



2 Kuwaitis decry dishdasha shortage crisis before Eid



5 Sri Lanka's president faces street protests



15 Everton beat Man Utd, boost survival hopes



Ramadan Timings	
Fajr	04:05
Shurooq	05:30
Dhuhr	11:49
Asr	15:23
Maghrib	18:11
Isha	19:30

VOLVO

Saudi to allow 1 million hajj pilgrims this year

Muslims outside kingdom happy with uptick in pilgrim numbers



HOLY MAKKAH: In this file photo, pilgrims perform prayers around the Kaaba at the Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia's holy city of Makkah on August 7, 2019, prior to the start of the annual Hajj pilgrimage in the holy city. —AFP

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia said Saturday it will permit one million Muslims from inside and outside the country to participate in this year's hajj, a sharp uptick after pandemic restrictions forced two years of drastically pared-down pilgrimages. The move, while falling short of reinstating normal hajj conditions, offered hopeful news for many Muslims outside the kingdom who have been barred from making the trip since 2019.

One of the five pillars of Islam, the Hajj must be undertaken by all Muslims with the means at least once in their lives. Usually one of the world's largest religious gatherings, about 2.5 million people took part in 2019. But after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, Saudi authorities allowed only 1,000 pilgrims to participate.

The following year, they upped the total to 60,000 fully vaccinated Saudi citizens and residents chosen through a lottery. This year the Saudi hajj ministry "has authorized one million pilgrims, both foreign and domestic, to perform the hajj," it said in a predawn statement Saturday. The pilgrimage, which will take place in July, will be limited to vaccinated Muslims under age 65, the statement said. Those

coming from outside Saudi Arabia, who must apply for hajj visas, will this year also be required to submit a negative COVID-19 PCR result from a test taken within 72 hours of travel.

The government wants to promote pilgrims' safety "while ensuring that the maximum number of Muslims worldwide can perform the hajj", the statement said. The hajj consists of a series of religious rites that are completed over five days in Islam's holiest city, Makkah, and surrounding areas of western Saudi Arabia. Authorities took a number of special measures to reduce the spread of the coronavirus last year, including dividing pilgrims into groups of 20 and handing out disinfectants, masks and sterilized pebbles for the "stoning of Satan" ritual.

But the relatively small crowds were distressing to Muslims abroad. "We have been in great sadness and pain in the past two years because of the small number of pilgrims. The scene was horrible," 36-year-old Cairo resident Mohamed Tamer said Saturday. "I am very happy that the hajj will return to normality to some extent," he added, though he also expressed worry about rising costs including for flights and hotels.

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Ramadan Kareem

Love for the Almighty Allah: Introduction

By Hassan T Bwambale

According to the Noble Quran, God Almighty created us to worship Him. Worship from the Islamic point of view can be anything you do, say and think of as long as it pleases God and is good for you and your fellow human-beings. There are three pillars of worship, viz love, fear, and hope. Although we hope for God's forgiveness and reward, and fear sinfulness that would displease Him, love for God is the most comprehensive, and encompasses the other two.

The most pleasing human emotion is love and the most beautiful form of love is to love the Almighty and Majestic Creator, Allah. We worship God, perform good deeds, and draw closer Him because we love Him and hope for His bounties and blessings, the most important being to see Him in Paradise. The love of a worshiper for his Creator is very satisfying and fills his heart, especially when he knows that Almighty Allah loves him. Among the names and attributes of Allah is Al-Wadoud, meaning "The Most Loving and Affectionate, The Beloved, The Kind and Loving God."

To love Allah, the Majestic, is more than simply pronouncing your love for Him; it is proven by obeying Him, worshipping Him, liking what He likes, and disliking what He dislikes. Allah Almighty says what can be translated as: "And (yet), among the people are those who take other than Allah as equals (to Him). They love them as they (should) love Allah. But those who believe are stronger in love for Allah..." (Al-Baqarah 2: 165)

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also said what can be translated as: "Whoever attains three things will get the delight of faith: to love

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52 killed as missile hits east Ukraine

KRAMATORSK, Ukraine: Evacuations resumed on Saturday from the town in eastern Ukraine where a missile strike killed 52 people at a railway station as civilians fled a feared Russian offensive. Six weeks into Russia's invasion, Moscow has shifted its focus to eastern and southern Ukraine after stiff resistance ended plans to swiftly capture Kyiv.

Civilians trapped in the region have faced brutal conditions, and EU

leaders met with President Volodymyr Zelensky in a show of support as news emerged of the devastating attack on Kramatorsk's station. The 52 victims included five children. With thousands killed in fighting and more than 11 million fleeing their homes or the country, Zelensky said the strike marked a fresh atrocity and called for a "firm global response" to the bloody incident.

"This is another Russian war crime for which everyone involved will be held accountable," he said in a video message. "World powers have already condemned Russia's attack on Kramatorsk. We expect a firm global response to this war crime."

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No-trust vote postponed in Pakistan again

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan lawmakers clashed angrily in the national assembly on Saturday with the opposition

accusing ruling party members of wasting time ahead of a no-confidence vote that will likely see Prime Minister Imran Khan booted from office.

The session was adjourned for a second time late Saturday afternoon, with lawmakers told to return in the evening after breaking their Ramadan fast. Khan, who was not present, has lost his majority in the 342-seat assembly through defections by coal-

One Palestinian killed, 12 hurt in Zionist raid

JENIN: Zionist security forces raided the flashpoint West Bank district of Jenin on Saturday killing a Palestinian and wounding 12 others, after vowing there will "not be limits" to curb surging violence.

The operation, which lasted several hours, came after a gunman from Jenin went on a shooting rampage in a

popular Tel Aviv nightlife area on Thursday evening. Following the attack, Zionist entity's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett gave security agencies "full freedom" to end deadly violence that has surged since March 22 "in order to defeat terror". "There are not and will not be limits for this war," Bennett.

On Saturday, the army said security forces had launched the operation in the city of Jenin, in the north of the occupied West Bank, its Palestinian refugee camp and adjacent villages. The Palestinian health ministry said that at least one Palestinian man was

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KRAMATORSK, Ukraine: A woman waves to say good bye to her husband as she leaves on a bus, a day after a rocket attack at a train station in Kramatorsk, on April 9, 2022. — AFP

tion partners and members of his own party, and the opposition needs just 172 votes to dismiss him.

There is no vote for a new premier on the agenda, but that could change and Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) leader Shehbaz Sharif is the anointed candidate.

Whoever takes over will still have to deal with the issues that bedeviled Khan-soaring inflation, a feeble rupee

and crippling debt. Militancy is also on the rise, with Pakistan's Taliban emboldened by the return to power last year of the hardline Islamist group in neighboring Afghanistan.

Tempers rose when Shehbaz insisted a vote be held immediately—as ordered by the Supreme Court on Thursday—but Khan loyalists demanded discussion first on their leader's

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JENIN, Palestinian Territories: The sister (center) of 25-year-old Palestinian Ahmed Al-Saadi, who was killed earlier during clashes with Zionist forces, faints as relatives react during the funeral in the Palestinian refugee camp of Jenin in the occupied West Bank on April 9, 2022. — AFP

Local

Kuwaitis decry dishdasha shortage crisis before Eid

COVID-19, labor exodus, 60s' visas main causes for delays



KUWAIT: Tailors busy working in a shop in Kuwait City. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Tailor shops lined up in Kuwait City.



Dishdashas lined up on shelves as tailors work in a shop.



Dishdasha stacked on top of each other inside a tailor shop.

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Many citizens are complaining they are unable to sew dishdashas for Eid due to the immense workload on tailors and long delivery times. Tailors told Kuwait Times the situation is a result of the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic and the exodus of a large number of tailors, in addition to the impact of decisions on renewing the residencies of expats aged 60 and above without a degree, which has led to a labor shortage during the peak Ramadan season.

Kuwait Times visited several tailoring shops in Kuwait City to learn more about the 'tailor crisis' that has led to orders piling up for months. Dilip Kumar told Kuwait Times his tailoring shop lost more than KD 7,000 during the pandemic, blaming the 60+ expat decision and the many tailors who were stuck outside the country who lost their visas that were never renewed. "We had eight tailors, but now we only have two," he said.

Kumar said the current situation is causing them embarrassment in front of customers, who want their clothes to be made quickly, stressing that the earliest date for delivery is at least a month after Eid, because now it usually takes up to 15 days to make one dishdasha.

Busy period

Mohammad Waqas said the season of Ramadan and Eid is a busy period. "Every year we face the same thing, but this year the orders have piled up. We have almost thrice the number of orders from 2020 because people haven't made any new clothes for two years due to COVID-19," he said. He explained 15 tailors are working currently, after five tailors left recently because of the 60+ law, which has levied an annual fee of nearly KD 750, which many cannot afford. "We are fully booked until July. We make anywhere between 80 to 90 dishdashas daily, and the number increases in the run-up to Eid Al-Fitr. Tailoring charges start from KD 7 per dishdasha, and the fabric must be provided by the customer," Waqas said.

Redha told Kuwait Times that along with the 60+ law and COVID, work visas are not yet open to bring in new workers for his shop, pointing out



A tailor takes measurements.

that he owns another shop but it has been closed since the pandemic broke out. "I'm paying the rent for the closed shop for two years now, until I find new tailors to work on the machines inside. We are hoping for new laws in order to get new workers," he said. Redha noted workload is high until August, as around 50 tailors are working on Eid orders from 70 earlier. "People asking for more than one dishdasha, which has made taking new orders impossible."

We are fully booked until July

Stuck outside

Meanwhile, Noor said he lost six tailors after their iqamas expired due to being stuck in their home countries because of the coronavirus-linked lockdowns. Also, as many workers didn't get to see their families during the pandemic, they are now on vacation, which has added to the pressure. He said his shop stopped receiving new orders since February to complete what they already have.

Kuwaiti customer Ahmad Al-Saffar told Kuwait Times he did not expect such a situation. "Tailors are all full until after Eid - this is unbelievable! I thought I came early to stitch my Eid clothes, but was surprised at how many orders they already have," he exclaimed, adding he and his three children will now have to buy readymade dishdashas.

For Ali Ebrahim, who received his dishdasha, going early to the tailor shop was the best decision



A tailor hands a dishdasha to a customer.



A tailor irons a dishdasha inside his shop.

he made. "I sent the fabric in March to wear it in Ramadan, but did not expect tailors to be so busy," he told Kuwait Times. Ebrahim said that his dishdasha was supposed to be ready two weeks ago,

but was just finished. "Now I will wear it for Ramadan and Eid, because many tailors will not take orders until after Eid. I intend to perform Eid prayer with this dishdasha."



Tailors at work.



A sign hanged at a tailor shop's door saying that no new orders could be accepted before June 24, 2022.

Local

S&P keeps Kuwait's credit ratings at A+ with negative outlook

Political gridlock prevents implementing future financing strategy



KUWAIT: The Standard & Poor's Global Ratings agency has affirmed its long- and short-term foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings on Kuwait at 'A+/A-1' with negative outlook. "The negative outlook primarily reflects the risks over the next 12-24 months relating to the government's ability to overcome the institutional roadblocks preventing it from implementing a future financing strategy," the New York-based agency clarified in a press release on Thursday.

The leading rating agency, however, stated that it could revise Kuwait's outlook to stable if the government successfully addresses the country's existing fiscal funding constraints, for example through a combination of debt law adoption, authorization to withdraw specified amounts from the Future Generations Fund (FGF) when required, and a fiscal consolidation program. The international agency also cautioned that it could lower the ratings if no sustainable comprehensive financing arrangements are agreed.

"This could happen, for instance, because of ongoing confrontations between the government and parliament, rendering the government unable to implement fiscal reforms, pass the debt law, or authorize other budget-financing mechanisms if needed," it indicated. "We could also lower the ratings if we concluded that the government will not

have full ready access to the FGF for budgetary and debt repayment needs, contrary to our current assumption."

The S&P forecasted that higher oil prices would bolster Kuwait's fiscal and balance of payments positions over 2022-2023. "Nevertheless, beyond this short-term support, Kuwait's medium-term funding strategy remains uncertain. The General Reserve Fund (GRF) has dwindled and the new debt law has still not been adopted."

"Other financing arrangements—such as an authorization for the government to readily directly access the large Future Generations Fund (FGF) up to a certain amount—are not yet in place," it pointed out. The agency also expressed concerns that rising tensions between the government and the parliament could reduce the likelihood that these reforms would be implemented in the near future.

It projected that Kuwait's general government debt will be just four percent of GDP by the end of 2022 and its total fiscal assets at around 400 percent of GDP. "Despite the prolonged standoff between the executive and legislative branches and the reported late payments to suppliers, we still assume the government will overcome institutional constraints and have a mechanism to access the FGF if other options are not available," it added. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Al-Resala National Humanitarian Association distributed iftar meals to people in need during a campaign carried out in Qadisiya recently. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Lebanon welcomes Kuwait envoy's return

BEIRUT: The Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed Friday Kuwait's recent decision to send its ambassador Abdelal Al-Qenaei back to Beirut. In a press statement, the ministry said it highly values Kuwait's diplomatic efforts to build bridges of dialogue and communication with Gulf countries. It added that Lebanon and the State of Kuwait share a

long history of honorable stances and mutual respect, voicing thanks and appreciation to Kuwait for its constructive and fruitful role in safeguarding and promoting inter-Arab relations. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs Thursday evening announced the return of Kuwait's ambassador to Lebanon. The decision was based on Lebanon's response to the Kuwaiti-Gulf initiative and to appeals of Lebanon's moderate national political forces, and following the Lebanese Prime Minister's commitment to take the necessary and required measures to bolster cooperation with Kuwait and other GCC countries, and to halt all political, military and security issues that affect the GCC countries, the ministry said. — KUNA



BEIJING: Deputy foreign affairs minister of China Zhou Roy meets with Kuwait's ambassador to China Samih Johar Hayat. — KUNA photos

Chinese official lauds Kuwait's role for boosting peace

BEIJING: A ranking Chinese official on Friday lauded the State of Kuwait's efforts for reinforcing global security and peace. The Kuwaiti embassy in Beijing said in a statement that the deputy foreign affairs minister at the central committee of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, Zhou Roy, lauded Kuwait's role at this level at the global and regional levels during a meeting with the State of Kuwait's Ambassador to China Samih Johar Hayat, held at the ruling party's headquarters in Beijing. The statement quoted the minister as affirming necessity to bolster the Kuwaiti-Chinese relations in various sectors. Kuwait, as an active state member in the GCC, has been playing a positive role for bolstering the collective cooperation between the council and China, he added, noting its role in launching the free trade negotiations between the two sides, noting Beijing's aspiration to ink a deal at this level soon. There is substantial harmony between the 2035 Kuwaiti development strategy and China's "silk road" initiative, he elaborated. For his part, Ambassador Hayat said that his talks with the Chinese official



Deputy foreign affairs minister Zhou Roy exchanges gifts with Kuwait's ambassador to China Samih Johar Hayat.

dealt with the deep partnership between the two friendly countries in diverse realms, adding that the discussions touched on regional and international affairs. China and Kuwait share great consensus toward a lot of regional and international issues and the two have been coordinating stances toward these topics. — KUNA

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Kuwaiti researcher Talal Al-Rumaidhi.

Kuwait researcher writes new book on religious maxims

KUWAIT: The tolerant Islamic Sharia' or law is closely related to people's lives, behavior and daily dealings, and has much influence over words and deeds. Thence, inherited popular proverbs are the outgrowth of this influence. In this context, Kuwaiti researcher Talal Al-Rumaidhi has recently issued a new book on "religious proverbs in Kuwaiti tradition", containing a lot of valuable traditional sayings bearing on various religious subjects. Speaking to the press, Rumaidhi said he had compiled popular religious expressions used in ancient Kuwaiti heritage and divided them into separate chapters according to topics. The books abound with proverbs that are pertinent to prayers, Hajj (pilgrimage), religious leaders and religious sites, he elaborated. The 258-page research contains 258 expressions divided into many chapters by topic, including sources and a simplified explanation of relevant occasions, he said, adding that the compiled sayings are characterized by accuracy, obvious meaning and simple, albeit funny, words. Talal Al-Rumaidhi, the former chairman of the Kuwait Writers' Association, has written a collection of historical and literary books. He acquired the State Incentive Award for the best history book in 2010. —KUNA

News in brief

Kuwait, Iran discuss latest developments

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received on Friday a phone call from his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. During the call, both sides discussed bilateral ties and latest developments internationally.

Kuwait oil price up to \$102.77 pb

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by 71 cents to \$102.77 per barrel on Friday as opposed to \$102.06 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) on Saturday. The Brent crude and West Texas Intermediate, globally, went up by \$2.20 and \$2.23 respectively with both settling at \$102.78 per barrel and \$98.26 pb.

Indian embassy marks foundation day of ICCR

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: Embassy of India, Kuwait on Saturday launched the curtain-raiser for International Day of Yoga (IDY) celebrations for the year 2022 during a celebration marking the foundation day of Indian



A group dance performance.

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: Imported vehicles drive on a newly paved road in old Kuwait as old buildings are still seen in the background. (Source: 'Kuwait Miracle on the Desert' by David Cooke, New York, 1970. Prepared by: Mahmoud Zakaria Abu Alella, researcher in heritage, Ministry of Information)

Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center wins 'Oscars for Museums' award

'New Cultural Destination of the Year' in MENA

BERLIN: The iconic Kuwait-based Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center was announced the 2021 winner of the Leading Culture Destinations Berlin Awards, known globally as the "Oscar for Museums", under the category of 'New Cultural Destination of the Year' in the Middle East and North Africa. The award was received by Maha Al-Mansour from the Amiri Diwan cultural centers department and Talal Al-Aqab from the relations department at Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Centre. Mansour said in a press statement that receiving an award is important for Kuwait in the cultural fields, especially with Berlin, which is one of the German cities that host all form of museums.

Enhancing
Kuwait's position
in global circles

Meanwhile, the observer of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center Fatma Aman said that just being nominated for this award brings cultural centers in Kuwait into the scope of international competition, which highlights Kuwait role in supporting culture and keeping pace with the world. She referred to the award's role in enhancing Kuwait's position in global cultural circles, not only in Germany by promoting the experiences of other countries. This year's ceremony included 13 awards, the New Cultural Awards, the Digital award, the Soft Power award, the Smart Climate Award, the Travelers award and many others.

In the award ceremony held in Berlin, the organizers said the award recognizes Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Center as a cultural icon of innovation and unique experiences that serves as a leading destination for local communities and travelers. The Kuwait center had vied for the prestigious award with 38 other cultural destinations from 21 countries. —KUNA



The Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center.



Maha Al-Mansour (center) from the Amiri Diwan cultural centers department.

Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). IDY will be held on June 21, 2022. The ICCR was founded in 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, India's first education minister.

"Today when we celebrate its foundation day, it is also an occasion to remember its founder. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was one of the foremost leaders of the Indian freedom struggle. He was also a great scholar and poet," Indian Ambassador Sibi George said in his inaugural address, recalling the invaluable contributions made by Azad which included establishing ICCR.

"Under his tenure as minister, a number of measures were undertaken to promote primary and sec-

ondary education, scientific education, establishment of universities and promotion of avenues of research and higher studies," he pointed out.

Azad helped establish many institutions such as India's literature academy, music and theater academy and fine arts academy and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). He also provided a major stimulus for the setting up of higher institutions of education including the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT). In recognition of his invaluable contribution to the nation, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was awarded India's highest civilian honor, the Bharat Ratna in 1992.

The ambassador also highlighted India's rich cultural heritage and its splendid diversity. He underlined that India is celebrating two years long celebration of 75th anniversary of its independence (Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav) as well as 60th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between the India and Kuwait. Launching the curtain-raiser for IDY celebrations for 2022, he mentioned that the embassy will have regular yoga events in Kuwait almost daily in the run-up to IDY 2022.

Local Indian artistes performed during the event such as live instrumental music, classical dance, Lavni dance, Gujarati dance, Punjabi and Rajasthani fusion dance and Bengali dance. The ambassador distributed certificates to participants of National Science Day Quiz. He also launched a virtual exhibi-



KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Sibi George, accompanied by First Secretary Dr Vinod Gaikwad (left) and ambassador's spouse Joice Sibi (right) releases the 'Ayush' bulletin for the period January-March 2022.

tion 'Visiting 7 legends of India' by ICCR. 'Ayush' bulletin for the period January-March 2022 was also released on the occasion. As part of curtain raiser for IDY, opening song of Indian Prime Minister's address on IDY 2021 followed by chair yoga demonstration was also screened during the event. The event witnessed enthusiastic response with people from different walks life in Kuwait participating virtually as well as physically.



Dutch teen killed in Malaysia diving accident, 2 rescued

UK finance minister under attack despite wife's tax U-turn

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COLOMBO: Protestors take part in a demonstration in Colombo on April 9, 2022. Severe shortages of food and fuel, alongside lengthy electricity blackouts, have led to weeks of widespread anti-government demonstrations — with calls for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign. — AFP

S Lanka's leader faces street protests

'It's time for you to leave' and 'enough is enough'

COLOMBO: Tens of thousands marched on beleaguered Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's office on Saturday, in the biggest protest to date over the country's dire economic and political crisis.

Sri Lanka's 22 million people have seen weeks of power blackouts and severe shortages of food, fuel and other essentials in the country's worst downturn since independence in 1948. Saturday's social-media organised protest drew the largest numbers since the crisis blew up last month according to AFP reporters. And pressure on Rajapaksa intensified further as the country's powerful business community also began withdrawing support for the president. Men and women poured onto Colombo's waterfront promenade and laid siege to the colonial-era Presidential Secretariat, chanting "Go home Gota" and waving the national lion flag. Others carried handwritten placards that read "It's time for you to leave" and "enough is enough."

Barricades blocked the entrance to the president's office with police in riot gear taking up positions inside the tightly guarded compound.

"These are innocent people here. We are all struggling to live. The government must go and allow a capable person to lead the country," one man told the crowd.



We are all struggling to live

But analysts warn that the outcome remains highly volatile with uncertainty remaining over turnout and some observers fearing a quarter of the electorate may stay away in a possible record boycott of the vote.

Far-left candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon is snapping at their heels in third and still fancies his chances of reaching the second round at the expense of Le Pen or even in an extraordinary upset-Macron himself. Although her opponents accuse her of being an extremist bent on dividing society, Le Pen has with some success during the campaign sought to show a more moderate image and concern with voters' daily worries such as rising prices. Macron by contrast has campaigned relatively little, by his own admission entering the election campaign later than he would have wished due to the war in Ukraine.

The head of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith led a protest in the town of Negombo, just north

of Colombo, urging people to continue protesting till the Rajapaksa administration resigned.

"Everyone must get on the streets till the government leave, these leaders must go. You must go. You have destroyed this country."

Fuelling losses

Sri Lanka's business community, which largely funded Rajapaksa's election campaign, also appeared to ditch the president on Saturday. "The current political and economic impasse simply cannot continue any further, we need a cabinet and interim government within a week at most," said Rohan Masakorala, head of Sri Lanka Association of Manufacturers and Exporters of Rubber products.

His association joined 22 other business and industry organisations, seeking a change of government, saying daily losses had reached around \$50 million due to the fuel shortage alone. In a joint statement, they said that they were responsible for generating nearly a quarter of the country's \$80.17 billion gross domestic product and warned millions of jobs would be in jeopardy.

Newly appointed central bank governor Nandalal Weerasinghe said a series of monetary policy blunders had led to the current crisis with no dollars to finance many imports. In a desperate attempt to shore up the free-falling rupee, Weerasinghe on Friday implemented the country's biggest-ever interest rate hike of 700 basis points. "We are now in damage control mode," he said. Weerasinghe added he expected the rupee to stabilise and dollar inflows to improve as he relaxes his predecessor's tight foreign exchange restrictions which he described as counter-productive.

The government is preparing for bailout negotiations with the International Monetary Fund next week, with finance ministry officials saying that sovereign bondholders and other creditors may have to take a haircut.

New finance minister Ali Sabry told parliament on Friday that he expects \$3 billion from the IMF to support the island's balance of payments in the next three years.

"We hope to get about a billion dollars a year in the next three years totalling a support of three billion," he said adding that Colombo will also seek a debt moratorium. — AFP



HONG KONG: File photo shows, Hong Kong's Chief Secretary John Lee speaks during a flag-raising ceremony to mark the 24th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from Britain in Hong Kong. — AFP

Leader-in-waiting light on policy details in Hong Kong reboot vow

HONG KONG: A former top cop set to become Hong Kong's new leader vowed to reboot the city's international competitiveness on Saturday, but revealed few concrete policy details on how that will be achieved. John Lee, 64, is expected to be anointed the business hub's new chief executive by a committee of Beijing loyalists next month.

A hardline former security chief, he is currently the only person to have announced a leadership bid in what Hong Kong media have widely reported will be a race with no rivals at Beijing's request. "Hong Kong must maintain its character of being an international metropolis," Lee said during his first press conference since announcing his leadership bid.

"This will include ensuring Hong Kong is an attractive place to work and live." Whoever takes over the running of Hong Kong will inherit a city that has had its reputation battered by huge democracy protests, an ongoing crackdown on political freedoms and more than two years of strict pandemic curbs that have left residents and businesses cut off internationally.

Speaking from behind a face mask at an online press conference, Lee laid out his vision for the future under the slogan "Starting a New Chapter for Hong Kong Together". But his stump speech stuck to aspirations and ideals without detailing any concrete policies or targets. — AFP

France prepares for first round of tight Macron re-election bid

PARIS: France on Saturday prepared for the first round of presidential elections projected to produce a run-off rematch between President Emmanuel Macron and far-right leader Marine Le Pen that will be far tighter than their duel five years ago.

All further political activity by candidates was banned on the final day before polls open in mainland France at 0600 GMT on Sunday, after a campaign overshadowed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. French overseas territories will begin voting earlier to take account of the time difference, starting with Saint Pierre and Miquelon off the coast of Canada at 1000 GMT Saturday. Territories in the Caribbean, the Pacific and finally the Indian Ocean will follow before polling stations open in mainland France. Polls predict that Macron will lead Le Pen by a handful of percentage points in round one, with the top two going through to a second round on April 24.

But analysts warn that the outcome remains highly volatile with uncertainty remaining over turnout and some observers fearing a quarter of the electorate may stay away in a possible record boycott of the vote.

Far-left candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon is snapping at their heels in third and still fancies his chances of reaching the second round at the expense of Le Pen or even in an extraordinary upset-Macron himself. Although her oppo-

nents accuse her of being an extremist bent on dividing society, Le Pen has with some success during the campaign sought to show a more moderate image and concern with voters' daily worries such as rising prices. Macron by contrast has campaigned relatively little, by his own admission entering the election campaign later than he would have wished due to the war in Ukraine.

'Strange campaign'

If Macron and Le Pen as forecast reach the second round, analysts predict that their clash will be far tighter than in 2017 when the current president thrashed his rival with 66 percent of the vote. "There is an uncertainty ahead of the first round," said French political scientist Pascal Perrineau, pointing to unprecedentedly high numbers of voters who were still undecided or who had changed their minds during the campaign as well as absentee voters.

Analysts fear that the 2002 record of the numbers of French voters boycotting a first round of 28.4 percent risks being beaten, with the 2017 absentee rate of 22.2 percent almost sure to be exceeded. "We have experienced a strange campaign that was at odds with what we experienced in the past presidential elections," Frederic Dabi, director of the Ifop polling institute, told AFP. The stakes of the election are high for Macron, who came to power aged 39 as France's youngest president with a pledge to shake up the country.

He would be the first French president since Jacques Chirac in 2002 to win a second term and thus cement a place in the country's history. If he wins he would have a five-year mandate to impose his vision of reform which would include a crack at reducing the pension age in defiance of union anger. — AFP



NARBONNE, France: French far-right party Rassemblement National (RN) presidential candidate Marine Le Pen (R) cheers supporters during a campaign trip in Narbonne, southern France, on April 8, 2022, two days before the French presidential election's first round. — AFP

News in brief

Thieves steal iron bridge

PATNA: A gang of crafty scrap metal thieves dismantled and decamped with a 500-tonne defunct iron bridge in eastern India, police said Saturday, pulling off the unlikely heist by pretending to be irrigation officials. The robbing of the bridge was reported Wednesday in the state of Bihar, one of the poorest in the country. Police officer Subhash Kumar told AFP the thieves came in the guise of government irrigation officials. They brought bulldozers and gas cutters and tore apart the structure before escaping with the booty over two days, Kumar said. "They took away the scrap in a heavy vehicle," he said. — AFP

Chaos hits UK sea route

LONDON: Travellers heading to France from England were urged Saturday to pack food and water after huge queues developed on routes to the ferry port of Dover. A "perfect storm" of factors have coalesced as many people hit the roads at the start of Easter holidays, said Toby Howe of the local authority's "Kent Resilience Forum" in southeast England. Foremost was the suspension of sailings by P&O Ferries on the popular Dover-Calais route, after it fired nearly 800 seafarers without notice. Another factor was problems with customs processes for freight lorries heading to Dover, Howe said, after Britain's Brexit divorce from the European Union. — AFP

Dancing women arrested

TEHRAN: Iranian police arrested three young women after a video online showed them dancing in a cemetery, the prosecutor in the northeastern city of Neyshabur said Saturday according to media. "Following the publication of a video on the internet of three girls dancing in the cemetery of the martyrs of Neyshabur in Razavi Khorasan province, the prosecutor ordered the identification and arrest of the defendants," the Tasnim news agency reported. "The emotions of the families of the martyrs were hurt", prosecutor Mohammad Hosseini said, adding that the three women had been arrested. — AFP

International

New Supreme Court justice Jackson hails US progress on racial equality

'It is an honor of a lifetime, for me to have this chance to join the court'

WASHINGTON: Ketanji Brown Jackson celebrated her rise "from segregation to the Supreme Court" at a White House event Friday marking her confirmation as the first Black woman appointed to the nation's highest judicial bench. In her first public remarks since the Senate endorsed her on Thursday, the 51-year-old judge shared the credit for a milestone that was 232 years in the making, telling her supporters: "We have made it—all of us."

"In my family, it took just one generation to go from segregation to the Supreme Court of the United States," she told around 150 guests invited to the South Lawn by President Joe Biden. "And it is an honor, the honor of a lifetime, for me to have this chance to join the court." Jackson came out of the White House with Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris to cheers from the new justice's family, current and former Supreme Court justices, administration officials and senators who voted for her.

"It has taken 232 years and 115 prior appointments for a Black woman to be appointed to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States, but we have made it—all of us," she said. "And our children are telling me that they see now more than ever that, here in America, anything is possible."

Jackson was green-lit by the Senate in a 53-47 vote that capped a bruising confirmation battle, with just three Republicans joining Democrats in advancing Biden's vision for a more diverse high court. She was also with the president at the White House to watch the vote on Thursday, with the pair embracing as she was confirmed.

'Moment of real change'

Introducing his first pick to the court, in front of a sun-drenched South Portico decked in US flags, Biden vowed future generations would be "proud of what we did" in choosing Jackson. "This is going to let so much sunshine on so many young women, so many young Black men, so many minorities—it's real," the Democratic president said.



Anything is possible

"We're going to look back and see this is a moment of real change in American history," Harris, who presided over the confirmation hearing, has broken down barriers of her own as the first woman and first Black and Asian American to be vice president. "President George Washington once referred to America as a great experiment, a nation founded on the previously untested belief that the people—we, the people—could form a more perfect union," Harris said.

"And that belief has pushed our nation forward for generations and it is that belief that we reaf-



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden speaks as Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson gets emotional at an event celebrating her confirmation to the US Supreme Court on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC, on April 08, 2022. — AFP

firmed yesterday through the confirmation of the first Black woman to the United States Supreme Court." One Democrat-backed justice replacing another—the retiring Stephen Breyer—will not change the ideological balance of the court, which has a 6-3 conservative edge.

But it will be the first time the bench has included four women, with Sonia Sotomayor and Elena

Kagan nominated by Barack Obama and Amy Coney Barrett picked by Donald Trump. Jackson will be the sixth woman in total to be elevated to the Supreme Court. Her confirmation comes 55 years after Thurgood Marshall became the first Black justice. Clarence Thomas, who assumed office in 1991, is the only other African American to have served on the bench. — AFP

UK finance minister under attack despite wife's tax U-turn

LONDON: Britain's embattled finance minister Rishi Sunak stood accused Saturday of political hypocrisy as new questions emerged over offshore tax havens reportedly held by his Indian wife. Sunak was also criticised for a lack of transparency, after he admitted to holding a "Green Card" for US permanent residents until last year. Sunak's wealthy wife Akshata Murty said she would start paying UK tax on "all worldwide income", in a bid to defuse a controversy that has further imperilled his waning political fortunes.

But Labour frontbench MP Louise Haigh told BBC radio that Sunak had "come out on a number of occasions to try and muddy the waters" around his family's tax affairs. She conceded that the "non-domicile" status enjoyed by Murty—shielding the overseas income from her family's company Infosys against UK taxes—was legal.

But Haigh queried "whether it was right that the chancellor of the exchequer, whilst piling on 15 sep-



LONDON: File photo shows Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak (R) poses with his wife Akshata Murty during a reception to celebrate the British Asian Trust at The British Museum in London. — AFP

arate tax rises to the British public, was benefiting from a tax scheme that allowed his household to pay significantly less to the tune of potentially tens of millions of pounds." The Independent newspaper reported that Sunak was listed as the beneficiary of trusts set up in the British Virgin Islands and Cayman Islands to help manage his wife's tax and business affairs. — AFP

Norway minister resigns over affair with young woman

OSLO: Norway's government announced Saturday that defence minister Odd Roger Enoksen was resigning following revelations that he had a years-long affair with a much younger woman. "It is a necessary decision, after what has surfaced in this matter," Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store told a press conference where he confirmed that he had accepted Enoksen's resignation.

"I have made several bad choices and judgements, and will give an unreserved apology for the fact that my actions have made life more difficult for others," Enoksen told news agency NTB earlier on Saturday. Enoksen started the affair in 2005 when his partner was still an 18-year-old high school student, according to daily VG.

Her class went on a school trip to Norway's parliament in the capital Oslo and met the Centre Party politician, who was 50 at the time. After the school trip she and Enoksen started what would become a very close and sexual relationship, VG wrote.

The woman, now in her 30s, detailed their relationship to the newspaper, saying she felt starstruck by Enoksen due to her interest in politics and that he



OSLO, Norway: File photo shows Norway's Minister of Defense Odd Roger Enoksen (Centre Party) holds a bouquet of flowers as he poses on Slottsplassen palace square in front of the Royal Palace in Oslo, after he became member of the new government. — AFP

"used his power and position to get what he wanted". According to the woman, they met at least 12 times in Enoksen's office between late 2006 and 2007 while he was the energy minister, with some of the meetings involving "sexual acts". — AFP

No-trust vote postponed in...

Continued from Page 1

claims there had been foreign interference in the process. "You will run proceedings of the house under the order of the Supreme Court," said a furious Shehbaz, wagging his finger.

"Parliament is going to write a new history. Today, the parliament is going to defeat a... prime minister." "We intend to face it in accordance with law and constitution," replied Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, adding: "It is my duty to defend the motion."

Qureshi returned after an adjournment with a litany of grievances, and accused the opposition of leading the country down a dangerous path. "History will expose all those, who set the stage for this move to topple the government," he said, to chants of "vote,

vote" from the opposition.

Khan, 69, said late Friday he had accepted a Supreme Court ruling that ordered the no-confidence vote, but insisted he was the victim of a "regime change" conspiracy involving the United States. The former international cricket star said he would not cooperate with any incoming administration and called on his supporters to take to the streets. A heavy security blanket was thrown over the capital Saturday, with thousands of police on the streets and a ring of steel containers blocking access to the government enclave.

The Supreme Court ruled Thursday that Khan acted illegally by dissolving parliament and calling fresh elections after the deputy speaker of the national assembly—a loyalist—refused to allow an earlier no-confidence vote because of "foreign interference". Khan said the PML-N and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) — two normally feuding dynastic groups who joined forces to oust him—had conspired with Washington to bring the no-confidence vote because of his opposition to US foreign policy, particularly in Muslim nations such as Iraq and Afghanistan. — AFP

Scholars of Islamic Jurisprudence recognize that we need ways to help us intensify our love for Allah, the Eternal, to help us stay motivated. They have listed ten effective ways to keep the love of Almighty Allah alive in our hearts. If you are currently going through a slump, and you feel that you need a boost in your love for Almighty Allah, I encourage you to follow this series. Each day we will share two ways of strengthening our love for Almighty Allah until we cover all the ways that scholars have unanimously suggested.

Courtesy of the TIES Center: As one of the projects funded and managed by Kuwaiti Society for Cultural Dialogue, TIES aims at empowering Kuwait's expats through social and educational services that promote a positive and productive role in society, and to facilitate opportunities for intra- and interfaith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, please call 25231015/6 or e-mail: info@tiescenter.net.

some \$12 billion annually. The kingdom of approximately 34 million people has so far recorded more than 751,000 coronavirus cases, including 9,055 deaths, according to health ministry data.

In early March it announced the lifting of most COVID restrictions including social distancing in public spaces and quarantine for vaccinated arrivals, moves that were expected to facilitate an increase in Muslim pilgrims. The decision included suspending "social distancing measures in all open and closed places" including mosques, while masks are now only required in closed spaces. — AFP

One Palestinian killed, 12 hurt...

Continued from Page 1

killed by Zionist gunfire, while the Red Crescent said 12 others were wounded.

Crowds of mourners marched through the streets carrying the body of the man—identified by Palestinian officials as 25-year-old Ahmad Al-Saadi—on a stretcher covered with the flag of the Gaza Strip-based militant group Islamic Jihad.

Palestinian security sources said part of Saturday's operation was to identify the home of the Tel Aviv assailant ahead of demolishing it. Rights activists have repeatedly denounced Zionist policy of destroying the homes of Palestinian attackers as collective punishment, while Zionists says it acts as a deterrent. Zionist soldiers and border police forces were "conducting counterterrorism activity" in the city of Jenin and its refugee camp, when gun-

men had opened fire "endangering their lives," the army said in a statement.

In response, troops opened fire "towards the armed assailants," the army said, adding there were no injuries among Zionist ranks. "An M16 assault rifle used by an assailant to attack the troops was confiscated," it added.

An AFP photographer at the scene said the operation ended at midday. The Jenin refugee camp is a stronghold of armed factions, where three other Palestinians linked to an anti-Zionist attack were killed by the army last week. Saturday's raid comes a day after Zionists said it had killed Raad Hazem, 28, the alleged Tel Aviv attacker.

In addition to giving security forces a free rein to curb a surge in violence, Bennett on Friday ordered the closure of the Jalameh checkpoint between the Jenin area and Zionist territory.

On Friday, the father of the Tel Aviv attacker, Fathi Hazem—a retired Palestinian security forces officer according to Palestinian sources—struck a defiant tone. Speaking to hundreds at the family home in Jenin, he said the Palestinian people were looking for "freedom and independence". — AFP

52 killed as missile hits...

Continued from Page 1

Zelensky later said he remained open to talks with Russia to resolve the conflict.

US President Joe Biden accused Russia of being behind a "horrific atrocity" in the de facto capital of the Ukrainian-controlled Donetsk region, and France condemned the strike as a "crime against humanity".

Moscow denied responsibility for the rocket attack on Friday morning, which killed 52 and injured a further 109 people, according to the latest official count. The Ukrainian president said the bombing had even landed and called for more weaponry to counter Moscow's aggression. "I am sure that the victory of Ukraine is just a matter of time, and I will do everything to reduce this time," he added.

Minibuses assembled at a church in Kramatorsk to collect shaken evacuees on Saturday. Almost 80 people, most of them elderly, took shelter overnight in the building, not far from the targeted station.

"There were around 300 to 400 people who rushed here after the strike," Yevgeny, a member of the Protestant church, told AFP.

"They were traumatized. Half of them ran to shelter in the cellar, others wanted to leave as soon as

possible. Some were evacuated by bus in the afternoon (on Friday)."

The station in Kramatorsk was being used as the main evacuation hub for refugees from the parts of the eastern Donbas region still under Ukrainian control. AFP reporters at the station saw the remains of the missile tagged in white paint with the words "for our children" in Russian. The expression is frequently used by pro-Russian separatists in reference to their losses since the start of the first Donbas war in 2014.

The governor of Donetsk claimed a missile with cluster munitions was used in the attack, according to remarks published by the Interfax news agency.

The strike came as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell were in Kyiv for talks with Zelensky and to visit the scene of civilian killings in Bucha. Russia faces "decay" because of ever tougher sanctions and Ukraine had a "European future", von der Leyen said at a news conference with Zelensky. "My instinct says: If this is not a war crime, what is a war crime?" she said of the Bucha killings, calling for a thorough investigation.

Joining the Western solidarity campaign, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer arrived in Kyiv and was expected to travel to Bucha later Saturday. Russian troops appear to be seeking to create a long-sought land link between occupied Crimea and the Moscow-backed separatist territories of Donetsk and Lugansk in the Donbas region. Civilians have been urged to flee the heavy shelling there that has laid waste to towns and complicated evacuation efforts. — AFP

Saudi to allow 1 million hajj...

Continued from Page 1

Reactions to Saturday's announcement were generally positive on social media, though some Twitter users criticized the age cap.

Before the pandemic, Muslim pilgrimages were key revenue earners for the kingdom, bringing in

International

Dutch teen killed in Malaysia diving accident, two rescued

Search for the boy had been called off

MERSING, Malaysia: A Dutch teenager was killed when a group he was diving with off Malaysia's coast went missing, officials said Saturday following the dramatic rescue of his father and two others. The three Europeans and their instructor got into trouble Wednesday after they surfaced from a dive near a southern island but could not find their boat. A British man, 46-year-old Adrian Chesters, and Frenchwoman Alexia Molina, 18, were discovered by fishermen in the waters of neighbouring Indonesia, picked up by marine police and taken back to Malaysia.

But Chesters told officials that his son, 14-year-old Nathen, who holds Dutch citizenship, had died. The teen, "as a result of being too weak... was unable to survive", a coastguard statement said, citing the father.

Police earlier said the search for the boy had been called off after they concluded he had floated into Indonesian waters, and they had informed their counterparts in the archipelago nation. In recent days, Malaysia had deployed helicopters, a plane, boats, divers and jet skiers to hunt over a large area. The instructor, Norwegian woman Kristine Grodem, had already been rescued on Thursday in waters off southern Malaysia.

The other two survivors were found about 30 kilometres (18 miles) north of Indonesia's Bintan Island - having drifted some 130 kilometres from where they had been diving. The pair were admitted to a Malaysian hospital in a stable condition, said local police chief Cyril Edward Nuing in the coastal town of Mersing, the base for search operations.

'Strong girl'

Authorities did not give details on how the rescued trio survived a long period drifting at sea, and said they had not yet been questioned in detail about their ordeal. Previously, officials had expressed hope the divers would be found alive as they had substantial experience and were well equipped, including with a diving buoy.



MERSING: Rescue volunteers ride jet skis on the Mersing River during the search to locate three missing divers in Mersing in Johor state on April 8, 2022, after they disappeared off Malaysia's southeast coast. —AFP

They also said light rains in recent days might have helped the divers survive by providing drinking water. On Thursday, the French teen's mother Esther Molina told AFP from Mersing that the family were "hoping for the best. She's a strong girl,



Could not find their boat

she'll kick ass." Grodem had been instructing the divers close to a small island, Tokong Sanggol, about 15 kilometres (nine

miles) off Malaysia's southeast coast, when the accident happened.

After a dive lasting about 40 minutes, they surfaced but could not find their boat. They drifted together in strong currents, but ended up getting separated. The captain of the boat who took them to the dive site has been arrested after testing positive for drugs.

The area where the accident happened is popular with foreign and domestic visitors - resorts dot the coast and the islands. Diving accidents, while rare, do occasionally happen in Malaysia. In 2013, a British tourist died when she was struck by a passing boat's propeller while diving off resort islands in the South China Sea. The tropical Southeast Asian nation's borders reopened to foreign tourists on April 1 after a two-year coronavirus closure, and thousands of visitors have arrived. —AFP

Japan, Philippines agree to boost security ties

TOKYO: Japan and the Philippines agreed to boost security ties in their first foreign and defence ministerial meeting on Saturday, amid worries over China's increasingly assertive maritime activities. It was the first so-called two-plus-two talks between the two US allies, both of which have overlapping territorial claims with Beijing.

"Our two countries share serious concern about the situation in the East and South China Sea and we agreed to ensure observing international laws including the 2016 arbitral award to the Philippines" in disputes with China, as well as the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea, Japan's foreign minister Yoshimasa Hayashi said.

China claims nearly all of the South China Sea, locking it into disputes with several Southeast Asian neighbours. In 2016, an international tribunal in The Hague

invalidated China's claims in the South China Sea in a first-ever ruling. Beijing has ignored the decision.

In the meeting, "we were able to confirm our will to further enhance our collaboration in dealing with regional and global challenges and our cooperation towards the realisation of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific", Hayashi said.

Areas of cooperation include ensuring safety of sea lanes in Southeast Asia and discussion towards expanding joint military drills and exchanges, among others, he said. Philippine defence secretary Delfin Lorenzana echoed that, saying "we exchanged views on regional security issues of common concern, notably freedom of navigation and over flight" and "compliance with international laws" including the 2016 tribunal decision. —AFP



TOKYO: Japan's Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi (R) speaks during a meeting with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin at the Iikura Guest House in Tokyo on April 9, 2022. —AFP

Ford Trucks Alghanim strikes heavy truck deal with Al-Barakat Golden General Trading & Contracting Co



KUWAIT: In line with its sustained effort to raise Kuwaiti market added value, Ford Trucks Alghanim concludes a truck supply deal for Al-Barakat Golden General Trading & Contracting Co, one of the most reliable contractors for oil sector services and equipment in Kuwait. First of its kind between the two companies, this deal is of paramount importance and overwhelming influence considering the crucial role that Al-Barakat Golden General Trading & Contracting Co plays to revitalize the Kuwaiti economy in general as well as the country's oil sector.

Keen to always upgrade its fleet with top-brand trucks built to the highest specifications, Al-Barakat Golden General Trading & Contracting Co already owned a huge fleet of more than 320 trucks to deal date. New trucks by Ford Trucks Alghanim are a worthy addition to both the company and the sector.

As for trucks - the essence of this deal, Ford Trucks Alghanim supplied Al-Barakat Golden General Trading & Contracting Co, with 1943T - 4x2 and 3543T - 6x4 locomotive trucks. Not only are these trucks known to be the latest and most

efficient of their class but are also fit for logistic work pertinent to drilling, exploration and various field work among oil fields and facilities.

"In sealing this compelling deal with Al-Barakat Golden General Trading & Contracting Co, we are eager to hold onto Al Ghanim Auto's core values in liaising with our clients in general and oil sector institutions in particular. Providing value-for-money services is among these values," Ford Trucks GM, Nihad Al-Kilani stated. "We deeply take our values to heart as we believe that this is an effective, direct contribution in devel-

oping the oil sector and the entire Kuwaiti economy," he added.

It is worth mentioning that Al Ghanim Auto and Ford Trucks Alghanim have recently turned out as key players in heavy trucks sector. The cornerstone of this company is a combination of its unmatched quality, electrifying performance and adapting to meet heavy work and construction needs through proposing ultimate solutions for companies and top institutions in this sector, right here in Kuwait.

SUNDAY, APRIL 10, 2022

Crisis-hit Sri Lanka hikes rates as protests spiral

Country in turmoil as shortages of food and fuel ignite huge protests



COLOMBO: A soldier stands guard near the entrance of the president's office as protesters take part in a demonstration in Colombo on April 9, 2022. — AFP

COLOMBO: Cash-strapped Sri Lanka's central bank hiked interest rates by a record 700 basis points Friday as police fired tear gas at hundreds of students protesting over the economic crisis. Severe shortages of food and fuel, alongside lengthy electricity blackouts, have led to weeks of widespread anti-government demonstrations—with calls for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign.

The latest protests saw students try to march Friday to the national parliament, and police used water cannons in efforts to disperse the angry crowds. Monks, who had largely rallied the Sinhala-Buddhist majority to elect Rajapaksa at the November 2019 polls, were also seen joining demonstrations in the capital Colombo, where some defiantly stood opposite police wearing gas masks and holding riot shields.

Demonstrators nationwide carried placards saying "Gota go home", demanding Rajapaksa and his administration step down over the country's worst economic crisis since independence in 1948.

Damage control

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka said its benchmark

lending rate had been raised to 14.5 percent to "stabilise the exchange rate" after the rupee tumbled over 35 percent in a month. The rate for deposits was also increased by seven percentage points to 13.5 percent as reports said Sri Lanka's rupee was the worst-performing currency in the world, edging out the Russian ruble. The bank's newly appointed governor, Nandalal Weerasinghe, said attempts to control foreign exchange markets and keep interest rates artificially low in the past year had contributed to the unprecedented economic chaos.

"We are now in damage control mode," Weerasinghe said at his first press conference since replacing Ajith Cabraal, who was virtually forced out Monday with the country facing bankruptcy.

"We would not have had to make such a sharp increase if rates had been raised incrementally over a period of time," Weerasinghe said, vowing to relax exchange controls introduced by his predecessor.

The bank said the shock-treatment rate hike was due to its belief that the embattled island's inflation, already at record levels, could get worse. The Colombo Consumer Price Index rose 18.7 percent in March

while food inflation topped 25 percent, but private analysts placed inflation at over 50 percent in the month. International rating agencies have downgraded Sri Lanka as fears grow it could default on its \$51 billion external debt. This week, Rajapaksa appointed a panel of experts to organize a restructuring of foreign debt. His government is preparing for bailout negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, and finance ministry officials said the panel will prepare a program for sovereign bond-holders and other creditors to take a haircut. "What Sri Lanka is keen to do is avoid a hard default," a source from the ministry who requested anonymity told AFP. "It will be a negotiated restructuring of the debt with the help of the IMF."

Meetings with the IMF are set to begin by next week but finance minister Basil Rajapaksa, the president's brother, resigned Sunday along with nearly the entire cabinet.

The country is still without a replacement, with his successor Ali Sabry quitting after just one day in office. Sabry told parliament Friday he was still in the job because no one was willing to accept the finance portfolio. Colombo-based diplomats from European

Union member states, which form a key export market for Sri Lanka, on Friday asked the government to immediately begin reforms to revive the economy. "We stress the extreme urgency of the situation, which requires the authorities to start in-depth discussions with the International Monetary Fund," the diplomats said in a joint statement.

Public anger is at fever pitch, and on Saturday thousands of people are expected to take part in what likely will be the biggest protest since the crisis began. Opposition parties have rejected a presidential overture to form a unity administration and instead joined calls for Rajapaksa to step down.

The shortages of essentials have been caused by a wide-ranging import ban as Sri Lanka seeks to conserve its meager foreign currency reserves to pay its debts. In recent years the vital tourism sector has also been hit hard by Islamist bomb attacks in 2019 and the coronavirus pandemic, which dried up remittances from Sri Lankans abroad.

Economists say the crisis has been exacerbated by government mismanagement, years of accumulated borrowing and ill-advised tax cuts. — AFP

Russian shoppers feel pinch as inflation tops 16%

MOSCOW: Russia's inflation rate reached 16.7 percent year-on-year in March, the state statistics agency said Friday, a level not seen since 2015, while food prices have risen even more steeply.

Prices in March — the first full month since Moscow began its military campaign in Ukraine in late February — were up 7.5 percent on the previous month, according to Rosstat statistics agency. The Russian central bank sets a target for inflation of four percent, but as the economy has been hit by

unprecedented Western sanctions, the latest year-on-year figure is more than four times higher.

Renaissance Capital analysts predict that inflation will peak at 24 percent this summer. Inflation of food prices, a huge concern for Russians on low incomes, has reached 19.5 percent year-on-year, according to Rosstat. Pasta has gone up by 25 percent, butter by 22 percent, sugar by 70 percent and fruit and vegetables by 35 percent.

Other items that have soared in price are building materials (up 32 percent) and home electronics (up 40 percent). Inflation has been speeding up for months due to factors including the post-pandemic recovery and high prices for raw materials. President Vladimir Putin's decision to send troops to Ukraine has added sanctions and the resulting logistical difficulties as factors.

This undermines Russians' purchasing power and is a major headache for Russian authorities, whose measures to attempt to control prices have had the opposite effect for items such as sugar.

At a market in the second largest city of Saint Petersburg in the northwest, shoppers this week said they were feeling the pinch. "This happened due to politics, it seems. I don't understand that, to be honest," said 42-year-old Olesya Ogiyeva, a factory worker.

Leonid Kabalin, a 40-year-old production operator, said he was not ready for soaring inflation. "The prices have gone up, but pay isn't going up," he said. One retired shopper, 58-year-old Yulia Ryabinina, was philosophical about rising prices, however. "Since the top management and our president think that there have to be price rises, I calmly accepted it. What else can you do? — AFP



MOSCOW: Inflation of food prices, a huge concern for Russians on low incomes, has reached 19.5 percent year-on-year, according to Rosstat.

The tax scheme tarnishing UK finance minister

LONDON: UK finance minister Rishi Sunak is under pressure after it was revealed that his wealthy Indian wife is sheltered from paying tax on foreign earnings to his Treasury after claiming non-domiciled status.

The "non-dom" scheme has become a controversial issue in British politics in recent years, particularly now that Britons face tax rises and a cost-of-living crisis. Here is a summary of the rules:

Sunak's case

Akshata Murty, Sunak's wife and daughter of the billionaire co-founder of Indian technology group c, does not have to pay UK tax on her substantial overseas earn-

ings after applying for non-dom status. Murty, whose Infosys shareholding makes her richer than Queen Elizabeth II, has reportedly earned £54.5 million (\$71 million, 65 million euros) in dividends from her stake in her father's company since 2015.

History

The status was introduced in 1799 by prime minister William Pitt the Younger to allow wealthy plantation owners in British colonies to shelter their income from taxation back home. Today it typically applies to foreign-born taxpayers who spend most of their time in the UK but consider their permanent residence to be abroad.



Rishi Sunak

Who qualifies?

An applicant can live in Britain but must demonstrate that their main domicile is another country. The government generally considers a person's domicile to be the country that their father considered their residence when the claimant was born.

That status may change if the applicant does not intend ever to live in that country again, but Sunak claims his wife plans to move back to India when her parents are older. The person cannot claim the status if they have lived in the UK for 15 years or more.

Cost

Taxpayers with non-dom status must apply for an exemption if their overseas income exceeds £2,000.

This comes with a £30,000-a-year charge for those who have lived in Britain for at least seven of the last nine tax years, and £60,000 for those who have been resident for 12 of the last 14 tax years.

Murty moved to Britain with Sunak in 2013, and has

had to pay the annual charge to maintain her status.

High-profile cases

Around 113,000 people claimed the status in 2013 — the latest date for which figures are available—and include a number of celebrities, notably from the worlds of film and sport. The Guardian newspaper cited the examples of Russian oligarch and Chelsea football club owner Roman Abramovich, who was recently hit by UK sanctions in retaliation for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, and Indian steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal.

Controversy

The status came under increasing scrutiny more than a decade ago due to a series of cases of wealthy people who were born in Britain claiming to be non-domicile. They included businessman and Conservative politician Michael Ashcroft, who claimed his domicile was Belize despite taking up a seat in the UK's House of Lords. — AFP

Business

Shanghai lockdown snarls world's busiest port, China supply chains

Workers tangled in a morass of COVID controls

SHANGHAI: Shanghai's grinding coronavirus lockdown is slowly clogging China's supply chains, as delays hit the world's busiest container port where staff are tangled in a morass of COVID controls. Beijing has refused to tuck away from its strict zero-COVID strategy that has protected its public health system through the pandemic but at a mounting economic cost. China's financial hub Shanghai-home to multinational firms and its busiest port-has been sealed off almost entirely for a week following an outbreak fuelled by the Omicron virus variant.

That has forced many companies to halt production and slow new projects, factories told AFP, while those still operating are struggling with a shortage of truck drivers on top of onerous permit and Covid testing requirements. At Shanghai's port, the lack of drivers and other workers means getting goods in and out is increasingly hard.

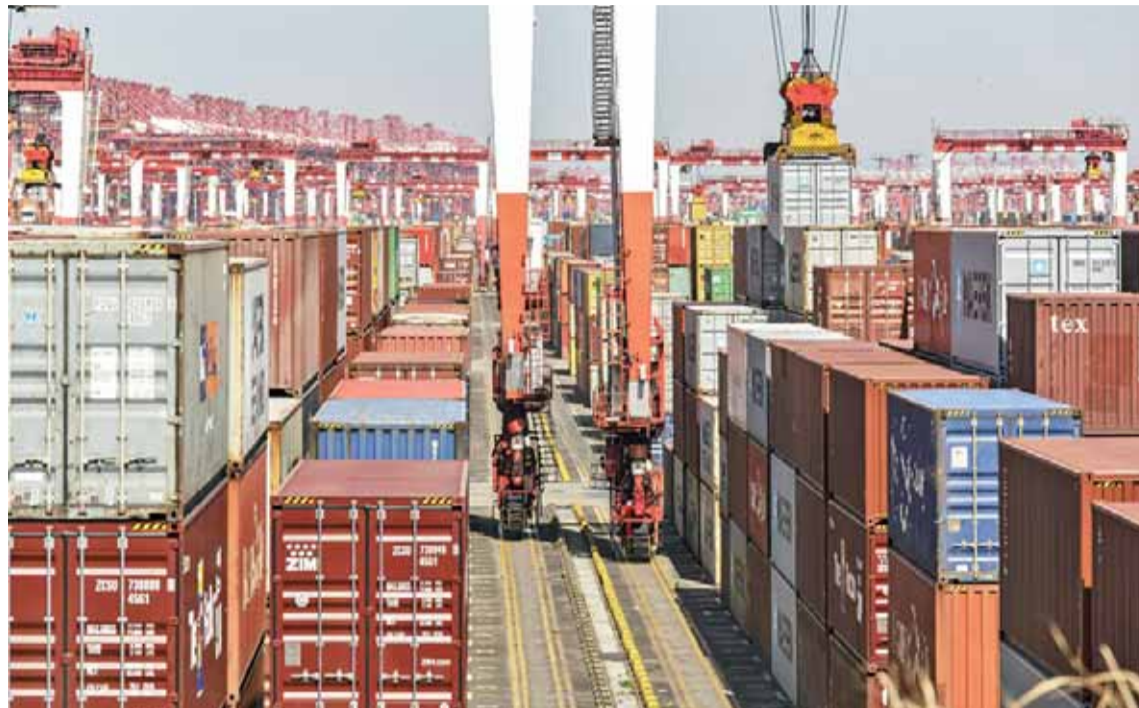
The docks are working normally with a "single-digit" number of vessels waiting to berth, Shanghai International Port Group said this week. "But the fact is... due to restrictions caused for truck drivers, it is not really operating," Bettina Schoen-Behanzin, vice president of the EU Chamber of Commerce's Shanghai Chapter, told AFP. "The figure I heard is that... week-on-week volumes at the Shanghai port are down by 40 percent. So that's really enormous." Shortages are starting to bite across China's vast consumer economy, where online shopping platforms such as Taobao face delivery delays, especially of imported goods.

Covid curbs in a number of cities have forced factories to find new suppliers. But the impact may soon also be felt outside China if lockdowns persist. Shanghai is the world's number one container port, a spinal point in the global supply chain and a key gateway for foreign trade.

It handles around 17 percent of China's total port volume and shipped 47 million TEU-the standard measurement for cargo, meaning Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit-in 2021.

Factories can't work from home

Chinese manufacturers say lockdowns, no matter how flexible or targeted, pile pressure on their business. "Not many roles allow working from home," said Jason Lee, founder of wheelchair producer Megalicht Tech, whose factory in Shanghai's Puxi area has suspended production. "People can't enter the factory... and because our raw materials come from other provinces or cities, these can't enter Shanghai either," he said. A Shanghai-based clothing exporter surnamed Zheng said his biggest prob-



SHANGHAI: Shanghai's grinding coronavirus lockdown is slowly clogging China's supply chains, as delays hit the world's busiest container port where staff are tangled in a morass of COVID controls.

lem was that he could not send samples to clients.

"Deliveries can neither leave nor enter," he said. Experts say the outbreak is currently nibbling at growth, but could soon take a big bite.

Nomura economists estimate that 23 cities accounting for 22 percent of China's GDP have rolled out full or partial lockdowns. "The costs of the zero-COVID strategy will rise significantly as its benefits decline, especially as exports are hit by the ongoing lockdowns," Nomura chief China economist Lu Ting told AFP. That will challenge Beijing's 2022 GDP growth target of around 5.5 percent, he added.

Adapting to survive

For now, companies are adapting to try and handle the restrictions. "Our main business activity is down by over 50 percent," said Gao Yongkang, general manager of Qifeng Technology in eastern China's Quanzhou city.

The company has been unable to transport textile

materials to regular clients because of the Covid curbs, and has instead pivoted to supplying the booming market for protective gear. Meanwhile, those who cannot reach their original suppliers are scouring for new ones.

"The costs are a little higher and it's slightly less efficient but we can fulfill our regular needs," said Shen Shengyuan, deputy general manager of diaper-producer New Yifa Group. In a nod to struggling industries, Premier Li Keqiang this week announced a temporary deferment of old-age insurance premiums for sectors such as catering, retail and civil aviation. But industry groups say hard lockdowns on major cities such as Shanghai are unsustainable, especially with many Omicron cases presenting light or no symptoms.

"Does the zero-COVID strategy still work in the current environment," said Eric Zheng, American Chamber of Commerce president in Shanghai. "That's a big question, particularly when you try to balance the economic cost." —AFP

India's CB cuts growth outlook on Ukraine fear

MUMBAI: India's central bank cut growth forecasts and sharply hiked its inflation projections Friday, citing fears that the war in Ukraine could derail the country's nascent recovery. Asia's third-largest economy bounced back from the pandemic with world-beating growth, but is now grappling with rising costs as global oil prices skyrocket.

"We are confronted with new but humungous challenges," Reserve Bank of India boss Shaktikanta Das said in a televised address, calling the war in Ukraine a "tectonic shift". "Inflation is now projected to be higher and growth lower than the assessment in February," he added.

The central bank projected the economy to expand 7.2 percent for the 2022-23 financial year, compared with a previous estimate of 7.8 percent. It also saw inflation at 5.7 percent, well up from the 4.5 percent predicted two months ago. India imports more than 80 percent of its oil needs, with the country's dependence on foreign crude growing as domestic production falls.

Consumer price inflation in the first two months of the year has remained persistently above the central bank's upper tolerance limit of 6 percent.—AFP

Canada unemployment drops to record low 5.3%

MONTREAL: Canada's unemployment rate fell to the lowest on record in March as job gains continued throughout the economy, Statistics Canada announced on Friday. The jobless rate fell to 5.3 percent, two-tenths lower than the prior month, and "the lowest rate on record since comparable data became available in 1976," the report said.

"With the exception of an increase in January 2022, the unemployment rate has fallen consistently in recent months," the agency said. The decline came as the economy added 73,000 jobs last month, a 0.4 percent increase driven by gains among women over 55 years old, and "core aged" men 25 to 54, according to the report. "The decline in the jobless rate was more pronounced than expected," said Royce Mendes, analyst at Desjardins. While the job gains slowed from the 337,000 created in February, the increase in employment comes amid the continued easing of COVID-19 restrictions which allows the return to in-person work.

Average hourly wages increased 3.4 percent compared to March 2021. Employment increased in both services and goods sectors, notably in agriculture, which saw its first increase since the end of 2020.

The number of workers in the accommodation and food services sector continued to grow, but remained below the pre-pandemic level in most provinces. "The solid pace of hiring reinforces our view that the Bank of Canada will act forcefully next week to quell inflationary pressures by both hiking rates 50bps and initiating its quantitative tightening program," Mendes said.—AFP



AGUADA DE PASAJEROS, Cuba: An operator controls the temperature of the furnaces that produce steam for electricity at the Antonio Sanchez Sugar Mill, in the town of Aguada de Pasajeros, Cienfuegos province, Cuba on March 17, 2022. — AFP

The struggle to save Cuban sugar from bitter end

HAVANA: A whistle reverberates through a sugar factory in central Cuba to signal the resumption of milling at midday after an hours-long halt when the raw cane ran out. It is cane harvest time in Cuba-once the world's top sugar exporter but now reliant on imports.

A critical shortage of harvesters and trucks to deliver the cane to factories has hamstrung production even as the government scrambles to revive the once-vibrant industry. Cuba's 2020-21 harvest yielded 800,000 tons of the sweet stuff, according to official figures. This was just 10 percent of peak production some three decades ago and the worst outcome in 130 years for an industry that was once Cuba's economic motor and a huge source of national pride. "This is a war without end," Lazaro Manuel Torres, boss of the Antonio Sanchez mill in Cuba's central Cienfuegos province, told AFP. "From the moment you wake up, you run into a mountain" of problems, said Torres, watching with obvious relief as a column of white smoke billowed from the chimney after the restart.

Just 56 mills left

Until 1989, Cuba was the world's biggest sugar exporter. The United States was its major client until 1960 — two years before Washington imposed crippling sanctions on the communist island nation.

The Soviet Union, a political ally, then became an important buyer and was given preferential rates. Sugar was at the heart of Cuba's plans for a prosperous future, with Fidel Castro leading a drive in the 1970s-complete with propaganda photos of him wielding a machete in the sugar plantations-to push the country's output to 10 million tons per year. The goal was never achieved.

The fall of the communist bloc in 1991 marked the beginning of the end for Cuba's sugar industry-exacerbated by sanctions, a steep drop in prices and a lack of investment that saw 100 mills disappear.

Just 56 are left today. Cuba now needs to import sugar to meet local demand and its export commitments. "We have been in decline since 2017," Noel Casanas, vice director of state-owned sugar producer AZCUBA, told AFP. "If the situation continues, it is true that (the industry) will disappear."

Sugar is still an important income generator for 50 of Cuba's 169 municipalities, or some 1.2 million of the country's 11.2 million inhabitants, he said.

'Practically a corpse'

In December, the government approved dozens of measures in a bid to resuscitate sugar. It doubled the price paid to cane producers, authorized the free hiring and firing of labor, and gave factories more decision-making autonomy in a country where just about everything is state-run.

"I don't think these measures can revive an industry that is already practically a corpse," said economist Emilio Morales of the Miami-based Havana Consulting Group. Casanas conceded production faces "limitations of all kinds"-critically a lack of foreign investment due to the strengthening of US sanctions since the presidency of Donald Trump. Since the cane harvest opened in December, Antonio Sanchez has not managed to exceed 65 percent of milling capacity, set at 20,000 tons for this year's harvest.

The problem has not been a lack of fuel or raw product, this time, but a shortage of harvesters and delivery trucks. There are not enough spare parts, even tires, for vehicles in Cuba and producers such as Torres cannot afford to buy the limited components that are available. "If you don't have harvesters, if you do not have trucks, you cannot mill," he lamented. Sugar producers in Cuba are also hard hit by a lack of fertilizers and pesticides.

For now, the government's measures have managed to slow an exodus of sugar workers, industry bosses told AFP. "We cannot complain, we are doing quite well-up to 700 pesos (about \$29) a day," said farmer Livan Hernandez. The average monthly Cuban salary is about \$162. Casanas said what is needed is foreign investment and expanding the industry into highly lucrative sugar derivatives such as bioethanol. Sugar "is no longer the locomotive (of the Cuban economy) nor will it be," he said. But "it continues to be a strategic sector... that must be developed." — AFP

Germany unveils relief package for companies

BERLIN: The German government unveiled a multi-billion euro support package Friday to help companies in Europe's biggest economy weather the fallout from the Ukraine war and sanctions against Russia. Finance Minister Christian Lindner described the measures as a "shock absorber" to cushion the blow from soaring energy costs and disrupted supply chains.

The package includes 100 billion euros (\$110 billion) in state-guaranteed loans and seven billion euros in cheap loans by public lender KfW, the finance and economy ministries said in a joint statement. It also includes direct financial aid for some companies when their energy costs have more than doubled, and for companies deemed systematically relevant such as those supplying gas and electricity.

The measures are likely to help energy-hungry sectors like Germany's steel, manufacturing and chemical industries. Although Germany is traditionally a fiscally frugal nation, the government broke its own debt rules at the start of the coronavirus pandemic and unleashed vast financial aid to steer the economy through the crisis.

The relief package to counter the Ukraine war impact is much smaller by comparison. It comes after Berlin already announced separate measures to help German citizens facing soaring household bills at a time of record-high inflation. That package included heating subsidies and extra child benefits for low-income families, as well as a tax fuel cut and a pledge to slash public transport costs for three months.

But Economy Minister Robert Habeck warned that the government could not fully shield citizens and firms from the Ukraine war repercussions. "We must all in these times carry a part of the burden, and the question is how big this part will be and how we can achieve it in a just way," said Habeck.

Lindner, from the liberal FDP party, said the government could not deplete itself financially and had to "act responsibly with taxpayer money". The government, which already announced 99.7 billion euros in new debt for 2022 in part to fund a massive shift towards renewable energy, will unveil an additional budget shortly that will take into account new borrowing plans since the war in Ukraine.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz has also announced a special fund of 100 billion euros to modernize the German military. Despite all the spending, Lindner has said he aims to reinstate Germany's cherished "debt brake" in 2023, which places a cap on new borrowing. — AFP

Tesla recalls nearly 128,000 cars in China due to defect

SHANGHAI: Tesla has recalled nearly 128,000 cars in China due to a fault that could "increase the risk of vehicle collision", the country's state market regulator said. It is the latest hitch for the US electric vehicle giant that is hugely popular in China, but has also faced complaints from consumers and been hit by COVID-19 lockdowns.

About 127,785 domestic and imported Tesla Model 3 cars were recalled due to a rear motor inverter defect discovered after regulators launched a probe, according to a Thursday notice.

"When this fault occurs when the car is driving, it will cause the vehicle to lose its driving motion," the State Administration of Market Regulation said. "In extreme cases, this could increase the risk of vehicle collision." Tesla sold a record 70,847 cars in China in December, facing stiff competition from homegrown brands such as Nio and XPeng.

But the carmaker has also been targeted by numerous social media complaints from Chinese users about quality and service issues, culminating in a high-profile customer protest at the Shanghai Auto Show in April last year. Tesla's Shanghai "gigafactory" has been shut for at least 12 days due to a spiralling outbreak that has seen record infection numbers and confined the city's 25 million residents at home indefinitely, according to Bloomberg.—AFP



AUSTIN: CEO of Tesla Motors Elon Musk speaks at the Tesla Giga Texas manufacturing "Cyber Rodeo" grand opening party in Austin, Texas.— AFP

Business

Rising petrol prices fuel crisis at Brazil's oil giant Petrobras

Bolsonaro widely blamed for double-digit inflation

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazil's state-run oil company Petrobras is once again in crisis: caught in a political tug of war over rising fuel costs. Far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, seeking re-election in October, is widely blamed by voters for double-digit inflation, polls show, on the back of skyrocketing fuel prices.

Feeling the heat, Bolsonaro last week fired Petrobras CEO Joaquim Silva e Luna, saying the petrol price was "unaffordable" and amounted to a "crime" against Brazilians. Tied to international market movement, fuel prices in Brazil rose 33 percent in the past year even as the economy recovers from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

Russia's war in Ukraine has led to a spike in crude prices in recent weeks, adding to the pressure. "Manipulating tariff policy is like manipulating the law of gravity," Silva e Luna said after his firing last week.

Inflation in Brazil, meanwhile, rose more than 11 percent in a year, and opinion polls show that three-quarters of Brazilians blame Bolsonaro for their thinning wallets. Bolsonaro's main rival, leftist former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, has also vowed to "Brazilianize the fuel price"—meaning to adapt it to the reality on the ground. Lula, a former trade unionist and popular ex-leader, is the polled favorite ahead of October's vote.

Sacrificial firing

With the fuel price in both men's crosshairs, the future of Petrobras—which determines the price of petrol at the pump—depends very much on the out-



RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil: In this file photo taken on February 18, 2020 a Brazilian flag is seen during a protest against layoffs outside Brazil's state-owned oil company Petrobras headquarters in Rio de Janeiro.— AFP

come of October's elections. The company has hardly had time to settle after the 2014-2021 Operation Car Wash corruption probe that saw several top politicians and business executives convicted for embezzlement of billions of dollars from the oil giant.

After a tough year in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic freezing global travel, Petrobras posted a

record net profit of nearly \$20 billion in 2021. But the results were not enough to satisfy the political bosses. According to economist Gesner Oliveira, Silva e Luna was sacrificed by Bolsonaro "to satisfy his electorate".

Silva e Luna's predecessor, Roberto Castello Branco, was fired by the president a year earlier for similar reasons. But replacing the latest CEO has turned

out to be more difficult than foreseen.

Bolsonaro's pick, economist Adriano Pires, withdrew his name from the race this week due to a possible conflict of interest over his other role as head of an energy consulting firm. Another nominee of the president, Rodolfo Landim, also withdrew to concentrate his attention on the Flamengo football club of which he is president.

Several other possible candidates had declined the job, according to the Brazilian press. Then on Wednesday, the government nominated Jose Mauro Coelho, who was in charge of oil issues at the Ministry of Mines and Energy. His appointment could be approved at a shareholders' meeting on April 13, making him the 40th Petrobras CEO in 68 years.

'Complex economic problem'

Whoever is at the helm, the pressure from the top will be intense. "This is a position exposed to very strong political pressure, and each dismissal is an easy political response to a complex economic problem," Adriano Laureno of consulting firm Prospectiva told AFP. Analysts say that internal regulations at Petrobras, which is listed on the New York and Sao Paulo stock exchanges, as well as Brazil's reliance on imported oil, prevent any drastic change in pricing policy. "A stabilization fund could be set up to mitigate price fluctuations, but it is not possible to change the tariff policy in depth," said Oliveira. Petrobras is also under threat of privatization, a move favored by Bolsonaro and several of his top political backers.— AFP

KFH values 16,358 properties in 2021

KUWAIT: KFH Executive Manager - Real-estate Valuation, Ahmed Al-Farhan said that Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has carried out valuation for 16,358 real estate properties during 2021 for individuals, corporates, banks and government institutions with a market value approximating KD 23.7 billion. He indicated that the real estate valuation department at KFH has gained the trust of several official authorities, legal bureaux, accounting offices, government bodies and individuals.

Al-Farhan emphasized in a press release that the valuation covered seven types of real estates. Private residence has taken the lead by 42 percent, investment real estate came second with 30 percent, followed by industrial and handcraft plots by 13 percent, ownership units and chalets by 10 percent, commercial real estate, B.O.T projects, hotels, medical clinics 5 percent in the valued real estate sequence. Various executed, yielding and under construction projects were also evaluated.

Al-Farhan reiterated that KFH has adopted international standards including cost, rate of return, common sale price, and local traditions for the valuation of all types of real estate properties based on organizational opinion and usage. The valuation is conducted by highly distinguished group of engineers and specialized and highly experienced Valuers accredited by the Ministry of Commerce & Industry. He highlighted the major significance of real estate valuation activity for economy, capital market performance towards real estate and investment companies, reservation of shareholders rights at KFH, providing services to other listed and unlisted companies and banks, and arbitration among individuals. Real estate is considered as one of the valuable assets and one of the main investment fields.

Al-Farhan praised the interest and concern which the Central Bank of Kuwait, Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Capital Markets Authority showed towards the follow up of the development process of real estate valuers and the valuation activity itself.

ABK launches 5-year term deposit: Interest in advance

KUWAIT: ABK is pleased to launch the '5-Year Term Deposit: Interest in Advance' deposit product. This product enables customers to plan for their future and maximize their savings, while simultaneously rewarding them with the interest in advance, on the day of booking the term deposit.

The tenor of the deposit, as the name suggests is 5 years. It functions as a long-term investment that brings customers convenience, security, and unique features. ABK customers can open their term deposits with a minimum investment of KD 20,000. The customer's funds will be committed for 5 years,

however the interest will be paid in full at inception. The '5-Year Term Deposit: Interest in Advance' has competitive interest rates and allows the amount to be credited to the linked savings or current account.

In addition to accepting deposits made by cash, cheque or direct account transfer, the '5-Year Term Deposit: Interest in Advance' allows clients to easily

The banking association has organized training courses to enhance valuers' skills and develop their performance and awareness of the latest real estate valuation standards regionally and globally, thus enhancing the significance of this profession and its role in the national economy movement.

He said that "KFH" is also interested in developing the real estate valuation activity by employing specialized engineers and employees and organizing comprehensive training courses for the valuers team. The trainees get "International Valuator" Certificates. Also, it seeks to expand the valuation fields to include new qualitative activities e.g., hospitals, factories and others through cooperation with highly specialized and experienced companies and entities in the field of real estate assets valuation. Accordingly, KFH would be able to value all types of real estate properties, be it residential, commercial, investment, agricultural, hotels, entertainment facilities, B.O.T projects, usufruct rights and others, through a professional service which is based on expertise in the real estate field, trust, impartiality, and transparency in decision making.

He added that KFH is an accredited valuation entity supported by a huge data base and a highly skilled technical team "engineering, legal and accounting" which conducts its functions based on administrative and engineering reports and market development follow up. This process renders the department able to present the best prices as per an approved official price list and the highest levels of performance and excellence. Accordingly, KFH has become the most favorable valuation destination for major companies, institutions, high value and multiple usage real estates and for individuals in cases of inheritance, litigation and exits. He expressed his trust that the real estate valuation department will surely develop more considering the great interest which executive management has expressed in developing the valuation functions and the growth of this industry which is important to the real estate market.

Regarding the real estate valuator's qualification, Al-Farhan said that "The valuator should have integrity, impartiality, ability to analyze, knowledge of construction laws, full awareness of the real estate market and developments, sufficient experience in trading, market drives and the advantages of each area and qualities of each real estate". He indicated that help may be sought from certain specialized companies in this field to obtain consultation and technical opinion so that real estate valuation would be perfectly complete including construction, maintenance, rent returns and others."

manage their account 24/7 via ABK online platform, mobile banking application, SMS, or automated telephone banking services from the comfort of their homes. As always, dedicated Relationship Managers are also available for Premium and Private Banking customers. Clients can book their deposit at any of ABK's branches upon filling out and submitting an application form for opening the account.

Commenting on the launch of the '5-Year Term Deposit: Interest in Advance' deposit product Johair Marafi, Acting General Manager of Retail Banking at ABK, said, "We are continuously developing new and exciting features to meet the changing needs of our customers. We have listened to their feedback and decided to expand our suite of products and services by creating and launching the '5-Year Term Deposit: Interest in Advance'. For customers who have a sum of money that they are willing to deposit and would like to receive expected returns immediately, the new 5-year Term Deposit account makes all the difference. The product allows our customers to make the most of the account's value-added benefits as they create immediate wealth at low risk. Customers can receive the interest up front on the date of booking the deposit, the product's unique feature eliminates the long wait until the maturity period." This unique proposition of the 5-Year Term Deposit comes close on the heels of the recently introduced exclusive savings account - A+ Student Account for the youth. The user-friendly A+ Student Account is a valuable tool for parents who want to educate their children about managing personal finances through smart-money management and help instill the habit of saving money.

Gulf Bank to reveal winner of Mercedes Benz G500

KUWAIT: In keeping with its commitment to rewarding its customers and fulfilling customers' dreams, Gulf Bank will announce its first winner of three Mercedes Benz G500 car prizes allocated to Kuwaiti Salary Account clients in 2022. The draw for the Mercedes Benz G500 is set to be the year's second Salary Account draw. The draw will take place on Monday, April 11, 2022 under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Industry, and Ernst and Young, and aired live on 360 FM radio.

Battal Jazi Al-Mutairi was the lucky winner of Gulf Bank's first Salary Account draw of the year in 2022. Al Mutairi received a cash prize equivalent to 12 times his salary, which makes him one of Gulf Bank's many lucky draw winners.

On this occasion, Mohammed Al-Qattan, the General Manager for Consumer Banking, stated: "Gulf Bank's Salary Account customers are enrolled in six scheduled draws throughout the year - with three draws for the chance to win 12 times their salary and three draws for the chance to win a Mercedes Benz G500 car."

He added: "Salary Account customers also receive a cash gift of up to KD 1000 and a free credit card for 2 years upon opening an account. Additionally, customers also have the chance to apply for an interest-free consumer loan up to KD 25,000 or a housing loan up to KD 70,000 (provided the loan period does not exceed 15 years)."

Al-Qattan noted that Gulf Bank's Salary Account is the only account in Kuwait that has special offers designed especially for each customer's needs, a testament to Gulf Bank's commitment in rewarding customers and fulfilling their dreams. Al-Qattan added that Gulf Bank provides special offers for Kuwaiti employees that work in the government sector. Employees can opt to receive a cash gift or an interest-free loan up to KD 25,000 (provided loan installments do not exceed 40 of their salaries, and customers can settle the loan within 5 years, with the option of postponing loan installments for 6 months). Customers can also apply for a free credit card for a period of two years.

Al-Qattan also noted that Kuwaitis who work in the military sector can choose between a cash gift an interest-free loan of up to KD 25,000 (provided loan installments do not exceed 40 of their salaries, and customers can settle the loan within 5 years), or an interest-free car loan of up to KD 25,000 (for a period of 5 years). Customers can also apply for a free credit card for a period of two years.

Al-Qattan concluded his statement by saying: "All Salary Account customers who transferred their salaries to Gulf Bank between the years 2020, 2021, and 2022 are eligible to enter this year's draw for a chance to win 12 times their salaries."

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The Bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience. Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining a robust sustainability program at the community, economic, and environmental levels through sustainability initiatives that are strategically selected to benefit both the country and the Bank. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with various parties to achieve it.



From coal to ports, Western sanctions hit Russian economy

MOSCOW: From a coal embargo to new restrictions on investments and European ports closed to Russian ships, the list of Western sanctions imposed on Russia's economy since it invaded Ukraine keeps getting longer.

Here is an overview:

Energy

The European Union decided Thursday to forgo from August purchases of Russian coal, which accounts for about 45 percent of its total imports. EU nations have already announced their intention to cut their imports of Russian gas by two thirds by the end of the year, as well as ban European companies from making new investments in the sector critical for the Russian economy. In another highly symbolic decision, Germany has suspended the entry into service of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline which was due to have allowed a significant increase in imports. But the bloc has been reluctant to impose a ban on Russian gas and oil so far, as member states such as Germany are heavily dependent on Moscow's fossil fuel exports. The United States and Canada have imposed their own embargoes of Russian oil and gas.

Britain plans to end imports of Russian coal by the end of the year, as it has already pledged to do for Russian crude oil and petroleum products.

Transportation

The EU announced Thursday it is closing its ports to Russian ships. Russian trucks are also banned from operating in the bloc. EU members as well as the United States, Canada, Switzerland, Norway and Iceland have closed their airspace to Russian aircraft and many Western airlines have halted flights to Russia. The wider aerospace industry is concerned as the export of aircraft, parts and equipment has been banned, as has maintenance work on Russian-registered Airbus and Boeing aircraft. Western insurers cannot provide coverage.

Trade

The fifth EU sanctions package adopted Thursday includes a 10-billion-euro (\$10.9 billion) ban on exports to Russia, including high-tech goods. The list of Russian products banned from the EU is also being extended to include certain "critical raw materials and equipment" worth an estimated 5.5 billion euros a year to stop the financing of Moscow's war effort in Ukraine. Shortly before the EU adopted its latest sanctions package, US lawmakers voted to revoke most favoured nation status for Russia and its ally Belarus, which will result on goods from them facing high US import tariffs. Imports of Russian seafood, vodka and diamonds have been banned outright. The United States on Wednesday also banned any new investment in Russia, and Britain has as well.

Financial sector

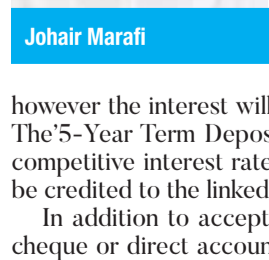
The US Treasury has blocked Russia from using dollars held in US banks to make payments on its foreign debt, forcing Moscow to settle in rubles which sets up a likely default. The White House also declared "full blocking" sanctions on Russia's largest public and private financial institutions, Sberbank and Alfa Bank. The United States, EU and Britain have frozen foreign currency held by the Russian central bank and banned all transactions with the institution. Most Russian banks were earlier cut from the SWIFT messaging system, which allows banks to communicate rapidly and securely about transactions. US credit card giants Visa, Mastercard and American Express have blocked Russian banks from their payment networks.—AFP



Johair Marafi



Mohammed Al-Qattan



Ahmed Al-Farhan

Lifestyle | Gossip



Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck are engaged

The 52-year-old actress has announced her engagement to Ben via a 13-second video clip posted on her official website. In the brief video, Jennifer is seen crying and looking at her sparkling engagement ring. The camera initially focuses on the ring, before it pans to her face, as the 'Jenny from the Block' hitmaker wipes away tears of joy. Jennifer - who rekindled her romance with Ben in 2021 - can also be heard saying the words: "You're perfect." The chart-topping singer and Ben, 49, previously got engaged in 2003. However, they subsequently called off their wedding and later ended their engagement in January 2004. Jennifer later married singer Marc Anthony and had 14-year-old twins Emme and Maximilian with the music star. Ben, on the other hand, married actress Jennifer Garner and they had Violet, 16, Seraphina, 13, and Samuel, ten, together. However, Jennifer and Ben always remained on friendly terms and they

rekindled their relationship last year. The actress recently described her romance with Ben as a "happy, healthy relationship". Jennifer also claimed they're both now older and wiser than they were 20 years ago. She said: "We're older now, we're smarter, we have more experience, we're at different places in our lives, we have kids now, and we have to be very conscious of those things." Jennifer and Ben's romance created huge interest in the early 2000s. But the 'On the Floor' hitmaker is convinced they will both be able to cope with the pressure this time around. Jennifer - who has also been married to actors Cris Judd and Ojani Noa - explained: "I think we are strong enough now to know what's real and what's not, whereas when we were younger maybe some of those outside voices were a little bit tougher for us to reconcile and survive."

Greene had crush on Twilight Costar Rathbone

Ashley Greene says she "had a big old crush" on Jackson Rathbone while working on 'Twilight'. The 35-year-old actress admitted her true feelings for her 37-year-old costar and her on-screen love interest Jasper Cullen in the film series based on the series of books by Stephenie Meyer while on the podcast 'The Twilight Effect' she does with Melanie Howe on Tuesday. Ashley said: "I had a big old crush on Jackson Rathbone while we were filming." Melanie then asked her if the attraction was quick to come, to which the 'CBCB' star - who played Alice Cullen - said: "Kinda." Ashley - who appeared with Jackson and her other co-stars such as Robert Pattinson, Taylor Lautner and

Kristen Stewart in all five movies in the series: 'Twilight', 'New Moon', 'Eclipse', 'Breaking Dawn: Part One' and 'Breaking Dawn: Part Two' - gushed how "super cute" she found him. She said: "Our first encounter, I was like, 'This dude's super cute and a Southern gentleman.' I was like, 'Oh, OK, I'm into it. He sings, he taught me how to swing dance. And he's supposed to be my lifetime love on-screen and I was like, 'This is gonna be easy.'" The 'Summer's Blood' star believes that Jackson "had to have known about her romantic feelings, but "if he did know, he just wasn't into me." Ashley - who married Paul Khoury in 2018, with she is expecting her first child later this year - labeled it "a harmless crush". She said: "I also hadn't developed the skill set of creating on-screen chemistry and separating that," before admitting that she let go of it during filming because "at a certain point, you can only crush so hard until your dreams are just broken." Ashley - who dated other stars such as Joe Jonas - clarified that she was not "hopelessly waiting for him." She said: "I wasn't just like, chilling, hopelessly waiting for him."



Will Poulter warns method actors over 'inappropriate behavior'

Will Poulter thinks method acting has been used as an "excuse" for inappropriate behavior. The 29-year-old actor - who has been cast as Adam Warlock in the Marvel Cinematic Universe - believes it's important that method actors don't "infringe" on other people. He explained: "When it comes to an actor's process, whatever that is, so long as it doesn't infringe on other people's and you're being considerate, then fine. But if your process creates an inhospitable environment, then to me you've lost sight of what's important. "Method acting shouldn't be used as an excuse for inappropriate behavior - and it definitely has." Will has recently been preparing to star in 'Guardians of the Galaxy 3'. And as part of his preparations, he's been forced to change his diet to achieve his "aesthetic goals". He told The Independent: "It's difficult talking about it because with Marvel it's all secret squirrel, but the most important thing is that your mental and physical health has to be number one, and the aesthetic goals have to be secondary, otherwise you end up promoting something that is unhealthy and unrealistic if you don't have the financial backing of a studio paying for your meals and training. "I'm in a very privileged position in that respect, and I wouldn't recommend anyone do what I did to get ready for that job." Asked what his preparation entailed, Will replied: "It's been a lot of gym work and a very, very specific diet." Will then elaborated on the keys to his recent transformation. He said: "I've gone through a series of different diets over the last few months. "Now I'm in a maintenance phase, which is quite nice. I'm not eating copious amounts of food to bulk, and I'm not cutting. I'm just maintaining my weight. I've gone through periods of looking at food and feeling like I can't face it, and then you blink and the next minute you're ready to eat furniture because you're so hungry."

Lohan was 'embarrassed' to be scolded by Fonda about being late

Lindsay Lohan says she was "embarrassed" to be scolded by Jane Fonda about being late. The 'Mean Girls' star was reprimanded by the '9 to 5' star when she left her "waiting" on set of the 2007 comedy 'Georgia Rule', something that led to it "never" happening again. The 35-year-old actress told Vogue: "I remember I was like three minutes late, and it was out that I was like three hours late. It was three minutes." "And [Fonda] was waiting for me tapping her feet being like, 'Lindsay, we're all waiting," Lindsay admitted to be "nervous" to work with Jane - who is the daughter of the late actor Henry Fonda and the sister of the late Peter Fonda - but learnt a lot from the 'Grace and Frankie' star, such as "being a female on set and how she takes charge." Lindsay said: "I just really admired her and learned so much from her." She also revealed that she wanted to play Regina George in the 2004 teen movie movie but director Mark Waters and writer Tina Fey She said: "Mark Waters, the director, was insistent that I played Cady and so was Tina. They were like, 'No, no, no you're the lovable one, you have to play Cady.' So I was so eager to get into the transitional part of, 'OK, let's get to the pretty part of Cady.'" The 'Freaky Friday' star is slated to appear in the Netflix original Christmas movie - due out later this year - opposite the former 'Glee' star Chord Overstreet.



The Simpsons casts its first-ever deaf actor

The 'Simpsons' is set to feature its first-ever deaf voice actor. John Autry has been cast in the role of Monk - the deaf son of saxophonist Bleeding Gums Murphy - and American Sign Language will be used for the first time in the show's history in an upcoming episode. Producer Al Jean shared a image of the new character on Twitter and captioned the picture: "Meet Monk Murphy voiced by @johnautryll in The Sound of Bleeding Gums, Sunday @8. An episode that makes me smile whenever I think about it. (sic)" In the episode, Lisa Simpson helps Monk in his pursuit of a cochlear



implant, which can help to improve speech understanding. John is thrilled to have been cast in the iconic TV show, describing it as an historic moment. He told Variety: "It's so incredible. It's life-changing equality and participation. "This can impact change for all of us. It's about hard of hearing and hearing characters coming together. It's a part of history." 'The Sound of Bleeding Gums' was in the works long before 'CODA' - the Oscar-winning movie about a deaf family - had been so widely lauded. But writer Loni Steele Sosthand acknowledges there are some obvious similarities between the upcoming episode and the Sian Heder-directed comedy-drama film. Loni said: "I was an early viewer of 'CODA' and really admire the movie. There are themes in it that are somewhat echoed here, coming out of a sibling relationship. And also 'CODA' has the tension between music and the deaf experience. I think it's great, because the deaf experience isn't just one story, there are so many stories to be told." Despite this, the episode was largely inspired by Loni's personal experiences.

Paris Jackson has become the new face of KVD Beauty

The 24-year-old model has starred in her first beauty campaign for the brand's new Tattoo Pencil Liner. Paris said: "As an artist, I was immediately drawn to KVD Beauty for their commitment to artistry and self-expression, both of which are huge parts of my personal identity. "I also appreciate how the brand brings tattoos and cosmetics together in such a beautiful way. Paired with the fact that they're 100 percent vegan and cruelty-free, this partnership with KVD Beauty feels truly organic and I cannot wait for all the exciting things to come." Tara Loftis, the global vice president of marketing and public relations at KVD Beauty, is thrilled to be working with Paris. She hailed the model as an "inspiring, powerful woman". Tara said: "Paris exemplifies so much of what KVD Beauty stands for - kindness, discovery and individuality, to name a few. "As graceful as she is beautiful, we are so excited to be partnering with such an inspiring, powerful woman as our new brand ambassador and the face of Tattoo Pencil Liner. We know this partnership will be a great success, and there's no one we'd rather work with than Paris for this exciting journey." Meanwhile, Paris previously admitted that her late father shaped the person she's become. Speaking about Michael Jackson - who died in June 2009, aged 50 - she explained: "My dad was really good about making sure we were cultured, making sure we were educated and not just showing us, like, the glitz and glam - like hotel-hopping, five-star places. "It was also like we saw everything: we saw third world countries. We saw every part of the spectrum." - BangShowbiz



Lennon's son Julian has performed his father's song 'Imagine' for the first time

John Lennon's son Julian Lennon has performed his father's song 'Imagine' for the first time. The 'Too Late for Goodbyes' hitmaker posted a link to a YouTube video of the candlelit live rendition of the 1971 song - written by the former Beatle and his stepmother Yoko Ono - to raise money for the ongoing "unimaginable tragedy" and humanitarian crisis happening in Ukraine following Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion in February. In a Twitter thread on Friday, the 59-year-old musician wrote: "The War on Ukraine is an unimaginable tragedy... "As a human, and as an artist, I felt compelled to respond in the most significant way I could. So today, for the first time ever, I publicly performed my Dad's song, IMAGINE." Julian explained why he was breaking his previous vow that he "would only" sing the song if it was "the 'End of the World' but was making an exception to make "love and togetherness" appear, if only briefly. He said: "Why now, after all these years? - I had always said, that the only time I would ever consider singing 'IMAGINE' would be if it was the 'End of the World' But also because his lyrics reflect our collective desire for peace worldwide. Because within this song, we're transported to a space, where love and togetherness become our reality, if but for a moment in time..." The 'Cannes Man' star believes that the tune "reflects the light at the end of the tunnel" that everyone wants after the "ongoing murderous violence". Julian said: "The song reflects the light at the end of the tunnel, that we are all hoping for... As a

result of the ongoing murderous violence, millions of innocent families, have been forced to leave the comfort of their homes, to seek asylum elsewhere. Julian concluded his thread with a plea to "world leaders and everyone who believes in the sentiment" of the to do something for the millions of people displaced by the conflict, such as donating to refugee aid providers Global Citizen. He said: "I'm calling on world leaders and everyone who believes in the sentiment of IMAGINE, to stand up for refugees everywhere!" "Please advocate and donate from the heart. #StandUpForUkraine."





In this picture Zohaib Hassan (center) teaches his students to play sarangi at his academy in Lahore. — AFP photos



Zohaib Hassan (right) teaches his students to play sarangi at his academy in Lahore.

Sound of Mughal-era sarangi instrument fading away in Pakistan

In the shadow of Lahore's centuries-old Badshahi Mosque, Zohaib Hassan plucks at the strings of a sarangi, filling the streets with a melodious hum and cry. Remarkable for its resemblance to the human voice, the classical instrument is fading from Pakistan's music scene—except for a few players dedicated to preserving its place. Difficult to master, expensive to repair, and with little financial reward for professionals, the sarangi's decline has been difficult to halt, Hassan told AFP.

"We are trying to keep the instrument alive, not even taking into account our miserable financial condition," he said. For seven generations, his family has mastered the bowed, short-necked instrument and Hassan is well-respected across Pakistan for his abilities, regularly appearing on television, radio and at private parties. "My family's craze for the instrument forced me to pursue a career as a sarangi player, leaving my education incomplete," he said.

"I live hand-to-mouth as the majority of directors arrange musical programs with the latest orchestras and pop bands." Traditional instruments are competing with a booming R&B and pop scene in a country where more than 60 percent of the population is aged under 30. Sara Zaman, a classical music teacher at the National Council of Arts in Lahore, said alongside the sarangi, other traditional instruments such as the sitar, santoor, and tanpura are also dying out.

"Platforms have been given to other disciplines like pop music, but it has been missing in the case of classical music," she said. "The sarangi, being a



A shopkeeper works at a musical instruments.

very difficult instrument, has not been given due importance and attention in Pakistan leading to its gradual demise."

'The strings of my heart'

The sarangi gained prominence in Indian classical music in the 17th century, during the reign of the Mughals in the subcontinent. Its decline began in the 1980s after the death of several master players and classical singers in the country, said Khwaja Najam-ul-Hassan, a television director who has created an archive of Pakistan's leading musicians. "The instrument was close to the hearts of the top internationally acclaimed male and female classical singers, but it began to fade away after they died," he said.

Ustad Allah Rakha, one of Pakistan's most globally acclaimed sarangi players, died in 2015 after a career that saw him perform with orchestras around the world. Now players say they struggle to survive on performance fees alone, often much smaller than those paid to modern guitarists, pianists or violinists.

Carved by hand from a single block of cedar native to parts of Pakistan, the sarangi's primary strings are made of goat gut while the seventeen sympathetic strings—a common feature on subcontinent folk instruments—are steel. The instrument costs around 120,000 rupees (\$625) and most of its parts are imported from neighboring India, where it remains a principal part of the canon.

"The price has gone up as there is a



A shopkeeper (right) works at a musical instruments shop in Lahore.

ban on imports from India," said Muhammad Tahir, the owner of one of only two repair shops in Lahore. Pakistan downgraded diplomatic ties and stopped bilateral trade with India over New Delhi's decision in 2019 to strip the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region of its semi-autonomous status. Tahir, who spends around two months carefully restoring a single worn-out sarangi, said no one in Pakistan manufactures the special steel strings because of the lack of demand. "There is no admiration for sarangi players and the few people who are repairing this wonderful instrument," said Ustad Zia-ud-Din, the owner of the other Lahore repair shop, which has existed in some form for 200 years.

Efforts to adapt to the modern music scene have shown pockets of promise. "We have invented new ways of playing, including making the sarangi semi-electric to enhance the sound during performances with modern musical instruments," said Hassan of the academy he runs in Lahore. He has now performed several times with the adapted instrument, and says the reception has been positive. One of the few students is 14-year-old musician Mohsin Muddasir, who has shunned instruments such as the guitar to take on the sarangi. "I am learning this instrument because it plays with the strings of my heart," he said. — AFP



Ustad Zia-ud-Din repairs a traditional sarangi at his shop in Lahore.



Zohaib Hassan (right) teaches his students to play sarangi at his academy in Lahore.



Ustad Zia-ud-Din repairs a traditional sarangi.

Long-lost video of Prince as child unearthed in Minnesota

A CBS affiliate in Minnesota has unearthed video footage of late music legend Prince commenting on a teachers' strike when he was just 11 years old—a child instantly recognizable to the journalist who found it purely by chance. The television station, WCCO in Minneapolis, was going through old reels and restoring some footage in an effort to provide context about a similar strike last month, and production manager Matt Liddy stumbled on the clip. "Are most of the kids in favor of the picketing?" the reporter asks the child, who is wearing a coat and headband to keep his ears warm. "Yep," the child answers. "How come?" the reporter asks.

"I think they should get some more money 'cause they work... extra hours for us and all that stuff," he replies, flashing a sly grin. On seeing the child's face, Liddy said he showed it to multiple people in his newsroom, "and every single

person" shared his view that it was Prince. A weeks-long investigation—involving analysis of the child's face, hairstyle and still pictures from the same era—allowed WCCO to verify that the child in the clip was indeed Prince, who grew up in Minneapolis.

The pop icon died in April 2016 at the age of 57 following an accidental overdose of painkillers. Drummer Sheila E, a frequent Prince collaborator, retweeted the video with a purple heart—his signature color. — AFP



In this file photo US singer and musician Prince performing on stage at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, outside Paris. — AFP

Two pictures from blockbuster Paris Russian collection show to stay in France

Two pictures from the smash hit Paris art exhibition of masterpieces collected by Russian aficionado Ivan Morozov are to remain in France due to circumstances created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the French culture ministry said Saturday. One picture, currently owned by a Russian oligarch targeted by Western sanctions, and another, belonging to a Ukrainian museum, "will stay in France," the ministry said Saturday after uncertainty over the return of the pictures following the close of the record-breaking exhibition.

A source close to the issue, who asked not to be named, told AFP that the first picture is a self-portrait by Russian artist Pyotr Konchalovsky owned by the Russian oligarch Petr Aven. Aven, a billionaire financier and banker, is seen as close to President Vladimir Putin and is the target of Western sanctions imposed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This painting "will remain in France so long as its owner... remains targeted by an asset freeze," the ministry said in its official statement.

The second picture, a painting of Margarita Morozova by the Russian



In this file photo women look at paintings by French painter Pierre Bonnard during a press visit of the exhibition "The Morozov Collection - Modern art icons" at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris. — AFP

painter Valentin Serov belongs to the Fine Arts museum in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro and will stay in France "until the situation in the country allows its return in security," said the ministry. It emphasized that this was "at the request of the Ukrainian authorities".

Meanwhile, France is currently assessing the situation concerning a third picture owned by a private founda-

tion linked to another Russian oligarch who is being added to the sanctions list, the ministry said. The source added to AFP that this picture is owned by the Magma foundation linked to Viatcheslav Kantor. He is already targeted by UK sanctions over his shareholding in a fertilizer company. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Will Smith banned from Oscars ceremonies for 10 years

Will Smith was banned on Friday from attending the Oscars for the next 10 years, two weeks after the actor stunned the world by storming on stage mid-ceremony to slap the comedian Chris Rock. Smith is also not permitted to attend any other events held by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences over the next decade. The Board's decision stopped short of revoking the best actor award Smith won last month for "King Richard," or barring him from future Oscar nominations or wins.

"The Board has decided, for a period of 10 years from April 8, 2022, Mr Smith shall not be permitted to attend any Academy events or programs, in person or virtually, including but not limited to the Academy Awards," wrote president David Rubin and CEO Dawn Hudson in a letter. In a brief statement to Hollywood trade publications, Smith said: "I accept and respect the Academy's decision." Governors from the Academy-Hollywood's most prestigious group of some 10,000 filmmakers, which organizes the Oscars-convened on Friday morning to discuss actions against Smith.

The meeting of top brass was original-

ly set to discuss suspending or expelling Smith, but he preemptively resigned from the group. Actors do not need to be members of the Academy to receive nominations, although each year's Oscar nominees-and winners-are voted for by members of the group.

"The 94th Oscars were meant to be a celebration of the many individuals in our community who did incredible work this past year; however, those moments were overshadowed by the unacceptable and harmful behavior we saw Mr. Smith exhibit on stage," said the Academy letter.

It added: "This action we are taking today in response to Will Smith's behavior is a step toward a larger goal of protecting the safety of our performers and guests, and restoring trust in the Academy. We also hope this can begin a time of healing and restoration for all involved and impacted." Some had called for Smith to be stripped of his best actor Oscar, which he won for his performance in tennis biopic "King Richard" less than an hour after striking Rock on the same stage.

Rock's brother Kenny Rock told the Los Angeles Times that Smith "belittled (Chris Rock) in front of millions of people



In this file photo US actor Will Smith (right) slaps US actor Chris Rock onstage during the 94th Oscars at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

that watch the show." But taking away Smith's award was considered unlikely, as the likes of Harvey Weinstein and Roman Polanski did not have their Oscars revoked when they were expelled from the Academy in the wake of sexual assault scandals. Traditionally the best actor Oscar winner is invited to present the following year's best actress award-an honor Smith will not be granted.

'Inexcusable'

Smith climbed onto the Oscars stage and slapped Rock across the face in response to a joke the comic made about his wife's closely cropped hair. Actress Jada Pinkett Smith has alopecia, a hair loss condition. The Academy has said Smith was asked to leave the Oscars ballroom shortly after the attack. But that claim has been disputed, including by

Smith's representatives, and the show's producer Will Packer reportedly told Smith to remain and accept his statuette. Rock was asked by Los Angeles police whether he wanted to file a report against Smith, but he declined.

"During our telecast, we did not adequately address the situation in the room," said Friday's letter from Academy bosses. "For this, we are sorry. This was an opportunity for us to set an example for our guests, viewers and our Academy family around the world, and we fell short-unprepared for the unprecedented." The letter thanked Rock for "maintaining his composure under extraordinary circumstances." Last week, Smith apologized to Rock, describing his actions at the Oscars as "shocking, painful and inexcusable," before resigning from the Academy days later. The Academy board members invited to decide on actions against Smith-only the fifth Black man to win the movie world's highest individual award for an actor-included Steven Spielberg and Whoopi Goldberg. — AFP

Pink Floyd
release first new
song since 1994
for Ukraine

Pink Floyd have written their first new song in almost 30 years to support Ukrainians, the band announced on Thursday. "Hey, Hey, Rise-Up!" will be released on Friday, and be used to raise funds for humanitarian causes linked to the war. It samples Andriy Khlyvnyuk, from one of Ukraine's biggest bands BoomBox, singing in Sofiyskaya Square in Kyiv in a clip that went viral. Khlyvnyuk abandoned a world tour to return to Ukraine and help defend his country.

"We, like so many, have been feeling the fury and the frustration of this vile act of an independent, peaceful democratic country being invaded and having its people murdered by one of the world's major powers,"

Pink Floyd said on their official Twitter feed. In a press release, band leader David Gilmour said he had been moved by Khlyvnyuk's video: "It was a powerful moment that made me want to put it to music." He was able to speak with Khlyvnyuk from his hospital bed in Kyiv, where the singer was recovering after being hit by shrapnel in a mortar attack, the record company said.

"I played him a little bit of the song down the phone line and he gave me his blessing. We both hope to do something together in person in the future," Gilmour said. The image accompanying the song is of a sunflower, and was inspired by a viral video showing a Ukrainian woman insulting two armed Russian soldiers. In it, she tells the soldiers: "Take these seeds and put them in your pockets. That way sunflowers will grow when you all rest here."

It is the first original music from Pink Floyd since 1994's "The Division Bell". Gilmour tweeted his opposition to the war soon after Russia's invasion, saying: "Putin must go". The band has also pulled their music from Russian and Belarusian streaming sites in protest at the invasion. — AFP

Spain locates
Christopher
Columbus' first tomb

Researchers said Thursday they have located the first tomb of Christopher Columbus, the 15th century navigator who began European incursions into the Americas, in the central Spanish city of Valladolid. It has long been known that Columbus was buried in Valladolid after his death there in 1506 but the exact location of his tomb was not known until now. Three years later his remains were taken to his family mausoleum in the southern city of Seville, and were moved several more times over the following centuries before returning to Seville in 1898.

Using DNA samples from bone slivers taken from the Seville tomb, a forensics team led by the University of Granada confirmed in 2005 that the remains kept there did in fact belong to Columbus. Researchers have now determined that he was first buried in the San Francisco convent in Valladolid which no longer exists, Spain's Naval Museum which helped coordinate the study said in statement. The site is currently a commercial zone near the spacious Plaza Mayor, a

broad, pedestrianised expanse surrounded by arched buildings painted red.

This conclusion follows "a detailed historical investigation, confirmed by ground-penetrating radars," the statement added. Researchers took samples of elements from the Seville burial sport-lead, brick, golden threads-and found they matched with the location of the spot in Valladolid which was excavated, it added. Historians and archeologists have since recreated in 3D the dimensions of the chapel in Valladolid that housed the remains of Columbus.

In 1544 his remains were moved from Seville to Santo Domingo, which is the capital of the Dominican Republic, in accordance with the instructions he had left behind. In 1795 his bones were moved to Havana before being shipped back across the Atlantic and returned to Seville in 1898. The Dominican Republic claims Columbus is buried at an ornate lighthouse in Santo Domingo.

The teams behind the 2005 DNA study said that while they are convinced the bones in Seville are from Columbus, the tomb in Santo Domingo might also hold part of his remains. Columbus, long hailed by school textbooks as the so-called discoverer of "The New World," is considered by many to have spurred years of genocide against indigenous groups in the Americas. — AFP

When art collectors
chucked NFTs
worth millions in
the garbage

When digital artist Robbie Barrat handed out free NFT coupons at Christie's four years ago, most guests dumped them in the bin, not realizing they would soon be worth millions of dollars. Barrat, then still in his teens, had been invited by the London auction house to talk about the rise of online art. As part of the presentation, he gifted the crowd 300 cards, each with a code that gave them rights to a digital artwork he had created using artificial intelligence.

This was before the NFT market exploded last year, and so only about two dozen of the guests bothered holding on to their little cards. Barrat later recovered many from garbage cans and the floor. On March 2 this year, just one of those artworks, "Nude Portrait#7Frame#64", was sold at Sotheby's for £630,000 (\$821,000).

AI fighting

Barrat, now 22, had been working with AI since high school in the United States. He made his images by uploading 10,000 nude images from classical art into his computer and then using two competing AI programs to distort them. "My interest was: can I use this tool to make something that is not classical?" he told AFP in a video interview. The method is known as "generative adversarial networks" (GANs): two neural networks that compete with each other using algorithms.

"(They) sort of fight between each other," Barrat said, adding that he purposefully added glitches to the programs to make the final results more interesting. The result was a series of shapeless "nudes", unsettling masses of reddish and brown tones that bear resemblance to paintings by Salvador Dalí or Francis Bacon.

'Don't throw this away'

Barrat was invited to talk at Christie's by art collector Jason Bailey, known in the crypto-art world as Artome, one of the pioneers of the NFT market. "Nobody knew what an NFT was back then," Bailey told AFP. He asked Barrat to create credit-card sized coupons for the presentation, each with a code that gave access to an NFT stored online using blockchain technology, which guarantees unique ownership rights to whoever has the code.

"I was telling everybody from the stage: 'This is the future. Don't throw this card away.'" Bailey recalled with a smile. "But these people were traditional art collectors. They were just, like, 'Who is this wacky guy on stage... nobody collects digital art.'"

'I'm not interested'

Today, Robbie Barrat's works are very rare, to the point of being nicknamed the "Lost Robbies". And the NFT market has gone wild, with total sales estimated at \$44.2 billion in 2021 according to analysis firm Chainalysis. But despite his financial success, Barrat has been left deeply disillusioned by the experience. "Over the past few years what I've seen with my work is that nobody even really discusses the image itself. All they talk about is the price," he said. Barrat continues to experiment with AI, but says he no longer intends to sell work through the NFT market.

"I really do not like the NFT space right now. Unless it changes, I'm not interested. Also because of the environmental issues with it," he said. There are widespread concerns about the vast amounts of energy required to maintain the blockchain and operate crypto-currencies such as Bitcoin that are used for many NFT transactions. Four years after the strange episode at Christie's, Bailey still defends the validity of cryptocurrencies and NFTs, particularly since they allow artists to receive payments each time their work is resold-unlike the traditional art market. —AFP



Snoop Dogg attends NBC's "American Song Contest" Week 3 Red Carpet at Universal Studios Hollywood on April 04, 2022 in Universal City, California. — AFP

Snoop Dogg
accuser withdraws
sex assault case

A former dancer who accused Snoop Dogg of sexual assault has dropped her lawsuit against the US rapper, according to court papers obtained Friday. The case was dismissed by a Los Angeles federal judge on Thursday after the unnamed woman voluntarily withdrew her case a day earlier.

"Jane Doe" had previously alleged that Snoop Dogg forced her to perform oral sex on him in 2013 while he was filming the "Snoop Dogg's Double G News Network" television show. In court documents filed in February, "Jane Doe" said Snoop burst into a restroom when she was unwell and forced himself on her.

She had requested unspecified "monetary and punitive" damages, alleging violation of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, sexual battery, and sexual assault. Snoop Dogg denied the claims, and on Friday his representative said the complaint had been "full of false allegations and deficiencies." Born Calvin Broadus Jr. near Los Angeles, Snoop Dogg has had several brushes with the law, but his public image has softened in recent years. — AFP

Tape of you: Sheeran
films songwriting
sessions after
court case

Ed Sheeran says he now films his songwriting sessions to try to avoid future copyright claims after winning a high-profile court case this week. The British singer-songwriter gave his first interview after a judge in London's High Court ruled Wednesday that his smash-hit "Shape of You" did not lift musical phrases from another track. "Now I just film everything, everything is on film," he told BBC television in the interview shown Friday. "We've had claims come through on the songs and we go, well here's the footage and you watch. You'll see there's nothing there," Sheeran said. "I personally think the best feeling in the world is the euphoria around the first idea of writing a great song."

"That feeling has now turned into 'oh wait, let's stand back for a minute'. You find yourself in the moment, second-guessing yourself." Judge Antony Zaccaroli said that Sheeran "neither deliberately nor subconsciously" copied a phrase from British grime track "Oh Why", when writing "Shape of You". Sheeran's 2017 song 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 their own composition "Oh Why", performed under Chokri's stage-name Sami Switch. Sheeran told the BBC that he regretted settling a prior plagiarism case in the United States over his 2017 song "Photograph", and said "there was no other choice" but to fight the UK claim. — AFP



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

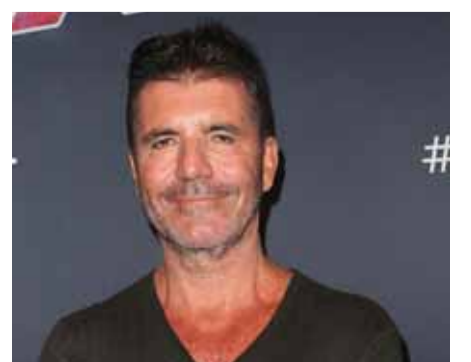
Simon Cowell 'leaves
£20m to animal charities'

Simon Cowell is leaving a "substantial amount" of his fortune to animal charities. The 62-year-old TV star recently made a will for the very first time, and Simon has admitted to leaving a significant sum - thought to be in the region of £20 million - to various animal charities, such as the Dogs Trust and London's Battersea Dogs Home. He said: "The will covers everything I care about - the charities I support. 'Look, I hadn't made a will until recently as I never thought I was going to die. At one point, as you know, I was thinking about being frozen, until I realised they actually chop your head off."

"So when I realized I was just going to be a floating head, it was like, 'Well, that doesn't sound like a lot of fun'. So that idea went out the window."

"Finally, I realized I was gonna die and that I had made absolutely no provisions whatsoever." Simon - who has an eight-year-old son called Eric with his partner Lauren Silverman - found writing his will to be a depressing experience. But it's also given the outspoken star some "peace of

mind". Simon - who has worked with the likes of One Direction, Little Mix and Fifth Harmony during his career - told The Sun newspaper: "It was one of the most depressing things I've ever done, and one of the hardest. 'Unfortunately, you have to - and that day, when it comes, is like, 'Christ, I've now got to sit and talk about my death for the next few hours'. It was dreadful. But the fact that I've done it now has given me peace of mind." — Bang Showbiz



Sports

Tiger battles back to stay in chase at the Masters

AUGUSTA, Georgia: Tiger Woods faltered early but battled back to keep his comeback from severe leg injuries alive amid gusting winds that wreaked havoc in Friday's second round of the Masters. The 15-time major champion fired a roller-coaster two-over par 74 to share 19th place on one-over 145 after 36 holes at Augusta National, nine adrift of leader Scottie Scheffler but only four back of second place.

"I've got a chance going into the weekend," Woods said. "Hopefully I'll have one of those lightbulb moments, turn it on and get it done. 'On the back nine on Sunday anything can happen. I've just got to get myself there.'" World number one Scheffler, seeking his first major title, matched the low round of the day of 67 to stand on 136 with a five-stroke lead, equaling the largest 36-hole edge in Masters history. "I wouldn't say much changes," said Scheffler. "I played solid golf. I put myself in position. I have to just keep doing what I'm doing." A second-place pack included South African Charl Schwartzel, the 2011 Masters champion, 18-hole leader Im Sung-jae of South Korea, Ireland's Shane Lowry and defending champion Hideki Matsuyama. "It was one of my better rounds of my career," said 2019 British Open champion Lowry. "It was quite tricky out there, quite difficult."

Woods, back in action 14 months after a horrific car crash, teed off only three strokes behind the leaders but made four bogeys on the first five holes. "It was blustery. It was windy, swirling all over the place," Woods said. "I got a couple bad gusts and I made a couple bad swings. Then on four, I ended up in a divot. It was almost, 'What else could go wrong?'"

He was at risk of missing the cut despite a solid opening 71, but rallied to carry his comeback charge into the weekend as he chased a record-tying sixth Masters crown. "I got back in the ball game," Woods said. "Tomorrow is going to be tough. It's going to be quicker, drier, faster, and it will be a great test." Woods will rely upon therapists and ice baths to control leg swelling and get himself ready to play again. "My team has done a hell of a job getting the body ready," Woods said. "After I go ahead and break it out there, they go ahead and repair it at night."



AUGUSTA, Georgia: Tiger Woods plays his shot from the 18th tee during the second round of The Masters at Augusta National Golf Club on April 8, 2022. — AFP

After the woeful start, Woods chipped to two feet and tapped in to birdie the par-5 eighth, saved par from six feet at nine and tapped in from three feet to birdie the 10th. Woods missed an eight-foot par putt at the 11th then found a bunker at the par-3 12th and missed a 12-foot par putt. He responded by making a three-foot birdie putt at the par-5 13th, curling in a nine-foot birdie at 14 then closing with four pars to make a 22nd consecutive Masters cut.

Even as Woods struggled, the 46-year-old legend drew throngs of fans. After being hospitalized for weeks and unable to walk for months, rehabilitation work has allowed the medical marvel to make an epic comeback in an iconic setting, although his gait is affected by a right ankle no longer working well. "It's never going to move like it used to," he said.

McIlroy 10 back

Woods, ranked 973rd, teed off in the third-to-last group alongside only Chile's Joaquin Niemann after 2010 British Open champion Louis Oosthuizen of South Africa withdrew due to injury. He missed seven-foot par putts at the first and third holes, missed the green at the par-3 fourth on the way to bogey and found trees off the tee to bogey the fifth.

Four-time major winner Rory McIlroy, seeking a green jacket to complete a career Grand Slam, fired a second straight 73 to stand on 146. McIlroy hasn't won a major title since 2014. Those missing the cut on 148 included four-time major winner Brooks Koepka and three-time major winner Jordan Spieth on 150, Tokyo Olympic champion Xander Schauffele on 151 and 2020 US Open winner Bryson DeChambeau on 156. — AFP

Djokovic returns to Monte Carlo; Alcaraz waits to pounce

MONTE CARLO: Novak Djokovic will return to action at the Monte Carlo Masters next week where Carlos Alcaraz, the teenager seen as his likely long-term successor as world number one and multiple Grand Slam winner, lies in wait. Djokovic, who on Monday starts his 365th week on top of the rankings, has played just one tournament in four months.

His now infamous deportation from Melbourne prevented him from an assault on a 10th Australian Open title. Djokovic's only appearances on court were in Dubai in February where he played just three matches. His reluctance to get vaccinated then meant withdrawing from the Indian Wells and Miami tournaments. While he took a back seat, 18-year-old Alcaraz stunned the tennis world by storming to the Miami title, becoming the third youngest winner of a Masters event.

Djokovic, 34, a two-time champion in Monte Carlo, was Friday drawn to face Alcaraz in what would be a blockbuster quarter-final in the principality. Alcaraz, unlike the great Serb star, has hardly been off a tennis court in 2022, playing 20 matches on the tour with a win-loss record of 18-2. He has rocketed from 133rd in the world to 11 in one year.

As well as his Miami triumph, the 18-year-old pushed Rafael Nadal all the way at Indian Wells before succumbing in a three-set semi-final. "I have always looked up to Rafa, I always watched his big moments and matches and learned a lot from that," said Alcaraz. — AFP



LIVERPOOL: Horses and jockeys clear The Chair during the Randox Topham Handicap Steeple Chase on the second day of the Grand National Festival horse race meeting at Aintree Racecourse on April 8, 2022. — AFP

Punters keep faith with Blackmore's ability to deliver

AINTREE, United Kingdom: Minella Times is all the rage with punters to win a second straight Grand National despite the burden of the heaviest weight since the legendary Red Rum won the second of his three Nationals in 1974. Minella Times's trainer Henry de Bromhead told AFP he felt he had got the 2021 winner right after a poor season but, like jockey Rachael Blackmore, was concerned by the hefty rise in weight for winning it last year. The 11 stone 10 pounds (74.39 kg) he has been allocated for the world's greatest steeplechase - to be played out in front of a capacity crowd for the first time since 2019 as Covid forced the race to be cancelled in 2020 and no spectators were allowed last year - is just shy of the 12-stone Red Rum carried to victory.

That is a considerable challenge when confronting the daunting 30 fences and 39 rivals bidding to dash the Minella Times team's dreams of a rare repeat success. Tiger Roll (2018/19) is the only horse to win in successive years since Red Rum won his first two (1973/74). "Absolutely the weight can count against you even with the fences being less challenging," de Bromhead said. "It's a good hike (17 pounds more than 2021) they (the handicapper) have been pretty tough I

think." The 49-year-old Irishman is a master at treating success and disappointment with the same sangfroid. Despite his caution punters believe the magic touch of de Bromhead and Blackmore in the big races (they come to Aintree having completed the Champion Hurdle/Cheltenham Gold Cup double last month) will deliver again. Snow Leopardess is competing with Minella Times for favouritism and has all the hallmarks of a National winner.

'The people's race'

She would be the first mare since Nickel Coin in 1951 to win the National but would trump the latter because she is already a mother. Due to a long injury absence it was decided to breed from her and she now has a three-year-old daughter called Red Panda. A striking grey she was bred by 80-year-old Marietta Fox-Pitt, mother of William the three-time Olympic three-day event team medallist.

Snow Leopardess - who carries the colors of William's brother Andrew - won the Becher Chase over the same fences and is fancied to give England their first winner since Many Clouds in 2015. Irish jockey Aidan Coleman came closest to winning the National in 13 attempts when second on 100/1 outsider Balko des Flos last year and believes he can go one better this time round on Snow Leopardess.

"Her form alone is enough for her to be the price she is," said 33-year-old Coleman. "I suppose her backstory for a race like the Grand National - the people's race - means some will go for her on the basis of her background rather than strictly on form: the fact that she's grey, a mare, a mum." — AFP

since 2012, said he had co-operated with trustees trying to secure his assets, even offering his wedding ring, and relied on the advisers who managed his life away from tennis.

Becker told the court he earned a "vast amount" during his career, with the court hearing he won some \$50 million in prize money and sponsorship deals. But Becker, who went on to coach current men's world number one Novak Djokovic for a spell, said his earnings "reduced dramatically" following his retirement in 1999. He told Southwark Crown Court he was involved in an "expensive divorce" from ex-wife Barbara Becker in 2001, which included high maintenance payments to their two sons. But a jury found him guilty of four charges, including removal of property, two counts of failing to disclose estate and concealing debt. It also acquitted him of a further 20 charges. Judge Deborah Taylor released the six-time Grand Slam singles champion on conditional bail ahead of sentencing on April 29, when he could face a jail sentence of up to seven years. Becker did not respond to reporters' questions as he left the court.

Former world number one Becker, who was supported in court by his partner Lilian de Carvalho Monteiro and eldest son Noah, said he was "shocked" and "embarrassed" when declared bankrupt on June 21, 2017 over an unpaid loan of more than £3 million (\$3.9 million) on his estate in Mallorca, Spain. — AFP

Women's basketball teams set for semis

KUWAIT: The semifinal matches of the women's basketball league will see Al-Fatat club players meet Salwa Al-Sabah Sabah team, while the other match will be between Qurain and Gulf University teams. The matches will be played on Sunday at the Basketball Federation Hall in Sabah Al-Salem at the Sheikh Saad Al-Abdullah Complex. The second part of the women's league concluded with two matches - the first between Gulf University and Salwa Al-Sabah, which saw Gulf University win 80-62, while Al-Fatat defeated Qurain 66-47.



Marquez sixth fastest as Zarco tops Texas practice

AUSTIN: Six-time MotoGP world champion Marc Marquez, back in the saddle after recovering from double vision, was sixth fastest in opening practice for the Grand Prix of the Americas on Friday. Honda star Marquez, chasing an eighth win in nine races at the Austin circuit, was 0.499sec off the leading pace set by France's Johann Zarco on a Ducati, who set a session best of 2min 02.542sec.

Australia's Jack Miller, on another Ducati, was second fastest ahead of reigning world champion Fabio Quartararo on a Yamaha. Ducati's Enea Bastianini, the winner of the season opener in Qatar, was fifth ahead of Suzuki rider Alex Rins, the only man to break Marquez's dominance in Texas when he captured the 2019 edition. "It feels good, a great time, I am happy



because it's a very difficult track," Zarco said. "This morning it was hard to put the laps together but in the afternoon I freed up on the bike. I was able to start riding better with better lap times."

Aleix Espargaro, who won the Argentina Grand Prix last weekend for his first MotoGP triumph in his 200th race, was 11th fastest. He needs to nip into the top 10 on his Aprilia in Saturday practice to guarantee a spot in the key second qualifying session. The 32-year-old Spaniard leads the world championship after three races by seven points over South Africa's Brad Binder of KTM and is nine ahead of Bastianini.

Marquez, 29, missed the race in Argentina with double vision following his violent high-side crash in Indonesia in March. He admitted his numerous falls at the Asian track had left him with a "scary, uncomfortable" injury. However, he was happy to embrace the enormous risks of the sport. I know there is a risk, but it's my passion, I'm here to race and not to think about injuries. Passion, always, is stronger than my injuries," he said Thursday. "After an injury, the first week you say to yourself 'I don't want to take this risk of MotoGP again and be injured again'. But the week after, this passion, this adrenaline takes over." — AFP

Tennis great Boris Becker could face jail after verdict

LONDON: Former Wimbledon champion Boris Becker could be jailed for up to seven years after being found guilty of charges relating to his 2017 bankruptcy by a London court on Friday. The 54-year-old German was accused of hiding millions of pounds worth of assets, including two Wimbledon trophies, to avoid paying his debts. Becker, who has lived in Britain



Boris Becker



AUSTIN: Marc Marquez of Spain and Repsol Honda Team leads Alex Rins of Spain and Team Suzuki ECSTAR during the MotoGP Of The Americas - Free Practice on April 8, 2022. — AFP

Sports

Guardiola says Klopp is 'biggest rival' ahead of title showdown

LONDON: Pep Guardiola admits Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp is the biggest rival of his career as the Manchester City boss prepares for Sunday's Premier League title showdown. Guardiola's side have battled with Liverpool for Premier League supremacy several times in his reign and their latest race is going down to the wire again.

Reigning champions City are one point ahead of second placed Liverpool going into the crucial clash at the Etihad Stadium. Liverpool have overturned a 14-point deficit to pile pressure on City, who have won three English titles under Guardiola, while Klopp has led the Reds to the trophy once. Guardiola's admiration for Klopp is so strong that he rates the German as an even bigger rival than his old nemesis Jose Mourinho.

"In the last five years they have been the biggest opponent. They have been an incredible, marvelous contender, with good games," Guardiola told reporters on Friday. "Jurgen, as a manager, has been

the biggest rival I've ever had in my career and I think what both teams propose is good for football. Except the year we made 100 points, the rest were tight. It is because they are good and hopefully they think we are good too. I will remember my period here, when I'm retired watching and playing golf, I'll remember my biggest rival was Liverpool, for sure."

A win for City this weekend would be a huge step towards retaining the title, but Liverpool can seize control of the race with a victory. Although Sunday's match will clearly have huge implications for the title race, Guardiola did not want to say it will be decisive. "It will be a massive, important three points but there will still be seven games, 21 points, and a lot of things involving the Champions League and FA Cup," he said.

Despite their high-stakes rivalry, the two bosses share a healthy respect, with Klopp describing Guardiola as the best manager in the world on Friday. "Thank you so much, but I'm not," Guardiola

said. "I would like to tell him I'm the best but I'm not." Guardiola was happy to return the compliment, saying: "Jurgen makes world football a better place to live with his message, and he's a huge competitor. He knows about my admiration for what he does, the message and the way his teams play. He's a good guy."

Widely regarded as Europe's top two teams at present, City and Liverpool will meet in the FA Cup semi-finals on April 16 and could face off in the Champions League final in May. City also have to protect a 1-0 lead against Atletico Madrid in the second leg of their Champions League quarter-final on Wednesday.

But Guardiola showed no signs of pressure at his media briefing, laughing as he said he would share a post-match bottle of wine with Klopp, as long as City win. "If we win I'd love it," he said. "I'll invite him! And he's said many times that we're a rich club so the wine will be perfect, high quality!" Guardiola



Jurgen Klopp

Pep Guardiola

also joked City might be content to settle for a draw, to ensure they preserve their lead at the top. "We trained today to sit back for 90 minutes, to get 0-0!" he said. "No, never in my life have I thought about this, except when there's five minutes left." — AFP

Everton beat Man Utd, boost survival hopes

LIVERPOOL: Everton beat Manchester United 1-0 on Saturday to boost their Premier League survival hopes and deal a blow to United's chances of finishing in the top four. Victory at Goodison Park, courtesy of Anthony Gordon's first-half deflected effort, lifts Frank Lampard's team four points clear of the bottom three having played a game more than 18th-placed Burnley.

But United's season is in danger of imploding - they remain three points behind fourth-placed Tottenham having played a game extra and look increasingly unlikely to qualify for next season's Champions League. Top-scorer Cristiano Ronaldo returned after missing last week's 1-1 draw with Leicester, along with out-of-form fellow forward Marcus Rashford.

United were content to let Everton pass the ball around in the spring sunshine in the early stages. The visitors were the first side to threaten against a team desperately short of confidence following a string of disappointing results, including a 3-2 loss to Burnley in midweek.

Everton goalkeeper Jordan Pickford made two fine early saves from Rashford, first keeping out a powerful drive and then scrambling low to his right to keep out a downward header. The home side scored against the run of play in the 27th minute, courtesy of



LIVERPOOL: Manchester United's French midfielder Paul Pogba vies with Everton's English striker Dominic Calvert-Lewin during their English Premier League match at Goodison Park on April 9, 2022. — AFP

a huge deflection off the luckless Harry Maguire, who has struggled to find his form this season.

United lost the ball in midfield and Richarlison, initially forced wide on the left, cut the ball back towards the box, where it fell for Gordon. The winger struck his shot well but a deflection off England defender Maguire left David de Gea stranded. The goal lifted the tension and energized the home crowd and Everton came close to dou-

bling their lead in the 36th minute, when De Gea tipped over a stinging shot from Richarlison.

United had a chance to equalize in the early stages of the second half but Rashford failed to connect with a long pass from Bruno Fernandes. Victor Lindelof then made a crucial block in to deny Gordon a second goal before Richarlison indulged in some ball-juggling with his head as Everton confidence grew. — AFP

Bucks eye second seed after routing Pistons

NEW YORK: The Milwaukee Bucks edged closer to securing second seeding in the Eastern Conference playoffs on Friday with a 131-101 rout of the Detroit Pistons. Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 30 points with 13 rebounds and eight assists as the Bucks improved to 51-30 to tighten their grip on second place in the table. The win leaves the Bucks in pole position to claim the second seeding heading into Sunday's final round of regular season fixtures.

Milwaukee will clinch the No. 2 spot with a win over the Cavaliers in Cleveland on Sunday, while the Boston Celtics must beat the Memphis Grizzlies in their final game to have any chance of snatching second place. Milwaukee, who beat the Celtics in a crucial game on Thursday, were always in control against the Pistons, owners of the sec-

ond worst record in the conference at 23-57.

The Bucks led from start-to-finish, romping into a 30-8 lead after the first quarter and dominating thereafter, racing into a 32-point lead at one stage in the third quarter. Antetokounmpo was one of six Bucks players in double figures, with Brook Lopez finishing with 17 points and Khris Middleton 15 points. George Hill, Pat Connaughton and Jrue Holiday all chipped in with 10 points apiece.

In other games with play-off ramifications on Friday, the Brooklyn Nets scored a crucial 118-107 win over Cleveland to leapfrog over the Cavaliers into seventh place overall. It means that if Brooklyn win their final regular season game on Sunday against the eliminated Indiana Pacers, the Nets will host a home game in the play-in tournament on Tuesday - possibly against Cleveland - where a direct route into the playoffs will be on offer.

Kevin Durant's 36-point display led the Nets to victory on Friday, with Kyrie Irving and Bruce Brown finishing on 18 points apiece. Brown narrowly missed a triple double, with eight assists and 10 rebounds. Darius Garland led the Cavaliers scorers with 31 points. — AFP



DETROIT: Giannis Antetokounmpo #34 of the Milwaukee Bucks drives to the basket against Killion Hayes #7 of the Detroit Pistons during the third quarter at Little Caesars Arena on April 8, 2022. — AFP

Brandt strikes twice as Dortmund earn win at Stuttgart

STUTTGART: Substitute Julian Brandt netted both goals Friday as Borussia Dortmund ground out a 2-0 win at VfB Stuttgart to trim Bayern Munich's lead in the Bundesliga, but lost three players to injuries. Midfielders Giovanni Reyna and Mahmoud Dahoud suffered first half injuries while defender Mats Hummels did not come out for the second half. Reyna was injured after just 54 seconds but his replacement Brandt gave Dortmund the lead on 12 minutes, then smashed in a second after the break.

Brandt made Bundesliga history with the earliest goal by a substitute. "Winning games is the best answer you can give," Brandt told DAZN as Dortmund bounced back from last weekend's 4-1 rout at home to RB Leipzig. "The most important thing was that we managed to stay stable despite a lot of changes due to injuries. In the end, there was a bit of luck involved, but the main thing is that we won."

The away win for second-placed Dortmund trims Bayern's lead to six points. However the run-away leaders can reopen the gap and inch towards a 10th straight league title at home to Augsburg in Saturday's Bavarian derby. Stuttgart are hovering just a point above the bottom three with five games left.

The match at rain-lashed Stuttgart had barely kicked off when Reyna clutched his right hamstring and the 19-year-old trudged off wiping away tears. It is the latest setback for the US international in an injury-ravaged season which has seen him make just 10 league appearances. His replacement Brandt



STUTTGART: Dortmund's German forward Julian Brandt heads the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match VfB Stuttgart v BVB Borussia Dortmund on April 8, 2022. — AFP

capitalized with the opening goal after Erling Haaland opened up the Stuttgart defense.

The visitors had a huge let off when Omar Marmoush chipped over Dortmund goalkeeper Gregor Kobel but his shot flew over the crossbar. Dortmund's luck with injuries did not improve. Dahoud went off after clutching his shoulder following a challenge while Hummels had to be replaced at the break with a leg injury.

Brandt grabbed his second with 19 minutes left

by curling a ferocious shot just out of Stuttgart goalkeeper Florian Mueller's reach. Kobel pulled off a superb late save to palm away a shot by Stuttgart defender Borna Sosa, who then hit the crossbar as the hosts pushed for a goal while Haaland had a late goal ruled offside. This is the fifth straight league game in which Haaland had failed to score - his longest dry spell for Dortmund - amid speculation he will leave at the end of the season. — AFP

PSG hold out hope over Mbappe future in title run-in

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain remain hopeful that Kylian Mbappe will sign a new contract to stay at the club with just eight games left this season before his existing deal expires. Despite all the speculation that he will join Real Madrid as a free agent, the France superstar has insisted that his mind is not yet made up between moving to the Spanish capital and remaining in Paris.

"I haven't made my choice. I haven't taken my decision, I'm thinking it over, there are new elements and there are loads of factors," Mbappe said last weekend after two goals and a hat-trick of assists in a 5-1 demolition of Lorient. It was the latest world-class display from the 23-year-old who has scored 28 goals this season in all competitions and is Ligue 1's top assist-provider with 13.

Amid rumors about the astronomical sums that PSG are prepared to offer Mbappe to stay, along with perhaps the captain's armband and a say in transfer policy, there was good news for the Qatar-owned club from UEFA this week. European football's governing body announced new regulations to replace its existing financial fair play rules, but said a cap that limits spending on wages and transfers to 70 percent of total revenues will not come in until 2025.

Meanwhile clubs will be allowed to report losses of €60 million (\$65.5m) over three years rather than €30 million previously, all of which appears to offer PSG more room to break the bank for their star player. "Kylian will give a better answer than me, but PSG and me as coach all want the best for Kylian and the best for the club," boss Mauricio Pochettino said on Friday ahead of his team's trip to relegation-threatened Clermont. "We think the best thing for the club is that Kylian stays."

Pochettino added that Mbappe could be given the armband in Clermont with regular skipper Marquinhos rested following the birth of his daughter during the week. The Brazilian's absence could also open the door for Sergio Ramos to make a rare start in an injury-plagued season. All PSG have left to play for in an anti-climactic end to the season is making sure they wrap up the title. They are 12 points clear of Marseille with eight games left and host their bitter rivals next weekend and so should have an eighth championship in 10 years secured by the end of the month. — AFP

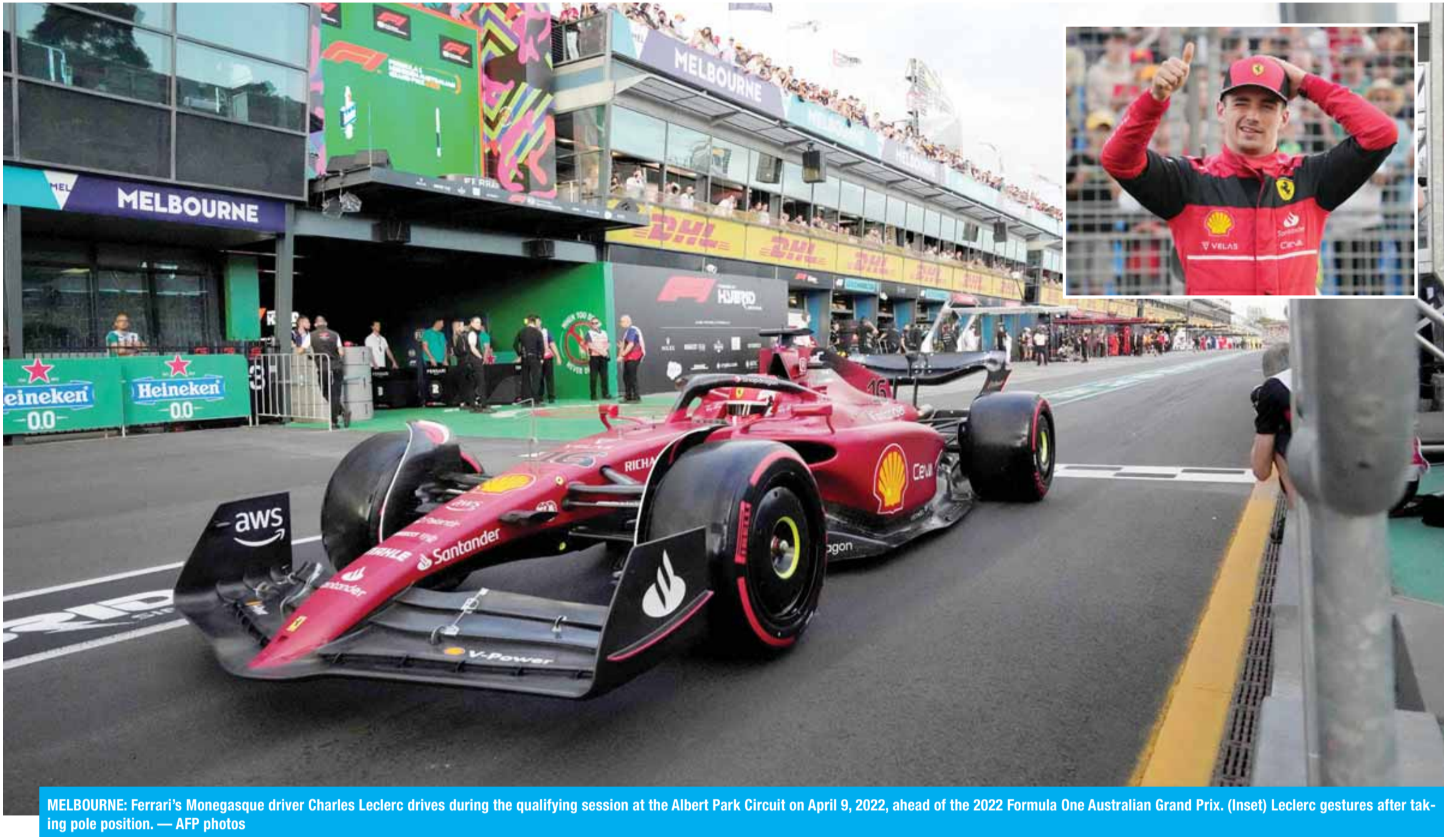
Napoli eye chance of lifetime as title tussle heads towards climax

MILAN: Napoli have a first Serie A title since the days of Diego Maradona in their sights and the chance to exorcise a ghost when Fiorentina come to town on Sunday. A point off the summit going into the weekend, southern Italy's biggest club are in buoyant mood and have a real chance to beat the powerful northern trio of AC Milan, Inter Milan and Juventus in a thrilling race for the Scudetto.

Last week's 3-1 win at Atalanta, claimed without suspended star striker Victor Osimhen, made it clear that Luciano Spalletti's side were not going to give up the chance to become legends easily. Naples has waited nearly 32 years to see its team crowned kings of Italy for a third time and Spalletti does not believe that his team will fall away at the last as they did in Florence in 2018.

Four years ago under Maurizio Sarri, Napoli moved a point behind Juventus with three games to go after beating the champions in Turin, but the very next week suffered a meltdown at Fiorentina, losing 3-0 and surrendering the title with a whimper. "At this point we can't get our attitude wrong again because we're fighting at the top end of the table and we can't hide anymore," Spalletti said after the win in Bergamo. "They understand the moment they're in... Our time is now."

Spalletti will have Osimhen and center-back Amir Rrahmani back for the clash at the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona, but is without injured Italy right-back Giovanni Di Lorenzo while midfielder Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa is suspended. Otherwise Spalletti has a strong squad to pick from and an optimism around the camp that is draining away from Milan, who are struggling for goals and on Saturday face Torino, the precise sort of team which gives the seven-time European champions problems. — AFP



MELBOURNE: Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc drives during the qualifying session at the Albert Park Circuit on April 9, 2022, ahead of the 2022 Formula One Australian Grand Prix. (Inset) Leclerc gestures after taking pole position. — AFP photos

Leclerc grabs pole ahead of Verstappen

MELBOURNE: Ferrari's Charles Leclerc claimed pole on Saturday for the Australian Grand Prix ahead of title rival Max Verstappen - and broke Lewis Hamilton's stranglehold on the Melbourne grid. World champion Verstappen's Red Bull team-mate Sergio Perez is on the second row after coming in third ahead of McLaren's Lando Norris at Albert Park.

Mercedes' Hamilton, who has been the pole-sitter eight times in Melbourne, including the last six in a row, will start an encouraging fifth. It is a second pole of the year for Monaco's Leclerc after the season-opening race in Bahrain, where he went on to win. He knocked out his rivals with a flying lap at the death of one minute 17.868, fractionally ahead of Red Bull's Verstappen, who won in Saudi Arabia two weeks ago.

This was more evidence ahead of Sunday's third race of the campaign that they are the two to beat this season. "It felt good, even more because it's a track where I've always struggled in the past, in Q3 I managed to put everything together so it feels great, very happy," said the 24-year-old Leclerc. "The car

is nice to drive, everything is possible tomorrow. We need a good start."

Verstappen had complained of oversteer and balance problems in the final practice ahead of qualifying and the Dutchman said he was still struggling despite being second-fastest. "I didn't really feel good in the car all weekend. I don't think there's been one lap where I've felt good in the car," said Verstappen, also 24. "We'll try to analyze it. This weekend has been all over the place. Happy to be second, but as a team we want more."

While Mercedes' speed is improving, it still has problems with porpoising - bouncing too much at speed. But fifth was a major improvement for Hamilton, who only qualified 16th in Jeddah. His team-mate George Russell was sixth on Saturday. "Compared to yesterday and to the last race, today was a good day for me," said Britain's seven-time world champion Hamilton. "I almost got P4, which would have been cool, but we'll be fighting for that position tomorrow."

Both McLarens made the third part of qualifying for the first time this season with Daniel Ricciardo coming seventh. Esteban Ocon in an Alpine was eighth and Carlos Sainz in the other Ferrari ninth. Veteran Fernando Alonso, who has been quick all weekend in the Alpine, had to settle for 10th after crashing at Turn 11, saying on the radio he couldn't shift down gears.

'He hit me'

It was a dismal day for four-time world champion Sebastian Vettel, who sent his Aston Martin into a wall in the final practice and managed just three laps in qualifying. He finished 18th to cap a miserable time for the German, who missed the opening two races of the year with Covid, suffered engine failure on Friday and was fined €5,000 (US\$5,437) after riding a moped on the track.

His team-mate Lance Stroll also endured a tough day. After crashing in third practice, his crew patched up the car and got him out with four min-

utes left of Q1. But before he completed a lap, he and Nicholas Latifi got tangled up, leaving debris from the Canadian's Williams strewn on the track. "He just hit me man," Stroll said in an expletive-laden radio message, with Latifi responding: "I don't understand what he was doing, he wasn't looking in his mirrors. Car's destroyed."

Stewards sided with Latifi and handed Stroll a three-place grid penalty. Not that it made any difference, as he was classified last anyway after failing to set a time. Perez topped Q2 from Sainz and Leclerc with Valtteri Bottas, the 2019 Melbourne winner, a casualty in his Alfa Romeo. The Finn's team-mate Zhou Guanyu also missed the cut for the top-10 shootout, as did Mick Schumacher in a Haas and AlphaTauri pair Pierre Gasly and Yuki Tsunoda. Verstappen was fastest in Q1 ahead of Perez. Along with Latifi, Stroll and Vettel, Kevin Magnussen in a Haas and Williams' Alex Albon, who already has a three-place grid drop after an incident in Saudi Arabia, also failed to get out of Q1. — AFP

Chahal says player dangled him from 15th-floor balcony

NEW DELHI: Indian bowler Yuzvendra Chahal says he was dangled from a 15th-floor hotel balcony by a heavily drunk fellow player during the Indian Premier League in 2013. The incident happened during a get-together when the leg-spinner, who has played 61 one-day internationals for India, was a part of the Mumbai Indians franchise.

Chahal previously alleged that he was also bullied by Mumbai teammates in 2011 when he was an up-and-coming talent. "So there was a player who was very drunk - and I won't take his name - he was very drunk, he just called me aside and he took me outside and he hung me out from the balcony," Chahal, now 31, said in a video posted Thursday by his current IPL team Rajasthan Royals.

"I was holding on to him, with my arms around

his neck. If I had lost my grip, we were on the 15th floor... had there been a small mistake there, I would have fallen down," he said. Chahal said he was saved by people who rushed to his rescue. "I kind of fainted and they gave me water. Then I realized how responsible we need to be when we go anywhere," said the bowler, who was chatting in the video to fellow spinner Ravichandran Ashwin about tricky off-field situations.

Former India all-rounder and coach Ravi Shastri said the incident must not be taken lightly, and called for players to be banned from the game if they commit such an offence. "Someone's life is at risk, some people might think it is funny but for me, it is not funny at all," he said during ESPNcricinfo's 'T20 Time Out' program. "If such an incident happens today, (give) a life ban for that person involved and send that person to a rehab center as quickly as possible."

Chahal had alleged in a podcast earlier this year that, in another incident, his then Mumbai teammates James Franklin and Andrew Symonds tied him up, taped his mouth and left him in a room and forgot about him in 2011. — AFP



Yuzvendra Chahal

S Korea's An stuns Sindhu on day to forget for India

SUNCHEON, South Korea: South Korea's second seed An Se-young defeated two-time Olympic medalist PV Sindhu in the women's semi-finals at the Korea Open Badminton Championships on Saturday on a day to forget for India. The 20-year-old An won 21-14, 21-17 and will face Thailand's unseeded Pornpawee Chochuwong in Sunday's final in the Korean city of Suncheon.

The last time a home player won the women's singles was in 2015, although the annual Korea Open was cancelled for the last two years due to coronavirus concerns. Pornpawee booked her place in the final by roaring back from losing the first game 21-17 to another Korean, Kim Ga-eun, before taking the next two by the same 21-14 scoreline.

In the men's singles semi-finals Indonesia's Jonatan Christie, the third seed, defeated India's fifth-seeded Kidambi Srikanth 21-19, 21-16, in another disappointing outcome for the Indian team. Christie faces Weng Hong-yang of China after he defeated Denmark's Victor Svendsen 22-20, 21-13 to advance to the final. —AFP



SUNCHEON: South Korea's An Se-young hits a return against India's Pusarla Venkata Sindhu during their women's singles semifinal match at the Korea Open Badminton Championships on April 9, 2022. —AFP



Mohamed Salah

Salah says Liverpool contract talks 'sensitive'

LONDON: Liverpool forward Mohamed Salah admits his protracted contract talks with the quadruple chasers are a "sensitive situation". Salah has 16 months left on his current contract and the Egypt star is reportedly demanding a deal that would make him the Premier League's top earner. Ahead of Sunday's crucial clash with Premier League leaders Manchester City, Salah conceded it was a delicate issue for all concerned but insisted he would not be a distraction

to Liverpool's title charge.

Jürgen Klopp's side are one point behind leaders City with eight games left. Salah has only one goal in his last seven matches, but has netted 28 times in all competitions for Liverpool this term. "There are many things that people don't know about it. I can't be selfish and talk about my situation because we are in the most important situation that is coming for the team," Salah told Sky Sports News on Friday.

"I've said many times what I want but I can't really go deep into the contract now because it is a sensitive situation. I can't go in the news and talk about the contract now, I am just focused on the team. That is the most important thing for me, being focused to win trophies and I'm just giving everything for the club." — AFP