodigy who has followed in Messi's footsteps at Barcelona, has only just turned 19. Argentina captain Messi, 39, will be playing in his third World Cup final in what is almost certainly likely to be his last appearance in the tournament.

"That photo is incredible," Messi said at a fan event in Manhattan on Friday. "I took a picture with him when he was a baby ... the fact that we're both playing in the World Cup now is crazy." Messi said while he has a soft spot for Yamal given his association with his former club Barcelona, it will not detract him from the task in hand on Sunday — beating Spain.

"I wish him luck because his success will be Barcelona's success, (but) we'll try to keep him from playing at his best. He's 19 years old and has his whole career ahead of him. I wish him the best, but we'll give it our all to ensure he doesn't become champion this time."

Photographer Monfort describes Messi and Yamal's first meeting and subsequent World Cup final date as "a true miracle of destiny". "If you wrote this in a film it would not seem possible," Monfort told the BBC.

Even Yamal's Spain teammate, Mikel Merino, said Friday he initially believed the photo was an AI-generated hoax when he first saw it. Messi and Yamal now both serve as UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors. "Growing up, all I had was a family, a ball, a park and a dream," Yamal said in June. — AFP

BARCELONA: 20-year-old Lionel Messi bathes 6-month-old Lamine Yamal during a UNICEF photo shoot by Joan Monfort in the dressing room of the Camp Nou stadium on Oct 31, 2007.

Judicial reforms drive faster and smarter justice system

Kuwait modernizes justice system with digital courts and faster case resolution

KUWAIT: Kuwait has made significant strides in modernizing its judicial system through a series of legislative and administrative reforms aimed at improving efficiency, reducing case backlogs and embracing digital technologies while safeguarding judicial guarantees and data confidentiality. Since May last year, the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Judicial Council have implemented a broad reform agenda focused on accelerating litigation, tackling the accumulation of appeals and judicial notifications, expanding electronic litigation and updating laws governing judicial procedures.

A major step came in July 2025, when the Ministry of Justice announced the establishment of new appeal circuits at the Court of Cassation in cooperation with the Supreme Judicial Council and the Civil Service Commission. The initiative was designed to address the growing backlog of appeals and expedite case resolution following studies that demonstrated the effectiveness of specialized appeal circuits. The reforms have yielded measurable results. According to Supreme Judicial Council President and Court of Cassation President Counselor Dr Adel Boursli, the Court of Cassation decided 17,434 appeals during the 2025-2026 judicial year, up 17.7 percent from 14,816 appeals in the previous judicial year.

The Supreme Judicial Council said the court continues to implement its plan to eliminate the backlog of appeals in line with the directives of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Addressing the Court of Cassation's General Assembly in May, Boursli praised the judiciary's efforts in resolving a large number of long-pending appeals. The Misdemeanor Appeals Chambers at the Court of First Instance also recorded substantial progress, deciding 36,093 appeals during the 2025-2026 judicial year, representing a 203 percent increase compared with the previous year. As a result, the waiting period for appeal hearings has been reduced from more than two years to no more than two months from the date of filing.

Meanwhile, the Court of Appeal resolved more appeals than it received during the same judicial year. Between Oct 1, 2025, and the end of April 2026, the court received 31,790 appeals and resolved 33,195 cases, including appeals carried over from previous years. The Ministry of Justice has also overhauled the judicial notification system, long regarded as a major source of litigation delays. Justice Minister Nasser Al-Sumait said nearly 36 percent of dismissed cases were previously linked to incomplete notification procedures.

He noted that electronic integration with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the Public Authority for Civil Information, completed in March, increased the availability of company contact information from less than one percent to approximately 67 percent. Contact details are now available for around 162,000 of Kuwait's 242,000 registered companies. Al-Sumait said the introduction of electronic notifications through the "Sahel Aamal" platform marks a significant advancement by linking judicial notices to official databases, improving service accuracy and accelerating legal proceedings.

The ministry has also equipped process servers with electronic tools that digitally link notifications to case files, litigants and procedural requirements, reducing paperwork and improving efficiency. The adoption of official electronic seals for ministry-issued documents has further strengthened the authenticity and reliability of digital judicial records. In criminal proceedings, Kuwait has significantly expanded electronic notification services. Ministry statistics showed that 27,665 electronic criminal notifications were issued between June 7 and July 9, 2026, compared with just 12 during the same period a year earlier, reflecting the country's transition toward fully electronic criminal procedures.

Earlier this month, Kuwait launched the first phase of its electronic litigation system for penal orders, the country's first platform to issue fully electronic criminal judgments in such cases. Penal orders account for around 20 percent of all court cases annually, making the new system a key milestone in the digital transformation of the judiciary. Al-Sumait said the platform allows penal orders to be processed electronically from filing and judicial review to issuance and official notification through approved legal channels. The system is expected to shorten litigation timelines, reduce dependence on paper documents and help prevent criminal cases from lapsing due to procedural delays.

The reforms have also been supported by a series of legislative amendments. Decree-Law No 71 of 2025 amended provisions of the Civil and Commercial Procedures Law to simplify litigation, particularly for lower-value claims, which account for approximately 75 percent of cases before lower courts. The law authorizes creditors to notify debtors through approved electronic communication methods capable of being stored and retrieved, in addition to traditional registered mail, paving the way for wider use of digital legal services.

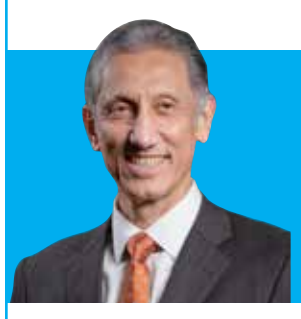
Decree-Law No. 133 of 2025 further strengthened the legal framework for electronic litigation by establishing dedicated case preparation offices responsible for managing electronic case files from registration until the first hearing. The offices verify documents, complete case files and communicate with litigants electronically. The legislation also seeks to curb the misuse of judicial recusal requests, which had been employed by some litigants to prolong legal disputes and delay proceedings.

In criminal justice, Decree-Law No. 157 of 2025 introduced amendments allowing judges to review penal order applications electronically and issue rulings bearing approved electronic signatures. The law grants electronic signatures and documents the same legal validity as their paper counterparts, provided they comply with the Electronic Transactions Law and its implementing regulations.

According to the Ministry of Justice, the combined legislative and procedural reforms have already produced tangible results. During the second half of 2025, the total number of court cases fell by approximately 21 percent compared with the same period in 2024. Payment orders also declined by around 40 percent, dropping from approximately 56,000 cases to about 34,000 over the same period, reflecting greater efficiency across Kuwait's justice system. — KUNA

In my view

Read before you break



By Taleb Alrefai

"What is on your mind right now?" Simple question. Bottomless answer. Science tells us that between 6,000 and 50,000 thoughts cross the human mind every single day, some flickering like sparks, others taking root for months. More unsettling still: Nearly 80 percent carry a negative charge. Not because human beings are drawn to darkness by nature, but because this age does its quiet, relentless work on us. News floods in without pause. Social media strips away inner stillness. What remains is an unbearable noise, and in the face of it, genuine peace is no longer a luxury. It is survival.

Humanity has always known this, long before science gave it a name. Since the earliest stirrings of consciousness, people have reached toward the written word as though it were a rope thrown into the well of their turmoil. A Quranic verse captures this with striking precision. In Surah Ar-Ra'd, the Chapter of Thunder, we read: "Verily, in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest." That this declaration appears in the chapter named after one of nature's most terrifying sounds is no coincidence. Against the very backdrop of storm and upheaval, the verse insists: Tranquility is possible.

The heart has an anchor that holds even in the worst of tempests. And in reading, in the act of reaching toward the word, a heart on the verge of breaking finds its way back. It was inevitable, then, that this ancient human instinct would become an organized science. In 1904, at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, a librarian named E Kathleen Jones laid the foundations of an unprecedented practice: Reading as a tool for psychological healing. Twelve years later, "The Atlantic" published the first formal documentation of the concept, and a discipline was born: Bibliotherapy. It spread quietly through human societies. And the more life grew complex, the more wars consumed human beings, the more people turned, almost instinctively, to the refuge of the book.

Early in my own journey with reading, two sayings by Al-Jahiz lodged in my memory and never left. That towering Arab intellect, who lived between 775 and 869 AD, said with a master's economy: "Reading is a partnership with scholars in their minds." And: "Reading is another's intellect that you add to your own." Two sentences carrying the entire secret of the act: When you read, you do not merely receive information, you borrow another soul, another experience, another life and fold it into your own.

Science today confirms what Al-Jahiz understood twelve centuries ago. A 2011 study published in the Annual Review of Psychology, built on functional MRI scans, reached an extraordinary conclusion: "When a person reads about an experience, the same neural regions activate as if they were living it themselves." The brain's network for reading stories is the same network we use to understand what another human being feels. Reading, then, is not passive reception. It is a parallel life; a life lived within a life.

Here lies the greatness of art at its highest: To lift you out of your own world, with all its weight, its wounds, its suffocation, and cast you into another that you inhabit with every sense you possess, as though it happened to you. That is the miracle a true book performs. And that is the wisdom upon which bibliotherapy rests: the word holds genuine power to offer the burdened human being a moment of breath; to allow someone drowning in their own pain to glimpse, however briefly, a fresh human experience, and return to themselves a little lighter, a little more capable of going on. A book is medicine. Reading is healing. This is not a metaphor. It is science.

KFAED-backed solar plant inaugurated in southern Turkey

ISTANBUL: The Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) participated on Saturday in the inauguration of a solar power plant project in Kahramanmaras Province in southern Turkey, funded through the Fund's grant supporting the response plan for the Syrian refugee crisis. Kuwait's Ambassador to Turkey Mohammad Al-Shabbo said during the inauguration ceremony that the project reflects Kuwait's commitment to supporting sustainable development initiatives that enhance the resilience of host communities, help them address challenges and improve essential services.

He explained that the project, located in the Pazarcik district, has a capacity of six megawatts and is designed to meet heating and cooling needs at camps and temporary accommodation facilities. The facility will also contribute to reducing energy consumption, lowering carbon emissions and promoting the use of renewable and sustainable energy sources. Al-Shabbo noted that the project forms part of KFAED's efforts to support development programs linked to the Syrian refugee crisis, helping improve living conditions and strengthen stability in affected communities.

Meanwhile, Kahramanmaras Mayor Firat Gorgel described the solar power plant as an important addition to the city's sustainable development initiatives. He expressed appreciation for KFAED's financial support, which helped make the project possible. Gorgel said the project reflects the strong friendship between Turkey and Kuwait and highlights the importance of international cooperation and partnerships in advancing sustainable development. KFAED allocated $4 million for the construction of the solar power plant as part of a $10 million grant that also covers three additional projects: a children's library and arts center, a guidance and career planning center, and a youth and sports center. — KUNA

Kuwaiti investments in Oman rise 4.6% in first quarter

MUSCAT: Kuwaiti investments in the Sultanate of Oman increased by 4.6 percent during the first quarter of 2026 to reach OMR 1.444 billion (about $3.76 billion), reinforcing Kuwait's position as the largest Arab investor in the sultanate, according to official data released on Saturday. Preliminary statistics issued by Oman's National Centre for Statistics and Information showed that Kuwait retained its position as the third-largest foreign investor in the country, behind the United Kingdom and the United States.

British investments rose by 9.9 percent to OMR 16.884 billion (about $44 billion), while US investments grew 10 percent to OMR 8.695 billion (around $22.6 billion). China ranked fourth among foreign investors, with investments totaling OMR 901 million (approximately $2.35 billion), an increase of 9.3 percent compared with the same period last year. Overall, foreign direct investment (FDI) in Oman rose by 8.7 percent year-on-year to OMR 32.197 billion (around $83.8 billion) by the end of the first quarter, while investment inflows during the period reached approximately OMR 2.567 billion (about $6.7 billion).

The oil and gas extraction sector attracted the largest share of FDI, accounting for OMR 25.888 billion (around $67.4 billion), up 9.5 percent from a year earlier. The manufacturing sector ranked second, with investments of OMR 2.87 billion (approximately $7.5 billion), reflecting growth of 5.4 percent, followed by the financial intermediation sector, which attracted OMR 1.565 billion (around $4 billion), an increase of 9.6 percent. — KUNA

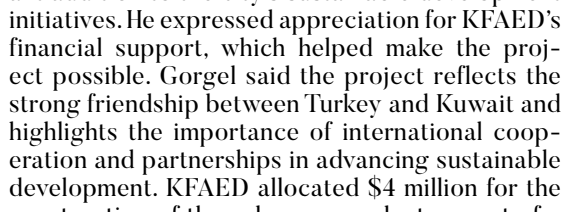
PAAET reschedules aptitude tests for high school graduates

KUWAIT: The Dean of Admissions and Registration at the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET), Dr Mohammad Al-Kandari, announced on Saturday that the academic aptitude tests for high school graduates have been rescheduled and relocated to the Higher Institute of Communications and Navigation. In a press statement, Al-Kandari said the new test dates will be finalized and announced in the coming days. He added that all registered applicants will be notified through the official "Sahel" application, with updates also to be published on PAAET's official website and social media platforms.

He urged students to rely solely on information issued through the Authority's official channels and to disregard any unofficial reports or announcements. Al-Kandari affirmed that PAAET is continuing to take all necessary measures to ensure the smooth and orderly conduct of the aptitude tests. He concluded by praying for the continued security, safety and stability of Kuwait and for the well-being of its leadership, government and people. — KUNA

Kuwait Airways reschedules flights

KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways announced on Saturday that it has rescheduled most of its flights following the temporary suspension of takeoffs and landings at Kuwait International Airport due to the Iranian aggression. In a press statement, the national carrier urged passengers to check the status of their flights regularly, noting that updates and text messages would be sent to the mobile numbers registered with their bookings. The airline said passengers requiring further assistance or information can contact its customer service center from within



Kuwait at 171, from outside Kuwait at +965 2434 5555 ext. 171, or through WhatsApp at +965 180 2050. Kuwait Airways expressed its appreciation to passengers for their understanding and cooperation, reaffirming its commitment to ensuring the safety and security of its customers while maintaining operational readiness. — KUNA

Studies highlight the biggest drivers of Kuwait's electricity consumption

Residential buildings and air conditioning account for the largest share of electricity use

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: As Kuwait enters another summer of extreme heat, calls for more responsible electricity consumption are growing louder. Government awareness campaigns are urging the public to cut unnecessary energy use, while some cafes have begun adopting and promoting energy-saving practices. Residents have also called on malls, cooperatives and other businesses to follow suit, with social media content creators joining the campaign to encourage more conscious consumption.

Homes at the center of demand

Studies have consistently identified the residential sector as Kuwait's largest electricity consumer, accounting for more than half of total consumption. According to Kuwait's 2019 National Communication submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, residential buildings account for around 64 percent of electricity consumption — significantly higher than commercial, industrial and other sectors.

Researchers attribute this high demand to several factors, including the large size of many homes, extensive use of air conditioning throughout much of the year, and historically low electricity tariffs that have limited incentives for reducing consumption. The scale of household energy use is reflected in Kuwait's high per-capita consumption. Dr Bassam Shuhaibar, environmental engineer and associate research scientist at the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR), previously noted that energy consumption in Kuwait reaches an average of around 40 kilowatt-hours per person per day — a level he described as equivalent to nearly 400 hours of television viewing.

Cooling remains the biggest load

In Kuwait, where summer temperatures regularly exceed 40°C, cooling is the single biggest contributor to electricity consumption. A 2025 study titled Modeling and Forecasting End-Use Energy Consumption for Residential Buildings in Kuwait Using a Bottom-Up Approach found that air conditioning accounts for around 67 percent of residential electricity consumption and 72 percent of peak household electricity demand.

The study projected that electricity demand for air conditioning will continue growing, increasing by an average of 2.9 percent annually through 2040. The 2019 EPA National Communication also highlighted the dominance of cooling, estimating that air conditioning represents nearly 70 percent of Kuwait's peak electricity demand and more than 45 percent of annual electricity consumption across residential, commercial and public buildings.

After cooling systems, refrigerators and freezers represent the next largest household electricity consumers, while lighting and water heating account for smaller portions of household demand. In a previous report by Kuwait Times, Environmental specialist Samia Al-Duaij said even small changes in cooling habits could have a noticeable impact on electricity consumption. She pointed to the widespread practice of setting air conditioners to very low temperatures, noting that studies have shown raising the thermostat by just 2-3°C can reduce energy use by up to 30 percent.

Key figures

- More than half of Kuwait's electricity consumption comes from the residential sector, according to local studies.
- Around two-thirds of household electricity use is linked to air conditioning, according to residential energy modelling research.
- More than 70 percent of peak residential electricity demand is driven by cooling, according to modelling estimates.
- Residential cooling demand is projected to continue increasing, with one study forecasting annual growth of around 2.9 percent through 2040.
- Kuwait aims to generate 15 percent of electricity from renewable sources by 2030.

A display on Kuwait's main governmental electricity control tower reads 47 degrees Celsius at 17:53 pm in this file photo. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

The subsidy challenge

While Kuwait's climate remains the main driver of electricity demand, researchers have also pointed to the role of electricity subsidies in shaping consumption patterns. According to the EPA's 2019 National Communication, the cost of generating electricity is significantly higher than what residential consumers pay, meaning households cover only a fraction of the actual production cost. Several studies have argued that low electricity prices reduce the financial motivation for consumers to invest in energy-efficient appliances or reduce unnecessary consumption. In an earlier interview, Shuhaibar told Kuwait Times that awareness campaigns alone are unlikely to significantly change consumption patterns, saying stronger financial incentives are needed to encourage conservation. He called for a mix of reduced subsidies, penalties for excessive consumption and reward schemes for those who adopt greener practices.

Kuwait's renewable ambitions

Reducing consumption is only one part of Kuwait's energy strategy. The country is also investing in expanding renewable energy capacity as it works to diversify its electricity sources. One of the key initiatives is the Shagaya Renewable Energy Park, which aims to contribute to Kuwait's target of generating 15 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, with a planned capacity of 4,500 megawatts.

After previous delays linked to administrative and logistical challenges, the project is moving forward through additional phases and investment opportunities. Dr Ayman AlQattan, head of phase one of the Shagaya project, previously described Kuwait's renewable energy target as achievable, pointing to the country's strong solar potential. He also highlighted other possible measures to address future electricity demand, including greater reliance on the GCC electricity grid during periods of shortage and reviewing electricity pricing structures to encourage conservation, particularly during peak consumption hours.

Experts suggest ways forward

Local studies recommend action across several areas to address rising electricity demand, from the way buildings are designed and maintained to how energy is consumed during peak periods. These measures include strengthening building codes to improve insulation, window efficiency and cooling performance, as well as retrofitting older homes with better insulation and more efficient air-conditioning systems.

These measures have also been raised by local specialists in earlier interviews with Kuwait Times. Architectural engineer and sustainability advocate Ahmad Salmeen said stronger design guidelines are needed for new buildings and renovations, pointing to solutions such as optimizing window-to-wall ratios, installing external shading systems and improving thermal insulation to reduce heat gain and lower reliance on cooling systems.

In another interview with Kuwait Times, former Ministry of Electricity and Water and Renewable Energy consultant Salem Al-Ajmi highlighted the importance of ensuring electrical appliances entering Kuwait meet efficiency standards, particularly air conditioners, which account for a significant share of electricity consumption. He also called for better management of peak-hour demand, suggesting measures such as adjusting working schedules in some sectors to reduce pressure on the grid during the hottest months.

Al-Duaij also called for renewed consideration of proposals to require solar panels on newly constructed homes, saying household-level solutions should be an important part of Kuwait's future energy strategy. Researchers have similarly highlighted the importance of policies that encourage efficient consumption while maintaining affordability, alongside wider adoption of renewable energy solutions.

Key recommendations to reduce electricity demand

- Improve building efficiency through stronger building codes, better insulation, efficient windows and smarter cooling designs.
- Upgrade older homes with improved insulation, efficient air-conditioning systems and other energy-saving measures.
- Use more efficient appliances, including high-efficiency air conditioners, refrigerators and LED lighting, while enforcing appliance efficiency standards.
- Adopt smart energy technologies such as smart meters, programmable thermostats and automated lighting controls to monitor and reduce consumption.
- Manage peak-hour demand through measures that reduce pressure on the grid during periods of highest use.
- Promote efficient cooling habits, including setting air conditioners at suitable temperatures and avoiding unnecessary consumption.
- Expand rooftop solar and renewable energy solutions to diversify electricity sources and reduce reliance on conventional power generation.
- Review electricity policies and incentives to encourage efficient consumption while keeping energy affordable.
- Strengthen awareness efforts to encourage households, businesses and institutions to adopt responsible energy practices.

In my view

Iran's misuse of self-defense

By Nejoud Al-Yagout

Everywhere we turn, we read or hear that Iran has the right to defend itself. It seems that powerful nations have conflated defending their countries with attacking the defenseless. Iran claims that Kuwait deserves to be punished for hosting US bases. A base was permitted on Kuwaiti land so that we would not become the 19th province of Iraq. Today, the bases are still here to protect us from countries who cause sectarian divides and implant terrorist cells in our country to overthrow our government. For a country that does not want US bases in the region, Iran does not seem to be doing a good job convincing us that we are safe without the protection of the US armed forces.

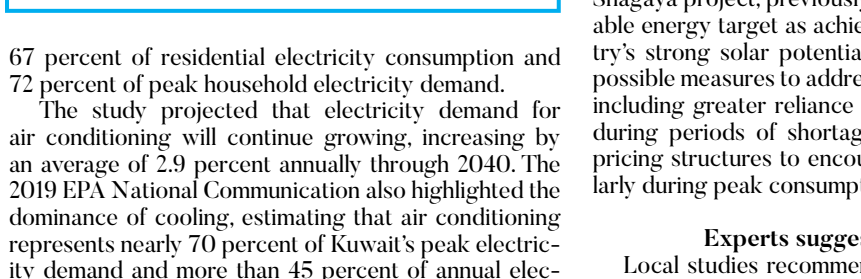
And this week, Kuwait has been hit hardest since the beginning of the war, with water and energy sites among the targets. What will it take for the Iranian government to stop attacking us? Even when Israel launched attacks on Iran, the majority of retaliatory attacks were against the GCC states. It is the GCC that has borne the brunt of Iran's wrath since the inception of this unfortunate war. We can only hope that wisdom will prevail and we can all coexist with one another again soon. We can only hope that these attacks will stop and no more innocent lives will be taken because of another war. This region has suffered enough. We can only know peace when we are assured that our sovereignty is not in danger.

No country, not even the enemy of an enemy, can retaliate against the people of another country. War is never a solution, but since we inhabit a paradigm where war is rife, there are rules of war. When Iran condemns one country for targeting its infrastructure and retaliates by doing the same to other countries, that is not defending itself. That is retaliating against people who are doing their best to get on with their lives in a war that was not even chosen by them in the first place. It is always the people who suffer.

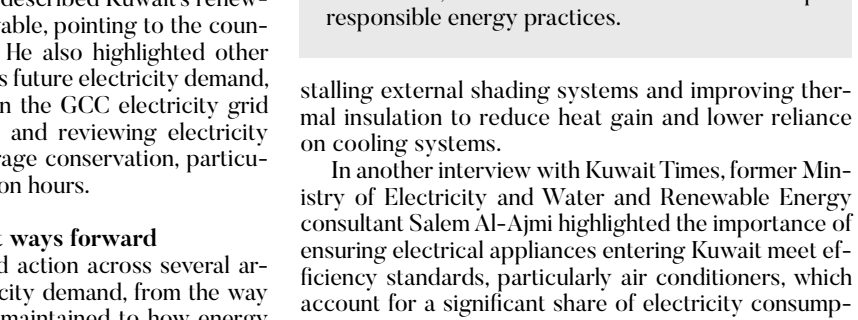
For those who loathe Kuwait, remember that Kuwait is a humanitarian and peaceful nation that has been, and remains, a fierce supporter of the Palestinian cause. In addition, our government has always extended a hand to other countries in need whether due to natural disasters, famine or war. Like all countries, we have a lot of work to do, but when we read comments celebrating the attacks on our country, it breaks our hearts. Our government is not a threat to any of its neighbors. Our approach has always been defensive, truly defensive.

Today, Kuwait and the GCC have the support of many countries across the globe, but we especially need the support of all countries in the region. We do not want people to revel in our misfortune. We want compassion, we want people to wake up and recognize that terrorism is terrorism even if it occurs from the enemy of an enemy. When we collectively condemn any crime against humanity, we can know peace. Iran's right to defend itself cannot come at the expense of the lives of its neighbors or the stability of the region.

God bless Kuwait, the ruling family, the GCC, the region and the world. May peace prevail. Always. And may all the powerful nations in the world who strive to defend themselves know the difference between creating suffering and protecting the sovereignty of their nations. Viva l'amore!



A project to support people with chronic diseases was implemented in Sanaa and Lahj, Yemen. — KUNA photos



250 Yemenis benefit from a chronic disease medication project.

Namaa provides treatment for 250 patients in Yemen

ADEN: Kuwaiti charities continue to expand their humanitarian efforts worldwide, with Namaa Charity, affiliated with the Social Reform Society, implementing a medical support project benefiting 250 patients suffering from chronic diseases and kidney failure in Yemen. In a statement issued on Saturday, Head of the Development and Relief Sector at Namaa Charity Khaled Al-Shamari said the project provided treatment for 150 patients with chronic illnesses in Sana'a, while also supporting 100 kidney failure patients receiving care at Al-Wahatt Hospital in Lahj Governorate.

Al-Shamari said the initiative helped reduce the health and financial burdens faced by patients and their families, allowing them to continue their treatment plans. He added that it provided regular medical care for kidney failure patients and helped ease their suffering amid the challenges confronting Yemen's healthcare sector, particularly in securing essential medicines.

He stressed that supporting patients with chronic diseases and kidney failure remains a humanitarian priority, as interruptions in treatment can lead to serious health complications and potentially life-threatening consequences. Al-Shamari expressed appreciation to donors and supporters, saying their contributions played a direct role in the success of the project and provided vital assistance to patients struggling to afford necessary treatment.

Meanwhile, Majdi bin Harhara, Executive Director of the Yemeni organization Al-Rufaqa'a for Development, which implemented the project, said the initiative helped reach vulnerable groups facing difficulties in obtaining essential medicines. He thanked Kuwait, Namaa Charity and its supporters for the humanitarian effort, noting that such initiatives contribute to alleviating patients' suffering and strengthening the ability of humanitarian organizations to respond to growing healthcare needs in Yemen. — KUNA

Kuwait highlights sustainable development progress, stresses global partnerships at UN

Kuwait reaffirms commitment to SDGs, condemns Iran's attacks

NEW YORK: Kuwait has reaffirmed that achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires fair, innovative and coordinated measures, as well as a secure international environment that enables countries to meet their development objectives. The position was outlined by Minister Plenipotentiary Faisal Al-Enezi, Chargé d'Affaires of Kuwait's Permanent Mission to the United Nations, during the general debate of the 2026 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development held at UN Headquarters.

Al-Enezi said the forum comes at a critical stage, with only four years remaining to achieve the SDGs, stressing the importance of fostering a stable international environment to support sustainable development efforts. He expressed Kuwait's concern over the adverse economic, environmental and developmental consequences of armed conflicts, particularly on countries that are not party to them. He warned that the growing number of conflicts continues to drain national resources and divert funding away from education, healthcare and infrastructure toward emergency response and reconstruction.

Highlighting Kuwait's commitment to sustainable development, Al-Enezi said the country continues to translate its national priorities into concrete achievements. He pointed to the recent launch of the Kuwait Fund for Emergency Response, with an initial capital of $100 million, to support efforts to repair damage to national infrastructure caused by Iranian aggression and to mitigate its impact on affected communities.

Al-Enezi strongly condemned attacks carried out by Iran and its proxies against Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states and Jordan. He noted that the latest drone attack targeted offshore drilling platforms belonging to Kuwait Oil Company in Kuwait's territorial waters, causing material damage and injuring a worker. He reaffirmed Kuwait's sovereign right to take all necessary measures to protect its national security in accordance with international law and the Charter of the United Nations.

Al-Enezi also highlighted Kuwait's continued efforts to strengthen water security through the expansion of water production, desalination and wastewater treatment facilities, alongside ongoing investment in digital infrastructure and e-government services to promote innovation, improve service delivery and enhance the business environment. He underscored the importance of Sustainable Development Goal 17, which focuses on global partnerships, describing it as a key pillar for accelerating progress toward achieving the SDGs.

Al-Enezi said Kuwait's infrastructure and housing projects demonstrate the value of collaboration between the government, private sector and international partners in bridging financing gaps, transferring technology, building institutional capacity and advancing reforms to the international financial system. Concluding his remarks, Al-Enezi reaffirmed Kuwait's commitment to working closely with international partners to safeguard development gains, strengthen essential services and translate global commitments into tangible outcomes. — KUNA

Kuwait AMR designated as WHO Collaborating Centre

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health announced on Friday that the World Health Organization (WHO) has designated Kuwait's Authority for Medical Responsibility (AMR) as a WHO Collaborating Centre for Medical Responsibility, marking a significant milestone in the country's healthcare sector. In a statement, the ministry said the designation allows the AMR to join the WHO network of collaborating centres and contribute to international initiatives focused on training, research, capacity building, and the development of policies and best practices in medical responsibility.

The four-year designation is expected to strengthen international cooperation by enhancing institutional capacity, facilitating the exchange of expertise, supporting evidence-based policymaking, and promoting best practices in the field. The ministry described the recognition as an important step that will further expand collaboration with global partners and reinforce Kuwait's role in advancing medical responsibility.

Established in 2020, the AMR is an independent government body responsible for overseeing matters related to medical and allied health professions in both the public and private sectors. The authority is mandated to provide expert technical opinions on cases referred to it through complaints, reports, investigations, and legal proceedings involving alleged medical errors and professional misconduct. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Defense Minister Sheikh Abdullah Ali Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah visits injured servicemen.

Kuwait Dive Team salvages vessel off Marina Sharq coast

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Dive Team, operating under the Environmental Voluntary Foundation, has salvaged a vessel that sank off the Marina Sharq coast, the team's chief Walid Al-Fadhel said on Friday. Al-Fadhel urged sea-goers to exercise caution and adhere to safety measures to help prevent such incidents. He warned that chemical substances and other pollutants released from damaged or sunken vessels pose a serious threat to the marine environment, particularly coral reefs. He noted that the Kuwait Dive Team has been carrying out marine salvage operations since 1986, recovering a total of 830 vessels of different sizes and types over the past decades. — KUNA

Defense minister, army chief visit injured personnel

KUWAIT: Defense Minister Sheikh Abdullah Ali Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah visited a number of wounded members of the Kuwaiti ground force who were injured as a result of the targeting of a number of facilities and camps of the Kuwaiti army following the Iranian aggression. The minister was assured of their health condition and followed up on the progress of the medical care provided to them.

He listened to an explanation from the medical team about the health status of the injured, praising the efforts made by the medical staff in providing the necessary care and treatment, wishing the injured a speedy recovery and continued health and well-being

Chief of General Staff of the Kuwait Army Lt Gen Khaled Al-Shuraian, accompanied by Deputy Chief of General Staff Maj Gen Sabah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, also visited personnel from the army's ground force injured in hostile drone attacks targeting several military facilities and camps.

Al-Shuraian received a briefing from the medical team on the condition of the injured personnel and the treatment being provided. He praised the efforts of medical teams and staff for their dedication in delivering the necessary care and treatment, expressing his appreciation for their professionalism and commitment. Al-Shuraian wished the injured personnel a speedy recovery and continued health, affirming his support for them during their recovery. — KUNA

Kuwait envoy joins Gulf-Jordanian talks with US lawmakers

WASHINGTON: Kuwait's Ambassador to the United States Sheikha Zain Al-Sabah participated in the second joint Gulf-Jordanian meeting with members of the Democratic Party on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. In a statement issued Thursday night, the Kuwaiti Embassy said the meeting provided an important platform to discuss key regional developments and explore ways to strengthen cooperation and coordination between the two sides. The meeting also highlighted the importance of continued dialogue and engagement between Gulf and Jordanian representatives and US lawmakers on issues of mutual interest. — KUNA

Islamic Affairs Ministry joins 'Waffer' campaign to save power and water

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has joined the national "Waffer" (Save) campaign launched by the Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy to promote the efficient use of electricity and water as part of coordinated government efforts to conserve national resources. Acting Undersecretary Dr Eng Suleiman Al-Suwailem said the ministry's participation reflects ongoing cooperation among government agencies to raise public awareness about the importance of rationalizing electricity and water consumption.

Speaking to KUNA, Al-Suwailem said the ministry is supporting the campaign by disseminating awareness messages through its media platforms and dedicating Friday sermons to highlighting the importance of conservation, moderation and avoiding waste in accordance with Islamic teachings. He said the ministry has implemented a series of energy- and water-saving measures across mosques, including the installation of energy-efficient lighting, switching off water heaters during the summer months, and ensuring that lights and electrical appliances are turned off in unused rooms.

Al-Suwailem added that in low-density, well-ventilated mosques, prayers are confined to the designated prayer area to reduce electricity consumption. Exterior lighting is switched on at the Maghrib call to prayer and turned off 30 minutes after the Isha prayer, while lights are also activated at the first Fajr call to prayer and switched off half an hour after the dawn prayer. The ministry is also installing approved water-saving devices on ablution taps as part of broader efforts to reduce water consumption. Al-Suwailem said the measures underscore the ministry's commitment to supporting national initiatives aimed at improving the efficiency of electricity and water use, preserving natural resources and fostering a culture of conservation across all its facilities. — KUNA

Food Authority issues 315 violations against Jleeb establishments

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Food and Nutrition (PAFN) issued 315 violation reports against food establishments in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh for serious breaches, including the sale of expired and adulterated food products and operating without valid licenses. In a statement issued Thursday, PAFN said it participated in a large-scale security campaign carried out in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh on Wednesday under the direct supervision of First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousef Saud Al-Sabah.

The campaign involved 11 government agencies and aimed to strengthen security measures and safeguard public health. PAFN said the recorded violations included failures to meet personal and public hygiene standards, as well as selling food products without valid health certificates. It added that food items deemed unfit for consumption were immediately destroyed, while the violations were referred to the relevant authorities for legal action.

The authority said its participation was carried out by inspection teams from the General Directorate of Inspection and Control Affairs, led by Director of the Farwaniya Governorate Inspection Department Talal Al-Daihani, with the involvement of 102 inspectors. PAFN stressed that the campaign marks the beginning of an expanded monitoring phase that will cover all governorates of Kuwait, reaffirming its commitment to strict enforcement of regulations to ensure a safe and hygienic food environment. — KUNA

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International

US-Iran fighting escalates

Tehran issues threats as two US troops killed, one missing

WASHINGTON/TEHRAN: Iran's supreme leader vowed to teach the United States "unforgettable lessons" on Saturday, as Washington reported its first military deaths since renewing its hostilities with the Islamic republic. A month after the foes signed a now-abandoned preliminary deal aimed at ending their war, Tehran struck infrastructure around the Gulf in retaliation for a week of intensifying US attacks, which Iran said had hit an airport, a railway station and bridges.

Tehran launched fresh strikes in Jordan, where the US military's Central Command said two service members were killed on Friday as they "defended against Iranian ballistic missile and drone attacks". It said another service member was still missing in action.

Iranian supreme leader Mojtaba Khamenei, who took over from his father after he was killed in the opening salvo of US-Zionist strikes on Feb 28, said the ongoing attacks on his country "once again demonstrated to everyone the worthlessness of the American president's signature". "Now that the American enemy seeks to incite war and bear its most serious consequences, it should know that the dear Iranian nation and the axis of resistance have unforgettable lessons to offer it," he added, in a statement carried by state TV.

Major General Mohsen Rezaei, a senior military adviser to Khamenei, warned that Tehran would resume "full-scale offensive operations" if US strikes continued in the coming days. "Iran will no longer limit itself to retaliatory, like-for-like responses," Mohsen said, according to state media.

Hope for a political settlement to the war has fallen by the wayside, though mediators have attempted to bring both sides back to the negotiating table. US President Donald Trump this week threatened to hit Iranian infrastructure, although there has been no confirmation from Washington since then that US forces have begun to do so.

Deputy Iranian foreign minister Kazem Gharibabadi told state TV on Saturday that Washington was "not getting anywhere with these aggressive actions". "America has violated and stopped all its commitments under that memorandum of understanding, and we have also stopped all our commitments," he added.

Iranian state news agency IRNA reported Saturday that US attacks killed three people and wounded eight in the southern province of Hormozgan. In Khuzestan province, the deputy provincial governor said the US had attacked 95 locations in 12 cities over the past 10 days, according to Iran's Tasnim news agency, with eight people killed. Iran also said the supply of drinking water to several villages in the south had been cut off, accusing the US of striking power facilities and desalination plants in the village of Bonji, according to Tasnim.

Iran's energy ministry urged citizens to reduce electricity use and switch off air conditioners in peak hours after the power grid came under strain. The health ministry said Friday that 50 people had been killed since the renewed fighting broke out and more than 500 injured.

The latest bout of violence was sparked by Iranian attacks on ships in the strategic Strait of Hormuz, a vital transport lane for Gulf energy exports that Iran seeks to control. Iran closed the strait after the war broke out in late February with US-Zionist strikes, and control over the route has become leverage in negotiations with the US, which recently reimposed its own blockade of Iran's ports. — Agencies

BANDAR KHAMIR: This screen grab taken from video footage broadcast by Iran's IRINN state television network and made available via AFPTV on July 17, 2026, shows what the network says is the aftermath of overnight US strikes on a bridge in Bandar Khamir County, near the Strait of Hormuz. — AFP

GAZA: A young Palestinian boy lies injured at Al-Awda Hospital following a reported Zionist strike on the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza on July 17, 2026. — AFP

Children among 10 killed in Gaza Zionist strikes

GAZA: Gaza's civil defense and hospitals said Zionist attacks on Saturday killed 10 people across the territory, among them three children and their parents. A ceasefire remains in place between the Zionist entity and Palestinian group Hamas, but it has not halted the violence in Gaza, and efforts to secure a lasting agreement to end the war have stalled.

A family of five – three children and their parents — were killed when a Zionist strike hit a residential apartment in northwest Gaza City, according to the territory's civil defense agency, which operates as a rescue service. "The family's only surviving member is one child, who was not inside the house at the time of the strike," Mahmoud Bassal, spokesman for the agency, told AFP. Gaza's Al-Shifa hospital confirmed it had received the five bodies.

Gaza resident Mousa Al-Aimawi said the strike came without warning. "Suddenly there was a missile hitting the building. No one knew, no one, no warning, nothing," he told AFP. "They hit it without caring that there are civilians, children, women, girls." Mohammed Kali, who lives in the same building, said he saw several people lying on the ground. "There were bodies scattered on the ground — women and children dead, and elderly people too," he said.

AFP footage from the scene showed large sections of the building's facade torn away, as rescue teams helped the wounded. Onlookers picked through shattered concrete blocks and twisted metal, searching for any belongings that could be salvaged.

Three more people were killed when a Zionist airstrike hit a group of civilians in the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City, the agency reported. Al-Shifa hospital confirmed it had received the three bodies. Health officials said two other people were killed elsewhere in Zionist attacks in Gaza. Violence has persisted despite the ceasefire. Before Friday's casualties, at least 1,144 Palestinians had been killed since the truce took effect last October, according to Gaza's health ministry. — AFP

Defense and minerals: Pakistan's lobbying push in Washington

ISLAMABAD: As Pakistan stepped into the global centre-stage through Iran war mediation, it hired a US lobbying firm to push Washington for boosted security cooperation and minerals investment, the contract shows. The two-year, $1.2-million lobbying agreement, filed in a public official database, began in May, spanning a period officials and experts say is critical to converting the goodwill Pakistan has earned with Donald Trump's administration into tangible bilateral benefits.

But Islamabad could face an uphill battle. "How long the dramatic improvement in relations will last is uncertain given the history of ups and downs" in ties, said Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan's former ambassador to Washington. "It is also an open question whether it will outlast Trump." The contract directs Capitol Hill-headquartered Ervin Graves Strategy Group to engage with the US Congress and government, and facilitate meetings including with Pentagon and National Security Council officials.

It expands on a short-term agreement struck between Pakistan's Washington embassy and the firm in October, though the new arrangement doubles the monthly payment to $50,000. Pakistan's foreign ministry did not respond to request for comment on the contract. A US State Department spokesperson said the two countries "continue to identify areas of cooperation that benefit our nations related to trade and some security priorities". Governments regularly hire lobbyists to boost their profile among Washington power players.

Pakistan's latest agreement, disclosed under the US Foreign Agents Registration Act, provides direct insight into Islamabad's strategic priorities. It outlines efforts to restore defense cooperation mechanisms that existed during the Afghanistan war and attract investment in the minerals sector, currently dominated by China. "The contract highlights aspects of the relationship that align with Trump administration priorities, including critical minerals and counterterrorism," said Elizabeth Threlkeld, a former US diplomat in Pakistan and head of the Stimson Center's South Asia Program.

The text also demonstrates "an interest in engaging Congress to broaden constituencies of support for the partnership", said Threlkeld. It includes a direction to emphasize "threats emanating from Afghanistan" and "promote continued US support for Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts" at a time when Islamabad is carrying out strikes on its neighbour in response to militant violence. Afghanistan's Taleban government denies the country's involvement in militancy in Pakistan.

Powerful Pakistani army chief Asim Munir's rapport with Trump has elevated Islamabad's influence in a bilateral relationship long focused through a security lens. The US president refers to Munir as his "favourite field marshal", following their acquaintance in the aftermath of conflict with India that Trump helped mediate last year. A source familiar with the matter said Pakistan's help in US-Iran negotiations to broker their June interim agreement provided a window of opportunity. "We want to go beyond personal relationships so that the relationship becomes more institutionally based and can outlast changes in government," the source said on condition of anonymity.

Overall, Islamabad's ties with Washington have drifted since the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2021 ended a 20-year war that defined much of the relationship. Pakistan instructed Ervin Graves to work on efforts "for the resumption of... appropriate high-level bilateral defence and security dialogue mechanisms". — AFP

ISLAMABAD: (FILES) Commuters ride past an electronic board featuring Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif (L) with Army Chief and Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir, displayed along a roadside in Islamabad after the US-Iran peace deal announcement. — AFP

Democratic split over Zionist aid deepens

WASHINGTON: More than 100 US House Democrats voted this week to cut military aid to Zionist entity, exposing a widening party divide that could reshape both November's midterm elections and the future of one of Washington's most durable foreign policy alliances. The measure, offered by conservative Kentucky congressman Thomas Massie, was defeated overwhelmingly after nearly all his fellow Republicans and 98 Democrats opposed it. But the vote was striking because 103 Democrats backed ending the aid, while 10 others voted present - a near-even split that would have been almost unthinkable for most of the modern US-Zionist relationship.

"When more than 100 House Democrats are willing to vote to cut military aid, that's no longer a protest vote," veteran political strategist Mike Fahey told AFP. "That's a signal that the party is undergoing a generational and ideological realignment." The revolt reached deep into Democratic leadership. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries opposed the amendment, but his deputy Katherine Clark voted for it, as did former speaker Nancy Pelosi, one of Congress's longest-serving defenders of the alliance.

"For the good of the (Zionist) people and the Palestinian people, it is clear US policy must change," Pelosi said. Clark said Washington should not provide a "blank check" to any country that fails to comply with US law, interests and values. The amendment had little chance of becoming law. But it became a political marker, revealing how much support for Zionist entity has eroded inside the Democratic Party after years of war in Gaza, mounting Palestinian casualties and frustration with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government.

It isn't simply a Washington dynamic; opinion among left-leaning voters has shifted sharply. A recent Washington Post-Ipsos poll found that nearly three-quarters of Democrats want to reduce or end military support for Zionist entity, while 40 percent want to eliminate it entirely. Other surveys show a broader generational shift, with younger Americans far less willing to accept unconditional US support for Zionist entity than older voters.

The shift is already playing out in Democratic primaries. Progressive candidates in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Colorado have won races while openly criticizing US aid to Zionist entity and attacking the influence of the American (Zionist) Public Affairs Committee, the powerful pro-Zionist lobby known as AIPAC. In Michigan, a key battleground state, Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed has made opposition to Zionist entity's war and US military aid a central part of his campaign against Congresswoman Haley Stevens, a longtime Zionist entity supporter backed by pro-Zionist groups.

That fight has national implications. Anger over Gaza helped weaken Democrats in Arab American areas of Michigan in the 2024 presidential election, when Donald Trump carried the state, and party strategists fear the issue could again depress turnout or intensify intraparty conflict. Progressives argue that Democratic leaders are only now catching up with their voters. They say the party cannot credibly campaign on human rights, economic justice and opposition to Trump while continuing to send billions in military aid to Netanyahu's government.

But pro-Zionist Democrats warn that the left is moving too far, too fast - and that Republicans will use the divide to portray Democrats as hostile to Zionist entity, weak on security or tolerant of antisemitism. The National Republican Congressional Committee quickly seized on the House vote, saying Democrats had become consumed by a "radical, antisemitic faction" and promising that voters would remember. The issue is also straining Democratic unity in the Senate. John Fetterman, the Pennsylvania Democrat who has become one of Zionist strongest defenders in his party, told a political event in Washington he would consider leaving if Democrats officially became what he called the "anti-Zionist party." — AFP

Man charged with attempted murder in 'hate attack'

WASHINGTON: Prosecutors in a Utah county announced the filing of two attempted aggravated murder charges on Friday against a man who police said had stabbed a Muslim man multiple times earlier this week because of the victim's religion. Salt Lake County District Attorney Sim Gill said the defendant, Peter Michael Larsen, was charged with two counts of first-degree felony attempted aggravated murder over Monday's knife attack at the Valley Fair Mall in West Valley City. "In the filed information document, notices are given for a potential hate crime, the defendant as a habitual violent offender, and use of a dangerous weapon by a restricted person," Gill's office said in a statement. "An alleged unprovoked attack on anyone in our community is unacceptable, but an attack allegedly motivated because of the victim's religion is alarming," Gill added.

The victim had "multiple stab wounds all over his body and was bleeding profusely," police said earlier this week. A friend said he was stabbed 15 times and needed surgeries. Police had said the defendant told them he "intends to kill Muslims," that "he had targeted the victim with intent to kill him because of his religion," and that he constituted "a substantial danger to the public if released based on his violent actions ... ideologies and pre-planned mass casualty events."

A charging document filed on Friday said Larsen stated he wanted "to be a catalyst so people would rid the country of Muslims." The document cited Larsen as saying that "if he could go from one Muslim to another in close proximity, he would have killed as many as possible." Larsen also stated he chose that location because he knew there were Muslims there, according to the charging document. Authorities said the defendant was pinned to the ground by bystanders before officers arrived on the scene. He was booked into the Salt Lake County jail. — Reuters

New Labour leader Burnham vows to renew hope as next UK premier

Burnham will enter Downing Street on Monday after meeting King Charles III

LONDON: Andy Burnham vowed Friday to restore "hope" to the British people as he officially became the ruling Labour party's new leader, and incoming UK prime minister. Nicknamed the "King of the North" for a nine-year spell as Manchester mayor, Burnham pledged to work to improve living standards in every region of the United Kingdom.

"People and places ... have been waiting too long for politics to let them hope again ... We're going to give them hope back," he promised at a special party conference. "I am for us, for all of us," Burnham told cheering delegates. The 56-year-old takes over from Keir Starmer, who resigned last month after months of political turmoil, scandal and domestic policy missteps. Centre-left Labour retains an overwhelming majority in parliament after the 2024 general election. As the leader of the largest party he becomes the country's prime minister, without having to call new polls.

Burnham will enter Downing Street on Monday after meeting King Charles III, becoming the UK's seventh prime minister in a decade. It is only four weeks since Burnham sensationally returned as a member of parliament following a nine-year absence, determined to replace Starmer.

Labour MPs reckon he is their best chance of reining in Nigel Farage's anti-immigrant Reform UK party, tipped in the polls to win the next general election, expected in 2029. Burnham's flagship idea is devolving powers to cities and regions, including by setting up a "Number 10 North" office.

LONDON: Andy Burnham gestures after being confirmed as the Labour Party's new leader and the country's next prime minister. — AFP

Hailing from the party's so-called soft left, he favours more public control of services, such as water, and reindustrialization. "If we want an economy and a country that works for all people and places ... then it requires a new path to the one we've been on for the last 40 years," he said.

Burnham has pledged to boost the construction of public housing to try to resolve the homelessness crisis, and pump resources into social care. After facing no challengers, he becomes leader at his third attempt, following failed bids in 2010 and 2015.

Burnham was an MP between 2001 and 2017, serving as a minister in Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's governments. He has since reinvented himself as a man of the people, melding a relaxed folksy style with slick social media videos.

Labour MPs see him as a better communicator than Starmer and hope will take a more radical approach to reforming Britain's battered public services. "It feels like a fresh start. There's reason to be hopeful," Labour MP Richard Baker told AFP after Burnham's speech.

New leader, old problems

Starmer returned Labour to power after 14 years in opposition in July 2024 with a landslide victory over the Conservatives, who had churned through five prime ministers in the tumult unleashed by the 2016 Brexit referendum.

But his premiership quickly became characterized by domestic policy missteps and controversies, including his appointment of ex-Jeffrey Epstein associate Peter Mandelson as ambassador to Washington. Disastrous local and regional election results in May heaped further pressure on Starmer, which became impossible to withstand after Burnham won a parliamentary by-election on June 18, allowing him to run for leader.

Burnham, regularly seen in his trademark dark T-shirt and casual jacket, secured the backing of 379 of Labour's 403 MPs, with no one mustering the 81 nominations required to challenge him. He will face the same unenviable challenges that beset Starmer: a tepid economy, high government borrowing costs, a ballooning welfare bill and irregular migrants arriving in small boats that have fuelled support for Reform.

Unpredictable energy prices due to the US-Iran war and a volatile American president in Donald Trump also threaten to buffet his premiership. Burnham has vowed not to raise the country's main taxes, but will need to fill a £4.7-billion ($6.3-billion) gap over four years in the country's defence investment plan.

"Most of what's been said by Burnham and his supporters so far has been pretty vague," politics professor Tony Travers told AFP. "He's going to have to come out with a visible plan and policies people understand ... pretty quickly," or he risks "losing momentum", Travers added. — AFP

Trump revives election fraud claims ahead of US midterms

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Thursday revived sweeping and unsupported claims of voter fraud and Chinese meddling — firing a clear warning shot ahead of midterm elections that many expect him to dispute. In a primetime White House address, Trump portrayed the US electoral system as dangerously exposed and urged lawmakers to adopt new restrictions on voting, despite scant appetite for the measures even within his own Republican Party.

"We can never watch a stolen election again," Trump said, referring to his 2020 defeat by Democrat Joe Biden. Trump said he was declassifying intelligence that showed, among other things, that China had illicitly acquired 220 million US voter files. "Over a period of years, starting during the 2020 election cycle, the People's Republic of China carried out what is believed to be the largest compromise of election data in history," he said from the White House.

Beijing denied Trump's claims and urged the Washington "to do more to benefit China-US relations." "The relevant claims made by the US side are pure fabrications and malicious smears that have long since been proven to be groundless statements," Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian told a news conference on Friday.

Trump also claimed that more than 250,000 non-US citizens were registered to vote in four states. He then attacked US broadcasters that refused to interrupt programming to carry his speech live, naming ABC and NBC, and baselessly implying they were involved in election-rigging attempts.

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump addresses the nation from the East Room of the White House in Washington, DC on July 16, 2026. — AFP

"They and others in the media are part of a plot," Trump said. "Fraud like this should mean a revocation of their licenses." Trump's claim that the 2020 election was "rigged" has never been substantiated. More than 60 lawsuits produced no ruling establishing fraud capable of changing the outcome, while recounts, audits and his own Justice Department found none.

Trump had promised "big news" on election security, but analysts said much of the address repackaged old or unsupported material. Rick Hasen, an election law expert at UCLA in California, called it the "same old unsupported, and surprisingly weak, claims of American election vulnerabilities." "It was a tired speech with recycled and debunked claims," Hasen said. "I don't think it changes anything with how American elections will be run."

Trump devoted little time to issues voters appear more focused on, including the Iran war and the economy. Democrats accused Trump of trying to undermine confidence ahead of November's midterms, in which Republicans fear his unpopularity could cost them control of Congress. Senate Democrat Dick Durbin called the speech "a dangerous attempt to resurrect disproven lies to undermine future elections before a single vote is cast." Former Trump White House lawyer Ty Cobb said the speech appeared intended to build a case for declaring an election emergency. "I think tonight's speech is intended to add to the predicate that he needs to declare an emergency at or about the time of the elections," Cobb told PBS, adding that he believed immigration officers at polling places were a "virtual certainty." — AFP

Trump threatens to increase Canada tariffs over pollution

NEW YORK: US President Donald Trump threatened on Friday a tariff increase on Canada to cover the cost of smoke pollution from wildfires that have choked large parts of the United States. Dense wildfire smoke billowing down from Canada and northern Minnesota has set off unhealthy air quality alerts across the US.

As of Saturday, there were 937 active fires in Canada, most of which were burning out of control, according to the Canadian Wildland Fire Information System. "This is Willful Negligence, and becoming a yearly occurrence, costing the United States Billions of Dollars," Trump said on Truth Social, adding that the "cost of this pollution must of necessity be added to the TARIFFS Canada is currently paying."

Trump accused Canada of "not properly maintaining" their forests, failing to carry out "basic Forest Management and Debris Removal." He said he would call Prime Minister Mark Carney "to find out what they are going to do about" the smoke.

Canada's emergency management minister Eleanor Olszewski said Canada and the United States were in "constant contact," pointing toward their "long history of working together to fight wildfires." She added that Canada has invested $12 billion in forests sustainability and fire prevention since 2020. Detroit, in the US Midwest, remained the most polluted city in the world on Friday, according to tracker IQAir. Washington and Chicago weren't far behind, and officials warned against spending unnecessary time outside.

The pollution triggered concern over the World Cup final on Sunday in an open stadium in New Jersey. In New Jersey and New York, the metro area was experiencing air that could be unhealthy for sensitive groups, an improvement after smog on Thursday made the Manhattan skyline barely visible.

But the National Weather Service (NWS) warned the smoke may thicken overnight into Saturday morning. Tournament organizers are "monitoring closely," White House World Cup task force executive director Andrew Giuliani told a briefing. Peter Mullinax, a meteorologist for NWS, told AFP that winds over the Great Lakes could push more smoke into the Northeast, which could keep skies hazy. He said forecasts for that region do expect some improvement. — AFP

LONDON: France's Culture Minister Catherine Pégard (C) listens to Michael Lewis (2nd L), lead curator of the exhibition, during a visit to the unveiling of the Bayeux Tapestry at the British Museum in central London on July 17, 2026. — AFP

British Museum shows Bayeux Tapestry unfurled after 'titanic' efforts

LONDON: The British Museum on Friday revealed some sections of the Bayeux Tapestry a week after its arrival, as the curator of the forthcoming exhibition told AFP he was "relieved" the fragile embroidery appeared to have "travelled well".

Michael Lewis, the curator of the landmark exhibition opening in September, said: "I'm relieved that the tapestry has travelled well" with "no obvious signs of damage". The 11th-century tapestry depicting the 1066 Battle of Hastings and the invasion by William the Conqueror's Norman army, was brought to London last week.

It will be displayed from September 10 until July 11, 2027, with 100,000 tickets already sold to the public for the first four months of the exhibition. On Friday, the tapestry was shown to officials and journalists laid out flat at full length on the table where it will be displayed, in a long gallery with dark walls.

Some sections of the embroidery were uncovered, including one showing the Anglo-Saxon King Harold, while others were protected with dark sheets. Once the tapestry has been checked and is perfectly laid out, in the coming days, it will placed inside a sealed glass case.

Seeing the tapestry being installed "was an amazing thing to witness", Lewis said in the gallery. Museum staff and French colleagues will be "condition checking the tapestry over the next few weeks", he said, but "as far as I'm concerned it has worked really well".

French culture minister Catherine Pegard visited the museum Friday to see the 68-metre (224-foot) embroidery, telling AFP it "arrived in excellent condition, in very good shape". "We are now carrying out all the checks to make sure that every aspect of the journey went smoothly," she added, praising the work in bringing over the tapestry as a "titanic undertaking" and a "technical feat".

French teams will remain at the British Museum until mid August to "oversee all the work involved in installing the tapestry", the minister said. Transported to London under tight security by truck from western France, the tapestry was initially kept in a specially designed double case to limit vibrations and maintain constant temperature and humidity levels. — AFP

Founding father: Statues of Myanmar's Aung San disappear

YANGON: Statues of independence hero Aung San are quietly disappearing across Myanmar in a contest over his legacy as father of both the nation and of detained democracy figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi. General Aung San fought with and against both the British and the Japanese colonisers as he sought independence, but was assassinated on July 19, 1947, just months before his dream was realised.

Considered the father of modern-day Myanmar, his statues have dotted the country for decades. Many were added while Suu Kyi's party was in power — and many are now being taken down by the government of Min Aung Hlaing, the coup leader who ousted her in 2021.

In Yangon's Thu Mingalar Park, an AFP reporter this week noted the absence of one towering likeness installed almost a decade ago, grass newly planted in its place. The government has acknowledged taking down some statues it said had "incorrect proportions and shapes".

But analysts say the removals may be an attempt to erase from public spaces a powerful symbol linked to Suu Kyi, the popular Nobel laureate who remains detained. Aung San is "engraved in people's memory" as Myanmar's independence hero, and many see his legacy being continued by his daughter, according to Myanmar specialist Moe Thuzar.

Historical legacy

While in power from 2016-2020, during Myanmar's decade-long experiment with democracy, Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) put up statues and also returned Aung San's face to local currency notes.

They could be seen as "efforts to revive his historical legacy", Moe Thuzar said. Since the coup, which triggered a devastating civil war, the military has focused on making Suu Kyi and the NLD "politically irrelevant", she added.

But erasing the memory of Suu Kyi's father is unlikely. The murder of Aung San and several of his colleagues by local rivals is marked each year as Martyrs' Day, a public holiday when thousands pay their respects at the Yangon mausoleum that holds the victims' remains.

"They can remove the statues, but they can never erase Bogyoke's image," one Yangon resident said, using the Burmese word for general to describe Aung San. "They already hold power, and they have the weapons and the military. I don't know what they are still so afraid of," the 34-year-old said, speaking anonymously due to security concerns.

'Incorrect proportions'

After local media reported the removal of several statues, government spokeswoman Khaing Khaing Soe said earlier this month that only those with "incorrect proportions and shapes are being systematically reviewed and addressed".

Since 2016, she said in a statement, a review of Aung San statues in more than 100 townships had found some had features "inconsistent with the dignity of such an important historical figure". "Systematic maintenance efforts are being carried out" to prevent "any disrespect toward the commemorative statues", and to ensure "future generations can continue to study Myanmar's historical heritage in a correct and appropriate manner", she added.

One statue installed during the NLD administration was removed earlier this month from Mya Kan Thar Park in Yangon, a local resident said. Another resident in the township said the statue had been "totally fine, with good proportions".

In late June, authorities also removed a statue from a park in Mudon, in southern Mon state, said a resident speaking anonymously. Authorities later covered the foundation of the 2019 statue with a plastic sheet, the resident said, adding: "No one has dared to complain." Despite his national hero status, Aung San is feted mostly by ethnic majority Bamar elites, rather than the ethnic minority groups who have fought against central rule for decades, researcher Morgan Michaels said. Under the Suu Kyi-led government, there were several arguments with ethnic minority groups over the NLD's attempts to erect statues or name infrastructure after Aung San, said Michaels, a Myanmar specialist with the International Institute for Strategic Studies. — AFP

India successfully launches first private orbital rocket

'Hello space, we have arrived!'

SRIHARIKOTA: India's first privately built orbital rocket took its maiden flight on Saturday, its company said, marking a significant step for the South Asian giant as it eyes a bigger slice of the global space economy.

The Vikram-1 rocket, built by Skyroot Aerospace and designed to carry small satellites into low-Earth orbit, took off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota amid loud cheers. "Hello space, we have arrived!" Skyroot Aerospace said in a post on X. "Vikram-1's Test Flight-1 has completed its mission. The first ever Indian private sector launch has been successfully completed." Vikram-1 is about as tall as a seven-storey building and capable of carrying payloads weighing up to 350 kilograms (771 pounds).

Pawan Goenka, chairman of the government's Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Centre, said the achievement went "way beyond expectation for the very first orbital launch ever taken by an Indian private company".

Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the endeavour as "a defining moment in India's space journey". "The growing participation of our private sector is opening new frontiers and accelerating innovation," Modi said.

"This achievement will encourage countless youngsters to dream bigger and innovate fearlessly."

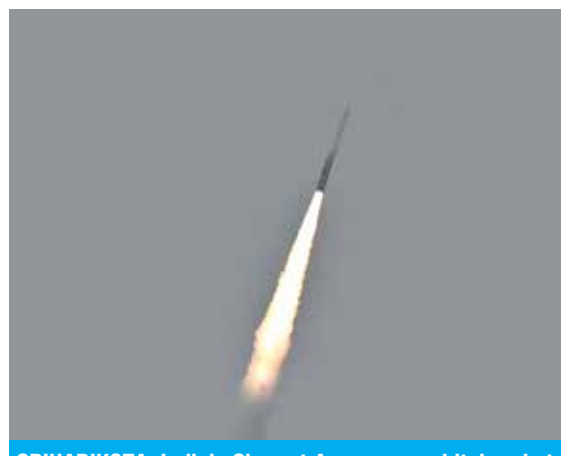
The rocket is carrying a diverse range of payloads, including a lab-grown diamond and robotic arms capable of removing space debris. A miniature 18-karat gold rocket that has mini sculptures of Indian physicists Vikram Sarabhai, CV Raman and former Indian president and noted aerospace engineer APJ Abdul Kalam is also aboard the vehicle. India's space ambitions, built on decades of investment by the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), have gathered pace in recent years. The country's space economy - valued at around $8.4 billion - has rapidly expanded since the sector opened up to private players in 2020, and is now home to more than 400 space startups.

'New heights'

"India's space ambitions soar to new heights!" Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar said after the successful launch. In August 2023, India became only the fourth country to successfully land an unmanned spacecraft on the Moon, after Russia, the United States and China.

Former ISRO chairman K. Sivan hailed the work done by space startups, adding that the country was witnessing the "fruits of the seeds sown" when it opened up the sector to private players.

"With Skyroot especially, the rocket is one of the most challenging and complex technologies in the space system... It is going to motivate many people," he told AFP. Sivan added that "there is no doubt" the launch will have a global impact. "If an Indian startup can make one of the most challenging things in the space industry, then it gives a huge boost to India's reputation globally." – AFP



SRIHARIKOTA: India's Skyroot Aerospace orbital rocket Vikram-1 blasts off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Andhra Pradesh's Sriharikota. - AFP

Japan imperial rules tweaked, but still no woman emperor

TOKYO: Japan's parliament tweaked the imperial succession law on Friday but maintained the bar on women emperors — despite surveys suggesting wide public support for the idea. The future of the imperial household — mythically descended from the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu — depends currently on Prince Hisahito, the 19-year-old nephew of Emperor Naruhito, 66.

If Hisahito — a fan of dragonflies, who is currently studying biology and is not married — has no son, then under the rules as they stand he will have no heir and the bloodline will end. There have been eight female emperors on the Chrysanthemum Throne in Japan's imperial family, whose divine status was renounced after World War II. But an 1889 imperial house law stipulated that only men could become emperor, and only through the paternal line. This was carried over in 1947 into the current Imperial Household Law.

This rules out the popular Princess Aiko, 24, daughter of Naruhito, or any other royal woman ever becoming emperor. The bill, passed by the upper house on Friday, allows the adoption of male distant relatives aged over 15 back into the imperial family — as long as they are single — and for their future sons to become eligible to ascend the throne. They are members of 11 families that left the imperial register after Japan's defeat in World War II. The new rules also end the practice of women having to lose their royal status after marrying a commoner, although because of their gender their children still cannot become emperor.

'Utterly outrageous'

The legislation passed after wrangling within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) led by Japan's first woman prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, who opposes female succession. Seiichiro Murakami, a veteran of the conservative LDP, said after the bill passed the lower house on July 10 that it was "utterly outrageous" to rule out Aiko becoming emperor.

Asahiro Kuni, 81, a member of one of the 11 imperial branches, has also said he would advise his grandchildren to refuse the opportunity of becoming royals. "By the age of 15, a person has grown up breathing the air of freedom," Kuni told the Asahi Shimbun daily.

A poll conducted by the Mainichi Shimbun last month found only 23 percent of people in favour of the sons of re-adopted imperial family members becoming emperor, and 34 percent against. By contrast, more than 70 percent supported a woman emperor, and 40 percent a matrilineal one. An Asahi Shimbun poll in May also showed 72 percent of respondents in favour of changing the rules to allow women to ascend the throne. The imperial family now has 16 members in total, including five men — retired emperor Akihito, 92, his brother, 90, the emperor, his brother, and Hisahito. — AFP

NEW DELHI: Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) founder Abhijeet Dipke (C) sits on an indefinite hunger strike demanding the resignation of India's Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over alleged NEET examination irregularities in New Delhi. — AFP

Police shift fasting activist to hospital against his will

NEW DELHI: Authorities in India's capital Delhi moved social activist Sonam Wangchuk to hospital against his wish on Saturday, after his condition worsened on the 21st day of a hunger strike launched to demand the resignation of the federal education minister. Wangchuk, 59, had been fasting since June 28 in solidarity with India's youth Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), which is demanding Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan step down over exam paper leaks in May that affected millions of students. Wangchuk's campaign has emerged as a rare public challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, drawing support across India and amplifying the activist's demands through millions of views and shares on social media. Television footage on Saturday showed dozens of security personnel, some in plain clothes, holding large white cloth sheets like a curtain on a stage that had been created for the protest before Wangchuk was taken away.

Wangchuk had told government doctors on Friday that he did not wish to be moved to a hospital. On Saturday, he was refusing treatment, hospital authorities said. "In compliance with the court's order, and based on health conditions and medical advice, Sonam Wangchuk has been moved from here to an appropriate government hospital for much-needed medical intervention," Deputy Commissioner of Police Sachin Sharma told reporters at the site.

Wangchuk is weak due to prolonged fasting and dehydration, the state-run Safdarjung Hospital said in a statement. "Although intravenous fluids were advised ... the patient has refused all intravenous fluids, oral rehydration fluid or any other medication," it said.

"He is being continuously monitored and counselled for treatment in (the) best interest of his health." Satish Lamba, Wangchuk's personal physician, told reporters he had heard from the doctor monitoring him at hospital that the current concern was the risk of hypokalemia.

Hypokalemia refers to low levels of potassium in the blood, and a severe or sudden drop can be life-threatening. Potassium can be replaced in a hospital through intravenous therapy.

On Thursday, the Delhi High Court asked authorities to watch Wangchuk's health closely and intervene if needed, in response to a petition asking authorities to force-feed him as his health weakened. Police also moved some CJP supporters who were staging a sit-in at the venue, asking them to vacate the area. But a few hundred returned later in the day as CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke began an indefinite hunger strike after Wangchuk was taken away. Protesters from the CJP said they would march to India's parliament on July 20, when the monsoon session begins, to press their demand for Pradhan's resignation and seek exam reforms. Wangchuk had been at the centre of CJP's protests, lying on a mattress in the middle of a stage, as supporters and visitors to the protest site milled about. — Reuters

Pakistan pressures Afghans in border province to leave

PESHAWAR: Members of Afghan settlements in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa border province hurriedly packed up belongings this week while others hid at home as police launched a "large-scale crackdown" on undocumented residents.

Authorities in the northern province carried out housing demolitions, roadside identity checks and told Afghans to leave as part of a broader government pushback, community members and officials said.

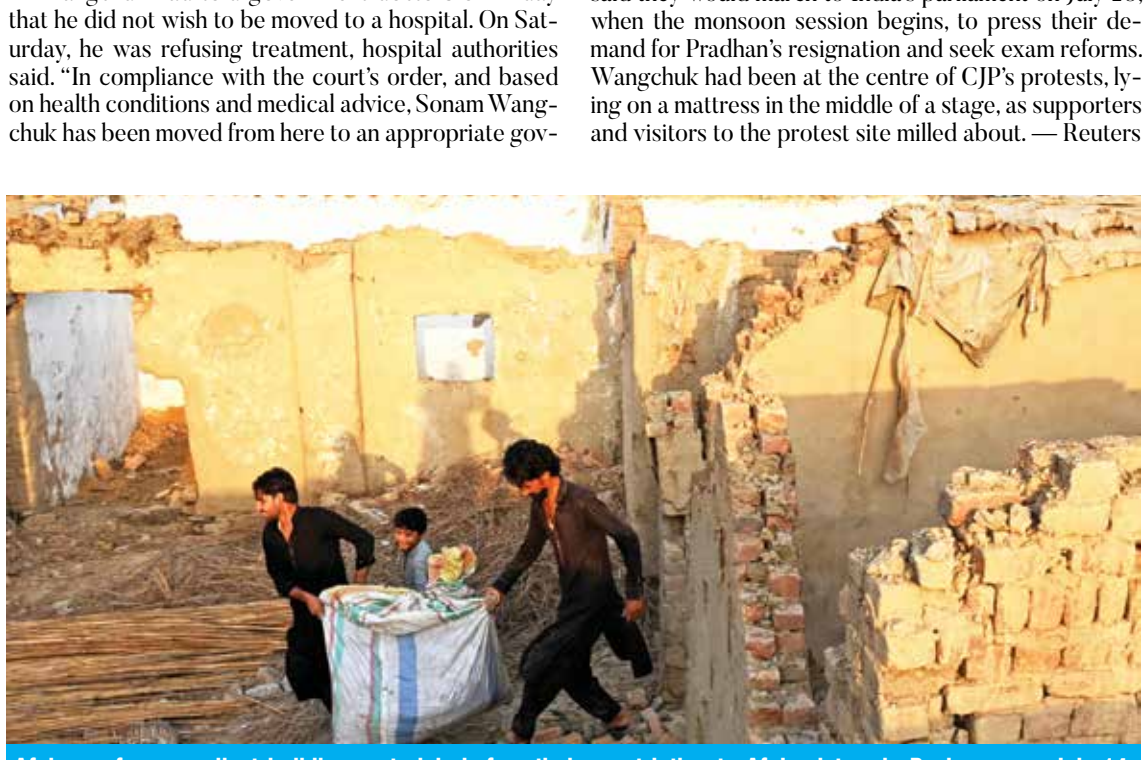
Residents of Mattani, a short drive from the provincial capital Peshawar, told AFP that authorities had demolished many of the Afghan settlement's 200 houses in July. Najeeb Rehman, 50, said he first tried to retrieve his father's medication and children's school certificates from his home. "But the officers didn't listen to us and just said to demolish the house," he said, in the remains of the settlement where the walls of many homes were now in rubble. Young men nearby loaded household belongings including beds and solar panels into trucks to cross the border.

In June, Pakistan's interior ministry ordered law enforcement nationwide to arrest Afghan citizens without visas from July 10. The ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the demolitions.

"A large-scale crackdown against undocumented Afghan nationals began on July 10 and is still ongoing," a senior police officer in Peshawar told AFP on condition of anonymity. "Even before the federal government issued clear directives, police had completed the mapping of Afghan nationals across all parts of the province," the official said. Though millions of Afghans have returned from Pakistan since the security-driven repatriation drive began in 2023, much of the earlier effort focused on centres such as southern megacity Karachi and the capital Islamabad. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's population of around 40 million has deep cultural, linguistic and historic ties with Afghanistan, and many families span both sides of the border. Police and officials said they warned Afghan residents before July 10 they must leave, including through mosque loudspeakers and meetings with community elders.

But some said they had few options. "The police don't consider anyone's circumstances. They don't care whether I have any money in my pocket or not. They don't take my health into account either," said Ahmad Mula, 70, whose home in Mattani was demolished.

"The police have made announcements at least twenty times, but we have our own hardships and circumstances," he said. The crackdown exacerbates the years-long repatriation policy that UN figures show has pushed back 2.3 million Afghans — some who lived in Pakistan for decades and others who fled their home country following Taleban authorities' return to power in 2021. UN data showed almost 6,200 Afghans returned from Pakistan in the seven days to July 11, up by around a third from the previous week. Pakistan remains home to more than a million Afghans, according to the UN. – AFP



Afghan refugees collect building materials before their repatriation to Afghanistan, in Peshawar on July 14, 2026, after voluntary departure deadline for Afghan citizens without visas ended as part of an intensifying deportation drive. — AFP

Hong Kong blaze survivors waiting for apology

HONG KONG: Residents who survived Hong Kong's deadliest fire in decades said they hoped the government would finally take responsibility for failures that led to the disaster, as a months-long inquiry wrapped up on Friday.

The fire at Wang Fuk Court in November - the world's deadliest residential building blaze since 1980 - killed 169 people as it engulfed seven of the eight high-rise apartment blocks. Thousands of residents were displaced. An independent, judge-led committee heard from the leading counsel on Friday that the fire "was preventable but not prevented, and foreseeable but not foreseen". Some residents were left in tears and hugging each other as the committee's final session ended, with many others calling for officials to face accountability.

"Shouldn't you actually step forward and apologize, rather than claiming you're not involved and washing your hands of the whole thing?" said resident Dorz Cheung, describing a "sense of helplessness". "There is a lack of communication across all the departments, the entire government," he said.

HONG KONG: Yip Ka-kui, a Wang Fuk Court resident who lost his wife and home in the world's deadliest residential building blaze since 1980, reacts after a hearing session investigating the blaze in Hong Kong on July 17, 2026. - AFP

"That is simply unacceptable." Repeated complaints by Wang Fuk Court residents that construction workers renovating the estate were smoking on site received little response. According to the committee's leading counsel, Victor Dawes, evidence suggests the fire was likely caused by a lit cigarette that was improperly disposed of.

The Hong Kong Labour Department had carried out at least 16 inspections but was unable to take enforcement action, referring some of the residents' complaints to the Fire Services Department, which said the issue did not fall within their remit.

A sweeping smoking ban on construction sites in Hong Kong came into force on Friday. The probe also heard that the Urban Renewal Authority had failed to address complaints about the estate's management or examine contractors' qualifications.

The government has admitted "systemic weaknesses", including the limited scope and frequency of inspections. But, the government's closing arguments said, "the primary causes remained the deceit, inaction and deliberate omissions of private actors." "They really ought to all come forward collectively to apologize," said Cheung, demanding "a reasonable explanation, rather than just a half-hearted, slapdash one" from officials. Other residents also said they were disappointed at the buck-passing between government departments.

'Justice'

Peggy Fung, who is in her 70s and lived in the complex for over four decades, told reporters she felt the fire was "a disaster of the century". "Why has no one from the related authorities come out to apologize for so long?"

She is one of about 1,700 residents over the age of 65, out of a total of more than 4,600. Of those who died, 114 people - or about 70 percent - were aged 65 or older. "People like me and my neighbours - we're not young anymore - why do we still have to endure all this?" said Fung. "Why can't the government be a bit braver and actually do something?"

Harry Leung, one of the last residents to leave the complex on the day of the blaze, said that "the ultimate regulatory responsibility still lies with the government". "All I'm asking is for (officials) to say, 'sorry, it was our fault', and to take responsibility," he said. "This is not an unreasonable demand." Betty Ho, who lived at Wang Fuk Court for more than 30 years, said officials cannot "shirk their responsibility by claiming they bear none". "If they had just gone the extra mile, the whole incident would never have happened." — AFP

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SUNDAY, JULY 19, 2026

India launches first hydrogen-powered train in push for greener rail transport

India modernizes rail network and cuts emissions

JIND: India launched its first hydrogen-powered train Friday, joining a small group of nations testing the technology as part of efforts to decarbonizes rail transport and cut dependence on fossil fuels. The project is part of a broader push to modernize one of the world's largest rail networks while reducing carbon emissions. The 10-coach train runs along an 89-kilometre route between Jind and Sonipat in India's northern state of Haryana, powered by a 1,200-kilowatt hydrogen fuel cell propulsion system. Officials described the system as the world's most powerful for a train.

Hydrogen trains use fuel cells to generate electricity by combining hydrogen and oxygen, emitting only water and steam. "This is a very significant day in the direction of self-reliant India and sustainable development," Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who flagged off the inaugural journey, said in a social media post. The railway ministry said the train was "developed entirely in India", although senior officials told reporters that some key components, including the fuel cells, were imported. The ministry also inaugurated what it described as the country's largest railway hydrogen storage and refuelling facility in Jind, with a capacity of some 3,000 kilograms, to "support hydrogen-powered train operations".

The pilot project cost around $12 million, according to a senior railway official who acknowledged it was significantly more expensive than a comparable conventional service. However, he said costs were expected to fall as the technology matures. With the launch, India joins countries such as Germany, Japan, China and the United States that are testing or operating hydrogen-powered trains. India's railways have undergone a major transformation since the first passenger steam train puffed out in 1853 from Mumbai.

In recent years, New Delhi has pumped billions of dollars in investment aimed at upgrading infrastructure, improving safety and expanding capacity. The vast network carried 7.41 billion passengers and 1.67 billion tons of freight last year, official data shows. India has also introduced its domestically designed Vande Bharat trains, which can reach speeds of up to 180 kilometers per hour. At the same time, the country is building its first high-speed rail line using Japanese Shinkansen technology. Officials expect the bullet train, designed to operate at up to 320 kph, to begin service on its first section in 2027. - AFP

JIND: This handout photograph shows India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagging off Indian Railways' first hydrogen-powered train during an inaugural ceremony at Jind railway station in Haryana's Jind city. — AFP

JIND: A man takes a selfie with the Indian Railways' hydrogen-powered train after its flagging-off ceremony at Pandu Pindara railway station in Haryana's Jind city. — AFP

Iraq and US sign 48 agreements during PM's visit

BAGHDAD: Iraq signed 48 agreements and partnerships with American companies, many in the oil sector, during a visit to the US by Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi, his office said Saturday. Oil-rich Iraq has been trying to move past decades of war and unrest, but still suffers from poor infrastructure, failing public services, mismanagement and endemic corruption. It is in urgent need of an economic boost, especially after losing revenue due to a halt in oil exports caused by the Middle East war.

"A total of 48 agreements, memoranda of understanding, cooperation agreements, and partnership declarations were signed between public and private sector entities in Iraq and the United States," the Iraqi leader's media office said. They include "cooperation and partnerships involving the ministries of oil and electricity... with ExxonMobil, KBR, GE Vernova, Shell, and Halliburton," as well as several deals related to the construction of a major crude oil pipeline between Iraq and Syria.

Iraq also signed a deal with Starlink, which dominates the global satellite communications sector, to introduce services to the country. On Tuesday, US President Donald Trump praised Zaidi as a "champion" in a meeting at the White House. Zaidi, a businessman, came to power this year with US blessing after Trump vetoed another candidate. He has vowed to boost Iraq's fragile economy and disarm pro-Iran armed groups in Iraq that have targeted US facilities. Iraq has long walked a tightrope between the competing influences of allies the United States and neighboring Iran. — AFP

Xi says AI should not be dominated by one country

SHANGHAI: Artificial intelligence should not be dominated by a single country, China's President Xi Jinping said Friday at a major technology conference in Shanghai, urging international cooperation on its development. Chinese AI models are catching up to the most powerful US offerings and attracting global users with lower costs. But how to govern the sector has become a key question, as concerns grow over military AI deployment or its use by hackers and terrorists. "AI development should not be a solo performance by a single country, but a symphony of international cooperation," Xi said at the opening of the World Artificial Intelligence Conference. "We should jointly oppose overstretching the national security concept in the field of AI or placing one country's security over that of others," Xi added.

The United States and European Union restrict tech exports to China over national security concerns, while tussles between Washington and American AI labs have raised the issue of who controls top technologies. "China is trying to lead not only in terms of the technology development, but also in terms of AI governance," said Shengyun Lu, AI entrepreneur and founder of Shanghai consultancy Praxis Advisory. Lu told AFP that in his view, AI should be regulated "like we regulate nuclear power". The four-day WAIC gathers more than 1,000 of China's tech firms, officials, researchers and industry figures. Around 3,000 products are on display, from powerful semiconductor systems for AI computing to a smartphone that can autonomously operate apps. But eyes were first on Xi's vision of how the world should handle the potential impacts of AI. "We should put in place laws and regulations, technological monitoring, early warning, and emergency response systems, in order to... ensure AI is always under human control," Xi told the conference, calling for a "people-centric" approach. — AFP

CAIRO: Egyptian workers load bails of plastic for recycling on a truck at the garbage city in the Manshiyet Nasser neighborhood in Cairo. — AFP

Egypt's 'Garbage City' recyclers reap gains from plastic squeeze

CAIRO: In the labyrinthine alleyways of Cairo's Garbage City, recycling specialist Peter Romany finds himself fielding calls from factories scrambling for plastic to plug supply shortfalls caused by the Iran war. The 25-year-old is among the hundreds of recyclers and manufacturers across Egypt benefiting from a war-driven surge in demand ever since the United States and Iran choked off the Strait of Hormuz - a major shipping lane for the raw materials from which plastic is made.

At the heart of the boom is the sprawling eastern Cairo settlement of Manshiyet Nasser, where generations of garbage collectors have built one of the world's most sophisticated informal recycling systems. "Before the war, we were the ones calling factories, trying to sell our material," Romany told AFP, standing beside towering bales of compressed plastic. "But after the war broke out, the factories started calling us. They'd ask: How much do you have? Can you deliver today? That never used to happen."

Built on trash

Home to more than 115,000 residents, Manshiyet Nasser is a predominantly Coptic Christian neighborhood nestled beneath the Mokattam hill and facing Cairo's historic Citadel. The settlement handles more than a third of the capital's waste, according to government figures. Families live and work under the same roof, often separated from mountains of waste by little more than a staircase or curtain, exposing them to foul odours, plastic fumes and other health risks. Downstairs, men sort plastics, cardboard, paper, metals and glass into neat piles destined for workshops and factories.

Upstairs, children pore over schoolbooks, mothers prepare lunch and television sets flicker in cramped living rooms, all against the constant background noise of shredders whining and baling presses pounding below. The smell of rubbish hangs heavy in the air as pickup trucks and handcarts crawl through narrow alleyways, unloading the day's collections while children weave between them chasing footballs. It's a well-oiled machine, kicked into overdrive by a war more than a thousand kilometers away. Romany specializes in recycled polyethylene, one of the world's most widely used plastics and a key ingredient in packaging. According to the pricing agency Independent Commodity Intelligence Services (ICIS), the Middle East is a major global supplier of polyethylene, with around 85 percent of its exports passing through the strait

Egypt imports around 40 percent of its raw plastic materials, mainly from Gulf countries, Europe, China and South Korea, according to the Chamber of Chemical Industries. Packaging and plastic prices have more than doubled for some products, three industry sources told AFP, pushing manufacturers towards locally recycled alternatives. Factories that would normally delay payment started putting down cash upfront "because they were so eager to secure material", said Rizq Yousif, who mainly recycles PET, the plastic widely used in beverage and food packaging. Yousif told AFP demand had tripled, while prices for some recycled plastics increased by up to 60 percent.

The disruption has been good for local business all along the value chain. "We have been in this business for 16 years," said Fayrouz El-Sayed, chief executive of Sadat City Chemical Fibre Factory, which produces polyester fibres from used plastic bottles. But only since the latest crisis have they managed to crack new markets as far away as Brazil, she said. Nesma El-Areef, senior marketing and sales manager at Uflex Egypt, which converts plastic waste into new packaging materials, said demand for the company's recycled products rose by up to 40 percent. "We saw a significant increase in orders, particularly from food and beverage manufacturers, because we offered a more readily available alternative to imported materials," she told AFP. Despite the gains, industry figures believe the boom could fade once supply routes stabilize. —AFP

Boeing sees 'new generation' planes dominating in 2045

NEW YORK: Boeing projected Friday a global commercial fleet of 50,000 planes in 2045, more than 90 percent of which will be more fuel-efficient "new-generation" aircraft. That compares with today's global fleet of 28,000 airplanes, reflecting higher long-term demand due to economic growth and additional travel routes. Plane manufacturers must build nearly 44,000 new planes over the next two decades to meet new growth and replace older planes, according to Boeing's new annual forecast.

The figures, released ahead of next week's Farnborough Air Show in Britain, are similar to those in Boeing's 2025 outlook, which also highlighted favorable travel demand dynamics in light of rising GDP. In 2045, an estimated 92 percent of the fleet will have the environmental benefits of the newer fleet, estimated to use about 20 percent less fuel. About 32 percent of today's fleet is composed of new-generation aircraft.

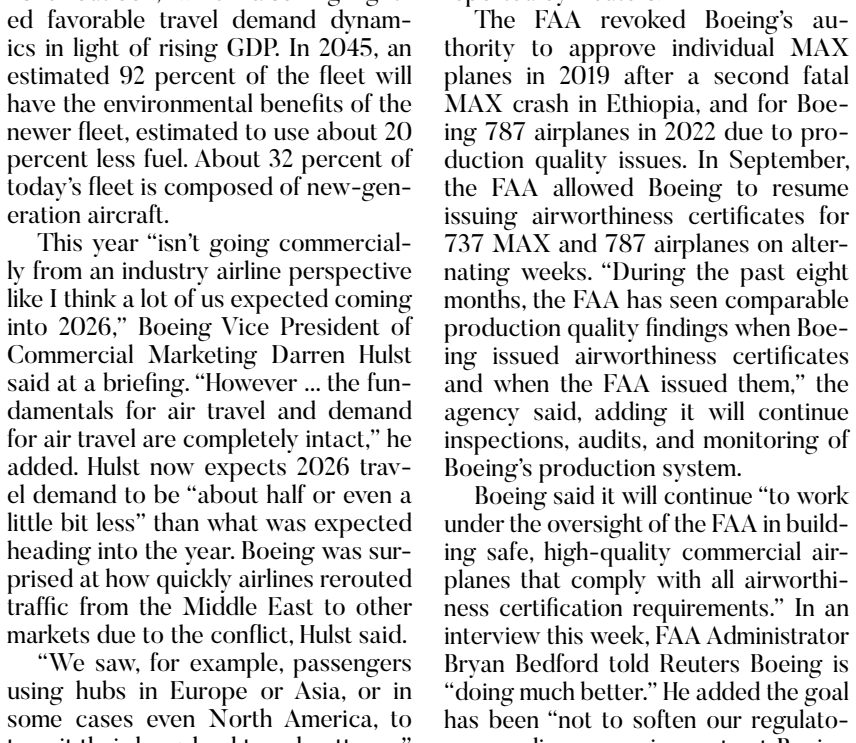
This year "isn't going commercially from an industry airline perspective like I think a lot of us expected coming into 2026," Boeing Vice President of Commercial Marketing Darren Hulst said at a briefing. "However ... the fundamentals for air travel and demand for air travel are completely intact," he added. Hulst now expects 2026 travel demand to be "about half or even a little bit less" than what was expected heading into the year. Boeing was surprised at how quickly airlines rerouted traffic from the Middle East to other markets due to the conflict, Hulst said.

"We saw, for example, passengers using hubs in Europe or Asia, or in some cases even North America, to transit their long-haul travel patterns," said Hulst. Between 2026 and 2045, Boeing's forecast projects four percent annual passenger traffic growth and 2.5 percent global economic growth. As with last year, Boeing's outlook highlights the gap between new plane production and demand in light of supply chain difficulties since the COVID-19 pandemic. Hulst said this "deficit" will probably not clear for single-aisle planes until the end of the 2020s and will go into the early 2030s for widebody jets.

Meanwhile, the Federal Aviation Administration said it will allow Boeing to issue airworthiness certificates for all 737 MAX and 787 airplanes starting next week, a significant milestone for the US planemaker as it ramps up production. The FAA said the "decision follows months of thorough data and safety review demonstrating consistent production quality and reflects the FAA's confidence in Boeing's ability to issue airworthiness certificates under FAA oversight." The decision was first reported by Reuters.

The FAA revoked Boeing's authority to approve individual MAX planes in 2019 after a second fatal MAX crash in Ethiopia, and for Boeing 787 airplanes in 2022 due to production quality issues. In September, the FAA allowed Boeing to resume issuing airworthiness certificates for 737 MAX and 787 airplanes on alternating weeks. "During the past eight months, the FAA has seen comparable production quality findings when Boeing issued airworthiness certificates and when the FAA issued them," the agency said, adding it will continue inspections, audits, and monitoring of Boeing's production system.

Boeing said it will continue "to work under the oversight of the FAA in building safe, high-quality commercial airplanes that comply with all airworthiness certification requirements." In an interview this week, FAA Administrator Bryan Bedford told Reuters Boeing is "doing much better." He added the goal has been "not to soften our regulatory compliance requirements at Boeing but to be more collaborative in the decision-making process." The decision comes as Boeing seeks to increase 737 MAX production. The FAA last year raised Boeing's monthly production cap to 42 aircraft, ending a 38-plane limit imposed after a mid-air panel blowout aboard a new Alaska Airlines MAX 9 in January 2024. — Agencies



EVERETT: Mike Fleming, senior vice president of Airplane Programs and Customer Service of Boeing Commercial Airplanes, speaks during the opening of the company's new North Line assembly line, which will produce the 737 MAX aircraft, at the Boeing Everett Factory in Everett, Washington. – AFP

Apple unseats Nvidia to become world's most valuable company as AI bets shift

Investors look beyond AI chip boom

NEW YORK: Apple overtook Nvidia on Friday to become the world's most valuable company, reshuffling the top ranks of tech heavyweights as investors reassess the outlook for artificial intelligence. Apple was last valued at $4.88 trillion as its shares held steady, while Nvidia was roughly at $4.86 trillion, following a 3.5 percent decline. The shift in the pecking order illustrates that investors are broadening their focus beyond the most obvious beneficiaries of the AI boom, such as Nvidia, which had been at the helm for nearly a year. Apple is reclaiming the top spot for the first time since April last year.

"Apple was seen as a laggard in the AI race because it wasn't spending to develop models, but now sentiment has changed," said Toni Meadows, head of investment at BRI Wealth Management. "Apple is less exposed to capex intensity and better positioned to monetize AI via services, ecosystem lock-in, and hardware upgrades. The re-rating reflects confidence in earnings durability rather than speculative AI upside." For a company that was often seen trailing in the AI race, the milestone reflects Apple's efforts to establish itself more firmly among the sector's leading players, and could shape how CEO Tim Cook's final months at the helm are viewed.

Cook is preparing to cede his role to hardware veteran John Ternus in September. Last month, the company rolled out a long-delayed overhaul of Siri, betting the upgraded assistant would help close the gap with Big Tech rivals and new-age startups in the crucial AI race. Some analysts say Apple is sitting on an AI gold mine in the form of the personal data that lives on every iPhone. The data could make Siri's answers more useful and the assistant more capable. The challenge is that such data is locked away in operating systems in the name of privacy and the company would have to find a way to unlock its value.

AI spending lifts new winners

Nvidia became the first company in the world to surpass a $5 trillion market valuation in October, a landmark that propelled it into a rarefied territory that was far beyond the reach of its rivals. Being superseded by Apple does not necessarily signal a lasting change in the companies' relative standing. The chipmaker remains a major beneficiary of AI-related spending, and its graphics processors are powering much of the generative AI frenzy. Nvidia could also reclaim the top spot if sentiment shifts.

Besides, Apple is in a delicate position itself, having raised prices to offset rising costs—a strategy that could hurt demand. "I don't see any meaningful distinction. Nvidia likely to be a significant participant in whatever happens going forward," said Benjamin Hall, vice president, alpha research at Segal Marco Advisors. However, the AI enthusiasm has spread to other corners of the semiconductor industry. The bigger winners this year have been memory chipmakers such as Micron, which crossed $1 trillion in market value in May as investors embraced the significance of memory chips in AI infrastructure.

South Korea's SK Hynix also listed on the Nasdaq earlier this month, adding another player to the race for investor attention. "The new entrants to the market could spread out the focus away from the pure Magnificent Seven names into a wider number of names," Hall said. The eye-watering chips rally ran into turbulence in July as investors reassessed the sustainability of the artificial intelligence trade, knocking the Philadelphia SE Semiconductor index down almost 19 percent from its all-time highs. Despite the steep fall, the index has performed better than Nvidia so far this year. — Reuters

TOKYO: Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang poses with attendees for a selfie after the media Q&A session during the Nvidia/Japan AI Ecosystem Reception in Tokyo. — AFP

Tech share selloff rolls on, oil prices jump on clashes

NEW YORK: Wall Street stocks fell decisively Friday, joining most global markets in retreating on continued weakness in artificial intelligence shares and rebounding oil prices. Tech shares have been under pressure in recent days on questions about their lofty valuations following Nasdaq's surge in the second quarter. With semiconductor companies the worst hit in the selloff, Nvidia briefly lost its crown to Apple as the world's most valuable publicly traded company.

In recent weeks, some doubts have cracked the AI bonanza narrative, with analysts wondering if huge investments can be recovered through the adoption of the new AI products being released to the public. Adding to worries about tech, Chinese startup Moonshot AI on Friday released a model that experts said could rival some of the more advanced offerings from US labs. "Tech weakness is driving the risk off sentiment," said Angelo Kourkafas from Edward Jones. "We have seen more volatility in the space as investors question both the pace and the payoff of the investments made."

All three major US indices retreated, led by the tech-focused Nasdaq which lost 1.4 percent. Kourkafas also cited the latest jump in oil prices as a factor in stock market weakness. Oil prices jumped more than four percent on renewed fighting between the United States and Iran, intensifying a clash over control of the Strait of Hormuz, a key waterway in petroleum transport. International benchmark Brent North Sea crude closed at $88.10 a barrel.

"The technology selloff is not the only reason markets are in a sour mood," noted Ipek Ozkardeskaya, senior analyst at Swissquote bank. "Developments in the Middle East are getting worse by the hour." Trade Nation analyst David Morrison said: "The ongoing conflict, combined with threats to major shipping routes such as the Strait of Hormuz and potentially the Red Sea, has increased uncertainty across global financial markets." Earlier on, Asian and European stock markets also took their cue from Wall Street's finish on Thursday, where sharp falls in Nvidia and Amazon helped drag down the Nasdaq by more than one percent.

The Nasdaq's slide intensified on Friday, with Netflix shares tumbling more than seven percent as the streaming giant warned of slowing sales growth. With South Korea enjoying a holiday on Friday, Tokyo and Taipei — also heavily weighted toward tech — were at the forefront of Asia's latest selling heading into the weekend. Japan's Nikkei ended the day down four percent with shares in semiconductor tester Advantest, Tokyo Electron and tech investment titan SoftBank each sliding more than seven percent.

Chipmaker Kioxia collapsed 16 percent, meaning it has lost around half its value since briefly becoming Japan's biggest firm by market capitalization last month. Taiwan's Taiex index had shed 6.5 percent by the close Friday, as chipmaker TSMC retreated more than seven percent — a day after announcing record second-quarter profits and that it would invest a further $100 billion in the US state of Arizona. Europe's main stock markets closed mostly lower. London rose thanks to its share listings of energy giants, which climbed on rising oil prices. — AFP

NBK reaffirms leadership across diverse areas of banking with five prestigious Euromoney awards

In recognition of bank's exceptional performance and active role in advancing sustainability, CSR initiatives

KUWAIT: In a further testament to its market leadership and sustained excellence across local and regional markets, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) has been honored with five prestigious awards from Euromoney, the globally renowned authority in banking and finance, as part of its Awards for Excellence 2026. The recognition reflects NBK's exceptional performance across diverse areas of banking and its active role in supporting sustainability and corporate social responsibility initiatives.

NBK received the following awards: Kuwait's Best Bank; Middle East's Best Bank for Corporate Responsibility; Kuwait's Best Retail Bank; Kuwait's Best Bank for Large Corporates; Kuwait's Best Bank for ESG. Euromoney's Awards for Excellence are granted according to a rigorous data-driven methodology, under which participating institutions undergo a comprehensive assessment process based on the analysis of financial performance and achieved results, the level of innovation in products and services, and their impact on customers. The evaluation also compares institutions against their market peers using comparable indicators and criteria. The assessment process further includes in-depth research reviews, analysis of submitted data, and follow-up interviews with executive management to verify results and understand strategic direction.

Best bank

Winning the Kuwait's Best Bank award demonstrates NBK's success in reinforcing a balanced business model that combines strong performance, operational resilience, and the ability to adapt to economic changes. The Bank continued to steadily execute its long-term strategy, leveraging the diversity of its businesses and accumulated expertise, enabling it to continue delivering sustainable value to its customers and shareholders while maintaining its leading position in the Kuwaiti banking sector.

The Bank's continued investments in technology and human capital have also strengthened its ability to keep pace with the rapid transformations shaping the financial sector. NBK continued to develop its services and products and expand its digital solutions, enhancing operational efficiency and improving the customer experience. This approach reaffirms the Bank's commitment to innovation and to delivering advanced banking services that respond to customers' evolving needs and meet future requirements.

This recognition also reflects NBK's success in integrating sustainability principles across various aspects of its business through the expansion of sustainable finance, the development of institutional frameworks related to governance and risk management, and the reinforcement of responsible practices that support long-term growth. At the meantime time, the Bank continued to advance its vision of placing customers at the core of its strategy while balancing technological progress and sustainability, further strengthening its position as a leading financial institution that contributes to economic development and creates sustainable long-term value.

The Bank has also reinforced its position by adopting advanced practices in transparency, disclosure, and engagement with the investment community. NBK is committed to providing accurate and timely information and to developing effective communication channels with investors and analysts, helping to strengthen confidence and reinforce adherence to global best practices in governance and disclosure. This also underscores the Bank's focus on building sustainable relationships with its various stakeholders.

Winning the Middle East's Best Bank for Corporate Responsibility award reflects NBK's success in developing a comprehensive corporate responsibility framework. The Bank has evolved beyond the implementation of traditional initiatives toward long-term investment in measurable community programs aligned with national development priorities.

This framework is built on aligning its programs with Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) principles, applying the highest standards of governance and transparency, and focusing on delivering tangible developmental and behavioral outcomes that extend beyond participation in activities alone. This approach further strengthens NBK's position as a financial institution at the forefront of advancing the concept of corporate responsibility within the banking sector.

In evaluating this award, Euromoney considered a range of factors, including corporate responsibility strategy, governance framework, level of innovation, progress in social investments, and the measurement of the tangible impact and economic value generated by these initiatives, as well as the Bank's ability to further develop its institutional capabilities in this field.

At the core of this framework is a portfolio of flagship initiatives, led by Bankee, NBK's financial literacy program for schools. The program has successfully reached more than 50,000 students across over 104 schools throughout Kuwait, with the active participation of more than 12,000 teachers, and an investment exceeding KD 1 million. This reflects the program's extensive reach, meaningful impact, and role in empowering educators and enhancing their ability to deliver financial literacy concepts through modern and interactive learning approaches.

NBK's broader community initiatives have further amplified this impact. The NBK Run attracted more than 7,000 participants from various age groups, reflecting an inclusive model that promotes the integration of all segments of society, including people with disabilities. More than 94 percent of participants indicated their intention to adopt a healthier lifestyle following the event.

The Bank's seasonal initiatives have also played an important role, including the "Doing Good Deeds" campaign during Ramadan, which benefited more than 6,800 individuals and encompassed food distribution, road safety awareness, and food waste reduction initiatives, alongside efforts to promote cultural engagement and community interaction. Through these initiatives, NBK has demonstrated its ability to build an integrated corporate responsibility framework that generates sustainable economic and social value while contributing to the long-term development of the community.

- **The accolades reinforce NBK's standing as a financial institution distinguished by its ability to combine operational excellence with a strong commitment to corporate responsibility**
- **This international recognition underscores the Bank's continued commitment to advancing a business model anchored in sustainability and innovation. The diversity of the awards reflects NBK's ability to deliver strong performance across a broad range of banking activities and business segments**

Best Retail Bank

In retail banking, NBK launched several innovative products to meet customers' evolving needs, offering exclusive experiences through strategic partnerships with leading global brands, such as The Bicester Collection luxury retail destinations, co-branded credit cards with Harrods, and a prepaid card in partnership with Alshaya Group. The Bank also continued to invest in upgrading its digital banking services and expanding digital solutions that enable customers to conduct their transactions easily and efficiently. NBK continues to diversify and tailor its offerings to meet the needs of different customer segments by integrating banking products with value-added benefits and services that support everyday use and strengthen customer engagement with the services provided.

Best Bank for Large Corporates

NBK further strengthened its longstanding position as a trusted financial partner for large corporates, supported by its ability to deliver added value to clients and provide innovative solutions that support their expansion and business sustainability. The Kuwait's Best Bank for Large Corporates award reflects the Bank's outstanding performance and its ability to provide integrated banking solutions that meet the evolving needs of large corporate clients.

Moreover, NBK stood out through the provision of innovative financing services and the development of advanced digital products that enhanced the client experience and contributed to attracting a broad segment of leading corporates. The Bank also played a pivotal role in financing major strategic projects in Kuwait, making an effective contribution to supporting economic growth and implementing national development plans. This distinction is underpinned by NBK's extensive relationship network and deep expertise in transaction structuring and corporate finance.

Best Bank for ESG

The Kuwait's Best Bank for ESG award reaffirms NBK's commitment to adopting an integrated approach to sustainability that combines strong financial performance with corporate responsibility. The criteria for this category are based on assessing tangible initiatives undertaken by financial institutions in developing and delivering products and services that address environmental and social considerations, implementing effective governance policies, strengthening institutional capabilities in sustainability, advancing sustainable project financing, and reducing carbon footprint in line with international standards.

NBK distinguished itself through the integration of ESG principles into its business model, alongside the development of impactful initiatives in sustainable finance, reducing environmental impact, promoting diversity and inclusion, and upholding the highest standards of governance. These efforts are supported by an advanced level of disclosure and the provision of measurable data on performance and sustainability, enhancing investors' ability to assess the resilience of the Bank's business model and its future prospects.

Sustainability represents a key driver of the Bank's strategic decisions, from capital allocation and risk management to business development and institutional resilience. This is guided by four core pillars: Governance for Resilience, Responsible Banking, Capitalizing on Our Capabilities, and Investing in Our Communities. NBK has translated this approach into tangible results by expanding sustainable finance, integrating ESG criteria into lending and investment activities, enhancing governance, and developing human capital. These efforts have been reflected in improved assessments by international rating agencies, further reinforcing the Bank's position as a leading institution in sustainable finance.

The Euromoney Awards for Excellence span more than three decades and attract hundreds of financial institutions annually from over 125 countries, making them a trusted benchmark of leadership and excellence in the global banking industry. For more details about the winners of the 2026 Euromoney Awards for Excellence, please visit the following website: Awards for Excellence 2026 results - Euromoney

NBK elevates experience of KWT Visa Infinite holders

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) continues to elevate the experience of NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Cardholders through exclusive benefits and valuable rewards that enable them to maximize value from their spending with a selection of leading partners and brands. This reflects the Bank's commitment to delivering banking solutions that align with customers' lifestyles and provide genuine added value. During the summer season, whether customers are renovating their homes, purchasing home appliances and electronics, or preparing for travel and holidays, the card provides greater opportunities to benefit from exclusive offers and rewards that address their diverse needs and deliver tangible savings across various spending categories.

Home Renovations and Furnishing

As part of its commitment to offering benefits that directly address customers' everyday needs, NBK enables NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Cardholders to benefit from 10 percent cashback at IKEA on eligible purchases, in addition to free delivery and installation services. This benefit provides customers with the opportunity to achieve tangible savings when furnishing their homes or renovating their living spaces, further enhancing the value they receive when shopping at one of the leading destinations for furniture and home solutions.

Electronics and Home Appliances

The card also offers special benefits at Xcite Alghanim, enabling cardholders to benefit from 10 percent cashback on eligible purchases, in addition to an instant 2 percent discount on selected categories. These benefits provide customers with added value when purchasing a wide range of electronics and home appliances, allowing them to access the latest available products while enjoying meaningful savings and rewarding benefits that enhance the value of their purchases.

Cashback tailored to customers' lifestyles

Cashback benefits are not limited to shopping, home furnishing, and purchases of home appliances and electronics, but also extend to restaurants, cooperative societies, phone bills, jewelry stores, health clubs, and fuel stations as part of the card's dedicated benefits program. Customers can also benefit from cashback on their spending at a wide range of preferred dining destinations. This benefit further enhances the value the card offers to its holders, making it a suitable choice for everyday use across various spending activities. In addition to benefits linked to everyday spending, the NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card enables cardholders to benefit from up to 25 percent cashback when booking airline tickets with a selected group of leading airlines.

- **NBK KWT Visa Infinite Card benefits make it the ideal companion for everyday use**
- **NBK's strategic partnerships enable cardholders to benefit from exclusive offers and tangible savings**
- **Exceptional offers at IKEA include 10% cashback, along with free delivery and installation services**
- **10% cashback on electronics and home appliances from X-cite, in addition to an instant 2% discount**
- **Rewards and cashback tailored to customers' lifestyles through the card's dedicated benefits program**
- **Up to 25% cashback on flight bookings with selected airlines**

Integrated experience

NBK is committed to offering banking products that provide its customers with real value beyond the traditional concept of credit cards, delivering tangible benefits that align with their everyday needs and lifestyles. The NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card is at the forefront of these products, combining cashback, exclusive offers, and rewarding benefits within an integrated experience that makes it the ideal companion for everyday use.

The Bank continues to develop its strategic partnerships with leading brands to deliver exclusive benefits that provide genuine added value to customers. Through its partnerships with leading brands such as IKEA and Xcite Alghanim, NBK enables cardholders to benefit from exclusive offers and tangible savings when furnishing their homes or purchasing home appliances and electronics, further enhancing the value they receive from using the card and enabling them to maximize value from their spending.

NBK continuously works to develop its benefits and rewards programs in line with customers' needs and evolving spending patterns. The Bank also continues to expand its network of partnerships and enhance its offers on an ongoing basis, ensuring the best possible experience for its customers. The NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card is one of the Bank's leading cards in terms of exclusive benefits and added value, offering the highest cashback in Kuwait of up to KD 1,000 every month.

NBK views this card as more than just a payment tool. It is a solution that provides customers with real rewards and tangible savings throughout the year, while offering an integrated experience built around quality, flexibility, and added value. This reflects NBK's continued commitment to enhancing the customer experience and reinforcing its position as a trusted banking partner that keeps pace with customers' evolving aspirations and needs.

NBK invited customers who do not currently hold the NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card to apply for it easily through the NBK Mobile Banking App. The application process can be completed digitally through simple steps, with no salary transfer required, enabling a wider segment of customers to benefit from the exclusive advantages and offers provided by the card. During the summer period, the Bank is offering an exclusive issuance fee of KD 25 for the NBK KWT Visa Infinite Card.

In line with its commitment to delivering added value, NBK continues to provide innovative banking solutions and advanced benefits programs that enhance the value customers receive from using their cards, further reinforcing its position as a trusted banking partner.

NIC recognized as the 'Best Investment Bank in Kuwait'

Euromoney honors National Investments Company for Equity Capital Markets excellence

KUWAIT: In a new achievement that reflects its leadership and established position in the financial and investment sector, National Investments Company (NIC) has been recognized by Euromoney for the third consecutive time as Best Investment Bank in Kuwait for Equity Capital Markets in the Euromoney Awards for Excellence 2026. The recognition reflects the pivotal role played by the Company in providing advanced investment and financial services, as well as its effective contributions to developing Kuwait's capital market through the management of public offerings and the execution of investment transactions.

Euromoney's awards are based on a comprehensive study and evaluation of a range of quantitative and qualitative criteria, including innovation, service quality, institutional performance, expert views, reports and research. The awards are among the most prominent global awards in the financial sector, drawing on more than 50 years of experience. Commenting on the recognition, Bashar Khan, Managing Director of the Alternatives and Investment Banking Division at NIC, said: "This recognition reflects the continued strength of NIC's Investment Banking platform and the depth of our Equity Capital Markets expertise. We remain committed to advising issuers through strategically structured offerings, disciplined price discovery and effective investor engagement, while upholding high execution standards that contribute to successful market outcomes."

Bashar Khan

A strong track record

NIC successfully executed several landmark transactions with a combined value exceeding several billion US dollars. Khan stated that the Company continued to strengthen its presence in Kuwait's most prominent Initial Public Offerings, playing a key role across the various stages of each transaction, from structuring and regulatory coordination to subscription management, allocation and listing. Among the most notable transactions was the Initial Public Offering of Action Energy Company, which achieved subscription coverage of 5.0 times the offering size and generated the total demand of USD 900 million. The Company's performance during the period also reflected the strong momentum across its investment activities.

The transaction also received broad investor interest. These offerings witnessed strong participation from local and international institutional investors, including investors from the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This reflects the attractiveness of the Kuwaiti market and its ability to attract foreign capital when supported by clear governance, fair valuation and effective investor communication. Notably, Action Energy Company was listed on Boursa Kuwait on December 17, 2025, and its share price recorded a gain of approximately 13% over ten trading sessions by the end of 2025.

Khan further explained that NIC, through its various Equity Capital Markets transactions, has been committed to raising execution standards in the market by applying more professional pricing mechanisms and organizing in-depth introductory sessions for investors. These practices contribute to enhancing transparency, improving the quality of engagement between issuing companies and investors and achieving more efficient subscription outcomes.

The Company is also distinguished by its strong ability to manage complex, multi-party processes involving regulators, legal advisors, auditors, issuers and market participants, ensuring that transactions are executed in line with regulatory frameworks and approved timelines.

Khan also noted that NIC continues to strengthen its presence in Equity Capital Markets through a diverse range of future transactions across key growth sectors, including retail, consumer, education and technology, in addition to advisory services related to capital increases in the transportation and real estate sectors.

Khan concluded by stating that this achievement also highlights the continued momentum of the Company's Investment Banking services, noting that the high-quality transactions executed by the Company have contributed to reinforcing its position as a distinguished provider of investment advisory services. These achievements also reflect the depth of the Company's Advisory expertise and its commitment to delivering added value to its clients and investors.

As one of the leading investment institutions locally and regionally, NIC reaffirms its continued commitment to delivering integrated and innovative investment solutions based on a deep understanding of markets and client needs, while focusing on achieving sustainable growth and creating long-term value. The Company is committed to upholding the highest standards of governance and transparency, reinforcing its position as a trusted partner in developing the investment sector.

Gulf Bank direct sales team at the bank's stand in Al Khairan mall.

Gulf Bank launches 'red'y to impress' marketing program

KUWAIT: For many young people, the journey toward financial independence begins with their first student allowance and continues well beyond graduation. Recognizing the importance of supporting them at every stage, Gulf Bank has launched 'red'y to impress', a new marketing program designed to make youth banking more rewarding, relevant and closely connected to their evolving lifestyles. The program brings together two of Gulf Bank's internationally recognized propositions: red, winner of the Best Gen Z Product of the Year award, and Gulf Points, winner of the Best Loyalty and Rewards Program award.

Together, they provide young customers with savings opportunities, everyday benefits, exclusive rewards and financial planning tools, beginning with the transfer of a student allowance and the issuance of a red Plus prepaid card, and continuing through graduation and the transition to a salary account. Under the new offer, young customers who transfer their student allowance and obtain a red Plus card will receive the card free of charge for five years, along with 20,000 welcome Gulf Points through Gulf Points (equivalent to KD 60), Kuwait's most rewarding loyalty program. They will also enjoy a KD 10 Trolley voucher and a range of exclusive offers from Oula and Trolley.

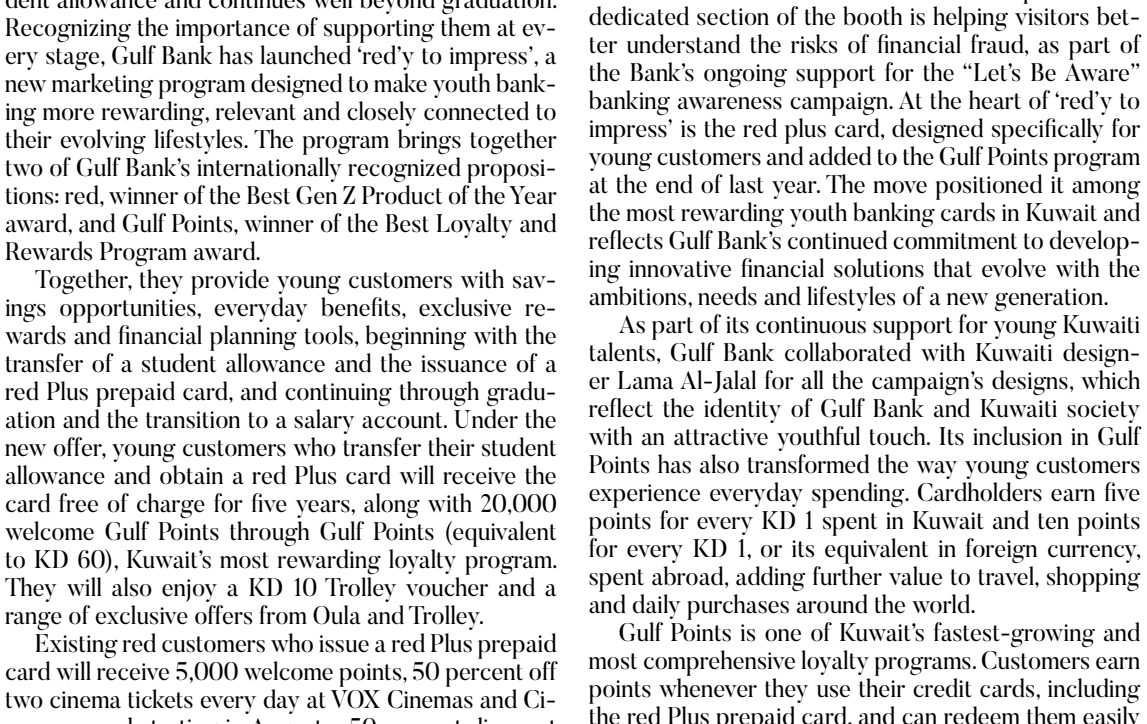
Existing red customers who issue a red Plus prepaid card will receive 5,000 welcome points, 50 percent off two cinema tickets every day at VOX Cinemas and Cinescape and starting in August a 50 percent discount on talabat every Monday. The journey continues after graduation. Graduates will receive an immediate gift of 5,000 points when their graduation allowance is credited, followed by a further 20,000 points when they convert their red account into a salary account and obtain a complimentary credit card.

To mark the launch of 'red'y to impress', Gulf Bank's sales team has welcomed visitors at a dedicated booth in Al Khairan mall last weekend. The activation brings the program's youthful spirit to life through competitions, entertainment activities, a photo corner and a dedicated sales area where visitors can learn more about the Bank's youth-focused products and services. Visitors also have the opportunity to enter a draw to win a red kayak.

Alongside the entertainment, Gulf Bank is placing financial awareness at the heart of the experience. A dedicated section of the booth is helping visitors better understand the risks of financial fraud, as part of the Bank's ongoing support for the "Let's Be Aware" banking awareness campaign. At the heart of 'red'y to impress' is the red plus card, designed specifically for young customers and added to the Gulf Points program at the end of last year. The move positioned it among the most rewarding youth banking cards in Kuwait and reflects Gulf Bank's continued commitment to developing innovative financial solutions that evolve with the ambitions, needs and lifestyles of a new generation.

As part of its continuous support for young Kuwaiti talents, Gulf Bank collaborated with Kuwaiti designer Lama Al-Jalal for all the campaign's designs, which reflect the identity of Gulf Bank and Kuwaiti society with an attractive youthful touch. Its inclusion in Gulf Points has also transformed the way young customers experience everyday spending. Cardholders earn five points for every KD 1 spent in Kuwait and ten points for every KD 1, or its equivalent in foreign currency, spent abroad, adding further value to travel, shopping and daily purchases around the world.

Gulf Points is one of Kuwait's fastest-growing and most comprehensive loyalty programs. Customers earn points whenever they use their credit cards, including the red Plus prepaid card, and can redeem them easily through the Gulf Bank mobile application. Redemption options include an innovative eStore where customers can purchase a wide range of products with points, share points with family and friends, convert points into cashback, or use them to book flights, hotels and car rentals worldwide.



Great turnout and interaction of young people at the Gulf Bank pavilion.

Cameroon cracks down on under-reported gold production

YAOUNDE: Cameroon's government announced Wednesday it was cracking down on its gold mining sector over discrepancies between the volumes produced and declared by companies, potentially costing billions in lost tax revenue. Cameroonian authorities estimate that the illegal export of gold to the United Arab Emirates has deprived the state of around 2,000 billion CFA francs (about $3.5 billion) over the past five years.

"The main problem does not necessarily lie in the disappearance of gold belonging to the state, but in the under-reporting of part of the production by certain private operators," acting mining minister Fuh Calistus Gentry told journalists. Cameroon's mining sector has faced recurring criticism over the low revenues generated from gold extraction. The government plans to step up controls at mining sites, introduce minimum gold delivery thresholds, improve monitoring of the various stages of ore recovery and strengthen production traceability.

Fuh said there were also plans to clean up issues of licensing, noting more than 200 companies are known to be carrying out mining activities without authorization, and 137 cases have already been referred to the competent courts. The government also plans to crack down on the improper use of exploration permits for mining operations. "An exploration permit is intended for conducting exploration works aimed at identifying and assessing a deposit," he said. The central African nation is banking on the exploitation of its mineral resources such as iron, diamonds, gold, and cobalt to develop its economy, having adopted a new mining code in 2023. — AFP

TEETH BARED IN GREECE'S BEAR-HUMAN SHOWDOWN

A brown bear (Ursus arctos) at the Arcturos Bear Sanctuary in Nymfaio, northwestern Greece.

A brown bear (Ursus arctos) at the Arcturos Bear Sanctuary in Nymfaio, northwestern Greece.

A wild female brown bear (Ursus arctos) and her two cubs in a forest, near Grevena, northwest Greece.

Visitors look at goods in the souvenir shop of the Arcturos Bear Sanctuary.

Two brown bears (Ursus arctos) at the Arcturos Bear Sanctuary in Nymfaio.

Living in a mountain village in northern Greece, retired furrier Dimitris Despas is no stranger to brown bear encounters — the latest one in his garden just weeks ago. "The bears have surrounded us. They come into the house yards, cause damage, eat the fruit off the trees," the 65-year-old told AFP at his home in Kleisoura, just east of the city of Kastoria. The population of brown bears in Greece's mountainous Western Macedonia region has grown steadily in past decades due to hunting bans and other conservation efforts.

The 900 bears counted in a 2025 survey by Greek authorities was almost twice the figure of the previous survey six years ago. There have been increasing complaints from farmers about damaged crops and residents over bear incursions into inhabited areas, sparking angry social media exchanges with those who defend the animals' protected status.

"A few days ago, a bear was roaming here in the village's central square at dusk. Another animal injured a fellow villager, thankfully only lightly. We're now afraid to leave our homes," Despas said. Just in Kastoria prefecture, forestry services received over 300 complaints from citizens reporting bears in residential areas between 2025 and last month.

'We are in danger'

More than 2,000 people in the Kastoria area have joined a Facebook group titled 'Not living with bears'. It shares stories of encounters and pressures state authorities to take action. "We are in danger," said one group administrators, Dimitris Mitsopoulos. Bears have been photographed outside schools at times when children are inside, he added. The bears "are in the wrong place. They are wild beasts; they are not pets for us to be able to say that we live together," the 53-year-old graphic designer said.

The showdown became radical in June when three bears were found dead in two days Western Macedonia, according to the leading wildlife groups Arcturos and Callisto. One was a recently rewilded young female. Two had gunshot wounds, while the third — named Circe when she was rescued and nurtured for a year by Arcturos — apparently ate poisoned bait, the organisation said.

In the town of Grevena further to the south, 48-year-old Lefteris Zioutis regularly posts images of intruding bears on social media. "There are more than 10 bears moving about around our town, frequently entering urban areas," the works contractor and self-styled nature lover told AFP. "A few days ago, they were wandering near the city's library and cinema," said Zioutis, who estimates that he has photographed more than 100 different bears since early 2025. "Because of the increase in the population, people are now very disturbed. Damage is being done to farmers, livestock breeders and beekeepers," he said.

'Longstanding issue'

Iason Bantios, spokesperson for the Callisto wildlife group, said animal damage to crops and livestock "is a longstanding issue". "We understand the concerns of residents in affected areas, but what we tell them is that, with proper information and preventive and deterrent measures, the phenomenon of bears approaching inhabited areas can be drastically reduced," he said.

A road sign signaling a bear crossing path and reading "we live together, reduce speed" outside of the city of Kastoria, northwest Greece.

A European wildcat (Felis silvestris) in a forest near Grevena, northwest Greece.

"Under no circumstances, however, can this concern serve as a vehicle for promoting views that call for the adoption of lethal and illegal methods against bears, as we recently saw in Western Macedonia," he said. The Arcturos sanctuary in Nymfaio, 1,350 meters (4,450 feet) up the slopes of Mount Vitsi, about 600 kilometers (375 miles) northwest of Athens, hosts 20 bears.

Originating from Greece and other countries, most were dancing bears in captivity, or animals that lived in zoos. Some were orphaned cubs. Data shows that bears are recolonizing areas from which they had disappeared for decades during the 20th century.

But urbanization, changing land use and the abandonment of grazing and other traditional farming practices, appear to have significantly reduced available food sources, the wildlife groups noted. The human presence, which in the past acted as a deterrent to bears approaching inhabited areas, has also fallen. "Greece has done well in the field of protection, as wild animal populations have recovered," said Arcturos director Alexandros Karamanlidis.

"But this success also creates obligations, since we now need to manage the interactions between animals and humans," he said. "Generations of animals have grown up finding food of high nutritional value more easily near residential areas. We are heading, with mathematical certainty, towards more unpleasant situations," Karamanlidis said. — AFP

'Chainsaw massacre': Europe mulls culls for fish-guzzling cormorant

Europe's great cormorant has recovered from near-extinction to overabundance in half a century, stoking a long-running debate over population control between fishers troubled by its voracious appetite and conservationists. The large black bird's relentless raids on the continent's waters have recently led nine European Union members to urge an easing of the culling rules that have protected the species since 1979.

In a note to Brussels in May, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden asked for the bloc's cormorant population to be kept at "an ecologically and economically acceptable level". "The situation is very bad and keeps worsening," Peter Bozik from the Slovak Fishing Club told AFP, calling the bird "a terrorist". "When cormorants gather in wintering grounds, they can collect the entire fish population out of the unfrozen water in a moment, or damage it so that it will not survive," he added.

Pavel Vrana, an ichthyologist at the Czech Fishing Union, said cormorants not only eat fish, but also often injure them or stress them out so they will not reproduce. "When you have 3,000 cormorants descending on a place, it's a chainsaw massacre," he told AFP. Grigore Stefan, from the Murighiol Fishermen's Association in the Danube Delta, said Romania lost "millions of fish" to cormorants annually. "It's a harmful animal," he said. "I don't know if there are any fish left in the delta this summer."

'Fish tubs'

In the past, Europeans systematically destroyed some cormorant colonies with the help of fire brigades and the military, according to a European Parliament report. Those efforts brought the species close to extinction. By the early 1960s, only a few thousand breeding pairs remained in the main breeding range of the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Poland.

But since being granted protected status, its numbers have soared to an estimated two million birds in Europe in 2026. Zdenek Vermouzek, head of the Czech Society for Ornithology, said cormorants benefited from overfishing in the Baltic Sea, which has wiped out large predatory fish feeding on smaller fry. "The cormorants have simply replaced these predators," he told AFP.

In central Europe, fish lack hiding places as the authorities are quick to clear natural shelters such as fallen trees, while ponds resemble "fish tubs" with steep banks, making them vulnerable to predators, Vermouzek added. Cormorants also have "very few natural predators and so multiply uncontrollably", Romania's General Association of Hunters and Sport Fishermen told AFP.

Pavel Vrana, ichthyologist at the Czech Fishing Union, poses with a taxidermy cormorant bird on July 13, 2026 in Prague. — AFP

Both fishers and conservationists agree that while local cormorant populations are relatively low and stable, the greatest damage is caused by large flocks of migrant birds. But they propose very different methods to deal with the fast-flying, flexible cormorants.

Calling for a "pan-European solution", Vrana proposed oiling eggs in the nest to close the pores through which the embryo breathes as an efficient culling method. "If we want to ecologically and efficiently curb the population, it must happen in the place where they reproduce, no matter how terrible that sounds," he said.

Conservationists disagree, though they accept the practice of shooting cormorants, allowed under an exception to the EU rules, to deter them from areas where fish winter. Ornithologist Jozef Ridzon, from SOS/Birdlife Slovakia, said fishers should identify "sensitive" fish protection areas to continue deterrent shooting. "A blanket solution will fail," he warned.

'Mankind has erred'

Vermouzek was also skeptical of large-scale measures for which "we don't have the men and we don't have the guns". "The birds are rather intelligent and when someone intervenes in a colony, they will start nesting separately and the costs of the intervention will rise," the ornithologist added. He proposed reducing river-clearing operations to give fish better hiding places from the birds, and returning to nature-driven management on the region's exposed ponds.

Both conservationists and fishers agree humanity is to blame for the damage. But while environmentalists favor letting nature run its course, fishers want greater human intervention. "If mankind has erred, mankind must make amends. We cannot rely on natural mechanisms at a time when nature's hands are tied," said Vrana. — AFP

Cuban lives cut short as health system flatlines

Rosa Valentina Perez has been lying in a bed in Cuba's main cancer clinic for nearly three weeks, waiting for a CT scan to diagnose loss of mobility in her legs. Perez underwent surgery for breast cancer two years ago. She urgently needs a scan to know whether the cancer has spread to her spine, but the only working CT scanner in Havana is at the city's neurology hospital - and the waitlist there is long. "You can't imagine what it's like to have this pain, to know that your life span is being diminished, and to hear them say: 'Let's see when we can do that scan,'" the 64-year-old told AFP.

Perez was born a few years after Fidel Castro and his comrades overthrew a US-backed dictator and installed a communist regime that provided free, high-quality healthcare and education for all. The health system particularly was the crowning glory of the revolution, with Castro deploying doctors around the world to showcase Cuba's achievements. But that system is now on life support, with the Covid pandemic, the tightening of US sanctions and an energy crisis exacerbated by US President Donald Trump's six-month-old fuel blockade pushing it to the brink.

Cuban cancer patients remain hospitalized in a room at the Institute of Oncology and Radiobiology in Havana. — AFP photos

A patient with renal failure receives haemodialysis treatment at the Hermanos Ameijeiras Clinical Surgical Hospital in Havana.

Broken or obsolete equipment

Days-long power outages, acute shortages of medicine, an exodus of medical staff to better-paid jobs abroad or in the private sector, and serial breakdowns of ageing equipment have created the perfect storm in Cuban health facilities. The cash-strapped government has concentrated resources on a handful of priority areas including cancer, cardiology, nephrology and maternal and child health. But these departments too are at breaking point.

At the National Institute of Oncology and Radiobiology (INOR), the waitlist for radiotherapy tops 1,200 patients. Eighty percent of the equipment used in diagnostics and treatment is obsolete or broken, institute director Luis Eduardo Martin told AFP. "We administer medication without at times being able to verify they are having the effect we expect... because we don't have the reagents or the equipment to monitor them," he said.

More children dying

Children are on the frontlines of the crisis, despite being prioritized for treatment. The country's childhood cancer survival rate has fallen from 85 percent pre-crisis to 65 percent currently, according to government data. Mariuska Forteza, head of INOR's pediatric oncology unit, said routine but essential blood tests were being cut back because of a lack of equipment and fuel to ferry samples between hospitals.

"It's very frustrating to know you can save the child, achieve a better survival rate, and you can't do it because your hands are tied," she said. In time-honored Cuban tradition, technicians work to repair equipment as best they can. "Sometimes I have to come to the hospital at midnight or 2 am to repair equipment so the patient can begin their (cancer) treatment," said Alexis Amado Dominguez, a repair technician.

Treatment of heart disease is also taking a hammering. Jose Esteban Abreu, a doctor at the National Institute of Cardiology and Cardiovascular Surgery, said the number of heart surgeries conducted annually had fallen from more than 400 in 2018 to barely 100 currently. Around 130 patients are waiting to be fitted with pacemakers.

In the hospital's maintenance department, technician Luis Alexis Duncan showed AFP a large array of equipment awaiting repairs, from anesthesia and cardiopulmonary bypass machines to heart monitors, some of which have been dismantled for spare parts. "We're always inventing, working, innovating," he said.

A patient undergoes radiation therapy at the Institute of Oncology and Radiobiology in Havana.

Lives cut short

Inventiveness is not always enough though. In the workshop where 80 percent of Havana's medical equipment is repaired, faulty incubators and neonatal ventilators are piling up. A personnel shortage has made an already dire situation untenable. The health sector has hemorrhaged doctors, nurses and technicians, unable to survive on pittance state wages paid in heavily devalued Cuban pesos.

In the dialysis unit of the Hermanos Ameijeiras Hospital, a beacon of Cuban medical excellence in Havana, nurses are overwhelmed. The hospital's head of nephrology, Iamara Castro, told AFP some dialysis sessions had to be cut from four to two hours to ensure more patients receive treatment and "avoid overworking the only staff we have." Deciding to trim a patient's life-saving treatment is excruciating, she said.

"When you shorten the hemodialysis period, you are shortening life," she said gravely, adding that the service was kept going by dint of sheer "compassion". One of her patients, 81-year-old Nelson Companioni, said he often feared the equipment would cave in before his session was finished. He described watching staff trying to coax a small pump back to life. "You see the nurses kneeling there, hitting it to get it working." — AFP

Apricots are seen on sale in Yerevan.

A woman weighs fruits in a store in Yerevan.

ARMENIAN APRICOTS BECOME BATTLEGROUND WITH RUSSIA

In Armenia's Ararat valley, where apricots ripen beneath the biblical mountain of the same name, farmer Aramais Kazaryan's harvest has been swept into the centre of a geopolitical battle between Russia and the West. Angered at Yerevan's pivot away from Moscow, the Kremlin imposed bans and restrictions on the imports of a wide range of Armenian goods, including fruits, vegetables and flowers, ahead of parliamentary elections last month. Russia said it was for unspecified sanitary concerns, but it is widely seen as an attempt to heap economic pressure on Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to reverse course and turn back toward Moscow.

The 75-year-old farmer's eyes filled with tears as he walked through his orchard in the village of Vosketap, where a breeze from snowcapped Mount Ararat, across the border in Turkey, dispelled the summer heat. "The apricot is a symbol of Armenia," he told AFP. "Its taste and aroma are royal. The apricot is a wonder of wonders." Cultivated for millennia, Armenia's famed apricots were known to ancient Romans as the "Armenian apple." Before the ban, the vast majority of exports went to Russia.

'Cannot be forgiven'

Kazaryan planted his orchard in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union when farmland was distributed to private owners. Within five years, the trees were bearing fruit, and Russia became the natural destination for much of the harvest, trucked north across the border. Russia has also restricted Armenian fish, famed Jermuk mineral water, wine and brandy. The move has angered Kazaryan and many of his fellow farmers.

"For decades this trade went on. And suddenly everything changed?" he said. "This cannot be forgiven in any way." Moscow was punishing ordinary workers over the government's European course, despite Russia's claims of historic friendship, he said. "This is aimed not against Pashinyan or the leadership, it is going against our people." Pashinyan's party won the June 7 vote — despite intense pressure and allegations of interference from Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin has so far withheld formal congratulations and Moscow has talked up alleged violations in the vote.

Trade war

Ex-Soviet Armenia has strong formal ties to Moscow — a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union that hosts a Russian military base. But Pashinyan has sought to reduce Yerevan's dependence on Moscow after Russia failed to intervene during military conflicts with Azerbaijan over the then-disputed Karabakh region. Armenia has frozen participation in a Moscow-led security bloc, deepened ties with the European Union and the United States, and set the country on a path toward possible EU membership.

The Armenian government has scrambled to soften the blow of the trade war unleashed by Moscow. In early June, it approved support for farmers, including subsidies for greenhouse exports. It is also compensating customs duties on fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers exported to the EU. The European Commission has pledged more than 50 million euros in immediate assistance, along with measures granting nearly 80 percent of Armenian exports tariff-free access to the EU's 450-million-consumer single market.

Apricot farmer Aramais Kazaryan, 75, talks to AFP reporters in his orchard in the village of Vosketap in Armenia's Ararat valley, with Mount Ararat seen in distance.

'Focus on quality'

Armenia's economy could contract by up to two percent if exporters fail to find new markets, Central Bank Governor Martin Galstyan has warned. Economic analyst Ashot Aramyan said government measures and EU help would only ease the shock temporarily. Armenia exported nearly $200 million worth of fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers in 2025, with 93.3 percent going to Russia, he said. "It will not be possible to redirect the entire harvest to European and other markets," Aramyan told AFP, warning of overproduction, bankruptcies and possible social strain. Officials are putting on a brave face. "The times have passed when we used to say that Armenian products were uncompetitive in Europe," Economy Minister Gevorg Papoyan told lawmakers. Apricot farmer Kazaryan sees reason for optimism. Italian investors have planted large orchards in a nearby village and have started to export back home. But many farmers worry "what to do with fruit that may have nowhere to go."

Under good weather conditions, he said, a single apricot tree can yield up to 500 kilograms. "For a long time we were chasing only volumes, quantity — after all, Russia was an inexhaustible market for us." Armenian farmers, he said, should focus more on quality than yield to carve out a place in alternative markets. "Now the main thing is quality." — AFP

Opposition to data centres grows in cramped urban Japan

The more Yoriko Kitagawa learns of a massive data center to be built near her home in Hino on the outskirts of Tokyo, the more she worries. "This is a terrible plan," the 94-year-old told AFP. The explosion in resource-hungry data centers – housing the hardware "brains" of artificial intelligence – is fueling unease worldwide, with New York State and Australia the latest jurisdictions to announce new rules.

Opponents of data centers in the United States have called for a "national day of protest" on Saturday to "protect our hometowns, our wallets, and our way of life". Japan, with some of the most densely populated cities among advanced economies – 80 percent of the country is mountains – has a particular problem: A shortage of suitable urban space to build the facilities. One center is even planned next to the famous Tokyo Tower.

In Hino, the height of two of the three planned buildings has been cut by a fifth to 63.5 m, but they still will tower over nearby houses, blocking the sun for some. "As someone who lives next to the site, I'm most worried about a fire that could be triggered by the massive amount of batteries," said 69-year-old campaigner Yasuo Yamazaki. "Heat from the data center is also worrisome, as well as noise," he told AFP. He also frets about a potential explosion due to a stockpile of fuel on site for a backup generator.

Developer Mitsui Fudosan plans a "green buffer zone" of up to 78 m with trees and a stream, reducing the noise, the heat and the "oppressive feeling", said an official in charge of the project. "One approach is to set the building back from the street and... to arrange greenery so that, at eye level, its presence doesn't feel so overwhelming," he told AFP. "It may be difficult to have a 100-percent consensus with everyone, but we will do our best," he said, noting that the company has held regularly held meetings with residents.

This picture taken on June 30, 2026 shows the site of a data centre construction project in Hino, Tokyo prefecture.

Yasuo Yamazaki, a representative of a citizens' group expressing concerns about the construction of the data centre, poses next to a protest flag reading, 'Do Not Push Forward with the Data Centre Construction!', in Hino. — AFP

AI-friendly

Trillions of dollars are being spent on data centers to train and run AI models and provide cloud storage for humanity's zettabytes – a unit equivalent to a trillion gigabytes – of digital information. Japan has big plans in the field, including for 10 million AI robots operating by 2040, aiming to become "the most AI-friendly country in the world". It wants to develop its own sovereign AI models and infrastructure to avoid over-reliance on the United States and China, the sector's runaway leaders.

Partly to meet a projected increase in power demand from AI, Japan is moving to revive its nuclear power sector, 15 years after the Fukushima disaster. But despite being a large and politically stable economy with good telecoms infrastructure, Japan has "important constraints", said Trung Ghi, energy and utilities consultant at Arthur D Little. "Suitable large-scale land near demand centers is limited, particularly because Japan is mountainous and major demand is concentrated around dense urban areas," Ghi told AFP.

Having data centers near end-users is important – not least for the ultra-speed of response needed for financial trading, streaming or gaming. According to real estate company JLL, around 90 percent of Japan's data centers are concentrated in the greater Tokyo and greater Osaka areas. Electricity is key though, and over time the "winning locations" may not be closest to cities but where there is "reliable, affordable and increasingly low-carbon power at speed", said Ghi. "Power, grid, cooling, land-use, fibre, regulation and community engagement need to be planned together," he said.

'Feeling of oppression'

Elsewhere, Tokyo commuter town Inzai already has at least 10 data centers including one used by Google, but residents have launched legal action against a proposed new facility. The lawsuit says that locals' "peaceful daily existence... will be destroyed by violations of their right to sunlight, the ruin of the landscape, a feeling of oppression, noise, vibrations, hot air, traffic hazards, and large-scale construction work".

Contacted by AFP, the defendant Japan ERI, which granted the certificate for the construction plan, declined to comment. Critics say Japan also differs from many other countries by having out-of-date building regulations that can classify data centers as offices and not industrial facilities. Japanese law "is not catching up with the situation", said Satoshi Oikawa, a lawyer for Inzai's residents. — AFP

Garry Sobers, towering Windies cricket all-rounder, dies at 89

'A great innings has come to an end, in our hearts, now and forever'

PARIS: Cricket in the 20th century was littered with great players, but by universal consent two stand head and shoulders above the rest - Australian batsman Donald Bradman and West Indian all-rounder Garry Sobers, who has died aged 89.

"A great innings has come to an end. In our hearts, now and forever, Sir Garfield Sobers," West Indies Cricket posted on social media on Friday. In a poll of 100 cricket experts in 1999, both Bradman and Sobers were chosen in Wisden's Five Cricketers of the 20th Century with the West Indian all-rounder garnering 90 votes.

Bradman had an extraordinary 100 votes and yet before his own death in 2001, the Don paid the ultimate tribute to Sobers. "He is, in my opinion, the greatest cricketer of all time," said the Don. That tribute is based not just on the statistics or on style — of which Sobers had plenty — but on the breathtaking breadth of his cricketing ability.

As a batsman Sobers scored 8,032 runs in his 93 Tests at an average of 57.78, numbers that on their own that would guarantee him a place in any pantheon. On top of that, Sobers was a bowler, who took 235 wickets at 34.03 runs each. Sometimes he would open with fast left-arm but, if the pitch was breaking up, he would switch to the left-arm spin — orthodox or wrist — that first brought him to the attention of the West Indian selectors as a teenager.

He was also a lightning fielder, taking 109 Test catches, often at slip but, as captain, he would place himself in the danger zone at short-leg when he brought off-spinner Lance Gibbs into the attack. "The bloke could do just about anything on a cricket field except umpire," Australian all-rounder Alan Davidson told The Cricket Monthly on the occasion of Sobers' 80th birthday in 2016.

"He was a complete cricketer, magnificent fielder, bowled all types of bowling, and when in form, he absolutely decimated great bowling attacks. "You could not set a field to him because he just had that innate ability to be able to score runs whenever he wanted to."

Early promise

Garfield St Aubrun Sobers, who was known as both Gary and Garry, was born in Bridgetown, Barbados on July 28, 1936, the fifth of six children. He was just six when his father Shamont, a merchant seaman, was killed when his ship CNS Lady Hawkins was struck by two torpedoes from a German U-boat off the North Carolina coast.

Sobers showed immense early promise in several sports. He made his debut for Barbados against the Indian tourists as a spinner in January 1953 aged just 16. He played against the MCC tourists a year later and, after just two first-class games, was selected as a replacement for the ill Alf Valentine for a Test debut against England at Sabina Park in March 1954. The tourists won by nine wickets but Sobers made an early impression, removing Trevor Bailey in his first over, and taking 4-75 in the tourist's first innings.

Record breaker

Four years later he shifted himself on to another

LONDON: West Indian cricket legend Sir Garfield Sobers waves as he rings the five minute bell before the start of the second session in memory of Muhammad Ali on the second day of the third Test cricket match between England and Sri Lanka at Lord's in this file photo. — AFP

plane against Pakistan in Kingston, breaking a world record in the process. Since 1938, Len Hutton's 364 against Australia at the Oval had stood as the highest individual score in Test cricket. Sobers, in his maiden Test century, made 365 not out, setting a record that would last until another West Indian Brian Lara made 375 against England in 1994.

In the tied Test in Brisbane in 1960-61, he scored a blistering 132 which set the tone for a memorable series. "It was absolutely one of the greatest innings I have ever seen in my life," said Davidson. "He didn't just beat the field. He split the field. His placement was just incredible."

Sobers succeeded Frank Worrell as West Indies captain for the 1964-65 series at home to Australia and led the hosts to their first ever series win against the Aussies. Results were mixed under his captaincy, which lasted until 1972 when he handed over to Rohan Kanhai, but with Sobers' hand on the tiller, West Indies cricket continued to develop and evolve into the dominant force of the late 1970s and 1980s.

As Sobers aged so his influence on the field waned but he still stroked 254 for the Rest of the World at the MCG in 1972 in what Bradman described as "probably the greatest exhibition of batting ever seen in Australia".

Outside the international arena, Sobers helped South Australia win the Sheffield Shield and played for Nottinghamshire in England's county championship. In 1968, while facing Glamorgan bowler Malcolm Nash, he became the first player to hit six sixes in one over - a feat only equalled once since in first-class cricket by Indian all-rounder Ravi Shastri in 1985.

Sobers retired from Test cricket in 1974 and was knighted a year later. The International Cricket Council honoured him in 2004 when with the Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy for the annual world player of the year but it is the testament of Bradman which will mark him as one of the greatest cricketers. — AFP

AL-MUGHAYYIR: Mourners carry the body of 17-year-old Fadi Al-Nassan during his funeral in this village east of Ramallah in the Zionist-occupied West Bank on July 18, 2026. — AFP

Palestinian teen footballer martyred in Zionist attack

RAMALLAH: A 17-year-old Palestinian footballer died on Saturday a week after he was shot and injured during an attack by Zionist settlers in the occupied West Bank. Dozens of mourners dressed in black carried the body of Fadi Hamdallah Al-Nassan – a player for Al-Mughayyir Club and a member of the Palestinian national youth team – from the Palestine Medical Complex in Ramallah to his village for burial.

The Palestine Football Association accused Zionist forces of shooting Nassan while settlers were attacking the village on July 11. The young player was reportedly shot in the thigh during the attack. His leg was amputated, but he later died from his injuries, the association said. "He loved football," his father, Hamdallah Al-Nassan, told AFP. "When the settlers attacked, he heard the screams of the girls and women," he said. "He went to the scene of the attack and was killed."

The Palestinian official news agency Wafa also reported details of the incident in which Nassan was wounded and the amputation of his leg, adding that two other residents were hit by rubber bullets fired by Zionist forces, and 10-year-old boy was also hit on the head by a stun grenade. Since the start of the war in Gaza in Oct 2023, the United Nations has reported a sharp increase in violence attributed to Zionist settlers in the West Bank. Zionist soldiers or settlers have killed at least 1,088 Palestinians in the West Bank since Oct 2023. — AFP

Australia beat Italy to end Schmidt era with win

PERTH: Australia snapped a six-match losing streak after dismantling a depleted Italy 57-10 in the Nations Championship on Saturday, ensuring coach Joe Schmidt ended his unsuccessful tenure on a winning note. The home side ran in nine tries to two in front of 19,268 fans at Perth's HBF Park, with lock Josh Canham bagging a hat-trick. Schmidt will now hand over to Les Kiss, ending an underwhelming stint where he won 12 of his 31 Tests in charge since assuming control from Eddie Jones.

The victory did ensure the New Zealander avoided the ignominy of finishing with the worst winning percentage of any Wallabies coach in the professional era. It gave Australia their first win of the Nations Championship and ended a prolonged form slump, where they had lost nine of their past 10 Tests. "It was awesome, and I think those three tries were because of how well that forward pack went tonight," said player-of-the-match Canham. "I didn't have to do too much. It was a metre each try, so yeah, it's all the forward pack.

"We put in a lot of hard work the past three weeks. It's been frustrating to not get the results the last couple of weeks, but to put it together tonight, it feels a lot better." After costly fade-outs against Ireland and France, the Wallabies' red-hot start ensured their second-half frailties were not really put to the test.

A rampaging Australian forward pack outmuscled Italy, scoring six tries in a one-sided first-half to lead 38-5 at the interval. The injury-ravaged Italians succumbed to their third straight defeat in the competition, having previously been beaten by Japan and New Zealand. Their task was made harder without head coach Gonzalo Quesada, who was suspended for the match for criticizing the referee and Nations Championship scheduling following the heavy loss to the All Blacks.

PERTH: Italy's Gianmarco Lucchesi (C) appeals to the referee during a scrum in the rugby union Nations Championship match between Australia and Italy at HBF Park in Perth on July 18, 2026. — AFP

"Gutted. Obviously very disappointed with the result and the performance we put in," said Italy captain Michele Lamaro. "I think we played a very good first half against the All Blacks last week, but apart from that, we've been pretty poor against Japan, pretty poor today, and the second half against the All Blacks wasn't us. "We haven't been able to put in a performance we were proud of, and that's the most disappointing."

Italy had entered the match with confidence having beaten the Wallabies in consecutive matches, including a 26-19 triumph in Udine late last year. They were immediately on the defensive with a pumped-up Wallabies opening the scoring in the fifth minute when Canham barrelled over the line.

The Wallabies' knack of starting matches quickly was again on show as Tom Wright weaved through a tentative Italian defensive line to dot down. Brandon Paenga-Amosa got on the end of a patient move as the Wallabies stormed to a 19-0 lead.

A rare foray into attack proved fruitful for Italy in the 20th minute when captain Michele Lamaro scored in the left corner. The Wallabies regained control with Canham scoring twice before Angus Bell and Len Ikitau put the finishing touches on a dominant opening half. "We had a lot of positive moments in a row. Our discipline was improved, and we've been preparing hard," said Australia captain Harry Wilson. The Wallabies came out of the blocks sluggishly with Monty Ioane dashing over the line to restore hope for Italy. — AFP

Antonelli continues to set blazing pace in Belgian practice

SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS: Championship leader Kimi Antonelli topped the times again with a searing lap for Mercedes in Saturday's crash-hit third and final free practice at the Belgian Grand Prix.

The Italian teenager, who was fastest on Friday, clocked a best lap in one minute and 45.990 seconds to beat McLaren's resurgent defending world champion Lando Norris by 0.139 with four-time champion Max Verstappen third for Red Bull.

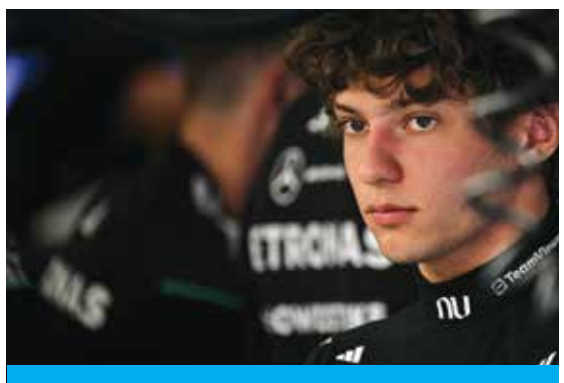
Norris has a 10-second grid penalty for Sunday's race. George Russell worked his way through to finish fourth, three-tenths off the pace, having struggled to match the Antonelli's pace, with Lewis Hamilton fifth for Ferrari despite crashing heavily at the end of the session.

The seven-time champion lost control at the Fagnes chicane and ran wide, smacking the right rear of his car into the barriers, as Pierre Gasly did in his Alpine on Friday. Hamilton was unhurt, but his car was badly damaged with only two hours for repairs ahead of qualifying later Saturday.

His Ferrari team-mate Charles Leclerc was sixth ahead of Oscar Piastri in the second McLaren, the two Audis of Nico Hulkenberg and Gabriel Bortoleto, and Isack Hadjar, who also faces a grid penalty, in the second Red Bull.

The session began slowly in mild, dry and sunny conditions with Valtteri Bottas leading out for Cadillac to clock the first lap before Hadjar on mediums delivered 1:48.231, a time beaten immediately by both Racing Bulls before the top guns joined the fray.

Twelve minutes had gone when Hamilton, his car dazzling in the Ardennes sunshine, took control in 1:47.436 ahead of Piastri and Hadjar. Lindblad then



SAN-FRANCORCHAMPS: Mercedes' Italian driver Kimi Antonelli reacts in the garage before taking part in the third practice session at the Spa-Francorchamps circuit, in Spa, ahead of the Formula One Belgian Grand Prix, on July 18, 2026. — AFP

went faster before Hamilton responded, trimming his lap to 1:46.789, half a second clear of his compatriot.

It was the first sub-1:27 lap of the weekend but Antonelli, on his first flying lap, slashed seven-tenths out of Hamilton's time with 1:45.990 – an astonishing 1.3 seconds quicker than his Mercedes' team-mate Russell.

Verstappen was third, in 1:46.837, with Leclerc fourth, 1.132 adrift of the Italian's astonishing pace and Russell fifth. Only the leading three, on softs, had gone under 1:47 at this stage on what is regarded as a true drivers' circuit.

In this season's new 'hybrid era' of energy management, sensitivity and pure talent appear to flourish on some circuits more than others. For a spell, the teams contented themselves with tyre evaluation by running on used softs to establish durability, while Norris, on a different plan, drove 13 laps on a set of mediums to gather data. Verstappen then took new softs and enjoying tows from Leclerc and Bottas went second with 12 minutes remaining before Norris, back on softs, jumped to second with 1:46.129, just 0.139 adrift before the final drama. — AFP

Kerr targets world record, Hodgkinson happy to 'run free'

LONDON: Josh Kerr is confident he is in the kind of form that could see him break the 27-year-old world record for the mile to add his name to a storied list of previous British athletes. But Keely Hodgkinson said thoughts of going after Jarmila Kratochvilova's 800m record dating back to 1983 was not the overiding factor going into Saturday's Diamond League meet in London.

Kerr has built his season around going after Hicham El Guerrouj's best of 3min 43.13sec, which the Moroccan set in Rome in 1999. "My body is capable of the mark," Kerr said Friday. British record holder Kerr, the Olympic 1,500m silver medallist, has a personal best of 3:45.34, sixth on the all-time list.

"It was a dream for a long time, but I knew it could be reality for a long time," remarked Kerr, who defended his world indoor 3,000m title in Poland in March. "It's about convincing yourself, but that didn't take too long," he said, adding it had been more about establishing a supportive team around him to allow him to go after the record "as fiercely as I wanted to".

Kerr, who will be paced by his training partner Brannon Kidder, added: "Every race has a moment where you can see an athlete go from 'This is really hard' to 'I'm going to get this', and those are the moments I'm looking for.

"What's going to transpire tomorrow is my moment. "I've had belief in myself for a long time. It's not something that is difficult for me." While a record attempt is on the cards, Kerr acknowledged that there is also a race, with Olympic bronze medallist Yared Nuguse, the North American record holder and fourth in the all-time mile list, in the field.

LONDON: Britain's Josh Kerr (R) poses after winning the men's one mile event and setting the record time, during the IAAF Diamond League athletics competition at the London stadium in London. — AFP

"In the 1,500m we have so many great athletes," the 28-year-old US-based Scot said. "The clock is not something I've chased. I just have to turn up and be consistent, like in training. "It's an open race. I know what my focused plan is."

Before El Guerrouj installed himself as world record holder, British milers were an institution on the track. Roger Bannister was the first man to run a sub-4min mile in 1954. Then came middle-distance legends Steve Ovett, Sebastian Coe and Steve Cram, who dominated the event from 1979-93.

Kerr argued that having his name mentioned with that trio "would be the biggest moment of my career". The build-up to Saturday's meet had been dominated by talk of two potential world record attempts, with Kerr joined by Hodgkinson.

But the 24-year-old Olympic 800m champion has had a frustrating season and played down expectations of a tilt at Kratochvilova's record time of 1:53.28. Despite improving her own British record to 1:54.33 in Stockholm in June, she is yet to win a Diamond League race this season. She was beaten in Sweden by Switzerland's Audrey Werro, who ran the third fastest 800m in history to win the race. — AFP

Infantino's enlarged World Cup gamble pays off with punters

'We've seen an 80% increase in the ticket volume'

'PARIS: The World Cup has engaged punters like never before with an 80% increase in betting volume compared to the 2022 edition, even taking into account the higher number of matches for a 48-team tournament, a betting expert told AFP.

Although many football fans were skeptical about the increase in the number of teams from 32 to 48, it appears punters have welcomed it. "We've seen an 80% increase in the ticket volume," Darren Small, senior vice president of Managed Trading Services at Sportradar, told AFP.

"So we're seeing more bets and more active customers. "We've seen record numbers and we've surpassed our expectations in terms of what we felt we were going to see if we compare it to 2022, which is a little difficult because it was different as it was in the winter."

For Sunday's final between Spain and defending champions Argentina, Small expects the company to be handling approximately 8.5 million betting tickets for their 250 bookmaking clients round the world. Sportradar is a global sports technology company that says it creates immersive experiences for sports fans and bettors.

Small said even if the numbers have surprised the company, they anticipated an increase because of the expansion of the tournament to 104 games. "But we also expected it just because of the industry growth and general growth," he added. England may have to wait another four years to try to add a second star to their 1966 triumph but they have topped the betting table.

Indeed the four semi-finalists — also the top four FIFA-ranked teams — drew the most interest. England attracted approximately 16.3 million betting tickets ahead of France (15.5m), Argentina (15m) and Spain (14.5m). The games with the highest volume of betting tickets were England's 2-1 semifinal defeat by Argentina, which generate approximately 5.8 million, England's 2-1 quarterfinal win over Norway (5.7m) and Spain's 2-0 semifinal victory over 2018 champions France (5.3m).

NEW YORK: Former Croatian football player Davor Suker (L) and FIFA President Gianni Infantino (R) take a selfie during the Legends Cup of the 2026 World Cup football tournament at the Rockefeller Center in New York. - AFP

'Switch off'

David Stevens, head of public relations at historic English bookmaker Coral, said their concerns over the enlarged format had been put to rest by a group stage that threw up its fair share of surprises.

"Our fear was there would be a large proportion of predictable results, with the so-called smaller nations offering little or no resistance to their established rivals," he told AFP. "But in the event, that was not the case at all. "Throughout the group stage there were those was Cape Verde, who more than held their own against Argentina in the last 32, bowing out in a 3-2 thriller after extra-time. "Special mention must go to Cape Verde," said Stevens.

"The Islanders are every bookmakers' new favourite team having held both Argentina and Spain to draws, so I suppose... to a large extent, those fears we had at the start didn't really come back to bite us."

The increase in betting interest has been sparked also by offers not just on which team will win but on the individual players and a whole range of other potential outcomes. "You could be backing Messi to score with his left foot in the first 25 minutes, Spain to go on to win 3-1 and there to be 15 corners, 2 assists," said Small. — AFP

England carry 'scars' of World Cup exit: Tuchel

MIAMI: Thomas Tuchel said Friday that England's players carry the "scars" of a painful World Cup exit, admitting there was still a gap to close to the top nations. The England boss has been heavily criticized for his defensive substitutions in a 2-1 semi-final defeat by Argentina in Atlanta on Wednesday.

Anthony Gordon put England on track to reach their first World Cup final since 1966 but late goals from Enzo Fernandez and Lautaro Martinez turned the match around. The Three Lions face France in the third-place play-off in Miami on Saturday after Didier Deschamps' men were beaten 2-0 by European champions Spain.

Tuchel was repeatedly grilled over his tactics during the Argentina game at his pre-match press conference on Friday. "I tried to help, I tried to support," said the German, taking charge of his first major tournament with England. "I took a decision, I took several decisions, trusting my instinct, my intuition, my experience, trusting my competitiveness and I took the decision in order to help the team and get the result.

Thomas Tuchel

"We didn't get the result, so I take, of course, the responsibility for these decisions. But the decisions are made under stress, the decisions are made in-game." Tuchel was downbeat as he took questions alongside former Manchester City defender John Stones, saying he and his players would suffer the most.

"We have to live with this, so it's our pain, my pain and the players' pain — we feel the most pain of all," he said. "And it is our scar that we carry now. It is a very painful defeat, and we have to live with this defeat, first and foremost, not the critics, not the experts, not our family members who suffer as well with us and want only the best for us, but it's basically us."

The former Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and Bayern Munich boss said England, fourth in the FIFA rankings, still had a gap to bridge to reach the standards of the three top nations — Argentina, Spain and France.

Defending champions Argentina face European champions Spain in Sunday's final in East Rutherford, New Jersey. "I think the gap is there because of the titles that Argentina, France and Spain have as national teams, as countries," he said.

"What they built over many years with the coaches and the team, there's still a slight gap that we have to close. "I think the gap shows in almost the expectations of these countries to win a World Cup and to be in a final."

But Tuchel promised a reaction from his men. "We will overcome it, we will use it, we will have a reaction and it starts from tomorrow," he said. "We have a gap to close, and we are aware of that, and that's where the focus is." – AFP

Didier Deschamps

No tears as coach Deschamps prepares for final match

MIAMI: Didier Deschamps said Friday that no tears will be shed as he prepares to take charge of his final France match in the World Cup third-place play-off against England. The 57-year-old coach has enjoyed a successful reign, winning the World Cup in 2018 and reaching the final in Qatar four years ago, having also won it as a player in 1998. His talented team were favourites to win a third World Cup for France at the 2026 tournament but lost 2-0 to European champions Spain in the semifinals. That means Les Bleus will face England in Miami on Saturday after the Three Lions lost to defending champions Argentina.

"I know that the final curtain falls tomorrow," Deschamps said at his pre-match press conference on Friday. "No one here is going to cry, but I know I'll miss the French team. For 15 years (he was appointed in 2012), I had the privilege of experiencing moments that were magical, and others that were difficult.

"But life goes on. I'm a positive person, and I know things will be good, too. It's the best thing that ever happened to me. "It took up 25 years of my life and left a lasting mark. Unforgettable memories remain. But the most important thing is always what lies ahead."

Deschamps, who was captain when France won the World Cup on home soil in 1998, said his team were not playing the match they wanted to be in for his final game in charge. "We are disappointed because we had a lot of ambition for this competition," he said. "We must accept the loss, and we now have this game around the corner, and then we will go on holiday — we all need it." — AFP

Messi eyes glorious farewell as Spain, Argentina clash

EAST RUTHERFORD: Spanish elan meets Argentinian steel in a historic World Cup final on Sunday which sees the reigning champions of Europe and South America battle for football's ultimate prize. Holders Argentina are bidding to become the first team in 64 years to successfully defend the title, in what is almost certainly the final World Cup match of captain Lionel Messi's career.

Spain are aiming to thwart those ambitions by clinching the country's second World Cup crown following their maiden victory in 2010. US President Donald Trump will be among a star-studded crowd of just over 80,000 spectators at the MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford as the largest World Cup in history reaches its climax. World Cup officials have said they are "monitoring closely" air quality from Canadian wildfires affecting the region around the final, which kicks off at 3pm local time (1900 GMT). The final will also see an unprecedented 25-30 minute half-time interval for a Super Bowl-style concert featuring the likes of Madonna, Shakira and Justin Bieber.

But the real action will unfold on the pitch in a cross-continental clash of footballing titans that bristles with sub-plots. At the centre of the drama will be Argentina's Messi, the 39-year-old genius regarded by many as the greatest football player in history.

The veteran superstar will become only the second man ever to play in three World Cup finals, matching the achievement of Brazilian great Cafu in 1994, 1998 and 2002. Messi has enjoyed a vintage World Cup campaign and is on course for the Golden Boot after scoring eight goals in Argentina's journey to the final.

Repeated escape acts

More significantly, the eight-time Ballon D'Or winner has repeatedly rescued Argentina at moments when they appeared headed for the exit. Messi was the driving force of an incredible comeback victory over Egypt in the last 16, when the South Americans trailed 2-0 with 11 minutes to go before eventually winning 3-2.

He then provided two assists in a dramatic come-from-behind 2-1 defeat of England in Wednesday's semifinal in Atlanta. That victory embodied Argentina's dogged, never-say-die approach, a rugged resilience forged under head coach Lionel Scaloni. Scaloni, who has led Argentina to back-to-back Copa America wins either side of a 2022 World Cup triumph, attributes his team's success to fearlessness.

"This group is difficult to explain," he said. "It is a show of the collectiveness, the brotherhood that we are in, the willingness to fight to the very end. "I know the guys. They fear nothing." Argentina's astonishing fortitude is likely to face its most searching examination of the tournament in Sunday's blockbuster. Spain have gradually built momentum in the early rounds before arriving in the final with a magnificent performance to defeat favourites France 2-0 in the semifinals. That performance underscored the strengths of Spain coach Luis de la Fuente's squad, who neutralized France's potent attacking arsenal with their trademark brand of skillful possession-based football. — AFP

NEW YORK: Argentina's forward #10 Lionel Messi (R) waves to fans next to head coach Lionel Scaloni at the Javits Center in New York. - AFP

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SUNDAY, JULY 19, 2026

Spain, Argentina prepare for World Cup final, Trump hails success

EAST RUTHERFORD: Spain and Argentina prepared to do battle in Sunday's World Cup final in New Jersey as organizers said they were keeping a close eye on smoke from wildfires in Canada.

Lionel Messi's Argentina are bidding to become the first team since Brazil in 1962 to win back-to-back World Cups, while Spain are trying to win a second title after their maiden victory in 2010.

Organizers said they were "monitoring closely" the smoke that has choked skies over large areas of the United States. "There's been discussion about it, and we have somebody with the National Weather Service that sits in FIFA headquarters there, so we're monitoring closely," Andrew Giuliani, White House World Cup task force executive director, told a briefing.

US President Donald Trump will be among a crowd of over 80,000 spectators as the largest World Cup in history reaches its climax in the MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey. It will be the only game of the tournament that Trump has attended. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said she would also attend the final after an invitation from the American president.

Trump on Friday hailed the World Cup, also played in Mexico and Canada, as "the most successful sporting event perhaps in the history of the world" as he held a reception in New York with FIFA chief Gianni Infantino.

Physical battle

Spain captain Rodri said he was bracing for a "physical" battle with Argentina and would aim to ignore any possible "provocations". Rodri, the 2024 Ballon D'Or winner, said he expected the final to be unlike any other game the European champions had faced. "I think Sunday's match will be quite different," the Manchester City star told reporters.

This combination of file photos created on July 18, 2026, shows (left) Spain's forward #19 Lamine Yamal at the Dallas Stadium in Arlington on July 14, 2026 and (right) Argentina's forward #10 Lionel Messi in Atlanta on July 15, 2026. — AFP

"It will be a more physical one, and we must be prepared. But I believe that if we are known for something in this national team, it is that we know how to play different games based on the moment.

"So we can adapt to having to defend, counter-attacking, to attacking. We are a very complete team, and that is why we are here." When asked if he expected Argentina to resort to "provocative" tactics, Rodri replied: "Well, that's a part of football."

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni urged fans to make the most of seeing Messi lead out his team in another World Cup final at the age of 39. "He has made history. He is a legend," Scaloni said of the former Barcelona player, who helped Argentina to win the World Cup in Qatar in 2022.

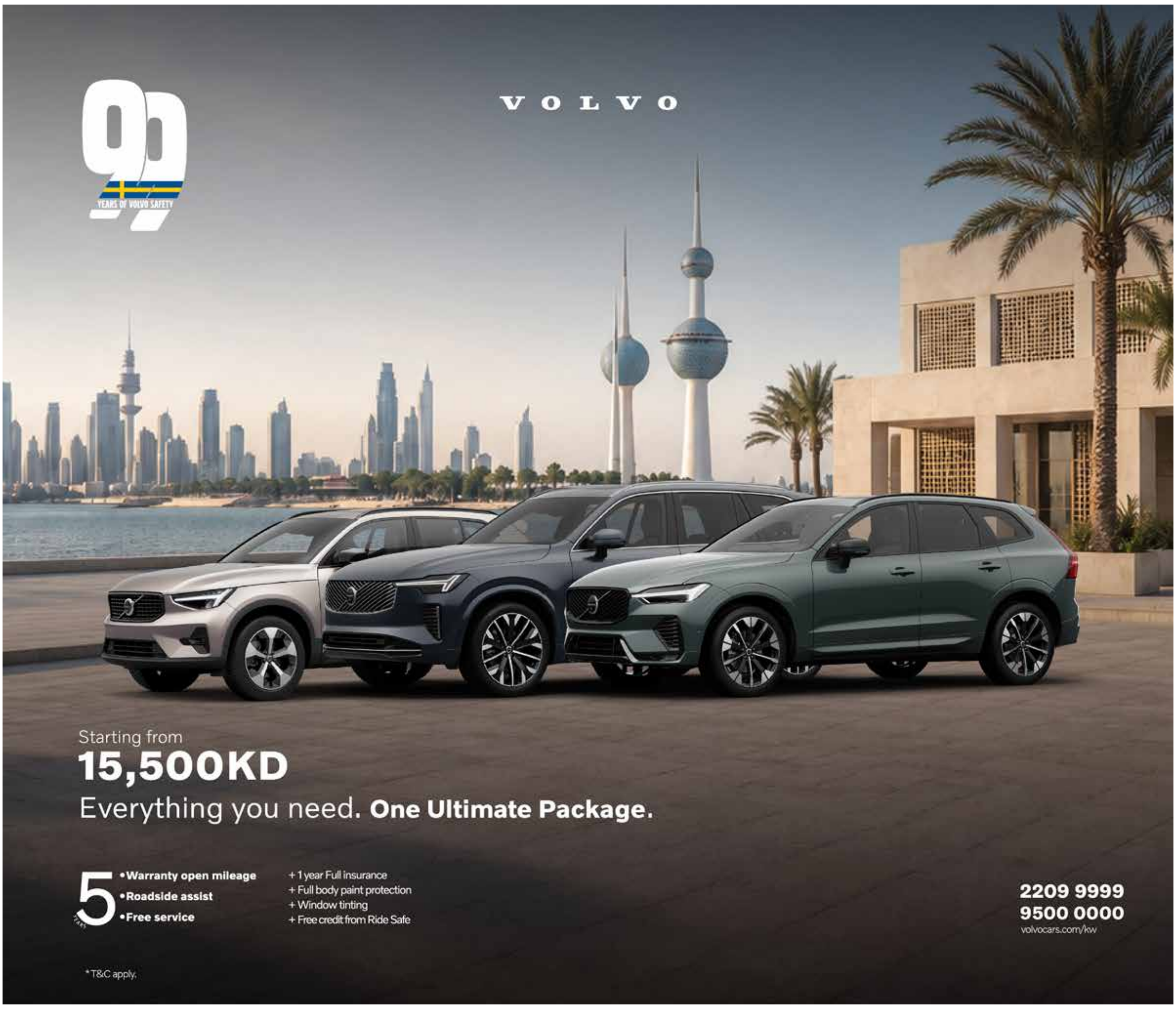
For Argentinian goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez said he gets emotional when he reflects on the collective efforts that have gone into their success. "Honestly sometimes I cry to myself thinking about what we have achieved," he said. "My message to my teammates is that they should enjoy this moment, prepare with a smile on our faces.

"This is something we will remember forever." England arrived in Miami to play France on Saturday in the meeting of the beaten semi-finalists to determine who finishes third. England coach Thomas Tuchel admitted that their 2-1 defeat to Argentina in the semi-final had been painful.

"We have to live with this, so it's our pain, my pain and the players' pain — we feel the most pain of all," Tuchel said at a press conference. "And it is our scar that we carry now. It is a very painful defeat, and we have to live with this defeat."

France coach Didier Deschamps vowed that no tears would be shed as he prepares to take charge of his final World Cup match, having guided them to glory in the 2018 edition and taken them to the final in 2022.

"I know that the final curtain falls tomorrow," Deschamps said on Friday. "No one here is going to cry, but I know I'll miss the French team. For 15 years (he was appointed in 2012), I had the privilege of experiencing moments that were magical, and others that were difficult." — AFP



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