



7 Sri Lanka parliament speaker warns crisis risks starvation



12 'Infurrection': Fox terrorizes humans in Capitol rampage



16 De Bruyne gives City slender lead over stubborn Atletico



Ramadan Timings	
Fajr	04:12
Shurooq	05:33
Dhuhr	11:51
Asr	15:23
Maghrib	18:09
Isha	19:27



US and UK announce new sanctions against Russia

Hundreds of civilians found dead; Putin's daughters targeted



SEVERODONETSK: Residents run near a burning house following a shelling in Severodonetsk, Donbas region, on April 6, 2022, as Ukraine tells residents in the country's east to evacuate 'now or risk death' ahead of a feared Russian onslaught on the Donbas region, which Moscow has declared its top prize. — AFP

KYIV: The US and Britain announced new sanctions against Russia Wednesday after Ukraine said hundreds of civilians were found dead around its capital, as Kyiv warned residents in the east of the country to get out "now" ahead of a feared assault. The White House unveiled measures targeting Russia's top public and private banks and two daughters of President Vladimir Putin, while Britain sanctioned two banks-and vowed to eliminate all Russian oil and gas imports by year-end.

Their actions followed an international outcry after Ukraine said its forces found hundreds of civilians dead around the capital Kyiv, including the town of Bucha, after Russian troops withdrew. In a video address to the UN Security Council on Tuesday, Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky showed harrowing images of corpses-including of children-that he said were victims of Russian atrocities.

The Kremlin denies responsibility and on Wednesday, Putin accused Ukrainian authorities of being behind "crude and cynical provocations" in Bucha, in a call with Hungary's prime minister, the

Kremlin said. The Russian withdrawal from areas around Kyiv and the north is part of a shift in focus towards Ukraine's southeast, in a bid to create a land bridge between occupied Crimea and Moscow-backed separatist statelets in the region of Donbas.

Ukraine Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk on Wednesday warned residents in the eastern Kharkiv, Lugansk and Donetsk regions to leave immediately due a feared Russian attack. "It has to be done now because later people will be under fire and face the threat of death," she wrote on Telegram. NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said there was no sign Putin had dropped "his ambition to control the whole of Ukraine". "We have to be realistic and realise that this may last for a long time, for many months, for even years," he said ahead of a meeting with NATO foreign ministers.

Zelensky called for Russia's exclusion from the UN Security Council, where it is one of five members with veto power, and made an impassioned plea for action in response to the civilian killings.

Continued on Page 6

Ramadan Kareem

Holy Ramadan in Prophet's words

By Teresa Lesher

S alman Al-Farasi (RA) narrated that the Prophet (PBUH) delivered a sermon on the last day of the month of Sha'ban. It can be translated as the following: "O People! The month of Allah (Ramadan) has come with its mercies, blessings and forgiveness. Allah has decreed this month the best of all months. The days of this month are the best among the days and the nights are the best among the nights and the hours during Ramadan are the best among the hours.

This is a month in which you have been invited by Him (to fast and pray). Allah has honored you in it. In every breath you take is a reward of Allah, your sleep is worship, your good deeds are accepted and your invocations are answered. "Therefore, you must invoke your Lord in all earnestness with hearts free from sin and evil, and pray that Allah may help you to keep fast, and to recite the Holy Quran."

Indeed! Miserable is the one who is deprived of Allah's forgiveness in this great month. While fasting, remember the hunger and thirst of the Day of Judgment. Give alms to the poor and needy. Pay respect to your elders, have sympathy for your youngsters and be kind towards your relatives and kinsmen. Guard your tongue against unworthy words, and your eyes from scenes that are not worth seeing and your ears from sounds that should not be heard.

Be kind to orphans so that if your children may become orphans they will also be treated with kindness. Do repent to Allah for your sins and supplicate with raised hands at the times of prayer as these are the best times, during which Allah Almighty looks at His servants with mercy. Allah Answers if they supplicate, Responds if they call, Grants if He is asked, and Accepts if they entreat.

"O people! You have made your conscience the slave of your desires. Make it free by invoking Allah for forgiveness. Your back may break from the heavy load of your sins, so prostrate yourself before Allah for long intervals, and

Continued on Page 6

Is this the end of zero-COVID strategy?

PARIS: Jenny Leung, who lost her job as a waitress last month due to Hong Kong's zero-Covid strategy, has one question: "What was it all for?" Her frustration was in response to Hong Kong indicating it could transition towards living with the virus, though the city's leaders have since said it will stick with zero-COVID. Leung, 29, called it a "half-hearted attempt" after more than two years of "a zero-COVID mindset that really hurt all of us".

China finds itself increasingly isolated in pursuing the strategy, which

uses harsh localized lockdowns to snuff out even a small number of infections, after other early adopters such as Australia and New Zealand abandoned it last year. A new daily record number of COVID cases in China on Wednesday of more than 20,000 piled further pressure on Beijing's zero-COVID strategy as millions remain locked down in financial centre Shanghai.

Although Hong Kong now insists it will stick with its zero-COVID policy despite easing some restrictions, experts suggest that the strategy's days could be numbered. Such policies saved lives by fending off worse outbreaks in the early stages of the pandemic, but the availability of vaccines - and the emergence of the more contagious but less severe

Continued on Page 6



SHANGHAI: People wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) transfer daily food supplies and necessities for local residents during the COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai. — AFP

Why are there fears in Jerusalem?

JERUSALEM: After 11 lives were lost in a spate of attacks, some linked to the Islamic State group, Zionist entity placed its forces on high alert for Ramadan, which began last weekend. Why has the Jewish state stepped up security for the Muslim holy month of fasting?

Why is Jerusalem important?
Every evening during Ramadan,

thousands of Muslims gather for prayers at Al-Aqsa mosque in east Jerusalem. Al-Aqsa-known by Jews as the Temple Mount-is located in the Old City in mainly Palestinian east Jerusalem. The third-holiest site in Islam, it is a flashpoint in the long-running Middle East conflict that is often the scene of clashes. Last year, nightly demonstrations in Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa compound escalated into 11 days of war between Zionists and Hamas, the Islamist movement that runs the Gaza Strip.

Violent demonstrations have already left dozens injured this Ramadan. On Tuesday, while visiting the West Bank, Prime Minister Naftali

Continued on Page 6



JERUSALEM: Zionist security forces detain a Palestinian youth outside Damascus Gate in Jerusalem's Old City during Ramadan. — AFP

TikTok is having a bad war: Experts

PARIS: The war in Ukraine has rapidly positioned TikTok as the number one source of misinformation thanks to its gigantic number of users and minimal filtering of content, experts say. Every day, Shayan Sardarizadeh, a journalist with the BBC's disinformation team, ploughs through a hallucinatory mix of fake and misleading information about the war

being spewed out on the video-sharing site.

"TikTok is really not having a good war," he told AFP. "I haven't seen another platform with so much false content," he added. "We've seen it all: videos from past conflicts being recycled, genuine footage presented in a misleading way, things that are so obviously false but still get tens of millions of views." He said the most disturbing were fake live-streams in which users pretended to be on the ground in Ukraine but were using footage from other conflicts or even video games - and then asking for money to support their "reporting".

"Millions tune in and watch. They even add fake gunshots and explosions," said Sardarizadeh. Anastasiya Zhyrmon of Access Now, an advocacy group, said it was no excuse to say that the war came as a surprise. "This conflict has been escalating since 2014 and these problems of Kremlin propaganda and misinformation have been raised with TikTok long before the invasion," she told AFP. "They've promised to double their efforts and partner with content checkers, but I'm not sure they are taking this obligation seriously," she added. — AFP

Local



KUWAIT: An aerial view shows residential districts of Kuwait City and its suburbs. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



An aerial view shows residential buildings in Kuwait.

People explain why they prefer their areas of residence in Kuwait

Services, proximity to key locations main advantages

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Kuwait's areas are spread across six governorates, but what distinguishes one place from another? As part of our occasional series exploring various areas of the country, Kuwait Times interviewed citizens and residents to learn more about the reason for their preference for the areas they choose to live in.

Yousef Hashemi, a Kuwaiti who lives in Jaber Al-Ahmad, told Kuwait Times that his area, one of the largest areas in the country, has neat streets that people may not find in other areas, adding that in every block one can find a variety of services. "Jaber Al-Ahmad area provides a unique and progressive style of living for all its residents. Its streets are clean and tidy compared to roads that are in dire need of maintenance in other areas, in addition to easy access from the Fifth and Fourth Ring Roads. The area is very suitable for families, as it is almost free of any inconvenience," he noted.

Eissa Al-Mutoutah, a Kuwaiti who has been living in Salwa for the past 10 years,

said he has many good memories of the area. He said the area, located between Mishref and Bayan, is a trendy location among Kuwaitis. Regarding the disadvantages, he said the traffic congestion in the area is disastrous in the morning during school hours. Aya Ashkanani, a citizen who also lives in Salwa, agrees with Mutoutah on the benefits of the location of this area. She said she prefers this area

the seaside and have all services," he said. "I have been living in this area for 10 years. Unfortunately, the population is rising, which is taking away some of the advantages off the list." Sami Al-Eidan, who lives in Khalidiya, told Kuwait Times that this area is characterized by the fact that most of its houses are large, as well as the spaciousness of its internal streets. But what affects the area is the presence



Traffic jams common issue in most areas

because it is close to Kuwait City, and has all services, from clinics and supermarkets to restaurants. Also, it is close to where her grandparents live.

For Kuwaiti Hussain Al-Njadah, Rumathiya is the best area in Kuwait to live in. "We are five minutes away from

of Kuwait University, which makes it crowded with cars during official working hours.

Meanwhile, Ali Khader, a Jordanian who lives in Salmiya, affirmed that expats are social and keen on family visits and meeting friends, indicating that residing in faraway areas is tiring for social reasons, in addition to the distance of these areas from the family and workplace. He said Salmiya is the best area for those who seek a dynamic place full of life, as it is a hub for several commercial complexes, restaurants and cafes.

Ahmad Karam, a Lebanese who resides in Maidan Hawally, said: "Salmiya, Maidan Hawally and Hawally are suitable areas for expats and most of us choose these areas due to reasonable rentals and proximity to most areas. My area has great location, as it is a link between Salmiya and Hawally. Also, I have easy access to the Fourth Ring Road and the seaside." He added: "If I live in a faraway area, how can my daughter drive for more than an hour to go from home to university, work and other places with her friends? It is not easy."



Residential buildings seen along a main highway in Kuwait.



Residential buildings along the Arabian Gulf Road.

Zain launches annual 'Ramadan Machla' initiative

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, launched its annual charitable initiative to provide 'Ramadan Machla' (supplies). Zain's 'Machla' was delivered in collaboration with its strategic partners to underprivileged families in Kuwait to serve their needs during the holy month.

Zain's 'Ramadan Machla' initiative has kicked-off before the arrival of the holy month, and it is considered one of the main pillars of the company's annual Ramadan campaign, which stems from its Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability strategy to serve the needs of underprivileged families in the country.

This year, Zain delivered the 'Machla' to



KUWAIT: Musalam Al-Subaie welcomes Zain's team.

a number of non-profit organizations that are certified by the authorities, including the Social Care Centers represented by Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Community Development Musalam Al-Subaie, the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), represented by Vice Chairman Anwar Al-Hasawi, the

Kuwait Food Bank, represented by Vice Chairman Meshal Al-Ansari, as well as the Patients Support Fund Society.

Zain's Machla was offered via vouchers to give each family the opportunity to choose specific supplies as per their different personal needs. The families are able to redeem them at a local megamarket that offers a large collection of food and other consumer supplies, catering to their needs before the arrival of the holy month.

Zain's distribution plan included the delivery of the vouchers to the biggest certified organizations across Kuwait to ensure their delivery to those in need before the arrival of the holy month in order to guarantee that families have enough quantities of the most basic supplies. The company hopes this initiative has a deep positive impact on the community's various segments, especially the most vulnerable ones, during such circumstances.

Zain's Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility campaign during the holy month of Ramadan aims at helping less fortunate people to enjoy Ramadan happily, as well as celebrating the true spirit the Holy month brings by supporting humanitarian and charitable campaigns.



Anwar Al-Hasawi receives the vouchers from Zain.

Hotline unresponsive as consumer complain of high Ramadan prices

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Although inspectors of the Ministry of Commerce go on regular inspections in various areas and locations, prices of some products have still increased. At a cooperative society, the price of both local and imported tomatoes has risen by around 30 percent in two days. When Kuwait Times asked the director of the supermarket about the reason for the price hike, he said that it's the supplier that increased the price and not the co-op.

Kuwait Times tried to contact the Consumer Protection Department of the Ministry of Commerce to get information about the reason for this price increase and whether the supplier is controlled by the ministry, but was not able to get in contact with the ministry through any of its channels.

The popular channel for consumers to register a complaint or get information is by calling the hotline of the Consumer Protection Department on 135. But this number is not a hotline anymore, as its working hours are now limited to only four hours (9:00 am to 1:00 pm). When calling during these hours, nobody answers most of

the time. When someone does pick up the phone, they will usually direct the caller to file their complaint through their WhatsApp number.

The WhatsApp number 55135135 will not connect the consumer with any staff, but will automatically send a link for the complainant to fill in their personal information and verify it with the Kuwait Mobile ID app. If the consumer calls 135 out of working hours, the answering machine will lead the caller via a recorded message to register their complaint on their website: ccas.moci.gov.kw, which leads to the app that requires authenticating with the Kuwait Mobile ID and does not provide for a simple registration of a complaint or obtain information.

According to the call center on 135, there are consumer protection offices in different areas in all governorates that work for only three hours - from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm (before Ramadan), that also receive complaints. The address of these centers is not mentioned on the ministry's website. It's hard for the consumer to receive assistance or help from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry if they face a problem with any store, product or service.



KUWAIT: Products stacked inside a co-op society in Kuwait. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Local

Smoking kills around 3,000 people in Kuwait every year

50% tobacco price increase can help save 1,000 lives annually

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait Society for Preventing Smoking and Cancer (KSSCP) and Chairman of Cancer Aware Nation (CAN) Dr Khalid Al-Saleh said smoking contributes to the death of nearly 3,000 people every year in Kuwait. This represents 25 percent of annual mortalities of 209 per 100,000 people, equivalent to 12,380 death cases in 2020.

During the opening of the "Gaining health and fighting smoking in Ramadan" program organized by CAN in cooperation with the smoking fighting team at KSSCP, Dr Saleh said the program, which will continue until the 20th of Ramadan, aims at urging smokers to stop smoking and encouraging them to exercise.

Dr Saleh said studies showed the financial burden of smoking in the Gulf is 1 percent of the GDP of these countries. Bearing in mind that Kuwait's GDP is around KD 41 billion, then 1 percent equals KD 401 million, which is a huge amount the country spends annually on the harm smoking causes to people. He said if we succeed in adopting awareness programs that are financially supported and increase cigarette prices by 50 percent, we can prevent more than 1,000 deaths annually and reduce the financial cost for the health ministry by nearly 33 percent.

Dr Saleh said as an encouragement for participants, each individual who succeeds in reducing their weight by at least 10 percent and participants who refrain from smoking since the start of Ramadan will have the opportunity to enter a draw to receive air tickets, laptops and other valuable prizes. He said a hotline 66523740 is designated to answer questions.

Dr Saleh said cancer is one of the three dis-

eases that lead to most deaths in most countries, and many studies have shown a large percentage of the health budget goes for cancer treatment, reaching nearly 15 percent in some countries. He said smoking in Kuwait causes a large burden of diseases that can be avoided, adding the World Health Organization recommends prevention and early detection to prevent the disease and reduce its budget, which affects health services.



Dr Khalid Al-Saleh speaks during the function.



KUWAIT: Participants in the opening of the "Gaining health and fighting smoking in Ramadan" program.



49.9% of men and 4.4% of women in Kuwait smoke

regional countries - 49.9 percent of men and 4.4 percent of women in Kuwait smoke, while a survey in 2014 showed 39.2 percent of men and 3.3 percent of women smoked. This compared to male smokers making up 23.8 percent in Bahrain, 22.2 percent in Saudi Arabia and 18.1 percent in the UAE.

Dr Saleh said a previous study showed doctors, who are most aware about the harms of smoking, make up 18.4 percent, while the percentage of doctors who quit smoking is 15.8 percent. The survey revealed 46 percent of students smoke - 10 percent smoke only shisha and 13 percent smoke only cigarettes, while 23 percent smoke both.

Kuwait Times, Kuwait News sign agreement with Kareem Media



KUWAIT: Kuwait Times and Kuwait News signed a cooperation agreement with Kareem Media, a media agency specializing in digital news to become the advertising agent for the two newspapers. Kuwait Times and Kuwait News were represented by Advertising Manager Taleb Kanjo, while Kareem Media was represented by Mohammad Suwaidan.

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Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: A scene showing traders in an old market exchanging currencies. One trader is seen sitting next to an open treasury while examining banknotes as a shisha sits besides him. The picture depicts the simple lifestyle of Kuwait in the past. (Source: Photo album of the KOC in 1970s. Prepared by Mahmoud Zakaria Abu Alella, heritage researcher at the Ministry of Information)

India opens regular tourist visas to Kuwait nationals

KUWAIT: Indian Embassy in Kuwait has commenced issuing regular tourist visas including multiple entry visas to Kuwaiti nationals, the embassy announced on Wednesday. The decision was taken after India eased travel restrictions as the pandemic situation in India has improved significantly. Visa applications, along with requisite documents and visa fee, may be submitted at one of the BLS international outsourcing centers of the embassy, the embassy said in a press release.

Visa applicants are required to appear in person at the BLS center for capture of bio-metric data and photograph. BLS outsourcing centers are: 1) Third Floor, Jawahara Tower, Ali Al-Salem Street, Kuwait City. 2) Mezzanine floor, Olive Supermarket Building, Jleeb Al-Shuyouk, Kuwait. 3) Al-Anoud Shopping Complex, Mezzanine floor; Mecca Street, Fahaheel. The centers will be open from Saturday to Friday from 9.30 am to 2 pm. For further details regarding documentation requirements and visa fee, please refer to the BLS International website (<https://www.blsindiakuwait.com/visa/requirements.php>).

Kuwait oil price up \$3.36 to \$110.07 pb

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by \$3.36 to \$110.07 per barrel on Tuesday as opposed to \$106.71 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) on Wednesday. The Brent crude and West Texas Intermediate, globally, went down by 89 cents and \$1.32 respectively with both settling at \$106.64 per barrel and \$101.96 pb. —KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways participated in the celebrations of the Embassy of the United Kingdom in the State of Kuwait, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth II to the British royal throne. KAC's participation and presence, at this important event, was at the kind invitation extended by the Ambassador of the United Kingdom to the State of Kuwait, Belinda Lewis, and organized at the Embassy's headquarters. On the sidelines of the ceremony, KAC's Director of

Corporate Communication and Public Relations, Wael Al-Hasawi, stated, "Kuwait Airways is pleased to be part of this important function, and our participation on this occasion indicates effective cooperation and the depth of historic and deep-rooted relations between the State of Kuwait and the United Kingdom with all governmental and private sectors, thus bringing both entities together, whether in the political, economic, cultural or other various important fields."

Hasawi added, "Kuwait Airways participated in the ceremony with a special booth so as to interact and respond to the queries of the attendees regarding the latest destinations of the Blue Bird, especially the destination of Manchester, which is in great demand by customers and will be launched as of 1st May with three flights per week on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays."

Hasawi continued, "Kuwait Airways supports diplo-

matic relations that benefit the State of Kuwait and is always present on such important occasions and extending efforts to strengthen historic relations between the two parties. This is also because Kuwait Airways is a prominent part of Kuwait's society and, as the National Carrier of the State of Kuwait, its participation comes in accordance with the State's directions in strengthening and consolidating bilateral relations with other friendly countries, while improving the level of relations and cooperation with all other establishments."

Hasawi concluded his statement and extended his sincere appreciations to the Embassy of the United Kingdom for their invitation. He also commended the Embassy's effective contributions as well as unremitting efforts in strengthening relations between Kuwait and the United Kingdom, while extending best wishes for success in further strengthening diplomatic relations between the two countries.

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KFH organizes banking experiment for university students

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) implemented an innovative banking awareness experiment to measure the banking awareness of university students and provide educational advice and the need to review and read any contract signed to complete banking transactions. The experiment comes as part of the awareness campaign "Be Aware" launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait in collaboration with the Kuwait Banking Association, and part of the bank's social responsibility.

The experiment focused on testing the banking information of some university students to enhance their banking awareness and shed light on the importance of reviewing the terms and conditions of any contract to be signed for the completion of various banking services.

KFH conducted the awareness experiment at Gulf University for Science and Technology, and it consisted of testing a number of students by asking them to sign a contract that includes the terms and conditions for opening a fictitious bank account, and then the students received a text message via mobile phone indicating a deduction of an amount of KD 100 as account opening fees, which sparked reprehensible reactions for the reason of the deduction from their personal account, despite the fact that the contract signed by the students participating in the awareness experiment stipulates the deduction of KD 100 in account opening fees.

Having conducted the experiment, Public Relations representative at KFH, Muhammad Al-Awadhi, explained to the students the need to review and read the terms and conditions in the contract before signing

it to completely avoid such a practical experience that the students were exposed to.

The banking experience received great interaction from students, positive responses from followers and the public, and praise for the quality of the presented content, idea and implementation.

It's worth noting that KFH has conducted an awareness experiment in Kuwait University campus. The experiment took the form of a competition requiring participants to enter their information to be able to enter the draw, win a cash prize and share the one-time OTP with KFH employee. Students had different reactions. KFH officer confirmed to the participating students that KFH would not ask for the personal information of any of its customers through e-mail, SMS, or phone calls. He reiterated that such messages should be ignored and avoided as they represent fraudulence attempts to obtain their banking information and steal their funds or information.

KFH is continuing to support the "Be Aware" campaign to protect customers' rights, spread awareness in this respect, enhance best practices and spread awareness on the banking services provided by the bank. The bank supports various related campaigns by posting educational videos and materials and awareness messages on KFH's social media channels and various communication points with the public. Also, the bank explains the mechanisms of filing complaints and protecting customers' rights.

The campaign "Be Aware" comprises of various topics: recognizing the bank's role as a financial mediator, the significance of saving and investment, how to benefit from products provided by banks, awareness on customers' rights when obtaining individual finance facilities e.g. consumer or residential finance, services provided to persons with special needs, the mechanism to file complaints regarding banking services, various banking cards, the most important steps to be applied to avoid being exposed to fraud.



KUWAIT: Public Relations representative at KFH Muhammad Al-Awadhi gives an explanation to some students.



S Lanka parliament speaker warns crisis risks starvation

Burkina ex-president gets life for Sankara killing in historic trial

Page 6

Page 7



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif (C) leaves the Supreme Court after a hearing in Islamabad on April 5, 2022, as the supreme court adjourned without ruling on the legality of political manoeuvres that led Prime Minister Imran Khan to dissolve the national assembly and call fresh elections. —AFP

Pakistan president wants election date set

Opposition cries foul, refuses to cooperate with forming interim govt

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan President Arif Alvi told the country's election commission Wednesday to fix a date for a new national ballot, as the supreme court adjourned a hearing into the legality of political manoeuvres that led to parliament being dissolved.

The court—which will sit for a fourth day Thursday—must rule if the deputy speaker of the national assembly violated the constitution by refusing to allow a no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Imran Khan at the weekend.

Had the vote taken place Khan was certain to have been booted from office, but the move allowed him to get the loyalist president to dissolve parliament and order an election. The opposition have cried foul and are refusing to cooperate with forming an interim government to oversee any ballot, but on Wednesday Alvi upped the ante. A statement from his office said the election commission had been told to propose a date “in order to carry out the mandate of the Constitution”.

On the campaign trail
While the opposition applied its resources to the court, Khan effectively hit the campaign trail-telling party workers in Lahore late Tuesday that he would



Political crisis continues

be more careful in picking candidates to stand for his Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.

Khan's woes started weeks ago when a group of rebel PTI lawmakers threatened to vote against

him, but his fragile ruling coalition was beginning to unravel anyway. There had been high hopes for Khan when he was elected in 2018 on a promise of sweeping away decades of entrenched corruption and cronyism, but he struggled to maintain support with soaring inflation, a feeble rupee and crippling debt.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan has been wracked by political crises for much of its 75-year existence, and no prime minister has ever seen out a full term. Whether the election commission has the capacity to organise a ballot within 90 days remains to be seen, with a watchdog group warning this week of “grave concerns” for potential violence.

“The Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) has identified multiple constitutional, legal and operational challenges to the conduct of an early election,” said the group. “Public confusion and political divisions that have already arisen as a result can potentially translate into violent expression.”

Khan has already blown anti-US sentiment into the political atmosphere by saying the opposition had colluded with Washington for “regime change”. The cricketer-turned-politician says Western powers want him removed because he will not stand with them against Russia and China, and the issue is sure to ignite any forthcoming election.

Court precedent

It is unclear when or how the court will rule on the issue—or if Khan would even accept its decision—but there is precedent. In 1988, Muhammad Khan Junejo appealed to the court after the assembly was dissolved by then president General Zia-ul-Haq, who had taken power in a military coup years earlier. It agreed his government had been dissolved unconstitutionally, but ruled that since elections had been announced anyway it was best to move on. In 1993, the court ruled president Ghulam Ishaq Khan had also illegally dissolved the assembly—then with Nawaz Sharif as prime minister. — AFP

Biden, Obama put the band back together for a day

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden and Barack Obama got the band back together Tuesday—at least for the day, with the former president visiting his former vice president in the White House to try and restoke Democratic momentum ahead of midterm elections. The mood was simultaneously nostalgic, festive and humorous as the old team reunited.

“Welcome back to the White House, man. It feels like the good old days.” Biden told his former boss in a packed ceremonial East Room, where they entered together to huge cheers from staff and members of Congress.

For Obama, it was the first time he's stepped into the hallowed corridors and historic rooms since he left five years ago, handing power to Donald Trump and ushering in a period of political turmoil unprecedented in the modern US era. “Vice President Biden,” Obama began on taking the microphone, before correcting himself to laughter, saying “that was a joke.” Biden prolonged the quip by introducing himself as “Barack Obama's vice president.”

But for Biden, who served two terms as deputy to the first Black president before coming out of



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden (3rd L) bumps fists with former president Barack Obama (2nd R) while signing an executive order intended to strengthen the Affordable Care Act. Also pictured (from L) US Vice President Kamala Harris, US Representative Angie Craig (D-MN), US Representative James Clyburn (D-SC), and US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). —AFP

retirement to deny Trump a second term, it was a hugely poignant moment. Beseated by aftershocks of the Covid-19 pandemic, galloping inflation, a bitterly obstructionist Republican opposition, and

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Biden's had more than a year to appreciate how hard the top job really is. His approval polls are dire, stuck in the low 40 percent range, with little sign of improvement. — AFP

Pope Francis to visit crisis-hit Lebanon in June

BEIRUT: Pope Francis is set to visit Lebanon in June, the country's presidency said on Tuesday, in a long-awaited trip that comes amid spiralling financial and political crises. Lebanon, home to one of the largest Christian communities in the Middle East, has been gripped by an unprecedented economic downturn since 2019, with more than 80 percent of the population now living in poverty.

The pontiff, who has received Lebanon's president and prime minister in the Vatican in recent months, had previously promised to visit the country and repeatedly expressed concern over its

worsening crises. “Apostolic Envoy Joseph Spiteri informed President Michel Aoun that Pope Francis will visit Lebanon next June,” a presidency statement said. “The Lebanese people have been waiting for this visit for some time to express gratitude to his holiness for his support,” the statement said, adding the exact date and agenda for the visit would be set later. Lebanese took to social media to celebrate the announcement.

“A welcome to the pope of peace in the holy land,” said one user. The Vatican has not confirmed Pope Francis' trip, but usually confirms such visits nearer the time. Lebanon, a multi-confessional country of some six million people, is home to a Muslim majority but Christians account for around a third of the population. Pope Francis' planned visit, coming after Lebanese parliamentary elections scheduled for May 15, would be the third by an incumbent pope to the country since the end of its 1975-1990 civil war. The last trip in 2012 saw



BAABDA, Lebanon: Photo shows Lebanon's President Michel Aoun meeting (L) with Apostolic Envoy Joseph Spiteri (R), the papal nuncio to Lebanon, at the presidential palace in Baabda, east of Beirut. —AFP

Pope Benedict XVI visit to appeal for peace, months after the start of the civil war in neighbouring Syria. — AFP

Mother remembers 'brutal' soldiers who terrorised Bucha

BUCHA, Ukraine: A couple of weeks into the Russian occupation of Bucha, local resident Olena sensed a turn for the worse when older, rougher soldiers appeared and began to spread fear in the town. They were “brutal” compared to the younger soldiers who captured the town at the start of the invasion, said the 43-year-old mother of two.

“Right in front of my eyes, they fired on a man who was going to get food at the supermarket,” said Olena, who did not wish to give her second name. Located 30 kilometres (19 miles) northwest of Kyiv's city centre, the town of Bucha was occupied by Russian forces on February 27 in the opening days of the war and remained under their control for a month.

After the bombardments stopped, Ukrainian forces were able to retake the town on Thursday. Large numbers of bodies of men in civilian clothing have since been found in the streets. Throughout March, Olena lived with her children, 7 and 9 years old, in a cellar with no electricity under a four-storey housing block, along with other residents.

“There was no Ukrainian army in town, only the territorial defence made up mostly of unarmed guards from local businesses. And then they fled” when the Russians arrived, she said. “At the beginning, there were mostly young (Russian) soldiers. Then, two weeks later, there were others, older ones. They were more than 40 years old. “They were brutal. They mistreated everyone. And that's when the massacres started,” she said, before pausing, a dark, thoughtful look on her face. On Monday, Russia “categorically” rejected all accusations in relation to civilian killings.

According to Olena, the older soldiers “were very well equipped and wore black and dark green uniforms” as opposed to standard Russian army fatigues. “There were some good guys among the Russian soldiers and there were some very rough men, especially officers from the FSB”, the Russian security services, said Olena, who was dressed in a red beanie, a fleece jacket, tracksuit bottoms and trainers. “I was going up to the soldiers to ask them what I should feed my children with and they brought us rations and food. “It was they who told us that it was the FSB that had banned us from moving around, that they were very violent special forces. It was Russians saying this about the Russians!” she said. — AFP

International

Sri Lanka parliament speaker warns crisis risks starvation

Crowds attempt to storm homes of several government figures

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's crippling economic crisis risks starvation across the island nation of 22 million while acute shortages and blackouts will get worse, the speaker of parliament warned Wednesday. Scarce supplies of food and fuel, along with record inflation and blackouts, have inflicted widespread misery in the country's most painful downturn since independence from Britain in 1948.



More than 60 people arrested

Public anger is at a fever pitch, with crowds attempting to storm the homes of several government figures—including President Gotabaya Rajapaksa—and large demonstrations elsewhere. Mahinda Yapa Abeywardana told legislators that more hardships were to come.

"We are told this is the worst crisis, but I think this is just the beginning," Abeywardana said at the start of a two-day debate on the worsening economic woes. "The food, gas and electricity shortages will get worse. There will be very acute food shortages and starvation." Security forces have dispersed protests with tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets, but a state of emergency imposed by the president last week to quell demonstrations was lifted at midnight.

More than 60 people had been arrested in connection with unrest and many have said they were tortured in police custody. Legislators had pushed for a debate on the emergency decree during this week's session of parliament, where the government has lost its majority after the desertion of political allies—several of whom have since called for Rajapaksa's resignation.



COLOMBO: Police officers try to stop medical students as they protest against Sri Lanka's crippling economic crisis, outside the Health Ministry in Colombo on April 6, 2022. — AFP

Opposition parties had already rejected the president's overture to form a unity administration after the resignation of nearly the entire cabinet late on Sunday. But there has so far been no clear signal that opposition legislators will attempt a no-confidence motion to topple the Rajapaksa administration.

Prior warnings

A critical foreign currency shortage has left Sri Lanka struggling to import essential goods, with the pandemic torpedoing vital revenue from tourism and remittances. Rating agencies have warned of a potential default on Sri Lanka's \$51 billion foreign debt, and authorities are unable to raise more commercial loans because of credit downgrades.

Economists say the crisis has been exacerbated by government mismanagement, years of accumulated borrowing and ill-advised tax cuts. Agriculture ministry secretary Udith Jayasinghe warned in December that the country could face a famine due to the government's decision to ban agrochemical imports last year. The decision, taken in an apparent effort to shore up foreign currency reserves, saw farmers leave their fields barren instead of toiling over crops without the aid of fertiliser and pesticides. Jayasinghe was sacked within hours of issuing his warning.

Sri Lanka has said it will seek an IMF bailout to overcome the crisis but negotiations are yet to begin, and the country's latest finance minister resigned Tuesday after just one day in office.—AFP

India backs probe into Ukraine civilian deaths

NEW DELHI: India's foreign minister said Wednesday he was "deeply disturbed" by civilian deaths in the Ukrainian city of Bucha but stopped short of blaming Russia, calling for an independent probe. New Delhi has historically close ties with Moscow and has refrained from condemning its invasion of its ex-Soviet neighbour, abstaining in several UN votes and hosting Russia's foreign minister for talks in India last week.

The discovery of hundreds of civilians found dead in areas from which Russian troops have withdrawn has sparked global outrage, with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky describing them as "war crimes" and "genocide".

Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar told parliament Wednesday that India was "deeply disturbed" and "strongly condemned the killings". "This is an extremely serious matter and we support the call for an independent investigation," he added.

The Kremlin has said that the images were fakes produced by the Ukrainian army or that the deaths occurred after its soldiers pulled out. India, the world's largest democracy, has been under intense Western pressure to take a tougher line on Russia, with US President Joe Biden calling Delhi "somewhat shaky". Last week saw a flurry of diplomatic visits to India, including Washington's chief sanctions strategist and Britain's foreign secretary. On Tuesday Jaishankar spoke by phone with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited New Delhi last Thursday and Friday, praising India for not taking a "one-side" approach. Western financial sanctions aimed at isolating Russia have reportedly made it difficult for India to pay Russia for imports and the two are reportedly working on a rupee-ruble mechanism to facilitate trade.

Harsh V Pant, a New Delhi-based analyst, told AFP that there has been "a gradual evolution in India's position" on the invasion. "While earlier India was only talking about a diplomatic resolution, it is now asking to fix responsibility for specific actions," Pant said.

Manoj Joshi with the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi said that the latest comments "could be interpreted as a slight shift in India's position." "But given the humanitarian situation in Ukraine it was the most logical reaction. They couldn't have said anything else publicly," Joshi told AFP. India, however, is in a tricky spot since the Ukraine crisis has pushed Russia closer to China. Delhi shares Western alarm over China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, and is a member of the so-called Quad alliance with the United States, Japan and Australia.—AFP

Former Amnesty India chief stopped from leaving country

NEW DELHI: Amnesty International's former India chief said Wednesday he was stopped from flying to the United States because of government legal action against the human rights watchdog. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has long been accused of trying to silence critics, and activists say they have been targeted for harassment since he took office in 2014.

Aakar Patel said he was stopped from boarding his flight to the United States at the airport in the southern city of Bangalore because he was on an "exit control list". He wrote on Twitter that he was then contacted by the country's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and told he was prevented from leaving "because of the case Modi govt has filed against Amnesty International India".

Amnesty has been a vocal critic of the Modi government's treatment of minorities and alleged abuses by Indian security forces in the disputed territory of Kashmir. It halted its India operations in 2020 after the government froze its bank accounts in what the group said was part of an official "witch hunt".

Amnesty's Bangalore offices had been raided two years earlier by the Enforcement Directorate, which investigates financial crimes in India. The group had also faced sedition charges, later dropped, over a 2016 event to discuss human rights violations in Kashmir. Amnesty on Wednesday called on Indian authorities to allow Patel to fly.

"For Aakar, who dares to raise his voice peacefully and consistently against injustice, a travel ban is nothing but retaliation from the Indian government against his activism," said the watchdog's deputy secretary general Kyle Ward.

Last week, prominent Indian activist and writer Rana Ayyub was prevented from flying to London to speak about the intimidation of journalists in India. Ayyub, a fierce government critic, tweeted that she was stopped at Mumbai airport because of a probe into an alleged money laundering case against her. Delhi's high court on Monday gave the 37-year-old permission to fly.—AFP



Aakar Patel

US approves \$95m sale of missile systems to Taiwan

WASHINGTON: The US announced Tuesday it has approved the sale of up to \$95 million worth of training and equipment to support Taiwan's Patriot missile defense system, something Taipei said would help protect the island from any invasion by China.

"The proposed sale will help to sustain (Taiwan's) missile density and ensure readiness for air operations," the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a statement. It added Taiwan will use the proposed training and equipment as a "deterrent to regional threats and to strengthen homeland defense."

Taiwan's foreign ministry welcomed the arms deal—the third approved under US President Joe Biden.

"In the face of China's continuing military expansion and provocation, Taiwan must fully demonstrate its strong determination to defend itself," it said in a statement. "Our government will continue to strengthen our self-defense and asymmetric combat capabilities."

Taiwan's defense ministry said the deal is expected to take effect in one month. The latest arms purchase comes as Taiwan closely watches the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, as it also lives under the constant threat of an invasion by a giant neighbor. The Chinese foreign ministry on Wednesday condemned the deal, saying it "severely harms US-China relations, and the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait."

"China will take resolute and forceful measures to resolutely defend its own sovereignty and security interests," spokesman Zhao Lijian said without elaborating. Beijing has sanctioned US defense giants—including Boeing Defense, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon—for selling arms to Taiwan.

China regards Taiwan as its territory and has vowed repeatedly to seize it one day, by force if necessary.

Beijing has ramped up its sabre-rattling in recent years, sending 969 Chinese warplanes into Taiwan's air defense zone in 2021, according to a database compiled by AFP—more than double the roughly 380 in 2020.

Taiwan has recorded about 280 warplanes entering the zone this year. Western powers, including regional neighbors Japan and South Korea, have looked on with growing alarm at Beijing's designs on Taiwan under President Xi Jinping, China's most authoritarian leader in a generation.—AFP



BRASILIA: Young Brazilian students talk after classes at a public school in Brasilia. The vote of young people aged 16 and 17 in Brazil was instituted as an option in the 1988 Constitution. With seven months to go before the elections, voter turnout among this age group is threatening to become the lowest in 30 years.—AFP

Young voters blase on Brazil elections

BRASILIA, Brazil: Not only is this the year Brazilian teenager Rodrigo Kutz turns old enough to vote, the almost-16-year-old gets to cast his first ballot in a clutch presidential election. Only thing is, he couldn't care less—like a lot of young Brazilians, who could make up a key voter demographic in the October contest... if only they were interested.

A deeply divided Brazil is heading for a clash of the titans in six months' time, likely to face a stark choice between polar opposites: far-right incumbent Jair Bolsonaro and his nemesis, leftist ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. But "I don't like either of them," says Kutz, a high school student in the capital, Brasilia.

"Maybe a younger candidate would make more sense to me. I hope there will be other options next time around." Brazil is one of just nine countries where 16-year-olds have the right to vote in national elections.

They also have the right not to. Voting is mandatory in Brazil, but only for 18-and-ups. With a month to go for voters to register, 16- and 17-year-olds look set to participate at the lowest rate in 30 years. Just 850,000 have registered so far, down 60 percent in a decade.

At the last elections, in 2018, 1.4 million voters from the youngest demographic turned out. "My parents have been telling me I should vote, but I'm not really into politics," says Eduardo Proenca, 16. "I just see politicians fighting over which one's the least awful. It doesn't really inspire me."

Neglected demographic

There is not much that is youthful or new about the 2022 race, which looks set to pit the 67-year-old who has led Brazil for the past four years against the 76-year-old who led the country from 2003 to 2010. But figures ranging from pop superstar Anitta to the electoral authorities themselves are trying to get young voters more involved. "You wanna ask me for a picture when you meet me someplace? If you're over 16, I'll

only take a picture if you've got one of your voter registration card," Anitta, a vocal Bolsonaro critic, tweeted recently.

The Supreme Electoral Tribunal has meanwhile launched a social media campaign with a diverse crowd of hip young models telling teens, "Bora votar"—slang for "Let's go vote." "Young people need to get involved to decide our future," the tribunal's top judge, Edson Fachin, told AFP by email. "The worst vote is the one that doesn't get cast."

But the cheerleaders of democracy are up against the apathy of young voters alienated by years of seemingly bottomless corruption scandals and a pandemic-battered economy that has left them out, said political scientist Marco Antonio Teixeira of the Getulio Vargas Foundation. In 2020, at the height of the crisis, some 30 percent of Brazilian youths were neither employed nor in school. Brazilian political parties have also done a bad job involving the next generation, Teixeira said. "They're very hierarchical spaces dominated by the leadership and traditional political families. They're completely passive when it comes to young people," he said.

'Extremist views'

Eighteen-year-old Marco Antonio May will have to vote under Brazilian law—but doesn't want to. "If it were up to me, I wouldn't go," he says. "I don't see politicians worrying much about us (young people). Brazil has two dominant candidates who usually have extremist views on everything, and I just find that uninspiring."

The two front-runners have been trying to reach out to young voters, especially Bolsonaro. The president called on "parents and grandparents" to help get teens out to vote against Lula, urging them to explain to kids "where Brazil was going" when it was governed by the ex-steelworker and his hand-picked successor, Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016)—a period that ended with Brazil's economic boom going catastrophically bust amid a tsunami of corruption scandals.

But Bolsonaro is trailing in the polls, and fares even worse among young voters. Lula leads him by 29 percentage points among 16- to 24-year-olds, according to a recent poll from the Datafolha institute, which put the gap between the candidates at 17 percentage points for the electorate as a whole.—AFP

Business

THURSDAY, APRIL 7, 2022

Russia says it paid foreign dollar debt in rubles amid default fears

New blow to Russian efforts to avoid a sovereign default

MOSCOW: Russia said Wednesday it had been forced to make foreign debt payments on dollar-denominated bonds in rubles, in a new blow to its efforts to avoid a sovereign default amid unprecedented Western sanctions over the Ukraine conflict.

The announcement came on the 42nd day of Russia's military campaign in pro-Western Ukraine, with thousands killed and more than 11 million displaced as refugees or within the country in the worst refugee crisis in Europe since World War II.

The West has pummeled Russia with debilitating sanctions since President Vladimir Putin sent troops to Ukraine on February 24. On Wednesday, the United States and EU were readying new sanctions after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky showed the UN Security Council harrowing images of violence. The Russian finance ministry said on Wednesday that it had been forced to repay \$649.2 million to foreign debt-holders in rubles after a correspondent bank refused to execute payment instructions.

"A foreign correspondent bank refused to execute instructions for the payment" of debt on two bonds on April 4, the ministry said in a statement. "In order to fulfil the state debt obligations of the Russian Federation," the finance ministry said it "was forced to attract a Russian financial institution to make the necessary payments."

The finance ministry did not specify if the ruble payment had been accepted. The United States from Tuesday barred Russia from making debt payments using funds held at American banks, ramping up the economic pain in Moscow.

Analysts say the risk of a debt default is rising, and major ratings agencies have downgraded the country.

'Putin impoverishing Russia'

The Kremlin denied suggestions that Russia could default on foreign debt payments.

"Russia has all the necessary resources to service its debts," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. "There are no grounds for a real default." Timothy Ash, an emerging markets strategist at BlueBay Asset Management, said, however, that it was hard to see Russia avoiding a sovereign default.

"Putin is impoverishing Russia for years to come," he said in a note to clients.

"Default might not crash Russian markets and the economy immediately but will have devastating longer term consequences," he said, adding that investment, growth and living standards will be affected. Russia missed payments on domestic, ruble-denominated debt in 1998 amid a broader financial crisis, but last defaulted on its foreign currency debt in 1918, when Bolshevik revolution leader Vladimir Lenin refused to recognize the obligations of the deposed tsar's regime.

In recent years, Moscow amassed about \$600 billion in foreign currency reserves, including gold, largely from oil and natural gas sales.

The government owes about \$40 billion in dollars or euro-denominated debt, though only half of that is held by foreign creditors—a relatively small amount given the size of the economy and its oil earnings. The sanctions also sparked an exodus from Russia of hundreds of foreign companies, which have mothballed their subsidiaries in Russia or announced full pullouts.

US officials expect the sanctions to plunge Russia, which has heavily relied on imports of manufacturing equipment and consumer goods, into deep recession. Ordinary Russians have been bracing for tough times,



MOSCOW: The risk of a debt default is rising in Russia and major ratings agencies have downgraded the country.

stocking up on food and other supplies as inflation soars.

New car sales sank almost 63 percent in Russia in March year-on-year, industry data showed Wednesday, with Russians less likely to buy imported

cars after the ruble plummeted in value.

Only 55,129 cars or light commercial vehicles were sold last month, a 62.9-percent drop from the same period last year, said the Association of European Businesses. —AFP

EU takes sanctions aim at Russia fossil fuel exports

BRUSSELS: EU leaders on Wednesday said the bloc will soon have to sanction all of Russia's hydrocarbon exports as they blamed Moscow for "war crimes" discovered in Ukraine, especially in the town of Bucha. The declarations, made to the European Parliament in the French city of Strasbourg, came as the European Union was poised to implement a fifth round of sanctions cutting off Russian coal imports, while NATO and G7 foreign ministers gathered in Brussels for further steps on coordinated action.

The EU must also impose oil and gas sanctions on Russia "sooner or later", European Council chief

Charles Michel told MEPs. The deaths of civilians in Bucha and other parts of Ukraine were "war crimes" and "yet more proof that Russian brutality against the people of Ukraine has no limits," he said.

"We the EU, we will not turn our backs. We will look reality straight in the eye. There must be, and there will be, severe consequences for all those responsible," he said.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen echoed that, saying: "We will hold accountable those who are responsible for war crimes. The perpetrators must pay after Bucha more than ever."

She said the EU intended to keep ramping up "smart" sanctions that would hurt Russia more than the European Union. The latest package of measures, she said, "will not be our last sanctions".

"Yes, we've now banned coal. But now we have to look into oil. And we'll have to look into the revenues that Russia gets from the fossil fuels," she said. Russia's oil, gas and coal exports are its key sources of foreign income, with the EU its main customer.

Some EU countries, notably Germany, have been reluctant to hit Russian energy exports because of the damage it would do to their own economies. But pressure has been building to go after them following the reports of mass civilian deaths in Bucha and other areas in Ukraine formerly held by Russian troops. The EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell stressed to the European Parliament that the bloc's payments for Russian fossil fuels were funding President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine.

"A billion euros (\$1.1 billion) is what we have paid Putin every day for the energy he provides us since the beginning of the war. We have given him 35 billion euros," since the February 24 invasion date, Borrell said. "Compare that to the one billion (euros) that we have given to the Ukraine in arms and weapons."

"This gigantic difference has to highlight the importance and need of implementing what the (European) Council asked to do—we have to reduce energy dependence." —AFP



Dubai utility DEWA readies Gulf's largest IPO since 2019

DUBAI: The Dubai Electricity and Water Authority said Wednesday it had raised 22.3 billion dirhams (\$6.1 billion) for the Gulf's second-largest IPO since 2019. The 18 percent stake in the emirate's state-owned DEWA is the biggest IPO in the Gulf region since that of Saudi oil giant Aramco.

Some nine billion shares will be listed from April 12 on the Dubai stock exchange, with the price set at 2.48 dirhams (\$0.68). The deal, in which more than 65,000 institutional and retail investors participated, values the company at 124 billion dirhams (\$33.9 billion), the statement said.

The record for the largest public listing in the Gulf, and in the world, is held by Saudi oil company Aramco, which raised \$29.4 billion by listing 1.7 percent of its shares on the Riyadh Stock Exchange in December 2019. DEWA CEO Saeed Mohammed Al-Tajer said the strong demand for the company's shares, which reached 315 billion dirhams (\$85.7 billion), was a testament to "the attractiveness of Dubai as a global capital market".

The emirate, which is less oil-rich than its neighbors, has diversified its economy by focusing on finance, tourism and trade. But it is facing increased competition in the region, notably from Saudi Arabia, which is also seeking to reduce its dependence on hydrocarbons. —AFP

Brazilian real hits two-year high against dollar

BRASILIA: The Brazilian real traded near a two-year high against the dollar Tuesday, boosted by foreign investors drawn to high interest rates set by Brazil's central bank. The dollar started the week at 4.61 reals, its weakest against the Brazilian currency since March 4, 2020 — a week before the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

The dollar strengthened slightly Tuesday, buying 4.66 reals, according to the Brazilian central bank's foreign exchange data. That was still well below 2021, when the real averaged 5.39 to the greenback.

The real has gained 21 percent this year against the dollar, one of the best-performing emerging market currencies. Analysts say the upswing is mainly driven by foreign investors buying reals to take advantage of high returns in Brazil created by aggressive interest rate hikes by the central bank, which is trying to rein in surging inflation. "Brazil's central bank started raising interest rates before other emerging markets, and that attracts capital," said economist Mirella Hirakawa of investment fund Az Quest.

Brazil has been on one of the most hawkish monetary tightening cycles in the world, raising the benchmark Selic rate nine straight times, from two percent in March 2021 to 11.75 percent currently.

It has struggled to tame inflation, currently at 10.54 percent—far above the central bank's target of 3.5 percent. The effect on the real may be short-lived, however, as the US Federal Reserve and



other central banks start raising interest rates, too. Analysts currently forecast an average value for the real of 5.25 to the dollar for 2022. —AFP

Easier for Europe to give up Russian coal than gas

PARIS: The EU is preparing to hit Russian coal with sanctions. While European Council chief Charles Michel said Wednesday the 27-nation bloc will have to impose oil and gas sanctions on Moscow "sooner or later", it has been reluctant to do so for now.

Here is a look at the reasons behind the hesitation:

A boon for Russia

Russia is a major fossil fuel producer, and revenue from oil and gas made up 45 percent of the federal budget last year, according to the International Energy Agency. That's why Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky urged the EU to stop buying Russian energy so "Russia will have no more money for this war".

Russia exported nearly five million barrels per day

of oil in 2020, with half going to European countries, especially Germany, the Netherlands and Poland, according to US data. The United States, a major energy producer, has put an embargo on Russian energy including oil. But there is only an EU proposal to ban coal imports, although Brussels aims to reduce purchases of Russian gas by two-thirds this year.

Coal: replaceable

Russia holds 15 percent of the world's coal reserves, according to BP's annual report on global energy.

Certain European countries like Germany and Poland are especially dependent on Russia for coal, used to produce electricity. The trend in the EU is to move away from polluting coal: consumption of solid fossil fuels dropped from 1.2 billion to 427 million tons between 1990 and 2020, according to the Brussels-based Bruegel Institute think-tank.

Europeans also closed their mines but they became more dependent on imports.

The EU purchased 40 million tons of Russian hard coal in 2020 (54 percent of imports) compared with eight million tons in 1990 (seven percent). But

Germany plans to live without Russian coal by this autumn. "Russian coal can be replaced because global coal markets are well supplied and flexible," noted Bruegel. Other major producers of coal include the US from where the EU imports 17.5 percent of coal today or Australia, representing 16 percent of the bloc's purchases. Other options include South Africa or Indonesia.

Oil remains possible

Russia is the world's largest oil exporter and supplies more than 25 percent of the EU's crude, according to the EU statistics agency Eurostat. In the first six months of 2021, Russia provided 75 percent of crude to Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary and Finland.

"In principle, replacing Russian oil will be easier than replacing Russian gas" because the imports arrive by ship and not infrastructure like pipelines, wrote Bruegel.

Experts also refer to the phenomenon of "communicating vessels": Russian barrels would ultimately be sold in China, replacing those from the Middle East, which would then become available to Europe.

But Russia also exports 1.5 million barrels per day

of diesel, which Europe is very fond of.

"(An embargo) will pose a real problem for diesel," warned French ecological transition minister Barbara Pompili. If there is an embargo, it will be necessary to find other sources of diesel, and not just crude oil. French energy giant TotalEnergies plans to import oil from its Saudi refinery.

Expensive choice

Russia exports gas directly to Europe via a network of pipelines. With 155 billion cubic meters imported annually, Russian gas represents 45 percent of the EU's imports and meets nearly 40 percent of consumption. A potential embargo on all Russian energy divides Europe because some are more dependant than others, like Germany where 55 percent of its gas is from Russia.

"Russian gas deliveries are not exchangeable" and cutting them off "would harm us more than Russia", German Finance Minister Christian Lindner said.

Russian gas made up 75 percent of imports of 10 countries—Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia—last year, according to Eurostat. —AFP

Business

ADB trims Asia growth forecast for 2022 as price pressures rise

Inflation across Asia gathering pace as energy and food costs spike

MANILA: The Asian Development Bank trimmed its 2022 growth forecast for developing Asia Wednesday as "increasing" price pressures after Russia's invasion of Ukraine threaten a recovery from Omicron surges. Inflation across the vast region stretching from the Cook Islands in the Pacific to Kazakhstan in Central Asia was expected to gather pace as countries bounced back from the pandemic, and energy and food costs rose, it said.

In the wake of the Omicron-driven surge in coronavirus infections and the conflict in Ukraine, the Philippines-based lender lowered its 2022 economic growth forecast to 5.2 percent.

That compares with its previous prediction in December of 5.3 percent and the 6.9 percent growth chalked up last year. While the bank was optimistic the region would continue to rebound from Covid-19, chief economist Albert Park said the recovery would be "uneven" and there were "signif-

icant downside risks".

"What is certain is that the fallout from the war is an additional hurdle for economies in developing Asia which are still contending with the pandemic," Park said.

While the Caucasus and Central Asia would take a direct hit from the Ukraine crisis due to their close trade and financial links to Russia, the rest of the region would be affected indirectly through higher food and energy prices. "Energy bills will rise for energy importers, pushing inflation up and weighing on demand," the bank said in its flagship Asian Development Outlook report.

Inflation was expected to reach 3.7 percent, compared with 2.5 percent in 2021, which Park noted was "still well below" other parts of the world, which he partly attributed to relatively lower consumption of wheat and fewer supply chain disruptions.

But he warned that in developing Asia "price pressures are increasing and monetary authorities need to remain vigilant." Also clouding the outlook was the US Federal Reserve, which has started to raise interest rates in a bid to rein in a surge in inflation that has threatened to derail the economic recovery. A recent solid US jobs report increased expectations of an aggressive rate hike. The Asian Development Bank warned that could ignite "financial market volatility, rapid capital outflows and sharp currency depreciations".

COVID-19 still casts a shadow over developing Asia, with the risk of more deadly variants emerging and the Omicron outbreak in China threatening regional growth and supply chains, the bank said.

Countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia were expected to record the slowest growth, with 3.6 percent in 2022, down from 5.6 percent in 2021. East Asia was tipped to grow 4.7 percent, com-



pared with last year's cracking pace of 7.6 percent, as a slowing China grapples with a growing COVID-19 outbreak. Crisis-hit Sri Lanka was tipped to grow 2.4 percent—the worst performer in South Asia where the economy is expected to expand by 7.0 percent. —AFP



Captain's Fish and Chip shop owner Pam Sandhu, shows the contents of a freezer before opening for business in Brighton on March 25, 2022.



Billy Sandhu removes a piece of fish from the fryer at Captain's Fish and Chip shop in Brighton on March 25, 2022. —AFP photos

Ukraine war batters British fish and chips

BRIGHTON, UK: They have weathered the storm of Brexit and COVID, and are fighting the tide of rising inflation. But thousands of Britain's fish and chip shops could be sunk by the war in Ukraine.

At Captain's, in the seaside resort of Brighton, on England's south coast, owner Pam Sandhu is normally not one to complain. Yet the shelves of her large refrigerators are empty when they should be full of fresh white fish ready to be dipped in batter and deep fried, then served to hungry customers with piping hot chips.

In ordinary times, Russia supplied between 30 and 40 percent of the fish sold in British fish and chip shops, mostly cod and haddock, said Andrew Crook, president of the National Federation of Fish Friers (NFFF). Ukraine is the world's biggest exporter of vegetable oil, which is used for deep frying what the NFFF calls Britain's "undisputed national dish".

"With this war in Ukraine, there is no fish available or a very small amount," Sandhu told AFP. "Before we were ordering in large quantities."

"Now there is only a minimum order that we can get. The price has doubled from what we paid last year." The vegetable oil has also become hard to come by, she added, and meanwhile the UK's intro-

duction in mid-March of a 35 percent tariff on the import of white fish from Russia has begun to bite.

At the same time, fish and chip shop proprietors are also being hit by rising energy prices.

On a sunny spring Friday in late March, Sandhu was worrying whether she would even have enough fish to get through the weekend. She has been in the business for 30 years, often working seven days a week, and said she has never known as many problems with supplies or pressure on costs.

Sandhu's restaurant has a terrace that looks out onto Brighton's pebble beach and pier. She bought it three years ago and had planned to open in March 2020.

Then came COVID, followed by rising inflation and now the war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. It's been the perfect storm for fish and chips vendors.

Price hike

Fish and chips, first served as a single dish in the 1860s, has long been a working-class staple, although demographic and dietary changes have seen its popularity wane in recent years. The take-away favorite, covered in lashings of salt and vinegar, used to be wrapped in old newspaper and is typically served with mushy peas or tartare sauce.

"We've always been seen as a cheap meal so our margins have always been quite low and we work on volume," said the NFFF's Crook. "Unfortunately now with the inflationary price it is very difficult to protect your margins, in fact they're wiped out."

Crook, a fish and chip shop owner in Lancashire, northwest England, has increased his prices by 50

percent to \$317.8 billion.

The data did not capture the disruptions caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Mahir Rasheed of Oxford Economics said, which has caused energy prices to spike and Western nations to retaliate against Moscow with forceful sanctions.

The conflict's impacts "will unfold slowly in the coming months and potentially longer if the war persists," he predicted. "Given our broad-based downward revisions to global growth in 2022 and 2023, we believe geopolitical headwinds will squeeze demand for US exports this year," while import growth will take a less severe hit.

Among exports, goods rose \$2.8 billion, led by industrial supplies and pharmaceutical preparations. Services exports rose \$1.3 billion, most of which was travel, which Rasheed said was a con-

sequence of lessening Covid-19 infections.

Goods imports increased \$1.7 billion, as shipments of crude oil and other chemicals rose, though cars and parts decreased. Services imports rose \$2.4 billion, comprised of transport, travel and intellectual property charges. The US deficit for goods and the surplus for services both decreased by \$1.1 billion in February, the data said, to \$107.5 billion and \$18.3 billion, respectively.

Meanwhile, the dominant US services sector saw growth accelerate in March as worker shortages and COVID-19 cases eased, but firms continue to face supply challenges, according to an industry survey released Tuesday. The Institute for Supply Management (ISM) said its services index rose 1.8 points to 58.3 percent, recovering from the slowdown seen in February and boosted by big jumps in new orders and employment. —AFP

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Bargaining Code, which was a world first, aimed at making Google and Facebook pay for news content on their platforms. Australian regulators, too, had accused the companies, who dominate online advertising, of draining cash away from traditional news organizations while using their content for free.

Big tech firms had fiercely opposed the Australian legislation initially, fearing it would threaten their business models, but with amendments it was easily passed by lawmakers.

Google, meanwhile, signed agreements in November with French newspapers to pay for their content, after the EU introduced in 2019 a law on "neighboring rights."

AFP signed a five-year content agreement with Google at the end of 2021, as well as two commercial contracts. —AFP

Stock markets beat retreat with all eyes on Fed

LONDON: Global equities sank Wednesday on bets the Federal Reserve will act more aggressively to bring inflation under control, while oil prices rebounded. Asian and European bourses retreated after heavy falls on Wall Street Tuesday.

The euro hit a one-month dollar low before minutes from the Fed's latest policy meeting due Wednesday. London stocks slid also as UK businesses and individuals saw a major tax hike kick in, worsening Britain's cost-of-living crisis as domestic energy bills rocket.

Minutes from the Fed's March meeting will be pored over for insights into the thinking of US central bankers, in light of the Ukraine war and recent data suggesting the world's top economy remains resilient.

'Significant headwinds'

"Investor confidence might have improved from the low point in early March when the Ukraine war was unfolding," said AJ Bell investment director Russ Mould. "However, there remain significant headwinds for equities and the latest trouble spot is what the Federal Reserve might do to curb inflation."

Investors are fretting also over how quickly officials will withdraw their vast pandemic-era financial support. After last month's 0.25-percentage-point hike in US interest rates, the focus is now on its plans for May's meeting, with expectations growing that the Fed will announce a 0.50-point lift followed by several more before the end of the year.

Fed governor Lael Brainard, who is considered a dove, on Tuesday spooked traders by saying bringing US inflation down from 40-year highs was of "paramount importance" and that the bank was "prepared to take stronger action" if warranted. Brainard also said bank policymakers were ready to start reducing its vast bond holdings, which have helped keep borrowing costs down.

"Brainard's hawkish comments rocked the markets," said Swissquote analyst Ipek Ozkardeskaya.

"In this tense environment, investors will be closely watching the Fed minutes today. There would be no surprise if the Fed hinted a 50-basis-point hike (for) the next meeting," she noted.

All three main indices on Wall Street ended Tuesday in the red, with the Nasdaq off more than two percent owing to tech firms being more susceptible to higher rates.

Oil rebounds

Oil prices rebounded on Wednesday, after European Council chief Charles Michel told the European Parliament that it must impose oil and gas sanctions on Russia "sooner or later".

Crude futures had slid the previous day on the European Union's decision not to include Russian oil in a fresh round of sanctions. Adding to downward pressure on crude is a strong dollar thanks to the prospect of a series of US interest rate hikes. Oil is priced in dollars, making it more expensive for clients using other currencies. —AFP

US exports rose in Feb, before Ukraine shock

WASHINGTON: US exports grew more than imports in February though the trade deficit was basically flat, US government data said, but analysts warned of a hit to come from the war in Ukraine.

The Commerce Department reported the trade deficit inched down 0.1 percent to \$89.2 billion, against expectations for a larger drop in February but still the second-largest level in the data's history after January's record high. Exports jumped 1.8 percent to \$228.6 billion, and imports rose 1.3

Canada unveils law requiring digital giants to pay for news

MONTREAL: The Canadian government unveiled legislation Tuesday that would require global digital giants to pay for local news content, in step with a landmark law passed by Australia last year.

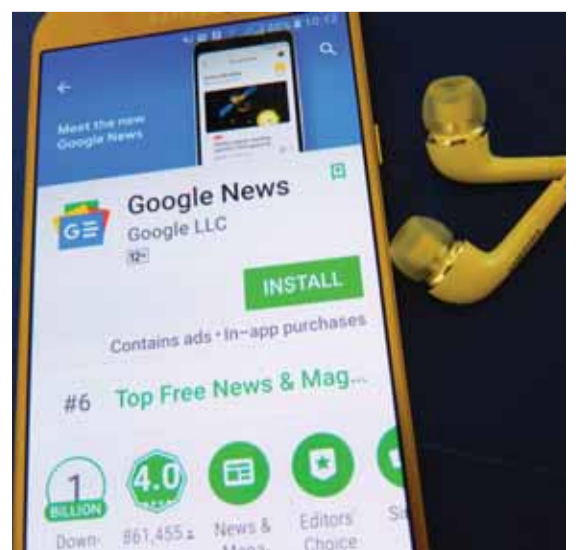
The Online News Act, which is expected to be passed into law by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government with backing from a small leftist faction, comes after more than 450 news outlets closed in Canada since 2008 as digital platforms took over the space.

"The news sector in Canada is in crisis and this contributes to the heightened public mistrust and the rise of harmful disinformation in our society," Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez told a news conference.

He noted billions of dollars in advertising revenues that once fed newsrooms across Canada now go mostly to two companies: Facebook and Google. "We want to make sure that news outlets and journalists receive fair compensation for the work. We want to make sure that local independent news thrives in our country," Rodriguez said. "It shouldn't be free."

The new law would require tech giants to make fair commercial deals with Canadian outlets for the news and information that is shared on their platforms, or face binding arbitration.

It builds on Australia's New Media



Business

Ukraine's auto parts industry at standstill amid raging war

German car sales plunge as war disrupts supply chains

PARIS: Ukraine's car parts industry, which supplies many vehicle manufacturers in western Europe, has taken a battering since the Russian invasion one month ago. Factories are at a standstill, cable production has slumped and there are concerns about neon supplies. Ukraine saw its domestic car production industry nosedive when the Soviet Union collapsed but successfully reinvented itself in the early 2000s as a major producer of automotive parts.

The country's proximity to the European Union, its skilled workers and low labor costs have attracted a string of Western manufacturers, particularly from German groups like Bosch, Kostal and Prettl. By 2021, they were employing 60,000 workers in 38 Ukrainian plants, according to government figures.

The factories produce electronic components, car seats and, crucially, electric cables. A maze of cables known as a wire harness runs through every vehicle and constitutes its central nervous system. A large SUV like the Porsche Panamera contains several kilometers (miles) of these cables.

Before the Russian invasion on February 24, Ukraine was one of Europe's biggest manufacturers of electric cable. Last year it supplied 760 million euros (\$835 million) worth of cables to the EU's automotive and aeronautics industries, according to the European Association of Automotive Suppliers (CLEPA).

Some 45 percent of Ukrainian harnesses go to Germany and Poland. Every vehicle has a "specific wire harness", which requires 10 to 15 hours of manual labor and is produced on a just-in-time basis, two to three days after order, Volkswagen boss Herbert Diess explained in early March.

Most of the parts factories are located in western

Ukraine, which has been somewhat spared the worst of the war, and employ mostly women. The plants are seen to be working to "a certain extent" but shipping parts out to Western Europe is "equally challenging", according to CLEPA secretary-general Sigrid de Vries.

Domino effect

At the Polish border, the Bosch factory in Krakovets has slowly resumed production of starter motor parts "at the request of 180 employees who want to get back to work", the world leader in car parts told AFP. "We continue to apply the strictest security measures for workers on site," Bosch continued, adding that it had paid workers "several months of wages in advance".

Several Western manufacturers have taken the radical option of creating duplicates of entire factories in countries neighboring Ukraine.

A few days before the war started, Ireland's Aptiv moved cable production to mirror sites in Poland, Romania and Serbia. "(Cable production) isn't that complicated to relocate. They're relatively straightforward pieces of equipment," explained Alexandre Marian of consulting firm AlixPartners.

But de Vries cautioned that "it's easier said than done" as the auto parts industry is labor intensive.

"It's very specific to a certain model. It needs time and careful reflection on what to do," she said.

Car plants in eastern Europe employ many Ukrainians and a number have gone back home to fight, as have Ukrainian lorry drivers, who make up a significant proportion of the transport workers shipping parts to western Europe. As a result, Volkswagen, BMW and Renault have all had to sus-



pend production at certain factories.

Ukraine, a major steel producer, is also the world's top exporter of neon, which is essential for manufacturing semiconductors. While the manufacturing process has adapted since Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014 and there are adequate stocks of neon, "there could be a problem in the medium term", AlixPartners' Marian said. However, any Ukrainian shortage would be less consequential than the scarcity of Russian raw materials, he added.

More widely, it is the rocketing prices of energy—gas, oil, and electricity—that worry the sector the

most. The war has worsened the prospects of a vehicle market already struggling from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the semiconductor shortage, logistical costs and the rise in the price of raw materials. Global sales are expected to fall a further two percent in 2022, particularly in Europe. Standard & Poor's (S&P) had hitherto forecast a rise of four to six percent. And although carmakers have succeeded in putting up prices and protecting their margins, parts manufacturers have to find "a delicate balance" between rising supply costs and cautious clients, S&P's Vittoria Ferraris pointed out. —AFP

Markaz: Oil crosses \$120/b and propels GCC markets higher

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz" recently released its Monthly Market Review report for the month of March 2022. In line with its GCC peers, Kuwait's all share index gained 6.7 percent in the month of March, supported by a rise in oil prices. Oil prices, which were a major driving factor for the GCC stock market performance, crossed \$120 per barrel mark in the month of March.

Among sectors, Boursa Kuwait's Banking sector was the top gainer, rising 9.9 percent followed by financial services sector at 5.3 percent. Healthcare sector had the biggest decline in the month and Energy sector index declined, falling 5.3 percent. Among Premier Market stocks, National Investments Company and Boursa Kuwait were the top gainers during the month, rising 23.7 percent and 14.3 percent respectively.

Inflation in Kuwait rose to 4.37 percent YoY driven by rising prices of food and housing services, in the month of February 2022. Kuwait's government is taking cautious measures to keep critical commodity prices in check and has halted all grain exports for the next three months. Central Bank of Kuwait has raised its main interest rates by 25 bps in March, subsequent to the interest rate hike by the US Federal Reserve and Kuwaiti banks are expected to be benefitted by this interest rate hike. Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain have also increased their policy rates by 25 bps. Kuwait's M2 money supply expanded 1.9 percent YoY in January, and bank lending to the private sector grew by 6.8 percent YoY in the same month. Kuwaiti bank revenues grew 7.1 percent in 2021 with profits almost doubling to \$2.9 billion driven by increase in revenues as well as decline in loan loss provisions. According to Moody's, Kuwaiti Islamic banks have recorded the fourth best growth rate in financing operations, globally, during the period 2019-Q3 2021.

Ali Alghanim & Sons whose businesses include car dealerships, construction and electronics has filed to list on Boursa Kuwait and the company is expected to sell a 45 percent stake in the listing, as per Bloomberg.

Regionally, S&P GCC composite index rose by 4.8 percent for the month, driven by upward oil price momentum. All GCC markets gained for the month. Abu Dhabi and Bahrain equity indices were the biggest gainers among GCC, rising 6.8 percent and 5.6 percent respectively over the month. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Oman equity indices also marked a gain of 4.5 percent, 4.0 percent and 3.7 percent respectively over the month. Among the GCC blue chip companies, the best performer was First Abu Dhabi Bank, which gained 14.6 percent during the month. Due to a sharp increase in oil prices and robust domestic demand, Saudi Arabia's real GDP increased by 6.7 percent year on year in Q4 2021. S&P upgraded Saudi Arabia's outlook from stable to positive, as it expects improved GDP growth and fiscal dynamics in the medium term, improved oil sector prospects and the Government's reform programs. The IPO of Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) opened for subscription on March 24, intends to float 17 percent and could raise as much as \$5.7 billion.

Fossil fuel assets risk evaporating in climate fight

PARIS: Oil platforms, pipelines, coal power plants and other fossil fuel assets could lose trillions of dollars in the battle against climate change in the coming decades, experts say. The warning was issued in a 3,000-page report by UN experts who said fossil fuel assets must be retired and replaced with clean energy faster to mitigate financial losses.

Such assets will become "stranded" and worth less than expected because they may never be used since fossil fuel demand must fall in the near future to limit greenhouse gas emissions.

Limiting warming to the aspirational 1.5 degree Celsius target in the Paris Agreement, or the more conservative 2C goal, "will strand fossil-related assets", said the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its latest report Monday. "The combined global discounted value of the unburned fossil fuels and stranded fossil fuel infrastructure has been projected to be around 1-4 trillion dollars from 2015 to 2050 to limit global warming to approximately 2C, and it will be higher if global warming is limited to approximately 1.5C," the IPCC said.

Any move to alleviate the impact of climate change means using less fossil fuel, thus rendering

Car sales sink in sanctions-hit Russia

MOSCOW: New car sales sank almost 63 percent in Russia in March year-on-year, industry data showed Wednesday, as the West pummels the country with sanctions over Moscow's military campaign in Ukraine.

The massive drop in the car and light commercial vehicle segment comes after Russian troops entered Ukraine on February 24, prompting severe Western sanctions, including a ban on spare parts export to Russia. The Russian operation also caused the ruble to plummet in value, making Russians less likely to buy imported cars.

Only 55,129 units were sold last month, a 62.9 percent drop from the same period last year, according to the Association of European Businesses. The association did not explain why the

Compact, green and car-free: Can city living beat climate change?

PARIS: With a whopping 70 percent of humanity predicted to be living in urban areas by the middle of the century, UN climate experts see a huge opportunity to create ideal cities that are walkable, leafy and energy efficient. Urban areas currently account for around 70 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, notes a comprehensive report on climate change solutions from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released this week.

We are in the "urban century", the report says, with nearly seven billion people expected to live in built-up areas by 2050. If this rapid expansion is chaotic, unplanned and inefficient it could cause emissions to explode. But the IPCC says there is another option.

"Although urbanization is a global trend often associated with increased incomes and higher con-



assets obsolete as companies are under pressure to move away from harmful energy production.

The IPCC said that if current oil, gas and coal energy infrastructure were to operate for their designed lifetime—without technology to capture and store carbon—capping global warming at the 1.5C target would be impossible. It said nations should stop burning coal completely and cut oil and gas use by 60 and 70 percent respectively by 2050 to keep within the Paris deal goals, noting that both solar and wind were now cheaper than fossil fuels in many places.

The idea of "stranded assets" dates back to the 2010s and was put forward by think tank Carbon Tracker. Companies could be further affected by

governments taking decisions such as increasing the price of coal or even banning certain energies. Consumers could also turn to other products like electric vehicles. Other assets impacted include infrastructure such as drilling platforms, which have become useless quicker than expected. Some fossil fuel reserves will become too costly to exploit due to falling prices.

For the IPCC, coal-related assets are the most vulnerable before 2030, than those that are oil- and gas-related towards mid-century. The idea of stranded assets, taken up by both environmentalists and investors, has gained popularity and has been used in shareholder meetings of energy companies such as ExxonMobil or TotalEnergies. —AFP

figures fell, as it would usually. Sales of the country's most popular and affordable brand, Lada, whose Avtovaz manufacturer is majority-owned by the Nissan-Renault group, fell even more sharply by 64 percent.

Renault is under intense pressure to boycott Russia over Ukraine and considering whether to withdraw from Avtovaz. It owns Avtovaz in partnership with Rostec, a state-owned defense conglomerate run by Sergei Chemezov, a sanctioned close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The Nissan-Renault group has tens of thousands of workers in Russia and spent billions updating Avtovaz. Western carmakers have ventured into Russia to assemble cars over the past two decades as the country's economy expanded. Renault said in late March that it was suspending production at its Moscow plant for Renault and Nissan models.

Numerous car makers have stopped sales of their cars or parts to Russia—including Audi, Honda, Jaguar and Porsche. Makes that have halted Russian



MOSCOW: New car sales sank almost 63 percent in Russia in March year-on-year, industry data showed Wednesday, as the West pummels the country with sanctions over Moscow's military campaign in Ukraine.

production include BMW, Ford, Hyundai, Mercedes, Volkswagen and Volvo. Russia's year-on-year car sales for February were down 4.3 percent. —AFP



Plants on city streets and rooftops can help cool cities in heatwaves and absorb CO2.

sumption, the growing concentration of people and activities is an opportunity to increase resource efficiency and decarbonize at scale," the report says.

Cities are already more efficient: For the same level of consumption, a city dweller often needs less energy than their neighbor in the countryside. That's because of the economies of scale in densely populated areas, where people share infrastructure and services, it says. The IPCC did not give specific price

tags for the measures it outlines, since they would vary considerably from place to place, but stressed that electrification, for example, was a "feasible, scalable and affordable" way of decarbonizing public transport systems. Overall, the IPCC makes clear that the economic benefits of cutting carbon pollution outweigh the costs of climate inaction. Air pollution, for example, causes some seven million premature deaths each year around the world. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Mark Wahlberg piles on the pounds as boxer-turned-priest

Mark Wahlberg has a famously punishing physical routine that has kept the 50-year-old in enviable shape. But for his latest outing, "Father Stu," he had to ditch the training and eat. A lot. "Porterhouse steaks, baked potatoes, a dozen eggs every morning, a dozen pieces of bacon, two bowls of white rice, a glass of olive oil," he tells AFP. "Lots of high protein for the first two weeks; second two weeks, we had lots of starch. And then the last two weeks, we had lots of sodium to kind of get the bloating effect, but not fun at all."

The physical transformation from taut athlete to out-of-shape and overweight was in aid of his role as Stuart Long, an amateur boxer who hangs up his gloves after an injury and moves to Hollywood to become an actor. Odd-jobbing in a supermarket, Long meets Carmen, played by Teresa Ruiz ("Narcos"), and sets out to win her heart by going to her church. His avowed agnosticism gives way to genuine faith, and



Mark Wahlberg attends a special screening of Father Stu starring Mark Wahlberg and Rosalind Ross at AMC Boston Commons in Boston, Massachusetts. — AFP

he decides he will become a priest, despite the skepticism of his parents, played by Jacki Weaver (Oscar-nominated for "Silver Linings Playbook") and Mel Gibson ("Braveheart").

He must also face his biggest challenge:

a diagnosis of a degenerative disease that will rob him of the use of his body. For Wahlberg, who also produced the movie, the real-life story of "Father Stu" is a departure from previous action outings like "Mile 22" and "Uncharted"—but, he insists, not

unexpected. "It's an unusual role, but it's also (a) pretty obvious choice if you kind of know me and my own personal journey and what I'm looking to do as I get older and try to find things that have a little bit more meaning and purpose," he told AFP. "But I always felt like I was... tasked to do it for a reason. "This is for God's greater good and so to do that, and utilize my talents and gifts for that particular purpose is something that I embraced," he said.

Reflection of community

Along with its unabashedly religious theme—the film will be released in the United States ahead of the Easter Weekend—"Father Stu" also zooms in on family, and on human kindness. For Ruiz, these elements all came together in her character. "I liked that she was very kind and very generous and she had a very rooted faith," Ruiz said. "That was something that I've seen in my community, it's something that

I've seen in my mother, so I really enjoyed being able to portray that for a worldwide audience." The cast of "Father Stu," which also includes Malcolm McDowell ("A Clockwork Orange"), afforded Ruiz the chance to work alongside a different generation of actors—at close quarters.

"My camper was right next to Mel (Gibson's) camper. So sometimes I would peek and hear him, how he prepped and that was very important to me as a young actor, you know, to hear how one of the greats works. "And then I would go on set with him and it was just this presence that he has, and his incredible talent." For Weaver, Wahlberg was one of the biggest revelations of the project. "I thought he might be a bit of a ruffian, because he always played those tough roles," the Australian told AFP. "But he's a wonderful person." — AFP



Unhappy spouses celebrate as England adopts 'no-fault divorce'

No more faked evidence or years-long waits—from Wednesday, unhappy spouses in England and Wales can end their marriages without blaming each other, in the biggest reform of divorce law for half a century. The onset of "no-fault" divorces means one spouse no longer needs to prove the other guilty of adultery, "unreasonable behavior" or desertion. If such grounds did not exist, the couple had to live apart for two years before a divorce could be granted—or five years if one partner objected to the proceedings.

The change brings England and Wales into line with Scotland, which has its own legal system, and with other countries including the United States, Australia and Germany. While experts expect a rush of divorces by couples who were waiting for the legal reform, they predict it could also ironically increase rates of marriage, by promising an easier way out if the relationship sours. The case of Tini Owens galvanized a campaign for the change after she lost a Supreme Court fight in 2018, having failed to persuade the judges that her 40-year marriage should end.

Her husband had contested her claims of unreasonable behavior, and the judges ruled that being trapped in an unhappy marriage was not in itself grounds for divorce. "No-one should have to remain in a loveless marriage or endure a long, drawn-out and expensive court battle to end it," Owens said. "This change in the law guards against that happening and I welcome it," she added. The reform does not herald US-style "quicker divorces"—there is a minimum wait of 20 weeks between a spouse first initiating proceedings and then applying for a legal order.

They must then wait another six weeks before the divorce can be granted. But it does overhaul the current system, in place for decades, under which some spouses would resort to private detectives to find evidence of fault, or the couple would agree simply to concoct the evidence. Vicky admitted that she and her first husband "had to make up scenarios and situations that we felt were going to be accepted" by the court after they had agreed to an amicable divorce. Her second marriage was to a "very manipulative" and "violent" man who refused to engage with divorce proceedings, forcing her to wait for five years of separation.

"And I could have been out of that relationship a lot quicker and a lot sooner than I was," Vicky, giving only her first name, told BBC radio. Some lawyers welcomed the end of an adversarial divorce culture, while stressing that legal advice remained essential for resolving financial and child custody issues. A survey commissioned by the law firm Slater and Gordon pointed to an unintended consequence — 32 percent of cohabiting respondents said they were more likely to get married now that the divorce process was simpler. — AFP



Gazans' Ramadan habits return after COVID-19 restrictions

The people of the Gaza Strip resumed their Ramadan habits after two years of COVID-19 restrictions and also despite of the ongoing Zionist entity's brutal blockade. Folks in the Gaza

Strip returned to old bazars and markets to buy their goods. They also packed mosques to offer daily and Tarawih prayers. — KUNA





A view of the Santa Maria della Pietra church, near the castle of Rocca Calascio.



An elderly woman sits by the entrance of her house in Calascio.



A view shows the castle of Rocca Calascio.

Italy takes to battlements to save its dying hamlets

The streets are silent and cats hunt in abandoned houses, but the view from the battlements of Calascio's castle is spectacular-good enough perhaps to save this dying Italian hamlet. Local officials have put restoring the ruins and attracting tourists at the heart of their bid to revive the village, which has won 20 million euros (\$22 million) in EU post-pandemic funds.

Surrounded by Abruzzo's snow-capped peaks, Calascio is one of 21 dying or deserted villages awarded an equal share of a 420-million-euro pot by the Italian government. Critics question how equipped the tiny councils are to spend such vast sums of money-which translates to almost 154,000 euros per person in Calascio.

The nationwide project has soured relations in several regions between winning villages and those that have lost out, and prompted warnings over potential fraud and waste. But Calascio's mayor Paolo Baldi, a former mountain guide originally from Rome, is undaunted. "We want to bring the hamlet back to life," said Baldi, who did up one of its ruined houses in 1993 and moved in with his young family.

New life

Once a bustling and wealthy wool centre, Calascio shrunk from over 2,000

residents at the start of the 1900s to just 130 now, almost all of them elderly. In the winter months, only 70 or so people remain. Just three children have been born here in 12 years. It has no grocer's shops, school or doctor's surgery. What the hamlet does have is Rocca Calascio, an ancient castle which draws 100,000 tourists a year.

Baldi plans to spend a big chunk of the funds-just over 4.6 million euros-on restoring part of the ruins, which were damaged in a deadly earthquake in 2009. It is hoped archaeological digs will determine when the castle-originally a watchtower-was built, and reveal more about a neighboring church and graveyard, where bones come to the surface after storms.

Some funds will also go to creating jobs and attracting more tourists, with just under 7.5 million euros earmarked for a "scattered" hotel in the village's empty houses and nearly one million euros for a museum. Locals say they hope young families will move in to the area and perhaps open their own businesses. "Do you know what the biggest event was in Calascio this year? It was the birth of a baby," tobaccoist Walter Zara told AFP.

Big winner

Italy is the biggest beneficiary of the



A view shows the castle of Rocca Calascio in Calascio. — AFP photos

EU's 800-billion-euro plan to boost the bloc after the pandemic, allocated almost 200 billion euros in grants and loans. The funds for Calascio are part of a program to increase tourism in undervalued areas, notably in the poorer south, and ease pressure on hotspots like Venice.

Villages across Italy competed, with winners including Pietrabbondante in Molise, which boasts a sixth-century amphitheatre. "Italy's real wealth today

lies precisely in these small centres," Mayor Baldi says, adding that countless hilltop hamlets across the country are in a state of serious decline but could be "a driving force for the economy".

Shepherds and maggot cheese

Here, that driving force includes a sheep farming school. The plan is to teach youngsters the ancient art of pastoralism, where shepherds and their

flocks spend the warmer months on the move. Funds will also go to increasing cheese production. The region's pride is Marretto, a traditional sheep's cheese made using live maggots, which soften it with their digestive acids.

It was staple for herders who used to gather with their flocks outside the 16th-century Santa Maria della Pietra church, perched just along the ridge from the castle. Bleating livestock permitting, mass at the so-called "Shepherds' Church" was followed through a little side window.

Fermented cheese and religion may not be enough. Domenico Ciccone, 78, who began shepherding at just 10 years old, said he was not convinced it was a job that would attract many youngsters. Ciccone's son and wife pitch in with the milking, but without a new generation of pastoralists to help over the coming summer, he has been forced to sell much of his flock. "It's a tough job, you've got to like it. There's no taking time off for a party, or a Sunday, (or) if it's stormy". He also questions whether training new shepherds will help reverse the population decline, quipping that "a 20-year-old who looks after sheep all day long isn't going to have any luck with women!"—AFP



In this file photo a picture shows a red fox at the Legendia Park in Frossay, western France. — AFP

'Infurrection': Red fox terrorizes humans in US

Being outfoxed in Congress usually means losing a vote on an amended resolution or being too late for the donut line in the Senate cafeteria. So spare a thought for the politicians and staff at the US Capitol in Washington, where a highly aggressive red fox spent at least two days stalking frightened humans, including a Democratic congressman. Police officers warned Tuesday that they had received multiple reports of people "being attacked or bitten" by an aggressive canine at the seat of US democracy-in a statement first reported by none other than... Fox News.

The force quickly dispatched animal control officers to "trap and relocate" any foxes they found-and within hours they posted pictures on social media of the beast, finally taken into custody, sitting in an animal cage above the caption: "Captured." Online political magazine Punchbowl News reported that congressman Ami Bera had to be rescued by police late Monday after squaring up to a fox that had just bitten him in an "unprovoked" attack. "I didn't see it and all of a sudden I felt something lunge at the back of my leg," Bera, a physician by profession, told Punchbowl. The 57-year-old Sacramento Democrat wasn't hurt, but agreed "out of an abundance of caution" to get a series of rabies shots.

Bloodlust sated

"I expect to get attacked if I go on Fox News, I don't expect to get attacked by a fox," he told Punchbowl. Ximena Bustillo, a Congress reporter for Politico, said she was bitten on the ankle from behind as she was leaving the complex. "I'm from Idaho. I know to not try and pet it!" she tweeted. Witnesses flooded social media with sightings, with several reporting seeing it munching on a squirrel or merely enjoying the sun-its bloodlust apparently sated-in the Senate gardens.

Fifteen months after a violent mob stormed the Capitol to disrupt the certification of last presidential election, one wag even referred to the ongoing animal threat as an "infurrection." Inside the Capitol, reporters spent the weekly leaders' press conferences in a breathless interrogation about possible action on the four-legged menace. Top Republican Mitch McConnell ignored the inquiries, but Iowa's intrepid two-term senator Joni Ernst was proud to report that she had spotted the animal, without revealing how close the encounter was.

Red foxes-the most common of several North American species-are regularly found in towns and cities but tend to avoid people, according to the city environmental department. They typically eat insects, small birds, squirrels and rabbits, and are not known for their predilection for legislators or their intimidated staffers.

The species has thrived during the pandemic, according to wildlife experts in the nation's capital. "Less ambient noise, less traffic, less interference... right now, life is better for them," Bill McShea, a wildlife ecologist with the Smithsonian National Zoo, told DCist magazine. "If there's an upside to COVID, it's on the wildlife."—AFP

Russian cinema in turmoil as Hollywood pulls out

After years spent translating Hollywood films, Russian Mila Grekova was suddenly thrown out of work after Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine. Five Hollywood giants-Disney, Warner Bros, Universal, Sony Pictures and Paramount-have all stopped releasing new films there, leaving Russian cinemas bereft of the latest blockbusters. But it has not made Grekova turn against President Vladimir Putin. "It's the West that I hate today and not Putin," the 56-year-old said.

"Bollywood may replace Hollywood in Russia, but it's too late for me to learn Hindi," she said, referring to India's refusal to condemn Moscow or join in with sanctions. Russia's film industry has been thrown into turmoil by the fighting in Ukraine just as it was beginning to recover from the pandemic. And like in many sectors hit by sanctions, the film industry is turning away from the West, looking inward to its own movies or east to Asia. Russians are avid cinema-goers with the highest number of admission in Europe, 145.7 million last year, according to the European Audiovisual Observatory. Many flock to see Hollywood films, which are often dubbed instead of being shown with subtitles.

Looking to Asia

Before Hollywood's withdrawal, Russian company Mosfilm-Master was dubbing around 10 foreign films a month,

mostly from English. "Now we have lost two thirds" of business, the company's director Yevgeny Belin told AFP in its high-tech dubbing studio in Moscow. "During the pandemic, we had films but no cinemas open. Today, we have our cinemas but no films," he said.



Olga Zinyakova, 37, the president of Karo - one of Russia's leading cinema chains, poses during an AFP interview in a screening room of the Oktyabr cinema in Moscow.

Russia's National Association of Cinema Owners said last month that cinemas risk losing up to 80 percent of their revenue. Looking to adapt, Mosfilm-Master is on the hunt for translators from Korean and Mandarin, even though Belin said he "doubts that Asian films work for Russians" because of cultural differences. "Westerners are closer to us," said the 70-year-old, who has spent three decades in dubbing.

Olga Zinyakova, the president of Karo, one of Russia's leading cinema chains, said she is confident the industry can rebuild. "The situation is extremely difficult but not catastrophic," the 37-

year-old said. "Since the arrival of Hollywood in post-Soviet Russia 30 years ago, we have gone through a lot of crises: political, economic and the pandemic," she said, surrounded by empty seats in Moscow's Oktyabr cinema, home to Europe's largest screening room with 1,500 places.

Russian identity

Since the conflict began on February 24, the number of tickets sold in Karo's 35 cinemas has fallen by 70 percent, Zinyakova said. The Russian government has promised major financial support and tax breaks to film production and cinemas, as it looks to replace Hollywood films with more homegrown fare. "Russians will explore themselves more deeply," said Zinyakova, pointing to the success of Russian films from the 1990s like the cult movie "Brat" ("Brother") which is screening again in several Moscow cinemas.

Zinyakova is also preparing to include more Asian and Latin American films among upcoming releases. "And when Hollywood comes back, the Russian market and viewers will no longer be the same," she said. Pavel Doreuli, a 44-year-old sound designer who works on around 15 Russian films a year, said it was no surprise that Hollywood has pulled out of Russia.

"World cinema has been hostage to big politics for years," he said, saying major film festivals like Cannes and Berlin were no longer about art, but about promoting "certain values". Still, Doreuli said it would be a shame for Russia to be cut off from world cinema, pointing to the exclusion of official Russian delegations from this year's Cannes film festival. "If they are excluded from international festivals, Russians will give up on arthouse cinema that offers a different vision of the world, which is so precious today," he said. — AFP



Men walk past film posters in a hallway of the Oktyabr cinema in Moscow.



A view of the grounds of the Russian studios Mosfilm in Moscow.

Lifestyle | Features

Singer Ed Sheeran wins 'Shape of You' copyright dispute



In this file photo British singer Edward Christopher Sheeran aka 'Ed Sheeran' poses on the red carpet prior to the 23rd NRJ Music Awards ceremony at the Palais des Festivals in Cannes, south-eastern France.— AFP

British singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran on Wednesday won his copyright trial at London's High Court after a judge ruled that his hit song "Shape of You" did not lift musical phrases from another track. Judge Antony Zacaroli said that Sheeran "neither deliberately nor subconsciously" copied a phrase from British grime track, "Oh Why", when writing the worldwide smash hit. "Shape of You", released in 2017, remains the most-streamed song ever on Spotify, with more than three billion streams.

It won Sheeran, 31, a Grammy for Best Pop Solo Performance. He, along with several others, has a writing credit on the track. But two other songwriters, Sami Chokri and Ross O'Donoghue, alleged that the song had musical similarities to one they wrote called "Oh Why", performed under Chokri's stage-name

Sami Switch. Judge Zacaroli ruled on Wednesday that "there are obvious similarities" between hooks in the two songs, but that there were also "important differences". While both hooks drew from the minor pentatonic scale, "there are countless songs in the pop, rock, folk and blues genres where the melody is drawn exclusively" from the same scale, he said.

Zacaroli also said that the two phrases "play very different roles in their respective songs." The claimants hook "is the central part of the song" whereas in Sheeran's hit, it is "something catchy to fill the bar before each repeated phrase 'I'm in love with your body'." Sheeran attended court during the 11-day trial, bursting into song and humming musical scales and melodies as he was questioned over how the song was written.

'Shocked'

The singer denied he "borrows" ideas from unknown songwriters and told court he "always tried to be completely fair" in crediting contributors. Sheeran and the song's other credited writers launched legal action against Chokri and McDaid in 2018, asking the High Court to declare they had not infringed Chokri and O'Donoghue's copyright. This prompted the pair to launch their own claim for "copyright infringements, damages and an account of the profit in relation to the alleged infringement".

Lawyer Andrew Sutcliffe, representing the aggrieved songwriters, told the judge Sheeran was a "maggie" who "borrows ideas" and will sometimes not acknowledge them. Chokri told the trial he was "shocked" when he first heard "Shape of You" on the radio.

Sheeran's lawyers told the High Court that he and his co-writers have no memory of having heard the song "Oh Why" at the time. The PRS for Music, which pays out royalties for the use of music, has temporarily halted royalty payments. Attendees at the high-profile trial inadvertently heard a snippet for free when an unreleased track was accidentally aired in court. "That's a song I wrote last January," a confused Sheeran told his lawyers as the clip of the hitherto unplayed song was heard in London's High Court. "How have you got that?" One of the lawyers said the incident happened "by mistake" through the use of an iTunes account on the computer of Steven McCutcheon, one of the co-writers of "Shape of You". — AFP

QUEEN LETIZIA INAUGURATES FIRST UK MUSEUM OF SPANISH ART

Queen Letizia of Spain teamed up with Britain's Prince Charles on Tuesday to inaugurate the first UK museum dedicated exclusively to Spanish art, which is part of an ambitious town regeneration effort. Letizia, 49, and the 73-year-old British heir to the throne visited the new "Spanish Gallery" in Bishop Auckland, in northeast England, which boasts one of Europe's best-preserved bishop's palaces. The gallery is home to around 120 works by great Spanish masters of the 16th and 17th centuries, from El Greco and Murillo to Velasquez and Juan de Juanes.

It is inspired by an exceptional collection of paintings by fellow Spaniard Francisco de Zurbaran, which have sat for centuries in the nearby castle. Philanthropist Jonathan Ruffer and his wife Jane, who are behind the new showcase, purchased the 12 paintings as well as the palace in 2012 after learning the



The signatures of Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales and Spain's Queen Letizia are pictured in the visitors' book at the Spanish Art Gallery in Bishop Auckland.

artworks were for sale. The painting had resided there since a powerful local bishop acquired them in 1756, but were in danger of being uprooted from their longtime home. Jonathan of 70 years was unable to attend after con-

tracting COVID-19. Jonathan Ruffer, 70, was unable to attend after contracting COVID-19. "He thought it was a real shame, a sadness for the town, and so he thought we should buy the paintings," Jane Ruffer told reporters on the fringes of the royals' visit. "In the end, we got the paintings and the castle and the grounds," she explained. "The question then was what to do with it?"

Jane Ruffer noted that the town had traditionally served the castle and its bishop over the centuries, but the couple wanted to reverse that with their present-day venture. A decade and £200 million pounds (\$262 million, 240 million euros) later, the palace now comprises galleries, gardens and parks, with the Zurbaran paintings on display there.

It opened to the public in 2019 after a lengthy restoration, and together with the new Spanish Gallery in the town centre, are "a long-term project" for the couple.

The gallery, which first welcomed visitors in October, is now Britain's largest collection of Golden Age paintings outside London and the only museum in the country devoted to Spanish art.

"Some (museums) have a room, but the Meadows (Museum) in Texas and this here are the only dedicated Spanish galleries," said Ruffer, who spent a decade alongside her husband finding and acquiring the pieces at auction Home to around 24,000 people, Bishop Auckland has been in decline since the closure of the coal mines at the end of the last century and now suffers from high unemployment. The Ruffers are hoping the sites will become attractions drawing in tourists, helping to boost the local economy and the need for hotels, restaurants and other enterprises. — AFP



Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton celebrates his third place on podium after the Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix at the Bahrain International Circuit in the city of Sakhir.— AFP

Next stop the Oscars? Lewis Hamilton eyes biopic similar to 'King Richard'

Lewis Hamilton says he is open to a biopic being made about him in a similar vein to 'King Richard', the critically acclaimed film based on Venus and Serena Williams and their father. Britain's seven-time world motor racing champion is currently producing a documentary about his life and career, but would be happy to see a feature-length film too. "We have this documentary that we're working on and I think you have to just do everything at the right time," he was quoted as saying by the official formula1.com website ahead of this weekend's Australian Grand Prix.

"The documentary is the current focus. I think stories are there to be told. I think it's important. I think there's lots that can be learned. "So I think, yes, one day I perhaps will try to do the same maybe. I'm very inspired by how Will (Smith) did it with his team. "And with those two icons (Venus and Serena Williams), pretty proud of them." Smith won the best actor Oscar last month for his portrayal of the Williams sisters' ambitious father Richard— an award overshadowed by his slap of host Chris Rock during the Academy Awards ceremony.— AFP



Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales (third right) and Spain's Queen Letizia (fourth left) unveil a plaque to officially open the Spanish Gallery in Bishop Auckland, north east England.— AFP photos



Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales (second left) and Spain's Queen Letizia (center) visit The Spanish Art Gallery in Bishop Auckland, north east England.

French artist sprays 'smiles and humanity' on Ukraine walls

Paris-based graffiti legend C215 puts the final touches on a blue and yellow portrait of a young girl on a Kyiv bus shelter, a colorful contrast with the badly damaged buildings nearby. "It's a sign of support," the energetic 48-year-old tells AFP, spray can in hand. "If this can bring a little smile or a bit of humanity in a difficult situation, then I'm satisfied." One of France's leading street artists, the man-whose real name is Christian Guemy—travelled to Ukraine to tag the country's walls with images of peace and innocence in a time of brutal war.

After the Russian invasion, the one-

time Banksy collaborator did a huge mural of the same girl in the colors of the Ukrainian flag covering the side of a Paris apartment block. But despite the dangers C215 felt he "had no choice" but to come

to Ukraine itself, after meeting Ukrainians and wondering for several days what more he could do to help.

"I didn't really decide to come to Kyiv, it was more that my paintings decided for

me," he told AFP last week, as Kyiv residents stopped and took pictures of him at work. This painting of a young girl with a headband of flowers is located next to a metro station and food market that were badly damaged by a Russian strike—which he says shows Russia is deliberately targeting civilians. "It's very intense to see the contrast with the bombed building behind," he said. "If you want to do street art that speaks about war, the work must be in the place where the war is, and it must show the destruction and the situation in that country."

'A child is an innocent'

C215's own journey began with a traumatic upbringing, born in a tough Paris suburb to a teenage mother who killed herself, and then a painful break-up that caused him to sink into depression. After the split, he gave up his job to start doing graffiti, stenciling his daughter's portrait to "channel my depression" and developing his technique of cutting out faces in card then spray-painting them. That technique can now be seen in several places around Kyiv.

C215 gives AFP a tour of his works,

including one on a rusty signboard near the city's TV tower that was targeted in a deadly Russian missile strike on March 2 which killed five people. Another picture of a girl is stenciled on an abandoned tram near a checkpoint, painted in the same faded red and cream colors as the carriage.

He has also tagged walls in the western city of Lviv, where a huge missile struck an oil depot during his time there, and in the central town of Zhytomyr. The imagery of childhood that haunts his work—he has said his work was "too French, too tragic" to continue his Banksy collaboration—is clear in all his Ukrainian works. "A child is an innocent, a child doesn't have to cope with war, and in this war there are millions of mothers and children that are spread all over Europe," he said. Walking off into the rain in his cagoule, C215 says he is returning to France soon but will definitely be coming back to Kyiv. The reaction from Ukrainians themselves has been "super—that is what makes me happy". — AFP



French street-artist Christian Guemy, known as C215, paints one of his works.



French street-artist Christian Guemy, known as C215, paints one of his works next to a metro station and food market that were badly damaged by a Russian strike in Kyiv.



French street-artist Christian Guemy, known as C215, paints one of his works.— AFP photos

Sports

Finch, Ellis help world champions Australia thump Pakistan in T20I

LAHORE: Skipper Aaron Finch returned to form with a half century and pace bowler Nathan Ellis took four wickets as world champions Australia beat Pakistan by three wickets in the only Twenty20 international in Lahore on Tuesday. Finch scored a 45-ball 55 to anchor Australia's chased a 163-run target after Ellis took 4-28 kept Pakistan down to 162-8 in their allotted 20 overs.

Pakistan failed to reach a big score despite skipper Babar Azam's brisk 46-ball 66 with six fours and two sixes. Finch, who had not scored a half century in the last 13 T20Is, ensured he not only removed doubts over his batting but also helped Australia overhaul the target in 19.1 overs for the loss of seven wickets.

When Finch holed out Australia needed just four runs and despite Sean Abbott fell for nought in the same Shaheen Shah Afridi over, Ben McDermott hit the winning boundary in his 19-ball 22 not out to achieve Australia's fourth successive win in T20Is against Pakistan. Finch, who hit six boundaries, put on a brisk 40 for the opening stand with Travis Head (14-ball 26 with three fours and a six) and another 44 for the second with Josh Inglis who made 15-ball 24 with two fours and a six.

Pakistan did pull back with leg-spinner Usman Qadir (2-33) and pacer Mohammad Wasim (2-30) brought the home team back in the game. But

Marcus Stoinis (nine-ball 23 with five boundaries) and McDermott ensured they supplement their skipper to achieve the chase. "I thought the way our bowlers attacked that game were fantastic," said Finch. "Nathan Ellis had a tough start but showed real character and we took wickets upfront."

Pakistan skipper Azam rued loss of wickets after a good start. "We had a very good start but then lost couple of wickets that took away the momentum," said Azam. "We lost momentum and in the end were 20-30 runs short." Pakistan made a brisk start. Azam, who hit back to back hundreds in Pakistan's 2-1 win in the one-day international series, put on 67 for the opening wicket with Mohammad Rizwan (23) after Australia sent the home team in to bat at Gaddafi Stadium.

But Green dismissed Rizwan with the fourth ball of his first over and Fakhar Zaman off a full toss next ball to pull things for Australia. Azam drove Green for a four to bring up his 26th T20I fifty off just 33 balls. He smashed spinner Adam Zampa for a six but next ball holed out at deep cover. Khushdil Shah chipped in with 21-ball 24 and Usman Qadir six-ball 18 not out as Pakistan managed 50 runs in the last five overs, losing five wickets. Marnus Labuschagne, Ben Dwarshuis and Green were handed Twenty20 international debuts by Australia. — AFP



LAHORE: Australia's players pose with the trophy after winning a Twenty20 international cricket match between Pakistan and Australia at the Gaddafi Cricket Stadium on April 5, 2022. —AFP

Alshaya & Alsagar hails Mobil, Red Bull victory at 2022 Saudi Arabian GP

KUWAIT: Mobil 1, along with Red Bull Racing, is one of the most successful teams in recent Formula One history, winning 63 Formula One Grand Prix races, four Drivers' and four Constructors' World Championships during the last 16 years. The vast knowledge and expertise needed to succeed in Grand Prix Racing fit perfectly with the Mobil 1 team's approach: Clear thinking, extensive research, and a combined effort of technology and creativity.

Commenting on the upgraded fuel, Red Bull Racing Honda Team Principal, Christian Horner, said: "Winning in Formula One comes as a result of an incredibly intricate process whereby competitive advantage is assembled from a huge variety of elements, all the way from aerodynamics through to horsepower and creating the optimum fuel for the power unit."

Max Verstappen's 2022 charge roared into life in Jeddah as the defending World Champion passed Ferrari's Charles Leclerc in a nail-biting finish to win the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. Sergio Perez was forced to settle for fourth place behind Ferrari's



Carlos Sainz after the pole-sitting Mexican was disadvantaged when the safety car was released almost immediately after he had made his first pit stop from the race lead.

The cat and mouse game began, and at the end of the lap, Max attacked again on the next lap, once more closing under DRS ahead of turn 27, but this time he locked up, and Leclerc held the lead as they began lap 44. With five laps to go, Max attempted to make a move into turn one. Leclerc positioned his car well, though the World Champion had to back out of the attempt. However, he closed again rapidly and put his vehicle almost alongside the Ferrari at the end of the lap. That gave him the perfect opportunity at the

start of lap 47, and with the aid of DRS on the main straight, he swept past the Ferrari to take the lead.

Ashish Tandon, General Manager of KAICO (Kuwait Automotive Imports Co WLL - Alshaya & Alsagar) stated, "We are thrilled to see Mobil along with Red Bull racing winning the 2022 Saudi Arabian GP". Jayan O S, Divisional Manager of Mobil stated, "We are proud to see the Mobil team along with red bull achieving such success".

KAICO, the only authorized distributors of Mobil 1 oil since 75 years in Kuwait, has always been proactive in providing the best facilities in the Kuwait market, which is a component in the company's strategy that the customer's satisfaction always comes first.

Technology boosts pitchers for new baseball season

LOS ANGELES: Pitchers and catchers will be given the option of using new technology to prevent sign-stealing as Major League Baseball looks to move on from its scandal-plagued recent past when the delayed new season finally gets under way on Thursday. Five years after the Houston Astros claimed a controversial World Series victory over the Los Angeles Dodgers, baseball chiefs said Tuesday that clubs will be allowed to use new "PitchCom" equipment that has been successfully tested during Spring Training.

PitchCom is wearable technology that allows catchers and pitchers to communicate directly without needing to use hand signals - the traditional method of signaling what kind of pitches a batter will

face. Under the new technology, catchers wear a sleeve on their forearm with nine buttons that represent different pitches and the location where they will be thrown. Messages from the catcher's device are transmitted to a receiver fitted in the pitcher's cap.

The Astros were fined \$5 million and manager AJ Hinch was suspended for a season after the MLB found the club had been using a camera hidden in the outfield to decode the signs being used by the Dodgers in the 2017 World Series. The new technology - which is also aimed at speeding up the pace of play - has received broad support since being tested. "Anything that can help the pitcher get the sign without anyone knowing what the sign is, we're moving in the right direction," was the verdict of Colorado Rockies director of pitching Steve Foster.

New York Yankees ace Luis Severino tested the system for the first time last weekend and was impressed. "I think it was great," Severino told reporters. "I was a little doubtful at the beginning, but when we started using it, it was really good. You know what pitch you're going to throw right

away." Thursday's opening round of regular season fixtures comes after an acrimonious off-season dominated by the labor dispute between MLB owners and players.

The season had been due to start on March 31 but was delayed after negotiations for a new collective bargaining agreement became deadlocked. The dispute came to an end last month after both sides reached agreement on a new deal that includes increased minimum salaries, a pre-arbitration bonus pool to reward top young players before they can negotiate new deals and a boost to the league's luxury tax thresholds.

Designated hitters will replace batters in the National League, as they have for many years in the American League. An expanded playoff format will see 12 teams advance, six from each league, adding two clubs to the post-season championship chase. The two top division winners in each league would receive first-round byes. Bookmakers have installed the Dodgers as early favorites to repeat their World Series triumph from the pandemic-shortened 2020 season. — AFP

Ageless cricketer Stevens 'buzzing' ahead of 26th season

CANTERBURY, United Kingdom: Kent cricketer Darren Stevens made his debut in first-class cricket before Tony Blair became British prime minister. A quarter of a century later he shows no signs of slowing down. Stevens, 46 later this month, is bouncily optimistic as he prepares for the start of his 26th season in the English county game on Thursday, despite icy spring temperatures and snow flurries.

The all-rounder, who began his career with Leicestershire in 1997, has enjoyed some of his finest moments in recent years with both bat and ball. He hit a career-best 237 against Yorkshire in 2019 and the following season took 29 wickets at an eye-catching average of just over 15.5 in the inaugural Bob Willis Trophy. Cricketing "bible" Wisden recognized his feats in 2021, naming him as one of its cricketers of the year.

The ageless Stevens showed he had lost none of his magic touch last year-smashing 15 sixes in a barnstorming innings of 190 and later in the season helping Kent win the Twenty20 Blast for a second time. So what motivates the Leicester-born player, who narrowly missed out on winning an England cap? "The game itself," he tells AFP, sitting on a bench at Kent's Canterbury home ground dedicated to his late father, Bob Stevens.

"It's a beautiful game, it's an amazing game. For us, we're classed as entertainers so you put on a show. Who doesn't love putting on a show? I'm passionate about the game and I just love batting and I love bowling." Stevens enjoyed a successful stint with England's second-tier Lions team in a 2010 triangular series against India A and West Indies A, averaging nearly 80 with the bat.

But he never received a full international cap whereas other players alongside him in that team, including Alastair Cook and Chris Woakes, went on to enjoy successful England careers. "It's frustrating when you see a lot of people that have played or are playing," he said. "It's like you mirror yourself to their job and what they do and it's a bit frustrating but it is what it is."

But Stevens' sanguine approach belies a fierce competitive edge. He had to fight his way back into Kent's T20 plans after he was told he was surplus to requirements, proving his worth last year as they beat Somerset in the final. Although he is a cult hero in the county game, Stevens' name has also been invoked in the debate over the weak state of English cricket after the recent disastrous Ashes defeat against Australia.

Former captain Michael Vaughan argued that success for the 45-year-old illustrated a lack of competitive edge in the English county game. But the all-rounder, who bowls right-arm medium pace, shrugs off the criticism. "It doesn't bother me," he said. "He can have his opinion. Everyone can have their own opinion. My job is to get wickets for Kent."

"Stevo's gonna get ya"

Stevens may have missed out on an international cap but he is certainly on the radar of the Australian internationals who have plied their trade in the English county game - they even set up a WhatsApp group called "Stevo's gonna get ya". "It's funny. I played golf with (Australian Test player) Travis Head last year. "He's a good mate and we were on the course and he showed me a text from one of the lads saying 'Stevo's going to get you, ha, ha' and I got him (when playing against Sussex)."

The evergreen all-rounder cannot wait for the new season to start, saying he is "more buzzy" now than when he was a young player. "As everybody says and as all the old pros that coach now when I go and play against teams and I have a good catch-up with them - all of them are 'long-time retired mate, don't do it.'" So how much longer can he resist the march of Father Time? "I can see myself playing next year, because if I don't think like that my body will shut down and I'll probably finish tomorrow, so my mindset is I'm still ready to play next year," he said. "In my mind there's no reason why I should finish." — AFP



Darren Stevens

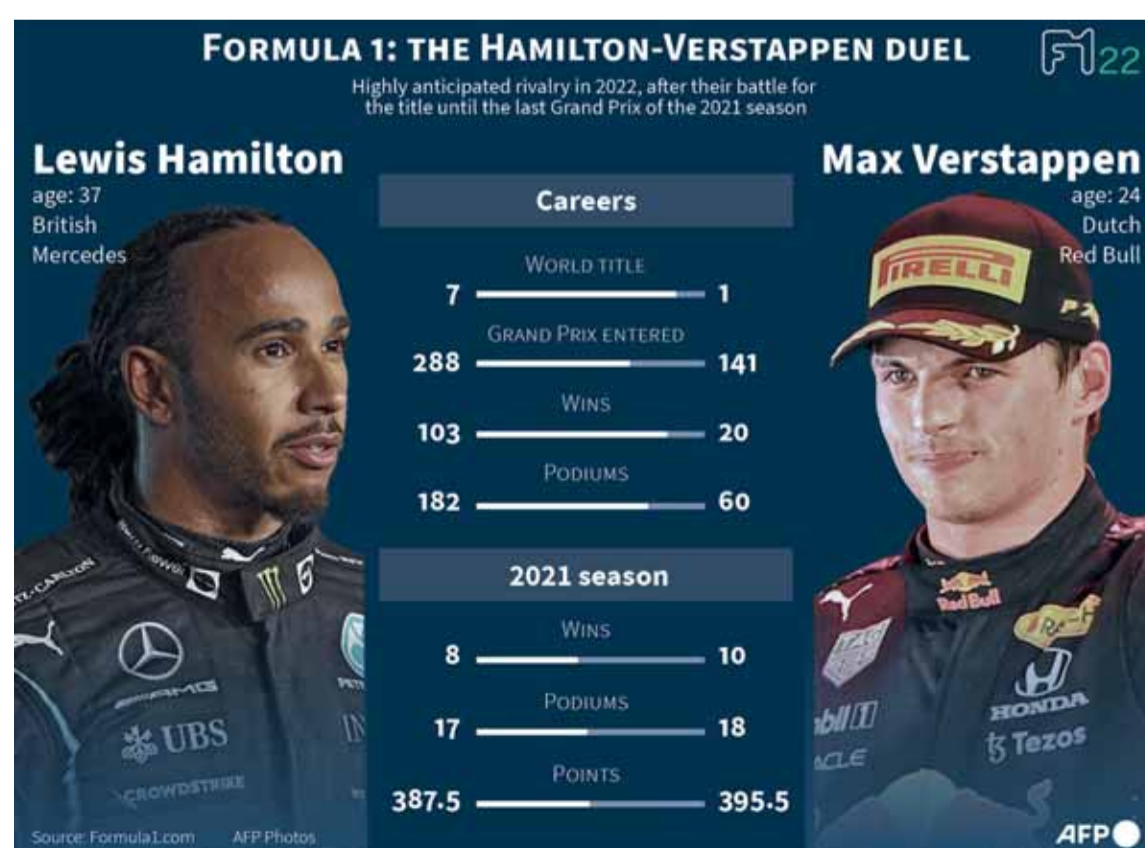
Mercedes, Hamilton's struggles put to the test in Melbourne

MELBOURNE: An uncompetitive Mercedes and admission that he is "struggling mentally and emotionally" have put Lewis Hamilton's remarkable record at the Australian Grand Prix under severe threat this weekend. Britain's deposed seven-time world champion is bidding to make it an incredible seven straight pole positions in Melbourne.

But Hamilton has endured a torrid start to the season with Mercedes alarmingly adrift of pace-setters Red Bull and Ferrari, unable to challenge for grid position or victory in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The once-dominant German manufacturer has had problems with porpoising - bouncing at high speed - after a radical design overhaul in the off-season to meet new technical regulations designed to promote closer racing.

"Hard some days to stay positive," the 37-year-old Hamilton said on Instagram last week. "I have struggled mentally and emotionally for a long time, to keep going is a constant effort but we have to keep fighting. We have so much to do and to achieve." Hamilton, who was demoralized at the messy way his world crown slipped from his grasp last year in the final race at Abu Dhabi, described his car as "undriveable" after qualifying only 16th in Saudi Arabia a fortnight ago.

It was the first time since the 2017 Brazilian Grand Prix, where he crashed, that the Briton had failed to progress from the Q1 section of qualifying. Things didn't improve much during the race, ending



10th to earn a solitary point, some 1:13.948 secs adrift of winner, world champion and rival Max Verstappen of Red Bull. While Hamilton managed third in the opening round at Bahrain, it was only after both Red Bull drivers - Verstappen and Sergio Perez - retired in the closing stages.

After those back-to-back races to open the sea-

son, Mercedes have had an extra week to dissect the data and work on their problems heading to Albert Park. Red Bull motorsport advisor Helmut Marko has no doubt Mercedes, who have claimed eight straight constructors' championships, will fix their issues, denying their early form spelt an end to their dominant era. — AFP

Sports

Lakers out of NBA postseason contention after Suns rout

LOS ANGELES: The Los Angeles Lakers were officially eliminated from postseason contention on Tuesday as the Phoenix Suns sent the crisis-stricken NBA giants spinning to a seventh straight defeat. With an injured LeBron James watching from the sidelines, the Lakers' faint hopes of scraping into the playoffs were snuffed out as the Western Conference leaders turned on the style to complete a convincing 121-110 win in Phoenix.

The Los Angeles defeat - and San Antonio's 116-97 win over the Denver Nuggets earlier Tuesday - mean the Lakers will not be in the postseason for the first time since 2019. It is only the fourth time since James entered the league in 2003 that the NBA superstar has failed to reach the postseason.

"We're extremely disappointed," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said. "Disappointed for our fanbase, disappointed for the (ownership), that gave us this opportunity. "We wanted to play our part in bringing success to Laker basketball and we fell short. It's not been due to a lack of effort. We have all put in the work. Guys stayed fighting right to the end. We brought integrity to the process we just fell short through a disjointed season. We're all disappointed."

Tuesday's loss brings the curtain down on a miserable campaign for the Lakers. A decision to rebuild their roster last year in a blockbuster trade for Russell Westbrook has been a spectacular failure, accentuated by a long-term injury to Anthony Davis that kept the star forward sidelined for roughly half the season. A pall of gloom shrouded the NBA's most glamorous franchise in recent weeks, as loss after costly loss piled up to leave the 17-time NBA champions needing a miraculous sequence of results to somehow

scrape into the play-in tournament.

Before Tuesday's game, social media had been ablaze with speculation that the Lakers will move quickly to fire beleaguered coach Vogel, who led the team to the NBA championship in 2020. Philadelphia 76ers coach Doc Rivers and Utah Jazz coach Quin Snyder have both been linked to the Lakers hot seat. With San Antonio clinching victory over Denver well before the Lakers-Suns game had finished, Los Angeles knew that only a win would do in Phoenix.

'Playing for our lives'

But after a bright opening they were rapidly outclassed. The Suns surged into a 59-50 lead shortly before half-time and kept the hammer down in the third quarter, Devin Booker draining a three-point jump shot to put Phoenix 84-65 ahead before the Suns pulled 26 points clear. Booker led the scoring for Phoenix with 32 points, with Deandre Ayton adding 22.

Vogel said knowledge of San Antonio's win over Denver had not changed his team's approach against Phoenix. "We've been playing for our lives for the last five, six, seven games," Vogel said. "It didn't change anything." Westbrook, meanwhile, could not pinpoint how the Lakers' season had gone awry. "There's not one thing," Westbrook said. "There's so many different things that happened but I don't like to point fingers or blame anybody."

In other NBA games Tuesday, Joel Embiid enhanced his MVP credentials with another monumental performance as the Philadelphia 76ers overpowered the Indiana Pacers 131-122. Embiid finished with 45 points, 13 rebounds and two assists, while



PHOENIX: Torrey Craig #0 of the Phoenix Suns handles the ball against Carmelo Anthony #7 of the Los Angeles Lakers during the second half of their NBA game at Footprint Center on April 5, 2022. —AFP

Tyrese Maxey provided support with 30 points and seven assists. James Harden had a quiet scoring night with 11 points but laid on 14 assists for his teammates.

The playoff picture in the Eastern Conference became clearer with Toronto and Chicago both clinching postseason berths. Toronto assured them-

selves of a playoff spot after defeating Atlanta 118-108 while rivals Cleveland slumped to a 120-115 loss in Orlando. Chicago meanwhile were thumped 127-106 by the NBA champion Milwaukee Bucks but also secured a playoff place thanks to Cleveland's loss in Florida. —AFP

NBA player Kanter out to corner UN rights chief

GENEVA: Long-time NBA player Enes Kanter Freedom, whose advocacy on Xinjiang and Tibet has ruffled feathers, hopes to bend UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet's ear on Thursday about her forthcoming China visit. Kanter Freedom has emerged as one of China's most vocal critics in the sporting world: a rare athlete willing to forgo lucrative endorsements to speak on issues such as Beijing's treatment of its Uyghur Muslim and Tibetan minorities.

And at an event they are both due to attend in Geneva, he hopes to spur Bachelet into "solid action" on China rather than mere condemnation. "I am really hopeful for that meeting," he told AFP. "We need change, and change cannot wait any more. We need to take immediate action. What she represents is to bring awareness but what I want to tell her is, don't just talk about it: be about it. Take some solid actions because condemning is good, it brings awareness, but it doesn't change anything."

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is set to make a long-delayed visit to China in May, including to Xinjiang, where Western lawmakers have accused Beijing of genocide against the Uyghurs - allegations vigorously denied by China. "We don't have time to wait. People are dying and getting killed, so she definitely needs to push whoever she needs to push," said Kanter Freedom.

Golovkin's blockbuster Canelo trilogy at stake in Murata showdown

TOKYO: Middleweight great Gennady Golovkin returns to the ring for the first time in 16 months on Saturday, where victory against Japan's Ryota Murata could set up a long-awaited third fight against Saul 'Canelo' Alvarez. IBF champion "GGG" Golovkin (41-1-1, with 36 KOs) will face Murata (16-2), who holds the WBA version of the title, in a unification fight at Saitama, north of Tokyo.

The hard-hitting Kazakh has been hailed as the biggest name to enter a ring in Japan since heavyweight

champion Mike Tyson, who was knocked out in Tokyo by 40-1 underdog James "Buster" Douglas in one of boxing's biggest upsets in 1990. The prize at stake for Golovkin is a potential third crack at pound-for-pound king Alvarez in a blockbuster trilogy fight later this year, having pushed the Mexican all the way in two previous epic encounters.

If the pair, who appear to harbor genuine mutual animosity, remain unbeaten in their upcoming fights, then a September trilogy fight could smash box office and pay-per-view records. The all-conquering Alvarez, having last year unified the four super-middleweight belts in just 11 months, will move up to light-heavyweight to challenge undefeated WBA champion Dmitry Bivol on May 7.

The veteran Golovkin, who turns 40 on Friday, has

never beaten his Mexican nemesis. Their first fight, in September 2017, saw Golovkin give an inspired performance, with many believing he had won, only for the judges to declare the bout a split draw. The rematch eight months later was postponed after Alvarez tested positive for a banned substance.

When it eventually took place in Sept 2018, Alvarez battled to victory by majority decision after a pulsating contest. Golovkin said his rivalry with Alvarez was not "the only thing that characterizes my career" in a recent interview with Bleacher Report, pointing to his 21 world title defenses - a middleweight record. "If I'm going to approach the third fight with Canelo, it'll certainly be with different thoughts and not with the idea of righting any wrongs," he told broadcaster DAZN, adding he was not "bothered by the results in the first two fights". —AFP

Money versus morals

He was raised in Turkey and played for the national team but criticized President Recep Tayyip Erdogan over rights issues and had his passport revoked by the Turkish government in 2017. For several years afterwards, Kanter said he feared for his life and refused to leave North America. The former Boston Celtics center, who made his NBA debut in 2011 with the Utah Jazz, became a US citizen last November and added Freedom to his name to celebrate his new nationality.

He was presented Wednesday with the 2022 Courage Award at the 14th annual Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, organized by rights NGOs, for "risking his career" to speak out on the Uyghurs. China is by far the NBA's largest overseas market but in October last year Chinese streaming service Tencent stopped showing Celtics games after Kanter Freedom branded President Xi Jinping a "brutal dictator".

Kanter Freedom said that athletes nowadays have a huge platform due to their social media reach, and urged them to use it to raise issues that transcend sport - even if it risked sponsorship deal opportunities. He called for a boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February and while pleased with the diplomatic snub from some countries, he said athletes should also have taken a stand.

"They have picked money and business over morals, principles and values. So shame on all these athletes who attended," he said. Kanter Freedom said China was closely watching the world's response to Russia's war in Ukraine and called for tougher sanctions on Moscow to deter Beijing from invading Taiwan. "We don't want another Ukraine to happen to Taiwan," he said.



Enes Kanter Freedom

Traded, then released

NBA basketball only returned to Chinese state broadcaster CCTV for the first time in nearly 18 months last week, after China blacklisted it after a Houston Rockets official voiced support for Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement. Kanter Freedom feels he is paying a price for his advocacy. The Celtics traded him in February to the Rockets - who immediately released him, leaving him looking for a new NBA team.

"I averaged double-double last year and people know I can still go out there and play," he said, citing his statistics. "I'm 29 and I plan to play another six or seven years in the league because my body feels healthy and I love basketball. "I do believe that yes, they are punishing me in a way, and making sure every other athlete sees what I am going through so they won't talk about the issues that are happening in China." But he added: "I don't regret anything that I have done. If I could go back in time, I would do it even louder." —AFP

Woods aims to pull off another Masters miracle

AUGUSTA: Tiger Woods plans to tee it up in the Masters on Thursday, gunning for a record-equalling sixth green jacket in what would be the most miraculous resurgence of a career studded with epic comebacks. Woods last played 17 months ago, in the pandemic-delayed 2020 Masters. His lower right leg is knit together with the "hardware" of stabilizing rods and screws inserted after he suffered devastating injuries in a February 2021 single-car crash.

Woods spent three months in a hospital bed, more time in a wheelchair before graduating to crutches, and now thinks he can not only walk the rolling, 7,510-yard Augusta National course for four rounds, but also give himself a chance to match Jack Nicklaus's record of six Masters titles. "I do," Woods said when asked outright if he thought he could win.

Through years of injury and comebacks, Woods has always said he wouldn't enter a tournament he didn't think he could win. He won the 2008 US Open with a broken leg and torn knee ligament. It would be more than a decade, and five back surgeries later, before he won his next major title at the 2019 Masters, taking his career tally to 15. "You know, 72 holes is a long road, and it's going to be a tough challenge and a challenge that I'm up for," Woods said. "I don't have to worry about ball striking or the game of golf, it's actually just the hills out here. That's going to be the challenge, it's going to be the challenge of a major marathon."

Defending champion Hideki Matsuyama is in a race for fitness. Rory McIlroy is still chasing the Masters title that would complete his career Grand Slam. Scottie Scheffler arrives at the first major of the year as a newly minted world number one. But Spain's second-ranked Jon Rahm is one of five players who could topple Scheffler from his perch.

The others are British Open champion Collin Morikawa, US PGA FedEx Cup champion Patrick Cantlay, rising Norwegian star Viktor Hovland and Aussie Cameron Smith - who shot four rounds in the 60s in 2020 in a runner-up finish to Dustin Johnson at Augusta. The contenders have been greeted this year by significant changes to several holes at the iconic Georgia course. —AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Rawda	22517733
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Adaliya	22517144
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Khaldiya	24848075
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Kaifan	24849807
Chest Hospital	24849400	Shamiya	24848913
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Shuwaikh	24814507
Adan Hospital	23940620	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Nuzha	22526804
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Qadsiya	22515088
		Dasmah	22532265
		Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
		Shaab	22518752
		Qibla	22459381
Clinics			
Kaizen center	25716707		

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MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Dutch defender Nathan Ake vies with Atletico Madrid's Croatian defender Sime Vrsaljko during their UEFA Champions League quarterfinal first leg match at the Etihad Stadium on April 5, 2022. — AFP

Man City in slender lead over Atletico

MANCHESTER: Pep Guardiola praised Manchester City's patience after Kevin De Bruyne broke Atletico Madrid's stubborn resistance to clinch a 1-0 win in Tuesday's Champions League quarterfinal first leg. Guardiola's side spent much of the night banging their heads against the red and white wall of Atletico's massed defense at the Etihad Stadium.

But Guardiola sent on Phil Foden midway through the second half and his sublime pass teed up De Bruyne to finally reward City for their territorial dominance. "I didn't expect to win three or four nil. I knew who we were facing. They have been together for many years," Guardiola said. "They defend so well, so compact and so deep. We were patient. You have to be against these teams. They want you to be anxious. It's a good result. Unfortunately, we had a couple more chances with Kevin to score again."

While Guardiola launched a water bottle in a frenzied celebration that underlined what a testing

night it had been for his team, the City boss knows the tie is far from over. "Even a 1-0 lead going to Madrid is tough," Guardiola said. "We have to control our emotions. It will be a good test for us, our maturity. We will try to score and win the game."

At the start of a season-defining 11 days for treble-chasing City, this was a qualified success that justified their patient performance. But Atletico have already knocked out Manchester United in the last 16 this season, while Liverpool fell victim to Diego Simeone's side when the Reds were the holders in 2019-20. The Spanish champions will believe they can cause another surprise in the second leg in Madrid on April 13.

"It's clear we were playing against an extraordinary opponent. We have to use a great way of defending and without being embarrassed," Simeone said. "We need to be better, see if we can have the ball a bit more in the second leg. Perhaps we can create more difficulties. We are still in the

tie." City have no margin for error over the next two weeks as the Premier League leaders host Liverpool, just a point behind them in the title race, on Sunday. They head to Madrid next week before facing Liverpool again in the FA Cup semifinals at Wembley three days later.

'Special quality'

Guardiola has often been criticized for his curious team selections in previous Champions League knockout stage defeats with City. However, Guardiola's game-changing decision to introduce Foden should silence a few critics after it turned a difficult evening into a vital victory. "When the game was a little bit flat, we knew we could change it with the substitutes," Guardiola said. "Phil has a special quality. He had the composure to make an incredible assist and Kevin is in the best moment of his season."

As ever, City monopolized possession, yet they often found themselves shuffling passes across mid-

field before Atletico shut the door on them. Simeone's famously pragmatic approach presented a stark contrast to the purist principles espoused by Guardiola. Gradually, City rose to the challenge and Ilkay Gundogan went close with a curling shot that deflected wide off Stefan Savic soon after the interval. De Bruyne's free-kick finally forced Jan Oblak's first save, while Raheem Sterling dragged his effort well wide from a dangerous position moments later.

When Aymeric Laporte headed wastefully over from Riyad Mahrez's corner, Guardiola had seen enough and he sent on Foden, Jack Grealish and Gabriel Jesus. Foden's arrival was an inspired move as the England forward played a key role when City at last broke through in the 70th minute. Taking possession outside the Atletico area, Foden shimmied away from two defenders and slipped a precise pass to De Bruyne, who timed his run perfectly to drill a low strike into the far corner from a tight angle. — AFP

Liverpool in sight of semis after putting three past Benfica

LISBON: Liverpool took charge of their Champions League quarter-final against Benfica on Tuesday as Sadio Mane, Ibrahima Konate and Luis Diaz gave them a 3-1 lead after the first leg in Lisbon. Konate nodded in his first Liverpool goal from a corner before Mane tapped home to put the visitors in command at the Estadio da Luz.

Benfica made a game of it early in the second half when a Konate error allowed the lively Darwin Nunez to pull one back, but Diaz, who was superb all night, added a third to put Liverpool in sight of the semis. "They fought for their lives. We opened the door a little bit for them," said Jurgen Klopp. "We scored a third one and I think everyone agrees we could and should have scored more." Liverpool will be confident of finishing the job at Anfield next week, with Klopp comfortable enough to take off Mohamed Salah, Mane and Thiago Alcantara after an hour. Salah, in particular, was surely being preserved for Sunday, when Liverpool face Manchester City in what could prove to be the decisive match in the Premier League's neck-and-neck title race.

The only disappointment was that Salah was unable to get on the scoresheet, with the Egyptian missing a handful of chances. "Every player in that situation



LISBON: Liverpool's English midfielder Jordan Henderson fights for the ball with Benfica's Argentinian defender Nicolas Otamendi during their UEFA Champions League quarterfinal first leg match at the Luz stadium on April 5, 2022. — AFP

wants to score and it's clear Mo wants to score as well," said Klopp. "It's a tough period, the boys came back from Africa and that's really not easy. Massive pressure. They need some time to settle, everything will be fine." Benfica are dotted between a Liverpool-City league and cup double-header, with the FA Cup

semi-final at Wembley coming after the second leg next week, before Klopp's team continue a crunch period with league games against Manchester United and local rivals Everton. Liverpool's convincing victory may offer Klopp the luxury of rotating players again for the return leg next week. — AFP

was unproven when he took his first major coaching job in November.

Barcelona's fortunes have turned around so dramatically that they now have two chances to qualify for the Champions League. They could finish in the top four in La Liga, where they are second after overhauling Sevilla on Sunday, or they could win the Europa League where they are clear favorites. They face Frankfurt on Thursday in the first leg of the quarterfinals, with the winner to face Lyon or West Ham in the last four.

The 32-year-old Aubameyang's departure from Arsenal mid-season continues to cause debate in England, with some questioning Mikel Arteta's decision to let the striker leave for free, particularly given the team's struggles to score goals. Many say the wisdom of that move will depend entirely on whether Arsenal finish in the Premier League's top four and qualify for the Champions League for the first time since the 2016-17 season.

"I think (the problem) was just with him and after he made this decision, I can't tell you much, he wasn't happy and that's it. I was not very happy, I was very calm and that's it," Aubameyang said in February of



Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang

Arteta. Perhaps more to the point is that in January, Arsenal and Barcelona had very different priorities. While Arteta was nurturing and protecting a young Arsenal team for the future, Barcelona wanted to patch together a short-term squad capable of averting impending financial disaster. Aubameyang's disciplinary problems, age and lack of fitness meant he no longer fitted in with Arteta's long-term vision. — AFP

West Ham run recalls memories of halcyon days

PARIS: West Ham United host Lyon in the first leg of their Europa League quarterfinal on Thursday with the Hammers' run in continental competition bringing back memories of the club's halcyon days. They have not seen a European quarter-final in the east end of London since 1981, when second-division West Ham lost to eventual winners Dinamo Tbilisi in the last eight of the Cup Winners Cup.

Their best years came before that, with Bobby Moore captaining the team to victory in the 1965 Cup Winners Cup and a side featuring Frank Lampard senior reaching the final of the same tournament in 1976. On that occasion they lost to a brilliant Anderlecht team, but returning to another European final is now the dream, almost half a century later.

After ousting record six-time winners Sevilla in the last round, a meeting with Lyon will hold no fears for David Moyes's men, who are sixth in the Premier League. "It's very exciting. I've been here a long time and seen the lows of relegation battles to being in the quarter-final of the Europa League," Aaron Cresswell told the club's website. "That's what we want as a club, we want progression and as players we want to play in those competitions against the best players in the world. It's fantastic."

Lyon have a fantastic recent pedigree in Europe, reaching the Champions League semifinals in 2020 and the last four of the Europa League in 2017. They knocked out Porto in the last round, but it is hard to know what the true face of Peter Bosz's side is just now - they lie in mid-table in Ligue 1. Lyon are missing gifted midfielder Maxence Caqueret due to injury but anything is possible for them if the likes of Lucas Paqueta and Houssein Aouar perform to the best of their ability.

Whoever wins that tie - the second leg will be played next week - will face Eintracht Frankfurt or a resurgent Barcelona in the semifinals. The Catalans must now be seen as the favorites to win the Europa League as they head to Germany on a run of 13 games unbeaten. Opponents Eintracht sit mid-table in the Bundesliga but they have beaten Bayern Munich this season and knocked out another Spanish side in the last round, ending the prospects of Betis reaching the final in Seville. — AFP

Aubameyang: Barca's gift who keeps on giving

BARCELONA: "A gift from heaven," was how Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez described the arrival of Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and the striker, discarded by Arsenal, has certainly delivered. It is hard to think of a more significant January acquisition than Aubameyang, given his impact on Barca's immediate and long-term future.

By the end of the season, Aubameyang's goals could be the biggest factor in Barcelona finishing in La Liga's top four, an achievement that could prove transformative. He has scored nine goals in 12 games so far, including a hat-trick against Valencia and two against Real Madrid. Missing out on the Champions League next season would have derailed Barcelona's financial recovery and destabilized the entire project under Xavi, who looks an astute appointment now but