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India, Kuwait defence co-operation signed

KUWAIT CITY: As Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Kuwait's Amir His Highness Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah held their first bilateral meeting, the two countries elevated their relationship to a "strategic partnership" and signalled that trade and defence co-operation would form the key pillars of their ties.

The two sides institutionalised defence co-operation through an overarching agreement that includes training, exchange of personnel and experts, joint exercises, supply of defence equipment, and collaboration in research and development, among others. Besides defence, three other MoUs (Memoranda of Understanding) were inked to facilitate co-operation in the areas of sports, culture and solar energy.

With a "strategic partnership", India and Kuwait have given new momentum to bilateral ties. Kuwait is among India's top trading partner, with bilateral trade valued at US\$ 10.47 billion in 2023-24. The Indian community forms the largest expatriate group in Kuwait.

Modi invited a delegation comprising the Ku-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi meeting with the Amir of Kuwait His Highness Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in Kuwait.

waiti Investment Authority and other stakeholders to visit India to look at new opportunities, including in the fields of energy, defence, medical devices, pharma, food parks, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said.

Modi on X

During his meeting with Kuwait's Amir, Modi also invited him to visit India. "Excellent meeting with His Highness the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah. We discussed co-operation in key sectors like pharma, IT, FinTech, infrastructure and security," Modi said in a post

on X after the meeting.

"In line with the close ties between our nations, we have elevated our partnership to a strategic one and I am optimistic that our friendship will flourish even more in the times to come," Modi added.

While a strategic partnership entails greater co-operation in the areas already identified — pharma, IT, fintech, in-

frastructure and security in this case — several new areas of co-operation will also be sought. In this regard, regular bilateral consultations, exchanges and visits pertaining to issues of mutual concern will be held.

Modi also thanked the Amir for ensuring the well-being of over one million Indians in Kuwait while the Kuwaiti leader expressed appreciation for the contribution of the community. Besides the Amir, Modi also met Crown Prince His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, who hosted a banquet in his honour and held delegation-level talks with Kuwaiti Prime Minister His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

Kuwait bestows its highest honour on Modi



Prime Minister Narendra Modi receives Kuwait's highest honour "The Order of Mubarak Al Kabeer" from Amir of Kuwait His Highness Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah in Kuwait.

his distinguished achievements and the efforts made to strengthen the relations between the two countries. This is the 20th international honour given to PM Modi by a country.

"The Order of Mubarak Al Kabeer" is a knighthood order of Kuwait and is named after the seventh ruler of Kuwait, Mubarak bin Sabah Al-Sabah, who assumed power in 1896 and took Kuwait to new heights during his reign.

The Order is awarded to Heads of State and foreign sovereigns and to members of foreign royal families in sign of friendship. It has been previously awarded to foreign leaders like Bill Clinton, Prince Charles and George Bush besides other

One million Indian tourists visit Malaysia this year

NEW DELHI: Tourism Malaysia felicitated India's travel industry players for their role in promoting the destination, as arrivals from India reached a new record. Malaysia is now truly established as a leading holiday spot for outbound Indian travellers, Malaysian High Commissioner to

India Datuk Muzafar Shah Mustafa said.

"Over one million Indian travellers have chosen Malaysia as their destination of choice this year. It is a reflection of the trust, passion and collaboration between Tourism Malaysia and the Indian travel in-

(Cont. on page-2)

KUWAIT CITY: Kuwait on Sunday bestowed its highest honour "The Order of Mubarak Al Kabeer" to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in appreciation of



Oman's Vision 2040 a success story for Gulf diversification

MUSCAT: Oman's continuing efforts to diversify its economy are an example of how countries in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) can successfully move away from oil and gas, an official at the International Monetary Fund has said.

Muscat's Vision 2040 is among a number of "vision" plans in the region as countries continue to implement initiatives to diversify their economies. An IMF mission to Muscat found implementation of Oman's Vision 2040 plan is advancing "decisively", and it urged the sultanate to push through with its efforts to ensure sustainable growth.

The lender noted in particular progress the sultanate made on strengthening social safety nets, increasing labour market flexibility, strengthening its business market, advancing climate and digitalisation priorities, and continuing its state-owned enterprise reforms.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain are also in the process of implementing reforms. Countries in the region are aiming to attract greater foreign investment by establishing stronger

business-friendly environments, investing in infrastructure and advanced technology, and promoting tourism and other policy priorities.

"[A] success story in terms of growth, diversification and where they come from is Oman," IMF mission chief to Saudi Arabia Amine Mati said during a discussion at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. Mati also said Omani authorities have introduced efforts to be more financially prudent.

Recent IMF projections showed that Oman's economic growth was boosted by stronger non-hydrocarbon growth, which grew by 3.8pc in the first-half this year. Mati said the Vision 2040 plan was "chugging along" despite falling oil prices. He said some countries in the GCC are moving quicker than others, but noted many of the plans are continuing.

The IMF official was speaking after a presentation on a staff report outlining the GCC's outlook for 2025. The report said that the region's economic outlook remains positive despite conflicts in the Middle East, although medium-term risks do remain.

Kuwait bestows its...

(Cont. from page-1)

dignitaries like Queen Elizabeth and Prince Muhammad bin Salman.

Last month, Prime Minister Modi was conferred with Guyana's highest civilian honour, "The Order of Excellence", by the country's President Mohamed Irfaan Ali, for his visionary statesmanship, championing the

rights of developing countries on the global stage, exceptional service to the global community and for his commitment to strengthening India-Guyana relations.

Modi was the first foreign leader to be conferred with the award since 1969 when Queen Elizabeth received Nigeria's highest national honour.

One million Indian tourists...

(Cont. from page-1)

dustry," Muzafar said at an event organised by Tourism Malaysia to felicitate tour operators and airlines.

Malaysia has seen a sharp rise in arrivals from India this year following the introduction of free visa entry in Dec 2023.

Last year, Malaysia welcomed a total of 671,846 Indian visitors with the figure surpassing one million between Jan and Nov this

year.

Malaysia is looking to achieve a bigger number from India as it prepares to launch its tourism promotion activities next year in conjunction with Visit Malaysia Year 2026.

Travel demand between India and Malaysia is supported by strong air services and continues to grow, according to Ahmad Johanif Mohd Ali, director of Tourism Malaysia in New Delhi.

Modi meets Crown Prince of Kuwait



Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with His Highness Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, the Crown Prince of Kuwait.

KUWAIT CITY: Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, Crown Prince of Kuwait. Modi fondly recalled his recent meeting with His Highness the Crown Prince on the margins of the UNGA session in Sept 2024.

Prime Minister con-

veyed that India attaches utmost importance to its bilateral relations with Kuwait. The leaders acknowledged that bilateral relations were progressing well and welcomed their elevation to a Strategic Partnership. They emphasised on close coordination between both sides in the UN and other multilateral fora. Prime Minister

expressed confidence that India-GCC relations will be further strengthened under the Presidency of Kuwait. His Highness the Crown Prince of Kuwait hosted a banquet in honour of Prime Minister.

Modi invited His Highness the Crown Prince of Kuwait to visit India at a mutually convenient date.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Kuwaiti Prime Minister His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah in Kuwait.

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India's Ambassador in Kuwait Dr Adarsh Swaika greeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Kuwait airport.

Malaysia extends visa exemption for Indian nationals until 2026

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian government has announced an extension of the visa exemption for Indian nationals until Dec 31, 2026.

In a statement, home ministry secretary-general Datuk Awang Alik Jeman said this was in line with Malaysia's 2025 Asean chairmanship and preparations for Visit Malaysia Year 2026.

He added that the government had extended a similar visa exemption to Chinese nationals until the same date. Awang Alik said the government's visa liberalisation plan, which has been in place since Dec 1, 2023, aims at boosting the country's economic and tourism sectors while maintaining national security.

"As part of this plan, a 30-day visa exemption is granted to nationals of the People's Republic of China and India. "This initiative is part of broader efforts to enhance Malaysia's appeal as a travel destination while ensuring the safety and security of the nation," he said.

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FOREX RATES

As on 23rd December, 2024 (In rupees)

Currency	Buying	Selling
US Dollar	85.44	84.60
British Pound	107.66	106.46
Euro	89.66	88.01
Japanese Yen	54.72	54.03
Swiss Franc (CHF)	96.09	94.30
Canadian Dollar	59.82	58.65
Australian Dollar	53.73	52.73
Norwegian Krone	7.59	7.45
Swedish Krona	7.80	7.64
New Zealand Dollar	48.52	47.66
Hong Kong Dollar	11.04	10.84
Singapore Dollar	63.42	62.15
Saudi Arabian Riyal	22.87	22.44
United Arab Emirates	23.37	22.92



Prime Minister Narendra Modi attends an Indian community programme in Kuwait City.



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Kuwait's Foreign Minister Abdullah Ali Al Yahya exchanging Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a Joint Commission for Co-operation (JCC) at the level of foreign ministers.



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COCHIN - MUNNAR - THEKKADY - ALLEPPEY

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- Haveli Backwater Resort Alleppey Or Similar

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GULF FAQs

Work permit renewals, cancellations in Mohre's new automated services

Can you please explain new work permit renewal system?

Employment services offered by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (Mohre) will either be automated or made a lot easier as the authority heeds the call for “zero bureaucracy”. Several requirements and procedures will be completely eliminated, with transaction processing time slashed to maximum one business day.

Work permit renewals are among those that have been automated, Mohre said. The process previously required in-person visits but now, it can be done through the ministry's smart application, with no documents required. What used to take two days is now automatically completed.

This was made pos-

sible through Mohre system's integration with the Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security (ICP). This means several other related services are done instantly.

No procedures and documents are also required when cancelling work permits for employees outside the country, deceased individuals, those with contagious diseases and unused work permits, Mohre said.

Settling violators' status when renewing work permits with their current employer has also been automated, with 50pc fewer procedures and required documents.

The ministry also worked with other government entities and tapped into their systems to further streamline its services.

“Building on data from various other agencies' systems, the ministry has

developed all of its core services, reducing the number of fields required through integration with relevant entities, and cutting down on required documents by up to 76pc,” said Khalil Ibrahim Al Khoori, undersecretary of labour market and Emiratisation operations at Mohre.

“Service completion was made automatic and immediate using AI technologies, reducing transaction processing time to a maximum of one business day,” Al Khoori said.

The ministry's core services include issuing work permits for establishments and domestic workers, renewing employment contracts, cancelling work permits or contracts, and processing labour complaints.

The developments have also allowed Mohre to offer new smart services. Employees may now request job experience cer-

tificates and get them in under two minutes. An electronic authorisation service is also available free of charge and can be completed in two minutes instead of three days. No documents and in-person visits are required and the procedures were cut by 80pc.

All these instant services were made available as the ministry took steps to migrate all of its systems to the Federal Network (FEDnet) cloud network infrastructure at the Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority, Al Khoori said.

Mohre also launched an artificial intelligence (AI) platform as part of its plan to enhance organisational efficiency.

This automates primary and secondary pursuits for establishments with multiple activities, reducing process completion time to just three

hours — compared with the three months a single employee previously needed for the task. The platform also uses AI to determine the proposed primary activity for a client when opening an establishment card.

Moreover, the ministry also developed a smart inspection system, which proactively monitors risks to labour market stability, ranks establishments by risk level, and focuses inspection operations on high-risk establishments.

An integrated service system was also created for the issuance, renewal and cancellation of work permits for UAE citizens, thanks to Mohre's partnership with the Emirati Talent Competitiveness Council (Nafis) and the General Pension and Social Security Authority.

Dubai cuts domestic worker residence visa requirements in new online procedure

Dubai has cut domestic worker residence visa requirement and it works through Dubai Now app. Can you please explain the details?

All domestic worker visa services — including application, renewal and cancellation of residence permits — can now be accessed through the Dubai Now app, authorities announced.

The “Dubai Now” smart app now serves as the sole channel for the issuance, renewal and cancellation of domestic workers' residence permits.

This initiative is aimed at simplifying

the process and significantly reducing the time involved in such transactions. This unified platform was a project put together by the Ministry



of Human Resources and Emiratisation (Mohre) and the General Directorate of Residency and Foreigners Affairs in Dubai (GDRFA).

With the new “Domestic Worker Package”, the number of service chan-

nels involved in transactions has been cut from four to one and the steps required to complete the process have been reduced from 12 to four.

Visits to service centres were slashed from eight to two, and the processing time has been reduced from 30 to five days. The number of required documents has also been cut from 10 to just four, leading to a

cost reduction of Dh400 per transaction.

How it works?

For those who are applying for a domestic worker's residency, here are the steps:

*Customers can easily access these residency services through the “Dubai Now” app.

*One will have to fill out a unified service package form, where he/she will enter the domestic worker's details and submit identity and passport information.

*The employment contract is signed electronically within the app.

*The worker will have to undergo medical examination and results will then be sent through

the app.

The worker's ID and residency permits will then be issued.

The rollout of this Domestic Worker Package is the third phase of the Mohre's Work Bundle project, which eases the processes for residence visas and employment permits by unifying all services in one platform.

The first phase was rolled out in Dubai in March and later implemented in all seven emirates. The second phase of Work Bundle covered about six lakh companies and more than seven million workers.

KNOW YOUR SCHENGEN

What is the history behind the name SCHENGEN?

The village of Schengen, in Luxembourg, where the Schengen Agreement was signed in 1985, is the source of Schengen's name recognition. Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands were the five nations that collaborated on the agreement. Internal border controls between these nations were to be gradually eliminated as part of the deal. The Schengen area is currently one of the biggest free travel zones in the world.

Schengen- the Cradle of the Schengen Zone

With a land area of slightly more than 30 square kilometers and a population of slightly more than 5,000, Schengen is a charming little village that is extremely off the usual route. Schengen, the town at the intersection of the borders of France, Germany, and Luxembourg, on the western bank of the river Moselle, is also well-known for its wine production. This is due to the fact that Schengen, Luxembourg, was the birthplace of what is now known as the Schengen Zone, a region of Europe (and beyond) that is home to nearly 420 million people and spans more than 4 million square kilometers.

What is the Schengen Agreement?

A treaty between a few EU members and a few nearby non-member states is known as the Schengen Agreement. It allows citizens of signatory states, third countries, and other EU members to travel freely, with internal border controls largely eliminated. Five of the ten member states of the European Economic Community at the time signed it on June



14, 1985, in Schengen, Luxembourg. Travelers can move freely between participating countries without going through border controls thanks

uniform guidelines that apply to individuals entering the EU member states' external borders * Harmonization of the conditions of entry and

issuance. The 29 Schengen Member States are **Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France,**



to the Schengen Area's common entry and exit requirements. Countries do, however, implement standardized controls at their external borders. Over time, the Schengen Area grew to become the largest free travel area in the world. According to a 90/180 day rule, you risk deportation, a fine, or a ban from entering the Schengen area if you remain for more than 90 days during a 180-day period. To enhance border controls and facilitate border crossing for frequent travelers, the EU is developing a "Smart Border" program. A "touring visa" that would permit visitors to remain in the Schengen Area for longer than ninety days but no longer than a year is also being considered.

Crucial Guidelines: Within the Schengen framework, the following important rules have been adopted: * Removal of internal border checks on individuals * A set of

visa rules for short stays * Enhanced police collaboration (including the ability to conduct hot pursuit and cross-border surveillance) * Improved judicial cooperation by transferring the enforcement of criminal judgments and implementing a quicker extradition process * Establishment and development of the Schengen Information System (SIS) which facilitates border control, law enforcement, and vehicle registration cooperation among member states. * Schengen Member States issue uniform short-stay visas known as Schengen Visas.

Member States of Schengen

To date, 29 nations have ratified the Schengen Agreement; 25 EU members and four 4 Non-EU Associated States have eliminated border controls and fully implemented the Schengen acquis with regard to visa

Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland (Non-EU), Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein (Non-EU), Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway (Non-EU), Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland (Non-EU).

Two EU members, Ireland and the United Kingdom, maintain independent visa, immigration, and asylum policies and do not engage in Schengen cooperation, while Cyprus is not yet a full member of the Schengen area.

The Schengen visa

An authorization granted by a Schengen state that permits visitors to enter the Schengen area for brief visits or transit through its territory is known as a Schengen visa. It is an entry permit that allows non-EU nationals (non-European Union) to visit the Schengen area for short stays or transit. The following

Schengen visa types are permitted for transit or short-term visits: **The Schengen short-stay visa:** A stay of up to 90 days during any 180-day period is permitted with the Schengen short-stay visa. **The Schengen Airport transit visa:** Travel through the international transit area of an airport within the Schengen region is permitted with the Schengen Airport transit visa. **The Schengen multiple-entry visa:** As long as the visa is valid, the Schengen multiple-entry visa permits multiple visits to the Schengen region.

The Schengen area consists of 29 European nations that do not have border controls and have a common legal system. "Schengen Member States" are the nations that grant Schengen visas. Entry into the Schengen area is not guaranteed by a Schengen visa. If a visa holder fails to present proof of purpose, border officials have the right to deny entry. Entry may also be denied if the trip's details do not satisfy additional requirements. A Schengen visa can be used for travel, family visits, business travel, seasonal employment, transit, medical care, education, training, placements, and volunteer work.

As members of the Schengen area, 29 European nations currently grant Schengen visas. As of March 31, 2024, Bulgaria and Romania are fully implementing the Schengen acquisition and restrictions are no longer in place at the internal air and sea borders with these two member states. With a unanimous Council decision, controls at these Member States' internal land borders may be further relaxed. *(In upcoming issues, we will discuss more about the Schengen).*