



5 Zionists launch new raids in flashpoint W Bank city



16 Man City and Liverpool seek perfection in push for glory



Ramadan Timings	
Fajr	04:04
Shurooq	05:26
Dhuhr	11:49
Asr	15:23
Maghrib	18:12
Isha	19:32



VOLVO

'Thousands' killed; Ukraine braces for fall of Mariupol

Over 1,200 bodies found; EU eyes sixth round of sanctions



ANDRIIVKA: Workers exhume a body of a civilian man buried in the yard of his house in Andriivka village, Kyiv region, on April 11, 2022. — AFP

KRAMATORSK: Ukraine steeled itself on Monday for what could be the imminent fall of Mariupol to Russian troops as President Volodymyr Zelensky said he believed "tens of thousands" of people had been killed in Moscow's assault on the strategic southern port city. With the war grinding toward its seventh week, Ukrainian forces said they were also bolstering their positions in the east ahead of an anticipated massive Russian campaign.

Austria's chancellor meanwhile became the first European leader to visit Moscow since the Russian invasion, saying he would raise alleged war crimes in devastated areas around Kyiv that had been under Russian occupation. Ukrainian authorities say over 1,200 bodies have been found in the area so far and that they are weighing cases against "500 suspects", including President Vladimir Putin and other top Russian officials.

French investigators arrived in Ukraine to help probe suspected Russian atrocities in the area, as the European Union earmarked 2.5 million euros (\$2.7 million) to the International Criminal Court for future Ukraine cases. Russia is believed to be trying to link up occupied Crimea and Moscow-backed separatist territories Donetsk and Lugansk in Donbas and has laid siege to Mariupol, once a city of more than 400,000 people.

"Today will probably be the last battle, as the

ammunition is running out," the 36th marine brigade of the Ukrainian armed forces said on Facebook. "It's death for some of us, and captivity for the rest," it added, saying it had been "pushed back" and "surrounded" by the Russian army. A pro-Russia rebel leader, Denis Pushilin, said separatist forces had already taken control of the city's port, in comments reported by the RIA Novosti news agency. Speaking to South Korea's National Assembly by video link in an appeal for military assistance, Zelensky said Russia had "completely destroyed" the city and "burned it to ashes".

"At least tens of thousands of Mariupol citizens must have been killed," he said. Russian forces are also turning their focus to the Donbas region in the east, where Zelensky said Russian troops were preparing "even larger operations". "They can use even more missiles against us... But we are preparing for their actions. We will answer," Zelensky said. Lugansk governor Serhiy Gaiday warned that the region could suffer as badly as Mariupol.

Over the weekend, further strikes hampered evacuations in and around Kharkiv in the northeast, killing 11 people including a seven-year-old child, regional governor Oleg Syneghubov said. "The Russian army continues to wage war on civilians due to a lack of victories at the front," he said

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Ramadan Kareem

Loving Beneficent Allah - (Part 2)

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.

According to scholars of Islamic Jurisprudence, there are ten ways in which to prove our love for the Almighty Allah. In this article, I will share the third and fourth among those ten ways, and will share the others in subsequent articles, so keep reading.

(3) Remember our Provider, Allah, by always mentioning His name, praising Him, glorifying Him, thanking Him, asking for forgiveness, and being aware that He is watching over you. Almighty Allah says what can be translated as: "Still those who disbelieve say (of you, O Prophet): 'If only a (miraculous) sign would be sent down to him from His Lord, then we would believe him.' Say (to them): 'Indeed, Allah leaves to stray whomever He wills.'

Yet He guides to Himself whoever turns to Him (in penitence.) Those are the ones who (truly) believe (in Allah) and whose hearts grow calm (with assurance) at the remembrance of Allah. Most assuredly, it is by the remembrance of Allah that hearts grow calm." (Ar-Ra'd 13:27-28)

It is not due to a lack of signs and miracles that polytheists and hypocrites do not find the right path, but rather, it is due to the lack of any desire in their hearts and minds to follow the truth. They do not see any of the countless signs and miracles that lie scattered all around them because they have no desire to follow the Right Path. (Refer to www.quran7m.com)

Abdullah bin Busr (ra) narrated that a man asked the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) what can be translated as: "O Messenger of Allah, indeed, the (supererogatory) injunctions of Islam are too many for me (to observe), so tell me of something to cling to." He replied, "Your tongue should

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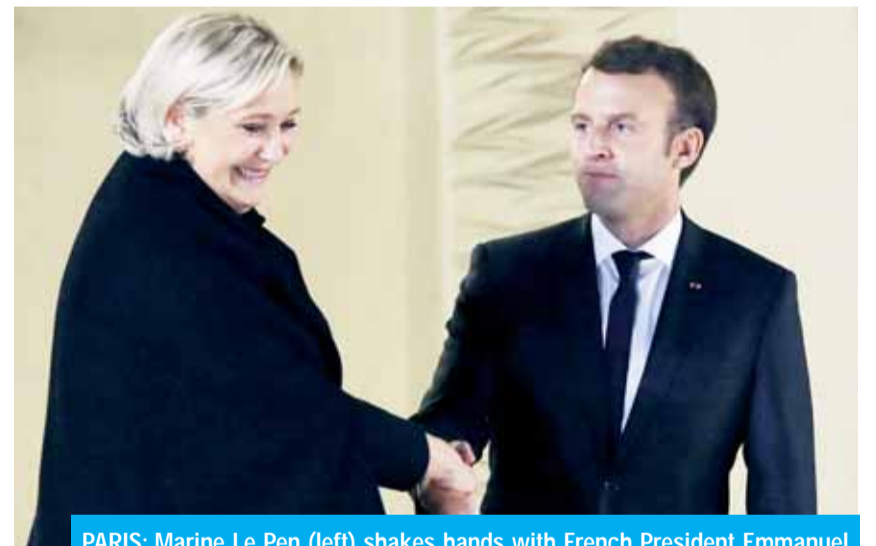
France's Macron, Le Pen face off in election run-off

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron Monday embarked on a final fortnight of bruising campaigning against far-right rival Marine Le Pen for a French presidential election run-off whose outcome is far more uncertain than their encounter five years ago. With final results in, Macron came first in Sunday's first round of voting with 27.85 percent. Le Pen was second with 23.15 percent. As the top two finishers, they advance to a second round on April 24.

Far-left candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon came close, after a late surge gave him a score of just under 22 percent. The duel between Macron and Le Pen is a re-run of the 2017 election final from which Macron emerged victorious with 66 percent - but this time polls predict a closer contest which will crucially hinge on voters who backed other candidates in the first round.

Making an aggressive start to the next phase of the campaign, Macron visited Denain, a small town in northern France where he came only third on Sunday behind Le Pen and Melenchon. "I am here today to convince but also to listen," said Macron, who is sometimes labeled "president of the rich" by opponents, as he

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PARIS: Marine Le Pen (left) shakes hands with French President Emmanuel Macron after their meeting at the Elysee palace in this file photo. — AFP

Landslides and flooding kill 24 in Philippines

ABUYOG: At least 24 people have been killed in landslides and flooding across central and southern Philippines, authorities said Monday, after tropical storm Megi dumped heavy rain and disrupted travel ahead of the Easter holidays. More than 13,000 people fled to emergency shelters as the storm pounded the region Sunday, the national disaster agency said,

flooding houses, inundating fields, cutting off roads and knocking out power. The central province of Leyte was among the hardest hit, with landslides leaving 21 people dead in four villages, Baybay City disaster officer Rhyse Austero told AFP.

Leyte's death toll adds to another three people killed on the main southern island of Mindanao, the national disaster agency said. Photos posted on Facebook and verified by AFP show several houses buried in mud up to the rooftops in Bunga, one of the affected villages in Leyte. "Yesterday the rain was so hard, it was non-stop for more than 24 hours," resident Hannah Cala Vitangcol told AFP.

The 26-year-old teacher fled with her family to a hotel Monday after waking to find nearby homes had

been covered in an avalanche of mud. "I was crying because I know the people buried there and I was also scared because there were mountains behind our house," she said. Baybay City council member Mark Unlu-cay posted photos on Facebook showing survivors from another village, Kantagnos, being treated in hospital. "It seems like the entire community... was badly hit by the landslide and the riverflow," he said. Unlu-cay said he feared the death toll could rise after receiving reports that other villages had also been inundated by the waves of earth and mud. Philippine Coast Guard and police personnel rescued people from their homes in the flooded town of Abuyog, carrying residents onto orange stretchers laid on floating boats.

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Pakistan MPs elect Sharif as new PM

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan lawmakers on Monday elected Shehbaz Sharif as the country's new prime minister following the weekend ouster of Imran Khan, who resigned his national assembly seat - along with most of his party members - ahead of the vote. Khan was dismissed Sunday after losing a no-confidence vote, paving the way for an unlikely alliance that faces the same issues which bedeviled the cricket star-turned-politician.

Sharif, leader of the centrist Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) was the only candidate after Khan loyalist Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the former for-

eign minister, withdrew his candidacy and resigned his seat. "It's a victory of righteousness, and evil has been defeated," Sharif said to cheers from lawmakers.

Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party had 155 lawmakers in the 342-seat chamber before the mass resignations, and Sharif was elected with 174 votes. His first task will be to form a cabinet that will also draw heavily from the centre-left Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), as well as find space for the smaller conservative Jamiat-ulema-e-Islam-F (JUI-F) group.

The PPP and PML-N are dynastic parties that have dominated Pakistani politics for decades - usually as bitter rivals - but their relations are sure to fray in the lead-up to the next election, which must be held by October 2023. They need to tackle soaring inflation, a feeble rupee and crippling debt, while militancy is also on the rise - with Pakistan's Taliban emboldened by

Continued on Page 6



ISLAMABAD: In this file photo, Pakistan's opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif gestures as he speaks during a news conference in Islamabad. — AFP

Local

Kuwait qualifies for International SeaPerch Challenge for first time

Team ranked first in regional challenge held in UAE



KUWAIT: Members of the Kuwaiti Team Blue Tech Youth Valley celebrate qualifying for the finals of the annual International SeaPerch Challenge.



Members of the Kuwaiti Team Blue Tech Youth Valley pose with their ticket to the International SeaPerch Challenge.



Members of the Kuwaiti Team Blue Tech Youth Valley hold Kuwait's flag.



Members of the Kuwaiti Team Blue Tech Youth Valley in action.



By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: For the first time, Kuwait qualified for the finals of the annual International SeaPerch Challenge in Maryland, US. The Kuwaiti Team Blue Tech Youth Valley, consisting of three players: Hawraa Merza, Talal Al-Hezami and Mohammed Al-Bahar, their trainers Mohammed Al-Dafeeri and his assistant Maram Al-Salman of the Public Authority for Youth, ranked first at the regional SeaPerch challenge held last month in the UAE. They also received the Best Maneuver prize among more than 30 participating teams.

"This competition focuses on science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Naval engineering is the focus of the challenge, in addition to the participants experiencing the design and implementation of a remotely-operated robotic submarine using the basics of ship and submarine design and some physics rules to execute certain submarine missions as this year's challenge," Merza told Kuwait Times.

She expressed her happiness to be part of the first and only Kuwaiti team participating in this competition. "Every year this championship is held without a Kuwaiti team. I feel very proud and excited, especially as this is our first participation and we won this challenge and ranked first, in addition to

winning one of the prizes," gushed Merza.

When she participated at the Expo Science Dubai 2022, one of the activities was the underwater robotics workshop. "At this workshop they presented the SeaPerch challenge. So, I sent it to our team in Kuwait, who read all the details about this challenge. We then registered to participate. We



**Third best team
among 200
worldwide**

only prepared for the championship for a week, while the other teams were preparing for months before the championship. Yet we achieved the full score in all missions in the shortest time when writing the report and giving the presentation," Merza explained.

"After this win, our team has qualified for the International SeaPerch Challenge that will be held in



June 2022 in the United States. We also qualified as the third best team in the world among over 200 other teams," she pointed out. "Our team is planning, in cooperation with the Public Authority for Youth, to form and train new Kuwaiti teams this

summer to increase our participation in international championships. We will be the first trainers of this competition in Kuwait. We will train the teams to participate regionally, then internationally," concluded Merza.

Crescents, stars adorn households in Kuwait celebrating Ramadan nights



KUWAIT: Crescent moon and star-shaped electric lights, of various colors and sizes, adorn Kuwaiti households and paint a joyful scene in celebration of the holy month of Ramadan. Decorating household exteriors to reflect either general occasions or private celebrations is a phenomenon that is gradually spreading over the years. — KUNA photos

Local

Interior Minister chairs meeting with top Kuwait Fire Force officials

Sheikh Ahmad conveys leadership's appreciation for firemen's sacrifice



KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Lt Gen Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah arrives to attend a meeting with senior Kuwait Fire Force officials.



KFF Chief Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mekrad gives a presentation during the meeting.

KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Lt Gen Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah chaired Monday a meeting with senior Kuwait Fire Force officials to discuss the mechanism of work and the level of coordination and readiness among all KFF sectors. KFF Chief Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mekrad, his deputies and other sen-

ior officials were present at the meeting, the Interior Ministry said in a press statement.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf started the meeting by welcoming the attendees and conveying to them greetings of the political leadership and appreciation for their efforts to protect lives and property and maintain security in the country. Furthermore,

the Interior Minister gave orders to pay performance and excellence bonuses, in addition to cash allowances for leave balance before the Eid Al-Fitr holiday "in appreciation of the great role played by the firefighters," the ministry said.

KFF deputy chiefs reviewed during the meeting current and future work plans and stages of

development in each sector. They also made a presentation for a summary of accidents reported recently and how firefighters dealt with them, the statement adds. Moreover, the meeting reviewed ways of cooperation and coordination between KFF and different state departments, the ministry concluded.

Firemen battle Abu Halaifa store fire

KUWAIT: Firemen put out a blaze reported in a clothes store at a mall in Abu Halaifa at dawn Monday. Mangaf, Fahaheel and Qurain firemen arrived at the scene in response to an emergency call, then evacuated the place and put out the fire, Kuwait Fire Force said, noting that no injuries were reported in the incident. An investigation was opened to reveal the cause of the fire, it added.



Five women, three children saved from burning Jahra house

KUWAIT: Jahra firemen rescued five women and three children who were trapped behind flames in the first floor of a house in Jahra. Paramedics treated some of the evacuees from smoke inhalation on site. A case was filed for investigations, Kuwait Fire Force said.



Violators arrested in Rai crackdown



KUWAIT: Residency detectives carried out a campaign in Rai area targeting residency law violators. The campaign resulted in the arrest of 37 violators, 20 absconders, 14 people with

expired residencies and three without IDs. They were sent to concerned authorities for further legal action, the Interior Ministry said in a statement.

On the occasion of the



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News in brief

Kuwaiti, Saudi ministers
discuss security cooperation

KUWAIT: Kuwait's First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah spoke on Sunday with his Saudi Minister of Interior Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayf on issues of common interest and ways to promote the joint security action. During the phone conversation, both sides exchanged Ramadan greetings and expressed wishes for more prosperity for both sisterly countries, according to a press release from the General Directorate of Security Relations and Media of Kuwait's Ministry of Interior.

Agency OKs \$5 million tender

KUWAIT: The Heavy Engineering Industries and Shipbuilding Company announced on Monday that the board of the Central Agency for Public Tenders approved a tender for service of the ministry of electricity and water at a value of KD 1.5 million (\$5.1 million). The company said in a statement posted on Boursa Kuwait website that the tender envisages installing workshops' equipment, supplying raw materials to the South Al-Zour Station for generating power and desalinating water. It was established in 1974 and was listed at the bourse in 1984. With a capital amounting to KD 22 million (\$74.8 million), the company builds, repairs ships and executes various marine operations.

US Dollar up to KD 0.304

KUWAIT: The US dollar went up on Monday by 0.03 percent, trading at KD 0.304, and the Euro rose by 0.09 percent settling at KD 0.331 compared with Sunday's rate. The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said in its daily bulletin the British sterling pound was down by 0.24 percent to reach KD 0.396, the Swiss franc dropped by 0.16 percent to KD 0.325, while the Japanese Yen moved down by 0.78 percent to settle at KD 0.0024. The CBK publishes daily average exchange rates that do not necessarily reflect actual prices of the currencies' trade for the day.

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: The meat market in the early '60s. (Source: Collection of Ali Al-Rais, center of research and studies on Kuwait, 2017. Prepared by Mahmoud Zakaria Abu Alella, heritage researcher at the Ministry of Information)

KFH distributes iftar meals
at various locations in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House "KFH" continued its endeavor to distribute Ramadan iftar meals in collaboration with Kuwait Red Crescent Society as part of its campaign "increase good deeds in Ramadan" which comprises several social events and activities.

KFH voluntary team was present with Red Crescent Team at various locations in Kuwait to cover the largest possible number of fasting people in those locations. This initiative, which KFH is accustomed to performing annually, reiterates KFH commitment to social responsibility and the keenness to enhance voluntary spirit and contribute to enhancing and strengthening the concept of giving.

KFH Ramadan program "increase good deeds in Ramadan" comprises several social activities and contributions, awareness initiatives, communication with the public, Quran competitions and sporting youth events, in collaboration with V-Thru to affirm KFH leadership in all aspects of social responsibility and the continued efforts to enhance initiatives which better serve society.

KFH signed a collaboration agreement with Kuwait Red Crescent Society to support needy families in Kuwait with consumer and food items basket during the holy month of Ramadan. The



KUWAIT: KFH voluntary team and Kuwait Red Crescent Society officials.

agreement is a continuation of the partnership with Kuwait Red Crescent Society which has produced several social and human projects and initiatives inside and outside Kuwait.

KFH's social efforts are compatible with its strategy to achieve sustainable growth and reflects its

keenness to perform its social role as a leading financial institution at the private sector level while observing the significance of confuting the social voluntary teamwork and intensifying efforts during the month of Ramadan to better serve all society segments.



Rania Abulhasan with VIV General Manager Laila Al-Mukhtar.



Rania Abulhasan's artwork.



Rania Abulhasan's exhibition.

VIV Terminal showcases contemporary
Kuwaiti artist Rania Abulhasan

KUWAIT: Contemporary Kuwaiti artist and designer, Rania Abulhasan, on Monday inaugurated her latest art exhibition at the VIV Terminal, the first private terminal to offer a luxury experience in Kuwait.

Until the end of the summer season, guests travelling through the VIV Terminal will be able to enjoy Abulhasan's artworks. The exhibition is the first to be curated at the Terminal as well as in a terminal at Kuwait International Airport. It comes as part of the VIV's aim to promote local artists and engage its guests with new unique experiences.

According to the VIV Terminal General Manager, Laila Al-Mukhtar, the art exhibition at The VIV gives our guests an even more unique and exclusive travel experience through Kuwait International Airport.

She added: "The VIV Terminal is all about making our guests' travel journey faster and more comfortable by taking care of all their airport procedures in one place. Guests are therefore left to enjoy the unique services and facilities we offer, including such beautiful exhibitions in which we connect artists with our guests."

Abulhasan is showcasing a selection of her con-

temporary art. It is very modern yet respectful of Kuwait's heritage and the past. Her work is strongly influenced by her experience of fashion and product design: she emphasizes life and movement, using shapes and vibrant colors to express her ideas and communicate her message.

Speaking of her art, Abulhasan explained: "I like to create timeless pieces that can go on and evolve with time. All the pieces that I work on are special to me. They start with an idea, emotion or just a visual inspiration and go from there."

The VIV Terminal is the ideal start and end to a business trip or holiday getaway with services that make the travel journey easier and faster by ensuring that all airport procedures are taken care of by the VIV team while guests enjoy the privacy and safety this service provides.



Rania Abulhasan tours the exhibition.



KUWAIT: Rania Abulhasan at the inauguration of her exhibition at VIV Terminal.



Abolish or rebrand?
South Korea's feminist
ministry in crosshairs

Mexican president wins recall vote marked by low turnout



KARACHI, Pakistan: Supporters of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party of dismissed Pakistan's prime minister Imran Khan, wave placards as they take part in a rally in his support in Karachi. —AFP

Sharif steps out of shadows to lead Pakistan

A seasoned politician in his own right

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan: Shehbaz Sharif, who became Pakistan's new prime minister Monday after leading the opposition alliance that ousted Imran Khan, is a tough administrator with a penchant for quoting revolutionary poetry.

Sharif is the younger brother of three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was dismissed then jailed on corruption charges in 2017 and is currently in Britain after being released from prison two years later for medical treatment.

He is a seasoned politician in his own right, however, having served for years as chief minister of Punjab province, the Sharif family's power base, and also president of the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N). The 70-year-old jointly inherited the family's steel business as a young man and was first elected to provincial office in 1988.

During his stints as chief minister in the years that followed, he presided over a series of big-ticket infrastructure projects, including Pakistan's first metro bus service. Officials were reportedly kept on their toes by workaholic Sharif's habit of surprise visits to government offices, which he would inspect clad in a favoured safari suit and hat.

Still, critics say he did little to address the province's core issues—including the need for civil

service, health and agricultural reforms—and instead focused on vote-grabbing projects, such as distributing laptops to students or offering subsidised taxis to the jobless.

Free on bail

Sharif has also been linked to graft and corruption-charges supporters say sprang from a political



A more flexible dealmaker

vendetta by Khan. In December 2019, the National Accountability Bureau seized nearly two dozen properties belonging to Sharif and his son Hamza, accusing them of money laundering.

He was arrested and detained in September

2020, but released around six months later on bail for a trial which is still pending. Unlike his elder brother-whose relations with the country's powerful military and his opponents were strained—Sharif is seen as a more flexible dealmaker, capable of compromising even with his enemies.

Pakistan's military is the country's most powerful institution and has ruled the nation for nearly half its history—and pulls the strings even when not actually ruling. "I have always remained a strong supporter of effective coordination between Islamabad and Rawalpindi," Sharif said, referring to the administrative capital and the nearby military headquarters.

Sharif remains popular despite lurid tabloid headlines about multiple marriages and a property portfolio that includes luxury apartments in London and Dubai. His current marriage, to author Tehmina Durrani, has largely ended the gossip.

Durrani, a feminist whose book "My Feudal Lord" earned her international acclaim, is also credited with improving Sharif's respect for women. Tough economic and security challenges await Sharif as he inherits a stagnant economy and escalating violence from Pakistan's Taliban and Balochistan separatists. —AFP

Iran questions US will to reach nuclear talks deal

TEHRAN: Tehran on Monday questioned Washington's will in reaching an agreement to restore the 2015 nuclear agreement, with key sticking points unresolved after talks halted last month. Iran has been engaged for a year in negotiations with France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China directly, and the United States indirectly to revive the deal, known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Negotiations in the Austrian capital Vienna aim to return the United States to the nuclear deal, including through the lifting of sanctions on Iran, and to ensure Tehran's full compliance with its commitments. "We really don't know if we'll get a deal or not, because the United States hasn't shown the necessary will to reach an agreement," Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

"What remains are the decisions of Washington," he added. Earlier this month, Khatibzadeh's counterpart in the State Department Ned Price said it was Tehran that was not giving way to make a deal possible, but that Washington still believed there was "opportunity to overcome our remaining differences."

The 2015 agreement gave Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme to guarantee that Tehran could not develop a nuclear weapon—something it has always denied wanting to do.

But the US unilateral withdrawal from the accord in 2018 under then-president Donald Trump and the reimposition of biting economic sanctions under a "maximum pressure" campaign prompted Iran to begin rolling back on its own commitments. "All components of maximum pressure must be removed," Khatibzadeh said.

"Unfortunately, the United States is trying to maintain some of the elements of maximum pressure," he added. The talks have been paused since March 11 after Russia demanded guarantees that Western sanctions imposed following its February 24 invasion of Ukraine would not damage its trade with Iran.

Days later, Moscow said it had received the necessary guarantees. The negotiations had progressed most of the way toward reviving the deal, with different parties pointing to the "final phase", but pending issues are still unresolved.

"More than one issue is remaining between us and the United States," Khatibzadeh added. Among the key sticking points is Tehran's demand to delist the Revolutionary Guards, the ideological arm of Iran's military, from a US terror list.

Last month, US negotiator Rob Malley said the Guards would remain "sanctioned by American law" even in the event of an agreement. "What is important to us is the certain benefit of the Iranian people from the lifting of the sanctions," Khatibzadeh said. —AFP

French Greens face crisis after failed presidential bid

PARIS: France's Green party were facing a financial and political crisis on Monday after a deeply disappointing presidential election saw their candidate finish sixth and struggle to put climate change on the national agenda. Yannick Jadot from the Europe Ecology-The Greens party (EELV) was eliminated in Sunday's first round with a score of around 4.6 percent, following a campaign that never gathered momentum.

Under French campaign financing rules, only candidates who score above 5.0 percent have their expenses reimbursed by the state, leaving the Greens with a huge hole in their accounts. "The situation is critical and the fact that we came below the bar of five percent puts us in a very, very difficult situation," national secretary Julien Bayou told France Inter radio on Monday.

He appealed for donations from those who backed the party, as well as others "who would have liked to vote for Yannick Jadot and perhaps voted for another candidate." "We need this support to be able to con-

tinue to ensure the ecology movement lives on," Bayou added.

President Emmanuel Macron finished top in Sunday's vote on around 27.6 percent followed by far-right leader Marine Le Pen on 23.4 percent, with the pair set to contest a run-off vote scheduled for April 24.

EELV was not the only party appealing for financial help on Monday, with the once-mighty right-wing Republicans also facing a 7.0-million-euro (\$7.6 million) hole in their finances after their candidate, Valerie Pécresse, scored just under 5.0 percent on Sunday.

The performance from Jadot, a former Greenpeace executive, spelled bitter disappointment for his party which was hoping to build on successes in local elections last year which saw them sweep major cities from Lyon to Bordeaux. Germany's historically more powerful Green party entered government after elections last year and controls several ministries and key posts in the cabinet, including the foreign minister role.

'Enormous disappointment'

Jadot scored slightly better than the last ecologist candidate to stand—Eva Joly with 2.3 percent in 2012—but less well than Noel Mamere in 2002 who secured 5.25 percent despite the stakes for the planet being

the West Bank, said a military source, speaking on condition of anonymity. In Jenin, thousands of mourners flooded the streets, many carrying Palestinian flags or rifles, for the funeral of Mohamed Zakarneh, 17, who according to the Wafa news agency died of gunshot wounds overnight.

"The resistance is in direct confrontation with the occupation and any minute we must expect a total clash," said Ziad al-Nakhala, secretary general of the militant Islamic Jihad movement, in a statement. "Jenin must not be isolated, no matter the cost."

The Zionist army said it operated nearby Monday, in Burqa and Qallil in the northern West Bank, as well as in Al-Aroub and Hebron in the south. "Violent riots were instigated by dozens of Palestinians" near Nablus, the army said, while the Palestine Red Crescent said 24 Palestinians were wounded in the Nablus area overnight. Jenin, as well as Bethlehem in the southern West Bank, declared general strikes, shuttering shops, offices and official institutions.



TOULOUSE: Photograph taken in Toulouse, on April 10, 2022 shows screens displaying TV shows showing the projected results after the close of polling stations in the first round of the French presidential election. —AFP

much higher in 2022.

In a concession speech on Sunday night, Jadot said his programme sought to respond to the challenges posed by climate change, as well as growing economic inequalities in France. "It's an understatement to say that these vital challenges—vital for our country, vital for us and our children—were largely ignored in a campaign that was confiscated," he said. —AFP

Weeks of violence

Tensions have surged during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, nearly a year after violence flared in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, leading to 11 days of war. A total of 14 people in Zionist entity have been killed in four attacks since March 22, including a shooting spree in Bnei Brak, an Orthodox Jewish city in greater Tel Aviv, carried out by a Palestinian from Jenin.

Over the same period, at least 14 Palestinians have been killed, including assailants, according to a count by AFP. Two of them were women shot dead on Sunday—one after stabbing and lightly wounding an officer in Hebron, the other when she failed to stop at a checkpoint near Bethlehem.

The military source said 30 Palestinian suspects were apprehended in the past few days, and 16 attacks against Zionists targets foiled. Islamic Jihad has been growing in strength and capability both in Gaza and the West Bank, and especially in Jenin, according to the Zionist military source. —AFP

Zionist army launches new raids around flashpoint West Bank

JENIN, Palestinian Territories: Zionist forces launched a third day of operations Monday around the flashpoint West Bank city of Jenin following heavy gun battles in recent days and overnight arrests, the army said. Tensions have soared since a spree of attacks that left 14 people dead in the past three weeks, with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett warning the Jewish state is now "on the offensive".

The Zionist army said 14 Palestinians were arrested early Monday, a day after four Palestinians were killed in separate incidents in the occupied territory. An additional 13 army battalions were now operating in

International

Mexican president wins recall vote marked by low turnout

'I'm going to continue serving until the last day of my term'

MEXICO CITY, Mexico: Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on Sunday easily won a divisive referendum he promoted on whether he should step down or complete his term—a vote marked by low turnout. With an approval rating of nearly 60 percent, Lopez Obrador's presidency had never appeared seriously at risk, and the left-wing populist was himself one of the vote's biggest cheerleaders.



'We have the chance to change what's not right'

The 68-year-old president, elected in 2018 for a six-year term, won slightly more than 90 percent of votes in favor of his staying in office until 2024, according to an official initial count. But the turnout rate was estimated to be no more than around 18 percent, well below the 40-percent level needed for the poll to be legally binding.

That means that even if Lopez Obrador had lost, he would not have been obliged to step down. Lopez Obrador ruled out using the result to pursue a constitutional reform allowing him to seek another term, as some critics have accused him of planning to do.

"I'm going to continue serving until the last day of my term. I'm not going to go past that because I'm a democrat and I'm not in favor of re-election," he said in a video message. Supporters of the referendum—the first of its kind in Mexico—said it was a way of increasing democratic accountability, giving voters the oppor-

tunity to remove the president due to loss of confidence.

"Now we have the chance to change what's not right. There have been presidents who, after being elected by the people, ended up serving other interests," Benigno Gasca, a 57-year-old mathematician and musician, told AFP.

'Useless exercise'

But critics saw the referendum as expensive propaganda and an unnecessary distraction from the many challenges facing the country, including drug-related violence, poverty and the rising cost of living. "It's a useless exercise—money thrown away," said Laura Gonzalez, a 62-year-old retired teacher.

Mario Delgado, leader of the ruling party Morena, said voters had recognized Lopez Obrador's "dedication to the most needy and the enormous moral authority with which he governs." "Only an indomitable, unwavering democrat like him can subject himself to a recall process," he added.

But Marko Cortes, of the conservative opposition party PAN, said the vote was marked "by illegality, lies, manipulation and the diversion of public resources." Alejandro Moreno of the PRI, which ruled Mexico for seven decades until 2000, tweeted that Morena had turned the referendum into a "mockery" to "satisfy its own ego and continue deceiving Mexicans."

'Political muscle'

Some 93 million voters were eligible to participate in the midterm referendum, which was incorporated into Mexico's constitution in 2019 at Lopez Obrador's initiative. Most of the signatures that were collected in order for the vote to happen came from his supporters.

Experts had predicted that a win could give impetus to Lopez Obrador's policy agenda, such as controver-



MEXICO CITY: Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (L) and his wife Beatriz Gutierrez show their voter ID after voting at a polling station during the national consultation on the revocation of his mandate in Mexico City. —AFP

sial energy reforms. The president also has his eye on the 2024 elections and the prospects for his party and possible successors, including Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum.

"We all knew that the president was not going to be removed and his opponents were not going to vote," said political analyst Hernan Gomez Bruera. Despite the high abstention rate, the referendum showed that Lopez Obrador and his followers have "political muscle" to mobilize support, he told AFP.

"The real litmus test will be in 2024 when he leaves, because no one seems capable of taking his

leadership place," Bruera added. Lopez Obrador enjoyed an approval rating of 58 percent in March, although that was far below a peak of 81 percent seen in February 2019, according to a poll of polls by the Oraculus firm.

Carmen Sobrino, a 64-year-old housewife, said she heeded the call to vote because she was happy with Lopez Obrador. "I hope he continues," she said after casting her ballot in the capital. The president accused the National Electoral Institute before the vote of sabotaging the exercise in collusion with his political opponents by failing to do enough to promote it. —AFP

Fears for traumatised N Ireland veterans fighting in Ukraine

NEWTOWNARDS, United Kingdom: In the first weeks of the war in Ukraine, 16 veterans treated by Robert McCartney, a counsellor for British former military personnel from Northern Ireland, travelled to join the fighting against Russia. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called at the outset of the war in February for an "international legion" to join the defence against the Russian invasion.

Many, including members of the Ukrainian diaspora, answered the call with little to no military training. But some, like the veterans McCartney counsels, wanted to bring their years of military experience to bear despite suffering conditions including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "They could be in a ditch, they could be seriously injured and their parents are back here, their families are back here, and nobody knows what's happened to them," McCartney told AFP. The veterans were sometimes haunted by their own demons from Britain's recent con-

licts. "There's so many questions that they've asked themselves from Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan," the 63-year-old counsellor said. "They're always questioning themselves: 'Was someone killed because of me? Did I have my head down when I should have been putting rounds down?'"

'Verge of losing everything'

McCartney explained that for these reasons, when the conflict erupted in Ukraine, there was a high number of ex-servicemen coming through his door wanting to go off to fight. "And we persuaded a lot of them to stay. But obviously the ones that are there are there, and they're there for their own reasons—but at the same time it's not the right reasons to go to war."

Beyond The Battlefield, the charity that McCartney heads based in Newtownards, 10 miles (16 kilometres) outside Belfast, treated 854 veterans last year. The charity offers counselling



NEWTOWNARDS, United Kingdom: Former soldier and chairman of the Veteran's Charity association in Northern Ireland "Beyond the Battlefield", Robert McCartney, poses for pictures in his office in Newtownards, county of Down. —AFP

but also helps veterans with support for housing or to seek compensation they may be due from the armed forces.

McCartney is a former Royal Irish Ranger and a veteran of Britain's war in the Falkland Islands 40 years ago. He says that when former personnel are referred to him, they are "on the verge of losing everything" and often "on the thought process side of suicide".

Calls for military personnel to join

the fight in Ukraine have flooded social media channels used by veterans. "I think there's a lot of people who maybe do have PTSD that have heard about going out," said James Girvan, who served the British army in Iraq and Afghanistan. Girvan said social media was a vital tool for ex-servicemen to stay in touch with those who have gone. Fears for friends' safety grew when posts and messages stopped. —AFP

'Thousands' killed; Ukraine braces...

Continued from Page 1

on Telegram. In Dnipro, an industrial city of around one million inhabitants, Russian missiles rained down on the local airport, nearly obliterating the facility, local authorities said.

Gaiday said a missile strike on a railway station in the city of Kramatorsk on Friday, which killed 57 people, had left many afraid to flee. He again urged people to leave the region, with five humanitarian corridors agreed for Monday. "You are alive because a Russian shell has not yet hit your house or basement—evacuate, buses are waiting, our military routes are as secure as possible," he wrote on Telegram. Russia has denied carrying out the strike.

Over the weekend, nearly 50 wounded and elderly patients were transported from the east in a hospital train by medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF), the first such evacuation since the Kramatorsk attack. Electrician Evhen Perepelytsia was rescued after he lost his leg in shelling in his hometown of Hirsk. "We hope that the worst is over—that after what I've been through, it will be better," said the 30-year-old after arriving in the western city of Lviv.

On the diplomatic front, EU foreign ministers were meeting Monday to discuss a sixth round of sanctions,

with concerns that divisions over a ban on Russia gas and oil imports could blunt their impact. Austria is an EU member, but does not belong to NATO, and Chancellor Karl Nehammer's spokesman said Brussels, Berlin and Kyiv had been informed about the talks with Putin, held at the president's residence in Moscow.

Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg said earlier that Nehammer would tell Putin that he "is isolating Russia, that he will lose this war morally, and that he is doing everything wrong that can be done wrong". US President Joe Biden meanwhile will hold virtual talks on Monday with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, just weeks after saying New Delhi had been "shaky" in its response to the invasion.

A US spokeswoman said the two leaders would consult on ways to offset the "destabilizing impact (of the war) on global food supply and commodity markets". Russia was responsible for an escalating global food crisis because of its bombing of wheat stocks and preventing ships from carrying grain abroad, the EU's top diplomat Josep Borrell said Monday. The World Bank warned Sunday that Ukraine's economy would collapse by 45 percent this year—far worse than it predicted even a month ago—while Russia would see an 11-percent decline in GDP.

Despite Kyiv's allegations of Russian atrocities, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on Sunday told NBC's "Meet the Press" he was still open to negotiating with Moscow. "If sitting down with the Russians will help me to prevent at least one massacre like in Bucha, or at least another attack like in Kramatorsk, I have to take that opportunity," he said. —AFP

stretch up to the mountains in height." (Al-Isra'a 17: 37) This means your gait, dress, dwelling and means of transportation - among others - should denote humility and not pride. (Refer to www.quran7m.com) Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said what can be translated as: "Charity does not decrease wealth, and Allah increases the honor of him who forgives, and no one humbles himself for Allah's sake except that Allah raises his status." (Muslim # 2, 588)

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.

Landslides and flooding kill 24...

Continued from Page 1

Baybay City council member Mark Unlu-cay posted photos on Facebook showing survivors from another village, Kantagnos, being treated in hospital.

"It seems like the entire community... was badly hit by the landslide and the riverflow," he said. Unlu-cay said he feared the death toll could rise after receiving reports that other villages had also been inundated by the waves of earth and mud. Philippine Coast Guard and police personnel rescued people from their homes in the flooded town of Abuyog, car-

France's Macron, Le Pen face off...

Continued from Page 1

walked about in the town. "I hear the divisions and the splits and it's my job to rally people around," he said, adding that he would reach out to all the first round losers over coming days. Le Monde daily headlined: "Macron-Le Pen—A more uncertain Act II."

Le Pen is set to meet her campaign team before resuming her months-long grassroots efforts in small towns and rural France later in the week. "A sad repetition," left-leaning daily Liberation called the Macron-Le Pen duel on Monday, adding: "This time it's really scary." Polls gauging second-round voting intentions mostly point to around 53 percent for Macron and 47 percent for Le Pen. One poll, however, by the Ifop-

Pakistan MPs...

Continued from Page 1

the return to power last year of the hardline Islamist group in neighboring Afghanistan.

Shehbaz Sharif is the younger brother of disgraced three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif, and Pakistan media are already speculating the latter may soon return

rying residents onto orange stretchers laid on floating boats.

Tropical storm Megi-known in the Philippines by its local name Agaton-is the first major storm to hit the disaster-prone country this year. Whipping up seas, it forced dozens of ports to suspend operations and stranded nearly 6,000 people at the start of one of the busiest travel periods of the year.

The Philippines re-opened to fully vaccinated tourists from most countries in February after lifting most Covid-19 restrictions, and Easter is a popular holiday for domestic tourists. The storm comes four months after a super typhoon devastated swathes of the archipelago nation, killing more than 400 people and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Rai, the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines last year, intensified faster than expected, officials said previously. —AFP

Fiducial group suggested Macron could have only a razor-thin win with 51 percent versus 49 percent.

"The second round is the hardest one," said Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire on RTL radio. "Everything begins again with a new campaign." Both candidates will now scramble to woo voters of their defeated first-round rivals. "We're going to have to win over the French people who didn't vote for Emmanuel Macron in the first round," government spokesman Gabriel Attal told the France Inter broadcaster on Monday.

In an early boost for the president, Communist Party candidate Fabien Roussel, Socialist Anne Hidalgo, Yannick Jadot of the Greens and right-wing Republicans candidate Valerie Pécresse said they would vote for him to prevent the far-right leader coming to power. Melenchon told his supporters not to give a "single vote" to Le Pen, but stopped short of backing Macron directly. "If Macron wants to convince our voters, he's going have to work for it," said Melenchon's campaign director, Manuel Bompard. —AFP

from exile in Britain. The elder Sharif was dismissed in 2017 and later jailed for 10 years by an accountability court on graft charges after revelations from the Panama Papers, but was released to seek medical treatment abroad. The younger Sharif is also mired in graft proceedings.

In 2019, the National Accountability Bureau seized nearly two dozen properties belonging to him and his son Hamza, accusing them of money laundering. He was arrested and detained in September 2020, but released six months later on bail for a trial which is still pending. —AFP

Loving Beneficent Allah...

Continued from Page 1

continue being moist with the remembering and mentioning of Allah." (Al-Albani rated it as Saheeh (authentic) in Saheeh At-Tirmidhi # 3, 375)

(4) Remain humble: Humility is equivalent to submission to Almighty Allah. We should abandon selfishness and pride in our human power, and rather stand humbled, meek, and submissive as servants of the Majestic Allah. The All-Aware Allah says what can be translated as: "And you should not ever walk on the earth proudly exultant. For never will you (human beings) be able to perforate the earth (with your steps). And never will you

International

Abolish or rebrand? South Korea's feminist ministry in crosshairs

Ministry's supporters point to a track record of welfare policies

SEOUL: South Korea's anti-feminist president-elect has vowed to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality. But actually getting rid of it will be tricky, experts say, and the incoming administration is already backing off its promise.

Since it was set up in 2001, the department has been a driver of social progress for South Korean women — for example, making it possible for single mothers to register their kids in their name.

Along the way, it has also become a flashpoint in South Korea's increasingly bitter debates over sexism and gender, with detractors such as incoming President Yoon Suk-yeol claiming it is an obsolete backwater of "radical feminism".

The ministry's supporters, however, point to a track record of welfare policies that benefit a diverse cross-section of society — from teenage runaways to the children of North Korean defectors.

"My ex just moved out one day and never came back," said single mother Jin Mi-ae, adding that her former husband refused to contribute financially to their child's upbringing.

Failing to pay child support was criminalised in South Korea only last year. Many eligible parents — mostly women — still do not receive it but thanks to the ministry's efforts, there are now mechanisms in place to help. Jin filed a case with the Child Support Agency — set up by the ministry in 2015 — and said its assistance was crucial in her quest to get her ex-husband to help.

Yoon has said he will not renege on his abolition pledge, but last week, his transition team said they would keep the ministry for now. Scrapping the ministry would require legislation to reorganise the government — a tricky ask as Yoon does not have a

majority.

"The likely clash at the National Assembly may taint the new administration's image," Shin Yul, a political science professor at Myongji University told AFP. With local elections coming up in June, he added, it is unlikely Yoon's People Power Party would want to expend political capital on a bruising legislative fight and has put the issue "on hold".

'Symbolic target'

In recent years, South Korea's #MeToo generation has mobilised on a host of issues, from legalising abortion to demanding prosecutions for "revenge porn". This has triggered online backlash against so-called "radical feminism", with young South Korean men bemoaning their own lot — chiefly compulsory military service, from which women are exempt.

Yoon appealed to disgruntled male voters, branding himself an anti-feminist and pledging to abolish the ministry.

It became a "highly symbolic target" as the conservative candidate courted young men who felt the government was unfairly "privileging the

interests of women", Sharon Yoon, a Korean studies professor at the University of Notre Dame, told AFP.

Yoon claimed South Korean women do not suffer from "systemic gender discrimination" — despite much evidence to the contrary on the gender wage gap and female workforce participation.

He won the election in March — but by the narrowest margin ever, after young women mobilised against him. Even so, activists say his victory is a huge blow. "It's devastating to have a president-elect who actively spreads prejudice and hatred," Yujin, a 26-year-old female voter and activist, told AFP.



BUcheon, South Korea: File photo shows South Korean single mother and activist Kim Do-kyung posing with a photo of her son after an interview with AFP at her home in Buecheon. —AFP

'We are the fire'

With a budget of some 1.41 trillion won (\$1 billion) — compared with 54.61 trillion won for defence spending — the ministry has the least funding of any government department.

Even so, it has introduced a slew of programmes that supporters say help the most vulnerable, from stipends to tackle "period poverty" to projects that assist victims of domestic abuse. Its most defining achievement was its role in the abolition of South Korea's "hoju" registry, the

patriarchal family record system.

But this vital work is not recognised, activist Kim Do-kyung told AFP. Like domestic labour, "it's a lot of real and important work, but no one really considers it work," she said.

The ministry declined AFP's request for comment. Yoon's battle cry against it appears to have galvanised women — the left-leaning Democratic Party said it has signed up thousands of new female members, and other activists have announced forays into politics. —AFP

Indonesia police fire tear gas at protesters

JAKARTA: Indonesian police deployed tear gas and water cannon against thousands of students protesting Monday against extending the presidential term limit, after rumours swirled for weeks about a potential change to the country's constitution.

The Southeast Asian country's next election is in 2024 and President Joko Widodo would not be eligible to run as Indonesia places a two-term limit on its leader. But senior ministers and several political parties last month suggested the election should be delayed and the constitution amended to allow presidents to serve more than two terms.

Monday saw about 2,000 university students gather in front of the House of Representatives building. Indonesia has seen similar rallies sprout across the country in the last week. "We demand the House of Representatives not betray the constitution by making an amendment and we firmly reject delaying the 2024 election," protest coordinator Luthfi Yufri said in a statement.

Police later fired tear gas and water cannon to disperse the protesters, according to AFP reporters on the scene. Some students clashed with police, who rounded up dozens of people to



BANDA ACEH, Indonesia: University students participate in a protest against high prices of supplies, postponement of presidential elections and an extension of the president's term in front of the people's representative council (DPR) in Banda Aceh on April 11, 2022. —AFP

be taken in for questioning.

The debate on delaying the election and extending the presidential term has gathered steam since March, despite Widodo himself rebuking the suggestions multiple times. On Sunday, he reiterated that it was "speculation".

street by private citizens and being forced to produce identification to verify their immigration status," Ramaphosa said in his weekly newsletter.

"This was how the apartheid oppressors operated." "Under apartheid, black people were deemed suspects by default and stopped by police when found in so-called white areas," he said.

Blacks "were forced to produce a dompas (a passport-like document that restricted their movements) and if they could not do so, they were jailed." "We cannot allow such injustices to happen again."

The murder of the seven South Africans in Diepsloot was a tragedy, he said. "This loss of life is deplorable, as is the killing of a fellow African from Zimbabwe allegedly at the hands of vigilantes," Ramaphosa said.

But he warned: "Today, our anger may be directed at nationals from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria or Pakistan. Tomorrow, our anger may be directed at each other." "Attacking those we suspect of wrongdoing merely because they are a foreign national is... immoral, racist and criminal. In the end, it will lead to xenophobia," he said.

Competition for jobs, especially in low-skilled

Zuma, who turns 80 on Tuesday, is accused of taking bribes from French defence giant Thales. He faces 16 counts of fraud, graft and racketeering over the purchase of fighter jets, patrol boats and equipment from five European arms firms.

Thales has also been charged with corruption and money laundering. Both the French firm and Zuma deny any wrongdoing. The closely-followed trial started in May 2021 after repeated postponements as Zuma's legal team battled to have the charges dropped.

It was set to resume on Monday with witness testimony after Zuma failed in a fresh bid to derail proceedings. In October, he sought to have lead prosecutor Billy Downer dropped from the case, accusing him of bias. He contended Downer leaked confidential

"The schedules for the presidential and regional election of 2024 have been agreed. It's all clear," Widodo said in a tweet. "Don't be provoked by insignificant political interests." But critics said his objection to the proposals came far too late, only fuelling the furore. —AFP



DIEPSLOOT, South Africa: Residents hold placards as they protest against the rise of crime in the area in Diepsloot, South Africa. —AFP

sectors, is also a factor in sharpening anti-immigrant resentment. South Africa is buckling under one of the world's highest joblessness rate — more than 35 percent of the workforce are unemployed. —AFP

documents to the media. But the Supreme Court of Appeal last month ruled against him, saying his petition had "no reasonable prospect of success." Zuma was president from 2009 to 2018, but was forced to step down by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) as graft scandals surrounding his government brewed into a political storm.

Last year he was given a 15-month jail sentence for contempt of court after refusing to testify before a panel probing financial sleaze and cronyism that proliferated under his presidency. His jailing sparked riots that descended into looting and left more than 350 dead in the worst violence since the advent of South Africa's democracy. He was released on health grounds two months into the term. —AFP

Veteran Hong Kong journalist arrested for 'sedition'

HONG KONG: A veteran Hong Kong journalist was arrested by national security police on Monday for allegedly conspiring to publish "seditious materials", police said. The arrest is the latest blow to the local press in Hong Kong, which has seen its media freedom rating plummet as Beijing cracks down on dissent.

Allan Au, a 54-year-old reporter and journalism lecturer, was arrested in a dawn raid by Hong Kong's national security police unit, multiple local media outlets reported. A senior police source confirmed Au's arrest to AFP on a charge of "conspiracy to publish seditious materials".

Police later confirmed the arrest of a 54-year-old male on the same charge in a statement that did not name Au, which is local practice. "Further arrests may be made," the statement warned. Au is a former columnist for Stand News, an online news platform that was shuttered last December after authorities froze the company's assets using a national security law.

Two other senior employees of Stand News have already been charged with sedition. National security charges have also been brought against jailed pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai and six former senior executives of Apple Daily.

Once Hong Kong's most popular tabloid, Apple Daily collapsed last year when its newsroom was raided and assets were frozen under the security law. Soon after Stand News was shut down, Au began to write "good morning" each day on his Facebook page to confirm his safety. One of the city's most experienced local columnists, he was a Knight fellow at Stanford University in 2005 and earned a doctorate from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 2017 Au published a book about censorship in Hong Kong titled "Freedom Under 20 Shades of Shadow".

Au spent more than a decade working for RTHK, Hong Kong's government broadcaster, running a current affairs show. But he was axed last year after the authorities declared a shake-up that began transforming the once editorially independent broadcaster into something more resembling Chinese state media.

Colonial legacy law

First penned by colonial ruler Britain in 1938, sedition was long criticised as an anti-free speech law, including by many of the pro-Beijing local newspapers now praising its use. By the time of the 1997 handover, it had not been used for decades but remained on the books. It was dusted off by police and prosecutors in the wake of massive and sometimes violent pro-democracy protests in 2019. Over the last two years sedition has been wielded against journalists, unionists, activists, a former pop star and ordinary citizens. Sedition is currently separate from the sweeping national security law that Beijing imposed on Hong Kong in 2020. But the courts treat it as a national security offence, which means that bail is often denied for those charged.

Next month Hong Kong is expected to install a new Beijing-anointed leader, former security chief John Lee, who oversaw the police response to the 2019 democracy protests and subsequent crackdown. Asked on Monday whether Au's arrest would worsen press freedom, Lee declined to comment, only saying all investigations should be carried out independently. Outgoing leader Carrie Lam also declined to comment on Au's arrest. —AFP

Anti-migrant attacks akin to apartheid actions: Ramaphosa

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa: President Cyril Ramaphosa on Monday blasted vigilante groups for harassing migrants in South Africa, likening their behaviour to strategies adopted by the apartheid regime to target blacks.

Scores of people have been staging demonstrations in recent months against the proliferation of undocumented migrants in the country.

Last week a Zimbabwean man was killed and burnt in an apparent mob attack in the northern Johannesburg township of Diepsloot.

A small group of vigilantes had gone door-to-door demanding to see people's identity documents after seven people in the township had been murdered the previous weekend. Angry residents complained that police were not doing enough to stem crime.

"We have seen people being stopped on the

Zuma to miss graft trial on health grounds

PIETERMARITZBURG, South Africa: South Africa's former president Jacob Zuma will miss the resumption on Monday of his trial for alleged corruption on the grounds of ill health, his lawyer said. "There was a medical emergency which took place in the past few hours," his lawyer Dali Mpofo announced in court, giving no further details.

Business

TUESDAY, APRIL 12, 2022

Indonesian tech giant GoTo skyrockets on market debut

Billion-dollar IPO defies heavy weather for Asian tech stocks

JAKARTA: Indonesia's biggest tech firm soared on its market debut Monday after a billion-dollar IPO that was the world's fifth-biggest this year, defying recent heavy weather for Asian tech stocks.

GoTo, the largest digital ecosystem in the archipelago nation of 270 million people, was formed by the merger of ride-hailing company Gojek and e-commerce platform Tokopedia in May 2021.

Clad in the signature black-and-green jacket of a Gojek driver, GoTo CEO Andre Soelistyo pressed the 9 am opening bell at the Jakarta stock exchange. "Despite global market volatility, investor interest has been strong, reflecting the rapidly growing demand in Southeast Asia for our on-demand, e-commerce and financial technology services, as well as confidence in GoTo's position as the largest digital ecosystem in Indonesia," he said in a press release.

GoTo shares jumped as much as 23 percent in early trade before closing 13.02 percent higher at 382 rupiah. Overall, Jakarta stocks ended down 0.10 percent.

The company raised about \$1.1 billion in its IPO that concluded last week, priced at 338 rupiah a share, representing a market value of about \$28 billion, it announced. It has sold shares for \$954.7 million (13.7 trillion rupiah) plus \$146.3 million from treasury shares for the purpose of over-allotment. Based on the total funds raised, GoTo's IPO is the third-largest in Asia and fifth-largest in the world this year, it said.

The company announced last week it would distribute shares worth about \$21.6 million to hundreds of thousands of its drivers. One of the lucky drivers was Ryan Supriandi, who has been a Gojek driver for nearly seven years. Supriandi was pleasantly surprised

to receive a mobile notification saying the company had granted him 4,000 shares, worth about \$90. "I was happy and confused at the same time—what am I going to do with it? Many drivers don't understand shares or markets," the 34-year-old told AFP.

US listing planned

President Joko Widodo congratulated GoTo on its debut. "I hope GoTo IPO will motivate Indonesian youth to give new energy for the leap of our country's economic development," Widodo said.

But Reza Priyambada, a stock market analyst from CSA Research Institute, said that while it was still too early to judge how GoTo would perform, investors should proceed cautiously.

"While they do claim to be the biggest marketplace in Indonesia, they are still suffering losses at the moment," Priyambada said. "Right now investors are still under a euphoria, but we don't know if they really understand how GoTo works, what are their prospects and how the management is run."

GoTo has not published profits yet. The exchange reported that from January to July 2021 the company posted more than \$556 million in net losses. Last year, another Indonesian unicorn, Bukalapak, launched the biggest initial offering in the history of the country's stock market, raising more than \$1.5 billion. However, shares in the online marketplace have since dropped by around 60 percent, instilling doubts in the Southeast Asian tech sector.

A successful IPO for GoTo could open the door to a string of listings in the country as several tech firms—including Traveloka, LinkAja, J&T Express, Tiket and



JAKARTA: This handout photo taken and released by Indonesian tech firm GoTo on April 11, 2022 shows (left to right) GoTo Group president Patrick Cao, co-founder William Tanuwijaya, group CEO Andre Soelistyo and co-founder Kevin Aluwi standing under a giant screen after the company's initial public offering (IPO) on the stock exchange in Jakarta. —AFP

Blibli-are also set to make their market debut, according to local media. GoTo, whose main competitors in the region are SEA and Grab, has said previously that it was also

planning a US listing. In November it said it had raised \$1.3 billion from various investors including Google, Singapore's Temasek and China's Tencent. —AFP

Future in balance for German refinery fed on Russian oil

BERLIN: The PCK refinery in the German town of Schwedt has been processing crude oil from Russia since before reunification, but with a ban on Russian oil looming its future could be in doubt. The mass of metal tubes and canisters in the former East Germany near the border with Poland employs 1,200 people, and many local businesses depend on the custom it brings to the area.

"The sense of not knowing what will happen tomorrow is very similar to how it felt after the fall of the Wall," said Buckhard Opitz, 60, who has worked at the plant since 1977 and is a member of the local energy workers' union.

Opitz has not forgotten the economic turbulence that came with reunification in 1990 — the dismantled industrial sites and painful wave of privatizations. The Schwedt refinery survived, after a drastic restructuring, because "it was one of the most modern, because we were always on top", Opitz said. But since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, uncertainty has once again descended on the plant.

Although the PCK refinery supplies around 90 percent of the oil consumed in Berlin and the surrounding region, including Berlin Brandenburg airport, doubts still remain.

And the situation is complicated by the fact that Russian oil giant Rosneft, controlled by the Kremlin, is a majority shareholder in the site.

'Friendship'

Though the EU's latest package of sanctions agreed on Thursday was focused on coal, European Council President Charles Michel has said that the EU will have to impose oil and gas sanctions "sooner or later". Germany has ruled out an immediate embargo on all Russian energy, especially gas. But it aims to end Russian oil imports by the end of this year.

Oil pumped in from Russia is the lifeblood of the Schwedt refinery, which is serviced by a branch of the Druzhba pipeline, the world's longest oil pipeline. The Druzhba project was commissioned in the 1960s to transport oil from the Soviet Union to Eastern Europe and remains a vital source of crude for many central European refineries. "Druzhba" means "friendship" in Russian.

In late 2021, Rosneft announced plans to increase its stake in the PCK refinery from 54 to 92 percent by buying shares from Shell. Germany's Federal Cartel Office approved the transaction a few days before the outbreak of the war but the Economy Ministry is examining whether it can still be stopped.

Rosneft is chaired by Igor Sechin, an oligarch close to President Vladimir Putin and who has been the target of Western sanctions.

"The world was still normal then. There was no reason to refuse Russian involvement, just as there was German involvement in Russia," Alexander von Gersdorff, a spokesman for the German oil industry association En2x, told AFP. —AFP

Elon Musk no longer joining Twitter board

WASHINGTON: Elon Musk is no longer joining the board of Twitter, the CEO of the social media company said late Sunday, in a reversal less than a week after announcing the Tesla and SpaceX chief would be appointed. Musk was named to join the Twitter board after buying a major stake in the firm and becoming its largest shareholder.

"Elon has decided not to join our board," Twitter CEO Parag Agrawal tweeted. "Elon's appointment to the board was to become officially effective 4/9, but Elon shared that same morning he will no longer be joining the board," Agrawal said.

"I believe this is for the best." Currently the world's richest man and with more than 80 million followers on the microblogging platform, Musk last week disclosed a purchase of 73.5 million shares—or 9.2 percent—of Twitter's common stock. His announcement sent Twitter shares soaring more than 25 percent. Agrawal had announced on Tuesday that Musk would be joining the board, describing him as "a passionate believer and intense critic of the service which is exactly what we need".

Musk himself tweeted that he was "Looking forward to working with Parag & Twitter board to make significant improvements to Twitter in coming months!"

In his announcement Sunday, Agrawal shared a note

Paris stocks, euro gain on Macron election result

PARIS: The Paris stock market and the euro rose on Monday, with investors soothed by French President Emmanuel Macron's election performance. Frankfurt and London equities however fell on Asian losses, with sentiment souring on flat UK economic growth, Chinese inflation jitters and the prospect of more aggressive US interest rate hikes.

Oil prices slid on fears over the demand impact of China's COVID-19 containment measures. Macron topped France's first round presidential vote on Sunday, leading far-right rival Marine Le Pen by a larger-than-expected margin.

'Solid result'

With 97 percent votes counted, Macron came in first with 27.6 percent of the vote. Le Pen was sec-

Russia says will 'go to court' if declared in default

MOSCOW: Moscow will start legal proceedings if it is declared in default by the West, finance minister Anton Siluanov said Monday, after Russia was declared in "selective" default over the weekend. Russia last week paid its foreign dollar debt in

he sent to Twitter, which said Musk's appointment to the board would be contingent on a background check and that he would have to act in the best interests of the company once appointed. "We have and will always value input from our shareholders, whether they are on our board or not," he said.

"Elon is our biggest shareholder and we will remain open to his input," Agrawal added. Musk had agreed to limit his Twitter stake to a maximum of 14.9 percent while serving on the board but could now in theory increase his holding beyond that.

Polarizing figure

In an apparent reaction to the news, Musk tweeted a smirking emoji, without any other comment.

The billionaire tech entrepreneur is a frequent Twitter user, regularly mixing in inflammatory and controversial statements about issues or other public figures with remarks that are whimsical or business-focused. He has also sparred repeatedly with federal securities regulators, who cracked down on his social media use after a purported effort to take Tesla private in 2018 fell apart.

Musk's decision not to take a seat on the Twitter board came after he tweeted Saturday asking whether the social media network was "dying" and to call out users such as singer Justin Bieber, who are highly followed but rarely post.

"Most of these 'top' accounts tweet rarely and post very little content," the Tesla boss wrote, captioning a list of the 10 profiles with the most followers—a list which includes himself at number eight, with 81 million followers.

"Is Twitter dying?" he asked. In other weekend tweets, Musk posted joke polls on whether to drop the "w" from Twitter's name and on convert-

ing with 23.4 percent.

"A solid result for incumbent Emmanuel Macron ... has helped to allay fears of a Le Pen presidency," said economist Jessica Hinds at research consultancy Capital Economics. "But the latest polls still point to a very tight race."

Investors had fretted about the implications of a victory for Le Pen in the midst of the war in Ukraine, given her long-standing sympathies for Russia. "All attention will now turn to the second round on April 24, and the big question for that will be where the supporters of the defeated first-round candidates go," wrote Deutsche Bank analysts in a client note.

On the downside, London stocks slid on official data showing that the UK economy had ground to a near halt in February, growing by just 0.1 percent.

Elsewhere, the dollar hit a 2015 high at 125.54 yen on expectations of more US Federal Reserve interest rate hikes, in contrast with the Bank of Japan's loose policy. That was not far from the greenback's two-decade peak of 125.86 yen.

The Fed has recently taken a hawkish tone as it embarks on an aggressive tightening path to count-

er rubles after it was unable to process the payment in foreign currency due to sanctions over Ukraine.

"We will go to court because we have taken all the necessary measure to ensure that investors receive their payments," Siluanov said in an interview with the Izvestia newspaper.

"We will present to the court our invoices confirming our efforts to pay both in foreign currency and in rubles," he said, without specifying which legal body Moscow would turn to. Credit ratings agency S&P on Saturday said Russia had gone into "selective default" after it repaid dollar-denominated bonds that matured last week in rubles.

The designation, however, only affected



GRUNHEIDE, Germany: In this file photo taken on March 22, 2022, Tesla CEO Elon Musk is pictured as he attends the start of the production at Tesla's "Gigafactory" in Gruenheide, southeast of Berlin. —AFP

ing its San Francisco headquarters to a homeless shelter since no one shows up anyway". He also suggested removing ads, Twitter's main source of revenue.

An outspoken and polarizing figure, the announcement of his appointment to the board had sparked misgiving among some Twitter employees, according to a Washington Post report.

Workers at the California-based social media company cited worries about Musk's statements on transgender issues and his reputation as a difficult and driven leader, according to statements on Slack reviewed by the Post. A California agency has sued Tesla, alleging discrimination and harassment against Black workers. The electric carmaker has rejected the charges, saying it opposes discrimination. —AFP



HONG KONG: A man walks past a sign showing the numbers for the Hang Seng Index in Hong Kong on April 11, 2022. —AFP

er runaway inflation. In China, factory-gate inflation was higher than expected in March, official data showed, as Russia's war on Ukraine pushes up oil prices while a domestic COVID-19 resurgence strains food supplies and consumer costs. —AFP

Moscow's payments in foreign currencies while the rating for its ruble payments remained unchanged. "Russia has tried in good faith to repay external creditors by transferring the corresponding amounts in foreign currency to pay our debt. Nevertheless, the deliberate policy of Western countries is to artificially create a default by all possible means," Siluanov said.

"If an economic and financial war is waged against our country, we are obliged to react, but while fulfilling our obligations," he added. For several weeks, Russia avoided the danger of a default, as the US Treasury allowed the use of foreign currency held by Moscow abroad to settle foreign debt. —AFP

Business

World Bank warns of bleaker economic outlook for Ukraine

Economy will collapse by 45% if war drags on

WASHINGTON: The World Bank issued dire forecasts for Ukraine as Russia's invasion impacts both the country and its neighbors, warning in a report released Sunday of an even bleaker economic outlook if the conflict drags on. Ukraine's economy will collapse by 45.1 percent this year, the bank predicted, far worse than the 10 percent to 35 percent downturn the IMF projected last month. Russia will see an 11.2 percent decline in GDP, and the World Bank said the entire region is suffering economic consequences from the war, which began in late February and has caused more than four million Ukrainians to flee to Poland, Romania and Moldova. The conflict also has caused prices of grains and energy to soar.

"The results of our analysis are very sobering. Our forecasts show that the Russian invasion in Ukraine has reversed the region's recovery from the pandemic," said Anna Bjerde, World Bank vice president for Europe and Central Asia. "This is the second major shock to hit the regional economy in two years and comes at a very precarious time for the region, as many economies were still struggling to recover from the pandemic," she told reporters. The Washington-based institutions expect emerging and developing countries in the Europe and Central Asia region to contract by 4.1 percent this year, a sharp reversal from the three percent growth projected before the war, and twice as bad as the pandemic-induced recession in 2020.

Worse-case scenario

Ukraine faces the starkest outlook, with its economy under "severe strain" from shrunken government revenues, businesses that have closed or are only partially operational and trade in goods that is severely disrupted. Grain exports and other economic activity have "become impossible in large swaths of the coun-



The World Bank building in Washington.

try due to heavy damage to infrastructure," Bjerde said. The bank's forecasts assumed the war would continue for a few more months, but cautioned that they "are subject to significant uncertainty."

In a more pessimistic scenario, which reflects an escalation of the conflict, there would be a larger negative impact on the euro area, increased Western sanctions and a financial shock due to eroding confidence. The region's economy would contract by nearly nine percent—worse than the 2008 global financial crisis—with a 20 percent decline for Russia and a 75 percent collapse for Ukraine, the report said.

Another cause for concern is a projected increase in poverty in Ukraine. The proportion of the population living on \$5.50 a day is expected to rise to 19.8 percent this year from just 1.8 percent in 2021, accord-

ing to the World Bank.

Collateral damage

Even if the region avoids the worst case scenario, Eastern Europe alone is expected to see its GDP plummet by 30.7 percent rather than grow by 1.4 percent, as projected before the invasion.

The region also has been impacted by the sanctions imposed on Russian ally Belarus for its role in the war. The report warns that Moldova is likely to be one of the countries hardest hit by the conflict, not only because of its geographic proximity to the war, but also its inherent vulnerability as a small economy closely linked to Ukraine and Russia. In addition, this part of Europe is dependent on natural gas to meet its energy needs. —AFP

CBK bonds and related Tawarruq

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced the most recent issues of CBK bonds and related Tawarruq at a total value of KD 240 million for six months with a rate of return at 1.625 percent.

Egypt inflation rises to 12.1% as reserves dip

CAIRO: Egypt's annual inflation rate hit 12.1 percent in March, official figures showed Sunday, as foreign reserves declined by \$4 billion during the same month, according to the central bank. "The annual headline inflation rate recorded 12.1 percent for March 2022, compared to 4.8 percent for the same month last year," the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) said in a statement. The latest figure marks an increase of more than two percent compared to the 10 percent inflation rate recorded in February—already at a near three-year high.

This comes less than three weeks after the Egyptian pound depreciated against the dollar, losing about 17 percent of its value in one day. The Arab world's most populous country has been struck by mounting economic pressures since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February caused global commodity price to shoot up. As the world's largest importer of wheat, Egypt relied on the two countries for 85 percent of its supply, as well as 73 percent of its sunflower oil. CAPMAS attributed the latest hike to a surge in food prices, specifically an 11 percent increase in bread and grain prices and a 36.2 percent increase in the price of cooking oil.

It comes after the Central Bank of Egypt said on Thursday that foreign reserves saw a \$4 billion decline, registering \$37 billion at the end of March 2022, compared to \$41 billion in February. It attributed the decline to its mobilization of foreign reserves "to calm the markets" in the wake of the Ukraine war. Egypt has rolled out a series of measures to mitigate the economic fallout from the conflict, including announcing a \$7 billion relief package to shield society's most vulnerable. —AFP

UK finance minister requests ethics review amid tax row

LONDON: Britain's embattled finance minister, Rishi Sunak, has asked the government's ethics advisor to review whether he followed all the rules after revelations about his family's financial affairs stoked political controversy. In a letter to Prime Minister Boris Johnson-disclosed late on Sunday—Sunak requested that the government's adviser on ministerial standards, Christopher Geidt, assess his declarations of interest since he first became a minister in 2018.

It follows a leak last week revealing that his wealthy Indian wife has benefited from "non-domicile" tax status in the UK, shielding her overseas income from taxes at a time when they are rising for most Britons. After initially claiming his spouse Akshata Murty—whose father co-founded the Indian IT behemoth Infosys—was the victim of a smear campaign, the couple U-turned last Friday and vowed she would now pay British taxes on all her global income.



LONDON: Britain's embattled finance minister, Rishi Sunak, has asked the government's ethics advisor to review whether he followed all the rules after revelations about his family's financial affairs stoked political controversy.

But it has failed to quell accusations of hypocrisy for raising taxes on Britons in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, while his own family has seen millions of pounds in Infosys dividends shielded from his own ministry. Sunak is believed to be Britain's richest member of parliament.

He has also faced criticism for a lack of transparency, after admitting to holding a "Green Card" for US permanent residents until last year. Possession of the card would enable him to keep the United States as his long-term home and pay US taxes, despite serving as Britain's second-most powerful politician with designs on Johnson's job. Meanwhile, other claims have also emerged in recent days, including that he was listed as the beneficiary of offshore trusts set up in so-called tax havens to help manage his wife's business affairs.

In his letter to Johnson asking for Geidt's review, Sunak insisted he had acted appropriately at all times but his "overriding concern" was that the public should have confidence in the answers.

"I am confident that such a review of my declarations will find all relevant information was appropriately declared," he added. However, the main opposition Labour party has said his situation raised potential conflicts of interest, and its deputy leader Angela Rayner has also written to both Johnson and Geidt requesting answers.

"A fish rots from the head. It is the prime minister's responsibility to bring this debacle to a close by ensuring that standards are upheld across his cabinet," she said.

Once a leading contender to succeed Johnson as the British leader struggled with his own series of scandals, Sunak has seen his popularity plummet in recent weeks amid the cost-of-living crisis and the revelations. —AFP



MIRNY, Russia: This file photograph taken on July 2, 2019, shows a view of Nyurbinsky diamond mining pit of Nakyn diamond ore field, some 340km north-east of Mirny. — AFP

Top Russian diamond miner says can't make eurobond payment

MOSCOW: Russia's state-owned diamond miner said on Monday it cannot make a payment on a eurobond after Washington imposed blocking sanctions, the Interfax news agency reported.

The company said that for "technical reasons" it cannot pay a \$11.6-million (10.6-million-euro) coupon on a dollar-denominated eurobond, the agency reported. The US Treasury on Thursday announced blocking sanctions against Russia's partly state-owned Alrosa, one of the world's largest diamond mining companies. The company was already under UK sanctions.

Washington cited Alrosa's role providing "an additional source of support and revenue" for the Russian government while it conducts a deadly military operation in Ukraine. The company had earlier been targeted by Britain, which additionally imposed personal sanctions on its president, Sergei Ivanov, whose father has the same name and was formerly Russian President Vladimir Putin's chief of staff. Alrosa said the latest measures made it "technically impossible" to

correctly settle its debt obligations, while it has the financial resources to do so.

Alrosa is based in Yakutia, Sakha Republic, in eastern Siberia. In March it announced its net profit for 2021 had tripled year on year to 91.3 billion rubles (\$1.1 billion, 1.0 billion euros). The bond payment was due on Saturday April 9 but Interfax said scheduled payments that fall on weekends are usually carried over to the next working day. Russia is the largest global producer of natural diamonds and Alrosa makes up 93 percent of its production, according to the company's website. Alrosa's shares on the Moscow Stock Exchange fell 13 percent last Friday after the US sanctions announcement.

The company had said in a press release on April 5, ahead of the additional US sanction announcement, that it was "taking all possible steps and measures" to make the next coupon payment. Russia was declared in "selective" default over the weekend after it paid its foreign dollar debt in rubles due to sanctions rules.

Russia's finance ministry on Monday accused foreign countries of wanting to force Russia into an "artificial default" through unprecedented sanctions over Ukraine and said it would meet its debt obligations.

Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said Moscow will start legal proceedings if it is declared in default by the West. A cascade of defaults on payments by Russian companies could also seriously disrupt the market. —AFP

Capital, an investment firm founded by one of Russia's richest oligarchs, Kremlin confidant Vladimir Potanin.

"With this agreement, concluded after several weeks of intensive work, the Group would exit in an effective and orderly manner from Russia, ensuring continuity for its employees and clients," Societe Generale said. The bank said it expects the deal to be completed in the coming weeks and that it was subject to approval from regulators. Societe Generale shares were down by almost six percent following the announcement.

'Great resistance'

In a separate statement, Interros said that "the conditions for the deal have been approved by the government commission on control over foreign investment in the Russia Federation." "Interros intends to do the maximum efforts to develop Rosbank," Potanin said in his company's statement. "The main objective is to maintain the stability of Rosbank, as well as create new opportunities for its clients and partners," he said.

In a statement, Rosbank said it was "certain" that the firm would maintain its stability thanks to its "expertise" and reliance on "international expertise".

The Russian bank said it built "great resistance" to economic turmoil due to its "well-thought-out risk policy" as well as its balanced loan portfolio and diversified liquidity base. Meanwhile, Societe Generale's auto leasing subsidiary, ALD, said it would not enter into new commercial transactions in Russia,

French bank Societe Generale to exit Russia

PARIS: French banking group Societe Generale said Monday it was ceasing activities in Russia and selling its majority stake in Rosbank, weeks after Ukraine's leader urged French firms to leave over Moscow's invasion of the country. Hundreds of foreign companies, ranging from financial firms to retailers and fast-food restaurants, have pulled out of Russia since the February 24 invasion.

But French firms, which are the biggest foreign employers in Russia, have been among the slowest to withdraw, prompting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to urge them to leave during an address to the French parliament on March 23.

Societe Generale said in a statement that its withdrawal from Russia would cost it 3.1 billion euros (\$3.4 billion). "Societe Generale ceases its banking and insurance activities in Russia," the firm said in a statement. It also announced "the signing of a sale and purchase agreement to sell its entire stake in Rosbank and the Group's Russian insurance subsidiaries" to Interros



Kazakhstan and Belarus.

Since Zelensky's speech to the French parliament, auto giant Renault suspended operations at its Moscow factory and hinted that it might divest its majority stake in domestic car giant AvtoVAZ, while French sports retailer Decathlon halted sales at its stores in Russia. Another major French company sin-

gled out by Zelensky, supermarket chain Auchan, has decided to stay, citing the "human" cost of leaving. The Western exodus followed the invasion and a slew of Western sanctions on Russia, including the freezing of \$300 billion of the country's foreign currency reserves abroad. Russia has since faced the risk of defaulting on its debt. —AFP

Business

Ukraine crisis and high inflation risks loom over ECB meeting

Policymakers signal willingness to act on rates

FRANKFURT: European Central Bank governors meet Thursday to ponder record-high inflation and fresh economic uncertainty caused by the war in Ukraine, with policymakers signaling a willingness to take action sooner rather than later.

At its last meeting in March, the ECB said it would accelerate the winding down of its bond-buying stimulus, with a view to ending the scheme in the third quarter. An interest rate hike—the ECB's first in over a decade—would follow “some time” after that, it said.

But since then prices have continued to spiral, with costs for energy, commodities and food surging in the wake of the war in Ukraine, adding to fears that the conflict will stunt a post-COVID recovery.

The US Federal Reserve and the Bank of England have already announced their first rate hikes to combat price pressures, leaving the ECB looking out of step. Inflation jumped to a record 7.5 percent in the euro area last month, well beyond the ECB's two-percent target. Although no major policy changes are expected on Thursday, ECB chief Christine Lagarde's press conference will be scoured for clues of the bank shifting into more aggressive inflation-fighting mode.

“In our view, policymakers are likely to bring forward their plans to raise interest rates,” said Capital Economics in a client note, “as inflation continues to surprise to the upside”.

Lagarde tested positive for COVID-19 last week but is still set to chair the meeting and take part in the virtual press conference afterwards.

‘Too late’

Central bankers use interest rate rises as a tool to tame inflation, but pulling the trigger too soon risks hurting economic growth. The ECB's dilemma has been complicated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Western sanctions against Moscow, as the fallout from the upheaval to international trade and energy markets remains difficult to predict. Minutes from the last ECB meeting revealed that many members of the 25-member governing council wanted “immediate further steps” to tackle inflation despite the darkening economic picture.

Some governors called for ending the bond purchases in the summer, opening the door to a rate hike in the third quarter. The minutes showed that the ECB “has become more hawkish”, said ING bank economist Carsten Brzeski, describing those advocating for a tightening of monetary policy.

Joachim Nagel, the head of Germany's powerful Bundesbank central bank, is among several ECB members who have said they expect the first rate rises this year. He has cautioned against “acting too late”.

Gloomy consumers

The ECB has for years maintained an ultra-loose monetary policy, pushing interest rates to historic lows to stoke growth and drive up below-target inflation.

It even set a negative deposit rate of minus 0.5 percent, meaning banks pay to park excess cash at the ECB. It has also hoovered up billions of euros in government and corporate bonds each month to keep credit flowing in the 19-nation currency club. The massive stimulus is now being phased out, a move the ECB always said would come before any interest rate changes.

Capital Economics analysts said they now expect the ECB to raise the deposit rate as early as July, followed by two more hikes before the end of the year.

Lagarde recently warned that higher energy costs as a result of Europe's reliance on Russian oil and gas would worsen Europe's cost-of-living squeeze. Households were becoming more pessimistic, she said, and could cut back fur-



FRANKFURT: In this file photo taken on December 16, 2021 European Central Bank (ECB) President Christine Lagarde takes her protective face mask off to address a press conference following a meeting of the governing council of the ECB on the eurozone monetary policy in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany. — AFP

ther on spending. “The longer the war lasts, the higher the economic costs will be and the greater the likelihood we end up in more adverse scenarios,” she said.

Lagarde, a former French finance minister, has urged European governments

to help cushion the blow through fiscal policy. France, Spain, Germany and other countries have already moved to ease the burden on households and companies, including through fuel tax cuts or subsidies for heating. —AFP

Ericsson suspends all Russia operations

STOCKHOLM: Swedish network equipment maker Ericsson said Monday that it was suspending all of its Russian operations over the war in Ukraine for the foreseeable future. The telecom giant already announced in late February that it would stop all deliveries to Russia following Moscow's February 24 invasion of Ukraine. “In the light of recent events and of European Union sanctions, the company will now suspend its affected business with customers in Russia indefinitely,” Ericsson said in a statement.

The company added that it was “engaging with customers and partners regarding the indefinite suspension of the affected business.” “The priority is to focus on the safety and well-being of Ericsson employees in Russia and they will be placed on paid leave,” it said.

Hundreds of Western firms ranging from Ikea to Coca-Cola, Goldman Sachs and McDonald's have stopped operations in the country since the invasion, with French banking group Societe Generale announcing Monday it was selling its stake in Russia's Rosbank.

Ericsson has around 600 employees in Russia, and is a “major supplier to the largest operator MTS and the fourth largest operator Tele2,” a company spokeswoman told AFP, adding that together with Ukraine, Russia accounts for less than two percent of revenue. As a result, the equipment maker said it would record a provision for 900 million Swedish kronor (\$95 million, 87 million euros) for the first quarter of 2022 for “impairment of assets and other exceptional costs,” though no staff redundancy costs were included. Ericsson is due to publish its first quarter earnings on April 14. —AFP

Russia's alarming hold over German energy infrastructure

FRANKFURT: The war in Ukraine has exposed not only Germany's dependence on Russian gas, but also the large share of Russian capital in the country's oil refineries, pipelines and other gas infrastructure.

The German subsidiaries of Russian giants Gazprom and Rosneft are key players in the energy landscape of Europe's biggest economy. Energy deals with Russia were long seen as part of a German policy of keeping the peace through cooperation with Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime, but that approach now lies in “ruins”, according to Der Spiegel magazine.

German politicians now “have to face the fact that they have not brought on board agents of change within Russia, but possibly also Trojan horses of the Kremlin”, the magazine said.

Gas storage

In early April, the German government took the unprecedented step of temporarily taking control of Gazprom's German subsidiary, after an opaque transfer of ownership of the company sent alarm bells ringing in Berlin. Economy Minister Robert Habeck justified the radical move by saying it served “public order and national security”.

Gazprom's Rehden gas storage facility in Lower



Saxony state alone accounts for around 20 percent of Germany's total gas storage capacity.

The Rehden facility was owned by the German group BASF until 2015, when it was sold to Astora, a subsidiary of Gazprom. It has a capacity of four billion cubic meters and bills itself as the largest gas storage facility in Europe. However, its tanks are currently only 0.5 percent full, with Gazprom suspected of having deliberately kept levels low ahead of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Astora has additional storage facilities in Jemgum, on the border with the Netherlands, and

in Haidach, Austria. Gazprom Germania also has a stake in a large salt cavern storage facility near Hamburg. Gascade, one of the largest gas distribution network operators in Germany, is 50.03-percent owned by Gazprom Germania. The company describes its network of 3,200 kilometres (2,000 miles) of pipelines delivering gas to cities across the whole of Germany as “the hub of European natural gas transport”. On its website, Gascade says its “transport business is not subject to the influence of the Gazprom Group or any other shareholder”. —AFP

China factory inflation higher than expected

BEIJING: China's factory-gate inflation was higher than expected in March, official data showed Monday, as Russia's war on Ukraine pushes up oil prices while a domestic COVID-19 resurgence strains food supplies and consumer costs.

The producer price index (PPI) — measuring the cost of goods at the factory gate—grew 8.3 percent on-year, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) figures showed. This was slightly more than a Bloomberg poll of economists expected, while PPI also rose on-month. “Geopolitical and other factors have pushed global commodity prices to continue increasing, driving the prices of oil, non-ferrous metals and other related industries to rise further domestically,” NBS senior statistician Dong Lijuan said in a statement.

China's consumer price index (CPI), a key gauge of retail inflation, rose more than expected as well, by 1.5 percent on-year in March, the NBS said. Although consumer demand eased after festive periods earlier in the year, some food prices have picked



FUYANG, China: This file photo taken on March 31, 2022 shows employees working on an assembly line producing speakers at a factory in Linquan county, Fuyang city, in China's eastern Anhui province. —AFP

up due to “rising international prices of wheat, corn and soybeans” and domestic COVID-19 outbreaks, Dong said. This comes as world food prices hit an all-time high in March following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, an agricultural powerhouse, according to a

UN agency. Russia and Ukraine make up a massive share of exports in major commodities such as wheat, vegetable oil and corn. Zhaopeng Xing of ANZ Research said energy prices had “become the major driver for both CPI and PPI”. —AFP

Singapore-based BOC Aviation orders 80 Airbus planes

SINGAPORE: Singapore-based BOC Aviation has ordered 80 A320neo family planes from Airbus, the European manufacturer said on Monday, a contract estimated on paper to be worth nearly \$10 billion (\$9.2 billion). “Global aircraft operating lessor BOC Aviation ... has signed a firm order for 80 A320neo family aircraft comprising 10 A321XLR, 50 A321neo and 20 A320neo,” Airbus said.

According to the latest available catalogue prices, the deal is worth nearly \$10 billion, although such deals are usually subject to discounts. BOC Aviation said it expected the aircraft to be delivered between 2027 and 2029.

CEO Robert Martin said this was “the largest single order” BOC Aviation had ever placed. It takes 546 the number of Airbus planes purchased by the company since it started operating, Martin said. BOC Aviation, which is listed on the Hong Kong stock market, says it currently owns 530 planes, which it leases to 73 airlines across 36 countries and regions. Its deal with Airbus enables the latter to almost double its net orders since the start of 2022.

These stood at 83 planes as of end-March, according to the latest figures from Airbus, which hopes to deliver 720 in 2022, against 611 last year. Airbus said in total it had clinched more than 7,900 orders from over 120 customers for its A320neo family planes, which rival Boeing's 737 MAX. The company said it had delivered more than 2,100 A320neos since the aircraft entered into service six years ago. —AFP

Former Wirecard executive may be hiding in Moscow

BERLIN: A former executive at the German financial services company Wirecard, Jan Marsalek, sought by Interpol following the firm's stunning collapse in 2020, could be hiding in Moscow, according to a report Monday. Marsalek moved into a “gated community” in the Russian capital after the scandal under the “care” of the FSB, the Russian secret service, and could still be there today, the German daily Bild reported.

In Moscow, Marsalek was involved in trading the Russian “Sputnik V” vaccine against the coron-

avirus and was in contact with “paramilitary mercenaries”, according to the tabloid.

The FSB offered their German counterparts the opportunity to “interrogate” Marsalek in 2021, Bild said. Local officials in Moscow contacted central German intelligence in Berlin to ask “if a meeting with Marsalek should take place”. But the question from the Moscow office went “unanswered” by colleagues in the capital, according to Bild, though the German government was “informed”.

Once the standardbearer for the German tech industry, Wirecard collapsed in June 2020 after admitting that a missing 1.9 billion euros (\$2 billion) from its balance sheets likely didn't exist.

The scandal was “unparalleled” in Germany's history, according to the then finance minister Olaf Scholz, who is now chancellor. The company's CEO, Markus Braun, was charged with fraud by German authorities earlier this year.



Jan Marsalek

Marsalek, an Austrian national considered to be Braun's right-hand man, has been on the run since the collapse. —AFP

Mosques in Tunisia reopen after coronavirus peak

Devotees are flocking to the mosques for group and tarawih prayers after two years of suspension due to the coronavirus. The Ministry of Religious affairs advised mosque goers to abide by health protocols, keeping a distance apart, wear-

ing the protective mask and using personal prayer carpets. It declared that in coordination with the Ministry of Health, it will organize vaccinations outside the mosques. — KUNA



Meghan, Duchess of Sussex is being sued by her half-sister

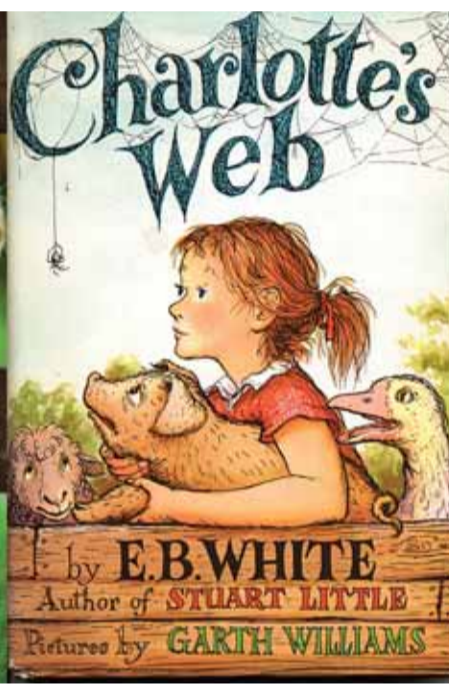
The 40-year-old royal and her husband, Prince Harry, sat down for a tell-all interview with Oprah Winfrey last year and Samantha Markle has been left unimpressed by the "rags to royalty" narrative detailed by the duchess, which she claims is false. In documents from the defamation lawsuit obtained by TMZ, Samantha accused Meghan of spreading lies in order to promote the idea she's overcome a difficult family situation, and highlighted the fact the former 'Suits' star told Oprah she was an "only child", despite sharing the same father in Thomas Markle as Samantha and her brother, Thomas Markly Jr.



The writer also disputed Meghan's claim in the interview that she'd last seen her half-sister "at least 18, 19 years ago and before that, 10 years before that", and that Samantha only changed her own surname back to Markle when the former actress began generating headlines for her relationship with Harry. Samantha claimed Meghan has fabricated stories of growing up in "virtual poverty" because her dad paid for her to attend dance and acting classes, and "elite and expensive private schools".

And despite the duchess' claims to Oprah and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres that she worked hard to put herself through university, Samantha insisted their father covered the costs of Meghan's tuition and living expenses at Northwestern University. Samantha accused Meghan of lying about her and her childhood as part of a calculated effort so they "could not interfere with or contradict the false narrative and fairytale life story concocted by" the duchess.

Samantha has claimed her estranged relative's comments have damaged sales of her autobiography, 'The Diary of Princess Pushy's Sister', prevented her from getting work, and caused emotional and mental distress. A lawyer acting on behalf of the duchess - who has children Archie, two, and Lili, eight months, with Harry - branded the lawsuit "baseless and absurd". Michael Kump said: "This baseless and absurd lawsuit is just a continuation of a pattern of disturbing behavior. We will give it the minimum attention necessary, which is all it deserves." — Bang Showbiz



Princess Charlotte loves 'Charlotte's Web'

Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, marked World Book Day by sharing a selection of children's book suggestions with Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall's Reading Room and revealed E.B. White's 1952 classic tale about a spider's efforts to save a pig named Wilbur is a firm favourite in her household because the arachnid heroine shares the same name as her six-year-old daughter. Catherine said of the book: "[It is an] all-time classic and loved in our house for obvious reasons. 'This is a charming story about friendship, loyalty and love.'"

The duchess - who also has sons Prince George, eight, and Prince Louis, three, with husband Prince William - also singled out one of her own childhood favourites, 'Stig of The Dump', which had encouraged her to love "spending time outdoors, making dens, digging, discovering and making things out of odds and ends" as a child. She added of Clive King's 1963 novel: "Whether this was why my father recommended this book to me or whether this book inspired my imagination I can't remember, but I have never forgotten this brilliant book and the values it teaches."

And that wasn't the only one of the stories she had loved as a little girl that

Catherine included in her selection, as she also shortlisted 'The Owl Who Was Afraid of the Dark' by Jill Tomlinson, which she recently read on the 'CBeebies Bedtime Story' segment. She said: "I loved this book as a little girl and listening to my own children reading it has brought back so many wonderful memories. A comforting story to help children face their fears and grow in confidence with the help of others."

"I loved this book as a little girl and listening to my own children reading it has brought back so many wonderful memories. A comforting story to help children face their fears and grow in confidence with the help of others." Mairi Hedderwick's 'The Katie Morgag Series' - which was written between 1984 and 2007 - were chosen because of how they can help children of different ages bond.

Catherine said they were "fun stories for children of all ages and a great book for older children to read to younger siblings. These books are filled with captivating and beautiful illustrations to accompany the text, so there's lots to talk about." The final choice was the most modern, with Libby Walden's 'Feelings' first published in 2016. —Bang Showbiz

Joe Jonas' neighbor complained about his singing

The Jonas Brothers star spent two months living in Islington, north London, with his wife Sophie Turner and although he "loved" their time there, he admitted the people next door were not so keen on them because of the noise from one of their parties. Speaking to Jimmy Hill on the 'Capital Evening Show', he said: "I've been spending a lot of time in England, I just love it, we were in Islington for two months, it was so fun. 'We had a New Years Eve party which was pretty hilarious because, we had a dinner and we didn't have a neighbor who loved the noise, but it wasn't even noise it was music."

"She came by to complain a few days later and she was like, 'And the music....and the singing!...and the singing!' I was like, 'Oh god forbid we were singing!' " The 'Sucker' hitmaker was baffled as to why the neighbor had taken issue with him because there was so much other noise going on with peo-



ple celebrating the turning of the year. He added: "It was really funny and of course there were fireworks going off all night on, and I was like, why did our dinner party set you off?"

Joe will likely be having disturbed nights of his own again in the near future because it was recently claimed he and Sophie - who already have 19-month-old daughter Willa - are expecting another baby. According to reports, the 26-year-old actress is due to give birth "in the middle of summer". Just a few months after welcoming Willa into the world, it was claimed, the pair were "already" considering adding to their brood. A source said: "They are really excited to expand their family. Having the baby has made them really close and want to have a large family together." — Bang Showbiz

Hilaria Baldwin is taking a break from social media

The 38-year-old yoga instructor - who has six children with husband Alec Baldwin - has told her fans she is taking a step back from the online world but insisted it won't be for good as she still plans to "check in from time to time" to reassure her followers on her family's wellbeing. She announced on Instagram: "Hey friends! I'm gonna take a social media break. 'I promise I'll be back. I love you and know you worry, so want to give you a heads up. I might check in from time to time, dropping you a photo, and letting you know we are ok. Be good to yourselves and so much love and good energy to you. See you soon. HB." Hilaria's decision comes a few weeks after it was revealed her husband is the subject of legal action from the family of Halyna Hutchins, who was shot and killed when the actor's prop gun went off on the set of 'Rust' in October 2021.

Matthew Hutchins' lawyer, Brian Panish, said of the wrongful death lawsuit: "The lawsuit, as you can see, names

Alec Baldwin and others who were responsible for the safety on the set, and whose reckless behavior and cost-cutting led to the senseless and tragic death of Halyna Hutchins." The lawsuit blames the actor and others on the set - including armorer Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, and assistant director David Hall - for Halyna's death as it alleges they were responsible for "numerous violations of industry standards."

And Matthew subsequently hit out at the 63-year-old actor for giving an interview in which he insisted he didn't know the gun was loaded with a live round and did not pull the trigger when it went off during rehearsal.

He said: "Watching him I just felt so angry. I was just so angry to see him talk about her death so publicly, in such a detailed way and then to not accept any responsibility after having just described killing her. The idea that the person holding the gun causing it to discharge is not responsible, is absurd to me." However, Matt - who works as an attorney and has eight-year-old son Andros with Halyna - then explained that there were several "industry standards" that were not adhered to on the day his wife was fatally shot. He added: "But gun safety was not the only problem on that set. There were a number of industry standards that were not practiced and there's multiple responsible parties." — Bang Showbiz



Dua Lipa became better because of online bullies

Dua Lipa thinks being bullied online has made her a better artist. The 'Levitating' singer was widely ridiculed for a quirky dance move back in 2018 but she's now "reclaimed" the choreography because she has a "different perspective" on the situation and can recognize how the trolling she received motivated her to "work harder". Speaking on 'The Tonight show Starring Jimmy Fallon', she said: "The reason we're talking about it is because I brought it back. I'm doing it on my tour. 'I'm reclaiming it because there was a moment where it caused me a lot of grief. Like I was being bullied online. It wasn't very nice, but now I can look at it from a different perspective."

"I look back on it with such fondness because it helped me grow into the artist I wanted to become. It made me work harder. I went in, I did more rehearsal. I just wanted to become a real performer and I think that was the thing I needed." The 26-year-old star also reflected on

collaborating with Sir Elton John on 'Cold Heart'. She said: "I'm so lucky to have so many pinch-me moments in my life." The 'One Kiss' hitmaker has previously admitted online trolling left her with "anxiety" and questioning whether she was "good enough" to be a star.

She said: "I experienced a ton at the end of my first record, and it was definitely something that gave me anxiety and made me upset and made me feel like I wasn't good enough and made me feel like, maybe I'm not meant to be here and on the stage. "Even after the Grammys, some people were like, 'Well, she doesn't deserve it.' "There were so many things, especially when you start out, like a video of me dancing and they're like, 'Ah well, she has no stage presence' - but they'd never been to one of my shows, they'd never seen me perform." — Bang Showbiz





Indigenous woman Luana Melgueliro da Silva, of the Bare tribe, poses for a photo during a fashion event in Manaus, Amazonas state, Brazil. — AFP photos



Indigenous models take selfies during a fashion event in Manaus.

BRAZIL'S FIRST INDIGENOUS FASHION SHOW 'A FORM OF RESISTANCE'



An indigenous models poses during a fashion event in Manaus, Amazon.

Proudly donning majestic feathered headdresses, models sing an ode to the rain while a makeup artist draws geometric patterns on their faces, arms and thighs in preparation for Brazil's first-ever indigenous fashion show. "It is a feeling of happiness and pride," 19-year-old model Moan Munduruku told AFP ahead of his turn on the catwalk in Manaus in the Brazilian Amazon. "We are very eager to show our talent, in sewing, in crafts. To show the world that indigenous people can also succeed" in fashion, he said.

Moan is one of 37 models — women and men — representing 15 indigenous groups of Brazil to take part in the month-long Intercultural Exhibition of Indigenous Fashion in the Brazilian Amazon's largest city. For the entire month of April, the catwalk is to host the creations of 29 indigenous designers. "It's a form of resistance, a way to overcome stereotypes," event organizer Reby Ferreira, 27, told AFP.

"Here in Manaus, unfortunately, many



people are ashamed or even afraid to recognize that they have indigenous blood. Our goal is for everyone to feel included and to show our culture to everyone through these clothes." The designers use natural elements in their

creations, including the spearlike teeth of the peccary-an Amazonian boar — the red guarana fruit, acai seeds and coconut shells. The same geometric patterns sported by the models are repeated in the fabrics that envelop them.

"My outfit evokes the (coming-of-age) ritual of the Ticuna girl," said Kimpuramana, a 17-year-old model sporting a white dress adorned with black diagonal stripes. On the runway, a presenter announces the ethnicity of each model and explains the symbolism behind the clothes and accessories they wear. Saturday's show was hosted at the Rio Negro Palace, an early 20th century building that now serves as a cultural center. "I feel privileged to have been able to attend such an event in this place. We are generally excluded from such sites.

Today I can see my people telling their story through fashion," said participant Bianca Mura, 24. As the models walked down the catwalk to appreciative applause, thousands of indigenous



Brazilians gathered in the capital Brasilia some 3,500 kilometers (2,175 miles) away, for an annual mass camping event called Terra Livre (Free Land). The gathering is both a rally for indigenous rights and a protest against the government of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who is in favor of opening indigenous reserves — already hard hit by deforestation — to mining and farming companies. — AFP



Vogue Williams is still going to the gym five times a week

The 36-year-old star is currently preparing for the arrival of her third child with husband Spencer Matthews - but that hasn't stopped her from hitting the gym in recent weeks. Vogue - who already has Theodore, three, and Gigi, 20 months, with Matthew - shared: "I was working out today. I do this thing with John Belton, so we did a program for Gymondo [an online fitness membership]. "So I train five times a week, but I've had to really cut it down from my doctor. "I can't go running, I can't do anything too strenuous, so that's why I've been doing loads of weights and using restraint bands." Vogue and Spencer, 33, currently live together in London. But Vogue is open-minded about their long-term future. Asked if she'd ever return home to Ireland, the model told MailOnline: "I wouldn't say never. I love Ireland, and when the kids go to school, and when Theodore starts going to school that's when we're really going to have to start thinking about where we're going to live, and I really love London as well.

"I think in London you can be in the city and it's amazing, but then you can be a little bit further out.



Vogue Williams

Bella and Chigvintsev have 'hesitated' over getting married because of the cost

Nikki Bella and Artem Chigvintsev have "hesitated" over getting married because of the cost. The couple - who have 18-month-old son Matteo together - have been engaged since 2009 but have still not set a date for the big day and the 'Total Bellas' star admitted they want to make sure they can splurge on their dream day, rather than compromise on their celebrations because they need to use their money for other things. She said: "I will be getting married, and I can't wait. I do me, for me. So that means I'll marry Artem when I want, for me and Teo and him, for my life..."

"There are also things that Artem and I don't talk about. Like, financially, we have so much more going on in our lives to think, for Artem and I, for the past two years, of putting our money into a wedding - it's probably the main reason we've hesitated.

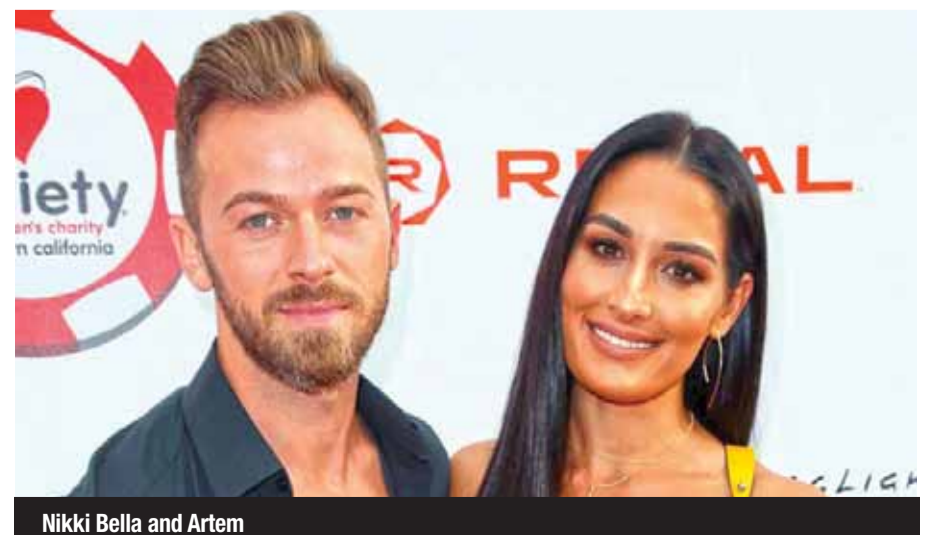
"We just never wanted to say to people, 'We don't wanna spend the money on that right now.' "We're building a home that costs us four to five times more than we thought, and we want Matteo to have an amazing education, so we started to put all of our money in other places and then we're like, 'Do we really want to spend all this on a wedding?' " "I want it to be a dream. I don't want to do something little because it's all that you can afford right now... We have just never really wanted to say that." When Nikki and Artem eventually do get married, she

knows exactly what she wants their wedding to be like.

She said: "I don't want to get married at a courthouse! "I wanna get married in Paris with a gorgeous couture dress and Artem in a gorgeous couture tux." The 'AGT: Extreme' judge dismissed suggestions she doesn't want to marry Artem, insisting she "can't imagine" her life without the 'Dancing With the Stars' professional. Speaking on a special addition of her and sister Brie's podcast 'The Bellas', she said: "When Artem's on tour, when Artem's gone, I get really sad. I love my life with Artem in it and I can't imagine Artem not in my life... I truly feel like, deep

down in my heart, I've found the person that I do want to spend the rest of my life with and I do want to get married to him."

Artem added: "When one proposes to another, they definitely have a better understanding of what that person wants to do. I proposed to you, knowing how I [felt] and what I wanted." The 38-year-old star also noted how she has been "very careful" with their relationship after getting "traumatized with a public break-up", in reference to her ending her engagement to John Cena shortly before they were due to marry in 2018. — Bang Showbiz



Nikki Bella and Artem

Lifestyle | Features



In this photograph a shopkeeper shows a traditional Banarasi sari at a store in Varanasi. — AFP photos



A worker uses a hand loom to weave a Banarasi silk sari at a workshop in Varanasi.

Indian sari weavers toil to keep tradition alive

In a dim room near the banks of India's Ganges river, arms glide over a creaking loom as another silken fibre is guided into place with the rhythmic clack of a wooden beam. Mohammad Sirajuddin's cramped studio is typical of Varanasi's dwindling community of artisans painstakingly working by hand to produce silk saris, uniquely cherished among their wearers as the epitome of traditional Indian sartorial style.

The city he calls home is revered among devout Hindus, who believe that cremation on the banks of its sacred waterway offers the chance to escape the infinite cycle of death and rebirth. But Sirajuddin's own reflections on mortality are centered on his craft, with competition from more cost-efficient mechanized alternatives and cheap imports from China leaving his livelihood hanging by a thread. "If you walk around this whole neighborhood, you'll see that this is the only house with a handloom," the 65-year-old tells AFP.

"Even this will be here only as long as I am alive. After that, nobody in this house will continue." Varanasi's hand-weavers have cultivated a reputation for excellence over centuries, specializing in intricate patterns, floral designs and radiant golden brocades. The Banarasi saris—so-called in reference to the city's ancient name—they produce are widely sought after by Indian brides and are often passed on from one



A worker uses a power loom to weave a Banarasi silk sari at a workshop in Varanasi.



A shopkeeper shows a traditional Banarasi sari at a store in Varanasi.

generation to the next as family heirlooms. The elegant garments fetch handsome prices—Sirajuddin's current work will go on sale for 30,000 rupees (\$390) — but the cost of inputs and cuts taken by middlemen leave little left for weavers. "Compared to the hard work that goes into making the sari, the profit is negligible," Sirajuddin says. His neighbors have all switched to electric looms for their garments, which lack the subtleties of hand-woven textiles and sell for just a third of the price but take a fraction of the time to finish.

'Thriving industries got killed'
The fortunes of India's textile trade—historically a cottage industry—have long been subject to sudden and devastating upheavals from abroad. Its delicate fabrics were prized by the 18th century European elite but British colonization and England's industrial-era factories flooded India with much cheaper textiles, decimating the market for hand-woven garments. Decades of socialist-inspired central planning after independence bought some reprieve by shielding local handicrafts from the international market.

But economic reforms in the early 1990s opened the country up to cheap goods just as the country's northern neighbour was establishing itself as the globalised world's workshop. "Chinese yarn and fabric came in everywhere," said author and former politician Jaya Jaitly, who has written a book on Varanasi's woven textiles, adding that sari factories there had for years been emulating the city's unique patterns and detail. "All of these thriving industries got killed... through Chinese competition, and their ability to produce huge quantities at very low prices."

'Tradition to be proud of'
Jaitly said local weavers needed urgent protection from government to preserve a wealth of artisanal traditions that otherwise risked disappearing. "We have the largest number of varieties of handloom, techniques, skills... more than anywhere else in the world," she said. "I think that's truly a tradition to be proud of." Demand for Banarasi saris, already limited to a select Indian clientele able to justify spending at a premium, has also suffered in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.



A worker uses a hand loom to weave a Banarasi silk sari at a workshop in Varanasi.



A worker adjusts his hand loom before weaving a Banarasi silk sari at a workshop in Varanasi.

The virus threat may have receded in India, but job losses and a big dent to the economy have taken their toll. "The weavers are suffering a lot. They are not getting the right price for their products, payments are also coming late," said local sari merchant Mohammad Shahid, his store empty but for sales assistants stacking silk garments on the shelves.

Shahid was nonetheless hopeful that well-heeled and discerning customers would return. "Those who know the value of handloom will continue to buy and cherish our saris. The handlooms can dwindle but they will never go away," Shahid, 33, told AFP. — AFP

'Sonic' sequel zips to top of N America box office

Paramount's action-adventure film "Sonic the Hedgehog 2" took in an estimated \$71 million in North America this weekend, a welcome sign for Hollywood that families are returning to in-person viewing, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported Sunday. "This is an outstanding opening," particularly for a sequel to a video-based movie, said David A Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research.

The original "Sonic" film, based on the popular Sega game involving a lightning-fast hedgehog, scored a \$58 million opening in early 2020 at a time when Covid-19 was only beginning to register as a threat. The latest hybrid production includes Jim Carrey in a live-action role, while Ben Schwartz (Sonic), Idris Elba (Knuckles) and Colleen O'Shaughnessey (Tails) voice animated characters.

Last weekend's box office leader,

Sony's vampire flick "Morbius," placed a very distant second this weekend, taking in \$10.2 million, a steep drop from last weekend's \$39.1 million. Jared Leto stars as a Nobel Prize-winner turned blood sucker in an adaptation from Marvel comics. In third was another Paramount film, action romance "The Lost City," at \$9.2 million. Sandra Bullock plays a romance novelist kidnapped by a twisted tycoon (Daniel Radcliffe) who wants her to help him find a buried artifact on a remote, volcano-prone island.

Fourth spot went to a new Universal release, action adventure "Ambulance," at \$8.7 million. Jake Gyllenhaal and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II star as adoptive siblings who steal an ambulance to escape after a bank heist. And in fifth was dark superhero film "The Batman" from Warner Bros., taking in \$6.5 million in its sixth week out. Robert Pattinson plays the caped crime fighter.

Rounding out the top 10 were:
"Everything Everywhere All at Once" (\$6 million)
"Uncharted" (\$2.7 million)
"Dog" (\$635,000)
"Spider-Man: No Way Home" (\$625,000)
"Jujutsu Kaisen 0" (\$500,000)—AFP



Johnny Depp, ex-wife Amber Heard head to court again, this time in US

After a high-profile libel case in London, actor Johnny Depp and his ex-wife Amber Heard are headed back to court Monday, this time in the United States, for a blockbuster defamation case revolving about allegations of spousal abuse. The case pitting the 58-year-old Depp against Heard, 35, will be broadcast live. Both are expected to testify, along with actors James Franco and Paul Bettany—and billionaire Tesla and SpaceX chief Elon Musk. The case centers on a column written by Heard and printed in The Washington Post in December 2018 in which she describes herself as a "public figure representing domestic abuse" who was pilloried online after her assault claims.

The column was entitled: "I spoke up against sexual violence—and faced our culture's wrath. That has to change." The actress never names Depp, who she met on the set of the 2011 film "The Rum Diary" and was married to from 2015 to 2017 — but he sued her for defamation for implying he was an abuser, seeking \$50 million in damages. "The op-ed's clear implication that Mr Depp is a domestic abuser is categorically and demonstrably false. Mr Depp never abused Ms Heard," the complaint says.

Depp accuses Heard of seeking to "generate positive publicity for herself" ahead of the release of the film "Aquaman," in which she had a starring role. Heard countersued, asking for \$100 million, saying she suffered "rampant physical violence and abuse" at his hands. "The frivolous lawsuit Mr Depp has filed against Ms Heard continues that abuse and harassment," her counterclaim says.



This combination of file pictures US actress Amber Heard (left) as she makes a statement on the steps of the High Court in London and US actor Johnny Depp (right) as he arrives to deliver a masterclass at the Auditorium della Conciliazione venue in Rome. — AFP

Intimate details laid bare

After an ardent legal battle at each phase of the US case, jury selection begins Monday in a county court in Fairfax, outside Washington. Depp filed his case in Virginia as The Washington Post is printed there. The state also has defamation laws considered to be more favorable to plaintiffs than those in California, where the two actors live. The trial, presided over by Judge Penney Azcarate, is expected to last several weeks. Opening statements could begin as soon as Tuesday. Depp and Heard are expected to testify in person, while other witnesses could be heard via video link.

More details about the private lives of the two actors are expected to emerge. Starting in 2016, Heard sought a restraining order against Depp amid abuse allegations. Their divorce was finalized in 2017. Depp lost the London case, which

he brought against The Sun for branding him a "wife beater." His attempt to appeal was rejected in March last year. That trial laid bare details of the couple's volatile relationship, including Depp's battle with drugs and alcohol.

Heard testified that she loved the sober Depp—but that he became a "monster" after days-long binges on powerful prescription and other drugs. Depp's career has suffered in the wake of that case. He left his role as Captain Jack Sparrow in the "Pirates of the Caribbean" franchise. Depp also has said he was asked to step down from the "Fantastic Beasts" film franchise based on the book by Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling. He has been replaced by Mads Mikkelsen. In a quirk of timing, the next movie in that series opens in US theaters on April 15. — AFP

Sports

Turning professional: Cuban boxers hope to land heavy blow

HAVANA: Spirits and expectations are high at Cuba's La Finca national boxing school, where training has intensified ahead of the "Los Domadores" national team's first professional contest since 1962. Cuba has long been a powerhouse of Olympic boxing, but participation in professional sport was barred by the late revolutionary leader Fidel Castro.

Over the decades, many pugilists fled Cuba and defected to pursue salaried careers. Then last week, the communist nation's authorities finally gave way, opening up participation in professional boxing competitions. Members of Los Domadores will fight their first professional bouts in Mexico next month under a deal between the Cuban Boxing Federation and the Golden Ring Promotions company.

"It is what we have been waiting for," team captain Julio Cesar La Cruz, a five-time World and twice Olympic champion, told AFP at La Finca on the outskirts of Havana. "We have had great generations of boxers, great champions and this possibility could not be given to them," said the 32-year-old, drenched in sweat after three hours of sparring practice. "But for the first time, it is going to happen with this generation, with these champions and we are going to do it well for all those who

could not do it at the time. We are going to represent them well," he vowed.

'Solve many problems'

Cuban boxers hold 80 World and 41 Olympic titles. La Cruz's team-mate and fellow Olympic champion Arlen Lopez welcomed the prospect of earning a salary. The Cuban Boxing Federation has said that fighters will be allowed to keep 80 percent of the salary due to them for each fight. "Many of us have families. I am a father of two... so it will help us to raise our socio-economic status and solve many problems," Lopez told AFP.

Cuba is facing its worst economic crisis in nearly three decades due to the coronavirus pandemic and biting US sanctions. Reigning Olympic and Pan-American boxing champion Andy Cruz, 26, said he was happy because the opening will allow him to test himself against "the best boxers in the world". Cuba started a slow advance towards joining the professional realm when Los Domadores debuted at the World Series of Boxing (WSB) in 2014. The tournament allowed fighters to retain their amateur status.

The country won three of the five WSB tournaments in which it competed, including the last one in 2018. Los

Domadores trainer Rolando Acebal said he saw no problem with adapting to professional boxing, which in addition to more rounds per bout, also entails harder blows. "Those issues are being trained," he told AFP. La Cruz, Cruz, Lopez, Yoelvis Feliciano and Lazaro Alvarez will take part in the Mexican competition, for which Lopez said the training effort was double the usual. "It is going to be beautiful... beautiful, special and historic," added La Cruz.

'Factory of champions'

The news was also met with enthusiasm from the international boxing fraternity. "Great news for professional boxing," because "Cuba is a factory of champions," said Spanish Boxing Federation president Felipe Martinez, in Cuba with a group of fighters preparing for the Paris 2024 Olympics.

France's Cuban-born coach Luis Mariano Gonzalez added the move would "further raise the level of Cuban boxing." World Boxing Association president Gilberto Jesus Mendoza said it was "a new opportunity for Cuban boxers to make a life in their country." Several Cuban boxers who defected to make a living off their fists are holders of WBA



HAVANA: Cuban Olympic boxers Julio Cesar La Cruz and Roniel Iglesias take part in a training session at the Cuban National Boxing School on April 7, 2022. —AFP

titles, including Yuriorkis Gamboa, Guillermo Rigondeaux and Luis Ortiz. Acebal believes Cuba's entry into professional boxing could stop the exodus-most recently this year when Kevin Brown and Herich Ruiz left the Cuban delegation par-

ticipating in the Pan-American Championship in Ecuador. The question now is whether US sanctions in place since 1962 will allow Cuban champs to contest the sport's hot ticket events, usually organized on American soil. —AFP

S Africa spinners wrap up crushing win over B'desh

GQEERHA, South Africa: South African captain Dean Elgar hailed the performance of a below-strength team after they completed a crushing 332-run win on the fourth day of the second Test against Bangladesh at St George's Park on Monday. Bangladesh captain Mominul Haque, meanwhile, bemoaned the failure of his players to perform with both bat and ball.

Keshav Maharaj and Simon Harmer bowled South Africa to victory for the second week in a row. Bangladesh were bowled out for 80, losing their remaining seven wickets inside an hour. Left-arm spinner Maharaj took seven for 40 and off-spinner Harmer claimed three for 34. It was the second successive match in which the two spinners bowled unchanged through the fourth innings. It was also Maharaj's second seven-wicket haul in successive matches after he took seven for 32 in South Africa's 220-run win in the first Test in Durban.

Maharaj, who top-scored with 84 in South Africa's first innings, was named player of the match and player of the series. South Africa shrugged off the loss of five leading players, including their full first-choice fast bowling lineup, to the Indian Premier League. "People say we were playing the series with a weakened squad but I don't see

it as that," Elgar said at the post-match presentation. "I see that as giving guys opportunities at this level, testing their skills and seeing where they are as an international cricketer."

Elgar praised Maharaj and Harmer, who took advantage of spin-friendly conditions in both Tests. "What a combination that is," he said. "It's great to see two guys experienced in their careers going about their business at the highest level." Elgar said the performance of some of the younger players was a highlight of the series. "They are putting their hands up and putting pressure on the guys who aren't here," he said.

'Massive statement'

Speaking later at a press conference, Elgar said South Africa had enjoyed a successful summer with five wins in seven Tests but he was mindful that major challenges lay ahead with away series against England and Australia coming up. He said the IPL players were not guaranteed their places. "I think the guys who have played right now have made a massive statement."

Mominul said Bangladesh had failed to perform as a team. "When we play well, we play as a team. We didn't make any partnerships with the batting and



GQEERHA, South Africa: South Africa's Dean Elgar holds the trophy as the South African team poses after winning the Test series against Bangladesh at St George's Park on April 11, 2022. —AFP

the bowling." He said the bowlers were guilty of bowling on both sides of the wicket while the batsmen needed to apply themselves more. Three wickets fell in the first half hour in what for Bangladesh was a depressingly similar pattern to the first Test in Durban when they were bowled out for 53 after starting the last day on 11 for three.

Resuming in a near-hopeless position at 27 for three after being set 413 to win, Bangladesh lost their fourth wicket just eight balls into the day's play. Mushfiqur Rahim went on a big drive against Maharaj and was smartly

caught at slip by Elgar for one. Mominul did not add to his overnight score of five, top-edging an attempted sweep to midwicket.

Yasir Ali slogged the fourth ball he received from Harmer to deep midwicket and Bangladesh were 44 for six, having lost three wickets for 17 runs in 29 balls since the start of play. Liton Das batted brightly, scoring 27 and sharing a stand of 25 with Mehidy Hasan before leaving down the wicket against Maharaj to be stumped by Kyle Verreynne. The last three wickets fell in the space of seven balls. —AFP



MONTPELLIER: Harlequins' English player Marcus Smith is tackled by Montpellier's French center Geoffrey Doumayrou during their European Rugby Champions Cup match at the GGL stadium on April 10, 2022. —AFP

Harlequins fightback gives them hope after Montpellier onslaught

PARIS: Montpellier will be kicking themselves despite beating Harlequins 40-26 in their Champions Cup last 16 first leg clash on Sunday as they at one point led 34-0. In the last game of weekend's round of matches, Leicester finished with 14 men in Clermont, but still scored five tries and won 29-10. It was the sixth of the weekend's eight matches won by the away team. In Montpellier, the French league leaders dominated the English champions for the first 45 minutes with ex-Saracens prop Timi Lamositele and backrow forward Zach Mercer among the try-scorers.

Driven on by England fly-half Marcus Smith, Quins responded with four tries in the final half hour. Back row forward George Hammond touched down a Smith kick, before South African Andre Esterhuizen, and his English center partner Joe Marchant touched down. Full-back Louis Lynagh - son of former Wallaby legend Michael - rounded off the try spree running 80 m with an interception two minutes from time.

Philippe Saint-Andre's side hold a 14-point lead as they go in search of only a second last-eight appearance and a quarter-final against either last season's finalists La Rochelle or Bordeaux-Begles. But Harlequins, given their habit of comebacks, can dream of winning a knockout encounter for the first time in this competition.

In Clermont, Leicester, the English league leaders, fell behind to a 12th minute try by winger Cheikh Tiberghien but then dominated the team lying eight in the Top 14. Prop Ellis Genge and hooker Julien Montoya drew Leicester level at 10-10 with unconverted tries before halftime. Scrum half Jack Van Poortvliet and wing Hosea Saumaki crossed early in the second half with George Ford converting both. Centre Guy Porter was red carded after an hour following an accidental off the ball collision that left Montpellier's Fritz Lee bleeding. But winger Harry Potter still added a fifth try for the visitors.

On Saturday, La Rochelle's conquerors in last season's final Toulouse slipped to defeat at home to Ulster. Robert Baloucoune bagged a hat-trick of tries to help Ulster notch up a memorable 26-20 victory. The Ireland winger shone not only in attack but also as part of a strong defensive showing against a star-studded Toulouse side boasting 10 of France's Grand Slam-winning squad.

However, the hosts played with 14 men for 70 minutes of an entertaining match after a red card for Argentina winger Juan Cruz Mallia. La Rochelle look set for the last eight after sauntering to a 31-13 victory over Bordeaux-Begles. Elsewhere, Gael Fickou scored the only try as Racing 92 beat city rivals Stade Francais 22-9, a feat mirrored by Fiji's Semi Radradra in Bristol's 10-9 victory over fellow English Premiership club Sale. —AFP

Durant, Irving lead Nets over Pacers, Celtics take second

NEW YORK: Kyrie Irving and Kevin Durant combined for 55 points as the Brooklyn Nets held off a rally from the Indiana Pacers on Sunday to seal seventh place in the Eastern Conference and clinch home advantage for next week's play-in. The Nets' final regular season game looked set to be a blowout for long periods as Brooklyn jumped out to an 18-point lead in the first half.

But a dogged Pacers unit drew level at 89-89 with less than five minutes remaining in the third quarter before Brooklyn regrouped to pull clear and run out 134-126 winners. The win means Brooklyn will face a home game against the Cleveland Cavaliers on Tuesday where a victory will see them enter directly into the playoffs as seventh seeds.

The Nets will head into that showdown buoyed by the recent form of Irving and Durant. Irving finished with 35 points, seven rebounds and five assists on Sunday, going 15-of-20 from the field. Durant, meanwhile, completed a triple double of 20 points, 10

rebounds and a career-high 16 assists while Brooklyn had six players finish in double figures.

Durant is now looking forward eagerly to the business end of the season, starting with Tuesday's assignment against Cleveland. A Brooklyn victory over Cleveland on Tuesday would see the Nets face the second-seeded Boston Celtics in the Eastern Conference playoffs. That crunch showdown - which would pit Irving against his former club - was made possible after the Celtics vaulted over the Milwaukee Bucks into second place in the standings.

The Celtics clinched the second seed after a 139-110 blowout of the Memphis Grizzlies in their final game on Sunday. Celtics star Jayson Tatum led the rout with 31 points - making 11-of-14 from the field in just 26 minutes on court. Jaylen Brown added 18 points with Al Horford scoring 13. The Grizzlies, who had already clinched second place in the Western Conference, rested several of their first choice starting line-up. The Celtics rise to the second seeding is all the more remarkable given their indifferent early season form. As recently as February, Boston were languishing in ninth place in the East, well outside the automatic playoff places. Milwaukee meanwhile dropped to third in the Eastern Conference standings after their under-strength lineup was thumped 133-115 by the Cavaliers in Cleveland on Sunday.

The Bucks were without key players Giannis



NEW YORK: Kyrie Irving #11 of the Brooklyn Nets goes to the basket as Terry Taylor #32 of the Indiana Pacers defends during the first half at Barclays Center on April 10, 2022. —AFP

Antetokounmpo, Khris Middleton and Bobby Portis for the game which was notable for a bizarre fleeting cameo by another mainstay Jrue Holiday. Holiday came onto the court for the tipoff and promptly committed a foul after eight seconds before leaving the court without returning. Reports said the brief appearance allowed him to collect a \$255,000 bonus included in his contract for featuring in 67 games this season. —AFP

Bastianini wins Grand Prix of the Americas

AUSTIN: Italy's Enea Bastianini won his second MotoGP race of the season at the Grand Prix of the Americas on Sunday and seized control of the world championship. The 24-year-old passed fellow Ducati rider, and long-time leader, Jack Miller with five laps left to add the Austin win to his maiden elite class victory at the season-opener in Qatar. Australian Miller, who had stormed into the lead at the start, finished third having also been passed by the Suzuki of Alex Rins, the winner in Texas in 2019.

"It's a fantastic day. Miller had fantastic pace in the first part of the race, then I felt like I had to push, I accelerated like crazy and I won," said Bastianini. "Winning here in America is fantastic. Now we can eat some burgers!" Six-time MotoGP champion Marc Marquez, bidding for an eighth win in nine visits to the Texas circuit, finished sixth, having slipped to the back of the field at lights out on his Honda.

The 29-year-old Spaniard, who missed last weekend's race in Argentina due to double vision after a violent

high-side crash in Indonesia, had started ninth on the grid, his worst qualifying performance ever at the Circuit of the Americas. However, he stormed back through the field into the top 10 at the midway point, even setting a fastest lap.

Fourth on Sunday was Suzuki's Joan Mir, the 2020 world champion, with Francesco Bagnaia on another Ducati coming home fifth. Reigning world champion Fabio Quartararo of Yamaha was seventh behind Marquez with pole-sitter Jorge Martin on a Ducati-Pramac having to settle for eighth. Previous world championship leader Aleix Espargaro of Aprilia was only 11th on Sunday.

Bastianini has a five-point lead in the standings over Rins and is 11 in front of Espargaro who won his first MotoGP race in Argentina last week in his 200th race. Mir and Quartararo are fourth and fifth respectively, 15 and 17 points off the lead after four rounds. Rins dedicated his second place "to Ukraine, and to all the people who suffer from the war and also from the Covid".

In the Moto2 race, Italy's Tony Arbolino claimed a maiden victory by 3.4sec over Ai Ogura. Britain's Jake Dixon took third to secure his first ever podium while American pole sitter Cameron Beaubier failed to finish. Jaime Masia won the Moto3 race, his first success since



AUSTIN: Enea Bastianini of Italy and Gresini Racing MotoGP celebrates his victory in the MotoGP Of The Americas Race on April 10, 2022. —AFP

Qatar last year. Dennis Foggia was second and takes over the world championship lead while Andrea Migno was third. Former series leader Sergio Garcia failed to finish. The fifth round of the 2022 world championship is the Portuguese Grand Prix on April 24. —AFP

Sports

De Jong stoppage time header gives Barca victory over Levante

MADRID: Luuk de Jong headed in a 92nd-minute winner on Sunday as Barcelona prevailed in a five-goal thriller against Levante to return to second in La Liga. De Jong's late goal, his sixth in the league for Barca, proved the decisive moment in a 3-2 victory in Valencia but it was the introduction of the 19-year-old Pedri off the bench that turned the momentum of the contest.

Asked if the team are too reliant on Pedri, Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez said: "I wouldn't put it like that but he is an extraordinary player. I don't hold back any praise, he is a player who excites people and makes a difference." A frantic 11 minutes early in the second half saw Levante score one penalty in the 52nd minute through Jose Luis Morales before missing a second in the 55th, this time Roger Marti stepping up, only to be denied by Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Pedri came off the bench in the 56th minute and three minutes later Barcelona equalized, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang heading in Ousmane

Dembele's cross to score his 10th goal for his new club. Then in the 63rd minute, Pedri fired Barca in front with a first-time finish into the corner, only for Levante to level again after being awarded a third penalty, Gonzalo Melero this time making no mistake.

Levante looked set to claim a point but De Jong snatched the win, meeting Jordi Alba's cross and heading in at the near post. "When we don't play well and we pull through, it shows we have that winning mentality," said Xavi. Barca climb back above Sevilla into second, still 12 points behind Real Madrid, who eased to a 2-0 victory over Getafe on Saturday. Xavi's side have a game in hand over Real Madrid, Sevilla and Atletico Madrid, with Atletico three points behind in fourth after losing on Saturday away at Mallorca.

Pedri scored a brilliant winner against Sevilla last weekend and while the midfielder was initially rested against Levante, Barcelona were transformed after he came on. Aubameyang, mean-

while, continued his own rich vein of form since leaving Arsenal in January. The Gabon striker now has 10 goals in 14 games for his new club.

Levante were all over Barcelona early on and Morales was thwarted by an excellent, goal-line clearance by Eric Garcia after his finish at the end of a weaving run looked to be spinning in. Garcia scrambled back to hook away. Ferran Torres twice went close but the mayhem began shortly after half-time when Dani Alves leant into Son to prevent him retrieving a one-two and Morales scored from the spot.

Three minutes later, Levante had another penalty after the ball cruelly dropped down onto the arm of Garcia. Morales left this spot-kick to Roger but his low shot to the left was palmed away by Ter Stegen. Levante knew an opportunity had been squandered and Barca played quicker with Pedri on the pitch, the teenager playing the key pass out to Dembele, who crossed in for Aubameyang to nod in.

Five minutes later, Barcelona were in



VALENCIA: Barcelona's Gabonese midfielder Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang heads the ball and scores his team's first goal during the Spanish league football match against Levante at the Ciutat de Valencia stadium on April 10, 2022. — AFP

front as Gavi nipped between two Levante defenders and squared for Pedri, who bent the ball first time into the far corner. Levante, though, came again and when Melero fired in their third penalty of the night after Dani Gomez was

clipped by Clement Lenglet, they looked to have secured a point. De Jong, on for Aubameyang, had other ideas, dashing into the area in the 92nd minute and Alba's curving cross finding him. De Jong headed the ball inside the post. — AFP

Marseille strike early, move back to second place

PARIS: Marseille scored twice in the first 19 minutes and then spent a relaxed Sunday evening cruising to a 2-0 home victory over Montpellier and back into second place in Ligue 1. The home team pressed hard at the start and were rewarded after nine minutes when Amine Harit cut in from the right, drew goalkeeper Jonas Omlin and then rolled the ball across the six-yard box to Bamba Dieng who shot into the empty net. Dieng won the penalty that doubled Marseille's lead 10 minutes later.

Gerson's clever backheel gave Dieng a yard of

space but Jordan Ferri hacked him down. Cengiz Under converted the spot kick. Omlin was sent off in added time, but by then the match had long been over. Marseille gained the confidence boost of a fourth straight league win at the start of a difficult week. They travel to Greece to defend a one-goal lead against PAOK in Thessaloniki in an already acrimonious Europa Conference League tie on Thursday.

They visit bitter rivals and runaway league leaders Paris Saint-Germain on Sunday. "These victories give us momentum," said Marseille Jorgie Sampaoli. "Now we have to recover and hope to have some players back for Thursday. Then there will be the game on Sunday with very little preparation time."

Earlier in the day, fourth-placed Strasbourg's hopes of catching Marseille suffered a blow when they conceded a last-minute equalizer to Lyon. Ibrahima Sissoko gave the home team a 20th after a comical mix up in the home defence which also

forced goalkeeper Anthony Lopes off injured. Karl Toko Ekambi equalized in the 90th minute but the 1-1 draw in the home of the European Parliament left Lyon 10th and even further from a place in Europe.

Fifth-placed Nice lost more ground in the race for a Champions League spot after going down 3-0 at Lens, who played over 70 minutes with 10 men. Nice trainer Christophe Galtier accused his players of "turning up as tourists". At the other end of the table, Bordeaux ended an eight-match winless run by beating relegation rivals Metz 3-1 on Sunday to earn a first victory under coach David Guion and climb off the foot of the Ligue 1 table.

Metz took a first-half lead through Didier Lamkel Ze, who cut short a loan at Russian side Khimki following the invasion of Ukraine. Ricardo Mangas equalised early in the second half and M'Baye Niang put Bordeaux ahead. "Relief is not the word," said Bordeaux coach David Guion. — AFP

City retain edge, West Ham suffer top four blow

LONDON: Manchester City preserved their one-point lead at the top of the Premier League after a pulsating 2-2 draw against title rivals Liverpool on Sunday. Pep Guardiola's side twice led in the blockbuster showdown at the Etihad Stadium thanks to goals from Kevin De Bruyne and Gabriel Jesus. Liverpool hit back to equalize on both occasions through Diogo Jota and Sadio Mane, but it was City who finished happier with the result of a high-quality encounter between arguably the world's two best teams.

City made a flying start in the fifth minute as De Bruyne skipped past Fabinho on the edge of the area and unloaded a shot that took a wicked deflection off Joel Matip before glancing in off the far post. City's joy at De Bruyne's sixth goal in his last six games was short-lived and Liverpool were level eight minutes later. Andrew Robertson's cross reached Trent Alexander-Arnold at the far post and he clipped the ball towards Jota, whose low shot from 10 yards beat Ederson's weak attempted save.

City regained the lead in the 37th minute as Jesus repaid Guardiola's faith for selecting him instead of Riyad Mahrez. Cancelo's superb pass picked out Jesus's run behind the slow to react Alexander-Arnold and the Brazilian forward guided a fine finish in off the underside of the bar. Trailing at half-time in a Premier League game for the first time in a year, Liverpool hit back 47 seconds after the interval. Mohamed Salah's sublime defense-splitting pass found Mane's run and the Senegal forward fired a composed strike into the top corner to celebrate his 30th birthday in style.

Away from the day's summit meeting, West Ham's hopes of finishing in the top four suffered a major blow in a 2-0 defeat at Brentford. Bryan Mbuemo and Ivan Toney's goals left sixth-placed West Ham six points behind fourth-placed Tottenham, who have played a game less than their London rivals. Norwich kept alive their faint hopes of beating the drop with a 2-0 win against fellow strugglers Burnley at Carrow Road. Pierre Lees-Melou and Teemu Pukki scored for bottom-of-the-table Norwich, who are seven points from safety with seven games remaining. Third-bottom Burnley are four points adrift of fourth-bottom Everton, with both teams having eight matches to play. Leicester beat Crystal Palace 2-1 at the King Power Stadium as Ademola Lookman bagged his first goal since February. — AFP

Milan stalemate at Torino lets Napoli off the hook

MILAN: AC Milan missed a chance to cement their position as Serie A leaders on Sunday after only managing a goalless draw at Torino which left them just two points ahead of the chasing pack. Stefano Pioli's side had the chance to extend their lead to four after Napoli slumped to a 3-2 home defeat at the hands of Fiorentina but once again underwhelmed against modest opposition.

The draw not only let third-placed Napoli off the hook but gave Milan's local rivals Inter Milan the upper hand in an enthralling race for the Scudetto, as the champions also sit two back in second after their 2-0 win over Verona on Saturday but with a game in hand. Also big winners this weekend are

Juventus, who looked out of the picture after being defeated by Inter last weekend but are now six points back in fourth with six matches still to play.

Milan have kept six straight clean sheets but have had trouble finding the net in recent weeks and, hampered by last-minute injuries to Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Ismael Bennacer and Ante Rebic, on Sunday did little to suggest they are a title-winning side. A combination of rock-solid Torino defending led by the unflappable Bremer and poor finishing, exemplified by Sandro Tonali's weak shot in a great position with 15 minutes remaining, enabled Torino to gain another home point against one of the big boys after similar results with Inter and Juventus.

In fact it was Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan who made the best save of the match five minutes after the break from Mergim Vojvoda, while Fikayo Tomori had to be at his best to block a powerful effort from Andrea Belotti 15 minutes later. Napoli's bid for a first league crown since 1990 was hit less severely than Luciano Spalletti's team thought when they trudged off the field at the Stadio Maradona. — AFP



TURIN: Torino's defender Bremer from Brazil vies with AC Milan's Olivier Giroud from France during their Italian Serie A match at The Olympic Stadium on April 10, 2022. — AFP

second goal as he netted for the first time after missing most of the season with injury.

Nkunku's strike - a superb finish from a free kick - saw him move up to third among the leading scorers. Robert Lewandowski of Bayern Munich is the league's top marksman after scoring his 32nd league goal on Saturday in a 1-0 home win over Augsburg. Nkunku now has one more goal than Norway star Haaland, who has not scored in his last five games for Dortmund. Sunday's home win continues Leipzig's great form under head coach Domenico Tedesco who has lifted the team from 11th when he replaced Jesse Marsch last December. Leipzig have picked up 29 points in the second half of the season - three more than league leaders Bayern. They are now just a point behind third-placed Leverkusen

who they face away next Sunday.

Eintracht Frankfurt lost 2-1 at home to Freiburg in a final tune-up before Thursday's crunch Europa League quarter-final at Spanish giants Barcelona. Striker Filip Kostic equalized after Vincenzo Grifo gave Freiburg an early lead before Nils Petersen headed in the visitors' late winner. It was a disappointing result for Frankfurt, four days before their European second leg at Barcelona's Camp Nou having drawn the home tie 1-1 last Thursday. There was a brief delay at the start of the first half when two environmental protestors tied themselves to a post in the Frankfurt goal. After Kostic's equalizer ruled out Grifo's opening goal, Petersen came off the bench to head in the winner from a free-kick on 69 minutes. — AFP

Nkunku shines as Leipzig brush aside Hoffenheim

BERLIN: Christopher Nkunku overtook Erling Haaland among the Bundesliga's top scorers after the French winger netted Sunday to help resurgent RB Leipzig defeat Hoffenheim 3-0. Nkunku bagged his 17th league goal this season to give hosts Leipzig an early lead, then set up Dominik Szoboszlai as Leipzig consolidated fourth place. Midfielder Marcel Halstenberg scored Leipzig's

Classifieds

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Sabah Hospital	24812000	Rawda	22517733
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Adaliya	22517144
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Khaldiya	24848075
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Kaifan	24849807
Chest Hospital	24849400	Shamiya	24848913
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Shuwaikh	24814507
Adan Hospital	23940620	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Nuzha	22526804
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Qadsiya	22515088
		Dasmah	22532265
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MANCHESTER: Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah vies with Manchester City's French defender Aymeric Laporte during their English Premier League match at the Etihad Stadium on April 10, 2022. —AFP

Man City, Liverpool seek perfection

MANCHESTER: Pep Guardiola is demanding perfection from his Manchester City side to keep Liverpool at bay after a pulsating match between the Premier League title challengers finished all square. Sunday's 2-2 draw at the Etihad between the two outstanding sides of the current era was billed as a potential title decider even though each have seven matches still to play. The expectant crowd was treated to a feast of attacking football in Manchester but at the end of it nothing much had changed.

Defending champions City remain just one point ahead of their rivals, who were 14 points off the pace in January. City were twice pegged back after goals from Kevin De Bruyne and Gabriel Jesus were cancelled out by Diogo Jota and Sadio Mane. Guardiola's men were the better side in the first half, putting Liverpool's defense under intense pressure, but the visitors were

revitalized after the break.

The City boss said he had a nagging feeling that his side had let Liverpool off the hook when they were on top - they could even have won the match in the dying seconds but Riyad Mahrez lifted his shot over the bar. "It was a fantastic game from both sides and both sides try to win every game in all competitions," he said. "I had the feeling that with this result we missed an opportunity, a feeling we leave them alive."

Although the draw suits City more than Liverpool, Guardiola said his team would have to win all seven of their remaining games to be crowned Premier League winners. "We know that right now that one game dropped we will not be champion," he said. City, chasing a fourth Premier League title in five years, appear to have the easier run-in, with Liverpool still to face Manchester United, Everton and Tottenham.

Winning run

But Klopp's team have shown that - City apart - they are a cut above the rest of the teams in the league, as shown by their 10-match winning run before Sunday's game. "Nothing's changed really," said the Liverpool boss. "So you play 95 minutes of incredibly intense football and you are as smart as before but that's actually pretty good news." The German compared the two teams to heavyweight boxers. "The moment you put your arms down you get such a knock in the middle of your face and then you have to get up again and you have to try to get control again."

Klopp agreed with Guardiola's assessment that nothing short of perfection would do if his side were to stand any chance of winning a record-equaling 20th English top-flight title. "We have to be pretty much as close to perfection as possible to win every game," he

said. "This is absolutely insane but that's obviously the only way to beat this team."

City and Liverpool have been involved in some epic battles in recent seasons, in particular in 2018/19 when City pipped their rivals to the title by a single point. And fans will not have long to wait until the next instalment, with the two teams locking horns again on Saturday in the FA Cup semifinal. This time they know there cannot be a draw, with Liverpool's bid for an unprecedented quadruple and City's treble chase on the line.

Even after Wembley there is a chance for one more encounter between the two heavyweights this season - in the Champions League final. For many, such a match-up would merely confirm what we already know-they are the best two sides not only in England but also in Europe. —AFP

Tall story: Opelka downs Isner to win Houston crown

HOUSTON: Reilly Opelka defeated his childhood hero John Isner to win the tallest final in ATP Tour history at the US Clay Court Championship in Houston on Sunday. The 24-year-old Opelka powered past the veteran Isner in straight sets to claim the fourth singles title of his career with a 6-3, 7-6 (9/7) victory. Sunday's showdown between the two towering Americans - Opelka stands at 6ft 11in (2.1m), with Isner at 6ft 10in - was billed as the tallest ATP Tour final of the open era.

It also marked a symbolic moment for Opelka, who grew up watching the 36-year-old Isner. "He was my idol growing up as a kid, and before I even met him, I liked him," Opelka said after his win. "But since then we've become such good friends and spent so much time on Tour, I like him even more now," Opelka added.

"He's been an unbelievable role model for not just myself, (but) Taylor Fritz, Frances Tiafoe and Tommy Paul. We all say the same. He's been an unbelievable competitor for a long time." —AFP

No.1 Scheffler wins first major at Masters after Tiger's return

AUGUSTA, Georgia: Top-ranked Scottie Scheffler captured his first major title on Sunday by winning the Masters in dominating fashion, holding firm down the stretch to seize the green jacket after Tiger Woods completed his comeback from severe leg injuries. Scheffler fired a final-round one-under-par 71 to finish 72 holes on 10-under 278 and defeat four-time major winner Rory McIlroy by three strokes with Australian Cameron Smith and Ireland's Shane Lowry sharing third on 283.

"It was a long day, a tough day for me," Scheffler said. "I just tried to keep my head down and execute my shots." Scheffler, who only won his first PGA title in February, holed a spectacular chip-in birdie from 87 feet at the par-4 third to blunt an early charge by Smith, last month's Players Championship winner. "It was not a shot I expected to see go in but it got things off and rolling for me," Scheffler said.

He also birdied the 14th and sank a 14-foot birdie putt at the par-5 15th to signal there would be no collapse to open a door for McIlroy, chasing an Augusta National win to complete a career Grand Slam.

Scheffler endured an agonizing double bogey at the 18th hole, needing three putts from inside five feet before finally sinking the putt to secure his breakthrough major triumph.

"I didn't want to break my concentration," Scheffler said. "The minute I did was on 18 green when I finally got on there and I had a five-shot lead and was like, 'All right, now I can enjoy this.' And you saw the results of that." The 25-year-old American took a \$2.7 million top prize from a \$15 million purse and joined 1991 Masters champion Ian Woosnam as the only players to win majors in their debut events as world number one.

Scheffler is only the fifth player to win the Masters while atop the rankings, joining Welshman Woosnam and Americans Fred Couples, Dustin Johnson and Woods, whose epic injury fightback dominated attention all week. Spectators gave Woods a standing ovation at the 18th green for his astonishing return to golf 14 months after a car crash that left him hospitalized for weeks and unable to walk for months. "I wasn't playing my best but to have their support out there, I don't think words can describe it," Woods said.

The 15-time major winner fired weekend 78s, his worst Masters rounds, to finish with his highest Augusta National 72-hole score of 301 and in a worst-ever 47th place. But the fact Woods was able to walk the course and play at all was nothing short of incredible given the 46-year-old medical marvel had not played a top event



AUGUSTA: Scottie Scheffler poses with the Masters trophy during the Green Jacket Ceremony after winning the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club on April 10, 2022. —AFP

for 17 months and feared amputation of a right leg now held together with rods, plates, pins and screws.

"Given where I was a little over a year ago and what my prospects were, to end up here and be able to play in all four rounds, even a month ago, I didn't know if I could pull this off," Woods said. Woods arrived at Augusta chasing a record-tying sixth Masters crown and departed knowing he had the fortitude to play majors again. "It has been a tough road and one that I'm very thankful to have the opportunity to be able to grind through," Woods said. —AFP

Leclerc the man to beat after Aussie masterclass

MELBOURNE: Charles Leclerc has long been touted as a Formula One world champion in the making and the Ferrari driver has emerged as the man to beat this season after a dominant victory in Melbourne. The 24-year-old from Monaco blew away his rivals at Sunday's Australian Grand Prix at a revamped Albert Park, starting from pole and taking the chequered flag by more than 20 seconds from Red Bull's Sergio Perez.

The 2022 campaign is just three races old, but the pace and reliability of Leclerc's Ferrari - coupled

with Max Verstappen's problems at Red Bull and Lewis Hamilton's travails at Mercedes - have seen him emerge as early favorite to win a maiden drivers' title. Leclerc and Ferrari will have extra motivation, but also pressure, to ram home their advantage in the next race on April 24 because it takes place at Imola in front of their passionate home fans.

Leclerc sits 34 points clear in the standings after his runaway triumph, which came after victory in the season-opener at Bahrain and second place in Saudi Arabia, behind world champion Verstappen. "Obviously we only had the third race so it's difficult to think about the championship," Leclerc stressed in the immediate aftermath of victory.

But he conceded: "To be honest, we've got a very strong car, a very reliable car too. I hope it continues like this and if it does, then we probably have chances for the championship, which obviously makes me smile after the last two years that have been difficult for the team and obviously for myself.

It's great to be back in this position."

The level-headed Leclerc has for years been regarded as a potential F1 world champion. Having won the GP3 and Formula 2 championships, he stepped up to F1 in 2018 and a year later won his first race for Ferrari. Leclerc's second victory came at the Italian Grand Prix in 2019, the team's first victory on home soil since Fernando Alonso in 2010, prompting scenes of jubilation among the Ferrari faithful.

In 2020 and 2021 Ferrari failed to record a single victory on any track, but now seem capable of sustaining a serious title challenge for the first time in more than 15 years. "The mindset is a bit different compared to the last two years because now I know that underneath me I've got a car that is capable of winning," said Leclerc. His weekend masterclass saw him qualify on pole, set the fastest lap and lead every lap of the race. "I don't really have to overdo things or to do something extremely special and spectacul-

lar to actually get one or two positions because I know that it's in the car," he said. "I just have to do the job."

Red Bull 'so far behind' Leclerc's upbeat assessment was in stark contrast to his title rival and fellow 24-year-old, Verstappen. The Dutchman and team-mate Perez were both forced to retire in Bahrain as the defense of Verstappen's title got off to the worst possible start. After victory in Jeddah, Verstappen's car again broke down in Melbourne when he looked destined for second. "We are so far behind (Ferrari). We need to finish races," Verstappen fumed, calling it "unacceptable". —AFP



Charles Leclerc