



King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud

Kurds urged to scrap independence vote

Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday urged Iraqi Kurdish leader Massud Barzani to call off a planned referendum on independence for his autonomous region to avoid further "crises" in Iraq and the region.

A Saudi government official said Barzani should drop plans to hold a referendum "in light of the situation in the region and the dangers it is facing,

and in order to avoid new crises".

He called on the Kurdish leader to make use of his "wisdom and experience", the state-run Saudi Press Agency said.

Holding the referendum as planned on September 25 could have "negative consequences on the political, security and humanitarian fronts".

It could also "affect efforts to

establish security and stability in the region, as well as efforts to fight against terrorist organisations and their activities," the official added.

Saudi Arabia is the latest country to voice its opposition to the referendum in oil-rich Iraqi Kurdistan.

But Barzani has so far resisted pressure from Baghdad and Iraq's neighbours Turkey and Iran, as well as from the

United States and its Western allies, to call off the vote.

Iraq's supreme court has ordered the suspension of the referendum to examine claims made by the federal government that it was unconstitutional.

The Saudi official called on "all concerned parties to engage in a dialogue that would serve the interests of the entire Iraqi people". (AFP)

Saudi game for big change

Setting up \$2.7bn entertainment investment firm



A handout picture provided by the Saudi Royal Palace shows King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (C) meeting with members of the Saudi national football team at the Royal Palace in Jeddah.

Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund is set to create a \$2.7 billion entertainment investment company, state media said yesterday, as the kingdom opens up avenues for leisure.

The country seeks to increase domestic spending on entertainment and launch hundreds of recreation

centres across the kingdom as part of its Vision 2030 plan to reduce its dependence on oil.

"The Public Investment Fund is in the process of developing a new company to act as its investment arm in Saudi Arabia's growing entertainment sector," the Saudi Press Agency said.

"The company, which will have an initial capitalisation

of SAR 10 billion, will play an active investment role in various areas of the entertainment sector."

The unnamed company will invest in a variety of projects, including an entertainment complex that will be launched by 2019, SPA said, adding that it aims to create more than 22,000 jobs by 2030.

SPA did not give further details about the projects. Alcohol, cinemas and theatres are currently banned in the kingdom.

Vision 2030, an ambitious economic diversification plan unveiled in April 2016, aims to broaden its investment base to make citizens reliant on private sector jobs rather than on government largesse.

Women allowed to enter stadium Locks are off for internet calling apps

Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has invited women to a sports stadium for the first time to attend annual national day celebrations with their families, state media said Wednesday, opening up a previously male-only venue.

Families will be allowed into the King Fahd stadium in Riyadh, used mostly for football matches, and seated separately from single men to mark the kingdom's 87th National Day this weekend.

"The stadium is ready to receive about 40,000 people divided between individuals and families to be seated separately," the official Saudi Press Agency said in a statement, citing the general authority of entertainment.

This marks a shift from previous



Representative picture

celebrations in the kingdom where women are effectively barred from sports arenas by strict rules on segregation of the sexes in public.

Under the country's guardianship system, a male family member -- normally the father, husband or brother -- must grant permission for a woman's study, travel and other

activities. But the kingdom appears to be relaxing some norms as part of its "Vision 2030" plan for economic and social reforms.

In July, rights campaigners welcomed an "overdue" reform by the education ministry to allow girls to take part in sports at state schools. (AFP)

Riyadh

Saudi Arabia will lift its ban on internet calling applications on Wednesday, authorities said, easing restrictions online.

Voice and video calling apps such as WhatsApp and Skype will be "widely available to users", a government statement said Tuesday, in a move aimed at improving business confidence as the kingdom transitions into a post-oil era.

"Access to VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) will reduce operational costs and spur digital entrepreneurship," the statement

said, citing a directive from the communications and technology ministry.

"Digital transformation is one of the key kick-starters for the Saudi economy, as it will incentivise the growth of internet-based businesses, especially in the media and entertainment industries."

