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FM fumes, says Iran attacks resulted in martyrs, injured Page 2

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## KUWAIT STRENGTHENS TIES WITH E.U. AMID REGIONAL TENSIONS

**Opinion**

**Ahmed Al-Jarallah**  
Editor-in-Chief, the Arab Times

### Are we witnessing a 'new Yalta'?

"THE crisis will intensify before it eases." This timeless wisdom accurately describes the current condition of the Iranian regime.

Its escalating aggression against its neighbors has left no room for reconciliation, while its people – the primary victims – have no stake in the terrorist wars waged by their leaders.

Iran is now on the threshold of a 'new Yalta', confined within its own territory. In the midst of such heinous acts, the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries continue to exercise remarkable restraint borne out of wisdom.

They are fully aware that the Persian regime of terror will no longer be able to threaten regional stability once this conflict concludes, because the threat has 'metastasized' throughout several Arab lands – from the ruins of Lebanon to Iraq and Yemen.

Given the intolerable terrorist practices against the global economy and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the world is now more convinced than ever that removing this malignant tumor is a surgical necessity that cannot be ignored.

Therefore, no matter how vicious the aggression against our nations becomes, relief is near. The 'victories' loudly proclaimed by Tehran are nothing more than the final death throes of a regime that lost its place in the civilized world.

The regime's leaders, now covering in underground bunkers, have proven their total inability to communicate with the world. The images and videos they continue to disseminate are merely artificial intelligence fabrications – a desperate attempt to mask their terminal isolation and extreme weakness.

Notwithstanding these considerations, it is a recorded reality that our nations, and the entire global community, have endured the relentless scourge of Persian-sponsored terrorism for five decades.

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# 10 soldiers hurt in bold attack on Kuwait base



Ministry of Foreign Affairs photo  
Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah receives European Union Special Envoy for the Gulf Luigi Di Maio, who is currently on an official visit to the country.



Ministry of Defense photo  
Undersecretary of the Ministry of Defense Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Meshal Al-Sabah during a meeting with European Union Special Envoy for the Gulf Luigi Di Maio.

### Electricity, water fully stable

By Munif Naif

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff and Agencies

**KUWAIT CITY, March 29:** The Ministry of Defense announced on Sunday that it detected and intercepted 14 ballistic missiles and 12 hostile drones over the past 24 hours.

In a media briefing, spokesman of the ministry Colonel Saud Al-Atwan confirmed that some of these missiles and drones targeted a Kuwait Armed Forces base, causing injuries to 10 personnel and material damage to the site.

He added that depots owned by a private logistics company were targeted during the attack, resulting only in material damage, as no human casualties were reported.

Since the start of the heinous Iranian aggression on Feb 28, Kuwait has been hit by a total of 307 ballistic missiles, two missiles and 616 drones.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Interior said on the same day that the explosive ordnance disposal teams dealt with 11 reports of falling debris from defensive interception operations over the past 24 hours, increasing the total number of such reports since the start of the attacks to 599.

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National Guard photo  
KNG Deputy Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Hamad Al-Barjas poses for a group photo during an inspection visit to one of the sites assigned to KNG as part of its security duties.



Ahmadi refinery

KUNA photo

## Oil jumps 50% as Hormuz crisis chokes global supply

**KUWAIT CITY, March 29, (KUNA):** Global oil markets are undergoing exceptional shifts amid escalating geopolitical tensions affecting energy supply flows and reshaping supply-demand dynamics, posing unprecedented challenges to the global economy.

Crude oil prices have risen by over 50 percent since February 28, following regional developments and disruptions to navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, which halted parts of global energy supplies.

Prices closed last Friday at USD 112.57 per barrel for Brent futures and USD 99.64 per barrel for US West Texas Intermediate futures.

Kuwaiti analysts told KUNA on Sunday in separate statements that current developments reflect a fundamental shift in risks, with activity in the Strait of Hormuz nearly halted.

They noted price increases are driven by supply shortages rather than actual market activity, raising concerns over consumers' reliance on strategic reserves.

Oil expert Kamel Al-Harami said Kuwaiti crude is estimated at over USD 140 per barrel, though such levels re-

main indicative due to the absence of actual trading.

Exports from Gulf ports in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iraq have largely stopped, with limited Saudi shipments via Yanbu and small Iraqi volumes from Kirkuk.

The Strait of Hormuz, a key artery for global energy, previously handled around 22 million barrels daily, but tanker traffic has dropped to one or two vessels per day from about 300.

Limited exports continue, including about one million barrels per day of Iranian oil, six to seven million Saudi barrels via Yanbu, and 1.5 million UAE barrels through alternative routes.

Specialist Tariq Al-Wazzan said the challenge now lies in delivering supplies on time rather than production levels, amid rising logistical and geopolitical constraints.

He added global consumption exceeding 100 million barrels daily faces mounting supply chain disruptions, while availability alone no longer ensures market stability.

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Al-Harami



Al-Wazzan

### 'Any conspiracy against Kuwait is against all Arabs'

## Lebanese leaders push back on Hezbollah threat to Kuwait

**KUWAIT CITY, March 29:** Leading figures across the Lebanese political spectrum have unanimously condemned Hezbollah's subversive attempts to threaten the security and stability of Kuwait, reports Al-Seyassah daily.

They affirmed that Kuwait has always been a sisterly country to Lebanon and its people, in both good times and difficult periods.

They denounced Hezbollah's pursuit of Iranian interests, which ignores the principles of good neighborliness with the Gulf states.

They emphasized that Hezbollah shows no regard for the interests of Lebanon or its people, as well as the longstanding support Kuwait and the Gulf states have extended to Lebanon, both in times of peace and war.

The Lebanese political figures expressed their

rejection and condemnation of any attempts by Hezbollah to undermine the stability of Kuwait, a country with which Lebanon shares strong historical ties, as it does with all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

They emphasized that harm to Kuwait is harm to Lebanon, and vice versa.

Former Lebanese President Michel Suleiman affirmed that Kuwait has always been a nation dedicated to promoting peace and goodwill and a mediator in de-escalating conflicts among Arab states.

Suleiman praised Kuwait's significant role in supporting development efforts in numerous countries and its steadfast defense of Arab causes.

He described any conspiracy against Kuwait as an attack on all Arabs and a plot against Lebanon

and its people.

On his part, the Lebanese Minister of Industry Joe Issa El Khoury expressed his regret over the attacks targeting a segment of the Lebanese population, highlighting that Lebanon has been proud of its exports to the world for thousands of years.

He affirmed that the Lebanese citizen has always been a source of pride for the country and its people.

El Khoury highlighted his concern that countries closest to Lebanon - the Gulf states, particularly Kuwait - were being targeted, despite the strong and longstanding ties between the Lebanese people and all segments of society.

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## Saudi transit window opens for Kuwait-based Lebanese

By Fares Ghaleb

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

**KUWAIT CITY, March 29:** The Embassy of the Lebanese Republic in Kuwait confirmed the arrival of Lebanese nationals at the Kuwaiti-Saudi land border, specifically those who registered on the designated emergency land departure platform before March 24.

In an official communiqué, the em-

bassy pointed out that this development follows the completion of official approvals and clearances from the relevant authorities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It stated that individuals whose names are on the approved transit list may proceed to the border to finalize the administrative and security procedures.

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## Kuwait, GCC move to fortify environmental crisis defenses

**KUWAIT CITY, March 29, (KUNA):** Head of the GCC Emergency Management Center Brigadier Dr. Rashid Al-Marri and Acting Director General of Kuwait's Environment Public Authority Nawaf Behbehani discussed ways to enhance cooperation and address environmental implications amid current regional developments.

In a statement to KUNA on Sunday, Al-Marri underscored the im-

portance of the strategic partnership between the center and Kuwait's Environment Public Authority.

He noted that the center operates within an integrated system for information exchange and technical support to ensure rapid response to any environmental threats affecting regional security and stability.

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### 3 Crisis fails to hinder work



8 KIPCO reports a net profit of KD 16.3 million in 2025

### Newswatch

**KUWAIT CITY:** The Amiri Diwan on Sunday mourned the passing away of **Sheikha Khazna Ahmad Sabah Al-Salman Al-Sabah** at the age of 85.

The funeral service is to take place after Asr (afternoon) prayer Monday. (KUNA)

**ISLAMABAD:** A two-day quadrilateral meeting to hold consultations on evolving regional situations commenced in Islamabad on Sunday, with Foreign Ministers of **Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye** and **Egypt** in attendance.

At the invitation of Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister **Mohammad Ishaq Dar**, the Foreign Ministers **Faisal bin Farhan** of Saudi Arabia, **Hakan Fidan** of Turkiye and **Dr. Badr Abdelatty** of Egypt arrived in Islamabad to hold in-depth discussions on a range of issues, mainly regional de-escalation, said Pakistan Foreign Office in a press release. (KUNA)



GCC Emergency Management Center  
Brigadier Dr. Rashid Al-Marri, Head of the GCC Emergency Management Center, and Nawaf Behbehani, Acting Director General of Kuwait's Environment Public Authority, pose for a group photo with officials following talks.



## Counter threat to Hormuz navigation: AL chief

# 'United Arab stance vital against Iran attacks'

CAIRO, March 29, (KUNA): The 165th session of the Council of the Arab League at the level of foreign ministers commenced on Sunday via video-conference, chaired by Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdullah Al-Zayani, to discuss repeated Iranian attacks on Arab states and the selection of a new Secretary-General.

In his opening remarks, Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit stressed the need for a unified Arab voice and clear, unambiguous messages.

He affirmed that Arab states condemn and reject the Iranian attacks on sovereign Arab countries, targeting their resources, or terrorizing civilians.

Aboul Gheit added that justifying such attacks under the pretext of confronting Israel constitutes a "mixing of issues," noting that these policies have not served the Palestinian cause but have in-

stead harmed the countries pursuing them.



Talal Al-Mutairi

cluding navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, reaffirming support for the right of affected states to self-

defense, individually or collectively.

He stressed that such attacks, including threats to freedom of navigation, pose a danger to international peace and security and require a firmer international stance reflecting collective rejection.

Earlier, permanent representatives approved the draft agenda of the ministerial session, which includes two items: addressing violations of Arab states' sovereignty due to Iranian attacks, and Egypt's nomination of former Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy for the post of Secretary-General, succeeding Aboul Gheit, whose second term ends on June 30.

Kuwait was represented at the meeting of permanent delegates by its Permanent Representative to the Arab League, Ambassador Talal Al-Mutairi.

# FM fumes, says Iran attacks resulted in martyrs, injured

## Blatant violation of Kuwait sovereignty, int'l law: Sheikh Jarrah

KUWAIT CITY, March 29, (KUNA): Kuwaiti Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on Sunday renewed Kuwait's strongest condemnation and denunciation of the blatant Iranian aggression against the country and other regional countries.

Sheikh Jarrah Al-Sabah, in a speech delivered while chairing Kuwait's delegation participating in the 165th Ordinary Session of the Council of the League of Arab States at the ministerial level, held via video-conference, stated that the Iranian aggression had resulted in martyrs and injuries, endangered citizens and residents, threatened residential areas, and caused destruction to facilities and vital civilian infrastructure.

He pointed to the expansion of Iranian aggression through attacks carried out by Iraqi factions and militias loyal to Iran using missiles and drones against Kuwait and several Arab states, commending the measures pledged by Iraq to halt the hostile acts carried out by those factions and militias against Kuwait and the countries of the region.

He expressed hope that the efforts of the Iraqi government in this regard would soon succeed.



Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah

KUNA photo

In light of the widening scope of Iranian aggression against Kuwait, the minister noted recent attempts in the region to destabilize internal security in several Arab countries and spread chaos and panic among citizens and residents.

He praised the efforts of Kuwait's security agencies, which succeeded through the arrest of three terrorist cells linked to the terrorist organization Hezbollah in confronting Iran's attempts to carry out acts of sabotage in Kuwait.

The foreign minister stressed that such Iranian practices constitute a blatant violation of international law and unjustifiable aggression, regardless of

Iran's attempts and those of its proxies to legitimize their barbaric attacks through misleading rhetoric, systematic efforts to obscure facts, falsify realities, and rely on baseless pretexts.

He underscored that what is being witnessed today is not merely a passing escalation but a systematic pattern aimed at destabilizing regional stability, led by Iran with chaos and terrorism as tools of influence, which necessitates a firm international stance and deterrent measures to safeguard international peace and security.

He affirmed Kuwait's full and inherent right to self-defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and its right to take all necessary measures

to defend its sovereignty, protect its territory, and ensure the safety of its people in line with international law.

He noted that successive experiences have revealed the limited effectiveness of joint Arab action within the framework of the Arab League, calling for a frank and responsible review, as the League despite its symbolic status, has demonstrated clear shortcomings in keeping pace with rapid challenges and in playing an effective role in preserving Arab security.

From this standpoint, the minister stressed the urgent need for comprehensive restructuring to enhance decision-making mechanisms and establish more effective and responsive executive tools in line with the complexities of the current phase.

He added that it is regrettable that this shortcoming comes at a time when the GCC has spared no effort in supporting Arab and Islamic causes politically and economically, as they have been and continue to be at the forefront of supporting stability and development and safeguarding Arab unity, which increases the responsibility to develop the Arab institutional framework to keep pace with these efforts and translate them into tangible results.

He also emphasized the importance of involving regional countries in any future negotiation track with Iran, based on the necessity of engaging regional states in shaping visions related to achieving regional security and stability, particularly those directly affected by Iran's aggressive behavior toward its regional surroundings.



Education Ministry photos

Top and above: Distribution of books in progress.

# Syllabus books delivered to over 50% of students: MoE

By Inaas Awadh

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: The Ministry of Education continues its efforts to complete the distribution of textbooks for the second semester to the students in line with its commitment to ensure the continuity of the educational process.

According to statistics published on its social media accounts, the ministry has so far distributed textbooks to more than 50 percent of the students. This is a positive indicator of the success of the logistical plan laid down by the ministry and personally overseen by Minister of Education Sayed Jalal Al-Tabtabai.

The ministry pointed out that the textbook distribution initiative, which started last Wednesday, is part of a comprehensive strategy to deliver textbooks to the students' homes to facilitate their learning and guarantee their academic readiness.

The initiative utilizes several field teams and meticulously organizes the distribution process, taking into account the population density and

distribution of schools in different areas.

Meanwhile, reliable sources from the academic sector confirmed that the book distribution is proceeding smoothly and quickly in coordination with the parents throughout the day to ensure prompt delivery.

Sources said the ministry will complete the delivery of books to students at their homes with their parents by the end of this week, while affirming the continuation of monitoring and evaluation to ensure the achievement of the desired goals.

Sources called on the parents to fully cooperate with the distribution teams and report observations or delays to ensure that the books reach all students on time.

Sources also urged them to obtain information regarding book distribution only from the ministry and ignore websites that promote book delivery through electronic links, as the approved communication and coordination process for distributing books to students is only through direct communication with parents, stressing there is no other method.

# Metro, railways, land, sea taxis to reform travel mode

By Inaas Awadh

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: The Environment Affairs Committee at the Municipal Council on Sunday held its first workshop for the fourth session, chaired by Alia Al-Farsi, with the participation of Committee Rapporteur Abdullah Al-Anzi and committee members Waleed Al-Dagher and Fahad Al-Khounain.

The workshop, titled "The Public Transportation System in the State of Kuwait - Bus Passenger Waiting Stations," started with the speech of Al-Farsi who asserted that public transportation is the cornerstone of urban development, specifically a safe and accessible means of transport.

She highlighted the difficult challenges that the public transportation system in the country is currently facing, citing structural and operational issues. She said these challenges include overlapping roles and responsibilities among the operating entities, irregular bus schedule and routes, lack of adherence to the designated waiting stations, limited infrastructure at waiting stations, and lack of a unified design for their layout.

She also pointed out that the Fourth National Structural Plan consists of a comprehensive vision for developing the transportation system by diversifying and integrating modes of transportation, including buses, the metro, railways and land and sea taxis in order to build an integrated and multi-modal transportation network, which

meets the needs of the population and urban growth.

The workshop, which lasted about four hours, concluded with extensive discussions on the importance of regulating public transportation companies, standardizing operational procedures, activating the oversight role of the General Traffic Department, strengthening partnership with the private sector, and taking advantage of academic and research expertise.

The following recommendations were presented at the workshop:

- Conduct a design and supervision study for the public transportation system and passenger waiting stations by contracting with a consulting firm in line with the National Structural Plan. This study should include a comprehensive survey of bus stations, assessment of their technical and operational conditions, establishment of unified standards, specifying their locations, and linking it with the development plans.
- Coordinate with the relevant authorities to regulate bus traffic and lay down a plan to remove the neglected and ineffective stations.
- Coordinate with the competent authorities to conduct a study on establishing a public transport authority or an entity specializing in public transportation affairs at the State level. This entity should regulate transport services and develop regulatory frameworks to enhance investment and support economic and social development goals.

## 'Client has experience, deserves it'

# Appeals overturns ruling as MoE asked to promote staff

By Jaber Al-Hamoud

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: The Court of Appeals obligated the Ministry of Higher Education to promote an employee from accountant to senior accounting specialist, overturning its previous decision to withhold the promotion.

Attorney Jassim Al-Tuwaitan, who filed the case on behalf of his client - a citizen, revealed that his client was appointed as junior accountant at the Supreme Council for Governorate Affairs, which is affiliated with the Council of Ministers, in 2011. He was then promoted to various positions until he reached the accountant position in the latter part of 2013. In mid-2014, he transferred to the Inspection and Audit Office at the Min-

istry of Higher Education, where he also worked as an accountant.

Al-Tuwaitan pointed out that his client has more than 13 years of experience without being promoted to the next level. This prompted him to file a grievance with the administrative body at the end of 2014, but he did not receive a response. He asserted that the administrative body's refusal to promote his client is a violation of the law, so the latter decided to file the lawsuit to cancel the negative administrative decision.

This decision included refusing to raise his job level immediately with the resulting privileges, most notably his promotion to the senior account specialist position in accordance with Civil Service Commission decision No. 3/2017, which stipulates the promotion conditions.

## Other Voices

# Most vital pleasures of life

By Ahmad alsarraf

Sleep is one of life's pleasures that many people overlook, even though we spend more than a third of our lives in bed.

Hotel staff often ask their guests the familiar question - "How was your sleep?" The answer is usually "good" or "bad," depending on the number of hours slept or how often we woke up for one reason or another.

Sleep experts note a third factor - the regularity of our bedtimes. Maintaining a consistent bedtime and wake-up time, with a margin of error of no more than 30 minutes, is important, even during holidays and long vacations.

According to Dr. Jean-Philippe Chabot, a professor of medicine at the University of Ottawa, this guideline applies to all ages.

Research in the United States indicates that most adults do not maintain a regular sleep schedule, which can lead to poor health, though the exact reasons are not fully understood. Scientists have found, however, that people who frequently deviate from a consistent sleep routine are more prone to certain health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, obesity, mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and dementia.

A 2020 study analyzed the sleep patterns of nearly 2,000 adults aged 45 to 84, and found that individuals with irregular sleep patterns were twice as likely to develop heart disease compared to those with consistent sleep schedules.

Another study in 2024, based on sleep data from tens of thousands of adults in the UK, showed that those with irregular sleep patterns were nearly 50 percent more likely to develop dementia than those with average sleep patterns.

Sumi Lee, a sleep and aging expert at the University of Pennsylvania, stated that scientists are still unsure how frequent or severe sleep disruptions must

be to increase health risks. The greater the deviation from normal sleep times, whether over a single 24-hour period or across weeks and months, the higher the risk.

In a comprehensive review of studies published in 2023, a group of sleep scientists concluded that there is sufficient evidence to recommend maintaining a regular sleep schedule to support metabolic, mental, and cardiovascular health.

Researchers are still exploring why irregular sleep patterns negatively affect health, but their main theory involves the body's circadian rhythm.

Dr. Lee explained that the body's circadian rhythm functions like an internal 24-hour clock, regulating the sleep-wake cycle as well as hormonal fluctuations, metabolism, cardiovascular function, the immune system, appetite, and mood.

According to Dr. Chabot, when you deviate from your usual sleep schedule, bodily functions that depend on these rhythms are disrupted. This can increase stress and inflammation throughout the body, which over time may affect cardiovascular health and metabolism.

Disrupting the biological clock can also trigger hunger at unusual times, causing some people to eat late at night. This can negatively impact the digestive system and contribute to weight gain or obesity.

So, how can you maintain a regular sleep schedule?

Maintaining a regular sleep schedule can be challenging for many, but it is recommended to set an alarm an hour before bedtime each night to remind yourself to prepare for sleep.

Using that hour for a relaxing activity, such as reading or meditating, can help you unwind.

It is also advisable to get 20 to 30 minutes of sunlight exposure every morning at the same time each day, preferably outdoors.

Light is the primary cue that regulates your circadian rhythm. When morning light reaches your eyes, your body begins its countdown to evening, releasing hormones that signal it is time to sleep.



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Enam Haidar



Al-Qattan

## Prosecution wins praise

# 'High rate of conviction reflects probe quality'

By Jaber Al-Hamoud

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: The 2025 annual report of the Public Prosecution has drawn the attention of legal experts, given the remarkable case completion rates and the quality of investigation outcomes.

These results proved the improvement of the criminal justice system and its ability to deal with emerging crimes and their complexities.

Attorney Enam Haidar affirmed that the report embodies institutional efficiency and strong commitment to uphold the rule of law. She pointed out that achieving 97.5 percent case completion rate proves that cases are resolved immediately without compromising the guarantees of a fair trial.

She added that the high conviction rate reflected the quality of investigations and the accuracy of evidence collection, thereby, boosting public trust in the prosecution.

Attorney Abdulmohsen Al-Qattan asserted that the noticeable development in the performance of the prosecution proves the effectiveness of integration among the law enforcement agencies. He indicated that dealing with cybercrimes and national security crimes necessitates the use of advanced legal tools and qualified personnel, as shown in the report.

He stressed the need to continue updating legislation to keep pace with the nature of modern crimes in order to guarantee deterrence and to protect the society.

Attorney Jarrah Mubarak Al-Wawan stated that the level of transparency adopted by the prosecution in publishing its annual data enhances the principle of accountability and opens the door for an objective evaluation of performance.

He confirmed that this step boosts public trust in the judicial institution, adding that the next phase requires focusing on expediting litigation procedures, while maintaining the highest standard of justice, especially in handling highly sensitive cases.

The three legal experts agreed that the 2025 achievements of the prosecution are considered a positive indicator of the development of the judicial system in the country.

They also underscored the importance of continuing support for legal professionals and adopting the latest technologies to ensure the sustainability of this performance and to overcome challenges in the future.



Cardinal denied entry in Jerusalem

## Catholic Church in Kuwait condemns denial of access to Christian Holy site

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: The Holy Family Cathedral in Kuwait condemned the Israeli police for barring Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa -- head of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, and Franciscan Custos of the Holy Land Father Francesco Ielpo -- official custodian of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on Sunday where they were heading to celebrate Palm Sunday Mass, reports Al-Seyassah daily.



Fr. Haifaoui

Official spokesperson for the Catholic Church in Kuwait Father Suleiman Haifaoui described the incident as "serious and a violation of the very essence of freedom of worship and the historical respect for holy sites in Jerusalem."

He disclosed that the Israeli police forced Cardinal Pizzaballa and Father Ielpo, who were walking through the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem, to turn back despite their modest demeanor and the absence of official procession or fanfare. He pointed out this is the first such incident in centuries, when heads of the Catholic Church were prevented from celebrating this sacred occasion at the holiest Christian site in the world.

He asserted "this action does not only constitute a blatant violation of freedom of worship, but also disregards the feelings of hundreds of millions of believers around the world, whose eyes are turned toward Jerusalem during this Holy Week, when the Passion and Resurrec-

tion of Christ are commemorated."

He added that "preventing the highest authorities of the Catholic Church from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a completely unjustified measure and a clear departure from the principles of rationality, freedom of worship, and respect for the historical and legal status quo at the holy sites."

He affirmed that churches and mosques have adhered to all imposed measures since the outbreak of war. He said public celebrations were canceled, ceremonies scaled back, and live streaming adopted to deliver prayers to believers throughout the country in the interest of public safety due to the current circumstances.

He stated that "our Muslim brothers were not permitted to hold Eid Al-Fitr prayers at Al-Aqsa Mosque, in accordance with the principle of respecting religious rites and freedom of worship." He expressed strong condemnation of this unacceptable act, which infringes upon freedom of worship and violates the sanctity of holy sites. "We affirm that such actions do not serve peace, but rather exacerbate feelings of pain and resentment and hinder dialogue for peace and mutual respect among followers of different religions," he stressed.

He went on to say that "the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Custody of the Holy Land express their utter disappointment over this painful development, which deprived believers of celebrating one of the most important days of the Christian year. They underscored the need for respecting religious rights and guaranteeing freedom of access to holy sites for all believers. Jerusalem remains a holy city for all religions and a living symbol of coexistence and faith."

### Other Voices

## Your credit score is your financial identity

By Dr. Fawaz Khaled Alkhateeb

Your credit score may be the most important number in your life, yet it remains one of the least understood.

For years, financial opportunity was associated with income. Today, that assumption no longer holds. Financial institutions are no longer asking how much you earn. They are asking a more critical question: Do you honor your obligations?

This shift defines the modern financial system.

Credit classification systems, such as Kuwait's Credit Information Network (Ci-Net), are built to measure behavior not wealth. A disciplined individual with consistent repayment patterns is often considered low-risk, regardless of income level. Conversely, a high-income individual with irregular payment behavior may be classified as high-risk.

In simple terms, reliability has replaced income as the primary measure of trust.

From a legal perspective, credit data is not ordinary information. It is protected under structured regulatory frameworks that grant individuals the right to access and challenge their records, while imposing strict obligations on financial institutions to ensure accuracy. Misuse or unauthorized disclosure of such data is not a technical breach it may carry criminal consequences.

The economic implications are equally significant. Without credit classification, lending becomes uncertain, risk exposure increases, and disputes escalate. With it, financial institutions make informed decisions, capital is allocated more efficiently, and systemic stability improves.

Kuwait's relatively low non-performing loan ratio approximately 1.7% is not incidental. It reflects a system that rewards discipline and

penalizes inconsistency.

Yet the real challenge is not the system itself, it is awareness. Many individuals still do not monitor their credit profiles or fully understand how their financial behavior shapes their opportunities. The consequences often emerge too late: rejected applications, higher costs, or missed opportunities.

A weak credit profile does not simply limit borrowing. It limits flexibility, timing, and growth. It shapes decisions made about you, often before you are even part of the conversation.

In a data-driven economy, your financial behavior speaks long before you do.

One practical step remains widely underutilized: reviewing your own credit profile. In Kuwait, individuals have direct access to their credit reports through Ci-Net application which is available on iPhone and Android systems with initial reports available at no cost. Taking the time to review this information understanding your classification, identifying any inaccuracies, and recognizing patterns in your financial behavior is not merely informative; it is essential.

Awareness, in this context, is not theoretical. It is actionable. Ultimately, your credit score reflects more than numbers. It reflects consistency, commitment, and credibility. Trust is no longer assumed. It is calculated. And in today's financial system, you are not judged by what you earn, but by how you manage what you owe.

I recently had the opportunity to discuss this topic in a podcast conversation with Eng. MahaAlbaghli on Safeera Podcast, a platform that addresses important and often overlooked issues across society and the economy. Conversations of this nature are essential, not only to inform, but to challenge how we think about financial responsibility in a rapidly evolving system.



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Dr. Alkhateeb

Virtual lectures target faculty efficiency

## PAAET rolls out online assessment program

By Abdulrahman Al-Shammari

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) has launched a new digital initiative aimed at developing the academic assessment system and enhancing the quality of online learning.

The initiative includes a series of virtual lectures available on its YouTube channel - KUW\_PAAET.

Titled "Towards Distinguished Digital Assessment", the initiative focuses on the mechanisms for managing virtual lectures using the Microsoft Teams platform. It aims to improve faculty efficiency and enable them to effectively use modern digital tools.

This series is part of the authority's ongoing efforts to enhance academic performance and promote digital transformation by providing practical, simplified training content that supports improved e-assessment methods and ensures high-quality

learning outcomes.

PAAET invited students and faculty members to view the lecture playlist on its YouTube channel, noting that it can be easily accessed by scanning the attached QR code.

The authority emphasized that this step reflects its commitment to adopting the best global educational practices and providing a flexible learning environment that supports innovation and continuous development in various disciplines.

## CSC introduces WhatsApp service for bachelor scholarship students

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: To maintain communication with scholarship students in Kuwait and abroad amid current regional circumstances, the Scholarships and Study Leave Department of the Civil Service Commission (CSC) announced the availability of a WhatsApp service for inquiries and emergencies for bachelor's degree scholarship students, reports Al-

Anba daily.

It stated that the service is available via the numbers 22333784 and 22333786.

CSC reaffirmed its commitment to receiving visitors to facilitate transactions and provide all services to beneficiaries. The reception area is open from 8:30am to 12:00 noon at CSC's main reception hall.



**EID MUBARAK**

<b>Book for One-night</b> (Inclusive of breakfast)	Queen Cabana (2 persons), 2 Bedroom Chalet (4 persons).	<b>BHD 76.230 net</b> <b>BHD 170.247 net</b>
<b>Book for Two nights</b> (Inclusive of breakfast) (Non-refundable/Non-Cancellable)	Queen Cabana (2 persons) per night, 2 Bedroom Chalet (4 persons) per night.	<b>BHD 65.000 net</b> <b>BHD 145.000 net</b>
<b>Book for Three nights</b> (Inclusive of breakfast) (Non-refundable/Non-Cancellable)	Queen Cabana (2 persons) per night, 2 Bedroom Chalet (4 persons) per night.	<b>BHD 57.173 net</b> <b>BHD 128.000 net</b>

Lunch Buffet will be served at **Café Marisol Restaurant** with price of **BD6.600/net** per person. Starts from 12:30 Noon to 15:30 hrs.

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### Kuwait, GCC

The meeting provided a valuable opportunity to exchange views on best practices in environmental crisis management and coordinate efforts to strengthen early warning capabilities, he added.

Both sides also reviewed the center's mechanisms for analyzing regional risks and activating rapid response plans, stressing the importance of technical connectivity and real-time data sharing to support accurate, science-based decision-making.

The meeting concluded with an agreement to intensify technical coordination, enhance readiness, and develop proactive plans to safeguard marine and terrestrial ecosystems, ensuring efficient handling of complex environmental scenarios across the region.

### Lebanese leaders

He reiterated the statement made by Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam that harming Kuwait is harming Lebanon.

El Khoury stressed that the recent events in Kuwait have no connection to Lebanese culture or its people, insisting that those involved in the sabotage networks represent only a small group and do not reflect Lebanon as a whole.

He highlighted that Lebanon is committed to putting an end to these destructive activities at the earliest.

Meanwhile, Kataeb party Vice President Salim el-Sayegh stressed that whatever affects the Gulf states, particularly Kuwait, directly affects Lebanon.

He affirmed that the relationship between Lebanon and the Gulf, especially Kuwait, goes beyond shared interests, as there is a genuine partnership between the two.

El-Sayegh highlighted the significant contributions of Lebanese expatriates to the development and progress of Gulf countries, carried out with dedication and sincerity.

He also emphasized that the Lebanese people have greatly benefited from the resources of the Gulf states, which have been crucial in supporting Lebanon's resilience during crises, thanks in large part to the efforts of Lebanese workers in Kuwait and other Gulf countries.

El-Sayegh insisted that any threat against Kuwait or any other sisterly Gulf state is unacceptable, as such actions ultimately threaten the Lebanese people.

He expressed concern that Lebanon could be used as a base to advance Iranian interests, turning the Gulf states into unjustified targets for Iranian missiles.

El-Sayegh stressed that this shared vulnerability requires a unified approach to Arab national security, adding that Lebanon and the Gulf states are not only partners in development, trade, and the labor market but also allies in promoting stability and security in the region, as these matters are closely interconnected.

He concluded by reaffirming that what affects the Gulf affects Lebanon, and vice versa. Furthermore, MP Melhem Khalaf strongly condemned any criminal activities that threaten public security, particularly those targeting the sisterly state of Kuwait.

He emphasized that while the Lebanese state continues to uphold its legitimacy, such terrorist acts are isolated incidents and are not associated with any specific nationality.

Khalaf also praised the Kuwaiti authorities for their efforts in combating crime and ensuring fair accountability.

Also, as a member of the "Strong Republic" bloc, MP Ghayath Yazbek expressed deep regret that a Lebanese faction, defined by nationality but loyal to Iran, would engage in such reprehensible acts, endangering both the Kuwaiti people and the stability of Kuwait by replicating the "Abdali Cell" model.

He noted that those committing these criminal acts show complete disregard for Kuwait's sovereignty and for the hospitality extended by the Kuwaiti people to Lebanese citizens.

Yazbek emphasized that it is unsurprising such a group would carry out these crimes, given that it does not prioritize the interests of its own people, as these individuals have brought only misery and destruction to Lebanon.

He stressed that both the Lebanese people and state must take all necessary measures to stop this phenomenon and work toward disarming Hezbollah, insisting that the issuance of government decrees, no matter how important, is not enough, as those who disregard the interests of their own countries will pay no heed to the interests of other nations.

Yazbek stated that Hezbollah has subordinated its ideology and reasoning to the Iranian Supreme Leader's doctrine, which is based on the principle of exporting the revolution, creating instability, and imposing its agenda on other peoples by force.

He stressed that Iran has successfully infiltrated the core of sovereign national entities that initially welcomed it as a neighboring state, citing examples such as the Houthis in Yemen, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, the Alawites in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Yazbek also highlighted Iran's attempts to influence Sunni factions, pointing to Hamas as a prominent example, which is widely known for following the orders of Tehran's Supreme Leader and receiving funding from him.

He stressed that Hamas has brought significant catastrophe upon the people of Gaza. For his part, MP Camille Chamoun, head of the National Liberal Party, condemned and denounced Hezbollah's attempts to undermine Kuwait's security and threaten the stability of the Gulf states.

"I urge our Kuwaiti brothers to remain vigilant against the plots orchestrated by Iran and its agents," Chamoun emphasized.

He affirmed that Kuwait possesses all the necessary means to safeguard its sovereignty from dangers and conspiracies, underscoring the need for heightened vigilance and caution.

Chamoun also highlighted the importance of remaining alert to security threats posed by Iranian-backed groups in many Arab countries, which aim to sow discord and destabilize the region.

He strongly condemned these actions targeting Kuwait and the brotherly Gulf and Arab states, which have supported Lebanon and stood by it during its most difficult times.

Chamoun affirmed that Kuwait and the Gulf states played a vital role in assisting Lebanon and contributing to its post-war reconstruction.

He stressed the importance of standing with Kuwait and the Gulf and Arab states against the schemes of subversive and terrorist groups that should not be considered as representative of Lebanon, as their loyalty lies with Iran rather than the Lebanese state, despite holding Lebanese identities.

He emphasized that these terrorist acts will not harm Lebanon's longstanding relations with Kuwait, which are built on decades of strong, unshakable ties.

In addition, MP Bilal Abdullah, a member of the Democratic Gathering parliamentary bloc, stated that this is not the first time sabotage networks have been uncovered in the Gulf, particularly in Kuwait.

He recalled the Abdali Cell and reiterated his condemnation of these acts targeting any sisterly or friendly nation, especially Kuwait, which has long been a source of support for the Lebanese people.

He noted that Iran's actions against the Gulf states during the recent war clearly reveal its malicious intentions.

Abdullah affirmed that Lebanon's relations with Kuwait, both at the government level and among the people, are far too strong to be undermined by such reprehensible acts.

He emphasized that at a time when Lebanon was being drawn into Iran's war, these acts of sabotage were particularly unacceptable; instead, Lebanese citizens should focus on strengthening their national social fabric.

### Saudi transit

It then clarified that all travel arrangements and associated costs remain the sole responsibility of each traveler.

It also stressed that the emergency transit visa is valid for only four days from the date of entry into the Kingdom. Anyone who stays beyond this duration will be subject to fines as per the regulations.

It urged those who want to verify their inclusion on approved transit list number 10 to contact the specified inquiry hotline to ease their border crossing and ensure a smooth transition without procedural obstacles.

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## Are we

Our strategic patience in facing such a sustained harm has been immense, a testament to the immense wisdom of our leaders who recognize the immutable laws of geography. They understand that the Persian people themselves remain the primary casualties of the oppressive mullahs' regime.

However, the current conflict totally changed the calculation, as the aggression has 'metastasized' into more vicious strikes against civilian sectors, forcing our people to bear the heavy brunt of this unwarranted suffering.

Moreover, the regime's intolerable terrorist practices against the global economy have reached a breaking point, convincing the international community that removing this malignant tumor has become a surgical necessity for regional stability.

For 50 years, the Iranian regime has methodically sought to destabilize Arab lands, from Lebanon – which it has reduced to ruins over the course of 45 years – to Syria, which it transformed into a breeding ground for its militias, and Iraq, where it has been granted free rein since 2003.

In Yemen, Tehran established a base for regional terror against the GCC states, daring even to target the sanctity of the holy sites in Makkah and Madinah.

In the final analysis, it is a recorded reality that the mullahs' regime failed to achieve even a fraction of its sinister objectives.

Having watched its claws decisively clipped from the ruins of Lebanon to the breeding grounds of Syria and Gaza, Tehran now reaps nothing but a bitter harvest in Iraq.

As for its regional base in Yemen, the future holds only deeper isolation and insurmountable difficulties.

Nevertheless, considering these points, the intensification of the current crisis is merely the beginning of the end for this malignant tumor.

The ancient wisdom reminds us that "the clouds of fate reveal the truth." The current events are finally exposing the reality of a regime that has tried to defy the immutable laws of history, failing to realize that those who strike their heads against the solid rock of reality will inevitably suffer the bruise of their own arrogance.

## 10 soldiers

Spokesperson of the ministry Brigadier Nasser Bouslaib said sirens were activated 12 times in the last 24 hours, bringing the total number activations since the beginning of the crisis to 158.

He stressed the importance of public cooperation with security authorities, urging citizens and residents to verify information and rely only on official

sources, while warning that the spread of unverified news undermines security efforts and could lead to legal accountability.

In addition, the Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy affirmed Sunday that the electricity and water systems of the country remain stable and under control despite damage to parts of the power grid caused by shrapnel from air defense interception operations.

Spokesperson of the ministry Eng. Fatima Hayat revealed that seven overhead power transmission lines in various areas were damaged by shrapnel recently. She said four lines were repaired and restored within 24 hours in coordination with the security authorities, while two additional lines were fixed the following day.

She stated that the total number of affected overhead transmission lines has reached 22, indicating that 20 of which have been repaired. She said work is ongoing to complete the maintenance of the remaining two lines.

She also mentioned the damage to a fuel tank at Subiya Power and Water Distillation Plant in recent weeks, adding that the specialized technical teams are currently carrying out repairs and that restoration work will take longer due to the extent of the damage.

She stressed that the ministry remains committed to ensuring transparency and continuous communication with citizens and residents through official channels to provide accurate information, while urging the public to follow only verified accounts and disregard rumors.

She also pointed out that conserving electricity and water is a shared responsibility, which supports system sustainability and helps maintain reliable services throughout the country.

She expressed appreciation for the ministry personnel, who are working round the clock with high level of professionalism to guarantee system reliability. She commended the close coordination with security and other relevant authorities, proving the effectiveness of government integration and response efficiency.

She prayed for the continuous security and prosperity of the country under the leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

Moreover, Kuwait National Guard (KNG) spokesman Brigadier General Dr. Jadaan Fadel Jadaan announced that the KNG task force downed four drones in its area of responsibility on Sunday.

In a press statement, Jadaan confirmed this is part of ongoing efforts to maintain national security, protect vital sites and counter threats. He urged everyone to strictly comply with the security and safety instructions issued by the

relevant authorities.

He revealed that the KNG forces, in cooperation with the Kuwait Armed Forces, police and Kuwait Fire Force (KFF), are fully prepared to deal with threats, foil attempts to destabilize national security, preserve the sovereignty, security and stability of the country, and protect national interests and resources.

As part of efforts to keep the public updated on the current situation, KNG started posting on its X account in the early morning hours to document the heroic efforts of its personnel in intercepting and destroying the drones.

In a related development, KNG Deputy Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Hamad Al-Barjas on Sunday conducted an inspection visit to one of the sites assigned to KNG as part of its security duties.

In a press statement, KNG revealed that Al-Barjas stressed the importance of maintaining the highest levels of readiness and discipline to improve the ability of KNG to support other State institutions and contribute to reinforcing national security and stability under the wise leadership of the country.

He also conveyed the greetings and appreciation of the KNG leadership to the personnel, expressing pride in the vital national role played by the KNG forces. He commended their sincere efforts and praised their high morale, dedication and commitment to perform their national duties.

On the other hand, KFF showed the highest level of heroism in defending Kuwait under the current circumstances. It proved its exceptional competence in protecting lives and properties, and in overcoming various field challenges with unwavering strength and determination.

KFF and its fire stations have been on full alert since the start of the war, supported by well-developed emergency plans and a high level of readiness to operate in coordination with the Kuwait Army, Ministry of Interior and KNG.

This integration is not spontaneous, as it is a manifestation of the well-established institutional framework, which recognizes that crisis management requires unity, swift decision-making and precise execution.

The role of KFF is exemplified in its direct response to the increasing number of fires resulting from attacks on vital and residential sites. In the midst of flames and billowing smoke, firefighting teams moved in a swift and efficient manner to contain the fires and prevent the spread of fire in a race against time to protect lives and minimize losses, always keeping the well-being of Kuwait in their minds. The role of these teams is not limited to extinguishing fires, as it extended to include evacuations, securing sites, and handling emergencies with a high level of professionalism. Their efforts saved many lives and preserved the properties of citizens and

residents, reflecting the immense responsibility borne by firefighters in facing challenges and dangers.

The extensive presence of fire stations in the governorates played a crucial role in expediting response to fires resulting from the Iranian aggression against Kuwait. This presence guaranteed rapid arrival at fire incident sites and highly efficient handling of incidents, thereby, minimizing the damage and controlling the situation within a short span of time.

KFF also played its media role efficiently, as it diligently provided daily briefings and explanatory statements on Kuwait Television, detailing the nature of the incidents handled and the measures taken, whether routine incidents or those resulting from the aggression. This enhanced transparency has reassured the public.

In the meantime, Brigadier General Mohammad Al-Gharib, Director General for Public Relations and Media at KFF, revealed to the newspaper the extent of the efforts exerted by the field teams since the beginning of the Iranian aggression.

He disclosed that the total number of reports handled from Feb 28 to March 29 reached 1,256, including 86 unusual incidents, such as falling debris from intercepted drones. He said the teams responded to 36 fire incident reports, indicating these fires were extinguished in a highly efficient manner. He added that 50 cases were handled by surveying and securing the sites before handing them over to the relevant authorities, stating that the response time ranged from four to eight minutes, which proves the readiness of the fire stations and the effectiveness of their strategic geographical distribution. He emphasized that this response speed played a vital role in saving lives, minimizing material losses, and preventing the escalation of incidents in numerous locations.

Earlier, the Ministry of Interior affirmed its security readiness and responsiveness to developments. Director of the Public Relations and Security Media Department in the ministry Colonel Othman Al-Mansouri asserted that the security forces remain vigilant in thwarting sabotage plots. He warned against sympathizing with traitors and stressed that there is no leniency in enforcing the law, indicating the media briefings include updates on the evolving incidents amidst the ongoing Iranian aggression.

He explained that unifying the media discourse among official entities has contributed to curbing the spread of rumors, citing the commitment of citizens and residents to believe only the information released by the Ministry of Information and other official platforms, as well as their cooperation in responding to various reports.

He disclosed that the total number of reports received since Feb 28 reached 588, all of which were handled by the

relevant authorities. He said most of these reports are about falling shrapnel, thanks to the concerted efforts of the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense, KNG and KFF.

He also affirmed the discovery of three terrorist cells involved in acts of treason, simultaneously with the Iranian aggression. He pointed out that this is the result of the vigilance of the security authorities, especially the State security system, which closely monitors the situation round the clock.

He added that sympathizing with these cells, whether individually or through online groups, is considered treason, which is punishable by law. He stressed that there is no leniency toward any behavior that threatens national security and called on anyone with hostile intentions to reconsider before legal action is taken against them.

He said the concerned authorities continue to exert tremendous efforts to clarify developments and strengthen national unity, underscoring the importance of service in the interest of the public and to maintain national security.

Regarding the weapons surrender campaign, Al-Mansouri stated that procedures are streamlined in all police stations for those concerned to surrender their weapons, stressing there will be record or legal action against them. He said this step reflects the sense of patriotism and responsibility in protecting society. He urged those concerned to surrender their weapons before the deadline (April 1). He warned that retaining a weapon after the deadline will subject the owner to legal accountability, emphasizing the need for compliance to maintain national security and stability.

Furthermore, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on Sunday met with European Union (EU) Special Envoy for the Gulf Luigi Di Maio, who is currently on official visit to the country.

In a press statement the Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed that the two sides discussed the latest regional developments amid the escalating military tensions resulting from the Iranian aggression against countries in the region, and the serious repercussions and concerning implications for regional and international security and stability.

The talks also touched on the long-standing relations and close strategic partnership between Kuwait and the EU.

Also, Ministry of Defense Undersecretary Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Meshal Al-Sabah had a meeting with Di Maio on the same day and they deliberated on ways to strengthen cooperation between Kuwait and the EU.

The ministry announced this in a press statement it issued after the meeting, which was held at its headquarters on the occasion of the official visit of Di Maio to the country. He was accompanied by EU Ambassador to Kuwait

Anne Koistinen.

During the meeting, Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Al-Sabah affirmed the commitment of Kuwait to consolidate its strategic partnership with the EU and the importance of continuing coordination and consultation on issues of mutual interest, while praising the level of the existing cooperation.

The ministry added that both sides discussed views on the latest regional developments amid the military escalation witnessed in the region and its repercussions on security and stability at the regional and international levels.

Also present at the meeting were Chief of the Armament and Procurement Authority Brigadier General Khalifa Duajj Al-Sabah, Assistant Undersecretary for Support Services Dr. Wael Nasser Al-Sabah and several representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## Oil jumps

The Strait of Hormuz remains a critical chokepoint, handling roughly one-fifth of global consumption and significant shares of seaborne oil and LNG trade.

Al-Wazzan noted widening price gaps between Brent crude traded at USD 105,115 per barrel and Middle Eastern crudes traded at USD 150, 160 per barrel reflect higher insurance costs, geopolitical risks, and shipping disruptions.

Global inventories exceed eight billion barrels, plus 400 million in strategic reserves, but their effectiveness is limited by distribution and accessibility constraints.

He warned partial disruption of Hormuz flows could remove 5 to 8 million barrels per day, heavily pressuring markets despite adequate theoretical supply.

Low demand elasticity makes markets highly sensitive, where a one percent supply drop could raise prices by 5 to 10 percent.

Rising oil prices are expected to increase transport costs, commodity prices, and global inflation, with Asia most affected and Europe facing slower growth.

Al-Wazzan stressed the issue is not resource scarcity but access, highlighting the need for more resilient supply chains and diversified transport routes.

He said Asian economies are the most affected due to heavy reliance on energy imports, while Europe faces mounting pressure from rising energy costs and slowing economic growth.

Al-Wazzan noted the next phase requires redesigning global energy transport systems to enhance supply stability and reduce reliance on chokepoints, adding current developments are reshaping pricing across the global economy.



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'There's got to be a change for newer conservatives'

## CPAC activists embrace Texas AG Paxton as MAGA's choice for Senate over Cornyn

GRAPEVINE, Texas, March 29, (AP): Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's was the unofficial guest of honor at the Conservative Political Action Conference, where hundreds of right-wing activists from around the country hailed him as Republicans' clear choice for US Senate.

He met with supporters behind closed doors, gave the keynote address at the Ronald Reagan dinner and held court during a private reception where people lined up for handshakes and photos. Audiences cheered for Paxton and booed any mention of Sen John Cornyn, Paxton's opponent in the May 26 runoff.

If Paxton wins the nomination, it will be because of support from his party's fervent grassroots base. That rock-solid foundation rescued Paxton's political career after he was impeached - but acquitted - for corruption charges by the Texas Legislature three years ago.

Neither Paxton nor Cornyn won enough votes in the March 3 primary to clinch the nomination outright. Although Cornyn has raised far more money and is backed by the party establishment in Washington, Paxton's well-honed survival skills could lead him to victory.

The winner will face Democrat

James Talarico, a state lawmaker, in what will be one of the most closely watched Senate races as Republicans try to retain their grip of Congress.

Cornyn did not attend CPAC, which was held at a resort and convention center near Dallas. Paxton was the overwhelming favorite in CPAC's straw poll, beating Cornyn by more than three to one, and he won the organization's endorsement.

President Donald Trump promised that he would endorse either Paxton or Cornyn weeks ago, but no announcement ever came. Paxton, however, has had no trouble proving his bona fides with the party's right wing.

"The real benefit of Paxton is that he is more an ally of Trump," said Luke Brown, a 21-year-old college student from Amarillo, Texas. "There's got to be a change for newer conservatives."

He added that, "I have respect for Cornyn. I just think it's time for someone more conservative."

Although Cornyn finished first in the primary, which also included Rep. Wesley Hunt, Paxton swiftly appealed to Trump by embracing legislation known as the SAVE Act, which would mean new, strict proof-of-citizenship requirements for voting. The proposal is a priority for the president, but it



Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton speaks at the Ronald Reagan dinner during the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Dallas on March 27. (AP)

has stalled in the Senate because Republican leaders do not want to lift the filibuster.

Paxton said he would consider stepping aside if the legislation passed and accused Cornyn of being a "coward." About a week later, Cornyn reversed his position on the filibuster and wrote

in an op-ed that "I support whatever changes to Senate rules that may prove necessary."

Paxton crowed about the shift during his reception on Saturday.

"Unfortunately, John Cornyn has never been focused on this issue until right now, when I called him out on it,"

he told supporters.

Cornyn's campaign noted that the senator is an original co-sponsor of the voting legislation.

"Ken Paxton has lied to his staff, to taxpayers, to his colleagues and to his own family, so it should be not a surprise he's lying here too," said Matt Mackowiak, a senior adviser to Cornyn's campaign.

Joe Ropar, a 72-year-old defense contractor who attended CPAC, described Paxton's maneuvering as "brilliant." "Cornyn's trying to change his stripes now," Ropar said. "It's too little too late."

While Cornyn did not attend CPAC, which was held at a resort and convention center near Dallas, Paxton was extolled by speakers throughout the event.

"Ken Paxton is emblematic of the grassroots of the MAGA movement across the nation," said Steve Bannon, a former Trump adviser who hosts the "War Room" podcast, referring to Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan.

Earlier Friday, CPAC senior fellow Mercedes Schlapp polled the crowd. Asking for a show of support for Paxton, there was a roar of cheers. When she asked about Cornyn, there was a

light ripple of boos.

Paxton reminded conservatives here of another connection with Trump: They both have portrayed themselves as the victims of political persecution. While Paxton was impeached and acquitted once, Trump went through the process twice during his first term.

Some conservative Republicans hold other grudges against Cornyn. They remember his early criticism of Trump's proposal for a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border in 2016, his co-sponsoring of gun control legislation after the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, in 2022, and his dismissive remarks about Trump's comeback campaign in 2024.

Retired music teacher Valerie Burge, 58, said she voted for Cornyn in the primary because of his long service.

"But I'm not sure about the runoff," she said. "It might be time for something new."

Barbara Palmer, a 65-year-old lawyer, said Cornyn had simply been in office for too long. He has been a judge, state supreme court justice and state attorney general, and now he wants a fifth term as senator.

"It's just time for a change," Palmer said.

### Springsteen headlines Minnesota demonstration

## 'No Kings' rallies draw crowds across US, in Europe

ST PAUL, Minn., March 29, (AP): Large crowds protested Saturday against the war in Iran and President Donald Trump's actions in "No Kings" rallies across the US and in Europe. Minnesota took center stage, with thousands of people standing shoulder-to-shoulder to celebrate resistance to Trump's aggressive immigration enforcement.

Minnesota's flagship event on the Capitol lawn in St. Paul drew Bruce Springsteen as its headliner. He and other speakers praised the state's people for taking to the streets over the winter in opposition to a surge of US Customs and Immigration Enforcement agents.

Springsteen performed "Streets of Minneapolis," the song he wrote in response to the fatal shootings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti by federal agents. Springsteen lamented Good and Pretti's deaths but said the state's pushback against ICE gave the rest of the country hope.

"Your strength and your commitment told us that this was still America," he said. "And this reactionary nightmare, and these invasions of American cities, will not stand."

People rallied from New York City, with almost 8.5 million residents in a solidly blue state, to Driggs, a town of fewer than 2,000 people in eastern Idaho, a state Trump carried with 66% of the vote in 2024.

US organizers have estimated that the first two rounds of No Kings rallies drew more than 5 million people in June and 7 million in October. They expected 9 million participants Satur-

day, though it was not clear whether those expectations were met.

Organizers said more than 3,100 events - 500 more than in October - were registered, in all 50 states.

Protests were mostly peaceful, but some arrests were reported.

In Los Angeles, authorities deployed tear gas near a federal detention center downtown. One man had a leaf blower, attempting to clear the air. The Los Angeles Police Department later arrested people for failing to disperse. Earlier in the day, a band was playing and people were dancing to Spanish-language music.

The Denver Police Department said on the social platform X that it declared an unlawful assembly and deployed smoke canisters after a small group of protesters blocked a road and did not leave as asked. Some threw the canisters back at officers, police said. At least eight people were arrested, as was a ninth person later on who police said was throwing objects.

White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson called them the product of "leftist funding networks" with little real public support.

The "only people who care about these Trump Derangement Therapy Sessions are the reporters who are paid to cover them," Jackson said in a statement.

The National Republican Congressional Committee was also sharply critical.

"These Hate America Rallies are where the far-left's most violent, deranged fantasies get a microphone," spokesperson Maureen O'Toole said.

Trump's immigration enforcement

push, particularly in Minnesota, was just one item on a long list of grievances that also included the war in Iran and the rollback of transgender rights. Speakers at the Minnesota rally decried billionaires' economic power.

In Washington, hundreds marched past the Lincoln Memorial and into the National Mall, holding signs that read "Put down the crown, clown" and "Regime change begins at home."

Bill Jarcho was there from Seattle, joined by six people dressed as insects wearing tactical vests that said, "LICE" - spoofing ICE - as part of what he called a "mock and awe" tour.

"What we provide is mockery to the king," Jarcho said. "It's about taking authoritarianism and making fun of it, which they hate."

About 40,000 people marched in San Diego, police there said.

In New York, Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, said during a news conference that Trump and his supporters want people to be afraid to protest.

"They want us to be afraid that there's nothing we can do to stop them," she said. "But you know what? They are wrong - dead wrong."

In Topeka, Kansas, a protesters dressed up in an inflatable frog costume and a baby version of Trump. Wendy Wyatt showed up with a "Cats Against Trump" sign. Many things upset her about the administration, she said, but the rallies are "very hopeful to me."

Organizers said two-thirds of RSVPs for the rallies came from outside of major

urban centers. That included communities in conservative-leaning states like Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, South Dakota and Louisiana, as well as suburbs in electorally competitive Pennsylvania, Georgia and Arizona.

Organizers designated the rally there as the national flagship event.

Before Springsteen took the stage, organizers played a video in which actor Robert DeNiro said he wakes up every morning depressed because of Trump but was happier Saturday because millions of people were protesting. He also congratulated Minnesotans for running ICE out of town.

The bill also included singer Joan Baez, actor Jane Fonda, Vermont US Sen Bernie Sanders and a long list of activists, labor leaders and elected officials.

Protesters held up a massive sign on the Capitol steps that read, "We had whistles, they had guns. The revolution starts in Minneapolis."

"Donald Trump may pretend that he's not listening, but he can't ignore the millions in the streets today," said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers.

Demonstrations were also held in more than a dozen other countries, according to co-executive director Ezra Levin of Indivisible, which spearheaded the events.

In Rome, thousands marched with chants aimed at Premier Giorgia Meloni, whose conservative government saw its referendum on streamlining Italy's judiciary fail badly this week. Protesters also waved banners protesting Israeli and US attacks on Iran.



People walk from Washington Square Park to the Capitol during a 'No Kings' anti-Trump protest in Salt Lake City on March 28. (AP)



Demonstrators holding banners take part in the 'No Kings' protest in Paris, France on March 28. (AP)



Migrants trying to reach Britain, walk on a beach shore in Gravelines, northern France on March 18. (AP)

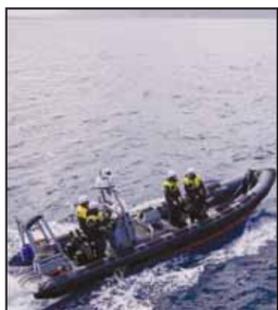
## Europe seeks to increase deportations as some warn of Trump-like tactics

BRUSSELS, March 29, (AP): The European Union is expanding its powers to track, raid and deport migrants to "return hubs" in third countries in Africa and elsewhere, quietly adopting tactics of the Trump administration that have drawn public criticism across the 27-nation bloc.

The EU continues to tighten migration policies after right-wing parties took power in some countries in 2024. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, from the center-right European People's Party coalition, has said the new measures will prevent a repeat of the 2015 crisis caused by Syria's civil war, when about 1 million people arrived to seek asylum.

"We have learnt the lessons of the past. And today, we are better equipped," von der Leyen has said. The new policies, known as the Pact on Migration and Asylum, go into effect on June 12.

Far-right parties in Europe have praised the deportation policies of U.S. President Donald Trump and called for the EU to adopt a similar approach. Human rights groups warn that author-



Frontex officers from the Italian Guardia Di Finanza OPV Osum patrol by speedboat on the Aegean Sea near Heraklion, Crete Island, Greece on Feb 16. (AP)

ities are already illegally pushing back migrants at EU borders and hollowing out their legal protections.

The EU already spends millions of dollars to deter migrants before they reach its shores, and has supported

tens of thousands of Africans returning home, voluntarily or by force.

What's envisioned now is an expansion of what Italy has created under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her "tough on migration" stance. It operates two migrant detention centers for rejected asylum-seekers in Albania. One currently holds at least 90 migrants, said lawmaker Rachele Scarpa, who said she found people confused and scared during a recent visit.

In addition, Meloni's Cabinet has approved an anti-immigration package that would allow the navy to halt vessels in international waters for up to six months if they are deemed a threat to public order; return intercepted migrants to countries of origin or third countries; and speed up the deportation of foreign nationals convicted of crimes.

An "informal group" of EU nations including Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark and Greece are pursuing deportation center agreements, said Bernd Parusel, a researcher at the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies.

## With candidates losing in metro Atlanta, Georgia GOP seeks to remove party labels

ATLANTA, March 29, (AP): With Democrats steadily wiping out Republicans electorally in the core Atlanta counties of swing-state Georgia, Republicans have a new idea: Make most local candidates run for office without party labels.

The Republican-majority Georgia House on Friday gave final passage to a bill that would require nonpartisan elections in the five most populous counties in metro Atlanta. Among officials affected would be Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, whom Republicans have repeatedly targeted because of her prosecution of Republican President Donald Trump after he pushed to overturn Democrat Joe Biden's key win in Georgia in 2020.

State Sen. John Albers, a Republican from the Atlanta suburb of Roswell who pushed the bill, said he believed it was needed to promote public safety, even though the counties' elected sheriffs will continue to be elected under party labels when it goes into effect in 2028.

"This is a bill that makes perfect sense," Albers said during Senate debate Thursday. "If you're playing politics, you'll be against this. If you want to keep Georgians safe, you'll be for it."

The measure would require nonpar-



US Sen John Albers walks on the Senate floor inside the state capitol on March 6, in Atlanta. (AP)

tisan elections for district attorneys, lower level county prosecutors called solicitors general, county commissioners, court clerks and tax commissioners.

It would apply in Fulton County, which includes most of Atlanta, as well as the suburbs of Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb and Gwinnett counties. Fulton, DeKalb and Clayton counties are

the three most important Democratic jurisdictions in the state. Cobb and Gwinnett, once the suburban heartlands of Georgia Republicans, have increasingly come under Democratic control since 2016.

Democrats assailed the bill as trying to rig elections so Republicans running without party labels had a better chance to win.

## Attempted bomb attack against Bank of America foiled in Paris: authorities

PARIS, March 29, (AP): French police have thwarted a suspected bomb attack outside a Bank of America building in Paris, authorities said Saturday. One suspect was detained and another escaped.

The national anti-terrorism prosecutor's office, or PNAT, told The Associated Press that it has opened an investigation into alleged terrorism-related offenses.

The suspected offenses include attempted damage by fire or by a dangerous means, the manufacture of an incendiary or explosive device, the possession and transport of such devices with the intent to prepare dangerous damage, and involvement in a terrorist criminal association.

A person was placed in police custody. "Well done to the rapid intervention of a Paris police prefecture unit, which made it possible to thwart a violent act of a terrorist nature overnight in Paris," Interior Minister Laurent Nuñez said. "Vigilance remains at a very high level," Nuñez said. "I commend all security and intelligence forces, fully mobilized under my authority in the current international context."

RTL radio, citing police sources, reported that the incident



Police stand outside the Bank of America building in Paris on March 28. (AP)

took place early Saturday when police officers spotted two suspects carrying a shopping bag near the premises of the Bank of America in the 8th arrondissement of the French capital.

## INTERNATIONAL

## Asia

**9 trapped after building collapses in NE China:** Nine people were trapped after a building partially collapsed in Hailin Town, Hailin City in northeast China's Heilongjiang Province on Sunday, said the local authorities. Rescue efforts are underway. (Xinhua)

**1 dead, 25 injured in north China high-rise building fire:** One person died and 25 others were injured, including seven in critical condition, after a high-rise building fire broke out in Taiyuan, north China's Shanxi Province, on Saturday, local authorities said.

The fire erupted at around 8 p.m. in Xiaodian District of Taiyuan, sources with the Taiyuan municipal government said.

So far, the open flames have been extinguished. Firefighters are carrying out search and rescue operations inside the building. (Xinhua)

**5 police officers killed in Philippine ambush:** Five police officers were killed Saturday night in an attack in Shariff Aguak, Maguindanao del Sur province, in southern Philippines' Mindanao island, said local authorities.

According to the Philippine Daily Inquirer, quoting the Police Regional Office Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, the officers were onboard a police mobile patrol vehicle when they were ambushed by unidentified suspects.

Further investigation is underway. (Xinhua)

**2 dead as SUV swept away by river in Philippines:** Two people were killed on Friday after their sport utility vehicle (SUV) was swept away by a strong river current in Benguet province in the northern Philippines, said local police.



Rescuers attend a ceremony marking the one-year anniversary of the Mandalay earthquake in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, March 28, 2026. A ceremony marking the one-year anniversary of the Mandalay earthquake that struck on March 28, 2025, was held in Myanmar's capital Nay Pyi Taw on Saturday, according to state-owned Myanmar Radio and Television. (Xinhua)

The incident occurred shortly after 1 pm local time along the Agno River. Four others on board managed to escape the vehicle.

According to the police, the SUV attempted to cross the swollen river, but was

spun by the current and carried about 100 meters downstream before coming to a stop, half-submerged in the water. (Xinhua)

**Malaysia, Indonesia to intensify diplomatic efforts:** Malaysia and Indonesia will intensify their diplomatic efforts to help de-escalate the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said on Saturday.

Anwar, who just concluded a special working visit to Indonesia to meet with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, said in a statement that both countries also stressed the need to strengthen principled regional cohesion to preserve peace, ensure stability, and enhance economic resilience for the well-being of the people.

During the meeting, both leaders further emphasized the importance of ensuring the continuity of global supply chains and strategic trade routes, including the Strait of Hormuz, remain unaffected.

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East has disrupted energy supplies across the Southeast Asian region, driving up fuel prices and disrupting the supply and manufacture of critical commodities. (Xinhua)

**Myanmar marks one-year anniversary of Mandalay quake:** A ceremony marking the one-year anniversary of the Mandalay earthquake that struck on March 28, 2025, was held in Myanmar's capital Nay Pyi Taw on Saturday, according to state-owned Myanmar Radio and Television.

During the event, Myanmar's Acting President Senior General Min Aung Hlaing expressed sorrow over the loss of lives and property caused by the disaster and highlighted ongoing rehabilitation efforts.

He said the earthquake affected 10 regions and states, including Nay Pyi Taw, leaving 3,818 people dead and 5,104 injured. Over 160,000 households and more than 420,000 people were affected, with total damage estimated at over 7,979 billion kyats (about 3.79 billion U.S. dollars). (Xinhua)

Some experts speculate Pyongyang's claim may be exaggeration

## North Korea conducts engine test for missile capable of targeting US mainland

SEOUL, South Korea, March 29, (Agencies): North Korean leader Kim Jong Un observed a test of an upgraded, high-thrust, solid-fuel engine for weapons and hailed it as a significant development to boost the country's strategic military capability, state media reported Sunday.

While the test was in line with Kim's stated goal of acquiring more agile, hard-to-detect missiles targeting the United States and its allies, some experts speculate North Korea's claim may be an exaggeration.

The Korean Central News Agency reported Kim watched the ground jet test of the engine using a composite carbon fiber material. It said the engine's maximum thrust is 2,500 kilotons, up from about 1,970 kilotons reported in a similar solid-fuel engine test in September.

KCNA reported the test was conducted as part of the country's five-year arms build-up meant to upgrade "strategic strike means," a term referring to nuclear-capable ballistic missiles and other weapons.

Kim said the latest engine test had "great significance in putting the country's strategic military muscle on the highest level," according to KCNA.

KCNA did not report exactly when or where the test occurred.

North Korea's report on the latest test could be "bluffing" as it didn't disclose some key information like the engine's total combustion time, said Lee Choon Geun, an honorary research fellow at South Korea's Science and Technology Policy Institute.

Kim oversaw the training of special operations units during a visit to a major training base, the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said Sunday.

At the special operations training base directly under the authority of the Operations Bureau of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army, Kim Jong Un, general secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea and president of the State Affairs of the DPRK, instructed the country's armed forces to get fully prepared in conformity with the trend of modern warfare, stressing what he called an iron truth: "Much more sweat in the peacetime training leads to less blood in the battlefield," said the report.

Kim laid out his plan for reorganizing the special operations forces and follow-up measures, the report added.

The training aimed to assess the physical and military capabilities of



This undated photo provided on March 29, 2026 by the North Korean government, shows what it says a solid-fuel engine test at an undisclosed place in North Korea. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event depicted in this image distributed by the North Korean government. (AP)

the combatants in the special operations units, it said.

When North Korea described the September test as the ninth and final ground test of a solid-fuel engine that it earlier said would be used for inter-

continental ballistic missiles. Observers predicted at the time North Korea would soon test-launch an ICBM loaded with that engine, but it hasn't done so yet.

North Korea's solid-fuel engine development program may be facing

some delays or the country might have determined to develop a better engine, possibly with Russian technical assistance, Lee said. Cooperation between the countries has deepened in recent years, with the North sending troops and conventional weapons to support Russia's war against Ukraine.

In recent years, North Korea has test-fired a variety of ICBMs demonstrating the potential range to reach the US mainland, including missiles with solid propellants that make detection prior to liftoff more difficult. The country's older liquid-fuel missiles must be fueled before liftoffs and cannot last long.

Some of North Korea's past claims about major weapons test-launches drew outside skepticism. In 2024, North Korea claimed to have successfully tested a multiwarhead missile, but South Korea quickly dismissed the claim as deception to cover up a failed launch.

Some foreign experts say North Korea still faces technological hurdles before it has a functioning ICBM, such as ensuring its warheads survive the harsh conditions of atmospheric reentry. But others dispute that assessment given the number of years the country has spent on its nuclear and missile programs.

Possession of more powerful and efficient solid-fuel engines would allow North Korea to build smaller ICBMs that can be launched from submarines or land-based mobile launch trucks, Lee said. Other observers say a push to increase the engine power is likely associated with efforts to place multiple warheads on a single missile to increase chances of defeating US defenses.

### Also:

**SEOUL:** South Korean President Lee Jae Myung said Friday that the country will rapidly regain its wartime operational command from the United States amid the swiftly changing security environment.

Lee presided over a meeting with major military commanders, stressing that the transition of wartime operational control to South Korea from the United States will be pursued expeditiously, as self-reliant defense is essential to respond to the rapidly changing security environment.

Seoul's wartime operational command was handed over to the US-led UN Command after the three-year Korean War broke out in 1950. The Asian country regained its peacetime command in 1994.

## Republic of Congo constitutional court confirms prez election win

BRAZZAVILLE, Republic of Congo, March 29, (AP): The Republic of Congo's constitutional court on Saturday confirmed President Denis Sassou-N'Guesso's victory in the recent election, granting the 82-year-old leader a fifth term with 94.90% of the vote.



N'Guesso

"The president Denis Sassou-N'Guesso is elected with 94.90% of the vote, representing an absolute majority," said Auguste Iloki, president of the constitutional court, at the end of the hearing.

Provisional results announced March 17 by Interior Minister Raymond Zephirin Mboulou had already placed Sassou-N'Guesso in the lead with 94.82% of the vote.

Six other candidates challenged the 82-year-old for the top job in the Central African country that boasts one of the largest oil reserves in sub-Saharan Africa.

Two of his challengers had rejected the provisional results last week.

One of them, Uphrem Mafoula, had filed an appeal with the constitutional court seeking to annul the election. The constitutional court on Saturday rejected the appeal.

The election is the latest in a trend of octogenarian African leaders clinging to power. Sassou N'Guesso is the third-longest-serving African president, only behind Cameroon's Paul Biya and Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo.

Sassou N'Guesso, running for the Congolese Party of Labor, first came to power in 1979 and ruled until 1992 when he organized the country's first multi-party elections. He returned to power as a militia leader following a four-month civil war in 1997.

The campaign period showed a vast mismatch between Sassou N'Guesso and his opponents, with the incumbent being the only candidate to travel around the country to canvass for votes. Roads in the capital city, Brazzaville, were paved with Sassou N'Guesso's effigies.

Two other major parties boycotted the elections over allegations of unfair electoral practices. A constitutional referendum in 2015 removed presidential age and term limits, allowing N'Guesso to run again.

## Conflict in eastern Congo escalating with use of heavy weapons and drones, UN warns

UNITED NATIONS, March 29, (AP): The United Nations' acting top envoy for Congo warned the UN Security Council that the conflict in mineral-rich eastern Congo is escalating and expanding, with increasing use of heavy weapons and offensive drones posing serious risks to civilians.

Vivian van de Perre said that despite the withdrawal of Rwanda-backed M23 rebels and their allies from the town of Uvira under international pressure in January, clashes are escalating in the provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu between the M23 and Congolese army forces and their supporters.

"The situation in South Kivu remains tense and the renewed hostilities have expanded and shifted the front lines, including toward Burundi's border, increasing the risk of a regional conflagration," she warned.

Eastern Congo has been battered by decades of unrest as government forces fight more than 100 armed groups, the most potent being M23, often over access to its mineral riches. M23 fighters made a major advance into the region early last year, seizing Goma and other key cities as they quickly expanded their presence.

Van de Perre, who heads the nearly 9,000-member UN peacekeeping force



UN peacekeepers guard a house hit by a drone strike in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo on March 11. (AP)

in Congo known as MONUSCO, said the situation in Ituri province also "remains alarming," with numerous casualties from violence linked to one rebel group while another group has been attacking mining sites.

Van de Perre cited two "concerning" emerging elements: the conflict is

expanding from North and South Kivu into Tshopo province, and the use of heavy weapons and drones in urban areas poses risks to civilians and civilian infrastructure, which she said includes "recent incidents affecting sites such as Bangoka Airport in Kisangani and in Goma town."

At the same time, she said, M23 is consolidating parallel administrative structures in areas under its control, which include Goma, "further undermining state authority and complicating the delivery of humanitarian assistance."

Officials from Congo, Rwanda and the United States met in Washington last week and agreed on coordinated steps to de-escalate tensions in eastern Congo.

After briefing the Security Council, van de Perre told reporters that the "extremely volatile" situation in the east is why all agreements signed by the parties must be implemented. The first step should be a ceasefire, followed by the reopening of airports and the restoration of freedom of movement for peacekeepers, she said.

Massad Boulos, who chaired the council meeting and is a senior adviser to US President Donald Trump on African and Arab affairs, said "MONUSCO remains indispensable to the success of the peace process."

He said resolving the conflict in eastern Congo is "a matter of highest priority" for Trump. He echoed van de Perre's call for the parties to stick to their obligations and commitments, including respecting a ceasefire.

## Mexico says third of 130,000 missing might be alive, fueling criticism from families

MEXICO CITY, March 29, (AP): Mexico's government said in a new report Friday that it identified signs of life for a third of the country's 130,000 registered missing people, an announcement that was quickly criticized by a number of search groups who called it another attempt to undermine the depth of Mexico's disappearance crisis.

The mounting criticism cut to the heart of fierce debate over how Mexico tracks disappearances, which have soared since the beginning of the drug war in 2006. While authorities say figures are overcounted, families say the number of missing people in Mexico is actually far higher. Both blame what they see as a lack of reliable data on failures by local governments and deep-seated impunity.

Mexican authorities said Friday that by cross-referencing things like vaccination records, birth and marriage registries and tax filings, officials found that 40,367 people - around 31% of reported disappearances - showed some activity in government records since they'd been reported missing. Marcela Figueroa, a top security official, said it indicated that those people might still be alive.

Using that search method, and consulting with a number of search groups, she said that the government was able to track down 5,269 people and mark them as "found."



Relatives of missing people, part of a group called the Guerreros Buscadores, hold a shoe they found among skeletal remains buried in Tlajomulco de Zuniga, on the outskirts of Guadalajara, Mexico on March 24. (AP)

Figueroa described many of those cases as "voluntary absences," citing a number of examples of men leaving their partners for another woman being reported as missing and women running away from abusive relationships.

"Not all disappearances are the same," she said, adding that the government was constantly working to locate Mexico's missing people.

But Héctor Flores, a leader of a search collective in the heart of Mex-

ico's disappearance crisis, the state of Jalisco, said he saw the Friday report as "misleading" and said the government's methodology lacked transparency.

Groups like his have accused the government for years of trying to disappear the disappeared to save face on an international stage. Historic corruption and lack of investigation into such cases has fueled distrust among families who believe that changes to the

registry could cut real cases from the list and hinder search efforts.

"For us, it's just another attempt by the administration to hide and downplay the numbers and continue to paint a picture that doesn't reflect the reality of what we're living through," said Flores, whose 19-year-old son was forcibly disappeared by agents from the Jalisco state prosecutor's office in 2021.

According to figures shared Friday, 46,000, or 36%, of those registered as disappeared had missing data like names and dates that made searches impossible.

Meanwhile, 43,128, or 33%, showed no registered activities in government databases. Of those, less than 10% are under criminal investigation, something Figueroa called a failure by Mexican authorities.

Figueroa also said the government was more vigorously monitoring local prosecutor's offices that have failed to investigate and accurately document cases of missing people, and has sought to boost the number of cases being investigated.

"Society and the families can trust in the records and better tools to search for people," Figueroa said.

The reinterpreted figures are part of a larger effort to bring order to a convoluted data set that connects to a collective trauma scarring the Latin American nation.



This photo taken on March 25, 2026, shows a photo of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores during a vigil in Caracas, Venezuela. (Xinhua)

## Venezuela's ex-president and wife 'well, firm' in first message since capture

CARACAS, March 29, (Xinhua): Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro said Saturday in a social media post that he and his wife, Cilia Flores, are "well, firm and calm," two days after a court hearing in New York.

In a first-person message posted on his official Telegram and X accounts, Maduro and Flores said that "now more than ever," it is necessary to "continue consolidating the country's peace, national unity, reconciliation, forgiveness and reunification among all."

"No one should deviate from the path of dialogue, coexistence and re-

spect," the couple said in the message, their first public statement since their capture in Caracas in January.

On Jan. 3, U.S. military forces launched a large-scale operation against Venezuela and forcibly seized Maduro and his wife before transporting them to New York.

On Jan. 5, Maduro made his first court appearance in New York, where he pleaded not guilty to all US charges against him.

Maduro appeared again before the same court on Thursday, where the judge denied his motion to dismiss the case.

## Boursa Kuwait closes session lower

KUWAIT CITY, March 29, (KUNA): Boursa Kuwait ended Sunday's trading session in negative territory, with the general index slipping 70.87 points, or 0.84 percent, to close at 8,335.09 points. Trading activity saw a total of 135.3 million shares exchanged across 14,218 transactions, with a total value of KD 41.7 mil-

lion (approximately USD 128 million).

The main market index recorded the sharpest decline, shedding 116.06 points, or 1.50 percent, to settle at 7,600.12 points. Around 59.9 million shares changed hands through 5,343 transactions worth KD 9.2 million (around USD 28.2 million).

# Business

'Our hedging strategy & diversified investment base have proven effective & are clearly reflected in our results'

## KIPCO reports a net profit of KD 16.3 million in 2025

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: KIPCO – Kuwait Projects Company (Holding) – delivered strong financial and operational performance in 2025, supported by the resilient performance of its portfolio companies. Net profit for the year ended December 31, 2025 reached KD 16.3 million, representing an increase of 4.4% compared to the KD 15.6 million reported at year-end 2024. Earnings per share for 2025 stood at 1.8 fils.

KIPCO's operating revenue came to KD 1.54 billion at the end of 2025, representing an increase of 3.1% compared to the KD 1.50 billion reported for 2024. The results reflect the improved performance of

KIPCO's operations in the oil services and logistics sectors.

Shareholders' equity increased 1.7% to KD 645 million in 2025, compared to 634 million at the end of 2024.

As part of its continued focus on strengthening its asset base, KIPCO's consolidated assets increased 6.5% to KD 13.8 billion at the end of 2025, up from the KD 13.0 billion reported at year-end 2024.

The Board of Directors is recommending a 3% stock dividend for 2025 using existing treasury shares, subject to the approval of the company's General Assembly and regulatory authorities.



Sheikha Dana Naser Al Sabah

Reflecting on the Group's performance and strategic priorities, Sheikha Dana Naser Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah, KIPCO's Group Chief Executive Officer, said:

"KIPCO's 2025 results reflect the strength of our core operating companies and the steady execution of our strategy to preserve and grow stakeholder value. This is achieved through strengthening the performance of our portfolio companies, while maintaining a balanced and diversified investment base. Our core sectors continued to demonstrate resilience and strong operational performance, and we are pleased to resume the distribution

of dividends to our shareholders. During the year, KIPCO undertook a number of proactive liability management initiatives that strengthened our balance sheet and contributed to improvements in our credit ratings, reinforcing market confidence in KIPCO's financial position and long-term outlook."

She added:

"As we look ahead, we remain committed to disciplined capital management and delivering sustainable growth across our portfolio. At this time, we reaffirm our commitment to Kuwait and stand ready to contribute in any way we can to support our country and community."

### 'Full recovery may take years'

## Rystad: War causes major oil, gas disruptions in Middle East

By Najeh Bilal

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: Rystad Energy documented severe disruption of global oil and gas supplies, as damage to Middle Eastern oil sectors continues five weeks into the Israeli-American war against Iran.

Damages and shutdowns have affected liquefied natural gas (LNG) production units, refineries, fuel stations and gas-to-liquid (GTL) facilities throughout the region.

Rystad Energy estimates the cost of repairing and restoring energy infrastructure at \$25 billion, based on an initial assessment of the damaged facilities.

The report touched on the repair costs and full restart timelines at different risk levels in Ras Laffan Industrial City in Qatar. The destruction of two LNG production units there led to a declaration of force majeure and 17 percent reduction of production capacity -- equivalent to about 12.8 million tons per year. It indicated that capital alone will not be enough to restart the facility and full recovery could take up to five years due to the large-frame gas turbines needed to power the main refrigeration compressors for LNG, which are supplied by only three equipment manufacturers worldwide. All three entered 2026 with two to four years' worth of production backlogs due to demand from data center electrification and coal-fired power plant closures.

The report stated that the recovery of the Gulf region will be determined less by financial capital and more by structural constraints. It pointed out that while some assets might be restored within months, others may remain out of service for years.

It added that regardless of the situation in the Strait of Hormuz, every day of damaged or inoperable infrastructure pushes pre-war production

capacity further away.

The report stated that the disruption scenario in Bahrain is totally different from that in Qatar, where the Bapco Sitra refinery was attacked twice, damaging two crude oil distillation units and a tank farm. Force majeure was declared in all operations of the group.

It added that the obstacle is not lack of equipment or sanctions, but the timing of the damage relative to the investment cycle of the facility, which just completed mechanical work as part of the \$7 billion modernization program in December. Engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) contractors were still on-site finalizing their commitments to increase production when the attacks occurred.

The destruction of the newly commissioned crude oil distillation unit, just months after it began production, eliminated new processing capacity, delaying revenues intended to support the recent investment. Rehabilitating the units will likely require re-engineering by international contractors at considerable cost due to the conflict and uncertain war risk insurance coverage, given that the damaged assets were commissioned only recently.

Some countries experienced moderate to minor disruptions, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

In all affected facilities, the density and proximity of the local EPC infrastructure surrounding each facility is the most influential factor in recovery paths -- a factor often underestimated in traditional damage assessments.

Saudi Aramco's rapid resumption of operations at Ras Tanura, where maintenance teams were already on-site for planned routine maintenance when debris fell into the perimeter, serves as the clearest example of the advantages offered by extensive local capabilities.

Recovery paths -- a factor often underestimated in traditional damage assessments.

Saudi Aramco's rapid resumption of operations at Ras Tanura, where maintenance teams were already on-site for planned routine maintenance when debris fell into the perimeter, serves as the clearest example of the advantages offered by extensive local capabilities.

### 'Targeting refineries threatens global energy stability'

## Kuwait cuts oil output amid regional conflict

By Najeh Bilal

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: Since the war between the United States of America (USA) and Israel against Iran began on Feb 28, the local oil sector has been facing numerous challenges and incurring losses due to the ongoing conflict and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

On March 7, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) decided to reduce oil production due to repeated Iranian attacks against Kuwait, including threats to the passage of ships through the Strait of Hormuz.

KPC implemented the precautionary reduction in crude oil production and refining operations as part of its risk management and business continuity strategy. It emphasized that this adjustment is purely a precautionary measure, which will be reviewed as the situation develops, while affirming its full readiness to restore production levels as soon as the conditions permit. It also confirmed that the needs of the local market remain fully secured as per the established plans.

On March 8, the Public Authority for Civil Aviation (PACA) announced that a drone targeted two fuel tanks at Kuwait International Airport belonging to Kuwait Aviation Fueling Company (KAFCO), resulting in a large fire at the site.

According to initial reports, the damage was limited to properties, without loss of life. PACA stated that the concerned authorities immediately implemented emergency procedures, with firefighting teams and other concerned parties working hard to contain the blaze. All the relevant au-

thorities were present at the scene.

On March 19, KPC stated that drones attacked some operational units at the Mina Al-Ahmadi and Mina Abdullah refineries, owned by Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC), causing minor fire in the units. The corporation confirmed that these attacks did not result in injuries.

PACA announced that emergency and rapid response teams immediately dealt with the fire incidents according to the highest safety standards, and all the necessary precautionary measures were taken to ensure personnel safety and secure the site.

On March 24, during his participation via video conference in the CERA Week Conference, held annually in Houston, Texas, which brings together thousands of leaders and experts in the oil and energy sector to discuss challenges and opportunities amidst global economic transformations, KPC CEO Sheikh Nawaf Saud Al-Sabah asserted that "attacks on oil refineries in Kuwait and the region cannot be justified in any way," expressing his condemnation of such acts.

He explained that "targeting oil facilities is a dangerous escalation that threatens the stability of global energy markets," calling for "avoiding such attacks, the repercussions of which are felt by the international economy as well."

He stated that "if the war ends, we will be able to resume production quickly. It will take three to four months to reach full production. These are not just attacks on the Gulf states, but also on the global economy. They are unjustified and illegal."

### The Conversation

## Soaring gas prices & disrupted supply chains will ripple out to increase costs in every store and sector of the economy

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

By Vidya Mani

University of Virginia

The disruptions from the U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran spread quickly to commercial aircraft, shipping lanes and the world's energy supply. Those repercussions have already hit fuel costs, including for motorists, truckers and fishermen, and are set to spread even more widely, to packaging, household goods, appliances, medicines and electronics.

I study global supply chains and how they interconnect and depend on each other around the world. There are several ways in which U.S. consumers will begin to feel the pinch of the war. Some of those effects have to do with domestic commerce, and some are a result of the interwoven nature of global trade, where raw materials from one place are shipped somewhere they are manufactured into specific items that are then transported to consumers.

There are three main categories in which costs will begin to rise.

**Fuel shortages and freight surcharges:** From March 2-16, 2026, the average nationwide price of U.S. regular gasoline rose from US\$3.01 to \$3.96 per gallon, while diesel fuel rose from \$3.89 to \$5.37. Diesel prices matter to consumer costs because diesel engines power trucks, farm machines, construction equipment, fishing vessels and many of the vehicles that carry domestic freight. When items become more expensive to harvest, build and ship, diesel costs spread quickly into grocery, household and building material prices.

**Chemicals, fertilizer and packaging:** Qatar-Energy has said Iranian attacks on the world's largest liquefied natural gas export plant at Ras Laffan and another plant in Mesaieed, both in Qatar, forced the company to stop producing LNG and associated products on March 2. Two days later, the company declared that it could not fulfill its contracts due to extreme external pressures that would require many years to recover from. The affected products included urea, polymers and methanol, used to make fertilizer, plastics, detergents, packaging and other consumer goods. Reduced production and closed transit routes are also affecting supplies of aluminum and helium produced in the Gulf countries.

**Factory slowdowns abroad:** When shipping slows and energy costs rise, factories abroad face higher operating costs. As a result they ration production, diverting energy supplies to producing a narrow range of high-value products that can absorb these costs. Diversions of shipment traffic and fewer transportation routes lead to delivery delays. Economic research shows that shipping-cost increases also raise import prices, producer costs and consumer inflation.

Air cargo and delivery delays: Early in the



Marathon and Shell gas stations display price signs in Lakeside Park, Ky., Monday, March 23, 2026. (AP)

conflict, several countries, including Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, closed their airspace to all traffic. Later advisories warned of risks to planes over neighboring countries as well, except for limited corridors. Those closures affected 20% of global air cargo capacity, raising the risk of delays for higher-value cargo such as medicines, aircraft components and electronics.

About 80% of the oil and 90% of the LNG moving through the Strait of Hormuz, between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, is destined for Asian markets. With strait shipments stopped, consumer electronics and manufacturing hubs in China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea are drawing on their energy reserves and inventories. But those supplies will run out in a few months. Reduced manufacturing capacity can be expected to cause shortages and higher costs for textiles, chemicals, consumer goods, electronics, appliances, auto parts and fertilizer-intensive industries.

Europe is less directly dependent than Asia on Hormuz shipments, but it is still vulnerable to high LNG prices, increased shipping costs and diesel fuel shortages. Europe has also already faced shortages of heating oil and other fuels as a result of Russia's war on Ukraine. The strait carried about 7% of Europe's LNG inflows in 2025, and higher costs for energy, ship fuel, freight and insurance can ripple through global trade. For the U.S., that matters because Europe supplies industrial equipment, precision components, medical technology and specialty chemicals sold to businesses and directly to consumers.

African economies are especially exposed

to fuel and fertilizer shocks. Large volumes of fertilizer pass through Hormuz, and higher energy and fertilizer prices threaten crop yields and food systems across most of Africa. As a result, U.S. prices can rise for coffee and chocolate - much of which originates in Africa - as well as critical minerals for electric vehicles, energy storage and high-tech equipment.

This war is not a distant geopolitical shock for U.S. households. It reaches everyday life through fuel, freight, fertilizer, petrochemicals and global supply chains through factories that produce consumer goods.

Some mitigation is possible: 32 nations will be releasing more than 400 million barrels of oil to the global market over the next few months. There are pipelines and alternative ports in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that, if they remain undamaged and uninterrupted, can handle potentially 40% of the 20 billion barrels per day that was passing through the Strait of Hormuz. Combined with a temporary easing of sanctions on Russian oil, limited shipments to India and China through the Strait of Hormuz and the March 23 announcement of a five-day pause on U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran, it is possible to head off the worst-case scenario.

But these measures cannot fully replace the strait's normal oil and LNG shipment volume. And if oil production, refining and shipment locations continue to be targeted, recovery can be expected to stretch into many months. The likely result is broader inflation, prolonged shortages and longer waits for goods of all sorts, including food and packaging as well as electronics and appliances. (AP)

### CBK relaxes lending, liquidity limits

## Kuwait Central Bank eases rules to strengthen liquidity

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: Following the Central Bank of Kuwait's announcement last Thursday of a stimulus package for local banks, including regulatory guidelines and precautionary policy tools in response to current geopolitical developments, economist Salman Al-Mu'tash indicated that these measures aim to strengthen banks' resilience and ensure the flow of liquidity to productive sectors to support economic stability, reports Al-Seyassah daily.

Al-Mu'tash provided a technical explanation of the terms used in the Central Bank's statement.

The measures include lowering liquidity standards applied to banks, such as the liquidity coverage ratio, the net stable funding ratio, and the regulatory liquidity ratio, in addition to raising the maximum limits for cumulative gaps in the liquidity system, increasing the maximum lending limit, and releasing a portion of the precautionary capital buffers within the capital base.

Al-Mu'tash shared a detailed explanation of the Central Bank's recent decision on his personal social media account, presenting it in simple language and describing it as a move to free up liquidity in response to geopolitical developments.

He provided the following explanation of the terms:

1. Liquidity Coverage Ratio (LCR)  
Definition - The ratio of high-quality liquid assets a bank holds to cover expected net cash outflows during a stressful 30-day period.

Al-Mu'tash explained that this means the Central Bank has directed banks to maintain emergency reserves in the form of cash, gold, and bonds that can be sold at any time, sufficient to cover the bank's needs for a full month without external assistance. The Central Bank has now allowed banks to draw on these reserves to a

greater extent.

2. Net Stable Funding Ratio (NSFR)  
Definition - This standard ensures that banks maintain sufficient stable funding sources to meet the long-term financing needs of off-balance-sheet assets and activities.

Al-Mu'tash explained that this means preventing banks from "playing with fire," ensuring they do not grant loans for long-term projects, such as those requiring ten years to complete, while relying on short-term deposits of just one or two months.

3. Regulatory Liquidity Ratio (RLR)

Definition - This is the minimum liquid balance a bank must maintain as a percentage of its total deposits, as determined by the monetary authorities.

Al-Mu'tash explained that this refers to the "mandatory reserve" or fractional reserve. The Central Bank previously required banks to hold a minimum of 18 percent of their deposits in cash, and this requirement has now been reduced to 15 percent.

4. Capital Buffer

Definition - This is additional Tier 1 capital that banks are required to maintain above the minimum capital adequacy requirements, intended for use during times of crisis.

Al-Mu'tash explained that this means the Central Bank has allowed banks to access these "piggy banks" of savings to relieve pressure on their balance sheets and enable them to finance projects despite challenging political circumstances.

5. Maximum Lending Limit (MLL)

Definition - This is the maximum amount of credit a bank is allowed to extend, based on its total available deposits and capital base.

Al-Mu'tash explained that this means a bank cannot grant loans exceeding the limit set by the Central Bank, which has now raised this limit.

## BUSINESS

## Türkiye faces dual shock

## Farmers worldwide struggle as fertilizer trade plummets

HANOI, March 29, (Agencies): Farmers around the world are feeling the squeeze of the Iran war. Gas prices have shot up and fertilizer supplies are waning due to Tehran's near shutdown of the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for U.S. and Israeli bombing.

The fertilizer shortage is putting the livelihood of farmers in developing countries - already troubled by rising temperatures and erratic weather systems - further at risk, and could lead to people everywhere paying more for food.

The poorest farmers in the Northern Hemisphere rely on fertilizer imports from the Gulf, and the shortage comes just as planting season begins, said Carl Skau, deputy executive director of the World Food Program.

"In the worst case, this means lower yields and crop failures next season. In the best case, higher input costs will be included in food prices next year."

Baldev Singh, a 55-year-old rice farmer in Punjab, India, says smallholders - the bulk of the country's farmers - may not survive if the government cannot subsidize fertilizers when demand peaks in June.

"Right now, we are waiting and hoping," he said.

Iran is seriously limiting shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow passage that usually handles about a fifth of the world's oil shipments and nearly a third of global fertilizer trade.

On Friday Iranian ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva Ali Bahreini said Tehran has accepted a request from the U.N. to let humanitarian aid and agricultural shipments move through the critical waterway, even as it endured strikes on its nuclear facilities.

The aid plan would be the first breakthrough at the shipping chokepoint after a month of war. While markets and governments have largely focused on blocked supplies of oil and natural gas, the restriction of fertilizer threatens farming and food security around the world.

Nitrogen and phosphate - two major fertilizer nutrients - are under immediate threat from the blockade.

Supplies of nitrogen including urea, the most widely traded fertilizer that helps plants grow and boosts yields, are the hardest hit because of shipping delays and the soaring price of liquefied natural gas - an essential ingredient.

The conflict has restricted about 30% of global urea trade, said Chris Lawson of CRU Group, a London-based commodities consultancy.

Some countries are already facing critical shortages, according to Raj Patel, a food systems economist at the University of Texas. For example, Ethiopia gets over 90% of its nitrogen fertilizer from the Gulf through Djibouti, a supply route that was strained even before the war began in February.

"The planting season is now," Patel said. "The fertilizer isn't there."

Phosphate supplies, which support root development, are also under pressure. Saudi Arabia produces about a fifth of the world's phosphate fertilizer, and the region exports more than 40% of the world's sulfur, a key ingredient and byproduct of oil and gas refining, Lawson said.

Even after the war ends, producers in the Gulf would need clear security guarantees before resuming shipments through the strait, and insurance costs would almost certainly rise, said Owen Gooch, an analyst with London-based Argus Consulting Services.

In India, the government has prioritized urea supplies for domestic use and provides fertilizer manufacturers with about 70% of their natural gas needs. Some plants are still running below capacity, leading to lower output.

"The food system is fragile, and it depends on stable fertilizer supply chains to ensure farmers can produce the food the world relies on," said Hanna Opsahl-Ben Ammar of Yara International, one of the world's largest fertilizer companies.

Fertilizers are generally applied just before or at planting, so crops miss key early growth stages and yields can fall when deliveries are delayed, even if supplies improve later.

The impact is already being felt in the United States and Europe, where the main planting season is underway, and it is expected to hit the first planting season in much of Asia in the coming months.

"Our crops out in the field need nitrogen now - the sooner the better - so they can get off to a good start, helping them establish themselves and build up reserves for the harvest later this summer," said Dirk Peters, an agricultural engineer who runs a farm outside Berlin.

Fertilizer prices are below the peaks seen after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but grain prices were higher then, helping farmers absorb the costs, said Joseph Glauber of the International Food Policy Research Institute. Grain prices are lower now meaning margins are tighter and farmers may have to switch to less fertilizer-intensive crops - such as soybeans in the U.S. - or apply less fertilizer, reducing yields. Lower yields can lead to higher consumer prices.

Other nations likely won't make up the shortfall. China, the world's

largest producer of nitrogen and phosphate fertilizers, is prioritizing domestic supply, and urea shipments probably won't resume until May, Lawson said. Plants in Russia, another major producer, are already running near full capacity, he said.

The disruptions are already being felt across Africa, where many farmers rely on fertilizer imported from the Middle East and Russia.

Early heavy rains in East Africa have left farmers with about a week of dry weather to prepare fields and apply fertilizer, said Stephen Muchiri, a Kenya maize farmer and CEO of the Eastern African Farmers Federation, which represents 25 million smallholders.

Fertilizer shortages and price hikes hit farmers hard, forcing them to use less and leading to reduced yields. Even short delays can reduce maize yields by about 4% in a season, Patel said, citing research from Zambia.

Governments can intervene by applying subsidies, promoting domestic production and controlling exports.

India already subsidizes fertilizer to ease the financial strain on farmers, but those subsidies leave less money for long-term farming investments. It has budgeted \$12.7 billion this year for urea subsidies alone, according to the U.S.-based Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis.

Efforts to produce domestic urea have increased India's dependence on imported gas, and excessive urea use has harmed local soil, said Purva Jain of IEEFA, who supports the use of organic fertilizers.

Less reliance on imported fertilizers could protect farmers and consumers from energy price swings and climate shocks, said Oliver Oliveros, executive coordinator of the Agroecology Coalition.

"This could be a turning point," he said.

## Also:

**ISTANBUL:** As geopolitical tensions in the Strait of Hormuz disrupt global supply chains, Turkish agriculture is hit hard. Farmers and experts warn that soaring fertilizer costs are now a direct threat to the country's food security.

The Strait of Hormuz serves as a global agricultural artery. According to data from the International Fertilizer Association, Gulf nations account for approximately one-third of the global export supply of urea and nitrogen-based fertilizers.

The maritime instability has hence translated into a swift 30 percent price surge for Turkish producers since the start of the war, said Halim Orta, an academic at Tekirdag Namik Kemal University and a wheat farmer in Türkiye's Thrace region.

Orta told Xinhua that the crisis has shifted from a logistical concern to a struggle for survival, adding that the price of urea rose within days from 20 to over 30 Turkish liras (0.68 U.S. dollars) per kg.

This agricultural pressure is further compounded by a volatile energy market. While diesel prices stood at approximately 60 liras (1.35 dollars) at the beginning of March, they have since skyrocketed to a peak of 80 liras (1.8 dollars) per liter -- marking a staggering 33 percent increase in fuel costs for farmers in just a few weeks.

"The combination of expensive fertilizer and 80-lira diesel has created a perfect storm for the producer," Orta said, noting that insufficient nutrients today will lead to lower yields and protein values by August. "This is a total availability crisis during the critical 30-day fertilizing window that determines the fate of the entire Turkish agricultural season."

The warnings from the fields are echoed by financial analysts who see this fertilizer shock as the primary trigger for a wave of food inflation. Turkish economist Murat Tufan describes the situation as a "vicious cycle" that goes beyond what traditional monetary policy can fix.

"We are seeing a double inflation shock where soaring fertilizer prices are compounded by record-high energy costs," Tufan explained. He noted that this is a supply-side crisis, which leaves central banks with limited options. "You cannot curb rising food costs through interest rate hikes alone when the primary drivers are external shocks to fuel and fertilizer."

**Emine Olhan**, an academic from Ankara University's Department of Agricultural Economics, emphasized that this disruption is more than a temporary setback -- it is a matter of national security.

"Food security is a fundamental human right," Olhan said, calling for a production-heavy strategy to break Türkiye's dependency on imports. To tackle this "existential threat," she proposed a circular farming model that integrates livestock and crop production to reduce the need for expensive, gas-based chemical fertilizers.

"We must move away from an 'import-first' mindset for staples like wheat, sugar and oil," Olhan said. Long-term stability requires more than just tax cuts, it demands a shift toward high-efficiency, resource-conscious farming that can feed the nation regardless of global or geopolitical volatility, she added.

## Worries about global economic pain deepen as war in Iran stretches out

Economists warn of stagflation risk amid soaring energy costs

**WASHINGTON, March 29, (AP): U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran have driven up prices, darkened the outlook for the world economy, sent global stock markets reeling and forced developing countries to ration fuel and subsidize energy costs to protect their poorest.**

Ongoing strikes and counterstrikes on Persian Gulf refineries, pipelines, gas fields and tanker terminals threaten to prolong the global economic pain for months, even years.

"A week ago or certainly two weeks ago, I would have said: If the war stopped that day, the long-term implications would be pretty small," said Christopher Knittel, an energy economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "But what we're seeing is infrastructure actually being destroyed, which means the ramifications of this war are going to be long-lived."

Iran has hit Qatar's Ras Laffan natural gas terminal, which produces 20% of the world's liquefied natural gas. The March 18 strike wiped out 17% of Qatar's LNG export capacity and repairs will take up to five years, state-owned QatarEnergy said.

The war caused an oil shock from the get-go. Iran responded to U.S. and Israeli attacks Feb. 28 by effectively closing off the Strait of Hormuz, a transit point for a fifth of the world's oil, by threatening tankers trying to pass through.

Gulf oil exporters like Kuwait and Iraq cut production because there was nowhere for their oil to go without access to the strait. The loss of 20 million barrels of oil a day delivered what the International Energy Agency calls the "largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market."

The price for a barrel of Brent crude oil climbed 3.4% on Friday to settle at \$105.32. That was up from roughly \$70 just before the war began. Benchmark U.S. crude rose 5.5% to settle at \$99.64 per barrel.

"Historically, oil price shocks like this have led to global recessions," Knittel said.

The war also has dredged up a bad economic memory from the oil shocks of the 1970s: stagflation.

"You're raising the risk of higher inflation and lower growth," said the Harvard Kennedy School's Carmen Reinhart, a former World Bank chief economist.

Gita Gopinath, former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund, recently wrote that global economic growth, expected before the war to register 3.3% this year, would be 0.3 to 0.4 percentage points lower if oil prices averaged \$85 a barrel in 2026.

The Persian Gulf accounts for a big share of exports of two key fertilizers, a third of urea and a quarter of ammonia. Producers in the region enjoy an advantage: easy access to low-cost natural gas, the primary feedstock for nitrogen fertilizers. Up to 40% of world exports of nitrogen fertilizer pass through the Strait of Hormuz.

Now that the passage is blocked, urea prices are up 50% since the war and ammonia 20%. Big agricultural producer Brazil is especially vulnerable because it gets 85% of its fertilizer from imports. Alpine Macro commodity strategist Kelly Xu wrote in a commentary. Egypt, a big fertilizer producer itself, needs natural gas to make the stuff and production falters when it can't get enough.

## Kenya and Uganda face fuel shortages amid supply disruptions

## Africa feels the pain of Iran war's economic shock

**LAGOS, March 29, (AP):** Lagos taxi driver Adegbola Isaac went to the gas station twice last weekend. Each time, the price in the Nigerian city had climbed further and hit 1,350 naira (\$0.99) per liter, a nearly 35% increase since the Iran war started. That's wiped out most of his daily profit.

"It is hitting hard," Isaac told The Associated Press.

Like many people across the world, Isaac is one of millions across Africa who are reeling from the economic impacts of the far-away conflict in the Middle East, which began Feb. 28 with joint U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran.

For many Africans, the fuel price hike because of the Strait of Hormuz being largely closed off worsens the hardships they already struggle with in some of the world's poorest households.

The latest shock also isn't isolated.

Africa is hurting again from another global crisis it had no part in starting.

From the COVID-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine and now the Middle East conflict, the world's fastest-growing continent - with a population rivaling China and India - is at the painful end of ripple effects that include a global scramble for critical resources like fuel and fertilizer.

With the majority of African countries being net importers of refined oil products, the impact has been swift, leading to rising retail fuel prices in Africa and associated increases in the costs of most goods and services.

Experts say African countries are critically integrated into global economies and are exposed to global shocks because of their dependence on major economies.

The United Nations on Friday said it is pursuing a way to allow



Motorists queue up to get fuel at a pump, fearing a possible fuel shortage due to the US Iran war, in Ahmedabad, India, Monday, March 23, 2026. (AP)

Eventually, higher fertilizer prices are likely to make food more expensive and less abundant as farmers skimp on it and get lower yields. The squeeze on food supplies will land hardest on families in poorer countries.

The war also has disrupted world supplies of helium, a byproduct of natural gas and a key input in chipmaking, rockets and medical imaging. Qatar makes helium at the Ras Laffan facility and supplies a third of the world's helium.

"No country will be immune to the effects of this crisis if it continues to go in this direction," International Energy Agency head Fatih Birol said on March 23.

Poorer countries will be hit hardest and face the biggest energy shortages "because they will be outbid when competing for the remaining oil and natural gas," said Lutz Kilian, director of the Center for Energy and the Economy at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

Asia is especially exposed: More than 80% of the oil and LNG that passes through the Strait of Hormuz is headed there.

In the Philippines, government offices are now open just four days a week and bureaucrats must limit the use of air conditioning to nothing cooler than 75°F (24°C). In Thailand, public workers have been told to take the stairs instead of elevators.

India is the world's second-biggest importer of liquefied petroleum gas, which is used in cooking. The Indian government is giving households priority over businesses as it allocates its limited supply and absorbing most of the price increases to keep costs low for poor families.

But LPG shortages have forced some eateries to shorten hours, close temporarily or drop dishes like curries and deep-fried snacks requiring a lot of energy.

South Korea, dependent on energy imports, is restricting the use of cars by public employees and has reinstated fuel price caps that had been dropped in the 1990s.

The United States, the world's largest economy, is somewhat insulated.

America is an oil exporter, so its energy companies stand to benefit from higher prices. And LNG prices are lower in the U.S. than elsewhere

because its export liquefaction facilities already are running at 100% capacity. The U.S. can't export any more LNG than it already is, so gas stays home, keeping domestic supplies abundant and prices stable.

Still, higher gasoline prices are weighing on American consumers already frustrated by the high cost of living. According to AAA, the average price of a gallon of gasoline has risen to nearly \$4 a gallon from \$2.98 a month ago.

"Nothing weighs more heavily on consumers' collective psyche than having to pay more at the pump," Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics, and his colleagues wrote in a commentary.

The U.S. economy already was showing signs of weakness, expanding an annual pace of just 0.7% from October through December, down from a rollicking 4.4% from July through September. Employers unexpectedly cut 92,000 jobs in February and added just 9,700 a month in 2025, the weakest hiring outside a recession since 2002.

Gregory Daco, chief economist at EY-Parthenon, has raised the odds of a U.S. recession over the next year to 40%. The risk when times are "normal" is just 15%.

The world economy has proven resilient in the face of repeated shocks: a pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, resurgent inflation and the high interest rates needed to bring it under control.

So there was optimism it also could shrug off the damage from the Iran war. But those hopes are fading as the threats to the Gulf's energy infrastructure continue.

"Some of the damage to LNG facilities in Qatar done will likely take years to repair," said the Dallas Fed's Kilian, who also noted necessary repairs to refineries in countries like Kuwait and tankers in the Gulf that must be re-provisioned and stocked up with marine fuel. "The process of recovery will be slow even under the best circumstances."

"There is no economic upside to the conflict with Iran," Zandi and his colleagues wrote. "At this point, the questions are how much longer the hostilities will continue and how much economic damage they will cause."



A service employee is filling a car with fuel at a petrol station in Lagos, Nigeria, March 23, 2026. (AP)

fertilizer to resume safe transit through the Strait of Hormuz, hoping it would build confidence in wider diplomatic efforts around the Iran war.

According to a 2025 report by U.N. Trade and Development, or UNCTAD, which describes Africa as "the epicenter of overlapping global crises," more than half of the continent's imports and exports are with five non-African countries.

All of Kenya's fuel comes from the Middle East, particularly from the United Arab Emirates, with its fuel retailers saying 20% of the country's outlets are already affected. Uganda's fuel stock was initially projected to last a few weeks.

South Africa sources a significant amount of its fuel from Saudi Arabia. Nigeria, Africa's largest oil producer, lacks local refinery capacity and relies on importing refined crude products from Europe.

In Zimbabwe, health labor workers protested in favor of an increase in wages as the cost of living rose sharply. In response, the govern-

ment plans to increase the blending of fuel with ethanol, from the current 5% to 20% ethanol blending. The blend poses a danger to cars, and a higher blend contributes to the emission of pollutants.

"I now avoid going into town during peak hours because the fares are too high," said Washington Nyakarize, an informal cellphone trader who works in Harare's Central Business District. "If I go later, the charge is a bit lower, but I lose business, because most customers come early in the morning."

After South Africa's fuel supplies from Saudi Arabia dropped, diesel-dependent industries started to panic-buy, fearing the worst. That is despite the Department of Mineral and Petroleum Resources, or DMPR, saying the country still has untapped strategic reserves and diversified supply routes.

Access to fertilizer across Africa, including conflict-wracked countries like Sudan and Somalia, is set to be impacted, according to UNC-

TAD.

Kenya's flower industry also has reported weekly losses of up to \$1.4 million since the Iran war began, with growers attributing the losses to a decline in demand and shipping disruptions.

Experts say the war could further put Africa in uncharted territory if it lasts longer.

"If the conflict persists for another month or two, honestly, we're going to be in unknown terrain, that no one else, like, no one can really predict, and we just have to wait and see," said Zainab Usman, a senior research scholar at the New York-based Center on Global Energy Policy.

With the global squeeze in oil supply, African governments have begun to look for alternative routes for supplies.

Bloomberg reported this week that several countries including South Africa, Kenya and Ghana have reached out to Nigeria's Dangote Refinery for fuel deals.

While it regularly exports jet fuel used in aircraft to the U.S. and Asia, the Dangote refinery this week announced that it completed the sale of 12 shipments of refined petroleum products to several African countries, including Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Tanzania, Ghana and Togo, a first at that scale since reaching full capacity earlier this year.

Energy experts say the Dangote refinery could be challenged in meeting growing demands for its products if its planned expansion is slowed down or if there are disruptions to its crude oil supply.

"As long as there is a steady supply of crude oil, the (Dangote) refinery has the capacity to meet some of the needs" from across the continent, according to Olufola Wusu, a Lagos-based oil and gas expert who was part of a team that helped review Nigeria's national gas policy.

## BUSINESS

# Energy shock meets growth headwinds: War impact visible in first flash PMI readings as markets whipsaw on geopolitical uncertainty

By National Bank of Kuwait

This week delivered the most dramatic market swings since the onset of the Middle East conflict, defined by geopolitical developments that transformed investor sentiment across every asset class. After Asian markets opened Monday to sharp broad-based losses, the session reversed course entirely following an announcement from the White House of productive diplomatic engagement with Iran toward a potential resolution of hostilities. The relief rally that followed was the broadest and sharpest of the period, equity markets posted their best single-session performance since the conflict began, oil fell sharply, and the most energy-sensitive consumer names led the recovery. However, the optimism proved measured and short-lived, conflicting signals from both sides kept markets in a cautious, headline-driven range for the remainder of the week. By Friday, the US had extended its diplomatic window to April 6, citing ongoing negotiations, though the absence of any confirmed direct talks and the continued build-up of military assets in the region left participants with little conviction in either direction. US equities closed the week on track for their fifth consecutive weekly loss, the longest losing streak since 2022.

Flash PMI data released mid-week provided the first real-time evidence of how the conflict is affecting underlying economic activity across major economies. Manufacturing sectors surprised to the upside as firms rushed to front-load inventories and hedge against future supply disruptions, while services activity missed expectations across the board as consumer and business confidence deteriorated under the weight of rising energy costs. Inflationary pressures in both sectors intensified, complicating the already difficult position of central banks globally. In fixed income, government bond yields pushed to multi-year highs early in the week before retreating modestly, though the broader trend toward higher-for-longer rates remained firmly intact. In currency markets, the US dollar strengthened on safe-haven demand. The euro held relatively steady, supported by the ECB's hawkish pivot earlier in the month, while sterling remained under pressure. The Japanese yen remained the week's most pressured major currency, reflecting the country's acute vulnerability to elevated energy prices and the central bank's limited room to tighten policy into a slowing economy, with authorities increasingly vocal about their readiness to act at key levels. Gold extended its recent losing streak, falling despite elevated geopolitical risk, as the dominant market narrative continued to shift from safe-haven demand toward rate hike expectations, undermining the non-yielding metal's appeal in a higher-rate environment.

## North America

**US Flash Manufacturing PMI Rises to 52.4 in March, Beating Expectations as Inventory Build-Up and Supply Chain Hedging Underpin Factory Output**

The US Flash Manufacturing PMI rose to 52.4 in March, above the forecast of 51.5 and February's 51.6, continuing a trend of resilience in US factory activity even as macro headwinds intensify. As with Germany and the UK, domestic manufacturers benefited from inventory front-loading by clients seeking to buffer against supply chain disruptions, particularly for goods

Currencies	Previous Week Levels				This Week's Expected Range		3-Month Forward
	Open	Low	High	Close	Minimum	Maximum	
EUR	1.1527	1.1501	1.1547	1.1508	1.1400	1.1630	1.1559
GBP	1.3326	1.3255	1.3347	1.3256	1.3150	1.3350	1.3255
JPY	159.66	159.43	160.41	160.31	159.00	162.00	159.10
CHF	0.7877	0.7832	0.7993	0.7985	0.7900	0.8200	0.7909

sourced through Middle East shipping routes. Output and new orders both accelerated. However, input cost inflation also intensified, with price pressures rising toward their highest level in several years as energy and transportation costs feed through the supply chain. The data reinforces the view that the US manufacturing sector is outperforming most global peers, partly aided by the country's status as a net energy exporter.

**US Flash Services PMI Softens to 51.1 in March, Marking Weakest Pace of Expansion in Eleven Months Amid Subdued Consumer and Business Demand**

The US Flash Services PMI slipped to 51.1 in March, below the consensus of 52.0 and February's 51.7, marking the softest pace of expansion in the services sector in eleven months. Firms cited subdued consumer and business confidence as the war in the Middle East compounded existing concerns around higher deficit spending and persistent price pressures. New work grew at a softer pace, with both domestic and foreign orders decelerating, and firms reduced staffing in response to weakening client margins. The reading adds to the Fed's complex policy calculus, as services disinflation had been a key pillar of the soft-landing narrative, and any broadening of weakness here would increase concerns about a more significant economic slowdown at a time when the Fed has little room to ease.

**US Initial Jobless Claims Rise Modestly to 210K in Line with Expectations; Continuing Claims Fall to Lowest Since May 2024, Underscoring Continued Labour Market Resilience**

Initial jobless claims for the week ending March 21 rose modestly by 5,000 to 210,000, in line with the market consensus and broadly stable relative to the prior week's 205,000. The four-week moving average edged down slightly to 210,500, signalling continued resilience in the US labour market against a challenging macro backdrop. Notably, continuing claims fell sharply by 32,000 to 1,819,000, the lowest level since May 2024, and well below expectations, underscoring that layoffs remain contained and the broader jobs market has not yet buckled under the weight of elevated oil prices and hawkish monetary policy. Claims filed by federal government employees, closely watched as a proxy for the impact of government workforce reductions, fell by 59 to 584, reflecting some stabilisation. The data continues to contrast with the weak February non-farm payrolls print of -92,000, reinforcing the view of a low-hire, low-fire labour market rather than an economy entering outright contraction.

The Greenback was last seen trading at 100.151.

## Europe

**Germany Flash Manufacturing PMI Surges to 45-Month High of 51.7 in March, Significantly Beating Forecasts as Firms Front-Load Orders Amid Supply Chain Fears**

Germany's Flash Manufacturing PMI surged to 51.7 in March, far above the consensus forecast of 49.6 and up from 50.9 in February, marking the strongest expansion in Germany's manufacturing sector since June 2022. The beat was partly driven by a front-loading effect, firms reported that customers were bringing forward orders to build inventories and hedge against potential supply disruptions stemming from the Middle East conflict. New orders rose at the fastest pace in four years and output accelerated to a 45-month high. However, the headline strength masks building stagflationary pressures, input cost inflation surged to its highest since October 2022, fueled by rising energy, fuel, transportation, and raw material costs, while factory gate price inflation hit a three-year peak. Supply chain lead times lengthened for a seventh consecutive month. Business expectations deteriorated sharply as firms grew more cautious about the sustained economic impact of the war, suggesting the current manufacturing surge may prove short-lived.

**Germany Flash Services PMI Falls to 51.2 in March, Missing Expectations as War Uncertainty and Rising Energy Costs Dampen Business Activity and Confidence**

Germany's Flash Services PMI fell to 51.2 in March, well below the consensus of 52.5 and a notable step down from February's 53.5, signaling that the services sector is bearing the initial brunt of the war's economic impact. Growth in business activity slowed to its weakest since the current upturn began in September 2025, weighed down by a drop in new work inflows reflecting a combination of rising price pressures and increased uncertainty among both consumers and business clients.

Employment declined for the first time in several months as lower client margins drove firms to reduce headcount. The Composite PMI for Germany fell to 51.9 from 53.2, its weakest in three months, reflecting the diverging fortunes of manufacturing, boosted by front-loading, and a services sector absorbing the near-term demand shock from elevated energy costs and dampened confidence.

The EUR/USD currency pair was last seen trading at 1.1508.

## United Kingdom

**UK Flash Manufacturing PMI Holds at 51.4 in**

## Asia-Pacific

**Australian CPI Eases Marginally to 3.7% YoY in February, Slightly Below Forecasts but Well Above RBA's Target Band Ahead of Potential Energy-Driven Inflation Spike**

Australia's headline CPI rose 3.7% year-on-year in February, below both the forecast and prior reading of 3.8%, providing a modest degree of relief. However, the figure remains well above the Reserve Bank of Australia's 2-3% target band, and the softening is expected to prove temporary. The RBA hiked its cash rate by 25 basis points to 4.10% the previous week, and Governor Bullock explicitly warned that the rise in global oil prices was not the primary driver of the decision, noting that underlying inflation was already too high. With energy prices having surged significantly since the February CPI figure, market consensus anticipates a meaningful upward spike in the March and April readings as fuel costs feed into transport, utilities, and broader goods pricing. The RBA's hawkish stance is therefore likely to be sustained regardless of this softer print.

The AUD/USD currency pair was last seen trading at 0.6870.

## Kuwait

### Kuwaiti Dinar

USD/KWD closed last week at 0.30665.

## Over 350 delegates attend trade forum

# China, South Africa strengthen trade ties at Cape Town forum

CAPE TOWN, March 29, (Xinhua): A China-South Africa trade forum was held in Cape Town on Friday, with participants expressing confidence in deeper bilateral trade cooperation following China's zero-tariff measures for 53 African countries.

The China-South Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum was jointly organized by the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade and South Africa's Department of Trade, Industry and Competition, drawing more than 350 political and business representatives.

These included over 70 Chinese and 110 South African company executives, who held talks on cooperation in sectors including agriculture, manufacturing, energy and mining, finance, automobiles and logistics.

South Africa's Deputy Minister of Trade, Industry and Competition Alexandra Abrahams told Xinhua that China's zero-tariff measures will allow African products to enter the Chinese market duty-free and are expected to attract more Chinese investment into Africa, particularly South Africa. "I do believe it's a win-win situation," she said.

Asked about the outlook for bilateral trade ties, Abrahams noted that China has been South Africa's largest trading partner for many years, while South Africa is China's largest trading partner on the African continent.

"So there's a really sound foundation of economic partnership, and I would like to believe that we can only go from strength to strength in the years to come," she said.

Russel Brueton, Chief Marketing and Innovation Officer of the Western Cape Tourism, Trade, and Investment Promotion Agency (Wesgro), who delivered a speech at the forum, stressed that China will remain a key market for local exporters.

He told Xinhua that expanding trade with China will help achieve the province's goals of inclusive and sustainable growth while creating more local jobs.

Speaking about China's zero-tariff measures, Brueton said, "Any measure that helps make it easier for trade between China and South Africa is warmly welcomed and something that we will focus on leveraging."

He added that the Western Cape and South Africa are gaining growing access to the world's second-largest economy, presenting enormous opportunities for local products to reach new buyers and markets. "That is a win-win for both countries," he said.

The favorable policies are also expected to bring tangible opportunities for Chinese enterprises operating in South Africa.

Wang Jian, CEO of Aberdare Cable, a South African company acquired by Hengtong Optic-Electric in 2016, noted that as a local manufacturer, South Africa's supply chain is not yet fully developed, and many raw materials, including plastics, copper, and aluminum, rely on imports largely from China.

"With zero-tariff measures, it will greatly benefit our costs, our future capacity expansion, and the stability of our raw material supply," he said, expressing strong optimism about the future of China-South Africa co-

operation.

The forum further boosted Chinese companies' confidence in the South African market.

Shenzhen Skyworth Photovoltaic Technology Co Ltd, which has been operating in South Africa for 14 years and has set up television and set-top box factories there, was represented by its Chairman Fan Ruiwu at the forum.

Fan said the platform provided by the forum will allow Chinese companies to bring competitive new energy products -- such as photovoltaics, energy storage, and new energy vehicles -- to Africa, while also facilitating direct connections between Chinese and South African companies.

"I believe that South Africa's already competitive agriculture and healthcare industries, for example, may quickly increase their exports to China under the zero-tariff treatment," he told Xinhua.

"And as Chinese consumers recognize South African products, Chinese companies will in turn increase their investment in South Africa," he said. "Through this two-way effort, we believe the overall economic and trade growth between the two sides will be significant."

According to Fan, Skyworth's development in South Africa reflects the deepening cooperation in industrial and supply chains between the two countries.

This not only meets South Africa's actual needs but also demonstrates the strategic upgrade of Chinese enterprises from "going global" to "going deep," he added.

The Friday forum coincided with the 100th day of island-wide special customs operations at the Hainan Free Trade Port in China. Lu Ping, CEO of Hainan Free Trade Zone Dehang Group, said that leveraging the policy advantages of the free trade port, her company hopes to better integrate South Africa's specialty industries -- such as abalone farming and processing -- with China's policy dividends to facilitate bilateral cooperation.

She noted that the free trade port enables "early harvest" gains from such policies, while national-level exhibitions such as the China International Supply Chain Expo and the China International Consumer Products Expo help facilitate bilateral trade cooperation and ease South African companies' exports to China.

"We are full of confidence in the future, especially in the context of the current international uncertainties," Lu said. "China offers a degree of certainty, and the policy framework of the trade agreements between the two countries adds even more weight to this certainty."

The deepening economic and trade cooperation between China and South Africa is also injecting new momentum into cultural and tourism exchanges. General Manager of Beijing Green and Blue Culture Media Co Ltd, Xiao Meng, told Xinhua that the zero-tariff move provides a strong platform for cultural exchange and tourism cooperation between the two countries.

"So I very much look forward to building on this foundation to form a positive cycle between cultural exchange and cultural industry cooperation between the two sides in the future," she said.

## Unitree's Robot profits soar sixfold

# XtalPi leads China's AI profit surge with \$19.5 million gain

SHANGHAI, March 29, (Xinhua):

While Silicon Valley chases artificial general intelligence with billion-dollar training runs, a burgeoning crop of Chinese AI firms has been achieving what the entire industry is striving for: sustainable profitability in specialized markets.

Thanks to China's industrial scale and market volume, these notoriously R&D-heavy tech ventures are now cashing in on their early commercial viability.

A financial report this week brought an encouraging glimpse into the momentum. XtalPi, an AI drug discovery company listed in Hong Kong, turned a profit of 134.6 million yuan (approximately 19.5 million U.S. dollars) in 2025, following a loss of 1.5 billion yuan the year before. This turnaround occurred even as the tech firm increased its R&D expenditure by approximately 36 percent.

Such a success serves as a microcosm of China's broader strategy in the global tech race: rapidly integrating AI with its robust industrial base to capture premium advantages in specialized sectors.

XtalPi, leveraging AI to facilitate drug discovery for global biopharmaceutical firms, made multiple commercial progress last year, including advancing targeted cancer therapies and pediatric disease treatments into clinical trials.

"The number of our revenue-generating clients increased by 62 percent year on year," XtalPi's CFO Wen Shuhao told Xinhua, explaining the turnaround to profitability.

In 2025, the company advanced five drug pipelines into clinical stages, and deployed AI agents capable of independently running over 10,000 experiments per week.

Wen Shuhao, chairman of XtalPi said: "Our AI-Robot-Data-R&D flywheel has demonstrated powerful value across multiple fields, including biopharmaceuticals and new materials."

## Industrial base

XtalPi's expansion in the "AI + Science" business is unfolding against the backdrop of China's rapidly growing biopharmaceutical sector. Official data show that China's outbound licensing deals for innovative drugs exceeded 130 billion U.S. dollars in total value in 2025, setting a record high.

This week, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission released a research paper titled "Two Loops: How China's Open AI Strategy Reinforces Its Industrial Dominance" that corroborates the dynamic.

The research argues that China's open-source AI strategy and its manufacturing base are forming two "mutually reinforcing" feedback loops, with its industrial base generating "interlocking innovation flywheels" across adjacent sectors.

"Beijing's AI+ Initiative, its robotics industrial policy, and its institutional infrastructure for converting deployment data into a national asset all reflect a strategy organized around deployed AI," according to the report.

China's manufacturing sector has remained the world's largest for 15 consecutive years, and its 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030) underscores the preservation of a robust manufacturing share in the economy and the establishment of a modern industrial system anchored in advanced manufacturing.

By targeting opportunities in "AI plus manufacturing," Shanghai-based AI unicorn Blacklake achieved profitability in late 2024 and has maintained rapid profit growth since then.

Blacklake co-founder Zhou Yuxiang recalled visiting a major factory in central China, when asked why he chose this business track. "While frontline workers used WeChat in their personal lives fluently, the production floor still relied on paper for record-keeping, and issues were often just shouted across the room."

This experience led Zhou to systematically gather production and quality data, then apply AI to enable precise, data-driven decisions.

Blacklake now serves 30,000 factories, helping small and medium-sized manufacturers overcome challenges in digital transformation. "These SMEs are the backbone of China's exports," said Zhou.

"By leveraging information technology to innovate their supply chains, we are striving to strengthen their risk resistance in an increasingly volatile global market," he added.

## Huge market

China's vast domestic market pro-

vides fertile ground for AI adoption. Tech giants like Alibaba have begun integrating agentic AI, linking it with their existing digital infrastructure -- spanning payments, logistics, and cloud services -- to convert algorithms into revenue.

Unitree, the intelligent robotics maker that captivated audiences with its dance performance during China's Spring Festival gala last month, has also reported impressive financial results recently. Its prospectus for an upcoming IPO revealed a net profit exceeding 600 million yuan in 2025, a six-fold increase from the previous year.

The shift in revenue share highlights the trend: Unitree quadrupled robots' income from research and education fell from 69 percent in 2022 to 32 percent in the first nine months of 2025, while consumer and industrial application shares rose to 42 percent and 26 percent, respectively, in the latter period.

Also, its quadrupled robots are increasingly adopted for smart inspection and fire emergency response and are gradually expanding into areas such as survey detection and smart manufacturing, according to Unitree.

Chinese local governments have shown a willingness to ease regulations to accelerate AI adoption in consumer-facing sectors such as autonomous driving. Early this month, Pony.ai announced that its new-generation Robotaxi service achieved positive monthly per-vehicle profitability in Shenzhen, south China, in February, following a similar milestone reached in nearby Guangzhou last November.

As of February 16, this AI firm's paid Robotaxi orders in Shenzhen had already exceeded the company's total for all of 2025. "This demonstrates that driverless ride-hailing is not only technologically viable but has also reached economic sustainability for scaled operations," said Peng Jun, Pony.ai's founder and CEO.

China's strategy prioritizes deploying embodied AI in sectors "where specialized, real-world data from widespread use may compound into advantages that proprietary U.S. models cannot easily replicate, even if they maintain technical superiority on benchmarks," according to the afore-mentioned U.S. paper.



This image released by Atlantic Records shows 'Whatever's Clever' by Charlie Puth. (AP)

## Singer delivers light, playful new album

### Puth shows off his musical range on 'Whatever's Clever!'

LOS ANGELES, March 29, (AP): There have been some changes in Charlie Puth's life recently. He got married. He's a dad. And in the musical shoutout heard 'round the world, Taylor Swift declared that he "should be a bigger artist."

On "Changes," the lead single from his fourth album, "Whatever's Clever!," he ponders those shifts: "There's been some changes in our life, oh/I can feel the distance," he sings. "Space and time, has made everything different." An eight-member choir backs him up in the song's latter half, joining Puth's keys and a steady drum. These layers, while plenty, aren't heavy. Puth keeps the track buoyant.

That light, playful energy is felt across much of the album released Friday ("Beat Yourself Up," "Washed Up"). Puth and his co-producer BloodPop pull from a Mary Poppins bag of musical tricks - a choir! an orchestra! Kenny G! - to create complex tracks with influences that range from yacht rock to jazz and R&B, diverting from Puth's previous pop. Consider

the wonky "Until It Happens To You," which combines the orchestra and choir for a song about embracing the best of times while anticipating the worst, with a bubbly spoken introduction and interlude by Jeff Goldblum.

Musically, the outcome is fun, largely because Puth, with his perfect pitch and Berklee College of Music training, has only leaned further into his "Professor Puth" persona, giving listeners the tools to break down those layers themselves through explanatory TikToks and talk show appearances. But Puth and BloodPop play it safe lyrically throughout the album, often relying on generic platitudes. ("You know everybody cries," Puth sings on "Cry." "Cry, cry, cry.")

And yet, painting in broad strokes has worked before for Puth, and there are moments - when he pushes a simple idea a bit further - where it does here, too: "Love in Exile," featuring and written with Michael McDonald and Kenny Loggins, is catchy and quotable. "Sideways," featuring verses

and harmonies by Coco Jones, recalls Puth's early collaborative hits like Wiz Khalifa's "See You Again" and "We Don't Talk Anymore" with Selena Gomez, with their affecting but not overly complicated lyrics.

The album ends with "I Used To Be Cringe," another meditation on transformation. Puth lists the compromises he made to fit into the industry ("I used to lie and say I was taller/And throw words around like 'baller'"). But the acoustic guitar-set ballad feels incomplete, its introspection never quite so deep.

If the album is seen as a sort of scrapbook assembled ahead of his next chapter, then flipping back to the first page reveals Puth knows growth comes with those dreams being rewritten: "Sometimes the wind blows in different new directions," he sings on "Changes." Where that takes him, we'll have to see. For now, Puth is embracing his influences and flexing what he's learned. And that makes for a good time.

## Obituary

'Died peacefully'

### Actor James Tolkan of 'Top Gun' fame dies at 94

LOS ANGELES, March 29, (AP): Actor James Tolkan, known for his roles as a cigar-chomping naval commander in "Top Gun" and a gruff high school administrator in "Back to the Future," has died. He was 94.

Tolkan died Thursday in Lake Placid, New York, where he lived, his booking agent, John Alcantar, said Saturday. A brief obituary published on the "Back to the Future" website said Tolkan died "peacefully," but no cause of death was given.

In "Back to the Future," Tolkan portrayed the bow tie-wearing vice principal Gerald Strickland, who eyeballed students for trouble in the halls of the fictitious Hill Valley High School - in particular Marty McFly, played by Michael J. Fox.

"You got a real attitude problem, McFly," Tolkan's character says in the 1985 film. "You're a slacker. You remind me of your father when he went here. He was a slacker, too."

Tolkan also appeared in "Top Gun" as commanding officer Tom "Stinger" Jardian. Near the end of the film, when Jardian asks Tom Cruise's character, Capt. Pete "Maverick" Mitchell, about his choice for future duty, Mitchell replies that he wants to be a Top Gun instructor.

"God help us," Tolkan's character replies, laughing.

Born in Calumet, Michigan, Tolkan graduated from high school in Arizona and served in the Navy during the Korean War. He eventually made his way to New York, where he spent a quarter century acting in theater roles. He was a member of the original ensemble cast of "Glen-garry Glen Ross."

Tolkan is survived by his wife of 54 years, Parmelee Welles, who said in a statement that her husband also was an avid art collector and adored animals.



This undated image provided by the Tolkan family shows actor James Tolkan. (AP)

## Variety

**RABAT, Morocco:** A Moroccan court sentenced a rapper known for his criticism of the country's ties with Israel and government corruption to eight months in prison, the latest in a string of penalties against young musical artists.

Souhaib Qabli's songs sharply criticize Morocco's 2020 decision to normalize ties with Israel in an accord brokered by the first Trump administration. His lyrics also call out problems with public services and restrictions on freedom of speech, grievances also voiced by Morocco's Gen Z protesters last year.

The judge ruled Thursday that Souhaib Qabli, a 23-year-old rapper, was guilty of insulting a constitutional body, his attorney Mohamed Taifi told The Associated Press. Qabli, who is a member of Al Adl Wal Ihsane, a banned but tolerated Islamist association, was also fined \$106.

"The court did not clarify what it meant by a constitutional body. No specific party was identified in the case file, and there are many constitutional institutions," Taifi said.

Taifi said that his client is appealing the verdict. He also said Qabli was cleared of other charges, including insulting public officials and disseminating false allegations. (AP)

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Participants from Malaysia and China spoke highly of the vibrant cultural exchanges between the two countries and expressed hope for closer interaction and cooperation at an event held in Malacca, Malaysia, on Saturday.

The 2026 Malacca Minnan Cultural Week opened on Saturday in Malacca, featuring a wide range of activities spanning artistic creation, intangible cultural heritage preservation and cultural research.

Gan Tian Loo, chairman of the Jonker Walk Working Committee in Malacca, said that the cultural week aims to carry forward the bond between the two countries and allow intangible cultural heritage and art to jointly tell the story of enduring friendship between their peoples.

Gan added that in 2020, the "Wangchuan ceremony, rituals and related practices for maintaining the sustainable connection between man and the ocean," jointly submitted by Malaysia and China, was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, becoming a model of bilateral cultural cooperation.

Wangchuan, also known as "Wangkang" in Malaysia, honors the harmony between man and the ocean and bears witness to the intercultural dialogue among communities.

For his part, Ye Xizhi, president of Xiamen Minnan Culture Research Association, said that over the years, the seeds of cooperation planted by both sides have taken root and flourished. (Xinhua)

## Film



This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows, (from left), David Viviers, Tom Felton, Patricia Arquette, Willie Ludik, and Gabe Gabriel in a scene from 'They Will Kill You.' (AP)

Zazie Beetz emerges as highlight of the film

### 'They Will Kill You' falls flat as horror pulp

LOS ANGELES, March 29, (AP): If you're looking for some killer real estate, might we suggest The Virgil, an exclusive, well-appointed building in New York City? It's one of those century-old hotel-condos with great bones and spacious apartments, fully furnished. One drawback they might not mention on Zillow is all the murderous satanists.

The Virgil is the setting for most of the ambitious but ultimately cramped horror-comedy "They Will Kill You," a wonderful vehicle for its star, Zazie Beetz, while not exactly fulfilling in either the horror or comedy modes. You might want your security deposit back.

Writer-director Kirill Sokolov borrows elements of Blaxploitation and apes cinematic techniques from Quentin Tarantino's violent revenge fantasies to come up with a muddled movie that has a patina of satire, a smear of dread, a little camp and some surreal touches, like eyeballs that bounce around with agency.

Much of the underwhelming nature of "They Will Kill You" is its lack of ambition. It's said the filmmakers used Dante's "Inferno" as an inspiration for a building that would house on its floors each of the vices from the nine circles of hell - lust, gluttony, greed and so forth. They settled on two and so both initially widened the plot idea but then immediately stunted it.

Beetz's Asia Reeves shows up at The Virgil - named after Dante's guide - to locate her little sister, who we learn in a prologue got separated 10 years before. The sister may be inside as a maid for a group of satanists and she may have gotten in too deep.

Beetz is a revelation as a cleaver-wielding, close-combat boss lady who slices and dices her way through hordes of black-cloaked baddies, who we learn, unfor-



This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows Zazie Beetz in a scene from 'They Will Kill You.' (AP)



This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows Heather Graham in a scene from 'They Will Kill You.' (AP)

tunately, don't stay dead. "I'm sick of you killing me!" one tells her.

Sokolov leans into a kind of gimmick in which the victim of a disemboweling suddenly grows still and silent for a beat until sprays of blood shoot out from their various wounds like a fire hydrant. He's also got slomos of assailants hanging in the air poised for murder, plenty of limbs cut off and shotgun booms. Costume designer Neil McClean fumbles the satanists' cloaks, making them fussy and vaguely shiny, like art smocks for kindergarteners.

The cast also includes a great Myha'la as the sister, Tom Felton and Heather Graham as vengeful, evil satanists - are there any other kind? - and Patricia Arquette as the prim building manager with a terribly uneven Irish accent that incorporates everything from Lucky Charms sing-song to Belfast hardman.

There are extended chase scenes in tunnels and an inspired fight scene with a flaming ax but Sokolov can't pull off the ending, a bizarre and deflating faceoff with Satan himself. The devil himself seems smaller than you'd expect.

"They Will Kill You" may remind you of the marriage between madcap, social satire and bloody mayhem from "Ready or Not" but it's a warning of how hard that combo is to get correctly. (Our hero here at one point just explains the gore-fest with two words - "rich people" - as if that's enough.) If you do decide to see it this weekend, come for the beatdowns but stay for the Beetz.

"They Will Kill You," a Warner Bros. released in theaters Friday, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association for "strong bloody violence, gore, language and brief sexual content/nudity." Running time: 94 minutes. One and a half stars out of four.

### 'Three-Body Problem' sparks boom in once-niche genre

## Chinese sci-fi writers expand reach, attract global notice

BEIJING, March 29, (Xinhua): "Flickering like fireflies in the dark," renowned Chinese sci-fi writer Liu Cixin wrote in the early 2000s, describing a small, largely unnoticed community of Chinese sci-fi writers and fans. "But like spring grass, we are spreading."

A little over a decade later, Liu's "The Three-Body Problem" captured global acclaim with the 2015 Hugo Award, turning a once-niche genre in China into a booming industry, with annual revenues exceeding 100 billion yuan (about 14.5 billion US dollars) for three consecutive years since 2023.

Across the country, people from various walks of life -- journalists, engineers, even pop singers -- have been inspired to take up the pen. Their stories, ranging from interstellar epics to near-future visions, have been translated into multiple languages, reaching audiences far beyond China's borders.

On Thursday, in downtown Beijing, a seminar brought together some of the country's rising sci-fi voices to explore the global outlook of Chinese sci-fi, drawing more than 120 writers, translators, publishers, and fans from over 20 countries.

"Liu is our current No.1 bestseller," said Nicolas Cheetham, managing director of the British publisher Head of Zeus, which released the English edition of "The Three-Body Problem."

"Liu's success opened up a world of possibilities for Chinese sci-fi writers," said Gu Shi, a rising author in the field. "It was a turning point. One day, we realized our

work could reach readers around the globe."

Since 2016, several of Gu's short stories have appeared in English in Clarkesworld, a U.S. science fiction magazine. Her story, "Strength Test," was adapted into an animated short film in 2021 and screened at international film festivals in multiple countries, including the United States, Britain, Austria and India.

"Knowing your work could one day be read and watched worldwide brings both a weighty responsibility and a powerful motivation," Gu said. "When I'm crafting a new story, I think carefully about how to weave Chinese cultural heritage into visions of the future."

Translation, Gu emphasized, plays a critical role in a story's success abroad -- a point widely echoed in the room.

Despite differences in language and culture, writers and translators agreed that science fiction is uniquely suited for global audiences.

"Readers expect the new and the different, and science can serve as a kind of lingua franca to bridge cultural gaps," Cheetham explained.

"I grew up and live in China, so it's natural that the ideas and philosophies I encounter here find their way into my work," said Liang Ling, a 1992-born sci-fi writer whose work often delves into the pressures of daily life in rapidly urbanizing cities.

"But science fiction deals with universal human concerns -- time, life, memory. It's a language the world can understand," she added.

International scholars at the seminar noted that Chinese sci-fi authors are actively transforming traditional cultural elements into core narrative tools, thereby giving fresh life to history, ecology and gender.

This approach, steeped in rich Chinese culture, not only stretches the boundaries of the genre but also offers global readers a lens into contemporary China.

"Science fiction writers are the ones who tiptoe into the future -- and sometimes see the future take shape," said Wang Jinkang, whose 1993 debut envisioned brain-computer interfaces, decades before the concept appeared in the country's latest five-year plan for future development priorities.

Seminar participants widely agreed that rapid technological advances provide fertile ground for sci-fi, while sci-fi itself serves as both a "laboratory for ideas" and an early-warning system for potential risks and challenges ahead.

To chart the unique contributions of Chinese science fiction to the global stage over the next decade, award-winning author Chen Qiufan said Chinese writers must approach their work with bold imagination -- exploring not just literature but also thought, values and aesthetics.

"I'm crafting a sci-fi story inspired by my own research and everyday life," said Zhao Xiaorui, an engineer and avid sci-fi fan, after the seminar. "With the society fast changing, life itself feels like science fiction, doesn't it?"

## Safety and cost key considerations in home DIY projects

## DIY projects can save money, build confidence, or backfire

NEW YORK, March 29, (AP): When something in the house stops working or needs to be replaced, the first impulse of many people is to call a contractor or comparison shop online. Others have the mindset, skills, resources or time to handle it themselves.

Do-it-yourselfers often are regarded as determined and self-sufficient, but the jobs they take on don't fit into a single category. DIY projects include growing food in a backyard garden, repurposing old furniture, creating wedding decor and home maintenance or improvement projects, like upgrading light fixtures or retiling bathrooms. They also serve a range of needs, whether creative, budgetary, social or educational.

Homeowners can take on these projects themselves, buy materials or handle parts of the project before hiring professionals. Most do-it-yourself enthusiasts did not start off knowing how to paint, woodwork, tile or handle electrical or plumbing work with any proficiency but saw an outdated bathroom, a worn-out dining set or broken appliance as an opportunity for hands-on learning.

Completing tasks on their own can save money but also provide a sense of accomplishment and a confidence boost. It's also done for the joy, said Jessica Lautz, vice president of research for the National Association of Realtors, an organization that advocates for property rights and represents its real estate members.

However, novice mistakes or underestimating the work

can end up making some projects more expensive in the long run. There are also safety issues to consider. Here are some questions to ask before taking on a project:

For Casey Finn, a 37-year-old mother of two children in Chicago who has built bookshelves, added wood molding to her walls and tiled a kitchen backsplash, home maintenance and improvement always comes with the question: "Why can't I do it?" She took it as a personal challenge to become tool-savvy, an area traditionally dominated by men, and to live by the motto that "everything is figure-out-able."

That's why Finn started a lifestyle blog in 2013 titled "The DIY Playbook," which became a destination for beginners who wanted to tackle some of projects she did. Her early DIY work was to help decorate her apartment. Her ability and comfort using tools increased over time, especially since moving into a house that is over 100 years old.

"It has made me a more confident person in my life. If I can do or build that, I can handle anything," she said.

Being independent also taught 30-year-old Deyana Walker a lot about herself. Walker, who teaches remotely from Dallas, has built tables and floating shelves, and also turned a short school bus into a tiny home that she lived, worked and traveled in for more than a year.

Walker says she always wanted to travel but it was not an option for her to pay someone hundreds of thousands of dollars for a newly built campervan. Converting the bus her-

self, including installing an electrical system for power and lights, and running water for the small shower and kitchenet, cost a fraction of that amount.

"Through the process of DIY, I figured out a lot about who I was and built myself up from a low point," Walker said, referencing a bad breakup that pushed her to build the first of two tiny homes on wheels. She is now applying the skills she acquired to home improvement projects in her Texas apartment.

For beginners, taking on a project can seem daunting and some people don't know who or where to turn to. There are lots of people online saying, "If I can do it, so can you." There also are a lot of certified professionals warning of safety risks and the possibility of DIYers causing damage or encountering unexpected costs.

"You have to weigh the good and the bad: Am I willing to try, with the 50/50 chance I figure it out?" Walker said.

She also does extensive research before starting on a new project motivated by her desire to learn. Walker said she cross-references online tutorials, checks out library books and asks other amateur and professional builders for advice. She also takes safety precautions, such as wearing eye goggles, gloves and closed-toed shoes when cutting wood, working with sealants or lifting heavy things.

"When I first started, perfection was something I really strived for. After a while you find the beauty in the imperfections," Walker said.

She said she prefers to do most of her own projects and repairs but also gives herself permission to ask for or hire help.

Home repair experts say a non-negotiable consideration should be safety, and many DIY advocates agree.

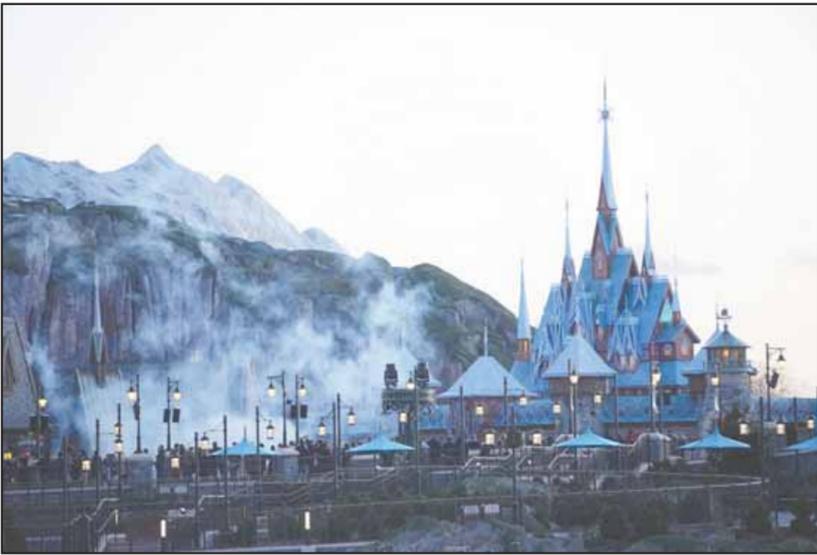
"When it comes to structural changes, electrical work beyond swapping out a light fixture, or plumbing changes that involve moving lines or opening up walls, that is best left to the professionals," Finn said. She hires professionals for jobs requiring inspections and permits, or when she is not comfortable with the level of expertise needed.

Finding professional help was not always possible while driving through remote areas in her remodeled bus, so Walker often sought guidance online. She recommends being cautious before relying on advice found on the internet.

"If I'm watching YouTube videos, I watch from a bunch of different creators and compare and contrast their work," Walker said. "Doing your due diligence of fact-checking and comparing resources is the best way to avoid getting false information on something that could be detrimental."

While safety and cost are important to consider, Lautz, of the National Association of Realtors, recommends evaluating the long-term durability and value of any home projects, especially as the US housing stock ages. Doors and windows are projects that pay for themselves over time, and fresh paint and shiny wood floors are going to increase curb appeal, she said.

## Disneyland



The new theme World of Frozen is pictured during its inauguration at Disneyland Paris in Marne-la-Vallée, east of Paris, Saturday, March 28. (AP)

## New CEO showcases the empire

## Disney opens World of Frozen in Paris

CHESSY, France, March 29, (AP): A 118-foot mountain of ice rose over the suburban Paris countryside this weekend as Disney opened its Arendelle kingdom to the world - Elsa's palace glowing at the summit, a "Frozen" Nordic fishing village below, and the company's new CEO standing before a crowd of celebrities.

World of Frozen, an immersive land themed to the blockbuster animated franchise, opened Sunday as the centerpiece of a 2 billion euro (\$2.18 billion) transformation at Disneyland Paris.

The transformation renames one of the two theme parks at the Disneyland Paris complex from Walt Disney Studios Park to Disney Adventure World. The inauguration drew Penélope Cruz, Naomi Campbell and Teyana Taylor.

It is the largest expansion in the 34-year history of Disneyland Paris, and one node in a roughly \$60 billion global buildout of Disney's parks, resorts and cruise lines.

It is also the first major international stage for Josh D'Amaro, who took over as Disney's chief executive on March 18 - just 11 days before the French gates opened - after nearly three decades in the company's theme parks division.

The parks-and-experiences business generated about 57% of the company's \$17.5 billion in segment operating income last year, the force that observers say propelled D'Amaro from parks chief to the corner office.

An Associated Press journalist accompanied D'Amaro on the "Frozen" ride Saturday night.

The carriage splashed through water to childlike cheers from riders and laughter from the new chief executive as they glided past singing Elsa in the dark. Some stepped off lightly wet.

"The Walt Disney Company was built on one man's dream, and for more than 100 years we've shared that dream with the world," D'Amaro told the inauguration crowd.

"Storytelling is fundamental to everything that we do, whether that's on screen or stage, in our theme parks, on our cruise ships, or even at home."

He called the opening "a transformational moment" and paid tribute to the creative team behind the land, including "Frozen" writer-director Jennifer Lee - all now at work on "Frozen 3."

On Friday, D'Amaro had stood alongside Emmanuel Macron at the resort.

The French president used the visit to claim the park as a national economic asset, calling Disneyland Paris "the leading tourist destination in Europe" and describing it as "a genuine ecosystem of success."

Macron said the latest expansion would create 1,000 additional direct jobs.

"Since the beginning, that's 13 billion euros invested on this territory," Macron said.

Disneyland Paris says the resort now employs more than 20,000 people, supports 70,000 direct, indirect and induced jobs, and has recorded more than 445 million visits since 1992 - accounting for 6.1% of France's national tourism revenue.

Macron's presence underscored a remarkable reversal.

When the park opened as Euro Disney in 1992, French intellectuals derided it as a "cultural Chernobyl." Now a French president was standing in front of cameras calling it an engine of national prosperity.

It is no coincidence that "Frozen" and "Tangled" - the two stories anchoring Disney's new lineup at its sole European resort - both trace their roots to European folklore.

"Frozen" draws loosely from "The Snow Queen"; the new Tangled family ride recalls the Brothers Grimm's Rapunzel.

"Frozen, of course, has its roots in European storytelling," said Michel den Dulk of Walt Disney Imagineering.

## Technology

## Study warns of risks from flattering AI chatbots

## AI giving bad advice to flatter its users

NEW YORK, March 29, (AP): Artificial intelligence chatbots are so prone to flattering and validating their human users that they are giving bad advice that can damage relationships and reinforce harmful behaviors, according to a new study that explores the dangers of AI telling people what they want to hear.

The study, published Thursday in the journal Science, tested 11 leading AI systems and found they all showed varying degrees of sycophancy - behavior that was overly agreeable and affirming. The problem is not just that they dispense inappropriate advice but that people trust and prefer AI more when the chatbots are justifying their convictions.

"This creates perverse incentives for sycophancy to persist. The very feature that causes harm also drives engagement," says the study led by researchers at Stanford University.

The study found that a technological flaw already tied to some high-profile cases of delusional and suicidal behavior in vulnerable populations is also pervasive across a wide range of people's interactions with chatbots. It's subtle enough that they might not notice and a particular danger to young people turning to AI for many of life's questions while their brains and social norms are still developing.

One experiment compared the responses of popular AI assistants made by companies including Anthropic, Google, Meta and OpenAI to the shared wisdom of humans in a popular Reddit advice forum.

Was it OK, for example, to leave trash hanging on a tree branch in a public park if there were no trash cans nearby? OpenAI's ChatGPT blamed the park for not having trash cans, not the questioning litterer who was "commendable" for even looking for one. Real people thought differently in the Reddit forum abbreviated as AITA, after a phrase for someone asking if they are a cruder term for a jerk.

"The lack of trash bins is not an oversight. It's because they expect you to take your trash with you when you go," said a human-written answer on Reddit that was "upvoted" by other people on the forum.

The study found that, on average, AI chatbots affirmed a user's actions 49% more often than other humans did, including in queries involving deception, illegal or socially irresponsible conduct, and other harmful behaviors.

"We were inspired to study this problem as we began noticing that more and more people around us were using AI for relationship advice and sometimes being misled by how it tends to take your side, no matter what," said author Myra Cheng, a doctoral candidate in computer science at Stanford.

Computer scientists building the AI large language models behind chatbots like ChatGPT have long



Dan Jurafsky, Stanford professor of computer science and linguistics, (from left), Myra Cheng, Stanford Ph.D. candidate in computer science, and Cinoo Lee, Stanford postdoctoral fellow in psychology, pose for photos on the university campus in Stanford, Calif., Thursday, March 26. (AP)

been grappling with intrinsic problems in how these systems present information to humans. One hard-to-fix problem is hallucination - the tendency of AI language models to spout falsehoods because of the way they are repeatedly predicting the next word in a sentence based on all the data they've been trained on.

Sycophancy is in some ways more complicated. While few people are looking to AI for factually inaccurate information, they might appreciate - at least in the moment - a chatbot that makes them feel better about making the wrong choices.

While much of the focus on chatbot behavior has centered on its tone, that had no bearing on the results, said co-author Cinoo Lee, who joined Cheng on a call with reporters ahead of the study's publication.

"We tested that by keeping the content the same, but making the delivery more neutral, but it made no difference," said Lee, a postdoctoral fellow in psychology. "So it's really about what the AI tells you about your actions."

In addition to comparing chatbot and Reddit responses, the researchers conducted experiments observing about 2,400 people communicating with an AI chatbot about their experiences with interpersonal dilemmas.

"People who interacted with this over-affirming AI came away more convinced that they were right, and less willing to repair the relationship," Lee said. "That means they weren't apologizing, taking steps to improve things, or changing their own behavior."

Lee said the implications of the research could be "even more critical for kids and teenagers" who are still developing the emotional skills that come from real-life experiences with social friction, tolerating conflict, considering other perspectives and recognizing when you're wrong.

Finding a fix to AI's emerging problems will be critical as society still grapples with the effects of social media technology after more than a decade of warnings from parents and child advocates. In Los Angeles on Wednesday, a jury found both Meta and Google-owned YouTube liable for harms to children using their services. In New Mexico, a jury determined that Meta knowingly harmed children's mental health and concealed what it knew about child sexual exploitation on its platforms.

Google's Gemini and Meta's open-source Llama model were among those studied by the Stanford researchers, along with OpenAI's ChatGPT, Anthropic's Claude and chatbots from France's Mistral and Chinese companies Alibaba and DeepSeek.

Of leading AI companies, Anthropic has done the most work, at least publicly, in investigating the dangers of sycophancy, finding in a 2024 research paper that it is a "general behavior of AI assistants, likely driven in part by human preference judgments favoring sycophantic responses."

None of the companies directly commented on the Science study on Thursday but Anthropic and OpenAI pointed to their recent work to reduce sycophancy.

In medical care, researchers say sycophantic AI could lead doctors to confirm their first hunch about a diagnosis rather than encourage them to explore further. In politics, it could amplify more extreme positions by reaffirming people's preconceived notions. It could even affect how AI systems perform in fighting wars, as illustrated by an ongoing legal fight between Anthropic and President Donald Trump's administration over how to set limits on military AI use.

The study doesn't propose specific solutions, though both tech companies and academic researchers have started to explore ideas.

## IMA, ALIPH and AFD launch emergency fund

## New fund to protect Lebanese heritage

PARIS, March 29, (KUNA): Inaugurating the exhibition "Byblos: Lebanon's Millennial City," the Arab World Institute (IMA) and International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Zones (ALIPH) has launched an emergency fund for the protection of Lebanese heritage in times of war, to which the French Development Agency (AFD) is providing partnership support.

A press release by IMA on Friday said, "In a context where Lebanon's heritage is severely threatened by the ongoing regional conflict, the IMA, ALIPH, and AFD wished to join forces to express their solidarity with the Lebanese authorities and people through the creation of an international fund dedicated to the emergency protection of monuments, archaeological sites, museums, and their collections in Lebanon."

The Arab World Institute, co-founded by France and the 22 states of the Arab League, is committed to promoting the archaeological heritage of its member states through major, emblematic exhibitions.

The exhibition "Byblos: Lebanon's Millennial City," organized in partnership with the Lebanese Ministry of Culture and with the exceptional participation of the Louvre Museum, presents 400 exceptional pieces that immerse the public in the epic story of this city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Established in Geneva in 2017, ALIPH is the leading global fund dedicated to protecting heritage threatened by conflict, climate change, and natural disasters.

Since 2020, ALIPH has supported some forty projects in Lebanon, totaling USD 5.6 million.

The foundation intervened quickly after the explosion in the port of Beirut and during the outbreak of the conflicts of 2024 and 2026.

The AFD, a major player in France's international coop-

eration, has been present in Lebanon since 1999, where it has financed more than 125 projects for EUR 1.3 billion in net commitments, operating in sectors as diverse as health, water and sanitation, and education.

The AFD's commitment to Lebanese cultural heritage is part of this long history: as early as 2007, the agency supported the institutional strengthening of the Directorate General of Antiquities, funding training in conservation techniques and archaeological research in partnership with the French Institute for the Near East (IFRE).

It is in keeping with this commitment that the AFD is now joining forces with the IFRE and ALIPH to respond urgently to the threats posed by the current conflict to archaeological sites and collections in Lebanon.

The emergency fund for the protection of Lebanese heritage in times of war - announced on Friday - reinforces this collective mobilization.

Implemented by ALIPH in close collaboration with Lebanese authorities and professionals in the sector, it will support priority actions for the safeguarding, securing, and preservation of Lebanese heritage, particularly the Byblos site.

The initial grants demonstrate the joint commitment of the partners:

■ EUR 50,000 from the Arab World Institute for the preservation of the Byblos site,

■ USD 100,000 from ALIPH to protect the heritage of the archaeological site of Tyre and the reserves of the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA),

■ EUR 25,000 from the French Development Agency (AFD).

Through this initiative, the Arab World Institute and ALIPH reaffirm their commitment to the protection of heritage, essential to the memory of peoples and the reconstruction of societies in times of crisis.

## Variety

**VIENNA:** Markus Hinterhäuser is out as artistic director of the Salzburg Festival after a decade in one of Europe's most influential cultural roles, cutting short a tenure that had been set to run through 2031.

An Austrian pianist who turns 68 on Monday, Hinterhäuser became artistic director on Oct. 1, 2016. The festival announced in April 2024 that he had been given a third five-year term from 2026-31, but his relationship with management became strained.

"Due to irreconcilable differences of opinion, the Salzburg Festival and artistic director Markus Hinterhäuser have decided to part ways, effective immediately," the festival's supervisory board said in a statement Thursday. "This is the result of a meeting between the lawyers for the Salzburg Festival's supervisory board on the one hand and the artistic director and his counsel on the other."

The board said Hinterhäuser will be on leave until his current contract ends on Sept. 30. The board said it will appoint a provisional artistic director "without delay" and said conversations with potential candidates had begun. (AP)

**VIENNA:** The federal government of Austria decided on Friday to introduce a social media ban for students up to the age of 14, the Austrian news agency APA reported.

Starting in the 2027/28 school year, this reform will pro-

vide more instruction in media literacy, democracy, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for students.

According to the related documents, the Ministry of Education and its partners in the education field have agreed that schools can autonomously decide whether to teach media literacy as a separate subject or as part of a combined curriculum.

The real-name policy will not be implemented, APA reported, adding that the federal government, however, is committed to stricter enforcement of the disclosure of existing user data by social media platforms in cases of serious offenses, and to strengthening cooperation between platforms and authorities in prosecuting perpetrators. (Xinhua)

**THE HAGUE:** A Dutch court on Thursday banned Grok and X from generating and distributing "undressing" images and child pornography. The ruling applies to content depicting individuals residing in the Netherlands, as well as to the production and distribution of such content within the country.

The Dutch online abuse expertise center Offlimits and the independent civil society group Victim Support Fund announced last month that they had initiated summary proceedings against Grok, an AI tool available on social media platform X.

The organizations sought an immediate ban, arguing that the tool enables users to partially or fully undress individuals without their consent and to generate and share images depicting the sexual abuse of minors. (Xinhua)

## Research may offer early insights into mental health risks

## New study predicts youth impulsivity from brain structure

MANHASSET, N.Y., March 29, (AP): What if individual variations in brain structure could predict a young person's tendency towards impulsive behaviors, offering early insights into mental health risks? New research from scientists at Northwell Health's Feinstein Institutes for Medical Research has identified distinct neuroanatomical patterns that predict individual differences in impulsivity across youth. Published in *Molecular Psychiatry*, the study reveals how specific brain regions and networks are associated with various dimensions of impulsivity, suggesting new avenues for understanding and addressing psychiatric conditions.

This discovery, led by Elvisha Dhamala, PhD, assistant professor in the Institute of Behavioral Science at the Feinstein Institutes, advances the understanding of the complex interplay between brain structure and behavior during a critical developmental period. While impulsivity is a common feature in many psychiatric illnesses and undergoes changes during adolescence, the precise structural underpinnings

contributing to its diverse manifestations have remained largely unexplored. By employing machine learning across a large, longitudinal dataset, researchers have mapped these intricate brain-behavior relationships.

Using brain-based predictive models and data from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study, the team analyzed multiple neuroanatomical features – including cortical thickness, surface area and gray matter volume – and self-reported measures of impulsivity from over 8,600 youth across several developmental timepoints. The study found that regional variations in these brain features significantly predict different dimensions of impulsivity, such as drive, urgency, lack of planning and behavioral inhibition. Notably, these associations broadly mapped onto key brain networks including the default mode, limbic, ventral attention and visual networks, as well as cerebellar and brain stem structures. The research also revealed sex-specific patterns, indicating that the neuroanatomical basis of impulsiv-

ity is not static but changes with development and varies between males and females. While individual differences in stable brain organization proved predictive, longitudinal changes in neuroanatomy were not as strongly associated with changes in impulsivity, suggesting that a young person's overall brain structure may be a more consistent indicator of their behavioral tendencies than short-term structural changes.

"Our findings reveal that the brain's physical structure holds clues to understanding why individuals exhibit different levels and types of impulsivities," said Dr. Dhamala. "This research not only deepens our understanding of the brain's role in decision-making and emotional regulation but also highlights that impulsivity is not a single trait, but a complex interplay of various neural patterns that evolve over time and differs between sexes."

These insights have clinical implications, especially given that heightened impulsivity is a core characteristic of many

psychiatric disorders, including attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), substance use disorder, and mood disorders. Identifying these neuroanatomical signatures can inform the development of more precise diagnostic tools and personalized early interventions. By understanding which brain structures are most implicated in specific aspects of impulsivity, clinicians may one day be able to tailor treatments that target these unique neurobiological underpinnings.

"Precision mental health care demands we deeply understand the developing brain. Dr. Dhamala's research precisely uncovers the neurobiological wiring behind impulsivity in youth," said Anil K. Malhotra, MD, co-director of Institute of Behavioral Science at the Feinstein Institutes. "This knowledge can open pathways for targeted diagnostics and personalized interventions, informing our search to create device-based therapies that re-engineer these circuits for better lives."

## Vaccine may not be effective

## Doctor explains what to know as BA.3.2 COVID variant spreads in US

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



By Kyle B. Enfield

University of Virginia

A variant of COVID-19 called BA.3.2, which has circulated under the radar since late 2024, is now spreading quickly across the United States.

As a pulmonary and critical care doctor, I see many patients who are at high risk for severe COVID-19 due to chronic lung disease, as well as patients living with long COVID. All of them ask me how worried they should be about new variants of the virus.

There's no sign so far that BA.3.2, nicknamed Cicada, is any more dangerous or causes more severe disease than the variants that were circulating in the winter of 2025-26. But because it's significantly different from them, the current COVID-19 vaccine may not be as effective against it.

BA.3.2 is descended from the omicron variant, which emerged in late 2021.

Compared to the current predominant strains of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, BA.3.2 carries 70 to 75 genetic changes in its spike protein, the part of the virus that helps it get into cells. The spike protein is also the part of the virus that vaccines rely on to coax people's immune systems into recognizing the virus.

Researchers first identified BA.3.2 in November 2024 in Africa. It started its global trek in 2025 and had made it to 23 countries as of February 2026.

The first US case was detected in a traveler coming into the US in June 2025. Since then, it has been detected in patients and the wastewater systems of 29 states.

Wastewater monitoring is one of the best early methods of detecting strain shift, though the number of states submitting wastewater data to the CDC has declined since around 2022, after the height of the pandemic.

All viruses change over time - and the type of virus that causes COVID-19 does so especially quickly. Every time the virus copies itself inside a cell, its DNA mutates. Most of these changes disappear, but occasionally one gives the virus an advantage over other variants, allowing that version to spread.

These changes make it harder for the immune system to recognize the virus.

Think of it like showing up to your 25th high school reunion and seeing people who have put on weight, dyed their hair and started wearing tinted contacts. You will recognize them, but it might take longer. Had you seen them every month or so for those 25 years, you would recognize them right away.

Similarly, changes to a virus' DNA also affect how well vaccines work. Vaccines prime people's immune systems by reminding them of what the virus looks like. Scientists design vaccines based on the most common versions of a virus circulating at a given time.

Current COVID-19 vaccines are made to protect against strains from the JN.1 lineage of the virus, which have been the most common strains in the U.S. since January 2024. However, BA.3.2 is the new kid in the block - it's almost a complete stranger to residents of the U.S. It is different enough from the JN.1 strains that the vaccine may not do as good a job of priming the immune system against it, allowing it to evade detection.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't get a vaccine - a large body of evidence shows that they reduce hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19. But a poorly matched vaccine simply won't recognize the new variant as quickly, which means it takes longer for the immune system to mount its defense.

Because people's immune systems aren't as good at detecting BA.3.2, this variant may infect people more widely, potentially leading to a spike in COVID-19 cases.

But even though BA.3.2 is spreading quickly, there's no indication that it's any more dangerous or that it causes more severe disease than the COVID-19 variants that have circulated widely over the past few years.

However, especially given that current vaccines may not be as effective against it, protection remains important. That's particularly true for people with chronic health conditions, who can experience severe illness from a COVID-19 infection.

And while the number of people who develop long COVID has declined as the virus has changed since early in the pandemic, it still occurs in about 3 in 100 cases.

People can take these commonsense steps to avoid getting or spreading COVID-19:

- First, wash your hands after using the bathroom, before preparing food or eating, and after being in contact with a sick person. Hand-washing decreases the chance of a respiratory infection by 16% to 21%.

- Second, if you feel unwell, stay home - not just to take care of yourself, but to prevent spreading disease. You may be hesitant to miss work or school, but the person sitting next to you might have a condition, such as cancer or chronic lung disease, that puts them at risk for severe infection, or they might live with someone who does.

- Third, get outside. Reducing your time in crowded environments reduces your chance of exposure.

- Finally, if you have concerns about your risk of developing a severe infection due to your own health conditions, talk to a trusted clinician who can offer advice that's specific to your circumstances. (AP)

## Call to act fast to save this unique ecosystem

## Scientists dive deep under Arctic and Antarctic ice to uncover secrets

KILPISJÄRVI, Finland, March 29, (AP): As bubbles rippled across the frigid Finnish lake, diver Daan Jacobs emerged from a hole carved out of the thick, crackling ice.

The journey had taken him 8 meters (26 feet) beneath the surface, where sunlight filtered through the Arctic ice and fish swam around a rock formation. It's a remote place few will ever see, especially in winter, when snow blankets the ice and temperatures on land approach minus 40 degrees in both Celsius and Fahrenheit.

But Jacobs, a biodiversity adviser in the Netherlands, is one of a growing number of fortunate underwater explorers.

He was part of the Polar Scientific Diving class in the far north of Finland earlier this month, a program designed by the Finnish Scientific Diving Academy to train the next generation of scientists and researchers to dive beneath the Arctic and Antarctic ice to study the flora and fauna below.

"The view is beautiful," Jacobs said, gulping for air following his 45-minute dive.

The Arctic is warming four times faster than the rest of the planet. From impacting worldwide weather patterns to making the polar bear population smaller, weaker and hungrier, because they rely on the sea ice to hunt from, higher temperatures at the North Pole spell disaster for the entire globe.

In Antarctica, meanwhile, global warming is leading to melting of ice sheets, prompting sea level rise and disrupting ocean ecosystems.

So scientists need to study what's underneath the remaining Arctic - and Antarctic - ice, and determine how climate change is affecting the plants and animals that have traditionally survived along the seafloor with little to no sunlight. But carrying out such research requires specialized scuba diving skills plus the proper scientific background - qualifications that experts say only a few hundred people in the world currently have.

The Finnish Scientific Diving Academy's class aims to not only train more divers, but also to convince the world



In this photo provided by Pata Degerman, a diver swims under the ice during a Polar Scientific Diving class in Kilpisjärvi, Finland, March 13, 2024. (AP)

that the polar ice crisis requires additional research.

"Because it is melting so fast, we need to have more people deployed there - more science to be done - to understand better what happens," said Erik Wurz, a marine biologist and one of the class's scientific diving instructors. "We have to do more and we need to be fast to save this unique ecosystem in the Arctic, but also the Antarctic."

And in a world that's increasingly outsourcing work to artificial intelligence and robots, British Antarctic Survey marine biologist Simon Morley said that human hands are still necessary for this. Dragging nets across the seafloor would destroy the habitat, and a remotely operated submersible or robot can usually only pick up one specimen at a time.

"A diver can go down and pick up 12 urchins, put them in a bag and not affect the rest of the system," said Morley, who isn't part of the course.

During each 10-day session, the academy's instructors drill a dozen experienced divers on a frozen lake at the University of Helsinki's Kilpisjärvi Biological Station. The program began

in 2024 and the demand has allowed them to add a second session per year.

The participants range from marine and freshwater biologists and other scientists to highly skilled recreational divers and documentary filmmakers.

Ruari Buijs, a marine biology and oceanography student at the University of Plymouth in England, ultimately wants to work in Antarctica and research marine megafauna. He enrolled in this month's polar diving class in an effort to be more employable upon graduation.

"I thought this would be a very good stepping stone toward that goal," he said.

Meanwhile, Caroline Chen, a scientific diver and research assistant in Germany, said it's her dream to dive in the polar regions. She believes that her experience in this course will help her design future experiments in such challenging conditions.

The students must learn more than just diving under ice that's nearly a meter (around three feet) thick and into water temperatures that hover just above freezing. For starters, there's the frigid air temperatures and whipping winds over Lake Kilpisjärvi.

## Programs help reduce birth complications, C-sections

## Once a luxury for new mothers, doula care is going mainstream

MEMPHIS, Tenn., March 29, (AP): Shaquoya Stewart held one of her 6-month-old twins on her lap while Shanille Bowens held the other. As the women caught up and the babies stared at each other quietly, Bowens came around to the key question she asks all the mothers she works for: "Do you think there's anything you need more support with?"

Bowens is a doula, a provider of physical and emotional support before, during and after birth - care that used to be seen as a luxury and was available only to those who could afford it. But doulas are becoming mainstream.

The country's once-reluctant medical establishment is increasingly welcoming the way doulas complement doctors and nurses, and with insurance coverage growing fast, parents from across the economic spectrum can now take advantage.

More than 30 states reimburse doulas through Medicaid or are in the process of implementing such coverage, up from 14 in late 2022, according to the nonprofit National Health Law Program. Private insurers are starting to do the same, with industry giant UnitedHealthcare launching a new benefit this year. Without insurance, costs vary widely but can exceed \$2,000.

The changes are being driven by mounting research that shows these trained, non-medical professionals can significantly improve the health of moms and babies. Expanding doula care, experts say, is a relatively inexpensive way to help reduce maternal mortality, which kills Black mothers like Stewart at a rate more than three times higher than white women.

"Doulas can benefit everybody," said Sierra Hill, maternal care access coordinator for Minnesota's health department. "And that's especially true for our communities that are facing a lot of inequities and health disparities."

Stewart, who has Tennessee Medicaid, said Bowens shepherded her through the jitters of early pregnancy with her twin sons, blood pressure issues during delivery, a C-section and baby blues after birth.

"I felt safe. It didn't feel like I was just by myself," said Stewart, a 35-year-old single mother of four. "She was like my homegirl."

In 2006, 3% of women in the US got care from a doula during labor, according to a survey conducted for the nonprofit Childbirth Connection, now a program of the National Partnership for Women & Families. That figure has doubled or tripled since then, researchers estimate.



Mary Bey looks on while doula Shanille Bowens holds Bey's daughter, Ca'Mya, during an appointment on Feb. 28, 2026, in Memphis, Tenn. (AP)

When Bowens was pregnant with the first of her six children more than two decades ago, a counselor recommended a doula.

"I'm like, 'A doula, what is that?'" Bowens recalled.

Bowens was so inspired by the care she received that she ultimately became one herself. In addition to answering moms' questions and connecting them to community services, Bowens helps her clients navigate the health system and advocates for them.

"Oftentimes, we become friends with our clients - lifelong friends. We help connect them with resources in the community," said Bowens, founder of Naturally Nurtured Birth Services. "We cater to them ... so it looks different for each client."

That help pays off, especially for moms from underserved communities.

Research comparing two groups of socially disadvantaged mothers found that those who used doulas were four times less likely to have a baby with low birth weight, two times less likely to have a birth complication and much more likely to start breastfeeding. Another study published last year found that Medicaid recipients with doulas had a 47% lower risk of C-sections and a 29% lower risk of preterm birth and were 46% more likely to go to a postpartum checkup.

That postpartum finding is key, said April Falconi, a scientist at Carleton Research who co-authored the recent study. More than half of maternal deaths occur during the postpartum period, she said. Causes include infection and excessive bleeding.

These sorts of results led Minnesota to

become one of the first states to cover doulas through Medicaid in 2014. A decade later, the state expanded coverage, allowing Medicaid recipients 18 sessions with a doula without prior authorization, more than double what was allowed before.

"The return on investment is huge," the health department's Hill said.

There are no mandatory licenses for doulas, but there are state qualification standards to receive Medicaid payments and many doulas seek certification from private entities.

Naturally Nurtured is involved in a pilot project in Memphis in which doula services are paid for under a Tennessee Medicaid program run by UnitedHealthcare. Services are free to members.

UnitedHealthcare commercial clients with a doula benefit, on the other hand, get reimbursed for the care. Doulas are also included in a limited but growing number of other private plans.

"I see doulas becoming more and more integrated and accepted by all within the health care system," said Dr. Margaret-Mary Wilson, chief medical officer at UnitedHealth Group.

That extends to doctors and nurses in hospitals.

Dana Morrison, principal director of Doulas of Duluth in Minnesota, said there "was definitely" resistance to doulas by birth teams when she began her work 10 years ago. That was also true nationally. One point of friction was when doulas advocated for something different from what the medical professionals wanted. And since doulas weren't as integrated into care, they didn't have the time to build trust with doctors and nurses.

## Rider injuries from e-bikes on the rise

## How to stay safe on fast, risky e-bikes

SIoux FALLS, S.D., March 29, (AP): The 14-year-old was riding an electric bicycle at an estimated 25 mph when he slammed into Janet Stotko during her evening walk, leaving her unconscious and bleeding on a sidewalk in her Minnesota neighborhood.

The 2024 crash nearly killed Stotko, who was raced to a hospital with severe brain injuries, a facial fracture and broken eardrum. But after being on a ventilator for two days, spending three weeks in the hospital and enduring brain surgery, she survived, surprising even her doctors.

At a checkup, she said, her doctors told her, "Wow, we can't believe you're here."

Now, she's pushing for stricter laws regulating e-bikes in hopes that others won't be hurt.

E-bikes offer a convenient, eco-friendly and cost-effective alternative to cars, but their increasing use is drawing safety concerns. A study by the University of California, San Francisco found that rider injuries from e-bikes nearly doubled each year from 2017 to 2022, and a University of California, San Diego study showed injuries in San Diego among e-bike riders under 18 soared 300% from 2019 to 2023.

Under federal law, most e-bikes are considered nonmotorized vehicles just like traditional bicycles, so riders don't need a driver's license or insurance and they don't have to wear a helmet. But many states have more stringent rules, and regulations vary widely.

Health experts have called for new laws and better enforcement of existing regulations, and officials in many places are taking action.

Here's what e-bikers should know to keep themselves and people around them safe.

Many states have adopted a three-tier classification of e-bikes: Class 1 have motors that kick in while riders pedal with maximum speeds of 20 mph; Class 2 have throttles that reach the 20 mph maximum without pedaling; and Class 3 provide pedal-assist up to 28 mph.

There are faster versions available, sometimes called e-motos, that can reach 40 mph even without pedaling. Many states treat these bikes like motorcycles, so they're not allowed on sidewalks or paths, but in some states there are no specific rules for the ultra-fast bikes.

As John Maa, a general surgeon at MarinHealth Medical Center in Northern California, notes, it's basic math that increased speeds lead to increased injuries.

"It's Newton's principles, right? Force equals mass times acceleration, and also kinetic energy is mass times velocity squared," Maa said.

Speed limits, helmet requirements and other rules for e-bikes are changing rapidly, and what's legal in one city or state might be illegal in the next.

New York City imposed a speed limit of 15 mph on all electric bikes in October, and Florida lawmakers recently sent the governor a bill limiting e-bike speeds to 10 mph within 50 feet of pedestrians. In Connecticut, an October law requires all e-bike riders to wear a helmet, and bikes without pedals equipped with batteries over 750 watts will require a driver's license.

"We were not only hearing from manufacturers and riders, but we were hearing from concerned citizens trying to share the road with these new electric bikes and e-scooters, and also law enforcement who really needed some clear policies set into place," said Christine Cohen, the Connecticut state senator behind the legislation.

The market is full of vehicles that blur the line between a traditional e-bike and something closer to a motorcycle, and manufacturers don't always make the distinction easy to spot.

To understand a bike's capabilities and where it can be legally ridden, check its top speed, motor wattage, and whether it requires pedaling or operates on throttle alone. Anything outside the three-class classification could be subject to motor vehicle regulations, making it illegal to ride on some shared-use paths where slower e-bikes are allowed.

"The first thing we always tell people is familiarize yourself, read the manual, look at some videos, look at your specific model," said Charles DiMaggio, an injury public health researcher and professor at New York University's medical school.

Going to a local bike shop instead of buying online can help, enabling riders to ask questions, take a test ride and learn what's legal and what isn't.

Hospitals and medical groups like the American College of Surgeons and American Association of Neurological Surgeons have called for stricter policies and offered safety tips.

Above all, they stress wearing a helmet. Other tips include riding defensively around cars, using front and rear lights, wearing reflective vests in the dark, and avoiding biking under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Experts also recommend against altering an e-bike to make it faster.

Maa added that e-bike riders should consider wearing a motorcycle helmet that covers the neck to protect against spinal injuries. He also advises parents to make sure their children can comfortably ride a pedal bike before they graduate to e-bikes.

## Spurs steamroll Bucks

## Pistons strengthen hold on Eastern Conference top seed

MINNEAPOLIS, March 29, (AP): Tobias Harris led a balanced scoring attack with 18 points on Saturday as the Detroit Pistons strengthened their hold on the top seed in the Eastern Conference with a 109-87 victory over the injury-riddled Minnesota Timberwolves.

Jalen Duren had 10 points and 13 rebounds for the Pistons, who have won nine of their last 11 games. They began the day with a four-game lead over Boston in the race for the Eastern Conference's top seed.

Five other Pistons scored at least 10 points, led by Daniss Jenkins and Ronald Holland II with 13 apiece.

Minnesota's Anthony Edwards (right knee inflammation) missed his sixth straight game. The Timberwolves also played without starting forward Jaden McDaniels (right knee soreness) and guard Ayo Dosunmu (right calf soreness).

Pistons guard Cade Cunningham (collapsed lung) also missed his sixth straight game.

Donte DiVincenzo hit five 3-pointers and led Minnesota with 22 points. Rudy Gobert had 14 points and 12 rebounds for the Timberwolves, who shot a season-low 32% (27 for 85) from the floor and 21% (9 for 43) from beyond the arc.

**Spurs 127, Bucks 95**

In Milwaukee, Stephen Castle had a triple-double with 22 points, 10 assists and 10 rebounds as hot-shooting San Antonio steamrolled Milwaukee for its eighth consecutive victory.

Castle was one of seven players to score in double figures for the Spurs, who have won 13 of their last 14 to move within two games of the first-place Oklahoma City Thunder in the Western Conference standings.

Victor Wembanyama added 23 points, 15 rebounds and six assists. San Antonio never trailed and shot 55.1% (49 of 89).

Milwaukee's loss eliminated the Bucks from playoff contention, snapping their streak of nine consecutive postseason appearances. The Bucks



Detroit Pistons guard Kevin Huertler, left, goes to the basket against Minnesota Timberwolves center Rudy Gobert, right, in the fourth quarter of an NBA basketball game in Minneapolis. (AP)

have lost nine of their last 11 games.

Giannis Antetokounmpo sat out a sixth straight game for Milwaukee with a left knee hyperextension and bone bruise. The Bucks also were missing Kevin Porter Jr. (right knee), Bobby Portis (left wrist sprain), Kyle Kuzma (Achilles tendinopathy), Gary Harris (personal reasons) and Thanasis Antetokounmpo (left calf).

Gary Trent Jr. scored 18 points to lead the Bucks.

San Antonio's Keldon Johnson and Devin Vassell scored 16 points each. Dylan Harper added 14, De'Aaron Fox 12 and Julian Champagnie 11.

**76ers 118, Hornets 114**

In Charlotte, Joel Embiid scored 29 points, Paul George finished with 26 points and 13 rebounds and Philadelphia rallied from 13 points down in the second half for a win over Charlotte Hornets.

With its fourth win in five games, Philadelphia extended its lead over

Charlotte to two games in the race for the seventh spot in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

Tyrese Maxey returned to the Sixers' starting lineup and added 26 points, eight assists and seven rebounds. The All-Star guard had been sidelined since March 7 due to a tendon injury in his right pinkie finger.

Brandon Miller hit five 3-pointers and finished with 29 points and eight rebounds for Charlotte, which had its five-game winning streak halted. LaMelo Ball pitched in with 20 points and eight assists, and Moussa Diabate added 10 points and 11 rebounds.

Charlotte led 36-25 after the first quarter. Philadelphia's 39-point second quarter cut the lead to 69-64 at halftime. Embiid led all scorers with 21 points in the first half, while Maxey added 17. Miller led Charlotte with 18 points in the opening periods.

**Hawks 123, Kings 113**

In Atlanta, Nickail Alexander-Walker scored 27 points and Atlanta shot 8 of 12 on 3-pointers in the fourth quarter to survive a late surge from Sacramento to win for coach Quinn Snyder's 500th career victory.

Jalen Johnson had 26 points and 10 assists and Jock Landale had 19 points and 13 rebounds to help Atlanta to its 15th win in its last 17 games. It was Johnson's 44th double-double of the season and Landale's first since his debut with Atlanta on Feb. 5.

The Kings, who have lost their first three games of a four-game road trip, fell to 19-56. DeMar DeRozan led Sacramento with 22 points. Maxime Raynaud had 18 points and 10 rebounds.

After a back-and-forth first half during which Atlanta trailed by as many as seven points, the Hawks went on a 26-8 run in the final 5:54 of the second quarter to lead 66-54 at halftime. Atlanta held its lead the entire third quarter.

But Sacramento bounced back to tie it at 97 with 7:56 left. The Hawks went on a 26-16 run to end the game, with



Philadelphia 76ers guard Quentin Grimes (5) drives against Charlotte Hornets forward Brandon Miller during the second half of an NBA basketball game in Charlotte, N.C. (AP)

18 of those points coming on 3-pointers.

**Grizzlies 125, Bulls 124**

In Memphis, Cedric Coward scored 24 points, including a pair of free throws with 6.5 seconds left, and had nine rebounds and Memphis outlasted Chicago.

After Coward's free throws, Josh Giddey made two foul shots with 4 seconds left to pull Chicago within one point. The Bulls had a chance to win after the Grizzlies turned over the ensuing inbound pass, but couldn't get a shot off in time.

Tyler Burton finished with 18 points and Jahmai Mashack added 17 as Memphis snapped a five-game losing streak.

Matas Buzelis led Chicago with 29 points and Collin Sexton had 26 in a reserve role. Giddey had 18 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists for his 13th triple-double of the season for the Bulls, who have lost three straight.

**Suns 134, Jazz 109**

In Phoenix, Jalen Green scored 31 points, Devin Booker had 26 and Phoenix routed Utah.

Grayson Allen added 19 points, Oso Ighodaro scored 13 and Khaman Maluach had 12 and nine rebounds for the Suns, who had lost six of their previous seven games. The win moved Phoenix within 3 1/2 games of sixth-place Houston, the last position to stay out of the Western Conference play-in round.

Neither Green nor Booker played in

the fourth quarter as the Suns cruised to the victory.

Brice Sensabaugh and Kyle Filipowski each scored 26 points for the Jazz, who lost their fifth in a row, seventh straight on the road and 10th of their last 11 overall. Svi Mykhailuk scored 14 points and Ace Bailey had all of his 13 points in the second half. Kennedy Chandler had 11 points and eight assists for Utah.

The Suns used a 21-2 run in the first quarter to open up a 37-17 lead. Green had 11 points in the quarter, making three of Phoenix's eight 3-pointers in the period.

Phoenix posted its biggest halftime lead of the season at 73-45, led by Green's 20 points.

## Malinin rebounds from Olympic nightmare with worlds 3-peat



Ilia Malinin from the United States competes during the men free skating at the Figure Skating World Championships in Prague, Czech Republic. Inset: Silver medalist Yuma Kagiyama from Japan, left, gold medalist Ilia Malinin from the United States and bronze medalist, Shun Sato from Japan, stand on the podium during the medal ceremony. (AP)

## Kagiyama and Sato complete podium

**PRAGUE, March 29, (AP): Ilia Malinin is back on the top step of the podium.**

Six weeks after a disastrous free skate knocked the Olympic gold-medal favorite off the podium, the "quad god" reeled off one huge jump after another, and a backflip for good measure, to retain his world championship title for the third year running.

Malinin shouted and punched the air with relief after finishing a skate that showed he had achieved his desire to "move on" from the Olympics after days tormented by his mistakes.

He praised the crowd's support, saying: "It was really challenging, really hard but with you guys I was able to make it through." His aim, he added, had simply been to get through the free skate "in one piece."

Skating last after leading the short program, just as he did in Milan, Malinin landed five high-scoring quadruple jumps but not his pioneering quad axel, a jump he didn't attempt at the Olympics.

Malinin said that he came to the worlds with a fresh mindset after all the pressure from the Olympics was over. His goal was to "enjoy every moment on the ice and just have fun out there."

"Going here I felt like there was almost no pressure at all," he said. "I just completely blocked out all the expectations, all the pressure that people

put on me and was really here to escape for myself and enjoy every moment of these world championships."

Malinin scored 218.11 in the free skate for a total 329.40, far ahead of silver medalist Yuma Kagiyama of Japan on 306.67. Another Japanese skater, Shun Sato, was third on 288.54.

Kagiyama beat his personal-best free skate score but still had to make do with a fourth career world championship silver in a career which includes four Olympic silvers and five total worlds medals, but no gold from either event. He still embraced Malinin after his skate and they jumped together in celebration.

Being second again was not a big deal for Kagiyama.

After a disappointing performance at the free skate at the Olympics, he said "I came here solely focused on finishing the event with a satisfying performance," adding that "I'm relieved that I was finally able to achieve that goal."

In a showcase of top-level skating, there was no podium spot for France's Adam Siao Him Fa, who had been in second after the short program but dropped to fifth overall after a fall. Estonia's Aleksandr Selevko also fell dropped from third to sixth.

Malinin had no rematch with Mikhail Shaidorov, the skater from Kazakhstan who won the Olympic gold, because he opted against competing again this season.

That's relatively common in figure skating for gold medal winners who face a rush of media and commercial opportunities after a grueling four-year Olympic buildup.

Malinin becomes the first skater to win three consecutive men's world titles since fellow American Nathan Chen, who achieved the feat in 2018, 2019 and 2021 after the 2020 event was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ice dance was the only event at the world championships where the Milan Cortina Olympic champions were competing, and France's Laurence Fournier Beaudry and Guillaume Cizeron added a world title to their collection.

The French team scored 138.07 in their free dance for a total 230.81, both personal bests, to cap a successful and often controversial first season together.

Olympic bronze medalists Piper Gilles and Paul Poirier of Canada are world silver medalists three years running after scoring 211.52.

Olympic silver medalists Madison Chock and Evan Bates withdrew before the championships but Emilea Zingas and Vadym Kolesnik still took a surprise bronze for the U.S. on 209.20.

That was decided when British pair Lilah Fear and Lewis Gibson picked up a rare two-point deduction for an "illegal element/movement" and dropped behind the Americans. Exactly what was wrong wasn't immediately explained.

## Mayweather says Pacquiao rematch exhibition, with venue still undecided

LAS VEGAS, March 29, (AP): Turns out the Floyd Mayweather Jr. vs Manny Pacquiao fight on Sept. 19 in Las Vegas won't count after all.

And it might not even be at the Sphere, the immersive arena near the Strip that has attracted people from all over the world because of its massive high-resolution video backdrop.

"As of right now, we don't know exactly where the fight is going to be at," Mayweather said Saturday in a video captured by Vegas Sports Today in an interview session with select media. "The Sphere is one of the places that they've talked about, so we don't know if it's 100% going to be there."

Wherever the location, this fight comes 11 years after their first meeting, which didn't live up to the enormous hype between the two most notable boxers of that time. Both were

past their prime when Mayweather beat Pacquiao by decision in what promoters said was the most profitable fight in history and set pay-per-view records.

The 49-year-old Mayweather downplayed the significance of his rematch with the 47-year-old Pacquiao being an exhibition and not a bout that will count on the two boxers' record. Mayweather pointed out he also has an exhibition with former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson coming up and one in Greece against kickboxer Mike Zambidis.

"If I'm just sitting at home and I'm working out every day and spending time with my grandson and spending time with my children, I said why not go out and have little fun and entertain the public with some exhibitions?" Mayweather said.

## 'Fight should have continued'

## Fundora retains welterweight title with sixth-round KO of Thurman

LAS VEGAS, March 29, (AP): Keith Thurman said the fight should have continued, and maybe if it had, he would have found a way to get the best of Sebastian Fundora.

But until referee Thomas Taylor stopped the bout at 1:17 of the sixth round on Saturday night, there was little evidence that Fundora was in danger of relinquishing his WBC super welterweight belt.

The 6-foot-5 Fundora (24-1-1, 16 knockouts) used his nine-inch height and reach advantage to pepper Thurman (31-2, 23 KOs) with a series of hard lefts and combinations. Thurman managed to get in the occasional blow, but had to pick his spots.

There just wasn't enough of an opportunity for him against the man called The Towering Inferno. Fundora landed 96 shots to 28 for Thurman, according to CompuBox, and 64 power punches to 25.

"I was a little nervous today because Thurman is such a big name," Fundora said. "But once we got in that ring, I said, 'This is my world.'"

He made that clear early in the fight, and by the fifth round, Fundora was in complete control, delivering blow after blow with Thurman against the ropes. A knockout seemed like a matter of time, and it nearly came in the closing seconds of that round before the bell rang.

The moment, instead, occurred early in the sixth.

Thurman, holding ice to the left side of his battered and bruised face, was upset about the ref's decision to step in, arguing he hadn't been knocked down and was on the verge of giving his opponent a true challenge.

"The fight was getting really good," Thurman said. "The fans were loving the action and the referee stopped the fight too early. They don't have the guts to let the fights go on like (in past years). He talked to me and said if I was moving my feet he wouldn't stop the fight. I wasn't on the ropes taking shots. It was very unfortunate to not give the fans a better show. Win, lose, or draw, I thought it was a little bit premature. I had more in me."

Fundora, a 28-year-old from Coachella, California, was a significant favorite entering the bout, listed at -325 at BetMGM Sportsbook.

"We've been working very hard for this fight," Fundora said. "I told him that I've always looked up to him. He's a Hall of Famer for sure."

Thurman, a Clearwater, Florida resident, looked all of his 37 years old, and perhaps after this night, he could have some big decisions to make about his future. But Thurman said he has more left in him, especially the way this fight ended.

He once ruled the welterweight division, his only loss before Saturday occurring July 20, 2019, in a split-decision loss to Manny Pacquiao.



Sebastian Fundora hits Keith Thurman in a super welterweight championship boxing match in Las Vegas. (AP)

Americans allow five straight goals in deflating 5-2 loss

## US with big World Cup dreams gets a dressing down from Belgium

ATLANTA, March 29, (AP) — Belgium gave a dressing down to a U.S. team with big World Cup dreams.

The Americans allowed five straight goals in a deflating 5-2 loss to the Red Devils in a friendly on Saturday night. The U.S. had not lost by three in a home game in which it scored the opening goal since an 8-1 defeat to England in 1959, according to Opta.

"We cannot arrive with the wrong idea of that we are so good, we are so handsome, we are so well dressed and we are Americans," said U.S. coach Mauricio Pochettino, a former Argentina defender. "Always after the games when the team wins, (it's) because we fight, we were aggressive, we were intense, yes? When we drop in that intensity - we saw today."

Preparing to host the World Cup this summer, the U.S. entered with a five-game unbeaten streak and Pochettino's message to players had been they can win soccer's top title for the first time.

Weston McKennie's 39th-minute goal from Antonee Robinson's corner kick put the 15th-ranked U.S. ahead of the world's No. 9 team. But then the U.S. level lagged.

"We didn't defend our box well enough," said Matt Turner, who returned to the U.S. goal for the first time since June. "That's something that we cannot have. We can't accept that we didn't lay everything on the line to keep the ball out of the back of the net because that's when our tails should be up the most."

Dodi Lukébakio scored two goals for Belgium and Zeno Debast, Amadou Onana and Charles De Ketelaere had one each. Patrick Agyemang got an 87th-minute goal for the U.S., which has lost seven straight games to European opponents while getting outscored 20-6.

Christian Pulisic, the top American player, failed to convert several good scoring chances. He entered scoreless in his last 12 games with AC Milan and extended his U.S. goal drought to seven games since November 2024.

Last fall's unbeaten streak included wins over Japan (currently No. 18), Australia (27), Paraguay (38) and Uruguay (17) plus a draw vs. Ecuador (23). The U.S. plays No. 5 Portugal on Tuesday in its last game before Pochettino announces his World Cup roster on May 26.

Turner said the match reminded him of the 3-1 loss to the Netherlands that eliminated the U.S. from the 2022 World Cup in the round of 16. Belgium withstood U.S. pressure early, then raised its aggressiveness to a level the Americans couldn't withstand.

Both teams missed several regulars because of injuries and fitness: the Americans missed Tyler Adams, Sergio Dest and Chris Richards, and Belgium was without Romelu Lukaku, Leandro Trossard, Hans Vanaken and Thibaut Courtois.

With Richards sidelined, the U.S. started 38-year-old Tim Ream in central defense along with Mark McKenzie.

There was no American defender within 5 yards when Debast scored the equalizer from about 30 yards in the 45th minute after Turner parried Jérémy Doku's initial attempt. Onana put Belgium ahead in the 53rd with a shot through the center of the penalty area after a layback from Alexis Saelemaekers.

De Ketelaere converted a penalty kick in the 59th after Thomas Meunier's shot glanced off Ream's left arm. Lukébakio spun around Max Arfsten to score in the 68th and then had an open shot after Timothy Castagne's cross deflected off a foot of Sebastian Berhalter in the 82nd.



United States' Tim Ream (13) and Belgium's Charles De Ketelaere (17) battle for a header during the second half of an international friendly soccer match in Atlanta. (AP)

## Kohli gets Royal Challengers off to winning start in title defense



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Virat Kohli plays a shot during the Indian Premier League cricket match between Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Sunrisers Hyderabad in Bengaluru, India. (AP)

### Hyderabad suffers six-wicket defeat

**BENGALURU, India, March 29, (AP) — Star batter Virat Kohli hit 69 not out off 38 balls, including five sixes and five fours, as defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru beat Sunrisers Hyderabad by six wickets in the Indian Premier League season-opener.**

Devdutt Padikkal smashed a 26-ball 61, with four sixes and seven fours, as Bengaluru raced to 203-4 in 15.4 overs with 26 deliveries to spare.

Earlier, New Zealand pacer Jacob Duffy picked up 3-22 in four overs on his IPL debut as Hyderabad finished with 201-9 in 20 overs. Stand-in skipper Ishan Kishan hit 80 off 38 balls, including five sixes, with Aniket Verma adding an 18-ball 43.

Chasing a par score at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, Bengaluru lost Phil Salt cheaply - out caught for eight.

But impact substitute Padikkal lived up to his role as he raced to 50 off 21 balls. He put on 101 runs off 45 deliveries with Kohli as Ben-



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Jacob Duffy, center, celebrates with teammates the wicket of Sunrisers Hyderabad's Travis Head during the Indian Premier League cricket match between Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Sunrisers Hyderabad in Bengaluru, India. (AP)

galuru set a hectic pace in its chase - 76-1 in powerplay and 100 off just 8.1 overs.

Padikkal was caught in the 9th over, but skipper Rajat Patidar didn't let the momentum slip. He smashed 31 off 12 balls and put on 53 off 22 with Kohli for the third wicket.

Sunrisers' impact player David Payne struck twice in the 13th over

- Patidar and Jitesh Sharma (0) were caught off consecutive deliveries.

But Kohli paced the chase well and Bengaluru was never in serious trouble.

Kohli brought up his 64th IPL half-century off 33 balls to the delight of a packed home ground and then raced to the finish, hitting 18 off Harshal Patel's four deliveries in the 16th over.

Tim David hit 16 not out off 10 balls, sharing a 40-run unbeaten stand with Kohli off 19 balls.

Put into bat, Hyderabad's top order struggled against Duffy's disciplined bowling. Big hitting openers Abhishek Sharma (7) and Travis Head (11) fell cheaply, while Nitish Reddy was out caught for 1.

Hyderabad was 29-3 in 4.2 overs, when Kishan and Heinrich Klaasen came to the rescue with 97 off 53 for the fourth wicket.

Kishan continued his T20 World Cup form to rescue his side, hitting five sixes and eight fours in his 27-ball 50.

Klaasen made 31 off 22, and looked good for more. He was adjudged caught at midwicket off Romario Shepherd. Phil Salt's catch was reviewed by the third umpire and Klaasen was not pleased with the decision.

Salt pulled another one-handed stunner at the deep point fence - already a contender for catch of the season - as he dived to the right to dismiss Kishan in the 16th over.

With Hyderabad running out of batting, Aniket Verma (43) smacked four sixes and three fours in 18 balls to take his side past the 200 mark.

But it never looked enough against a raging Bengaluru batting side.

### Mexico, Portugal draw 0-0

## Azteca Stadium reopens after WC renovations

MEXICO CITY, March 29, (AP) — Mexico and Portugal played to a scoreless draw on Saturday night in a warmup match that marked the reopening of the Azteca Stadium after nearly two years of renovations for the 2026 World Cup.

Goncalo Ramos had the best scoring chance in the match when he rattled the goalpost in the 26th minute.

The iconic Azteca Stadium, which hosted the finals of the 1970 and 1986 World Cup tournaments, has been closed since May 2024 for renovations for the upcoming World Cup, where it will host five matches: three in the first-round and two in the knockout stages.

"Individually, everyone, or almost everyone, responded well," said Mexico coach Javier Aguirre. "Yes, there are some inconsistencies, which is normal, but I'm happy with the performance."

"Obviously, I don't want to ignore the fact that some players are out injured. As I said, there are 12 players who are missing, players who helped us win the Nations League and the Gold Cup," Aguirre added.

The Portuguese also faced the match with absences, most notably those of forwards Cristiano Ronaldo and Rafael Leão.

Mexico plays South Africa at the Azteca in the June 11 tournament opener.

"For us it is important to face these types of rivals, who are among the best in the world because it shows us what level we are at," said midfielder Erik Sanchez. "Now we have to think about doing things well against Belgium."

The Mexicans will play against Belgium next Tuesday at Soldier Field in Chicago, while Portugal face the United States at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta.

Portugal will make its debut in the World Cup on June 17 against the winner of the



Portugal's Diogo Dalot, center, controls the ball against Mexico's Johan Vasquez, left, and Jesus Gallardo during the international friendly soccer match between Mexico and Portugal in Mexico City. (AP)

intercontinental playoffs match between Jamaica and Congo. Security authorities said a fan in the VIP box area of the reopened stadium fell from the second level and died shortly before the match commenced.

"An intoxicated fan attempted to climb from the second to the first level by jumping over the outside, causing him to fall to the ground floor," local police said. "He was attended to by medical personnel, but unfortunately, he lost his life."

Before the match, groups of mothers searching for missing family members staged protests outside the stadium, bypassing city government controls that restricted access to ticket holders only.

Mexico's government said in a new report Friday that it had identified signs of life for a third of the country's 130,000 registered missing people, an announcement that was quickly criticized by a number of search groups who called it another attempt to undermine the depth of Mexico's disappearance crisis.

### Best of the Rest

**Véron Mosengo-Omba steps down:** Véron Mosengo-Omba has stepped down as general secretary of the Confederation of African Football after five years as the deputy head of African soccer's governing body.

The Swiss-Congolese official, who left FIFA to take over as CAF general secretary in 2021, said Sunday he was stepping down "to devote myself to more personal projects."

The Nigerian Football Federation said Samson Adamu was taking over as acting general secretary.

CAF announced in January 2025 that the Swiss Public Prosecutor's Office had decided to stop investigations against Mosengo-Omba "as they found no facts or legal basis to initiate legal proceedings" after he faced allegations of financial wrongdoing.

"Now that I have been able to dispel the suspicions that some people have gone to great lengths to cast on me, I can retire with peace of mind and without constraint, leaving the CAF more prosperous than ever," Mosengo-Omba said Sunday in a statement published on social media. (AP)

## Summit and Spirit draw before a record NWSL crowd

DENVER, March 29, (AP) — The Denver Summit and the Washington Spirit played to a scoreless draw before a record National Women's Soccer League crowd of 63,004 fans at the home of the NFL's Denver Broncos.

In other action around the league, the Utah Royals held on for a 2-1 victory over the Boston Legacy; and the Portland Thorns downed the Kansas City Current 2-0; the Seattle Reign beat Racing Louisville 2-1 in Spokane, Washington; Bay FC dominated the North Carolina Courage on the road 3-1; and the San Diego Wave defeated the visiting Chicago Stars 2-0.

The Summit (1-1-2) broke the NWSL attendance record of 40,091 set last season in a Bay FC match at San Francisco's Oracle Park.

Denver goalkeeper Abby Smith and Spirit counterpart Sandy MacIver each made two saves to preserve their clean sheets. It was Smith's second straight shutout.

The Spirit (0-1-3) have yet to win this season. Olivia Moultrie converted a penalty kick in the

53rd minute and the Thorns went on to defeat the Current 2-0 at Providence Park in Portland.

Moultrie, 20, became the youngest player to score 20 league goals, breaking Sam Kerr's record set in 2016.

Reilyn Turner added a goal for the Thorns (3-1-0) in the 63rd minute.

The Current (1-3-0) continue to struggle without two-time NWSL MVP Temwa Chawinga, who is out for the season with a hip injury.

Thorns forward Sophia Wilson made her first start of the season in her return from maternity leave.

Tatum Milazzo returned from a one-game red card suspension to score her second goal of the season and help the Royals beat the winless Legacy.

Milazzo scored on a tap-in in the 33rd minute to give Utah (1-2-1) the lead. Mina Tanaka drew a penalty in the 49th minute and Lara Prasnikar converted to go up 2-0.

Aissata Traoré scored in the 72nd minute to

close the gap for Boston (0-3-0).

Maddie Mercado and Nériia Mondésir scored first-half goals to lead the Seattle Reign (3-1-0) to another win at One Spokane Stadium.

In the 10th minute, Mercado scored for the second consecutive game. Initially, her shot was saved by Racing Louisville goalkeeper Jordyn Bloomer, but it slipped through her hands and rolled into the goal.

Mondésir added a goal in the 42nd minute for her first of the season.

Late in second half stoppage time, Louisville rookie Macy Blackburn scored her first professional goal to close the margin.

Louisville (0-2-1) has allowed two goals this season.

Bay FC (2-0-1) had three first-half goals to hand the Courage (1-1-1) their first loss of the season.

Alex Pfeiffer opened the scoring in the 20th minute on a left-footed shot past Courage goalkeeper Kailen Sheridan.



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Aryna Sabalenka holds the trophy after winning the women's singles final at the Miami Open tennis tournament in Miami Gardens, Fla. (AP)

# Sports

Athletics Federation cancels remaining championships

## Kuwait Olympic Committee meets sports bodies

By Khaled Al-Enezi and Hassan Mosa

Al-Seyassah/Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, March 29: The Kuwait Olympic Committee is holding an important meeting today with local sports bodies, including national federations and clubs, to review the state of domestic sports amid ongoing regional developments in the Gulf.

The meeting will be attended by Sheikh Fahad Al-Nasser, President of the Kuwait Olympic Committee, and Dr. Tarek Al-Jalahma Minister of State for Youth and Sports Affairs. Discussions will focus on maintaining athlete safety, exploring ways to continue sports activities, and assessing the potential adjustment or postponement of local championships and competitions.

The committee aims to ensure continuous coordination between sports authorities and government bodies while making informed decisions that reflect current circumstances. Official recommendations are expected soon, balancing the continuity of sporting events with the safety of athletes, technical staff, administrators, medical teams, and spectators.

Previously, the Kuwait Olympic Committee suspended all national sports activities and competitions from February 28 until further notice to maintain a safe environment. Given



The sports federations meet to coordinate their positions.

current conditions, there is a possibility that this season's events may be postponed or canceled.

Ahead of today's meeting, sports federations met yesterday to coordinate positions and prepare proposals for discussion with the Ministry of

Youth and Sports.

In line with the current regional situation, the Kuwait Athletics Federation has announced the cancellation of all remaining championships for this season.

According to Circular No. 2, the

decision follows Board Decision No. 28 during an emergency meeting and complies with directives from the Public Authority for Sports to halt training sessions. The move prioritizes the safety of athletes, medical staff, administrators, and technical teams.

## Kuwaiti riders claim third at Al-Shaqab Equestrian Cup

DOHA, March 29, (KUNA): Two Kuwaiti riders secured third-place finishes at the Al-Shaqab Equestrian Cup, held at the Longines main and indoor arenas in Doha, Qatar.

In the junior category (125 cm), Kuwaiti rider Madhi Al-Khamees rode Cash Maker to a time of 41.27 seconds, earning third place. Qatar's Mohammed Al Thani took first with 38.13 seconds on Granny, followed by Bahrain's Sultan Al-Rumaithi in second with 40.91 seconds on Jouhelis.

In the three-star category (145 cm), represented Kuwait and finished third on Jaya de Fortis with a time of 77.07 seconds. Jordan's Nasouh Kayali claimed first place with 71.24 seconds on High Score, while Germany's Frederic Stakk took second on Chelseas with 76.02 seconds.

The Al-Shaqab Equestrian Cup,



KUNA photo

Fawaz Rashid receives his award.

organized by a member of the Qatar Foundation, concluded on Sunday with the final rounds.

### Best of the Rest

**Moriyasu hails Japan's late tactical switch:** Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu hailed his team's tactical flexibility after a late Junya Ito strike secured a 1-0 victory over Scotland in a pre-World Cup friendly at Hampden Park, leaving the home side facing a chorus of boos.

In a key warm-up for their eighth successive World Cup appearance, the Samurai Blue overcame a bright Scotland start to dominate the second half. Substitute Ito proved the difference in the 84th minute with a clinical finish from 12 yards to settle a tight contest. (AP)

# Antonelli goes back-to-back with Japanese GP win

'Too early to think about the championship'

SUZUKA, Japan, March 29, (AP): Italian 19-year-old Kimi Antonelli of Mercedes has won his second consecutive Formula 1 race, taking Sunday's Japanese Grand Prix ahead of Oscar Piastri of McLaren. Antonelli finished a comfortable 13.7 seconds ahead of the Australian.

Charles Leclerc of Ferrari was third with George Russell of Mercedes in fourth. McLaren's Lando Norris was fifth with sixth for Lewis Hamilton of Ferrari at the Suzuka circuit in central Japan on a clear, sunny spring afternoon.

Antonelli won the first F1 race of his career two weeks ago in China, the second-youngest winner in history. The youngest was Max



Mercedes driver Kimi Antonelli of Italy holds his trophy aloft on the podium after winning the Japanese Formula One Grand Prix at Suzuka in central Japan. (AP)

Verstappen in 2016 at 18. Antonelli also won from pole position in China.

Antonelli has 72 points from three races and now becomes the youngest to lead the season drivers' standings.

"It's too early to think about the championship, but we're in a good way," Antonelli said. "I got a terrible start, I just need to check what happened."

"Definitely, it's been (the starts) a weak point this year and I need to improve that because you can easily win or lose races with that."

Russell was second in China two weeks ago and won the season-opening race in Australia, which means Mercedes has victories in the first three races of 2026.

In Japan, Antonelli started from pole with Russell alongside him, but neither got a great start with Piastri beating both to the first turn and holding the early lead.

But Antonelli and Mercedes again showed that they have mastered the 2026 car configuration, which features a 50-50 split between internal combustion and electrical-battery power.

The cars are also lighter, narrower and shorter than last season, with many drivers complaining about the new regulations, the most radical changes in a decade.

McLaren's Piastri got a great start. Antonelli didn't and wound up in sixth after the first lap but clawed his way back. He had the lead on the 22nd lap when Hass driver Oliver Bearman lost control and hit a tire barrier, triggering the safety car.

Bearman limped out of the car but was reported later to be in good shape by medical officials.

Antonelli said he got a bit "lucky"



McLaren driver Oscar Piastri of Australia leads the field at the start of the Japanese Formula One Grand Prix at Suzuka in central Japan. (AP)

with the deployment of the safety car.

"I don't know what would have happened, what the outcome would have been without the safety car," Antonelli said. "But that definitely made life a lot easier."

Piastri also wondered what might have been, but acknowledged Mercedes probably had too much pace. "It's a shame we never got to see

what would have happened, but for us at this point to be disappointed about finishing second - is a pretty good place to be."

Piastri did not even start the season's first two races. He crashed on a warm-up lap prior to his home race in Australia, and both McLaren cars failed to start in China due to electrical faults.

"I think this weekend we just did a really good job of optimizing what we had," Piastri said. "We just nailed everything. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite enough for the win. But at the moment a result like today is as good as a win."

Hamilton went all last season without a podium driving for Ferrari, but managed third place in China. He

was close to another podium in Japan, showing the Ferrari is much more competitive.

"I've not lost what I had," Hamilton said this week in Japan.

Formula 1 now takes a five-week break with races scheduled for April in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia called off because of the war in Iran. The next race is May 3 in Miami.

## Sabalenka wins Miami Open final to complete the 'Sunshine Double'

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla., March 29, (AP): Aryna Sabalenka beat Coco Gauff in the Miami Open women's singles final 6-2, 4-6, 6-3.

The world No. 1 overpowered fourth-ranked Gauff in the first and third sets with sizzling groundstroke winners and became the first player to accomplish the "Sunshine Double" - winning Indian Wells followed by Miami in the same season - since Iga Swiatek in 2022.

It was Sabalenka's second straight title at the Miami Open, Gauff's hometown tournament, and put her ahead of Gauff in their head-to-head record, 7-6.

"You've pushed me to be a better player," Sabalenka said during the ceremony, before adding to the crowd. "You always bring a full stadium."

The match lasted 2 hours, 11 minutes and ended on Gauff getting broken for the fourth time with a wide backhand.

Gauff fought back to force the third set, but couldn't maintain the momentum she appeared to get from the deafening crowd supporting her.

Sabalenka at times was frustrated by the fan noise, including when someone yelled "out" during a long rally. She used a curse word at the fan and the chair umpire warned the crowd, but also gave a code violation to Sabalenka.

Gauff's off-and-on serve created seven double faults while Sabalenka registered none.

Sabalenka broke Gauff in the first game of the third set, helped by a Gauff double fault and an unforced error. On break point, Sabalenka crunched a backhand winner.

The match was attended by Kai Trump, President Donald Trump's granddaughter and a golfer at the University of Miami. She posted a photo with Sabalenka at the tournament on social media Friday.

Sabalenka, who earned her 24th pro title, said before the match she was happy Gauff had found her best tennis in her home tournament at which she had never gotten past the fourth round.

## Magnitude beats Forever Young to win Dubai Gold Cup

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, March 29, (AP): Magnitude beat race favorite Forever Young to win the 30th Dubai Gold Cup in the first major outdoors sporting event in the United Arab Emirates since the outbreak of the Iran War.

The 4-year-old American horse, ridden by Jose Ortiz and trained by Steve Asmussen, successfully resisted a determined effort from Japan's Forever Young with Ryusei Sakai on board, to win the almost \$7 million first prize.

"When I looked to my side passing the 600 meters I saw Forever Young and I knew it was time to go," Ortiz said. "I knew Forever Young was going to be the horse to beat so I asked (Magnitude) to run and he was there for me."

"We knew we had a very good horse but obviously Forever Young was the best horse in the world and we had to respect that. But we knew we had a good enough horse to win the race and he showed up today."

Meydaan was third, followed by Imperial Emperor, both Irish horses.

There was a total of \$12 million in prize money for the 9-horse race. It was Asmussen's second win

in the race after Curlin's success in 2008. He has also won the Preakness twice and the Belmont once.

Magnitude jumped fast and went straight to the lead, hugging the rail. The Not This time four-year-old led by about a length from Forever Young until the field turned for home when it opened a wider margin.

Forever Young which was Japan Horse of the Year last year finished strongly and closed the gap to a length at the line.

The race went ahead despite the cancellation of other major sporting events in the region since the United States and Israel launched their initial attacks on Iran on Feb. 28.

Formula 1 Grand Prix races scheduled for April in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were both called off, while UEFA called off a soccer game between Argentina and Spain known as the Finalissima that was originally scheduled to be played in Qatar on Friday.



Jockey Jose Ortiz, second right, holds the trophy after riding Magnitude to win the Dubai World Cup over 2,000m (10 furlongs) at Meydan Racecourse in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates. At left is owner Ron Winchell, and assistant trainer Scott Blasi. (AP)