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THE WORLD CAME TO PLAY. NOT ALL OF IT WAS LET IN.

FIFA WORLD CUP 2026 · THE VIEW FROM EAST RUTHERFORD

On Sunday, the planet's biggest game will be decided twenty miles from Jackson Heights. Getting there took a visa, a bond, and - in one country's case - a war.

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THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ IN CRISIS

War Over the Nuclear Question: From Khamenei's Assassination to the Brink of Economic Collapse

Five months into active conflict with Iran, the U.S. and Israel face a ceasefire in name only. A renewed bombing campaign, blockaded shipping lanes, and failed diplomacy signal a war without resolution-one born from decades of nuclear brinkmanship that now threatens global energy markets and regional stability.

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A detective, a Gotti, a theme-restaurant owner and a Glen Cove man with twenty shell companies. What the federal docket actually shows about Long Island's COVID loan fraud - and what nobody is counting.

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THE WORLD CAME TO PLAY. NOT ALL OF IT WAS LET IN.

In Buenos Aires this week, photographers found a mural on a city wall with two subjects sharing the same paint: Diego Maradona, and the Argentine soldiers who fought and died over a cluster of windswept islands in the South Atlantic.

To an outsider, that is a strange pairing. A footballer and a war. To Argentina, it is not a pairing at all. It is one story, told twice.

Three thousand miles north, in a stadium in Atlanta, that story got its next chapter this afternoon — England against Argentina, a place in the World Cup final on the line, and forty-four years of unfinished business in the stands.

This is what the World Cup does. Every four years it hands nations a way to fight the wars they are no longer permitted to fight. For thirty-nine days it has been doing something else, too, something the tournament's organizers did not put in the brochure: it has been holding up a mirror to the country hosting it.

The 2026 World Cup was sold to America as a celebration of a borderless world. Forty-eight teams. One hundred and four matches. Sixteen cities across three countries. It ends Sunday afternoon at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey — a twenty-minute drive from Newark, an hour from Hicksville, close enough that some of you will hear the traffic.

And from the first whistle, it has been less a portrait of a world without borders than the most detailed picture we have of a world made entirely of them.

THE OLDEST GRUDGE

Start with the game in Atlanta, because it is the easiest to understand and the hardest to explain. In 1982, Britain and Argentina fought a seventy-four-day war over the Falkland Islands — the Malvinas, to Argentines — three hundred miles off the Argentine coast. Nine hundred and seven people died. Argentina lost. The islands remain British, confirmed by a 2013 referendum of the islanders themselves, which Argentina rejected and still rejects.

Four years after the shooting stopped, the two countries met in a World Cup quarterfinal at the Azteca in Mexico City. In the space of four minutes, Diego Maradona scored twice. The first he punched in with his left hand while the referee's view was blocked; asked afterward whether it was legal, he said it was scored "a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God." The second was a sixty-meter run past half the England team that is still, by broad agreement, the finest goal ever scored. Argentina won 2–1. Decades later, Maradona said plainly what the country had understood immediately: it was "symbolic revenge" for the Malvinas.

Everything since has been aftershock. David Beckham's red card in 1998. Beckham's penalty in 2002 — the last time these two met at a World Cup, twenty-four years ago. England has won three of the five previous World Cup meetings; Argentina has won two. Nobody in either country counts it that way.

The politics arrived before the players did. In the hours before Argentina's quarterfinal win over Switzerland, Argentina's foreign minister, Pablo Quirno, posted on X: "Malvinas: the strength of a just cause. By history, right and conviction, the Malvinas are Argentine." Nile Gardiner of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom answered in the same forum: the matter was settled in 1982, he wrote, with Argentina's defeat. Don't try it again.

Two governments, relitigating a war on social media, on the eve of a football match.

The coaches tried to lower the temperature and could not. Argentina's Lionel Scaloni said he didn't want to "mix everything up." England's Thomas Tuchel was blunter about his opponent: they are "fueled by history," he said, "it means a lot to them." Gary Lineker, who scored England's consolation goal in 1986 and has

Exclusive Report
(By our staff reporter)

spent forty years being asked about it, said this week he wanted revenge. Maradona's son told the Spanish press that his father would never have called it a normal game, and that it never will be.

Argentina took the field in Atlanta in its dark blue away shirt — the same shade Maradona's team wore at the Azteca. Nobody had to explain the reference. Flags in the stands carried the outline of the islands.

THE TEAM THAT PLAYED THE COUNTRY BOMBING IT

And then there is Iran, which is the story nobody is telling properly.

On February 28 of this year, the United States and Israel began a war against Iran. In the opening hours, a missile strike hit a girls' school in Minab, in the country's south. Iranian officials say 168 people were killed, most of them children. Days later, the war killed Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Iran had already qualified for the World Cup. The World Cup was being hosted, in largest part, by the country dropping the bombs. There is no precedent for this. Teams have played through wars. Teams have played their rivals' countries. No team in the ninety-six-year history of the tournament has flown into the territory of a state actively bombing its homeland in order to play a group-stage match.

The unraveling took months. In December, Iran boycotted the World Cup draw in Washington after the United States granted only four visas to its delegation and refused one for its federation president, Mehdi Taj, whose earlier affiliation with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had also gotten his Canadian visa canceled. In March, President Trump said publicly that he did not think it was "appropriate" for Iran to come, citing the players' "life and safety." Iran's team answered the next day: no one, it said, can exclude us. Iran's own sports minister said it would not be possible to go. FIFA president Gianni Infantino insisted throughout that Iran would play.

His stated reason: "because we have to unite."

The team asked for its matches to be moved to Mexico. FIFA said no. It moved its training base instead — out of Tucson, Arizona, and down to Tijuana, on the Mexican side of the California border, at FIFA's own suggestion. Fourteen staff members were denied U.S. visas. The players' visas came through on June 5, ten days before their opening match, processed at the U.S. embassy in Ankara while the squad trained in Turkey because Iran's domestic league had been shut down by the war.

Then they were driven and flown across the border to play, allowed into the United States roughly twenty-four hours before kickoff and required to leave the same day the whistle blew. After the team and its coach called the schedule unfair, the Department of Homeland Security relaxed it — to forty-eight hours — for the Egypt match in Seattle. Iran's federation says the United States revoked its allocated fan tickets for all three group matches, leaving it, in its words, unable to provide a single ticket to a single supporter.

So on June 15, at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California, Iran drew 2–2 with New Zealand in front of a crowd that contained essentially none of its own people, having trained at a stadium in Tehran that the United States had bombed, wearing pins for schoolchildren the United States had killed, in a country that had given them one day's admission.

Whatever the World Cup is, it is not a place where politics stops at the touchline. It is the place where politics puts on a kit.

THE BORDER FOLLOWED EVERYONE INSIDE

For readers of this newspaper, the Iran story is the extreme edge of something much closer to home. Thirty-nine countries face some form of U.S. entry restriction. Four of them qualified for this World Cup: Haiti, Iran, Ivory Coast, and Senegal. Their players were let in. Their fans were not. Haiti reached its first World Cup in more than fifty years and could not bring its people to watch. Since April, the State Department's expanded visa bond program has required nationals of fifty countries to post a bond of up to $15,000 before entering the United States as visitors. Five qualified nations are on that list: Algeria, Cabo Verde, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Tunisia. On May 12, Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin confirmed that ICE agents would be present at World Cup stadiums. He said their role would be mainly security. He also said this: "ICE always says immigration enforcement. We're always going to do that." He did not rule out arrests. Border czar Tom Homan promised to send "more ICE agents than you've ever seen" to New York City, which is hosting eight matches — including Sunday's final. The consequences arrived quickly and unevenly. Iraq's star forward, Aymen Hussein, and his team's photographer were held and questioned for seven hours by Customs and Border Protection at Chicago's O'Hare. Hussein was let in. The photographer was not. A Somali referee, Omar Abdulkadir Artan, expected to officiate at the tournament, was refused entry outright. The International Sports Press Association wrote to FIFA to say Iranian and African journalists had been denied the visas they needed to cover their own national teams. In Miami, federal immigration agents disrupted a World Cup celebration on Biscayne Bay — at an event the county mayor was attending.

At SoFi Stadium, UNITE HERE Local 11, representing two thousand workers, filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board asking FIFA and the stadium's owners to limit ICE's access, and voted to strike over the threat of enforcement. The dispute settled. One clause of the settlement lets workers walk off the job if they believe ICE poses a danger to their safety. Read that sentence again and consider what it means that it had to be written. More than a hundred and twenty civil society organizations, including the ACLU, issued a formal travel advisory — for the United States — ahead of the tournament, warning fans, players and journalists about racial profiling, device searches and social media screening. Which leaves the question this newspaper's readers have actually been asking each other all summer, in Edison and Hicksville and Jackson Heights and Richmond Hill: is it safe to go to a watch party? There is no official answer. That is the answer.

THE MONEY THAT DIDN'T COME

The tournament was sold on a number. A joint FIFA and World Trade Organization study projected $30.5 billion in gross output for the United States, $17.2 billion in direct GDP growth, and 185,000 full-time-equivalent jobs — for $11.1 billion in spending. Six and a half million fans. The most lucrative World Cup ever staged. The number was always softer than it looked. Set $17.2 billion against a U.S. economy that ran at roughly $31.9 trillion in the first quarter of this year and you get about five one-hundredths of one percent. Oxford Economics pointed out the deeper problem: almost no new infrastructure was built for 2026, because America already had the stadiums. Which means most of the tourism doesn't add. It displaces. Victor Matheson, the sports economist at Holy Cross, told Newsweek the real impact would be "a fraction of what was being advertised." Then the environment did the rest. In April, the American Hotel and Lodging Association reported that eighty percent of hotels across the eleven U.S. host cities had bookings below forecast, blaming visa troubles and the geopolitical climate directly. The association's own word for the World Cup was "non-event." Hotels in the Canadian and Mexican host cities have been outperforming their American counterparts all summer. Projected international visitors to the U.S. for the tournament: about 1.24 million — fewer than the 1.4 million who went to Qatar in 2022, a country with a fraction of America's tourism capacity.

And the tickets. On FIFA's own resale marketplace, four seats to Sunday's final were listed at $2.3 million apiece. FIFA does not set those prices, but it takes fifteen percent from the buyer and fifteen percent from the seller. One of those tickets selling would have earned FIFA $690,000 on a single transaction. Even the President, told what seats were going for, said he wouldn't pay it either. The World Cup came to America promising a windfall. It is arriving as a rounding error with a security perimeter.

WHOSE UNITY?

It is worth being precise about FIFA's role, because FIFA keeps using a particular word. Infantino attended President Trump's second inauguration. At the World Cup draw in Washington in December, FIFA presented the President with its inaugural "Peace Prize." FIFA and the White House reportedly reached an understanding that ICE would not conduct enforcement during last summer's Club World Cup, the dress rehearsal for this tournament. Infantino has reportedly weighed asking the President for a moratorium on ICE raids for the duration of this one. FIFA is not powerless in these matters when it chooses not to be. It stripped Indonesia of the 2023 Under-20 World Cup when Indonesian officials objected to Israel's participation. So when Infantino says Iran must play "because we have to unite," the sentence deserves a follow-up question. Unity is not a principle here. It is a product. It is the thing being sold, from a stage the seller does not control, in a country whose government sets the guest list.

WHAT THE SUBCONTINENT SAW

India is not in this World Cup. India has never been in a World Cup since 1950, when it qualified and withdrew. And yet. FIFA initially priced Indian media rights for 2026 and 2030 at around $100 million. Nobody bought. The price came down to roughly $35 million. JioStar offered about $20 million; FIFA refused. Sony didn't bid at all. There was a petition in the Delhi High Court. Days before kickoff, the largest football audience on earth was staring at a blackout in the world's most populous country. Zee took the deal at the eleventh hour, launched a sports network to carry it, and put all 104 matches on Zee5. In the opening weekend alone — with the matches falling between 12:30 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. Indian time, with no Indian team on the field, in a sport that is not India's first, second, or third — Zee counted more than 100 million viewers. A football record for its networks. Sunday's final kicks off at 12:30 a.m. in Delhi, Mumbai and Chandigarh, and millions will be awake for it. A hundred million people, at three in the morning, for somebody else's team. That is the audience nobody would pay $100 million for. And the largest concentration of those people outside the subcontinent is here — in Queens, in Edison, in Nassau County — inside driving distance of the stadium where it ends.

SUNDAY

On Sunday afternoon, Spain will walk out at MetLife Stadium against England or Argentina, and something like a billion and a half people will watch. It will be, by a distance, the most-watched event on this planet in 2026. It will happen in New Jersey. Spain has conceded one goal in the entire tournament and has not lost a match in two years — thirty-seven games. Whoever meets them will have earned it through a semifinal that two foreign ministries treated as a territorial dispute. For thirty-nine days this tournament has been sold as proof that the world can still gather. What it actually proved is narrower and more useful: that the world will still come when you call it, and that everything else — the bans, the bonds, the badges at the gate, the war — travels with them through the turnstile. There is exactly one participant in this World Cup that crossed every border without paperwork, without a bond, without a background check, and without being asked where it was born. The ball.

HIGHLIGHTS

Sunday's final — Spain vs. England or Argentina, MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford,
N.J. Spain has conceded one goal all tournament and is unbeaten in 37 matches over two years.

The oldest grudge — Argentina and England met in Atlanta today for the first time at a World Cup since 2002, 44 years after the Falklands/Malvinas war killed 907 people.
Argentina's foreign minister and a Thatcher Center director traded claims over the islands on social media in the run-up.

No precedent — Iran played its group matches inside the United States while the U.S. was at war with Iran, based in Tijuana, admitted roughly 24 hours before kickoff, expelled the same day. Its federation says U.S. authorities revoked its fan ticket allocation entirely.

Who couldn't come — Fans from four qualified nations (Haiti, Iran, Ivory Coast, Senegal) were barred outright. Five more face visa bonds of up to $15,000. A Somali referee was refused entry. Iraq's leading striker was held seven hours at O'Hare.

The money — FIFA projected $30.5 billion in U.S. economic impact. In April, 80% of hotels across the eleven U.S. host cities reported bookings below forecast; their trade association called the tournament a "non-event."

The desi audience — India, which isn't in the tournament, delivered over 100 million viewers in the opening weekend alone, watching between 12:30 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. FIFA had failed to sell the Indian rights at $100 million, then at $35 million.

Cartoon explained-

"For this latest cartoon, we wanted to capture that raw, resilient-but-worn-out spirit of America right now in mid-July 2026. The bald eagle as the central figure felt perfect—it's our national symbol, strong and iconic, but I made it look battle-scarred and juggling too much to show the exhaustion after the big 250th anniversary celebrations. Those bandages on the wings represent real pressures like economic hiccups and ongoing global tensions, while the smartphone with "Midterm Polls Chaos" nods to the political heat building toward November.

The wobbly birthday cake with sparklers is a fun way to highlight the Semiquincentennial joy mixed with the messiness underneath—fireworks one day, reality the next. We added the divided crowds and signs ("MAGA Forever" vs. "Resistance 2.0") to reflect the deep polarization without picking sides... just showing the tug-of-war that's defining this era under the current administration. The cracked Liberty Bell in the back ties back to that historic milestone while hinting at cracks in the system.

Overall, We aimed for sharp satire with a touch of empathy—America's been through a lot (shutdowns, reforms, international moves), but there's still that spark of endurance. It's meant to make you chuckle and think, "Yeah, that tracks."

What part resonates (or doesn't't) with you?

The Island That Cashed In

Bolden obtained, or sought to obtain, PPP funds for himself, his co-defendants and more than 65 individuals. Three people were charged.

Exclusive Report
(By our staff reporter)

CENTRAL ISLIP, N.Y. — The last man in the case walked into a federal courtroom yesterday. Christian McKenzie was scheduled to be sentenced on July 14, 2026, according to federal prosecutors, closing out a prosecution that began with an August 2024 indictment and ended a piece of Long Island's pandemic story that nobody on the Island particularly wants told. McKenzie's cousin was a New York City police detective. His cousin's business partner was a New York City police detective. And between May 2020 and October 2022, prosecutors say, the three of them turned a tax preparation franchise into a machine for looting the Paycheck Protection Program.

John Bolden, 47, of Valley Stream, was sentenced on June 3 in federal court in Brooklyn by United States District Judge Diane Gujarati to 48 months in prison for wire fraud conspiracy. At the time of the conduct, he carried an NYPD detective's shield. Judge Gujarati ordered him to pay $303,138 in restitution and forfeit $112,002. He had pleaded guilty on February 18, 2026. The number that matters in the Bolden case is not his sentence. It is 65.

Prosecutors say Bolden helped submit online loan applications containing materially false and fraudulent information on behalf of himself, his co-defendants and more than 65 individuals — clients, family members and NYPD co-workers among them. He prepared fictitious IRS Schedule C forms to accompany the applications, containing false information about places of employment, gross income and net income. He sought to steal nearly $3 million from the PPP and succeeded in stealing at least several hundred thousand dollars.

Sixty-five-plus applicants. Three defendants. That gap is the story that Long Island has not reckoned with.

Nobody publishes the number

There is no official count of COVID loan fraud arrests on Long Island. There cannot be one, structurally. The United States Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York covers Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, Nassau County and Suffolk County, and it reports its work by district, not by Island. Cases against Long Islanders are split between the Brooklyn courthouse and the Central Islip courthouse depending on where the conduct occurred, not where the defendant sleeps. State cases against Long Islanders have been brought in Queens Supreme Court. Some Long Island defendants ran businesses in Queens. Some Queens defendants ran businesses on Long Island.

So The Washing Observer built the count case by case, from federal press releases, court records and contemporaneous reporting. The verified figure is at least a dozen named Nassau and Suffolk residents charged or convicted in COVID relief fraud since 2020, in cases whose combined loss figures exceed $20 million.

It is a floor, not a ceiling. It does not include the sixty-five.

The nine-and-a-half-million-dollar shell game

The largest single Long Island case on the record belongs to Rami Saab, 44, of Glen Cove, who also used the name Rami Hasan.

Saab pleaded guilty at the federal courthouse in Central Islip, before United States District Judge Gary R. Brown, to conspiracy to commit wire fraud. Between May 2020 and May 2021, according to court filings, Saab and others fraudulently applied for and received at least 20 PPP and Economic Injury Disaster Loan Program loans totaling in excess of $9,500,000 on behalf of numerous corporate entities under his control.

The entities were not businesses. They were shell companies claiming false numbers of employees, false payroll costs and false intended uses of the proceeds, designed to mislead the Small Business Administration and the numerous banks administering the loan programs. Once the money landed, Saab moved it — electronically transferring portions between various bank accounts he controlled, then making personal cash withdrawals and transferring funds to associates overseas. He faces up to 20 years and restitution of $9,668,508. The Nassau County Police Department assisted the federal case.

Twenty loans. One man. Nine and a half million dollars, some of it now abroad.

Two Patek Philippes and an Ethereum wallet

Niall Alli, of Inwood, controlled two corporate entities: Allicorp, Inc. and Oxypaper, Inc. Between April 2020 and November 2021, prosecutors say, he fraudulently applied for and received four PPP loans totaling over $1.7 million using bogus financial data and fabricated payrolls, then filed fraudulent forgiveness applications supported by fictitious financial statements to make the debt disappear.

United States Attorney Joseph Nocella, Jr. itemized where the money went: nearly $500,000 into cryptocurrency, $140,000 on two wristwatches, a $36,000 stay at a luxury Manhattan hotel, an $800 bottle of champagne and a $600 bottle of Scotch at fine restaurants. Judge Gary R. Brown sentenced Alli to 48 months and ordered $1.7 million in restitution to the SBA plus roughly $135,000 in forfeiture — including Ethereum seized from a corporate Coinbase wallet.

Donald Finley, a Locust Valley businessman, owned the now-defunct Jekyll & Hyde theme restaurant in Manhattan and the Bayville Adventure Park on Long Island. He pleaded guilty in May 2023 to disaster relief fraud and wire fraud over $3.2 million in PPP and EIDL loans. Once the loans were approved, prosecutors say, Finley sent the funds through more than 30 bank accounts to prevent tracing, with substantial portions used to purchase real property in Nantucket, Massachusetts, in February 2021. United States District Judge Joan M. Azrack sentenced him to 24 months. He has paid the $3.2 million back in full, plus a $15,000 fine and 500 hours of community service. Thirty bank accounts and a house on Nantucket, financed by a program written for businesses that could not make payroll.

The Gotti grandson

On April 20 of this year, in Central Islip, United States District Judge Nusrat J. Choudhury sentenced Carmine G. Agnello — grandson of the late Gambino crime family boss John Gotti — to 15 months in prison for defrauding the SBA of approximately $1.1 million in EIDL loans.

Between April 2020 and November 2021, according to court filings, Agnello fraudulently applied for and received at least three EIDL loans on behalf of Crown Auto Parts & Recycling, LLC, a Jamaica, Queens-based business he operated, submitting false information about the number of employees and the intended use of the proceeds. He diverted the money to personal use, including roughly $420,000 invested in a cryptocurrency business. Judge Choudhury ordered $1,268,302 in restitution, two years of supervised release, 100 hours of community service and mental health counseling that includes treatment for a gambling addiction.

“It was wrong, selfish and criminal,” Agnello told the judge before sentencing, Newsday reported. “I carry a great deal of guilt and shame for my actions.” He is due to surrender on July 20.

The state’s turn

The federal cases are the loud ones. The state cases are the ones that show the shape of the thing.

In February, Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz and New York State Inspector General Lucy Lang announced that nine New Yorkers had pleaded guilty in Queens Supreme Court, between May 2025 and February 2026, to grand larceny in the fourth degree and petit larceny for looting the COVID-19 Pandemic Small Business Recovery Grant Program. They submitted applications on behalf of fictitious and shuttered businesses. Collectively they were ordered to pay nearly $1.1 million in restitution; the state has recovered $760,000.

Three were Long Islanders — two from Nassau, one from Suffolk.

Tanvir Milon, 55, of Farmingdale, stole $280,512 in state grant funding through claims for nine fraudulent businesses, investigators said, and separately took the federal EIDL program for more than $2.5 million. Juned Khan, 56, of Deer Park, used eight businesses to steal $127,300 from the state program and $72,000 from EIDL. Nadeem Sheikh, 56, of New Hyde Park, took $96,208 in state recovery grants through two fraudulent businesses. Milon was ordered to pay $280,512 in restitution; Khan $70,000; Sheikh $46,208. Court documents did not list attorneys for the defendants; a lawyer identified by Newsday for Milon declined to comment.

Nine businesses. Eight businesses. Two businesses. None of them real.

The Katz-Lang prosecutions followed a June audit by State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli’s office finding that nearly $4.1 million in grant funds from the state’s $800 million Recovery Grant Program were erroneously awarded to 101 entities across New York — 17 of them on Long Island. Empire State Development, the agency that ran the program, has said it will pursue recapture of the misappropriated money. ESD declined to comment on the criminal case.

Still unproven

Two matters on the Long Island ledger remain allegations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

Donna Ingram, 50, of Long Island, was arrested and charged with wire fraud, disaster relief fraud and theft of public funds in a scheme prosecutors describe as involving at least 27 federal applications for COVID-19 relief loans and $3.28 million. The case was built by a Homeland Security Investigations task force working with the Eastern District, the Secret Service, the SBA’s Office of Inspector General and the NYPD. If convicted, she faces up to 20 years.

Separately, seven individuals — including three Long Islanders — were charged in what prosecutors called the largest COVID Employee Retention Credit scheme case in the United States. According to court documents, between November 2021 and June 2023 the defendants filed over 8,000 quarterly payroll tax returns claiming over $600 million in pandemic relief funds, and successfully secured over $44 million, spending it on jewelry, electronics, designer clothing and luxury automobiles. The scheme operated primarily out of a purported credit repair business called “Credit Reset,” filing returns on behalf of shell businesses that in the vast majority of cases had no legitimate operations or employees. The indictment was unsealed in Central Islip. Those charges are allegations.

What the docket says

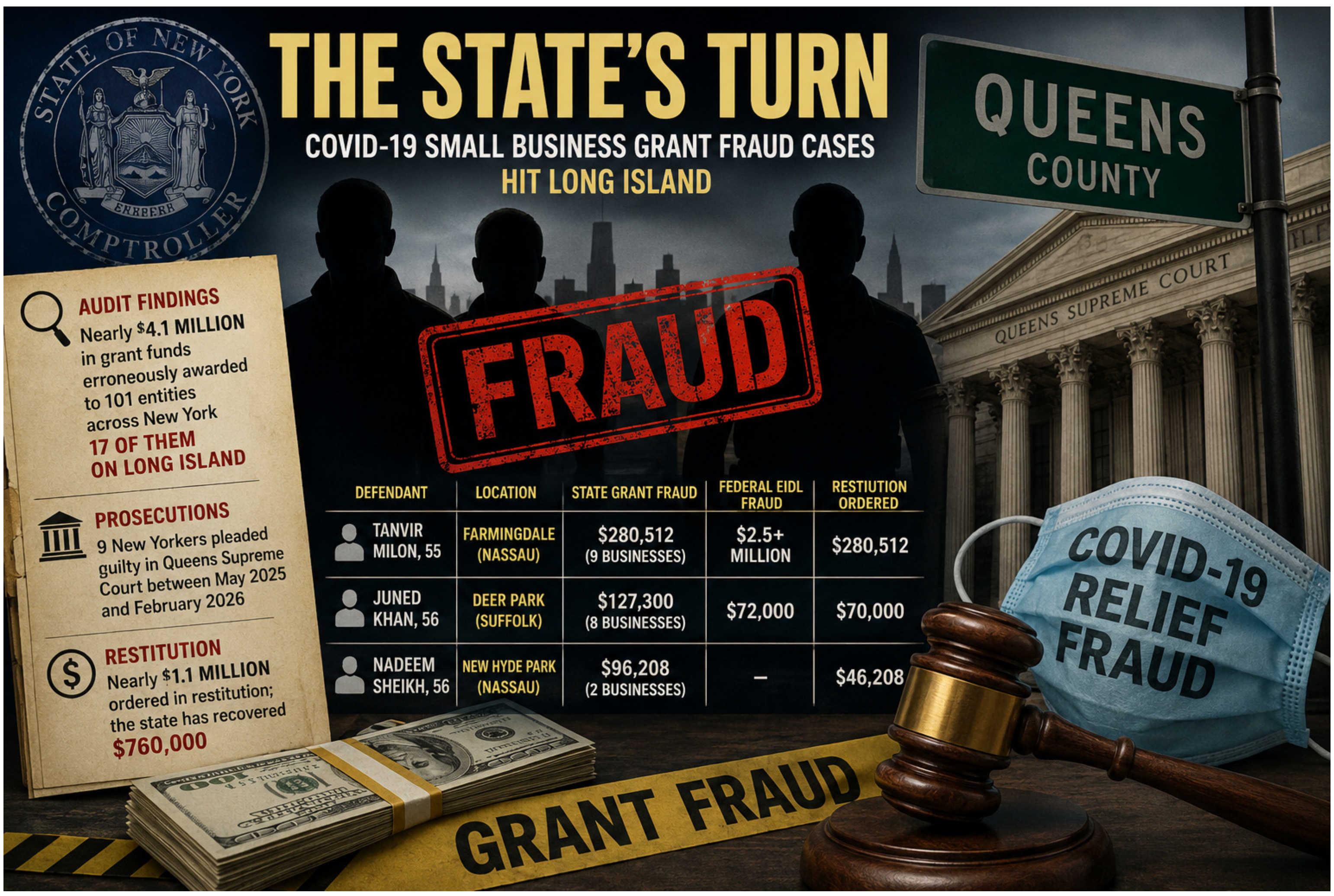
Read the Long Island cases together and a pattern surfaces that no single press release captures. The instrument is almost never a gun or a threat. It is a form. A fictitious Schedule C. A payroll that does not exist. An employee count invented to fit a formula. The programs were built for speed — the EIDL advance was designed to reach a small business within three days of applying, and the advance amount was calculated from the number of employees the applicant claimed. Speed was the point. Speed was also the vulnerability, and it was priced into the fraud from the first week.

> *Nearly $4.1 million from the state's $800 million Recovery Grant Program went to 101 entities that were not entitled to it. Seventeen were on Long Island.*

The second pattern is the professional intermediary. Bolden and Carreira held partnership interests in a tax preparation franchise. The ERC defendants allegedly worked out of a credit repair storefront. Milon and Khan ran their claims through nine and eight businesses respectively. The money did not move because desperate people lied on their own applications. It moved because someone with a business card and a shingle knew which boxes to tick.

The third pattern is what happens after. Saab wired funds to associates overseas. Finley used more than 30 bank accounts. Alli and Agnello both went into cryptocurrency — Alli nearly $500,000, Agnello roughly $420,000. The stolen relief money did not stay in the community it was appropriated for. It left. And the fourth pattern is the one the Bolden file exposes and no agency will quantify: for every person charged, there is a cohort who filed and were never touched. Sixty-five-plus applicants, three prosecutions. The Island’s real number is not in any press release.

The count The Washing Observer’s verified tally of named Nassau and Suffolk residents charged or convicted in COVID relief fraud since 2020: John Bolden of Valley Stream; Rami Saab of Glen Cove; Niall Alli of Inwood; Carmine G. Agnello; Donald Finley of Locust Valley; Donna Ingram; Tanvir Milon of Farmingdale; Juned Khan of Deer Park; Nadeem Sheikh of New Hyde Park; and three unnamed Long Islanders among the ERC defendants. Anthony Carreira and Christian McKenzie complete the Bolden conspiracy, though their towns are not specified in the public record. At least a dozen. More than $20 million. And a state audit saying 17 Long Island entities took grant money they were never entitled to — a separate universe from the criminal docket, and one that has produced clawback letters rather than handcuffs. United States Attorney Nocella has said his office will continue to investigate and bring to justice those who stole funds intended for legitimate businesses and their employees during a time of crisis. The pandemic ended. The docket did not.



Exclusive Report
(By our staff reporter)

THE WAR CONTINUES—CEASEFIRE COLLAPSES

As this edition goes to press on July 14, 2026, the United States military is conducting renewed strikes against Iranian targets. The bombing campaign—described by President Trump as part of a "military skirmish" but characterized by international observers as a resumption of full-scale war—marks the latest escalation in a conflict that has defied every diplomatic and strategic forecast since it erupted on February 28.

The war can no longer be called anything but war. According to multiple independent estimates, between 1,444 and 3,636 Iranians have been killed. The Foundation of Martyrs in Tehran cites 3,468 total deaths. Lebanese casualties—resulting from the parallel Israeli conflict with Hezbollah—exceed 2,976 killed and 9,123 wounded. At least thirteen American service members have died, along with ten civilian mariners in Strait of Hormuz-related incidents. Israeli military deaths stand at 21 since the escalation began in early March.

The most immediate flashpoint is the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most critical energy chokepoint. According to marine tracking data, international shipping through the strait has collapsed. As of July 10, zero large Western-allied vessels were transiting coordinated routes—down from 34 vessels just one day prior. Iran's Revolutionary Guards have established a tollbooth system for merchant traffic, demanding fees of up to $2 million per vessel, payable in Chinese yuan, Bitcoin, or USDT. This represents a de facto blockade and an extraordinary economic power play.

THE ROAD TO FEBRUARY 28: YEARS OF ESCALATING TENSION

The February 2026 airstrikes did not emerge from a vacuum. They represent the culmination of decades of U.S.-Iran antagonism, centered above all on the nuclear question.

Iran's nuclear program first became public in 2002. For years, the Islamic Republic insisted it was purely civilian—a position backed by a 2003 fatwa issued by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei declaring nuclear weapons prohibited under Islamic law. Yet persistent evidence suggested otherwise. Uranium enrichment continued. International inspectors encountered opacity and obstruction. In 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—known colloquially as the Iran nuclear deal—temporarily resolved the standoff, requiring Iran to freeze most of its nuclear work in exchange for sanctions relief.

But the JCPOA collapsed when the Trump administration withdrew in 2018. Sanctions were reimposed. Iran, emboldened by what it saw as American dishonor, accelerated its uranium enrichment and expanded its ballistic missile program. By 2025, the International Atomic Energy Agency detected that Iran had stored highly enriched uranium in underground facilities—material that, if weaponized, could alter the entire balance of Middle Eastern power.

Negotiations to resurrect or replace the JCPOA began in April 2025 under the current Trump administration. According to official statements, the U.S. sought to constrain Iran's uranium enrichment, eliminate its ballistic missile threat, and curb what Washington characterized as its sponsorship of terrorist organizations and destabilizing proxy forces across the region. These negotiations were ongoing when the February 28 strikes were launched.

What triggered the American and Israeli military action remains officially undisclosed—no formal casus belli has been published. However, intelligence assessments widely reported that Iran possessed the capability to produce weapons-grade material within months. In the calculus of Trump administration officials, the window for preventive military action was closing rapidly.

THE STRIKE THAT KILLED A SUPREME LEADER

On February 28, 2026, U.S. and Israeli aircraft conducted what the White House labeled "Operation Epic Fury." The stated objective was to target Iran's nuclear facilities, missile production capacity, and Revolutionary Guards command infrastructure. The actual achievement was far more consequential: the strikes killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Khamenei, 84, had been Iran's supreme leader for 35 years—since 1989. His death was not merely a tactical loss but a seismic upheaval in the Islamic Republic's institutional structure. Succession was contested. His son, Mojtaba Khamenei, was named to replace him, but reports indicated he remained in hiding during the early days of the conflict, absent even from his father's funeral on July 9.

Iran's response was swift and overwhelming. Within 48 hours of the American strikes, Iran launched hundreds of ballistic missiles and thousands of drones across the region. Targets included Israel, U.S. military bases in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The Iranian military attempted to strike the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain and oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia. Defense systems—both American and Israeli—intercepted the majority of the incoming fire, but several Iranian missiles and drones broke through.

Two days later, Hezbollah entered the fray, launching rocket attacks on northern Israel. This triggered what became the parallel 2026 Lebanon war—a conflict with the potential to destabilize an already fragile nation.

THE FORTY-DAY WAR AND THE FAILED MEMORANDUM

After forty days of intensive combat—from late February through early April—Pakistan brokered a ceasefire. On April 7 and 8, 2026, the United States, Israel, and Iran agreed to halt major hostilities. The ceasefire held, provisionally, but the underlying tensions did not dissipate.

In mid-June, after weeks of mediation by Qatar and Pakistan, Washington and Tehran negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The agreement stipulated that Iran would maintain its nuclear program at current levels while the U.S. would refrain from imposing new sanctions or deploying additional military forces to the region. Critically, it also addressed the Strait of Hormuz—Iran would cease blockading commercial shipping.

The MOU was signed on June 17 by both presidents. According to the Trump administration, it "achieves everything we set out to accomplish: ending the current conflict, reopening the Strait of Hormuz, and preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon."

But the agreement was never operationalized. Iran allowed some petroleum shipments to transit but resumed harassment of international merchant traffic. The U.S. interpreted these incidents as violations and reimposed sanctions. On July 9, after reports of Iranian attacks on commercial ships in the strait, the Trump administration launched a fresh bombing campaign, striking approximately ninety targets across Iran in a single night. The U.S. subsequently carried out at least 170 strikes in two days.

On July 10, Trump announced via Truth Social that "the Cease Fire is OVER," even as he claimed the U.S. would continue diplomatic talks. By July 13, Iran was firing ballistic missiles at U.S. military bases in Jordan, and the U.S. was conducting fresh strikes. The memorandum—signed barely three weeks earlier—had dissolved into rhetorical dispute and renewed violence.

THE ECONOMIC EARTHQUAKE

The Strategic Petroleum Reserve implications of this conflict are staggering. During the initial forty-day war, oil prices spiked above $110 per barrel. The International Energy Agency declared the disruption "the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market." Shipping companies rerouted away from both the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea, adding weeks to transit times and billions to global logistics costs.

Tourism collapsed. Dubai International Airport, one of the world's busiest hubs, sustained damage from Iranian drone strikes and operated at severely limited capacity. International flights in and out of the region came to a near standstill, stranding residents, expatriates, and tourists.

The military cost to the United States alone is estimated between $34 billion and $42 billion for the five-month conflict. Neither the FY 2026 defense budget nor the FY 2027 budget request included provisions for these expenditures, setting up a major congressional battle over appropriations.

Most critically, the Strait blockade has created a de facto toll system. Iran's Revolutionary Guards, operating as the self-styled "Persian Gulf Strait Authority," are collecting fees from merchant vessels seeking passage. This represents not merely an economic disruption but a fundamental challenge to the international order—the privatization and weaponization of a global commons.

WHAT RESOLUTION LOOKS LIKE—AND WHY IT REMAINS ELUSIVE

Multiple observers have assessed what a resolution would require. The Trump administration has advocated for a binding agreement that would: (1) Permanently freeze Iran's uranium enrichment at its current level; (2) Allow inspections to verify compliance; (3) Dismantle Iran's ballistic missile threat; (4) Restabilize the Strait of Hormuz; and (5) Prevent Iran from assisting groups designated as terrorist organizations.

From Iran's perspective—now led by a new Supreme Leader consolidating power—the terms are unacceptable. Iran's chief negotiator, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, stated unequivocally: "ending the war is a priority for countries around the world. However, everyone must understand that this conflict will never end with Iran's surrender." Iran has demanded that any deal include provisions protecting its nuclear facilities from future military strikes and has insisted that negotiations extend to Lebanon, conditioning any resolution on an end to the Israeli conflict with Hezbollah.

The international community remains fractured. Saudi Arabia, which neither sought nor actively engaged in the war, is determined to exit entanglement. Qatar and Pakistan are attempting mediation. The European Union has called for de-escalation but lacks the leverage to enforce its preferences. Russia and China abstained from a UN Security Council condemnation vote in March, signaling tacit support for Iran and complicating diplomatic pathways.

Several analysts have noted that the war has exposed the limits of military power in the 21st century. Even with technological superiority, the U.S. and Israel have not achieved a decisive victory capable of changing Iranian strategic behavior. Conversely, Iran's missile and drone capabilities have proven more resilient than Western assessments suggested, and its willingness to absorb punishment rather than capitulate complicates American strategic calculus.

A sustainable resolution likely requires at least four conditions: (1) A formal recognition that Iran will maintain a civilian nuclear program under international monitoring—abandoning the fantasy of complete elimination; (2) A credible verification regime that allows continued uranium enrichment at agreed-upon levels; (3) Economic incentives for Iranian compliance—namely, lifted sanctions and normalization; and (4) A parallel or concurrent resolution of the Lebanese and Strait of Hormuz crises, requiring buy-in from Israel, Hezbollah, and regional powers.

None of these conditions have been met as of July 2026.

THE NUCLEAR STALEMATE CONTINUES

Five months into conflict, 136 days from the initial strike that killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the United States and Iran remain at war. A ceasefire exists in theory only. Renewed bombing campaigns are underway as of this writing. The Strait of Hormuz is effectively blockaded. Oil markets are destabilizing. The global economy absorbs the shock.

This is not a traditional war—there is no front line, no territorial objective, no conventional endgame. It is a conflict born from the nuclear question and sustained by competing visions of Middle Eastern order. The U.S. and Israel seek to forestall Iranian nuclear development through force and isolation. Iran seeks to survive, consolidate its new leadership, and preserve what it views as its legitimate regional role.

Without a fundamental shift in either side's strategic calculation—or the emergence of new mediators with genuine leverage—this conflict will likely persist as a grinding, low-intensity campaign punctuated by cycles of escalation and de-escalation. The global consequences—economic disruption, refugee flows, regional realignment—will continue to ripple outward.

The nuclear question that sparked this war remains unresolved. Until it is addressed through negotiation rather than firepower, the Strait of Hormuz will remain contested, and the risks of further escalation will loom.

Sources: CNN, Britannica Encyclopedia, Congressional Research Service Report R48887, CSIS Analysis, Global Security Iran War Daily Update Calendar. All casualty figures represent the most recent verified counts available as of July 14, 2026.

Byju's founder can't return to Singapore without risking jail after court setback

Singapore's High Court rejected Byju Raveendran's plea to suspend a six-month contempt sentence. The ruling keeps the term in force and adds to his cross-border legal battles.

(By Our Staff Reporter) Byju's founder, Byju Raveendran has suffered another legal setback after Singapore's High Court rejected his plea to suspend a six-month jail sentence for contempt of court, effectively preventing him from travelling to the country unless he is prepared to serve the sentence, reported Bloomberg.

The court on July 9 dismissed Raveendran's application to halt the sentence. The six-month jail term was originally handed down in May, although the court had granted a temporary stay last month.

The latest ruling marks another challenge for Raveendran, whose once high-flying edtech company Byju's, operated by Think & Learn Pvt Ltd, collapsed after a period of rapid expansion and allegations of corporate governance lapses.

WHAT THE COURT'S ORDER MEANS

The Singapore High Court's decision means the jail sentence remains in force. However, Raveendran is currently not in Singapore.

His lawyer, J. Michael McNutt of law firm Lazareff Le Bars, said the order has no immediate practical effect unless Raveendran chooses to travel to Singapore.

"In the future, should he be in, or intend to travel to, Singapore, he may appeal then and the court will deal with it," McNutt said. "The order has no practical effect unless and until he chooses to enter Singapore." McNutt also said Raveendran maintains that he did not intentionally violate any court order and would continue pursuing all available legal remedies."Mr. Raveendran maintains that he did not breach any court order, intentionally or otherwise, and will continue to pursue every lawful remedy through the proper legal process," he said.

LEGAL BATTLES CONTINUE

Raveendran has been facing legal challenges in multiple countries as creditors and investors seek to recover money from the troubled edtech company.

In the United States, lenders are trying to recover losses linked to a defaulted $1.2 billion loan, according to the Bloomberg report. In Singapore, he is also facing legal action from a subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), the sovereign wealth fund that invested in Byju's during one of its funding rounds when the company was cutting jobs. Following the latest court ruling, QIA said it welcomed the decision and would continue pursuing all legal remedies against Raveendran.

India Home Opens First Senior Center in Hicksville, Long Island with Support from AIA National, Guru Krupa Foundation, and The New York Community Trust

(By Our Staff Reporter)

HICKSVILLE, N.Y. - India Home celebrated the grand opening of its first Senior Center in Hicksville, Long Island, marking a significant milestone in expanding culturally sensitive services for the region's rapidly growing South Asian senior community.

The new center will provide seniors with opportunities for social engagement, health and wellness programs, educational workshops, cultural activities, recreation, and supportive services in a welcoming environment. The inauguration drew more than 200 attendees, including elected officials, community leaders, India Home and Association of Indians in America (AIA) members, donors, volunteers, and representatives of numerous community organizations.

Opening the ceremony, Mukund Mehta, President of the Board of Directors of India Home, reaffirmed the organization's commitment to improving the quality of life of South Asian seniors through compassionate care and meaningful programming. He thanked AIA National, Guru Krupa Foundation, The New York Community Trust, donors, volunteers, and supporters whose generosity made the center possible.

Among the featured speakers was Gobind Munjal, Immediate Past National President and Member of the Board of Trustees of the Association of Indians in America (AIA). He described the opening of the Senior Center as the realization of a shared vision to provide Long Island seniors with friendship, dignity, purpose, and a strong sense of community.

Mr. Munjal noted that during his tenure as AIA National President (2022-2025), he worked closely with Dr. Vasundhara Kalasapudi, Founder and Executive Director of India Home, to address the growing need for a culturally appropriate senior center on Long Island. While India Home successfully operates six senior centers in Queens, along with affordable senior housing, home care services, and other programs, Long Island's expanding South Asian senior population had long lacked a culturally responsive center to meet its unique needs.

Recognizing this need, the AIA National Executive Committee unanimously approved a $35,000 grant to help establish India Home's first Senior Center on Long Island. During the ceremony, Mr. Munjal invited AIA Board of Trustees, current and past Presidents, and National Executive Committee members to join him in presenting a ceremonial check to India Home. The check was accepted by Dr. Kalasapudi and Mr. Mehta on behalf of the organization.

Mr. Munjal thanked the AIA Board of Trustees, National Executive Committee, Life Members, donors, and supporters for their confidence in the project and congratulated India Home's leadership, volunteers, sponsors, and donors for transforming a long-held vision into reality.

Mukund Padmanabhan of the Guru Krupa Foundation reaffirmed their commitment to supporting programs that promote the health, dignity, independence, and well-being of senior citizens.

Assemblyman Charles Lavine congratulated India Home on opening the new center and praised the organization for creating an inclusive, culturally responsive environment that will benefit seniors across Long Island.

Dr. Kalasapudi expressed gratitude to the organization's donors, volunteers, elected officials, community organizations, and principal supporters-especially AIA National, Guru Krupa Foundation, and The New York Community Trust-for helping make the center possible. She reaffirmed India Home's mission of enabling seniors to age with dignity, independence, and purpose while remaining connected to their cultural heritage and community.

The Hicksville Senior Center will be open free of charge every Tuesday and Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., with a complimentary lunch served each program day. The celebration concluded with cultural performances and a sumptuous community luncheon.

Mr. Munjal also acknowledged the media coverage provided by News Channel 12 Long Island, Jus Broadcasting TV, South Asian Times, Indian Panorama, The Indian Eye, News India Times, India Abroad, Hum Hindustani, and South Asian Insider. The opening of the Hicksville Senior Center represents another important milestone in India Home's mission to enrich the lives of South Asian seniors through compassionate care, cultural understanding, and community collaboration. Supported by AIA National, Guru Krupa Foundation, The New York Community Trust, and numerous community partners, the center will serve as a lasting investment in the health and well-being of Long Island's senior community.

FBI Issues Wanted Notice for Indian Gangster Nitish Kaushal

Alleged Operative of Punjab-Based Transnational Crime Syndicate Targeted in RICO Crackdown The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has placed Indian national Nitish Kaushal, also known as "Lala," on its Most Wanted list following his alleged involvement in a Punjab-based transnational criminal syndicate operating across the United States. Federal authorities allege that Kaushal is a key operative for the Jaggu Bhagwanpuria Organized Crime Group (Bhagwanpuria OCG), an enterprise originating in Punjab, India, that has expanded extensive illicit operations into the Central District of California and surrounding areas.

A federal arrest warrant was issued for Kaushal on June 25 by the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles after he was formally indicted on charges under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act. According to law enforcement officials, Kaushal executed violent enforcement actions—including kidnappings, assaults, and extortion—to facilitate the gang's drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, and money laundering activities. The FBI warned the public that Kaushal should be considered armed and dangerous, urging anyone with information on his whereabouts to contact federal authorities or the nearest U.S. Embassy.

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Indian-Origin Astronaut Anil Menon Embarks on 8-Month ISS Mission

Soyuz MS-29 Successfully Docks with Orbiting Laboratory for Expedition 74/75 Science Endeavors

In a historic milestone for space exploration, Indian-origin NASA astronaut Dr. Anil Menon has safely arrived aboard the International Space Station (ISS) following the successful launch and docking of the Soyuz MS-29 spacecraft. Launching alongside Roscosmos cosmonauts Pyotr Dubrov and Anna Kikina from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, Dr. Menon's crew completed a streamlined orbital rendezvous to join Expedition 74 and 75.

During his scheduled eight-month mission aboard the space laboratory, Dr. Menon—a physician, mechanical engineer, and former SpaceX flight surgeon—will oversee cutting-edge research projects. His planned work includes microgravity experiments in semiconductor crystal growth, advanced medical diagnostics, and in-space ultrasound monitoring designed to safeguard human health on long-duration interplanetary missions.

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BAPS Organizes Faith, Service, and Cultural Initiatives for America250

Nationwide Commemorative Program Highlights Indian American Contributions to the Nation

BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha has officially joined the national America250 initiative, launching a series of community service, cultural exhibitions, and interfaith harmony gatherings to honor the 250th anniversary of the United States. Through its network of spiritual centers and volunteer networks across the country, BAPS aims to celebrate the principles of civic duty, diversity, and community wellbeing that unify Indian Americans and the broader national landscape.

The nationwide campaign includes large-scale blood drives, youth empowerment summits, environmental sustainability drives, and civic appreciation events designed to strengthen community ties. Organization leaders emphasized that active civic participation reflects core spiritual values, highlighting the enduring contributions of South Asian immigrants to America's historical and cultural tapestry.

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Union Minister Piyush Goyal Rejects Reports of Impasse in India-U.S. Trade Talks

Commerce Minister Affirms Ongoing Dialogue on Strategic Economic Cooperation and Tariffs

India's Union Minister of Commerce and Industry, Piyush Goyal, has dismissed widespread media reports suggesting a stalemate in bilateral trade negotiations between India and the United States. Speaking at a press conference, Goyal underscored that trade discussions remain active, constructive, and oriented toward long-term strategic alignment between the two major democracies.

Addressing specific concerns regarding tariff structures, intellectual property rights, and market access, Minister Goyal noted that complex bilateral talks naturally involve intense deliberation on critical domestic sectors. He reiterated India's commitment to expanding trade volume and investment ties with Washington while safeguarding domestic industrial and agricultural interests.

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Rep. Ro Khanna Calls for Federal Probe into Alleged West Bank Detentions

California Congressman Demands Translucent Review of Rights Violations Involving U.S. Citizens

U.S. Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA) has publicly called on federal state officials to launch a thorough investigation into reports regarding the unlawful detention and mistreatment of individuals, including American citizens, in the West Bank. Expressing serious concern over civil rights abuses and due process violations, Congressman Khanna urged the U.S. Department of State to mandate absolute accountability and transparent reporting. Khanna emphasized that safeguarding the constitutional rights and bodily safety of Americans abroad remains an imperative duty of the federal government. His call for an official probe has drawn widespread support from civil rights organizations and diaspora groups advocating for equal diplomatic protection and human rights oversight.

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Khosla Family-Led Ownership Group Acquires Seattle Seahawks for $9.612 Billion

Venture Capital Titan Vinod Khosla Makes History with Record-Breaking NFL Purchase

The Seattle Seahawks have officially been sold to a group led by tech investor Vinod Khosla and the Khosla family for a record-breaking $9.612 billion, marking the highest transaction price ever recorded for a professional sports franchise. The historic purchase, executed through the estate of late Microsoft co-founder Paul G. Allen, surpasses the previous NFL record set during the 2023 sale of the Washington Commanders.

Under the terms of the deal, Neeru Khosla will serve as the team's primary controlling owner, while the family divests its minority holding in the San Francisco 49ers to satisfy NFL regulatory rules. Vinod Khosla expressed immense gratitude, emphasizing the family's commitment to maintaining the franchise's deep ties to the Pacific Northwest and preserving the winning culture at Lumen Field.

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Tragic Loss: Tech Manager Sheetal Wrzesien Shot Dead in Georgia Home

Husband Kirk Wrzesien Facing Murder and Felony Charges Following Domestic Incident

The South Asian tech community is in mourning following the fatal shooting of 57-year-old Sheetal Wrzesien, an esteemed technology executive and former senior engineering manager at Google. Police officers responding to a domestic disruption at the family's Smyrna, Georgia, residence found Wrzesien's 23-year-old son outside suffering from critical gunshot wounds, while Sheetal was pronounced dead inside.

Local authorities arrested her husband, 56-year-old Kirk B. Wrzesien, at the scene without incident. He faces multiple counts, including felony murder, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, and possession of a firearm during a felony. Tributes have poured in from former colleagues and community members who remembered Sheetal as an accomplished leader, mentor, and advocate for women in technology.

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Indian-Origin Software Engineer Tragically Killed in Massachusetts Skydiving Accident

Investigation Launched After Parachute Failure Leads to Fatal Freefall in Pepperell

An Indian-origin software engineer lost his life in a tragic skydiving accident near Pepperell, Massachusetts. Authorities reported that the victim, an experienced sports jumper working at a major tech firm in the Greater Boston area, suffered a catastrophic gear failure when his primary canopy failed to fully deploy during a solo jump.

Emergency rescue crews responded within minutes, but the jumper was pronounced dead at the scene from severe traumatic injuries. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and local law enforcement have launched a comprehensive inquiry into the incident, focusing on equipment inspection logs and packing procedures to determine the precise cause of the failure.

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United States Pushes for Greater Access to Indian Market for Kentucky Bourbon

Congressional Hearing Emphasizes High Tariffs and Trade Barriers Impeding U.S. Exports

During a Capitol Hill hearing on trade barriers facing American agricultural and manufactured exports, U.S. lawmakers and trade officials singled out India's high tariffs on spirits, requesting lower trade restrictions for iconic products such as Kentucky Bourbon. Witnesses testified that current tariffs and complex state-level import regulations significantly restrict market opportunities for U.S. distillers and producers.

Congressional representatives urged federal trade negotiators to secure lowered duties in upcoming bilateral trade talks with New Delhi. Importers and economic experts noted that expanding access for American agricultural goods could foster mutual trade balance while satisfying rising consumer demand for foreign premium goods in India's urban markets.

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Kuwait Awards First 15-Year Golden Residency Permit to Billionaire Yusuff Ali M.A.

LuLu Group Chairman Honored with Long-Term Residence Under New Investor Scheme

Billionaire businessman Yusuff Ali M.A., chairman and managing director of LuLu Group International, has made history as the recipient of Kuwait's very first 15-year Golden Residency permit. The prestigious long-term residency program was recently established by the Kuwaiti government to honor leading global investors, entrepreneurs, and key contributors who add exceptional value to the nation's economic landscape.

Expressing his appreciation to Kuwait's leadership, Yusuff Ali emphasized LuLu Group's ongoing dedication to expanding retail, supply chain, and hypermarket operations within the region. The groundbreaking decision is seen as a major milestone for Kuwait's economic diversification plans, encouraging foreign direct investment and strengthening business ties with international entrepreneurs.

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Foreign Military Personnel Detentions Highlight Border Security Concerns in South Asia

Recent Interceptions Involving U.S. Navy Veterans and Foreign Nationals Raise Regional Vigilance

A series of cross-border security incidents involving foreign individuals with alleged military backgrounds has raised diplomatic concern and security scrutiny across South Asia. In the latest incident, Indian border security personnel detained a California resident claiming past service in the U.S. Navy who was caught attempting to cross into Nepal without valid travel documentation or passports. This border breach follows an incident four months prior involving the arrest of an American citizen allegedly linked to private military training operations, along with six Ukrainian nationals operating near sensitive regional transit routes. Indian security agencies have intensified monitoring along land borders to neutralize clandestine cross-border networks and prevent transit irregularities.

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Former CDC Official Dr. Nirav Shah Qualifies for Statewide Ballot in Maine

Public Health Expert Advances to General Election Race Following Successful Petition Drive

Dr. Nirav Shah, a prominent physician and public health administrator who earned widespread acclaim for leading state health operations during major health crises, has official qualified for the upcoming statewide ballot in Maine. State election officers confirmed that Dr. Shah's campaign submitted well above the required threshold of verified voter signatures.

THE CLIMATE BILL HAS ARRIVED - AND EVERYONE IS PAYING OPINION

Climate change is no longer a distant environmental warning about melting ice and future generations. It is becoming a household expense, a food-security threat, an insurance nightmare and a direct assault on the global economy. The argument over whether the climate is changing has become a costly distraction. The bill is already on the table.

For years, climate change was presented to the public through pictures of polar bears. A lonely animal standing on shrinking ice. A melting glacier. A smokestack. A forest fire somewhere far away.

The images were powerful. But for millions of ordinary people, the crisis still felt distant. Important, perhaps.

Serious, certainly. But distant. Then the grocery bill went up. Insurance premiums climbed. Homes became harder to insure. Farmers watched crops struggle under brutal heat. Cities flooded after extraordinary rainfall. Flights were disrupted. Power grids strained. Workers collapsed in dangerous temperatures. Wildfires turned afternoon skies orange.

Suddenly, climate change stopped being a documentary. It became an invoice. And the invoice is getting larger. The world's political leaders have spent decades arguing over climate targets, carbon emissions, international agreements and who should pay for what.

Meanwhile, nature has continued operating without attending a single summit. The atmosphere does not care whether a government is conservative or liberal. A heat wave does not check your political registration. A flood does not ask whether you drive an electric vehicle. A hurricane does not debate climate science on television. The weather simply arrives. And increasingly, it arrives with a repair bill.

STOP CALLING IT ONLY AN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE

One of the greatest mistakes in the climate debate has been the way the issue was packaged. Climate change became an "environmental issue." That placed it in the same mental box as recycling, endangered animals and protecting forests. Those are important issues. But climate change is much bigger. It is an economic issue. It is an agricultural issue. It is a housing issue. It is a public health issue. It is an immigration issue.

It is an infrastructure issue. It is a national security issue. It is an insurance issue. And, increasingly, it is a kitchen-table issue. Consider food. Agriculture depends on a remarkably delicate relationship between temperature, water, soil and seasons. Farmers are sophisticated businesspeople, but they cannot negotiate with rainfall. They cannot sign a contract guaranteeing moderate temperatures. They cannot tell a drought to come back next quarter. Extreme heat can reduce crop yields. Flooding can destroy fields. Drought can reduce water supplies. Changing weather patterns can affect planting and harvesting seasons.

When agricultural production is disrupted in one region, the impact may travel thousands of miles. A crop failure does not stay on the farm. It enters the supermarket. It appears on a restaurant menu. It reaches food-processing companies. It affects exports. It pressures governments. Eventually, it reaches your wallet. The distance between a drought and your grocery receipt is shorter than most people realize.

THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY IS SENDING A WARNING

If you want to understand climate risk, do not only listen to environmental activists. Listen to insurance companies. Insurance is a business built around calculating risk. Insurers study probability. They examine historical losses. They model disasters. They ask a cold, mathematical question: How likely are we to lose money? When insurance becomes more expensive or difficult to obtain in disaster-prone areas, society should pay attention.

By Sharanjit 'Sunny' Thind

Homeowners in vulnerable regions are increasingly confronting painful realities. Premiums rise.

Deductibles increase.

Coverage becomes more restrictive. Some insurers reduce exposure.

Governments face pressure to step in. Homeowners become trapped. And then comes the dangerous chain reaction. If a home cannot be insured, can it easily be financed? If it cannot be financed, who will buy it? If buyers disappear, what happens to property values?

If property values fall, what happens to local tax revenue?

If tax revenue declines, how do communities pay for roads, schools, emergency services and infrastructure? This is how climate risk can become financial risk. A flooded basement is a personal tragedy.

Thousands of repeatedly damaged properties can become an economic problem. Millions of properties exposed to changing climate risks can become a national financial concern. The climate crisis does not need to destroy Wall Street in one dramatic afternoon. It can slowly weaken household wealth, one insurance renewal at a time. EXTREME HEAT IS AN ECONOMIC WEAPON Heat is often underestimated because it does not produce the same dramatic television images as a hurricane. There may be no collapsed buildings. No giant wave. No dramatic aerial footage. But extreme heat can quietly shut down human productivity.

Construction workers cannot safely perform at the same level in dangerous temperatures. Farm laborers face serious health risks.

Delivery workers suffer.

Factory conditions can become unbearable. Outdoor businesses lose customers. Energy demand surges as air conditioners run continuously. Power systems face pressure.

Schools may struggle in buildings without adequate cooling. Hospitals see heat-related illness.

The elderly and poor face the greatest danger.

In wealthy communities, extreme heat may mean turning down the thermostat.

In poor communities, it may mean deciding whether the electricity bill can be paid.

That is the inequality of climate change. The wealthy experience inconvenience.

(Contd. on page 11)

WHO IS REALLY IN CHARGE—HUMANS OR THE MACHINES WE ARE BUILDING?

Artificial intelligence is racing into our offices, schools, elections, hospitals and homes faster than governments can write the first paragraph of the rulebook. AI may become one of humanity's greatest achievements. But innovation without accountability can quickly become power without control. For most of human history, machines did what we told them to do. A calculator calculated. A camera took pictures. A telephone carried our voices. A computer processed instructions. Then artificial intelligence arrived and changed the conversation. Now machines can write. They can create images. They can imitate voices. They can summarize documents, translate languages, generate computer code, analyze medical information and hold remarkably human-like conversations. They can produce a political speech in seconds.

They can create a convincing video of a person saying something that person never said. They can answer a student's homework question before the student has finished reading it. And increasingly, AI systems are being asked to recommend, rank, predict and decide. Suddenly, the machine is no longer just a hammer in our hand. It is beginning to look over our shoulder.

That should excite us.

It should also make us uncomfortable. Because the most important question surrounding artificial intelligence is no longer whether AI will change the world. It already is. The real question is painfully simple: Who is making the rules?

WE BUILT THE ENGINE BEFORE WRITING THE TRAFFIC LAWS

Imagine inventing the automobile and allowing millions of cars onto the streets before deciding which side of the road people should drive on. No traffic lights. No speed limits. No driver's licenses. No safety standards. No insurance requirements. Just engines, excitement and a lot of confident people saying, "Don't worry. The market will figure it out." That is roughly where the world finds itself with artificial intelligence.

Technology companies are competing to build faster, smarter and more powerful AI systems. Governments are holding hearings. Experts are issuing warnings. International organizations are organizing conferences. Lawmakers are asking questions. Meanwhile, the technology keeps moving. By the time a government committee finishes defining one AI problem, the industry may have created three new ones. This is the fundamental challenge. Democracy moves through debate. Technology moves through updates. Government schedules hearings. Software engineers release a new version. Lawmakers negotiate language. AI companies add another capability. The speed difference is enormous. And when the technology involved may affect employment, national security, education, privacy and democracy itself, being permanently five years behind is not a governing strategy. It is surrender by paperwork.

THE DEEPFAKE PROBLEM: SEEING IS NO LONGER BELIEVING

For generations, people were told not to believe everything they read. Then came social media, and we learned not to believe every post. Now we are entering a far more dangerous era. We may no longer be able to believe our own eyes and ears. Artificial intelligence can generate realistic images, voices and videos. A political leader can appear to make an inflammatory statement. A celebrity can appear to endorse a product. A military official can appear to announce an attack. A business executive can appear to authorize a financial transaction.

(Contd on page 12)

The South Asian INSIDER Voice of South Asian Community

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(Members of The South Asian Insider Weekly's Editorial Board are experienced and respected journalists, who offer reasoned opinions based on hard facts, to encourage informed/constructive debate about the issues facing South Asian community in the United States.)

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THE CLIMATE BILL HAS ARRIVED -AND EVERYONE IS PAYING OPINION

The poor experience exposure. A rich family can temporarily relocate after a disaster. A low-income family may lose everything. A large corporation can diversify suppliers. A small business may close permanently after one flood. A wealthy country can spend billions rebuilding infrastructure.

A developing nation may borrow heavily and spend years recovering. The same storm does not create the same suffering.

THE DEVELOPING WORLD HAS A FAIR QUESTION: WHO CREATED THIS MESS?

This is where the global climate debate becomes politically explosive. Developing countries look at wealthy industrial nations and ask a reasonable question. Who produced most of the emissions during the long march toward industrial prosperity? Europe industrialized. America industrialized. Factories expanded. Coal was burned. Oil powered economic growth. Cars filled highways. Cities grew. Living standards rose. Now developing nations are being told that the planet cannot afford for them to follow the same path.

Imagine arriving late to a banquet and being told the food is gone—but you are responsible for washing the dishes. That is how many developing countries view the climate debate. India, in particular, faces an enormous challenge.

It must create jobs for a huge population. It must expand industry.

It must build infrastructure. It must increase energy availability. It must improve living standards.

At the same time, it faces growing climate risks and international pressure to reduce emissions. Telling India simply to “stop using fossil fuels” is not a serious policy.

Hundreds of millions of people require affordable, reliable energy. Economic development cannot run on good intentions.

But India and other developing economies also cannot pretend climate change is somebody else's problem. Their own citizens will suffer.

Heat waves do not distinguish between historical and current emissions. Floods do not read United Nations reports assigning responsibility.

The moral argument over who created the crisis is important. But the physical consequences are arriving now.

Developed countries must provide meaningful climate finance, technology and cooperation. Developing nations must improve planning, expand cleaner energy and build climate resilience. Everybody has a responsibility.

Not the same responsibility.

But a responsibility.

CLIMATE SUMMITS HAVE BECOME A FESTIVAL OF PROMISES

Every few years, world leaders gather at major climate meetings.

There are speeches.

There are handshakes.

There are group photographs. There are urgent declarations. There are new targets.

There are complicated phrases that ordinary citizens rarely use at the dinner table. “Net zero.”

“Climate finance.” “Loss and damage.”

“Nationally determined contributions.” “Decarbonization pathways.”

Then the delegates fly home.

The world continues burning enormous amounts of fossil fuel. Governments announce climate goals for 2030, 2040 or 2050.

There is something politically convenient about promising dramatic action decades into the future. Many of today's leaders will not be in office.

Some will not even be alive.

A target for 2050 is wonderfully safe for a politician facing an election next year.

The climate movement must also understand why ordinary people become skeptical. Families are told to change light bulbs, use paper straws and consider electric cars.

Meanwhile, they see private jets, giant luxury homes and global conferences attended by powerful people whose lifestyles appear untouched by the sacrifices they recommend.

Hypocrisy is gasoline for public distrust.

If leaders want citizens to accept major economic changes, they must explain the costs clearly. They must show that policies are fair.

They must demonstrate results.

Climate policy cannot become a moral lecture delivered by wealthy people to working families.

People struggling to pay rent do not want to be told that their old car is the greatest threat to humanity. Good climate policy must work in the real world.

And the real world has monthly bills.

THE GREEN TRANSITION WILL NOT BE FREE

There is another truth climate advocates sometimes avoid.

Transforming the global energy system will cost enormous amounts of money. Power grids must be modernized.

Energy storage must expand.

New transmission lines must be built. Cleaner technologies require investment. Buildings need upgrades. Transportation systems must change.

Industries such as steel, cement and shipping face difficult technological challenges. Minerals needed for batteries and electronics must be mined and processed. Workers in traditional energy industries may need new opportunities.

Communities dependent on fossil fuel industries cannot simply be told, “Learn to code.”

The transition will create jobs.

It may create new industries.

It may produce extraordinary technological innovation. But transitions create losers as well as winners. Pretending otherwise is politically dangerous.

If climate policy raises energy prices without protecting vulnerable families, voters will revolt. If factories close and jobs disappear, communities will resist. If governments ban technologies before affordable alternatives are available, public anger will grow. And when voters become angry, climate policy can move backward.

A successful green transition must be economically sustainable and politically sustainable. A policy that survives one election and dies after the next is not a climate strategy.

It is a press release.

WE CANNOT “ADAPT” OUR WAY OUT OF EVERYTHING

There is growing discussion about climate adaptation. And rightly so. Cities need better drainage. Coastal communities need protection. Buildings need stronger standards. Water systems must improve. Farmers need climate-resilient crops and better forecasting. Emergency services need preparation. Power grids need greater resilience. But adaptation has limits. You can build a higher sea wall. Then perhaps you need an even higher one. You can install more air conditioning. Then electricity demand rises. You can rebuild after a flood. Then another flood arrives. You can provide crop insurance. But somebody still pays the insurance bill. At some point, society must ask whether endlessly repairing damage is cheaper than reducing the forces making the damage worse. Imagine a leaking roof. You place a bucket under the leak. Then another bucket. Then ten buckets. Eventually, somebody should repair the roof. Climate adaptation is essential. But buckets are not a roofing strategy.

CLIMATE MIGRATION MAY REDRAW THE HUMAN MAP

One of the least discussed consequences of climate disruption is migration. People live where they can survive and build a future. If farmland becomes less productive, people move. If water becomes scarce, people move. If repeated disasters destroy communities, people move. If coastal areas become increasingly vulnerable, people move. Most climate-related migration may initially occur within countries. Villages to towns. Rural areas to cities. Vulnerable regions to more stable ones. But large population movements create pressure. Housing shortages. Competition for jobs. Strained public services. Political tension. And eventually, some movement crosses borders. The world is already struggling to manage migration. Now imagine climate pressure affecting regions with large populations, weak governments and limited economic resources. Climate change does not automatically cause war. But resource scarcity, displacement, economic stress and weak institutions can create dangerous conditions. A farmer who loses one harvest has a bad year.

A region that repeatedly loses harvests has a crisis. The difference matters.

STOP ASKING WHETHER EVERY DISASTER WAS “CAUSED” BY CLIMATE CHANGE

After almost every major weather disaster, the same argument begins. “Was this caused by climate change?” The question is often oversimplified. Climate change does not need to personally sign its name at the scene of every hurricane, fire or flood. The more useful question is whether a warming climate is changing the probability, intensity or consequences of certain extreme events. Think about a professional athlete using performance-enhancing drugs. Did the drugs hit the home run? Technically, the bat hit the ball. But the drugs may have changed the strength of the player. Climate change can act as a threat multiplier.

Warmer conditions can intensify certain risks. Higher sea levels can worsen coastal flooding. Extreme heat can become more dangerous. Weather patterns can shift. The atmosphere can hold more moisture. The debate should focus on risk. We buy insurance not because we know our house will burn down next Tuesday. We buy insurance because risk exists. Humanity is currently running a planetary experiment with the atmosphere while arguing about the exact percentage chance of disaster. That is an interesting academic discussion. It is a strange way to manage a civilization.

THE ECONOMY AND THE ENVIRONMENT ARE NOT ENEMIES

For too long, climate politics has been presented as a choice. Jobs or the environment. Economic growth or climate action. Factories or clean air. Prosperity or the planet. This is a false and increasingly outdated argument. There is no strong economy on a permanently damaged foundation. Businesses need functioning infrastructure. Farmers need workable climate conditions. Cities need water. Workers need safe environments. Insurance markets need manageable risk. Governments need stable communities. At the same time, environmental policy that ignores economic reality will fail. People need jobs. Countries need growth. Developing nations need energy. Families need affordable transportation. Businesses need reliable power. The answer is not economic destruction in the name of climate purity. The answer is economic modernization. Cleaner energy. Smarter infrastructure. More resilient cities. Better technology. Efficient transportation.

Advanced agriculture. Stronger electrical grids. Serious research. And policies designed by people who understand that citizens live in homes, drive to work and pay bills. Climate policy must leave the conference hall and enter the kitchen.

THE BILL IS HERE

The world spent decades discussing the cost of fighting climate change. Perhaps we asked the wrong question. What is the cost of not fighting it? Add the damaged homes. Add the insurance losses. Add the disrupted crops. Add the emergency spending. Add the infrastructure repairs. Add the health costs.Add lost worker productivity. Add water shortages. Add disaster recovery. Add migration pressures. Add the economic damage to vulnerable nations. Then keep adding. Climate action is expensive. Climate inaction is not free. That may be the most important fact political leaders need to explain. The climate debate has been trapped for too long between denial and alarmism. One side sometimes acts as if nothing is happening. The other sometimes speaks as if human civilization will end before next Tuesday. Ordinary people are exhausted by both.

They deserve a practical conversation. What risks are increasing? What will those risks cost? Which policies actually work? How do we protect vulnerable families? How do we keep energy affordable?

How do developing countries grow? How do we force governments to meet promises instead of merely announcing them? How do we build a cleaner economy without destroying public support along the way? These are difficult questions. But difficulty is not an excuse for delay. The climate crisis is no longer standing at the door. It has entered the house. It is sitting at the kitchen table. And it has brought a bill.

The only question now is whether humanity will finally decide to pay for prevention—or continue paying far more for the damage.

— THE EDITORIAL BOARD THE SOUTH ASIAN INSIDER WEEKLY

WHO IS REALLY IN CHARGE—HUMANS OR THE MACHINES WE ARE BUILDING?

A family member can appear to call asking urgently for money. The person may never have said a word. Think about what that means during an election. A fake video appears forty-eight hours before voting. It shows a candidate supposedly making a racist statement, admitting corruption or discussing a secret plan.

Millions of people share it. Television networks debate it. Political campaigns react.

Anger spreads. Experts begin analyzing whether the video is authentic. Two days later, investigators conclude it was AI-generated. Wonderful. The election is over. Democracy cannot function if truth always arrives three days after the lie. The danger is not merely that people will believe fake material. There is an even more disturbing possibility. People may stop believing real material. A politician caught on genuine video can simply say, "It's AI." A corrupt official can dismiss authentic audio as fake. A public figure can deny embarrassing evidence.

When everything can be fabricated, everything can also be denied. This is sometimes called the liar's dividend. In plain English, it means technology does not just help people create lies. It gives liars a new way to escape the truth.

AI WILL CHANGE JOBS—STOP INSULTING WORKERS BY PRETENDING OTHERWISE

Whenever a new technology arrives, we hear the same comforting sentence: "Technology will not replace people. It will only help people." Maybe. But tell that to the travel agent. Tell it to the telephone operator. Tell it to the video rental store employee. Tell it to workers in industries that were automated, digitized or simply made unnecessary. Technology creates jobs. Technology also destroys jobs. Both statements can be true. Artificial intelligence is particularly disruptive because it is not limited to factory floors. For decades, white-collar workers assumed automation was somebody else's problem. Robots would replace repetitive physical labor, we were told. People with university degrees, professional skills and office jobs felt relatively safe. AI has entered the office through the front door. Writers are watching AI generate articles. Graphic designers are watching it create images. Programmers are using systems that write code. Customer service operations are adopting AI assistants. Law firms are experimenting with document analysis. Financial institutions are automating research. Marketing departments can generate dozens of campaign ideas in minutes.

Translators, administrative workers, researchers and analysts are all asking versions of the same question: How much of my job can this machine do? That is not an anti-technology question. It is a rent-and-mortgage question.

Political leaders and technology executives should stop treating worker anxiety as ignorance. People are not stupid. If a company can use AI to perform the work of ten employees with three employees, shareholders may call that efficiency. The seven former employees may use a different word. The answer is not to ban AI. Trying to stop artificial intelligence would be like trying to stop electricity because candle makers were worried. The answer is preparation. Schools must change. Universities must change. Worker training must change. Governments must rethink employment policies. Businesses must take some responsibility for the social disruption created by rapid automation. We cannot wait until millions of workers are displaced and then announce a six-week online retraining course. That is not economic planning. That is political comedy without a laugh track.

OUR CHILDREN ARE BECOMING THE GREAT AI EXPERIMENT

Walk into a classroom today and you will find teachers facing a problem that barely existed a few years ago. Who actually wrote the assignment?

The student? The machine? Or did the student ask the machine to write it and then change three words? Artificial intelligence can be an extraordinary educational tool. A child struggling with mathematics can receive personalized explanations. A student learning English can practice conversation. Complex scientific concepts can be simplified. Educational resources can reach remote communities. A good AI tutor could potentially give millions of children access to personalized learning once available only to wealthy families. That is revolutionary. But there is another side. If a student asks AI to write every essay, solve every problem and summarize every book, what exactly is the student learning? We do not send children to school merely to produce correct answers. We send them to learn how to think. Writing is thinking. Struggling with a problem is thinking. Reading a difficult chapter is thinking. Making mistakes is part of thinking. If AI removes every intellectual struggle from childhood, we may produce a generation that is extremely good at requesting answers and surprisingly poor at creating them. The calculator did not destroy mathematics. But teachers had to decide when students should use calculators and when they first needed to understand arithmetic. AI requires a similar conversation—on a much larger scale. Schools need clear policies. Teachers need training. Parents need guidance. Students need AI literacy. "Don't use AI" is unrealistic. "Use AI for everything" is irresponsible. The challenge is teaching young people to use a powerful intellectual tool without allowing the tool to replace their intellectual development.

WHO OWNS THE WORDS, ART AND IDEAS?

Artificial intelligence has also opened a cultural war over creativity. AI systems can generate paintings, music, photographs, articles and stories. But where did they learn? From human creation. Artists spent decades developing styles. Writers produced books and articles. Photographers captured millions of images. Musicians created songs. Publishers built archives. The internet became a vast library of human expression. Then AI arrived and learned from enormous amounts of data. Now the machine can produce something new in seconds.

The legal and moral questions are enormous. Should an AI company be allowed to train systems on copyrighted work without permission? Should creators be compensated? How can an artist prove that a system learned from his or her work? Who owns AI-generated material?

The user?

The company? Nobody?

Governments are trying to apply old copyright concepts to technology that was barely imaginable when many laws were written. It is like using horse-and-carriage regulations to manage an airport. Creators deserve better than vague promises. Technology companies also deserve clear rules. Without legal certainty, the result will be years of lawsuits, inconsistent decisions and public anger. The world needs modern intellectual property frameworks designed for the AI age. Not in twenty years. Now.

THE GLOBAL AI RACE MAKES SAFETY MORE DIFFICULT

Even if one country creates strict AI rules, artificial intelligence does not respect borders. The United States wants to lead. China wants to lead. Europe wants influence over the rules. India wants to expand its technological power. Middle Eastern nations are investing heavily. Companies and governments worldwide understand that AI may shape economic and military power for generations. This creates a dangerous incentive. Nobody wants to slow down. Imagine two countries racing to develop extremely powerful AI systems. Country A says, "We should spend another year conducting safety tests." Country B says, "Thank you very much." Country B moves ahead. That is the fear. The AI race increasingly resembles an arms race—not because every AI system is a weapon, but because national leaders fear falling behind.

Safety becomes difficult when caution is viewed as weakness. This is precisely why international cooperation is necessary. The world has agreements and institutions dealing with nuclear technology, aviation, telecommunications and international finance. They are imperfect. Countries break rules. Governments cheat. Disputes happen. But imperfect rules are better than no rules. Artificial intelligence needs basic global standards. Not one giant world government controlling technology.

Not an international bureaucracy approving every software update. But common red lines. AI systems used in critical infrastructure need strong safety requirements. Military applications need international discussion. Autonomous weapons demand urgent attention. Deepfake identification standards must improve. Companies developing the most powerful AI systems should face meaningful testing and transparency obligations. The idea that voluntary promises alone will protect humanity is charming. It is also naive. We do not ask pharmaceutical companies to voluntarily decide whether medicines are safe. We do not tell airlines to inspect aircraft only when convenient. We do not allow banks to invent their own definition of financial accountability. Powerful industries require rules because history has taught us something extremely simple: When enormous money and market dominance are at stake, good intentions can become surprisingly flexible.

DO NOT LET FIVE COMPANIES DECIDE HUMANITY'S DIGITAL FUTURE

There is another issue governments are reluctant to confront. Power. Building advanced artificial intelligence requires enormous computing resources, data, specialized talent and money. That naturally favors large corporations and wealthy governments. If the future of AI becomes concentrated in the hands of a few companies, society could become dangerously dependent on private institutions that were never elected by anyone. Who decides what an AI system will answer? Who decides what information it considers reliable? Who decides what political content is acceptable? Who controls the data? Who can audit the systems?

Who is responsible when something goes wrong? "Trust us" is not a governance model. Technology companies have created extraordinary products that changed human life. They deserve credit for innovation. But innovation does not grant permanent immunity from public accountability. The larger and more influential an AI system becomes, the greater the responsibility attached to it. We should not hate technology companies. We should not worship them either.

AI IS NOT THE ENEMY—HUMAN CARELESSNESS IS

There is a temptation to turn every debate into two angry camps. One side shouts, "AI will save humanity!" The other shouts, "AI will destroy humanity!" Reality is less theatrical and more complicated. Artificial intelligence could accelerate medical discoveries. It could improve education. It could help scientists understand climate patterns. It could increase productivity. It could assist people with disabilities. It could reduce repetitive work. It could help small businesses compete. It could translate knowledge across languages and borders. The possibilities are breathtaking. But electricity powers hospitals and electric chairs. Nuclear science produces energy and weapons. Social media connects families and spreads propaganda. Technology does not arrive with morality installed. Humans provide the purpose. Humans create the incentives. Humans make the rules. And humans live with the consequences.

THE WORLD NEEDS AN AI RULEBOOK—BEFORE THE CRISIS

Governments have a terrible habit of regulating after disaster. Financial rules change after financial crises. Security changes after attacks. Building codes change after buildings collapse. Public health systems improve after outbreaks. Must we wait for an AI disaster?

A manipulated election? A major financial fraud?

A catastrophic infrastructure failure? A military misunderstanding triggered by synthetic information? A massive wave of job displacement? Then we will hold hearings. Politicians will express outrage. Executives will apologize. Experts will say they warned us. And everybody will ask why nobody acted earlier. We are acting earlier right now. This is the moment. Artificial intelligence is still developing. The rules are not fixed. The institutions are not fully formed. The public conversation is still open. Humanity has a rare opportunity to govern a revolutionary technology before it becomes completely embedded in every corner of society. We should use that opportunity. The goal is not to put AI in a cage. The goal is to put guardrails on the road. Innovation must continue. Research must continue. Competition will continue. But transparency, accountability, safety and human rights cannot be optional software features. Artificial intelligence may become the most powerful tool humans have ever created. That is exactly why we cannot treat it like another smartphone app. The machine is learning fast. The uncomfortable question is whether governments, institutions and societies are learning fast enough. Because one day, perhaps sooner than we expect, we may discover that the greatest danger was never that artificial intelligence became too smart. It was that humans were too slow to decide what we wanted it to become.

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The Great Reversal

What It Means When Silicon Valley's Best and Brightest Go Home

For two decades, the direction of the story was never in question. Talent moved from Bengaluru and Hyderabad to Fremont and Redmond, not the other way around. That direction has now visibly reversed, and the numbers say this is not a mood — it is a migration.

A survey of more than 1,270 verified tech professionals by the workplace platform Blind found that 53 percent had witnessed colleagues or job candidates return to India in recent months, with another 17 percent aware of people actively planning the move. The trend is sharpest at the companies most associated with the American Dream narrative our community has told for a generation: 57 percent of Amazon employees surveyed, 58 percent at Walmart, and 55 percent at Uber reported reverse migration among their peers. These are not fringe companies shedding marginal headcount. They are the anchors of the diaspora's professional identity.

The mechanics are not mysterious. A wave of layoffs — more than 110,000 tech jobs eliminated so far this year, according to Layoffs.fyi — has collided with a punishing structural reality for H-1B holders: sixty days to find a new sponsoring employer or leave the country. Add a steep new $100,000 H-1B filing fee that makes companies far more cautious about picking up sponsorship for someone else's laid-off employee, and the math for many families stops working. Meanwhile, the same companies doing the layoffs are aggressively expanding Global Capability Centers in India, offering some of these very workers a path back onto the payroll — at a fraction of their former compensation.

That last detail is what should trouble us most. This is not simply displacement; it is a compensation reset dressed up as a homecoming. Engineers who spent a decade building American careers, buying American homes, and enrolling children in American schools are returning to job offers that reflect Indian, not American, market rates. Anecdotal reports place returning salaries well below what departing professionals earned in the U.S., even accounting for cost of living. For many, the "opportunity" being offered by GCC expansion is really a discount on talent that American companies spent years training and now no longer wish to sponsor.

For a media operation built around the diaspora's civic and economic story, this demands more than a labor-market footnote. It demands a reckoning with what permanence actually meant for a generation of skilled immigrants who structured their entire lives — mortgages, children's schooling, retirement plans — around continued U.S. employment eligibility. The employer-tied visa system was always a fragile foundation. What's different now is the speed and scale at which that fragility is being exposed, and the fact that the off-ramp back to India no longer looks like retreat — it looks, increasingly, like the more rational choice.

There is a second-order effect worth watching closely in our own backyard: the local economic footprint. Long Island and the broader tri-state region have absorbed two decades of South Asian tech and finance professionals who bought homes, opened businesses, and became part of school district tax bases. A sustained reverse-migration trend does not just change resumes in Bengaluru — it changes real estate markets, PTA rosters, and small-business customer bases here in Nassau County and beyond. Local institutions that have benefited from this population's stability should not treat the current wave as someone else's story.

There is also an uncomfortable question for those of us in community leadership: are our institutions actually built to track and respond to this, or have we been narrating an immigrant success story so consistently that we failed to notice its terms changing underneath us? Chambers of commerce, professional associations, and immigration advocacy groups within the diaspora need real data — not anecdotes from Blind threads — on how many local families are affected, what their timelines look like, and what support, if any, exists for a transition most did not choose.

None of this argues that reverse migration is inherently a tragedy. India's economy is different than it was fifteen years ago, and for some professionals, the return may prove to be the better long-term bet, particularly as GCCs mature into genuine centers of technical leadership rather than back-office cost centers. But the honest version of this story is not "opportunity beckons at home." It is that a generation of skilled immigrants built their American lives on a visa architecture that was never designed for permanence, and AI-driven cost-cutting has finally forced the reckoning that architecture always guaranteed. The diaspora's institutions owe their communities a clear-eyed account of that fact — not another round of celebratory framing about resilience while families quietly pack up homes they thought were permanent.

(By TSAI Editorial Board)

AI Didn't Just Take the Job

It Took the Visa Clock With It

There is a specific kind of cruelty in a sixty-day countdown that begins the moment a layoff notice lands, and this year that clock is ticking for more Indian professionals than at any point in recent memory — not because of a single bad quarter, but because of a structural bet several of America's largest companies have made on artificial intelligence over their own workforces.

Meta's cut of roughly 8,000 positions and Oracle's reduction touching an estimated 12,000 India-linked roles were not primarily driven by weak revenue. They were driven by capital reallocation: Meta alone is expected to spend more than $100 billion this year on AI infrastructure, chips, and data centers, according to reporting cited across the industry. Companies are not simply trimming costs — they are actively redirecting the money once spent on software engineers and support staff toward AI systems designed, in no small part, to reduce the future need for software engineers and support staff. For a workforce in which Indian nationals hold the largest share of H-1B visas, this is not an abstract trend. It is a direct threat to the legal basis of tens of thousands of families' presence in this country.

The visa mechanics were already unforgiving before AI entered the picture. A laid-off H-1B holder has sixty days, or until their I-94 expires, whichever comes first, to secure a new sponsoring employer. That window was written for a labor market defined by cyclical, temporary downturns — not for a moment when entire categories of roles may be permanently restructured out of existence. Immigration attorneys are now reporting that many affected workers are exploring stopgap measures like switching to visitor status simply to buy time, a workaround that speaks to how poorly the current framework fits the moment.

What makes this cycle different from prior tech downturns is the word "structural." Previous slowdowns were followed by rehiring once demand recovered. This one is explicitly framed by the companies themselves as a permanent reallocation of resources toward automation. If that framing holds, then the sixty-day grace period is no longer a bridge to the next opportunity — it is a countdown to an exit that increasingly has no landing pad, because the roles being eliminated are not coming back in the form workers are qualified to fill.

This is where the policy conversation needs to move beyond the tired binary of "more visas" versus "protect American jobs." The real gap exposed by this moment is that U.S. immigration law has no mechanism for a labor market being reshaped by automation rather than cyclical demand. A worker whose job is eliminated by AI-driven restructuring faces the identical sixty-day clock as one laid off in an ordinary downturn, despite facing a fundamentally different — and often much bleaker — reemployment landscape. Portable visa status, extended grace periods tied to documented AI-related restructuring, or a formal bridge visa category are all worth serious legislative attention, and diaspora advocacy organizations should be pushing this specific framing now, while the data is fresh and the political attention on AI's labor impact is unusually high.

There is also a candor the diaspora's own institutions owe their members: AI-driven job loss is not going to be a temporary feature of 2026. It is very likely the new baseline condition for skilled immigration in the technology sector. Community organizations that continue to advise members as though the old rules of "ride out the layoff, land the next role" still apply are doing their constituents a disservice. The advice needs to change because the labor market has changed, and pretending otherwise wastes the very sixty days that matter most.

Congress has shown no urgency on H-1B modernization in years, and there is no evidence that will change without organized pressure specifically naming AI-driven displacement as a distinct policy problem from routine economic cycles. That is the argument our community's advocacy voices should be making in Washington and Albany alike — not as an abstraction, but as a documented, numbers-backed case that the rules governing skilled immigration were written for a labor market that no longer exists.

(By TSAI Editorial Board)

Zoho and the Boomerang Economy

Is India Quietly Building Silicon Valley's Successor?

Buried inside the online chatter about Indian professionals leaving American tech jobs is a data point too significant to treat as a footnote: one returnee-founded company, Zoho, is estimated to be pulling roughly $3 billion in business that might otherwise have flowed to American firms. Apply that logic across a broader cohort of returning talent, and some estimates put the potential lost revenue to U.S. companies in the range of $10 billion. Whether or not those specific figures hold up to scrutiny, the underlying claim deserves serious attention: reverse migration may not simply be a story of diaspora hardship. It may be the early architecture of a genuine competitor to the American technology sector, built with capital, skills, and institutional knowledge that America itself trained.

This is worth sitting with, because it inverts the framing most diaspora commentary has defaulted to. The instinct is to treat returning professionals as casualties — displaced, underpaid, forced home by visa fees and layoffs. That framing is not wrong, but it is incomplete. A meaningful share of returning talent is not landing in junior roles at India's expanding Global Capability Centers; some of it is starting companies, and those companies are increasingly capable of competing directly with the firms that let their founders go.

Zoho is the most visible example, but it is illustrative of a broader pattern that predates this year's layoffs and is now accelerating because of them. Founders who spent a decade in American product organizations, absorbed the operating discipline of Silicon Valley, and built professional networks across the U.S. tech ecosystem are exactly the profile most capable of building serious competitors from Bengaluru or Pune rather than settling for GCC back-office roles. The same $100,000 H-1B fee and AI-driven layoffs pushing people out of the U.S. labor market are, in effect, subsidizing the formation of India's next generation of technology companies with American-trained founders.

For a firm like MST Strategies and for U.S.-India trade watchers generally, this should reframe how the current moment gets analyzed. The conversation in Washington around H-1B policy and tariff negotiations tends to treat the flow of skilled labor and the flow of trade as separate tracks. They are not. Every engineer priced out of the American labor market by visa costs and structural AI displacement is a data point in India's capacity to compete on innovation rather than simply cost — precisely the shift Indian policymakers have wanted for years and have struggled to engineer through domestic incentives alone. Washington may be inadvertently accelerating it through immigration policy.

There is a genuine question of scale here that deserves honest treatment rather than triumphalist framing in either direction. GCC expansion, for now, remains overwhelmingly about cost arbitrage — offshored roles at Indian salary levels, not innovation leadership. Most of the reverse-migration cohort is not founding the next Zoho; most is taking a pay cut in a familiar city. But it takes only a small fraction of a large, highly trained cohort to produce meaningful competitive pressure over a decade, and the U.S. business community should not assume the current talent exodus is cost-free simply because most individual cases look like hardship rather than opportunity.

For our readers with business interests spanning both countries, the practical takeaway is this: the returning talent pool is not simply a labor story to sympathize with — it is an emerging investment and partnership landscape worth studying seriously, now, before it matures. American capital that engages early with India-based ventures built by returning diaspora talent may find itself on the right side of a trend that U.S. immigration policy is currently accelerating almost by accident. Ignoring that possibility because the surrounding narrative is one of displacement would be a strategic error dressed up as sympathy.

(By TSAI Editorial Board)

The Kids Are Not Alright

Second-Generation Identity in an Era of Normalized Hostility

A rising high school senior in Cerritos, California, spent months of his final years of adolescence organizing a youth-led celebration of Asian American identity and America's 250th anniversary, not because an adult institution asked him to, but because he felt, in his own words, "split" between his South Asian and American roots and wanted to help others reconcile that same tension. The event, called "United We Stand," drew local officials, community recognition, and — more tellingly — a large turnout of young people who showed up to claim a version of belonging their parents' generation of institutions has struggled to articulate.

That last detail deserves more attention than a feel-good local news item usually receives. The organizer's own explanation for why the event mattered was blunt: he described a climate in which hostility and hate are becoming, in his phrase, "incredibly normalized," and said the response he wanted to offer was rooted in leadership grounded in accepting diverse viewpoints. That is a remarkably clear-eyed diagnosis from a teenager, and it should embarrass the adult institutions — media organizations very much included — that have spent years talking about diaspora identity in press releases and gala remarks while the actual identity-bridging work increasingly falls to high schoolers organizing their own events.

This is not an isolated phenomenon. Across the country, America's 250th anniversary has become an occasion for Asian American communities broadly, and South Asian communities specifically, to publicly narrate belonging — contributions to the railroads, to medicine, to technology, to civic life. Much of that narration is genuine and worth telling. But there is a real difference between a heritage-month press release authored by an adult communications team and a self-organized youth summit convened because young people concluded, correctly, that the adults were not going to do this work fast enough or honestly enough on their behalf.

There is a pattern worth naming plainly: second-generation South Asian Americans are increasingly describing their own coming-of-age not as a smooth blending of two cultures but as active, effortful reconciliation work performed under conditions of rising hostility — and they are doing that work through peer organizing rather than through the community institutions built, in theory, to support them. Parent-generation organizations focused on immigration policy, business advocacy, and homeland politics have real and important missions. But if the identity formation of the generation actually coming of age here is happening primarily through self-organized school clubs and one-off civic events, that is a gap institutions with resources and platforms should be filling, not admiring from a press-release distance.

What would filling that gap actually look like? Concretely: dedicated youth advisory structures within existing diaspora organizations, rather than youth committees that exist mainly to be photographed. Sustained funding for student-led civic initiatives beyond a single certificate ceremony. Editorial space — in outlets like this one — that treats youth organizers as primary voices rather than subjects of coverage. And a willingness among adult community leaders to ask hard questions about why teenagers feel compelled to build their own "United We Stand" events in the first place, rather than simply celebrating that they did.

The generosity and clarity in how this young organizer described his motivation should not be mistaken for evidence that everything is fine. It is evidence of a generation doing necessary work the adults around them have largely left undone. Community institutions — civic, religious, media, and political — have an obligation to notice that gap and close it, rather than treating youth-led events as heartwarming footnotes to a heritage-month news cycle that will move on by August.

(By TSAI Editorial Board)

US-Iran MoU Collapse: Why The Strait Of Hormuz Is Back On The Brink

Why did the ceasefire fail? Could it have been prevented? The answer to many of these questions lies in the framing of the 14-Point MoU and the uneven playfield that it created.

Col (Retd) Rajeev Agarwal

The 14-Point MoU between Iran and the US, signed digitally on June 16, was too good to last. The 23-day truce was broken when the US struck 80 targets in Iran in the early hours of July 8 and Iran retaliated almost immediately, targeting 85 American targets in the Gulf region. Interestingly, and mostly as a coincidence, the MoU was signed when President Trump was at the G7 Summit in France, and was called off at the NATO summit in Turkey.

Why did the ceasefire fail? Could it have been prevented? Did the roadmap agreed upon on 22 June fail to build enough safeguards to prevent such a disaster? And, most importantly, what is likely to happen going forward? The answer to many of these questions lies in the framing of the 14-Point MoU and the uneven playfield that it created. Also, there is a need to examine how and what Iran considers as its critical national security red lines, violations of which it cannot afford to ignore.

The MoU and the Uneven Deal

The 14-Point MoU, facilitated through Pakistan, was the foundation on which the ceasefire was to be converted into a peace deal. It gave 60 days to the US and Iran to reach a final deal while simultaneously implementing measures that not only eased the global energy crisis but gave some assurances to Iran that, this time, the US was serious about a lasting peace deal.

As a result, the naval blockade was removed almost immediately and the Strait of Hormuz was opened for commercial traffic. The US Treasury Department revoked sanctions over the sale of petroleum products by Iran, too, thereby giving a huge boost to revenues to Iran from the sale of crude oil and gas. As per some rough estimates, Iran was able to sell almost 50 million barrels of oil during this brief period, giving it a direct revenue of around USD 4 billion (on an average price of crude oil at USD 80 per barrel). There were also inputs that a number of steps were undertaken to defreeze Iranian assets and money, and that an initial tranche of USD 3 billion was delivered to Iran. Also, a ceasefire in Lebanon, a thorny issue and something that Iran insisted on as a precondition, was agreed upon through a tri-lateral agreement signed between Israel, the US, and Lebanon on June 26.

The 'roadmap' that followed the MoU was agreed upon on June 22 in Switzerland, which called for establishing a communication line (almost like a hot-line) between Iran and the US in order to ensure safe passage for commercial vessels through the Strait of Hormuz. It also included key provisions for setting up a high-level committee for political oversight, technical working groups on nuclear issues, dispute resolution mechanisms, and even a de-escalation and monitoring unit to ensure compliance with the ceasefire in Lebanon.

From the contents of the MoU, it is clear that Iran got almost everything that it was looking for, while the US had to make major concessions. The most surprising facet of the MoU was not what was included, but what was left out. Despite the US insisting on its earlier demands, major issues, such as Iran's ballistic missile programme and its support to proxies in the region, found no mention in the MoU. Even clauses 8 and 9, which refer to Iran's nuclear programme, had no provision for total dismantling of the program or complete stoppage of uranium enrichment, or even clear terms on handing over of the 450 kg of enriched uranium. Except for Iran reaffirming that it will not procure or develop nuclear weapons, that it will maintain the status quo (no further enrichment) till a final deal is reached, and that the disposal of its stockpile of enriched Uranium will be resolved through a mutually agreed mechanism, there was nothing the US would have liked as 'iron-clad' guarantees on the future trajectory of Iran's nuclear programme.

The deal was, therefore, uneven and heavily loaded in favour of Iran. The US was projected as weak and compromising at home and, more importantly, in Israel, which made its discontent very clear.

Plus, the images coming out of Iran were shocking to say the least as far as the US was concerned. Millions of people came out to offer their last homage to the assassinated Supreme Leader, and dignitaries of more than a hundred countries were present at the funeral, including regional countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Egypt, Turkey, and other major powers like Russia, China, India, etc. Adding to it was the fact that funeral ceremonies were held even in Iraq, which gave a clear message that Iran was not a defeated or isolated nation,

but, in fact, a nation that brought together others in defiance, solidarity, and pride. It also signalled that the regime the US tried so hard to topple remained in total control.

Iran's Red Lines

One of the major reasons for the MoU to collapse is Iran's red lines, especially over control in the Strait of Hormuz. If there is one thing that Iran understood from this war, it was the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz and how it could turn a regional conflict into a major global crisis when it was closed.

Accordingly, Iran insisted on a very carefully drafted Clause 5 in the MoU, which gave it, along with Oman, the sole rights to administer, monitor, and facilitate traffic across the Strait of Hormuz. To pacify the US, it included a provision that commercial ships would not be charged any fees for 60 days. However, on administering it, the clause read, "Iran will conduct dialogue with the Sultanate of Oman to define the future administration and maritime services in the Strait of Hormuz, in discussion with other Persian Gulf littoral states in line with the applicable international law and the sovereign rights of coastal states of the Strait of Hormuz", thereby making it clear that it was Iran that would control the Strait.

Accordingly, when some ships attempted to take the Southern route in the Strait of Hormuz, bypassing Iran's mandated route and its checkpoints, it issued warnings and even deployed fast boats to divert them to the notified route. There was an incident of firing on a commercial ship by Iran on June 28, which led to a brief exchange of military strikes between Iran and the US, but the 'Doha talks' ensured that there were no more skirmishes till July 8.

Two issues are worth mentioning on the Strait of Hormuz. One, if Clause 5 gives Iran the lead over how the strait is to be administered, and if Iran had assured ships that there would be no fees levied till August 21, then why were the ships adamant on avoiding the safe lane designated by Iran? Were these ships being goaded or manipulated to follow alternate routes? Second, the US, too, had assured world shipping that its navy would stay in the area and ensure that no ships were targeted. How did Iran then succeed in targeting and damaging the ships, including three on July 7? Is this once again a case of American security assurances failing miserably?

The second red line for Iran is Lebanon, but there, the ceasefire has largely held, except for sporadic strikes by Israel into southern Lebanon. However, as long as such skirmishes are restricted to Southern Lebanon and do not target Beirut or other important areas, Iran is unlikely to retaliate.

Looking Ahead

The MoU has been called off, although Trump has said that he will allow peace talks to continue. The renewed escalation has now been on for two days, but has been controlled and largely restricted to coastal areas in Iran on one side and US bases in Bahrain and Kuwait on the other.

Surprisingly, the UAE has not been targeted yet in this round, which is surprising given how heavily it bore the brunt of Iran's retaliation in the first 40 days. Also, the number of successful hits on US bases is once again raising questions about the effectiveness of its security umbrella in the region.

While the US is alleging that Iran violated the terms of the MoU, Iran is defiant and ready to give a tough fight. It has threatened America that if its key infrastructure, such as electricity grids, power stations, and desalination plants, is hit, it will not only escalate but once again close the Strait of Hormuz and possibly the Bab-al-Mandeb (with the help of the Houthis in Yemen) to enforce a double blockade. If that happens, the conflict will once again become global and put pressure on the US to de-escalate. The price of crude oil has already started rising, and unless another round of 'Doha Talks' is held soon, the conflict may escalate rapidly, and the US may find itself, once again, in an avoidable 'escalation trap'.

Trump misread Iran. The consequences are now unfolding

Trump and his advisors have failed to recognise that their actions have turned Iran into a more nationalist, confident and powerful country.

By Naresh Kaushik

Just three weeks after signing a memorandum of understanding in France to end the war in Iran, Donald Trump declared on Wednesday that the deal was over.

Denouncing Iranians as 'scum', 'liars', and 'sick people', he said, "We can play games, but I'm not sure, I want to make a deal". The US bombarded Iran for the second night on Wednesday after Iran hit several oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz on Tuesday. Iran has also struck US military bases in the Gulf in response.Hardly anyone is surprised by these developments.

The 14-point MOU didn't settle any of the issues that prompted the US and Israel to go to war with Iran. The status of Iran's nuclear programme was deferred to further negotiations. The future of Iran's ballistic missiles was not even mentioned. Even the status of the Strait of Hormuz was addressed only in broad terms. It merely stated that safe passage for commercial vessels would be provided at no charge for 60 days. But it granted Iran several concessions, including the immediate ability to start selling oil and recognised Tehran's stake in Lebanon for the first time, linking the deal to Israel's stopping military action against Hezbollah. The MOU was condemned in the US as a surrender, its worst humiliation since the Vietnam War. Yet that didn't stop Trump from claiming victory. "For the first time in 3000 years, we are going to have peace in the Middle East," Trump boasted two weeks ago.

In 2020, Trump observed on social media that "Iran has never won a war, but never lost a negotiation". One can debate whether Iran has won the war, but the latest developments confirm that Trump has lost not only the war but also the negotiations.

A MORE CONFIDENT NATION

Trump and his advisors have failed to recognise that their actions have turned Iran into a more nationalist, confident and powerful country. Trump's threats no longer work on the country. Before the February 28 attack, Iran had just dealt with anti-regime protests, its economy was in a terrible state — it is still very weak — and its military had suffered severe setbacks. Its regional proxies had also been weakened by the US-backed Israel's attacks.

But Iran not only survived 23,000 airstrikes by the US and Israel and the killings of its top leaders, but it also expanded the war into the Persian Gulf, inflicting heavy damage on 16 American bases and even rendering several inoperable. Israel also suffered heavy losses, which it had not anticipated. Iran also brought its most powerful weapon into play, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, effectively blocking a fifth of the world's energy supplies and creating havoc with the world's economy.

In late April, the US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, accepted that the strait had become Iran's "economic nuclear weapon". It should not have come as a surprise to him, as Iran had threatened to use it many times before, and US experts had warned about it before the war. But Trump ignored them. Iran is not going to give up that weapon, which it now also sees as a source of revenue.

A SOLID PLAN

Iran's conduct of the war and its decisions since then have not been erratic, unlike those of Trump. After its 12-day war last year, Iran prepared in detail for the next war, which it was sure would come soon. It knew that Israel and the US would target the leadership, so it delegated decision-making to local commanders. It also stepped up its military production to replenish the stock of missiles and drones lost during that war. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the expansion of the war in the Gulf were also part of the plan.

The way it quickly selected Mojtaba, the son of the assassinated Ayatollah Khamenei, as the next Supreme Leader was also impressive. And Mojtaba doesn't act like his father. Most decisions are made by battle-hardened leaders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in consultation with him. Even most political leaders have honed their skills within the IRGC. They are tough yet pragmatic. They know Iran's strengths and aren't hesitant to use them. But they are also well aware of Iran's vulnerabilities.

NEW NATIONALISM

The killing of top leaders and civilians by Israel and the US during the war fuelled strong nationalist sentiments across Iran, which these hardline leaders have not hesitated to exploit. The funeral of Ayatollah Khamenei is a good example. It was timed to coincide with America's 250th anniversary. The event helped unite Iranians, who raised slogans against Trump and the US. With the rise of nationalism since the war, the likelihood of anti-government protests is now low. Though this doesn't mean people are not dissatisfied.

Even critics of the regime now support the government's approach towards the US and Israel. Trump's threats or any new strikes are only fuelling this nationalism. In recent days, crowds attending the funeral greeted the President, Masoud Pezeshkian, with slogans of "death to the normalisers" and "death to the traitors".

But there is a risk that Iran may be overplaying its hand, especially with its repeated use of the Strait of Hormuz as a weapon. Two alternative pipelines in the Gulf are already in use as alternatives to that waterway. Saudi Arabia is pumping as much crude as possible through its pipeline to its Red Sea port of Yanbu, built in the early 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War. A UAE pipeline transports crude from Abu Dhabi to the port of Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman. There are also discussions about building more such routes. That would reduce reliance on the Strait of Hormuz.

Trump has already ordered new airstrikes against Iran. But he can't go back to a full-scale war. There is no appetite for that in the US, where even the Republican Party is increasingly opposed to it. Trump has indicated he may reimpose a blockade on the Strait. But Iran is unlikely to be deterred. It has lived with sanctions for more than four decades, so sanctions are no deterrent to the regime in Tehran. It's more likely that repeated bouts of fighting between Iran and the US could become the norm for some time.

Trump's Quiet Turkey 'U-Turn' Has Loud Consequences For India

Air Marshal (Retd) Anil Chopra

US President Donald Trump recently announced the lifting of sanctions on Turkey and signalled openness to restoring Ankara's access to the top-end American fifth-generation F-35 fighter jets. They had been denied to Turkey for years after the latter acquired the Russian S-400 air defence system. The US may also provide engines for Turkey's homegrown KAAN fighter aircraft. Turkey is reportedly seeking an initial delivery of six jets. The policy pivot was announced alongside Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an at a NATO summit in Ankara on July 8, 2026. However, Trump is expected to face heavy opposition in Congress for this change in policy.

The high-stakes geopolitical nature of the statement has not gone down well with Israel and Greece. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu strongly opposed the potential sale, including the engines, and is actively lobbying against the deal, warning that providing F-35s to Turkey will "destroy the balance of power in the Middle East". Similarly, Athens vehemently opposes the move, expressing alarm that advanced stealth fighters in the hands of Turkey could alter the military balance in the Eastern Mediterranean. The deal would have implications for India as well, as Turkey openly supports Pakistan with military hardware and had delivered cargo aircraft loads during Operation Sindoor. This when President Trump has already picked Pakistan as a key interlocutor in the back-channel talks and negotiations with Iran, praised its mediation efforts as "fantastic", and displayed a strong personal rapport with Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir.

The Best In Class

The Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II is widely considered the best overall 5th-generation fighter jet in service due to its unmatched multirole versatility, advanced sensor fusion, and active global production pipeline. The F-35's avionics compile data from 360-degree cameras, radar, and electronic warfare suites to give the pilot a complete, real-time picture of the battlefield without breaking stealth. Featuring a tiny radar cross-section (often compared in size to a golf ball), it allows pilots to penetrate dangerous airspace and strike targets while remaining functionally invisible to advanced enemy radars. F-35 aircraft operational campaigns have included crucial roles in suppressing enemy air defences, eliminating hostile drones, and conducting penetrating strategic strikes across the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean.

To date, the US has built and delivered over 1,340 F-35 variants globally. Ten countries already operate the jet, while another 11 nations have placed orders and are awaiting deliveries. The average annual production is 156 aircraft, but last year, a record 191 jets were delivered. This surge effectively cleared backlogs that had accumulated due to previous software and hardware upgrade delays. The main assembly plant is in Fort Worth, Texas, alongside secondary final assembly locations in Italy and Japan. There are three variants of the jet: F-35A (Conventional Takeoff and Landing), F-35B (Short Takeoff and Vertical Landing), and the F-35C (Carrier-Based Variant).

While the F-35 dominates in networking and multirole capabilities, there are other 5th-gen fighters too. There is the larger and older F-22 Raptor, which is still widely regarded as the better air-superiority and dogfighting aircraft due to its thrust-vectoring manoeuvrability and twin engines. China's Chengdu J-20 "Mighty Dragon" heavy stealth fighter is designed primarily for long-range interception and strike missions, but its true combat capabilities remain closely guarded. The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has inducted over 300 J-20 fighters. The Russian Sukhoi Su-57 5th-generation aircraft is also highly agile and cost-effective, but experts generally agree its stealth and avionics fall short of Western F-35 standards. Russia has built approximately 44 Su-57s as of mid-2026.

Meanwhile, China's Shenyang J-35 fifth-generation fighter has entered serial production and is currently in active service with both the PLAAF and the PLA Navy (PLAN). Pakistan has already signed an initial collaborative agreement to acquire up to 40 J-35AE export variants.

Why The Change Of Heart In Washington

The F-35s had been denied to Turkey initially because Ankara had purchased and integrated the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system. Washington argued that operating this Russian system alongside the F-35 could expose the stealth jets' classified capabilities to Moscow, resulting in Turkey's removal from the Joint Strike Fighter programme in 2019. Congress later reinforced this position by making any F-35 transfer contingent on Turkey no longer possessing the S-400. Even so, Ankara has done nothing meaningful since 2019 to meet that condition.

On the other hand, in fact, Turkey has escalated its rhetoric against Israel, threatened Greek sovereignty, entrenched its military presence in occupied northern Cyprus, and sought leverage over Europe through coercive regional behaviour. Turkey also continues to deepen its exposure to China in strategic sectors, including telecommunications. This matters because it was Washington's concerns over Huawei and Chinese 5G infrastructure in part that had once derailed the UAE's pursuit of the F-35. The same standard should apply to Turkey.

Erdogan wanted a formal public reversal in Ankara. He did not get that. The question now is whether Washington can resist the next round of Turkish pressure. Any decision will be conditioned on a proposed roadmap to transfer Turkey's Russian-made S-400 defence systems to a third country.

India's Headache

The Turkey-Pakistan military aviation nexus has rapidly evolved into a major strategic alliance. Centred on joint development and technology-sharing, the partnership features collaboration on Turkey's KAAN stealth fighter, the induction of Bayraktar TB2 drones, and the joint production of Anka unmanned aerial vehicles. Pakistani engineers are also actively involved in the development of Turkish Aerospace Industries' (TAI) KAAN programme, gaining access to next-generation aerospace design. Pakistan has heavily integrated Turkish-made UAVs into its arsenal. Agreements between TAI and Pakistan's National Engineering and Science Commission (NESCOM) focus on the joint production of Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) platforms like the Anka drone. Turkish-manufactured munitions, such as the Kemankes cruise missiles, have been procured by Pakistan to upgrade the operational capabilities of its Air Force (PAF). High-level leadership meetings between the PAF and the Turkish Air Force routinely reaffirm a shared commitment to joint training, aerospace innovation, and emerging technologies.

The nexus significantly alters the regional security dynamic, providing Pakistan with critical non-Western technology to modernise its aerial and drone capabilities. Military experts and geopolitical analysts have highlighted the strategic implications of this growing axis, particularly regarding its effect on regional stability. Turkey's drone know-how plus China's sensor suites could accelerate Pakistan's C4ISR edge. Lastly, both countries have grown even closer militarily owing to the security situation around their neighbours, as well as instability in ties with the US in recent years.

During Operation Sindoor last year, Turkey provided significant military and diplomatic support to Pakistan. The military hardware flown in included over 350 drones, comprising Bayraktar TB2, YIHA, and Songar armed drone systems. These were used for target designation, border strikes, and threats to forward supply convoys. Two Turkish military operatives and advisors were deployed to Pakistan to help operate and coordinate drone strikes against Indian targets. Turkey, in fact, was one of the few nations to explicitly back Pakistan and condemn Operation Sindoor on the international stage.

Greece, Israel Troubled Too

Greece strongly opposes the FR-35 transfer to Turkey, warning it will alter the regional balance. The two NATO allies have persistent disputes regarding territorial waters, airspace, and the militarisation of Aegean islands, occasionally escalating into open threats. Greece's Hellenic Air Force ordered 20 F-35As in July 2024. Deliveries are expected to begin by late 2028. Greek officials warn that arming Turkey with the F-35 undermines stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and may start an intense regional arms race. Greece has fortified its own air force by procuring Rafale jets and pressing forward with its F-35 acquisitions to offset Turkey's indigenous fighter programmes.

For Israel, too, a potential US-Turkey arms deal signals a shift in Washington's approach to preserving Israel's air superiority in the Middle East. The sale extends far beyond defence procurement and into the broader balance of power in the Middle East. Israel's core security priority is to maintain a qualitative military edge in the region. Prime Minister Netanyahu underscored those concerns in an interview with CNN, warning that Turkey is not a model US ally. He cited Ankara's ties to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. When some reiterate that Turkey was an original partner in the F-35 programme, Israel counters that Turkey's approach in the region has become more anti-Israel now. Opposition to this sale is an openly declared policy at the highest political levels. Although Washington has yet to make a final decision, the debate in Israel has already expanded beyond the question of the F-35 itself. It has become part of a broader discussion about the future of US-Turkish relations and whether a shift in that relationship could force Israel to reassess its security and strategic calculations across the region.

The Turkey-Pakistan Nexus

A stronger, more assertive Turkey presents both geopolitical challenges and economic opportunities for India. New Delhi is closely monitoring Ankara's expanding geopolitical reach, particularly its strong defence-industrial partnership with Pakistan and its broader strategic ambitions in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.

The growing relationship has several key implications for India. Turkey remains one of Pakistan's most important defence suppliers. Greater joint collaborations involving aerospace, drone technology, and naval corvettes directly impact India's regional security calculus. Turkey is also extremely vocal in its support for Pakistan on Kashmir.

A Quiet Indo-Pacific Revolution Is Underway, And India Is At Its Centre

America's unpredictability has finally done what the China threat never could for the Indo-Pacific

By Tara Kartha

It seems the building blocks of India's vision for the Indo-Pacific are being put in place rapidly. What's more, its receiving enthusiastic support from key countries that are actually in this region and have strong interests in making it happen. Certainly, there is much more to do, but the process has begun. Its not just the rather dizzying number of initiatives coming out of the visit by the Prime Minister to Indonesia and Australia, but also a squaring of the circle in another event that happened just before his travel. Besides, each of these are cooperating with the other in almost exactly the same areas, in an interlocking mesh of jigsaw moves, about as complicated to fathom. It's a process to watch, with huge implications.

Interlocking Parts

Take these visits in terms of their individual focus. Indonesia lies at the heart of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), and for years, the now rather shaky Quad - comprising India, Japan, Australia and the US - talked about the 'centrality' of ASEAN without anyone actually knowing how this was to be achieved. Now it's a done deal, at least as far as India and two other members of the Quad are concerned.

In February 2026, Australian Prime Minister Albanese and Indonesian President Subianto signed the vital Australia-Indonesia Treaty on Common Security (the Jakarta Treaty). It not only commits the two nations to "consult each other on security threats", but also "establishes defense interoperability, and expands military education exchanges". In March, Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae was in Indonesia to sign an enhanced agreement to sanction the export of arms and equipment - a huge change in policy for pacifist Japan - and also signed protocols for exchange of sensitive information. And in July, there was the Indian Prime Minister, signing on to significantly enhanced defence cooperation, not just limited to BrahMos and air-to-air missile deals, but much more besides. Just before that, on July 2, the Japanese Prime Minister in Delhi signed on to a "Partnership of Strategic Convergence and Trust", again shared with the others. One can almost hear an audible 'click' as things fall into place.

The Mechanics On The Ground

Now break that up into its component parts in terms of mechanics on the ground. Australia has now embedded a senior Indonesian officer inside the Australian Defence forces, in addition to a joint training programme. India has just invited Indonesia to be part of the Indian Navy-run Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), a multinational maritime security and information-sharing hub designed to monitor threats like piracy, trafficking, and illegal fishing. That means sharing of data on a real-time basis.

Japan and Indonesia signed on to an Integrated Defence Dialogue Mechanism and "enhancing discussions on measures to protect classified military information, with a view to strengthening operational cooperation". Australia is already part of the Fusion Centre, as is Japan. Both are also signed on to vital logistics cooperation agreements, which essentially means each can use the others' ports and airfields. Indonesia and India went one important step further in signing on not just to the integrated development of Sabang port - which will provide on-shore services for the huge gas discoveries in the Andaman sea recently - but also to enhancing the Andaman-Aceh connectivity. Look at the map, and the location of the naval base in Nicobar, with its upgraded air field and the massive Great Nicobar project. That clicks into place as well.

Meanwhile, Australia has beefed up the Coco islands, where the Indian Navy and Air force deploy regularly. As the world gets the jitters about 'straits' in general, the Malacca Straits seem to be now tied up neatly into a cooperative knot. Interestingly, both China and Thailand have backed off from the proposed Kra canal, a project that would have brought Chinese ships directly into the Andaman sea, in favour of a Land Bridge project. That is far less threatening, but still a concern.

Quick Reactions To The Energy Crisis

There is something else that is interesting among the four. All are targeting energy security, with India signing a separate agreement on this with Australia, recognising specifically the dangers from energy disruption from the (implied) Iran war. That includes renewables, LNG, and, notably, "the export of Australian uranium to India for exclusively peaceful purposes ... as provided for under the Australia-India Nuclear Cooperation Agreement (2015)". The original agreement is more than a decade old but was never implemented. Now, it is. Similarly, a separate agreement has also been signed between Japan and India, which, interestingly, includes "strengthening the voice of oil and gas-consuming countries" and has plans for investment in upstream sectors in third countries. Indonesia and India also tickbox energy security to include green hydrogen, LNG and solar power.

Japan is probably going to provide Indonesia with safe "nuclear energy solutions". Indonesia has never had nuclear power before, operating three small research reactors. In short, all are worried about volatility in West Asia, and all have had serious disruptions in energy, leading to a scramble to tap into reserves. Not all were able to manage like India. Japan for instance, was in a precarious state.

Those Elusive Value Systems

Last, but far from least, all tickbox a value system for the Indo-Pacific. That doesn't include just 'Free and Open Indo Pacific' but also calls upon "all parties to exercise restraint, de-escalate tensions, and ensure protection of civilians" in Iran and Ukraine by India and Australia. That's one in the eye for the US. The same sentiment is echoed across the other bilaterals, both with India and between the others. The calls for upholding international law are not just morality lessons; it matters intensely to the security of each country. Breaking the law in one part of the globe makes it that much easier to do it in another.

No, It's Not All About China

To wrap up then, while there is considerably worry about Chinese action, this is also not just about Beijing. The whole thing is a reaction to unpredictability of US policy, particularly following the 'dressing down' by Secretary Pete Hegseth of the Department of War at the Shangri La dialogue, where he demanded that all follow the American 'gold standard' of 3.5% spending on defence, noting, "We expect every single ally and partner to match that kind of (US) resolve". He promised expedited arms sales and rewards for those who did, and dire warnings for those who did not. This when every one of these countries are struggling with the costs of the Iran and Ukrainian wars. Each has also been targeted by tariffs, leading to huge losses. Indonesia only recently signed a Agreement on Reciprocal Trade (ART) with the United States, which bought it breathing space, by reducing tariffs from a punishing 32 % to 19%, and highly unfavourable conditions. Both India and Australia are being targeted by supposed 'forced labour' clauses for more tariffs, despite the latter having a free trade agreement with the US.

In sum, a new Indo-Pacific policy is being crafted by the Indo-Pacific countries, while keeping the US 'in play' to the extent possible. All have complicated security relations with the US, with Japan hosting US troops, and Australia an ally country. But the times, they are a-changing, and shifting rapidly. Politicians are trying to beat the clock, but the key question here is whether bureaucracies down the line can keep up. Our own initiatives in ship- and port-building, for instance, are key to the whole Indo-Pacific theatre. After all, one can hardly have one without the other. Time will tell.

ICE suspends vehicle stops for U.S. immigration enforcement

(By Our Staff Reporter) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement on Tuesday suspended vehicle stops related to immigration enforcement, two sources briefed on the matter said told Reuters, after agents fatally shot two men in separate incidents six days apart following stops in Texas and Maine.

The policy shift came one day after an ICE officer killed a driver in the coastal Maine town of Biddeford, about 15 miles south of Portland.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security released a statement nearly 12 hours after the shooting asserting that the officer, "fearing for public safety," opened fire on the driver when he attempted to flee agents trying to pull him over.

Officials did not explain how the driver might have posed a threat.

While some video footage of the incident's aftermath has emerged, there is not yet any public video showing the moment of the shooting itself. Maine Senator Angus King, an independent who caucuses with Democrats, told reporters that the agents involved were not wearing body cameras, leaving questions unanswered about the circumstances surrounding the shooting.

There were multiple protests on Monday, and further demonstrations were scheduled for Tuesday. Immigration advocates said the person shot was a 26-year-old Colombian man who was authorized to work in the U.S. Since the beginning of June, ICE arrests in Maine have more than quadrupled to around 70 per day in early July, according to internal ICE data shared with Reuters by a source.

Monday's killing, along with another that occurred last week in Houston, brought to at least seven the number of people shot dead during immigration enforcement operations since January 2025, when President Donald Trump returned to office and launched a campaign of mass deportations.

India says committed to combating organised crime after US indictment in Canada murder case

(By Our Staff Reporter)

NEW DELHI, - India said on Tuesday that it is committed to working with its partners to combat transnational organised ?crime, a week after the U.S. charged the imprisoned head ?of an Indian criminal gang with directing the 2023 murder of a Sikh separatist leader in Canada.

Hardeep Singh Nijjar was shot dead outside a ?Sikh temple in Canada's Surrey, and then-Prime Minister Justin ?Trudeau had alleged Indian involvement in his killing, badly ?damaging ties between the countries.

India had termed the accusations "absurd".

The U.S. last ?week charged Indian criminal gang leader Lawrence Bishnoi and his North ?American deputy with directing the murder.

India and the U.S. enjoy "strong and effective growing cooperation" on transnational organised crime, Indian foreign ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said, ?when asked about the U.S. indictment.

India remains committed to working ?with its partners in combating transnational organised crime through close law enforcement ?and ?security cooperation, he told a regular media briefing on Tuesday.

Asked about the possibility of Bishnoi's extradition, Jaiswal said New Delhi would deal with any such request according to "established legal obligations and judicial ?processes" applicable in ?the case.

An ?official at the U.S. Attorney's Office had replied in the affirmative last week when asked if ?they would seek Bishnoi's extradition. U.S. and Canadian officials ?did not ?reiterate any allegations that the Indian government was involved in or had prior knowledge of Nijjar's killing. Ottawa and New Delhi have been working to restore ties in recent months and are aiming to conclude a free trade pact by the end of this year.

E. Jean Carroll receives $5.6M from Trump in sex abuse, defamation case

(By Our Staff Reporter)

Writer E. Jean Carroll has been paid more than $5.6 million that she was owed as part of a federal civil jury verdict holding President Donald Trump liable for sexual abuse and defamation, a court filing showed Tuesday.

"The Eagle has landed," Carroll wrote later Tuesday in a social media post celebrating the transfer.

A notice on the online docket in Carroll's case against Trump in U.S. District Court in lower Manhattan indicates that $5,625,005.48 was disbursed to pay the law firm of Carroll's attorney on July 9. The total comprises the $5 million in damages awarded in the jury's May 2023 verdict, plus post-judgment interest that accrued in the subsequent three years.

A person close to Carroll confirmed to CNBC that the funds have been transferred to the writer.

"Three years ago, a unanimous nine-person jury found President Trump liable for sexually assaulting and defaming E. Jean Carroll," Carroll's lawyer, Roberta Kaplan, told CNBC in a statement.

"Today, we are pleased to report that she has received the damages payment the jury awarded her as a result of that verdict," Kaplan said.

Trump's attorneys in the case did not immediately respond to CNBC's request for comment.

One day before the money was disbursed, federal Judge Lewis Kaplan ordered that Trump must pay Carroll, rejecting his last-ditch efforts to avoid doing so while noting that the president "has been stalling this case for years."

Later that same day, a U.S. appeals court in New York denied Trump's request to block Carroll from collecting the money, which Trump had deposited more than three years earlier following the jury verdict.

Trump had been found liable for sexually abusing Carroll in the Manhattan department store Bergdorf Goodman in the 1990s, then defaming her in 2019 after she went public with her claim about the encounter. In a separate federal civil case centered on the defamation claim, a Manhattan jury in January 2024 ordered Trump to pay Carroll a total of $83.3 million in damages. Trump has vehemently denied Carroll's claims and filed numerous appeals in both cases. The Supreme Court in late June refused to hear Trump's appeal of the sexual abuse and defamation verdict. Trump is continuing to challenge the civil defamation verdict at a lower federal appeals court.

Ohio mom arrested for having 16 kids in 'evil' living conditions wants to be reunited with children: lawyer

Attorney J. Thomas Stolly argues Elizabeth Siders poses no threat since children's services removed the kids from her care

(By Our Staff Reporter)

An Ohio mother of 16 children facing sweeping charges of child abuse requested through her lawyer to be reunited with her kids during the trial this week.

Elizabeth Siders, 33, is charged with 16 counts of second-degree child endangerment alongside her husband, Gary Siders, Jr., and his two senior parents. The mother is being detained on $300,000 bond, but her attorney, J. Thomas Stolly, has requested that she be allowed to leave the jail under certain conditions, pointing to her lack of criminal history.

"Through conversations with Counsel, the Defendant maintains that her principal desire (is) to reunite with her children; she understands that reunification of any sort is an impossibility if she does not appear before this Court," a court filing obtained by WOWK 13 says.

Stolly's filing goes on to argue that Siders would not pose a threat to her children since they have now been removed from her care. A judge has yet to rule on the request.The other two suspects — Gary Siders Sr. and Christina Siders — also were charged with 16 counts of second-degree child endangerment. A judge entered not guilty pleas on their behalf during a court hearing last week, setting all four defendants's bond at $300,000.

Officials have not confirmed whether all 16 children were related but said they ranged in age from 18 months to 18 years old and included both boys and girls.Earlier last week, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine said he was being updated on the case.

"It is heartbreaking to learn the conditions that these children were living in and to learn of their medical conditions," he said. "Attorney General Wilson is an experienced prosecutor, and he has told me he has never seen anything like what he saw today. Fran and I pray for these children and thank the children's services workeAttorney General Andy Wilson publicized the case at a news conference last week after the children were removed from the home.

Wilson called them the worst conditions he had encountered in his career, describing it as "pure evil." Several were in serious condition when found, and two were flown to Level 1 trauma centers because of their injuries.

"If they had waited 24 hours, there is a very high probability that we'd be dealing with a death, or multiple deaths, of these children," Wilson said.Vinton County Sheriff Ryan Cain described horrid conditions the children were in, saying there was a high presence of feces and bacterial matter.

Mexico files criminal complaints in US over migrant deaths in custody

(By Our Staff Reporter) MEXICO CITY - Mexico has begun filing criminal complaints with ?state prosecutors in the United States over ?the deaths of its citizens in U.S. immigration custody and during enforcement operations, the foreign ministry said ?on Tuesday. Mexico's government has also sent cease-and-desist ?letters to U.S. detention centers where Mexican nationals have ?died, the ministry added in a statement. The filings ?follow the deaths of at least 14 Mexican ?nationals in ICE custody and several others during arrest operations, including the recent fatal shooting of a Mexican citizen ?by an ICE agent in Houston.President Claudia ?Sheinbaum announced Mexico's intention to escalate its response to the deaths ?last ?Friday, as she claimed that the government "cannot turn a blind eye to the Mexicans who have died." In addition to the measures in the ?U.S., Mexico's foreign ?minister ?also contacted the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights regarding the ?deaths of Mexican nationals in ICE ?custody. Mexico expects ?the U.N. office to gather information from U.S. authorities, analyze the events and "refer the case to the ?relevant special procedures of ?the Human Rights Council," the statement added.

Congo Ebola outbreak outpaces response as 80% of new cases lack traceable links

(By Our Staff Reporter) The Ebola outbreak in eastern Congo is continuing to spread faster than response efforts, the World Health Organisation's emergencies chief said on Tuesday after returning from Bunia, one of the worst-hit areas in Ituri province. Chikwe Ihekweazu said the situation was improving in some areas, but remained deeply worrying as many new infections were still emerging from unknown chains of transmission. Congo has been battling the outbreak of a rare type of Ebola since May, with no approved treatment or vaccine. "Perhaps the most alarming finding is that many of the newly reported deaths are people who died in their communities without ever reaching a health facility and without receiving care," Ihekweazu said. "And as of today, 80 per cent of new cases are outside our contact lists and so are coming to us from unknown chains of transmission." As of Monday, at least 1,926 people have been infected and 702 have died in three provinces in Congo from the rare Bundibugyo virus, Congolese authorities said. Cases have also been confirmed in neighbouring Uganda. Last week, the Africa Centres for Disease Control said this was the fastest-growing Ebola outbreak on the continent.

Bangladesh welcomes Sheikh Hasina's return to face death penalty case

(By Our Staff Reporter)

Bangladesh's government on Tuesday said it "welcomes" deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina's reported plan to return home, saying she must face the legal process in a case in which she has been sentenced to death in absentia. The remarks came amid reports that Hasina could return to Bangladesh by the end of this year. Prime Minister's adviser for information and strategy Zahed Ur Rahman said, "We welcome her announcement as we want to ensure justice," and added that the government was under no pressure over her planned return. He also said proceedings at the International Crimes Tribunal-Bangladesh would remain transparent and could be monitored by observers and broadcast through video coverage. Rahman said, "the people of the country want her death penalty to be upheld for the crimes she committed, and in that case her capital punishment will be executed as the people want to see that". He added, "Let her bring the best lawyers in the world." At the same time, he said the court could also revise the verdict against Hasina or acquit her, adding, "That too could happen." There have been previous instances in which rulings of the ICT-BD, formed during the Awami League regime in 2010, were stayed or overturned. Hasina, 78, the daughter of Bangladesh's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has been living in India since she fled Dhaka after her government was toppled in a violent student-led street protest on August 5, 2024. Rahman said "procedural issues will not debar her return" and that Delhi could make arrangements after consulting Dhaka on the matter. In November last year, a special tribunal in Dhaka sentenced Hasina to death in absentia for alleged "crimes against humanity" over her government's brutal crackdown on student-led protests in 2024. Hasina has dismissed the death penalty, criminal convictions and charges against her as "politically motivated". Since the verdict, Dhaka has been urging New Delhi to extradite her to face the law, while also saying her return can be arranged and the case will proceed through the courts.

Saudi-Houthi conflict hots up. Will Pakistan step in?

(By Our Staff Reporter)

A conflict that was on cold storage for years has flared up again after Saudi Arabia and Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen accused each other of launching attacks over the weekend. It has brought renewed attention to the role of Pakistan, which last year signed a mutual defence pact with Saudi Arabia, and has since expanded its military footprint in the Kingdom. It has led to speculation about whether Pakistan, already grappling with insurgency in Balochistan and tensions along the Afghanistan border, will join Riyadh in fighting the Houthis. The fresh tensions between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis have threatened to open a new front in the Middle East at a time when the US-Iran conflict has again thrown the region into turmoil. On Sunday, the Houthis accused Saudi Arabia of bombing Yemen's airport. The attack, which is believed to have Donald Trump's backing, was an attempt to prevent an Iranian flight from landing at the Sanaa airport, Axios reported.

SAUDI ARABIA, HOUTHIS EXCHANGE FIRE

The Mahan Air flight was carrying a Houthi delegation that was returning from Iran after attending the funeral of former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Saudi Arabia was concerned that the flight might have been used to transport weapons or Iranian military personnel to Yemen. The US has long maintained that Mahan Air is linked to Iran's powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The flight was diverted, and it eventually landed at Houthi-controlled Hodeidah airport. Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, and much of northern Yemen, including the port city of Hodeidah, is under Houthi control. The Yemen government, which has the backing of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, operates mostly in Aden on the south coast. It has effectively divided Yemen into two states.

Tensions, in fact, have been simmering for the past 10 days. Earlier this month, an Iranian flight landed in Sanaa to pick up a Houthi delegation for Khamenei's funeral. It was possibly the first time in a decade that a flight from Iran landed in Sanaa.

The Houthis claimed Saudi fighter jets attempted to prevent the flight from landing without success.

The July 12 bombing of Sanaa airport proved to be the final nail in the coffin. The Houthis retaliated by firing missiles and drones toward Saudi Arabia, specifically targeting Abha International Airport. The outfit also warned airlines to stay away from Saudi airspace.

The tit-for-tat strikes shattered a truce that has largely held since 2022, and even withstood the tensions ignited by the US-Iran war earlier this year.

The roots of Yemen's civil war can be traced back to 2014, when the Houthis seized much of northern Yemen and forced the government into exile. In subsequent years, a Saudi-led coalition fought the Houthis in the north. In 2022, a truce brokered by the United Nations brought hostilities to a halt.

WILL PAKISTAN JOIN SAUDI-HOUTHI CONFLICT?

The latest escalation has raised the spectre of renewed fighting between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia. It has revived a pertinent question. Will Pakistan step in if Saudi Arabia is attacked again?

In September last year, nuclear-armed Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a NATO-style defence pact. While the full text of the deal has not been made public, a key aspect stood out. It stated that an aggression against either country would be considered an aggression against both.

Pakistani defence minister Khawaja Asif also said that its nuclear program would be made available to Saudi Arabia under the pact. Several defence experts even believe that Saudi Arabia has quietly funded it. In such a case, it is obvious that Riyadh would want its pound of flesh.

The two countries have had several meetings about the pact after Iran, earlier this year, targeted Saudi energy facilities. However, Pakistan tactfully avoided getting itself dragged into the war by starting a conflict in its own backyard with Afghanistan.

There is a reason why I am saying that.

A ceasefire had been in place with Afghanistan since November 2025. Yet, Pakistan went ahead and conducted airstrikes in Kabul just as the Iran conflict started on February 28. Now, there was no trigger for Pakistan to suddenly attack Afghanistan. The conflict with Afghanistan gave Pakistan wriggle room to escape the Saudi defence pact.

CATCH-22 SITUATION FOR PAKISTAN

But now the fight is against the Houthis. Pakistan has never officially fought the Houthis in Yemen, or deployed combat forces against them.

Beginning in the 1970s, Pakistan has periodically provided training to more than 8,000 Saudi troops. Pakistani troops also travelled to Saudi Arabia in the 1960s during tensions over Egypt's war in Yemen.

In fact, ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had soured in 2015 after Islamabad refused to send troops for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen during the civil war.

Pakistan again finds itself in a Catch-22 situation. This time, it is also dealing with unrest across multiple fronts - attacks from Baloch rebels, protests in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, and tensions along the Afghanistan border.

Presently, around 8,000 Pakistani troops, 16 fighter jets (mostly JF-17 warplanes), and a Chinese air defence system are stationed in Saudi Arabia as part of the mutual defence pact. The deployments were made in May, when the tensions in the Middle East had subsided.

Presently, the situation remains volatile. Saudi Arabia and the Houthis have exchanged only one round of strikes. If the Houthis escalate their strikes on Saudi Arabia, Pakistan will come under immediate pressure to honour its defence commitment with Riyadh.

Singapore court orders Bloomberg to pay ministers in defamation case

(By Our Staff Reporter)

A Singapore High Court on Tuesday ordered Bloomberg and one of its reporters to pay SGD 230,000 in damages to two cabinet ministers in a defamation case, according to local media reports.

The lawsuit was filed last year by ministers K Shanmugam and Tan See Leng over a 2024 article on property deals. The court held that the article, read as a whole, linked their transactions to allegations of secrecy, opacity and money laundering, and therefore carried a defamatory meaning. The Bloomberg article was titled "Singapore mansion deals are increasingly shrouded in secrecy" and referred to transactions involving Good Class Bungalows in Singapore. It mentioned Shanmugam's 2023 sale of his former house in the Queen Astrid Park area to UBS Trustees for SGD 88 million and Tan's non-caveated purchase of a bungalow in Brizay Park for nearly SGD 27.3 million. A non-caveated transaction in Singapore's property market is one in which the buyer does not lodge a formal legal notice, or caveat, with the Singapore Land Authority to publicly record their interest in the property. The process is generally used to avoid delays and administrative procedures.

Justice Lim rejected Bloomberg's argument that the report was only about a wider pattern of non-caveated GCB transactions and that the ministers were cited merely as examples, The Straits Times reported. In a 71-page judgment, she said the test for deciding the natural and ordinary meaning of disputed words in a defamation case is well-settled.

According to Channel News Asia, courts in defamation cases decide meaning based on the common sense and general knowledge of ordinary readers. The intention of the publisher and the understanding of the claimants are not relevant to the final legal outcome.

The judge also rejected Bloomberg's reliance on the Reynolds Defence, a public interest defence in UK law, saying it is not part of Singapore law. The defence comes from the UK case Reynolds vs Times Newspapers and protects journalists in some defamation cases if the report is on a matter of public interest and is judged to be responsible and fair.

Justice Lim said, "The broader narrative of how wealthy individuals in Singapore use non-caveated transactions and trust structures to keep their dealings secret or 'off-radar' was the cover devised to carry that story." She also said the article, taken as a whole, linked the ministers' deals with claims about secrecy, opacity and money laundering.

The article had referred to a SGD 3 billion money laundering case and said criminals of Chinese origin linked to it had been convicted, jailed and deported, before naming Tan and Shanmugam and their GCB transactions, according to the CNA report. Bloomberg and reporter Low De Wei denied the claims, saying the story was about broader trends in Singapore's GCB market and not about the ministers personally or any wrongdoing by them.

The ruling means Bloomberg and Low De Wei must pay damages to Shanmugam and Tan See Leng after the court found that the article's overall presentation defamed the two ministers in the context of reporting on property transactions and secrecy.

Iran's next chokehold? Red Sea gateway emerges as new battleground after Hormuz

(By Our Staff Reporter)

Having choked off shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, Iran is now signaling it could play its most dangerous card yet: using Yemen's Houthi allies to shut the Bab el-Mandeb gateway to the Red Sea, opening a new front against Washington and putting two of the world's most vital energy arteries at risk.

As US strikes deepen inside Iran and Houthi attacks escalate in tandem, analysts say Tehran is widening the conflict and seeking to increase pressure on Washington by extending the threat to global trade and energy supplies beyond the Gulf.

Iran has already demonstrated the power of its most valuable strategic asset by disrupting traffic through Hormuz. Now it appears ready to open a second pressure point at Bab el-Mandeb, the narrow waterway linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden through which Saudi oil exports and a substantial share of global shipping pass.

A senior Yemeni official warned on Monday that the country's armed forces were prepared to close the Bab el-Mandeb Strait - a move he said could send oil prices soaring to $200 a barrel - if Saudi Arabia continued to attack Yemen, according to a report on Iran's Press TV website.

Mohammed al-Farah, a member of the political bureau of Ansarullah, the Houthi resistance movement, said Washington was inciting Saudi Arabia to strike Yemen and that such a provocation would never be in the interest of the United States.

"If the current situation aggravates, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Strait of Hormuz will be closed in an operational alliance. Oil prices would then skyrocket to $200 a barrel in a dreadful shock," he warned.

If Hormuz is Tehran's strongest strategic lever, Bab el-Mandeb may be its last major reserve, analysts said.

"Iran is willing to go all the way," Middle East scholar Fawaz Gerges told Reuters. He said Tehran was showing Washington it could threaten both chokepoints simultaneously, transforming the conflict from a bilateral confrontation into a challenge to the sea lanes underpinning global energy trade.

"Now (Tehran) is escalating both near and wide. The message is that not only Hormuz, but Bab al-Mandab, is at risk."

'MISSION CREEP'

The danger, analysts say, is less an immediate return to all-out war than a slow but relentless "mission creep" in which each side raises the stakes without crossing into direct confrontation.

As the conflict spreads from the Gulf to the Red Sea, the growing threat to trade and energy supplies could also increase pressure on Washington and Tehran to return to negotiations before the world's two most important oil chokepoints become the conflict's defining battleground.

Dennis Ross, a former US Middle East peace negotiator, said from Washington's point of view, "the issue is, how do you change the Iranian calculus to the point where they're ready, again, to talk, but not just to talk, but actually to work out an arrangement that is ... acceptable."

HOUTHI ATTACKS ON COMMERCIAL SHIPPING

The Houthis have already shown they can choke global commerce through the Bab el-Mandeb. After the Gaza war erupted in October 2023, the Iran-backed group launched attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, saying it was targeting vessels linked to Israel in support of Palestinians.

The campaign forced major shipping companies to reroute vessels around southern Africa, raising transport costs, and prompted US and British airstrikes as well as a multinational naval mission to protect shipping.

Andreas Krieg, a senior lecturer at King's College London's School of Security Studies, described the latest Houthi threat as "another nuclear option" for Iran after Hormuz — one it would deploy only if the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps concluded that a return to all-out war had become unavoidable. But he warned that if Washington intensified strikes on Iran's critical infrastructure, Tehran could respond by using its Yemeni allies to close Bab el-Mandeb, compounding the economic shock already caused by the Strait of Hormuz.

Abdulaziz Sager, chairman of the Saudi-based Gulf Research Center, said Gulf states increasingly believe diplomacy with Iran has reached its limits, despite the high cost that any wider confrontation would impose on the region.

"Both a victorious Iran and a defeated Iran carry consequences for the region," said Sager, adding that "many Gulf states may consider the costs of the latter to be more acceptable if they lead to a more stable regional security environment".

He said the Houthis retain the capability to disrupt navigation through Bab el-Mandeb but are unlikely to escalate without clear direction from Tehran. Any Houthi attempt to threaten shipping, he added, could trigger a broader military response from the United States and its partners aimed at significantly degrading the group's capabilities.

The war, launched in late February by the US and Israel, has destabilised the Gulf and spread across the region, with Iran attacking US bases in multiple countries. Thousands of people have been killed in the war, mainly in Iran and Lebanon.

France wildfires near Paris force evacuations as Spain counts more victims

(By Our Staff Reporter)

Wildfires linked to extreme heat continued to cause damage in parts of France and Spain on Tuesday, with hundreds of firefighters deployed near Paris and authorities in southern Spain identifying more victims of a deadly blaze. In France, two forest fires near the capital have forced evacuations, while in Spain officials are still tracing those killed in a fire that swept through a remote expatriate community.

The fires in the Fontainebleau forest south of Paris have burned nearly 2,000 hectares and led to the evacuation of 1,000 people, according to local authorities. No deaths or injuries have been reported. In southern Spain, judicial authorities said they have identified 10 of the 13 people who died in the Los Gallardos fire, while 10 others remain unaccounted for.

Hundreds of firefighters were battling two blazes in the Fontainebleau forest on Tuesday. While larger fires have hit southern France, the Fontainebleau fire is seen as especially serious because of its closeness to the densely populated area around Paris. Smoke covered the treetops and hung in the air as authorities worked to bring the fires under control. Water-dropping planes repeatedly descended to the Seine River to collect water and tackle the fires. The regional fire chief said it was the first time such aircraft had been used to fight fires in the Paris region.

Interior Minister Laurent Nunez told BFM television that two people had been arrested in connection with the Fontainebleau fires, and two others had been arrested over fires elsewhere in France. He did not give details. The heat wave that has scorched France in recent days, the third this year, is beginning to ease. The national weather service expects to lift its red heat-wave alerts from Wednesday, although thunderstorm warnings have been issued for several regions.

In Spain, authorities said 10 of the 13 people killed in the Los Gallardos fire had been identified through biological samples, four days after the blaze tore through the remote community in the south of the country. Most of those who died were foreign nationals. According to a statement from judicial authorities, they included five British citizens, including a woman who died in hospital, three Belgian nationals, a French woman and a Spanish national.

The Los Gallardos fire burned about 70 square kilometres of forest and farmland. Spain is facing extreme heat, and authorities said wind and a lack of rainfall were creating conditions in which small wildfires could spread unchecked. Europe is the world's fastest-warming continent, with temperatures rising twice as fast as the global average since the 1980s, according to the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service. The latest fires in France and Spain have again highlighted the scale of the threat as hot and dry conditions persist across parts of Europe.

'The Trojan Teddy Bear': The promise and peril of childhood in the age of AI

Back in 2001, Steven Spielberg released an underrated scifi movie named A.I. Artificial Intelligence (yes, the title is a bit redundant). The movie, which loosely borrows from Pinocchio, tells the story of a family who adopts a robotic boy programmed for love, and that robot's heartbreaking quest to become a real boy.

Much of the technology in A.I. remains elusive. We're probably not anywhere close to building androids that can convincingly pass as Haley Joel Osment — or Jude Law, for that matter. But some of the AI products imagined in the movie are starting to look surprisingly plausible.

Take Teddy, an animatronic teddy bear. Teddy can walk, talk, make decisions, and respond to the needs and emotions of people around him. He's more than just a toy. He's an intelligent companion and protector for children.

Today, a slew of technology companies are developing AI companions that sort of resemble Teddy. The most intelligent AI chatbots still live on digital screens, but a wave of startups is giving them bodies — creating dolls, action figures, and robots that can serve as companions for kids.

What happens when kids grow up with AI?

AI is already a part of childhood. Recommendation algorithms curate what many kids watch and listen to. Chatbots stand ready to answer questions like, "Are monsters real?" or "Why is the sky blue?" They can help with homework, tell bedtime stories, or even feel like a friend. And companies are racing to embed AI into toys, nurseries, classrooms, and eventually robots that live alongside families.

In a new book, Human Raised: Nurturing Connection, Curiosity & Lifelong Learning in the Age of AI, author Dana Suskind grapples with what the rising tide of artificial intelligence means for raising kids. On the one hand, she acknowledges that the technology offers promise as, for example, a productivity enhancer and time saver for parents, a monitoring and research tool that can give parents and scientists valuable data on child development, and an interactive tutor that might help some kids learn.

But Suskind worries about what happens if AI begins replacing the kinds of human interactions that young brains evolved to learn from.

In fact, Suskind says, her original, working title for the book was, "The Trojan Teddy Bear," a warning that AI companions may seem cute and cuddly — but they carry hidden risks for child development. She ultimately went with Human Raised because she wanted to emphasize the positive — and irreplaceable — role that parents, teachers, and caregivers play in molding young ones.

"If we want children to be able to continue to connect with each other and with other human beings, to be able to think critically, to be able to navigate the human world, we're gonna need to make sure that kids have a distinctly human-raised early childhood," Suskind says.

Suskind is a professor of surgery and pediatrics at the University of Chicago Medical Center, where she directs a program aimed at giving kids hearing with cochlear implants. After she began doing this incredible work — literally helping children hear — she noticed that some kids who had the procedure went on to understand spoken language and talk with relative ease, while others had a much harder time. Hearing alone wasn't enough. And that led her to dive into neuroscience and social science to understand why.

The brain development of young kids, Suskind learned, is heavily influenced by the back-and-forth interactions they have with their parents and caregivers during the first several years of their life. And she grew concerned that there is a big population of kids who aren't getting the enriching communication their brains need. And so she founded the TMW Initiative, a research center that helps parents create the kinds of brain-enriching environments that children need to reach their full potential. (You can read more about Suskind's biography and previous work in a Planet Money newsletter from 2022).

Why Dana Suskind is sounding the alarm

With the explosion of AI, Suskind has grown alarmed by a rush to introduce an unprecedented technology into kids' lives without careful reflection and rigorous scientific study about its effects on young minds. She is especially concerned about AI companions and other systems that interact socially with children, which she fears many people will use to substitute for the human interactions that children need most.

Since the dawn of civilization, humans have used technology to make raising children a little easier. In Human Raised, Suskind traces that history back to prehistoric times, when mothers used woven slings to carry infants while they worked. Over the centuries, new technologies — like television and tablets — have eased the burdens of caregiving or helped keep children occupied. Many of these technologies have also been greeted with fears that they would rot kids' brains.

But Suskind argues AI may mark a fundamental shift. Interacting with a chatbot or intelligent teddy bear is more than just a kid glued to a television or an iPad watching Sesame Street or Paw Patrol. AI systems carry on conversations that can feel strikingly human. They respond to kids' questions, emotions, and fears. They create a kind of synthetic social relationship — one that, Suskind argues, may shape developing minds in ways that, until recently, only humans could.

Suskind cites the research of renowned University of Washington developmental psychologist Patricia K. Kuhl. Kuhl proposed what's known as the "social gate" hypothesis — the idea that children's brains are biologically primed to learn through social interaction. Studies have shown, for example, that babies learn language much better from a live person than from a screen. Neuroscientists and psychologists suggest that's because social interactions engage the brain in ways passive media does not. The sing-song way adults naturally speak to babies, smiles and other facial expressions, gentle touch, eye contact, and back-and-forth exchanges all appear to help open that social gate and facilitate learning and healthy brain development.

While artificial intelligence is no match for human educators and caregivers, Suskind argues, it is capable of opening the social gate in young children in ways that previous technologies could not. That makes AI a potentially extraordinary educational tool — but also a potentially dangerous one.

Companies design AI systems with their own goals, which could include maximizing your kids' engagement, keeping their attention, collecting data, and making money. They don't have the same priorities as parents. And while those systems may imitate human interaction, Suskind argues they cannot recreate everything that makes human relationships developmentally valuable.

"Eye contact, shared laughter, patient answers to 'why' questions activate ancient neural circuits designed for connection," Suskind writes. "These exchanges provide a form of nourishment no algorithm, however sophisticated, can match."

Human relationships are also messy and filled with emotions. Parents misunderstand their children. Kids get frustrated. Families argue, reconnect, and then smooth things over. Suskind argues that those imperfect interactions — and "the productive struggle" they create — are how children learn resilience, emotional regulation, flexibility, and how to navigate real relationships.

Unlike most humans, AI systems can be endlessly engaging, infinitely patient, and relentlessly affirming. Interactions with them often feel frictionless. Suskind worries giving young kids considerable exposure to them may make them less prepared for the messy, unpredictable nature of real human relationships.

AI as junk food for the young mind

Suskind compares AI relationships to ultra-processed food. "?If all you eat is fruit snacks, which is a synthetic version of fruit, when you actually eat the real fruit, you're gonna be like, "Hmm, it's not quite as sweet," she says.

AI could eventually be programmed to try and mimic real parents and caregivers even more closely. But Suskind argues that the problem isn't simply that today's AI falls short of human relationships. It's that AI represents a fundamentally new kind of social experience for children — one that already raises concerns based on what we know about child development and whose long-term effects remain deeply uncertain.

Suskind uses an analogy from the 19th century, when a German chemist named Justus von Liebig created one of the first infant formulas, hoping to replicate the nourishment of human milk. But when a French physician tested the formula on four newborns, all of them died within days, and the episode sparked a fierce controversy.

The lesson, Suskind suggests, is that we should be cautious about engineering substitutes for something as biologically, emotionally, and socially complex as human caregiving before we understand how those substitutes shape children's development.

Given so much uncertainty about this rapidly evolving technology and its potential effects on kids, Suskind spends a lot of the book offering parents a practical guide for safely navigating child-rearing in the age of AI. She emphasizes that it's especially important to shield kids from AI during their first years of life.

"Older children and adults encounter AI with already-built neural scaffolding, but young children are still wiring the very circuits that shape future learning and relationships," she writes. "Introducing AI during this sensitive period presents a fundamentally different challenge with greater potential for harm." Suskind is open to the idea of using AI to enhance education for some kids — but only as a tool that enhances, rather than replaces, humans. She argues that human caregivers are the best way to cultivate what she calls "the Human Edge," a set of social, emotional, and cognitive skills like "critical thinking, interpersonal connection, genuine creativity, empathy, and resilience." But, like time-crunched parents who rely on screens to buy themselves some time today, there may be growing temptations to outsource parts of child-rearing to AI, especially considering the fact that childcare is incredibly expensive. Suskind worries that, over time, a fully human-raised childhood could become a kind of luxury good — much the way fresh, healthy food often is today. Families with the time and resources would provide rich human interaction to their kids. Everyone else might increasingly rely on cheaper, more convenient AI substitutes.

(By Greg Rosalsky, NPR)

‘Country grows, we grow too’: 1 million migrants seek legal status in Spain

The government expected half a million people to apply. Nearly double that number came forward, in a process advocates say exposed how many migrants had been left undocumented for years in the country.

Madrid, Spain – Badr Tmairi, 22, from Morocco, has spent six years living in Spain without legal status. He arrived at 16, alone, without his family. He held legal residency briefly after turning 18, but lost it when he failed to renew it in time.

“What I want is to get my papers back so I can work as a hairdresser and travel to visit my family in Morocco,” he said.

Tmairi is one of more than a million people who have now applied for regularisation under a new scheme that contrasts with a growing European trend against irregular immigration.

He has been homeless for the past year. Without documents, finding work and decent housing in Spain is difficult.

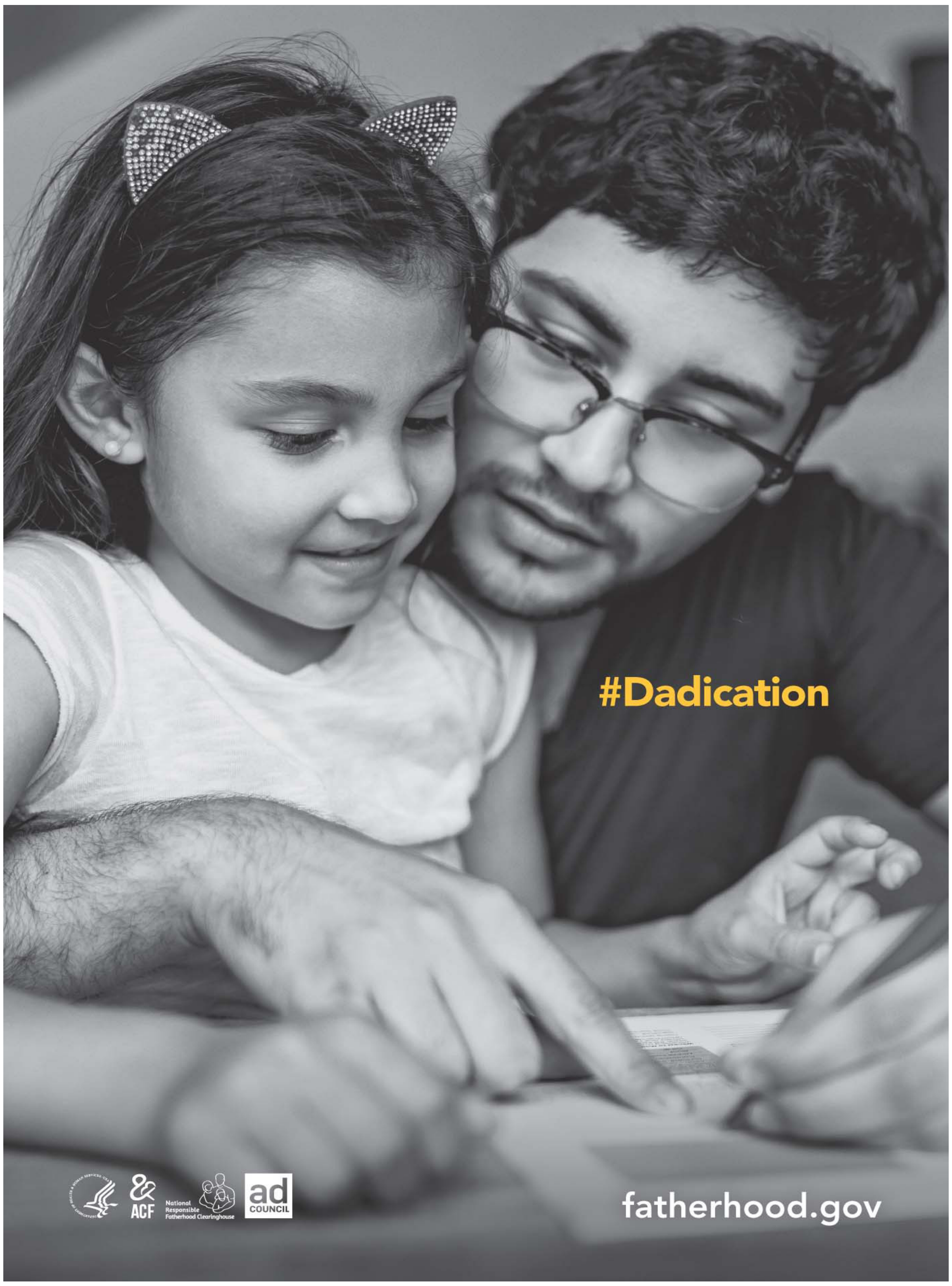
“It’s very encouraging to know that so many people submitted an application and are trying to regularise their situation, but that huge number is also proof that the state has failed in its duty to protect the most vulnerable,” Edith Espinola, president of the Active Domestic Workers’ Service Association (SEDOAC) and spokesperson for the Regularizacion Ya (Regularisation Now), told Al Jazeera.

Regularizacion Ya, a collective made up of migrants, has led the push for regularisation since 2020. The measure grew out of a broad social consensus and has been backed by civil society organisations, the Catholic Church, trade unions and business associations.

Living without legal status, Espinola said, condemns people to social exclusion, as it has for Tmairi. Without rights or protection from abuse, they are unaligned with most of the rest of the population.

The new initiative, Spain’s first regularisation process since 2005, began in April and closed on June 30. The government now has three months to resolve the vast majority of the applications submitted.

Of the 1,174,978 applications, according to the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, only 11,000 have received a favourable resolution so far. About 608,000 have been accepted for processing, granting provisional residency and work permits until a final resolution.



‘All I want is to work’

Rocio Neciosupe, 54, is a Peruvian migrant who has spent two years without legal status in Spain. “Regularisation isn’t a handout; all I want is to work. To work without fear and with rights, so that if I fall and I’m sick, I don’t have to go to work that day and can still get paid, like anyone else,” she said.

Neciosupe, a cleaner in private homes, is busy across six different buildings around Madrid. But she is currently recovering from a back injury sustained in a fall at work. Without documents or a contract, she has no right to sick leave.

Unable to afford to lose her income while she recovers, her husband accompanies her to work each day and helps her with tasks she cannot manage alone. Rocio, her husband and their two daughters, aged 22 and 17, have all had their regularisation applications accepted for processing and are now awaiting a favourable resolution.

“I want to support the country I live in, and if the country grows, we grow too,” Neciosupe added.

It is precisely in the contribution and growth potential of people like her that the Spanish government has framed its case for the measure.

“By 2050, Spain’s GDP would be 19 percent lower, 90,000 bars would close, 50,000 classrooms would shut and 220,000 farms would disappear,” Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said recently in a public address.

Gonzalo Fanjul, director of ISGlobal’s policy and development team and head of Research at the porCausa Foundation, said: “If you look at what’s happening in the United States, there are already estimates of the impact of the government’s violent, hostile anti-migration policies. Whole economic sectors are struggling to keep functioning.” One of those sectors is care work. With an ageing population, Spain needs trained workers to fill positions in that sector, among others.Josselyn Aguirre, 32, is one of those workers. A nursing assistant, she migrated from Ecuador to Spain in 2024. Her original plan had been to move to the United States, but her visa application was rejected. My goal is to stay and help older people. I really enjoy working with them,” she said. “Here, in my country and in other countries around the world, this sector is collapsing due to a shortage of staff. That’s why I believe that being able to regularise your status and contribute as a professional benefits everyone,” she told Al Jazeera. Migrants and refugees who applied for regularisation had already been living in Spain, working in the informal economy for years; 57 percent are men, most come from Latin American countries, and six out of 10 are below the age of 34. So far, 159,097 additional people have registered with the Social Security system as a result of the regularisation process.With this measure, “Spain has made a bet on growth. We’re going to be a country of 50 million people,” Fanjul said. “But it’s not enough.” Amid a European political climate in which anti-migration rhetoric appears to be gaining ground, Spain’s approach shows another path is possible, though “regularisation is only the beginning”, Fanjul said. “The system has been reset, but none of the underlying reasons that brought us to this point have been resolved. “For the state to open up legal, safe and orderly channels for labour mobility is simply common sense,” he concluded.

Espinola is in no doubt.

Despite criticism from those opposed to the regularisation, she stressed, “We have come out stronger.

The migrant community has once again shown its capacity for mutual support in difficult situations.” The regularisation process is not yet over, she added: “We will remain vigilant to make sure the more than a million applications submitted are processed properly.”

(By Patricia Macías López. Al Jazeera)

Lohagad Became 'Siya Point' And A Society Lost Its Compass

This is a question about the cultural water that an entire generation has been swimming in, so long and so completely that they no longer notice it is there. Lohagad Fort has seen centuries of warfare. Maratha soldiers bled on its ramparts defending something larger than themselves. On June 18, 2026, it became the site of something altogether different. A man pushed to his death by the woman he was going to marry. A birthday trip. A cliff. A plan allegedly rehearsed four days earlier. Ketan Agarwal was 26. He had a family, a business, a future. Siya Goyal was 20. She had a boyfriend, a three-year financial plan, and a decision.

India watched. India scrolled. India debated.But nobody asked the question that actually matters. What kind of generation are we producing? This is not a question about Siya Goyal specifically. The courts will decide her fate. The investigation is ongoing, and guilt is for judges to determine, not columnists. This is a question about the cultural water that an entire generation has been swimming in, so long and so completely that they no longer notice it is there.

We have raised a generation on a particular gospel. Individual desire is sacred. Commitment is negotiable. Inconvenience is intolerable. And if something, or someone, stands between you and what you want, the problem is theirs, not yours.

This is not Gen Z's fault. It is their inheritance. And the inheritance has a panoply of architects. The screen replaced the elder. For centuries, moral instruction passed through the family, the guru, the community elder. Gen Z received it through an algorithm. And algorithms do not teach consequence. They teach engagement.

Relationships became content. When love is performed for an audience, it stops being felt for a person. Intimacy became aesthetic. Commitment became a vibe. The other person in the relationship quietly became a prop.

Civilisational grammar was dismantled. Words like dharma, kartavya, paap stopped feeling relevant to a generation that can name their attachment style but cannot articulate a single moral absolute. The vocabulary of obligation was replaced entirely by the vocabulary of self.

Popular culture glamourised detachment. The most aspirational figures in Gen Z's cultural universe are those who feel the least, need the least, and discard the fastest. Vulnerability became weakness. Loyalty became naivety. Cold calculation got rebranded as emotional intelligence.

The family structure quietly eroded. Not dramatically. Slowly. Both parents working, children raised by screens, grandparents physically or emotionally absent. The result is a generation that grew up materially provided for and morally unparented. Instant gratification rewired patience. A generation that has never had to wait for anything has very little framework for tolerating the friction that real relationships, real commitments, and real consequences inevitably bring. These are not excuses. They are causes. There is a difference. And unless we name the causes honestly, we will keep lighting candles at the wrong altar.

We keep treating these cases as aberrations. Shraddha Walkar. Atul Subhash. And now, allegedly, Ketan Agarwal. Each time, we express shock. We hold candles. We demand stricter laws. Then the next reel begins, and we move on. Laws will not fix this. Stricter sentencing will not fix this. You cannot legislate a conscience into existence.

What is missing is the civilisational grammar that once told young Indians, quietly, consistently, through family, through festival, through story and song and ritual, that your desires do not exist in isolation. That another person is not a resource. That there are consequences, not just legal but karmic, moral, existential, to treating a human life as an instrument.

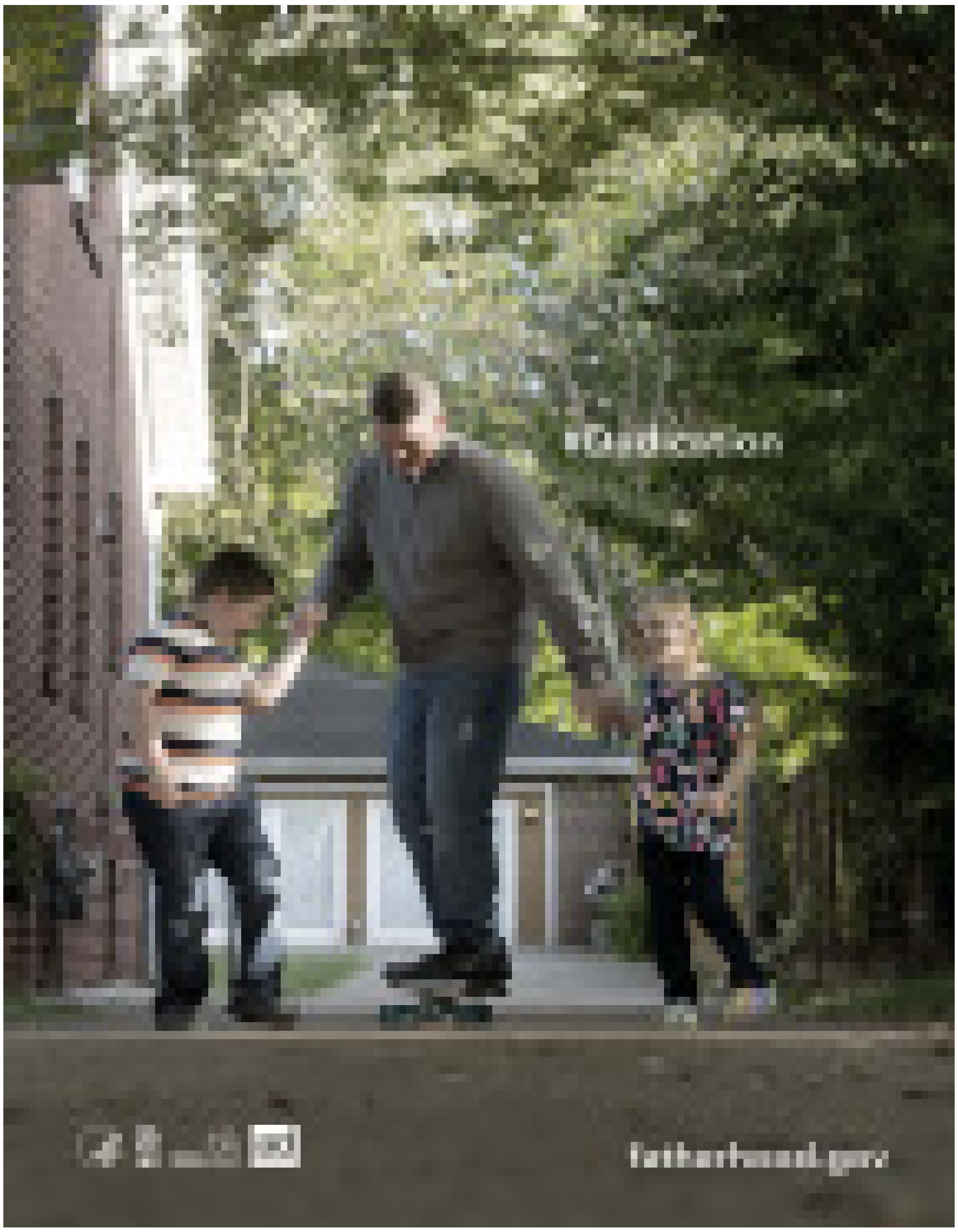
Gen Z is not broken. But they are being failed. By content. By culture. By a civilisational vacuum that nobody in right capacity seems in any hurry to fill. Ketan Agarwal's parents lost a son on a fort that once stood for sacrifice in the service of something greater. There is a brutality in that irony that should haunt us for a while. He deserved better. So does every young Indian still searching, often without knowing it, for a moral language that nobody taught them. But then something happened that made the question larger. And darker.

News18 Marathi reported that Lohagad Fort, a centuries-old Maratha rampart that once held the line against empire, has seen a 25% surge in visitors since the case broke. People are arriving not for the history, not for the monsoon green, not to pay respects to a man who died there. They are arriving to find the spot. To stand there. To click a picture. To post it.They are calling it Siya Point. A man is dead. A family is destroyed. And we have turned the site of his alleged murder into a tourist attraction with an Instagram-friendly name.

So, is Instagram to blame? Partly, yes. The platform that rewards sensation over substance, that turns grief into content and tragedy into trending, has a great deal to answer for. But Instagram did not build the appetite. It only fed it. The appetite was already there, in us, across every age group, every generation, every screen-addicted household that stopped asking what is right and started asking what is interesting.

This is not only about Gen Z anymore. It never really was. Gen Z is simply the most visible symptom of a civilisational sickness that runs much deeper. Where are we going as a society? Lohagad once symbolised resistance. Today it is a content location. If that does not disturb you, the problem is not Gen Z. The problem is the mirror.

By Yuvraj Pokharna



Mamata Banerjee's Bitter Loss And The Great Bengal 'Eggsplosion'

Bengali word for egg is "dim". Let's not slip into a "dimocracy"

Politicians craft their image. And nothing shatters it like a slick of yolk drooling down their face or starched kurtas.

A source of protein for common folk can also be an agent of ultimate humiliation for the high and mighty when flung from a commoner's hand. People's version of "shelling" truth to the power.

Yes, we are talking about the humble egg.

In Bengal, Trinamool leaders today fear egg more than the BJP. Since the Assembly election results, people have found this new form of eggs-pressing their anger. Video of Trinamool netas, including Abhishek Banerjee and other MPs, with their faces and clothes smeared with eggs have gone viral. The images have evoked both glee and concern among people depending on the which of the ideological fence they sit.

India has seen ink smearing, shoe attacks and even odd attempts to slap public representatives as expressions of anger, but egg attacks have not been seen with such ferocity in Indian political history as they have become common in Bengal.

The expression "egg on your face" largely remained an idiom till the losing side in Bengal literally had egg splattered on their faces.

There are a few old examples.

Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was egged by protesters at Heathrow and Southall in the United Kingdom in 1978 who were angry over the imposition of the Emergency.

In 2015, Youth Congress members attacked Odisha's then chief minister Naveen Patnaik's cavalcade with eggs.

But this never became a norm and accepted form of protest politically.

'Egging' In History

But in history, egg has been a potent tool of protest since at least the 16th century. A precursor to 'egging' in the ancient times was pelting of Roman Governor Vespasian with turnips by citizens angry with his policies.

Back in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, justice was very public. Offenders and political opponents were locked into stocks right in the town square while mobs threw whatever they had at them. Rotten eggs and vegetables came in handy.

Centuries later, theatre-goers borrowed the idea. If an actor flopped on stage in Elizabethan times, the crowd answered with rotten eggs and tomatoes. Eggs were the go-to missile - cheap, common, and messy enough to humiliate without actually killing anyone.

In modern times, before the Bengal egg barage, British politicians were most susceptible to this form of humiliation.

David Cameron, Nigel Farage, Ruth Kelly, George Galloway, Nick Griffin, Simon Cowell, David Blaine -- all have been egged.

Even Queen Elizabeth II was not spared. On February 24, 1986, the Queen was pelted with raw eggs by demonstrators in Auckland, New Zealand. During a children's rally campaigner for land rights masquerading as crowd-control officers threw three eggs. One egg struck the car's windshield, while another splattered onto the Queen's pink coat.

In the US, Arnold Schwarzenegger faced egg attack in California while campaigning in 2003

It's Not Just Egg

Various food items have been used as symbols of protest in different places.

The act of throwing yogurt at politicians in Greece is known as "yaourtoma". It emerged as a prominent symbol of public outrage and indignation during the 2011 economic crisis.

During the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, protesters in Odesa threw pots of spaghetti at the Russian consulate.

UK far right leader Nigel Farage had to endure a series of milkshake attacks during his election campaign. 'Milkshaking' became a term. Police had to order a McDonald's in Scotland to stop selling milkshakes over fears people would dunk them over Brexit campaigner Farag

A Bad (smelling) Precedent

Let's return to the eggsplosion back home.

They say "what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow". Today there are more eggs on Trinamool leaders' face than on kitchen pans. God forbid if it becomes a trend for others to follow and "egg on your face" becomes the predicament of losing politicians elsewhere. Today the BJP is watching the Trinamool leaders' public humiliation with glee. Bengal minister Dilip Ghosh has dubbed it a "harmless innovation" by people to vent out their anger, even joking that prices of eggs have gone up in the state. History tells us that vigilantism rarely remains confined to the intended targets. The shoe could be on the other foot without warning.

This idea of normalising of public humiliation as a substitute to due process is a slippery slope.

Bengali word for egg is "dim". Let's not slip into a "dimocracy".

(By Mohd Asim, NDTV)

Tariffs may sound like punishment for foreign countries, but the bill often lands much closer to home. As Washington embraces economic nationalism, the world must ask whether America is rebuilding domestic strength—or quietly dismantling the global trading system that helped create modern prosperity. There is something wonderfully simple about the word "tariff." A foreign country sells too much to America. Put a tariff on it.

An American factory is struggling. Put a tariff on foreign competitors. China is gaining economic power. Raise tariffs.

Jobs are disappearing. Raise tariffs.

Trade deficit too large? You guessed it—tariffs. In political speeches, tariffs are often presented as a magic hammer. Unfortunately, when every economic problem begins to look like a nail, somebody eventually smashes a thumb. And that thumb may belong to the American consumer. The new era of aggressive U.S. tariff policies is being sold under a powerful and emotionally appealing idea: America must protect its workers, rebuild its factories, reduce dependence on foreign countries and stop being taken advantage of.

There is truth in that argument. For decades, many American communities watched factories close, jobs move overseas and once-busy industrial towns slowly lose their economic heartbeat. Globalization created enormous wealth, but it did not distribute that wealth fairly. Wall Street often celebrated cheaper production while workers in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio and other manufacturing regions wondered what exactly they were supposed to celebrate. A cheaper television is not much comfort when your factory has closed. So, yes, the anger is real.

The mistake is believing tariffs alone can fix it. A TARIFF IS NOT A BILL SENT TO BEIJING One of the greatest political myths surrounding tariffs is the idea that foreign countries simply write a check to the U.S. government. That is not how the real world works.

A tariff is a tax placed on imported goods. American companies importing those goods face higher costs. Those businesses then have choices. They can absorb the cost and accept lower profits. They can pressure suppliers for discounts. They can find another source. Or—and this is often the easiest option—they can raise prices. Guess who is standing at the end of that chain? You.

The family buying a washing machine. The contractor purchasing tools and materials. The small business ordering components. The retailer stocking shelves. The manufacturer importing parts needed to assemble a product in America. This is where the tariff debate becomes far more complicated than a campaign slogan. Imagine an American company making kitchen appliances. The final product may proudly carry a "Made in USA" label, but the company could still rely on imported steel, electronic components, motors or specialized machinery. Raise the cost of those inputs and you may actually make the American-made product more expensive. In other words, a tariff designed to protect American manufacturing can sometimes hurt an American manufacturer. Economics has a sense of humor. Unfortunately, taxpayers rarely find the punchline funny.

AMERICA HAS A LEGITIMATE COMPLAINT

Critics of tariffs must also stop pretending the old global trading system was perfectly fair. It wasn't. China's rise as a manufacturing superpower fundamentally changed the global economy. Western corporations rushed toward cheaper labor and massive production capacity. Consumers enjoyed low prices. Corporate profits grew. But the social cost was often left behind in communities that lost stable, middle-class jobs. Trade rules were frequently slow to address state subsidies, intellectual property concerns, market barriers and strategic industries. Governments talked about "free trade" even when some markets were far freer than others. America and other democracies also made a serious strategic mistake: they confused economic efficiency with national security. The cheapest supplier is not always the safest supplier. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the danger of depending heavily on distant supply chains for essential goods. Suddenly, masks, medical equipment, pharmaceutical ingredients and basic industrial supplies became matters of national concern. Then came growing geopolitical tensions. Semiconductors were no longer just computer chips. They became strategic assets. Batteries were no longer just car parts. They became central to the energy economy. Rare earth minerals were no longer obscure entries in a geology textbook. They became essential to defense, electronics and advanced technology. The world discovered that supply chains are political. That lesson cannot be forgotten. But recognizing a problem does not justify using a chainsaw where a scalpel is needed.

THE DANGER OF TARIFF POLITICS

Tariffs are politically attractive because they are easy to explain. Industrial policy is complicated. Worker retraining is complicated. Education reform is complicated. Building modern infrastructure is expensive. Reducing bureaucracy takes years. Creating incentives for advanced manufacturing requires careful planning. A tariff, by comparison, can be announced at a podium. It creates an immediate headline. "We are fighting back." "We are protecting American jobs." "We will no longer be cheated." Powerful words. But economies do not run on applause. If tariffs are too broad, too unpredictable or constantly changing, businesses hesitate to invest. A company planning a factory needs to calculate costs years into the future. It cannot build a billion-dollar operation around trade policies that may repeatedly shift. Uncertainty itself becomes a tax. Small businesses suffer particularly badly. A giant corporation may have lawyers, trade experts and global sourcing teams. A family-owned importer does not. When trade rules change, the multinational corporation holds emergency meetings. The small businessman holds his head.

THE WORLD WILL NOT SIT QUIETLY

There is another uncomfortable truth. Other countries have governments too. When America raises tariffs, trading partners may retaliate. They can target American agricultural products. They can tax U.S. manufactured goods. They can place restrictions on technology. They can create new subsidies for their own industries. They can redirect trade toward other markets. This is how a trade dispute becomes a trade war. And trade wars have a dangerous habit of spreading. A tariff on steel raises costs for companies using steel. Those companies demand protection. Other countries retaliate. Exporters lose markets. Farmers seek government assistance. Industries lobby Washington. The government creates exemptions. Companies hire lobbyists to obtain those exemptions. Soon, the "free market" begins to look like a crowded political auction. Who receives protection? Who gets an exemption? Who has the best lobbyist? Who has the loudest political voice? This is not economic independence. It can become economic favoritism.

INDIA AND THE DEVELOPING WORLD ARE WATCHING CLOSELY

For India, the changing global trade environment presents both an opportunity and a warning. As companies attempt to reduce excessive dependence on China, India has a historic chance to attract manufacturing, investment and technology. The phrase "China Plus One" has become part of the global business vocabulary. Companies want alternative production bases. India has a huge workforce, a massive domestic market and growing technological capability. But opportunity does not automatically become success. Factories do not move because politicians give speeches. They move where electricity is reliable. Where ports work. Where roads connect. Where regulations are understandable. Where contracts can be enforced. Where land and logistics are manageable. Where skilled workers are available. Where policy remains reasonably predictable. India must understand this moment clearly. The world is redesigning its supply chains. The countries that move quickly may benefit for decades. Vietnam understands this. Mexico understands this. Southeast Asian economies understand this. India cannot afford to assume that its population alone guarantees economic victory. For smaller South Asian countries, the risks may be even greater. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and others depend heavily on international trade, exports or global supply networks. A world divided into competing economic camps could make life extremely difficult for developing nations.

They may increasingly face a cruel question: Whose side are you on? America? China?

The West? The emerging blocs? Trade should be about buying and selling. But in the new world, trade is increasingly becoming a loyalty test. That is dangerous.

GLOBALIZATION IS NOT DEAD—IT IS CHANGING ITS ADDRESS

Politicians often speak as if globalization can simply be switched off. It cannot. The smartphone in your pocket may involve design in one country, minerals from another, chips from another, software developed across several nations and final assembly somewhere else. Modern economies are deeply connected. The answer is not to pretend every country can manufacture everything. America does not need to make every T-shirt, toy and coffee mug within its borders. But America should ask serious questions about critical technologies, defense supplies, medicines, energy infrastructure and essential industrial capacity. This is where smart trade policy must replace emotional trade policy. Strategic tariffs may sometimes be necessary.

Targeted protection may sometimes be justified. Temporary government support for vital industries may be sensible. But tariffs should be a tool, not a religion. The goal must be resilience—not isolation.

THE WTO IS BECOMING THE QUIET GUEST NOBODY LISTENS TO

The World Trade Organization was supposed to help create rules for global commerce and provide mechanisms for resolving disputes. Today, the global trading system appears increasingly fragmented. Major powers are acting more aggressively in their own national interests. Governments are using tariffs, subsidies, export controls and sanctions as instruments of foreign policy. The rulebook is gathering dust while the players argue on the field. This should worry everyone. International institutions are often slow, bureaucratic and frustrating. But the alternative to imperfect rules is not perfect freedom. The alternative may be raw power. In a world without respected trade rules, large economies can bully smaller ones. A small country cannot win a tariff war against an economic giant. It needs rules. It needs arbitration. It needs a system where economic disputes do not automatically become political confrontations. Reforming global trade institutions may not excite voters, but it is far safer than allowing international commerce to become economic street fighting.

THE REAL QUESTION: WHAT IS AMERICA'S ECONOMIC PLAN?

Tariffs can buy time. But what will America do with that time? That is the question Washington must answer. If tariffs protect an industry for ten years but the industry never modernizes, what was achieved? If consumers pay higher prices but factories do not return, who benefited?

If companies receive protection but fail to innovate, have we created industrial strength—or corporate dependency? America's long-term competitiveness will not be decided at customs checkpoints. It will be decided in classrooms. Research laboratories.

Factories. Ports.

Energy systems. Technology companies. Community colleges. Engineering programs. Small businesses. America needs skilled workers. It needs faster infrastructure development. It needs affordable and reliable energy. It needs scientific research. It needs modern manufacturing. It needs immigration policies that recognize global talent while protecting national interests. And, perhaps most importantly, it needs consistency. No serious country can build a twenty-year industrial strategy around a four-year political cycle. CONSUMERS DESERVE THE TRUTH

If the United States decides that rebuilding strategic industries requires sacrifice, political leaders should say so. Tell Americans the truth. Say: "Some products may cost more, but we believe this investment is necessary for national security and long-term economic strength." That is an adult conversation. What is unacceptable is pretending tariffs are painless taxes paid by foreigners who conveniently disappear after writing checks to the U.S. Treasury. There is no free lunch in economics. There is not even a free coffee anymore. Every policy creates winners and losers. The responsibility of government is to ensure that the national benefit is greater than the national cost.

PROTECTION IS NOT THE SAME AS STRENGTH

A wall can protect a weak industry. It cannot automatically make that industry strong. Real strength comes from productivity, innovation, skilled workers, efficient infrastructure and the ability to compete. America should protect industries that genuinely matter to national security. It should confront unfair trade practices. It should reduce dangerous dependence on geopolitical rivals. But it must resist the temptation to treat every imported product as an enemy and every tariff as a victory. Because the world is watching. China is adapting. India is positioning itself. Mexico is benefiting from proximity. Southeast Asia is competing aggressively. Europe is defending its industries. The global economy is not waiting for Washington to finish its political arguments. The next chapter of globalization is already being written. The United States can help write the rules—or simply build higher walls and hope the world stays outside. History suggests walls rarely stop economic change.

They usually change where the opportunity goes.

Tariffs may be useful weapons in a nation's economic arsenal. But firing them in every direction is not a strategy. It is noise. And when the political cheering finally fades, American families, businesses and workers will ask the only question that truly matters:

DID THIS MAKE US STRONGER—OR DID IT SIMPLY MAKE EVERYTHING MORE EXPENSIVE?

— EDITORIAL BOARD THE SOUTH ASIAN INSIDER WEEKLY

From Europe to the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific, governments are buying missiles, drones, warships and advanced weapons at a breathtaking pace. Military budgets are rising, old alliances are hardening and new rivalries are emerging. Nations insist they are preparing for peace. History has heard that argument before. The world is preparing for war. Nobody likes saying it that plainly. Governments prefer more comfortable phrases. “Modernizing defense capabilities.” “Strengthening deterrence.” “Enhancing strategic readiness.” “Responding to emerging threats.” “Protecting national interests.” The language is polished. The weapons are real.

Across the world, nations are spending enormous sums on missiles, fighter aircraft, submarines, drones, cyber capabilities, satellites and increasingly intelligent weapons systems. Europe is rearming. China is expanding its military capabilities.

The United States is investing in the technologies of future warfare. Russia remains deeply militarized. India is modernizing its armed forces. Japan is reconsidering long-held defense assumptions. Middle Eastern powers continue purchasing sophisticated weaponry. Smaller countries are buying drones that can perform missions once requiring expensive aircraft. The global message is becoming difficult to misunderstand. Trust is declining. Fear is rising. And when nations become afraid, they buy weapons. The uncomfortable question is whether all these weapons will make the world safer—or simply ensure that the next mistake becomes far more deadly.

EVERY COUNTRY SAYS ITS WEAPONS ARE FOR DEFENSE

There is a fascinating rule in international politics. Almost nobody admits to participating in an arms race. Country A buys missiles. Country B becomes nervous and buys more missiles. Country A sees Country B's new missiles and buys advanced missile defenses. Country B worries those defenses will weaken its deterrent and develops better missiles. Both countries then issue statements. “We seek peace.” Technically, they may even mean it. That is the tragedy. Arms races do not always begin because leaders want war. They often begin because leaders fear war. One country's security becomes another country's insecurity. Strategists call this the “security dilemma.” Ordinary people might call it two nervous neighbors repeatedly buying larger dogs because each is worried about the other's dog. Eventually, both houses are full of barking. The danger is not only intentional conflict. The danger is miscalculation. A radar signal is misunderstood. A military exercise appears threatening. A drone crosses a border. A missile test is interpreted as preparation for attack.

A cyberattack disrupts critical systems, but nobody knows who launched it. Political leaders have minutes to make decisions. In those moments, the difference between peace and catastrophe may depend on communication, judgment and luck. Luck is not a national security strategy.

THE UKRAINE WAR SHATTERED EUROPE'S COMFORTABLE ILLUSION

For decades after the Cold War, much of Europe lived with an extraordinary assumption. Large-scale war on the continent had become almost unthinkable. Economic integration would create stability. Trade would encourage cooperation. Diplomacy would manage disputes. Military power still mattered, of course, but war increasingly felt like something happening elsewhere. Then Russia invaded Ukraine. Europe woke up.

Governments that had been reluctant to increase military spending suddenly began discussing ammunition production, air defense, military readiness and long-term security. Countries reassessed defense policies. NATO regained a sense of urgency. Weapons factories became strategically important. Ammunition stocks became political issues. The lesson was brutal. Peace does not maintain itself. But another lesson must not be forgotten. Military strength alone cannot create permanent peace. Wars eventually end through victory, exhaustion, collapse, negotiation—or some ugly combination of all four. Weapons determine what is possible on the battlefield. Diplomacy determines whether there is a road away from it. The danger today is that governments are rediscovering military power much faster than they are rebuilding diplomatic capacity.

THE MIDDLE EAST REMAINS A ROOM FULL OF MATCHES

Few regions demonstrate the danger of escalation more clearly than the Middle East. The region contains powerful militaries, armed non-state groups, competing governments, unresolved conflicts and deep historical grievances. Add drones. Add missiles. Add cyber warfare. Add major global powers. Add nuclear concerns. Then add social media, where rumors can travel around the world before diplomats finish verifying a fact. This is not a stable combination. A strike intended as a limited response can trigger retaliation. The retaliation demands another response. Political leaders fear appearing weak. Public anger rises. Allies become involved.

Suddenly, nobody remembers who originally wanted to keep the conflict limited. Escalation has its own momentum. Every side says, “We must respond.” Perhaps they must. But if everyone must always respond, when does the responding end? Diplomacy is often mocked as weakness. Negotiation is portrayed as surrender. Talking to an enemy is treated as moral compromise. But the purpose of diplomacy is not to have tea with your friends. You do not need diplomats to speak with people who already agree with you. Diplomacy exists precisely because enemies are dangerous. Talking does not mean trusting. Negotiating does not mean approving. Communication is not friendship. Sometimes, it is simply the thin line preventing a bad situation from becoming a catastrophe.

THE INDO-PACIFIC MAY DEFINE THE NEXT GREAT POWER CRISIS

The world's strategic attention is increasingly turning toward the Indo-Pacific. The United States views China's growing power as a defining long-term challenge. China sees American alliances and military presence in the region through its own security lens. Taiwan remains one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints. The South China Sea is crowded with competing territorial claims. Japan is expanding defense capabilities. Australia is deepening security partnerships. India is strengthening its strategic position while maintaining its own foreign policy independence. The region is economically vital. It is also becoming militarily crowded. This creates an extraordinary contradiction.The United States and China are strategic competitors. They are also deeply connected to the global economy. A major conflict involving them would not remain a regional tragedy. Financial markets would shake. Shipping routes could be disrupted.Technology supply chains would face enormous pressure. Semiconductor availability could become a global emergency. Businesses thousands of miles away would feel the impact.

Consumers would pay. The world has built an economic system deeply dependent on stability in a region increasingly preparing for instability. That should terrify corporate boardrooms as much as defense ministries.

THE NEW ARMS RACE IS NOT ONLY ABOUT NUCLEAR BOMBS

When people hear "arms race," they often imagine nuclear missiles. Nuclear weapons remain the ultimate danger. But modern warfare is expanding into new territories. Cyber weapons can attack electricity networks, financial systems, hospitals and government institutions. Satellites can be targeted or disrupted. Artificial intelligence can help analyze battlefields and accelerate decision-making. Autonomous systems may increasingly identify or engage targets. Drones have transformed warfare.Cheap unmanned aircraft can threaten equipment costing millions of dollars. A relatively inexpensive drone may force a military to use an extremely expensive missile to destroy it. That is not only a battlefield problem. It is an accounting problem. War has entered the age of software.

The next major conflict may involve programmers sitting thousands of miles from the battlefield. Computer networks may become targets before soldiers cross borders. Banks could fail. Communications could disappear. Transportation systems could be disrupted. And civilians may not immediately know whether they are experiencing a technical failure or an act of war.

This raises a terrifying question. What exactly counts as an attack? If a foreign cyber operation shuts down a country's power grid and people die, is that an act of war? If an AI-controlled military system makes a catastrophic error, who is responsible? The programmer?

The commander? The government? The machine?

International law was built around a world of soldiers, ships and identifiable battlefields. Technology is creating conflicts where the attacker may be invisible and the battlefield may be your laptop.

AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS SHOULD FRIGHTEN EVERYONE

Human beings have spent thousands of years becoming more efficient at killing one another. Artificial intelligence may accelerate that process. Autonomous weapons systems raise profound moral and security questions. Should a machine be allowed to decide who dies? Supporters argue that AI systems could potentially make faster decisions, improve accuracy and reduce risks to soldiers. Perhaps.

But machines make mistakes. Software contains flaws. Data can be wrong. Sensors can fail. Systems can be hacked. Artificial intelligence can misinterpret information. Anyone who has ever shouted at a smartphone because autocorrect changed a simple word should think carefully before giving software authority over lethal force. The comparison may sound humorous. The consequences are not. Human soldiers also make terrible mistakes.

But removing humans from critical decisions creates a new level of moral distance. War is already dangerously easy for political leaders who do not personally fight. Imagine making lethal decisions even more automated. The world urgently needs international rules governing autonomous weapons. Not after the technology becomes widely deployed. Not after the first catastrophe. Now. Because once dozens of countries possess such systems, agreement will become much more difficult. The best time to create traffic rules is before every vehicle is moving at 100 miles per hour.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS HAVE NOT DISAPPEARED

The nuclear danger has faded from everyday public conversation. That does not mean the weapons have faded. The world's major nuclear powers continue maintaining and modernizing their arsenals. Relations between some nuclear-armed states have deteriorated. Arms-control frameworks have weakened. Communication channels are under pressure. Meanwhile, nuclear technology and missile capabilities remain central to global security concerns. For younger generations, nuclear war may feel like an old movie plot. For those who lived through the Cold War, the fear was much more immediate. Children practiced emergency drills. Families discussed fallout shelters. Governments planned for unimaginable destruction. The world came dangerously close to catastrophe more than once. Humanity survived partly because leaders made careful decisions. And sometimes because individual people refused to panic.

That history should produce humility. Instead, the world appears increasingly comfortable using nuclear threats as political language. There is nothing normal about nuclear war. There is no meaningful "winning" when cities disappear. Nuclear deterrence may remain part of international security. But deterrence without communication is extremely dangerous. Two armed people pointing weapons at each other may create a form of stability. It is still a terrible time for somebody to sneeze.

THE WEAPONS INDUSTRY IS HAVING A VERY GOOD DECADE

War is tragedy. It is also business. Defense companies manufacture essential equipment for national security. Countries need military industries. Soldiers should not be sent into danger without proper equipment. But wherever governments spend hundreds of billions of dollars, powerful economic interests develop. Factories create jobs. Defense contracts support communities. Companies lobby governments. Politicians defend local industries. Military programs become economically and politically difficult to cancel. This creates uncomfortable questions. Are all weapons purchases based entirely on genuine security needs? Are some influenced by domestic politics? Do governments properly examine whether expensive systems are effective? Are taxpayers receiving value? Is enough money being invested in diplomacy, conflict prevention and international institutions? The imbalance is striking. Governments will spend billions preparing for a war. Then they will complain about the cost of maintaining diplomatic missions. A missile can cost millions. A skilled diplomat is considerably cheaper. Of course, diplomats cannot shoot down incoming aircraft. But perhaps better diplomacy can sometimes prevent the aircraft from taking off. The world needs both defense and diplomacy. The problem is that one comes with dramatic machinery, large contracts and patriotic ceremonies. The other often involves tired people sitting in windowless rooms arguing over commas in documents. Peace is not very cinematic. That may be why we consistently underfund it.

INDIA CANNOT IGNORE THE NEW SECURITY REALITY

India sits in one of the world's most complicated strategic neighborhoods. It has nuclear-armed neighbors. It faces a long-running rivalry with Pakistan. Its relationship with China combines economic interaction, competition and unresolved border tensions. The Indian Ocean is becoming increasingly strategically important. Technology is transforming warfare. India must modernize its military. That is reality. A country of India's size, economic importance and geopolitical position cannot outsource its security. But India must also protect one of its greatest strategic traditions: the ability to maintain relationships across competing blocs. The world increasingly wants countries to choose teams. Washington or Beijing. Russia or the West.

One alliance or another.

India has historically resisted simplistic choices. That strategic independence may become even more valuable. India can strengthen defense partnerships while continuing diplomatic engagement. It can modernize its military while advocating restraint. It can participate in strategic groupings while maintaining dialogue with countries outside them. This is not indecision. Done intelligently, it is statecraft. The world does not need another country shouting into the geopolitical argument. It needs powerful nations capable of speaking to more than one side.

MILITARY STRENGTH AND DIPLOMACY ARE NOT OPPOSITES

One of the most foolish ideas in modern politics is that supporting diplomacy means opposing military strength. History does not support that argument. Diplomacy often works best when backed by credible power. But power without diplomacy becomes intimidation. A strong military can deter aggression. A strong diplomatic service can prevent misunderstanding. Intelligence agencies can identify threats. Diplomats can communicate intentions. Defense alliances can create security. Negotiations can create exits from crises. These tools should work together. Instead, modern politics often rewards the loudest voice. Leaders compete to appear tougher. Compromise becomes a dirty word. Social media turns international crises into instant public performances. Every statement is analyzed. Every handshake becomes controversial. Every negotiation is accused of betrayal. But diplomacy requires flexibility. It requires private conversations. It requires allowing opponents to save face. Sometimes, it requires accepting an imperfect solution because the alternative is far worse. That is difficult in an age where every political decision must immediately become online content. War can begin with a viral video.

Peace usually requires boring meetings. We should learn to appreciate boring meetings.

THE WORLD NEEDS EMERGENCY BRAKES

The international system urgently needs stronger mechanisms to prevent accidental escalation. Military-to-military communication between major powers must remain open. Hotlines matter. Arms-control discussions must return to the center of international diplomacy. Cyber warfare needs clearer international norms. Autonomous weapons require serious global negotiations. Nuclear risk reduction cannot become an occasional conference topic. Regional organizations must improve crisis management. Governments must invest in diplomatic expertise. And leaders must stop treating every conversation with an adversary as political weakness. You install brakes on a car because you intend to drive. Not because you oppose transportation. Diplomacy is the emergency braking system of international politics. The world is currently building faster vehicles. We should probably check the brakes.

WE ARE SPENDING FORTUNES PREPARING FOR THE DAY WE HOPE NEVER COMES

Every government has a duty to protect its citizens. Ignoring genuine military threats would be irresponsible. Pacifist slogans will not stop tanks. Good intentions will not intercept missiles. International law does not enforce itself. Military strength matters. Deterrence matters. Preparedness matters. But humanity must confront the direction of travel. If every country feels less safe, and every country responds by buying more weapons, at what point does everyone finally feel secure? Ten thousand more missiles? A million more drones?

More nuclear warheads? More autonomous weapons? More military satellites?

Where does it end? Perhaps it does not.

That is the nature of an arms race. There is always another threat. Another technology. Another competitor. Another reason to spend. The world is entering an era of extraordinary technological power at precisely the moment international trust is collapsing. That combination should concern every serious leader. We need strong defenses. ut we also need strong diplomacy. We need military readiness. But we also need communication.

We need deterrence.

But we also need ways to step away from the edge.

The greatest military victory is sometimes the war that never begins. Unfortunately, history rarely builds monuments to successful prevention. There are no dramatic photographs of the missile that was never launched. No national holiday for the war that did not happen.

No famous battlefield where diplomats quietly prevented thousands of deaths. But perhaps there should be.

The world is rearming. The factories are busy.

The defense budgets are growing. The drones are flying.

The algorithms are learning.

The missiles are becoming faster.

And diplomacy?

Diplomacy is trying to catch up. Humanity should hope it does.

Because if the weapons reach the future before wisdom does, we may discover—once again and far too late

—that preparing endlessly for war is much easier than stopping one after it begins.

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4 POWERFUL BOOKS.
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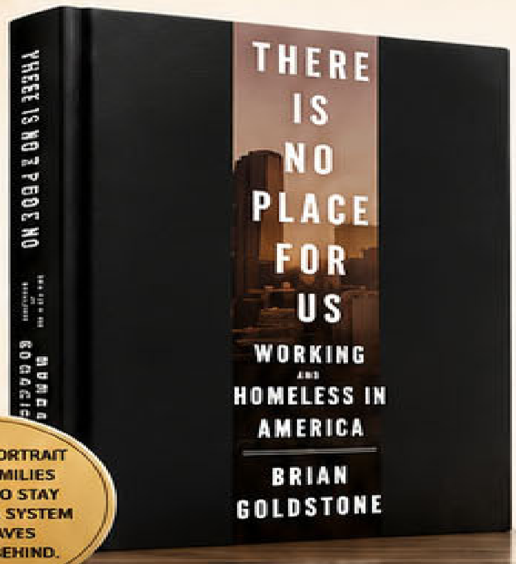

A MOVING PORTRAIT OF FIVE FAMILIES FIGHTING TO STAY HOUSED IN A SYSTEM THAT LEAVES MILLIONS BEHIND.

1 THERE IS NO PLACE FOR US:
WORKING AND HOMELESS IN AMERICA
— BRIAN GOLDSTONE

In this paradigm-shifting, immersive book, journalist and anthropologist Brian Goldstone follows five families in Atlanta who, despite working full time, struggle to stay housed amid gentrification, a lack of tenants' rights, and low wages.

These families, all Black, fall into a "shadow realm" — they are not considered officially homeless by the federal government, but lack a fixed living place as they double up with friends and family, sleep in their cars, or pay exorbitant rates at extended-stay hotels.

Woven throughout their stories is a trenchant exploration of how America's disinvestment in public housing and relentless pursuit of free-market growth have fueled housing insecurity for poor working families.

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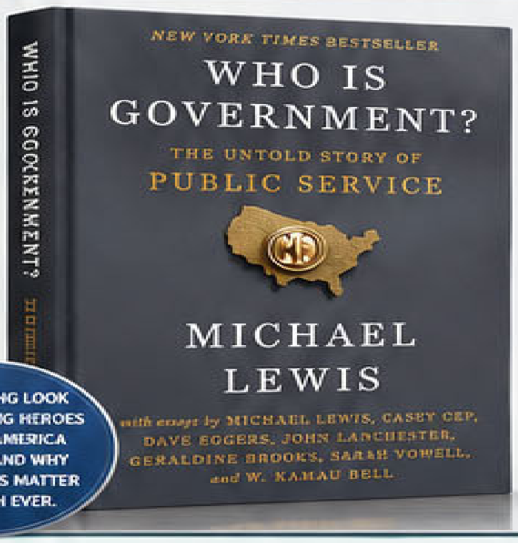


A COMPELLING LOOK AT THE UNSUNG HEROES WHO KEEP AMERICA RUNNING—AND WHY THEIR STORIES MATTER MORE THAN EVER.

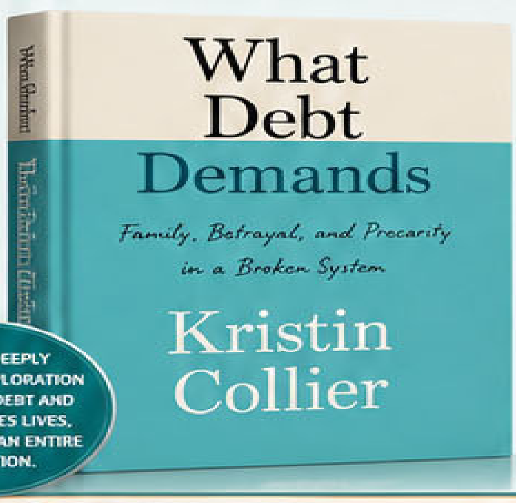
2 WHO IS GOVERNMENT?:
THE UNTOLD STORY OF PUBLIC SERVICE
— MICHAEL LEWIS

Thousands of unsung heroes in the government are making life better for Americans. But because of bureaucracies being made up of bureaucrats, we rarely hear those stories.

This book showcases them. Like a coal-mining safety official who helped the U.S. reach zero mine-collapse deaths. Or the man who has led the National Cemetery Administration to the top of the American Customer Satisfaction Index.

As the federal government is in its biggest shake-up in a generation, it's worth learning about where the bright spots are.

PUBLIC SERVICE & LEADERSHIP | DEDICATION & IMPACT | STORIES THAT INSPIRE



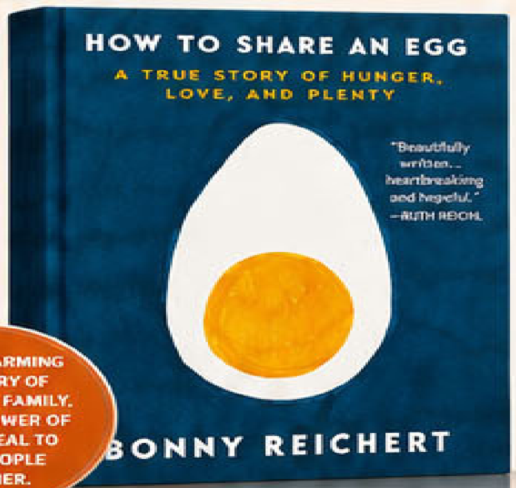
A SHARP, DEEPLY PERSONAL EXPLORATION OF STUDENT DEBT AND HOW IT SHAPES LIVES, DREAMS, AND AN ENTIRE GENERATION.

3 WHAT DEBT DEMANDS:
FAMILY, BETRAYAL, AND PRECARITY IN A BROKEN SYSTEM
— KRISTIN COLLIER

Kristin Collier, like millions of other American students, funded her college education in part with loans. But she was shocked when she first saw her credit report — it listed more than $200,000 in debts, mostly for private student loans that Collier did not take out herself.

In What Debt Demands, Collier braids her personal experience of familial identity theft and fraudulent debt together with a broader reckoning with how being saddled with debt impacts every aspect of a person's life, and how banks, loan servicers and the federal government benefit from borrowers' suffering.

STUDENT DEBT & FINANCE | BETRAYAL & IDENTITY | JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY



A HEARTWARMING TRUE STORY OF RESILIENCE, FAMILY, AND THE POWER OF A GOOD MEAL TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER.

4 HOW TO SHARE AN EGG:
A TRUE STORY OF HUNGER, LOVE, AND PLENTY
— BONNY REICHERT

The moment you finish, you'll want to share this book with family and friends, just like a good meal.

Journalist and chef Bonny Reichert grew up loving food. She also grew up the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, Saul Reichert, who had nearly starved to death when he was a boy.

There is pain but so much joy — and readers will love spending time in the Reicherts' kitchen. As the author writes in her introduction, it's "about a family that lost everything and built itself up again, one meal at a time."

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Rains Call For A Warm Cup Of Hot Chocolate That Will Keep Your Hormones Healthy

(By Abigail Banerji)

Hot chocolate has always been a comforting drink that brings warmth and all the cosy feels. However, it is also very indulgent and not something that can be consumed every day, no matter how tasty it is.

But what if there was a way to make it healthy? It would be perfect to enjoy during the season's rains. This recipe was shared by content creator and fitness coach Ashley Paz (@coach.ashleypaz) on Instagram. It includes only healthy ingredients that support hormone health without compromising on taste.

What are the health benefits?

Cacao powder

Cacao is a concentrated source of magnesium, a mineral that supports nervous-system regulation and helps muscles relax — useful when stress pushes cortisol up. Its flavonoids (antioxidant plant compounds) also reduce inflammation and improve blood-flow to the brain, which can support mood and cognitive clarity. Choose minimally processed, unsweetened cacao powder to get the most magnesium and antioxidant benefits without added sugars.

Cinnamon stick

Cinnamon contains compounds that improve insulin sensitivity and slow carbohydrate digestion, which can blunt post-meal blood sugar spikes and the energy crashes that follow. More stable blood sugar supports steady energy, fewer cravings, and a calmer mood. Whole cinnamon sticks release flavor slowly in hot drinks and stews, offering a gentler, longer-lasting effect than powdered cinnamon added cold.

Maple syrup

Pure maple syrup provides sweetness with a lower glycemic impact than refined white sugar for many people, thanks to its trace minerals (manganese, zinc) and antioxidant polyphenols. That said, it's still a concentrated source of sugars, so moderate use is key. When used instead of refined sugar, maple syrup can make treats taste sweeter while contributing small amounts of micronutrients and a more gradual rise in blood glucose.

Unsweetened almond milk

Unsweetened almond milk is low in calories and free of lactose and casein, making it easier to digest for people with dairy sensitivities. A less irritated gut helps maintain balanced inflammation and supports the microbiome, which in turn influences hormone regulation and mood. Opt for varieties without added sugars or gums if you're aiming for minimal processing and better digestive tolerance.

Hormone-Healthy Hot Chocolate Recipe

Ingredients for 2 servings:

- 3 cups unsweetened almond milk
- 2 tbsp unsweetened cacao powder
- 1 stick cinnamon
- 2 tbsp pure organic maple syrup

How to make:

Add all the ingredients to a pot.

The same amount of cocoa powder can also be used, but cacao is higher in magnesium, iron, and antioxidants to get the most hormone support from your hot chocolate

Whisk it till all the lumps and clumps have dissolved.

Keep whisking the mixture till it comes to a simmer over medium-low heat, but do not boil it. Once the liquid has simmered, check the consistency and ensure that everything has melded together.

Now it is ready to enjoy! Serve with whipped cream or marshmallows or enjoy as is. This hot chocolate is warm, nourishing, and perfectly balanced for your body.

6 Healthy Desk Friendly Foods Every Busy Professional Should Keep Handy

Almonds: Packed with healthy fats, protein, and fiber, a handful of almonds keeps hunger pangs at bay. They are highly shelf-stable and rich in vitamin E, an antioxidant that supports brain health and keeps you sharp during long afternoon meetings. (Image: Pexels)

Roasted Chickpeas: If you crave a crunchy savory snack, roasted chickpeas are the perfect alternative to potato chips. They are loaded with plant-based protein and complex carbohydrates, providing a steady release of energy without the dreaded mid-day blood sugar crash. (Image: Pexels)

Pumpkin Seeds: These tiny powerhouses are exceptionally rich in magnesium, zinc, and iron. Keeping a jar of pumpkin seeds on your desk helps regulate stress levels, supports your immune system, and provides a satisfying, quiet crunch that won't disrupt your coworkers. (Image: Pexels)

Dark Chocolate: A square of dark chocolate is the ultimate productivity booster. Rich in flavonoids and a touch of natural caffeine, it enhances blood flow to the brain, elevates your mood, and satisfies sweet cravings without a heavy sugar overload. (Image: Pexels)

Oatmeal Packets: Unsweetened instant oatmeal packets are a lifesaver for busy mornings. Just add hot water from the office dispenser for a warm, comforting bowl of soluble fiber that keeps you feeling full and focused well past the lunch hour. (Image: Pexels)

Walnuts: Distinctly shaped like brains, walnuts are indeed incredible for cognitive function. They are the only nut significantly high in omega-3 fatty acids, which actively fight inflammation and support mental clarity when you are facing dense, complex tasks. (Image: Pexels)

3 influencer marketing trends and ways to take action

Discover how influencer marketing has transformed the industry, reshaping brand marketing strategies. Stay ahead of the game and explore ways to incorporate upcoming trends into your campaigns.

By KELLIE DAVIS

In just three years, Khabe Lame became the most followed creator on TikTok with 2.4 billion likes and 162 million followers. And get this, he's never uttered a single word in his videos.

There's more than meets the eye when it comes to the impact influencers have. Investing in influencer marketing for your next campaign might just be the game-changing move your brand needs.

Let's dive into the top influencer trends predicted to change how brands strategize their marketing this year. Here they are at a glance:

Top 5 influencer marketing trends

Micro-influencers take the lead

Authenticity reigns supreme over polished content

Money is moving from paid advertising to influencer marketing

Say yes to long-term relationships

Video will become the dominant format?

1) Micro-influencers take the lead

Micro-influencers, with follower counts ranging from 15k to 75k, truly shine in their chosen niches. They combine their passion and expertise, providing credible endorsements that resonate with their highly engaged audience. These personalized interactions lead to higher engagement rates and foster strong relationships, resulting in increased conversion rates. Moreover, brands find their cost-effective partnerships incredibly appealing.

You may be scratching your head, wondering why these smaller players are making such a big splash in the influencer marketing scene. It's pretty simple: micro-influencers are masters of their niches. They're passionate experts, enthusiasts and thought leaders who have built highly engaged audiences. And when they endorse a product or service, their followers listen. It's like getting a recommendation from a trusted friend.

The numbers don't lie. Micro-influencers achieve higher engagement rates and personalized interactions (according to Hubspot). They strike up conversations, respond to comments and build relationships that increase conversion rates. That's the kind of authentic engagement you can't buy with traditional advertising.

Example of a micro-influencer campaign in action

The influencer-managed services team at impact.com partnered with luxury brand Coach to amplify the promotion of their newest fragrance, Coach Dreams Sunset. To generate engaging content, impact.com collaborated with 40 micro- and macro-influencers who received complimentary products in exchange for creating user-generated content (UGC). Coach then reposted this captivating content across their channels, further enhancing the brand's reach and impact. The campaign resonated with the intended audience, reaching an impressive 2.3 million people, while boasting an engagement rate of 4.5% and generating 211 pieces of user-generated content.

Recruiting the right micro-influencers in four steps

Now that you understand micro-influencers' power, the next step is finding the right ones to work with. Follow these steps:

Use the right social media analytics tools. Before signing the dotted line, you should understand a potential partner's demographic and reach. Ensure they align with what you're looking for before reaching out.

Join an influencer marketing platform, like impact.com / creator. Here you can access a global creator marketplace, filter creators by following, niche and much more. You can also handle everything from automated contracts to compensation and campaign tracking.

Search relevant hashtags. This is a great way to find creators that match your niche in a sea of influencers.

Contact micro-influencers directly via DMs. More than half of micro-influencers prefer this method of contact.

2) Authenticity reigns supreme over perfectly polished content

Recently, brands witnessed a rise in cynicism and skepticism regarding advertising. Digitally savvy consumers see right through inauthentic endorsements. Authenticity is a brand currency as consumers seek transparency, integrity and consistency when trusting influencers.?

Authentic content leads to deeper connections between influencers and their audience, helping influencers gain trust over time. This trust ultimately increases engagement, and when brands partner with these influencers, that trust gets transferred to them.

When impact.com partnered with the online education platform GetSmarter, they aimed to create excitement around its courses. A collective sixteen South African influencers within various niches were asked to create authentic and inspirational content with a 20% promo code. The influencers' authenticity translated into impressive results, with over 8 million impressions, 620k+ clicks and $0.01 cost-per-click (CPC).

Brands associated with authentic influencers can boost their image and reach a broader demographic. In this case, BBQGuys, a major online retailer for all things grill-related, partnered with impact.com to expand their audience beyond the typical griller. The brand reached target audiences, including the LGBTQ+ community, couples, urban dwellers and female campers. By leveraging authentic recommendations and UGC, the campaign successfully boosted BBQGuys' brand awareness. They reached over 636k individuals, with an impressive 60% of the audience being female.

How to brief influencers to create authentic content

Crafting authentic content is all about letting your influencers have the freedom to express their creativity. You've chosen them because their style aligns with your brand, right? So trust them to know their audience.

Give them clear goals, but don't micromanage their process. Authenticity shines when creators are allowed to be themselves.

Provide clear goals, but allow creative freedom. Share the objectives and key messages you wish to convey to the target audience. However, let the creators adhere to their unique style and explore creative ideas. Remember, you selected them for a reason.

?Encourage personal storytelling. Allow creators to share their authentic experience with the product. They can elaborate on how to use the product and why it should be the audience's go-to choice. You can also include examples of product reviews.

Provide product knowledge, but let them express their product experience. Engage in a comprehensive discussion with the influencer regarding the key features. Afterward, graciously step back and allow them to experience the product independently. Viewers possess an innate ability to discern authenticity from a considerable distance. Hence, it is imperative for influencers to convey an authentic and genuine opinion.

?Request UGC from creators. UGC focuses more on the audience's experience of the product or service. Build a content bank for future use by licensing creators' content. This differentiates it from influencer channels, where videos and photos are tailored to their audience. This excerpt from The state of influencer marketing for consumers in 2023 highlights the importance of sharing one's experience with a product and how it creates authenticity with audiences.

3) Money is moving from paid advertising to influencer marketing

If you want proof of what's working, follow where the money goes: 63 percent of brands allocate more budget to influencer marketing in 2024. This shift occurred as paid ads became more expensive and less visible. Influencer marketing also offers reduced customer acquisition costs (CAC) and 11x higher return on investment (ROI) compared to traditional marketing.

According to impact.com's research, 64 percent of consumers repeatedly purchase products or services at least some of the time based on an influencer's recommendation.

Define clear goals for your influencer marketing campaign. Don't leave influencers in the dark. They should understand what to focus on to hit brand goals.

Choose influencers based on those goals. You can choose between nano-, micro-, mid-tier, macro-, and mega-influencers or switch things up with UCG creators. Find what fits your brand and decide how the reach, engagement, and cost will influence your campaign.

Understand market rates and compensate creators fairly. Creators provide your brand with expert content creation skills, and in return, should get paid fairly—especially if you want to build a long-term partnership. Assess audience size, media quality, and different payment models to determine an appropriate offer. To learn more about what influencers charge, read our blog here.

?Identify which platform your target audience will be most active on. Then, calculate the cost per post or pay for performance rates accordingly. For example, a post for a video from a TikTok nano-influencer starts at around $500, but sponsored content for a similar-sized YouTube influencer starts at around $1,000.

?Easily track your ROI with impact.com / creator to determine where to invest your budget. The full-funnel management platform can help you analyze your data and optimize specific touchpoints all in one place.

4) Say yes to long-term relationships

Brands focusing on developing consistent brand messaging through increased visibility with longer, more frequent exposure are coming out on top. This messaging should flow into organic endorsements fitting into the brand's natural narrative. 29% of consumers say a promotion feels more authentic when an influencer posts about them several times.

37% of consumers also look to influencers for inspiration, meaning their recommendations can directly translate into conversions. Trust and authenticity matter to consumers above all, and long-term partnerships between brands and influencers facilitate these qualities.

Think of influencers like partners rather than freelancers. Create a strong feedback loop, sharing performance metrics so you can strategize going forward. The cherry on top—having go-to partners reduces the need for outsourcing content creation and takes the pressure off your internal teams.

How to cultivate long-term influencer partnerships for greater campaign success

Think of building lasting relationships as a marathon, not a sprint. Consistent collaboration leads to a unified brand message, increased visibility, and a deeper connection with your audience.

It's like having a trusted friend recommend your product or service, rather than a distant acquaintance. So, invest time in nurturing these relationships, understand their creative process, and work towards shared goals.

India's inflation risks mount on renewed US-Iran tensions, El Nino

By Ruchi Bhatia

India's stronger-than-expected inflation reading for June has left policymakers facing a more uncertain outlook, with renewed tensions around the Strait of Hormuz threatening to push up oil prices and a developing El Niño raising the risk of higher food costs.

Consumer prices rose 4.38 per cent from a year earlier in June — rising above the Reserve Bank of India's target for the first time in nearly a year and a half as higher food and fuel costs filtered through the economy. Yet, a majority of economists expect the central bank to keep rates at 5.25 per cent in 2026, saying there's still little evidence price pressures are broadening.That outlook is being tested by President Donald Trump's decision to reinstate a blockade of Iranian ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz, reviving concerns over energy supplies for the world's third-largest oil importer.

"Oil prices have started to increase once again," Sameer Narang and Jyoti Sharma of ICICI Bank wrote in a note. "This has added an element of uncertainty to inflation as well as growth."Core prices, ex-gold and silver, are inching up too, though they remain at 2.5 per cent. Narang and Sharma estimate this measure to nudge above 4 per cent toward the end of the year — becoming a potential trigger for the RBI to raise rates by 50 basis points "once this inflation gauge sustainably moves above 4 per cent." The RBI targets inflation at 4 per cent, with a tolerance band of 2 per cent to 6 per cent. Its next policy decision is due on Aug. 5.

Data released Tuesday showed a measure of prices received by wholesalers climbed near 10 per cent in June from a year earlier, exceeding the median estimate for a 9.2 per cent increase. Unlike producer prices, the index also captures commercial mark-ups and has rebounded steadily this year after spending much of last year in deflation.

India's retail fuel prices also remain elevated following recent increases by state-owned retailers. Still, economists don't expect further increases with crude oil trading closer to the mid-$80s a barrel, from above $100 earlier this year. That's one reason why many have pushed back or abandoned their calls for further tightening, arguing policymakers have room to wait.Among the outliers is Upasna Bhardwaj at Kotak Mahindra Bank who forecasts half a percentage point of rate hikes in the second half of the fiscal year, possibly beginning in December. "We remain cautious on the impact of the recent re-escalation of geopolitical tensions and the plausible upside risks on oil prices," said Bhardwaj. For now, she expects the RBI to "remain on a wait and watch mode" as it assesses the impact of pass through of supply-side pressures into core inflation. An intensifying El Niño has raised concerns that below-normal rainfall could hurt crop production and lift food prices later this year. Seasonal monsoon rainfall is running 18 per cent below the long-term average. As of July 3, farmers had planted only about one-third of the normal area for kharif, or summer-sown, crops — down 20.8 per cent from a year earlier, Aastha Gudwani, India chief economist at Barclays Plc. Gudwani expects inflation to accelerate toward the upper end of the RBI's tolerance band in the December quarter because of unfavorable base effects and weaker rains. However, she still believes policymakers will remain on hold. "Hopefully, as rains pick up, sowing decline should taper too," Gudwani said. "That said, should slower sowing yield lower output, we expect the government to dip into its buffer stocks."

Tata is still India's No.1 brand. But there's a new entrant in the top 10

Tata Group retained its place as India's most valuable brand for the 18th straight year, while Adani Group entered the top 10 for the first time. The Brand Finance India 100 2026 report also showed stronger gains for companies investing in AI, digital infrastructure and renewable energy.

Tata Group has retained its position as India's most valuable brand for the 18th consecutive year, but this year's rankings come with a notable change. Adani Group has entered the country's top 10 most valuable brands for the first time, reflecting its rapid expansion across infrastructure, energy, logistics and renewable energy.

According to the Brand Finance India 100 2026 report, the combined brand value of India's 100 most valuable brands rose 7% year-on-year to $252.8 billion, highlighting the resilience of Indian companies despite global economic uncertainty.

The report suggests that companies investing in areas such as electronics, semiconductors, artificial intelligence (AI), digital infrastructure, manufacturing and renewable energy are seeing stronger brand growth.

TATA EXTENDS ITS LEAD

Tata Group continued to top the rankings with a brand value of $33.6 billion, up 6% from last year.The report said Tata strengthened its leadership through investments in electronics, data infrastructure, digital platforms, electric mobility, semiconductors, renewable energy and advanced manufacturing.

Infosys retained the second position for the fifth consecutive year, with its brand value rising to $16.4 billion. The report attributed the growth to continued demand for AI, cloud computing and digital transformation services.

Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) secured the third spot after its brand value increased 12% to $15.3 billion, supported by its extensive rural distribution network and agent base.

HDFC Group ranked fourth despite a 2% decline in brand value to $13.9 billion, while Reliance Group completed the top five with an 11% increase in brand value to $10.8 billion, driven by growth in retail, telecom, digital services and energy businesses.

SBI Group retained the sixth position with a brand value of $9.8 billion, followed by HCLTech at seventh place with a brand value of $9 billion.

ADANI ENTERS THE TOP 10

The biggest change in this year's rankings came from Adani Group.

The conglomerate entered India's top 10 most valuable brands for the first time, climbing to the eighth position after its brand value jumped 31% to $8.5 billion.

The report said the growth reflects the group's continued expansion across infrastructure, energy, logistics, airports and renewable energy.

Larsen & Toubro (L&T) ranked ninth with a brand value of $8.3 billion, while Airtel completed the top 10 after its brand value rose 6% to $8.1 billion.

SUZLON EMERGES AS THE FASTEST-GROWING BRAND

While Tata remained the country's most valuable brand, Suzlon Energy emerged as India's fastest-growing brand.

Its brand value surged 114% to $418 million, helped by an operational turnaround, a stronger order book and growing momentum in India's renewable energy sector, according to the report.

Several other companies also recorded sharp gains in brand value.

Adani Power led the list with a 152% increase to $1.8 billion. Yes Bank's brand value rose 79% to $458 million, while JSW Group recorded a 55% increase to $2.3 billion. MRF and engineering company Zetwerk also posted healthy growth, with brand values rising 24% and 19%, respectively.

STRONGEST BRANDS

The report also ranked companies based on brand strength, a measure of how consumers perceive and trust a brand.

Taj Hotels retained its position as India's strongest brand for the fifth consecutive year, with a Brand Strength Index (BSI) score of 93.5 out of 100 and an AAA+ rating. Zomato ranked second after its brand value rose 37% to $1.4 billion, while Amul secured the third spot with a 22% increase in brand value to $5 billion.

Among technology companies, TCS remained India's most valuable IT services brand with a brand value of $21.2 billion. It also retained its position as the world's second most valuable IT services brand for the fifth consecutive year, the report said.

Thailand keeps visa-free entry for Indians, but cuts stay to 30 days

Thailand has dropped its plan to end visa-free entry for Indian tourists after seeing a decline in arrivals from India even before the proposal came into effect.

Indian visitors will continue to enjoy visa-free entry to Thailand, the Thai government said on Tuesday.

The move comes after a proposal to scrap visa-free entry led to a decline in tourist arrivals from India. Although the proposal didn't come into effect, it created uncertainty among travellers and resulted in fewer arrivals.

India is one of Thailand's biggest tourism markets, after China and Malaysia.However, the maximum visa-free stay duration for Indian visitors has been reduced from 60 days to 30 days.

Thailand's Tourism Minister, Surasak Phancharoenworakul, said the move was aimed to match the travel patterns of Indian tourists while supporting Thailand's tourism industry.

"If problems arise from this measure in the future, the government can review it then," Surasak said as reported by Bloomberg.

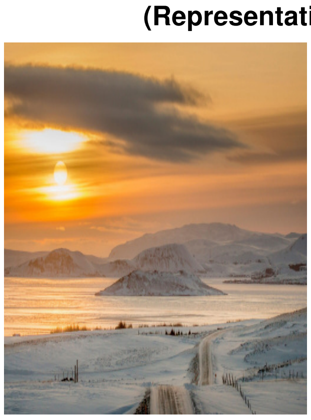
In May, the Thai cabinet had approved a proposal to reduce the list of visa-exempt countries from 93 to 54, with a 30-day stay limit for eligible visitors. However, the proposal had not yet come into force. Now, along with India, visitors from Croatia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Malta, and the Maldives will also enjoy 30-day visa-free entry.

The visa policy changes come as Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul's government steps up efforts to curb the misuse of Thailand's visa-free regime by foreign nationals involved in illegal activities. The move also addresses concerns raised by local businesses, particularly in tourist hotspots, over visitors working without authorisation or engaging in activities that violate their visa conditions.Tourism remains a vital pillar of Thailand's economy. Thailand tourism also grabbed headlines after a massive fire tore through a pub in Bangkok on July 12, killing at least 27 people and leaving several others injured.

5 Places In Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey You Can Visit In Real Life

The Odyssey Filming Location: Spanning the dramatic cliffside ruins of Greece and the storied caverns of Italy, scroll ahead to uncover the spectacular real-world backdrops of Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey.

Greece: Though Homer's epic poem unfolds across the Mediterranean Sea, it is Greece that Odysseus must return to, anchoring the country as a worthy filming location. As per Hellenic Film Commission, production took place in the Peloponnese region in March and April of 2025. Reportedly, the filming destinations include Voidokila Beach with its striking horseshoe-shaped cove, the Methoni Castle built by Venetians in the 13th century, the monolithic Acrocorinth overlooking the city of Corinth, the unspoiled Almyrolaka Beach, and Nestor's Cave. (Representative Image: Pexels)



Iceland: In book 11 of the epic poem, Odysseus journeys to the underworld to consult with the blind Theban prophet, Tiresias. Christopher Nolan chose Iceland to set this remote, otherworldly scene. The filming locations include the black sands and caves of Hjörleifshöfði mountain, the Snæfellsnes peninsula, the river Markarfljót, and the harbor of Landeyjahöfn. (Image: Pexels)

Italy: Production moved to Sicily in March 2025, where filming was spotted on the island of Favignana (also known as Goat Island) just off the Sicilian coastline. Other filming locations include Aeolian Islands of Lipari, Vulcano, Basiluzzo and sovereign island nation of Malta. (Representative Image: Pexels)

Scotland: Moray Firth Coast is a 500-mile inlet that stretches across northern Scotland. The dramatic coastline is known for its sea stacks and bottlenose dolphine. The crew also filmed at Findlater Castle and Culbin Forest, according to reports. (Representative Image: Pexels)

Morocco: Filming took place in Marrakech, Tahanaoute, El Haouz, Essaouira and Quarzazate – including Ait Benhaddou, the UNESCo-listed ksar reportedly used to represent Troy. Morocco delivered an authentically ancient atmosphere to The Odyssey. (Representative Image: Pexels)

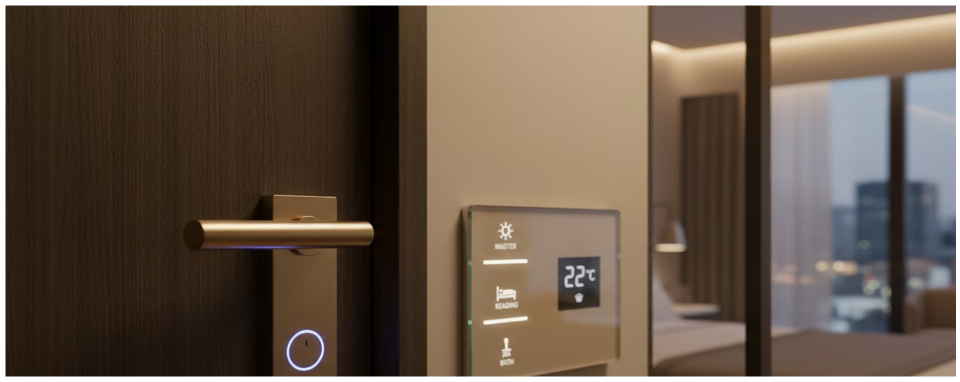
Checking Into A Hotel? Don’t Touch These 5 ‘Dirtiest’ Things In Your Room Right Away

That spotless hotel room may not be as clean as it looks. Before you unpack, here are 5 everyday items experts say deserve a quick wipe before you pick them.

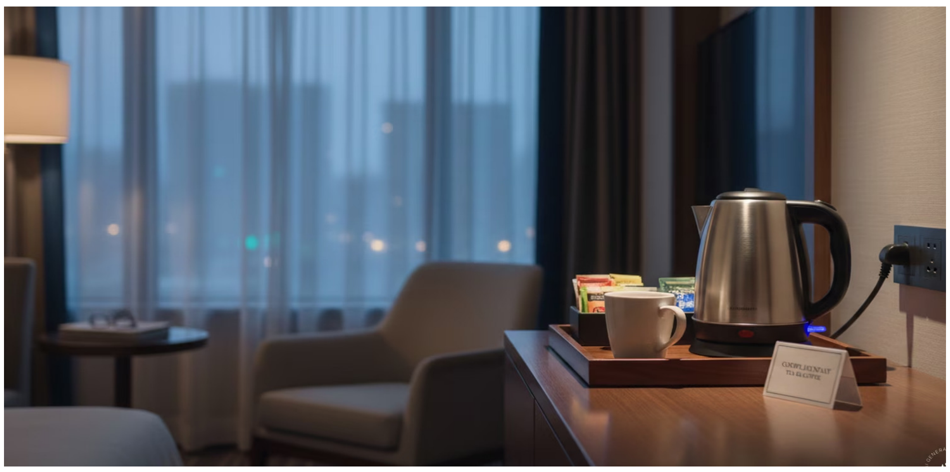
Stepping into a hotel room with crisp white sheets, a pleasant fragrance and polished interiors can make it feel perfectly clean. However, appearances can be misleading. According to travel experts, some of the most frequently touched items in hotel rooms may harbour bacteria and germs despite the room looking spotless.

Travel experts and room maintenance reports suggest that while hotel staff clean rooms thoroughly, they often have limited time between guests. Bed linen and bathrooms are usually prioritised, but some frequently handled objects may not be disinfected after every stay. Knowing which items deserve extra caution can help you stay healthier during your trip.

The TV and air conditioner remote are often among the first things guests touch. Since every visitor uses them, sometimes while eating or without washing their hands, they can accumulate bacteria. Experts recommend wiping remotes with a disinfectant wipe or tissue before use and sanitising your hands afterwards.

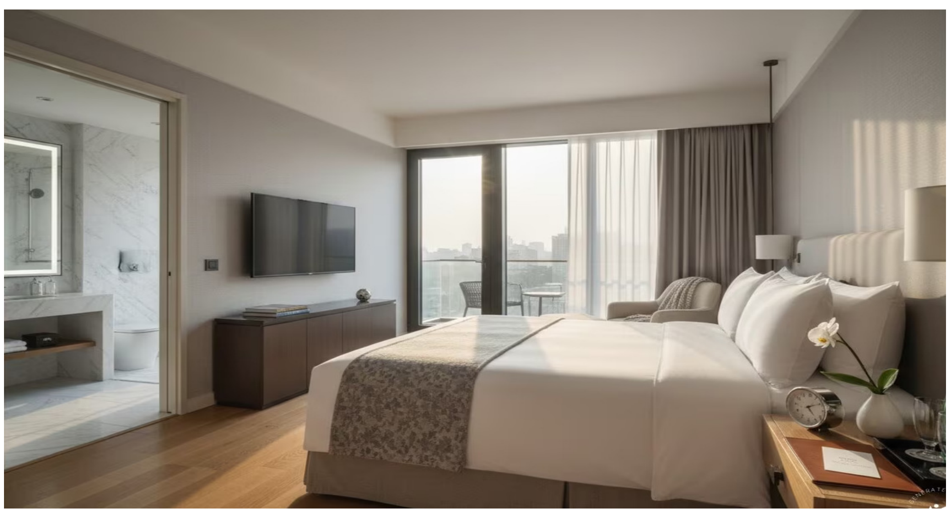


Door handles and light switches are high-touch surfaces that come into contact with countless hands throughout the day. Using a disinfectant wipe to clean them when you first enter your room can be a simple step to reduce exposure to germs.



Many hotel rooms provide electric kettles and coffee makers for guests. Although these appliances may be cleaned, they may not always be thoroughly disinfected after every stay. If possible, rinse them with warm water before using them.

The bed sheets and pillowcases are generally changed between guests, but decorative cushions and bed runners may not be. Since these items are frequently handled or placed on the floor by previous guests, experts recommend removing them from the bed before settling in.



Bathrooms are cleaned regularly, but surfaces such as taps, flush buttons and washbasin fixtures are touched repeatedly. Washing your hands thoroughly with soap after using the bathroom remains one of the simplest and most effective ways to reduce the risk of infection.

Carry disinfectant wipes and your own personal toiletries whenever possible. Wipe frequently touched surfaces, wash your hands before eating, and maintain good hygiene throughout your stay. A few simple precautions can help make your hotel experience cleaner, safer and more comfortable.

Going to Bed Straight After Dinner? This Habit Is Doing You A Lot Of Harm

By Abigail Banerji

Eating late-night meals and sleeping right after that appears to be no big deal after a long day but without realizing it, you are hurting your digestive system. It is warned against post-meal sleep as it increases the risk of acid reflux and aggravates Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD), a condition in which stomach acid repeatedly flows back into the food pipe. Persistent reflux not only disrupts sleep but also triggers chronic discomfort and long-term health complications.We speak to Dr Nitin Manglik, Consultant – Medical Gastroenterology, Manipal Hospital, Ghaziabad, who explains why doing this is not good for your long-term health.

Why Does Sleeping after Dinner Trigger Acid Reflux?

When a person lies down immediately after eating, gravity no longer helps keep stomach contents in place. As a result, acid travels upwards into the oesophagus causing heartburn, chest discomfort and a sour taste in your mouth. People with GERD are more vulnerable because the lower oesophageal sphincter which normally prevents acid backflow becomes weak. Eating heavy, oily or spicy food close to bedtime worsens these symptoms. It is recommended to keep a gap of 2 to 3 hours between dinner and sleep for healthy digestion and to reduce any reflux episodes.What Signs to Watch out for?

GERD symptoms begin subtly and are mistaken for occasional indigestion. However, frequent episodes indicate a chronic condition which requires quick medical attention. Ignoring these signs can lead to inflammation and other complications for your gut.

• Persistent Heartburn: A burning sensation in the chest after meals or at night is one of the most common symptoms associated with acid reflux.

• Acid Backflow: Many patients tend to have a bitter or acidic taste in the mouth due to stomach contents flowing back upwards.

• Sleep disturbance: Night time coughing, throat irritation and repeated awakenings affect sleep quality and overall wellbeing.

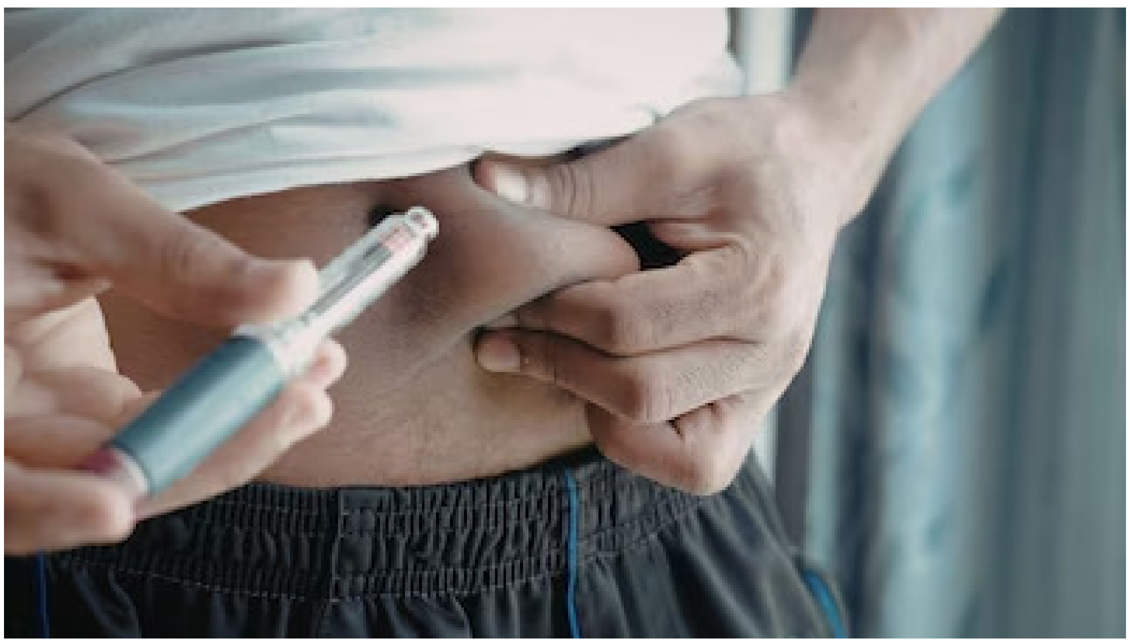
• Difficulty Swallowing: Chronic acid exposure causes narrowing of the oesophagus making simple swallowing an uncomfortable process over time.

How is GERD Diagnosed?

If reflux becomes consistent or severe, diagnostic tests are advised. Upper gastrointestinal endoscopy helps test for inflammation or ulcers in the oesophagus. In some cases, oesophageal pH monitoring measures acid exposure over 24 hours while manometry assesses muscle function. Identifying the severity of the disease is important because untreated GERD increases the risk of Barrett's Oesophagus and other complications. Early diagnosis allows doctors to make treatment plans according to the patient's symptoms and lifestyle factors.

Can Weight-Loss Drugs Slow Ageing?

Study Finds Semaglutide May Reduce Biological Ageing Markers



By Saurabh Verma

As GLP-1 medications such as Ozempic and Wegovy gain popularity for weight loss, new research suggests they may offer another potential benefit: slowing some of the biological processes associated with ageing.

A study published in Nature Communications found that semaglutide, the active ingredient in these drugs, may help reduce the buildup of DNA markers linked to biological ageing in adults living with HIV.Researchers described the findings as the first randomised, placebo-controlled evidence in humans suggesting that a GLP-1 medication could influence biological ageing pathways, as per Science Daily.

What Did The Study Find?

The research focused on adults living with HIV, a group known to experience accelerated biological ageing due to chronic inflammation and immune system activation.

Participants who received semaglutide showed a slower accumulation of DNA markers associated with biological ageing compared with those who received a placebo, according to the study.

While the findings do not prove that semaglutide can stop or reverse ageing, they suggest the drug may influence some of the underlying biological mechanisms that contribute to age-related decline.

Why Might GLP-1 Drugs Affect Ageing?

Researchers believe semaglutide may affect ageing through several interconnected pathways.

According to the study, GLP-1 medications help reduce inflammation and improve metabolic health, both of which are closely linked to the aging process. The drugs also reduce chronic immune activation, a major factor behind accelerated aging in people living with HIV, as per Science Daily.

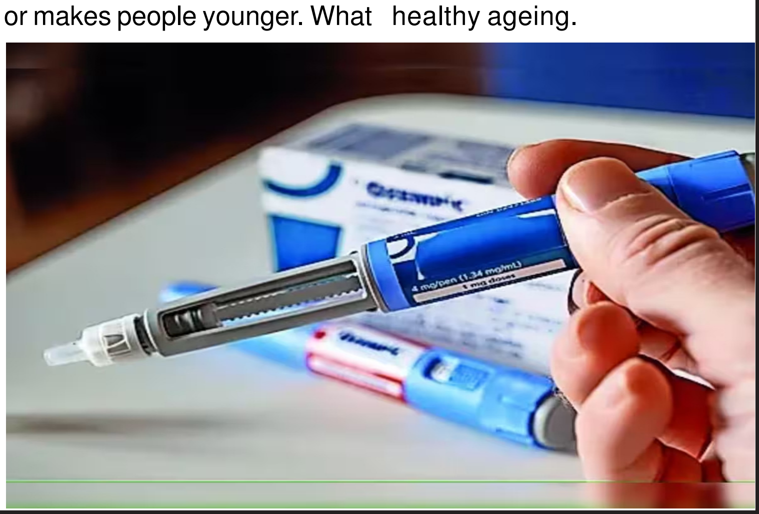
In addition, semaglutide helps reduce visceral fat—the harmful fat stored around internal organs—as well as ectopic fat that accumulates in tissues where fat does not normally belong.

Lower levels of these fat deposits may reduce inflammatory signals throughout the body, potentially slowing biological processes associated with ageing.

Scientists Urge Caution

Despite the promising findings, researchers stressed that semaglutide should not be viewed as an anti-aging treatment. "We are not saying that semaglutide reverses aging or makes people younger. What we are seeing is a signal that it may slow some of the biological processes associated with aging," said lead author Michael Corley, PhD, associate professor at the UC San Diego School of Medicine and the Stein Institute for Research on Aging. Corley added that newer GLP-1-based therapies provide an opportunity for scientists to explore whether different drugs in this class affect aging biology in different ways and to determine which patients may benefit the most.

Researchers emphasized that much larger clinical trials will be needed before any conclusions can be drawn about semaglutide's role in healthy ageing.



Wimbledon's viral towels have an Indian connection

They're draped over shoulders, clutched between points and often tucked into kit bags as prized souvenirs. Wimbledon towels have a story that leads all the way to India.

When it comes to Wimbledon, it's not just Naomi Osaka's fashion game or Novak Djokovic's phenomenal performance that grabs attention. The iconic towels used on court are part of the spectacle too.

Used by players throughout the Championships, these official towels have become one of the tournament's most recognisable accessories.

But these are no ordinary towels. They have become prized keepsakes, with many players happily taking them home as souvenirs after the games. And... these Wimbledon towels have an Indian connection.Since 1987, luxury home brand Christy has produced the official Championships towels. While they were originally manufactured in Britain, production shifted to Vapi, Gujarat, after Indian textile giant Welspun acquired the brand more than 15 years ago and gradually moved manufacturing to India.Every year, the design process begins nearly 18 months before the tournament, with Christy's design team studying seasonal colour palettes, design movements and evolving trends before finalising the look. Reportedly, it takes almost seven days to produce each towel.

This year's heritage towel is woven in Wimbledon green with the tournament's signature purple stripes, staying true to the colours tennis fans instantly associate with Centre Court. There's also a playful strawberry colourway - an ode to the Championships' most famous indulgence: strawberries and cream.Now, you may wonder what the big deal is. They are just towels, right? Players use them during the match, and they probably end up in some corner of the court.

Well, not quite.

'Not just towels'

According to Christy, players are expected to return their towels after every match. But many don't. Around 2,500 towels leave the All England Croquet Club each year – tucked into players' kit bags, gifted to ball boys and girls, or thrown into the crowd after a memorable win.

In fact, only about 15 per cent of the towels are returned during the tournament.Last year, Polish player Iga Swiatek was caught on camera gleefully stuffing her tennis bags with these towels. She does it almost every year, turning the ritual into a fan favourite and earning herself the tongue-in-cheek nickname of the "Wimbledon towel thief."

"Every time I come back from a Grand Slam I have like 10 friends and 10 family members wanting towels. So, sorry guys. Sorry Wimbledon. I don't know if I'm supposed to do that," she had told Reuters.Novak Djokovic is a fan too. A few years ago, he also joked about taking the towels home for friends and family.

How are these towels made

Clearly, these towels are more than just courtside essentials. Crafted using Christy's signature short-loop terry weave, they are exceptionally soft, highly absorbent and quick-drying.

They are made from premium cotton yarn, and are built to last, retaining their plush feel even after repeated washes. Beyond the courts, they fit seamlessly into everyday life, whether at the beach, by the pool or in the bathroom.

Christy also has an heirloom collection that transforms surplus towels from previous Championships into tote bags and robes.

Unsurprisingly, when the collection was launched for the first time, the tote bags sold out almost instantly. The official Championship towels, meanwhile, are still available online for around Â£40 (approximately Rs 5,114).

Wimbledon's tryst with IndiaThe Championships have recently leaned into their Indian fanbase in more ways than one. The tournament's Instagram game has struck viral gold by pairing iconic tennis moments with beloved Bollywood and Indian tracks.

Imagine, Roger Federer gliding across Centre Court to Pehla Nasha, Novak Djokovic matched with Divine's Baazigar, or Naomi Oska making a fashionable entrance to Jalwa from Fashion. It's the kind of crossover nobody saw coming, but everyone happily replayed.

Then came the sweetest collaboration yet.

In a first-of-its-kind partnership, the All England Lawn Tennis Club joined hands with Delhi's iconic over 100-year-old Kuremal Kulfi to create a limited-edition strawberries-and-cream kulfi.

Meet The Internet's Newest Stars: How Subaltern Social Media Creators Are Rewriting India's Digital Story

By Nandini Sengupta

A husband and wife team plucking wild Mahua flowers in the jungles of Palamau. A mother-daughter duo dancing to tribal Sadri or Nagpuri songs from their village in Jharkhand. A rural housemaker and her husband building a mud-brick structure from scratch. Welcome to the world of India's subaltern social media stars. Far away from the glitz and glamour of metro influencers, these rural men and women are bringing a slice of their simple life to the cramped, contaminated and polluted city dwellers across the country.

Call it India's Little House on the Prairie moment. Hundreds of social media accounts spanning the tribal belts of Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh are offering a slice of their unspoilt life for a dekko by city slickers. And totting up thousands of followers and likes while they are at it. Let's take some examples. Arti Devi from Jharkhand plucks mushrooms and gets 7,800 likes for her reels.A similar handle called villagefoodbysusmita shows a rural housewife cooking elephant foot yam on a wood-fired oven. She gets 19,000 likes. At last count, she has 63,000 followers for her Instagram page which focuses on rural, rude food recipes. A similar handle called Iamsuman makes reels on village markets and the kind of exotic roots and leaves that people sell by the roadside. The latest reel has clocked 21,000 likes. Tribal life with its simplicity and close-to-nature traditions is clearly a big hit with netizens across India. Let's take a dip-stick survey of some more handles. Sushil Kiran Vlogs makes reels on village life in tribal Jharkhand. He has 22,500 followers and regularly tots up 67,000 to 77,000 likes. R Binita Vlogs talks about love and heartbreak in tribal villages with an acerbic tongue. She has 57,500 followers. Anisha Tirkey is from Jharkhand. She and her daughter make dance videos to Sadri tunes. She has 32,000 followers and gets 3,000 to 11,000 likes on her reels.

Rubi9j talks about exotic hill-side foraging including fiddle head ferns and pickles made from them. She has 395,000 followers and tots up to 6 million views on her most popular videos. Another handle called agriculturetips07 offers home remedies and ayurvedic options for farming and food. He has 312,000 followers and gets 150,000 to 520,000 likes on his most popular posts. With the monsoon in full swing in rural India, foraging for mushrooms is a popular reel category with hundreds of handles showing videos on the more exotic varieties.

Others like Nera Devi make reels on digging out snails from village ponds. She clocks 8000 likes. Another handle called VillageTastyBhojan has a whopping 756,000 followers. Her latest reel on plucking koro/kutaj flowers from the hillside and making a fiery dish with it totted up 9,000 likes.

Part of the fandom for these handles comes from the section of the village population that has migrated to big cities and are using these reels to vicariously relive the lives they left behind. But a large section of those who follow or watch this content are city dwellers who have never set foot in a village, never eaten "Putu" roots, "Barka Khokri mushrooms" or sampled Mohua liquor. They don't normally listen to Sadri songs, don't normally watch tribal dances and certainly do not live in mud brick houses. They consume this content because it offers them a window into an entirely different India – where the skies are clean, the food is not contaminated and lives are simpler if poorer. In a sense, these videos are the best way that big city India can sample a bucolic and arcadian life without stepping out of their air-conditioned comfort. It is interesting that many of these handles use Hindi rather than the local tongue so as to reach a larger audience which is an indicator that they are looking far beyond their catchment area. They know they are catering to an audience for whom their content is both exotic and romantic in equal measure. That's why the emphasis in these videos is always on the variety of exotic flora and fauna that these communities consume and the simplicity of their lives rather than on the hardships that invariably accompany rural living.

Why marriage doesn't have to mean doing everything together

A couple that eats together, does everything together, stays together? Maybe. But happily, though? For too long, constant togetherness has been seen as the hallmark of a happy marriage. Maybe it's time to rethink that.

By Jigyasa Sahay

"Why are you travelling alone? Why isn't your husband coming along?" everyone keeps asking Samya Gupta, a 30-year-old, every time she decides to travel solo.

"We both have a life together, but we also have our own individual lives. We had one before marriage and have one now. I have my own set of friends. He has his own set of friends. He likes to do certain things. I like to do certain things. That's the kind of marriage we are in," Gupta says, emphasising how they mutually respect each other's decisions and are perfectly happy with it.But society isn't quite. They have questions. And assumptions too.

Today, more couples are opening up about pursuing individual experiences after marriage. Be it a solo trip, an all-boys' vacation (not the one with the bad rep), or hobby classes without the better half.

It's not because there's turbulence in the relationship or because they feel lonely. It's simply because they enjoy their individuality while respecting each other's.

According to experts, doing everything together all the time can actually become the reason for loneliness and the loss of individual identity.

Loneliness is a silent epidemic, and marriage is no antidote to it.

A recent study on loneliness among married Indian adults found that 46.4 per cent experienced moderately high loneliness, particularly those in the 31-40 age group. The researchers also found a strong association between loneliness and poorer marital quality.

So why is it so difficult to accept?

Nobody was lying when they said, "Bacche badhon se sikhte hain." (Children learn from their elders.)

We grow up watching our parents do everything together. From attending weddings and going out with friends to holidays, everything is done together. In fact, even grocery shopping becomes a compulsory activity for two.

"In India, marriage is sold to us as 'do jism ek jaan' — two bodies, one soul. Nobody tells us two whole people can still be one couple. We grow up watching our parents do everything together. So, independence starts to look like distance. The moment one partner says, 'I want to go on a solo trip,' it's read as, 'Something is wrong,'" Suvarna Varde, a relationship expert, tells India Today.

We've been conditioned to see marriage this way for generations, and over time, it became second nature because we've never known a world otherwise. As a result, non-conformity is seen as abnormal, and, more often than not, problematic.

Gupta's extended family, even her boss and several others question her decision. Many see it as a sign that "Kuch gadbad toh nahi hai?"

"I want to do this. But everyone is always so shocked about it. If I wasn't married, the same trips would have been celebrated far more than it was. Just because I'm married, suddenly people see it differently. I feel like my individuality, in their eyes, is hampered because I am married."Marriage doesn't just change your relationship status. It changes who people think you're allowed to be. And women, unfortunately, land on the harsher, stricter side of it (All thanks to patriarchy).

Supposedly, even when people do accept individual experiences within marriage, it's not without gender bias.

If a man goes out with his friends for some time to himself, it is often seen as a well-earned break because he works around the clock for the family. But when a woman decides to socialise without her spouse, she's often asked about being a "responsible" wife, mother or daughter-in-law.

"It's the same 'good bahu' conditioning — her identity is expected to dissolve into the family," says Varde. Women are often labelled "selfish" the moment they prioritise themselves, while men, in most cases, get a free pass.And when leaders like Anandiben Patel tell young women to become "expert mothers" above everything else, at a university no less, it feels like we're still having yesterday's conversation. Anyways.

Togetherness and connection are not the same

"When a relationship expects you to do everything together, you slowly lose touch with who you are outside of it. Ironically, that's when loneliness creeps in. You can be sitting right next to your partner and still feel emotionally isolated because you have been suppressing parts of yourself just to keep the peace," Namrata Jain, a Mumbai-based relationship expert, tells India Today.

According to Varde, constant togetherness creates enmeshment – a relationship dynamic where personal boundaries blur and individuality slowly fades - not intimacy.

Experts believe that boundaries are not a rejection; they are a relationship skill. Wanting space doesn't mean wanting distance. It means creating room to recharge so that you can return to the relationship with more presence rather than resentment.You, me and us

ain explains that the healthiest marriages have three identities — you, me and us.

"That's the difference between codependency and interdependence. Codependency is total fusion; interdependence is sharing a life while still having a distinct sense of self. Healthy independence looks like celebrating your partner's boys' trip or solo pottery class because you know they will come back more refreshed, fulfilled and emotionally available for the relationship."

Gupta's experience is a proof.

"I do think we have become more secure. If I'm going somewhere, living my own life and having new experiences, I'm growing as a person. And if I'm doing all of that and still coming back to share everything with him, and he feels secure instead of insecure, then our relationship becomes stronger."

Varde also highlights how mindsets around marriage are becoming increasingly polarised. "While society has traditionally discouraged individuality in marriage, I'm also seeing the opposite in therapy now — couples are becoming so focused on their individual lives that the relationship itself takes a back seat." She says lasting relationships aren't built by losing yourself — or by living entirely separate lives — but by finding a balance where both partners can grow as individuals while growing together.For Gen X or Boomers, 24x7 togetherness might still be a default. But things are changing slowly. So taking those trips or individual experiences is important for your own good. Not every event has to be a plus one affair.

Zendaya Channels Greek Goddess Athena In White Mini For The Odyssey

By Abigail Banerji

Zendaya stuns crowds in Manhattan, America, while her husband, Tom Holland, is promoting their new film in Mumbai, India. The couple will soon be seen together in the Christopher Nolan film The Odyssey. Zendaya will be essaying the role of Athena, the Greek Goddess of wisdom. The actor stepped out in a white mini dress by designer Alberta Ferretti. The dress has a plunging V-neckline that went down to her belly button. It had chainmail detailing on the bust area that also flowed down in a fringe pattern, a trend that has become very popular this year. Zendaya herself has worn a few outfits for this movie's press tour which featured fringe detailing, including the lit from within white Schiaparelli dress with a breastplate bodice and fringe skirt that she wore just hours after it debuted on the runway in Paris. According to reports by WWD, Zendaya's look was from the Italian designer's spring 2008 collection. The dress debuted during Milan Fashion Week in September 2007. Stylist Law Roach and long-time collaborator of Zendaya chose this dress as it featured several design cues that evoked the Grecian look that is imperative to this look.Leaning into the theme of the film, Zendaya added a pair of statement gladiator-style heels by Sophia Webster, featuring intricate lace-up detailing, and delicate pendant earrings by Fope. For her glam, Zendaya isn't one for OTT makeup. She kept things simple and subtle with a bronzy glow and minimal blush. She opted for a nude brown lip and minimal jewellery, wearing only diamond earrings. Her bixie haircut was styled with her natural curls, something she has been embracing a lot this press tour.

Kate Middleton's Grassy Green Dress Gets A Standing Ovation At Wimbledon

By Abigail Banerji

Kate Middleton was at the final match of Wimbledon and was accompanied by her family. her husband, the future King of England, and their two oldest kids – Prince George, 12, and Princess Charlotte, 11, – also accompanied her to the grassy centre.

Kate attended the Wimbledon women's finals to watch Linda Nosková capture her first Grand Slam title and was back at the All England Lawn Tennis Club for the men's finals between defending champion Jannik Sinner and Alexander Zverev.The British royal family received a lengthy standing ovation from the crowd, which included a volley of celebrities, as they took their seats in the front row of the Royal Box at Centre Court to watch the final match.For her last appearance at the tennis tournament for the year, the Princess chose to match the grassy greens in an olive midi dress by the brand Emilia Wickstead. Always a pinnacle of elegance, Kate's dress had asymmetrical short sleeves, and her bodice was covered with a cape-like design featuring a long piece of fabric that trailed down her back on her right side, while her full skirt flowed nearly down to her ankles with subtle pleats.Kate Middleton styled her brown hair in soft side-parted curls that framed her face. She accessorised with a pair of dangling clover-shaped earrings and a tiny brown bag in one hand. She also wore a pair of brown pointed-toe stilettos that matched her bag perfectly.

She added a purple-and-green pin to her lapel that she wears to signify her role as patron of the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, where the tournament is held. Prince George wore a full suit like his dad. The Prince wore a navy blue suit with a pinstriped tie and a light blue shirt, despite the London summer heat. On the other hand, Princess Charlotte took a leaf from her mother's playbook and wore a bright blue midi dress with fluttering sleeves. She tied her hair in a half-up-half-down style and wore a pair of simple white ballet flats.

In pictures: The 10 scenes that defined House of the Dragon's season 3 premiere

House of the Dragon returns with a dramatic premiere featuring Aegon II's escape, Alicent's failed scheme, a shocking confrontation with Aemond and the devastating Battle of the Gullet that changes the course of the war.

The premiere opens in complete darkness. A ruthless Prince Regent Aemond Targaryen drags Grand Maester Orwyle from his bed and threatens to have him beheaded. Aemond soon discovers that King Aegon II and Larys Strong have disappeared from the Red Keep under the cover of night, depriving him of the leverage that came with keeping the king close at hand.

(BOX OFFICE INSIDER BY OUR STAFF REPORTER)

The action then shifts to a muddy road beyond the capital. A bedridden and severely burned King Aegon II is concealed inside a modest carriage overseen by Larys Strong. In the rush to escape both Rhaenyra and Aemond, Larys realises he has forgotten the milk of the poppy, forcing the injured king to endure excruciating pain as they make their way into hiding.

Back at the Red Keep, Dowager Queen Alicent Hightower attempts to put her plans into motion. Convinced she can still influence her second son, she urges Aemond to take Vhagar and fly to Harrenhal. Her true objective is to leave King's Landing vulnerable so that Rhaenyra can claim the Iron Throne peacefully, as previously agreed.

Alicent's strategy quickly unravels. Aemond, fully aware of the power he now holds and desperate for affection, completely reverses the dynamic between them. He corners his mother and asserts his dominance in a deeply unsettling encounter. Alicent is left horrified as she realises her own son no longer sees her as a parent, but as a prize to be claimed.

Word that King's Landing has been left exposed soon reaches Team Black. Queen Rhaenyra is eager to mount Syrax and seize the capital at once. However, her heir, Jacaerys "Jace" Velaryon, remains deeply suspicious of Alicent's assurances and fears a trap. Determined to keep his mother safe, he orders the Queensguard to confine Rhaenyra to her chambers.

With Rhaenyra effectively sidelined, Jace assumes command and takes a significant risk. Alongside Baela Targaryen on Moondancer, he mounts Vermax and heads out to reinforce the Velaryon blockade before Team Green can recover its footing.

Meanwhile, the dragonseeds — Ulf White, Hugh Hammer and Addam of Hull — position themselves near Harrenhal in preparation for a potential confrontation with Aemond. They establish camp on the Isle of Faces, a sacred and eerily silent location filled with ancient weirwood trees.

The unsettling atmosphere of the island soon begins to affect the men. After Ulf briefly wanders away, Hugh and Addam notice their dragons reacting nervously to the surrounding woods. Looking into the thick mist, they catch a fleeting glimpse of what appears to be a legendary Green Man — a towering antlered figure standing watch over the ancient forest before vanishing back into the fog.

Dhamaal 4 review: You will find buried treasure before you find the comedy

Dhamaal 4 review: Ajay Devgn's film follows a familiar treasure hunt as more players join the chase. But how far can weak writing, bad AI visuals and dated humour take the franchise's comic spark?

(BOX OFFICE INSIDER BY OUR STAFF REPORTER)

Whoever said comedy is serious business was probably talking about the people making comedies in Bollywood. Because the level of earnest absurdity being served in the name of humour these days is almost admirable. Dhamaal 4 is the latest addition to that ever-growing list. Directed by Indra Kumar, the fourth instalment of the beloved comedy franchise sticks to the one formula it knows best: a treasure hunt. The cast remains largely intact. Ajay Devgn leads the pack as Guddu, joined by Sanjay Mishra, Arshad Warsi, Riteish Deshmukh and Jaaved Jaaferi. The new additions include Anjali Anand, Ravi Kishan, Sanjeeda Shaikh, Esha Gupta (who appears for barely four scenes), and two children. Unfortunately, none of them add much to a plot that feels as elusive as the treasure everyone is chasing.The story opens with a pirate (Kishan) searching for a long-lost fortune. Word spreads, more people join the race, misunderstandings pile up, stakes get higher, and chaos follows. On paper, it sounds like classic Dhamaal. In execution, it feels like watching people desperately search for something the audience has already given up on: laughter. The film throws every kind of comedy at the wall in the hope that something sticks. There's a jungle comedy with AI-generated animals doing the heavy lifting. There's body-shaming masquerading as humour, where a plus-size character exists almost exclusively as the gag. There's meta humour, with the film constantly breaking the fourth wall to remind you that everyone is in on the joke. The problem? Nobody is.In fact, if you happen to doze off before the interval, consider yourself lucky. You won't miss much, and no one around you is likely to complain.The plot is so generic that a six-year-old's comic book feels more inventive. But even that isn't the film's biggest problem. The real issue is how artificial everything looks. Entire stretches resemble AI-generated visuals, and not even the polished kind. They look like the very first image an AI model spits out before you realise you should probably refine the prompt. The film seems to have accepted that first draft and released it in theatres. Remember the iconic 'W' from the original Dhamaal? This time, the treasure is hidden behind a giant 'M'. Fittingly, the distance between those two letters mirrors the gap in quality between the first film and this one. Every sequel has chipped away at what made the franchise special, but Dhamaal 4 may well be its lowest point yet.Ajay Devgn and Sanjay Mishra still share an easy chemistry. A handful of their exchanges work, largely because they know comic timing better than the script does. Watching them struggle through underwritten scenes feels like watching accomplished chefs being asked to prepare a gourmet meal with instant noodles. The bigger tragedy, however, is Arshad Warsi and Jaaved Jaaferi. Their Aadi-Manav duo remains one of Hindi cinema's most delightful comic pairings, but the film gives them almost nothing worthy of their talent. Instead of laughing with them, you end up feeling protective of them.Ravi Kishan's villain serves little purpose beyond stretching the runtime. His presence only reminds you that the film is still not over. Riteish and Anjali generate occasional sparks, but that's more because they are capable performers than because the screenplay gives them something interesting to do. And every time you begin to warm up to them, the film returns to making Anjali's body the joke. The humour feels dated, lazy and strangely proud of itself. Visually, there's little for the cinematography to rescue. When almost every backdrop looks digitally created and every frame feels synthetic, the camera has very little to capture beyond green screens and missed opportunities. The writing, meanwhile, feels trapped in a version of Bollywood comedy that audiences have outgrown ages ago. It makes you want to revisit the original Dhamaal, Golmaal, Dhol or Welcome - films that probably understood an important truth: loud isn't automatically funny. By the end, the characters finally discover the giant 'M' they've been searching for. You, however, may spend the entire film searching for a single genuine laugh. And unlike the treasure, you won't find it.

Evil Dead Burn review: More blood, less scares; mistakes gore for horror

Evil Dead Burn pushes the franchise's signature gore to new extremes, but is that enough to keep viewers invested? Read our review to find out whether the latest chapter delivers the scares or loses itself in the bloodshed.

If there were a competition for finding newer, nastier and increasingly ridiculous ways to mutilate human beings, Evil Dead Burn would be taking home gold. Within minutes, limbs are flying, bones are snapping, flesh is peeling, and enough blood is splashed around to put an entire blood bank out of business. The problem is, after sitting through these gruesome attacks for an hour, you stop wincing and start waiting for the end credits to roll.The Evil Dead films have never exactly been subtle. Sam Raimi's cult classic thrived on over-the-top gore, possessed humans with foul mouths and a wonderfully unhinged sense of humour. Even when people were getting chainsawed in half, there was an infectious playfulness to the madness. The franchise always knew it was in on the joke. However, Evil Dead Burn forgot to laugh.

Directed by Sebastien Vaniek, the latest chapter follows Alice (Souheila Yacoub), a grieving widow who reluctantly reunites with her late husband's estranged family at their isolated ancestral home. Naturally, there's a mysterious attic... naturally, there is a harrowing past... naturally, everyone has secrets and naturally, everyone begins dying in spectacularly disgusting fashion.The mythology, which has often been one of the franchise's biggest strengths, feels frustratingly underexplained here. The film expects viewers to simply accept the chaos rather than invest in the evil that's causing it. What the movie also fails to do is tell viewers how and why the ghosts are summoned back.

To the film's credit, nobody can accuse it of holding back. Every set piece seems designed to outdo the previous one. If one Deadite is battering someone's face, another is ripping someone's body apart in ways that you can never imagine. Household objects become murder weapons, and every room eventually resembles a crime scene that would make forensic experts resign on the spot. For hardcore gorehounds, this is probably paradise, but for everyone else, it becomes exhausting.

The biggest issue isn't the violence. It's that the violence is almost the entire personality of the film. Every time the story hints at exploring grief, guilt or fractured family relationships, someone gets possessed even before the emotion can land. The screenplay keeps introducing interesting ideas only to abandon them for another creatively staged massacre. And the horror? That ends up just becoming the sidekick.

(BOX OFFICE INSIDER BY OUR STAFF REPORTER)

Alice is positioned as the emotional anchor, but the script gives her little to work with beyond looking traumatised while watching increasingly inventive acts of carnage unfold around her. Souheila Yacoub does her best to inject humanity into the role, but no performance can survive a screenplay that's more interested in exploding eyeballs than developing characters.

Even the Deadites feel strangely undercooked this time. They have always been terrifying, but they were also sarcastic, theatrical and gleefully cruel. Here, they are mostly screaming murder machines. They are vicious enough, but they lack the twisted personalities that once made them unforgettable. After a while, every kill begins to blur into the next. The shock value wears off. The emotional stakes never arrive. And what should have been ninety-odd minutes of gleeful horror gradually starts feeling like an endurance test in practical effects.

Ironically, the film is at its strongest when it stops trying so hard. A brilliantly choreographed action sequence involving a car briefly injects urgency and tension into the proceedings. Vaniek also stages several impressive long takes that show genuine visual flair. There's no denying that he has an eye for staging mayhem. The camera glides through blood-soaked hallways with confidence, and a few inventive visual flourishes hint at a far better horror film buried underneath all the carnage. It's just a shame that the script keeps choosing excess over atmosphere. The practical effects deserve applause too. In an era dominated by CGI blood splatter, the old-school makeup work here is wonderfully revolting. Unfortunately, technical skill can only carry a film so far.Yes, horror fans will probably discover at least three new fears involving ordinary household objects. But somewhere beneath the litres of fake blood and endless body horror lies a film that forgot the most important lesson of the franchise -- being disgusting isn't the same as being entertaining.

Centre asks states to take action over Diljit Dosanjh's Satluj screenings

By Piyush Mishra

The government is contemplating legal action over OTT release and public screenings of the Diljit Dosanjh-starrer Satluj, which lacked certification from the CBFC. Despite the film's removal from Zee5, community groups continue to screen it in gurdwaras, while a PIL seeks its restoration on the platform.

The Centre is considering legal action over the release and public screenings of Diljit Dosanjh-starrer Satluj, with sources claiming the film was released without obtaining a valid certification from the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC).

According to government sources, the CBFC had suggested 127 cuts to the film during the certification process. However, the makers allegedly did not incorporate the proposed changes, and no certificate was issued for Satluj.The film was released on Zee5 and taken down within 48 hours. It has since been screened at multiple locations, illegally, prompting the government to examine possible legal action, sources said.

Sources further said that state governments have been asked to take action wherever the film is being screened without the necessary certificate.The development comes days after Satluj was taken down from streaming platform Zee5 in India shortly after its release. The film, based on the life of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra, was removed from the platform within two days, with Zee5 citing "current circumstances" without offering further details.

(BOX OFFICE INSIDER BY OUR STAFF REPORTER)

Soon after Satluj was removed from the OTT platform, Diljit Dosanjh shared a video urging audiences to watch the film despite its takedown.

Following the OTT takedown, community organisations announced that Satluj would be screened at gurdwaras across five states to ensure the film reaches audiences. The initiative was launched to keep alive the story of Khalra, who exposed the alleged illegal cremations during Punjab's militancy era.Meanwhile, a public interest litigation (PIL) has been filed in the Punjab and Haryana High Court seeking the restoration of Satluj on Zee5. The petition alleges that the film was removed from the platform without any publicly disclosed statutory, judicial or governmental order and seeks its restoration along with disclosure of the reasons behind the takedown.