

Iranian currency plunges past 1m per dollar in record drop

DUBAI: (News Desk) Iran's currency fell below the psychologically key level of 1,000,000 rial per US dollar on Tuesday, as market participants saw no end in sight to sanctions under US President Donald Trump's renewed "maximum pressure" campaign. Trump said earlier this month that he had sent a letter to Iran's top authority, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, warning that Iran's nuclear programme could either be dealt with through negotiations or militarily. Khamenei rejected the US offer for talks as a "deception" and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said last week that negotiations with Washington were impossible unless its policy changed. The apparent diplomatic deadlock has raised fears of potential conflict, although Iranian officials have sought to assuage such concerns. "I am certain there won't be any war as we are fully prepared for such condition... so that no one will think about attacking Iran," Araqchi said on Monday.

Japan court dissolves controversial church

TOKYO: (News Desk) A Japanese court ordered on Tuesday that a religious sect be stripped of official recognition, the government said, in the wake of the assassination of ex-premier Shinzo Abe. A government spokesman said that the Tokyo District Court "issued the dissolution order" for the Japanese chapter of the Unification Church, founded in South Korea and nicknamed the "Moonies" after its late founder, Sun Myung Moon. The Church is accused of pressuring followers into making life-ruining donations, and blamed for child neglect among its members, although it has denied any wrongdoing. Former prime minister Abe, Japan's longest-serving leader, was shot dead on the campaign trail in 2022, allegedly by a man who resented the Unification Church. The alleged assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, 44, was reportedly angry with the Church which bankrupted his family after his mother had donated around 100 million yen (\$1 million at the time). Investigations after Abe's murder revealed close ties between the sect and many conservative ruling-party lawmakers, leading to the resignation of four ministers.

Trump admin in 'damage control mode' over Yemen chat breach

WASHINGTON: (News Desk) The Trump administration sought on Tuesday to contain the fallout after a magazine journalist disclosed he had been inadvertently included in a secret group discussion of highly sensitive war plans, while Democrats called on top officials to resign over the security incident. President Donald Trump dismissed the accidental addition of a journalist to a group chat about Yemen air strikes as a "glitch" and stood by his top national security team despite the stunning breach. Trump's administration faces mounting pressure following a report on Monday by The Atlantic magazine's editor-in-chief Jeffrey Goldberg about the conversation on the Signal messaging app. The chat about attacks on Iran-backed Houthi rebels involved some of the administration's most senior officials, including Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, Vice President J.D. Vance and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz. President, Hegseth downplay sensitivity of issue; Democrats grill top security officials over 'blunder' Trump told broadcaster NBC in a phone interview that the breach was "the only glitch in two months, and it turned out not to be a serious one." The president added that Waltz, his top security official in the White House, "has learned a lesson, and he's a good man." White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a post on X on Tuesday that "no 'war plans' were discussed" and "no classified material was sent to the thread." She also attacked Goldberg as being "well-known for his sensationalist spin". In another statement on Tuesday, the White House criticised Democrats and the media for "a coordinated effort to distract from the successful actions" of the Trump administration "to make America's enemies pay and keep Americans safe". Hegseth, a former Fox News host with no experience running a huge organisation like the Pentagon, said on Monday that "nobody was texting war plans." Goldberg responded to Hegseth's denial in an interview on CNN late on Monday by saying, "No, that's a lie. He was texting war plans." Democrats grill officials But top Democrats have condemned the breach, saying it was potentially illegal and calling for an investigation to find out why officials were using a commercially available app for sensitive discussions. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and CIA Director John Ratcliffe — both of whom were in the chat — testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee that no classified material was shared in the group chat. But Democratic senators voiced skepticism about that claim.



FBI Director Kash Patel, National Intelligence Director Tulsi Gabbard and CIA Director John Ratcliffe speaks during a hearing of the Senate Committee on Intelligence

Palestinians in north Gaza call for an end to Israel's onslaught

Gaza (News Desk) Hundreds of protesters have taken to the streets of Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and Jabalia to demand an end to Israel's attacks and blockade on Gaza, Al Jazeera reports. The protest took place on Tuesday, according to the Wafa news agency. They held up placards that said, "We refuse to die," "The blood of our children

is not cheap" and "Stop the war", Wafa reported. It quoted one protester as saying, "Enough displacement. We want to live! The siege is severe. There's no food, no security, no water, not even money. Enough of this situation. We want to live with dignity." AFP meanwhile reported that some protesters shouted anti-Hamas slogans at the rallies. In Beit Lahiya,

some shouted "Hamas out" and "Hamas terrorists", it said. Majdi, a protester who did not wish to give his full name, told the agency that the "people are tired". "If Hamas leaving power in Gaza is the solution, why doesn't Hamas give up power to protect the people?" he asked. Israeli bombings killed 8 aid workers in the past week. The UN's humani-

tarian agency OCHA said at least eight aid workers have been killed in Gaza since Israel resumed its onslaught last week, Al Jazeera reports. They include staff members of UNOPS, the UNRWA and MSF. The killings bring the total death toll among aid workers to 399, including 289 UN staff members, 34 of the Palestine Red Crescent Society and 10 of MSF.

No policy shift on Israel, says FO after reports of journalists' visit

ISLAMABAD: P (News Desk) akistan's Foreign Office (FO) has declared that the country's position on Israel remains unchanged, following the reports that a group of Pakistani journalists secretly travelled to Israel earlier this month. In a statement issued on Tuesday, the FO dismissed speculation of any policy shift, emphasising that Pakistan does not recognise

Israel and continues to support Palestinian rights. "The government of Pakistan has noted reports regarding Pakistani journalists travelling to Israel. In this regard, it is clarified that Pakistani passports explicitly state they are 'not valid for travel to Israel.' Therefore, no such visit is possible under existing regulations," the statement read. The ministry reaffirmed Pakistan's "steadfast

support" for an independent Palestinian state based on pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, in line with UN resolutions. The clarification follows a report by The Jerusalem Post, which stated that a delegation of 11 Pakistani journalists travelled to Israel this month. The visit, organised by the Israeli NGO Sharaka, included meetings with Israeli officials and

tours of key sites, such as the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem and areas affected by the Oct 7 Hamas attacks. One unnamed participant, identified only as "B" in an interview with The Media Line, claimed that Pakistan's government harbours an interest in developing ties with Israel but remains constrained by domestic political pressures, particularly from religious groups.



Palestinians flee Israeli bombardment drive vehicles carrying their belongings on a main axis in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip, on Tuesday

Pakistan, China in talks about security for Chinese nationals

Islamabad (News Desk) Pakistan and China's discussions about security measures to protect Chinese nationals working in the South Asian country are a work in progress, Islamabad's ambassador to Beijing said on Wednesday. The two countries have had close ties underpinned by long-standing wariness

of their common neighbour, India, and a desire to hedge against US influence across the region. Chinese investment and financial support for Pakistan since 2013 have been a boon for its struggling economy. China has thousands of nationals working on projects grouped under CPEC. The \$65-billion investment is part of President Xi's

Belt and Road Initiative, designed to Beijing's global reach by road, rail and sea. Militants who target Chinese nationals seek to undermine Pakistan-China relations, spread terrorism, destabilise Pakistan's security and economy and achieve financial gains. It is Pakistan's "national responsibility" and the country is "doing every-

thing possible", Ambassador Khalil Hashmi told reporters at the sidelines of the Boao Forum in China's Hainan province. "I think our two countries work very closely in terms of information sharing, in terms of developing the standard operating procedures" to ensure Chinese nationals working in Pakistan are safe, he said.

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Temple burned, historic village evacuated after South Korea fire

UISEONG: (News Desk) Residents of a Unesco-listed village were ordered to evacuate while a historic Buddhist temple was burned to the ground on Tuesday as South Korea scrambled to contain worsening wildfires. Blazes tearing across the country's southeast have killed four people, with authorities transferring thousands of prisoners and residents as dry windy weather hampers efforts to contain more than a dozen different fires which broke out over the weekend. The fires are collectively the third largest in South Korea's history, with acting Interior and Safety Minister Ko Ki-dong saying 14,694 hectares had been affected early Tuesday. "Strong winds, dry weather, and haze are hampering firefighting efforts," Ko told a disaster and safety meeting. The government has declared a state of emergency in four regions.

Israel releases Palestinian Oscar winning director after West Bank detention

Gaza (News Desk) Israeli police released Oscar-winning Palestinian filmmaker Hamdan Ballal on Tuesday, after detaining him a day earlier for "hurling rocks" following what activists described as an attack by settlers in the occupied West Bank. Basel Adra, who worked with Ballal on the Oscar-winning documentary No Other Land, posted a photo of Ballal on X after his release with blood stains on his shirt. "After I won the Oscar, I did not expect to be exposed to such attacks," Ballal said in a video by AFP TV. "It was a very strong attack and the goal was to kill." According to the Israeli military, three Palestinians were apprehended on Monday for "hurling rocks" during a confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians in the southern West Bank village of Susya. "Following this, a violent confrontation broke out, involving mutual rock hurling between Palestinians and Israelis," the military statement claimed, contradicting what witnesses interviewed by the Associated Press said. The village is located near Masafer Yatta, a grouping of hamlets south of Hebron city where No Other Land is set. The best documentary at this year's Academy Awards tells the story of forced displacement of Palestinians by Israeli troops and settlers in Masafer Yatta — an area Israel had declared a restricted military zone in the 1980s.

SpaceX rocket fuel makes stunning swirl in European sky

PARIS: (News Desk) A stunning blue and white spiral spotted in skies across Europe late Monday was created by frozen fuel tumbling from a SpaceX rocket, according to weather forecasters and scientists. The UK's Met Office said on X it had received many reports of an "illuminated swirl" in the sky on Monday evening likely caused by a rocket that had blasted off earlier from Cape Canaveral in Florida. "Don't panic! No, it wasn't a UFO but the degassing of a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket," said the French state weather forecaster Météo France in the country's central Loire Valley. Pictures of the vivid swirl were also posted by social media users in countries including Sweden, Poland, Hungary and Croatia. People across Europe may have had the chance to see the phenomenon — as long as it was not obscured by clouds, planetary scientist James O'Donoghue of the UK's University of Reading said. The spiral was created after the rocket's first-stage booster, which blasted it off the ground, separated and the upper stage took over, he said.

Italy minister hopes Russians could join 2026 Olympics, after war

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO: (News Desk) Italian deputy premier Matteo Salvini said on Tuesday he would like to see Russian and Ukrainian athletes compete at the Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics next year, if their countries have stopped fighting. The leader of the far-right League party, a junior partner in Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government who has responsibility for infrastructure, was speaking at the inauguration of the Winter Olympics bobsleigh track in Cortina d'Ampezzo. "Given that there are peace talks (on the Ukraine war) going on at the moment, and that the Olympic spirit should be what brings people and athletes together, I hope... the Milan-Cortina Olympics 2026 will be the first Olympics which will see Ukrainian and Russian athletes take to the ski slopes," Salvini said. "To see athletes from all over the world — once the war is over — run those 1,700 metres will mean that we have built a little piece of peace and that will be the most important thing." Russia and its ally Belarus have been banned from holding international sporting competitions since Moscow's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, while their flags, anthems and officials are banned from most world events. Only 15 Russian athletes took part in the Paris Olympics last year, under strict conditions — they competed under a neutral flag and had to prove they had no ties to the military or security services. A similar solution could be found for the Milan-Cortina Games, which take place in northern Italy on Feb 6-22 next year. Salvini has in the past expressed admiration for Russian president Vladimir Putin, although he has distanced himself from this stance since the Ukraine war began. While Meloni has been a vocal supporter of Kyiv, Salvini has worked to curb Italy's military aid, although he has not blocked it. Earlier this month, he called French President Emmanuel Macron "crazy" for proposing to send troops to ensure any peace deal in Ukraine was observed. He stressed on Tuesday that "Europe should be a protagonist of peace".

Israeli strikes kill 23 in Gaza, military expands evacuation orders

GAZA: (News Desk) Israeli strikes across the Gaza Strip killed at least 23 Palestinians on Tuesday, local health officials said, as the Israeli military expanded evacuation orders to tens of thousands of residents across the enclave. The Israeli military resumed its campaign against Hamas in Gaza a week ago, shattering a two-month ceasefire. Since then, nearly 700 people, mostly women and children, have been

killed, Palestinian health officials say. Most of Gaza's 2.3 million population has already been displaced by the fighting multiple times during nearly 18 months of conflict and is facing worsening shortages of food and water after Israel suspended aid deliveries earlier this month. On Tuesday, the Israeli army told residents in all northern border towns to evacuate, saying Palestinian rockets had been fired at Israel from the area.

The affected towns include Jabalia, Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and Shejaia in Gaza City. Orders were also issued for areas in Khan Younis and Rafah in the south. Tel Aviv to seize more Palestinian land if Hamas keeps refusing to free prisoners, says minister Palestinian and United Nations officials say there are no safe areas in the Gaza Strip. Hamas, which accuses Israel of abandoning the Jan 19 ceasefire deal, said

it was cooperating with a new effort, mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United States, to restore calm and conclude the three-phase ceasefire agreement. According to some Hamas sources, there has been no breakthrough. UN cut The United Nations is cutting its international staff in Gaza by around a third, a UN spokesperson said on Tuesday, citing safety concerns. "We are trying to reduce the number

of international staff by about one third and this is really because the Secretary General (Antonio Guterres) doesn't have the power of guaranteeing the safety of UN staff," UN spokesperson Alessandra Vellucci told a Geneva press briefing, saying that this meant around 30 of 100 international staff. The agencies affected included the World Food Programme, the World Health Organisation and the UN children's agency, she

added. Seizing Gaza "Israel will take more territory in Gaza and fight until Hamas is wiped out if the Palestinian group Hamas keeps refusing to free remaining hostages", Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz said on Tuesday. He spoke as mediators continued efforts to salvage Gaza's ceasefire deal shattered by Israel's renewal of air and ground conflict on March 18 after it and Hamas failed to agree on terms for an extension of the two-month-old truce.