

Business

Morocco's petro-PM faces heat over soaring fuel prices

Fuel distributors are 'exploiting the crisis to rack up immoral profits'

RABAT: Morocco's Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, a billionaire petrol baron, is facing a growing online campaign demanding he step down as fuel prices—and energy firms' profits—surge. The government of the North African kingdom, which is heavily reliant on oil imports, insists it is doing its best to ease the economic impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing shock to crude prices.

But that hasn't stopped some 600,000 Facebook accounts sharing Arabic or French hashtags demanding that "Akhannouch quit". United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres has just slammed global energy giants reaping billions in windfall profits for their "grotesque greed" that was harming the world's poorest and urged governments to tax them.

It is a sentiment shared widely in Morocco. Many are calling on the government to halve fuel prices and impose a cap on the profits of petrol retailers—including the dominant player Afriquia, of which Akhannouch is the majority owner.

"This campaign's focus on the prime minister in person reflects anger at the mix of money and politics which Akhannouch is seen as embodying," said analyst Mohamed Chakir. Critics see the premier as "part of the problem rather than as someone presenting solutions", Chakir added.

Petrol prices in Morocco hit record highs of 18 dirhams (\$1.80) for a litre of unleaded in June, fuelling overall inflation expected to top five percent this year, and adding to the misery of farmers hit by the worst drought in decades.

'Exploiting the crisis'

While discontent has not spilled onto the streets, the online campaign against Akhannouch has been taken up by opposition parties and trade unions.

"Petrol companies are continuing to fleece Moroccans," leading union the Democratic Confederation of Labour said in a statement, accusing the government of "silence".

It also charged that fuel distributors are "exploiting the crisis to rack up immoral profits". Neither Akhannouch nor Afriquia or its rival fuel retailers have publicly responded to the campaign or the accusations—and Afriquia is not obliged to disclose its profits.

The government has sought to blame rising living costs on the war in Ukraine which has driven up fuel and food prices, accelerating inflation in many countries. Akhannouch was named to head the government in September after his National Rally of Independents (RNI) thrashed the long-ruling Islamists in a parliamentary election.

He promised to improve living conditions and tackle social inequalities exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. The 61-year-old is seen as close to King Mohammed VI and has a personal fortune worth some \$2 billion according to Forbes.

'Speculation, manipulation'

Morocco used to subsidise fuel, but this system was scrapped in late 2015 because it was seen as costing the state too much. While the market was liberalised, this was meant to be accompanied by cash payouts to the most needy households—benefits that never materialised.

Many on social media are now calling for taxes on consumers at the pump to be slashed. The government has not responded, although it said in March it would pay out some \$206 million to help out transport workers operating some 180,000 vehicles, who had staged a national strike over spiralling fuel costs.



RABAT, Morocco: Morocco's Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, a billionaire petrol baron, is facing a campaign demanding he step down as fuel prices and energy firms' profits surge. —AFP

It has also doubled subsidies on cooking gas, flour and sugar. The country's economic woes have not gone unnoticed by King Mohammed. In an annual speech to the nation on Saturday, the monarch called for "mechanisms of national solidarity and a determined and responsible campaign against speculation and price manipulation".

Nor is this the first time Afriquia has faced pressure. The firm was among several major com-

panies hit by a boycott in 2018 over a cost-of-living crisis when Akhannouch was agriculture minister. But following the latest criticisms, state news agency MAP has slammed a "tendentious" campaign, saying it was "fuelled by more than 500 fake accounts".

That article sparked another storm on social media, with opposition MPs accusing MAP of pro-Akhannouch bias. —AFP



Jazeera Airways announces new service to Qassim

KUWAIT: Jazeera Airways announced a new direct service to the Qassim province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, operating four return flights weekly starting August 22 to the Prince Nayef Bin Abdulaziz International Airport in the province's capital, Buraydah. The upcoming service follows the success of the previously launched routes to Hail and Abha during the month of July. The airline operates seven routes to Saudi, including Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam and Medinah.

Commenting on the expansion, Jazeera Airways Chief Executive Officer, Rohit Ramachandran, said: "Demand for flights to Saudi Arabia has really grown and we're pleased to offer more choice to the Kingdom for Kuwaiti travellers. The momentum is expected to continue as events and festivals resume in the Kingdom for the cooler months. There are strong ties between Kuwaiti and Saudi families and we now offer a flight for them to connect rather than take to the highway."

Jazeera is responding strongly to the 2030 Vision that is driving growth in travel to Saudi Arabia. With over 60 flights a week now being offered, Jazeera is the number one airline from Kuwait. Jazeera is also working closely with the Saudi Tourism Authority to support the marketing of their event calendar in the Kuwait market to attract travellers.

Lufthansa records first net profit since pandemic

FRANKFURT: Lufthansa said Thursday its freight operations propelled the German airline group to its first net profit since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Between April and June, Lufthansa recorded a net profit of 259 million euros (\$263 million), over one billion euros more than the same period last year and its first positive quarter since the end of 2019.

Lufthansa was "back in the black", CEO Carsten Spohr said in a statement, describing the pandemic as "the most severe financial crisis in our history". The group—which includes Eurowings, Austrian, Swiss and Brussels Airlines—made huge net losses of 6.7 billion euros in 2020 and 2.2 billion euros in 2021

Smart government underpins Kuwait's digital future

KUWAIT: You've probably heard terms like 'Smart Government' being used a lot lately—but before we go further into this topic, it's worth spending a moment to better understand what the term means. Smart Government means using technology to enable and support better government planning and decision-making. It is designed to improve democratic processes and transform public service delivery. To be truly effective, this emerging governance method relies on consolidated information systems and state-of-the-art communication technologies. It is 'citizen-centric', data-driven and performance-focused.

Perhaps more broadly speaking, we see it as the use of innovative policies, new dynamic business models and technology to address all the financial, environmental, and service challenges facing public sector organizations. At its heart, smart government relies on advanced technologies, excellent telecommunications facilities and a population savvy enough to take full advantage of e-services.

Of course, a forward-thinking nation such as Kuwait has a blueprint for its future society, which includes enabling digitalization, a key part of which is the delivery of e-government services under the umbrella of smart government.

And central to smart government is a high-speed, reliable and robust telecommunications network. Together with local operators, we delivered high-speed 5G networks to Kuwait in 2019, as one of the earliest nations to

as the pandemic shut down large parts of the airline industry. Lufthansa was saved from bankruptcy by a government bailout in June 2020. The improved figures were lifted by a "record" result for Lufthansa Cargo, which has benefitted from high demand and "ongoing disruptions in ocean freight".

The freight division booked an operating-or underlying-profit of 482 million euros in the second quarter, a 48-percent improvement on last year. A "boom" in demand for travel saw the result for Lufthansa's passenger airlines "improved significantly" though they remained in the red, with the exception of Swiss.

Amid recent chaos at airports, Lufthansa said it would start recruiting again, bringing 5,000 new employees on board. A shortage of workers has left airports struggling to process high numbers of passengers, after they pared back their operations during the pandemic.

Despite the disruption and the clouded outlook for the economy, Lufthansa said it "expects demand for tickets to remain high for the remaining months of the year". For the whole of 2022 Lufthansa

adopt this technology in the region.

Faster connectivity helped deliver vital services during the pandemic, such as implementing distance learning solutions across Kuwait's education sector, ensuring compliance with the government's social distancing policy. This meant thousands of young people - the future of the nation - were able to continue with their education without risk.

We are already working with local operators to improve and upgrade the existing 5G network, making Kuwait a global benchmark for cutting-edge communications technology. Official data shows that the Internet services provided by the three mobile operators witnessed a great development during 2021, especially in downloading and uploading via HTTP using 4G/5G networks.

While 5G enables faster connectivity, 5G delivered via fiber is widely viewed as the gold standard for networks, providing fast, stable connectivity for all. Our fiber network, built-in close cooperation with the Ministry of Communications, is seen as an essential infrastructure for enabling digital transformation. We are doing our utmost to help turn Kuwait Vision 2035 into reality - by delivering optical fiber to more than 50,000 households, enterprises, and government departments.

Since 2016, we have cooperated with government ministries and commissions to introduce automated tools and platforms within the Kuwait National Guard (KNG) to facilitate office automation. Now KNG is fully automated, saving time, effort and expenditure, including saving a total of five million sheets of paper and 70% storage space. Our automation services have increased office efficiency by 45% and guarantee the security at the same time. KNG stands as a prime example of the power of technology-based automation.

I would like to invite our dear customers to join us in our efforts and contribute to granting food security to local families."

"We are incredibly excited to partner with Deliveroo to deliver much-needed food supplies to our local communities," said May AlTaraqah at the Social Work Society. "Food insecurity is a daily struggle for families around the world; with Deliveroo's Full Life campaign, we are glad to be doing our part to support communities in need - one food relief box at a time."

"Since our inception, Food Box has remained committed to making it easy for everyone to give back to the communities they know and love. We are proud to partner with Deliveroo to give their customers the option to choose from various food boxes of different sizes, prices, and ingredients - all with the ultimate goal of reaching vulnerable communities and doing our part to end food insecurity," said Mohammad Al Salem at Food Box. To contribute to Deliveroo's latest campaign and to deliver food items to those in need, customers can donate a food box through "Food Box" on the Deliveroo.



FRANKFURT, Germany: File photo shows a Lufthansa Airbus A340-300 is pictured after take-off from the airport in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany. —AFP

planned to offer 75 percent of its pre-crisis capacity on passenger airlines.

The group also put a number on an expected operating profit for the year, saying it anticipated a result "above 500 million euros". —AFP



Rico Lin, CEO, Huawei Kuwait

And we are proudly helping the government steer the nation towards a low-carbon future, together with investment in greener cloud-based technologies. Kuwait's forward-thinking 'cloud-first' policy means government departments must fully evaluate cloud services first, before considering other options when acquiring new information and communication technology or upgrading existing infrastructure and applications.

All of these signs of progress are building a solid digital foundation for smart government. We believe that smart government provides intelligent and precise responses and brings better social service to meet people's growing needs, which means a lot during Kuwait's future digital journey. We will maintain our long-term investment in Kuwait, and apply our world-leading experience and technologies to Kuwait, such as green energy, AI, and cloud-based service provision, to continue our assistance in implementing the country's New Kuwait 2035 vision.

Deliveroo launches 'Full Life' campaign

KUWAIT: Driven by its deep-rooted belief in the importance of giving back to our local communities, Deliveroo is launching its "Full Life" campaign in Kuwait in collaboration with the Social Work Society and Food Box. As a pillar of the aggregator's global Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) strategy, the campaign initially launched in the UK in 2021 to tackle food insecurities around the world and support local communities across Deliveroo's markets.

Deliveroo's Full Life campaign allows customers to donate food relief boxes from "Food Box" on the Deliveroo app from 03 August to 31 October. All food boxes will then be delivered to the Social Work Society, whose members will assist in their distribution to communities in need.

A variety of food boxes will be available for pur-

