

THE JORDANIAN TIMES

MARKET

Industry minister stresses prices stability, availability of essential goods

2



CYBERATTACK

Iranian hacking group targeted Jordan Silos systems — NCSC

3



TRADE

ASE records positive performance this week

7



TENNIS

'She's coming back': Djokovic predicts Serena return

8



Friday-Saturday, March 6-7, 2026 | Ramadan 16-17, 1447 Hijri

King discusses regional developments with Belgium monarch, Syrian, Djibouti presidents, Al Azhar Grand Imam

AMMAN (JT) — His Majesty King Abdullah, in a phone call with King Philippe of the Belgians on Thursday, called for stepping up international efforts to achieve comprehensive calm in the region.

His Majesty reiterated that Iran's attacks on Jordan and a number of countries in the region are a violation of state sovereignty and a dangerous escalation that threatens to expand the conflict, according to a Royal Court statement.

The King reaffirmed the need to resolve conflicts through diplomatic means, emphasizing that Jordan's priority is to protect its citizens, security and stability.

His Majesty King Abdullah and Syria President Ahmad Al Sharaa discussed on Thursday, during a phone call, the dangerous developments in the region.

His Majesty reiterated his condemnation of Iran's targeting of Jordan and a number of countries in the region, asserting that protecting citizens and preserving Jordan's security and sovereignty is a priority, according to a Royal Court



statement.

The two sides emphasised the need to utilise dialogue in order to avoid exacerbating the current crisis.

The call also touched on developments in the West Bank and the need to de-escalate tensions

and protect the freedom of worshippers to access Al Aqsa Mosque, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, the statement said.

Also on Thursday, His Majesty received a phone call from Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh, during which they discussed the dangerous escalation in the region.

His Majesty emphasised the need for the sovereignty of states' to be respected and to step up international

efforts to restore calm through dialogue, reiterating that Jordan will continue to take whatever measures necessary to protect its security, stability and the safety of its citizens, another Royal Court statement said.

His Majesty King received another phone call from Al Azhar Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed Al Tayeb on Thursday.

The call covered the dangerous escalation in the region, with both sides emphasising the need to stop Iranian attacks on Jordan and other countries in the region, and to utilise dialogue to avoid further conflicts, according to a Royal Court statement.

Imam Al Tayeb expressed his rejection of Iran's aggression against Jordan and his condemnation of the violation of Arab states' sovereignty.

The call also touched on developments in the West Bank and the need to de-escalate tensions and protect the freedom of worshippers to access Al Aqsa Mosque, especially during the holy month of Ramadan.



Foreign reserves rise to \$28.2 billion by end of February — CBJ

AMMAN (JT) — The Kingdom foreign reserves increased to \$28.2 billion by the end of February 2026, up from \$25.5 billion at the end of 2025, the Central Bank of Jordan (CBJ) said on Thursday.

The CBJ said the increase of \$2.7 billion since the end of 2025 and \$8.2 billion compared with the end of 2024 reflects the effectiveness of monetary policy and the efficient management of foreign currency assets, according to Al Mamlaka TV.

The increase was driven by continued foreign currency inflows, particularly national exports, tourism revenues, remittances from Jordanians working abroad and foreign investment, alongside broadly positive macroeconomic indicators.

The bank noted that the current reserve level provides a strong safety margin, covering imports of goods and services for around 10 months, exceeding internationally recognised benchmarks for reserve adequacy.

According to the CBJ, the robust reserve position reinforces confidence in the Jordanian dinar and supports monetary and financial stability, while enhancing the economy ability to withstand external shocks.

The bank reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining monetary stability, strengthening the resilience of the financial sector and supporting overall economic stability to foster sustainable and inclusive economic growth.



Jordan condemns attempted Iranian attacks on Turkey, Azerbaijan

AMMAN (JT) — The Foreign Ministry on Thursday strongly condemned attempted attacks by Iran targeting Turkey and Azerbaijan.

In a statement, the ministry said that the Kingdom rejects and

denounces the attacks, describing them as a "blatant" violation of the two countries' sovereignty and a serious escalation that threatens regional security and stability.

The ministry also reit-

erated Jordan's full solidarity with Turkey and Azerbaijan, affirming the Kingdom's support for any measures they take to safeguard their sovereignty, security and the safety of their citizens.

Trump demands say on Iran's next leader as Mideast war spirals

BEIRUT, Lebanon (AFP) — US President Donald Trump insisted on Thursday that he have a say in picking Iran's next supreme leader, as the war triggered by the US-Israeli campaign that killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reverberated throughout the Middle East and beyond.

Earlier, Israel issued an unprecedented evacuation warning for the entirety of Beirut's southern suburbs, a stronghold of Iran-backed Hezbollah, sending residents fleeing in a panic from the district of hundreds of thousands of people.

That warning followed a fresh wave of Israeli attacks on Iran, which again lashed out at Gulf nations.

The war has drawn in global powers, snarling shipping and rattling energy markets. It has been felt as far away as the Sri Lankan coast, where a US submarine torpedoed an Iranian warship and Azerbaijan, which threatened retaliation after a drone hit an airport.

Trump on Thursday



In this photo obtained from Iran's ISNA news agency on Thursday, mourners in the city of Qom attend the funeral of those killed in the US-Israeli war with Iran

rejected the possibility of Khamenei's son, Mojtaba Khamenei, replacing his slain father as supreme leader, dismissing the younger man as a "lightweight".

"I have to be involved in the appointment, like with Delcy," Trump told Axios in an interview, drawing a comparison to Venezuela, where in-

terim president Delcy Rodriguez has cooperated with him under threat of violence after the United States ousted her boss, Nicolas Maduro.

"Khamenei's son is unacceptable to me. We want someone that will bring harmony and peace to Iran," Trump was quoted saying, threatening more war in the future if

a better alternative was not found.

The remarks suggest a willingness to work with someone from within the Islamic republic rather than toppling the government entirely, despite Trump's repeated exhortations for Iranians to rise up and take back their country.

Lebanon was dragged

into the widening conflict on Monday, when the Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah attacked Israel to avenge the killing of Khamenei.

Israel responded with air strikes and sent ground troops into some Lebanese border villages. It told residents of a large area of south Lebanon to leave in anticipation of military operations there.

In a message on Thursday to the residents of Beirut's southern suburbs, known as Dahiyeh, an Israeli military spokesman said: "Save your lives and evacuate your residences immediately."

Such warnings typically foreshadow large-scale attacks and massive traffic jams formed on the outskirts of the suburbs, as people fled guns in the air, urging locals to leave as soon as possible.

On a Beirut beach, hundreds of families, many of them scared and angry, milled around after fleeing in haste, having nowhere else to go.

Continued on page 5

Israel keeps up Lebanon strikes as ground forces advance

BEIRUT, Lebanon (AFP) — Israel's attacks on Lebanon entered a fourth day on Thursday, killing at least two according to state media, after Israeli forces pushed into border towns and conducted air strikes targeting Iran-backed Hezbollah.

Lebanon was drawn into the Middle East war on Monday, when Hezbollah attacked Israel in response to the killing of Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during US-Israeli strikes over the weekend.

Lebanon's state-run National News Agency (NNA) reported several strikes early on Thurs-



A van drives past a destroyed building following air strikes in Beirut's southern suburbs of Ghobeiry neighbourhood, on Thursday

day, including two in the Hezbollah stronghold of south Beirut,

where AFP TV footage showed smoke rising, Israel's military

earlier told residents to leave the suburbs where the strikes were

reported, warning it was about to attack targets it said were linked to Hezbollah. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Citing the health ministry, the NNA said that an Israeli strike on an apartment in Beddawi, a Palestinian refugee camp near Tripoli, killed at least two people and wounded a third.

And on a road in south Lebanon, a drone hit a vehicle, killing three people, the NNA reported, without speculating who was behind the strike.

Another "enemy" air strike hit a house in Tyre district, the NNA

said. Israel has not claimed any of the latest attacks reported by the Lebanese news agency.

Meanwhile, in Israel's north near the border, repeated air raid alerts sent residents to shelters in several locations, with no immediate reports of impact or casualties.

Hezbollah's leader vowed Wednesday to keep up its fight against Israel and step up attacks, saying the group had targeted Israeli positions as far as Tel Aviv in at least 15 attacks.

"We are facing aggression... our choice is

to confront it until the ultimate sacrifice, and we will not surrender," Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem declared in his first speech since the latest round of fighting broke out.

Lebanese authorities announced at least 72 people killed, 437 wounded and 83,000 displaced from their homes since Monday.

'Direct' clashes

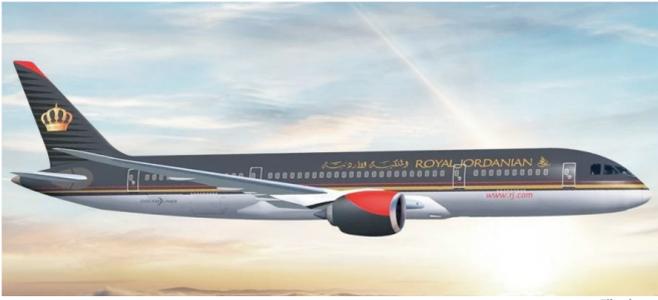
The Israeli military told people living south of Lebanon's Litani River — a large area stretching around 30 kilometres north of the border — to evacuate, warning that the

army was "compelled to take military action" against Hezbollah there.

Under a November 2024 truce, only UN peacekeepers and the Lebanese army may bear arms south of the Litani River. Israel was supposed to withdraw all of its forces, but has kept troops in areas it deems strategic and conducted regular air strikes, citing Hezbollah's refusal to surrender arms.

On Tuesday, Israel's military said it was creating a buffer zone inside Lebanon to protect Israeli residents.

Continued on page 5



The Civil Aviation Regulatory Commission says that air traffic at Jordanian airports remained stable on Wednesday despite ongoing regional tensions

Air traffic in Jordan steady despite regional airspace closures — CARC

AMMAN (JT) — Air traffic at Jordanian airports remained stable on Wednesday despite ongoing regional tensions and the closure of airspace in several neighbouring countries, said the Civil Aviation Regulatory Commission (CARC).

CARC Chairman Deifallah Farajat said that operations across the Kingdom's airports continued with a high degree of accuracy and regularity under the current circumstances, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported on Thursday.

Farajat noted that Queen Alia International Airport maintained scheduled flight operations, recording the arrival of 67 inbound flights from various international

destinations and the departure of 58 flights.

Farajat noted that Queen Alia International Airport maintained scheduled flight operations...

He added that the Royal Jordanian Airline accounted for the largest share of operations during this period in its capacity as the national carrier.

Farajat said that the

airline played a key role in maintaining Jordan air connectivity with global destinations, particularly as several foreign airlines temporarily suspended flights due to regional developments and airspace closures in neighbouring countries.

He added that the commission continues to closely monitor regional developments while coordinating with all relevant partners to ensure the safety and security of Jordanian airspace.

The chairman noted that technical and operational teams remain fully prepared to respond to any developments in support of travellers and the continuity of civil aviation operations.

Industry minister stresses prices stability, availability of essential goods

AMMAN (JT) — Minister of Industry, Trade and Supply Yarub Qudah on Thursday met with representatives of the food manufacturing sector to review the functioning of supply chains and ensure the sustainability of the Kingdom's strategic stock of essential goods.

During the meeting, Qudah highlighted key recent government decisions, including lifting the exclusivity of Aqaba Port for imports, allowing goods to be imported through land crossings for one month, and exempting importers from customs duties and taxes resulting from increased sea freight costs, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported.

He stressed the importance of maintaining stable prices, particularly during Ramadan, noting that the ban on exporting essential goods aims to ensure adequate domestic stock and are sold to traders at fair prices.

Qudah added that exports of key commodities will remain suspended and will only be allowed once sufficient stock is available to meet national needs across all sectors, in line with the ministry's vision to ensure food security and meet citizens' requirements.

Representatives of food factories stressed the availability of sufficient stock of essential goods, expressing appreciation for government measures that facilitate imports and reduce operational costs.

Earlier this week, Qudah said that the ministry has routine emer-



Minister of Industry, Trade and Supply Yarub Qudah on Thursday meets with representatives of the food manufacturing sector over means to ensure the sustainability of the Kingdom's strategic stock of essential goods

gency plans in place to address emerging regional developments in a manner that ensures the regular functioning of supply chains and the availability of goods and production inputs in the local market.

He added that the Kingdom's strategic reserves of basic food commodities are "secure

and reassuring," and sufficient to cover local market needs for "comfortable periods of time", in light of the continued regularity of supply operations and the stability of supply chains.

Qudah noted that the ministry monitors on a daily basis stock levels of essential commodities, including wheat, barley,

rice, sugar, oils and legumes, to ensure their uninterrupted availability in local markets.

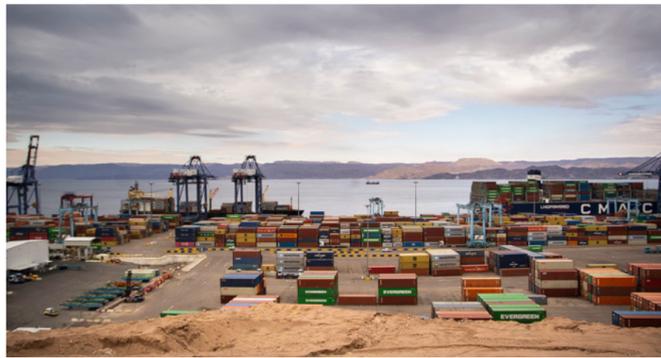
He pointed out that the ministry has taken proactive measures to enhance food stocks by diversifying import sources, enhancing partnership with the private sector and regulating food exports.

Transport minister reviews maritime services amid regional tensions

AMMAN (JT) — Transport Minister Nidal Qatamin on Thursday met with the head and members of the Jordan Shipping Association to review maritime services and challenges facing shipping companies amid ongoing regional tensions.

During the meeting, held at the association's headquarters and attended by Transport Ministry Secretary-General Fares Abu Deyyeh, the minister stressed the importance of maintaining the efficiency and continuity of supply chains under all circumstances, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported.

Qatamin highlighted



Transport Minister Nidal Qatamin on Thursday meets with the head and members of the Jordan Shipping Association to review maritime services and challenges facing shipping companies amid ongoing regional tensions

the need to intensify efforts to ensure the smooth flow of trade

and logistics services, underscoring the key role played by ship-

ping companies in adapting to regional developments.

He also called for preparedness to address any disruptions to maritime transport and emphasised the strategic importance of Aqaba Port as Jordan's main maritime gateway and a vital hub for trade and supplies.

Talks during the meeting also stressed the need for closer coordination between the public and private sectors.

Attendees agreed to form a joint working team from the Transport Ministry, the association and relevant stakeholders to monitor developments and propose solutions to support the maritime transport sector and ensure sustainable supply chains.



Damage caused to the World Heritage site of Golestan Palace by the US-Israeli air strike

Heritage under fire: US-Israeli strikes reportedly damage UNESCO-listed Golestan Palace in Tehran

By Sophie Constantin

AMMAN — Tehran's Golestan Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Iran's most significant historical complexes, has reportedly sustained damage following US-Israeli strikes on the Iranian capital.

According to local media, shockwaves and debris from an attack near Arag Square, located within the buffer zone of the site, caused damage to parts of the palace, including windows, doors and mirrored elements.

The palace's famed mirrored halls and museum collections had reportedly been moved to secure storage prior to the strike — a precaution increasingly adopted by cultural institutions in times of escalating hostilities.

Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2013, Golestan Palace is a masterpiece of the Qajar era. Built primarily in the 19th century, it reflects a fusion of Persian craftsmanship and European architectural influences.

Once the seat of government for the Qajar dynasty, the complex remains one of Tehran's oldest surviving architectural ensembles and a symbol of

Iran's political and artistic history.

Beyond the physical damage, the incident raises broader concerns about the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict.

UNESCO has expressed "concern" over the protection of heritage sites across the Middle East amid the escalating war.

Iran is home to 29 UNESCO World Heritage sites, reflecting millennia of cultural development of cultural development

The organisation said that it has "communicated to all parties concerned the geographical coordinates of sites on the World Heritage List as well as those of national significance, to avoid any potential damage".

It also reiterated the obligations enshrined in international law, including the 1954 Hague Convention for the Pro-

tection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the 1972 World Heritage Convention.

Under the 1954 Hague Convention, cultural sites must not be deliberately targeted and must not be used for military purposes. State parties are obligated to respect and safeguard such sites, including those located within buffer zones. The convention also provides for enhanced protection mechanisms for sites of exceptional importance.

Iran is home to 29 UNESCO World Heritage sites, reflecting millennia of cultural development. Damage to Golestan Palace, even if indirect, underscores the vulnerability of heritage in contemporary warfare, particularly in urban environments where military targets and historic sites exist in close proximity.

As conflicts intensify, the effectiveness of international legal protections will depend not only on treaties, but on restraint in their application.

The situation in Tehran serves as a reminder that cultural heritage, while protected in principle, remains exposed in practice.

Umayyads expanded monumental mosaics across Bilad Al Sham

By Saeb Rawashdeh

AMMAN — From the late seventh to the mid-eighth century, the Umayyad caliphs and princes commissioned mosaics for their palaces, bath-houses and mosques. Examples are known in modern Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine, then collectively known as Bilad Al Sham.

Churches in the region also continued to be re-decorated with mosaic, if not with quite the same frequency of the previous two centuries.

"Between the 690s and 710s, mosaics were laid in the Dome of the Rock and Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and the congregational mosques of Mecca, Medina, Damascus and Aleppo. The Great Mosque of Damascus, built for caliph Al Walid I (reigned 705-15), was the largest of these projects, originally displaying around 7,500 square metres of mosaic," said Beatrice Leal from The University of Oxford.

For both reasons, the mosaicists are likely to have been working to a predetermined design,



Umayyad Mosque in Damascus with its rich decorations

perhaps developed by a single artist, and so individual hands may be harder to distinguish.

"The Barada Panel was also heavily restored in the 1960s. My assumption is that such 'decorative' designs are more likely to reflect the habitual practices of the craftspeople. This is not to say that mosaicists were not capable of varying their style quite dramatically to suit the taste of a patron, or to follow compositions laid out by

their colleagues," Leal explained.

Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that they would significantly change their methods of composing basic forms in the course of one job, she continued, adding that while a patron might ask for an acanthus scroll, they would probably not specify how many points each leaf should have.

The shape of the windows has also sheltered them from damage to some extent, and so the

surfaces are less affected by medieval or modern repairs.

"Far from giving the patchwork effect of the decoration in some of the more exposed areas of the mosque, there seem to be only two phases: the original Umayyad mosaic of 705-715, and restorations of the 1960s."

"The 1960s work is identifiable by its brightness, the lack of subtle shading of motifs, and the uniformity of colour

and shape of the tesserae," Leal underlined.

The eighth-century mosaic is identifiable partly by comparison with motifs in the Dome of the Rock, but also by the broad consistency of the composition and palette across the whole portico wall.

The known mediaeval restorations elsewhere in the mosque were generally not designed to closely match the earlier ones around them, and even where the attempt was made, the style and colours are different, the scholar said.

"While there is currently no scientific evidence to date the mosaics of the west portico to the eighth century, the large amount of decoration from a single period can only plausibly be explained as original, given the grand scale of caliphal investment when the mosque was built, compared with the relatively modest repairs of later centuries," Leal underlined.

She added that there is mosaic on the inner faces of the piers either side of the windows, and on the soffits of the arches.

Safadi reiterates Jordan's condemnation of Iranian attacks

AMMAN (JT) — Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Ayman Safadi on Thursday stressed the repercussions of the dangerous escalation in the region and prospects for de-escalation, restoring calm and advancing diplomatic efforts to enhance security and stability.

During phone calls with counterparts, Safadi reiterated Jordan's full condemnation of the Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait, stressing the King-



Ayman Safadi



Abdoukader Houssein Omar



Helen McEntee



Petr Macinka



Kęstutis Budrys

dom's unwavering solidarity with its brotherly countries.

He reiterated that Jordan stands firmly alongside them in all measures to safe-

guard their security, stability, sovereignty and the safety of their citizens, according to a Foreign Ministry statement.

The minister af-

firmed their countries' solidarity with Jordan, expressing support for all measures taken by the Kingdom to protect the safety of its citi-

zens, its security and its sovereignty.

Safadi held phone calls with Djibouti's Foreign Minister Abdoukader Houssein Omar, Irish Minister

for Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence Helen McEntee, Czech Foreign Minister Petr Macinka and Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys.

AT A GLANCE

Army foils two narcotics smuggling attempts using balloons

AMMAN (JT) —

The Eastern Military Zone early on Thursday foiled two smuggling attempts involving large quantities of narcotics



carried by electronically guided balloons along its border front. Border Guard units, in coordination with security agencies and the Anti-Narcotics Department, detected the attempts and intercepted them, causing the balloons to drop their payload inside Jordanian territory. The seized materials were handed over to the relevant authorities to take the necessary legal measures, according to an army statement.

Agriculture Ministry resumes fresh meat imports from Syria

AMMAN (JT) —

The Ministry of Agriculture on Thursday announced the resumption of fresh meat imports from a slaughterhouse in Damascus through the ministry's approved electronic platform and in accordance with the regulations governing import procedures. The ministry said the decision comes as part of efforts to strengthen the strategic stock of red meat in the local market, contributing to stable supplies and meeting market demand.

Clothing, footwear supplies sufficient ahead of Eid — syndicate

AMMAN (JT) —

Clothing, footwear and fabrics are available in sufficient quantities in the local market and prices will remain stable, according to President of the Textile, Readymade Clothes and Footwear Syndicate Sultan Allan. Speaking to the Jordan News Agency, Petra, Allan said imported stocks are sufficient to last beyond the Eid season, stressing that there will be no shortage as large quantities have already arrived in the Kingdom. He added that importers and traders have brought in adequate supplies from various sources to meet citizens' needs, particularly during Eid Al Fitr season. Allan also commended government decisions aimed at ensuring the sustainability of energy and electricity security as well as supply chains in the Kingdom.



Authorities respond to 187 reports of falling debris across Kingdom



By Rana Hussein

AMMAN — The Public Security Directorate (PSD) said on Thursday that emergency service personnel dealt with over 187 reports of incidents caused by falling objects and debris

across most governorates of the Kingdom since last Saturday, with no new injuries recorded.

The Civil Defence Department and police personnel inspected some 187 scenes of debris and falling objects since

Saturday until 3pm on Thursday, Police Spokesperson Lt. Col. Amer Sartawi said.

Sartawi urged citizens to adhere to instructions issued by the PSD and relevant authorities and to contact the unified emergency number

(911) in the event of any sightings.

The police official reiterated previous calls by the PSD to refrain from approaching any suspicious object under any circumstances due to the extreme danger it may pose to the public.

Iranian hacking group targeted Jordan Silos systems — NCSC

AMMAN (JT) — The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) on Monday detected and thwarted an attempted cyberattack by an Iranian hacking group targeting the systems of the Jordan Silos and Supply General Company in Irbid, NCSC President Mohammad Samadi said.

Samadi told Al Mam-

laka TV on Thursday that the attackers attempted to infiltrate the company's network to manipulate its operations, including temperature control, weighing systems and backup power systems.

He said the breach occurred after the hackers exploited a weak password used

by one of the company's system users, allowing them to gain access to parts of the network before the intrusion was detected and contained by the NCSC.

Samadi added that the centre managed to stop the attempt after the hackers reached the power system but before they could ac-

cess other critical systems.

He stressed that the swift detection and response prevented what could have been a major cyberattack with serious implications for the safety of the Kingdom's strategic wheat reserves.

Samadi urged public and private institutions to adopt the

highest cyber security standards, comply with the policies and security controls issued by the centre, and report any incidents immediately.

He also noted that rapid response played a key role in foiling the attempt, adding that the NCSC had formed a crisis cell with the Ministry of Digital

Economy and Entrepreneurship that has helped thwart several cyber operations targeting Jordan's cyberspace.

Samadi said the attempted breach aimed to manipulate temperature control systems in a way that could have affected the country's strategic wheat stock.

Army chief visits national defence, staff colleges

AMMAN (JT) — Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maj. Gen. Yusuf Huneiti, on Thursday visited the Royal Jordanian National Defence College (RJNDC) and the Command and Staff College, where he was received by the college's commandants.

Huneiti was briefed on future plans for developing curricula and academic programmes, with discussions highlighting efforts to enhance the efficiency of both institutions in line with the vision of His Majesty King Abdullah, the Supreme Commander of the Jordan Armed Forces-Arab Army (JAF), and General Command directives.



Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maj. Gen. Yusuf Huneiti, on Thursday visits the Royal Jordanian National Defence College and the Command and Staff College

The development strategy seeks to modernise advanced curricula to align with leading international military colleges, reflecting the institu-

tions' pivotal role in preparing officers capable of addressing current and future threats, according to a JAF statement.

In the presence of senior JAF officers, Huneiti stressed that strategic planning and the assessment of available military capabilities are of "paramount importance", given the rapid developments in the region.

He added that both colleges play a key role in providing the JAF with leadership personnel trained to operate under diverse conditions, equipped to confront emerging challenges in the modern operational environment with efficiency and competence.

BIODIVERSITY

CARC, Environment Ministry launch JD500,000 afforestation project in Madaba

AMMAN (JT) — The Civil Aviation Regulatory Commission (CARC) and the Ministry of Environment on Thursday signed a cooperation agreement to implement a pioneering afforestation project in Madaba governorate.

The agreement aims to enhance biodiversity and support national efforts to combat climate change, in line with the Economic Modernisation Vision and sustainability goals, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported.

The agreement was signed by Minister of Environment Ayman Suleiman and CARC Chief Commissioner Dhaifallah Alfarajat at the ministry's headquarters.

The project, titled



The Civil Aviation Regulatory Commission and the Ministry of Environment on Thursday signs a cooperation agreement to implement an afforestation project in Madaba

"Forest Biodiversity Conservation and Awareness Project [Botanical Complex]",

has a total budget of JD500,000 and will run for 60 months.

It aims to preserve

them to ensure their sustainability, while also providing a non-traditional awareness platform highlighting the importance of forest biodiversity in the Kingdom.

During the signing ceremony, Suleiman said the partnership reflects institutional cooperation to protect Jordan's environment and supports the government's Economic Modernisation Vision.

Alfarajat said CARC's contribution to the project stems from its awareness of its social and environmental responsibility and its commitment to supporting initiatives that help reduce the carbon footprint and expand green cover in the Kingdom.



Ambassador Rolan Mahmoud Samara on Thursday presented credentials to Kenyan President William Ruto

DIPLOMACY

Jordan's ambassador to Kenya presents credentials

AMMAN (JT) — Ambassador Rolan Mahmoud Samara on Thursday presented credentials to Kenyan President William Ruto as the Kingdom's accredited and resident ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to Kenya,

during a ceremony held at the Presidential Palace in Nairobi. Samara conveyed His Majesty King Abdullah's greetings to President Ruto and his wishes for further progress and prosperity for the friendly Kenyan people, according

to a Foreign Minister statement.

President Ruto, in turn, asked Samara to convey his greetings and appreciation to His Majesty King Abdullah, praising His Majesty's wise policies and the distinguished relations between the

two friendly countries.

The president also expressed the Kenyan government's interest in strengthening and developing bilateral relations, wishing the Kingdom and the Jordanian people continued progress and prosperity.

The presentation of credentials ceremony was attended by the undersecretary of the ministry of foreign affairs and Expatriates, a number of its department directors, and other officials from the Presidential Palace.

Middle East war spirals as Iran hits Kurds in Iraq

TEHRAN (AFP) — Israel pounded Tehran with fresh strikes and Iran targeted Kurdish guerrilla groups in Iraq on Thursday as a spiralling war engulfed the Middle East.

A conflict ignited Saturday with US-Israeli attacks that killed Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini has spread rapidly since, snarling global shipping and energy markets, and sowing panic and chaos in previously safe-haven Gulf nations.

In Lebanon, AFP-TV images showed buildings in rubble and plumes of black smokes drifting over Beirut after Israeli strikes aimed at Iran-backed militant group Hizbollah.

AFP reporters in Tehran heard fighter jets screaming across the skies in the west of the city and several explosions as Israel launched a fresh barrage.

Earlier on Thursday, Tehran said it had hit Iraq-based Kurdish groups, as the United States reportedly seeks to arm Iranian Kurdish guerillas to infiltrate Iran.

The strikes which killed a member of an exiled Iranian Kurdish group, according to a representative, followed a warning from Iranian officials.

"Separatist groups should not think that a breeze has blown and try to take action," said Ali Larjani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council.



A boy plays with his sheep next to an unexploded missile that landed in an open field on the outskirts of Qamishli, eastern Syria, on Thursday

"We will not tolerate them in any way."

The strikes were further evidence of how the war is drawing in parties across the region and also further afield.

Australia deployed two military aircraft to the theatre while Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney said he could not rule out his armed forces taking part in hostilities.

The war has also dragged in NATO member Turkey after a missile launched from Iran was destroyed by NATO air defences as it headed towards its

airspace. While a Turkish official said the missile appeared to have been aimed at a British base in Cyprus, Turkey summoned the Iranian ambassador over the incident.

The conflict even reached the coast of Sri Lanka, where a US submarine sank an Iranian warship, Washington's first torpedoing of a vessel since World War II.

The strike killed at least 87 people, Sri Lankan officials said, with 61 remaining missing. Thirty-two sailors were rescued,

many wounded, said Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath.

"Mark my words: The US will come to bitterly regret the precedent it has set," said Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi about the attack that he described as "an atrocity at sea".

Iran's official IRNA news agency said 1,045 military personnel and civilians have been killed since the war began, a toll AFP could not independently verify.

The country is effectively cut off from the rest of the world, with the internet operating

at around 1 per cent of capacity, according to the Netblocks monitor.

'We will not surrender'

In the early hours of Thursday, AFP reporters in Jerusalem heard explosions following warnings of incoming Iranian missile fire, but residents were quickly cleared to leave their shelters.

Across the border in Lebanon, Israel said its forces had hit "several command centres belonging to the Hizbollah terrorist organisation" in south Beirut.

Lebanon's state-run

National News Agency (NNA) said a separate pre-dawn Israeli drone strike hit an apartment in Beddawi, a Palestinian refugee camp near Tripoli, killing senior Hamas official Wassim Atallah Al Ali and his wife.

Hizbollah's leader vowed Wednesday to step up its fight against Israel, saying the group had targeted Israeli positions as far as Tel Aviv in at least 15 attacks.

"We are facing aggression... our choice is to confront it until the ultimate sacrifice and we will not surrender," Hizbollah leader Naim Qassem declared in his first speech since the latest round of fighting broke out.

Lebanese authorities said at least 72 people had been killed, 437 wounded and 83,000 displaced from their homes since Monday.

Iran has retaliated by hitting US-linked interests in its Gulf neighbours, as well as energy infrastructure.

AFP journalists heard fresh explosions echoing over the Qatari capital Doha and Bahrain's Manama early on Thursday.

Thirteen people, seven of them civilians, have been killed in countries around the Gulf since the war began, including an 11-year-old girl in Kuwait.

Qatar said Thursday it was evacuating residents living near the US embassy in Doha, after earlier announcing it had thwarted at-

tacks on Hamad International Airport.

The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar all said they had intercepted Iranian missiles on Wednesday, including a drone set to hit the Saudis' huge Ras Tanura refinery.

'Catastrophic'

In Washington, the US Senate rejected a resolution aimed at limiting US military action, voting largely along party lines, with Republicans backing Trump.

Even if the measure had cleared the Senate and the House, where a vote on a similar resolution is expected Thursday, Trump would have been able to veto it.

Facing energy shortages, South Korea said it was activating a \$68 billion market stabilisation fund, while China reportedly told oil refiners to stop exporting diesel and gasoline.

With flights scrapped and travellers stranded or hastily repatriated, the war is also hammering tourism in a region that has become a prized destination for holidaymakers worldwide.

"My last group of tourists left three days ago, and all the other groups planned for March have been cancelled," said Nazih Rawashdeh, a tour guide near Irbid, in northern Jordan.

"This is the start of the high season here. It's catastrophic," he told AFP.

The war could usher in a "prolonged period of flux" for the global economy, International Monetary Fund chief Kristalina Georgieva

'This is the start of the high season here. It's catastrophic'



The paramilitary Rapid Support Forces accused the military of carrying out a drone strike on a market in Al Mojlad

Sudan drone strike kills 18 people — medic

KHARTOUM (AFP) — A drone strike on a Sudanese city under paramilitary control killed 18 people, a medic working in the area told AFP on Thursday, while blaming the army for the attack.

Both sides in Su-

dan's war have resorted to drone warfare, sparking frequent and strong condemnation from the UN.

The strike on Al Mojlad on Wednesday killed 18 people and wounded 25 others, according to a medic working at the city

hospital who added that he blamed the military for the attack.

The paramilitary RSF have been fighting the army for nearly three years and had accused the military of conducting a drone strike on a market in Al Mojlad.

Italy to send air-defence aid to Gulf countries — PM

ROME (AFP) — Italy will send air-defence assistance to Gulf countries hit by Iranian strikes launched in retaliation for US-Israeli attacks, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said on Thursday.

Separately, Defence Minister Guido Crosetto told parliament on Thursday that Italy would send, along with France, Spain, and The Netherlands, naval assets to defend EU member Cyprus "in coming days".

In an interview with RTL 102.5 radio, Meloni said "Italy, like the UK, France and Germany, intends to send aid to the Gulf countries."

We are clearly talking about defence, air defence, not just because they are friendly nations but because there are tens of thousands of Italians in that area and around 2,000 Italian soldiers that we must protect,"



Motorists drive along an expressway as plumes of smoke rise after a strike in Tehran on Thursday

she added.

'And the Gulf is vital for energy supplies for Italy and Europe'

Addressing parliament on Thursday morning, Foreign Minister An-

tonio Tajani explained that some strategic Gulf nations "have formally requested Italy's support to strengthen their air defence capabilities against attacks coming from Iran".

"Tens of thousands

of Italians, civilians and military personnel" were in those regions, he said.

Thus far, the foreign ministry had helped about 10,000 Italians to leave the areas at risk, he said.

Crosetto, while also addressing parliament, specified that the assistance sent to Gulf nations would be "air defence, anti-drone and anti-missile systems".

He said that in Italy, he had given orders to raise to its maximum level protection of the country's air and missile defence network, in coordination with NATO.

Meloni was also asked about the potential involvement in the war of the three US military bases in Italy.

She said they already had authorisation for "non-bombing operations", and any change in this would have to be considered by her government, and likely the Italian parliament.

But "to date, we have no requests in this regard", she added, a statement confirmed by Crosetto to parliament.

ATTACK

Seven troops, 11 civilians killed in raid

KANO, Nigeria (AFP) — At least 18 people, including seven troops, were killed when terrorists raided a base and a nearby community in northeast Nigeria's Borno state near the Cameroon border, residents, militia members and rangers told AFP on Thursday.

Africa's most populous nation is battling a 16-year insurgency, with the Nigerian army's attempts to fight the uptick in radical Islamist violence com-

plicated by the presence of other armed groups in the region.

Fighters from the Boko Haram group attacked an army base outside Ngoshe village in Gwoza district late on Tuesday, dislodging the soldiers after a fierce gun battle, sources told AFP.

After the troops withdrew, the extremists raided Ngoshe, killed residents in indiscriminate shootings and abducted dozens of women and children, the sources

said.

Shu'aibu Habu, a local ranger in the area, said 11 people were killed in Ngoshe village and that rangers and volunteers recovered bodies of at least "seven soldiers" killed by the terrorists.

"We recovered the bodies of three soldiers inside the base and four others in the bush," Habu said.

"Eleven residents of Ngoshe, including women and children, were killed," Habu added.

The militants kidnapped several people, including the local imam and a military officer, the ranger said.

"They sacked a base and raided the village, killing and abducting many people," Babakura Kolo, a member of anti-extremist militia assisting the military in the region, told AFP, without giving a toll.

He, however, said around 30 women and children were kidnapped.

Isa Laminu, another ranger who gave the

same toll as Habu, said five of his relatives were among those abducted. Hindatu Musa Yahaya, a Ngoshe resident, said her sister was killed when "a stray bullet hit her in her bedroom" during the attack, but her four children were unharmed.

Nigerian military authorities have not issued a statement on the incident.

A security report seen by AFP said Nigerian military air strikes killed "more

than 50" militants in their "hideouts" in Ngoshe on Tuesday, in an apparent response to the sacking of the base.

'They sacked a base and raided the village, killing and abducting many people'

Since 2009, the extremist insurgency in Nigeria, led primarily

by Boko Haram and its rival faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province group, has left more than 40,000 dead and 2 million displaced in the north-east of the country, according to the United Nations.

Last month, the United States began deploying troops to Nigeria to provide technical and training support to the country's soldiers in fighting the extremist groups.

The US Africa Command said that 200

troops were expected to join the deployment overall.

The deployment came after US President Donald Trump said the violence amounted to the "persecution" of Christians — a framing long used by the US religious and political right-wing.

Nigeria's government and many independent experts say Christians and Muslims alike are the victims of the country's security crises.



AFP photo

An aerial photo shows the French aircraft carrier Charles-de-Gaulle off the coast of Toulon, southern France, on Thursday

France to let US planes not involved in Iran strikes use air base

PARIS, France (AFP) — US military support jets have been allowed to use a French air base, the French military said on Thursday, adding it had “full guarantees” they were not involved in Iran strikes.

The announcement came after President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday said that US-Israel military operations in Iran were conducted “outside international law”.

“US aircraft providing operational support [not combat aircraft] have been accepted at the Istres air base in France,” the general staff said.

“France has required that the assets involved in no way take part in

the operations conducted by the United States in Iran, but strictly in support of the defence of our partners in the region. It has obtained full guarantees to that effect,” it said.

Separately, Alice Rufo, the minister delegate to the defence minister, said “this is a routine procedure within the framework of NATO”.

“In some countries, it is automatic,” she added. “We systematically verify, and in this case, the aircraft that were able to refuel at Istres were aircraft used for the defence of the Gulf countries and not for American offensive action. That is the limit we have set and it has been

respected,” she added.

“There is no use of French bases in the Near and Middle East for American offensive action,” Rufo said.

According to flight-tracking service Flight-radar24, four KC-135 refuelling aircraft arrived at the Istres base on Monday from Rota, a Spanish town where a US base is located.

Another aeroplane of the same type arrived on Wednesday, also from Rota.

The aircraft have not left the base since.

Earlier Thursday, Defence Minister Catherine Vautrin said that “a refuelling aircraft is a service station, it is not a fighter jet”.

“And so the issue is clearly refuelling capability, that is the only authorisation that has been given by the president,” she said.

Since the start of US-Israeli strikes against Iran last Saturday, France has adopted what Macron called a “strictly defensive” posture.

On Tuesday, he said France was sending the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier to the Mediterranean.

France is bound by defence agreements with Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE.

Left-wing French politicians have warned that France might get dragged into the war.

Colombian right-wing eyes comeback as country votes

BOGOTÁ (AFP) — Colombians vote on Sunday in legislative elections that will shape the final months of left-wing President Gustavo Petro's term and test whether the country's once-powerful right-wing is poised for a political comeback.

About 40 million voters will elect nearly 300 lawmakers — deciding the makeup of congress and providing a key temperature check weeks before a May presidential election.

The new congress will determine whether Petro can push ahead with last-minute efforts to rewrite the constitution, a move critics say would weaken checks on presidential power.

Colombia's decades of brutal internecine fighting and the presence of still powerful cocaine mafias have cast a long shadow over the campaign.

More than sixty political leaders have been killed, including a leading presidential candidate who was assassinated in broad daylight in the capital, Bogota.

Rebels also detonated a pipe bomb in a major city and a third of the country is considered unsafe for campaigning.

Against this febrile backdrop lies a battle for the political soul of the country.

Petro, a former guerrilla, became Colombia's first-ever leftist leader in 2022.

He was catapulted to the presidency by a broad progressive coalition that has since been riven by infighting and has struggled to govern.

Prone to social media outbursts, grandiloquent speeches and public spat, Petro has burned through more than 60 ministers in four years.



AFP photo

A man walks past an electoral campaign mural for the chamber and senate candidates of the Pacto Historico Party in Bogota on Wednesday

He is constitutionally barred from running again, but his allies hope to bolster their numbers in the legislature and continue reforms after he leaves power in August.

Petro has proposed creating a constituent assembly that would rewrite the constitution.

He hopes that the new basic law would remake the judiciary, which his allies see as tilted to the right and to give the president more power to rule by decree.

But the left must contend with the right's hope for a political revival after years in the doldrums.

Powerful former presi-

dent Alvaro Uribe is running for a senate seat, hoping to rally voters who backed his hard-line security policies during his 2002-2010 presidency.

Despite a 2016 peace accord, dissident armed groups are expanding and rearming under Petro's stalled “total peace” negotiations.

Defence Minister Pedro Sanchez has announced a deployment of security forces to ensure “safe” elections.

This will be the first election since 2016 in which former guerrilla fighters are not guaranteed seats.

“Scraping for votes has not been easy,” Sandra

Ramirez, a senator and former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla, told AFP.

Campaigns have leaned on TikTok personalities, singers and AI-generated content to cut through a crowded field.

Two activists have even put forward an AI candidate known as “Gaitana” for one of the seats reserved for Indigenous communities.

Represented by a blue-skinned woman wearing feather ornaments, Gaitana describes herself as an environmentalist and animal rights defender.

Polling stations open from 8:00am to 4:00pm local time (13:00-21:00 GMT).

Militants stage deadly attack on Benin troops

COTONOU, Benin (AFP) — Al Qaeda-linked militants staged a deadly attack on army troops in Benin near the border with Niger, a military source told AFP on Thursday.

The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) claimed the Wednesday raid on a northern army base, which the mili-

tary source said had left a “heavy” death toll — though the exact number killed was not immediately clear.

West Africa is suffering from a surge in attacks by the JNIM, the Daesh group and other extremist militias, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, where a series of military coups have

coincided with severe instability.

The violence has increasingly spread into northern Benin and Togo in recent years.

Wednesday's attack hit an army base in Kofouno, around 15 kilometres from the border with Niger.

An army spokesman said the toll could reach 15 dead, according to

Beninese broadcaster Bip Radio. AFP was not immediately able to confirm.

A regional security journalists' group gave a toll of at least 22 soldiers killed, which would be the deadliest attack in Benin since one in April 2025 that left 54 soldiers dead.

“We suffered an attack that left a heavy human

toll on Wednesday. We are currently sweeping the area,” said the military source, who is deployed to the region, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Experts say the JNIM, Al Qaeda's branch for the Sahel region of Africa, is increasingly recruiting members among the local population.

It has spread into

countries along the Gulf of Guinea, where it blends religious proselytising with logistics operations and periodic attacks — though without controlling large swathes of territory, as it does in the Sahel.

According to a UN Security Council report last month, the JNIM recently appointed an emir for Benin.



AFP photo

Streets of Cotonou on Monday

Trump demands say on Iran's next leader as Mideast war spirals

Continued from page 1

“We fled from the suburbs, we were humiliated,” one man told AFP, refusing to give his name.

“We'll sleep on the road tonight and God alone knows what will happen to us.”

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun asked his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron to intercede with Israel to prevent the bombing of south Beirut.

“At this moment of great danger, I call on the Israeli prime minister not to expand the war to Lebanon,” Macron said after the conversation.

Earlier in the day, Israel said its forces had hit “several command centres belonging to the Hizbollah terrorist organisation” in south Beirut.

Lebanese authorities

say at least 102 people have been killed, 638 wounded and at least 90,000 displaced from their homes since Monday.

From Sri Lanka to Azerbaijan

On Iran's borders, neighbour Azerbaijan warned a drone attack on an airport “will not go unanswered”, raising fears of another country entering the war.

Iran denied being behind the strike and blamed Israel, but that did not stop Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev from accusing Tehran of “terrorism”.

Australia deployed two military aircraft to the theatre while Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney said he could not rule out his armed forces taking part.

The war has also

dragged in NATO member Turkey after alliance air defences destroyed a missile launched from Iran heading towards Turkish airspace.

A Turkish official said the missile appeared to have been aimed at a British base in Cyprus, but Turkey nonetheless summoned the Iranian ambassador over the incident.

Following fresh strikes on the Iranian capital, AFP TV images showed blackened vehicles and mangled buildings, with smoke still rising from some.

A 30-year-old Tehran resident told AFP: “We're going through a very important page of our history and I'm not afraid.”

“Hope is the only thing that we have right now.”

An Iranian state-run foundation said the death toll from US and Israeli strikes on the Islamic republic has risen

to 1,230, a toll AFP could not independently verify.

The country is effectively cut off from the rest of the world, with the Internet operating at around 1 per cent of capacity, according to the Netblocks monitor.

AFP reporters in Jerusalem, meanwhile, heard explosions following warnings of incoming Iranian missile fire.

‘We will not surrender’

The conflict has not spared the rich Gulf monarchies, usually seen as a safe haven in a volatile region, as Iran has lashed out at cities and energy infrastructure.

Thirteen people, seven of them civilians, have been killed in countries around the Gulf since the war began, including an 11-year-old girl in Kuwait.

Israel keeps up Lebanon strikes as ground forces advance

Continued from page 1

Troops from three divisions, including infantry, armoured and engineering units were operating in southern Lebanon, Israel's army said late Wednesday.

AFP video footage showed what appeared to be two Israeli tanks amid residential buildings in Khiam, about 6 kilometres north of the border.

The UN peacekeeping mission, UNIFIL, reported Israeli “movements and military activities” on the Lebanese side, adding in a statement that they violate Lebanon's “sovereignty and territorial integrity”.

Hizbollah said its fighters had engaged Israeli troops in “direct” clashes in Khiam, while Israel said two of its soldiers had been “moderately injured” by anti-tank fire.

Meanwhile, an air

strike hit a hotel in Hazmieh — the first reported Israeli attack on the predominantly Christian area in Beirut's suburbs, which is near the presidential palace and several foreign embassies.

Some rooms were gutted in the strike, and wounded people received treatment in the lobby, AFP images showed.

People fled through debris carrying suitcases past the Comfort Hotel's sign, which had fallen broken to the ground. It was not possible to determine who was targeted in the attack.

Southern suburbs targeted

A series of strikes on Wednesday hit Beirut's southern suburbs following evacuation warnings from Israel's military.

One of the strikes targeted a building near a major hospital, according to an AFP photographer.

AFP footage showed thick plumes of smoke rising above buildings in the densely populated suburb, which some residents fled when the violence erupted on Monday.

In Aramoun and Saadiyat south of Beirut — two towns outside of Hizbollah's traditional sphere of influence — the health ministry said Israeli strikes killed at least six people.

AFP footage from Aramoun showed damaged cars and rescue workers carrying a wounded person on a stretcher.

Strikes also targeted a four-storey building in the city of Baalbek, in Lebanon's east, far from the border where Hizbollah also has a strong presence.

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‘Narrative war’: disinformation surges as conflict roils Middle East

By Anuj Chopra

Agence France-Presse

WASHINGTON, United States — Recycled images, video game footage passed off as missile strikes, and AI-generated combat visuals: the US-Israeli assault on Iran has unleashed a torrent of online disinformation that analysts are calling a war of narratives.

Since US and Israeli strikes over the weekend ignited a regional conflict, a parallel information war has erupted, with supporters on both sides flooding social media with falsehoods that often spread faster than the facts on the ground.

AFP’s fact-checkers have debunked a series of claims by pro-Iranian accounts posting old videos to exaggerate the damage from Tehran’s missile strikes on Israel and Gulf states including the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

“There is definitely a narrative war unfolding online,” Moustafa Ayad, from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), told AFP.

“Whether it was to rationalise the strikes across the Gulf, or to trumpet Iranian military might in the face of the Israeli and US strikes, the goals seem to be wear down ‘enemies.’”

On the other end of the divide, Iranian opposition outlets have pushed false narratives on X and Telegram blaming a missile strike on an Iranian girls’ school on the Iranian government itself, researchers said.

ISD also cautioned that fake social media accounts have sprung up impersonating senior Iranian leadership.

Meanwhile, video game clips repurposed as Iranian missile strikes and AI-generated images of US warships being sunk, including the USS Abraham Lincoln, have garnered millions of views across major platforms.

Similar disinformation tactics have also been reported in other global conflicts including Ukraine and Gaza.

“It is really the speed and scale of these representations that is astounding, driving much of the online confusion of what has been targeted, or casualty counts for instance,” said Ayad.

Such fabricated visuals, portraying Iran as more menacing than evidence from the ground suggests, have collectively garnered more than 21.9 million views on the Elon Musk-owned X alone, according to the disinformation watchdog NewsGuard.

‘Fog of war’

X on Tuesday announced it would suspend creators from its revenue sharing program for 90 days if they post AI-generated videos of armed conflicts without disclosing they were artificially made.

The policy change targets what the company described as a threat to information authenticity amid the ongoing war against Iran.

“During times of war, it is critical that people have access to authentic information on the ground,” X’s head of product Nikita Bier said, adding that current AI technologies make it “trivial to create content that can mislead people”.

The new AI disclosure policy represents a notable pivot for a platform whose approach to content moderation has been heavily criticised since Musk completed his \$44 billion acquisition of the site in October 2022.

“The fog of war is quickly becoming the slop of war as AI synthetic content creates infinite noise in information ecosystems,” said Ari Abelson, co-founder of OpenOrigins, a media authenticity company that fights deepfakes.

“As we witness yet another immensely impactful global conflict unfolding in Iran, it’s important for us to all understand how our media ecosystem is shifting.”

In what could further stoke online chaos, a NewsGuard study showed that Google’s reverse-image tool has produced inaccurate AI-generated summaries of fabricated and misleading visuals tied to the Middle East conflict.

This exposes a “significant weakness in a widely used system for verifying the authenticity of images”, the watchdog said.

There was no immediate comment from Google.

The United States and Israel launched the attack on Saturday and quickly killed Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, two days after US envoys had been speaking to Iran in Geneva on a nuclear accord.

Since then, Iran has expanded its retaliatory missile and drone barrage across the Middle East, hitting on Tuesday a US consulate and base as the United States and Israel said they had pummeled key sites inside Tehran.

Iran war threatens Trump fight with inflation

By Beiyi Seow

Agence France-Presse

WASHINGTON, United States — US-Israeli strikes in Iran, and Tehran’s retaliation, are set to trigger a surge in US gas prices with a potential knock-on inflationary hit that could pile pressure on President Donald Trump domestically as midterm elections approach.

Economists warn that costs at the gas pump, a politically sensitive issue, could jump in just days, while inflation risks would make the Federal Reserve more cautious of cutting interest rates.

The conflict started with strikes over the weekend that killed the Iranian supreme leader, and oil prices have soared as the war disrupted supplies.

The crucial Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 per cent of global oil transits, has been effectively closed and energy infrastructure across the Middle East hit.

“Prices at the pump are likely to rise within days,” Oxford Economics lead analyst John Canavan told AFP.

Gas prices have been “slowly but steadily increasing since early January”, he said, add-

ing that “retailers are typically quick to respond to any developments pushing prices higher”.

Already, the price of Brent crude has momentarily jumped to its highest level since July 2024.

Additional costs will stretch US households, threatening consumer spending which makes up two-thirds of US GDP, analysts say.

‘Pain point’

As steeper prices filter through the economy, this could mean higher fares on airlines and other modes of transport, alongside elevated logistic costs, said economist James Knightley of ING.

Even if the United States is self-sufficient in natural gas, these costs still take their cue from global markets. This means higher international prices could also push up electricity costs.

“This is undoubtedly going to be a pain point for the US economy,” Knightley said.

The US energy sector might get a boost but that could be offset by a hit to consumer confidence that is already weak from tariff and job secu-

rity worries.

“If you’ve suddenly got to spend a whole lot more filling up your gas tank and paying more for your utility bills, that’s only going to intensify the pressure on consumer finances,” he said.

All of this could weigh on US economic growth if the war lasts for more than a couple of weeks, he added.

The Trump administration is likely wary and will try to mitigate energy price hikes, Nationwide chief economist Kathy Bostjancic told AFP.

“They know affordability is an issue for many households,” she said. “They’re very aware and would be sensitive that higher gasoline prices would negatively impact consumer confidence and sentiment.”

“That could show up in the voting booth in November,” she added.

Fed caution

For the US central bank, the risk of higher inflation and the chance of weakening growth and employment pull policy-makers in different directions.

While the Fed would be inclined to keep interest rates elevated to rein in inflation, a

deteriorating economy could trigger the need for cuts.

“We’ll have to wait and see,” New York Fed President John Williams told reporters on Tuesday.

While the conflict affects prices, he said: “We’ll have to see how persistent this is and how long this is.”

Higher rates in the meantime would mean elevated borrowing costs, sustaining the pressure that firms and consumers face.

Bostjancic expects that if the rise in oil prices is largely contained and reverses soon, the Fed would have reason and room to cut rates still.

“We haven’t changed our baseline forecast yet,” she added. She expects two rate cuts in 2026, starting mid-year.

Inflation risks could make rate cuts “a difficult sell” for the Fed for now, said ING’s Knightley.

The bank has to “optimize policy for two very different goals” of low inflation and maximum employment, he added.

“I still think there is a case for rate cuts, but the near-term inflation dynamics mean that it’s more likely to be delayed,” he said.

Europe should focus on industrial AI, SAP says

By Sam Reeves

Agence France-Presse

WALLDORF, Germany — Europe should focus on competing in industrial AI, a top executive at German software giant SAP said, as the continent plays catch-up in the race for the cutting-edge technology against the United States and China.

Artificial intelligence for use in industry is “where I believe Europe can succeed big time around the globe”, Thomas Saueressig, a board member at the continent’s biggest software maker, told AFP in an interview.

This was because of “the industrial knowledge and the industrial data and competency we have in Europe”, he said at the company’s headquarters in Walldorf, southwest Germany.

Europe is seen as lagging behind the world’s top two economies in the strategic sector: the US with major players from OpenAI to Google, and China, which has a buzzing AI scene and hosts influential labs such as DeepSeek.

But fraying ties with Beijing, which Europe accuses of engaging in unfair trade practices, and the United States under President Donald Trump have given the continent fresh impetus to step up its efforts.

Industrial AI applications are typically smaller and less energy-intensive than the large models produced by major players, and designed for specific tasks that could range from developing construction plans to optimising electrical wiring in devices.

That is where “we can differentiate ourselves in Europe” by “leveraging the industrial expertise, the data expertise for specific models”, said Saueressig, SAP’s chief customer officer.

“We don’t need to think about only the large language models, we also need to talk about the specific industry models.”

‘New potential’

High-tech processes are nothing new on factory floors but AI promises to turbocharge them, and there are already signs efforts are being ramped up in Germany, Europe’s biggest economy.

Last week, auto giant BMW unveiled a pilot project to deploy two AI-powered humanoid robots in a German factory this year to help in the production process.

“Advances in AI system performance unlock new potentials for automation,” said Milan Nedeljkovic, who is BMW’s head of production and is set

to take over as CEO in May.

The carmaker has been building up its AI capabilities for some time and was moving “towards autonomous AI which can be used in manufacturing to take its own decisions”, Nedeljkovic told journalists, including from AFP, in Munich.

German telecoms giant Deutsche Telekom and US chip juggernaut Nvidia recently launched an industrial AI hub aimed at helping European companies use the technology in processes ranging from design to robotics.

The hub says it offers a “sovereign AI platform” that can reduce “risky dependencies” on Chinese and US tech.

Europe’s drive to boost its AI capabilities ties in with broader efforts to ensure “digital sovereignty”, by dialling back a heavy reliance in particular on US tech giants and ensuring Europeans’ data is stored safely at home.

Saueressig said SAP, which makes a wide range of business software, had seen “exponentially increased demand” for products that guarantee “digital sovereignty”.

But the executive, who oversees the group’s cloud computing operations, said some concerns about reliance on US tech were “overdone” and

urged Europe to focus on producing world class technology so it could compete globally.

AI disruption

SAP has faced worries that new AI products could threaten its business, with its share price falling heavily in recent months.

But Saueressig says the group, which has been developing AI tools for its clients, can benefit as the technology provides “growth opportunities and more value for our customers”.

Europe faces many challenges when it comes to building up its industrial AI offerings, experts warn.

These range from lower data centre computing power compared with the US and China, challenges in the field from manufacturing powerhouse China, and a lack of funding for promising start-ups.

Despite the challenges, the continent has plenty of opportunity and the AI race is in its early stages, said Antonio Krueger, head of the German Research Centre for Artificial Intelligence (DFKI).

“We don’t know exactly where this will end and when it will end,” he told AFP.

“It is not justifiable to claim that the race has been lost.”

Privacy and attention promises from alternative phones at MWC

By Mona Guichard

Agence France-Presse

BARCELONA — Alternative phones on offer at the Mobile World Congress (MWC) telecoms trade show in Barcelona this week aim to answer demand for devices that protect users’ data and attention.

In the vein of Netherlands-based Fairphone, whose smartphones are marketed as ethical and environmentally friendly, other small companies have saddled up against the sector’s giants like Apple and Samsung.

Light phone, designed not to be used

With a black screen showing a few lines of text and no application logos, American company Light Phone’s third model appears to have little in common with colourful mainstream devices.

With a \$699 price tag, its creators intend it to be “used as little as possible”, chief executive Kaiwei Tang told AFP.

Only basic functions are on offer: phone calls, messaging and 5G data, but no social net-

working.

Tang called the phone a response to the “attention economy” in which device and app developers attempt to keep their users online and engaged for as long as possible.

Given the attention-sucking power of mainstream devices and software, “this is not about self-control anymore,” Tang added.

People aged 20-30 are especially drawn to the Light Phone, he said, as a tool to control their relationship to the tech in their lives.

With its limited functionality, Light Phone is also designed for a long life.

“Why would I need to upgrade it every two years?” Tang asked.

Jolla, Finnish simplicity

Finland-based Jolla has just released its latest model, 13 years after the first.

Touting the device as thoroughly European, its price is similar to Light Phone’s at \$753.

Around 10,000 people had pre-ordered the device since its launch in December, with deliv-

eries expected starting in June, the company said.

Those are small figures compared to the hundreds of millions shipped by sector giants, but enough to keep the company profitable, according to chief executive Sami Pienimäki.

“There is high demand for, in general, European technology,” he said.

Built around former Nokia workers, the team behind the Jolla phone at first tackled software, building their own operating system for their devices, a rarity on a market dominated by Apple’s iOS and Google’s Android.

“You can have your WhatsApp, your Signal, your Spotify, whatever, all the Android applications run without Google services,” Pienimäki said.

Although the Jolla phone is assembled in Finland, the company remains dependent on parts manufactured elsewhere.

“Of course we get components from Asia,” the chief executive said.

‘Strongbox’ Punkt

Swiss sister companies Punkt

and Apostrophe were in Barcelona to show a phone whose homescreen is divided in two.

By swiping from left to right, users can switch to a “strongbox” environment offering secure applications, many developed by fellow Swiss firm Proton.

The devices aim to be “tools that respect your attention”, according to the company website.

Their Android-based operating system offers users centralised settings designed to control access to their data, with a selectable security level on a scale of one to five.

“Applications that you don’t use for three days go automatically back to (security level) five,” the highest, to avoid unnecessary data collection, sales chief Yanapi Senaud told AFP.

On top of the 699-euro phone, Punkt requires a 10-euro monthly subscription after one year of use, which the company says covers the costs of the operating system.

“If you aren’t paying for the product, you are the product,” it insists.

BUSINESS

Friday-Saturday, March 6-7, 2026



AFP photo

Cargo containers are seen at a port in Qingdao, eastern China's Shandong province on Thursday

China prioritises energy and diplomacy

BEIJING (AFP) — China has expressed its anger over Israeli-US strikes on Iran but, despite hits to its oil imports, will not risk its interests by confronting Washington and helping its long-standing partner, analysts say.

The war in the Middle East has sparked global fears of an energy supply crunch, with traffic in the vital Strait of Hormuz blocked.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards said on Wednesday they had "complete control" of the waterway as it kept up its missile and drone barrages across the Gulf.

China, a net importer of oil, is one of several major Asian economies that depend on the narrow strait for energy.

However, experts say strategic stockpiles will help Beijing endure short-term disruptions, allowing it to pursue other diplomatic priorities.

Looming ahead is a high-stakes summit in China between President Xi Jinping and his US counterpart Donald Trump, which the White House says will begin on March 31.

"The Iran crisis is unlikely to derail the Trump-Xi summit unless the United States launches a sweeping crackdown on Iran-China [oil] flows," Dan Wang, China Director for the Eurasia Group, told AFP.

"Beijing views Iran as a strategic partner rather than a military ally," said Wang.

"China also values its relationship with other Gulf states, making direct military support beyond rhetoric highly unlikely," he added.

Key 'buffer'

Beijing has ramped up its diplomatic presence in the Middle East in recent years, notably brokering a 2023 deal between longtime rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore ties.

Tehran was later added as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a geopolitical and economic bloc anchored by Beijing and Moscow.

China has also grown heavily reliant on the region for powering its huge economy.

Its own crude production accounts for

only about 30 per cent of domestic demand, according to analytics firm Kpler, with the gap covered by vast shipments of foreign oil.

The Middle East was the source of 57 per cent of China's direct seaborne crude imports in 2025 — 5.9 million barrels per day (mbd) — Kpler said.

Of those, 1.4 mbd came from Iran.

Although China depends on imports to meet energy demand, it has also carefully prepared for unexpected disruptions.

"Thanks to years of sustained stockpiling, China now holds roughly [1.2 billion barrels] of onshore crude inventories," Kpler analyst Muyu Xu wrote.

Those reserves are "equivalent to about 115 days of its seaborne crude imports", Xu said.

"The sheer scale of China's overall crude stockpiles provides a meaningful buffer, enabling both the country and its refiners to comfortably weather short-term supply disruptions from the Middle East and the resulting price spikes."

ASE records positive performance this week

AMMAN (JT) — Despite the current regional conditions and the state of war in the region, the performance of the ASE remains positive.

The general benchmark index during the current week increased from 3559 points at the beginning of the week to reach 3630 points at the end of the week's trading, an increase of 0.8 per cent.

The index has witnessed consecutive gains over the past three days, while the financial market has performed among the best in the region with a higher-than-expected daily trading rate, according to public service TV Al Mamlaka.

The average daily trading volume on the ASE during the period from March 1 to 5 increased to about JD9.5 million, compared with JD8.6 million in the previous week, recording an increase of 10.3 per cent.

The total trading volume during the week amounted to about JD47.3 million, compared to JD42.9 million



Al Mamlaka TV photo

The general benchmark index during the current week increases by 0.8 per cent to reach 3630 points at the end of the week's trading, according to Amman Stock Exchange

in the previous week, while the number of traded shares reached 15.1 million shares executed through 13611 contracts.

In terms of sectorial distribution of trading volume; the financial sector ranked first with a value of JD18.47 million, accounting for 39.06 per cent of the

total trades, followed by the services sector with a trading volume of JD15.28 million, or 32.32 per cent.

While the industrial sector came in third place with a trading volume of JD13.53 million, or 28.62 per cent.

At the price level, the General Share Price Index increased to

3629.6 points at the close of the week, compared to 3598.8 points in the previous week, recording an increase of 0.86 per cent.

At the sectorial level, the Financial Sector Index increased by 1.31 per cent, the Services Index increased by 0.8 per cent, while the Industrial Index

decreased by 0.8 per cent.

Comparing the closing prices of the 123 companies traded during the current week with their previous closures, the share prices of 41 companies increased, while the share prices of 52 companies decreased, Al Mamlaka TV reported.

Google opens AI centre as Berlin defends US tech reliance

BERLIN (AFP) — Google opened an AI centre Berlin on Thursday, pledging to step up innovation in the German capital, which boasts a dynamic start-up scene and strong academic and research institutions.

German politicians hailed the move despite growing fears Europe is overly reliant on US tech giants that its own corporate players are struggling to match,

particularly in artificial intelligence.

Google — a major AI player alongside US firms such as Anthropic, OpenAI and Microsoft — announced a 5.5 billion euro (\$6.4 billion) investment drive in Germany last November.

"We have a whole range of outstanding researchers who are working on AI here in Berlin," said Philipp Justus, Google's country manager for Germany and VP Central Europe.

"This centre is intended to enable exchange with the academic community, with policymakers, and ultimately also with companies that are driving forward the application of AI."

In an expansion of its Berlin site, Google added an "AI demo space" for new innovations, a separate floor for research teams and an area where

AI-focused events will be held.

Berlin Mayor Kai Wegner said the move "underscores Berlin's international significance as a science and technology hub — with a dynamic start-up scene, strong universities and an open society that enables and promotes innovation".

Karsten Wildberger, minister for digital transformation, stressed that "digital sovereignty

is extremely important for Germany and Europe".

"But that does not mean doing everything alone," he said. "We continue to work in equal partnerships."

He added that it was "important that we become much more active in developing things under our own steam", listing key areas that included IT infrastructure and cloud computing.

Seoul leads rebound across Asian stocks, oil extends gains

HONG KONG (AFP) — Asian equities jumped on Thursday after a three-day rout sparked by the Middle East war, but concerns about an extended conflict helped oil extend gains, while analysts warned of more volatility ahead.

Seoul was again the standout, with the KOSPI soaring 12 per cent at one point as traders snapped up bargains following the previous two days' near 20 per cent collapse that put the index within reach

of a bear market.

South Korea's president ordered on Thursday the activation of a \$68 billion stabilisation fund as the Mideast crisis roiled markets.

The advances followed a positive day on Wall Street, where forecast-topping figures on US private-sector hiring and services industry activity provided some much-needed positive news.

Global markets have been thrown into turmoil this week after the

United States and Israel began strikes against Iran on Saturday, killing its supreme leader and sparking a wave of retaliatory attacks across the Gulf.

Crucially, Tehran also effectively shut down the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of the world's crude and considerable liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies travel.

That sent the price of energy soaring, with both main oil contracts up almost 20 per

cent since Friday, and ramped up the likelihood of a fresh spike in inflation, dealing a blow to central bank hopes of lowering interest rates.

The sell-off in equities also came as traders were questioning elevated prices in the tech sector after a long-running AI-fuelled rally that saw several markets hit multiple record highs.

Among the best Asian performers was Seoul, which had advanced about 50 per cent since the start of the year —

having gained 76 per cent in 2025 — thanks to a surge in chip giants Samsung and SK hynix.

But it was at the forefront of this week's collapse, shedding almost 19 per cent on Tuesday and Wednesday as traders returned from a long weekend.

It clawed back a substantial part of those losses Thursday, thanks to a flood of cash into the semiconductor makers. But observers remained cautious.

"Much of the move re-

flects technical traders stepping in to buy the dip after the market fell nearly 20 per cent from its peak in just a matter of days, one of the worst-hit Asian markets," Reed Capital Partners' Gerald Gan said.

"It remains unclear whether this marks a genuine inflection point for further upside or simply a bear-market rally, especially with geopolitical tensions continuing to escalate in the Middle East."

"Not the end of volatility" There were also gains elsewhere in the region, with Tokyo piling on more than 1 per cent at one point, while Hong Kong, Shanghai, Sydney, Singapore, Taipei and Manila were also well up.

But SPI Asset Management's Stephen Innes warned: "The real driver remains the same fuse that lit the selloff in the first place: Oil."

"Brent grinding higher and [West Texas Intermediate] climbing to-

ward the mid-\$70s is not yet a supply crisis, but it is a reminder that energy remains the hidden central bank of the global economy.

"Oil does not just move commodities. It reshapes rate expectations, equity valuations, and currency flows all at once."

He added that traders were having to weigh the geopolitical issues against data showing the US economy, the world's biggest, continued to grow.

China sets growth target of 4.5 to 5% for 2026 — official report

BEIJING (AFP) — China set the country's lowest annual growth target in decades on Thursday at its yearly Two Sessions parliamentary gathering, where the government will unveil its plans to tackle sluggish consumption and a flagging property market.

For 2026, China expects growth of 4.5 to 5 per cent, according to a government work report issued on Thursday, "with efforts in actual work to strive for even better results".

In 2025, it had set a target of around 5 per cent.

This year's is the

lowest target in decades, barring 2020, when no goal was set as the economy reeled from the COVID-19 pandemic.

China's leaders say the economic model must shift away from traditional drivers like exports and manufacturing, and towards consumption-based growth.

Other "main projected targets for development" in 2026 include an increase in the consumer price index of around 2 per cent, and "growth in residents' income in step with economic growth".



AFP photo

A woman walks on an overpass at the financial district of Lujiazui in Shanghai on Thursday

AMMAN STOCK EXCHANGE



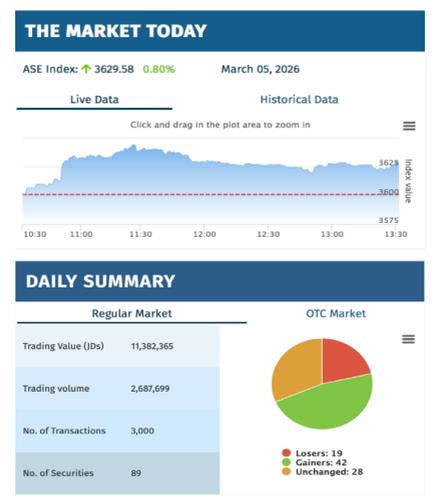
AMMAN (JT) — Amman Stock Exchange (ASE) trading value for Thursday amounted to JD 11.4 million spread over 2.7 million shares that traded through 3,000 transactions.

The ASE share price index shed 0.8 per cent, closing at 3629.58 points.

Out of 89 companies whose shares were traded, the share price of 42 companies rose while the share price of another 19 declined.

Topping the list of the companies whose shares gained the most were United Financial Investments by 4.92 per cent, Comprehensive Land Development and Investment by 4.55 per cent, Amwaj Properties by 4.35 per cent, Jordanian Management and Consulting Company by 3.68 per cent, and Tuhama for Financial Investments by 3.23 per cent.

The companies whose shares dropped the most were Real Estate Development by 4.55 per cent, Zara Investment Holding by 3.70 per cent, Arab East Investment by 3.41 per cent, Afaq Holding for Investment and Real Estate Development Company Plc. by 2.86 per cent, and Jordan Insurance by 2.78 per cent.



THE JORDAN TIMES

SPORTS

AT A GLANCE

CRICKET

Ibrahim Zadran replaces Rashid Khan

KABUL (AFP) — Afghanistan replaced Rashid Khan with Ibrahim Zadran as skipper on Thursday for the T20I series against Sri Lanka but are still monitoring the situation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to stage the matches. Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) said Zadran's appointment is in alignment for future build-up. "In alignment with the ACB's long-term strategic vision and following recent changes in our team management, we have made the thoughtful decision to appoint Zadran as new T20I skipper," ACB said in a statement. Hashmatullah Shahidi will continue to lead the team in the ODI series which follows the T20Is. The series begins with three Twenty20 internationals in Sharjah on March 13, 15 and 17 before the ODIs are played in Dubai on March 20, 22 and 25. Afghanistan crashed out in the first round of the ongoing Twenty20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka after losing to South Africa and New Zealand. As a fall out, fast bowler Fazal Haq Farooqi, all-rounder Gulbadin Naib, and wicket-keeper-batter Mohammad Ishaq have been left out from both the squads, the release said.

RUGBY

Scotland shuffles pack for Six Nations clash against France

LONDON (AFP) — Scotland coach Gregor Townsend has selected a new front row as part of five changes to his starting side for Saturday's top-of-the-table Six Nations match at home to leaders France. Looshead prop Pierre Schoeman and hooker George Turner, both replacements in the 26-23 win away to Wales a fortnight ago, both start, with tighthead prop D'Arcy Rae also coming in for his first appearance of the tournament. Jack Dempsey, who has recovered from a bicep injury sustained in last month's victory over England, returns at No 8, with Matt Fagerson moving to blindside flanker and Gregor Brown slotting into the second row to accommodate Dempsey's recall. The other change sees wing Darcy Graham in for Duhan van der Merwe. But a similarly emphatic victory for the Scots would see them leapfrog Les Bleus at the top of the table heading into the final round of matches on March 14. Earlier on Thursday, France coach Fabien Galthie recalled fly-half Matthieu Jalibert to his starting line-up following injury.



Novak Djokovic of Serbia fields questions from the media during Day 1 of the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden on Wednesday in Indian Wells, California

'She's coming back': Djokovic predicts Serena return

INDIAN WELLS, United States (AFP) — Novak Djokovic is convinced US tennis great Serena Williams will return to competition, and the 24-time Grand Slam champion is itching to see "one of the greatest athletes" back on court.

"I think she's coming back," Djokovic said on Wednesday at the ATP/WTA Indian Wells Masters. "I don't know. I haven't spoken to her, but I guess the sentiment is that she's coming back. Where and how, singles, doubles, we don't know, and if I'm in her position, I would hide it too."

Williams, a 23-time Grand Slam champion, hasn't competed since a third-round loss at the 2022 US Open. But the 44-year-old

mother of two re-entered the anti-doping testing pool in December and regained eligibility.

Initially she denied she planned a comeback, but in January she declined to rule it out, telling NBC's "Today" show: "That's not a yes or a no. I don't know, I'm just going to see what happens."

Djokovic said players were buzzing at the prospect.

"Everybody is excited, and it's definitely something that's very highly anticipated," he said.

Williams's sister Venus, 45, accepted a wild card into the Indian Wells singles draw and will face France's Diane Parry in the first round.

Djokovic suggested Serena could return for

Wimbledon — where she is a seven-time singles champion.

"I pick that one as well as her comeback," he said. "I don't know. I think she might maybe play a doubles tournament or two with Venus. That would be nice to see, just from my point of view and tennis fans', for sure."

"She's one of the greatest athletes, really. It would be great to have her back too."

Djokovic is seeded third in Indian Wells as he plays his first event since he fell to Carlos Alcaraz in the Australian Open final, after toppling Jannik Sinner in the semis.

"For me that has been a phenomenal result," the 38-year-old said. "I have proven to myself primarily and to others

that I can still compete at the highest level and beat these guys."

"So my logic is why not keep going as long as I have that fire and flair and quality and also motivation to do that."

"There are objectives and goals that are always there. You want to win, so you want to get another title and get another Slam, hopefully," he said. "I was close in Australia."

Djokovic's five Indian Wells titles are tied for the most with Swiss great Roger Federer.

But he hasn't reached the quarter-finals since his last title run in 2016.

He'll launch his latest desert campaign on Saturday against either France's Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard or Poland's Kamil Majchrzak.

Wales revel in being the underdogs, says skipper Lake

DUBLIN (AFP) — Wales captain Dewi Lake is comfortable with the Welsh being regarded as underdogs for their Six Nations match with Ireland, saying on Thursday "that's probably our favourite place to be".

The Irish are favourites to extend Wales's Six Nations losing streak to 15 when they face each other at Lansdowne Road on Friday.

The hosts rediscovered their brio with a 42-21 thumping of England at Twickenham in the last round of matches to keep alive their slim hopes of winning the title.

'We put a bit more effort in defence in the week and you probably saw that, the mentality to go and defend...'

The Welsh — whose last Six Nations win in Dublin was in 2012 — arrive boosted by a vastly improved performance, after two heavy defeats in their opening games, last time out at home to Scotland.

Lake, though, said that being given little chance against the Irish was fine by him and his teammates.

"That's probably our favourite place to be really, the underdog," he said after the eve of match

training. "Being Welsh, we've always loved being the underdog — nobody giving us a chance."

Lake said that their display against the Scots — they led until six minutes from time — illustrated how they revel in the underdog role.

"I think nobody really gave us a chance last week and we showed what we could do," said the 26-year-old hooker.

"I know, ultimately, we didn't come away with a result in that game, but that game has given us belief and is only going to carry the momentum of this squad through this weekend."

'Obvious gulf'

Lake admitted that a Welsh defence which had been taken to pieces by England and France in the tournament, faces a tough evening as the "Irish backs are deadly".

However, he called on his teammates to build on an improved defensive display against the Scots.

"We put a bit more effort in defence in the week and you probably saw that, the mentality to go and defend, and when we get the ball we looked good in attack and have done over the last couple of months," he said.

His Ireland counterpart Caelan Doris said that he and his teammates would have to keep a watchful eye on the Welsh as they had "invested a lot in their attack".

Berlin film festival chief to remain in job after Gaza row

BERLIN (AFP) — The head of Berlin's international film festival will stay in the post despite controversy over a film director's anti-Israel remarks at the event, the German culture minister's office said on Wednesday.

Tricia Tuttle had been under fire from some politicians after the comments by Syrian-Palestinian filmmaker Abdallah Al Khatib, with some media reporting that culture minister Wolfram Weimer had sought to oust her from the job.

But after a meeting of the board of the state-owned KBB — the company that runs the Berlinale — on Wednesday, Weimer's office said in a statement that it welcomed Tuttle's willingness to "continue her work".

Angry rows over the Israel-Palestinian conflict have repeatedly rocked the Berlinale, held every February as Europe's first major film festival of the year.

This year, Khatib's comments at the closing ceremony accusing Germany of being complicit in "genocide" in Gaza provoked outrage from some German politicians.

Tuttle also faced criticism for posing for a photo with some of the team behind Khatib's film, "Chronicles from the Siege".

But Weimer on Wednesday said Tuttle

had "put a great deal of energy into setting a new course" at the festival, which she has led for the past two years.

"I thank her for her willingness to continue on this path," he said.

"I welcome today's decision by the supervisory board to reaffirm its confidence in my leadership of the Berlinale," Tuttle said in a statement.

Weimer added that the board of the KBB had laid out recommendations for "strengthening" the festival, including a new code of conduct. "The board has issued a number of recommendations, which we will carefully consider," Tuttle said.

Controversy surrounded this year's Berlinale almost from the beginning, after the jury president, acclaimed German director Wim Wenders, responded to a question about Gaza by saying cinema should "stay out of politics".

Heated debate about Wenders' comments followed, with award-winning Indian writer Arundhati Roy withdrawing from the festival and denouncing his remarks.

Tuttle received support from thousands of filmmakers after German tabloid Bild reported that Weimer was trying to remove her from the job.

Harry Styles fans head in one direction: To star's home village

HOLMES CHAPEL, United Kingdom (AFP) — Boasting a centuries-old church, quaint pubs and rolling green countryside, Holmes Chapel looks like many other English villages.

But having played a formative part in Harry Styles' rise to global superstardom, nothing can be as it was for the village near Manchester, in northwest England.

Fans from around the world — dubbed Harries — flock there year-round to pay homage at several sites linked to the "Watermelon Sugar" singer.

With the ex-One Direction member releasing a new album and staging a Manchester concert on Friday, recent weeks have been extra busy.

"I've been looking forward to this day for too long!" Spanish student Elena Garcia, 21, told AFP as she visited this week with two friends.

Like other Styles pilgrims before them, they stopped by the village train station where the ticket office has become a shrine of sorts, as well as the bakery where he once worked.

And, of course, they made their way to a spectacular viaduct where Harries have for years been leaving messages — after Styles wrote his own name there in the 2013 One Direction biopic "This Is Us".

The 32-year-old pop sensation is also famously said to have had his first kiss beneath its 23 arches.

"It was just beautiful," Katharina, 22, another of



The Fortune City Chinese restaurant, said to be where Harry Styles took Taylor Swift for dinner, is photographed in Holmes Chapel, northwest England, on Wednesday

the trio, from Germany, said of the site known as Harry's Wall. "Having the name on the wall's a big thing."

These days, fans are encouraged to sign and leave behind small slate stones to preserve the 180-year-old viaduct's brickwork.

'Demand'

Holmes Chapel — population nearly 7,000 — has welcomed thousands of Harries over the years.

Numbers swelled after he played two huge gigs in Manchester in 2022, according to the Holmes Chapel Partnership

non-profit.

It handed out 5,000 maps showing Styles points-of-interest the following year. It then started offering near-daily guided tours for much of 2024.

Peter Whiers, who heads the partnership, noted the response was "phenomenal" with people "arriving at all sorts of different times a day" to see the sights.

"It became a little bit difficult to meet the demand," he noted.

"For every one person on the guided tour, there were probably another 10 that came here and did it under their own

steam."

Bartender Chloe Thomason, a self-proclaimed superfan from nearby Congleton, was one of the 11 guides hired after acing an 80-question exam about Styles and Holmes Chapel.

The 24-year-old — who is set to attend Friday's album-reveal concert — cherished the period. "I loved finding out about everybody... how they found Harry, if they were a new fan, an old fan... and it was just so good."

The tours are now self-guided, with the partnership offering an online version for fans world-

wide who cannot make it to Holmes Chapel.

'Heights'

Styles moved to the village as a youngster, attending schools there and later beginning his journey to A-list status on trains to London for 2010's The X Factor.

At the auditions he described it as "quite boring" but "picturesque".

Later that year, he was chosen to be part of One Direction, remaining in the boyband until a late 2015 indefinite hiatus.

Its members launched solo careers and none has enjoyed more sub-

sequent success than the boy from Holmes Chapel.

At Mandeville's Bakery, fans take selfies next to a full-length poster photo of a teenage Styles wearing an apron, taken when he worked there part-time.

Down the road, a Chinese restaurant he reportedly took Taylor Swift to when they briefly dated more than a decade ago is also a magnet for Harries.

Meanwhile, the station master now features a mural bearing his image, designed by two local artists.

Graham Blake, the station master for 28 years, can still remember the budding performer bound for the capital.

"I knew he had talent. He used to sing on the platform... 'Kings of Leon' and stuff like that," he told AFP.

"He had a good voice but I never thought he'd reached the heights that he has now. It's incredible. But it's all hard work."

A fans message book in his memorabilia-packed ticket office — all provided by Harries — has reached its 12th volume.

Styles' dad, who still lives nearby, collects each one once full, with the star also known to stop by occasionally.

He has visited his old school, once donating computers, according to a long-time local Andrea Pearson, whose wedding Styles attended.

"We're just so proud of him," she said. "He's never forgotten his roots."