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A happy Eid Al-Fitr to all

There will be no issue of the Arab Times on Sunday. The next issue of the Arab Times will appear on the news-stands on Monday morning.

Drone attacks spark fires at 2 Kuwait refineries, no injuries

- PM inspects crisis management operations
- EPA confirms air quality safe after refinery fires
- Kuwait rolls out mobile alerts for imminent dangers

By Munif Naif and Najeh Bilal
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff and Agencies

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah conducted an inspection visit on Thursday to the Crisis Management Room at the Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) to check on staff and monitor operations following the attacks on Mina Abdullah and Mina Al-Ahmadi refineries.

During the visit, His Highness was received by Minister of Oil Tareq Al-Roumi, CEO of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) Sheikh Nawaf Saud Al-Nasser Al-Sabah, CEO of Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) and Kuwait Integrated Petroleum Industries Company (KIPIC) Wadha Ahmed Al-Khateeb, along with a number of executives.

His Highness was briefed on the rapid response plan implemented by KNPC's Emergency Management Team to deal with the attacks on its refineries, the immediate measures taken to ensure the safety of staff at KNPC and KIPIC, and the actions to secure facilities and enhance precautionary measures across all vital sites of the company.

His Highness the Prime Minister praised the efforts of the national cadres in ensuring the continuity of refining operations at the company's refineries and the regular supply of local market needs for petroleum products, expressing his deep gratitude and appreciation.

He stressed the importance of intensifying efforts to guarantee the continuity and sustainability of essential services provided to the community.

Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said the emergency response teams doused fires that broke out in some operational units at the Mina Al-Ahmadi and Mina Abdullah refineries operated by Kuwait National Petroleum Corporation (KNPC), following drone attacks on both facilities Thursday morning.

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HH the Prime Minister reviews emergency response at KNPC after refinery drone attacks.

PM Diwan photo

Kuwait thwarts yet another terror plot targeting State's vital facilities

KUWAIT CITY, March 19, (KUNA): The State Security Service successfully foiled a terrorist plot targeting vital installations in the country, the Ministry of Interior announced on Wednesday.

"In another pre-emptive strike, the State Security Service has dismantled sleeper cells seeking to undermine the country's security," the Ministry

Spokesman Brigadier Nasser Abusulaib said in a televised statement.

He unveiled that "following intensive surveillance and security investigations, 10 citizens who are members of a terrorist group affiliated with the banned Hezbollah terrorist organization were apprehended".

He pointed out that these individuals had been planning and coordinating with foreign entities to provide them with the coordinates of the targeted sites, thus posing a direct threat to national security.

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Rain, dust, fog to lash Kuwait

KUWAIT CITY, March 19, (KUNA): The Meteorological Department has forecast a period of relative weather instability in Kuwait this weekend, with increasing cloud cover, scattered rain, occasional thunderstorms, active winds raising dust, and the possibility of fog reducing horizontal visibility.

The acting Director of the department Dhirar Al-Ali told the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) that weather forecasts and numerical models indicate the formation of low and medium clouds, interspersed with cumulonimbus clouds.

He indicated that periods of active winds may cause scattered rain, occasional thunderstorms, and blowing dust, leading to reduced visibility in some areas.

Al-Ali explained that gradual improvement in weather conditions is expected from Friday afternoon. Fog is likely to form Friday evening, reducing horizontal visibility, and may persist until Saturday evening, being light in some areas. Cloud formation and scattered light rain are also possible at night.

Day by Day

THE Ministry of Information currently has no permanent minister at this critical juncture. Moreover, the ministry also oversees culture and tourism. Thousands of employees work in this ministry. Is there truly no one among them capable of assuming their responsibilities?

There are active undersecretaries and department heads who are intimately familiar with the law. With careful search, the right person for the position can be found, someone who knows everything about the ministry.

... Yet tomorrow is another day.

Zahed Matar

Other Voices

Iran and Israel are both threats

By Abdulaziz Al-Anjeri

The most dangerous distortion in this moment is not only the missiles falling across the region. It is the growing effort to rewrite where this crisis began and who gets blamed for it.

Iran is a real and obvious threat to the Gulf and the wider Arab world. Its danger is not theoretical. It has been visible in missiles, proxies, militias, and sustained interference across Arab states. That reality should not be softened or denied.

But acknowledging the Iranian threat does not require erasing Israel's role in driving escalation. Yet that is exactly what many now try to

do. They condemn Iran without hesitation, as they should, but become strangely hesitant when the discussion turns to Israel. The language suddenly becomes evasive. The standard changes. The story is reduced to Iranian retaliation, while the Israeli actions that preceded it are pushed out of view.

This is not analytical balance. It is political selectivity.

Worse, anyone who insists on condemning Israel, is increasingly portrayed as sympathetic to Iran.

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A greeting from the Catholic Church on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr

In a time of challenges, peace is our common choice

By the Catholic Church in the State of Kuwait

His Excellency Bishop Aldo Berardi
Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia

On the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, the Catholic Church in the State of Kuwait, represented by His Excellency Bishop Aldo Berardi, Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia, extends its warmest congratulations and blessings to His Highness Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait, may God protect him, as well as to His Highness the Crown Prince, the esteemed government, and to all citizens and residents of the beloved State of Kuwait, asking Almighty God to bring back this blessed occasion upon all with goodness, prosperity, and blessings.



His Excellency Bishop Aldo Berardi, Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia

Eid al-Fitr, which comes as the culmination of the holy month of Ramadan, carries within it profound spiritual and human meanings, embodied in sincere faith, solidarity with those in need, and a spirit of giving and forgiveness. These are noble values that we all share and that form a solid foundation for building societies marked by mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

In light of the current circumstances our region is experiencing, we raise our hearts in prayer to Almighty God, asking Him to grant peace to our countries and to the whole world, to replace anxiety with tranquility, fear with hope, and to sow in all hearts the spirit of peace.

The Catholic Church in Kuwait—its priests, monks, nuns, institutions, and all its faithful—expresses its deep appreciation for the security and stability

that this country enjoys under its wise leadership, and praises the spirit of fraternity and coexistence that unites the various components of Kuwaiti society, which stands as a model to be emulated in the region and the world.

The Church also reaffirms its ongoing commitment to strengthening the bonds of dialogue and joint action with all partners in society, for the good of the human person and his dignity, and for the promotion of the values of peace and love.

Therefore, on this blessed occasion, we raise our prayers to God the Protector to safeguard the State of Kuwait, its leadership and its people, and to perpetuate the blessing of security and peace, and to bless its efforts aimed at spreading goodness and stability in the region.

Have a blessed Eid al-Fitr, and may you be well every year.

Kuwait raises alarm over Hormuz crisis threat

LONDON, March 19, (KUNA): The State of Kuwait affirmed on Wednesday the importance of prohibiting the use of force against civilian vessels in accordance with international maritime law, deeming Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz as a serious violation and a heinous assault on freedom of navigation.

Delivering a speech to the 36th Extraordinary Session of the London-based International Maritime Organization (IMO) Council discussing the situation in the Arabian Gulf region, Kuwait Ambassador to the UK Bader Al-Munaikh said that his country "strongly condemns the actions and threats by the Islamic Republic of Iran aimed at closing, obstructing, or interfering with international navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, as well as threatening maritime security in Bab Al Mandab."

He added, "Such actions disrupt maritime safety and security, particularly international shipping, as commercial vessels have been attacked, endangering the lives of innocent seafarers, risking significant marine pollution, and profoundly undermining maritime safety and security."

He pointed out that "the IMO Secretary-General has expressed deep concern regarding fatalities and injuries to seafarers stemming from these attacks in the Strait of Hormuz."

"Iran's actions constitute a serious violation of the principle of freedom of navigation under international maritime law. Kuwait therefore reaffirms the importance of safeguarding maritime routes and freedom of navigation, including the Strait of Hormuz, as stated in Articles 87 and 90 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, to ensure the safety and security of supply chains and the stability of global energy markets," he affirmed.

"Kuwait also reaffirms the importance of prohibiting the use of force against civilian vessels, as stated in Article 301 of the Convention," the Ambassador asserted.

Ambassador Al-Munaikh pointed out, "Any maritime incident in this sensitive region could lead to serious environmental consequences for the



Al-Munaikh

marine environment in the Arabian Gulf, including potential oil or hazardous material spills, which would significantly affect international maritime trade and the security of global supply chains."

On Iranian attacks against the GCC countries, Ambassador Al-Munaikh expressed his country's "strongest condemnation and rejection of the Islamic Republic of Iran's unjustified, unlawful, and indiscriminate missile and drone attacks against Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and my country, Kuwait, which involved over 3,000 ballistic missiles and drones, resulting in more than 30 civilian fatalities and more than 300 injuries."

"We extend our deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of the victims, and our thoughts and prayers are with those injured. These attacks constitute a grave breach of sovereignty, a profound threat to international peace and security, and a clear violation of international law, as reflected in Security Council Resolution 2817, adopted on March 11, 2026," he said.

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CBK: Standard & Poor's affirms Kuwait's 8 long-term credit rating at 'AA-' with stable outlook



Jazeera Airways 8 restores Kuwait-India connectivity

Eid Prayer Timing

Eid prayers Friday 06:08

Prayer Timings

Fajr	04:34	Asr	15:33
Sunrise ..	06:10	Maghrib ..	17:59
Zohr	11:56	Isha	19:15

Local

Expected weather for next 24 hrs:

By Day: Warm with light to northwesterly wind to light wind, with speed of 08-32 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

Weather

By Night: Rather cold to cold with light variable wind to light to moderate southeasterly wind, with speed of 08-32 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

Station	Max Exp	Min Rec
Kuwait Airport	22	05
Abdaly	22	07
Jahra	23	08



Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad



Mohammad Bin Salman

Amir, Saudi Crown Prince call for end to hostilities and talks

KUWAIT CITY, March 19, (KUNA): His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received on Thursday a phone call from Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud.

During the call, the Saudi Crown Prince expressed his sincere congratulations and best wishes on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr, praying to Almighty Allah to return this blessed occasion to both countries and the Arab and Islamic nations with blessings, and wishing His Highness continued good health and wellbeing.

The two sides also reassured each other on the conditions of the two brotherly countries and their peoples in light of the Iranian attacks that targeted the territories of Kuwait and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, reiterating their strong condemnation and denunciation of this

blatant aggression, which constitutes a flagrant violation of the sovereignty of both countries, international law and the Charter of the United Nations.

Both sides affirmed their commitment to mobilizing all capabilities and resources to safeguard the security and stability of the region, stressing the need for an immediate halt to escalatory actions and a return to dialogue and diplomatic solutions.

His Highness the Amir expressed his appreciation for this kind gesture, which reflects the deep-rooted fraternal relations between the two countries and their peoples, exchanging Eid greetings and wishing him continued health and wellbeing, and wishing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its people security, progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud.

Envoys extend Eid greetings to Kuwait, hail armed forces

UK, Egypt, Russia, Pakistan express solidarity

By Fares Ghaleb
Al-Seyassah/Arab
Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: The ambassadors of several brotherly and friendly nations extended congratulations to the State of Kuwait, its leadership and its people on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr.

These ambassadors expressed their wish for blessings for the whole nation and commended the Kuwaiti security forces for their courage, vigilance and professionalism in protecting the country, as well as the unity of the Kuwaiti people – a reflection of the strength and cohesion of the national fabric.

Egyptian Ambassador to Kuwait Mohamed Abu Al-Wafa offered heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and the Kuwaiti people on the occasion.

He prayed to Almighty Allah that this blessed occasion returns to the State of Kuwait, its leadership, government and people with goodness, prosperity, blessings and more progress.

The Arab Republic of Egypt expressed full solidarity with the State of Kuwait under the cur-



Qudsi Rasheed



Vladimir Zheltov



Abu Al-Wafa



Dr. Zafar Iqbal

rent circumstances and confirmed support for all measures being taken to preserve its sovereignty, security and stability.

Egypt wished the sisterly State of Kuwait permanent security, peace and stability, affirming its pride in the deep-rooted fraternal and historical relations with Kuwait and the enduring social, cultural and humanitarian ties connecting the two brotherly peoples.

British Ambassador Qudsi Rasheed stated "I extend my heartfelt wishes to the people and leadership of Kuwait during this difficult time. We pay tribute to the brave men and women serving on the front lines, whose sacrifices allow others to celebrate in safety. The United Kingdom stands shoulder to shoulder with Kuwait, united in our commitment to its security and stability."

Russian Ambassador Vladimir Zheltov extended his warmest congratulations and best wishes to His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Crown Prince and the Kuwaiti people, wishing everyone a blessed Eid filled with goodness, security, prosperity and well-being.

Zheltov stated that "in light of the dramatic events currently unfolding in the Gulf region,

we call on the Islamic nation during this blessed occasion to demonstrate solidarity and goodwill in order to protect Islamic values and promote coexistence among peoples."

Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Dr. Zafar Iqbal extended his warmest congratulations and best wishes to His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Crown Prince and the government and

people of Kuwait on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr.

He confirmed Pakistan's full solidarity with the leadership and people of Kuwait in light of recent events, while praising the courage, vigilance and professionalism of the Kuwaiti security forces that contributed to protecting the country and ensuring the safety and security of citizens and expatriates.

He also expressed sincere condolences to the families of those who lost their lives, wished speedy recovery for the injured, and commended the unity of Kuwaiti people, which reflects the strength and solidarity of the national fabric.

He emphasized that Kuwait, thanks to the wise guidance of its leadership, has presented a distinguished model in maintaining the continuity of daily life through efficient management, preparedness and national harmony, making it a model for the region.

He reaffirmed the deep fraternal relations that bind the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the State of Kuwait, stressing that his country is keen on further strengthening the bonds of cooperation and friendship between the two countries. He wished Kuwait continuous security, stability and prosperity.

Jahra Gov. extends Eid wishes to Amir, Crown Prince and PM

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: Jahra Governor Hamad Al-Habashi extends his sincerest congratulations and best wishes to His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah (May God protect him), His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah (May God protect him) and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdulah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah (May God protect him) on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr.



Al-Habashi

According to a press release issued by Jahra Governorate, Governor Al-Habashi prayed to God Almighty that this blessed occasion returns to them with abundant health and well-being, and to the State of Kuwait with increased security, stability, and prosperity.

The governor also congratulated the residents of Jahra Governorate and all citizens

and residents of the country on this auspicious occasion, praying to God Almighty to fill its days with goodness, tranquility, and love.

He commended the great efforts of the men of the Armed Forces and all military and security agencies, highlighting their high level of readiness and sincere dedication in performing their national duties.

Governor Al-Habashi affirmed that their efforts are a source of pride and honor, reflecting the spirit of belonging and loyalty in protecting the homeland and preserving its security and stability, especially in light of current developments.

He prayed to God to protect Kuwait and its wise leadership, to maintain the blessings of security and safety, and to return this blessed occasion to everyone with goodness, prosperity, and blessings.



Worshippers, citizens and expats flocked to mosques in Kuwait to bid farewell to Ramadan in the last 'Qiyam' prayer. Photo by Samer Shaqir

Grand Mosque will not host Eid prayer

Muslims bid Ramadan farewell in 'Qiyam' prayer

By Mohammad Al-Enezi
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: In a deeply spiritual scene, the holy month of Ramadan ended on an extraordinary night.

Mosques throughout the country were filled with worshippers who gathered to perform the final night of Qiyam prayers in an atmosphere marked by reverence, emotion and tearful farewells.

Rows of worshippers -- citizens and expatriates -- extended throughout the mosques, forming closely aligned lines that reflected unity and collective devotion.

The sounds of Qur'anic recitation and heartfelt supplication filled the mosques with a unique sense of tranquility that accompanies the conclusion of this blessed month.

A huge turnout was observed among all segments of society, including youths, the elderly and families who brought their children to share in the spiritual ambiance of the night.

This scene highlights the depth of religious awareness and the strong connection of the Kuwaiti community to its spiritual traditions.

During the Qunut supplications, hands were raised in humility, and eyes filled with tears in sincere moments where hope blended with awe.

Worshippers prayed to Allah to accept their good deeds, to protect Kuwait – its leadership and people – and to sustain the blessings of security and stability. They also prayed for the safety of the armed forces stationed at the borders, asking for their protection, strength and success in light of the current circumstances.

Amid the solemnity of the moment and the bittersweet farewell, worshippers bid goodbye to the month of mercy, hoping to witness it again, carrying its spiritual impact in their hearts and the serenity of its days within their souls.

Meanwhile, the Grand Mosque announced on Thursday that it will not be able to receive worshippers for Eid Al-Fitr prayers, reports Al-Seyassah daily.

According to a statement published by the Government Communication Center on its X account, the Grand Mosque's decision comes in light of the current circumstances in Kuwait and the region.

Also, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, represented by the Fatwa Department, affirmed the permissibility of reducing the number of worshippers in mosques when necessary, particularly under the current exceptional circumstances, to prevent overcrowding and protect lives, reports Al-Seyassah daily.

In a recent fatwa No. 434/2026, the ministry explained that the general rule is to hold Friday prayers in one main mosque in the area. The fatwa stated that it is permissible to hold Friday prayers in multiple mosques when needed, such as when a mosque is overcrowded or difficult to reach due to distance. If the risk of harm increases due to overcrowding and high density of worshippers inside mosques, and the relevant authorities consider it necessary to reduce the number of worshippers in each mosque to protect lives, there is no legal objection.

New regulations for sale and distribution of energy drinks

By Marwa Al-Bahrawi
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: The Ministry of Commerce and Industry issued Ministerial Decision No. 29/2026 for regulating the distribution and sale of energy drinks.

The decision, which was published on the ministry's X account, includes the following:

Article 1 (Definition of Energy Drinks)

These are non-alcoholic or non-carbonated beverages primarily made from water and contain high levels of caffeine, not less than 80 mg per 250 ml, derived from a natural source such as guarana or produced synthetically. They may also include other added stimulants such as taurine, inositol, or glucuronolactone.

Energy drinks may contain additional ingredients such as carbohydrates, sugar, sweeteners, vitamins, minerals, and amino acids. Flavorings are defined as substances that enhance alertness, physical activity, or mental performance.

Article 2 (Regulations for Sale and Distribution)

1. The sale or distribution of energy drinks to individuals under the age of eighteen is prohibited.

2. The sale or distribution of energy drinks is prohibited if the caffeine content of a single can exceeds 80 mg per 250 ml, or if it contains stimulants that violate the health requirements approved by the Public Authority for Food and Nutrition (PAFN).

3. Consumers may not consume more than two cans of energy drinks per day.

4. Manufacturers and suppliers are re-

quired to display clear and prominent health warnings on the packaging.

5. The sale of energy drinks is permitted only in cooperative societies, parallel markets, and designated areas, under strict supervision by the relevant authorities.

Article 3

The sale, serving, or distribution of energy drinks is prohibited in the following locations:

1. Government agencies and public institutions

2. Public and private sports clubs

3. Public, private, and community educational institutions at all levels, including public and private institutes and universities

4. Restaurants, cafes, grocery stores, juice shops, food trucks of all types and sizes, and self-service kiosks

5. Through delivery and takeout platforms

Article 4:

Advertising, promoting, marketing, or commercially sponsoring energy drinks, whether directly or indirectly, through any media outlet, electronic platform, or social media platform, is prohibited.

Companies and their agents are also prohibited from sponsoring or supporting events that promote the product.

Article 5:

Without prejudice to any harsher penalties stipulated by other laws, upon proof of a violation, the ministry may impose one or more of the following penalties:

1. Warning the violator

2. Temporary administrative closure

3. License revocation in the case of repeated violations

Other Voices

Majidi and his connection to the Prophet's family

By Ahmad alsarraf

MAJID MAJIDI, the acclaimed Iranian director, screenwriter, and producer, was born in 1959. He is renowned for his poetic yet realistic films that focus on children's lives, poverty, and human values.

Majidi became the first Iranian director to be nominated for an Oscar for his acclaimed 1998 film "Children of Heaven".

In his diary, he wrote, "We went to a village to film part of a movie. For some scenes, we needed to build a shrine.

To save the time of the crew and actors, we built a small room to resemble a shrine, and several actors performed their roles there. After filming wrapped, we decided to leave the room as it was. Five years later, a friend told me that the shrine we had built had become an important pilgrimage site. I didn't believe him, so I visited the village to verify what he had said. I didn't want to distort people's beliefs. I wanted to change their behavior and minds through my films. I spoke with the villagers and explained the truth that we had built it years earlier to film scenes for one of my movies. The villagers, especially those with white beards, reacted very angrily,



alsarraf

saying enthusiastically, 'No, this is the tomb of Imamzadeh. He cures madness and grants the wishes of the heart.'

I felt powerless to do anything. I knew I could be harmed, so I decided to go to their wise man, or the local religious endowments office, to try to dispel this ignorance. I met with the official and explained the situation. Contrary to my expectations, the head of the endowments became angry, dismissing my words as nonsense and insisting it was a holy shrine. He even showed me a handwritten letter, bearing seals, which supposedly proved the lineage of certain imams.

I left in despair, but at the office door, I was met by an employee who seemed more understanding than the others. He said, 'Sir, don't trouble yourself. People simply consider that shrine holy. That's all there is to it. You live in this country, and you should have removed what you built back then.' It was then that I realized how easily and deeply ignorance and superstition can take root in the hearts and minds of some people."

The story of director Majidi reminded me of a similar incident I experienced when a well-known lawyer friend invited me to visit his new home. There, he showed me the contents of the house, including the furniture, antiques, and paintings. Everything was truly beautiful, which reflected the refined taste of its owner.

He stood before a silver frame containing a document, a large emblem, and several sig-

natures and seals. He explained that it was a certificate he had received from the Association of the 'Ashraf' (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), proving his lineage to the Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's family).

After dinner, he whispered that he had paid a considerable sum for membership in the 'Ashraf' club, a rare and exclusive membership.

I was surprised that someone who claimed to be liberal and open-minded would be so eager to obtain a fabricated certificate of lineage, especially since he came from a well-known family and had no need for such a claim.

Time passed, and a few years later, I ran into my lawyer friend by chance at a mutual friend's house.

One of the guests addressed our friend as "Mawlana al-Sayyid" (Our Master), prompting laughter from the attendees. I was surprised when the lawyer expressed his disapproval of some people's reaction to his title. He heard apologies from some and silence from others.

I later spoke with him privately and reminded him of what he had previously told me about the source of the certificate. He flew into a rage and denied ever speaking to me about it. His anger seemed genuine. He had probably repeated his lie so many times that he began to believe it himself. He passed away later, likely still convinced of his claimed lineage.

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diwaniya ديوانية

A DIGEST OF PUBLIC OPINION

Kuwait rejects ambiguous stance & divided loyalties

"IN major crises, positions are revealed, and the credibility of political discourse is tested beyond slogans," columnist **Khaled Ahmad Al-Tarrah** wrote for **Al-Seyassah** daily.

"The Iranian aggression against Kuwait and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states was not a passing event that could be delayed in its characterization or its condemnation postponed. It was a direct attack on the sovereignty of states and the stability of the region.

"Yet, the Muslim Brotherhood (the Constitutional Movement) in Kuwait waited nine full days before issuing a statement of condemnation. The statement came late and was limited in content, ignoring the aggression against the rest of the Gulf states. This delay, without a doubt, cannot be dismissed as a minor detail. It raises questions about the nature of the political stance of the Muslim Brotherhood at a time when positions should be clear and unambiguous.

"The political stances of ideological groups are not fleeting in times of national crisis. They become a test of loyalty and allegiance between the state and the organization. In Kuwait, the name of the Muslim Brotherhood resurfaces whenever the country faces a challenge to its sovereignty or a regional threat, as is the case today with the Iranian aggression against the GCC states.

"These ambiguous or belated stances cannot be interpreted in isolation from the political memory of Kuwait and the Gulf region, nor from the events of the 1990 Iraqi invasion, when similar questions arose regarding the position of politicized Islamist organizations on issues of national sovereignty. In moments of great danger, positions are not measured by the length of statements or the eloquence of phrases, but by the clarity of commitment to the nation-state and its sovereignty.

"Kuwait, which faced the Iraqi invasion with Gulf support in the past and now confronts, along with its Gulf neighbors, direct Iranian aggression, cannot accept ambiguous positions or divided loyalties. National memory is not short, and past experiences cannot be erased by late statements or vague positions.

"Therefore, the question today is not about a statement issued or a delayed stance, but about the future of the relationship between the nation-state and organizations that transcend its borders. Kuwait will remain a state firmly grounded in its sovereignty and cohesive in its internal front, and it will not allow any organization, regardless of its slogans, to place its interests above those of the nation.

"In such critical moments, the difference becomes clear between those who stand unequivocally with the state and those who hide behind ambiguous positions, waiting to see how events unfold. The question regarding the position of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait does not end with a delayed statement or a lukewarm stance on the aggression against Kuwait and the Gulf states. It points to a deeper issue concerning the nature of the relationship between the nation-state and transnational political Islamist organizations.

"Historical experience, from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to the current Iranian aggression against the Gulf states, has shown that ideological organizations often view major crises through the lens of their own interests rather than through the lens of the state and its sovereign borders. If this duality in positions persists, the future of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Kuwait and the region will not be separate from the rapidly accelerating international and regional transformations.

"The world is gradually moving toward redefining its relationship with ideological organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and legal and political pressure on its networks and institutions is increasing. This comes at a time when the concept of the nation-state is gaining strength as the primary authority for allegiance.

"Therefore, the future of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait will not be determined solely by its statements or media discourse, but by its ability to clearly define its position: Are they part of the nation-state, its interests, and its sovereignty, or are they an extension of an international organization whose interests take precedence over those of the state? This is the question that will shape the coming period, not only for the Muslim Brotherhood but for the entire political landscape of the region.

"Are the Muslim Brotherhood relying on the short memory of Kuwaitis to recirculate claims and state-

ments about their positions, and those of Hamas, during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait? More than twenty years later, leaders of the Constitutional Movement, most notably Mubarak Al-Duwailah, have attempted to reinterpret that period and present new narratives on behalf of the organization. However, the facts and realities documented by events do not support these claims.

"If the Muslim Brotherhood holds a narrative different from what has been established in the national memory, the appropriate course of action is not to issue belated statements, but to provide clear evidence for their claims, particularly regarding the 'Jeddah Popular Conference' and the international organization's stance on the Iraqi invasion. Major national issues are not resolved through delayed narratives or vague statements, but through documents and facts that have stood the test of time."

Also:

"Ramadan is a month of striving for good deeds and increasing acts of worship. During this month, rewards are multiplied and ranks are elevated. Charity is among the most important acts of worship, and a Muslim should give it more generously in Ramadan than at any other time." Imam and preacher **Muhammad Al-Fawzan** wrote for **Al-Seyassah** daily.

"Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, 'The best charity is that given in Ramadan.' Ibn Abbas said, 'The Messenger of God (PBUH) was the most generous of people, and he was at his most generous during Ramadan when Gabriel would meet with him and they would study the Quran together.'"

"The Prophet's increased charity during this month clearly affirms that it is more virtuous in Ramadan than at any other time.

"A woman, Umm Abdullah, said, 'I used to live in a house in one of the suburbs. My neighbors had an eight-year-old son in the third grade of elementary school, attending the same school as my children. He was an orphan and lived with his wealthy, cruel, and stingy uncle, who neglected him and failed to meet his needs. I once saw him washing cars, and I felt sorry for him. I took his hand and asked why he was washing cars at such a young age.'

"He said, 'So I can buy pens and notebooks for school. My uncle doesn't give me money for my school supplies.'

"I promised to send him food every day and buy everything he needed for school, and I considered him one of my own sons."

"Umm Abdullah used to check on the boy and advise him to focus on his studies and prayers.

"After years of this, Umm Abdullah moved to a new house and said goodbye to the boy. She gave him

her phone number so he could contact her if he needed any help and encouraged him to keep good and kind company. Years passed, and Umm Abdullah always remembered the child she had

taken as her own, praying to God to grant him success and guidance.

"Umm Abdullah said that as the years went by, she grew older, and her children grew up and married. One day, she felt unwell and went to the hospital, where the doctors told her she had a chest infection. While she was being treated, the consultant came to examine her and, upon seeing her name, recognized her. He asked, 'Aren't you Umm Abdullah?' She confirmed that she was. He said, 'I am that orphaned child you used to help and be kind to. Thanks to you, I am now a consultant doctor, and I am at your service, as are all my colleagues.'

"Umm Abdullah said she felt a shiver, as if she were in a dream, and asked, 'Are you Khalid?' He began kissing her head, and they both wept. "Umm Abdullah thanked God for blessing Khalid and granting him success and excellence. She told him that she had always remembered him, her eyes welling with tears, and prayed to God to protect and bless him.

"Khalid gave her his phone number and assured her that he would always be at her service whenever she needed him.

"The light of good deeds never fades, and their reward will shine, no matter how long it takes. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, 'The people most beloved to God are those who are most beneficial to people. The most beloved deeds to God are bringing joy to a Muslim, relieving him of distress, paying off his debt, or driving away his hunger. Walking with my brother to fulfill his need is more beloved to me than secluding myself in this mosque for a month (in the Prophet's Mosque in Madina).'"

— Compiled by Simi K. Kutty



Khaled Al-Tarrah



Al-Fawzan

'Law puts Kuwait among top nations safeguarding rights'

Female lawyers commend decree condemning family strife

By Jaber Al-Hamoud
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: The Protection from Domestic Violence Decree-Law No. 11/2026 was issued in an atmosphere of positivity, praise and widespread satisfaction, marking a pivotal step toward strengthening family stability, reinforcing community security, and ushering in a new phase in addressing this sensitive issue.

In a statement to the newspaper, some female lawyers described the law as 'white revolution' in the system of social protection.

Attorney Inam Haidar affirmed that the law is vital in modernizing the legislative framework of Kuwait in the field of family protection.

She pointed out that the strength of the legislation is not confined to penalties alone, but also extends to the introduction of practical and effective mechanisms, including judicial protection orders and shelters – a manifestation of the progressive understanding of the Kuwaiti legislator of contemporary social needs.

She added that the law takes into consideration the prevention of misuse of reports by establishing controls that ensure it is not exploited for malicious purposes.

Attorney Israa Al-Haddad described the law as a qualitative leap in Kuwaiti social legislation, indicating that it puts Kuwait among the leading countries in the protection of human rights within the family.

Al-Haddad cited one of the advantages of the law -- that it does not merely address crimes after they occur, but rather establishes a comprehensive prevention system, which begins with



Inam Haidar



Israa Al-Haddad



Halima Bahman

awareness and extends to providing health and psychological care for victims.

She stated that the establishment of shelters and the formation of a specialized national committee proved that family stability has become a critical security and social issue that cannot be overlooked.

Attorney Elaf Al-Saleh considers the law a significant advancement in Kuwaiti legislation, especially since it establishes an integrated framework for preventing and addressing violence, ensuring justice and dignity for all family members, and creating a safe environment that supports family cohesion and societal stability.

She disclosed that the law includes a comprehensive strategy to combat all forms of domestic violence, along with mechanisms for evaluating programs and statistics, and the establishment of shelters for victims under the supervision of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs.

She also praised the creation of a fund to support victims of domestic violence, in addition to provisions safeguarding privacy by prohibiting the publication of case details before or after court rulings, while allowing summaries to be published without disclosing names or images.

She said the law stipulates that crimes involving sexual abuse, violence against children or individuals lacking legal capacity or assault by children against their parents cannot be waived.

She added that the legislation stipulate penalties like sanctions on those who fail to report in-

cidents of violence, those who submit false reports, and those who violate protection orders, while granting victims the right to file complaints through the relevant department, police stations or investigative authorities.

Attorney Halima Bahman commended the issuance of the law, emphasizing that it comes at a critical time to address the rise in domestic cases in recent years and provides a more comprehensive legal framework for safeguarding families and their members.

She explained that the law introduces major amendments, particularly expanding the definition of 'family' to include relatives up to the second degree, and broadening the definition of abuse to cover physical, psychological, sexual and financial harm, in addition to regulating the concept of 'settlement' within a legal framework.

She stressed that the legislation strengthens the institutional structure by restructuring the national committee, developing a unified strategy, establishing a database, launching an electronic platform, and enhancing reporting procedures through modern technologies, including the provision of interpreters.

She revealed that the law introduces important enforcement tools, such as 'empowerment' orders that allow victims to retrieve personal belongings and enter residences with police escort, as well as monitoring the implementation of protection orders, strengthening the role of female police officers, and granting them judicial authority upon completion of specialized training.

She affirmed that the law prohibits the waiver of rights in cases involving sexual abuse and violence against children, incapacitated individuals or parents.

She added that the law addresses false reporting through penalties that include imprisonment and fines, while underscoring the confidentiality of procedures and prohibiting the publication of case details.

Appeals court nullifies PADA decision

Kuwaitis detention extended in bribery case

By Jaber Al-Hamoud
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: The detention renewal judge ordered the extension of the detention of eight citizens for a period of two weeks, pending investigations into charges that include bribery, intentional damage to State property, facilitating the unlawful acquisition of agricultural plots, forgery and money laundering linked to farm sales between 2017 and 2020.

Since the beginning of the investigation, the Public Prosecution has taken immediate and decisive measures, including freezing the bank accounts of the accused and suspending financial or real estate transactions linked to the cases under review.

It is worth noting that the detention of other defendants—including former employees and officials of the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAAFR)—was also extended during a previous hearing.

Ruling overturned: The Court of Appeals overturned the ruling of a lower court and annulled

the decision issued by the Public Authority for the Disabled Affairs (PADA) to exclude the client of Dr. Fadhil Al-Basman from the persons with disabilities category.

The court affirmed that the plaintiff suffers from permanent moderate visual impairment, so he is entitled to all the legal rights and benefits prescribed for this category under the law.

This ruling confirms the judiciary's role in upholding justice for persons with disabilities, reinforcing the legal protections granted to them, and ensuring their full access to the rights and privileges guaranteed within the legal framework.

Gambling network convicted: The Criminal Court, presided over by Judge Ahmed Al-Sadi, convicted an international gambling and betting network operating via a website and managing alternative money transfer operations, after proving the existence of an organized money laundering network using shell companies.

The court imposed severe penalties, including imprisonment, fines, and confiscation of funds. The verdict will be published in the official gazette at the expense of the convicted parties.

The court sentenced the first defendant, a Syrian national, to 15 years in prison with hard labor. Six Egyptian defendants, including a woman, and another defendant were each sentenced to ten years in prison with hard labor, and jointly fined KD 16,839,226.620 for money laundering crimes linked to international gambling and betting activities.

The court also ordered the confiscation of the seized funds and forged documents, along with all proceeds derived from them, both inside and outside Kuwait, in addition to the tools used to commit the crimes. It further ordered the deportation of the first eight defendants from the country after they serve their sentences.

Regarding the entities connected to the case, the court fined five shell companies jointly and severally a total of KD 8,419,613.310, and ordered the permanent closure of their offices used in committing the crimes.

The court decided to publish the verdict in the official gazette at the expense of the convicted parties, based on its finding that an organized money laundering network was operating through shell companies linked to international gambling and betting activities.

Frozen meat sells fresh

PAFN shuts down eatery, market selling stale fish

KUWAIT, March 19, (Agencies): Kuwait's Public Authority for Food and Nutrition said Thursday a joint emergency team closed down a violating restaurant and fish market and destroyed contaminated food during an inspection campaign.

The authority said the campaign in Al-Asimah Governorate found the restaurant offering contaminated food and 127 kilograms of meat of unknown origin, which were confiscated and destroyed, and the outlet was closed.

It added the team, comprised of the authority as well as Commerce and Interior Ministries, also seized a fish market offering fish unfit for human consumption, with legal action taken against violators.

The authority affirmed continued inspections to protect consumers' health and urged compliance with approved health regulations.

Meanwhile, the Hawally Governorate Inspection Department of Public Authority for Food and Nutrition (PAFN) closed five food establishments as part of its ongoing efforts to ensure food safety and protect consumer health, reports Al-Seyassah daily.

In a press statement, PAFN explained that the establishments were found violating regulations, including selling spoiled food unfit for human consumption, selling adulterated food, and thawing frozen meat for sale as fresh. These establishments failed to comply with general hygiene standards and operational regulations.

PAFN emphasized that inspection and monitoring campaigns are continuing in various governorates to ensure adherence to health requirements and maintain food safety in the markets.

Kuwait warns against sharing 'war content'

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: The Cybercrime Department warned all residents in the State of Kuwait against publishing or sharing any online content related to wars, military operations, or missiles, reports Al-Anba daily.

It also emphasized that publishing or sharing any videos or images that incite sectarianism or sow discord within society is strictly prohibited.

The department affirmed that such actions constitute a clear violation of Kuwaiti law and may subject perpetrators to legal accountability.

It called on everyone to maintain complete neutrality and avoid engaging with provocative content, in order to preserve security, safeguard national unity, and protect the social fabric of the country.



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MoE to continue online classes after Eid Al-Fitr

Ministry prioritizes safety and continuity

KUWAIT CITY, March 19, (KUNA): Kuwait Ministry of Education announced on Wednesday that studies will resume through the online learning system following Eid Al-Fitr's holiday, should the current conditions persist.

This came during an expanded meeting chaired by Minister of Education Sayed Jalal Al-Tabtabaei, attended by senior officials from various sectors and departments of the ministry to follow up on the progress of the educational and administrative process amid the current circumstances and to review developments related to distance learning in the field.

In a statement, the ministry said that this decision comes in a manner that ensures continuity of the educational process under clear and organized frameworks, while monitoring students' attendance, engagement and commitment to enhance the quality and sustainability of education.

It noted that the meeting reflects the minister's keenness on strengthening coordination among its

sectors and integrating roles between educational leaderships to enhance performance efficiency and ensure the continuity of the educational process at a high level.



Al-Tabtabaei

Minister Al-Tabtabaei stressed the importance of continuous evaluation of educational outcomes and benefiting from field feedback to develop work mechanisms in a way that serves students' interests and preserves the quality of education, particularly under the current conditions.

He called for carefully studying all educational data and taking appropriate decisions that balance maintaining students' safety with ensuring the continuity of their academic attainment, thereby achieving overall stability of the educational process.

The minister also emphasized the need to enhance the technical readiness of the online learning system, directing concerned bodies to monitor and address any technical challenges faced by students and teachers while using Microsoft Teams, and to respond immediately through tech-

nical support teams in educational zones and the General Directorate of Information Technology to ensure the stability and smooth conduct of virtual classes.

He further instructed administrative and financial sectors to take necessary measures to facilitate transactions, simplify procedures and accelerate completion rates while operating at no more than 30 percent capacity in line with Civil Service Commission decisions, ensuring uninterrupted service delivery within approved legal and administrative frameworks.

In a related context, he underscored the importance of enhancing safety and security measures and raising readiness levels to deal with emergencies, calling for continuous coordination with relevant authorities to ensure preparedness of precautionary plans in accordance with the highest safety standards, verifying the availability of essential supplies in shelters and accommodation centers, and submitting regular reports to concerned authorities to enhance response efficiency and ensure the safety of all within ministry facilities.

He concluded by praying to Allah Almighty to protect Kuwait, its Amir, Crown Prince and people, and to bestow continued security, stability and prosperity upon the country.

Sheikh Jarrah engages Italy, Ukraine

Kuwait, Jordan FMs stress security concerns over Iranian aggression

RIYADH, March 19, (KUNA): Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah met with his Jordanian counterpart Ayman Al-Safadi to discuss the escalating hostilities in the region due to the Iranian aggression.

The meeting, held on the sidelines of the Arab-Islamic foreign ministers' meeting in Riyadh on Wednesday/Thursday, focused on the potential serious consequences of the Iranian attacks on regional and international security, according to a statement from the Kuwaiti



Sheikh Jarrah

Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The consultative foreign ministers' meeting gathered representatives of 12 countries, with Kuwait being represented by Sheikh Jarrah.

Earlier, Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah held phone calls Wednesday with Italian and Ukrainian counterparts; Antonio Tajani and Andrii Sybiba, respectively.

According to a Foreign Ministry statement, increasing military escalation in the region following Iran's attacks on regional countries and the serious implications and repercussions on regional and international security and stability, were discussed during the separate calls.

PUC disburses March social allowances

Higher Education opens applications for graduate entry medicine program

By Abdulrahman Al-Shammari
Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: The Ministry of Higher Education announced the opening of registration for the Advanced Human Medicine Program (Graduate Entry), which is designed for holders of a bachelor's degree to obtain a Bachelor of Medicine degree through a four-year program.

The ministry stated that registration started Wednesday, and will continue until noon on April 30.

It urged those wishing to enroll to complete their registration as early as possible or within the specified timeframe.

It explained that the program offers a valuable opportunity for bachelor's degree holders to pursue studies in human medicine through an advanced track, thereby, contributing to the provision of qualified national professionals to the healthcare sector in line with the highest academic standards.

It also stressed the need for applicants to review the program's terms, conditions

and guidelines through the official website before applying.

Meanwhile, The Private Universities Council (PUC), announced the transfer of social allowance payments for continuing students at private universities and colleges for the month of March, in preparation for depositing the allowance into the bank accounts of the students.

The council confirmed that the transfer process covered all eligible students in various private higher education institutions.

It explained that the disbursement of these allowances is in line with ongoing efforts to support and motivate students to continue their studies, emphasizing its commitment to the timely payment of entitlements in accordance with the approved schedule.

It urged the students to monitor their bank accounts and to contact it through official channels for any inquiries, reaffirming its commitment to provide all forms of support to ensure a stable and encouraging learning environment for them.

Education Ministry unifies distance learning schedules

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: The Ministry of Education, represented by acting Undersecretary Eng. Mohammad Al-Khalidi, issued a decision to organize school hours for distance learning in all public and private Arabic schools, including special education and religious institutions.

In a press statement issued by the ministry, it emphasized that this step is in accordance with its ongoing efforts to ensure the continuation of classes under the current circumstances. The decision mandates public, special education, religious and private Arabic schools to follow the approved schedule for each educational stage.

The aim of this measure is to structure the learning process and guarantee the regular delivery of

lessons through distance learning platforms.

Moreover, the administrations of special education schools are required to make their own schedule in accordance with their educational plans.

However, the starting time for these schools must not be later than the officially approved start time for public schools in any educational stage. The schedule should take effect immediately upon issuance and will remain applicable until further notice. The ministry specified school hours for each stage in order to ascertain the smooth conduct of classes.

Kindergarten classes will be conducted remotely through an asynchronous learning system, designed to suit the age group and its unique learning methods.

Primary level classes — grades one to three — will also follow an asynchronous system.

For grades four and five, as well as the middle school, the school day will start at 9:00 am and end at 12:35 pm, consisting of five periods of 35 minutes each, with two 15-minute breaks in between. The same schedule is adopted for the secondary level, where classes will run from 9:00 am to 12:35 pm, having five periods of equal duration. This is a unified daily schedule for intermediate and secondary levels.

The ministry stressed that these schedules are intended to regulate distance learning and ensure the continuity of the educational process through clear and structured timetables that consider the nature of each educational stage.



Kuwait 40th happiest country in the world

KUWAIT CITY, March 19, (Agencies): Kuwait ranked 40th in the 2026 World Happiness Report released by the Oxford Centre for Wellbeing Research recently.

The report stated that Finland maintained its position as the happiest country in the world for the ninth consecutive year, while other Nordic countries like Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway are among

the top 10 and Kuwait landed on the 40th spot in overall life evaluations.

On the other hand, the report cited the excessive use of social media as one of the factors that led to a remarkable decline in well-being among young people, with concerning effects on female teenagers in English-speaking countries and Western Europe.

CAPT approves key tenders

Public Works advances vital projects after years of delay

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: After years of waiting, the Ministry of Public Works has taken a new step toward implementing several vital projects. During its meeting on Tuesday, the Central Agency for Public Tenders (CAPT) approved the ministry's request to issue tenders for the construction, completion, and maintenance of the Sabah Al-Ahmad residential city sewer system, as well as for the food security system project in the northern and southern regions, reports Al-Rai daily.

According to informed sources from the Ministry of Public Works, CAPT, after reviewing the project documents and technical details, approved the tenders, thus allowing the ministry to proceed with these two projects, which are crucial for services and infrastructure development. The sources praised the efforts of the Minister of Public Works, Dr. Noura Al-Mashaan, and ministry officials

for their dedication to advancing these long-delayed projects and for prioritizing their implementation in the coming phase.

They said, "The construction, completion, and maintenance of the sewage system in Sabah Al-Ahmad Residential City will resolve the sewage overflow problem and its environmental impacts by connecting the city to the national wastewater treatment system, while also supporting the state's urban expansion plans in southern Kuwait."

Regarding the food security project, sources said, "CAPT's approval marks an important step in strengthening the country's food security by developing infrastructure in agricultural areas. The project will also improve logistics and the road network in Al-Abdali and Al-Wafra, thus supporting agricultural production and facilitating transportation and distribution."

252 fail equivalence check

Supervisory employees face legal action over missing qualification

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, Sharida Al-Maousherji, stated that 252 supervisory employees were found to have failed to apply for equivalence of their academic qualifications, and that the necessary measures are being taken with their respective employers, reports Al-Seyassah daily.

He issued this statement following a meeting of the Committee for Examining Academic Qualifications of Public and Private Sector Employees on Wednesday, which was also attended by the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Dr. Nader Al-Jalal.

Minister Al-Maousherji explained that the equivalence of 548 supervisory employees has been completed and issued. Necessary measures are being taken regarding 15 supervisory employees whose equivalence applications were rejected. The committee will refer any employee who fails to amend or update their academic qualification data, or who does not apply for equivalence when requested by the committee, for legal accountability.

The meeting reviewed the results of the committee's notifications sent via the Sahel application to update employees' educational qualifications, ensuring the continuity of their financial and employment rights.

A total of 144,420 notifications had been sent to employees in 23 government entities during the period between January 5 and February 9 as an initial tally. Work is currently underway to complete the process for the remaining entities. The data of 33,829 employees who received notifications has

been updated on the integrated systems.

Minister Al-Maousherji urged the committee to diligently follow up with entities that have not yet updated their employees' data to ensure the completion of educational qualification updates for all employees in both the public and private sectors. This is essential due to the importance and accuracy of this data and to enable the committee to complete its work.

He highlighted that some entities were granted additional time because of the current circumstances in the country, with the understanding that this would not delay the committee's work.

Minister Al-Maousherji explained that the committee's proposal to the Civil Service Commission (CSC), aimed at reinforcing the principles of governance and equal opportunity in filling supervisory positions such as Head of Department, Supervisor, Director of Administration, or Director General was adopted. The proposal requires CSC to circulate a memo to all entities subject to the Civil Service Law and Regulations, mandating that candidates for these positions submit updated documentation confirming the equivalency of their academic qualifications obtained outside the State of Kuwait and their accreditation by the Ministry of Higher Education.

He commended the work of the committee and its subcommittees from CSC, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the Public Authority for Manpower, urging the entities to continue monitoring their progress, submitting regular reports, and promptly reporting any instances of negligence by either the entities or their employees.

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Regional stability

Kuwait joins GCC-US talks on ME tensions

WASHINGTON, March 19, (KUNA): Ambassadors of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states and Jordan convened a high-level meeting on Wednesday with Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman James Risch and Vice Chair Senator Jeanne Shaheen to deliberate on the deteriorating security landscape in the Middle East.



Sheikha Al-Zain

Kuwait was represented by its Ambassador to the United States, Sheikha Zain Al-Sabah.

The Kuwaiti Embassy in Washington issued a press release characterizing the talks as a vital component of the ongoing strategic partnership between the GCC-Jordanian bloc and the United States.

During the session, participants underscored the imperative of bolstering joint coordination to mitigate escalating security threats and safeguard regional stability.

Central to the discussions was the protection of freedom of navigation—both aerial and maritime—and the defense of the region against persistent Iranian strikes.

The ambassadors condemned these attacks for deliberately targeting sovereign infrastructure and civilian facilities in “blatant violation” of international law and established norms.

The diplomatic corps unequivocally asserted that the security of the GCC states is indivisible, warning that recent hostile escalations pose a direct threat to international peace.

Furthermore, the envoys reaffirmed the inherent and legitimate right of the targeted nations to self-defense and their absolute prerogative to take all necessary measures to deter aggression and preserve territorial integrity.

Arab, Islamic Foreign Ministers denounce Iranian aggressions

Kuwait backs Riyadh summit call on sovereignty

RIYADH, March 19, (KUNA): The foreign ministers of 12 Arab and Islamic countries participating in the consultative meeting in Riyadh agreed that the Iranian aggressions on countries in the region could be by no means justified.

The conferees, including Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, strongly denounced Iran's missile and drone attacks on Arabian Gulf countries, Jordan, Azerbaijan and Türkiye, reads the final communique adopted by the meeting on Thursday early morning.

The Iranian attacks target civilian infrastructure, including oil and gas facilities, water desalination stations and airports, as well as residential areas and diplomatic missions, according to the statement.

The conferees stated support to the targeted countries' right to self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter, urging Iran to immediately halt the aggression and show respect for the international law, the humanitarian law and the principles of the neighborliness.

They urged preparing the ground for deescalation of the conflict and restoration of security and peace through diplomatic means, the statement noted.

The future relationship with Iran depends on the country's respect for the sovereignty of other nations, non-interference in their domestic affairs and abstention from using its military potentials against its neighbors, it stressed.

The conferees underscored the need of Iran abiding



KUNA photo

Foreign ministers of several Arab and Islamic countries participating in the consultative meeting held in Riyadh.

by the UN Security Council Resolution 2817, refraining from any provocative acts against neighboring countries, halting any support to its proxies in Arab countries, and ensuring safe shipping through the Straits of Hormoz and the Straits of Bab El-Mandab.

They reaffirmed support to Lebanon's security, stabil-

ity and territorial integrity and to the Lebanese government in its effort to assert the state monopoly of weapons.

They renewed denunciation of the expansionist policy of the Israeli occupation authorities and recurrent attacks on Lebanon, the statement added.

CAPT extends Subiya Power Plant bid bonds amid technical delays

MEW ramps up grid maintenance tenders to prevent peak-period outages

By Mohammad Ghanem

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: The Board of Directors of the Central Agency for Public Tenders (CAPT) has extended the initial bid bond for the Subiya Power Plant tender.

CAPT requested bidders for the tender to supply, install, operate and maintain combined-cycle gas turbine units—Phase Four—aimed at increasing electricity generation at the Subiya Power and Water Distillation Plant by 900 megawatts, to extend their initial bid bond from March 29 to June 29.

The agency also asked the Ministry of Electricity to expedite the submission of its technical recommendation in accordance with Article 46 of Public Tenders Law No.

49/2016.

The extension of the initial bid bond for the three companies competing for the tender is attributed to delays in submitting the technical recommendation for the bids by the Ministry of Electricity, as well as the failure of the Finance Ministry to respond to the request of the Ministry of Electricity regarding the allocation of additional funds for the project.

It is worth noting that this project is considered a priority and it is vital for the energy sector, because the objective is to increase the electricity grid's capacity to meet the growing demand for power, particularly during peak periods.

The implementation period for this ambitious project is 36 months, commencing from the date of signing the contract

with the winning company.

In another development, the Ministry of Electricity recently issued a new tender for the operation and maintenance of electricity transmission networks.

This reflects its commitment to enhance the efficiency of energy infrastructure and ensure continuous and reliable electricity supply throughout the country.

The ministry set April 19 as the deadline for submitting bids by specialized companies.

The technical and financial proposals will then be evaluated to select the most suitable company or consortium to execute the work as per the approved standards.

The tender includes comprehensive operation and maintenance of transmission networks, along with periodic inspections, emergency repairs, and the resolution of technical

faults. This will contribute to reducing power outages and improving the reliability of the electricity grid.

This is part of the strategy of the ministry to develop the energy production sector and keep pace with the continuous rise in demand.

It also involves leveraging specialized technical expertise to ensure the adoption of global best practices in managing and operating transmission networks, enhancing operational efficiency, and improving the quality of service provided to consumers.

Sources confirmed that the ministry, through these projects, aims to enhance the readiness of the electrical grid and ensure rapid response to power outages, thereby, maintaining system stability and keeping pace with urban development plans and population growth.

Continued from Page 1

Drone attacks

In a press statement, KPC disclosed the incidents did not result in any injuries, indicating that the situation was handled with high level of professionalism and in full compliance with the approved safety and emergency response standards.

KPC reaffirmed its commitment to ensure the safety of its employees and the continuation of its operations, stressing that it continues to take all the necessary measures to maintain safe and stable operations in its facilities.

It added that the relevant authorities are closely monitoring the situation, and that updates are communicated through official channels.

In a related development, Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) revealed that six firefighting teams extinguished the fires in the abovementioned refineries.

Also, the Environment Public Authority (EPA) affirmed that, in cooperation with KNPC, it is closely monitoring the air quality in view of the fire incidents, stressing that the situation is stable.

In a statement to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), acting Director General of EPA Nouf Behbehani indicated that the analysis of data from air pollution monitoring stations, particularly in areas near the two refineries, did not show readings exceeding the national standards and approved health requirements.

Behbehani asserted that the environmental situation in those areas remains within safe limits and there is no risk to residential areas or public health.

She added that the climate analyses revealed the presence of south-eastern winds, which is being taken into account in the ongoing assessment and monitoring efforts.

She went on to say that EPA, in cooperation with KNPC, continue the monitoring and surveillance efforts round the clock in full coordination with other oil companies to ensure immediate response to any developments and to take precautionary measures in line with the approved environmental standards.

She confirmed that joint coordination and communication between the two sides are continuing in order to closely follow up developments, thereby, enhancing transparency and ensuring environmental protection and public safety.

Following the announcement of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) that fires in certain operating units at the Mina Al-Ahmedi and Mina Abdullah refineries – caused by drone attacks on Thursday morning – had been fully contained, the corporation reassured the public that no human casualties were reported.

KPC emphasized that the incident was handled with a high level of professionalism and in strict adherence to the approved safety standards.

Commenting on the attacks on local refineries, and invoking the popular saying, “He who drinks the sea will not choke on a stream,” in reference to Kuwait's long-standing resilience in facing major crises – such as the 1990 invasion and the oil tanker crisis in the late 1980s – oil analyst and expert Kamel Al-Harami told the newspaper that the three refineries of the country possess substantial petroleum product reserves sufficient to meet local demand for more than three months. He stressed that these refineries continue to operate normally and are capable of offsetting temporary shortages in stored petroleum products.

He pointed out that the facilities operated by Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) and Kuwait Integrated Petroleum Industries Company (KIPIC) consistently maintain large quantities of all petroleum products as a precautionary measure during emergencies. He explained that this level of preparedness is maintained under both normal and exceptional conditions, ensuring that refining reserves remain adequate to meet market needs.

Regarding the energy outlook for water and electricity plants in the event of a prolonged conflict, Al-Harami stated that all precautionary measures implemented by the State are highly reassuring. He pointed out that local refinery storage tanks contain sufficient fuel reserves to sustain power generation and water desalination operations.

He added that should the situation persist and lead to a shortage of free gas, these plants are capable of operating on alternative fuels such as fuel oil – a byproduct of crude oil refining – as well as crude oil itself or other petroleum derivatives. He stressed that there is no justification for concern or alarm, particularly given that the country's oil sector remains fully operational and continues to meet all domestic needs.

He also clarified that although Kuwait does not produce free gas for domestic gas cylinders, KNPC's gas facilities maintain extensive reserves of gas cylinders. He affirmed that in the event of a shortage, cooking gas cylinders can be filled using associated gas produced domestically during oil extraction.

In addition, he confirmed the availability of a strategic reserve of liquefied natural gas (LNG), which is used for residential and other purposes. He asserted that despite repeated attacks on refineries throughout the Gulf region, the Gulf states

– including Kuwait – are expected to have comprehensive strategic plans in place to address potential shortages in petroleum products.

He said while exports of crude oil and petroleum products have been suspended due to the ongoing conflict, the subsidiaries of KPC continue to carry out crude oil production.

He stated that the three refineries – Mina Abdullah, Mina Al-Ahmedi and Al-Zour – remain operational to meet domestic demand. He indicated that the current crisis occurred during the pre-summer period, when fuel consumption for power generation and water desalination is typically lower.

He reiterated that even if the crisis extends into the summer months, there is no cause for concern, as the oil and gas reserves of Kuwait are more than enough to meet the needs of the nation and its citizens.

On the other hand, the Kuwait National Guard (KNG) Task Force intercepted and destroyed five hostile drones in its area of responsibility.

In a press statement, KNG spokesman Brigadier Jadaan Fadhel Jadaan stated this step is in line with ongoing efforts to guarantee national security and safeguard the vital sites against threats.

He added that KNG, in collaboration with the Armed Forces, police forces and Kuwait Fire Force (KFF), maintain the highest level of readiness to ensure national security and stability.

Furthermore, Kuwait Armed Forces spokesman Colonel Saud Al-Atwan confirmed that Kuwait air defense systems intercepted hostile missiles and drones, clarifying that the sounds of explosions were caused by the interception operations.

He urged the public to fully comply with the safety and security instructions published by the relevant authorities.

Earlier in a media briefing, he stated that the air defense systems detected four ballistic missiles and 23 hostile drones within the Kuwaiti airspace in the past 24 hours. He stressed that all were intercepted and destroyed, adding that three drones fell outside the threat zone without posing any risk or causing material damage.

He also reported that the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Unit at the Land Forces Engineering Corps dealt with 11 incidents over the past 24 hours.

Ministry of Interior spokesman Brigadier General Nasser Bousulaib said the EOD teams responded to 17 reports about falling debris from defensive interception operations in the past 24 hours, bringing the total number of such reports since the beginning of the aggression to 421.

He added that sirens were acti-

vated three times, raising the total number of activations since the onset of the aggression to 94.

He also presented a video highlighting the efforts of EOD teams in responding to reports about shrapnel or objects falling outside the threat zone.

He urged the public not to be influenced by rumors and to refrain from sharing edited, unedited or out-of-context media clips or content. He emphasized that all information related to security matters or developments are issued only through official government channels.

He warned that the spread of rumors or unreliable information has a negative impact on community security and stability.

In related news, the Center for Government Communication (CGC) announced on Wednesday the experimental launch of a cellular-based emergency alert system, to notify the public of imminent or occurring hazards.

CGC, via its official account on the social media platform ‘X’, detailed that the initial phase of the pilot is currently compatible with Android and Huawei operating systems. Support for Apple's iOS devices is slated for integration in an upcoming technical stage.

The Center clarified that the warning mechanism utilizes a three-tier hierarchical alert protocol: Emergency Level: the highest priority tier, triggering a distinctive high-volume warning tone to signal urgent danger; alert Level: A secondary tier that disseminates warning notifications in a format similar to Short Message Service (SMS) and Advisory Level: A tertiary tier utilized for silent informative messages.

CGC further underscored that the system offers full user autonomy, allowing individuals to customize notification preferences or opt-out through their device settings as required.

Elsewhere, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed on Thursday Kuwait's strong condemnation of the Iranian attacks on a refinery South of Riyadh and the SAMREF refinery in Yanbu in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

This came in a statement by the Foreign Ministry as it described the attack as a flagrant violation of international law, principles of good neighborliness, a direct threat to regional security and stability, and a clear breach of UN Security Council Resolution 2817.

The Ministry affirmed Kuwait's strong rejection of the hostile acts carried out by Iran, which have led to further escalation and heightened tensions, undermining the security and stability of the region.

It stressed the need to refrain

from targeting civilian facilities and energy infrastructure due to the serious threat posed to countries and the safety of their peoples.

The Ministry renewed Kuwait's full solidarity with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, affirming its support for all measures taken to safeguard its sovereignty, security, stability, and the safety of its facilities.

In the UAE, Kuwait's Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly condemned the Iranian attacks on Habshan gas facility and the Bab field in Abu Dhabi.

Those attacks represent a flagrant violation of the International Law and the UN Security Council Resolution 2817, and the principles of neighborliness.

They pose a direct threat to the security and stability of the Gulf region, according to a statement issued by the Ministry Thursday early morning.

Stressing categorical rejection of the Iranian hostilities which escalated regional tensions and threaten, the State of Kuwait urging abstention from targeting the civilian facilities, particularly the energy ones that put the safety of nations in jeopardy.

The statement reaffirmed Kuwait's full solidarity with the sisterly United Arab Emirates and support to whatever measures it might take to protect its sovereignty, security and stability.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also expressed the State of Kuwait's vehement condemnation of the Iranian attack targeting a facility within the Ras Laffan Industrial City in the sisterly State of Qatar, which resulted in substantial material damage.

In a statement released Wednesday, the Ministry characterized the assault as a flagrant violation of international law and the fundamental principles of good neighborliness.

It further underscored that the strike represents a direct threat to regional security and stability, as well as a provocative breach of UN Security Council Resolution 2817 (2026).

The Ministry reaffirmed Kuwait's categorical rejection of Iran's hostile attacks, which have served to escalate regional tensions and undermine collective security.

Furthermore, the Ministry emphasized the imperative of safeguarding civilian and energy infrastructure, noting that such targeted aggressions pose an unequivocal threat to the safety of sovereign states and their populations.

Kuwait reiterated its unwavering solidarity with the sisterly State of Qatar, affirming its full support for all measures Doha may undertake to uphold its sovereignty, national security, and the integrity of its vital facilities.

Kuwait thwarts

“Investigations revealed that the cell members received training abroad in Hezbollah terrorist organization's camps on using weapons and drone operation, in preparation for carrying out these sabotage operations,” he added.

He noted that the cell's plot aimed at undermining the state's sovereignty and stability and spreading fear and terror within society.

“The accused have given detailed confessions regarding these activities,” he affirmed.

He vowed the security agencies would deal with the utmost firmness with anyone who try to harm the country's security or cooperate with such terrorist groups.

Brigadier Abusulaib emphasized that the Ministry of Interior would not hesitate to deliver painful blows to anyone who pose a threat to the country's security.

He assured that the security and sovereignty of the State of Kuwait are well-protected and that the security services are continuing to track down and uncover all those involved in these terrorist plots.

He also vowed those involved would face the maximum penalties.

Iran and

That is a false and cynical choice. One can oppose Iranian aggression and still reject the normalization of Israeli impunity.

What is troubling is the broader climate it reveals. It suggests an attempt to make Arab public opinion more willing to tolerate Israel's conduct, excuse its actions, and gradually accept what much of the region has never truly accepted.

If this continues, the result will be a distorted Arab political consciousness, one trained to see Iranian danger clearly, but to avert its eyes whenever Israel is involved. That is not realism. It is an engineered imbalance with lasting political and moral costs.

Kuwait raises

“Kuwait affirms its full commitment to working with all Member States of the International Maritime Organization to enhance maritime safety, protect seafarers, and to ensure the continued safe and secure flow of international maritime trade,” the Ambassador concluded.

The 36th Extraordinary Session of the IMO Council, on March 18-19, is chaired by Council President Victor Jimenez of Spain following requests from several Council members. The IMO was established in 1948 and has 176 members.

INTERNATIONAL

Trump pays respects in Delaware to 6 US service members killed in Middle East

DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Del., March 19, (AP): US President Donald Trump paid his respects on Wednesday at a Delaware military base where the remains of six US service members killed in the crash of a refueling aircraft were returned to their families.

It was the second time since launching the war with Iran on Feb. 28 that the Republican president attended the solemn military ritual known as a dignified transfer, which he once described as the "toughest thing" he has had to do as commander in chief.

Accompanying Trump were Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, House Speaker Mike Johnson, Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and lawmakers including Sens Tommy Tuberville and Katie Britt, both Alabama Republicans.

All six crew members of a KC-135 Air Force refueling aircraft were killed last week in a plane crash over friendly territory in western Iraq while supporting operations against Iran. They were from Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and Washington state.

"Every person on that aircraft car-

ried a weight most Americans will never see, and they carried it with professionalism, courage, and a level of quiet excellence that deserves to be recognized," retired Lt Col Ernesto Nisperos, a friend of one of those killed, said in a text message Wednesday.

The crash brought the US death toll in Operation Epic Fury to at least 13 service members. About 200 US service members have been injured, including 10 severely, the Pentagon has said.

Wednesday's dignified transfer was closed to news media coverage at the request of the families in accordance with military policy. Trump spent just under two hours on the ground and didn't speak to reporters leaving Air Force One or returning to it.

Trump last traveled to Dover Air Force Base on March 7 for the dignified transfer of six US service members who were killed by a drone strike at a command center in Kuwait. He saluted as flag-draped transfer cases containing the remains of the fallen service members were carried from military aircraft to vehicles waiting to

take them to the base's mortuary facility to prepare them for their final resting place.

"It's the bad part of war," he told reporters afterward. Asked then if he worried about having to make multiple trips to the base for additional dignified transfers as the war continued, he said, "I'm sure. I hate to do it, but it's a part of war, isn't it?"

US Central Command, which oversees military operations in the Middle East, said that the crash followed an unspecified incident involving two aircraft in "friendly airspace" over Iraq but that the loss of the aircraft during a combat mission was "not due to hostile or friendly fire." The circumstances were under investigation. The other plane landed safely.

The crash killed three people assigned to the 6th Air Refueling Wing at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida: Maj. John A. "Alex" Klinner, 33, who served in Birmingham, Alabama; Capt. Ariana Linse Savino, 31, of Covington, Washington; and Tech. Sgt. Ashley Pruitt, 34, of Bardstown, Kentucky.



US President Donald Trump arrives on Air Force One on March 18 at Dover Air Force Base, Del., to attend the casualty return for the six crew members of an Air Force refueling aircraft who died when their plane crashed in western Iraq while supporting operations against Iran. (AP)

This is not Europe's war. We didn't start the war. We were not consulted: Kallas

Trump's failed strong-arming of allies on Iran shows that pressure losing its effect

PARIS, March 19, (AP): We've long had your back, now it's our turn. That is how the famously transactional US President Donald Trump is framing his demands that allies help him with the Iran war. He wants to call in IOUs for decades of US security guarantees.

The string of refusals indicates his stock of European goodwill is low. He has put allies through the wringer since returning to the White House, bullying them over tariffs, Greenland and other issues, and disparaging the sacrifices their soldiers made alongside US troops in Afghanistan.

Now he's demanding - not just requesting - that they send warships to help the US unblock the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of the world's traded oil passes - essentially mop up behind the conflagration that he and Israel ignited in the Middle East.

The reply has been a "global raspberry."

That's how a veteran French defense analyst, François Heisbourg, described allied responses.

No close ally has come forward with immediate help. Britain is flat-out refusing to be drawn into the war. France says the fighting would have to die down first. Others are non-committal. China, which is not an ally but was also asked to help, is ignoring Trump's call.

"This is not Europe's war. We didn't start the war. We were not consulted," European Union foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said Tuesday.

Trump has singled out the refusal from the United Kingdom. Prime Minister Keir Starmer cultivated ties with Trump and reached an early trade deal with the administration, but is now among allies who refuse to join a regional war with no clear endgame.

The UK "was sort of considered the Rolls-Royce of allies," Trump said Monday, adding that he'd asked for British minesweeping ships.

"I was not happy with the U.K.," Trump said. "They should be involved enthusiastically. We've been protecting these countries for years."

Starmer said Britain "will not be drawn into the wider war" and that British troops require the backing of international law and "a proper thought-through plan" - suggesting those were not in place.

He initially refused to let U.S. bombers attack Iran from British bases before accepting their use for strikes on Iran's ballistic missile program.

Retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, former commanding general of the U.S. Army in Europe, said allies are "looking at the United States in a way that they never have before. And this is bad for the United States."

Having previously appeased Trump, some European leaders are "starting to



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, (left), and French President Emmanuel Macron shake hands ahead of a bilateral meeting at Chequers, near Aylesbury, England on Jan 9, 2025. (AP)

realize that there's no benefit or value in using flattery," he said.

Going to war without consulting allies was in keeping with Trump's America-first outlook.

"My attitude is: We don't need anybody. We're the strongest nation in the world," he said Monday.

But failing to get an international mandate, as the US did before intervening in the 1990 Gulf War, is boomeranging.

"It is not our war; we did not start it," German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said. "We want diplomatic solutions and a swift end to the conflict. Sending more warships to the region will certainly not contribute to that."

French President Emmanuel Macron envisions possible naval escorts in the Strait of Hormuz - but only once fighting has died down.

"France didn't choose this war. We're not taking part," he said.

After bruising tariff battles with Trump last year, the first months of 2026 have further strained alliances. Trump's renewed pressure for U.S. control of Greenland, including a tariff threat against eight European nations, and his false assertion that allied troops avoided front-line fighting in the Afghanistan War, upset partners in the NATO military alliance.

"Allies, or at least the Europeans, aren't willing to be at the beck and call of a demand from Donald Trump," said Sylvie Bermann, a French former ambassador to China, the U.K. and Russia.

"And even in asking for a helping hand, he is doing so in a brutal manner, saying: 'You're useless, we're the strongest, we don't need you, but come,'" she said. Retired naval officers say that unblocking the Strait of Hormuz with military escorts while the war rages and without Iran's consent would be dangerous.

France, which has rushed its Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier to the Mediterranean, is working with other countries to prepare such a mission once the air war has subsided. French military spokesman Col. Guillaume Vernet said any escorting would be conditional on talks with Iran, and Macron has publicized two calls in eight days with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

That has won points with Trump.

"On a scale of zero to 10, I'd say he's been an eight," Trump said Monday. "Not perfect, but it's France. We don't expect perfect."

But he's fuming at other allies.

"We will protect them, but they will do nothing for us, in particular, in a time of need," Trump said Tuesday.

Allies in Europe and Asia need oil, gas and other products from the Middle East to flow again. That gives Trump some leverage.

Allies also know from experience that resisting Trump carries risks of retaliation.

"It really could be anything. Are the Europeans prepared for that?" asked Ed Arnold, a former British army officer and now a researcher at the Royal United Services Institute, a London think tank.

European allies need Trump's continued blessing for U.S. weaponry, intelligence, and other support for Ukraine, as well as financial pressure on Russia. The U.S. has started to chip away at some sanctions on Moscow by temporarily allowing shipments of Russian oil to ease shortages stemming from the Iran war. Allies also want him to reengage in talks to end the war.

"That was what kept European leaders quiet for a lot of last year in the face of the rhetoric and actions," said Amanda Sloat, a former U.S. national security adviser who now teaches at Spain's IE University.

'Iran's govt still intact but refuses to discuss talks with Trump about war'

WASHINGTON, March 19, (AP): The US government's top intelligence official told lawmakers Wednesday that Iran's government "appears to be intact but largely degraded" yet repeatedly dodged questions about whether President Donald Trump had been warned about the fallout from the weeks-old war, including Iran's attacks on Gulf nations and its effective closure of the vital Strait of Hormuz.

Tulsi Gabbard, the director of national intelligence, also stated in prepared remarks to the Senate Intelligence Committee that US attacks on Iran last year had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear program and that there had been no effort since then to rebuild that capability.

The statement was notable given Trump's repeated assertions that a war with Iran was necessary to head off what he said was an imminent threat from the Islamic Republic. Gabbard pointedly said that conclusion was the president's alone to draw as she declined to directly answer whether the intelligence community had likewise assessed that Iran's nuclear system presented an imminent risk to the United States.

"It is not the intelligence community's responsibility to determine what is and is not an imminent threat," she said at one point.

Democratic Sen Jon Ossoff of Georgia shot back: "It is precisely your responsibility to determine what constitutes a threat to the United States."

The testimony came at the first of two congressional hearings held each year to offer the public a glimpse into the largely secret operations of the government's intelligence agencies and the threats they confront.

The hearings this week take place at a time of scrutiny over the war with Iran and heightened concerns about



Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard testifies before the Senate Committee on Intelligence hearings to examine worldwide threats on Capitol Hill on March 18, in Washington. (AP)

terrorism at home after recent attacks at a Michigan synagogue and a Virginia university. Wednesday's hearing also came a day after the resignation of Joe Kent as director of the National Counterterrorism Center. Kent said he could not "in good conscience" back the war and did not agree that Iran posed an imminent threat.

But the hours-long hearing offered few revelations from Gabbard, who repeatedly declined to discuss conversations with Trump, or other senior intelligence officials who testified.

"I am very disappointed," said an exasperated Sen Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee. "It's the only one time of year the public gets to hear from you guys in this kind of setting."

French President Macron unveils name of new nuclear-powered aircraft carrier

PARIS, March 19, (AP): French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday named France's next nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the France Libre ("Free France"), framing it as a symbol of national independence and a push to strengthen the country's naval forces, whose presence in the Middle-East region has been significant since the start of the Iran war.

Macron unveiled the warship's name during a visit to the shipyard in the Western town of Indret, where its two nuclear reactors are to be built. The France Libre, which is to enter service in 2038, will have a capacity for 30 Rafale fighter jets and 2,000 sailors, for an estimated cost of 10 billion euros (\$11.5 billion).

The move comes as France deployed to the eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East eight frigates, two helicopter carriers and its current nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the Charles de Gaulle. Macron described the large-scale deployment of the French navy as "unprecedented," making France the European nation with the most prominent presence in the region.

France Libre is a direct reference to General Charles de Gaulle's resistance movement, which joined Allied forces



The model of the ship named 'France Libre' is displayed, as French President Emmanuel Macron visits the construction site of Naval Group Nantes-Indret, where the next generation of French aircraft carrier is under construction, in Indret, France on March 18. (AP)

to help liberate France and Europe from the Nazis during World War II, Macron said.

"In this name lives the memory of the women and men who stood up against barbarity, united to save the

homeland, determined to defend a certain idea of our nation," he said. "This name therefore seals a pledge for the future: to remain free, we must be feared. To be feared, we must be powerful."

Europe

'201 Ukrainian experts deployed to ME': Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Tuesday in London that Kyiv has deployed 201 anti-drone military experts to the Middle East to help counter Shahed drones.

"These are military experts who know how to assist and defend against Shahed drones. Our teams are already in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and are on their way to Kuwait," Zelenskyy told British lawmakers during an address to Parliament.

He added that an additional 34 specialists are ready for deployment.

Zelenskyy also noted that Ukraine is currently capable of producing around 2,000 interceptor drones per day and could supply up to half of that output to its allies to help strengthen their air defenses.

In addition, he said Kyiv is developing underwater drones as well as drones capable of operating in ocean environments. (Xinhua)



Zelenskyy

EU, Iceland sign defense partnership: The Europe-

an Union (EU) and Iceland signed a security and defense partnership on Wednesday, vowing to deepen defense cooperation in areas including support for Ukraine, Arctic matters and maritime security.

In a statement, the European External Action Service said that this important milestone for the EU and Iceland brings an impulse to their already deep relations, underpinned by the European Economic Area Agreement, in the current volatile security context.

The statement also said the partnership provides a framework of cooperation in areas including support for Ukraine, Arctic matters and maritime security, cyber issues, emerging and disruptive technologies, economic security, and the climate change and security nexus. (Xinhua)

Finnish govt to press ahead with bill: Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said on Tuesday that the government will move forward with a bill to remove legal restrictions on nuclear weapons.

Speaking to reporters at parliament, Orpo said the bill will not be sent back for an all-party preparatory process, as demanded by the opposition, the Social Democratic Party.

Nonetheless, Orpo said he will convene an all-party discussion next week, and is preparing a declaration on nuclear weapons, to be attached as an appendix to the government's upcoming foreign and security policy report. (Xinhua)

Spain's king acknowledges 'much abuse' in conquest of the Americas

MADRID, March 19, (AP): Spain's monarch said the Spanish conquest of the Americas included "much abuse" and "ethical controversies," striking a conciliatory tone amid a yearslong row between Spain and Mexico over colonial era abuses committed by the Spanish crown centuries ago.

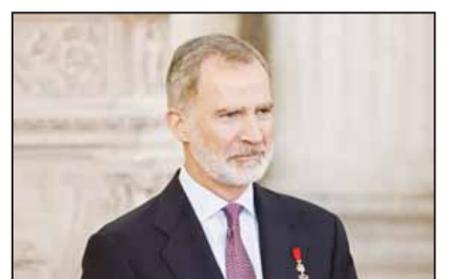
King Felipe VI made the remarks while speaking with Mexico's ambassador to Spain, Quirino Ordaz, during a visit to a museum exhibition in Madrid about the role of women in pre-Columbian Mexico.

About the centuries-old Spanish conquest, Felipe said: "There are things that, when we study them, we come to know them, and well, with our current values, they obviously cannot make us feel proud."

"But they must be understood in their proper context, not with excessive moral presentism, but with an objective and rigorous analysis," he said.

The Bourbon king's symbolic remarks came after years of a diplomatic spat between Spain and Mexico over the Mexican government's demands that Spain apologize for its 1519-1521 conquest of Mexico, which resulted in the death of a large part of the country's pre-Hispanic population.

Colonial Spain ruled one of the largest empires in history with its territorial holdings spanning 5 continents at its peak between the 16th and 18th centuries. That included much of



Spanish King Felipe attends commemorations marking the 10th anniversary of the proclamation of Spain's King Felipe VI at Royal Palace in Madrid, on June 19, 2024. (AP)

Central and South America.

Mexico City was the seat of Spain's colonial power in the Americas after the Spanish and their Indigenous allies toppled the Aztecs in 1521. Mexico City was built over the ruins of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan.

INTERNATIONAL

Trump seeks help securing Strait of Hormuz

Japan's Prime Minister Takaichi meets with US president

WASHINGTON, March 19, (AP): The meeting that Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi will have at the White House on Thursday originally seemed like a prime opportunity to have President Donald Trump's ear before he embarked on a trip to China.

But now, the war in Iran and Trump's unsuccessful call for Japan and other nations to help protect the Strait of Hormuz means the China trip has been delayed and Takaichi may be likely to get an earful.

Trump has repeatedly complained on camera and online that US allies, including Japan, have rejected his request to help safeguard the critical waterway for oil and gas transport.

"In fact, speaking as President of the United States of America, by far the Most Powerful Country Anywhere in the World, WE DO NOT NEED THE HELP OF ANYONE!" Trump exclaimed on Truth Social after his initial call for help was rebuffed.

The prime minister acknowledged before she left Japan that she expects her meeting with Trump will be "very difficult." She and her ministers have denied that Washington officially requested Japanese warships for the US-

Israeli operation.

Japan, a key US ally in Asia, is one of the countries that Trump namechecked on Tuesday as he railed against the lack of help with the Strait of Hormuz before declaring the help wasn't needed.

Trump is expected to put "enormous pressure" on Takaichi, said Kurt Campbell, the former US deputy secretary of state in the Biden administration who is now chair of The Asia Group.

Campbell said he's never seen a meeting between U.S. and Japanese leaders carrying such high stakes. In order to press for Japan's interests, he said, Takaichi will want to find a way to suggest that Japan is a part of the US plan in the Middle East.

"She's going to want to come out of that as a partner in this case and realize that if she can do that, that she can translate that potentially into the president listening more to Japanese concerns about Taiwan or other issues," Campbell said.

The constraints on Japan's involvement in Iran include a provision in its post-World War II constitution that bans the use of force except to defend its territory. The country's military is

called the Self-Defense Force.

Christopher Johnstone, a partner and chair of the defense and national security practice at The Asia Group, said Japan could help with mine-sweeping, and has had "a small naval presence" in the region as part of an anti-piracy mission for at least a decade. But to join the US mission would require Takaichi to clear "an exceptionally high bar politically to invoke collective self-defense" that has never been done before.

Takaichi, who had her first meeting with Trump in October in Tokyo, is Japan's first female prime minister and a protégé of former leader Shinzo Abe, who developed a close relationship with Trump.

She is also a hardline conservative and longtime supporter of Taiwan whose comments about Japan's willingness to provide military support to the island have heightened tensions with China.

Ahead of her meeting with Trump, Takaichi had sought to focus on trade, strengthening the US-Japan relationship and security concerns. Japanese officials said the two sides would work to deepen cooperation in regional security, critical minerals, energy and

dealing with China.

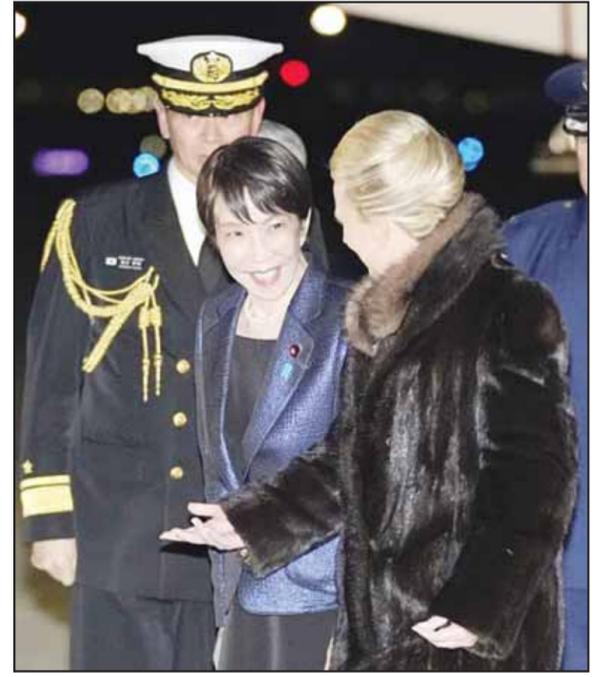
China views self-governed Taiwan, which the U.S. relies on for its production of computer chips, as its sovereign territory and has said it would take it by force if needed.

But beyond questions about helping with the Strait of Hormuz, the global implications of the Iran war have also put the Japanese leader in a tougher spot with Trump as she seeks to ensure US commitment to the Indo-Pacific region.

Japan considers China a growing security threat and has pushed a military buildup on southwestern islands near the East China Sea. But the U.S. has shifted some troops stationed in Japan to the Middle East, removing a check against China's power.

Takaichi is expected to raise concerns about troop shifts with Trump because they are coming at the same time China is launching a large number of exercises around Taiwan.

"This raises the prospect that - once again - the United States will be distracted and bogged down in the Middle East at a time when the deterrence problem in East Asia has never been greater," Johnstone said.



Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, (center), arrives at Joint Base Andrews, Md on March 18. (AP)

Asia

Crime rate in Australia's Victoria up: The number of crimes recorded in the Australian state of Victoria grew by 4.2 percent in 2025 as youth offenders drove an increase in carjackings and robberies, with the crime rate hitting a nine-year high.

According to official data released on Thursday by the state's Crime Statistics Agency (CSA), Victoria Police recorded 630,592 criminal offenses in the calendar year 2025, up 4.2 percent from 605,342 in 2024.

The crime rate, which accounts for population growth, increased by 2.4 percent from 8,674.1 offenses per 100,000 people in 2024 to 8,885.5 offenses per 100,000 people in 2025, the highest figure since 2016.

Victoria Police said in a statement that overall crime is starting to stabilize after the state's crime rate spiked by 19 percent between 2022 and 2024. Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police in Australia is Mike Bush.

However, it noted that the number of reported car thefts hit the highest level since 2001 in 2025, and has increased by 96.9 percent over the last three years, and retail theft of offenses increased by 6.1 percent in 2025.

Victoria Police said that child offenders committed 57.6 percent of carjackings, 52.6 percent of home invasions, 62.4 percent of robberies and 47.8 percent of aggravated burglaries in the state in 2025.

It said that youth gang members were most commonly



Bush

responsible for those crimes and that 1,223 children were arrested by officers a combined 6,997 times in 2025.

Under laws passed by the state parliament in December, children as young as 14 who are charged with violent offenses, including carjacking, home invasion and armed robbery, can face adult courts and adult sentences, including life imprisonment. The state government also, in 2025, classified machetes as prohibited weapons, making it illegal to own, use, transport or sell them except for legitimate purposes such as agriculture.

Victoria Police said on Thursday that it seized a record 17,400 knives and machetes in 2025. (Xinhua)

North China plant explosion injures 2: An explosion at a nitration facility in Alxa League, north China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, has left three people injured and two others missing, local authorities said on Thursday.

The blast occurred at 11:49 am on Thursday, with local police, firefighters and emergency response teams swiftly arriving at the site to conduct search and rescue missions. The cause of the explosion is still under investigation. (Xinhua)

1 dead in Singapore residential fire: One person died after a fire broke out early Thursday in a residential building in northern Singapore, the Singapore Civil Defense Force (SCDF) said.

The victim was pronounced dead at the scene inside a 14th-floor unit, the SCDF said.

Another person from the affected unit, who had evacuated before the SCDF arrived, was assessed for smoke inhalation and taken to a hospital. Two others from the block were also assessed for smoke inhalation but declined hospital transport. (Xinhua)

Thailand's PM Anutin to remain in power following Parliament vote

BANGKOK, March 19, (AP): Thailand's incumbent Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul won a vote in Parliament on Thursday to remain in office, according to an official tally.

The leader of the Bhumjaithai Party garnered 293 votes, exceeding the required majority of the 498 members who attended the session in the House of Representatives.

Anutin is expected to take office a few days after obtaining a formal appointment from King Maha Vajiralongkorn and the new cabinet is expected to be appointed in the following weeks.

Anutin's Bhumjaithai Party won 191 seats in February's general election, according to official results, and has since built a coalition with several other parties to form a governing majority. Among those partners is the populist Pheu Thai Party, which placed third with 74 seats.

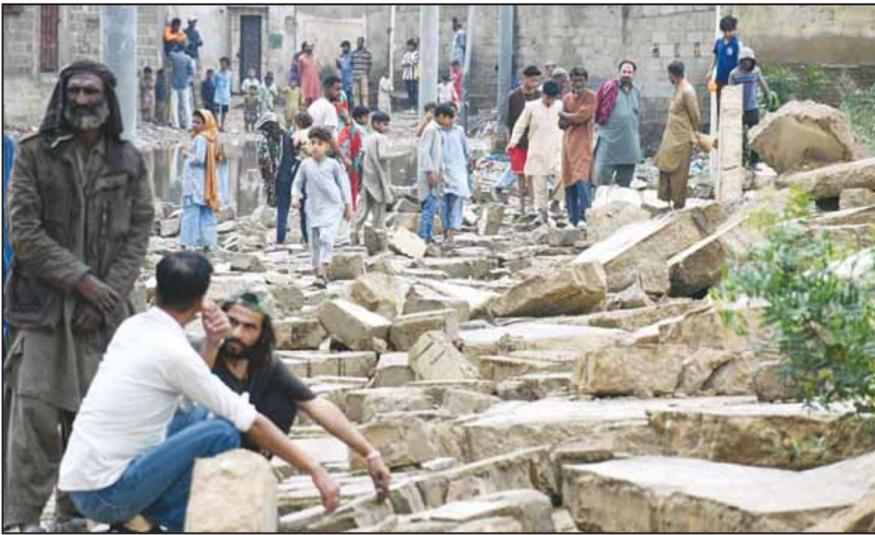
The progressive People's Party, which finished second with 120 seats, has said it will not join the Bhum-



Bhumjaithai party leader Anutin Charnvirakul, (center), is applauded by lawmakers after he was elected the new prime minister, at the Parliament in Bangkok, Thailand, on March 19. (AP)

jaithai-led government. Party leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut received 119 votes after being nominated in what the party said was only a sym-

bolic contest. Anutin and Natthaphong were among the 86 lawmakers who abstained from voting Thursday.



Local residents navigate through the rubble of boundary wall collapsed due to heavy rains and strong winds in Karachi, Pakistan on March 19. (AP)

Overnight storm in Pakistan's Karachi kills 17, injures 30

At least 17 people were killed and 30 others injured in rain-related incidents in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi on Wednesday, officials said.

According to local authorities and personnel from Rescue 1122, the casualties were reported from multiple areas of the city following

heavy rainfall that exposed vulnerabilities in urban infrastructure.

Rescue 1122 personnel said that 11 people were killed after a wall collapsed in the Baldia Town area of Karachi, the provincial capital of the country's southern Sindh province.

Six others died in different ar-

reas of the city, including a couple who lost their lives after their house roof collapsed in the Quaid Abad area.

Karachi Mayor Murtaza Wahab said the city was experiencing significant rainfall with strong winds, urging residents to avoid unnecessary movement. (Xinhua)



Firefighters work to extinguish a bus fire that was set ablaze by drug traffickers during a police operation in the Morro dos Prazeres community in Rio de Janeiro, on March 18. (AP)

Brazilian police operation in Rio favelas leaves at least 8 dead

A Brazilian police operation in Rio de Janeiro favelas on Wednesday killed seven presumed drug traffickers, including a gang chief, as well as a local resident caught in the crossfire, law enforcement officials said.

Claudio Augusto dos Santos, a drug-trafficking boss and mem-

ber of the notorious Red Command criminal organization, was among those killed in the operation in central Rio, Secretary of the Military Police Col. Marcelo de Menezes said in a press conference.

In retaliation, police said "criminals" set fire to a bus and blocked

roads in Rio's central zone. Some attempted to steal bus keys to use the vehicles to block the roads. Five people were arrested for acts of vandalism, police said.

Marcio Sousa, the driver of the bus set alight, reported that the attackers boarded the vehicle with two bottles of gasoline. (AP)

Noboa rejects allegations Ecuador bombing targets inside Colombia

BOGOTA, Colombia, March 19, (AP): Ecuador's president on Tuesday rejected allegations that his country is bombing targets in neighboring Colombia as tensions escalate between the two South American nations.

President Daniel Noboa said on X that his government "is fighting narco terrorism in all its forms" and "bombing places that serve as hideouts for those groups, of which many are Colombian," but only within Ecuadorian territory.

Noboa was responding to Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who on Monday accused Ecuador of bombing targets on Colombia's side of the border. He said a bomb had been found by Colombian officials, but provided no evidence to back up his claim, adding that he asked US President Donald Trump to call Noboa and persuade him to stop the supposed operations in Colombian territory.

On Tuesday, Colombian state owned broadcaster RTVC, published photos of an unexploded bomb which it said had been found in a coca field, near the nation's border with Ecuador.

The bishops of the border cities of Ipiales in Colombia and Tulcan in Ecuador urged both governments to strengthen dialogue and cooperation to find solutions to problems in the bor-



Air Force personnel destroy an airstrip they suspect to be in use by illicit aircrafts, in Milagro, Ecuador on March 16. (AP)

der region, including drug trafficking.

"We are worried about the expansion of illicit activities that deteriorate our social fabric and cause great damage to the environment," the statement said.

The dispute comes as Colombia prepares for presidential elections in May, and relations deteriorate between Colombia and Ecuador, two neighboring nations that were once close commer-

cial and security partners.

In January, Noboa imposed a 30% tariff on Colombian imports, which he later raised to 50%. The Ecuadorian president said Colombia has not done enough to stop drug traffickers and rebel groups from crossing into Ecuador, and said the tariffs, which he called a "security tax" will not be lifted until Colombia takes firmer actions against criminal groups.

Nigerian soldiers repel attack on base and kill 80 Islamic militants, says army

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria, March 19, (AP): Nigerian soldiers backed by air support repelled an attack Wednesday by suspected Islamic militants on a military base in northeastern Nigeria, killing at least 80 of the assailants, the army said.

The militants, suspected members of Boko Haram or the Islamic State West Africa Province, were supported by multiple armed drones when they attacked the base in Mallam Fatori in the state of Borno, near the border with Niger, at around 12:50 am, army spokesperson Sani Uba said in a statement.

Uba said the troops had anticipated the assault and repelled it with ground fire and air support, killing at least 80 fighters, including three "high-profile" commanders. The Associated Press could not independently verify the claims.

A previous statement by the army put the death toll at over 60.

The army spokesperson said four soldiers were wounded evacuated for treatment. He said troops recovered a large cache of weapons from suspected militants, including assault rifles, RPG launchers, machine guns, ammunition, improvised explosive devices and



A security person patrols at the scene of Monday's bomb blast at a market in Maiduguri, Nigeria on March 17. (AP)

armed drone components.

The attack comes after three suspected suicide bombings Monday killed at least 23 people and wounded 108 others in Borno's capital Maiduguri. No group claimed responsibility for the attacks, but suspicion quickly fell on the Boko Haram jihadi group, which in 2009 launched an insurgency in northeastern Nigeria to enforce their radical interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic law.

Boko Haram has since become stronger, with thousands of fighters and different factions. One of its offshoots, the Islamic State West Africa Province, which is backed by the Islamic State group, has staged a growing number of attacks against the military in recent months.

The crisis has overstretched the Nigerian military, which also battles other security crises across the conflict-battered north.

Kuwaiti oil barrel price dips to \$152.44

KUWAIT CITY, March 19, (KUNA): The price of Kuwaiti oil barrel went down 78 cents to reach USD 152.44 per barrel on Wednesday, compared with USD 153.22 pb on Tuesday, according to Kuwait Petroleum

Corporation (KPC) on Thursday. In international markets, Brent crude oil price went up USD 4.24 to USD 107.38 pb, while West Texas crude increased 11 cents to USD 96.32 pb.

Business

Real GDP growth forecast to slow to below 1% in 2026

CBK: Standard & Poor's affirms Kuwait's long-term credit rating at 'AA-' with stable outlook

KUWAIT CITY, March 19, (KUNA): The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced Wednesday that the international rating agency Standard & Poor's (S&P) has affirmed Kuwait's long- and short-term sovereign credit ratings at 'AA-/A-1+' respectively, maintaining a stable outlook.

In its latest report, the agency underscored that Kuwait's formidable fiscal buffers and substantial financial assets provide an effective shield against the repercussions of ongoing regional instability.

S&P indicated that it anticipates a de-escalation of threats to critical infrastructure, including vital oil facilities.

The stable outlook reflects the agency's assessment that Kuwait's vast sovereign wealth reserves offer sufficient fiscal and external maneuverability to mitigate the adverse impacts of geopolitical developments, including temporary disruptions to oil production and exports.

Regarding macroeconomic indicators, the agency noted that Kuwait's oil production has been reduced by more than half since the start of the conflict, and force majeure has been declared for its customers affected by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

As a result of disruptions to oil production and exports, the agency expects

real GDP growth to slow to just under 1 percent in 2026, compared to around 2.4 percent in 2025.

On the fiscal front, the agency projects the budget deficit to widen to approximately 17 percent of GDP in the 2026 fiscal year (ending March 31, 2027), up from an estimated 8 percent in fiscal year 2025.

This projected fiscal slippage is attributed to the combination of disrupted oil revenues and sustained high levels of public expenditure.

Touching upon the banking sector, S&P indicated that it does not foresee any contingent liabilities to the government arising from the financial industry.

The report highlighted that the sector's total loan portfolio is expected to expand by roughly 8.5 percent in 2025, driven by recent structural reforms and heightened banking activity.

Furthermore, the agency lauded the sector's asset quality, which has maintained its relative strength since 2022. Non-performing loans (NPLs) at the eight largest Kuwaiti banks stood at approximately 1.5 percent by the end of 2025.

The report concluded that local banks retain a robust net foreign asset position, leaving them well-positioned to weather potential capital outflows amid escalating geopolitical tensions.

Wide range of transactions available

KFH offers round-the-clock e-services during the holiday

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) announced it will continue providing its banking services to customers around the clock during the holiday period. Most services can be accessed through the bank's digital platforms, including its mobile applications and e-branches in key areas. Additionally, KFH's social media accounts and other e-service channels will remain active, utilizing the latest in financial technology and digital platforms.

KFHOnline app features a sleek, modern design with smart banking services. KFH has carried out a comprehensive update to its app, reaffirming its dedication to digital transformation and excellence in providing advanced financial solutions. These solutions meet customer needs and deliver seamless banking experience. This move also underscores the Bank's outstanding execution of its digital transformation strategy.

The KFHOnline app offers more than 200 banking services. New services allow customers to instantly request virtual prepaid cards through KFHOnline. Customers can also control the usage limits of their bank cards, additional credit cards, and both local and international money transfers.

KFH's hybrid branches offer a variety of services, giving customers the opportunity to access unlimited e-services through a range of digital channels. Customers can either interact directly with employees or use self-service devices and other modern technology.

KFH's e-branches are a smart banking channel that transforms typical customer transactions into an innovative, automated experience. These branches provide highly efficient banking services, offering over 80% of what is available at traditional locations.

KFH e-branches include the XTM device, which allows direct video calls with service personnel, as well as ATMs and cash deposit machines. The cash deposit machines accept up to 300 notes per transaction.

Moreover, customers can conduct a variety of interactive banking transactions through e-branches located in various places in Kuwait. These services include: establishing Murabaha transactions, requesting credit and prepaid cards, updating data and phone numbers, activating bank cards, opening deposits and accounts, instant cheque and card printing, receiving gold biscuits (10 grams), opening (gold, savings, Al-Rabeh, electron) accounts, online gold purchase and sell, cardless withdrawals using QR code through mobile, or by using Civil ID or phone number, in addition to many other financing and banking services conducted quickly, easily and safely.

The e-banking services encompass a wide array of digital functionalities, including opening additional bank account without a branch visit, instant virtual prepaid card issuance, viewing PINs and other credit and ATM card details, activating and temporarily suspending bank cards, opening deposits, adding beneficiaries, balance inquiries, cheque book requests, opening and trading gold accounts, gifting gold, requesting and checking financing obligations and installments, perusing investment plans, receiving account balances and deposit summaries, and managing children's accounts through the Baiti Online service, and more.

Call Center

The Call Center continues to provide services around the clock, receiving customer calls, addressing their inquiries, and responding to them through a qualified and technically advanced staff. KFH also provides the automated telephone service, 1803333, which operates with the same efficiency and speed to facilitate transfers between accounts, answer inquiries about financial transactions, among other services.

Customers outside Kuwait can



contact KFH's call center from seven countries (USA, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Turkey and Spain) without additional fees.

To use this service customers can call from the following toll-free numbers: USA and Canada (18008188608), UK (08000148898), France (0805086620), Germany (08001817080), Spain (900905440), and Turkey (908507712154). Local tariff charges may be applied in Turkey by local Turkish telecoms companies when calling this number.

This service is free exclusively for mobiles and landlines users in the mentioned countries only and doesn't include the (Roaming Service).

Social media channels

KFH's social media team remains dedicated to addressing customer inquiries and assisting them at all hours through the official social media accounts (@KFHGroup).

Money transfer and account opening

KFH successfully launched WAMD digital service, allowing customers to send and receive money instantly and for free using their mobile numbers, 24/7. Additionally, customers can request money through WAMD service by sharing or scanning a QR code from the KFHOnline app. This app also allows customers to transfer funds from their local Knet bank accounts directly to their credit and prepaid cards.

KFH also successfully launched the D-POS device for account opening, the first-of-its-kind in the market, allowing customers to open accounts at KFH immediately and anywhere.

Customers can now open accounts in major currencies through KFHOnline; previously, account opening was only available at branches. Additionally, KFH has integrated Western Union (WU) services into its app, enabling customers to make international transfers directly through the application. The Bank also offers instant transfers within the GCC countries through the AFAQ network on the mobile app.

Corporate services

KFH launched the first mobile application for corporate banking encompassing major services for business development, in addition to launching facial recognition technology based on biometric identity and other distinguished electronic services available through the corporate banking webpage.

KFH successfully introduced corporate cards, offering three different products that cater to the various local and global corporate needs. Key features include cash and cheque deposits, as well as cash withdrawals. The cards also provide access to Point of Sale (POS) terminals and online payment gateways, both in Kuwait and internationally.

In addition, KFH has introduced corporate credit cards, which are among the bank's distinguished offerings for business owners. These cards are linked directly to the company's account, allowing business owners to issue cards to employees for seamless expense management. They can be used to cover day-to-day business expenses, one-time travel costs, and more. The corporate credit card helps businesses better manage their cash flow while offering enhanced control over employee expenditures.

Fanning brings 20+ years of global aviation experience

Jazeera Airways appoints Nigel Fanning as VP to drive further strategic growth

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: Jazeera Airways, Kuwait's leading low-cost carrier, today announced the appointment of Nigel Fanning as Vice President - Strategy & Airports, in the Commercial team, further strengthening its leadership team as the airline continues plans to scale operations and expand its network.

Nigel brings over two decades of global aviation experience across leading airlines and airports, including Etihad Airways, Jetstar Airways (Qantas Group), Sydney Airport, and easyJet. He joins Jazeera Airways from Etihad Airways, where he served as Director Commercial Strategy, playing a key role in driving revenue growth, network expansion, and commercial transformation initiatives.

In his new role, Nigel will lead strategic planning, airport partnerships, and network development initiatives, supporting Jazeera Airways' long-term growth ambitions and operational resilience. He will work under the leadership of Paul Carroll, Chief Commercial Officer to strengthen Jazeera's development strategy and airport partnerships.

Commenting on the appointment, Carroll said:

"It's great to have Nigel on board. He brings a rare combination of strategic insight and hands-on execution



Paul Carroll - Chief Commercial Officer, Naser Fahad Alobaid, Chief Executive - Government Affairs, Nigel Fanning as Vice President - Strategy & Airports.

across multiple areas of Jazeera's business. His experience in network planning, revenue management, and airline partnerships will significantly enhance our commercial capabilities. As we continue to evolve our network and explore new growth opportunities, his leadership will play a key role in shaping the next phase of Jazeera's expansion."

Naser Fahad Alobaid, Chief Executive - Government Affairs, Jazeera Airways, said:

"We are delighted to welcome Nigel to Jazeera Airways at a pivotal time for the airline, reflecting our clear intent and ambition as we continue to build on our growth story in Kuwait and the GCC. As we navigate a dynamic operating environment and expand our network and ca-

pabilities, Nigel's deep expertise in commercial strategy, network planning, and airport partnerships will be instrumental. His global perspective and proven track record in driving growth and transformation will further strengthen our ability to execute our long-term vision and deliver value to our customers and stakeholders."

Prior to Etihad Airways, Nigel held several senior leadership roles at Jetstar Airways over a 12-year tenure, including Group Head of Networks, Schedules and Airline Partnerships, where he led long-term network strategy, capacity planning, and partnerships across multiple markets. He has also held leadership roles in pricing, revenue management, and ancillary revenue, with full P&L accountability and a strong track record of delivering commercial performance and innovation.

Nigel holds a Master's degree in Air Transport Management from Cranfield University, UK, and a Bachelor of Engineering from the University of Limerick, Ireland.

This appointment reinforces Jazeera Airways' commitment to strengthening its leadership team as it continues to expand its fleet, grow its network, and enhance its operational and commercial capabilities in line with its long-term strategy.

Jazeera Airways restores Kuwait-India connectivity

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: Jazeera Airways has marked another major milestone by simultaneously relaunching flights to six Indian cities from Kuwait via Qaisumah Airport (AQJ) in Hafar Al Batin, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under Project Vande Bharat.

With Jazeera Airways being the only airline operating from Kuwait, this service represents the first travel connection between Kuwait and India since regional airspace closures and the temporary suspension of operations at Kuwait International Airport.

Commenting on the relaunch of flights, HE Mrs. Paramita Tripathi, Ambassador of India to Kuwait said: "On behalf of the Embassy of India and the Indian community in Kuwait, I express appreciation to Jazeera Airways for operating the special flights from Al Qaisumah Airport to India. I would also like to thank the DGCA and the Ministries of External Affairs and Civil Aviation in Delhi for supporting and approving this unique arrangement. The temporary closure of Kuwait airspace since 28 February 2026 had resulted in much difficulties for our nationals some of who needed to travel out of Kuwait. The prompt, proactive and professional response and action on the part of Jazeera Air-



Jazeera continues to serve passengers.

ways is commendable. I hope that the situation in Kuwait and the region will improve towards normalcy soon and the uncertainty and difficulties being faced by the people, including the Indian community in Kuwait, would come to an end."

The Indian Business and Professionals Council (IBPC) Kuwait also appreciates Jazeera Airways' efforts to

serve the Indian community and connect them from Kuwait to India and back during this difficult time.

Barathan Pasupathi, Chief Executive Officer of Jazeera Airways, said: "Given the enormous Indian diaspora in Kuwait and thousands of nationals waiting to reunite with their families and loved ones, there was a strong demand to restore connectivity to In-

dia. Today, Jazeera Airways is pleased to announce the launch of - Project Vande Bharat -, reconnecting Kuwait with the six Indian cities we served prior to the suspension of operations. We would like to extend special appreciation to the Indian Ambassador, HE Mrs. Paramita Tripathi and the Indian Embassy for supporting us in this process."

Passengers will travel overland from Kuwait to Qaisumah on buses specially assigned for these trips. From Qaisumah, they will board outbound flights to their respective destinations. Incoming flights will also follow the same route.

Jazeera Airways continues to expand its network of destinations accessible from Kuwait. These include Alexandria, Assiut, Cairo, Luxor, Amman, Istanbul, Colombo and Al Ain, ensuring essential travel links remain available during the current operational environment.

Passengers aiming to travel to Egypt, India, Jordan, Sri Lanka, Türkiye, or the UAE can visit jazeeraairways.com or the Jazeera App to check flight availability.

Additional frequencies and destinations will be introduced gradually.

Reinforcing its commitment to continuous development & uninterrupted services

National Bank of Kuwait launches enhanced mobile banking app

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is pleased to announce the launch of a new update to its Mobile Banking App, introducing enhancements designed to make customers' digital banking experience simpler and smoother. The updated app features improved functionalities that help customers complete their everyday banking transactions quickly, securely, and with complete ease.

In light of the current situation in Kuwait, NBK insures its commitment to standing by its customers and giving access to essential banking services. As it's available around the clock, the NBK Mobile Banking App allows customers to manage their finances safely and comfortably from anywhere, at any time - without the need to visit a branch.

New Services Introduced for a Better Customer Experience

eSavings Account

The eSavings Account is a fully digital savings solution designed to help customers easily build and achieve their financial goals. The account enables customers to grow their savings automatically through the Auto Saver feature. NBK's eSavings Account leverages customers' everyday spending habits by automatically saving small



amounts through rounding up purchases using the Save the Change service, making daily banking transactions easier to save through.

Apple Messages

NBK customers using iPhone and registered on the NBK Mobile Banking App can now select Apple Messages as their preferred notification channel. This feature

enables customers to receive trusted banking notifications directly on their iPhone through Apple Messages, ensuring a seamless, more secure, and reliable messaging experience.

WAMD Eidiya

NBK customers can now celebrate Eid the smarter way by sending Eidiya instantly through the WAMD service on the NBK Mobile Banking App. The service allows customers to send Eidiya quickly and securely without the need for cash, with the ability to send Eidiya to up to five recipients in a single transaction, making Eid celebrations easier and more convenient.

NBK also provides enhancements to many of the services available through NBK Mobile Banking App, as part of its ongoing commitment to offering its customers a better banking experience.

A Complete Banking Experience, Right at Your Fingertips

The enhanced NBK Mobile Banking App brings a full suite of services within one secure and user friendly platform. Customers can make local and international transfers, including instant transfers through WAMD, temporarily block or unblock their debit and credit cards, and report lost or stolen cards with immediate reissuance for added peace of mind.

The app also enables customers to pay telecom and utility bills, purchase online shopping cards such as iTunes, Google Play, and Amazon, as well as buy digital gaming

cards including PlayStation and Koutbo6. Entertainment services such as TV channel subscriptions are easily accessible within the app.

For greater financial flexibility, customers can apply for personal loans and credit cards, request credit card limit increase, open savings account, (eSavings Account), term deposit, and investment accounts, establish standing orders, view currency exchange rates, perform cardless cash withdrawals, and register for eDividends services, all securely and conveniently, anytime and anywhere.

Always Within Reach wherever You Are

For customers who are currently outside Kuwait, NBK remains close and accessible. They can speak with the Contact Center agents by calling the international line at +965 2292 4888, use the international toll free numbers available in selected countries, or connect instantly via WhatsApp. Customers are also encouraged to follow NBK's official social media channels to stay informed about the latest updates and announcements.

Commenting on the launch of the new update, Mr. Mohammad Al-Dakhil, AVP - Head of Digital Banking Channels at National Bank of Kuwait (NBK), said: "With its strong digital readiness and uninterrupted operations, NBK continues to lead its digital transformation journey by delivering advanced banking services in all circumstances, prioritizing customer comfort and security, and ensuring that the NBK Mobile Banking App remains their trusted banking companion at all times."



Vendors line up at a popular market in Cairo, Egypt, Tuesday, March 12, 2026. (AP)

Sissi defends price hikes

Egyptians struggle as fuel prices surge amid Iran war

CAIRO, March 19, (AP): Sayyed Ragheb was already struggling to keep his family afloat, earning less than \$100 a month. Now he fears it will get even worse after Egypt hiked fuel prices because of the Iran war.

The father of four school-age children works day-to-day in cafes and sometimes in construction. With prices of meat and produce jumping just the past week, he worries about meeting his family's basic needs.

"This means a price increase for everything," said Ragheb, as he served hot drinks at a cafe on a recent evening in Cairo. "This is catastrophic for someone like me."

Egypt is one of the few countries in the Middle East not directly affected by the war, now in its third week with no sign of abating. It's not part of the U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran, and it hasn't been targeted by Iranian missile and drone fire, like Arab Gulf nations, or by Israeli bombardment, like Lebanon.

But the nation of over 108 million people is feeling the conflict's repercussions. Soaring energy prices forced the government to implement a steep hike in the prices of subsidized fuel and cooking gas.

That is having a domino effect on the prices of other goods and services in Egypt's struggling economy. Moreover, it comes during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when families traditionally hold large dinner gatherings, and ahead of the holiday of Eid al-Fitr, a major shopping season when people buy new clothes, especially for children.

World energy prices have surged since the U.S. and Israel launched the war on Feb. 28. Iran retaliated by attacking oil and gas infrastructure across the Persian Gulf and effectively blocking traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, where a fifth of the world's traded oil passes.

Brent crude, the international benchmark, soared from less than \$70 a barrel on Feb. 27 to a peak of nearly \$120 early March 9. It spiked to around \$110 a barrel on Wednesday after Iran threatened to retaliate for an attack on an offshore gas field.

The rise in prices is particularly painful for Egypt because the government dedicates a large part of its already strained budget to subsidizing gasoline, fuel and electricity.

Energy prices aren't its only vulnerability.

Traffic through the Suez Canal, a major source of government income, had started to recover after two years of attacks on Red Sea shipping by Yemen's Houthi rebels. Now some shipping companies are again routing traffic away from the Middle East because of the latest turmoil, and the government says it expects more losses.

Egypt, home to the ancient pyramids, also earns considerable foreign income from tourism. But arrivals are expected to plunge as

travelers steer clear of the region.

If the conflict is prolonged and continues to drive up prices and reduce government revenues, the short-term economic pain could become a broader political and economic crisis, said Alexandra Blackman, an expert in Mideast politics at Cornell University.

"That will be more challenging for the regime to manage and control," she said.

On March 10, the government announced a 15% hike in the price of gasoline, a 22% hike in cooking gas and a 17% hike in diesel, widely used in commercial and public transport.

President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi acknowledged the pressure on people but said the increases are "inevitable" and "the least expensive" option to protect the economy.

"The requirements of the reality sometimes necessitate taking difficult measures... to avert harsher options and more serious consequences," he said over the weekend at an Iftar event, breaking the daily sunrise-to-sunset Ramadan fast.

He said Egypt's consumption of oil products costs \$20 billion annually, including fuel used to operate power plants.

The government imports 28% of its gasoline needs and 45% of its diesel needs, which puts pressure on the budget, said Petroleum Minister Karim Badawy.

The government announced a series of measures aimed at mitigating the impact, including reducing official overseas trips and tightening fuel consumption across the public sector. It also announced salary increases starting in July.

Egypt's poor and middle class have already seen their purchasing power shrink over the past decade under government austerity measures. The measures included the slashing of subsidies and devaluation of Egypt's currency as part of an ambitious reform program in 2016.

Inflation jumped from 10% in January to 11.5% in February of this year, according to official figures. The price increases are rippling across the economy in a country where a third of the population is below the poverty line, according to government statistics.

Since the new fuel prices took effect, the cost of meat has jumped 25% and fruit and vegetables rose 15-30%, according to merchants at three markets in Cairo.

Hussein Rashad, a grocer in a poorer district, said customers have become more selective, and most have reduced the amount of vegetables they buy. Some have stopped buying fruit altogether, he said.

"Many things have become out of their reach," he said.

Ragheb, the cafe worker, said his family has tightened its budget, including resorting to the cheapest food staples. He won't be buying new clothes for his children for the upcoming Eid.

"One has no other option," he said.

US eases Venezuela oil sanctions to enhance supply during Iran war

Deals with Russia, Iran, and China entities still prohibited

WASHINGTON, March 19, (AP): U.S. companies will be allowed to do business with Venezuela's state-owned oil and gas company after the Treasury Department eased sanctions, with some limitations, on Wednesday as the Trump administration looks for ways to boost global oil supplies during the Iran war.

The Treasury issued a broad authorization allowing Petróleos de Venezuela S.A., or PDVSA, to directly sell Venezuelan oil to U.S. companies and on global markets, a massive shift after Washington for years had largely blocked dealings with Venezuela's government and its oil sector.

Separately, the White House said President Donald Trump would waive, for 60 days, Jones Act requirements for goods shipped between U.S. ports to be moved on U.S.-flagged vessels. The 1920s law, designed to protect the American shipbuilding sector, is often blamed for making gas more expensive.

The moves highlight the increased pressure that the Republican administration is under to ease soaring oil prices as the United States, along with Israel, wages war with Iran. Global oil prices have since spiked as Iran halted traffic through the narrow Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of the world's oil typically passes.

Drivers in the United States are paying the highest pump prices in about 2 1/2 years. The national average for a gallon of regular gasoline topped \$3.84 on Wednesday, according to AAA, compared with \$2.98 before the war began on Feb. 28.

Even before that, voters were worried about higher living costs, and fuel prices are now adding to concerns for Republicans heading into the election season with their control of Congress at stake in November.

"Gas prices are up and we know they're up. And we know that people are hurting because of it. And we're doing everything that we can to ensure that they stay lower," Vice President JD Vance said at an event in Auburn Hills, Michigan. "This is a temporary blip."

The Treasury's license is designed to incentivize investment in Venezuela's energy sector and is intended to benefit both the U.S. and Venezuela, while increasing the global oil supply, a Treasury official told The Associated Press. The official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Since the ouster and arrest of Nicolás Maduro as Venezuela's president during a U.S. military operation in January, Trump has said the U.S. would effectively "run" Venezuela and sell its oil.

The U.S. license provides targeted relief from sanctions, but does not lift the penalties altogether. The license allows companies that existed before Jan. 29, 2025, to buy Venezuelan oil and engage in transactions that would normally be banned under American sanctions.

But in the short term, there is not likely to be much impact on U.S. gas prices, said Geoff Ramsey, an expert on Latin America at the Atlantic Council think tank.

"We're talking about 12 to 18 months before we see dramatic changes in Venezuelan output," Ramsey said in an interview.

Easing sanctions and waiving Jones Act requirements normally would have significant impacts on gas prices, said Claudio Galimberti, Rystad



Fishermen pass an oil tanker in the Gulf of Venezuela off the shore of Punta Cardon, Venezuela, Jan. 14, 2026. (AP)

Energy's chief economist. "But we are in the most abnormal market I can remember," Galimberti said in an interview.

He said he expects hostilities between the U.S., Israel and Iran to last at least two or three more weeks, and said prices are likely to be high and volatile until oil and gas traffic resumes through the Strait of Hormuz. "As long as the strait remains shut, we're going to have a crisis," Galimberti said.

Gas prices in some parts of the country, such as the mid-Atlantic region, may see some relief from Trump's waiver of the Jones Act, which will allow larger ships to move between U.S. ports, said Ramanan Krishnamoorti, vice president for energy and innovation at the University of Houston.

"Places like Texas and Chicago are unlikely to feel any change in the price of gasoline and diesel because of the Jones Act waiver," Krishnamoorti said. He said some American shippers may now face more competition from the relaxation of shipping rules, which could mean higher costs for them.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the Jones Act waiver would help "mitigate the short-term disruptions to the oil market" during the Iran war and would "allow vital resources like oil, natural gas, fertilizer, and coal to flow freely to U.S. ports."

Last week, Trump announced that he would tap the strategic petroleum reserve, part of a wider agreement with many of the world's wealthiest countries to draw oil from emergency stockpiles.

The administration also eased sanctions on certain Russian oil shipments for 30 days. Next week, Vance and other administration officials are expected to meet with the main oil industry group, the American Petroleum Institute, to discuss energy markets and production, the group's spokesperson Andrea Woods said.

The waiver of the Jones Act rules might only save consumers three or four cents per gallon, said David Goldwyn, a former Obama-era State Department special envoy focused on energy.

"We're talking about pennies, Goldwyn said. All told, the administration's market tweaks will create some "buffers" for price hikes, at least until late May, Goldwyn said. The big risk for consum-

ers is if the Hormuz Strait remains closed beyond that point. "Then the shortfall will increase significantly," he said.

The Treasury license is expected to give a massive boost to Venezuela's oil-dependent economy and help encourage companies that have been apprehensive to invest. There are some limits. Payments cannot go directly to sanctioned Venezuelan entities such as PDVSA, but must be sent instead to a special U.S.-controlled account. In other words, the U.S. will allow the oil trade but will control the cash flow.

Additionally, deals involving Russia, Iran, North Korea, Cuba and some Chinese entities will not be allowed. Transactions involving Venezuelan debt or bonds will not be allowed. The new license does not allow payments in gold or cryptocurrency, including the petro, which was a crypto token issued by the Venezuelan government in 2018.

Venezuela sits atop the world's largest oil reserves and used them to power what was once Latin America's strongest economy. But corruption, mismanagement and U.S. economic sanctions saw production steadily decline from the 3.5 million barrels per day pumped in 1999, when Maduro's mentor, Hugo Chávez, took power, to less than 400,000 barrels per day in 2020.

A year earlier, the Treasury Department under the first Trump administration locked Venezuela out of world oil markets when it sanctioned PDVSA as part of a policy punishing Maduro's government for corruption. That forced the government to sell its remaining oil output at a discount - about 40% below market prices - to buyers such as China. Venezuela even started accepting payments in Russian rubles, bartered goods or cryptocurrency.

Critics of the acting Venezuelan government argue that the move rewards Maduro loyalists, while repression, corruption and human rights abuses continue.

Many public sector workers survive on roughly \$160 per month, while the average private sector employee earned about \$237 last year, when the annual inflation rate soared to 475%, according to Venezuela's central bank, and sent the cost of food beyond what many can afford.

Conflict disrupts oil, gas, and shipping routes across region

EU leaders meet to address soaring energy prices

BRUSSELS, March 19, (AP): Leaders from across the European Union were meeting Thursday to grapple with rising oil and gas prices caused by the war raging across key energy producers and shipping lanes in the Middle East.

Many of those leaders have deflected entreaties by U.S. President Donald Trump to send military assets to secure the Strait of Hormuz, a key waterway for the global flow of oil, gas and fertilizer. Rising energy prices because of the war and fears in Europe of a new refugee crisis have pushed leaders to make the Middle East a priority at the summit.

"We are very worried about the energy crisis," said Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever ahead of the European Council summit of 27 leaders of European Union nations. He said that energy prices were too high before the war, but that the conflict "created another spike."

"If that becomes structural, we're in deep trouble," he said. "At a European level, some measures can be taken to address the problem of the high energy prices."

'Only clean energy can deliver real energy security'

Iran war underscores risks of Trump's relentless focus on oil

WASHINGTON, March 19, (AP): When President Donald Trump returned to office last year, he launched a crusade to shift the country away from renewable energy, drastically undoing the climate-friendly policies of his Democratic predecessor to focus instead on oil and other fossil fuels as the answer to his goal of American energy dominance.

But the war in Iran is underscoring the risks of that approach.

As crude oil prices rise above \$100 a barrel and gasoline prices surge toward \$4 a gallon, the Republican president's strategy of blocking clean energy such as wind and solar power has left Americans with fewer alternative energy sources and thus more vulnerable to supply shocks caused by the war, experts say. The Strait of Hormuz, a key access point for the global oil market, remains effectively blocked as Iran targets traffic through it.

"The biggest short-term losers of the war will be U.S. consumers of oil and gas, as energy prices rise," said Peter Gleick, a climate scientist and co-founder of the Pacific Institute, a nonprofit that focuses on global water sustainability.

"It turns out fossil fuels have their own supply risks, and the administration has no answers," added Tyson Slocum, energy director at Public Citizen, a consumer advocacy group.

Trump promised during his campaign to cut energy bills in half but has presided over spikes in electric bills as demand from data centers soars, Slocum said. "Now we are seeing higher gas prices, and nobody knows where it's going," he said.

Trump told reporters the conflict is a "very small price to pay" after years of terror from the Iranian leadership and predicted that oil prices "will drop like a rock" once the war ends.

"Dig we must. That's the Trump policy of lots of oil," he said Monday at the White House.

Meanwhile, American consumers are already seeing the effects at the pump. The national average price for gasoline has jumped to about \$3.84 per gallon as of Wednesday, according to AAA, after Trump boasted in his State of

the Union address last month that gas prices were below \$3.

And in a pivotal midterm election year when affordability is a top concern for voters, Trump's energy policies could hurt Republicans as Americans feel the brunt of higher energy costs.

"We're always concerned when gas prices go up," said Republican Sen. Mike Rounds of South Dakota.

"Gas drives the affordability issue," added GOP Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina.

Trump has long been hostile to renewable energy, particularly offshore wind, and prioritizes fossil fuels to produce electricity. Trump has said wind turbines are ugly and expensive and pose a threat to birds and other wildlife. While wind turbines pose a risk to birds, cats are by far the leading threat, followed by building collisions, government statistics show. A report by the National Audubon Society found that two-thirds of North American bird species could face extinction due to rising temperatures.

In his second term, Trump has gone all in on fossil fuels, providing tax breaks and fast-tracked permits for oil and gas drilling. At the same time, he has blocked dozens of clean energy projects and canceled billions of dollars in grants to promote clean energy, which he derides as the "Green New Scam." Climate change is "the greatest con job ever perpetrated on the world, in my opinion," Trump told the United Nations last year.

Trump's policies mark a reversal from those of President Joe Biden, who unleashed a flurry of actions intended to slow planet-warming pollution from the power sector and other industries and encourage use of electric vehicles.

A landmark regulation, since reversed, would have forced coal-fired power plants to capture smogstack emissions or shut down. Biden and congressional Democrats also approved nearly \$375 billion to boost clean energy, the biggest spending to fight climate change by any nation ever.

Trump and congressional Republicans moved swiftly to overturn those policies. The president has gone so far as repealing a longtime scientific finding that climate change endangers public health and the environment.

"You see an administration that has said, quite literally through reversal of the Endangerment Finding, we shouldn't worry so much about climate change," said Jason Bordoff, founding director of the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University.

Under Trump, U.S. policy essentially says, "We're the largest oil and gas producer in the world, so why buy all this clean energy stuff like EVs and solar panels from China?" Bordoff said on Bloomberg Green's "Zero" podcast.

Seeking to ease pressure on prices, Trump has moved to release millions of barrels of oil from the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve and temporarily lift sanctions on Russian oil shipments already at sea.

Officials also are considering use of the U.S. Navy to escort oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz. The U.S. is negotiating with countries heavily reliant on Middle East crude to join a coalition to police the waterway, where about one-fifth of the world's traded oil normally flows.

Despite those efforts, prices have remained high. "We are currently experiencing what is the largest oil supply disruption in history," said Gregory Brew, a senior analyst at the Eurasia Group.

Energy prices will likely remain high for the foreseeable future, Brew said at an event sponsored by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "The Iranian strategy of applying pressure to the United States will continue to play out, and President Trump will continue to feel the pressure," he said.

Energy Secretary Chris Wright acknowledged that prices are likely to remain elevated for weeks but said the world will face "short-term pain to solve a long-term problem" as the U.S. and Israel try to "defang" Iran.

"There's no guarantees in wars at all," Wright told ABC News on Sunday. "This is short-term pain to get through to a much better place."

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said the turmoil in the Middle East shows "the fastest path to energy security" is to speed up a just transition away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy.

"There are no price spikes for sunlight and no embargoes on the wind," he said.

Decision matches market expectations with 11-1 vote

Fed holds interest rates at 3.5-3.75% amid war uncertainty

WASHINGTON, March 19, (Xinhua): The U.S. Federal Reserve on Wednesday voted 11-1 to keep the benchmark federal funds rate at 3.5-3.75 percent, despite continued high inflation and uncertainty over the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran.

Although the rate decision was in line with market expectations, Fed officials signaled they still expect a few rate cuts ahead.

The central bank's "dot plot," which reflects each Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) member's projection for the benchmark short-term interest rate, points to one rate cut this year and another in 2027.

On the other hand, seven out of the 19 FOMC officials indicated they expected interest rates to stay unchanged this year, up from six in December.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell downplayed how informative these forecasts are at the moment, repeatedly saying that it was too early to tell how the ongoing war in Iran would affect inflation and unemployment.

"In the near term, higher energy prices will push up overall inflation, but it is too soon to know the scope and duration of the potential effects on the economy," he said, adding that "We're in a difficult situation."

With the war going on for nearly three weeks, crude oil prices are hovering around 100 U.S. dollars per barrel. The Brent crude oil benchmark hit nearly 110 dollars per barrel on Wednesday after strikes hit Iran's gas and oil facilities.

Markets, businesses and consumers have been further rattled by Iran's attempted closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow Gulf chokepoint through which about 20 percent of the world's oil and gas normally passes, as Tehran uses the route as leverage in its confrontation with the United States and Israel -- a move that could further disrupt global energy supplies and send prices higher.

According to the American Automobile Association, the average price in the

United States for a gallon of regular gasoline jumped about 30 percent from a month ago to 3.84 dollars on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, markets have been volatile over the past few days, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average falling 1.6 percent on Wednesday, the S&P 500 down 1.4 percent and the Nasdaq Composite Index off 1.5 percent.

Economists backed the Fed's cautious approach. Gary Clyde Hufbauer, a non-resident senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, told Xinhua: "Definitely, the policy rate should not be lowered. Inflation is still too high."

Similarly, Dean Baker, co-founder of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, said the Fed has "no choice but to hold ... We know higher energy prices will be a source of inflationary pressures. I can't see the Fed doing anything other than hold."

Brent crude crosses \$115 as energy prices surge after Iran attacks Gulf energy sites

Analysts warn of 'macro wrecking ball' hitting Asian assets

BANGKOK, March 19, (AP): Global oil and natural gas prices soared Thursday after Iran attacked a key natural gas facility in Qatar that can supply one-fifth of the world's gas as well as two oil refineries in Kuwait.

The attacks added to fears the energy crisis triggered by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz to tanker traffic may be longer and more extensive than feared, with lasting damage to oil and gas production.

Brent crude, the international benchmark, rose to \$116.38 per barrel, up from under \$73 per barrel on the eve of the war.

The European TTF benchmark for natural gas prices traded 24% higher on Thursday.

The Iranian attack hit the Ras Laffan terminal for shipping out liquefied natural gas in Qatar. Qatar normally supplies some 20% of the world's consumption of LNG, which can be carried by ship. The facility shut down after a drone attack. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz to most tanker traffic also left the gas with nowhere to go.

If the disruptions from Iran's attacks on its Gulf Arab neighbors' energy infrastructure keep oil and gas prices high for long, they could create a debilitating wave of inflation for the global



A currency trader works near a screen showing international oil prices at the foreign exchange dealing room of the Hana Bank headquarters in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, March 19, 2026. (AP)

economy.

U.S. benchmark crude oil gained 1.1% to \$96.45 a barrel early Thursday, while the Henry Hub future contract, the benchmark for U.S. natural gas, gained 5.1%.

As oil and gas prices spiked, world shares retreated and U.S. futures edged 0.2% lower.

Germany's DAX lost 2.1% to 23,015.40 and the CAC 40 in Paris fell 1.5% to 7,848.88. Britain's FTSE 100 shed 1.7% to 10,134.02.

In Asian share trading, Tokyo's Nikkei 225 fell 3.4% to 53,372.53 as the Bank of Japan opted to keep its benchmark interest rate on hold at 0.75%, citing the war with Iran as one fac-

tor.

In its monetary policy statement the BOJ said that "in the wake of increased tension in the Middle East, global financial and capital markets have been volatile and crude oil prices have risen significantly; future developments warrant attention."

Higher oil prices are a heavy burden for Japan, which like South Korea and Taiwan depends on imports of most raw materials for industries that rely heavily on oil and its derivatives.

The Kospi in Seoul lost 2.7% to 5,763.22. In Hong Kong, the Hang Seng slipped 2% to 25,500.58, while the Shanghai Composite index shed 1.4% to 4,006.55.

Australia's S&P/ASX 200 lost 1.7% to 8,497.80 and Taiwan's Taicex fell 1.9%. In India, which has also suffered from shocks to supplies of oil and gas, the Sensex lost 2.7%.

"The combination of higher oil, rising U.S. yields, and a stronger dollar is acting as a macro wrecking ball across Asian assets and currencies," Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management said in a commentary.

On Wednesday, the S&P 500 fell 1.4%, flipping to a loss for the week so far. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 1.6% and the Nasdaq composite slid 1.5%.

The losses deepened after the Fed decided to keep its main interest rate steady, instead of resuming cuts meant to give the jobs market and economy a boost.

"We just don't know," Fed chair Jerome Powell said about what will happen with oil prices, along with how long President Donald Trump's tariffs will take to work their way fully through the system.

A report released Wednesday morning showed inflation pressures were already building before the war began. It said inflation at the U.S. wholesale level unexpectedly accelerated last month to 3.4%.

In other dealings early Thursday, The U.S. dollar fell to 159.10 Japanese yen from 159.88 yen. The euro rose to \$1.1463 from \$1.1453.

US employers cut 92k jobs in February

WASHINGTON, March 19, (AP): U.S. applications for unemployment benefits fell last week, remaining in the same range of recent years despite a broadly tepid labor market.

The number of Americans filing for jobless aid for the week ending March 14 fell by 8,000 from the previous week to 205,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. That's fewer than the 215,000 new filings analysts surveyed by the data firm FactSet were expecting.

Filings for unemployment benefits are viewed as a proxy for U.S. layoffs and are close to a real-time indicator of the health of the job market.

While weekly layoffs have remained in a healthy range mostly between 200,000 and 250,000 for the past few years, a number of high-profile companies have announced job cuts recently, including Morgan Stanley, Block, UPS and Amazon.

Earlier this month, the Labor Department reported that U.S. employers unexpectedly cut 92,000 jobs in February, a sign that the labor market remains under strain. Revisions also slashed 69,000 jobs from December and January payrolls, nudging the unemployment rate up to 4.4%.

The surprisingly weak employment picture in February adds to the economic uncertainty over the war with Iran, which has caused oil prices to surge more than 40% and saddled business and consumers with higher costs.

This comes at a time when inflation was already relatively high in the U.S.

Last week, the Commerce Department reported that the Fed's preferred inflation gauge, personal consumption expenditures or PCE, rose 2.8% in January compared with a year earlier. That's above the Fed's 2% target

and the latest sign that prices were persistently elevated even before the Iran war caused spikes in oil and gas costs.

That persistent inflation, combined with the uncertainties brought on by the conflict in the Middle East, led the Fed to leave its benchmark lending rate alone on Wednesday.

"The thing I really want to emphasize is, nobody knows," Powell said, referring to the impact of the Iran war. "The economic effects could be bigger, they could be smaller, they could be much smaller, they could be much bigger. We just don't know."

Powell said the central bank would need to see further progress in the price of goods declining as the impact of tariffs fades before cutting rates further. Lower interest rates tend to provide fuel for inflation.

For now, the U.S. job market appears stuck in what economists call a "low-hire, low-fire" state that has kept the unemployment rate historically low, but has left those out of work struggling to find a new job.

Data over the past year has broadly revealed a labor market in which hiring has clearly slowed, hobbled by uncertainty stoked by President Donald Trump's tariffs and the lingering effects of the high interest rates the Federal Reserve engineered in 2022 and 2023 to tamp down a spike of pandemic-induced inflation.

The Labor Department's report Thursday showed that the four-week moving average of jobless claims, which softens some of the week-to-week volatility, dipped by 750 to 210,750.

The total number of Americans filing for unemployment benefits for the previous week ending March 7 rose by 10,000 to 1.86 million, the government said.

ity in the world.

"War in the Middle East has pushed up global energy prices," Bailey said. "You can already see that at the petrol pump and, if it lasts, it will feed into higher household energy bills later in the year."

With these new inflationary pressures stalking the global economy, central bankers are having to reassess their projections in 2026, both for inflation and growth.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Federal Reserve also held its key interest rate and cautioned about the increasingly uncertain outlook.

For the Bank of England, it's likely to mean that inflation will not fall to its target rate of 2% as soon as expected and will lead to higher prices for the rest of the year - hardly the backdrop for further interest rate reductions anytime soon.

Following Thursday's unanimous decision and the tough language employed by Bailey, financial markets have actually moved to price in higher U.K. interest rates this year.

"While another interest rate cut remains possible if the Iran war ends quickly, with skyrocketing oil and gas prices locking in an imminent inflation spike, the chances of further policy loosening this year is rapidly receding," said Suren Thiru, chief economist at accounting body ICAEW.

Keeping interest rates higher than they otherwise would have been can help keep a lid on inflation. High interest rates weigh on the economy by making it more expensive for businesses and consumers to borrow, thereby bearing down on economic activity and consequently price pressures.

The Conversation

Global copper demand rises, supply struggles to keep up

The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts.

By Morgan Bazilian

Colorado School of Mines

Demand for copper is surging because of demand from new technologies, but suppliers are struggling to keep up, and they are likely to fall further behind in the coming years, resulting in shortfalls globally. Even though copper prices are at historically high levels, the financial risk involved in mining means that prices will need to go much higher before mining companies see profit in addressing the supply shortage.

Those are the key findings from our March 2026 analysis of the global copper market.

Copper is an essential material that is used in generating and distributing electrical power; cables, wires, motor windings, transformers and cooling equipment in data centers; and advanced manufacturing of consumer and defense products.

It's so important that in 2025, the U.S. Geological Survey designated copper as a mineral "vital to the U.S. economy and national security."

Copper is abundant in the ground, but there's not enough being extracted to be able to meet the demand. That's because investors want higher and more reliable returns than copper mines currently offer, and the industry faces complex permitting processes and can't find enough workers. Our analysis found that for new technologies to continue to develop, and for the global economy to continue to grow, even higher prices are ahead.

In the United States, the increased effort to build data centers for artificial intelligence systems has created a massive need for copper. Car manufacturers require some copper for internal combustion vehicles and four to five times more for the batteries and other parts of electric vehicles. In addition, as global temperatures increase, demand for power-hungry air conditioning in many emerging and developing economies has been growing, too, requiring copper inside the equipment and more wiring to power them.

Recycling existing copper could help reduce the amount needed from new mines, but it would not be enough to meet the rising demand. Even under generous assumptions, we found that recycling might provide 35% of the global copper supply by 2050, with mining producing the remaining 65%.

Substituting another material for copper won't really work either - at least in the short-to-medium term. Copper has an unmatched combination of physical properties such as electrical conductivity, durability and flexibility - which is why it became popular for so many purposes in the first place.

Aluminum could replace it in some cases, but not all - and that would amount to only about 2% of total copper use.

Fiber optics can also replace copper at times. Their glass fibers can carry more data more quickly than copper wires, but they can't also carry power. New copper substitutes, like ultra-conductive aluminum, carbon nanotubes, and niobium phosphide, are promising but still in their infancy.

The only other way to get more copper is to mine more of it. But building a new mine can take 20 to 30 years - a period during which investors are spending money but not yet getting returns, and a time when costs can rise significantly from preliminary estimates.

If industrial and economic growth is to stay on track in the 2030s, new mines would need to be in the financing and permitting processes right now. But they aren't.

Even Resolution Copper, which started decades ago trying to develop a mine in Arizona outside Phoenix, has more work to do before being able to start mining. Since 1995, the project's developers have spent several bil-

lion dollars on planning, permitting and legal cases.

Once in place, it could meet as much as 25% of U.S. copper demand from a high-concentration body of ore located near existing truck and rail lines.

Evaluating the environmental and community effects of proposed mining projects is essential, but in many countries there are overlapping levels of review that have different, and variable, timelines. And many parts of the process can be appealed to courts by opponents or supporters. That increases costs and imposes time delays for mine developers - and means consumers will have to wait longer, and pay more, for copper-intensive products and services.

Yet even though copper prices are near historic highs - over US\$13,000 per ton on the London Metals Exchange - the profit margins are still too low and price swings are too volatile for companies to forecast reliable returns on the risky investment of building new mines.

Copper is produced in a handful of countries but used widely around the world.

That leaves copper vulnerable to national policies about imports and exports, leading to trade disruptions and price shocks.

Countries with low and middle per-capita income are likely to require substantial amounts of copper to grow their economies. Right now, wealthy countries like the U.S. and members of the European Union have about 440 pounds (200 kilograms) per person in existing physical infrastructure - electrical wiring, plumbing systems, architectural elements and transportation. But that figure is 20 pounds (9 kilograms) per person in Africa and less than 2 pounds (1 kilogram) per capita in India.

To get a picture of what might be possible if there were a significant global effort to increase copper availability, we evaluated several optimistic scenarios. We looked at faster permitting for new mines, higher recycling rates and smoother mining processes than those currently in place. But even then, economic development drove demand to grow far faster than the available supply.

Existing mines will have decreasing amounts of ore available and will produce less copper in 2050 than they do in 2025. Yet even if all known copper deposits with known mine-opening dates go into production as scheduled copper supplies will not keep up with demand.

Our best-case scenario has global mine production at about 30 million metric tons of copper a year by 2050. But to keep pace with global economic development, the world will need 37 million metric tons of mined copper a year by then.

To meet that additional need, more mines will need to be opened, and extra production developed - including extracting residual copper from old mine debris that was previously viewed as having too little copper to be worth processing.

We found that more copper could be made available more quickly if permitting were streamlined in ways that preserve environmental standards but offer companies proposing new mines some predictability for regulatory approval.

If society wants more copper, faster, then people must accept that higher, more stable prices are part of the solution. Speculative trading contributes to price volatility, which complicates financial projections that are central to deal-making and makes it more expensive to invest in the large, long-term and irreversible expenses that new mines require.

Higher copper prices will ripple through the economy, raising costs for construction, energy and technology. But pretending those costs can be avoided doesn't make them disappear. Underinvestment across the supply chain from mines to processing today shows up as bottlenecks tomorrow, including delayed grid upgrades and constrained digital growth. (AP)

'As Deep as the Grave' honors late actor's spirit

AI-rendered Val Kilmer to posthumously appear in a new film

NEW YORK, March 19, (AP): A year after the actor's death, a generative AI version of Val Kilmer will co-star in an independent film, in one of the boldest uses yet of artificial intelligence in moviemaking.

First Line Films announced Wednesday that Kilmer has posthumously joined the cast of a film titled "As Deep as the Grave." The producers said that, before his death, Kilmer had signed on to perform in the movie but was unable to because of his health.

Kilmer's estate gave permission for his digital replication, and is being compensated for it. Mercedes Kilmer, the actor's daughter, said the role resonated with her father.

"He always looked at emerging technologies with optimism as a tool to expand the possibilities of storytelling," she said in a statement. "This spirit is something

that we are all honoring within this specific film, of which he was an integral part."

Kilmer died last April at the age of 65 from pneumonia. In 2014, Kilmer was diagnosed with throat cancer and required two tracheotomies. After losing his natural speaking voice, Kilmer turned to an AI software company to digital recreate his voice. In his final screen performance, 2022's "Top Gun: Maverick," Kilmer's voice was digitally altered.

The use of artificial intelligence in filmmaking has been one of the most contentious topics in Hollywood in recent years. Lately, some have attempted to make greater inroads for AI-generated performance. The company Xicoia last year launched the AI-concocted persona "Tilly Norwood"; earlier this month, it debuted a music video.

SAG-AFTRA, the actors union, has condemned Xicoia's "AI actor," but it has regulations around other uses of the technology. Its rules stipulate that consent from performers must be given for the use of digital replicas. "Consent not obtained before death must be obtained from an authorized representative or the union," reads its guideline.

Representatives for SAG-AFTRA didn't immediately respond to questions Wednesday.

In an email, writer-director Coerte Voorhees and producer John Voorhees said SAG guidelines were followed.

"We believe we are serving as a demonstrator for how to do it ethically and correctly, especially in the case of working with a deceased actor's estate and family," they said. "As Deep as the Grave," formerly



Val Kilmer poses for a portrait, Jan. 9, 2014, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP)

Val Kilmer poses for a portrait, Jan. 9, 2014, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP) titled "Canyon of the Dead," was stuck in postproduction. It's based on a true story about the archaeolo-

gists Ann and Earl Morris, whose Arizona excavations uncovered Native American history. The AI version of Kilmer plays Father Fintan, a Catholic priest and Native American spiritualist. The cast includes Abigail Lawrie, Tom Felton, Wes Studi and Abigail Breslin.

Coerte Voorhees said Kilmer, who identified as part Native American, was drawn to the project five years ago. Producers are seeking distribution with the hope of releasing the film this year.

"It was very unfortunate that his health at the time prevented him from playing this role which spoke to him spiritually and culturally," Voorhees said. "We are honored to collaborate with his daughter Mercedes, who brings her own filmmaking experience, to bring this character to life in the way that we had all originally imagined it."

Film

Film

Delicate details praised

AI-driven Chinese hero tale grips global viewers

WUHAN, March 19, (Xinhua): In early March, Yang Hanhan was surprised to find that an AI-generated short film about ancient Chinese general Huo Qubing, released by her team just a month ago, had quietly gone viral overseas.

In the film, not only do epic war scenes unfold one after another, but even details, such as the swirling dust of a desert charge, the tension of neighing warhorses, and the subtle furrow of the protagonist's brow, are rendered with remarkable delicacy. These elements shatter the public stereotype of AI-produced content as crude and low-quality.

International audiences were captivated by Huo's youthful spirit and patriotic devotion, as well as the Eastern aesthetics presented through AI. "This is mind-blowing!" Many netizens commented.

However, this project was completed by a team of just three people, with only 48 hours of work and about 3,000 yuan (about 435 U.S. dollars) in computing costs, according to Yang, the 35-year-old AIGC director from Wuhan, capital of central China's Hubei Province.

"Producing a four-minute film in 48 hours is becoming the industry standard," Yang said, adding that as AI technology continues to evolve and advance, China's film and television creation and cultural exports are being redefined.

Back in early 2025, Yang had no professional background in the film or television industry. As AI video platforms were rapidly evolving, she tried out AI video tools for the first time while promoting Wuhan's specialty "reganmian," or hot dry noodles.

"At the beginning, none of us had any experience. It took four of us over a week to put together a one-minute short video," Yang recalled. "The video wasn't great, but I saw the hope for this industry."

Standing in front of a small blackboard in the office at that time, Yang said to her partners, "One day, we will definitely make movies!"

The year 2025 is widely regarded by the industry as the "first year of the manju (comic-inspired short dramas) era" in China. A report shows that the total views of China's manju market exceeded 70 billion last year. Among them, AI-generated manju, powered by AIGC technology, saw particularly rapid growth, with its market share surging from nearly zero at the beginning of the year to 10.88 percent by the end of the year.

It was at this critical moment -- as the industry began its explosive expansion -- that the short film Huo Qubing emerged. Over the past year, Yang's team has conducted in-depth research on a variety of domestic and international AI imaging and video production tools, continuously optimized their prompts, and overcome fundamental challenges in AI creation, such as character consistency and visual coherence.

At the end of January this year, Yang completed the script for the short film Huo Qubing. Yang explained that Huo was chosen as the protagonist because he went to the battlefield at 17 and achieved a decisive victory at 21. "The courageous spirit of this young hero, undaunted by hardship and forging ahead with determination, resonates universally and touches hearts everywhere."

Yang's team of three divided their duties clearly: one took on directing and writing, another handled AI generation and editing, and the third was in charge of music and sound effects. They focused their energy for four days, working a total of 48 hours, to complete the project.

"In the video production phase, we first generated about 1,700 AI images, selected 90 as storyboards to produce roughly 500 video clips, and then meticulously edited, scored, and refined the footage to bring our vision of the young hero to life," Yang said.



Crew of a micro-short drama shoot at Hengdian World Studio in Dongyang, east China's Zhejiang Province, Dec. 25, 2025. (Xinhua)



This image released by Searchlight Pictures shows Kathryn Newton, (from left), Sarah Michelle Gellar, and Samara Weaving in a scene from 'Ready or Not 2: Here I Come.' (AP)

Sequel feels darker, heavier, and less enjoyable

Wedding horror worsens in 'Ready or Not 2'

LOS ANGELES, March 19, (AP): When we last left our new bride, Grace, at the end of 2019's "Ready or Not," she was smoking a well-earned cigarette, having survived a night of slaughter. She sat on a stone step as a mansion went up in flames behind her, her wedding dress ripped and caked with blood, dirt and grime (but mostly blood.)

"In-laws," she'd explained drily, when asked by police what had happened. It was the biggest laugh of the movie - and also well-earned, especially by us, after all that gore.

Now, seven years later, we have "Ready or Not 2: Here I Come," which takes off from that same moment. But the mood does not remain light. Uttering that last line, Grace (Samara Weaving) then collapses into unconsciousness and is carted away by ambulance. And her troubles, of course, are just beginning.

It's hard to pinpoint why this next level of Grace's very bad wedding night, again directed by Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett, feels darker and heavier - and hence, less enjoyable - than the original, which managed to maintain a bouncy feel, even with bodies combusting at an absurd rate. But if we have to blame someone, we're gonna go with the doctor from "The Pitt."

Yep, that would be Shawn Hatosy, and we're sorry, dear handsome Dr. Jack Abbott, but we never thought you could be such a downer. There's a particularly odious scene where Hatosy's character, Titus, seems to echo the murderous Shakespearean protagonist that he is, come to think of it, probably named after - Titus Andronicus. His twin

sister, Ursula, is played by Sarah Michelle Gellar, and together they're quite the depressing duo.

But back to the plot: Grace had triumphantly stayed alive 'til dawn in the first movie, thus winning the dastardly game she'd been forced to play moments after marrying Alex, her rich boyfriend. Required by family ritual to draw a game card from a deck, she'd unluckily drawn hide-and-seek, which meant she had to hide while the extended family hunted her down with weapons both antique and modern. Only gritty Grace survived.

The supporting cast of the first movie, including Andie MacDowell and Adam Brody, is not back (duh). In their place is a new group, including Hatosy, Gellar, Elijah Wood as the attorney who runs the grim proceedings, and Kathryn Newton as Grace's sister, Faith.

Or should we say estranged sister. Faith shows up at Grace's hospital bed, having not seen her in years, because she was listed as Grace's emergency contact. There's a detective in the room, too. Grace is now, annoyingly, suspected of arson and murder.

But soon none of that matters. Because, it turns out, Grace is being hunted yet again - not by her in-laws, the Le Domas family, which is gone, but by four other families jockeying for the High Seat on the council that rules the world.

And so Grace is captured, and everyone converges on a Newport, Rhode Island, estate with a gorgeous golf course, for another night of hunting. Is Grace up to the challenge of this new level of

play? Of course she is, and so is Weaving, who proves yet again that she's better than the material: expressive in both fear and feistiness, a good screamer, and able to step back for an occasional moment of humor. Lookalike Newton proves an appealing companion, and of course Faith and Grace stop bickering and start bonding - did you expect anything else? "I tried to invite you to the wedding," Grace says helpfully at one point. Reminder: the wedding ended in a bloodbath.

Speaking of a bloodbath, deep into the movie's production notes comes an icky statistic: Some 250 gallons of stage blood were used for the film. Maybe all that blood was needed, but the extra 15 minutes of run time, compared to the original, feel unnecessary. You start to wonder when dawn will come.

And while most of the deaths have a cartoonish element, there's nothing cartoonish when Titus is involved.

No, there is little to redeem this truly mendacious character. So fair warning: If you're still in the middle of the current season of "The Pitt," where Hatosy's Abbott is busy being heroic and also taking off his shirt, it might be better to wait a bit before you watch him here, doing the very opposite of saving lives.

"Ready or Not 2: Here I Come," a Searchlight Pictures release, has been rated R by the Motion Picture Association "for strong bloody violence, gore, pervasive language and brief drug use." Running time: 148 minutes. Two stars out of four.

Variety

NEW YORK: The Grammy-nominated rapper Afroman won a defamation lawsuit filed by seven Ohio sheriff's deputies who sued him over music videos in which he used home security footage to mock their raid of his home.

"We did it, America! Yeah, we did it! Freedom of speech! Right on! Right on!" the 51-year-old rapper, born Joseph Foreman, shouted outside the courthouse after the Wednesday evening verdict. He later posted the clip to social media.

The case tested the limits of parody and the license artists can take in social commentary directed at public figures. The deputies, collectively, sought nearly \$4 million in damages.

"No reasonable person would expect a police officer not to be criticized. They've been called names before," defense lawyer David Osborne said in closing arguments for the rapper and comedian, known for his breakout 2000 hit, "Because I Got High."

The Adams County deputies said they were publicly harassed over the viral videos, which were viewed more than 3 million times on YouTube. The videos show rifle-wielding deputies busting down Afroman's door, searching his shoes and suit pockets, and hungrily eyeing a cake on the kitchen table, inspiring one song's title, "Lemon Pound Cake."

In other music videos, Afroman took aim at the deputies' personal lives and called them "crooked cops" because of \$400 that went missing in the raid.

In court - wearing a red, white and blue American flag suit - he defended his work on First Amendment grounds and said he issued the diss tracks to cover damages from the raid, including a broken gate and front door.

No charges were filed over the 2022 raid, which the warrant said was part of a drug and kidnapping investigation. In his testimony, he said he had the right to tell his friends and fans what police had done. He said the raid traumatized his children, then 10 and 12. (AP)

NEW YORK: The cable news network MS NOW is shuf-

fling its schedule, moving anchors Stephanie Ruhle and Alicia Menendez into the daytime hours and shaving an hour off "Morning Joe."

Ruhle will anchor a two-hour daytime slot starting at 9 a.m. ET, while Menendez will start at noon, the network said on Wednesday. Ali Velshi will take over Ruhle's current 11 p.m. show and Luke Russert will replace Menendez alongside Symone Sanders Townsend and Michael Steele on "The Weeknight," which airs at 7 p.m.

The "Morning Joe" crew will be on for three hours starting at 6 a.m., instead of four, with MS NOW saying it was the show's choice to cut back.

Of the two current daytime anchors losing their jobs, Ana Cabrera is leaving the network and Chris Jansing will become MS NOW's chief political reporter. The network still has to fill an 11 a.m. time slot before the changes take effect in June.

Jacob Soboroff will anchor two three-hour shifts on the

weekend, the network's first program to be based in Los Angeles. (AP)

MADRID: An exhibition showcasing the bronze civilization of southwest China opened on Tuesday evening at the Guadalupe Museum in Spain, presenting the region's diverse ancient cultures and distinctive social life.

Co-hosted by China's National Cultural Heritage Administration and the regional government of Castilla-La Mancha, the exhibition features 58 artifacts or sets from 14 museums and institutions across four provincial-level regions in southwest China, spanning from around 1600 B.C. to 220 A.D.

Among the highlights is a bronze human head from the Sanxingdui archaeological site, placed at the entrance of the exhibition hall. Visitors can explore three themed sections featuring items such as bronze human figures, a parasol-bearing male figurine, and tiger-decorated vessels, offering insights into cultural exchanges and integration in ancient southwest China. (Xinhua)

Variety

NOME, Alaska: Former reality TV star **Jessie Holmes** cruised to a repeat victory in the Iditarod, the roughly 1,000-mile (1,609-kilometer) sled dog race in Alaska.

Holmes guided his dog team across the finish line Tuesday night in the old Gold Rush town of Nome, a Bering Sea coastal community, after traveling for nine days, 7 hours and 32 minutes. He pumped both fists in the air as the crowd cheered for him and his team of 12 dogs, who devoured some meat after finishing.



Holmes

"I've been chasing greatness ever since the last time I was here," Holmes said, noting that he had been thinking of others who followed up initial wins with a second, third or fourth. "So we're just going to keep chasing those footsteps, trying to push ourselves every day to be better."

Last year, Zeus, one of Holmes' lead dogs, was a 2-year-old finishing his first Iditarod after leading a couple of runs. But this year, Holmes said, Zeus led every run except one. (AP)

PARIS: A celebration ahead of the first International Day of Taijiquan, to be observed on March 21, was held on Wednesday at UNESCO headquarters in Paris under the theme "Fit for Life, Go for Taiji."

Through demonstrations by practitioners from China and France, the event highlighted the philosophical depth of the traditional Chinese martial art and the healthy lifestyle it embodies.

Inside Room II at UNESCO, dozens of performers in traditional attire took the stage before an audience of more than 400 guests, showcasing the diversity of Taijiquan, a centuries-old discipline.

The program featured synchronized fan routines, sword demonstrations and a paired performance combining Taijiquan with guqin music, with each display reflecting core principles such as the balance of yin and yang and the interplay between softness and strength. (Xinhua)

Music

Free concert to be livestreamed on Netflix

BTS to stage epic comeback at heart of Seoul

SEOUL, South Korea, March 19, (AP): BTS will stage its long-awaited comeback concert on Saturday night at Seoul's Gwanghwamun Square, one of South Korea's most famous landmarks that represents its royal heritage and political and cultural life.

In a free concert expected to draw tens of thousands of fans, the K-pop juggernaut's seven members, all South Koreans, will perform songs from their first album in nearly four years, "ARIRANG," whose title is taken from the most beloved traditional folk tune on the Korean Peninsula.

"ARIRANG" is an album that embodies the origin and identity of BTS and carries the message that they want to convey now," Hybe Corp., the parent company of BTS' management agency, said in response to questions by The Associated Press. "Considering the symbolic significance of the word 'Arirang,' we've decided to hold a performance at Gwanghwamun, a place that represents Korea."

Gwanghwamun Square is named after the huge main gate of nearby Gyeongbokgung, a royal palace for Korea's Joseon dynasty, which ruled the peninsula for more than 500 years until its collapse in 1910.

Located in the heart of Seoul, the sprawling square is home to cultural and art events. It hosts giant statues of two of Korea's most respected figures - King Sejong, who invented the Korean script in 1443, and navy admiral Yi Sun-shin, who defeated the Japanese invasion in the 16th century.

The square is also a symbol of South Korea's young, resilient democracy, the site of massive rallies in times of political upheavals in recent years.

When then-President Yoon Suk Yeol's martial law imposition in late 2024 triggered the most severe crisis for the country's democracy in decades, protesters gathered in the square, calling for his ouster. Rallies blended politics and pop culture, with demonstrators waving colorful light sticks used at K-pop concerts and signing K-pop tracks such as Girls' Generation's "Into the New World."

Observers say the hourlong Gwanghwamun concert, which will be



Korean group BTS appears at the 64th Annual Grammy Awards in Las Vegas on April 3, 2022. (AP)

livestreamed on Netflix globally, will reaffirm BTS' identity as a group that expanded from Korea to the world stage. BTS had been on hiatus because its members had to complete their mandatory military duties in South Korea.

Ha Jae-keun, a cultural critic, said that no matter where the BTS holds its comeback concert, it would be successful. But as the biggest stars of K-pop, BTS likely determined that appearing at a symbolic Korean site

would be "most meaningful," he said.

Jung Dukhyun, a pop culture commentator, said the selection of Gwanghwamun likely reflected a view that Korean traditional culture and local elements can resonate on a global scale, as seen in the success of the Netflix sensation "KPop Demon Hunters," which won the Oscar for best animated feature and best song for "Golden" this week.

Officials believe the concert will

likely enhance South Korea's international cultural influence. They also plan to take extensive safety steps to prevent crowd-related incidents.

In a message posted on X on Wednesday, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung called BTS "a proud artist of the Republic of Korea" and expressed hope that the concert will show "our beautiful cultural heritage and the charm of K-culture."

Besides about 20,000 ticketed fans

at the square, about 240,000 others are expected to fill nearby areas to watch the concert on temporary screens.

Authorities plan to block roads, have subway trains pass through some stations and close the Gyeongbokgung place.

Some residents criticized what they saw as preferential treatment given to BTS and potential inconvenience to the public. But many experts say the concert has a big public aspect.

Tajikistan is the motherland of Navruz: history, traditions, and contemporary diplomacy

By Dr. Zubaydullo Zubaydzoda

Dean of the Diplomatic Corps,

Ambassador of the Republic of Tajikistan to the State of Kuwait

Navruz, the "new day," has traveled through more than three thousand years of human history, yet it remains surprisingly young. Each spring, when the sun reaches the point of the vernal equinox and light begins to triumph over winter's darkness, the Tajik people greet not only a change of weather, but a renewal of meaning. In Tajikistan, Navruz is felt as something intimate and ancestral: a living thread tying the present generation to ancient Tajik civilizations, to legendary kings and classical poets, to the labor of farmers and the hopes of children who bring the first flowers of spring to their homes.

The story begins long before the modern map of Central Asia was drawn. Early agrarian communities of the region watched the sky carefully; they knew that the exact balance of day and night signaled the moment to prepare the fields, to trust once more that the earth would respond to their work. Over time, this practical wisdom crystallized into a festival. Astronomers like Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni later described the equinox in precise scientific terms, while storytellers and poets turned it into narrative: the legendary King Jamshed, raising his throne toward the heavens on the first day of the new year; kings using Navruz as a time to show justice and generosity; ordinary people taking the same day as a chance to cleanse their houses, their fields, and their hearts.

What makes Navruz particularly powerful in the Tajik imagination is the way it appears in classical literature. In the verses of Rudaki and Daqiqi, spring does not simply arrive; it bursts into gardens, awakens nightingales, and softens the hearts of lovers. Firdavsi, in *Shohnoma*, weaves Navruz into the story of rulers and cosmic order, suggesting that good governance itself should resemble the careful balance of the equinox. Umar Khayyom, in *Navruzнома*, quietly connects the holiday to the movement of stars and the inner life of the human being: as the sun crosses a new threshold, so too should a person. These authors do not treat Navruz as a simple folk custom; they turn it into a philosophical mirror in which society can examine itself.

This mirror reflects a set of values that feel strikingly modern. Navruz does not belong to any particular religion or dogma. It speaks instead in the language of nature and shared experience. The rituals at its heart - reconciliation with neighbors, visiting elders, forgiving old grievances transform the turning of the year into a moral practice. To prepare for Navruz is to ask uncomfortable questions: Whom have I wronged? What relationships have I neglected? What can I repair before I step into the new year? There is a quiet wisdom in beginning the year not with fireworks or noise, but with the decision to lighten the burden one carries into the future.

In Tajik homes, this philosophy takes on tangible form long before 21 March. Weeks ahead, families begin the deep cleaning of the house. Dust is swept from corners, old and broken things are discarded, walls are repainted. It is not difficult to see the metaphor: the home stands in for the self, for the community, for the country. Alongside this physical purification, women and neighbors gather to prepare *sumanak* from sprouted wheat. All night the cauldron is stirred in turn, songs are sung, wishes for the year ahead are whispered over the slow-thickening mass. No



Navruz in Tajikistan: a festival of forgiveness, shared labor, and the joy of new beginnings.

sugar is added; the sweetness must emerge naturally from the grain. It is as if the ritual insists that true sweetness in life can only come from patience, shared effort, and faith in the hidden potential of humble beginnings.

When the Navruz table is laid, it becomes less a piece of furniture and more a symbolic poem spread out in objects. The seven "S" elements of Haft Sin - sabza, seb, sir, sirko, sanjid, sumanak, sekka stand in a deliberate order, like carefully chosen words in a verse, each carrying its own story of health, protection, wisdom, love, fertility, and prosperity. In other homes and eras, the "Sh" items of Haft Shin - candles, milk, sweets, sugar, comb, juice, shamshad have formed their own constellation of meanings: light that drives away gloom, purity that cleanses, sweetness that softens life's hardships, order, vitality, and evergreen endurance. Taken together, these arrangements are far more than festive decoration; they are a compact worldview, a quiet manifesto in porcelain and glass that says, "These are the virtues we choose to live by in the year ahead." A guest who knows how to read this

language of objects can understand the hopes and priorities of the household without a single word being spoken.

Outside, the festival spills into streets and fields. On Navruz, Tajik cities and villages become stages: musicians tune traditional instruments; young men test their strength in wrestling matches; riders lean dangerously from their saddles in *buzkashi*; children chase each other with armfuls of blossoms. Poetry is recited not only in lecture halls but on makeshift platforms in courtyards. For a moment, everyday hierarchies soften. A farmer and a professor might find themselves side by side at the same communal table, sharing osh and stories, equal participants in a celebration that long predates their professions, their political systems, even their religious labels.

With independence in 1991, Tajikistan inherited not only a fragile state but also a precious question: how to build a future without severing the roots of the past. Navruz offered part of the answer. Recognized once again as a major state holiday, it became a public declaration that modern Tajik identity would

be built not from imitation but from continuity. Official celebrations, presidential messages, scholarly conferences, and village rituals began to echo one another. When the head of state speaks of Navruz as an advocate of peace, of creative labor, of unity between generations, he is not inventing new meanings; he is amplifying those preserved in folk practice and classical literature.

The world has taken notice. In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 21 March the International Day of Navruz, acknowledging its capacity to promote "life in harmony with nature" and friendly relations among peoples. A few years later, UNESCO placed Navruz on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as a shared tradition of several countries. Yet these international recognitions do something more than honor a beautiful festival; they quietly affirm that the values embedded in Navruz - respect for nature, social solidarity, reconciliation - are urgently needed in a century of ecological crisis and conflict. In this sense, Tajikistan's role is not merely to preserve an old custom, but to offer a living cultural resource to a troubled world.

This responsibility is being translated into institutions. In Dushanbe, the Kokhi Navruz complex rises like a stone and wood embodiment of the holiday itself - its carved ceilings, mirrored halls, and painted walls bringing together artisans from across the country. Inside this palace, contemporary state ceremonies take place under motifs that could have decorated royal courts in the Samanid era. Here, Navruz banquets for foreign delegations and cultural forums turn architectural splendor into diplomacy. Around this physical space has grown the idea - now being realized - of an International Navruz Center in the capital: a place where scholars, artists, and policymakers can study the festival, exchange experience with other Navruz-celebrating nations, and design new forms of cultural cooperation.

Beyond Tajikistan's borders, the holiday continues its journey in more intimate but no less important ways. At Tajik embassies - from New York to the Gulf - Navruz is the day when consular counters give way to long tables filled with *sumanak*, dried fruits, and traditional dishes. In the Embassy of Tajikistan in Kuwait, for example, the annual Navruz reception gathers diplomats, members of the Kuwaiti ruling family, officials, and expatriate Tajiks in a single hall. There, under the gaze of flags and photographs of mountain landscapes, foreign guests taste Tajik food, listen to Tajik music, and hear stories of how a festival older than many religions still shapes the rhythm of life in a modern Central Asian republic. For Tajik citizens living far from home, these events are more than protocol - they are a chance to step, for a few hours, back into the atmosphere of childhood springs.

Seen from this perspective, the proud statement that "Tajikistan is the motherland of Navruz" is not a narrow claim of ownership, but an invitation. It suggests that a small mountainous country, by carefully nurturing its oldest traditions, can offer them to a wider world as tools for thinking about peace, coexistence, and the relationship between humans and nature. Each year, when Tajik families clean their homes, sprout wheat, arrange seven symbolic items on their tables, and open their doors to neighbors and strangers alike, they are participating in something larger than a national holiday. They are renewing a civilizational memory: that every year can begin with forgiveness, that prosperity grows from shared labor, and that after the longest winter, a new day always arrives.



Tajik families celebrate Navruz by preparing traditional dishes, arranging symbolic items, and welcoming spring with music, poetry, and community gatherings.

Two deaths cause angst among university students

What to know about the meningitis outbreak in England

LONDON, March 19, (AP) — A meningitis outbreak in southeast England has led to the deaths of a university student and a pupil from a nearby school, prompting public health officials to quickly roll out medical interventions.

The outbreak in the county of Kent was described Wednesday as unprecedented by UK Health Secretary Wes Streeting, owing to the high number of cases appearing in such a short space of time. The first case was confirmed on Friday, and they had risen to 20 by Wednesday.

Most of them were linked to the University of Kent in the historic cathedral city of Canterbury. Students, many of whom have gone home for an end of term break, are being offered antibiotics as well as a vaccination against the strain identified as the source of the outbreak.

With public health officials highly visible, and students jittery, here is what to know:

Meningitis is an infection of the membranes around the brain and spi-



22-year-old postgraduate law student Oliver Contreras, (right), receives an injection in the sports hall at the University of Kent campus in Canterbury, England, Wednesday, March 18, where the rollout of a meningitis B vaccine to about 5,000 students has begun. (AP)

nal cord and can be caused by either viruses or bacteria.

Contracting meningitis can lead to a severe blood infection that is called meningococcal sepsis, which often manifests itself as a rash. It can be life-threatening if not treated rapidly.

Meningitis can also lead to limb amputations. The most dangerous outbreaks are usually a result of bacteria. The majority of the cases in Canterbury have been confirmed as stemming from a bacterial infection, or meningitis B.

Meningitis is a rare disease in the UK - around 350 a year - but it can spread in tight communities, such as university dormitories.

Students are seen as particularly vulnerable as the bacteria is often lying dormant in the nose or throat of individuals and can spread through coughing, kissing or sharing drinks and vapes.

Experts said many of those affected in the outbreak went to a nightclub in Canterbury from March 5-7. Doctors

across the country have been told to prescribe antibiotics to anyone who visited Club Chemistry during those dates in addition to students at the University of Kent.

"This is so that anyone who has traveled home, or away from Kent, can easily access this important preventative treatment close to them," it said.

Given the recent memory of the COVID-19 pandemic, people in Kent have started donning masks and keeping their distance from each other.

On the medical front, antibiotics are considered the most effective treatment to limit the spread.

So far, more than 2,500 doses have been given, including to some of those who visited Club Chemistry. A vaccination against the meningitis B strain is also being offered. The vaccine only became part of the UK's childhood immunization program since 2015, so students at the University of Kent wouldn't have been vaccinated, though some may have taken it privately.

The UK Health Security Agency, or UKHSA, said there are enough supplies of the two-dose vaccine course, though some pharmacies have reported struggling to obtain stocks for people who want to pay privately.

The number of cases is expected to rise because the infection's incubation period can be up to 14 days.

Scientists have said it's too soon to assess whether the strain in Kent is more virulent than others. The strain is undergoing whole genome sequencing to assess any potential differences.

The UKHSA issued an alert for the state-run National Health Service across England to look out for signs and symptoms of meningitis. However, this does not signal that the outbreak is spreading nationwide. The alert said the illness has been "severe with rapid deterioration" and urged clinical staff to take infection control measures.

Streeting said he wasn't concerned that the outbreak could spread as students go home for the Easter break.

Disparities highlighted

Over 150,000 early COVID deaths uncounted: study

NEW YORK, March 19, (AP) — The COVID-19 pandemic's early death toll was much higher than the official US count, according to a new study that spotlights dramatic disparities in the uncounted deaths.

About 840,000 COVID-19 deaths were reported on death certificates in 2020 and 2021. But a group of researchers - using a form of artificial intelligence - estimate that as many as 155,000 unrecognized additional deaths likely occurred in that time outside of hospitals. That would mean about 16% of COVID-19 deaths went uncounted in those years.

The overall findings, published Wednesday by the journal Science Advances, were close to estimates from other studies of pandemic deaths during that time. But the authors of the new study tried to determine exactly which deaths were more likely to be missing from the official tallies.

The answer: The undiagnosed dead were more likely to be Hispanic people and other people of color, who had died in the first few months of the pandemic, and who had been in certain states in the South and Southwest - including Alabama, Oklahoma and South Carolina.

Six years after the coronavirus swept through the US, barriers remain for many of the same people, said Steven Woolf, a Virginia Commonwealth University researcher not involved in the study.

"People on the margins continue to die at disproportionate rates because they can't access care," he said in an email.

While hospital patients were routinely tested for COVID-19, many who grew sick and died outside of hospitals were not tested - often because at-home testing was not readily available early in the pandemic, said one of the study's authors, the University of Minnesota's Elizabeth Wrigley-Field.

In some parts of the country, death investigations are handled by elected coroners who don't necessarily have the specialized training that medical examiners do. Some research has suggested partisan opinions could affect whether a sick person or their family members sought COVID-19 testing, and whether coroners pursued postmortem coronavirus testing. Indeed, some coroners said families had pressed them not to list COVID-19 as a cause of death.

"Our antiquated death investigation system is one key reason why we fell short of accurate counts, particularly outside of big metropolitan areas," said Andrew Stokes of Boston University, the senior author on the paper.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data count more than 1.2 million COVID-19 deaths since the pandemic erupted in early 2020. More than two-thirds of those reported deaths occurred in 2020 and 2021.

The count has long been debated, as false claims on social media said the number of COVID-19 deaths was inflated. Adding to the rancor was President Donald Trump, who in August 2020 retweeted a post claiming only 6% of reported deaths were actually from COVID-19 - a post Twitter later removed.

To be sure, there were other kinds of pandemic deaths. For example, uninfected people died from other medical conditions because they could not get care at hospitals overloaded with COVID-19 patients. People with drug addictions died of overdoses as a result of social isolation and losing access to treatment. Other studies that have estimated the actual number of pandemic deaths have taken those deaths into account.

But Stokes and his collaborators wanted to focus on the deaths of people infected by the coronavirus. They used machine learning to sift through the death certificates of infected patients who died in hospitals and then used patterns observed in those records to evaluate death certificates of people who died outside hospitals and whose deaths were attributed to things like pneumonia or diabetes.

Scientists' understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of machine learning-reliant research is still evolving, but Woolf called this team's use of it "intriguing."



Steve Grove, a chaplain at Hennepin County Medical Center, prays in a COVID-19 patient's room, Dec. 10, 2021, in Minneapolis. (AP)

Regenerative medicine gets boost

New transplantation therapy offers hope for Parkinson's, other diseases

GUANGZHOU, March 19, (Xinhua) — Chinese researchers have recently made a breakthrough by developing a novel and highly efficient mitochondrial capsule transplantation therapy, achieving the safe and efficient transplantation of healthy mitochondria into cells and tissues for the first time. This new therapy can significantly alleviate symptoms of severe diseases such as Parkinson's disease.

According to the study published on Wednesday in the journal Cell, the therapy proposes a brand-new strategy in the field of regenerative medicine, shedding fresh light on intervention in refractory diseases caused by mitochondrial dysfunction, such as mitochondrial genetic diseases and neuron degenerative disorders.

Mitochondria are organelles that refer to specialized subunits with specific functions in cells. Mitochondria function like power plants in cells, continuously converting nutrients into energy for life activities. They are also the only organelles in human cells that possess their own genome.

Mutations in mitochondrial genes can lead to severe genetic diseases, affecting more than 1 in 5,000 people worldwide. However, doctors have only been able to manage symptoms without fundamentally repairing the malfunctioning mitochondria. Their dysfunction is a significant contributing factor to aging and various neuron degenerative and metabolic diseases, including Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease and diabetes.

A research team from the Guangzhou Institutes of Biomedicine and Health under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Guangzhou Medical University and other institutions, utilized membrane vesicles from red blood cells as "capsules" to encapsulate healthy mitochondria, creating mitochondrial capsules with a diameter of one-thousandth of a millimeter.

The study notes that these capsules not only protect the mitochondria, but also help them pass through a cell's defense system, successfully enter the cell interior, and fuse with the cell's own mitochondria to achieve long-term survival.

The study found that the delivery efficiency of naked mitochondria was less than 5 percent, whereas the new therapy demonstrated high delivery efficiency, with roughly 80 percent of target cells successfully accepting the new mitochondria.

More importantly, once these foreign mitochondria enter the cell, they do not exist in isolation. Instead, they actively integrate with the cell's existing mitochondrial network, continuously functioning in the cell to compensate for metabolic disorders and functional deficiencies.

The research team also conducted tests on cells from patients with various mitochondrial DNA mutations. These cells contained both healthy and malfunctioning mitochondria at the same time.



Karim Benzema during a cupping session.



Swimming legend Michael Phelps underwent cupping.

Ancient therapies gain popularity among top athletes

Cupping, acupuncture speed up recovery for injured athletes, says Dr. Al-Hussainan

By Khaled Al-Enezi

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: Dr. Khaled Al-Hussainan underscored the importance of cupping therapy and acupuncture in the speedy recovery of injured athletes in various sports, helping them return to the field more quickly.

Speaking to the newspaper, Al-Hussainan explained that these complementary medicine techniques contribute to relieving muscle pain, stimulating blood circulation, and enhancing the readiness of the body, hence, shortening the rehabilitation periods following injuries.

He pointed out that cupping therapy has been used since ancient times as a treatment method based on stimulating blood flow.

He added that acupuncture works by stimulating specific points in the body to restore internal balance and activate the nervous system.

He emphasized that relying on these treatments under the supervision of specialists has become an important option for many athletes, given their role in speeding up recovery, improving physical performance, and reducing dependence on conventional medications.

He also clarified that sports cupping is a specialized form of cupping designed to support the performance of professional and amateur athletes. "It aims to reduce pain and help prevent injuries, and is often performed either before or after exercise depending on the body's needs," he elaborated.



Dr. Khaled Al-Hussainan

rated.

He pointed out that cupping helps stimulate blood circulation, eliminate waste products and lactic acid, and improve physical performance by improving blood flow and increasing oxygen supply to tissues.

He added that cupping is effective in treating lower back pain, shoulder and neck pain, muscle tension and tendon inflammation.

He said "cupping also stimulates weaker areas and enhances blood circulation, which reduces the likelihood of injuries during training or matches."

He asserted that many international athletes have turned to cupping therapy before major tournaments, most notably Ka-

rim Benzema, star of the French national team and Al-Hilal Saudi Club, and Michael Phelps, the American swimming legend.

He indicated that cupping therapy evolved significantly in recent years, with specialized sports cupping sessions now available for athletes and fitness enthusiasts, using modern techniques and trained professionals.

He explained that cupping points are carefully selected based on the athlete's condition and the goal of the session, whether to enhance performance or treat a muscular issue, stating that cupping is best performed after competitions or intense physical exertion.

Regarding acupuncture, he said it is an ancient treatment rooted in

the theory of energy pathways and acupuncture points in traditional Chinese medicine. He disclosed that its use in the treatment of sports injuries recently expanded worldwide.

He said the technique involves inserting fine needles into specific anatomical points to regulate the flow of the body's energy, known as 'Qi,' and is used to address a wide range of conditions.

He added that acupuncture includes various types, such as traditional acupuncture, electroacupuncture, surgical acupuncture, acupuncture point injections, auricular acupuncture, and micro-needling techniques.

He emphasized that acupuncture helps reduce swelling and pain associated with sports injuries, while also stimulating positive physiological responses that enhance anti-inflammatory resistance and increase analgesic and anti-shock effects.

He stated that Chinese acupuncture and dry needling are among the most effective and widely used techniques in sports medicine.

He pointed out that it is preferable to avoid acupuncture immediately before matches, as it may lead to excessive muscle relaxation.

He also advised against engaging in strenuous physical activity immediately after acupuncture sessions to reduce the risk of infection or irritation at the needle sites.

He recommended eating before undergoing acupuncture to prevent dizziness or fainting.

Most space rocks cause no damage

How often do fireballs light up the sky?

NEW YORK, March 19, (AP) — The Earth is under assault. Space rocks are constantly hurtling toward us, slamming into the atmosphere and often exploding into fireballs that both delight and alarm.

Thankfully, the vast majority cause no damage because they are pulverized into dust or small chunks by the journey to Earth.

A fireball streaked across the sky near Cleveland this week, caused by what was thought to be a space rock nearly 6 feet (1.8 meters) across and weighing 7 tons. It was seen from Wisconsin to Maryland, according to the American Meteor Society.

It traveled more than 34 miles (55 kilometers) through the upper atmosphere before breaking apart, according to NASA. No fragments have been found yet.

As dramatic as it was, it was also incredibly common.

Here's what to know: An asteroid is a chunk of rock, ice or metal that's left over from the solar system's formation 4.6 billion years ago. A meteoroid is a fragment of a larger space rock such as an asteroid or comet. A meteor is the light emitted from a meteoroid or asteroid as it burns up through the atmosphere. If a meteor is brighter than the planet Venus in the morning or evening sky, it is called a fireball. If a chunk of it makes it to



This image made from video taken from a surveillance camera showing a suspected meteor falling through the sky in Olmsted Falls, Ohio, on Tuesday, March 17. (AP)

land, it's called a meteorite.

Flashes of light from meteoroids are incredibly common, and there are times - called meteor showers - when they can be seen every few minutes in the night sky, weather permitting. The Perseids meteor shower, which happens in mid-August every year, is considered the best, according to NASA.

There are "several thousand" meteors that would qualify as fireballs in the Earth's atmosphere every day, according to the meteor society.

The problem is that most occur over oceans or other places where people don't live, or the sun is too bright to notice them.

Still, plenty are seen by people.

And if you see one, the American Meteor Society and the International Meteor Organization want you to tell them so they can check it out. So far in 2026, 10 fireballs have drawn more than 100 reports, which averages nearly one per week.

Meteoroids travel through empty space at extraordinarily high speeds - from 25,000 mph (40,233 kph) to as high as 160,000 mph (257,495 kph). When they suddenly hit the gases that blanket Earth, they undergo incredible stress as they compress the air in front of them, which heats the object to the point it starts to melt and break apart.

Staley isn't sweating team's 17-point loss to rival Texas

South Carolina resets for March Madness run after SEC title game stumble

WASHINGTON, March 19, (AP) — South Carolina coach Dawn Staley isn't sweating her team's 17-point loss to rival Texas in the Southeastern Conference Tournament championship.

In fact, she thinks it might be a blessing in disguise for her Gamecocks (31-3) heading into the NCAA Tournament, allowing them to refocus.

"Our team knows we didn't play our best basketball - not nearly what we're capable of doing," Staley said of the 78-61 loss to the Longhorns, a game in which they fell behind 14-0. "But I told them that the last time we lost in this situation, we won a national championship. So you've got to think about that. It might be the very thing this team needs."

The fourth-ranked Gamecocks (31-3) last lost the SEC championship game in 2022 to Kentucky, but went on to beat UConn 64-49 for the second of Staley's three national championships since taking over as coach at South Carolina.

South Carolina enters this year's tournament as a No. 1 seed for the sixth straight time. UConn, UCLA and Texas are the other top seeds.

The Gamecocks have reached the Final Four in each of the last five seasons, while making the national championship game three times and cutting down the nets twice during that span.

They open this year's tournament at Colonial Life Arena on Saturday against

the winner of a First Four game between Southern and Samford, both No. 16 seeds. If they win their first two games, the Gamecocks will head West to Sacramento for the regionals.

Two of South Carolina's three losses this season have come to Texas and first-team All-American Madison Booker, who has proven to be a difficult matchup. (The other defeat was an overtime loss on the road at Oklahoma.)

South Carolina is 1-2 against Texas (31-3), beating the Longhorns at home in January en route to winning the regular season title outright. The teams are on opposite sides of the bracket, meaning if they meet for a fourth time it would come in the national championship game.

South Carolina has the firepower to win another national championship despite losing four starters from the 2025 national runner-up squad.

Three of those players had completed their eligibility, and 2025 SEC Tournament MVP Chloe Kitts was lost for the season due to a knee injury. Key reserve MiLaysia Fulwiley transferred to LSU.

But returner Joyce Edwards (19.6 points and, 6.3 rebounds per game) has stepped up her game and the Gamecocks feature a strong backcourt led Raven Johnson and Tessa Johnson. They've also gotten big contributions from transfer Madina Okot and Ta'Niya Latson.

The Gamecocks have responded well to their previous two losses this season, twice rattling off 12-game win streaks.

The big question now will be if they can regroup from the Texas loss and make a run at another national title.

"Things we usually make weren't necessarily going in," Edwards said following the loss to Texas. "It just happens. We have other goals in mind - the national championship. This isn't the end all be all, so we're just moving forward."

If there was a big bright spot for the Gamecocks coming out of the SEC Tournament it was the improved play of 6-foot-7 Alicia Tournabize, a midseason addition from France. Tournabize's height and wing span could be a factor for South Carolina later in the tournament, allowing Okot more time to rest.

"If we could get Ali to play the way she did - she played inspired," Staley said. "If she can give us that. She got seven rebounds on a great rebounding team like Texas and held her own defensively."

"We needed scoring. We know Ali can score the basketball. I thought she did a pretty good job. I think we should probably have gotten her the ball a little bit more in the block and let her go to work. But we made a step forward in our journey to win a national championship. Somebody like her will add to the depth that we need to make this run."

Monaco's resurgence bad news for Lyon

Lens needs favor from former striker Wahi against PSG in Ligue 1 title race

PARIS, March 19, (AP) — Lens is wishing for a big performance from club-record signing Elye Wahi against Ligue 1 title rival Paris Saint-Germain.

The problem is he plays for another team.

Still, Lens fans hope Wahi can help struggling Nice beat PSG and do Lens a favor in the title race. Leader PSG is one point ahead of Lens with played one game less.

The signs are 23-year-old Wahi is finding the form that once made him among Europe's most promising young strikers and led to transfer fees totalling nearly 90 million euros (\$104 million).

Last weekend, he scored with a brilliant turn and lob from 40 meters for 15th-placed Nice against Angers, showing he's got his instinct and confidence back.

Three years ago, Wahi joined Lens from Montpellier for 35 million euros after scoring 19 league goals and turning down a move to Premier League side Chelsea. Although he was the player of the match against Arsenal in the Champions League, his form faded.

Lens sold him to Marseille for 25 million euros the following season. He didn't fit in at Marseille and - just 13 league games later - Wahi joined Eintracht Frankfurt on a five-and-a-half-year contract. The German club paid 26 million euros for Wahi, getting one goal in 25 games in return.

Eintracht loaned him to Nice in January and so far he has four goals and an assist in seven games.

Lens needs a morale-boosting home win against Angers on Friday. Having a smaller squad than PSG caused key players to look jaded in last weekend's 2-1 loss at Lorient.

According to Opta statistics, Lens crossed the ball 58 times in the match - a record in European soccer this season - and did not score from one of them.

Marseille is not playing well but still holds the cards in its bid to qualify automatically for next season's Champions League. Marseille is third under recently appointed coach Habib Beyé heading into Sunday's home game with fifth-

placed Lille.

But Marseille's fans are still raging about another trophyless season and the club's ultras did not encourage the players during the first half of last week's 1-0 win against Auxerre.

Monaco's resurgence, meanwhile, is bad news for Lyon ahead of their clash in Lyon on Sunday. While sixth-placed Monaco seeks a sixth straight league win, fourth-placed Lyon is winless in four games in Ligue 1 and six straight overall.

A Monaco victory would move it one point behind Lyon in the race for Champions League spots, so Lyon hopes 19-year-old Brazil forward Endrick can recapture his form after a lean spell.

Nathan Mbala, Metz. The 18-year-old striker is the latest player to come through Metz's respected youth academy and has scored twice so far for rock-bottom Metz, which is at Rennes on Sunday.

Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, PSG. The star winger is peaking at the right time. After being surprisingly dropped by coach Luis Enrique, he responded with three goals in two games against Chelsea in the Champions League.

Just after signing his first professional contract, 18-year-old Lyon forward Rémi Humbert sprained an ankle in the Europa League and faces six weeks out. He joins Lyon's long injury list.

PSG forward Bradley Barcola is out for several weeks after spraining his right ankle mid-week against Chelsea.

The match between Marseille and Lille, initially scheduled for Sunday evening, will instead kick off in the afternoon due to security concerns linked to the municipal elections in France. The far-right candidate is tied with the incumbent socialist mayor ahead of Sunday's second round and authorities fear that the result, expected in the evening, could spark tensions in the southern port city. Lille president Olivier Létang, however, remains concerned about security and would have preferred the match to be postponed to a later date.



PSG's Warren Zaire-Emery, right, challenges for the ball with Chelsea's Romeo Lavia during the Champions League soccer match between Chelsea and Paris Saint-Germain in London, England. (AP)

Doncic and James combine for 70 as Lakers stretch winning run to 7



Minnesota Timberwolves guard Bones Hyland (8) shoots during the first half of an NBA basketball game against the Utah Jazz in Minneapolis. (AP)

Trail Blazers close in on play-in spot

HOUSTON, March 19, (AP): Luka Doncic had 40 points and LeBron James added 30 as the Los Angeles Lakers extended their winning streak to seven games with a 124-116 win over the Houston Rockets.

It's the 10th win in 11 games for the Lakers, who also beat Houston 100-92 on Monday night.

The Lakers led by 4 with about 90 seconds remaining when Doncic found James for an alley-oop dunk. Kevin Durant had a turnover on the other end and Doncic made a 3-pointer to push the lead to 120-111 with less than a minute left.

Doncic had 10 assists and nine rebounds to finish one rebound shy of a triple-double. James was 13 of 14 from the floor - tying the best single-game shooting effort of his career - and had five rebounds to give him 12,002, making him the 23rd player in NBA history to reach 12,000 rebounds. James also shot 13 of 14 for Miami against Charlotte on Feb. 4, 2013.

Alperen Sengun had 27 points and 10 assists for the Rockets in his return after missing two games with a back issue. Amen Thompson added 26 points and 11 rebounds as Houston lost for the third time in four games.

Durant had just two points in the first half and finished with 18 points and six rebounds.

Trail Blazers 127, Pacers 119
In Indianapolis, Deni Avdija scored 23 of his 32 points in the first half Wednesday night and Donovan Clingan added a career-high 28 points and grabbed 13 rebounds to help the Portland Trail Blazers hold off the hard-charging Indiana Pacers.

Portland won the for the third time in four games as the 10th-seeded Trail Blazers close in on clinching a Western Conference play-in spot in what figures to be a wide-open post-season.

Indiana extended the longest losing streak in its NBA franchise history to 15 games. The Pacers' last win came Feb. 11.

Avdija also had 11 rebounds for Portland, which matched its highest-scoring half of the season with 79 points in the first two quarters. Clingan was 3 of 5 on 3-pointers and had two blocks.

Celtics 120, Warriors 99
In Boston, Jaylen Brown scored 23

of his 32 points in the first half and the Boston Celtics rolled to win over the Golden State Warriors.

Jayson Tatum added 24 points and 10 rebounds for the Celtics, who have won three straight.

It was Tatum's fifth time scoring at least 20 points in the six games he's played since making his season debut following Achilles tendon surgery. It also marked his third double-double.

Golden State cut a 21-point third-quarter deficit to 11 early in the fourth, but Boston responded with a 17-6 run to push the lead back to 22 with just more than five minutes to play.

Gary Payton II and Pat Spencer both had 14 points to lead the Warriors, who have lost six of seven.

Raptors 139, Bulls 109
In Chicago, RJ Barrett scored 23 points, Brandon Ingram had 18 and the Toronto Raptors pounded the Chicago Bulls for their third consecutive win.

Toronto shot 57% (48 for 84) from the field and put seven players in double figures in the opener of a five-game trip. Scottie Barnes had 18 points and seven rebounds, and Ja'Kobe Walter also scored 18.

The Raptors led by as many as 38 while completing a sweep of their three-game season series against the Bulls.

Thunder 121, Nets 92
In New York, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 20 points and the Oklahoma City Thunder beat the Brooklyn Nets.

Gilgeous-Alexander was 8 of 9 from the field and was subbed out with 4:28 remaining in the third quarter with the Thunder leading by 38.

The reigning NBA MVP extended his NBA-record of 62 consecutive road games with at least 20 points.

Jared McCain had 26 points and Aaron Wiggins finished 17 for the Thunder, who led by as many as 42 and never trailed in the second game of a back-to-back.

Grizzlies 125, Nuggets 118
In Memphis, Ty Jerome had 21 points, nine rebounds and nine assists as the Memphis Grizzlies snapped their eight-game losing streak with a victory over the Denver Nuggets.

Olivier-Maxence Prosper scored 19 points and GG Jackson added 16 for the injury-depleted Grizzlies (24-44), who are 4-15 in their last 19 games after winning for the first time since March 1 at Indiana.

Cedric Coward provided 15 points and seven rebounds. Taylor Hendricks scored 13 off the bench and made six of Memphis' 12 steals as the Nuggets (42-28) committed 19 turnovers in the makeup of a game postponed Jan. 25 because of bad weather.

Nikola Jokic had 29 points, 14 rebounds and nine assists for Denver, just missing his sixth triple-double in the past eight games - although he did rack up 10 turnovers.

Timberwolves 147, Jazz 111
In Minneapolis, Ayo Dosunmu scored 23 points and had nine rebounds in his second straight start in place of the injured Anthony Edwards and the Minnesota Timberwolves took charge in the second quarter to cruise past the Utah Jazz.

Rudy Gobert had 21 points and 12 rebounds, and Julius Randle also scored 21 points and had eight assists

for the Timberwolves, who have won two in a row without their All-Star guard.

Minnesota announced Tuesday that Edwards will miss one to two weeks with right knee inflammation before being re-evaluated. The Timberwolves beat the Phoenix Suns 116-104 behind 32 points from Randle.

Pelicans 124, Clippers 109
In New Orleans, Saddiq Bey scored 25 points, Trey Murphy added 23 and the New Orleans Pelicans overcame an early 18-point hole to beat the Los Angeles Clippers.

Dejounte Murray had 17 points and 11 assists, while Zion Williamson and rookie Derrick Queen each scored 14 for the Pelicans, who received a standing ovation as the final seconds wound down on their sixth straight victory at home and ninth win in their past 13 games overall.

Kawhi Leonard scored 25 points and John Collins added 18 for the Clippers, who dropped a game below .500 (34-35), but maintained a tenuous hold on the No. 8 spot in the Western Conference standings, a half-game ahead of Portland.

Hawks 135, Mavericks 120
In Dallas, CJ McCollum scored 24 points, Nickeil Alexander-Walker had 22, and the Atlanta Hawks beat the Dallas Mavericks for their 11th straight win.

Dyson Daniels had 19 points on 9 for 13 shooting and Jalen Johnson scored 17 points with 11 rebounds for the Hawks, who at 38-31 are in the middle of the race for a play-in playoff spot.

Atlanta hasn't won at least 11 in a row since winning a franchise-record 19 straight during the 2014-2015 season. Their current streak is tied for the fourth-longest winning streak in club history.

Daniel Gafford came off the bench to lead the Mavericks with 24. P.J. Washington had 23 and Cooper Flagg added 17.

The Mavericks have now lost 11 of their last 13 and appear destined for the draft lottery at 23-47.

Atlanta's Onyeka Okongwo scored the first 10 points of the game and the Hawks never trailed. The score was 67-56 by halftime.

The Mavericks turned the ball over 18 times, seven more times than the Hawks.

Jonathan Kuminga hit a 75-foot basket in the win, the longest basket by a Hawk in the play-by-play era and the sixth-longest among all players in the play-by-play era since 1997-98, according to Elias Sports. The previous longest made basket by a Hawk was a 63-foot bucket by Jason Terry on Jan. 5, 2000.

O'Sullivan, Trump advance to last 16

Change Name

I, AXA KAKOLIL STEPHEN holder of Indian Passport No. R2318863 having permanent address KAKOLIL HOUSE, MANARCAD PO, KOTTAYAM, KERALA - 686019, INDIA, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under: Given name: AXA and Surname: KAKOLIL STEPHEN

NANCHANG, China, March 19, (Xinhua) — Ronnie O'Sullivan, Judd Trump and Zhao Xintong all advanced to the last 16 of the World Snooker Open in Yushan, south China's Jiangxi Province, on Wednesday with comfortable victories.

Seven-time world champion O'Sullivan won five straight frames to beat fellow Englishman Matthew Selt 5-0. In the second frame, he compiled a superb 138 break in just nine minutes to take the frame.

"I'm going to win the whole match," O'Sullivan said in his post-match interview. "I've felt in good form over the first two matches, and I'll keep this form going and try to keep winning." World No. 1 Judd Trump also delivered a strong display, beating Welshman Jackson Page 5-2.

SPORTS

Milestone night for Messi ends in frustration as Nashville advances



Inter Miami midfielder Yannick Bright (42) grabs Nashville midfielder Patrick Yzбек (8) during the first half of a CONCACAF Champions Cup Round of 16 soccer match in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (AP)

Espinoza strikes crucial equalizer

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla., March 19, (AP): Inter Miami's Lionel Messi got a milestone. And Nashville got a tie that felt like a win.

Messi got the 900th goal of his career, but Cristian Espinoza scored in the 74th minute to give Nashville a good-enough-to-advance 1-1 tie with Inter Miami in the second leg of their CONCACAF Champions Cup Round of 16 matchup.

Cristiano Ronaldo is the only other men's player with more than 900 goals - at least, by official counts. It took Ronaldo about 100 more matches to get to the milestone than Messi needed; Ronaldo was 39 when he got to 900 goals in September 2024, while Messi doesn't turn 39 until June.

The teams tied both legs of the matchup, after a 0-0 game in Nashville started the series last week. Away goals were the tiebreaker, meaning Nashville will move onto the tournament's quarterfinals - denying the reigning MLS champions' bid for another trophy.

"Our goal and our club ambition is to compete against the best of North America, Central American and the Caribbean," Nashville coach B.J. Callaghan said. "That's what this tournament does, brings the best of the best together. ... If you want to become an elite team and an elite club, you need to be able to



Inter Miami forward Lionel Messi (10) walks to kick a corner kick in heavy rain during the first half of a CONCACAF Champions Cup Round of 16 soccer match against Nashville in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (AP)

perform in a prestigious tournament like this."

Espinoza scored on a wild play where he was in the right place at the right time.

Nashville's Alex Muyl took a shot that was blocked by a sliding Inter Miami defender Gonzalo Luján. The ball ricocheted off Luján and into the air, the topspin carrying it toward the goal mouth and Inter Miami goalkeeper Dayne St. Clair had to scramble to his feet in order to punch it away.

He didn't punch it far. St. Clair's momentum carried him into the net, where three other Inter Miami

defenders also wound up, and Espinoza had an easy goal to pull the match even.

It was Inter Miami's first match at Chase Stadium in Fort Lauderdale since last season's MLS Cup final - and, if all stays according to plan, it may be the club's last match in the facility as well. Messi's team doesn't play a home MLS match until April 4, when it is scheduled to open its new stadium near Miami International Airport.

And if this was the Fort Lauderdale finale, it wasn't a loss - but probably felt like one.

Messi, the Argentinian super-

star, scored his 900th career goal in the seventh minute for a 1-0 lead. It was quintessential Messi, with him making something out of very little.

He was well-defended when he took the pass with his back to the net, about 12 yards from the goal mouth and with other players creating more traffic in front of the goal.

No problem.

He turned and his left foot sent the ball skittering across the wet grass on a rainy night in South Florida, actually getting it through the legs of Nashville defender Jeisson Palacios and past the left arm of diving goalkeeper Brian Schwake for the opening goal.

But Inter Miami didn't score again, and eventually Nashville broke through.

Nashville had a great chance to tie it in the 67th minute, when Hany Mukhtar - despite Inter Miami arguing that he was offside, and replays suggesting that the Herons had a case - got free in the middle of the field.

Mukhtar came in alone on St. Clair, but wound up missing the net. A few minutes later, that was all forgotten. Messi had one good chance in the four minutes of stoppage time, but the shot was blocked away and soon afterward Nashville was moving on.

"I think we have a group right now in that locker room that has a lot of belief in what we're doing ... a relentless spirit," Callaghan said. "Just really proud of the entire group."

He is expected to drive during the season

Zhou sets timeline for return as Cadillac role takes shape

BEIJING, March 19, (Xinhua): China's Zhou Guanyu has not given up on returning to the F1 grid. But after two seasons on the sidelines, the Cadillac reserve driver now admits there is a point at which he may explore other opportunities.

"I think at the end of this year or the end of next year, if there's still no drive in F1, then there will be other series I'll be looking for," Zhou told Xinhua during the Chinese Grand Prix weekend.

It is the first time Zhou has openly placed a timeline on his future, in a subtle but telling shift for a driver who has spent the past two years insisting his focus remains fixed on F1.

Zhou made history in 2022 when he joined Alfa Romeo to become China's first F1 race driver. Two more seasons followed, before he lost his seat after a difficult 2024.

The Shanghai native then took on a reserve role with Ferrari in 2025 before joining the nascent Cadillac squad for 2026, where he combines standby duties with a development position.

"One of the reasons I joined the team is because I feel like with Cadillac there is a big opportunity for my future, hopefully to get back on the grid," he said.

His role extends beyond simply waiting in the wings in case regular drivers Valtteri Bottas or Sergio Perez are indisposed. Zhou is also involved in developing the car for the new rules cycle, drawing on experience gained across multiple teams.

"It's about waiting if the team needs me to step into the race car, and then helping with development for the entire 2026 season," he said. "New regs, new engine, everything is new." Yet even that opportunity comes with limitations. With more than 60 Grands Prix to his name, Zhou is no longer eligible for mandatory rookie appearances in Friday practice sessions, while Cadillac's status as a new entrant means it lacks a previous car for private testing programs.

He is expected to drive during the season, but opportunities may be limited.

"I will do a good amount of seat driving, not as much as the race drivers, but as normal," Zhou said, with timings still to be confirmed.

In the absence of regular mileage, Zhou has leaned into the technical side of his role, positioning himself as a conduit between driver and engineering team.

"I can really understand what is the right way of making sure we gather all the right data heading forward," he said.

There are also less tangible benefits.



Zhou Guanyu speaks to Xinhua during the Chinese Grand Prix weekend at the Shanghai International Circuit. (Xinhua)

After a difficult 2024 season spent at the back of the grid, Zhou described himself as mentally revitalized, freed from the weekly grind of racing without the tools to compete.

"When you have a car that can't fight for points, it's always draining," he said. "I feel much more refreshed now." Despite his absence from the grid, Zhou said he has remained in demand, revealing that both Cadillac and Ferrari had sought to retain his involvement following his departure from a full-time seat.

Zhou is also relaxed about his prospects beyond F1 if a return does not materialize. Drivers who leave the series often secure seats in championships such as Formula E, the World Endurance Championship or IndyCar, where Zhou's profile is likely to make him an attractive option for manufacturers seeking greater visibility in China's vast automotive market.

"There are so many teams approaching me from every series you can think of," he said. "Since last year it's been continuous, so I'm grateful for that." For now, his focus remains unchanged. Cadillac offers a pathway, however uncertain, back into a race seat. The volatility of the driver market means opportunities can emerge quickly, and Zhou is determined to be ready if one does.

But there is also an acceptance that waiting cannot go on indefinitely. If a return has not materialized by the end of 2026, Zhou's next move may take him beyond F1, a prospect he had previously resisted acknowledging.

Switzerland recalls Sanches ahead of World Cup

Allan, Arias lift Palmeiras to Serie A summit

SAO PAULO, March 19, (Agencies): Midfielder Allan and playmaker Jhon Arias scored in each half as Palmeiras rose to the top of Brazil's Serie A with a 2-1 home win over Botafogo.

The host took the lead when Allan ran onto Andreas Pereira's pass before firing a first-time effort into the bottom left corner.

Botafogo was reduced to 10 men on the stroke of halftime after Cristian Medina received a straight red card for a bad foul on Arias.

Former Manchester United midfielder Pereira was again the provider as he combined with Arias, who dribbled into the area and finished clinically past goalkeeper Raul Steffens.

Daniilo pulled a goal back for the visitor with a 59th-minute strike but Palmeiras held on to secure its fifth win of the campaign.

Palmeiras now has 16 points from seven games and is ahead of second-placed Sao Paulo on goal difference.

Botafogo is 18th in the 20-team standings with one victory from five games so far.

Elsewhere in Brazil's top flight on Wednesday, Bahia won 2-0 at home to Bragantino, Athletico Paranaense edged to a 2-1 home win over Cruzeiro, Atletico Mineiro won 1-0 at home to Sao Paulo, Cori-

tiba prevailed 1-0 at Mirassol, Internacional secured a 2-1 victory at Santos and Vasco da Gama clinched a 3-2 home win over Fluminense.

Switzerland recalled Alvin Sanches ahead of the World Cup on Thursday, exactly one year after he tore an ACL 25 minutes into his international debut.

Sanches, AC Milan playmaker Ardon Jashari and Monaco captain Denis Zakaria are among fit-again players back in coach Murat Yakin's plans for warmup games this month. The Nati plays two teams also going to the World Cup co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Switzerland hosts Germany in Basel on March 27 then goes to face Norway in Oslo four days later.

Galatasaray striker Victor Osimhen played with a broken arm during the 4-0 loss to Liverpool in the Champions League.

His club said in a statement after Wednesday's game that Osimhen took a knock on his right arm during the first half at Anfield. He remained on the pitch until halftime but could not resume after the interval due to a suspected fracture.

Is soccer no longer Italy's best sport?

Azzurri face World Cup playoff amid others' success

ROME, March 19, (AP): Italy is coming off a record performance at the Winter Olympics.

Kimi Antonelli just became the second youngest driver at 19 to win a Formula One race and is considered The Next Big Thing in auto racing.

The Azzurri rugby squad beat England for the first time in the Six Nations.

Jannik Sinner is back to winning ways on the tennis court.

Italy's men and women are the world champions in volleyball.

Even the country's unheralded baseball and cricket teams have broken barriers recently.

Yet there's one big team from Italy that continues to struggle. The once-dominant men's soccer team is at risk of failing to qualify for a third consecutive World Cup.

The four-time World Cup champion needs to beat Northern Ireland in the playoffs next Thursday in Bergamo and then either Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina away to avoid going at least 16 years without even playing a match at soccer's biggest event.

"Sports are about cycles but this one in soccer has gone on for too long," Italy Sports Minister Andrea Abodi says.

An entire generation - basically anyone under 15 - has no memory

of the last time Italy played in the World Cup: An elimination loss to Uruguay in 2014 in Brazil remembered for Luis Suarez's bite of Giorgio Chiellini's shoulder.

"For generations of Italians, the World Cup was the time when the country came together and waved our flag," Abodi tells La Stampa. "Our national spirit now extends beyond soccer but it would still be nice to share those emotions with younger fans."

Italy's qualifying campaign was doomed in the opening match by a 3-0 loss at Erling Haaland's Norway - leading to coach Luciano Spalletti being replaced by Gennaro Gattuso.

The Azzurri then went on a six-match winning streak before losing again to Norway in November to finish second in their group and end up in the playoffs again - the stage where Italy was eliminated by Sweden before the 2018 World Cup and by North Macedonia in 2022.

Ranked 13th, Italy will be a heavy favorite against No. 69 Northern Ireland.

But the Azzurri should be reminded that their last meeting, a 0-0 draw in Belfast in 2021, plunged the recently crowned European champion into the playoffs for the 2022 World Cup.

Italy has won all seven of its home games against Northern Ire-

land and the opponent's captain, Liverpool right back Conor Bradley, is out injured.

Northern Ireland coach Michael O'Neill was also appointed Blackburn manager last month in an arrangement that sees him splitting duties.

Italy's World Cup struggles go back all the way to 2010 and 2014, having failed to advance from its group on both occasions.

The Azzurri's last World Cup



In this file photo, Italy's Pao Esposito reacts during the 2026 World Cup Group 1 qualifier soccer match between Italy and Norway in Milan, Italy. (AP)

knockout match was when they won the title in 2006 by beating France in a penalty shootout - a match remembered more for Zinedine Zidane headbutting Marco Materazzi.

So it's no accident that members of the 2006 squad are involved in trying to revive the Azzurri's fortunes - starting with Gattuso.

Former goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon, who holds the record with 176 appearances for Italy, is the national team's delegation chief and had a role in selecting Gattuso.

Also, former fullback Gianluca Zambrotta and former midfielder Simone Perrotta are working in the Italian federation's youth development program.

Even with Gattuso and Buffon making their cases, the national team was not able to convince soccer authorities to set up a training camp in the four months since Italy last played.

Instead, Gattuso and Buffon embarked on a tour up and down Italy - plus trips to London, Saudi Arabia and Qatar - to share dinners with the squad's players and maintain team spirit.

Serie A has gone from being a destination for the world's best players in the 1990s and early 2000s to a competition that now attracts castoffs past their prime from other leagues.

Over 13,000 media accredited for Milan-Cortina Winter Games: IOC

BEIJING, March 19, (Xinhua): The Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games drew 13,478 validated media accreditations, the International Olympic Committee said Thursday.

The total included written and photographic press, media rights holders and host broadcaster personnel working across venue clusters stretching from Cortina d'Ampezzo to Milan. Media operations were supported by the Main Press Centre, the International Broadcast Centre and venue-based facilities.

According to IOC data, 2,537 written and pho-

tographic journalists validated their accreditation, representing 803 media organizations and 62 national or regional Olympic committees. Of those, 618 were women and 1,919 were men, meaning women made up 24 percent of the press category, up slightly from 23 percent at the Beijing 2022 Winter Games. Female representation varied across categories, from 11 percent among local journalists to 43 percent among NOC press attaches. Women also accounted for 40 percent of Main Press Centre support staff.

The IOC said 6,368 validated accreditations were

issued to media rights holders.

"With 13,478 validated accreditations, international and local media once again played a vital role in telling the stories of the athletes, the host regions and the communities engaged in the Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games, the most spread-out Olympic Games in history," read an IOC statement.

The Milan-Cortina Games, held from February 6 to 22, featured 2,880 athletes from 93 delegations competing in 116 events across eight sports and 16 disciplines. Benin, Guinea-Bissau and the United Arab Emirates made their Winter Olympic debuts.

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Sara Eggesvik of Philippines battles for the ball with Uzbekistan's Zarina Mamatkariyeva, right, during the Women's Asian Cup qualifying match for the World Cup, at Gold Coast Stadium in Robina, Australia. (AP)

Sports

Philippines, North Korea qualify for Women's World Cup

Hong Song nets hat trick

GOLD COAST, Australia, March 19, (AP): North Korea has qualified for the Women's World Cup for the first time since a doping saga in 2011 led to its long absence from top-tier international tournaments.

Hong Song Ok scored a hat trick in a 4-0 win over Taiwan on Thursday in playoffs at the Women's Asian Cup to determine the confederation's fifth and sixth qualifiers for next year's World Cup in Brazil.

Angela Beard and Jaelyn Sawicki scored in a six-minute span to help the Philippines secure a World Cup spot with a 2-0 victory over Uzbekistan in the afternoon game.

There were six guaranteed World Cup spots on offer at the continental championship, with Australia, Japan, China and South Korea assured places as quarterfinal winners. The quarterfinal losers went into playoffs at the Gold Coast for the fifth and sixth spots.

Taiwan and Uzbekistan still have another chance to qualify for Brazil via inter-confederation playoffs.

The Women's Asian Cup concludes Saturday with the final between Australia and Japan.

Back in 2011, North Korea officials blamed traditional medicines based on deer glands for causing the squad's five positive tests for steroids at the Women's World Cup.

After two players were caught during the tournament, FIFA tested the rest of the North Korean squad and found three more positive results.

A subsequent ban resulted in North Korea missing the 2014 Asian Cup. It failed to qualify for 2018 and missed the 2022 tournament because of travel restrictions imposed in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Head coach Ri Song Ho's young North Korea squad in Australia included players he guided to the Under-20 Women's World Cup title in 2024.

The three-time champions were playing at the Women's Asian Cup for the first time since losing the 2010 final to Australia, and narrowly lost to the Matildas in the quarterfinals after placing second to 2022 champion China in Group B.

"We'll play harder to become champions next time," the 22-year-old Hong said in comments translated for a tournament social media post.

The Philippines had nine shots at goal in the first half without being able to break the deadlock but Beard needed only two minutes following the interval to make it 1-0.



Philippines players celebrate after defeating Uzbekistan in their Women's Asian Cup qualifying match for the World Cup, at Gold Coast Stadium in Robina, Australia. (AP)

The ex-Australia youth international perfectly timed her run to the edge of the box and leaped to drive a left-foot volley into the net after Jael-Marie Guy's long, high cross from the right.

Guy crossed from the right again for Sawicki to double the lead with a header in the 52nd to ensure the win.

The Philippines bench cleared at the fulltime whistle as the substitute players sprinted onto the pitch and joined their teammates to celebrate back-to-back World Cup qualification.

With a view to World Cup qualifying, Philippines coach Mark Torcaso rotated his team in the quarterfinals and it resulted in a 7-0 loss to Japan, Asia's top-ranked women's team.

With a first-choice starting lineup restored, the Philippines had too much fire power for Uzbekistan.

"It's another step in the right direction for Philippines women's football," defender Hali Long said, "and just shows that we belong on the world stage."

Australia and two-time champion Japan will meet in the final for the third time in four Women's Asian Cups.

Japan beat South Korea 4-1 in Sydney in the semifinal on Wednesday, a night after Sam Kerr's Australia edged defending champion China 2-1 in Perth.

Japan beat Australia in back-to-back finals in 2014 and '18.

Bayern eases through, Atletico escapes

Barcelona runs riot with 7 as Liverpool fights back

LONDON, March 19, (AP): Barcelona scored seven and Liverpool revived its season with four goals to flip tight Champions League games into big wins sending them to the quarterfinals.

Atletico Madrid survived a pulsating Tottenham fightback to make it Spain 3, England 0 in round-of-16 clashes this week.

Bayern Munich had it easiest of all, pushing aside Atalanta 4-1 and 10-2 on aggregate, to get a blockbuster quarterfinal against Real Madrid.

Another Champions League goals rush was sparked by Barcelona tearing apart Newcastle in the second half of a thrilling 7-2 win after the teams went toe-to-toe before the break.

Tied 1-1 after the first leg in Newcastle, Barcelona surged to a victory after Lamine Yamal's momentum-shifting penalty kick in first-half stoppage time made the score 3-2.

Robert Lewandowski then scored twice, Fermin López finished a slick move and Raphinha got his second goal as Newcastle's defense collapsed.

Liverpool ultimately eased to a 4-0 win over Galatasaray at Anfield, overturning a one-goal loss in Istanbul, despite Mohamed Salah missing a penalty in first-half stoppage time when the score was 1-0.

Still, Salah was key to Liverpool's strong second half with two assists, for Hugo Ekitike and Ryan Gravenberch, then a trademark goal in a performance that could restart an erratic season for the English champions.

"From start to finish, we played the game I was hoping for, the players were hoping for and the fans were hoping for," said Liverpool coach Arne Slot, who has been under grow-



Newcastle's Sandro Tonali, left, and Kieran Trippier, right, defend against Barcelona's Fermin Lopez during the Champions League round of 16, second leg soccer match between FC Barcelona and Newcastle United FC in Barcelona, Spain. (AP)

ing pressure.

Tottenham showed real character after an embarrassing 5-2 loss in Madrid last week but was resisted by Atletico's second leveling the score in Wednesday's second leg. Xavi Simons' late penalty at least gave Tottenham a 3-2 win on the night.

Tottenham and Newcastle joined Manchester City, ousted by Real Madrid on Tuesday 5-1 on aggregate score, as Premier League teams eliminated by La Liga's best.

England had a record six teams in the competition and all reached the round of 16, but only Arsenal and Liverpool advanced. Chelsea was eliminated Tuesday by defending champion Paris Saint-Germain.

In Munich, fit-again Bayern talis-

man Harry Kane scored twice, the second an impressive rising shot after deft footwork, against Atalanta to end Italy's challenge in this Champions League edition.

Barcelona is scoring for fun at Camp Nou this year. It's now eight games at home in the Champions League, La Liga or Copa del Rey and Barcelona has won all eight, getting at least three goals each time.

Seven against Newcastle was the best yet for coach Hansi Flick team, started by Raphinha's sixth-minute shot - finishing a move where two Newcastle defenders slipped to the turf - then 18-year-old Marc Bernal found space alone in the goalmouth in the 18th.

Newcastle soon leveled each time

with rare goals from Anthony Elanga. The Sweden winger was goalless in 35 previous games this season in the Premier League or Champions League yet struck twice in a 13-minute spell.

Barcelona got a fast start to the second half when López ran clear on to slick passes from Gerard Martín to Raphinha to score with a well-placed shot and Newcastle's chance was gone.

"I saw new, improved confidence in that second-half performance," Flick said.

Real Madrid will play Bayern Munich, in a clash of 15-time and six-time European champions. They still have never met in the final across 71 years of the European Cup and Champions League.

"Every club would live for these games," Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said. "As a neutral, I'd watch it."

Liverpool face defending champion PSG with the first leg at Parc des Princes. It's a rematch of their thrilling round-of-16 games last season, that Slot reminded Wednesday: "We were the only team that brought them to extra time and penalties."

The second leg at Anfield should be on Tuesday, April 14. Liverpool hasn't played on April 15 since the Hillsborough Stadium disaster on that date in 1989.

Barcelona and Atletico Madrid meet again twice just weeks after they played a two-leg domestic cup semifinal. Then, Atletico won 4-0 at home and lost 3-0 at Camp Nou to reach the Copa del Rey final.

Days before the Champions League quarterfinal first leg at Atletico's Metropolitan Stadium on April 7 or 8, they are due to play there yet again in La Liga.

Al-Khatib to leave Fahaheel after four seasons amid local interest



Firas Al-Khatib watches on thoughtfully during a match, as he prepares for the next step in his coaching career.

By Hassan Mosa

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 19: Syrian coach Firas Al-Khatib has confirmed he will part ways with Al-Fahaheel SC at the end of the current season, bringing his four-year spell at the club to a close.

In a post shared on social media, Al-Khatib said the ongoing campaign will be his final one with Fahaheel, stressing his commitment to finishing the season strongly with the team.

He extended his appreciation to club President Hamad Al-Dabbous, team manager Khaled Abdulqaddous, as well as the technical, administrative, and medical staff for their support throughout his tenure. He also praised the players for their dedication and consistent efforts to deliver strong performances.

Al-Khatib expressed hope that the team can maintain a high level and finish the season on a positive note.

The coach has recently attracted multiple local offers, in addition to a previous approach from the Syrian Football Association to take charge of the national team.

Al-Khatib's football journey in Kuwait began as a player with Al-Nasr (Kuwait) before spells with Al-Arabi (Kuwait), Al-Qadsia SC, Kuwait SC and Al-Salmiya. He later transitioned into coaching, starting as an assistant at Al-Nasr and Al-Salmiya before taking charge of Iraq's Zakho in 2021 and Fahaheel in 2022.

Fahaheel has shown steady progress under his leadership in recent seasons. The team currently sits sixth in the standings with 18 points, three ahead of Al-Shabab and within touching distance of the teams above.

The club exited the Crown Prince Cup at the semifinal stage after a 2-0 defeat to Al-Arabi but remain in contention in the Amir Cup, where they are set to face Al-Qadsia.

CAF president defends controversial call to strip Senegal of title

JOHANNESBURG, March 19, (AP): The president of African soccer's governing body has defended its integrity and impartiality after Senegal's government called for an international investigation into "suspected corruption" at the organization after it stripped the country of its Africa Cup of Nations title.

Patrice Motsepe, the president of the Confederation of African Football, sought Wednesday to explain the decision made by its appeals board on Tuesday that ruled Senegal had forfeited the final in January by walking off the field, turning its 1-0 win in extra time into a 3-0 default win for host nation Morocco.

"The CAF disciplinary board took one decision. The CAF appeals board took a totally different position. And I'm told that Senegal is going to appeal, which is very important," Motsepe said in a video published on the CAF website. "We will adhere and respect the decision that's taken at the highest level."

Motsepe said that CAF's disciplinary and appeals board members are chosen from names proposed by each of its 54 member associations.

"If you look at the composition of those bodies, they reflect some of the most respected lawyers and judges on the continent," he said. "These are people who have integrity and have a track record. ... the

independence is reflected by the decisions that were taken by the two bodies."

In January, CAF's disciplinary board imposed fines of more than \$1 million against the Senegalese and Moroccan federations together. It issued suspensions against the Senegal coach and several players. But it did not interfere with the outcome of the final.

CAF's appeals board on Tuesday ruled that Senegal forfeited the Jan. 18 final by leaving the field of play without the referee's authorization, and that Morocco should consequently be awarded a 3-0 win.

Most of the Senegal team left for almost 10 minutes while Senegal fans battled stewards behind one of the goals in protest against a controversial penalty call for Morocco after Senegal had a goal ruled out. The players returned, Morocco missed the penalty, and Senegal won the match by scoring in extra time.

"What happened in that final match is it undermines the good work that CAF has done over many, many years to ensure that there's integrity, that there is respect, that there's ethics, that there's governance, as well as credibility in the results of our football matches," said Motsepe, who said the incidents in the final had exposed the work CAF was doing to address

suspicion and distrust.

"It's a legacy issue. When I became president one of the major concerns was the impartiality, the independence, and the respect of referees and match commissioners, and a lot of good, good work has been done," he said. "That there continues to be suspicions because it's a legacy issue, it's something that has been there for many, many years and we consistently deal with that because that's critically important."

The Senegalese soccer federation said it will appeal Tuesday's decision at the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Lausanne, Switzerland, and the Senegalese government slammed what it called a "manifestly erroneous interpretation of the regulations, leading to a grossly illegal and deeply unjust decision."

Motsepe defended CAF against perceptions of favoritism toward Morocco, which is a 2030 World Cup co-host and has invested heavily to become a soccer superpower.

"Not a single country in Africa will be treated in a manner that is more preferential, or more advantageous, or more favorable than any other country on the African continent," Motsepe said. "We take what has happened at the final match in Morocco ... we take it very, very seriously."

Best of the Rest

Dutch cleared to play for Suriname: Ahead of World Cup qualifying playoffs next week, Leeds forward Joël Piroe has been cleared by FIFA to play for Suriname.

Piroe and Melayro Bogarde, a defender with Austrian club LASK, are Netherlands youth internationals with family ties to Suriname, which plays Bolivia on March 26.

FIFA published its approval late Wednesday for both players to change national team eligibility to represent the nation that got independence from the Netherlands in 1975. Suriname shares a border with Brazil on the northern tip of South America though plays in the CONCACAF soccer region that includes the Caribbean and central America.

Suriname faces Bolivia next Thursday in Monterrey, Mexico, in an intercontinental playoffs bracket to qualify for the World Cup. The winner plays Iraq five days later with a World Cup place at stake.

None of the players called up by Henk ten Cate, the former Ajax coach, plays for a club in Suriname.

The playoffs bracket winner will be in a tough World Cup group in June with France, Norway and Senegal.

The Netherlands soccer federation also signed off on FIFA changing the eligibility of 18-year-old Benjamin Khaderi, a midfielder with PSV Eindhoven, to Morocco. (AP)