



**3** Kuwait Democratic Union condemns Zionist attacks



**5** More rain lashes South Africa; death toll rises



**16** Hawks, Pelicans book final playoff berths



Ramadan Timings	
Fajr	03:58
Shurooq	05:20
Dhuhr	11:48
Asr	15:22
Maghrib	18:15
Isha	19:36

## VOLVO

# Russia forces pound missile factory after flagship sunk

## Moscow shatters Kyiv calm with fresh strikes



**KHARKIV:** The wreckage of a downed Russian helicopter lies in a field near Kharkiv on April 16, 2022, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia has stepped up air strikes on Kyiv, hitting another military factory a day after Moscow warned it would renew attacks following two weeks of relative calm in the Ukrainian capital. — AFP

**KYIV:** Russia pounded a Ukrainian rocket factory following the sinking of its Black Sea flagship, as President Volodymyr Zelensky said his allies could shorten the war by delivering the weapons he had requested. The Vizar factory, near Kyiv's international airport, was seriously damaged in the overnight strikes, an AFP journalist said.

Russia said it had used sea-based long-range missiles to hit the plant, which Ukraine's state weapons manufacturer says produced Neptune cruise missiles - the projectiles both Kyiv and Washington say were used to sink the Moskva warship. "There were five hits. My employee was in the office and got thrown off his feet by the blast," Andrei Sizov, the 47-year-old owner of a nearby wood workshop, told AFP. "They are making us pay for destroying the Moskva," he said.

A Pentagon official briefing reporters said the ship had been hit with two Neptunes - contradicting Russia's claim that the ship lost balance in rough seas as it was towed to port after ammunition exploded. The Moskva had been leading Russia's naval effort in the seven-week conflict, and the fate of its crew of more than 500 was uncertain.

Meanwhile, Russia stepped up air strikes on Kyiv

on Saturday, killing at least one person at a tank factory a day after Moscow warned it would renew attacks following two weeks of relative calm in the Ukrainian capital. Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitschko said at least one person was killed and several wounded in the attack. Smoke rose from the Darnytsky district in the southeast of the capital after what Moscow said were "high-precision long-range" strikes on the armaments plant.

"Our forces are doing everything possible to protect us, but the enemy is insidious and ruthless," Klitschko said. "It's no secret that a Russian general recently said they were ready for missile attacks on the capital of Ukraine. And, as we see, they are carrying out such shelling." A heavy police and military presence was deployed around the factory, the day after a similar strike on a plant that produced the Neptune missiles Kyiv and Washington say sunk Russia's Black Sea naval flagship on Thursday.

Russia, which used sea-based long-range missiles to hit the Vizar plant on Friday, says the Moskva missile cruiser sank while being towed back to port after ammunition exploded on board. Amid escalating tit-for-tat sanctions since President

Continued on Page 6

Ramadan Kareem

## Love: Lessons of Ramadan

By Teresa Leshner

Ramadan is a month of intensified charity, community relations, forgiveness and compassion. The Quran encourages the reader to spend in charity, saying, "You will never attain virtue until you spend something of what you love..." (3:92) This means that you should give to others what you love for yourself, and in Ramadan we realize how much all people love and need food and water.

By experiencing hunger and thirst, the faster is reminded of the importance of providing for the poor's basic needs. The Quran never explicitly commands us to "Love one another," but it does have many commands to behave as though we love one another, regardless of our feelings. "Say kind words to people..." (2:83) "Pardon and overlook their misdeeds" (5:13) "Do not spy on one another, nor let any of you backbite others..." (49:12) and to "...judge with justice..." (5:42).

It says that "A good deed and an evil deed are not alike; repay [evil] with something that is finer, and see how someone who is separated from you by enmity will become a bosom friend." (41:33) Other verses are even more specific in telling us in specific detail how to treat others: "Your Lord has decreed that you should worship nothing except Him and show kindness to your parents; whether either or both of them attain old age, never say to them "Uf!" nor scold either of them. Speak to them in a generous fashion. Serve them with tenderness and humility..." (17:23).

Aside from these Quranic verses, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) advised his followers in innumerable traditions to be good to others. For example, he said, "Do you know what the rights of a neighbor are? If a neighbor seeks your help, extend it to him. If a neighbor asks you for a loan, lend him. If your neighbor becomes poor, then help him financially and attend to his poverty if you can. If your neighbor becomes ill, then visit him. If your neighbor is happy on certain gain, then congratulate him.

If your neighbor is suffering a calamity, then offer him condolences.

Continued on Page 6

## Iran Guards seize vessel, detain 7

**TEHRAN:** Iran's Revolutionary Guards said Friday they seized another vessel smuggling fuel in the Gulf and arrested its seven crew members, the second such incident in as many weeks. "Naval forces have seized a vessel carrying smuggled fuel in the Arabian Gulf," said Gholamhossein Hosseini, a public relations official of the Guards, quoted by the state news agency IRNA.

"During the inspection of this vessel, 250,000 liters of smuggled fuel were discovered," he said.

## Over 150 hurt in Jerusalem

**JERUSALEM:** More than 150 people were wounded Friday in clashes between Palestinian demonstrators and Zionist police in Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound, the first face-off at the flashpoint holy site since the start of Ramadan. Zionist police said dozens of masked men marched into Al-Aqsa setting off fireworks before crowds hurled stones towards the Western Wall-considered the holiest site where Jews can pray.

Witnesses said Palestinians threw stones at Zionist forces, who fired rubber-coated bullets and stun grenades. The Palestinian Red Crescent said 153 people were hospitalized and "dozens" of others were treated at the scene. Zionist police said at least three officers were hurt. Around 400 people were arrested, the Palestinian Prisoner's Club said.

## Rare rough ruby on display ahead of auction

**DUBAI:** A rare rough ruby dubbed one of the world's biggest has gone on display for the first time ahead of an auction in the Gulf emirate of Dubai. The 8,400-carat stone-nicknamed Burj Alhamal and weighing 2.8 kilograms - was mined in Tanzania and made its debut at a Dubai hotel on Friday as part of SJ Gold and Diamond's Callisto collection.

The company says it is "one of the biggest" rough rubies in the world, with managing director Patrick Pilati calling it among the "rarest rubies ever

adding that "seven crew members of this vessel are also in detention to complete the investigation process and legal steps". The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is the ideological arm of Iran's military. "The fight against smuggling, especially of fuel, in the Gulf is one of the important missions of the IRGC Navy," Hosseini said.

He did not specify the date the boat was seized, its origin or the nationalities of the crew. The incident comes in the wake of a wave of seizures of vessels in the sea lanes serving the Gulf, where a large portion of the world's oil is produced and shipped. Last week, Iran announced its seizure of a foreign boat carrying over 220,000 liters of smuggled fuel and the arrest of its 11 crew members, without giving further details.— AFP



**JERUSALEM:** Palestinian girls, wearing national flags and checkered "kafiyeh" headdresses kneel to pray in front of the Dome of Rock mosque at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City. — AFP

The clashes come after three weeks of deadly violence in Zionist entity and the occupied West Bank, and as the Jewish festival of Passover

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found". He said the Tanzanian stone was "not heated", meaning "it has not been treated, so it's natural and that's why it's precious." Local reports have suggested the rough ruby with greenish and dark-purple hues could fetch up to \$120 million. — AFP

## News in brief

### Eid holiday May 1-5

**KUWAIT:** The Civil Service Commission (CSC) announced that Eid Al-Fitr holiday would be on Sunday (May 1), ending Thursday (May 5). All ministries and state authorities would resume work on May 8 (Sunday), the CSC said in a press statement. State authorities with special working hours should arrange their work timing in a manner that would serve the public interest, it added. — KUNA

### Fuel-laden ship sinks

**TUNIS:** A tanker carrying 750 tons of diesel fuel from Egypt to Malta sank Saturday in the Gulf of Gabes off Tunisia's southeast coast, sparking a rush to avoid a spill. "The ship sank this morning in Tunisian territorial waters. For the moment, there is no leak," local court spokesman Mohamed Karray said. A disaster prevention committee would meet in the coming hours "to decide on the measures to be taken", he added. The Equatorial Guinea-flagged Xelo was headed from the Egyptian port of Damietta to the European island of Malta when it requested entry to Tunisian waters on Friday evening due to bad weather. — AFP

### Russia bans UK PM



**KYIV:** British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (left) and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (center) walk in central Kyiv in this file photo. — AFP

**MOSCOW:** Moscow on Saturday announced it was banning entry to Prime Minister Boris Johnson and several other top UK officials, after London imposed sanctions on Russia over its military operation in Ukraine. "This step was taken as a response to London's unbridled information and political campaign aimed at isolating Russia internationally, creating conditions for restricting our country and strangling the domestic economy," the foreign ministry said in a statement. — AFP

Local

# Kuwait, US achieved a lot together despite pandemic: Ambassador Alina Romanowski

## US Embassy hosts farewell ghabqa for outgoing envoy



KUWAIT: US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski speaks with journalists at the US Embassy in Kuwait. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski poses for a group picture with journalists at the US Embassy in Kuwait.

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: The US Embassy held a farewell ghabqa for outgoing US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski on the end of her tenure and her role in promoting bilateral relations in various fields. Romanowski said in a press statement that it has been an honor to serve as the 18th US Ambassador to Kuwait, thanking HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the Kuwaiti people for the hospitality extended to her during her stay in Kuwait, which reflected the deep-rooted ties between the two countries.

"In the coming month I will be ambassador to Iraq, but I will miss Kuwait, its diwanis, food and bicycle rides. I will miss the unique vibrancy of conversations in Kuwait. Your country has been my second home for the past two years," she said.

"Despite the pandemic, our countries achieved many accomplishments together. I have been in Kuwait for two years and it is very sad to leave after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions. But even during the pandemic, we accomplished a lot and expanded our relationship with the government of Kuwait and the medical sector. We had two strategic dialogues and visits by senior officials, with more to come after travel restrictions were eased to discuss cybersecurity, food security and the economy," Romanowski added.

On the freedom of press, the ambassador said Kuwait is full of ideas and discussions, adding the US Embassy encourages the Kuwaiti press. As for the US Department of State's human rights report, she noted the report is based on facts on the current situation for Kuwait to work on. "We have been having a big debate in our country and we have discussions with Kuwait. In the case of the human rights report, we worked directly with NGOs and



the Kuwaiti government for the information in the data we published to be accurate. We provided the Kuwait Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a copy of the report. There are some areas where we hope to see progress; we have seen improvements with female judges," Romanowski said.

The US ambassador emphasized that the embassy is working on the governmental level in terms of training on issues of corruption, money laundering and transferring funds to terrorist groups. "We also work for women empowerment with NGOs and the society to encourage them to build domestic violence shelters. We will have a special report later on religious freedoms," she added.



US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski with ambassadors and guests at her farewell ghabqa.

Local

# Kuwait Assembly Speaker stresses necessity to advance support for Palestinian people

## Attack testimony of failed discourse promoting false peace: Ghanem

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem on Friday stressed the necessity of solidarity with the Palestinian people under occupation and supporting them with any effort, even symbolic, to advance their cause. Ghanem made this call in a series of tweets he posted on his official account on Twitter following the Zionist occupation authorities' storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque at dawn Friday and attacking worshippers, which led to injuries and the arrest of others. The parliament speaker said that what is happening in the city of Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque is evidence that the terms struggle, support and solidarity have not died but are keywords articulated to obtain the inherent rights of the Palestinian people. Ghanem added that what is happening "is a daily and repeated testimony to the downfall of all the arguments and political discourse that prevailed for 30 years and promoted false peace, imaginary coexistence, and the arrangements of the so-called new international order." He stressed the necessity of "not withholding any effort from our people under occupation, even if it is symbolic, to advance their cause and ours at the level of the entire world, and to affirm our solidarity and support for them on a daily and permanent basis, and to expose the dirty practices of the occupation in all available forums." The Zionist occupation authorities stormed Al-Aqsa Mosque on Friday and attacked the civilians, injuring about 150 people. Around 450 others were arrested in the context of an escalation by the Zionist entity that has continued in the occupied Palestinian territories for days.

### Kuwait denounces attack

Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry strongly condemned the Zionist occupation forces' storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque. This attack is a dangerous escalation and flagrant violation of international resolutions and charters, the ministry said in a statement, warning that such escalatory acts would foment violence, extremism and undermine regional stability. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on the international community, namely the United Nations Security Council, to shoulder the responsibility of protecting the brotherly Palestinian people, the sanctities and halting the attacks by the occupation forces. Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Dr Nayef Al-Hajraf condemned in strongest terms the Zionist entity's special forces' storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the attacks on Muslim worshippers performing the dawn prayer. Hundreds of worshippers were injured or detained by the Zionist forces, which constitutes a serious violation and an unacceptable escalation of the aggressions against the Palestinian people, Dr Hajraf said in a statement. He stressed the need of forcing the Zionist entity into respect for the historical and legal status quo of the occupied holy city of Jerusalem and all sacred sites there, and halting all illegal measures against the Palestinian residents of the city.

Dr Hajraf urged the international community to shoulder its responsibility for protecting the safety of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the lives of worshippers and forcing the Zionist entity into meeting its obligations under the international humanitarian law. Since Friday



JERUSALEM: Zionist security forces prevent Palestinians from entering Al-Aqsa Mosque compound to attend the Friday prayers on April 15, 2022. — AFP

morning, at least 153 Palestinian worshippers were wounded and 450 others detained during Zionist forces' storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Muslims' third holiest place of worship, according to Palestinian medical sources.

### Attempts to Judaize Jerusalem

Secretary-General of the Arab League Ahmad Abul-Gheit warned against the fallout of the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the attacks on Muslim worshippers. Denouncing the Zionist aggressions on the Palestinians earlier Friday, Abul-Gheit expressed solidarity with the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem for their valiant resistance to the attempts to Judaize the holy city. He held the Zionist occupation forces accountable for the serious aggression on the Palestinian people and violating their religious rights during the holy month of Ramadan.

The Zionist entity's brutalities against worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque since the early morning fall in the framework of provocative acts against the Palestinian residents to evict them from the city and replace them with extremist Jewish settlers, the Secretary General said in a statement. The continuation of such serious attacks risks ignite a serious escalation that could be out of control, Abul-Gheit cautioned. He called on the international community to shoulder its responsibility for protecting the Arab, Muslim identity of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the religious rights of Palestinians under the relevant provisions of international law.

In the meantime, Arab Parliament Chairman Adel Al-Asoumi condemned the Zionist forces' storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque, attacking worshippers. Asoumi, in a statement, called for a decisive international stand to stop the hostile Israeli practices against the Palestinians. He condemned the desecration of Al-Aqsa Mosque and assaulting the worshippers in its compound, noting that these attacks are a breach of

the Al-Aqsa Mosque, in the midst of international and Arab's detestable silence towards these crimes.

"What is happening now is the dismantling of the plan to normalize relations with the Zionist entity for achieving peace, but rather the whole history itself comes together to break all normalization approaches and the cooperation with this Zionist entity. It is also a blatant statement of the Western world's bias towards this humanitarian cause, where there is nothing left for the Palestinian Arab individual but the active communities. "The Arab Palestinian people resist daily all the Zionist's attempts to control the lands of Al-Quds and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, they resist valiantly and in full belief that what is right will win.

We in the Kuwait Democratic Youth Union call for all the Arab people to take a serious stand against these aggressions and support all kinds of resistance against this menace. It is our duty to show solidarity to support our Arab Palestinian people that pushes the old and the young towards heroic deeds that no Zionist can ever do."

We don't want our hunger strike to end and die; rather we want to transfer it to another form that will deliver our message," said Barghash.

"We don't want our issue to remain just words and slogans - we have a clear goal. This strike is serious, and we believe that our case and demands are right. We will continue till the end. We believe God is with us, as we are only demanding our just rights," added Barghash.

Fadhel Al-Shimmari told Kuwait Times the government is not giving them their rights, so they had to go on hunger strike. "Unfortunately, after 19 days of this suffering, the neglect continues. Some officials don't care if we commit suicide or die. Our goal was to deliver the message that our suffering is unjustified. We will continue to demand our rights," he vowed.

"We were only drinking water and laban. When our blood sugar dropped, we drank juice. I collapsed on the fifth day and was taken to hospital. But I came back to join the strike. We have now ended the hunger strike temporarily for two months to see if the government resolves our issue. If they still don't help us get healthcare, education, citizenship and other rights, we will go back to hunger strikes in larger numbers," Shimmari warned.

During the gathering, activists made speeches in which they expressed their support for the bedoons' demands, highlighting that the fight for their rights is peaceful. They also lamented that the government and the parliament don't have any serious role in resolving the bedoon issue.

### News in brief

#### 2,309 driving licenses issued for bedoons

KUWAIT: The Central Agency for Illegal Residents said it had issued 2,309 driving licenses for bedoons in 2021. In a statement on Saturday, the agency's acting assistant secretary general for technical affairs and information Abdullah Al-Farhan said that the agency had also renewed 26,472 licenses in 2021. Issuing driving licenses follows the Cabinet decree number 409/2011 on providing facilitation for bedoons.

#### New banknotes ahead of Eid

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said Saturday it provided local banks with new banknotes of various grades to meet people's needs in the run-up to Eid Al-Fitr. People who would like to get new Kuwaiti Dinar banknotes can check with their respective banks during the routine working hours, according to a CBK press release. The bank congratulated all citizens and residents on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr, expressing the best wishes for Kuwait and all Arab and Muslim nations.

#### Kuwait Airways flights to Nice

KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways announced launching flights to the French city Nice with two flights per week, starting on June 15. The flights will be scheduled for every Sunday and Wednesday to Nice, which is a top tourist attraction, the company's CEO Maan Ruzouqi said in a press statement on Saturday. Last February, Kuwait Airways announced launching 17 new flight destinations, an addition to its current 40 destinations, reaching a total of 57 destinations by next May.

## Kuwait Democratic Youth Union condemns Zionist aggression

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Democratic Youth Union released the following statement, condemning the Zionist attack on Palestinian worshippers in Al-Aqsa Mosque on Friday: "The Kuwait Democratic Youth Union condemns the Zionist aggressions on the Palestinians in Al-Aqsa Mosque and the provocation of the Palestinian people as a whole. We salute all those who are close to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and its honorable defenders of its sanctity, what is happening is just the continuation of the series of crimes from Zionism.

"The aggressive Zionist gangs will never stop its crimes nor its inhumane behavior, so after they broke in the Al-Aqsa Mosque and arrested the worshippers in the mosque, they started throwing smoke bombs inside

## Bedoon protestors suspend hunger strike for two months

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: About 200 bedoons (stateless residents) gathered in a yard opposite Sulaibiya police station for a press conference organized by political activists, who called on seven bedoons who have been on hunger strike since March 27 to end their fast. They promised to work on their demands and find other ways to help them achieve their rights. The protestors agreed to suspend their hunger strike for two months in order to give an opportunity for serious steps to address the bedoons' issue.

"We don't even have the most basic of rights. Even those who are supposed to help the bedoons make their lives more difficult. An example is the Central Agency for Illegal Residents, which contacted a charity that was helping us and asked them to stop," said Mohammed Al-Barghash, one of the seven hunger strikers.

"Any struggle takes different forms. Today it is a hunger strike or protest, but tomorrow it may be different according to the needs of our case. Our case is facing challenges from the government and some institutions, but we have to resolve it wisely.

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## Kuwait continues humanitarian aid to brotherly countries

**KUWAIT:** Out of its unwavering stance and belief, Kuwait continues, through its bodies and institutions, to offer humanitarian assistance that shows the country's keenness on helping friends and brothers in several countries. Kuwait's Ambassador to Lebanon Abdul Al-Qenai affirmed Kuwait's permanent eagerness to provide support to brothers in Lebanon, mainly in humanitarian aspects. Speaking while opening a building affiliated to the cancer children center in Lebanon, Al-Qenai said that Kuwaiti people are always aiding brothers over many years. Meanwhile, Chairman of Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) Hilal Al-Sayer said that the society paid some visits to this building and the center during the establishment period. He noted that after the Beirut blast in 2020, the KRCS rapidly arrived in Lebanon, and restored and equipped some hospitals there. Dr. Sizar Bassim, chief trustee of the center, said "Kuwait has been supporting us for 20 years." The building is a place where different programs on varied therapies will be offered, in addition to handing out aid to the needy, he said in a similar statement.

Hossam Al-Sharkawy, Regional Director of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, appreciated Kuwait's contribution to constructing this building, saying it would allow Lebanese people to continue their lives despite their suffering. Lebanese Red Cross Secretary General Georges Kettaneh extolled Kuwait's role in helping Lebanon. He said that it is not the first time that the KRCS and Kuwait help Lebanon, the Lebanese and the refugees. The society supports and assists Syrian and Palestinian refugees and needy Lebanese families in various regions throughout the year. In Lebanon also, the society handed out humanitarian aid on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan, head of the society's mission in Lebanon Dr. Musaed Al-Enzi said. He said that the aid distributed to Syrian and Lebanese peoples included new clothes for Eid Al-Fitr that benefited 2,000 families, in addition to Ramadan food baskets. There is an agreement with officials in Lebanon to conduct open-heart surgeries for some refugee Syrian children, he pointed out.

Furthermore, Kuwait's Ambassador to Belgium, and head of missions to the EU and NATO Jassim Al-Bedawi announced the country's donation of \$2 million to Ukraine during a donor conference held in Poland, upon His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's direct instructions. The donation will be distributed to the UN agencies as follows: \$500,000 to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, \$500,000 to the World Food Program, \$250,000 to the International Organization for Migration, \$250,000 to the World Health Organization, \$250,000 to the United Nations Children's Fund and finally \$250,000 to the International Committee of the Red Cross, he explained. He said that Kuwait stressed the need for all parties to abide by the Minsk agreements and the mechanisms to follow up on implementing these deals, including achieving a comprehensive ceasefire in line with what was stated in UN Security Council Resolution No 2202 of 2015.

In Yemen, Human Access, a Yemeni non-governmental body, said that the Ramadan food baskets benefited 250 families in some governorates. It added in a statement that some 119 other families benefited from the food baskets. The aid aims to improve living conditions of the poor and displaced families which are suffering due to the lack of food and diseases, it noted. Moreover, Kuwait Society for Relief said that it handed out 150 auto rickshaws to 150 beneficiaries in three Yemeni governorates. The society is paying much attention to the projects that help the poor and low-income families, Adel Ba'shen, a society official in Yemen, said in a statement. The society further delivered 59 medical devices to a hospital in Shabwah governorate in Yemen, as part of "Kuwait beside you" campaign, he added. In a related development, Maha Al-Barjas, KRCS secretary general, said the society is offering iftar (fast-breaking) meals to thousands of workers inside Kuwait. The project will cover 70,000 workers throughout the holy month of Ramadan, she said, indicating that the society has been distributing meals since the first day of month across the country. — KUNA

# Zain organizes first Ramadan Padel Tournament for staff

## 24 teams competed at DOMS courts in Adaliya for two days



**KUWAIT:** Bader Al-Kharafi with participating employees.

**KUWAIT:** Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, successfully held the first Ramadan Padel Tournament for staff at DOMS courts in Adaliya. The competition, which lasted for two days, featured 24 teams and witnessed the participation of Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi.

Zain organizes various sports competitions as part of its solid internal strategy that closely focuses on enriching the health and sports aspects of its employees. The company remains committed to the



**Part of its solid internal strategy**

wellbeing of its staff by organizing similar events to increase the spirit of teamwork and out-of-office bonding.

The tournament witnessed great positive participation from Zain employees, continuing for two consecutive days throughout the weekend at DOMS courts in Adaliya. 24 two-player teams com-



**Waleed Al-Khashti** awarding the title winners.

peted for the title, which was won by ZAIN team, while KOBE team won second place. Zain awarded the winning teams during the awarding ceremony.

Zain spares no efforts to organize activities and programs that enrich the recreational aspect of its employees' lives and cater to their different talents and interests. The company is keen on encouraging employees to pursue healthier lifestyles and take part in different sports and health programs all year round.

Padel is a racket sport that witnessed great

popularity recently in Kuwait and around the world and features a unique playstyle that consists of a mix of tennis and squash. The sport is usually played in doubles in a closed court with walls the balls can be played off.

Zain considers its employees the main pillar of its overall success, and thus caters to the many different aspects of their lives. This competition came as part of the company's commitment towards its human resources, especially after the positive feedback it received from previous tournaments.



## Gulf Bank launches Ramadan activities week at 360 Mall

**KUWAIT:** As part of its ongoing initiatives for community sustainability, Gulf Bank launched the Gulf Bank Fit Ramadan Week of Activities at 360 Mall. The initiative encompassed multiple sports and health events, competitions, and prizes, and falls within the Bank's efforts to engage with the local community with various "GB COMMUNITY" events.

On this occasion, Lujain Al-Qenai, the manager of Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank, said: "We have provided many sports and health activities in the food court area of 360 Mall. The activities are open to all family members (16 and above) both before and after Iftar."

She added, "We are excited to collaborate with the '9Round' health and fitness club in organizing these events. The partnership enabled us to work with multiple professional Kuwaiti trainers who were able to work with participants on the challenges and guide participants in practicing the sports correctly."

## KFH distributes iftar meals in various locations in Kuwait

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Finance House (KFH) continued its efforts in distributing Ramadan iftar meals in various locations in Kuwait as part of its campaign "increase good deeds in Ramadan" which comprises several social events and activities. KFH voluntary team was present in 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's 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, Holy 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.



### Ramadan Activities

She pointed out that Gulf Bank's week of activities is taking place from April 13 to 19, and will include sports distributed over five stations, with each station containing a different challenge and difficulty. To motivate the general public to take part in the sports activities, Gulf Bank is also distributing cash and prizes to participants, including free subscriptions to the 9Round club.

Qenai pointed out that Gulf Bank's sports activities garnered lots of participation and engagement from the general public, indicating that the events aimed to encourage others to adopt healthier lifestyles during Ramadan. The week of activities falls in line with the spirit of the holy month, and is part of a general initiative to encourage positivity in the local community.

### Sustainability Initiatives

Qenai added that this initiative comes as part of a larger set of social sustainability programs that Gulf Bank regularly organizes and participates in, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, noting that a number of Bank employees volunteered to support the Red Crescent's latest effort to distribute electrical appliances to local families in need. Gulf Bank has also been distributing meals to the families in need with

the Kuwait Food Bank, and participating with non-profit organization, Altaqaful, as part of their campaign to relieve debts.

Qenai affirmed Gulf Bank's keenness to promote and implement various sustainability initiatives at the environmental, societal and economic levels, in keeping with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the national development plan (Kuwait Vision 2035), and Gulf Bank's 2025 Strategy.

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading bank in Kuwait. The Bank engages its employees in a comprehensive and diversified environment to provide excellent customer service, while ensuring sustainable service to the community. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience.

Gulf Bank is committed to supporting sustainability at the societal level, the economic level, and the environmental level, in initiatives that are selected and strategically determined for the benefit of the Bank in particular, and the country in general. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait's 2035 vision, a "New Kuwait", and works with various parties to achieve it on the ground.



**Members of the KFH voluntary team.**

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 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.



Belgium trial for accomplices of 2015 Paris attacks

Thousands join Pope for Good Friday service with Ukraine in mind Page 6

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SEVASTOPOL: File photo shows the Moskva, missile cruiser flagship of Russian Black Sea Fleet, entering Sevastopol bay. —AFP

## Lost warship dents Russian pride

‘In symbolic terms this is a great loss’

**PARIS, France:** Russia's loss of its flagship cruiser Moskva represents a dent in the operational capabilities of the Russian navy and a severe wound to Russian pride at the height of the war against Ukraine, analysts say. The Moskva sank on Thursday after an explosion and fire that Ukraine claimed was a successful missile strike and Russia said was the result of exploding ammunition. Until the sinking of the Moskva, nobody had good reason to doubt Russia's supremacy in the Black Sea during the conflict with Ukraine but these calculations have now changed.

“In symbolic terms this is a great loss,” said ex-admiral Pascal Ausseur, director general of the Toulon-based Mediterranean Foundation of Strategic Studies (FMES). The 12,000-ton ship should have been able to withstand one missile impact or more and get a fire under control, but instead went under in just 12 hours, he told AFP. “That was not part of the plan,” Ausseur said, adding that the Moskva probably housed the command post for the naval group which now will have to find a new home.

### ‘Same errors at sea’

Coming after successive setbacks for President Vladimir Putin in the 50-day-old war — including an unexpectedly weak air and land combat record —

loss of the Moskva will also have a real impact on the Russian navy's ability to attack Ukrainian targets and keep its fellow fighters safe.

“Russia is committing the same errors at sea that they previously made on land,” said one high-ranking French officer. The 186-metre- (610-foot-) long cruiser was equipped with 16 surface-to-surface Bazalt/Vulcan missiles used against ships as well as Fort missiles, which are navy-adapted versions of long-range S-300s, and short-range Ossa missiles.

Able to carry a crew of 680, its role was to give air cover to other ships during their operations, especially during the bombing of targets on the coast and landings, according to a Telegram post by Sergei Brachuk, a spokesman for the Odessa regional military administration. But beyond representing a body blow to Russian military prestige, the Moskva's loss is probably not a game changer for the Russian campaign, Western analysts said. “The rest of the Black Sea Fleet remains a puissant force,” said Nick Brown at British intelligence analysis firm Janes.

### ‘Not de-fanged’

Brown cited the Admiral Grigorovich-class frigates with their much more modern air defence suite, able to launch Kalibr precision land attack missiles, as exam-

ples. “The fleet has not been de-fanged,” he told AFP. Institute for the Study of War (ISW) analysts said in a note that the loss of the Moskva would reduce Russia's ability to conduct cruise missile strikes but was “unlikely to deal a decisive blow to Russian operations on the whole.”

“The Moskva's main role was likely conducting precision strikes with Kalibr cruise missiles on targets in Ukrainian rear areas, including logistics centres and airfields,” they said. The remaining force is all the more crucial for Russian capabilities as Moscow cannot dispatch a replacement for the Moskva while Turkey keeps the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits closed to warships. This, some analysts say, may not make a huge difference to the current phase of the war which has seen the Russian navy play a limited role.

But the ship's loss could force Moscow to revise any plans to give the navy a bigger role in the future, said Maia Otarashvili at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Russian strategists have to ask the uncomfortable question whether Ukraine has more powerful defences against naval onslaught than they thought, she told AFP.

President Volodymyr Zelensky has repeatedly asked friendly Western governments to supply him

with much-needed coastal defence missiles.

“What kind of recently-acquired anti-ship missiles does Ukraine have? And what damage can they do to the Russian navy?” she asked.

### ‘Real vulnerability’

Another consequence is that it is now far less likely that Moscow would launch any amphibious operation against a Ukrainian city such as Odessa.

“Even before this... the Russians did not have air superiority, which is a sine qua non for launching an amphibious operation,” said a senior French naval officer, who asked not to be named.

“Now they are less ready than ever to do so,” added the source. The full story of what caused the Moskva's demise are unlikely to be known soon, as experts will need to examine its hull which is now somewhere in the depths of the Black Sea.

But it's already clear that the disappearance of the Moskva “reveals a real vulnerability” of the Russian navy, Ausseur said. Whether it was a direct missile hit or an explosion caused by problems on board they “indicate possible Russian deficiencies — either poor air defenses or incredibly lax safety procedures and damage control on the Black Sea Fleet's flagship,” the ISW analysts said. —AFP

## Al-Aqsa compound: Jerusalem's flashpoint holy site

**JERUSALEM:** The Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Zionist entity-annexed east Jerusalem was the scene of clashes Friday between Palestinian demonstrators and Zionist police that left more than 150 wounded.

The compound in the walled Old City is a highly sensitive site sacred in both Islam and Judaism. The unrest came after three tense weeks of deadly violence in Zionist entity and the occupied West Bank, and as the Jewish festival of Passover and Christian Easter overlap with the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan.

### Ancient temples, night journey

The 14-hectare (35-acre) rectangular esplanade at the southeast corner of the Old City was seized by Zionist entity during the 1967 Six-Day War, along with the rest of east Jerusalem which was later annexed in a move never internationally recognised. Zionist entity considers all of Jerusalem as its undivided capital, but the Palestinians want the eastern sector as the capital of their future state.

Known to Muslims as Al-Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary), the compound houses the famous golden Dome of the Rock shrine and the Al-Aqsa mosque. Believed to be where the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) made his night journey to heaven, it is the third-holiest site in Islam after the Grand Mosque in Makkah and the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, both in Saudi Arabia.

The compound in its current form was built in the seventh century by Islam's second caliph, Omar, on the site of the Second Jewish Temple that was destroyed by the Romans around 70 AD. The esplanade is also revered as the holiest site in Judaism because it housed both the First and Second Temples. In Hebrew, it is referred to as Har HaBayit—the Temple Mount.

### History of clashes

Jews are allowed to visit the compound, but are forbidden from praying there for fear of sparking tensions

with Muslim worshippers. Most, however, do not enter the area as Zionist's chief rabbinate says that visiting it is forbidden under Jewish law due to issues of ritual impurity.

Today, the holiest site at which Jews can pray is the Western Wall—among the last remnants of the Second Temple. But ultra-nationalist Jews, some of whom want to begin building a Third Temple, regularly visit the esplanade where they can sometimes be seen praying discreetly.

This frequently creates tensions with Muslim worshippers who fear Zionist entity will seek to change rules governing the compound, which is now administered by Jordan in coordination with the Palestinians.

Zionist police monitor visitors entering through the Mughrabi Gate, the only entrance for non-Muslims, but have several times set foot inside the mosque following tensions, further vexing Muslims. There have regularly been tensions at the site.

In 1929, deadly riots broke out during the British mandate, with Muslims rallying to defend the site. In 1996, an Zionist entity decision to open a new entrance to the west of the plaza sparked clashes that left more than 80 people dead in three days.

And a controversial visit to the plaza in September 2000 by then right-wing opposition leader Ariel Sharon was one of the main triggers for the second Palestinian intifada, which lasted from 2000 to 2005.

In July 2017, the compound was temporarily closed after three Arab Zionists opened fire at Zionist police near the site, killing two of them, before fleeing into the sacred compound, where they were shot dead by security forces.

In August 2019, clashes between Zionist police and worshippers on the compound left dozens of Palestinians wounded during important Jewish and Muslim commemorations.

In 2020, access to the compound was closed to the public during the month of Ramadan due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the reopening was subject to strict health conditions, with a limit on the number of worshippers. In 2021, during Ramadan, the compound was the scene of clashes between Zionist police and Muslim worshippers that built up to an 11-day war between the Islamist group Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, and Zionist entity. — AFP



DURBAN, South Africa: Family members assist with clearing debris for member of the South African Police Services (SAPS) Search and Rescue Unit to conduct search efforts to locate ten people who are unaccounted for from area of KwaNdegezi township outside Durban after their homes were swept away following the devastating rains and flooding. — AFP

## More rain lashes South Africa's flood ravaged east

**DURBAN:** South Africa's flood-ravaged east was hit by more rain Saturday after the deadliest storm to hit the country in living memory killed nearly 400 people and left tens of thousands homeless. Floodwaters engulfed parts of the eastern coastal city of Durban earlier in the week ripping apart roads, sweeping away homes and those trapped inside them, and pulling down heavy cargo containers.

Emergency services in the southeastern KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, where Durban is located, were on high alert as weather forecasters predicted more rain over the Easter weekend. “It's already raining in some parts of KZN but it won't be as hectic as it was in the past few days,” Puseletso Mofokeng, senior forecaster at the South Africa Weather Service told AFP.

“But because of the soil being oversaturated with water, we can still get a lot of flooding,” he warned. The

provincial government said on Friday that disaster management teams were on “high alert to swiftly respond to communities known to be at high risk, to avert or minimise the disaster impact”.

Troops, police and volunteer rescue workers are operating from a small civilian airport normally used for air shows and for training pilots. “We are fully prepared,” said Dave Steyn, a senior police officer coordinating rescue and recovery operations at the airport.

Shawn Herbst of the first responder company Netcare 911 told AFP: “Sadly there are still bodies being recovered from homesteads, especially from the rural areas.” “There is still damage taking place, especially with the rain we are experiencing today which is aggravating the areas that have been damaged”.

The floods have damaged more than 13,500 houses and completely destroyed around 4,000. Authorities have urged people in high risk areas to move to community facilities such as halls and schools. Clean water is scarce and authorities have promised to deploy water tankers. The government has announced one billion rand (\$68 million) in emergency relief funding. “Just as we thought it was safe to get out of (the COVID) disaster, we have another disaster, a natural disaster descending on our country,” President Cyril Ramaphosa said in a Good Friday speech.—AFP

## International

# Thousands join Pope for Good Friday service with Ukraine in mind

## Russian and Ukrainian friends did carry the crucifix together

ROME: Thousands of faithful attended the "Way of the Cross" prayer service, presided over by Pope Francis at Rome's Colosseum on Friday, a ceremony overtaken by the war in Ukraine. It was the first time the traditional event on Good Friday, which marks the day Jesus Christ died on the cross in the Christian calendar, was held at the Roman monument since 2019, due to the COVID pandemic.



**'Taste mutual forgiveness'**

It also comes two days before Easter, Christianity's most important holiday. The pope, who has repeatedly condemned the conflict in Ukraine, and has called for an Easter ceasefire, prayed that the "adversaries shake hands" and "taste mutual forgiveness". "Disarm the raised hand of brother against brother," he said.

"I have lived in Rome for more than 30 years but today it seemed very important to come," Stefania Cutolo, a 52-year-old Italian teacher, told AFP as a choir rehearsed for the evening event. "The message tonight, after two years of closure due to the pandemic, is doubly important. In this context where nationalism is returning to Europe, we must act," she added.

Shortly after 9pm (1900 GMT), in front of 10,000 faithful, the Pontiff opened this highlight of Holy Week.

Organised since 1964 in the sumptuously illuminated Roman amphitheatre, the Way of the Cross event was held in Saint Peter's Square in the Vatican for the last two years, with very low attendances amid the health crisis. "We meet the whole world here, we hear all languages. It's marvelous," enthused Marie-Agnes Bethouart, 71, who arrived at Friday's event with her husband and two grandsons. Among the crowd, a yellow and blue flag stood out among the candles. They are the colours of Ukraine.

Among the families who were entrusted with carrying the crucifix at each of the 14 stations of the cross were two women, one Russian and one Ukrainian, who are life-long friends. The women carried the cross during one portion of the Way of the Cross, the traditional procession that commemorates the 14 stations of Jesus' suffering and death, from his condemnation to his burial.

### 'Inappropriate'

But the Vatican's initiative, intended as a gesture of reconciliation in the face of the war that began February 24, was not well received by Ukrainian officials. On Tuesday, the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Bishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, denounced an "inappropriate, premature and ambiguous idea, which does not take into account the context of Russia's military aggression".

For his part, the Ukrainian ambassador to the Holy See said he "shared the general concern". In a sign of the sensitivity of the issue, the Ukrainian media boycotted the broadcast of the ceremony, while the Vatican had added commentary in Ukrainian and Russian for the broadcast.

In the crowd at the event, Anastasia Goncharova, an



ROME, Italy: Photo shows Ukrainian nurse Irina (2nd R), who works at the Palliative Care Centre "Together for the cure" of the Opus Dei University Polyclinic Foundation, and Russian nurse Albina (R), a third-year student in the nursing course at the University Campus Bio-Medico in Rome, hand the cross to a family of migrants. — AFP

18-year-old tourist from Kyiv, said "I don't think it's a really good idea because we are no longer brother nations. They are killing our children, they are raping our children, stealing our house. It's disgusting."

In the end the two Russian and Ukrainian friends did carry the crucifix together. A contemplative silence replaced an original text for the occasion, which was

intended to deal more specifically with the war in Ukraine. Most of those attending welcomed the Vatican's Russia-Ukraine initiative.

"It is the cross, and therefore the pain of these two peoples, but also hope, because we believe that after the war there will be peace. It is very beautiful," said Bethouart. — AFP



STOCKHOLM, Sweden: Police vans are on fire during a counter-protest in the park Sveaparken in Orebro, south-central Sweden, where Danish far-right party Stram Kurs had permission for a square meeting on Good Friday. — AFP

## Nine police injured during protest in Sweden

STOCKHOLM, Sweden: Counter-protesters demonstrating against a far-right group's intention to burn a Quran in Orebro in central Sweden clashed with police on Friday, leaving nine police officers injured, authorities said. Police said in a statement that nine officers were injured in all.

Their injuries included "broken arms and police officers who have been hit by stones," police spokesperson Diana Qudhaib told the daily Aftonbladet. A member of the public was also hit by a stone to the head.

The demonstration, involving around 200 people, according to local media, dispersed later in the evening. It was the second day running that there had

been clashes on the fringes of a rally by the anti-immigration and anti-Islamic Stram Kurs (Hard Line) movement led by Danish-Swedish Rasmus Paludan.

Three police officers had to be taken to hospital after a riot broke out in the city of Linköping on Sweden's east coast on Thursday, where a demonstration that included a Quran burning was planned. Two people were arrested at that protest.

Reacting to the violence, Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said: "In Sweden, people are allowed to express their opinions, whether they are in good or bad taste, that is part of our democracy. No matter what you think, you must never resort to violence. We will never accept it."

"This is exactly the kind of violent reaction he (Rasmus Paludan) wants to see. The very purpose is to incite people against each other," she added in comments to the IT news agency. Paludan has regularly been at the centre of incidents in recent years.

In November 2020, he was arrested in France and deported. Five other activists were arrested in Belgium shortly afterwards, accused of wanting to "spread hatred" by burning a Quran in Brussels. — AFP

"unprecedented hostile actions", in particular referring to sanctions on Russia's senior officials, and "pumping the Kyiv regime with lethal weapons".

### Sanctions

Britain has been part of an international effort to punish Russia with asset freezes, travel bans and economic sanctions, and Moscow's new entry blacklist includes Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, and Defense Secretary Ben Wallace. Saturday's strike on the Ukrainian capital was among the first since invading Russian forces began withdrawing from regions around Kyiv last month, instead turning their focus on gaining control of the eastern Donbas region.

Kyiv regional governor Oleksandr Pavliuk said there were at least two other Russian strikes on the city Friday and that civilians thinking about returning should "wait for quieter times". — AFP

we can arouse the feeling of love for others in ourselves, and vice versa.

Islam insists on principle-driven love, a love that is proactive and action-based, not reactive and emotion-based. How important is love? Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said to his companions, "You will not enter Paradise until you have faith; and you will not complete your faith until you love one another" (Muslim). Through compassion, charity and generosity, Ramadan is the perfect opportunity to develop what we all need in our lives - love for one other.

*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.*

## Russian forces pound missile...

Continued from Page 1

Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on February 24, Russia on Saturday said it was banning entry to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and several other top UK officials.

"This step was taken as a response to London's unbridled information and political campaign aimed at isolating Russia internationally, creating conditions for restricting our country and strangling the domestic economy," the foreign ministry said in a statement. The ministry accused London of

## Love: Lessons of Ramadan...

Continued from Page 1

If your neighbor dies, then attend his funeral. Do not raise your building over his building, so that he would have no sun exposure or wind passage. Do not bother your neighbor with the smell of your cooking, unless you intend to offer him some" (Tabrani, 101). Detailing the behavior of a loving neighbor is more meaningful than a simple order to love them.

The Quran and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did not directly command us to "love one another" because love (the feeling) is a byproduct of positive actions and attitudes. Instead, we are commanded to treat one another with justice, respect, forgiveness, patience and kindness. By acting in this way,

## 9 schoolteachers among 11 dead in Iraq minibus crash

HILLA, Iraq: Eleven people including nine schoolteachers died in a head-on road crash south of Baghdad as they returned from a Ramadan meal, Iraqi authorities said Saturday, blaming speed. The accident happened in Babylon province around midnight as the group was returning in a minibus from the Shiite holy city of Karbala, a police source said.

Their vehicle collided with a 4x4 traveling in the opposite direction "due to high speed and the driver of the second vehicle's lack of attention", a statement from road traffic authorities said, adding two people were injured. The police source said the vehicles caught fire. Conflict, neglect and endemic corruption have left oil-rich Iraq's infrastructure, including roads and bridges, in disrepair. Many roads are full of potholes and are plunged into total darkness at night.

"The number of traffic accidents doesn't stop rising. It's as if we were at war," said senior road traffic official Tarek Ismail late last month, quoted by state news agency INA. He blamed a "lack of respect for speed limits", the use of mobile phones and driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

Last year, almost 1,000 people died in road accidents in Iraq, a country of around 41 million people, according to a traffic authority official. — AFP

## Over 150 hurt in Jerusalem...

Continued from Page 1

and Christian Easter overlap with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Al-Aqsa is Islam's third-holiest site. Jews refer to it as the Temple Mount, referencing two temples said to have stood there in antiquity.

Last year during the Muslim fasting month, clashes that flared in Jerusalem, including between Zionist forces and Palestinians visiting Al-Aqsa, led to 11 days of devastating conflict between Zionists and Hamas, the Islamist group that rules the Palestinian enclave of Gaza. Zionist Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said Friday's "riots" were "unacceptable". "The convergence of Passover, Ramadan and Easter is symbolic of what we have in common. We must not let anyone turn these holy days into a platform for hate, incitement and violence," he said.

UN Middle East peace envoy Tor Wennesland urged "the authorities on both sides to immediately de-escalate the situation and prevent any further provocations by radical actors". The US, European Union and the Arab League have also voiced their concern. Washington on Friday said it was "deeply concerned" by the events in Jerusalem. "We call on all sides to exercise restraint (and) avoid provocative actions and rhetoric," State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement.

### 'Red line'

Police said crowds had hurled rocks "in the direction of the Western Wall... and as the violence surged, police were forced to enter the grounds surrounding the mosque," adding officers did not

## Somali lawmakers prepare to elect new president

MOGADISHU, Somalia: Somalia's newly elected parliament convened for the first time on Saturday, bringing the war-ravaged nation a step closer to completing the drawn-out process of appointing a new president.

Elections in Somalia follow a complex indirect model, whereby state legislatures and clan delegates pick lawmakers for the national parliament, who in turn choose the president. Nearly 300 lawmakers were sworn in Thursday—already more than a year behind schedule—after a chaotic voting process that has been undermined by deadly violence and a power struggle between the current president and the prime minister. International partners—including the United Nations, the African Union mission in Somalia, the European Union and a host of foreign governments—have welcomed the development. Saturday's parliamentary session set the ball rolling for the election of speakers for the lower and upper houses before they sit to choose a new president.

A date for choosing the new president has yet to be set. The parliamentary elections should have been completed before President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed's term expired in February 2021. But political infighting stymied the process and the president's mandate expired without a vote taking place.

Mohamed, better known as Farmajo, tried to extend his rule by decree but faced protests and violent opposition in Mogadishu, where rival political factions fought on the streets. Under pressure from the international community, he appointed Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble to seek consensus on a way forward but disagreements between the two men hindered progress.

The bitter spat between Roble and Farmajo stoked fears of further instability in the Horn of Africa country, which is battling a decade-long Islamist insurgency and the threat of famine. Some parliamentary seats still remain unfilled but sufficient lawmakers have been sworn in to move the election process forward. — AFP

enter the mosque. But Al-Aqsa mosque director Omar Al-Kiswani told AFP that an "assault was made inside the Al-Aqsa mosque".

"More than 80 young people inside the holy mosque were displaced," he said, adding: "Al-Aqsa mosque is a red line". Before Ramadan, Zionist entity and Jordan stepped up talks in an effort to avoid a repeat of last year's violence. Jordan serves as custodian of the mosque compound, while Zionists control access.

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said there was "no place for the invaders and occupiers in our holy Jerusalem". Analysts say Hamas wants to keep the conflict alive in the West Bank and in Jerusalem but avoid escalation in the Gaza Strip after last year's war, and with thousands of Gazans' Zionist work permits at risk. "Hamas does not want a new confrontation," said Mukhaimer Abu Saada, professor of political science at Gaza's Al-Azhar University.

An Zionist security source said the Islamic Jihad militant group—which controls neither the West Bank nor Gaza—would be more inclined towards an escalation with Zionists. The group warned "the confrontation will be closer and harder" for Zionists forces if "they do not stop the aggression against our people". Along with Hamas, Islamic Jihad mobilized thousands of people in Gaza on Friday in solidarity with Palestinians at Al-Aqsa, AFP correspondents reported.

Zionist entity has poured additional forces into the West Bank and is reinforcing its wall and fence barrier after four deadly attacks in the Jewish state in the past three weeks. A total of 14 people have been killed in the attacks since March 22, including a shooting spree in Bnei Brak, an Orthodox Jewish city in greater Tel Aviv. Twenty-two Palestinians have been killed over the same period, including assailants who targeted Zionists, according to an AFP tally. — AFP

## International

# Myanmar rebel troupe takes aim at junta with folk satire

## 'Thangyat gives us some freedom of expression in our culture'

**KAYIN STATE, Myanmar:** A troupe of Myanmar folk singers and satirists are taking their new show on a jungle tour, hoping to rally anti-coup fighters far from their families with barbs against the junta and jokes about home. Myanmar has been in chaos since last year's coup sparked renewed fighting with ethnic rebels and sprouted dozens of "People's Defence Forces" that have battled the junta across the country.

In eastern Kayin state, the "Peacock Generation" activist troupe are trying to boost morale with traditional "Thangyat" performances of poetry, comedy and satirical songs against the junta. Near the Thai border, their makeshift tour bus-with a three-finger salute popular with pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong and Thailand painted on one side-bumps along a dusty track en route to a camp.

Upon arrival, the unfazed troupe of around 15 mostly young performers rehearse their lines. "We are expecting the battle like we hope for rains," they sing, stepping in unison across a makeshift stage, accompanied by drums and cymbals. "Let's start the bullets raining." Slam-poetry-like "Thangyat" is traditionally performed around the new year, and has been used for centuries in Myanmar to poke fun at politics and society and vent against injustices small and large.

But the military has waged a brutal crackdown on dissent since the February 2021 coup. More than 1,700 civilians have been killed and over 13,000 people arrested, including dozens of journalists, according to a local monitoring group. A handful of media outlets have also been forced to shut down. At the camp, a handful of young fight-

ers in camouflage uniforms sit cross-legged, some clapping along.

"We also want to live like you-peacefully with cigarettes and coffee," the troupe sings to a row of smartphones in the audience - a message that will reach those sitting at home when the performance is broadcast online later. "We are still young and we are missing our mothers who always scold us."

The few dozen at the camp are some of the hundreds, according to analyst estimates, who have trekked into border areas held by Myanmar's established rebel groups to receive weapons training.

### 'Freedom'

"Thangyat gives us some freedom of expression in our culture," said veteran performer Zay Yar Lwin, 32, who fled to the jungle after the coup and refounded the Peacock Generation group he had performed with in previous years. Thangyat performances are usually held in streets and parks at the Thingyan festival that welcomes in the new year and is usually marked by boisterous water fights in the streets.

But celebrations this year have been muted as many stay away from junta-sponsored events. "Most of what we're saying is targeting the military dictatorship," Zay Yar Lwin said. But they also tease the shadow 'National Unity Government' dominated by lawmakers from Suu Kyi's ousted party that is working to overturn the coup for failing to secure the weapons anti-coup fighters say they need. "Are we getting weapons from the NUG?" calls the troupe leader. "Yeah we are, but only wind guns," comes the response, a jibe implying the opposition body is all talk and no action.

Kim also visited the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, where the bodies of Kim Il Sung and his son and successor Kim Jong Il lie in state.

### Civilian, not military

There was a steady drumbeat of celebratory coverage in state media leading up to the day, including the opening of new apartment complexes, light festivals and floral tributes. It was a calculated decision to highlight new apartments and citizens with smartphones taking pictures of flowers, said Leif-Eric Easley, associate professor of international studies at Ewha Womans University in Seoul. "The Kim regime needs more sources of national pride and legitimacy than military parades," he said. "So the public commemorations around its founder's birthday tried to portray an economy that is not only resilient but growing." The anniversary celebrations came three weeks after North Korea staged its largest intercontinental ballistic missile test ever-the first time Kim's most powerful weapon had been fired at full range since 2017.

That test was the culmination of a record-breaking blitz of sanctions-busting launches this year and signalled an end to a self-imposed moratorium on long-range and nuclear tests. The absence of military activity on the holiday "does not represent a shift away from North Korea's military build-up", Easley added.

Satellite imagery has shown signs of new activi-

Part of the attack was planned in Belgium, according to prosecutors.

The 14 accused in the Belgian trial — 13 men and one woman—are suspected of transporting, housing or financially helping some of the perpetrators of the attacks. Charges include driving an alleged attacker to the airport for a trip to Syria.

Some of the suspects are close to Salah Abdeslam, a 32-year-old French national who is the only surviving suspected assailant after failing to set off his bomb belt. Abdeslam is on trial in Paris. Prosecutors allege they had knowledge of the jihadist group's intentions, or helped Abdeslam—who was living in the Brussels neighbourhood of Molenbeek-go to ground in the four months following the attacks that he was a fugitive.

### Two tried in absentia

One of the suspects is Abid Aberkane, Abdeslam's cousin who lived nearby him in Molenbeek. He is charged with hiding Abdeslam at his mother's house in the days before his March 2016 arrest. Others are friends of the attacks' mastermind, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, or of two brothers who were suicide bombers during later attacks in Brussels on March 22, 2016 that killed 32 people.

unable to prove they had managed to inform the defendants of the judicial process against them. The officers stand accused of kidnapping, conspiracy to murder and grievous bodily harm in the case, which sparked outrage in Italy and has strained diplomatic relations with Egypt.

"We need their residential addresses so we can try them in Italy. Help us to find them. Let's not give them the chance to... continue to do all the evil in the world with impunity," lawyer Alessandra Ballerini wrote.

"Anyone who has news about them and their home addresses please contact me. I will protect the anonymity of any witnesses," she said, posting photographs of three of the four men. The 28-year-old Regeni was doing research for a doctorate at Cambridge University when he was abducted in Cairo in January 2016.



**KAYIN STATE, Myanmar:** Photo shows members of the "Peacock Generation" activist troupe, some of whom are dressed as part of the "People's Defence Forces" (PDF), waving Yangon Student Union flags during a traditional "Thangyat" performance in Kayin state. —AFP

Rebel recruit Ma Yu, 30, said she feels especially homesick during Thingyan because under normal circumstances she would celebrate with a feast at home with her parents and family. "But I felt blessed while watching others practising for the performance, and so I joined it to have a new experience," she said.

Thangyat performances were prohibited under the previous junta regime which ruled for almost 50 years, and it was not until 2013 that the ban was lifted. But even after democracy hero Aung San Suu

Kyi's government was sworn into power, there were strict limits on free speech-especially when it came to the armed forces.

In 2019 Zay Yar Lwin and several other "Peacock Generation" members were jailed for a performance that a judge found was "disrespectful" to the military. Living in the jungle, he said it was satisfying to perform Thangyat and rebel against the military. "You can rebel against them with hip hop or electropop or Thangyat. People are ready to support you during this time," Zay Yar Lwin said. —AFP

## N Korea marks founder's birth

**SEOUL:** Kim Jong Un oversaw a huge public procession to celebrate the birthday of North Korea's founding leader, state media images showed Saturday, but the anniversary passed without an anticipated show of military strength. Known as the Day of the Sun in the nuclear-armed country, the April 15 birthday of the late Kim Il Sung-grandfather of current leader Kim Jong Un-is one of the most important dates in Pyongyang's political calendar.

Analysts and South Korean and US officials had widely predicted a military parade or even a nuclear test, but the celebrations Friday involved a civilian parade, synchronised dancing and fireworks. Photographs released by the state-run Korean Central News Agency showed thousands of colourfully dressed people marching through the capital's Kim Il Sung Square as Kim Jong Un looked on from a balcony.

"Columns of workers, peasant dancers and others marched past the square," carrying banners and boards bearing socialist slogans, and a giant national flag, KCNA said. Three generations of the Kim family have ruled the country since 1948.

## Belgium trial for accomplices of 2015 Paris attacks

**BRUSSELS:** Fourteen people charged as accomplices to jihadists who carried out deadly bomb and gun attacks in Paris in 2015 will go on trial in Belgium from Tuesday. Proceedings will take place under high security in NATO's former headquarters and are expected to last until May 20, with a verdict likely to take several more weeks.

They are happening in parallel with a trial in Paris of 20 suspects charged in France, which opened in September and is expected to run until the end of June. The November 2015 Paris attacks saw 130 people killed, with the Islamic State group claiming responsibility.

Assailants set off suicide belts outside the Stade de France stadium, as a group of gunmen in a car cut down people outside restaurants and bars. Three jihadists then killed 90 people attending a performance at the popular Bataclan music venue.

## Slain student's family seek Facebook sleuths over Egypt murder

**ROME:** The family of Italian student Giulio Regeni appealed Friday for help tracking down four Egyptian security officers suspected of playing a part in his brutal 2016 death. "We know who they are, what their faces look like, and we know how much harm they are capable of doing. Will you help us look for them?" the Regeni family's lawyer said in a Facebook post.

A trial of the four in absentia in Rome was thrown out by judges in October because prosecutors were



**PYONGYANG, North Korea:** Photo released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on April 16 shows a fireworks display over the Taedong river and Juche tower to mark the Day of the Sun, the 110th birth anniversary of late North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, in Pyongyang. —AFP

ty at a tunnel at the Punggye-ri nuclear testing site, which North Korea said was demolished in 2018 ahead of a summit between Kim and then-US president Donald Trump.

South Korean officials have said Pyongyang could still stage a military parade or carry out a weapons test on or around April 25, the anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army. —AFP



**PARIS:** This court-sketch made on April 13, 2022, shows co-defendant Salah Abdeslam during the trial of November 13, 2015 Paris and Saint-Denis attacks, taking place in a temporary courtroom set up at the "Palais de Justice" courthouse in Paris. —AFP

Another is Ibrahim Abrini, brother of Mohamed Abrini, an alleged assailant who decided not to blow himself up during the part of the 2016 attack in Brussels' airport. Ibrahim Abrini is suspected of helping his brother get to Syria in June 2015, by buying him a phone. —AFP

His body, bearing extensive signs of torture, was eventually found dumped on the outskirts of Cairo, naked from the waist down. The Italian government joined the proceedings with a civil suit for damages, in a symbolic show of support.

But the trial juddered to a halt before it could begin when the court said it was not possible to be certain that the four suspects, members of Egypt's National Security Agency (NSA), were aware of the proceedings against them. Egypt has repeatedly refused to provide their contact details.

The four are named in court documents as General Tariq Sabir, Colonels Athar Kamel and Usham Helmi and Major Magdi Ibrahim Abdelal Sharif, who is accused of carrying out the killing. Investigators believe Regeni was abducted and killed after being mistaken for a foreign spy. —AFP

## Rockets fired by Pakistani forces kill six Afghans

**KABUL:** At least five children and a woman were killed in an eastern Afghan province when Pakistani military forces fired rockets along the border in a pre-dawn assault Saturday, an official and a resident said. Since the Taliban seized power last year in Afghanistan, border tensions between the neighbours have risen, with Pakistan alleging militant groups were carrying out attacks from Afghan soil.

The Taliban deny harbouring Pakistani militants, but are also infuriated by a fence Islamabad is erecting along their 2,700-kilometre (1,600-mile) border known as the Durand line, which was drawn up in colonial times. An Afghan government official and a resident in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar province said Pakistani forces fired rockets early on Saturday that left six people dead. "Five children and a woman were killed and a man wounded in Pakistani rocket attacks in Shelton district of Kunar," provincial director of information Najibullah Hassan Abdaal told AFP. Ehsanullah, a resident of Shelton district who goes by one name as many Afghans do, said the assault was carried out by Pakistani military aircraft. He confirmed the death toll.

A similar pre-dawn assault was also carried out in Afghanistan's Khost province near the border, another Afghan government official said. "Pakistani helicopters bombarded four villages near the Durand line in Khost province," he said on condition of anonymity.

"Only civilian houses were targeted and there were casualties," he added, but did not offer more details. An Afghan tribal elder from Khost, Gul Markhan, confirmed the incident in Khost. Pakistani military officials were not immediately available for comment, and Taliban government spokesmen in Kabul declined to comment when contacted by AFP.

Afghan foreign ministry said later Saturday it had summoned the Pakistani ambassador in Kabul after the latest incidents. Border areas between the two countries have long been a stronghold for militant groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taleban Pakistan (TTP), which operates across the porous frontier with Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban and the TTP are separate groups in both countries, but share a common ideology and draw from people who live on either side of the border. Since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, the TTP has become emboldened and launched regular attacks against Pakistani forces.

In February, six Pakistan soldiers were killed in firing by the TTP from Afghanistan. Thousands of people usually cross the border daily, including traders, Afghans seeking medical treatment in Pakistan, and people visiting relatives. —AFP

# Business

SUNDAY, APRIL 17, 2022

## Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait holds annual General Assembly meetings for 2021

### AGM approves distribution of 5% bonus shares and 5% cash dividend

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) concluded its ordinary and extraordinary General Assembly meetings on Saturday, 16 April, 2022. The General Assembly meeting was held at 11 am followed by the extraordinary general meeting with a 92.337 percent voting rate. The event was held at the bank's head office branch and all items on the agenda of the meetings were approved by a majority of 92.337 percent.

Talal Mohamed Reza Behbehani, Chairman of ABK, commenced the event by welcoming the shareholders and

fiscal year ended 31 December 2021. The shareholders approved the Board of Directors' recommendation to distribute 5 percent cash dividend (5 fils per share), and to distribute 5 percent bonus shares (5 shares per 100 shares) of the issued and paid-up capital, by issuing 85,066,227 new shares distributed as free bonus shares to the shareholders registered in the bank's records on Wednesday, 11/05/2022. The issued and paid-up capital will be increased by KD 8,500,622,700 million from the retained earnings. The Board of Directors has been



Talal Mohamed Reza Behbehani



George Richani



KUWAIT: (From right to left): GM, Board Affairs Fawzy Al-Thunayan, Chairman Talal Behbehani, Group CEO George Richani and Deputy Group CEO Abdulla Al-Sumait.

the attendees and thanking them for their presence. Behbehani presented the annual report for the financial year 2021, noting that the bank reported an operating profit of KD 82.1 million, up 12 percent compared to 2020. Net profit reached KD 27.2 million and profit per share reached 12 fils. The bank's total assets increased by 16 percent to KD 5.6 billion. The group's loans and advances increased by 9 percent reaching KD 3.4 billion and customer deposits increased by 12 percent reaching KD 3.9 billion. The bank's non-performing loan (NPL) ratio stood at 1.55 percent in 2021 with an NPL coverage of 357 percent in comparison to 1.57 percent and NPL coverage of 339 percent during 2020. The capital adequacy ratio stood at 18.27 percent.

At the meeting, the shareholders approved the directors' report covering the financial activities of ABK for the

authorized to dispose of the fractional shares as it deems appropriate.

#### Ratings

The group maintained strong investment-grade ratings of A (stable) from Fitch and A2 (stable) from Moody's. These ratings reflect ABK's healthy capital position and excellent liquidity, which is fully compliant with the Central Bank of Kuwait's conservative and robust regulatory system.

#### Election of Board of Directors

The shareholders also elected the following (non-independent) members to join the Board of Directors for the next three-year term (2022-2024):

The non-independent members were elected as follows:

- 1) Talal Mohammed Reza Behbehani
- 2) Salah Ahmad Serhan
- 3) Ali Ebrahim Hejji Hussain Marafi
- 4) Khaled Othman Abdulwahab Al-Othman
- 5) Adel Ibrahim Yali Ahmed Bebehani
- 6) Raed Abdulkareem Al-Moamen

Ahmed Hamad Al-Thunayan - representative of the Public Institution of Social Security - was appointed as a non-independent member.

- The following two reserve members were also elected:
- 1) Mohammed Saleh and Redha Yousef Behbani Company (first reserve member)
  - 2) Behbehani Investment Company (second reserve member)

The following independent members were also selected:

- 1) Zaid Khaldoun Hassan Al-Naqeeb
- 2) Tarek Fareed Abdulrahman Al-Othman
- 3) Mahdi Ismael Ali Al-Jazzaf

ciency and enhanced customer experience, strengthen the bank's presence within different demographics, and introduce new products, and services. The group will also continue to invest in recruiting a talented workforce and maintaining its national cadres, developing human resource performance, and integrating overseas operations into the group.



ABK headquarters building

#### A sustainable future

The bank's first sustainability report was launched in 2021, and has set a benchmark that will pave the way for a more sustainable future. ABK is committed to endorsing ESG as a vital pillar in the way the teams conduct and operate the business. The bank will continue reporting its ESG performance and accomplishments with utmost transparency to accelerate human progress toward ensuring community and environmental sustainability.

ABK also reaffirms its commitment to the 'Let's Be Aware' Diraya' campaign from the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Kuwait Banking Association.

#### Appreciation

In conclusion, Bebehani said, "On behalf of ABK, I would like to thank the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Capital Markets Authority for their ongoing support of the Kuwait banking sector. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the bank's valued shareholders, partners, and customers for their ongoing commitment and loyalty to ABK. I also thank the ABK staff for their dedication and hard work."



ABK reports an operating profit of KD 82.1m for 2021

The extraordinary general assembly also approved an increase in the bank's capital by KD 8,500,622,700 which represents 5 percent of the capital, by issuing 85,066,227 new shares to be distributed among shareholders registered in the bank's records as bonus shares at a rate of 5 percent (five shares per hundred shares), and it was approved to increase the bank's capital (through bonus shares) from KD 170,012,454,500 to KD 178,513,077,200.

#### Simpler Banking

George Richani, ABK Group Chief Executive Officer, said, "We made great strides on our 'Transformation and Growth' strategy in 2021, which yielded a strong financial performance that was further supported by the global economic recovery. ABK's International operations in Egypt and UAE performed exceptionally well, contributing 40 percent of the group's total operating income. We expect to maintain a steady momentum in 2022 and are confident that we can continue to execute our strategy, strengthening our key strategic priorities - capital, cost, liquidity, assets and governance."

Richani also emphasized that under the 'Transformation and Growth' strategy, ABK will continue to invest heavily in the Bank's digital agenda, drive effi-

## ABK'S FINANCIAL RESULTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2021

### KD27.212 Million | Net Profit

	December 31 2021	December 31 2020		
Net Profit (Loss)	27.212	(69.684)	KD Million	139%
Operating Profit	82.130	73.456	KD Million	12%
Operating Income	153.863	141.464	KD Million	9%
Total Assets	5.627	4.852	KD Billion	16%
Shareholders' Equity	518	499	KD Million	4%
Earnings (Loss) Per Share	12	(45)	Fils	127%
Capital Adequacy Ratio	18.27%	17.26%		

#### ABK Ratings



KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait's shareholders attend the annual general meeting.



## Business

# Sri Lanka halts share trading after debt default, rate hike

## Bankrupt nation rations fuel as crisis worsens

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka on Saturday announced a five-day share trading halt after the crisis-hit country hiked interest rates and declared a default on its external debt during the traditional New Year holiday, as trade unions and top cricket stars joined protests demanding the president's resignation. The move came ahead of Colombo's planned talks with the International Monetary Fund in Washington on Monday to negotiate a bailout as the country has run out of foreign exchange to finance even the most essential imports.

The island nation is grappling with its worst economic downturn since independence in 1948, with regular blackouts and acute shortages of food and fuel in addition to record inflation.

The crisis has caused widespread misery for Sri Lanka's 22 million people and led to weeks of anti-government protests. Several trade unions joined demonstrators laying siege to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's seafarmer office for an eighth straight day Saturday demanding that he and his government quit, with thousands of health sector trade workers marching to the Galle Face promenade to join the protest. Colombo Stock Exchange officials said they were under pressure from brokers and investors not to reopen on Monday to prevent an anticipated collapse of the market.

The CSE said regulators had expressed concern over the "ability to conduct an orderly and fair market" and it would remain closed until Friday due to the "present situation in the country".

The central bank almost doubled its benchmark interest rate to 14.5 percent following the close on April 8, the last trading day before the holiday. And in the face of an unprecedented forex crisis the government on Tuesday declared it was suspending interest and capital payments on its huge foreign debt.

The CSE's All Share Index has shed over 38 percent in the past three months, while the Sri Lankan rupee has fallen by more than 35 percent against the US dollar in the past month.

## Washington resumes oil and gas drilling leases on federal land

WASHINGTON: The US government, under pressure to lower gas prices, announced Friday it will resume the sale of leases for oil and gas drilling on federal lands while imposing new conditions, including the first hike in royalties in more than 100 years. Shortly after coming to office in January 2021, President Joe Biden, who has made fighting climate change one of his priorities during his campaign, had proclaimed a moratorium on grants for new drilling leases on government-owned land and waters, pending a review.

The Interior Department said in a statement that starting next week, it will auction some 173 parcels representing 144,000 acres (58,275 hectares) in nine states after making several changes.

That area is 80 percent less than had been under consideration for leasing. The administration will also increase the royalties companies must pay on hydrocarbons extracted 12.5 percent—the rate that had been in place for at least a century — to 18.75 percent of profits. Companies interested in drilling will also have to meet new requirements, such as consultation with Native American tribes and compliance with "best available science" for the analysis of greenhouse gas emissions.

"For too long, the federal oil and gas leasing programs have prioritized the wants of extractive

## Shanghai lockdowns threaten China's auto output

SHANGHAI: Chinese automakers warned they may have to put the brakes on production if COVID-19 lockdowns in Shanghai persist, with a top Huawei executive also sounding the alarm Friday about snarled supply chains.

The restrictions have kept Shanghai's 25 million residents mostly at home for weeks, forcing manufacturers to halt operations and making China's GDP growth target of around 5.5 percent look increasingly difficult to achieve. Shipping giants also warned that Shanghai's lockdown was snarling up the world's busiest container port.

COVID outbreaks across the country and the associated reductions in economic activity have already hit the auto industry hard, with car sales dropping 10.5 percent in March. "If supply chain companies in Shanghai and its surrounding areas cannot find a way to dynamically resume work and production, all original equipment manufacturers may have to stop production in May," XPeng chief He Xiaopeng said on social media.

XPeng has been touted as a Chinese challenger to US electric car giant Tesla, and its chief said that businesses were hoping for more support from the authorities to navigate the COVID closures.

A top executive at Chinese tech giant Huawei—which has started to work with domestic auto manufacturers in the intelligent vehicle sector—echoed the comments on Friday and warned the clock was ticking. "If Shanghai continues being unable to resume work and production, from May, all tech and industrial players involving the Shanghai supply chain will completely shut down, especially the auto industry!" Richard Yu, head of Huawei's consumer

### 'Loud and clear'

Sri Lanka's World Cup-winning cricket captain Arjuna Ranatunga and fellow ex-skipper Sanath Jayasuriya became the first high profile sports stars to join the demonstrators outside Rajapaksa's office. Cricket is avidly followed in the Indian Ocean island nation and the pair called on other former players to support peaceful protests.

"Cricket is driven by spectators," Ranatunga said outside the colonial-era building in Colombo on Friday, surrounded by demonstrators, some of whom have been camping overnight since last week.

"Our fans are on the streets today because they no longer can bear the hardships. We must be with our fans when they need us most. Sports stars must physically join the protests." Hours later, his fellow former captain Sanath Jayasuriya, known as "Master Blaster", climbed the barricades in front of Rajapaksa's office and pledged solidarity. "Your message is loud and clear," he told the tens of thousands of protesters. "I hope the authorities will listen and ensure a brighter future for all of us."

Crowds have been chanting "Gota go home, go home Gota." Diplomatic sources said ambassadors have made it clear to top politicians that any use of violence against the peaceful protest could jeopardize the planned bailout talks with the IMF next week. Sri Lanka is to meet with IMF officials in Washington from Monday to negotiate a financial package to address the balance of payments crisis and the shortage of foreign reserves. Sri Lanka had sought debt relief from India and China, but both countries instead offered more credit lines to buy commodities from them.

### Fuel rationing

Cash-strapped Sri Lanka imposed fuel rationing on Friday in another worsening of the economic crisis that has sparked widespread demonstrations calling for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation.

The state-run Ceylon Petroleum Corporation



COLOMBO: People shout slogans during an ongoing anti-government demonstration outside the president's office in Colombo on April 15, 2022, demanding the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa over the country's crippling economic crisis. —AFP

(CPC), which accounts for two-thirds of the retail fuel market, said it would limit the quantities drivers can buy, and banned pumping into cans altogether to prevent motorists stocking up on petrol or diesel in fear of further rationing. The maximum for motorcycles was set at four liters of petrol, with three-wheelers allowed five liters, the CPC said. Private cars, vans and SUVs were allowed up to 19.5 liters of either petrol or diesel. Most pumping stations were already out of petrol, while the few that remained open saw long queues. At least eight people have died while waiting in fuel lines since last month.

Energy ministry officials said they expected the country's other fuel retailer, Lanka IOC—the local unit of Indian Oil Corporation—to follow suit. There was no immediate comment from the Lanka IOC, which

accounts for the remaining one third of the market.

The island nation is in the grip of its worst economic crisis since independence in 1948, with severe shortages of essential goods and regular blackouts causing widespread misery.

The country's main cooking gas retailer Litro Gas said it was completely out of stock, but hoped to get new supplies by Monday to resume distribution. The state-owned firm said its chairman, Theshara Jayasinghe, a strong ally of Rajapaksa, had resigned on Thursday over the "prevailing situation" in the country. Tens of thousands of people kept up a protest outside Rajapaksa's office for a seventh straight day Friday demanding he quit over the economic hardships suffered by the country's 22 million residents. —AFP



industries above local communities, the natural environment, the impact on our air and water, the needs of Tribal Nations," said Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, the country's first ever Native American cabinet minister. The move comes as the US president faces down record inflation, especially in gas prices, which is eroding his ratings.

He has been taking initiatives in recent weeks aimed at lowering the price of crude oil, including ordering at the end of March the release of oil from the country's strategic reserve.

The resumption of concessions for oil and gas

exploitation on federal lands, however, is not likely to have an immediate impact, as the process can generally take several years. The moratorium declared by Biden had already been put on hold by a judge in June 2021 on the basis that the administration needed to obtain congressional approval for such a move. A few weeks later the government launched an auction of offshore leases in the Gulf of Mexico, which were then canceled by Justice Department in January. The Department of the Interior also approved thousands of oil and gas permits on federal lands in 2021. —AFP



SHANGHAI: Port delays are getting worse in Shanghai. That's very bad news for global supply chains. An aerial photo shows large container ships in operation at Yangshan Port in Shanghai.

and auto segment, said on the social media platform WeChat.

Huawei sold its first 3,000 electric vehicles with the company's HarmonyOS operating system in March. The group has been working with automakers to provide intelligent auto components, but does not make cars on its own.

### Global brands affected

The COVID curbs have affected global brands as well, with Volkswagen saying it has been "severely hit by COVID-19 outbreaks in Changchun and Shanghai", where the German titan's Chinese joint ventures are located. The firm is "temporarily unable to meet high customer demand," said Volkswagen Group China CEO Stephan Wollenstein Thursday.

China's zero-COVID policy has been increasingly strained as the country battles its highest number of infections since the start of the pandemic.

Volkswagen said around 20 percent of its dealers were forced to temporarily close in March alone as a result of lockdowns.

And Tesla's multi-billion-dollar "gigafactory" in Shanghai—which the company calls its main export hub—has also been reportedly shut. Chinese electric vehicle maker Nio said last weekend that it had suspended vehicle production, as business partners in virus-hit areas such as Jilin and Shanghai halted operations. Containers have been piling up at the port of Shanghai as the city faces limited trucking capacity, and shipping giant Maersk said in a statement Thursday it would stop taking new bookings for refrigerated containers and hazardous cargo into the city. It cited "yard congestion in Shanghai terminals" for the move. Another shipping company, Ocean Network Express, said that plug slots for keeping refrigerated containers cool were "highly stressed". —AFP

## Russia gas exports to Europe, oil prices fall

LONDON: Russian gas exports to Europe have fallen in the past five months while the price of the country's benchmark oil contract has also dropped, according to official figures. The European Union is aiming to cut its reliance on Russian gas by two thirds this year in the wake of Moscow's military operation in Ukraine, though Germany has opposed calls for a full boycott.

Russian energy giant Gazprom said Friday that exports to Europe and Turkey fell by 26.4 percent in volume between November 1 and April 15 compared to the same period a year earlier. Gas storage in Europe was also at its lowest in several years, Gazprom added. Meanwhile, the gap between the price of Russia Urals crude and Brent North Sea, the international benchmark, has widened.

The price of Urals averaged \$79.81 per barrel between March 15 and April 14 compared to \$108.50 for Brent, according to the finance ministry. The price difference between the two contracts has traditionally been around \$1 or \$2, but it has risen due to sanctions against Russia, according to the Interfax news agency. While Russian oil is not under Western sanctions, the punitive measures have made buyers reluctant to purchase crude from the country. Despite the lower price, crude remains a major source of revenue for Moscow which bases its federal budget on \$40 per barrel of Urals. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has said that, in 2021, the EU paid Russia \$80 billion (74 billion euros) for oil and \$20 billion for gas—which would work out as an average of 250 million euros per day. —AFP

## Germany releases billions to move away from Russian gas

BERLIN: Germany has released nearly three billion euros (\$3.2 billion) to acquire floating liquefied natural gas import terminals, the finance ministry said Friday, as it seeks to move away from dependence on Russian gas. "Dependence on Russian energy imports must be reduced quickly and sustainably," tweeted Finance Minister Christian Lindner.

"Floating LNG terminals make an important contribution to this, for which we must provide funding," he added. A total of 2.94 billion euros has been made available for the lease of these huge LNG carriers, the finance ministry told AFP.

Europe, and Germany in particular, is counting on LNG to reduce its dependence on Russian imports after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Some 20 countries export this liquefied gas which is transported by ship, and whose three largest suppliers are Australia, Qatar and the United States.

Liquefied to take up less space, the LNG is regasified on arrival for distribution.

The mobile terminals, known as Floating Storage Regasification Units (FSRU), allow for converting LNG carried by a tanker into gas and injecting it into the pipeline network. Last week European countries announced expanded efforts to wean themselves off Russian gas.

Russia is a major fossil fuel producer and accounted for around 45 percent of the European Union's gas imports last year, but the bloc is under pressure to impose sanctions on oil and gas imports from Moscow. In recent years, Germany has imported an average of 55 percent of its gas from Russia via onshore pipelines. —AFP

## Business

# Elon Musk's move to buy Twitter faces roadblocks

## Musk's \$43 billion offer lays out the myriad potential pitfalls

WASHINGTON: Even for the richest person on the planet, buying Twitter was always going to be a challenge—a highly complex financial transaction now made even trickier by a defensive “poison pill” move from the platform’s board.

Musk’s \$43 billion offer lays out the myriad potential pitfalls: possible government approvals, legal as well as regulatory due diligence, negotiations of a final agreement and, of course, how to pay for it all.

Then Twitter’s board on Friday showed it won’t go quietly, saying any acquisition of over 15 percent of the firm’s stock without its OK would trigger a plan to flood the market with shares and thus make a buyout much harder.

“Your move @elonmusk,” tweeted Silicon Valley journalist Kara Swisher. The offer itself, which Musk said was final, values Twitter at \$54.20 per share—above the closing price ahead of his bid, but below a high of \$77.06 hit in February of last year. Even with a moderate and inflexible proposal, which could help the board argue for rejection, it’s a fraught moment that could end in lawsuits from just about everyone involved.

To succeed in repelling Musk’s offer, the Twitter board will need to be on solid ground making an argument that the company is worth more, said Wharton School finance professor Kevin Kaiser.

Shareholders who feel that the board is rejecting a profitable deal will be free to file lawsuits against Twitter.

### Sidestep the board?

Musk has the option of sidestepping the board and trying to buy shares directly from shareholders

on the market, but that could lead to tedious negotiations with some stock owners holding out for more money. “The Twitter board has limited ability under Delaware law to stop a tender offer made directly to the shareholders, which Elon Musk hasn’t done, but which he could do if he chose to,” Kaiser said.

“If he does this, and if the shareholders elect to tender their shares, then he can succeed without needing board support or approval.” While the serial entrepreneur’s net worth is estimated at \$265 billion by Forbes, his fortune is not sitting in a bank account waiting to be spent.

Musk said at a TED Conference that he had “sufficient funds” to consummate the deal, but financial analysts describe the situation as more complicated.

Much of Musk’s wealth comes from shares of electric car maker Tesla, which he runs.

Musk would need to turn a chunk of his Tesla holding into cash, either by selling shares or taking out loans with stock as collateral. “The specifics of how Musk would finance the deal will determine the ramifications for Twitter,” Moody’s said in a note to investors.

Moody’s estimated it would cost Musk \$39 billion to buy all the outstanding Twitter shares, and that there would be “a strong chance” he would have to repay or refinance the San Francisco-based company’s billions of dollars of existing debt. That was before the poison pill move by Twitter that ramps up the cost for Musk. Musk tweeted a poll that hinted he might be thinking of taking his bid directly to shareholders. He asked whether taking the company private for his offered price should be



Elon Musk's fortune does not mean it will be easy for him to buy Twitter.

up to shareholders and not the board.

As the poll neared its close on Friday, more than 2.7 million votes had been cast with nearly 84 percent of them in favor of the idea. Selling a massive amount of shares in Tesla to buy Twitter would come with a large tax bill based on capital gains, and could cause shares in the electric car company

to sink as the market is flooded with stock for sale. Musk could keep hold of his shares and get a loan, absorbing the interest payments. Or he could team up with a deep-pocketed partner, but that could come with the strong-willed executive having someone to answer to regarding his decisions at Twitter. —AFP

## Twitter adopts ‘poison pill’ defense against Musk bid

WASHINGTON: Twitter moved Friday to defend itself against Elon Musk’s \$43 billion hostile takeover bid, announcing a “poison pill” plan that would make it harder for the billionaire to get a controlling stake. Musk’s proposed buyout faces several hazards, including possible rejection and the challenge of assembling the money, but could have significant impacts on the key social media service if consummated.

Twitter said its board unanimously adopted a so-called shareholder rights plan, also known as a “poison pill,” which kicks in if an investor buys more than 15 percent in shares without the directors’ agreement. Musk holds nine percent. The maneuver makes it harder for a buyer to build too big of a stake without board approval, by triggering an option that allows other investors to buy more of a company’s shares at a discount.

Twitter said the plan, which experts consider a potent tool against corporate raiders, does not prevent discussing or even agreeing to an acquisition. Musk sent shockwaves through the tech world on Thursday with an unsolicited bid to buy the company, stating the promotion of freedom of speech on Twitter as a key motive for what he called his “best and final offer.”

The world’s richest person offered \$54.20 a share, which values the social media firm at some

## China’s economic growth under threat as virus takes hold

BEIJING: The mounting cost of China’s zero-COVID policy threatens to derail Beijing’s ambitious GDP target, analysts say, as supply chains snarl, ports face delays and Shanghai remains mired in lockdown.

Growth in the world’s second-largest economy was already slowing in the latter half of last year with a property market slump and regulatory crackdowns, leading policymakers to set their lowest annual GDP target in decades for 2022. But analysts told AFP the figure of 5.5 percent would be tough to achieve with stay-at-home orders halting production and stunting consumer spending in key cities.

Experts from 12 financial institutions polled by AFP forecast GDP growth of 5.0 percent for the full year. They expect a figure of 4.3 percent for the first quarter, just above the 4.0 percent recorded in the three months prior.

Official first-quarter data will be published Monday. “China’s economy saw a good start in January and February with less energy constraints, domestic demand recovery... fiscal stimulus, and resilient exports,” said Gene Ma, head of China research at the Institute of International Finance.

But surging virus cases in March and lockdowns have “severely disrupted supply chains and industrial activities”, he added. The analysts predicted the coronavirus outbreak would reverse the gains made earlier in the year. Carmakers this week warned of severe disruption to supply chains and possibly even halting production completely if a lockdown in business hub Shanghai continues.

Premier Li Keqiang said this week that state support should be stepped up and tools including cuts to the reserve requirement ratio for banks could be tapped to help virus-hit sectors.

Other major cities struck by COVID outbreaks include southern tech powerhouse Shenzhen, which went into full lockdown for almost a week in March.

\$43 billion, in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission. He has not directly addressed the poison pill, but tweeted after his bid was announced that the board would face “titanic” legal liability if it goes against the interests of shareholders in rejecting his offer.

Analyst Dan Ives predicted that the board’s move would “not be viewed positively by shareholders” given both the potential dilution of stock and the signal it sends of hostility towards being bought. He foresaw a “likely” court challenge.

Musk has already acknowledged he was “not sure” he would succeed and refused to elaborate on a “plan B,” though in the filing he noted a rejection would make him consider selling his existing shares.

He also said he “could technically afford” the buyout while offering no information on financing, though he would likely need to borrow money or part with some of his mountain of Tesla or SpaceX shares.

### ‘Frightened’ by Musk ownership

Some investors had already spoken against the proposal, including businessman and Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal. Morningstar Research analysts echoed that perspective, saying, “While the board will take the Tesla CEO’s offer into consideration, we believe the probability of Twitter accepting it is likely below 50 percent.” Twitter stock closed down nearly two percent Thursday.

Musk’s move throws another curve into the roller-coaster ride of his volatile relationship with the global social media service, and raises many questions about what comes next. He was offered a seat on the board but turned it down over the weekend.

“The hit to retail sales could be even bigger, as dining-out services—around 10 percent of retail sales—were temporarily suspended in a few provinces,” Goldman Sachs said in a recent report. But economists expect bigger consequences of the lockdowns to surface in April data and bog down growth.

### ‘Lesson’

With infections found in dozens of cities, Beijing has dug in its heels on the zero-COVID approach, which involves stamping out clusters as they emerge while conducting mass testing and isolating positive cases. This has resulted in strict movement curbs in Shanghai for around two weeks now as the financial hub logs tens of thousands of cases daily—most asymptomatic.

The city is home to the world’s busiest container port and while operations are running, intercity travel restrictions and a shortage of truck drivers have snarled the passage of goods.

The daily flow of freight vehicles along highways has “weakened sharply” since the start of April, Capital Economics senior China economist Julian Evans-Pritchard said in a recent report.

Shanghai authorities have come under fire for allowing cases to spike and for failing to ensure supplies of fresh food reach all residents. “Shanghai is a lesson, and local governments from other parts of China may become more sensitive to domestic flare-ups,” said Tommy Xie, head of Greater China research at OCBC Bank. “If they want to lock down, they will try to lock down earlier rather than later,” he told AFP. More short-term disruptions from Covid will likely arise, he added. Controls in other coastal cities will also remain tight, said Dan Wang, chief economist at Hang Seng Bank China. “It is not impossible for us to see maybe dozens or even more than 30 cities on lockdown at the same time,” she said. “The economic cost is very high.”

### Reserve ratio cut

China announced a reserve ratio cut on Friday, intended to free up billions of dollars in liquidity as worries intensify over prolonged COVID restrictions that have disrupted businesses across the country. The central bank said it would cut the reserve requirement ratio (RRR) by 0.25 percentage points for most banks starting April 25, and 0.5 percentage points for some



Musk’s shock offer to buy Twitter drew worries—and some cheers—over putting the platform in the hands of a mercurial billionaire who advocates generally for few limits on what users can post.

He provided some detail Thursday on his vision, saying he’d like to lift the veil on the algorithm that runs on the platform, even allowing people to look through it and suggest changes.

He also reiterated his support for a more hands-off approach to policing the platform, a thorny matter particularly in high-profile cases such as Donald Trump who was banned after the assault on the US Capitol last year. Critics argued that free speech absolutism on social media can be very messy in the real world. “I am frightened by the impact on society and politics if Elon Musk acquires Twitter,” tweeted Max Boot, a Washington Post columnist, on Thursday. “He seems to believe that on social media anything goes. For democracy to survive, we need more content moderation, not less,” Boot added.

Still Musk was rallying support on Twitter, where he has over 81 million followers, for the fight ahead. “Thanks for the support!” he tweeted in reply to a poll that overwhelmingly backed his bid. —AFP

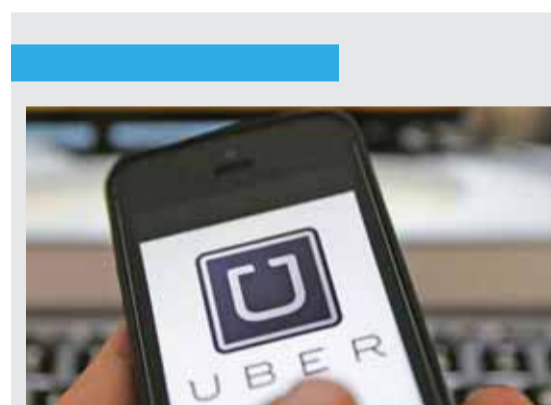


SHANGHAI: Shanghai authorities have come under fire for allowing cases to spike and for failing to ensure supplies of fresh food reach all residents. —AFP

smaller banks—lowering the amount of cash banks must hold as China battles its worst coronavirus outbreak since the start of the pandemic. The move should free up some 530 billion yuan (\$83 billion) of long-term liquidity to be injected into the economy, the bank said in a statement.

A virus surge has led to restrictions on dozens of cities in recent weeks as officials stick to a strict zero-COVID policy of stamping out clusters as they emerge, leaving areas like the key business hub of Shanghai locked down for weeks. Manufacturers have been forced to halt operations, while carmakers warned this week that the situation could threaten auto output and key ports like Shanghai have become clogged. A key aim of the rate cut is to “guide financial institutions to actively use funds from the RRR cut to support industries and small, medium and micro enterprises severely affected by the pandemic,” said the People’s Bank of China in a statement.

It added that the move would also reduce the capital costs of financial institutions by about 6.5 billion yuan per year. Analysts said the move would have a limited impact on the slowing economy. “The RRR cut should nudge down bank lending rates, which will take a bit of pressure off of indebted borrowers,” said Julian Evans-Pritchard, senior China economist at Capital Economics. “But on its own it will do little to boost lending growth.” —AFP



## Uber suspends services in Tanzania over new fare rules

DAR ES SALAAM: US ride-hailing giant Uber has suspended its services in Tanzania, saying government legislation that raises fares and cuts its commission made it difficult for it to operate. Uber said it made the “difficult decision to pause operations” in the East African country from Thursday. “The pricing order proposed by the Land Transport Regulatory Authority (LATRA) makes it challenging for platforms like Uber to continue to operate,” Uber said in a statement on Thursday.

Under the new regulations which come into effect this month, fares doubled to 900 Tanzanian shillings (\$0.4, 0.3 euros) per kilometer. Meanwhile, maximum commission for the ride-hailing companies was set at 15 percent from the previous 33 percent.

The transport regulator said the changes were aimed at maintaining competition and ensuring affordable taxis. It defended the rules late Thursday, saying all providers save for Uber had conformed to the new regulations. “We remind all the ride-hailing companies to abide by the rules and regulations of doing business in order to boost the economy,” LATRA director general Gilliard Ngewe said in a statement. Uber-founded in 2009 — arrived in Tanzania in 2016 and has capitalized in the country’s low levels of personal car ownership and a lack of efficient mass transport system.

The San Francisco-based company said it remained committed to resuming operations in the long-term if the pricing tussle was resolved. “We remain available to work with regulators on building a framework for technology to thrive, so that we can re-launch and provide a service loved by so many.” —AFP

## Russia may be considered in default: Moody’s

WASHINGTON: Moody’s Investors Service said Thursday that Russia “may be considered in default” if it does not pay two bonds in US dollars by end of a grace period on May 4.

Moscow paid in rubles to service its debt after it was blocked from using foreign currency due to sanctions cutting the country off from the global financial system following Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. But the April 4 payment in rubles on two foreign currency bonds maturing in 2022 and 2042 “represents a change in payment terms... and therefore may be considered a default under Moody’s definition if not cured by 4 May,” the ratings agency said in a statement. —AFP

## Business

# Biden touts US innovation on trip to battleground state

## President seeks to jumpstart high-tech manufacturing to combat inflation

GREENSBORO, US: President Joe Biden hailed US innovation on a visit to the south to promote his efforts to combat inflation, jumpstart high-tech manufacturing and return the United States to pole position in the global economy. The president said his top priority from his first day in office had been to promote products "made in America" as he met students at the country's largest historically Black university in Greensboro, North Carolina. "More is going to change in the next 10 years than has changed in the last 50 years," Biden told aspiring engineers at a new research complex opened by the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.

"Science and technology is moving so incredibly rapidly. It's all part of a broader vision that Vice President (Kamala) Harris and I ran on—to build back a better America than even before the pandemic." The visit came with the Bureau of Labor Statistics reporting inflation at a 40-year high of 8.5 percent—mainly due, it said, to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, rent hikes and gas prices. Biden met faculty and students reading robotics and cybersecurity to discuss how his Bipartisan Innovation Act could boost the economy by improving manufacturing.

"That means stronger supply chains, more manufacturing jobs and lower prices for consumers as we break up the bottlenecks, like semiconductor chips, that have driven inflation over the last year," the White House said ahead of the trip. Deputy press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters aboard Air Force One that Greensboro was an example of the kind of "regional manufacturing ecosystem" that Biden envisions building across America, to create an industry that can counter China's growing influence. One of the administration's top priorities, the legislation would offer funding to the city of 300,000 and places like it, to promote job creation and business growth.

Biden's trip—which came with Washington's political elite bracing for November's midterm elections—was the political equivalent of a fixture on neutral ground.

North Carolinians have voted for the Republican candidate in every presidential election since the Reagan era except 2008, when the state went for Barack Obama over John McCain.

But five out of its seven governors over the same



GREENSBORO, US: US President Joe Biden arrives to speak at the Alumni-Foundation Event Center of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, North Carolina. — AFP

period have been Democrats, and statistical analytics website FiveThirtyEight described North Carolina in 2020 as a "perennial" swing state.

### Deep underwater

Biden is deep underwater in recent polling, however, with inflation seen as the Democrats' biggest challenge if they are to pull off the unlikely feat of holding on to Congress.

A poll released last week by High Point University gave the president a job approval rating of 35 percent in North Carolina, while 53 percent said they disapprove. His lowest marks were for his handling of inflation (19 percent), including rising gas prices (18 percent), and his stewardship of the economy in general (26 percent). Nationally, a new Quinnipiac University poll has the president at just 33 percent approval, while 54 percent disapprove of his job performance.

cent to \$19.2 billion. Citi earnings were dragged lower by increased expenses, while its banking operations had a mixed performance. Fraser cited a difficult geopolitical and macro environment as a factor in weaker investment banking results, while pointing to trade loans and cross-border transactions as areas of strength. The New York bank, which is more exposed than competitors to Russia, said it set aside a \$1.9 billion in reserves related to the invasion.

About \$1 billion in the Citi reserves are for direct exposure to Russia, while the \$900 million relate to broader economic risks following the invasion, Citi Chief Financial Officer Mark Mason said on a conference call with reporters. Since the end of 2021, Citi has reduced its overall exposure to Russia from \$9.8 billion to \$7.8 billion, Mason said.

At Goldman Sachs, profits came in \$3.8 billion, down 43 percent from the year-ago period on a 27 percent drop in revenues to \$12.9 billion. Goldman sustained a big drop in revenues from asset management and equity and debt underwriting, offset by a strong activity in some trading divisions amid market volatility. The results also included a \$300 million hit from Russia. Solomon described Goldman's exposure to the conflict as "relatively limited," saying the bank has been focused on reducing exposure. Wells Fargo, meanwhile, reported profits of \$3.7 billion, down 20.8 percent from the 2021 period. Revenues fell 5.1 percent to \$17.6 billion.

### Downside risks

Thursday's deluge of earnings reports comes a day after JPMorgan Chase also reported lower profits. Chief Executive Jamie Dimon described a "very strong underlying economy," but warned that rising interest rates, inflation and the war in Ukraine had lifted the risk of recession. Wells Fargo Chief Executive Charlie Scharf employed a similar tone, noting that "our internal indicators continue to point towards the strength of our customers' financial position," while warning that Fed efforts to counter inflation will "certainly reduce economic growth," with Ukraine bringing "additional risk to the downside."

But unlike JPMorgan, which added \$902 million in reserves in part because of higher recession risk, Wells Fargo released reserves of \$1.1 billion on expectations of fewer bad loans due to upheaval from COVID-19.

Shares of Citi rose 1.6 percent to \$50.96, while Goldman Sachs dipped 0.1 percent to \$321.64. Wells Fargo slumped 4.5 percent to \$46.35. —AFP

Democrats and Republicans in the House and Senate have been discussing the contours for launching formal negotiations on Biden's legislation as early as April, with a floor vote expected in May or June.

The Senate passed its own package with a decisive bipartisan 68-32 margin last summer, but that needs to be synced up with a more contentious equivalent passed mostly along party lines in the House. Republicans argued that the 2,900-page House version wasn't tough enough on China and overly focused on unrelated issues such as climate change and social equity.

Biden implored Congress to "take action quickly" to support innovation, saying the "incredibly rapid" changes taking place in manufacturing required an urgent approach. "Congress: get this bipartisan bill on my desk... national security is on the line," he said. —AFP



A four-day-old strike by Argentine grain transporters, demanding higher freight rates in the face of rising diesel prices due to war in Ukraine, has paralyzed farming exports.

## Trucking firms end strike that crippled Argentine farm exports

BUENOS AIRES: Argentine grain transporters have called off a strike over a dispute with producers that had paralyzed farming exports, the national haulage federation said on Friday. Thousands of trucks that carry grain and its derivatives had been parked up on the side of the road for four days with shipment companies unhappy at the amount they were being paid to transport grain since their fuel costs have shot up in recent months due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

But the strike was lifted following an intervention by the transport ministry that resulted in an "immediate increase of 20 percent" in freight rates and a promise to renegotiate those again in the first half of May, said the Argentine Haulage Federation, FETRA. The agreement comes at a critical time for the Argentine farming industry right in the middle of the harvest season. The South American country is the world's largest exporter of soybean flour and oil, and one of the main suppliers of wheat, soybean and corn.

The strike caused "losses of about \$100 million a day," according to Gustavo Idigoras, president of the Ciara-CEG oil and grain exporters chamber.

"About 200 tons (of produce) have been left unloaded at port terminals," Idigoras said in a statement on Thursday. He said 50 boats were waiting to load their cargos but whereas normally 3,000 to 4,000 trucks a day would arrive at Argentina's ports, those had fallen to around just a dozen. Both truckers and producers had also complained of a lack of diesel that had pushed up prices at gas stations and left tractors unable to harvest grain. The transport ministry committed "to resolve the problem of diesel scarcity," said FETRA. Argentina's grain industry was worth \$35 billion in 2021.

The official price of diesel in gas stations is 110 pesos (\$0.93) per liter, but FETRA says truckers are being charged 191 pesos (\$1.60) due to shortages. The strike comes during full harvest time in Argentina's farming industry. "The strike is causing losses of about \$100 million a day. About 200 tons (of produce) have been left unloaded at port terminals. We have 50 boats waiting," said Idigoras. Whereas there are normally 3,000 to 4,000 trucks a day arriving at Argentina's ports, currently there are only around a dozen, he said. Idigoras also said there was not enough diesel for tractors to harvest the grain in fields. Argentina's grain industry was worth \$35 billion in 2021. —AFP

## Brazil's Petrobras names new CEO amid fuel price row

BRASILIA: The board of Brazil's state-run oil company Petrobras on Thursday named Jose Mauro Coelho as its third CEO in just over a year after President Jair Bolsonaro fired his predecessors in a stand-off over fuel prices.

Coelho was appointed for a one-year term, Petrobras announced in a statement. He was the government's choice to succeed Joaquim Silva e Luna, ousted by Bolsonaro last month after slightly more than a year in the post. The far-right president said then that the petrol price-set by Petrobras but tied to international market movement was "unaffordable" and amounted to a "crime" against Brazilians.

Silva e Luna's predecessor Roberto Castello Branco was fired by Bolsonaro in February 2021 for similar reasons. Bolsonaro, who is seeking reelection in October, is widely blamed by voters for double-digit inflation, polls show, on the back of skyrocketing global and local fuel prices. Fuel prices in Brazil have risen by nearly 28 percent in the year to March, even as the economy recovers from the fall-out of the coronavirus pandemic. Russia's war in Ukraine has led to a sharp rise in crude prices in recent weeks, adding to the pressure.



BRASILIA, Brazil: Natural Gas and Biofuel Secretary of Brazil's Mines and Energy Ministry (NME), Jose Mauro Coelho, speaks during a federal government radio program, in Brasilia. — AFP

### 'Guarantee of supply'

Bolsonaro's initial pick for Petrobras CEO, economist Adriano Pires, withdrew his name from the race last week due to a possible conflict of interest over his other role as head of an energy consulting firm. Another nominee of Bolsonaro, Rodolfo Landim, withdrew to concentrate his attention on the Flamengo football club, of which he is president. Several other possible candidates had declined the job, according to the Brazilian press.

The government then picked Coelho, who was the government secretary of petroleum, natural gas and biofuels in 2020 and 2021. With a degree in industrial chemistry, he enters the job with 25 years of experience in the energy sector. He has served since 2020 as chairman of the board of the PPSA oil and gas company linked to the ministry of mines and energy. Coelho said Thursday that "adhering to market prices is a necessary condition for the creation of a competitive business environment, attracting investment... and is a guarantee of supply". This in turn, he added, "leads to increased competition with benefits for the Brazilian consumer". Alex Agostini, chief economist at Austin Rating, said no major changes were expected under Coelho in favor of "greater intervention" in fuel pricing. By the close of trading Thursday, Petrobras shares ended 0.39 percent higher on the Sao Paulo stock exchange. — AFP

## Euro hits two-year low as ECB holds fire

FRANKFURT: The euro slumped to a near two-year low after the European Central Bank remained vague about when it will raise interest rates in the face of soaring inflation. The drop in the single currency helped boost European stocks, while Wall Street equities resumed a downward slide amid worries over tightening US monetary policy. The ECB stood still in the face of record eurozone inflation, keeping its stimulus plans and rates unchanged, as the war in Ukraine cast a pall over the eurozone economy. Meeting for the second time since the outbreak of the conflict, the bank's 25-member governing council stuck to a plan that "should" see its bond-buying scheme comes to an end in the third quarter.

An interest rate hike would follow "some time" after the stimulus program comes to an end, and any increases "will be gradual." The decision leaves the ECB further out of step with many of its peers. Central banks such as the Bank of England, US Federal Reserve and the Bank of Canada have already triggered their first interest rate rises in response to soaring inflation.

The euro took a knock after the ECB's decision, slipping under \$1.08 for the first time since May 2020, falling as low as \$1.0758. The ECB "continues to show little sign of looking to hike rates after leaving rates unchanged at their policy meeting today, while being even handed over the risks facing the eurozone economy," said market analyst Michael Hewson at CMC Markets UK. —AFP

## US banks expect upheaval from Fed shift, Russia challenges

WASHINGTON: Large US banks released a deluge of mixed earnings, pointing to the continued strength of US households and businesses while warning of rising risks from inflation, geopolitical upheaval and fast-changing monetary policy. Citigroup, Goldman Sachs and Wells Fargo all reported lower profits compared with the year-ago period, when results were boosted by the release of reserves set aside at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in case of bad loans.

Executives painted a complex picture of puts and takes as uncertainty from the war in Ukraine complicates an already unpredictable economy that's still grappling with COVID-19 disruptions. Geopolitical concerns have also slowed the arrival of initial public offerings, a source of investment banking revenues. Goldman Sachs Chief Executive David Solomon described a series of "cross currents" coursing through the economy.

"While US unemployment levels are low and wages are increasing, inflation is the highest it's been in decades," Solomon said on a conference call with analysts. "We're seeing new stress on supply chain and commodity prices and US households are facing rising gas prices as well as higher prices for food and housing. We've also seen an increased risk of stagflation and mixed signals on consumer confidence," he said.

The Federal Reserve's shift to a monetary tightening posture adds to the churn, simultaneously helping and hurting banks. Wells Fargo, for example, reported higher net interest income reflecting the benefit of being able to charge more for loans. But the domestic-focused bank, a big player in the US housing market, also experienced its highest quarterly decline since 2003 in the mortgage market as fewer consumers refinance due to higher interest rates. "The macro outlook for the rest of the year can only be described as complex and uncertain," said Citigroup Chief Executive Jane Fraser.

### Russia exposure

Citi reported a 46 percent decline in first-quarter profits to \$4.3 billion, while revenues dipped two per-



NEW YORK: In this file photo taken on April 17, 2019, the JPMorgan Chase & Co world headquarters are pictured in New York City. — AFP



Mariam Ashraf, a teacher and "natural hair influencer", speaks before a phone on a tripod and lights during a live-stream at her home in Egypt's capital Cairo. — AFP photos



Mariam Ashraf combs her hair as she speaks before a phone on a tripod and lights during a live-stream.



Rola Amer, hairstylist at the "Curly Studio", styles a client's hair at her salon in Egypt's capital Cairo.



## Get this straight: Curls bounce back in Cairo

"Shaggy," "messy," "unprofessional". Natural curls were once looked down upon in Egypt, where Western beauty standards favoured sleek, straight locks. Now, things are changing. For Rola Amer and Sara Safwat, their curls were once a career-hindering nuisance. Now part of an aesthetic liberation movement sweeping Egypt in recent years, they own a curly hair salon that caters to women and men like them. Amer used to spend hours straightening her bouncy curls, she told AFP as she began her day at the Curly Studio, which became Egypt's first natural hair salon in 2018.

"Curly hair takes a lot longer to cut than straight hair," Amer said, meticulously snipping her way through a client's curly mane in an affluent suburb of Cairo. Three hours later, she can finally show the result to her client, and both are delighted as the salon buzzes around them. It's a far cry from Amer's own experience a few years ago. "If I ever left my hair curly, I'd feel shaggy, like I wasn't taking care of myself," she said. In this rare type of salon in Cairo, the final product fits each client's curl pattern, and rollers have replaced straightening irons to prevent heat damage.

Safwat, 38, explained the dangers of straightening, adjusting her curly bangs as she spoke. "One time, a mother brought her three-year-old daughter. She had tried a chemical treatment to straighten her hair, and now it was falling out," she said. The obsession with straight hair, rooted in what Safwat calls "completely false beauty ideals," compelled generations of women



Sara Safwat (center), hairstylist and founder of the "Curly Studio", styles a client's hair at her salon.

to burn their hair to a crisp using chemical treatments and excessive heat damage.

### A marked change

With her curls considered "unprofessional" Safwat says that, before she became a hairdresser, she would often be asked in job interviews: "Will you be coming in to work like this?" In the early 2000s, Lebanese singer Myriam Fares was one of the first curly-haired icons in the Middle East.

Halfway across the world, Black women in the United States were increasingly embracing their curls in a natural hair care movement. Many of the biggest

brands built by Black women at the time would eventually find their way onto the shelves of curly salons in Cairo. In 2012, Egyptian actress Dina el-Sherbiny became one of the first to break the taboo on screen, flaunting her chestnut curls in hit TV series "Hekayat Banat" (Girls' Stories).

Ten years later, curly heads feature in TV shows, movies and the billboards that line Cairo's highways, a marked change in pop culture. In Hollywood, Egyptian-Palestinian actress May Calamawy even shows off her curls in Marvel's latest series, "Moon Knight," helmed by Egyptian director Mohamed Diab.

"There has been a real social movement," Doaa Gawish told AFP. In 2016, Gawish launched a Facebook group called The Hair Addict to help women give their hair a break from harsh chemicals and blow dryers. Within months, the online forum had grown from 5,000 to more than 80,000 members, as the local cosmetics market grew by 18 percent, according to Euromonitor International. Two years later, Gawish launched her eponymous haircare company.

"A lot of big cosmetics companies started releasing products for curly hair, because they could see it was an essential customer base," Gawish told AFP. This base is steadily growing in Egypt's sizable cosmetics market. With a population of 103 million, the country has about 500,000 salons and more than three million employees, as estimated in 2020 by Mahmoud El-Degwy, head of the hairdressers' division at the Cairo Chamber of Commerce.

Teacher and natural hair influencer Mariam Ashraf has seen the market's potential firsthand. Only a hobby at first, her Instagram videos quickly became "a real source of income", she told AFP before filming a new clip for her 90,000-plus followers. "Brands are contacting me more and more to showcase curly hair products," the 26-year-old explained. "And now modeling agencies are contacting me for advertisements."

### 'Fragile masculinity'

But the world of natural hair care is not accessible to everyone. While the average monthly income in Egypt is 6,000

pounds (\$325), a haircut at the Curly Studio can cost up to one-tenth of that. Since he inadvertently discovered his curls during Covid-19 lockdown, cybersecurity expert Omar Rahim has been gladly paying to maintain his style.



Sara Safwat, hairstylist and founder of the "Curly Studio", styles a client's hair at her salon.

Today, he maintains an intricate regimen, despite jeers from his friends in a conservative and patriarchal society. "We have a problem with fragile masculinity; people think a man shouldn't take care of his hair or buy products," he told AFP. "I want people to understand that this is normal, but I'm not ready to fight this fight just yet." — AFP



Britain's Duke of Sussex Prince Harry (left) and his wife Duchess of Sussex Meghan (right) walk with officials on the yellow carpet ahead of The Invictus Games in The Hague on Friday. — AFP

## Harry, Meghan make first public appearance in Europe since royal exit

Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan on Friday made their first joint public appearance on this side of the Atlantic since quitting royal life and moving to North America two years ago. The Sussexes attended an evening reception in the Dutch city of The Hague for the Invictus Games, a day after a visit with his grandmother Queen Elizabeth II in Britain on Thursday. Harry, who served with the British army in Afghanistan, founded the event for disabled military veterans that starts on Saturday.

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex on Thursday met Queen Elizabeth, who will celebrate her 96th birthday in a few days, at Windsor Castle. Harry, 37, and his wife, 40, were criticized by British tabloids for skipping Prince Philip's memorial service in Westminster Abbey last month. Philip, who was married to the queen for 73 years, died last April just weeks short of his 100th birthday. Harry and Meghan had not visited the UK together since their decision to step aside from the royal family. More than 500 participants from 20 countries are taking part in the Invictus Games, which have been postponed twice because of the coronavirus pandemic.

### 'In danger of death'

Just before the prince's arrival, the

Ukrainian team made their arrival to great applause. The team of 19 people from war-torn Ukraine arrived in the Netherlands to take part but the group regretted the absence of one participant, imprisoned in the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol. The paramedic, Yulia Paievskaya, known as Taira, is "in danger of death now", a spokeswoman for the team told AFP.

"She is the only woman on the team and was due to compete in archery and swimming," the team said in a statement. On Saturday, the royal couple will attend the opening ceremony of the games, with Prince Harry due to deliver a speech. The Invictus Games, the first of which took place in London in September 2014, have been a recurrent theme in Harry and Meghan's relationship. It was during the 2017 games that the prince made his first public appearance with the American ex-actress. The following year, they were in Sydney, a few days after announcing she was pregnant.

Harry and his wife quit life as frontline royals and decamped to Canada and then California two years ago. As a result of their decision, the UK government withdrew his taxpayer-funded protection on visits back to Britain, a decision that Harry is challenging in the courts. The queen, who has been in fragile health, marks her record-breaking 70th year on the throne in June with public events due to be held over four days to mark the occasion. The Invictus Games will end on April 22. — AFP

California's Coachella kicked off Friday for the first time since 2019, with hundreds of thousands of people flocking to the premier desert music festival, as the United States sees COVID-19 cases edge up. The mammoth event that takes place over two three-day weekends—and this year features Billie Eilish, Harry Styles and the Weeknd with EDM stars Swedish House Mafia as headliners—traditionally kicks off the year's summer concert circuit. Coachella's 2020 edition was scrapped as the coronavirus pandemic came into full force, and two years of chaotic cancellations, rescheduled shows and lineup shakeups ensued. As it returns after a three-year hiatus, Coachella is considered a bellwether for the multi-billion-dollar touring industry that's still on shaky ground after persistent pandemic setbacks.

After other large-scale festivals including Lollapalooza last year required proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 result, Coachella this winter announced it would not require any such mitigation measures, including masks or social distancing. The festival is held mostly outside, welcoming some 125,000 revelers daily from all over the nation and abroad, many of whom camp and fill up hotels nearby.

There will be two testing sites on festival grounds. Jose Arballo—a senior public information representative for the public health department of Riverside County, where Coachella takes place—said there also would be bolstered testing facilities nearby. "Any time you have large groups of people gathering in public settings there's some issues there—but we're hoping that more people will be vaccinated... and that more people will wear masks anyway," he told AFP.

"If people aren't feeling well, even if it

## Coachella music festival returns after three-year hiatus



Spectra, a seven-storey spiral walkway up to a viewing deck, and the ferris wheel are seen at night at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California. — AFP photos

might cost them something financially, we hope they can forgo going." Arballo said that case numbers in the county had "plateaued in the last couple weeks," but "other people will be coming in from all over the country and other places in the world where maybe the case rates aren't that low." He also noted that unreported at-home testing has possibly skewed case rate data downward, and anticipated the county would be able to assess the festival's public health impact by the middle of next week—just ahead of the festival's second string of dates.

Nationwide, COVID-19 cases are down sharply from where they were in January but recently have started ticking up, with the United States averaging approximately 38,000 cases a day,

according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The vast majority of new cases stem from the highly transmissible Omicron subvariant, known as BA.2, according to the CDC. Some universities have reinstated mask mandates as has the city of Philadelphia, but for the most part regulations nationwide, including in California, remain relaxed.

### 'Everybody misses this'

Major acts playing sets at Coachella include Megan Thee Stallion, Phoebe Bridgers, Doja Cat and Brazil's Anitta. The Weeknd and Swedish House Mafia were last-minute additions after chaos agent Kanye West unceremoniously pulled out of his headliner spot. Travis Scott pulled out after a deadly concert stampeding tragedy at his Astroworld show in Houston last year, while 2020's anticipated headliner Frank Ocean is set to return to the desert in 2023.

Also on deck are French rockers L'Imperatrice, superstar DJ Stromae, recent Grammy winner Arooj Aftab, Palestinian DJ Sama' Abdulhadi and South Africa's Black Coffee, who made Grammy history last week after winning a Grammy for Best Dance/Electronic Album, the first African act to do so. And in a last-minute surprise, Arcade Fire will play a set Friday evening. Coachella is a major draw for Indio, the city where it takes place, a desert municipality of just under 95,000 people whose slogan is "The City of Festivals." — AFP



US singer-songwriter Phoebe Bridgers performs onstage during the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival.

## Lifestyle | Features



Ivanna Kuziv, a retired accountant, picks daffodils from her garden in the western Ukrainian town of Vynnyky to sell at the market in the nearby city of Lviv.



Ivanna Kuziv, a retired accountant, prepares bunches of daffodils and bluebells picked from her garden in the western Ukrainian town of Vynnyky to sell at the market in the nearby city of Lviv.



Ivanna Kuziv picks daffodils from her garden in the western Ukrainian town of Vynnyky.— AFP photos

# In embattled Ukraine, spring flowers take on patriotic hues

In her garden in western Ukraine, Ivanna Kuziv, a retired accountant in her late 60s, gathers an armful of yellow daffodils and bluebells to sell at the market. It is purely coincidental that the flowers in her garden are the colors of the national flag this week, she says. "But I like it. It's in honor of Ukraine." Since Russia invaded her country in February, the population of the surrounding town of Vynnyky has dwindled. Many mothers and children have fled abroad, leaving the men behind struggling to find work and waiting to be drafted. "People are anxious," she says. But spring does not wait, and the garden she

inherited from her great-grandmother is in bloom.

Most days of the week, Kuziv snaps up some narcissus, drops them into a water-filled bucket, and heads into the city to sell them. Ukrainian children are taught the national flag is two strips of color, one representing the blue sky and the other a field of wheat. In Lviv, those hues have become omnipresent-in fluttering flags jammed into car doors, in patriotic dumplings and cakes served in restaurants, but also in bouquets of flowers. In the city centre, two women in long coats bring bunches of large saffron and indigo daisies to a well-attended mil-

itary funeral at the cathedral.

Among the dozens of men and women who walk in silence behind the hearse afterwards, one serviceman holds drooping tulips of both colors in his fist. On the train station platform, a 22-year-old soldier waits impatiently with 101 yellow tulips bound in blue ribbon for the girlfriend he has not seen in two months to arrive from the embattled east.

## 'Some positive'

Olga Fityo-Styslo sells two kinds of daffodils at the flower market-one their natural color, the other tinted after feeding off a mixture of water and navy-blue ink. "We have a war going on, and the color of the flag is blue and yellow," she says. "But since there are no blue flowers in early spring, I decided to give nature a little help." The 55-year-old, who has been selling flowers at the market since 1996, said she stopped working for a few days after war erupted. When she returned in early March, she was surprised to have so many customers. The city's population had swollen with families escaping with very little from war-battered eastern and southern Ukraine. "There were many displaced people, and they wanted flowers," she says. "In them, they find some positive."

## Bright petals

Even when they are not the colors of the nation, bright petals are everywhere



Olga Fityo-Styslo (right) shows off her daffodils, some of them dyed blue, to customers at the market in the western city of Lviv.

in the western city. A medical officer on leave waits for her friend to take money out at a cash point, cradling a huge bouquet of fuchsia, roses and tulips. It is the friend's birthday, and they are going for a stroll. At the foot of a monument to the Virgin Mary, an old woman prays in front of jars of pink tulips. The statue has been surrounded by scaffolding, but those trying to protect it from Russian bombardment seem to have run out of sandbags.

But the flower business is not as

good as it used to be, says florist Myroslava Kumechko. Beside buckets of daffodils, the 40-year-old says 70 percent of her business before the war came from christenings, anniversaries and weddings. But that income has now vanished, and she cannot stand at the market for too long because she needs to get home to her three children studying online. "It's not like it used to be," she says.—AFP



A bunch of flowers are seen on Myroslava Kumechko's stall on the market in the western city of Lviv.

## In US, every dog has its... DNA test

The routine is now a familiar one: Open the kit, swirl a swab around, put it in solution and wait impatiently for the results. Except this time it's not a test for COVID — it's a DNA test for dogs. The kits, which are used foremost to learn a dog's breeds, first appeared some 15 years ago and their popularity has since exploded in the United States, where nearly 40 percent of all families have at least one canine companion. "Having a dog and integrating them as a member of your family, you want to know where they're from," said Mila Bartos, a Washington lawyer.

One of the most popular test brands, Embark Vet, told AFP it experienced 235 percent growth between 2019 and 2020 alone. And the pandemic has only amplified the trend. At around \$100 to \$200 a pop, the tests are not cheap. But in a country where dogs are king, the price hasn't been a major deterrent for many pet owners. In 2020 alone, Americans spent nearly \$104 billion on their animal companions, according to the American Pet Products Association—a sum that is the equivalent of the GDP of Slovakia.

### 'You want to know'

The tests are simple: a saliva sample is taken from inside a dog's jowl and sent by mail, with results coming back generally two weeks to a month later. Sometimes, when a new pup parent has adopted a purebred dog, the test is

meant to verify that there has been no error in the dog's one-breed lineage. But for the owners of shelter pets, the burning question is—what IS my dog? Bartos, 51, adopted three dogs—Natty, Maisie and Mabel—and did a DNA test for each. Natty, she discovered, is a mix of pit bull, beagle, chow-chow and German shepherd. Results showed she even had a cousin living nearby in Baltimore.



With a luxuriously glossy brown coat, Maisie meanwhile turned out to be a descendant of a long line of show dogs. Levi Novey, a 42-year-old consultant in the state of Virginia, said that getting a test allowed him to make more sense of his tiny dog Summer's behavior. "For instance, her athleticism, prey drive, interest in retrieving balls, and selective choice in people she wants to be cuddly and sweet with became easier to understand given her ancestry," he said of the

little black pup, who weighs only 13 pounds (six kilograms).

When New Jersey native Ashley Ternyila decided the German shepherd she adopted from a breeder looked a little too much like a wolf, she got a DNA test. "He had quite a few wolf-like properties so for the fun of it and to put rumors to bed, we got him tested," said Ternyila. Allen McConnell, professor of psychology specializing in the relationship of humans and their pets, said "the owner's desire to understand, predict and anticipate their dog's actions makes wanting to know something about its breed useful in the owner's eyes." Dog breeds carry stereotypes—Labradors as are good with children, pit bulls are aggressive watch dogs—which can often be inaccurate but also help guide understanding of the animal, he explained.

### Genetic marker

In addition to revealing a dog's breeds, DNA tests can also uncover predisposition to genetic disease. The most expensive tests allow users to review their pet's DNA in search of genes that cause heart abnormalities, kidney disorders and premature deafness, among other problems. But beware, warns veterinarian Sarah Bowman of Washington: "Just because they have a genetic marker doesn't necessarily mean they also have the condition."

The tests make it possible to be cognizant of the risk and to exercise greater caution, she said. The American Veterinary Medical Association said it encourages owners "to consult with their veterinarians before making any decisions based on their pets' test results." Pet parents should also consider possible ramifications of finding out their dog's breed. In many countries, certain breeds are seen as aggressive, such as pit bulls or Staffordshire terriers, and are banned from apartment buildings. If the adoptee is half pit bull "could be an issue" with a landlord, Bartos the lawyer warned. "If you don't want to know that information, then you probably shouldn't run a breed DNA on it" Bartos said.—AFP



These handout photos courtesy of Levi Novey show his dog Summer, whose DNA test revealed she is a mix of at least 6 different breeds.— AFP photos

## Russian warship stamp becomes collector's item in Ukraine

A stamp depicting a Ukrainian soldier making an obscene hand gesture at the Russian Black Sea flagship Moskva has become a collector's item for Ukrainians who see it as a sign of "victory". At the central post office in the capital Kyiv, hundreds of Ukrainians of every age could be seen queuing for hours on Friday to get their hands on one of the one million copies printed so far. "That ship was the biggest one they had.... They gambled a lot on it and we destroyed it!" said Yuri Kolesan, 22, who waited for two-and-a-half hours to get a set of 30 stamps. "It's a new phase of the war, one of victory!" The warship sank on Thursday after an explosion and fire that Ukraine claimed was caused by a missile strike while Russia said the damage was caused by an explosion of munitions on board.

The missile cruiser gained notoriety in the early stages of Russia's invasion of Ukraine when its crew called on a unit of Ukrainian border guards to surrender, only for them to defiantly refuse. The incident quickly became a symbol of Ukraine's resistance against Russia's assault. Ukraine's postal service last month launched a competition to illustrate the episode. Out of more than 500 submissions, Lviv designer Boris Groh's winning entry shows a Ukrainian soldier from behind swearing at the warship. It has proved a hit, selling out in many post offices and quickly appearing for resale online.—AFP



## Undocumented migrant fights to claim Belgium lotto win

An Algerian migrant staying illegally in Belgium is battling to claim a 250,000-euro (\$270,000) jackpot won on a scratchcard—with authorities insisting it can only be paid if he can prove his identity. "My client is in an illegal situation, he has no papers and no bank account," Alexander Verstraete, a lawyer for the 28-year-old, told AFP on Friday. "We are looking for those documents that can prove his identity. He will have to contact his family in Algeria."

Verstraete said the winning scratchcard was currently being held by a court in the town of Bruges after three friends tried to claim it unsuccessfully on his client's behalf. The friends, also from North Africa, were detained for a night by police on suspicion of theft before being released when the real winner came forward with his lawyer. The winning ticket was bought a few weeks ago in Zeebrugge. The Belgian port city is a popular destination for migrants trying to reach England clandestinely hidden in trucks or containers.

Verstraete said his client, who does not intend to apply for asylum to stay in Belgium, had obtained a promise from the authorities that he would not be deported until he had received his prize. The prize is the jackpot of a scratchcard sold for five euros, which offers a "one in 3.69 chance" of winning some sort of payout, according to the national lottery website. The retailer who sold the ticket is prohibited from giving out such a prize in cash. For any prize of more than 100,000 euros the winner must go to the company's headquarters in Brussels, said Joke Vermeore, spokeswoman for the national lottery.—AFP

## Sports

# Twice exiled, Shakhtar Donetsk dreaming of war-torn home

**ISTANBUL:** They had already fled their home in eastern Ukraine for Kyiv when their shiny new stadium was battered by shelling in the first weeks of a Russian-backed insurgency in 2014. Now the players of Ukraine's perennial football champions Shakhtar Donetsk are training in Turkey because of the all-out invasion by Russia of their former Soviet state.

Team and national squad captain Andriy Pyatov - an imposing 37-year-old goalkeeper who has played at some of Europe's most famous grounds over his illustrious career - is tired of life in exile. "It is very difficult to keep losing your home," he said during a break in the team's Istanbul training session for a series of friendly matches organized to raise money for children orphaned by the war. "We have to run from one place to another because of a tyrant, a dictator," he said in reference to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

## Wandering wonders

Shakhtar's wanderings have captured the imagination of fans across Ukraine and much of the football world. The club first moved their training base to the Ukrainian capital - home to archrivals Dynamo Kyiv. They ultimately ended up playing most of their matches in the western city of Lviv. The Ukrainian cultural capital has strong nationalist tradi-

tions and a closer historical link to neighboring Poland than the far more distant Moscow. Shakhtar's original home in Donetsk became the stronghold of a new Kremlin-backed leadership in Ukraine's largely Russian-speaking east. This contrast made the overwhelming support the players received in Lviv that much more poignant. Success on the pitch also helped. Pyatov has been involved in 10 of Shakhtar's 13 Ukrainian league championship titles. They were leading the league again when play was suspended when the Russian assault began on Feb 24. Shakhtar's most recent home in the northeastern city of Kharkiv bore some of the deadliest fighting of the war.

## Brazilian exodus

Shakhtar arrived in Istanbul on April 6 to prepare for a tour of friendly matches that began last week in Athens against the Greek giants Olympiakos. The team also played Lechia Gdansk in Poland on Thursday and will face Istanbul side Fenerbahce as well as Croatia's Hajduk Split by early May. Team coach Roberto De Zerbi has returned from Italy to prepare his men for the tour. "I don't like the idea of giving up now," he told AFP about his decision to stay with a team swept up in a war.

Yet the current squad bares little resemblance

to the one that won their last league match before the winter break in December. The club's 13 Brazilian players have all either returned home or signed on with other European teams. And two of the local players have decided to stay behind in Ukraine. Midfielder Georgiy Sudakov's wife is about to give birth to the couple's first child while defender Viktor Kornienko has joined the volunteers who comprise Ukraine's new territorial defense units. Even the trip to Turkey was an adventure. The entire squad required special government permits because all Ukrainian men of fighting age have been barred from leaving the country for the duration of the war.

## 'I still dream'

Coach De Zerbi understands that some of his players might reach a point where they can no longer keep playing football and feel obliged to pick up arms to defend their land. "If he fights for freedom, for dignity, for pride, for the country, I will only congratulate him," the 42-year-old Italian said. The club's next friendly match against Fenerbahce on Tuesday will be played in the same Istanbul stadium where Pyatov and his teammates won the UEFA Cup against Germany's Werder Bremen in 2009.

The stadium will be filled with memories -



ISTANBUL: Shakhtar Donetsk's players attend a training session at Turkish Football Federation's (TFF) facilities during their global tour match for peace on April 13, 2022. —AFP

but not as many as the club's abandoned Donbass Arena in Donetsk. The vast glass-and-steel structure was built for the Euro 2012 championship that Ukraine co-hosted with Poland at a time when a major war in Europe seemed unimaginable. But Pyatov

knows that his career is likely to end long before Shakhtar get a chance to set foot in Donetsk again. "I still dream about it, as do all the players," he said of playing back home. "But we know that it won't happen overnight." —AFP

## Williamson hails Hyderabad's third win as a 'step up'

**MUMBAI:** Rahul Tripathi and Aiden Markram hit half centuries to guide Sunrisers Hyderabad to a third successive IPL victory on Friday but skipper Kane Williamson said there is scope for improvement. Chasing 176 for victory against Kolkata Knight Riders, Hyderabad rode on a third-wicket partnership of 94 between Tripathi (71) and Markram (68 not out) to achieve their target with 13 balls and seven wickets to spare in Mumbai.

Tripathi set the tone for Hyderabad's dominance with his 21-ball fifty and repay the team's faith after he was bought for \$1.13 million in the February auction of the Indian Premier League. The uncapped Indian, who played for Kolkata last season, fell to Andre Russell after his 37-ball blitz including four fours and six sixes but Markram kept up the charge. South Africa's Markram finished off the chase with a four and two sixes as Sunrisers won three in a row after their opening two losses this season of the Twenty20 tournament.

Williamson said the performance was a "step up" from their previous two victories. "To go and chase like we did and Rahul Tripathi playing an absolutely incredible knock and also Aiden Markram. Two amazing contributions for us in different roles but all in all a very good team performance," Williamson said. The New Zealand skipper added, "For us we always know these little things to improve on and the guys are working really hard. So far we're seeing those signs of improvement." Earlier Nitish Rana, who made 54, and Russell, who hit an unbeaten 49, guided Kolkata to 175 for eight after being invited to bat first. Kolkata struggled to build partnerships as Hyderabad pace bowlers T Natarajan and Umran Malik shared five wickets. Australia's white-ball skipper Aaron Finch did not last long in his first outing for Kolkata, caught behind for seven off Marco Jansen.

Natarajan then struck twice in one over to send back Venkatesh Iyer and Sunil Narine to push Kolkata on the back foot. Wickets kept tumbling as Shreyas Iyer attempted to rebuild in his 28-run stay before Malik, who clocked speeds up to 150 kmph bowled the skipper with a yorker. Rana hit back with Russell for company and reached his fifty in 32 balls.

The duo added 39 runs for the sixth wicket and Russell kept up the tempo after Rana's departure in the 18th over. The West Indian all-rounder, nicknamed 'Muscle' Russell for his power-hitting, finished off the innings with two sixes and a four in his 25-ball knock but it was not enough in front of the Tripathi show. "He was struck down in the last game with cramps but great to see him grab the game by the scruff of the neck and showed leadership in that top-order," Hyderabad coach Tom Moody said of the man of the match Tripathi. —AFP

## Sri Lanka cricket stars go into bat for protesters

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka's World Cup-winning cricket captain Arjuna Ranatunga and fellow ex-skipper Sanath Jayasuriya have joined street protests demanding the president step down over the country's economic crisis. Cricket is avidly followed in the Indian Ocean island nation and the pair called on other former players to support attempts to oust President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The island nation is in the grip of its worst economic crisis since independence in 1948, with severe shortages of essential goods and regular blackouts causing widespread misery.

"Cricket is driven by spectators," Ranatunga said outside Rajapaksa's office in Colombo on Friday, surrounded by demonstrators who have been protesting daily for the president's removal since last week. "Our fans are on the streets today because they no longer can bear the hardships. We must be with our fans when they need us most. Sports stars must physically join the protests."

Hours later, his fellow former captain Sanath Jayasuriya, known as "Master Blaster", climbed the barricades in front of Rajapaksa's colonial-era office and pledged solidarity. "Your message is loud and clear," he told the tens of thousands of

## 'Thai Messi' Chanathip making own name in Japan

**TOKYO:** He is known as the "Thai Messi" and grew up idolizing Diego Maradona - now Chanathip Songkrasin is making his own name after joining one of Asia's top clubs. The 159-cm attacking midfielder is a hero in Thailand, where he captains the national team and advertises everything from credit cards to energy drinks. Now the 28-year-old is breaking new ground after a January move to Japanese champions Kawasaki Frontale, which have won the J-League four times in the last five years.

Chanathip, also known as "Jay" in his home country, is keen to show football-mad Thai fans that he can live up to their expectations. "Football is a sport that's popular all over the world and it's very popular in Thailand too," he told AFP. "The fans gave me the nickname 'Messi' and that's a big honor, but Messi is a world-famous player, the best in the world. I can't be like Messi, but I'm happy to be called that."

Chanathip was born in central Thailand and first learned football from his father, a huge fan of Argentine legend Maradona. His father showed him videos of the midfield great and encouraged his son to copy his bamboozling tricks and dynamic dribbles.

## Dustbowl showdown promised at cycling's cobbled 'Hell of North'

**PARIS:** After last year's mud-splattered edition, the 2022 Paris-Roubaix cycling race will be run in bone-dry conditions Sunday over its fabled cobbled mining roads that usually bring falls galore. The grueling 257.2km-long race features 54.8km of rough-hewn cobbled sections where Dutch favorite Mathieu van der Poel awaits the challenge from bitter rival Wout van Aert of Belgium. "Sunday will be different," Van der Poel promised when asked this week about his narrow failure in the 2021 deluge when the race was staged in October after a Covid-19 delay.

Van Aert is over a recent bout of coronavirus and his Jumbo team say they have been testing his heart rate before, during and after training to make sure of his fitness. The Belgian champion was taking a tactical approach ahead of the race, saying the cobbles may not be the key. "The race can also be won between the cobbled sectors if you have two or three riders with you in the closing stages," he said.

Van Aert will likely have French rider Christophe Laporte alongside him. The pair have struck up a

formidable winning partnership this season, dominating Paris-Nice most notably. British outfit Ineos bring a strong team to the start line with world champion time-trialist Filippo Ganna named as team captain. Ganna will be backed up by the winners of two recent classics, American teenager Magnus Sheffield, who took the Brabantse Pijl, and Poland's Michal Kwiatkowski, who won the prestigious Amstel Gold.

Ineos also have a potential winner in Dylan van Baarle, runner up at both the Tour of Flanders and at last year's world championships. Belgian team Quick Step are in the reckoning too. "I don't care who wins so long as he has a blue jersey," team chief Patrick Lefevere said this week. "We'd like three or four riders in the finale and for the first time in ages we have seven riders with no excuses about Covid."

## Professional mentality

Chanathip says he struggled when he first moved to the J-League but his "imagination and vision have developed" after almost five years in Japan. He thinks the J-League is a higher level than many European leagues and would like to see more Thai players follow in his footsteps by moving overseas. "It sounds disrespectful to say that you can't compare the Thai league and the J-League, but you really can't," he said. "Lots of players in the J-League have a professional mentality and it's been like that for a long time. It's very difficult to compare the two."

Chanathip says he is not "technically or physically ready" to play in Europe, but he has plenty of

## ambitions to fulfil in Asian club football.

Frontale have dominated the J-League for the past five years but they have yet to win the AFC Champions League. They will try to put that right when this season's group stage gets under way on Friday, with the Japanese side drawn against South Korea's Ulsan Hyundai, China's Guangzhou and Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim. Chanathip believes Frontale, which have never gone past the quarterfinals, are good enough to finally claim the Asian title. "When you look at the kind of football we're playing, winning the trophy is the target and I think we're capable of doing it," he said.

Chanathip will switch focus to his national team this summer when Thailand play their qualifying matches in June for next summer's Asian Cup. The "War Elephants" will face Uzbekistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka in a round-robin tournament and are desperate not to miss out after failing to reach the final round of qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup. Chanathip is confident his team will make it to the Asian Cup finals in China next year. "As a player if you don't think you can get through then it's all over," he said. "I think we can do it." —AFP



Chanathip Songkrasin



In this file photo taken on April 14, 2019, the pack rides on the Trouee d'Arenberg cobbled stones sector (19) during the 117th edition of the Paris-Roubaix one-day classic cycling race between Compiègne and Roubaix, near Wallers, on April 14, 2019. —AFP

finish, or the Carrefour de l'Arbre which is just 17km from home. Race designer Thierry Gouvenou also predicted the 2022 edition would be different. "It'll go really fast," he said. "We have often hoped for rain, and we got a good dose of it last year so we'll be happy for a bit of sunshine this time." Last year's winner Sony Colbrelli fell to the floor at the finish line, unrecognizable in a coat of mud. This year's winner is likely to ride into the Roubaix velodrome cloaked in dust. —AFP



COLOMBO: People shout slogans during an ongoing anti-government demonstration near the president's office on April 16, 2022 demanding President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation over the country's crippling economic crisis. —AFP

protesters. "I hope the authorities will listen and ensure a brighter future for all of us." Crowds have been chanting "Gota go home, go home Gota."

The pair are the first former captains to join the street protests in person, but other stars have previously voiced their support. Former captain Mahela Jayawardena has strongly backed the demonstrations on social media and urged Rajapaksa to go while ex-captain Kumar Sangakkara has issued more guarded statements. —AFP

## Islanders great Bossy dies at 65

**NEW YORK:** Mike Bossy, an NHL scoring great who won four straight Stanley Cups with the New York Islanders, died on Friday at the age of 65, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman confirmed. Canada's Bossy had announced in October that he had been diagnosed with lung cancer. "The National Hockey League mourns the passing of Mike Bossy, the dynamic winger whose goal-scoring prowess during a remarkable 10-year career ranks, by almost any measure, as one of the greatest in NHL history and propelled the New York Islanders to four straight Stanley Cups," Bettman said in a statement.

The commissioner noted that Bossy's 573 goals in 752 games - a .76 goals per game average - is the highest in NHL history. "He is the only player ever to record nine straight 50-goal seasons and his five 60-goal seasons are matched only by Wayne Gretzky," Bettman added, noting that Bossy was just as dominant in the Stanley Cup playoffs, in which he scored 85 goals in 129 games. Bossy, who was born in Montreal on January 22, 1957, scored at least 70 goals in each of his four full seasons with Laval of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. The Islanders made him the 15th selection in the 1977 NHL draft and he would win Stanley Cup titles with the team in 1980, 1981, 1982 and 1983. Bossy played on a line with center Bryan Trottier and left wing Clark Gillies and scored the most goals by a rookie in NHL history at the time with 53



Mike Bossy

1977-78, winning the Calder Trophy as rookie of the year.

He then scored at least 50 goals in each of the following eight seasons before a chronic back problem limited him to 38 goals in 63 games in 1986-87, his last in the NHL. "His drive to be the best every time he stepped on the ice was second to none," Islanders general manager Lou Lamoriello said. "Along with his teammates, he helped win four straight Stanley Cup championships, shaping the history of this franchise forever."

Hoping that rest would enable him to play again, Bossy would sit out the 1987-88 season, but after his back didn't heal the way he'd hoped, he retired in October 1988. Bossy finished his NHL career with 573 goals and 1,126 points in 752 games. —AFP

Sports

# Milan beat Genoa to hold summit amid takeover talk

**MILAN:** AC Milan will stay top of Serie A this weekend thanks to Friday's 2-0 win over struggling Genoa after Inter Milan struck first with a 3-1 victory at Spezia. Milan, who are reportedly to be sold to Bahrain based investment firm Investcorp, reclaimed the summit after briefly being bumped down to second before kick-off in front of over 70,000 fans at the San Siro.

But Leao's cushioned 11th-minute volley from Pierre Kalulu's cross and a Junior Messias strike with three minutes remaining were enough for Stefano Pioli's side to maintain their two-point lead over local rivals Inter. Attention will now turn to third-placed Napoli who face in-form Roma on Monday evening hoping to move level on 69 points with Inter, while Juventus sit nine points off the pace ahead of their home fixture with Bologna on Saturday.

"The more games we play, the more important each match becomes," said Messias. "We knew today wouldn't be easy but we were good and we got the three points that make us want to keep fighting." Portugal forward Leao's sumptuous finish was the highlight of an otherwise uninspiring display which showed why Milan have struggled to put away Serie A's lesser lights since the turn of the year.

'Positive energy'

Milan kept their seventh straight clean sheet in all competitions - having lost right-back Davide Calabria to a stomach bug shortly before kick off - but it was a night of few chances for the seven-time European champions. Olivier Giroud's miscued overhead kick in the 57th minute was the first truly good opportunity after Leao's opener.

Leao then went close to doubling the hosts' lead when he forced a good save from Salvatore Sirigu, but Messias put the home crowd into party mood when he smashed in the second after being denied by the Italy international in the Genoa goal. "We have to make the pressure feel like nothing more than positive energy, because we are challenging for something that when we started working together was unthinkable," said Pioli to DAZN.

Milan now face Inter in the second leg of their Italian Cup semifinal on Tuesday before travelling to Rome to face Lazio next weekend as takeover talk hots up. Neither Milan nor Investcorp would comment to AFP over reports that the club was set to be sold by American investment fund Elliott for around one billion euros (\$1.08 billion). Elliott took control of the club in 2018 when previous owner Li

Yonghong defaulted on a loan taken out to finance the 740 million-euro purchase of Milan from former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Inter on Milan's heels

A third straight win for Simone Inzaghi's Inter confirmed their revival after a tricky February and March and kept them on Milan's coattails. "Today it was really important to win. We're very happy but we need to carry on like this," Inter midfielder Marcel Brozovic told DAZN. "We're a good team, we've got six matches to go and we need to win all of them."

It was Brozovic who opened the scoring for Inter with his first league goal of the season, and it was a spectacular effort for the man who makes Inter tick. The Croatia midfielder met Danilo D'Ambrosio's knockdown with a beautiful left-foot shot which flew past Ivan Provedel and set Inter on the road to victory. Martin Erlic flashed a header just wide shortly after the break but Inter missed some good chances before Martinez doubled their lead.

The worst miss came in the 49th minute, when the otherwise excellent Ivan Perisic snatched the ball off Edin Dzeko's



LA SPEZIA, Italy: Inter Milan's Chilean forward Alexis Sanchez challenges Spezia's Spanish defender Salvador Ferrer during their Italian Serie A match on April 15, 2022 at the Alberto-Picco stadium. —AFP

feet just as the Bosnian was set to slam in the second. Denzel Dumfries smashed over from close range but Martinez netted his 15th league goal of the season when he met Perisic's inswinging cross and clipped

home the second. Giulio Maggiore pulled a goal back with a superb shot with two minutes remaining but Sanchez rolled home Martinez's cross in the final seconds to make sure of the win. —AFP

## Marseille have eyes on European trophy, Champions League

**PARIS:** Marseille travel to face bitter rivals Paris Saint-Germain this weekend in buoyant mood as they target Champions League qualification and a European trophy to finish the season. PSG these days dominate French football and are closing in on an eighth Ligue 1 title in 10 seasons, but Marseille can still claim to be the country's best supported team and there is something else they can still brag about to their rivals.

With the Parisians again falling short in their pursuit of Champions League glory this season, the southern giants remain the only French club to have lifted the European Cup, back in 1993. Too inconsistent to seriously challenge PSG in recent years, Marseille have emerged as the best of the rest in Ligue 1 this season under Jorge Sampaoli and they head to the Parc des Princes sitting in second place.

With the top three qualifying for Europe's elite club competition, OM have a healthy seven-point cushion over Strasbourg in fourth as they target a return to the Champions League. That is of particular importance given the fragile finances of the club owned by American tycoon Frank McCourt, but

they also have silverware in their sights. Thursday's 1-0 win over PAOK in Greece took them through to the semi-finals of the Europa Conference League 3-1 on aggregate, with Dimitri Payet scoring the only goal on the night.

The new third-tier European competition may have been dismissed by many at the start of the campaign, but the opportunity of a second European trophy is not to be sniffed at for Marseille. They will play fellow former European Cup winners Feyenoord in the last four, with the first leg to come later this month. The winner of that will face either Leicester City or Roma in the final in Tirana in late May.

Marseille have now won eight straight games in all competitions with Payet in particular in inspired form. "This run really makes the end of the season exciting for us," said forward Cedric Bakambu after beating PAOK. "We have the PSG game in our minds, but we shouldn't play down this result. We should savor it and then get back to work. Everything is possible in football." However, it would be an enormous surprise if they could extend that winning streak in Paris, where they had gone a decade without tasting victory before coming out on top at the start of last season when only a handful of supporters were allowed to attend due to the pandemic.

Player to watch: Kylian Mbappe

Because he is arguably the best player in the



THESSALONIKI, Greece: Marseille's players celebrate their victory at the end of the UEFA Europa Conference League quarterfinal second leg football match against PAOK Thessaloniki at the Toumpa stadium on April 14, 2022. —AFP

world right now. Mbappe scored a hat-trick in PSG's 6-1 win at Clermont last weekend while also setting up a goal for Neymar and winning a penalty that the Brazilian converted. The week before that he scored two and had a hat-trick of assists against Lorient. Marseille will provide stiffer opposition than either of those limited sides, but Mbappe will take some stopping as he looks to add to his Ligue 1 best tallies of 20 goals and 14 assists moving into perhaps his final weeks at a PSG player. —AFP

## Bayern look to 'turn misery into momentum'

**BERLIN:** Bayern Munich coach Julian Nagelsmann on Friday urged his side to turn "misery into momentum" as they return to Bundesliga action on Sunday after a shock Champions League exit to Villarreal. League leaders Bayern travel to relegation candidates Arminia Bielefeld on Sunday, hoping to move a step closer to a seemingly inevitable tenth successive German title.

Yet the trip has been overshadowed by their surprise exit from Europe last Tuesday, with Nagelsmann admitting that his players are still "frustrated". "Obviously there is a bit of sadness, because we now have to wait another year for games like that. We'll have a year to think about it," he said. "We now have a job to do: win the next two games and secure the league title. We need to turn the misery into momentum."

Bayern are nine points clear of second-placed Borussia Dortmund at the top of the table with five games to go, meaning they could wrap up the title by next weekend. If they beat Bielefeld on Sunday, they will have the chance to finish the job in a head-

line clash with Dortmund the following Saturday. Nagelsmann said that his team will have to do without French stars Lucas Hernandez and Kingsley Coman due to "muscular problems", while defender Niklas Sule is also still nursing an injury.

Robert Lewandowski is expected to lead the line as usual amid speculation over his future. The Poland striker is yet to sign a new contract extension beyond 2023 at Bayern, which has raised questions over whether the club will sell him at the end of this season to avoid losing him on a free transfer next year. But on Friday, Nagelsmann dismissed rumors that Lewandowski may be on his way to Barcelona.

"I think there was nothing in that. When I talk to him, I don't have the impression that he wants to leave," said the coach of the FIFA Men's Player of the Year. "It's normal that a player is having thoughts about his future, especially when he's been at the club for so long. But it always seems to me as if he would like to stay. I would obviously like to keep him in my team."

One to watch: Felix Magath

The former Fulham and Wolfsburg coach now has just five games to save Hertha Berlin from relegation after a streaky start and a humiliating derby defeat to Union Berlin last Saturday. Hertha have won one and lost two since Magath returned from obscurity to take the reins in March, but are yet to win with the veteran coach in the dugout, as he was



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's German forward Thomas Mueller, Polish forward Robert Lewandowski and French defender Dayot Upamecano react after the UEFA Champions League quarterfinal second leg match against Villarreal on April 12, 2022. —AFP

forced to sit out the 3-0 win over Hoffenheim after a positive Covid test.

The coming weeks will be crucial for the beleaguered capital club, as they prepare for three successive clashes with relegation rivals, beginning with Saturday's trip to Augsburg. "So far, we've had the handicap of playing against very good teams, but now we have opponents on our level, so there can be no excuses anymore," said Magath on Friday. —AFP

## Real Madrid look to send Sevilla into scrap for top four

**MADRID:** Real Madrid against Sevilla on Sunday could have been a key game in La Liga's title race but instead it will decide the extent of Madrid's lead and how worried Sevilla should be about finishing in the top four. A Real Madrid win at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan would send them 15 points clear of Sevilla, who at the end of January were only five points behind the leaders, with a game in hand.

But a disappointing run of three wins from 11 league games has seen Sevilla fade away from the fight for the title and drift into the scrap for the Champions League places as local rivals Real Betis and Atletico Madrid look to take advantage. A 4-2 victory over struggling Granada last weekend was much-needed for Julen Lopetegui's side, even if it required two dramatic late goals in injury-time. Rafa Mir and Papu Gomez leaving it late to snatch the win.

Sevilla will be hoping to build on that result but they have a difficult run-in, with the game against Real Madrid coming before visits to Villarreal and Atletico Madrid ahead of a final game at home to Athletic

## CAF Confederation Cup quarterfinals: Five things to know

**JOHANNESBURG:** Ghanaians Bernard Morrison and Richard Ofori could play pivotal roles when Simba of Tanzania host Orlando Pirates of South Africa on Sunday in a CAF Confederation Cup quarter-final first leg. A former Pirate, speedy Morrison is the leading Simba scorer this season in the African equivalent of the UEFA Europa League with three goals. Pirates goalkeeper Ofori boasts three consecutive Confederation Cup clean sheets after replacing off-form Siyabonga Mponentshane and hopes to prevent his compatriot adding to his goal tally. Here, AFP Sport highlights five things to know ahead of the first legs on Sunday, with the return matches to be played seven days later.

Opposing Simba

A 60,000 crowd will fill the Benjamin Mkapa national stadium in commercial capital Dar es Salaam to see Simba confront Pirates, but not all the Tanzanians there will be backing the home team. Supporters of arch domestic rivals Young Africans plan to continue a tradition of cheering for the visiting club because they do not want Simba to succeed. This strange practice is not confined to Tanzania - when V Club play at home in the Democratic Republic of Congo, fans of fierce Kinshasa rivals Daring Club Motema Pembe always back the visiting side.

Home perils

Losing a first leg at home potentially spells elimination in the last-eight phase of Confederation Cup with none of the six sides who have done so escaping overall defeat. Only Zanaco of Zambia among the sextet won the return match, but the 1-0 victory over Pyramids in Egypt in 2020 was hollow following a 3-0 drubbing in Lusaka. Al Nasr of Libya suffered the most humiliating home loss - 5-0 to Hassania Agadir of Morocco two seasons ago - in a match staged in Egypt because of violence in the oil-rich north African nation.

Wary Pirates

Pirates hope a second successive appearance in the Confederation Cup quarterfinals will turn out much better than the first last season. After taking the lead through Vincent Pule at home to eventual title winners Raja Casablanca of Morocco, they were held 1-1 in Soweto. If the first-leg outcome was disappointing, the return match proved disastrous for the Buccaneers, who crumbled 4-0 with all the goals coming within 36 minutes of the kick-off.

Libyan showdown

Two Libyan clubs have reached the Confederation Cup quarterfinals for the first time and the luck of the draw saw Al Ittihad and Al Ahly Tripoli paired, sparing both potentially long, costly flights. Although both teams are based in the capital, Tripoli, no stadium there meets international standards so the matches will be played in the second largest city, Benghazi, 650 km to the east. Libya is the only north African country not to have won a CAF club competition. Ahly reached the 1984 Cup Winners Cup final against their Egyptian namesakes, but strained political relations between the nations forced the Tripoli outfit to withdraw.

Resurgent Mazembe

TP Mazembe of DR Congo, who face Pyramids with the first leg in Cairo, are chasing trophies again after several barren seasons as some stars grew old while others moved abroad to bolster monthly salaries. The Ravens from southern mining city Lubumbashi, who won eight CAF titles between 2009 and 2017, are guided by French coach Franck Dumas and topped Group C after a 2-0 win over Egyptian visitors Al Masry. If Dumas has a major concern it is the lack of a consistent scorer - Adam Nazli scored both goals against Masry and is the only squad member to net more than once in the eight matches of this campaign. —AFP

## Fulham lose at Derby as promotion party put on hold

**LONDON:** Fulham were stunned 2-1 by struggling Derby County on Friday and were made to wait a little longer to secure their return to the Premier League. The Championship leaders would have sealed a third promotion in five seasons with victory and they were on track when Fabio Carvalho put them ahead in the 20th minute. But Wayne Rooney's Derby hit back with goals from teenager Luke Plange in the 51st minute before Tosin Adarabioyo put through his own goal in the 73rd-minute.

The result leaves Derby nine points behind fourth-bottom Reading and safety while Fulham still enjoy a comfortable advantage at the top with five games to play. Earlier 10-man Luton earned a priceless 1-0 win over play-off rivals Nottingham Forest. Kal Naismith's first-half penalty proved decisive at Kenilworth Road but the home side had to hang on after Sonny Bradley was sent off for a trip on substitute Sam Surridge 13 minutes from time. —AFP



LOS ANGELES: Brandon Ingram #14 of the New Orleans Pelicans attempts a shot in front of Terance Mann #14, Marcus Morris Sr #8 and Nicolas Batum #33 of the LA Clippers during a 105-101 Pelican win in an NBA play-in tournament game at Crypto.com Arena on April 15, 2022. —AFP

## Hawks, Pelicans book final playoff berths

LOS ANGELES: Trae Young scored 32 of his 38 points in the second half as the Atlanta Hawks rallied to beat the Cleveland Cavaliers on Friday and book the final NBA Eastern Conference playoff berth. The New Orleans Pelicans grabbed the last spot in the West, thwarting a Clippers rally in a 105-101 victory in Los Angeles. The Hawks erased a double-digit halftime deficit in the play-in contest to line up a first-round series with Eastern Conference top seeds Miami, with game one scheduled for Sunday.

The Pelicans will face the Western Conference top-seeded Phoenix Suns in the first round. New Orleans booked their first playoff berth since 2018 in dramatic style. Brandon Ingram scored 30 points and Larry Nance Jr. added 14 points with 16 rebounds for New Orleans, who jumped out to a 16-point lead in the second quarter against a Clippers team that learned Friday morning they

would be without All-Star Paul George because of coronavirus concerns.

But the Clippers charged back in the third quarter, opening the second half on a 20-2 scoring run. Los Angeles led by as many as 13 points in the fourth quarter before the Pelicans roared back. "I knew what the stakes were, all of us wanted to be in the playoffs," said Ingram. "Whatever it took tonight, whether it was on the defensive end, offensive end, whatever it took I was going to do it."

In Cleveland, it was a heartbreaking finish to the season for a young Cavaliers squad, who fell one step shy of qualifying for the post-season for the first time since LeBron James departed the club in 2018. The Cavs dominated early, but Young found his touch in the second half and five Hawks players scored in double figures to complete the turnaround.

"I felt like I was letting my team down in the first half," said Young, who had four turnovers along with

six points before the interval. "I was missing some shots. We were only down 10 in the halftime and I knew I needed to make some more shots for my teammates." In fact, Young stepped up his game on all fronts. He scored or assisted on 43 of 56 second-half points for Atlanta, accounting for more than the 40 points that Cleveland scored after the break.

Young said it was just "more motivation" when center Clint Capela departed with a hyper-extended right knee moments before halftime. Capela had grabbed Cavs rookie Evan Mobley from behind as Mobley was shooting, but Mobley fell back into Capela's legs and the veteran fell to the court holding his knee in pain. After officials reviewed the play the call of a common foul stood, but Capela was ruled out for the rest of the contest.

'Show it'

"We wanted to win for him," Young said. "We

know how hard he's worked all year wanting to get in the playoffs. We hope he's going to be able to bounce back for us." Cleveland had jumped to a double-digit lead in the first quarter, boosted by the three-point shooting of Lauri Markkanen who scored 17 first-half points. Markkanen led the Cavaliers with 26 points and Darius Garland added 21.

All-Star center Jarrett Allen returned to Cleveland's starting lineup after missing 19 games with a broken left finger, scoring 11 points with three rebounds. But with Young leading the way the Hawks turned the tables in the third quarter, taking the lead for the first time on a three-pointer from Young with 1:42 left in the period. "Nobody had to say anything to me," said Young, whose driving basket early in the fourth quarter put the Hawks up for good. "I know the work I put in, the confidence I have and I've got to go out and show it." —AFP

## Riske rewarded in tiebreak, Swiatek, Raducanu shine

PARIS: Alison Riske came out on top of the second-longest tiebreak in Billie Jean King Cup history on Friday, edging Dayana Yastremska 7-6 (18/16), 7-5 as the United States took a 2-0 lead over Ukraine. Riske needed eight set points in the tiebreaker while Yastremska battled back from 5-1 down and had four set points herself before the American pulled off the epic decider in the opening rubber of the tie in Asheville, North Carolina. "It was so bizarre and amazing at the same time," said Riske.

Yastremska added: "I was laughing inside and, same time, I wanted to cry. I didn't know when it's going to finish. It was so unpredictable both ways." It was already an emotional week in Asheville, where the US team did all they could to make the Ukrainians - worried about family and friends at home amid the ongoing Russian invasion - feel welcome. "It's like living in two different realities," Ukraine captain Olga Savchuk said on Thursday of trying to focus on tennis while the brutal fighting 5,000 miles away in Europe remained in the forefront of their minds.

With Ukraine fans, flags and colors prominent in the stands, Riske was pushed all the way by Yastremska, a three-time WTA winner once ranked as high as 21st in the world but now at 93rd. But American Jessica Pegula sped past 22-year-old Katarina Zavatska 6-2, 6-1 in just 64 minutes as the United States moved close to a place in the finals. Seven qualifiers were played on Friday and Saturday. The winners will join Switzerland, Australia, Belgium and Slovakia in the finals later this year.

Defending champions Russia as well as Belarus have been expelled from the competition due to the invasion of Ukraine. Iga Swiatek marked her first match as world number one with an 18th straight victory as she steered Poland closer to the finals. The 20-year-old swept past 123rd-ranked Mihaela Buzarnescu 6-1, 6-0 in just 55 minutes as the Poles opened a 2-0 lead over Romania in Radom.

Swiatek went into the tie on a hot streak, putting together 17 successive wins on her way to titles in Doha, Indian Wells and Miami. Teammate Magda Linette earlier fought off the challenge of experienced Irina-Camelia Begu 6-1, 4-6, 6-2. "I'm much more confident right now," said Swiatek. "I feel like I have grown up for sure."

US Open champion Emma Raducanu helped Britain level their tie against 11-time champions Czech Republic 1-1 with a 7-5, 7-5 win against Tereza Martincova. Raducanu, playing on a clay court for the first time as a professional, wrapped up

Thai New Year Songkran festival. "My putting has just been phenomenal, that's pretty much what got me through it," Kim said.

The 33-year-old has been in fine form - winning his maiden Asian Tour victory last month at Hua Hin Thailand, but had previously not won a title since turning professional in 2011. The event's leading lady was rising Swedish star Maja Stark, 22, coming in second place with a total score of 47 after notching up one eagle and four birdies on Sunday. Thailand's Budsabakorn Sukapan, 24, was in third place on 42 points and her compatriot Phachara Khongwatmai, 22, was a point behind. Argentinian Maggie Simmermacher, 26, provided wow factor with a hole-in-one at the 12th hole, but finished further down the field.

Meanwhile, 15-year-old Thai young gun Ratchanon failed to make the cut on day two of the competition after becoming the youngest-ever winner of an elite international tour when he claimed last week's inaugural Asian Mixed Cup. "I am just tired. I tried my best, I wanted to be in the zone," he said. His focus will now shift to the upcoming Southeast Asian Games in Vietnamese capital Hanoi

## Sensational Sihwan Kim bags second Asian Tour win

BANGKOK: American golfer Sihwan Kim swept his second tournament in two months on Saturday, winning the Asian Mixed Stableford Challenge in Thailand as local teen sensation Ratchanon Chantananuwat suffered disappointment after his record-breaking victory last week. Sixty players from the men's Asian Tour and Ladies European Tour teed off in the \$750,000-prize tournament which wrapped up Saturday at Siam Country Club's Waterside Course near Pattaya.

Kim scored seven points in the final round for a 49 point total, under the modified Stableford scoring system. He had a rollercoaster Saturday with six birdies, two bogeys and a double. After sealing the win, he was splashed with water bottles to mark the



ASHEVILLE, North Carolina: Alison Riske of the United States and Dayana Yastremska of Ukraine shake hands after their match during the first round of the 2022 Billie Jean King Cup Qualifier at Harrah's Cherokee Center on April 15, 2022. —AFP

victory in just over two hours. The 19-year-old showed no ill effects from losing her toenails in training on the demanding surface earlier in the week in Prague. The Czechs, playing without two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova and former world number one Karolina Pliskova, had taken a 1-0 lead when Marketa Vondrousova defeated Harriet Dart 6-1, 6-0. —AFP



PATTAYA: Sihwan Kim of the US poses with the winner's trophy following round four of the Asian Mixed Stableford Challenge golf tournament on April 16, 2022. —AFP

in May ahead of the International Series England and British Amateur Championship in June. Ratchanon, who has to balance homework with competitions, is only the fifth amateur - and first since 2009 - to win on the Asian Tour. —AFP

## NZ women rugby coach resigns after scathing review

WELLINGTON: New Zealand women's rugby head coach Glenn Moore resigned Saturday, five days after a withering review found coaches made culturally insensitive comments to the country's top players and indulged in favoritism and body-shaming. Moore's immediate departure comes less than six months from the Women's World Cup, which will be hosted by New Zealand, the defending champions.

Despite steering the team to the 2017 title, Moore had been under intense pressure to quit following the independent review, which found that Black Ferns players had been badly served by both team management and New Zealand Rugby. It was launched after experienced hooker Te Kura Ngata-Aerengamate shared a social media post in which she said she had suffered a mental breakdown because of critical comments made by Moore. She alleged Moore had told her she did not deserve to be on the team and was "picked only to play the guitar".

Moore, 62, said in a statement that he had chosen to end his seven-year tenure following a wave of criticism at his retention. "The decision to resign from a position I am passionate about six months before the 2022 Women's Rugby World Cup has been really tough for both me and my family," Moore said. "I remain concerned that the prolonged Cultural and Environmental Review continues to be distracting at a time when all focus needs to be on maximizing performance."

Moore said he took issue with Ngata-Aerengamate's allegations, describing them as "misleading". "(The social media post) provided no context and unfairly and inaccurately represented me as a coach and a person," he said. "My values and beliefs were called into question, and it was very disappointing not only to me but also to my family. I have refrained from making any public comment about that until now out of concern for Te Kura's wellbeing at the time she made her post and to allow the review process to be completed." —AFP