



6 Coalition faces new split over Jerusalem violence



16 BNK 'official sponsor' of padel's world number one Juan Lebron



Ramadan Timings	
Fajr	03:55
Shurooq	05:18
Dhuhr	11:47
Asr	15:22
Maghrib	18:17
Isha	19:37



Kuwait protesters denounce Zionist aggression and raids

Demonstrators condemn 'double standard', support Palestinian cause



KUWAIT: Kuwaitis hold a gathering at the Erada Square in Kuwait City in support of Palestine and to denounce the Zionist entity's aggression against Palestinians. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Dozens of demonstrators gathered in a solidarity protest, on Monday, at Al-Erada Square in Shuwaikh area. The protesters chanted slogans to express their support and condemnation of Zionist forces' raid of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem. The protesters (Citizens and residents) chanted "You don't need to be Muslim to stand up for Palestine.... you just need to be a human" while holding Kuwait and Palestine flags, and calling for Arab and international support for Al-Aqsa Mosque worshippers and those in the occupied territories facing Zionist violence.

MP Osama Al-Shaheen said in a press statement that the solidarity protest is a moral message to Palestinian brothers at Al-Aqsa Mosque against the Zionist aggression. He affirmed that Kuwaiti Muslims will always defend the case because Al-Aqsa Mosque is a sacred symbol. It is the first of the second qiblas and the third of the three Mosques.

"We stand in solidarity, sympathize with them, and support them with prayers, money, and speeches. I would like to thank Kuwait government, civil society organizations and citizens, who are racing

to serve and support this honorable cause," Al-Shaheen added.

Meanwhile, MP Hamad Al-Matar announced that the Kuwaiti people will continue to support their brothers in Palestine - noting that "Kuwaiti is a nation that we are proud of, and we are always supportive of humanitarian issues such as the Palestinian cause". "Today, I will send a message to the hypocritical international community that defends everyone except the martyred heroes who defended their homeland," Al-Matar added.

He pointed out that Palestine will always be the first case to be discussed in Kuwait, and the protest that was held today is an obvious scene to see in the present of the one-year-old child to the 60-year-old man. "We do not recognize traitors who aren't supporting Palestine, they do not represent the Kuwaiti society," Al-Matar stated.

For his part, Sheikh Hamed Al-Saleh, Imam in a mosque, said "we are here to express solidarity with our oppressed brothers in Palestine, and to express our grief and pain over what is happening there." "Zionists kill innocent people in cold blood and desecrate Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Continued on Page 6

Ramadan Kareem

Lessons of Ramadan: Patience

By Teresa Leshner

One of the most prominent outcomes of fasting the month of Ramadan, especially in the summer heat, is the development and perfection of patience. Nobody can fast without having a degree of patience, which is mentioned in the Quran as one of the qualities of someone who will go to Paradise. For example, "I (God) have rewarded them this Day [with Paradise] for what they have endured patiently; they are indeed the ones that are truly triumphant!" (23:111)

As successfully completing fasting in Ramadan requires patience, so does entrance into Paradise. In fact, Paradise requires two kinds of patience: one is proactive and the other reactive. The proactive type is striving to adopt a way of life sanctioned by God. It means making the effort to learn what God wants from us and then applying it in our lives.

The Quran, which is God's final message to mankind, tells us exactly what God expects from us, and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) demonstrated practically its teachings, making it easier to understand. As it is a lifelong process of study coupled with conformance to God's teachings and to the example of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), it will take determination and patience.

But the reward is worth the effort, according to the Quran: "The ones who fulfill the covenant with God and do not break its solemn pledge to Him, who keep joined all the relations and obligations that God has commanded to be joined and stand in awe of their Lord, and fear an evil reckoning, who endure with patience seeking the countenance of their Lord, who establish the prayer and spend charitably from what We have provided them, secretly and openly, and who avert what is evil with what is good... the angels will say, 'Peace unto you for that you persevered in patience! Now how excellent is the final Home!'" (13:20-24)

Those who repent, believe, do not bear false witness, pass by vile talk with honor, and heed the verses of God... "those are the ones who will

Continued on Page 6

US death penalty: Firing squad or electrocution?

HOUSTON: A Death Row inmate in South Carolina forced to decide whether he wants the electric chair or a firing squad. In Texas, an ailing 78-year-old man scheduled to die for a murder he committed three decades ago and a mother of 14 children to be put to death despite serious doubts about her guilt. Capital

punishment has been on the wane in the United States but an upcoming slate of executions has refocused attention on the use of the death penalty.

Richard Moore, a 57-year-old African-American man, is to be executed in South Carolina on April 29 for the 1999 murder of a convenience store clerk during a robbery. It would be the first execution in the southern state in over a decade. Recent US executions have been carried out by lethal injection but South Carolina has been forced to abandon that method because drug manufacturers are refusing to supply the necessary ingredients.

So Moore had the choice between the electric chair and a firing squad made up of three rifle-tot-

ing volunteers from the Corrections Department. He chose the firing squad on Friday. Moore's lawyers have challenged both methods of execution, however, claiming they violate a constitutional ban on "cruel and unusual punishment," and a judge agreed on Thursday to hear their arguments.

"The electric chair and the firing squad are antiquated, barbaric methods of execution that virtually all American jurisdictions have left behind," said Lindsey Vann, a lawyer for Moore. Electrocution has been used for seven of the 43 executions carried out in South Carolina since 1985. The last time was in 2008.

Continued on Page 6

Russia strikes hit western Ukraine

LVIV: Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday lauded a brigade accused by Ukraine of committing atrocities near the capital Kyiv as his forces pounded targets across the country, killing at least seven people in the western city of Lviv. The air strikes in Lviv came just hours after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Moscow of wanting to "destroy" the entire eastern region of Donbas where Russian forces were massing for an expected all-out assault. Despite widespread condemnation of Russia's inva-

sion of Ukraine, Putin appeared to double down on Monday.

The Russian president signed an official decree bestowing the 64th Motor Rifle Brigade the title of "Guards" for defending the "Motherland and state interests" and praised the "mass heroism and valour, tenacity and courage" of its members. The Ukrainian defense ministry has accused the same outfit of carrying out "war crimes" while occupying the suburb of Bucha on the outskirts of Kyiv, where residents were shot to death with some having their hands bound.

Earlier Monday, Russia's defense ministry said it had hit 16 military targets at various locations across Ukraine. Following the attack on Lviv, black smoke billowed from the gutted

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NOVODRUZHESK: A photograph taken from Novodruzhesk village, shows smoke rising in Rubizhne city, on April 18, 2022, on the 54th day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. — AFP

Syrian war TV drama makes breakthrough

DAMASCUS: Breaking a decade-old boycott by Gulf broadcasters over a diplomatic standoff with the Damascus government, a Syrian war drama figures this month on the Ramadan menu of a Saudi-owned television channel. Syrian dramas have long been popular across the region, but since Arab states in the Gulf suspended ties with President Bashar Al-Assad's government in

2012, broadcasters in the region have shied away from Syrian-produced shows, especially those related to war.

Syrian actors, however, have still found their way on to screens through pan-Arab productions and historical dramas produced by Gulf networks, such as the popular Bab Al-Harra series. But shows made exclusively by Syrians were largely shunned. In a sign of change, the Saudi-owned MBC channel has started airing a Syrian-made series, "Suspension", during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan—a period that this year started April 2 and during which viewership peaks across the Middle East. — AFP (See Page 13)



DAMASCUS: Syrian actors Fadi Sobeih (left) and Yamen Al-Hajali (right) gesture thumbs up, during the filming of the Syrian Social series 'Maa Oaid Al-Tanfith' in the Wadi Barada suburb of Damascus. — AFP

Local

Initiative urges public, private sectors to develop mass transportation in Kuwait

Public transportation network has not been developed in 40 years: Jassim Al-Awadhi

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Taking the bus has personal, environmental and societal benefits. Riding the bus can improve health, reduce air pollution, lead to fewer traffic jams and help the economy. Jassim Al-Awadhi, founder of the Kuwait Commute initiative, works to raise awareness about the public transport system in the country to implement a feasible and executable solution to improve Kuwait's rapidly escalating traffic issues.

In an interview with Kuwait Times, Awadhi affirmed that he aims to develop Kuwait's bus facilities to keep pace with the development and progress of high-quality world-class systems, along with encouraging citizens to use public transport instead of cars.



KUWAIT: Jassim Al-Awadhi (left) with MP Abdul-Aziz Al-Saqabi using public transportation.

"Buses' routes in Kuwait are only suitable for workers, as the service is focused only on routes with a passenger density that enables bus operators to profit, which results in a lack of buses in high- and middle-class residential areas because it is unprofitable for them. Public transport is a public service that requires subsidies, which makes systems in Japan, London, Paris and Singapore successful. Also, there is no active central authority to regulate, support and provide the necessary infrastructure for the public transport sector and control the quality of service. The service must be provided to and target everyone," Awadhi noted.

Develop mass transportation

He stressed that all segments of society are reacting to the campaign "Kuwait Commute - Where is the bus?", adding that the initiative is placing this issue on the table of the government and private sector to develop mass transportation in Kuwait. Awadhi reached out to all stakeholders in the public and private sectors by presenting a well-studied vision to reduce road congestion, highlight the lack of parking spots and the need to increase the number of buses and routes to develop the current system, in addition to educating the community about the benefits of using public transportation.

Awadhi said his initiative is working to raise public awareness through the media, lectures and discussions at universities, and working with all bus operators, Kuwait Municipality, Public Authority for Roads and Transport, National Assembly members and NGOs, hoping to change people's views of public transportation.

"One of the problems the bus industry faces is the lack of Euro 5 diesel, so we have collaborated with City Bus to add a diesel additive produced by Imdad from used cooking oil. The first stage of the experiment is to test the mixture to see if it is useable. The second stage is to send the sample to a lab in the UAE to check if it is compatible, and if it is useable as a



We have to fix the buses to have a metro

diesel additive, we are going to use it and record the findings. Next Tuesday we will get the lab result," Awadhi told Kuwait Times.

Regarding issues related to bus routes, Awadhi said: "Bus operators are doing the best they can with what is available. Allocating bus lanes, providing the necessary infrastructure and setting a timetable from the central regulator will complement bus operators' efforts in expanding the network, increase the number of buses and reach new areas, while reorganizing other routes."

"Public transportation has to be available for us to use. I use public transportation weekly but it does not serve me well, because the network does not cover all of Kuwait. I used to live in Grenada at the end of the Fourth Ring Road and my destination was Salmiya. By car it took me 22-25 minutes, but by bus it took me two hours. The main problem is the last government development of public transport as a public service was more than 40 years ago, and until today there have not been any improvements to it," he said.

Bus stops redesign

Awadhi worked to redesign several bus stops in cooperation with citizens, public and private sectors, and activists. "As an activist, I introduce ideas and issues related to public transportation in Kuwait to engage the society with us and spread awareness in order to make officials begin cooperating with us. Kuwait Commute has been successful so far - our efforts have been sustainable for four years."

"Kuwait Commute started an open call design competition for a bus stop in cooperation with several private companies. We wanted the bus stop to be a safe



The new bus stop.

and comfortable zone for waiting. We chose the location and included elements of design sustainability as much as we could. We thought it was very important for us to develop a bus stop that was fit for purpose," he told Kuwait Times.

He added shaded bus stops are better than air-conditioned ones, where there is an added cost, maintenance and security risk. "We collaborated with other activists. The Mahboula bus stop was done by Jassim Al-Nashmi, founder of Manmade Studio, and we are exchanging experiences to understand other structural aspects regarding bus stop design. Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences is going to provide unified designs for bus stops. We signed the contract with KFAS and started the process to choose an engineering firm in Kuwait that has experience in bus stops, which will be launched soon," Awadhi said.

Awadhi confirmed the bus system is one of the most important complementary projects to the future of the Kuwait metro. "With no good buses, there will be no metro in Kuwait. We read the report by an international consultant for Kuwait, who highlighted six scenarios for the public transport system, with buses being part of each of them. So we have to fix the buses to have a metro, because how are people supposed to reach metro stations from homes if there is no effective bus network?" he asked.

"Where is the bus?" calls on the government and private sectors to show their actions to develop this public service. Since 2018, Kuwait Commute has tried to contact them to build a relationship and close the gaps in this ongoing process to have a public transportation system that is safe, eco-friendly and reflects Kuwaitis' values," Awadhi concluded.

Christians celebrate Easter



KUWAIT: Churches in Kuwait celebrated Easter on Sunday after a two-year absence due to COVID-19. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: Kuwait churches celebrated Easter according to the Gregorian calendar after a two-year absence due to the coronavirus pandemic. Meanwhile, Eastern churches are getting ready to celebrate Easter next week. The faithful attended a church service

at the Holy Family Cathedral in Kuwait. Christians thanked Kuwait leadership for promoting peace and religious freedom. Worshippers expressed pleasure that this year's Easter coincided with the holy month of Ramadan and prayed for God's blessings.



Gulf Bank distributes iftar meals to local families in need

KUWAIT: As part of its commitment towards social sustainability during the holy month of Ramadan, Gulf Bank distributed iftar meals to the local families in need. Gulf Bank has been proudly spearheading the annual initiative for five years in a row, as part of its strategic partnership with the Kuwait Food Bank.

"At Gulf Bank, we are keen to participate in various social initiatives designed to benefit and serve our local community, bringing joy to the hearts of local families in need, especially during the holy month of Ramadan," said Lujain Al-Qenaie, the Manager of Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank.

She added, "We are pleased to partner with the Kuwait Food Bank for the fifth year in a row, bringing joy to disadvantaged families during the holy month." Qenaie expressed her thanks to the Kuwait Food Bank officials for their efforts in delivering Gulf Bank's dona-

tions, and noted that Gulf Bank looks forward to continuing to collaborate with them on various charitable projects and community sustainability initiatives in the future.

"For more than 60 years, Gulf Bank has been an integral part of Kuwait's economic and social history. Gulf Bank has always been keen to participate in community events, seizing every opportunity to support disadvantaged groups in society, knowing full well the impact these efforts have on local families during the holy month," she added.

Qenaie 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.

"As a financial institution, Gulf Bank is committed to supporting active civil society institutions such as the Kuwait Food Bank, in part due to its exceptional social and humanitarian role. We believe that the private sector has an important role in raising awareness about major social issues," concluded Qenaie.

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and

diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience.

Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining a robust sustainability program at the community, economic, and environmental levels through sustainability initiatives that are strategically selected to benefit both the country and the bank. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with various parties to achieve it.



Local

Kuwaitis gather in support of Palestine



KUWAIT: Kuwaitis held a gathering at the Irada Square in Kuwait City in support of Palestine and to denounce the Zionist entity's aggression against Palestinians in Jerusalem Palestinian territories. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Mishref field medical center turned into labor testing facility

KUWAIT: Health Ministry said on Monday that it would be converting the Kuwait field medical center in Mishref area's international fairground (Hall 8) into labor examination facility, to support other examination centers. The Health Ministry said in a statement that the Health Minister Dr Khaled Al-Saeed, accompanied by the Undersecretary, Dr Mustafa Reda and number of leaders in the health sector visited the facility to follow up the procedures. It added that Minister Al-Saeed stressed providing all means of comfort and safety for employees and people. —KUNA



Arson behind Mina Abdullah fire: KFF

KUWAIT: An arsonist caused the fire that gutted abandoned fiber-glass boats at the auto impounding garage in Mina Abdullah, Kuwait Fire Force announced on Monday. The KFF said in a statement that the blazes started when an arsonist triggered inflammable substances at the municipality-run impounding garage. Inspectors who examined the scene found that the flames erupted among abandoned fiber-glass boats at the far end of the impounding garage. The flames had spread rapidly. Four squads doused the fire that erupted among the boats in Mina Abdullah, KFF said in an earlier statement. The KFF said in a statement late on Sunday that the central operations department notified the squads in Mina Abdullah, Umm Al-Haiman and Al-Ahmadi, to rush to the scene and contain the blazes that were raging in a number of boats. The flames that were raging on a wide spot were contained after intensive efforts by the firemen. No one was injured and an investigation was conducted. —KUNA



KFF inspects fire safety in Rai markets

KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Force inspections teams carried out a wide-ranging campaign in Rai under direct supervision by Deputy Chief for Prevention Major General Khalid Fahad. The campaign included the Friday Market, in addition to the tents, birds and feed markets to check compliance with safety procedures against fires. Many citations and warnings were issued for lack of safety and fire prevention conditions.



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News in brief

Kuwait condemns
desecration of Quran

KUWAIT: The State of Kuwait expressed on Monday its utter condemnation towards the acts of desecration perpetrated by Swedish extremists against the Holy Quran. In a statement by the Foreign Ministry, Kuwait indicated that the act of burning the Quran was provocative towards Muslims around the globe and it was against all values of peace and harmony. The statement called on the international community to take responsibility and action to stop such heinous deeds and prevent the abuse against religion.

Immune automatic update

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health announced Sunday that a joint data base system will be connected with the Ministry of Interior, in order to update the passport number on the Immune app and the vaccination certificate. A press statement by the Director of the Undersecretary office of the MOH Ahmad Al-Ghareeb said this update will only apply to recently issued passports proceeding April 13. For those who have issued passports beforehand, are required to update their data at the COVID-19 Vaccination Center located in Mishref during working hours.

IICO, UNICEF sign deal

KUWAIT: The Kuwait-based International Islamic Charity Organization (IICO) signed a deal for cooperation on Monday with the United Nations' children's agency UNICEF, an endeavor hailed by both bodies as a step towards bringing planned initiatives to fruition. The deal is expected to be instrumental in achieving common "humanitarian objectives," said the Kuwaiti body's chief Bader Al-Sumait, highlighting the charity's eagerness to forge closer ties with international organizations. Such deals will be for the benefit of displaced persons and refugees across the world, in addition to galvanizing humanitarian organizations, added the Kuwaiti official.

Zain shares joys of girgian
with special needs children

Company celebrated with children and their families at two events



KUWAIT: Aisha Al-Salem with Zain's team during Al-Kharafi Center's event.



Sheikhha Sheikhha Al-Abdullah with Zain's team at Ambition Club's event.



Zain celebrated with children and their families.

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, shared the joys of girgian with special needs children and their families as part of its social campaign during the holy month of Ramadan. The company sponsored the event hosted by Al-Kharafi Activity Kids Center for Children with Special Needs and took part in the event held by the Kuwait Ambition Sports Club for Mental Disabilities.

Zain's contributions came under its Ramadan social campaign and comprehensive Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility strategy,

through which the company aims at sharing the joys and blessings of the holy month with all segments of the society, especially children with special needs, celebrating special occasions with them and their families in an atmosphere filled with happiness and joy.

After a halt of two years due to the pandemic, Zain sponsored the girgian event hosted by Al-Kharafi Activity Kids Center for Children with Special Needs, a project of the Sanad Kuwaiti Foundation for Disabled Children. The event was attended by Chairman of Sanad Kuwaiti Foundation for

Disabled Children Sabeeka Al-Jaser and President of Al-Kharafi Activity Kids Center Aisha Al-Salem.

Zain also took part in the girgian celebration held by the Kuwait Ambition Sports Club for Mental Disabilities at Saleh Shehab High School in Mishref. The event was attended by Honorary President of the Kuwait Disabled Sports Club Sheikhha Sheikhha Abdullah Al-Sabah.

During both events, Zain's team delighted the children and their families by distributing girgian and gifts while also organizing many other fun activities. Zain has always been keen

on organizing interactive social initiatives during Ramadan to recognize and support the various segments of the Kuwaiti community, reflecting Islamic values and humanitarian principles to enrich the art of giving and strengthen bonding between community members.

Zain's Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility campaign during the holy month of Ramadan includes an extensive array of programs that cover different areas. The initiatives and programs include humanitarian, voluntary, cultural, religious, sports, and recreational programs.

Girgian celebrations
at British School
of Kuwait (BSK)

KUWAIT: Students from Reception to Year 5 at The British School of Kuwait (BSK) enjoyed girgian celebrations on campus last week, with staff and students in the Primary section attending school dressed in their finest traditional clothing to enjoy a day of girgian themed activities.

The Founder and Director of BSK Vera Al-Mutawa joined the students in their celebrations

and the day began in lively fashion with entertainment provided by a group of Bu Tabailah drummers, whose music and singing of traditional girgian songs was received with much applause. Students in Years 3-5 also contributed to proceedings with their own traditional dancing, singing and recitations which were performed to the delight of their classmates.

Occurring midway through the month of Ramadan, the traditional celebration of girgian is eagerly awaited by children who gather with their friends and siblings to visit local houses, singing songs and collecting sweets in small fabric bags. The celebrations at BSK were enjoyed by all involved and brought much color and cheer to the students and teachers alike.

KFH holds girgian
event for kids at
Avenues Mall

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) held confectionary girgian celebration for kids at Avenues Mall. This comes as part of KFH's Ramadan program "Increase Good Deeds in Ramadan" that affirms the pioneering role of the bank in the social responsibility, while contributing to strengthening the social ties.

KFH voluntary team distributed girgian confectionary and gifts to the children amidst friendly and passionate Ramadan atmospheres. Girgian is considered as an important occasion for children to enjoy. It is a folkloric event associated with the

holy month of Ramadan and it contributes to spreading joy and love among children.

Meanwhile, KFH offered at Avenues mall the service of withdrawing new banknotes "Ayadi" in various categories on Eid Al-Fitr. The service is available in all cash categories that include the KD 1, KD 5, and KD 10. KFH is keen on sharing various occasions and holidays with the community, confirming the uniqueness of KFH by providing a wide variety of communication channels that make the bank closer to its customers in their various places.

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





S Lanka's embattled leader trims cabinet of relatives

10,000 soldiers in South Africa flood relief effort

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NANTES: A protestor holds a placard reading 'Le Pen in power, the youth in the slaughterhouse' during a demonstration against racism, fascism and far-right in Nantes, western France, ahead of the second round of voting in France's presidential election. — AFP

France's presidential rivals gird for debate

I'm very confident, and I think I'm going to win: Le Pen

PARIS: Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen traded barbs Monday as they returned to campaigning for the French presidency ahead of a prime-time debate that is likely to prove decisive ahead of Sunday's second-round run-off. The two rivals held low-key events after a brief Easter pause as they paced themselves before Wednesday's face-off, when the centrist Macron will defend his record over the past five years against his combative far-right rival. It will be a rematch of their debate in 2017, when the same two finalists clashed at the same stage of the campaign, but which most analysts say was handily won by Macron, who was making his first-ever attempt at public office.

Le Pen, making her third run for the presidency, insists she is better prepared this time around. "I'm very confident, and I think I'm going to win," the National Rally candidate said during a visit to the sunlit village square in Saint-Pierre-en-Auge in Normandy, western France. "I hope this debate is carried out calmly... I hope it won't be what I've been hearing for the past week, a series of insults, fake news and excesses," she said.

"She knows her programme perfectly, and she knows very well how Macron is going to try to attack

her," Le Pen's close ally Louis Aliot, the far-right mayor of Perpignan in southern France, told France Inter radio.

The latest opinion polls suggest that Macron has the edge, giving him scores of 53 to 55.5 percent against 44.5 to 47 percent for Le Pen.

But allowing for margins of error, Macron knows there is no room for complacency, and polls have often underestimated the results of far-right candidates in the past—most notably in 2002, when Le Pen's father Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the presidential run-off against Jacques Chirac.

'Reassure everybody'

Macron took aim at Le Pen's proposal to hold constitutional referendums on tougher immigration laws and her plan for "national priority" for French citizens for jobs and welfare benefits, and to create the possibility for citizens' initiatives to propose and vote on legislation. "She is implying that once elected, she believes she's above the Constitution since she can decide not to respect it by changing the rules," he told France Culture radio in an interview published Monday.

But instead of focusing on immigration and the threat of Islamist extremism, Le Pen has insisted mainly

on her plans to tackle rising prices, a key element of her strategy of presenting a more moderate face to voters.

Her team has played down in particular a proposed ban on the Islamic headscarf in public places, with Le Pen acknowledging that it was a "complex problem" that would require parliamentary debate, and that "I'm not obstinate." Le Pen's team has also hit back at a



"Complex problem"

report that the European Union's anti-corruption body OLAF had accused her and senior colleagues of embezzling more than 600,000 euros (\$650,000) of EU funds during their time as euro-deputies.

Her lawyer, Rodolphe Bosselut, expressed suspicion at the timing of the release of the story, first revealed

by the investigative website Mediapart on Saturday.

Russian roulette'

Polls suggest that up to a fourth of the French electorate might not vote at all on Sunday, and much will also depend on the decisions of the millions of leftwing supporters of Jean-Luc Melenchon, who finished in a close third place in the first round on April 10.

The results of a survey Sunday carried out Melenchon's France Unbowed party showed that only a third of those who voted for him will back Macron in order to block a far-right presidency under Le Pen.

"The rest preferred to return a blank ballot, or said they would just stay home."

Melenchon, who is poised to loom large on the left ahead of parliament elections in June in which Macron is hoping to renew a majority if re-elected, has pointedly refused to urge voters to back Macron, saying only that "not a single vote" should go to Le Pen.

Christophe Castaner, the leader of Macron's Republic on the Move (LREM) group in parliament, attempted to play down the significance of the survey. But he also warned: "Not to choose, is to accept you are playing Russian roulette." — AFP

US announces global COVID summit May 12

WASHINGTON: A global summit to chart an end to the COVID-19 crisis and plan for future upheavals will occur May 12, the White House said Monday, even as President Joe Biden struggles to get vital pandemic funding from Congress. The virtual gathering will be co-chaired by the United States, along with current G7 president Germany, G20 president Indonesia, African Union chair Senegal, and Belize, the current chair of the CARICOM Caribbean grouping.

"The summit will redouble our collective efforts to end the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future health threats," the countries said in a joint statement. This will be the second global huddle on the pandemic, which has killed more than six million people and triggered profound disruption to leading economies and trading patterns in the two years since it began to spread.

Biden hosted a similar summit last September, at which he urged partners to surge vaccines and ensure that 70 percent of every country has been vaccinated by September this year. Although death rates are plummeting world wide, the virus continues to spread, preventing many leading countries from fully lifting restrictions, while Shanghai in China is in the midst of a draconian lockdown.

Summit hosts appealed for maintaining the sense of urgency. "In advance of the May 12 summit, we are calling on world leaders, members of civil society, non-governmental organizations, philanthropists, and the private sector to make new commitments and bring solutions to vaccinate the world, save lives now, and build better health security—for everyone, everywhere," the joint statement said.

"The emergence and spread of new variants, like Omicron, have reinforced the need for a strategy aimed at controlling COVID-19 worldwide," it said. And while the latest variants are less lethal, the summit statement stressed there must be a focus on stopping similar future catastrophes from taking the world by surprise. "We know we must prepare now to build, sustain, and finance the global capacity we need, not only for emerging Covid-19 variants, but also future health crises," the statement said.—AFP



TEHRAN: Photo shows a military parade marking Iran's annual army day in the capital Tehran. — AFP

Iran's Raisi warns Zionists against any hostile action

TEHRAN: Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi warned on Monday that the armed forces would not let arch-foe Zionist entity rest if it took action targeting the Islamic republic. "You must know that if you try to take any action against the Iranian nation... our armed forces will not leave you in peace," Raisi said, during a military parade to mark National Army Day.

His comments come days after he warned neighbouring Iraq against using its territory for activities that disrupt Iran's security. Last month, Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the military's ideological arm, said it fired a dozen ballistic missiles at a "strategic" site in Arbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous northern Kurdistan region, claiming they were being used by Israel.

However, Arbil governor Oumid Khouchnav dismissed as "baseless" the presence of Zionist sites in

and around the city. "There are no Zionist sites in the region," he said at the time. Also last month, Zionist entity hosted talks attended by top Arab diplomats and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, saying the meeting would send a strong message to Tehran.

"This new architecture, the shared capabilities we are building, intimidates and deters our common enemies—first and foremost Iran and its proxies," Zionist Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said at the end of the meeting in southern Zionist entity. The meeting came as world powers have been negotiating a way to revive a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, to rein in its nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief.

Zionist entity is adamantly opposed to the original deal and any effort to restore it. The accord started to unravel in 2018 when then US president Donald Trump left the deal and re-instated sanctions, leading Iran to in turn step up its nuclear programme again.

On Thursday, the UN atomic energy watchdog said Iran has started to make components for machines used to enrich uranium at a new workshop in Natanz, the country's main nuclear site. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said the new workshop replaces a nuclear facility in Karaj, near Tehran, after an attack there last year, which Iran said was an act of sabotage carried out by Zionist entity. — AFP

India slams WHO over report of 4m COVID deaths

NEW DELHI: India has sharply criticised a forthcoming World Health Organization study which reportedly claims coronavirus killed four million people nationally, the latest analysis suggesting a significant undercount of the pandemic's death toll. The New York Times reported last week that New Delhi had stalled the study's release after disputing that India's true fatality count was eight times higher than official figures.

The conclusion matches similar figures by the Lancet last month and a February study in the journal Science that calculated a COVID death toll of at least 3.2 million. But India's health ministry said in a weekend statement that the WHO's mathematical modelling of the pandemic was "questionable" and "statistically unproven".

Several concerns were raised to the global health body over the report, including what the ministry said was a "peculiar" assumption of a relationship between lower temperatures and monthly deaths. India had shared its misgivings through several formal communications and meetings since last November, according to the ministry.

"A satisfactory response is yet to be received from WHO," it added. The WHO was not immediately available for comment. Indian officials have previously disputed the methodology behind the Lancet and Science studies that also found vastly higher death tolls. Its official figures show 520,000 COVID deaths nationally, which still accounts for the world's largest single-country toll after the United States and Brazil.

India was battered by a devastating COVID outbreak last year that saw thousands of people dying each day at its peak, overwhelming hospitals and crematoriums. — AFP

International

10,000 soldiers in South Africa flood relief effort

Death toll stands at 443, hopes diminish of finding more survivors

DURBAN: A week after deadly storms started lashing South Africa's east coast, the army said Monday 10,000 troops were on the ground to help restore key services and aid the search for 63 people who remain missing. The death toll stands at 443, but with each passing day, hopes diminish of finding more survivors.

"The tragedy currently unfolding in our province is one of the worst natural disasters in the recorded history of our country," KwaZulu-Natal provincial government said. Funerals were being held across the city of Durban, which bore the brunt of the storms, as grim tales of the catastrophe continued to emerge.



Streets remain slathered with mud

One woman was found dead with her three grandchildren after their car was washed away, while rescuers reported finding bodies washed into dams, local media reported. Swathes of eThekweni, the municipality that includes Durban, remain without power or water, and the province said it could take time before services are restored.

"There are areas that have suffered extensive damage which will take longer to repair," it said in a statement. Many streets remain slathered with mud, although the main roads have been cleared enough to allow water tankers to the hardest-hit areas.

But eThekweni deputy mayor Philani Mavundla said in a television interview that 80 percent of the city's water works were down, making it difficult to even fill the tankers. Some of the troops include plumbers and electricians who joined the mammoth task of trying to get life back to normal.

Soldiers are also providing field accommodation and water purification systems, the army said. The deadliest



DURBAN: A member South African Police Services (SAPS) Search and Rescue Unit guide their sniffer dog during 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

storm on record dumped apocalyptic levels of rain on Durban and surrounding areas of KwaZulu-Natal.

Some 40,000 people were left homeless and more than 550 schools and nearly 60 health care facilities have been damaged, according to government tallies. South Africa is winding down a long weekend for the Easter holidays. Many children are due to return to school on Tuesday, but authorities warned that 271,000 students may not be able to attend due to damaged schools.

The government has announced an immediate one billion rand (\$68 million) in emergency relief. Nearly three dozen search teams were deployed across the region Monday, said coordinator Dave Steyn. "The rescue operations have stopped. It's now more of a search and recovery," he told AFP.

Shock

Blue skies finally reappeared Monday, giving hope that the rains have at last subsided. But the normally azure waters at Durban's famed beaches have been turned a muddy brown by the mountains of earth and debris washed to the shore.

The intensity of the floods took South Africa, the most economically advanced African country, by surprise. While the southeastern region has suffered some flooding before, the devastation has never been so severe. South Africans have previously watched similar tragedies hit neighbouring countries such as cyclone-prone Mozambique. The country is still struggling to recover from the COVID pandemic and deadly riots last year that killed more than 350 people, mostly in the now flood-struck southeastern region. — AFP

Several dozen hurt in days of unrest in Sweden

STOCKHOLM: Several days of unrest in Sweden, sparked by a far-right group's plans to burn Korans, have injured several dozen people, police said on Monday, calling for more resources to deal with the violence. Protests have turned violent in several cities since Thursday, leaving 26 police officers and 14 civilians injured, police said at a press conference on Monday. The unrest has been sparked by the leader of the anti-immigration and anti-Islam group Hard Line, the Danish-Swedish politician Rasmus Paludan who is aiming to drum up support

ahead of September elections.

Paludan—who intends to stand in the September poll but does not yet have the necessary signatures to secure his candidacy—has gone on a declared "tour" of Sweden, visiting cities and towns with large Muslim populations with the intent of burning copies of the Muslim holy book Koran as the faithful mark the holy month of Ramadan. Clashes with police have erupted during protests against the group since Thursday evening, starting in the cities Linköping and Norrköping. They spread to the city of Malmö, where a school was set alight during a second night of unrest Saturday-Sunday.

"Criminals have profited from the situation to show violence toward society, without any link to the demonstrations," national police chief Anders Thornberg said at a press conference on Monday. "There are too few of us. We have grown, but we have



NORRKÖPING, Sweden: Riot police pass a barricade to enter a shopping center during rioting in Norrköping, Sweden. — AFP

not grown at the same pace as the problems at the heart of society," he said, asking for more resources for the police.

As protesters burned cars and lobbed rocks at the police in Sunday clashes, offi-

cers responded, head of police special forces Jonas Hysing said. "Some 200 participants were violent and the police had to respond with arms in legitimate self-defence," he said. — AFP

Kuwait protesters denounce...

Continued from Page 1

We reject normalization with Zionist entity. Kuwait's position is firm and continues to support the Palestinian cause," he noted.

Protester Fahad Al-Wazeqi, a teacher, told Kuwait Times that the official position of Kuwait is honorable and the message is clear, loud, and supportive. "All segments of Kuwait are represented

here today at Al-Erada Square to send a message to the Palestinian people that we are with them. Kuwait is as it was and will remain - and we will continue to reject normalization."

Another protester Amal Shehab, told Kuwait Times that she hates double standards in cases of Ukraine and Palestine, adding that 70 years of Zionist violations continue - and no one has called for humanitarian actions just like they did in the case of Ukraine. "We will not tolerate the Zionist provocation in the Al-Aqsa Mosque and we will not accept its continuation," she said. The Zionist forces attacked the mosque - wounding and detaining several Palestinians who were performing the dawn prayers.

allowed such circumstances for our ultimate benefit. The Quran reminds us that "perhaps you dislike something and it is good for you and perhaps you like something and it is bad for you. And God knows, while you know not" (2:216). We must trust in God and His knowledge of the "big picture."

Both kinds of patience - making the effort to follow to the way of life God envisions for us, and then truly submitting to God and His management of our lives - should have the characteristic of beauty. The Quran describes real patience as beautiful. "Therefore, be patient with beautiful patience" (70:5). Beautiful patience is one of contentment and absolute conviction of God's goodness and care. In Ramadan, for example, patience means being cheerful and productive throughout the month, and anticipating God's pleasure, forgiveness and generous rewards.

The Quran encourages us to be patient: "Indeed, mankind is in loss, except those who believe and do righteous deeds, and exhort one another to uphold truth and exhort one another to persevere with patience." (103:2-3) "Those who show patience and work righteousness - for them is forgiveness and a great reward" (11:11). "So persevere in patience, for the Promise of God is true." (40:77) What a greater way to show patience than Ramadan!

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.

Russia strikes hit western...

Continued from Page 1

roof of a car repair shop in the northwest of the city as air raid sirens wailed. "Fires were set off as a result of the strikes. They are still being put out. The facilities were severely damaged," Lviv regional governor Maksym Kozitsky said on social media.

Lviv has largely been spared the Russian bombardment that has rained down on other parts of the country since Russia invaded on February 24. The city and its surroundings have instead become a relatively safe haven for those seeking to escape the fighting further east. "Today we understood clearly that we don't have any safe places in Ukraine. It's very dangerous," a bank employee who gave her name as Natalia told AFP after the strikes.

In the south, Russia continued its push to capture the besieged port city of Mariupol where the last remaining Ukrainian forces prepared for a final stand. Ukraine has pledged to fight on and defend the strategic city, defying a Russian ultimatum for remaining fighters inside the encircled Azovstal steel plant to lay down their arms and surrender.

US death penalty: Firing squad or...

Continued from Page 1

A firing squad has been used only three times in the United States - all in the western state of Utah - since 1976, when the US Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment.

There have been three executions in the United States this year and there were 11 in 2021, down from 17 in 2020. Only one of the executions in 2021 was of a woman and of the more than 1,540 people executed in the United States since 1976, only 17 have been women. Melissa Lucio, 53, could be the 18th. Lucio, a Mexican-American mother of 14 children, is scheduled to be executed by lethal injection in Texas on April 27 for the 2007 death of her two-year-old daughter, Mariah. Lucio claims a confession was coerced by police during a five-hour interrogation and that the toddler's death was actually caused by an accidental fall down a staircase.

Her case has been championed by the Innocence Project, which fights for the wrongly convicted, and reality TV star Kim Kardashian, who has urged Texas Governor Greg Abbott to grant clemency for Lucio. "The state extracted an unreliable 'confession' and

Zionist entity's govt faces new split amid Jerusalem violence

JERUSALEM: Zionist entity's fractious governing coalition faced a new split on Sunday when Arab-Zionist party Raam "suspended" its membership, after violence around a flashpoint Jerusalem holy site that wounded 170 people over the weekend. The government—an ideologically disparate mix of left-wing, hardline Jewish nationalist and religious parties, as well as Raam—had already lost its razor-thin majority this month when a religious Jewish member quit in a dispute over leavened bread distribution at hospitals.

Since then, days of violence around Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, sacred to both Muslims and Jews, put Raam under pressure to quit too. "If the government continues its steps against the people of Jerusalem... we will resign as a bloc," Raam said in a statement. The declaration came hours after more than 20 Palestinians and Zionists were wounded in incidents in and around the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount. The latest clashes take the number of wounded since Friday to more than 170, at a tense time when the Jewish Passover festival coincides with the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

They also follow deadly violence in Zionist entity and the occupied West Bank starting in late March, in which 36 people have been killed. Early on Sunday morning, police said "hundreds" of Palestinian demonstrators inside the mosque compound started gathering piles of stones, shortly before the arrival of Jewish visitors.

Jews are allowed to visit but not to pray at the site, the holiest place in Judaism and third-holiest in Islam. Zionist police said its forces had entered the compound in order to "remove" the demonstrators and "re-establish order". The Palestinian Red Crescent said 19 Palestinians were injured, including at least five who were hospitalised. It said some had been wounded with rubber-coated steel bullets. An AFP team near the entrance to the compound early Sunday morning saw Jewish worshippers leaving the site, barefoot for religious reasons, and protected by heavily armed police. Outside the Old City, which lies in Zionist-annexed east Jerusalem, Palestinian youths threw rocks at passing buses, smashing their windows, resulting in seven people being treated for light wounds, Shaare Zedek hospital said.

The police said they had arrested 18 Palestinians, and Public Security Minister Omer Bar-Lev said Zionist entity would "act strongly against anyone who dares to use terrorism against citizens". Bennett had said that the security forces "continue to receive a free hand... for any action that will provide security to the citizens of Zionist entity", while stressing every effort should be made to allow members of all religions to worship in Jerusalem. — AFP

Russian state TV on Monday broadcast a video of what it described as "Britons" captured fighting for Ukraine and demanding that Prime Minister Boris Johnson negotiate their release. The two haggard-looking men asked to be exchanged for Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian tycoon close to President Vladimir Putin, who was recently arrested in the pro-Western country. Ukraine then aired its own video featuring Medvedchuk calling for his exchange in return for an evacuation of civilians and troops from Mariupol.

"I want to ask Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to exchange me for Ukrainian defenders and residents of Mariupol," he said in the video published by Kyiv's security services, wearing black clothes and looking directly into the camera. Mariupol has become a symbol of Ukraine's unexpectedly fierce resistance since Russian troops invaded the former Soviet state on February 24.

While several large cities were under siege, according to Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, not one - with the exception of Kherson in the south - had fallen, and more than 900 towns and cities had been re-captured. Capturing Mariupol would allow Russia to have a land bridge between the Crimea peninsula, which it annexed in 2014, and the two Moscow-backed separatist statelets in Ukraine's east. — AFP

used false scientific evidence to convict Melissa Lucio of a crime she did not commit and in fact never occurred," said Vanessa Potkin, an attorney for Lucio. "What we know today is this: Mariah died from medical complications after an accidental fall. She was not murdered." Also scheduled to be executed in Texas in the coming days is Carl Wayne Buntion, who was sentenced to death in 1991 for the murder of a Houston police officer. Buntion, who does not dispute his guilt, is scheduled to die by lethal injection on April 21. At 78, he is the oldest man on Death Row in Texas and his lawyers have argued that executing him now - over 30 years after the crime - would constitute "cruel and unusual punishment."

Texas law also requires it be established that Buntion would "likely harm others if he is not executed," his lawyers said. Buntion, they said, poses no danger to anyone and suffers from multiple ailments including arthritis, vertigo, hepatitis, sciatic nerve pain and cirrhosis. "Mr Buntion is a frail, elderly man," his lawyers said in a petition to the Texas Board of Pardons and Parole, "and will not be a threat to anyone in prison if his sentence is reduced to a lesser penalty."

Buntion has also been in solitary confinement for the past 20 years, restricted to his cell for 23 hours a day. "When someone's sentenced to death, the jury isn't agreeing to sentence them to 30, 40, 50 years of solitary confinement and then death," Burke Butler, executive director of the Texas Defender Service, told AFP. — AFP

Lessons of Ramadan...

Continued from Page 1

be rewarded with the highest place in heaven, because of their patient constancy." (25:75) "Those who believe in the unseen, establish prayer and spend out of what We have provided for them, and who believe in what has been revealed to you [Muhammad (PBUH)] and what was revealed before you, and of the Hereafter they are certain - those are upon guidance from their Lord and it is those who are the successful" (2:2-5).

The patience required for Paradise needs a level of commitment and effort beyond the everyday patience of the common man. The second kind of patience required for Paradise is reactive, and it is demonstrated by our reaction to things outside of our control, such as illness, injury, loss, calamity and all circumstances related to our physical vulnerability and mortality.

The Quran guarantees us that "And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and crops, but give good tidings to the patient who, when disaster strikes them, say, 'Indeed, we belong to God, and indeed to Him we are returning'" (2:155-156). Our reaction in adverse circumstances beyond our control should be to turn our thoughts to God, who describes Himself as wise, merciful and caring. We should not disagree or be dissatisfied with what He does.

As the Quran reminds us, "He cannot be questioned as to what He does, while they will be questioned" (21:23). Instead, we should believe that God

International

Sri Lanka's embattled leader trims cabinet of relatives

Opposition parties rebuff invitations to join a unity government

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's embattled leader dropped two of his brothers and a nephew from his cabinet Monday, following public anger over the ruling family's mismanagement of a crippling economic crisis and calls for his resignation. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has presided over the island nation's most painful downturn in memory and his government is preparing for imminent bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund.

Dozens of lawmakers have turned against the administration and opposition parties have rebuffed invitations to join a unity government from the president, who insists he will remain in office to guide Sri Lanka through the crisis. Huge protests have nonetheless demanded Rajapaksa stand down, including tens of thousands of people camped outside his seafaring office for more than a week.

The new cabinet retains Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, Gotabaya's older brother and the head of Sri Lanka's ruling clan, while leaving out eldest sibling Chamal and younger brother Basil, the former finance minister. Mahinda's eldest son Namal, who ran the sports ministry and had been touted as a future leader before the crisis, was also dropped.

The 21-member cabinet is seven people fewer than its predecessor, which resigned en masse two weeks ago in response to public outrage over nepotism and corruption. Ministers are entitled to several

SUVs, a large contingent of bodyguards and unlimited fuel, as well as state housing and entertainment allowances.

New finance minister Ali Sabry led a delegation to Washington over the weekend to open talks with the International Monetary Fund from Tuesday, officials said. Sri Lanka is seeking three to four billion dollars from the IMF to overcome its balance-of-payments crisis and boost depleted reserves.

Fuel costs jump again

Alongside the acute shortages, Sri Lanka is also facing record inflation and lengthy electricity blackouts, as the government has run out of foreign currency to import fuel. Lanka IOC, a petrol retailer which accounts for a third of the local market, announced yet another steep hike in fuel costs on Monday to account for the collapse in value of the local currency.

The cost of diesel, the fuel most commonly used for public transport, has risen by 138 percent since the start of the year while petrol prices have nearly doubled. The government last week announced a default on Sri Lanka's \$51 billion foreign debt and the Colombo Stock Exchange has suspended trading to prevent an anticipated market collapse.

Rajapaksa's parliamentary majority has been thrown into question after former allies deserted the ruling coalition. The opposition has said it will

Lengthy electricity blackouts



COLOMBO: People display placards during an ongoing anti-government demonstration near the president's office in Colombo, demanding President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation over the country's crippling economic crisis. —AFP

attempt to topple the government through a no-confidence vote in the coming weeks. Monday marked the tenth straight day of protests outside Rajapaksa's office, with demonstrators establishing a protest camp that they say will continue until the

leader stands aside.

Activists shone digital projections on the office denouncing corruption and demanding the president "go home", prompting police to hold up large screens to block the light beams. —AFP

Presidential candidates refuse to back Robredo in Philippine race

MANILA: Three rivals of Philippine presidential candidate Leni Robredo refused to back her campaign Sunday, dousing speculation they would withdraw from the race to improve her chances of defeating the son of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Voter surveys show Robredo is a distant second behind Marcos Jr, but a recent bump in the polls and huge crowds at her rallies have raised hopes among her fervent fans that the campaign is gaining traction.

There has been speculation that worse performing candidates were considering pulling out and endorsing Robredo—the incumbent vice president and only woman in the race—to ensure Marcos Jr was defeated in the May 9 elections.

The latest Pulse Asia Research survey showed Robredo on 24 percent with Marcos Jr on 56 percent. But in a vitriolic press conference on Sunday, Francisco Domagoso, Panfilo Lacson and Norberto Gonzales—who are on single digits or less—accused Robredo of trying to get them to withdraw and strip them of support.

"Each of us will continue with our respective presidential campaigns," Domagoso, a celebrity mayor, told reporters at a luxury hotel in Manila. "I'm calling for Leni to withdraw because whatever you're doing is not effective against Marcos." Analysts said it was not clear how many votes

Robredo would gain from their exit in the raucous democracy where voter decisions were driven by personality rather than ideology.

But their backing would have energised her campaign, said Cleve Arguelles, an assistant lecturer in political science at De La Salle University in Manila. "It would send a really strong signal to the other campaign that she has gained a new momentum," he told AFP.

'Bluster and falsehood'

There are no runoffs in Philippine presidential elections, with the victor only required to win more votes than everyone else. Lacson accused Robredo of "lying", claiming she had previously told him that she would not run for president. He also alleged she had exaggerated the crowd size at a recent rally.

"You deceive once, you deceive twice, you will deceive all the time," he said. Domagoso, the top second preference for president in the Pulse Asia survey, said the polls were "polluted" and questioned their accuracy. The candidates said rival Manny Pacquiao, who was not at the gathering, was also on board with their decision.

A member of Pacquiao's team tweeted the boxing legend would "never" quit the presidential contest. Robredo's spokesman Barry Gutierrez accused the three candidates of "theatrics" and asserting



MAKATI: (L-R) Philippine presidential candidates Manila City Mayor Francisco Domagoso, former defence secretary Norberto Gonzales, and senator Panfilo Lacson show a signed copy of their joint statement during a press conference in Makati City, suburban Manila. —AFP

their positions through "bluster and falsehood". He did not respond to AFP's question about whether Robredo's team had asked the candidates to pull out. Political analyst Tony La Vina said their decision to stay the course could actually help Robredo.

"They take more votes away from Marcos than they do from Robredo," he told AFP. More than 18,000 posts are up for grabs in the national elections, from president all the way down to town councillor. Robredo, who narrowly defeated Marcos Jr in the 2016 vice-presidential race, reluctantly entered the contest following pressure from supporters and opposition groups. —AFP

N Korea must return to 'diplomatic path'

SEOUL: North Korea must return to a "diplomatic path", the top US envoy for the country said Monday, following Pyongyang's blitz of missile launches and growing signs it is resuming nuclear testing. North Korea has carried out more than a dozen weapons tests so far this year, the latest one over the weekend—a short-range test that state media claimed would enhance the "efficiency in the operation of tactical nukes".

US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim arrived in Seoul for a five-day visit Monday and met his South Korean counterpart Noh Kyu-duk. After talks, the two envoys jointly condemned "recent escalatory actions" by Pyongyang, including what they said were "at least three" launches of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

"We agreed on the need for a strong response to the destabilising behaviour we have been from the DPRK," Kim told reporters, using the acronym

for North Korea's official name. "We also discussed how to respond to future DPRK actions, including a possible nuclear test," he added. Kim reiterated that the United States has offered to meet Pyongyang "anywhere without any preconditions", saying that Washington has not "closed the door on diplomacy".

"I once again call on Pyongyang to pursue a diplomatic path with us," Kim said. "I want to make clear that we have no hostile intent towards the DPRK." Pyongyang has so far rebuffed offers of talks, blaming Washington's hostile policies.

Kim's visit comes as Seoul and Washington kicked off a nine-day annual joint military drill. Such exercises have always infuriated Pyongyang, which calls them a rehearsal for war. The allies regularly stage military exercises, but they have been scaled back in recent years as outgoing President Moon Jae-in made efforts to facilitate nuclear talks with North Korea.

"This training is a defensive command post training using computer simulation, and there is no real military manoeuvre training," Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said Sunday. North Korea had paused long-range and nuclear tests while leader Kim Jong Un met then-US president Donald Trump for a bout of doomed diplomacy, which collapsed in 2019. Talks have since stalled.

Australian citizens, who they understood were being held over alleged past association with the Islamic State group. "Some of the women may have been coerced or trafficked into Syria," they wrote.

The experts said the complexity of the situation could not justify "the complete lack of steps" taken by Canberra to remedy the "sheer obliteration of the rights of Australian citizens resulting from their arbitrary deprivation of liberty".

Sydney man Kamalle Dabboussy, whose daughter Mariam and her three children are among those in the Roj camp, told AFP on Monday that the UN experts' letter "reiterates and underscores what we have been telling the government for years".

He said the families back in Australia continue to get sporadic, "gut wrenching" messages from their relatives in the Syrian camps. The families had heard the children in the camps were malnourished and feared for their



SEOUL: Anti-war activists hold peace signs during a protest against joint military exercises between South Korea and the United States, near the presidential Blue House in Seoul on April 18, 2022. —AFP

But last month Pyongyang test-fired an ICBM at full range for the first time since 2017. Recent signs of new activity at North Korea's key nuclear testing site have also raised concerns over the possible resumption of nuclear testing.

South Korean officials have said Pyongyang could 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

welfare, Dabboussy said.

"The situation is dire both from a physical and mental health perspective," he said. The Australian government "continues to play politics with women and children's lives" by not repatriating them, he said.

Case by case

Australia's foreign minister Marise Payne said Sunday the government was discussing the issue, but she would not give information on repatriation or the nature of security concerns about citizens in Syria. The children were "Australians who have found themselves in this position because their parents took themselves to those war zones", she told the national broadcaster ABC.

Australia's representative to the UN Amanda Gorely said in a response to the experts' letter that repatriation from Syria was considered on a case-by-case basis

Shanghai reports first COVID deaths since lockdown

SHANGHAI: China said Monday that just three people have died from COVID-19 in Shanghai since a gruelling lockdown began last month, despite recording hundreds of thousands of cases of the fast-spreading Omicron variant in the eastern megacity. Authorities said the first deaths from China's biggest outbreak since the virus wave in Wuhan over two years ago were three people aged 89 to 91, all of whom had underlying health issues and had not received COVID vaccines.

Beijing insists that its zero-COVID policy of hard lockdowns, mass testing and lengthy quarantines has averted fatalities and the public health crises that have engulfed much of the rest of the world. But some have cast doubt on official figures in a nation with low vaccination rates among its vast elderly population. Shanghai health officials noted Sunday that less than two-thirds of residents over 60 had received two COVID jobs and less than 40 percent had received a booster.

Unverified social media posts have also claimed unreported deaths—typically before being scrubbed from the internet. Hong Kong, meanwhile, has attributed nearly 9,000 deaths to COVID-19 since Omicron first surged there in January.

The three reported victims in Shanghai "deteriorated into severe cases after going into hospital", according to a government account, with city health official Wu Qianyu telling a Monday press conference that "underlying disease" was the direct cause of death. The eastern business hub has simmered under lockdowns since March, with many of its 25 million residents confined to their homes as daily caseloads have topped 25,000—a modest figure by global standards but virtually unheard of in China.

Many inhabitants have flooded social media with complaints of food shortages, spartan quarantine conditions and heavy-handed enforcement, circulating footage of rare protests faster than government censors can delete them. But officials have vowed to continue isolating anyone who tests positive regardless of whether they show signs of the disease—with asymptomatic infections accounting for nearly 90 percent of the more than 22,000 new local cases on Monday.

China last reported new COVID-19 deaths on March 19—two people in the northeastern rust-belt province of Jilin—the first such acknowledged deaths in more than a year. —AFP

and noted Canberra had brought home all known unaccompanied minors from Syria in 2019.

The Australian government's long-held view was that its human rights obligations do not extend to the conditions in the camps in northeast Syria, she said. Mal Tinkler, acting chief executive of Save the Children Australia, said the organisation "fears it is only a matter of time before an Australian child dies if they're left to languish in Syria".

He said the recent repatriation of German, Swedish and Dutch citizens by their governments showed it was possible. In 2019, at least 11 women in Syrian camps told the Australian government they would consent to strict terrorism control orders if they were able to return to Australia with their children. These orders would limit their movement and enforce a curfew and reporting requirements. The offer was not pursued by the government. —AFP

UN experts ask Australia to repatriate citizens

SYDNEY: United Nations human rights experts have asked the Australian government to repatriate 46 of its citizens from detention camps in Syria, raising "deepest disquiet" that women and children are living in squalor.

In a joint letter made public Sunday, 10 UN special rapporteurs said bringing this group—which includes 30 children, some as young as two years old—home to Australia was "the only legal and humane response".

The UN experts described the situation in the Al-Hol and Roj camps as "uncertain and sordid" for

Business

TUESDAY, APRIL 19, 2022

Key Libyan oil port for exports closed amid shutdown 'wave'

Major oil fields close operations after staff blocked from working

TRIPOLI: Libya's National Oil Corporation announced Monday the closure of operations in major oil fields after staff in the key export terminal of Zueitina were blocked from working. "The National Oil Corporation is obliged to declare a state of force majeure on the oil port of Zueitina, including all fields and producing stations associated with this port and shipping facilities until further notice," NOC chief Mustafa Sanalla said in a statement.

Declaring force majeure is a legal move allowing parties to free themselves from contractual obligations when factors such as fighting or natural disasters make meeting them impossible.

Libya is seeking to extricate itself from a decade of chaos and conflict that followed the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in a 2011 NATO-backed uprising. "These interruptions were caused by the entry of a group of individuals into the port of Zueitina," the firm said in a statement, adding that the group "prevented workers" from continuing exports.

Zueitina is one of the four oil terminals in the so-called "Oil Crescent" region, and its closures will prevent Libya from exporting almost a quarter of its 1.2 million barrels per day of production. Sanalla added it was the "start of a painful wave of closures" in the North African nation at a time of an "oil and gas price boom". The NOC is one of the few institutions in the troubled country to have stayed in one piece. Oil revenues are vital to the economy, with Libya sitting on Africa's largest known reserves.

Libya has recently once again found itself with two rival governments after the eastern-based parlia-

ment in February appointed a new prime minister in a direct challenge to the UN-brokered government in the capital Tripoli, in the west. The latest in a long line of standoffs pits Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah's interim government in Tripoli against that of former interior minister Fathi Bashagha, who was chosen by parliament.

The groups blocking the oil port are seen as favoring the eastern camp, and are demanding "a fair distribution" of income and the transfer of power to Bashagha. Sanalla, the NOC's chief, repeated calls for the "neutrality" of the oil sector to be protected, "avoiding the political conflicts in the country".

Pumping of crude was stopped in the oil fields of Abuatufol, Al-Intisar, Anakhla and Nafura, all of which ship their oil through Zueitina, the firm added. NOC said that after the "forced closure" of the Al-Fil field on Saturday night, workers of several companies were "forced" into a shutdown of production at several sites. "On Saturday... the Al-Fil field was subjected to arbitrary closure attempts, due to the entry of a group of individuals and the prevention of the field's workers from continuing production," the NOC said on Facebook.

It added that the field was shut down on Sunday-marking the second closure in a matter of weeks—"making it impossible for the NOC to implement its contractual obligations". The firm said it "is obliged to declare a state of force majeure" and would no longer be able to provide crude to the Mellitah complex on the country's northwestern coast. Declaring force majeure is a legal move allowing parties to free them-



selves from contractual obligations when factors such as fighting or natural disasters make meeting them impossible. According to Libya's state news agency, the closure comes after a group of individuals declared that they were halting production "until a government appointed by parliament takes office in the capital".

Libya has recently once again found itself with two rival governments after the eastern-based parlia-

ment in February appointed a new prime minister in a direct challenge to the UN-brokered government in Tripoli. The move underlines the extent of divisions in the war-wracked country as observers fear a renewed descent into violence. Al-Fil, some 750 kilometers southwest of Tripoli, is jointly managed by the NOC and Italian energy giant ENI and produces around 70,000 barrels of oil per day. — AFP

HEISCO wins \$25.6m tender for US Army

KUWAIT: The Heavy Engineering Industries and Shipbuilding Company (HEISCO) declared on Monday it received a letter from the American Army affirming that it won a tender for marine constructions works at a value of KD 7.33 million (\$25.6 million). The company said in a website statement that

the qualification for the tender would be officially declared at a later date.

It was established in 1974 and was listed at the bourse in 1984. With a capital amounting to KD 22 million (\$74.8 million), the company builds, repairs ships and executes various marine operations. — KUNA

Sri Lanka fuel prices up ahead of IMF talks

COLOMBO: A key fuel retailer in Sri Lanka raised prices by up to 35 percent on Monday as the cash-strapped government was set to open crucial bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund. Sri Lanka is in the grip of its worst economic crisis since independence from Britain in 1948. It has led to shortages of fuel, food and essential medicines.

Lanka IOC, a fuel retailer which accounts for a third of the local market, said it raised the diesel price by 75 rupees to 327 a litre while petrol was increased by 35 rupees to 367 rupees (\$1.20).

The state-run Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, which accounts for two-thirds of the market and imposed fuel rationing last week, did not immediately raise its prices, but most of its pumping stations were without fuel. Lanka IOC, a local unit of the Indian Oil Corporation, said the sharp depreciation of the local currency forced it

to carry out the latest revision, three weeks after a 20 percent hike.

Since the start of the year, petrol prices have increased by 90 percent while diesel—commonly used for public transport—has gone up by 138 percent.

"The rupee devaluation by more than 60 percent during last one month compelled Lanka IOC to again increase its retail selling prices with effect from today," the company said.

The increase came as Sri Lanka's new finance minister Ali Sabry led a delegation to Washington seeking between \$3 billion and \$4 billion from the IMF to overcome the balance-of-payments crisis and boost depleted reserves. The government last week announced a sovereign default on its huge foreign debt and the Colombo Stock Exchange announced trading would be halted for five days from Monday amid fears of a market collapse. Sri Lanka was in a deep economic crisis when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, reducing foreign-worker remittances and crippling the lucrative tourism sector—a key source of dollars for the economy. The government imposed a broad import ban in March 2020 to save foreign currency. It is now facing record inflation. — AFP



COLOMBO: A man walks inside Colombo Stock Exchange (CSE) in Colombo on April 18, 2022. — AFP

Boursa Kuwait edges lower

KUWAIT: Boursa Kuwait shares edged lower on Monday, closing 69.19 points lower at 8232.71, down 0.83 percent. A total of 203.15 million shares were traded through 13,431 cash transactions worth KD 70.2 million (about \$245.7 million).

The main market index fell 61.50 points to 44,647.4, down 0.94 percent from 109 million shares in 5,717 cash transactions worth KD 18.4 million (about \$64.4 million). The first market index fell 73.56 points to 9,094.66 points, down 0.80 percent from 94 million shares in 7,714 trades worth KD 51.8 million (about \$181.3 million).

The Main Index (Main 50) fell 87.03 points to 6,645.30, down 1.29 percent from 91.4 million shares in 3,761 cash transactions worth KD 13.3 million (about \$46.5 million).

Meanwhile, stock markets across the Gulf countries were mixed on Monday as crude prices remained steady. Dubai's main share index remained flat, after jump-



ing 1.7 percent in the previous week following Dubai Electricity and Water Authority's (DEWA) market debut. Gains in the real estate sector were offset by losses in financials. Abu Dhabi index slipped 0.3 percent while Qatar's benchmark index shed 0.2 percent, extending losses on profit-taking. Saudi Arabia's benchmark index was also flat.

Oil prices were stable on Monday as concerns over slowing demand in China forced investors to book profits on gains

made earlier in the day on worries over tight supply and the escalating crisis in Ukraine.

Brent crude fell 19 cents, or 0.2 percent, to \$111.51 a barrel, sliding from the highest since March 30 of \$113.80 hit earlier in the session. US West Texas Intermediate was down 19 cents, or 0.2 percent, at \$106.76. Authorities in Ukraine's Western and Southern regions of Lviv and Dnipropetrovsk reported multiple explosions on Monday. — Agencies

High debt could slow countries' recoveries: IMF

NEW YORK: Debt accumulated by businesses and individuals worldwide could slow economic recoveries from the pandemic crisis, the IMF warned Monday.

Governments took exceptional measures to support their economies as COVID-19 spread two years ago, including rolling out debt repayment suspensions or offering large-scale loans. But these programs resulted in higher debt levels for some sectors, including those most disrupted by the virus, like tourism and restaurants, as well as low income households, the Washington-based crisis lender said.

In a chapter of its World Economic Outlook, the IMF said the debt burden could hold growth back in developed countries by 0.9 percent and in emerging markets by 1.3 percent over the next three years.

"Financially constrained households and vulnerable firms, which have grown in number and proportion during the COVID-19 pandemic, are expected to cut spending by more, especially in countries where the insolvency framework is inefficient and fiscal space limited," the lender said. To avoid exacerbating problems, government should "calibrate the pace" of phasing out aid and spending programs.

"Where the recovery is well underway and balance sheets are in good shape, fiscal support can be reduced faster, facilit-

tating the work of central banks," the IMF said. For struggling sectors, governments could offer aid to prevent bankruptcies, or provide incentives for restructuring, rather than liquidation.

"To lessen the burden on public finances, temporary higher taxes on excess profits could be envisaged. This would help claw back some of the transfers to firms that did not need them," the lender said.

The IMF had planned to raise at least \$45 billion for a new trust to help "low-income and vulnerable middle-income countries" cope with protracted challenges like pandemics and climate change. The Washington-based crisis lender's Resilience and Sustainability Trust (RST) will come into effect May 1, and is in addition to a \$650 billion boost to reserve assets called Special Drawing Rights (SDR) allocated earlier this year.

"As the world is confronting consecutive global shocks, we must not lose sight of the critical actions needed today to ensure longer-term resilience and sustainability," Georgieva said in a statement announcing the new trust. She added that the goal of the trust is to redistribute funds from wealthier countries to more vulnerable ones as members look to support global economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Around three-quarters of the IMF's 190 members will be eligible to borrow from the new tool, it estimates. First proposed last year, the RST will offer extended repayment periods, with a 20-year maturity and 10-year grace period. In order to access the money, member countries will need "a package of high-quality policy measures," have sustainable debt and

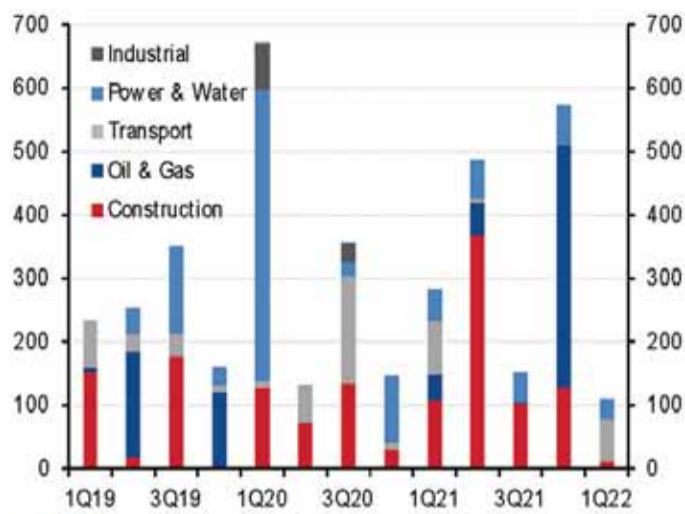


GLASGOW: In this file photo taken on November 03, 2021 IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva speaks during a panel discussion at the COP26 UN Climate Summit in Glasgow. — AFP

"adequate capacity to repay," the IMF said. It added that the trust will require close collaboration with the World Bank and other international financial institutions. "The RST will amplify the impact of the US\$650 billion SDR allocation implemented last year by channeling resources from economically stronger members to countries where the needs are greatest," said Georgieva. The increase was the biggest ever for SDRs, which are international reserve assets that aid governments in protecting their financial reserves against global currency fluctuations and also help the IMF calculate loans and interest rates. — AFP

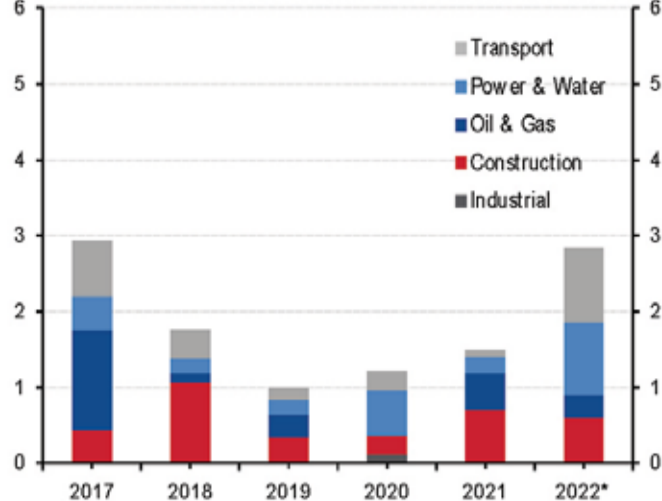
Business

Chart 1: Project awards (KD million)



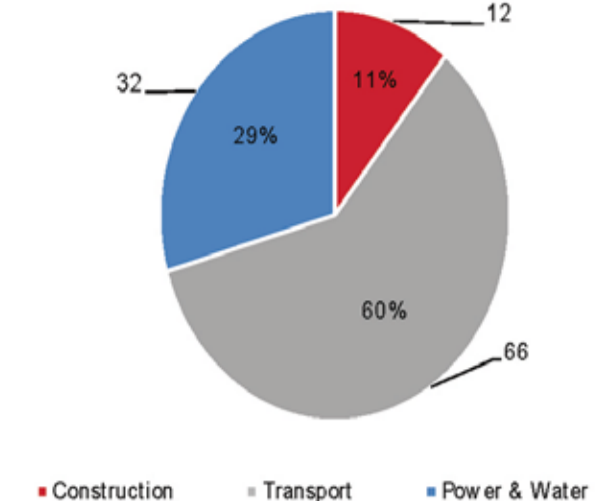
Source: MEED Projects; updated on 5 April 2022

Chart 2: Project awards (annual) (KD billion)



Source: MEED Projects, *as of 5 April 2022, includes planned projects

Chart 3: 1Q22 project awards by sector (KD million)



Source: MEED Projects, updated on 5 April 2022

NBK Economic Report

Kuwait's project activity eases in 1Q22, seen picking up in 2Q22

Total value of project awards came to just KD 110 million in 1Q22

KUWAIT: The pace of project awards slowed significantly in 1Q22 compared to 4Q21, according to MEED projects. The total value of project awards came to just KD110 million, falling around 81 percent q/q. This figure falls substantially short of the KD1.3 billion that was expected, likely due to the continued slow approvals process and cost rationalization as well as on-going supply chain issues that have raised the costs of materials and labor. Last year saw about KD1.5 billion in projects awarded in the full year.

Project awards in 1Q22 stemmed mainly from the transport sector, with KD 66 million approved (60 percent of total project awards). The value of contracts awarded in the power and water sectors was the next highest at KD32 million (29 percent of awards).

Activity in the construction sector dropped nearly

90 percent q/q, with only KD12 million worth of projects awarded. This was mainly Touristic Enterprise Company's (TEC) development of the New Messila Beach project.

Transport sector awards recovered in 1Q22, after several quarters of relatively subdued activity. The total value of contract awards came in at KD 66 million, the highest in a year. This was mainly due to the signing off of KPA's Shuaiba Port Upgrade and Expansion (KD18mn) project and the Rehabilitation of Berths in Shuwaikh Port (KD 48 million) project.

Project activity in the power and water sectors retreated again in 1Q22, with the value of awards falling 45 percent q/q to KD 32 million. Two small-scale projects were awarded in the previous quarter:

MEW's Supply & Installation of 132kV OHL to Sheikh Salem Al-Sabah Camp (KD27 million) and PAF's Water Cooling Drainage Network (KD5.4 million).

No oil and gas projects were awarded in 1Q22. This is in marked contrast to 4Q21 when KD 383 million worth of contracts were signed (70 percent of total).

Looking ahead to the rest of the year, project activity could in theory accelerate amid greater system liquidity and business confidence, though the government's recent resignation has to be seen as a setback. MEED Projects' estimate for the year of KD 3 billion worth of awards is looking doubtful.

The expected pipeline of awards include KD 986 million worth of transportation projects, the largest of which are the PAHW's South Sabah Al-Ahmed Township (KD 300 million) and MPW's Regional

South Road (KD130 million) projects, expected in 3Q22. KD 453 million worth of construction sector awards are expected, including two larger scale project awards due in 4Q22. In the power and water sectors, around KD 907 million is forecast, the largest of which are the MPW's Wastewater Treatment Plant (KD173.4 million) and the Upgrade & Development of Doha Western Power Station (KD 45 million) projects, both scheduled for 3Q22. Projects awards in the oil and gas sector, though, are likely to remain subdued, with only KD 251 million worth of relatively small scale projects planned for the year. As for Kuwait's chemical sector, project activity is not likely to pick up again until 2023 at the earliest, when KIPIC's Al-Zour Petrochemical Complex (KD 2.85 billion) project is expected to be awarded.



TOKYO: An electronic quotation board displays the yen's rate against the US dollar (center top) and the share price of the Tokyo Stock Exchange (center bottom) at a foreign exchange brokerage in Tokyo on April 18, 2022. — AFP

Regional conference for Africa takes place in Equatorial Guinea

MALABO: On top of the climate crisis, long-standing regional conflicts and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, now in its third year, a severe drought is tightening its grip on East Africa. Most recently, the war in Ukraine is severely limiting the supply of wheat to Egypt and nearby countries, pushing up bread prices in the north of the continent.

The number of people going hungry in Sub-Saharan Africa is on the rise again after years of decline. According to the latest numbers available, 282 million people on the continent, or over one-fifth of the population, don't have enough food, representing a

rise of 46 million from 2019.

Meeting Africa's overlapping challenges and realizing its enormous potential both require extraordinary efforts and new ways of working together, QU Dongyu, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) said as he opened the 32nd Session of the Regional Conference for Africa (ARC32) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

The regional conference, hosted here by the Government of Equatorial Guinea and held until April 14, places the spotlight on the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 and its efforts to transform agri-food systems to be more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable through the Four Betters: Better Production, Better Nutrition, a Better Environment and a Better Life for all, leaving no one behind.

The ministerial meeting is taking place as the continent's aim of ending hunger by 2025, as well as FAO's efforts to support Members achieve the Sustainable

Development Goals by 2030, face an unprecedented confluence of obstacles. "Like the tall ceiba tree on the flag of Equatorial Guinea, we too must stand tall in facing Africa's many complex challenges," Qu told delegates in his opening statement.

This year's regional conference brings together agriculture ministers and other government officials from more than 50 African countries, along with civil society groups, the private sector, development partners and observer member countries.

The president of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, said the conference was taking place at a critical time for the region's economy and that there was an urgent need to transform our agri-food systems in a sustainable way. Josefa Sacko, Commissioner for Agriculture, Rural Development, Blue Economy and Sustainable Environment at the African Union Commission also addressed the opening day of the conference, which is FAO's highest governing body in Africa.

Asian markets slide on COVID fears, inflation

HONG KONG: Asian stocks closed lower on Monday in cautious trade, as figures showed China's economic growth accelerated in the first quarter of the year, but the government warned of "significant challenges" ahead. Tokyo's benchmark Nikkei 225 ended down more than one percent and Shanghai posted small losses, while Hong Kong and Sydney were closed for holidays. Shanghai reported its first Covid-19 deaths since the start of its weeks-long lockdown. China's largest city and economic powerhouse has stewed under a patchwork of restrictions this year amid the country's worst COVID-19 outbreak since the start of the pandemic. The country reported first-quarter economic growth of 4.8 percent, the National Bureau of Statistics said, as the pandemic threatens Beijing's ambitious annual growth target.

That figure was up from 4.0 percent in the final months of 2021. The world's second-biggest economy was already losing steam in the latter half of last year as it endured a property slump and regulatory crackdowns. "We must be aware that with the domestic and international environment becoming increasingly complicated and uncertain, economic development is facing significant difficulties and challenges," said NBS spokesman Fu Linghui.

"Overall, the data suggest that China started the year well, but as the quarter has moved on, the headwinds have gotten stronger," said Jeffrey Halley, senior market analyst with OANDA. "A slowing property market, sweeping COVID restrictions, the Ukraine invasion pushing up base commodity and energy prices, and a central bank still intent on deleveraging sectors of the economy, have all combined to weigh on China's growth. "About the only thing missing is a meaningful rise in inflation, which is some small sliver of comfort."

Oil prices, which have been elevated since Russia's February invasion of Ukraine, were up again, with Brent Crude topping \$111 a barrel. Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management said the rise was "likely to fuel inflation fears and rate hike jitters around the meaningful Fed action required to snuff those fears out." Russia is a major global oil and gas supplier, and-along with Ukraine-is also a key player in the grain sector. The conflict has shaken markets for these commodities, and the impact has been felt from the Middle East to South America. The war has sent oil prices soaring, with reports swirling about further energy sanctions on Russia. —AFP



MALABO: Delegates of the regional conference pose for a group photo.

A sensor-based irrigation system is saving water in Goa

PANAJI, India: A sensor-based irrigation system using bank filtration technology and controlled via web and mobile app has prevented wastage of water in Cortalim, Goa, an Indian state and also made it easy for farmers to monitor the irrigation remotely. The system is installed at Sal River near Navelim and Nauta lake.

The sensors provide the moisture values and start the water motor only when there is an actual need for water. They turn it off when the moisture level reaches the maximum value. This process prevents water erosion and maintains the soil quality throughout the field.

The system has saved time, especially for the daily wage farmers giving them freedom and flexibility to

sell their harvest in the market. It has reduced their labor work and helped the farmers financially as well. The irrigation system was implemented by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), in collaboration with the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Goa, and supported by the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India, under the umbrella of Demand Driven Mission - Water Technology Initiative.

It provides clean water to farmers for irrigation through River Bank Filtration (RBF) technology coupled with a sensor-controlled irrigation system, which is the first of its kind in the region. RBF operates by extracting water from wells located near rivers or lakes. As the river water infiltrates into and passes through the riverbed sediments, contaminants like bacteria and toxic metals are removed by overlapping biological, physical, and chemical processes. TERI installed affordable RBF wells for the treatment of polluted water from the Sal River near Navelim and Nauta lake at Cortalim, Goa, powered by renewable energy

resources (solar-powered pumps) to provide clean water to farmers in off-the-grid areas. Water, with improved quality parameters such as reduced turbidity and bacterial load supplied through a systematic pipeline system, helped farmers to obtain better crop production.

The project presents a model of sustainability for educating farming communities with small landholdings which are unique to Goa, the Union Ministry of Science & Technology, stated. The technology of RBF offers an inexpensive means to remove large amounts of contaminants, including suspended particles and attenuation of microbes, and essentially provide improved water quality to the farmer's community to fulfil their irrigation requirements. A dissemination workshop was also organized in which relevant stakeholders, researchers, policymakers, and farmers were handed over the information and technology to the local ownership, and the initiative has opened up new collaborations for future developments the Ministry informed.

Business

China economy accelerates in Q1 but virus stalks outlook

Govt warns of 'significant challenges' ahead as lockdowns begin to bite

BEIJING: China's economic growth accelerated in the first quarter of the year to 4.8 percent, official data showed Monday, but the government warned of "significant challenges" ahead while massive COVID-19 lockdowns started to bite. The world's second-biggest economy had lost steam in the latter half of last year with a property slump and regulatory crackdowns, pulling down growth.

But it exceeded expectations in the first three months of 2022, growing 4.8 percent on-year, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said, with Lunar New Year spending and factory production cajoling growth. The weeks ahead, however, appear treacherous for the economy with Beijing's unrelenting zero-COVID approach to outbreaks clogging supply chains and locking down tens of millions of people-including in the economic dynamos of Shanghai and Shenzhen as well as the northeastern grain basket of Jilin.

Virus restrictions in March have already gouged at retail sales, as consumers shied away from shopping, and drove up unemployment. "With the domestic and international environment becoming increasingly complicated and uncertain, economic development is facing significant difficulties and challenges," NBS spokesman Fu Linghui said on Monday.

The pandemic rebound-as well as the sanctions binding Russia's economy-ups the ante on officials to deliver Beijing's full-year growth target of around 5.5 percent.

The target comes in a pivotal political year for President Xi Jinping who is eyeing another term in power at the Party Congress to be held this autumn. The current virus outbreak is the worst since the peak of the first wave which

emerged in Wuhan in late 2019, and the economy is beginning to weaken.

Industrial production growth eased to 5.0 percent in March, NBS data showed, down from the January-February period. Meanwhile, retail sales sank 3.5 percent and the urban unemployment rate ticked up to a 22-month high of 5.8 percent last month.

"March activity data suggests that China's economy slowed, especially in household consumption," Tommy Wu, lead China economist at Oxford Economics, said in a note.

'Worse to come'

China's government is trying to balance "minimizing disruption against controlling the latest wave of COVID infections", Wu said, but he warned of a drag on economic activity into May or beyond.

Last week, carmakers including XPeng and Volkswagen warned of severe disruptions to supply chains and possibly even a halt on production completely if the lockdown on Shanghai's 25 million inhabitants persisted. Already, goods are piling up at the world's busiest container port in Shanghai, prompting shipping giant Maersk to say it will stop taking new bookings for refrigerated containers into the city.

"Further impacts from lockdowns are imminent," said Iris Pang, chief economist for Greater China at ING. As Shanghai struggles to rein in an outbreak that has seen tens of thousands of daily cases, Pang said other cities may attempt to replicate Shenzhen's success in reopening swiftly by resorting to strict measures with just a few COVID patients.



The southern tech powerhouse went into full lockdown for almost a week in March, but has since eased restrictions. Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics cautioned that "the worst is still to come". Fu of the NBS warned of high commodity prices on Monday with the Russia-Ukraine conflict leading to a decline in the availability of commodities such as corn and wheat. Although China's

central bank has announced a reserve ratio cut, lowering the amount of cash banks must hold in a push to support small businesses, experts say officials were taking a restrained approach to stimulus. But economists expect officials will eventually publish a growth figure consistent with official targets, as part of doubts that the numbers may be massaged for political reasons. —AFP

CBK bonds and related Tawarruq

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

Shares in Chinese pharma firm tank as COVID drug questioned

BEIJING: Shares in one of China's largest traditional medicine producers plunged on Monday after reports questioned the efficacy of pills approved by the government as a coronavirus treatment.

Shanghai authorities have joined their Hong Kong counterparts in handing out 'Lianhua Qingwen'-a herbal remedy marketed for fever and sore throats-as the cities battle their worst Covid-19 outbreaks since the pandemic's start. But on Sunday, popular Chinese health platform Dingxiang Yisheng said the capsules, made by Shijiazhuang Yiling Pharmaceutical, could not prevent cases of the virus, in a report then picked up by state media.

Monday's share dump sent them falling to 32.39 yuan (\$5) with the stocks hitting the daily limit of 10 percent on the Shenzhen exchange. Last week, Wang Sicong, an influencer and son of one of China's wealthiest scions, ignited debate about the drug on Weibo when he reposted a social media video questioning whether the World Health Organization had ever recommended it for use against COVID-19.

The United States and other countries have warned there is no evidence the medicine works to prevent or cure coronavirus, even as it has increasingly been promoted by government authorities in China and Hong Kong. The US Food and Drug



Administration has said it has not approved Lianhua Qingwen, and that coronavirus-related claims about it were "not supported by competent and reliable scientific evidence".

In 2020, Beijing approved the remedy-initially developed for SARS and made up of ingredients like honeysuckle and apricot seeds-as a coronavirus treatment.

In financial centers Hong Kong and Shanghai, which are struggling to quash fast-spreading Omicron-fueled surges, boxes of Lianhua Qingwen tablets have been included in government care

packages. Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam even claimed last month that traditional Chinese medicine may be more effective than Western medicine at preventing Covid and accelerating recovery.

Shanghai, China's largest city, has been locked down since March as cases have topped 25,000 a day-low compared with parts of the world now living with the virus, but virtually unheard of under China's "zero-COVID" strategy.

At the peak of its Omicron-driven outbreak last month, Hong Kong was recording one of the world's highest mortality rates from the virus. —AFP

Elon Musk, tech visionary hogs the spotlight

WASHINGTON: Space conquest: check. Disrupt the auto industry: check. Take over Twitter? Why not. From eccentric entrepreneur to the world's richest man, Elon Musk likes to dream big-and these days, he is everywhere you look.

Two decades after banking his first millions, the South-African born Musk last year became the world's richest person-wresting the title from Amazon's Jeff Bezos-following the meteoric rise of Tesla, his electric automaker founded in 2003. The billionaire's latest big splash: a bid announced Thursday to take over Twitter, capping a roller-coaster fortnight of announcements and counter-announcements-which Musk punctuated, characteristically, by gleefully firing tweets at the platform.

Just a week earlier, the 50-year-old was making headlines as Tesla cut the ribbon on a "gigafactory" the size of 100 soccer fields in Texas, where the firm is now based and Musk himself has relocated from California. At the same time, his space transport firm SpaceX was breaking yet another boundary as a partner in a three-way venture to send the first fully private mission to the International Space Station.

Musk also makes news of a less flattering kind: Tesla has faced a series of lawsuits alleging discrimination and harassment against Black workers as well as sexual harassment.

In parallel with the whiplash-inducing stream of business news, Musk's controversy-courting persona-with an unrestrained Twitter style and penchant for living by his own rules in the private sphere too-keeps the gossip press busy.

It recently emerged Musk had had a second child with his on-again off-again partner, the musician Grimes: a girl they named Exa Dark Sider. Musk-although the parents will mostly call her Y.

He is even expected to make an appearance-in person or not-at the celebrity defamation trial pitting Johnny Depp against his ex-wife Amber Heard, who formerly dated Musk.

But one way or another, Musk has become one of the most ubiquitous figures of the era. So how did he get where he is today?

To Mars... and beyond?

Born in Pretoria, on June 28, 1971, the son of an engineer father and a Canadian-born model mother, Musk left South Africa in his late teens to attend Queen's University in Ontario. He transferred to the University of Pennsylvania after two years and earned bachelor's degrees in physics and business. After graduating from the prestigious Ivy League school, Musk abandoned plans to pursue further studies at Stanford University. Instead, he dropped out and started Zip2, a company that made online publishing software for the media industry. He banked his first millions before the age of 30 when he sold Zip2 to US computer maker Compaq for more than \$300 million in 1999. —AFP

ECB stands firm as Ukraine war casts a pall over eurozone

FRANKFURT: The European Central Bank stood still in the face of record 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, it said.

An interest rate hike would follow "some time" after the stimulus program comes to an end-a delay the ECB's President Christine Lagarde stressed could be "between a week and several months".

Governors would "assess exactly the timing of the conclusion of our net asset purchases" at the bank's next meeting in June with the help of new forecasts, Lagarde said. The decision to stick to its plan 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.

Calls for the ECB to follow suit as soon as possible from within the governing council have grown stronger as price rises in the eurozone have taken off.

Year-on-year inflation hit 7.5 percent in March, an all-time high for the currency bloc and well above the bank's own two-percent target. The

surge owes a great deal to the take off in prices for energy, commodities and food as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time, high energy costs, added disruptions to supply chains and weaker confidence were "severely affecting" the eurozone economy, Lagarde said in a press conference.

The former French finance minister last week tested positive for COVID and had to dial into the press conference via video link.

'Europe is different'

Lagarde conceded that the bank's forecasts had been "wrong in the past", as calls increased for the central banks to get out ahead of the inflation wave by raising interest rates. Minutes from the last ECB meeting in March revealed that many members of the governing council wanted "immediate further steps".

Central bankers use rate rises as a tool to try and tame inflation, but pulling the trigger too soon risks hurting economic growth. Any hike would be the ECB's first in over a decade and would lift rates from their current historic low levels.

The Frankfurt-based institution even set a negative deposit rate of minus 0.5 percent, meaning banks pay to park excess cash at the ECB. The ECB's straightforward reiteration of its stimulus planned showed a "somewhat strengthened" commitment to end its



FRANKFURT: In this file photo taken on February 03, 2022, a European flag flutters in front of the European Central Bank (ECB) building in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany. —AFP

bond-buying scheme in the third quarter, said Carsten Brzeski, head of macro at ING bank.

But the status quo stance showed that "Europe is different and the ECB is different" to other countries and central banks, Brzeski said. The ECB's gradual plan would see it put an "end to the era of negative interest rates before the end of the year", he predicted.

Gas boycott

Comparing the eurozone with the United States and the policies of the Fed was like "apples and oranges", Lagarde said. Just as the risks from the pandemic "have declined", the European economy will "be more exposed and will suffer more consequences" from the war in Ukraine, she said.

The impact "will depend on how the conflict evolves, on the effect of current sanctions and on possible further measures," Lagarde said. Looming over the outlook was the possibility of a stop to supplies of Russian gas, which many eurozone countries rely on heavily to meet their energy needs.

"An abrupt boycott would have a significant impact," Lagarde said. While the ECB's bond-buying stimulus is being phased out, the advent of a fresh crisis has some speculating about the possibility of the bank designing a new tool to contain the impact of the war.

Questioned on the subject, Lagarde simply said the ECB would stay flexible and act "promptly" if new risks emerged and some countries found it harder to finance their response. —AFP



SUDANESE OBSERVE RAMADAN AMID PANDEMIC FREE CONSTRAINTS

Sudanese have restored normal living activities during the fasting month of Ramadan, two years after constraints warranted by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The Sudanese, weeks ahead of Ramadan's onset, begin preparing for the month long fasting from dawn to dusk, making the favorite beverages, locally called "helo mur" and "ebri."

Many people hold their iftar meals at public locations, sharing them with others of low-income fellow citizens. The group prayers, Taraweeh, are being held at the mosques again following recession of the pandemic and easing of the health restrictions. — KUNA



Volunteer rescuers step in to save Shanghai's locked-down pets

With quarantine looming after a positive COVID-19 test, Shanghai resident Sarah Wang said her first worry was who would look after her cat. China's pursuit of "zero-COVID" means anyone who catches the virus is sent to central facilities, sometimes for weeks, leaving their pets at the mercy of local authorities. Aside from fears the animals will be unfed or abandoned, a video showing a health worker in Shanghai bludgeoning a corgi dog to death this month caused uproar among residents-with some taking matters into their own hands.

The clip created "pure panic", said Erin Leigh, the main organizer of an emergency rescue service that has been formed to help pets who could otherwise become casualties of the hardline virus approach. In the last few weeks, Leigh, 33, has expanded her group from a pet-sitting firm to a network of thousands of unpaid volunteers. The group has found Wang's fortunate feline a temporary home with a sitter across town. The relieved financial worker told AFP her cat "wouldn't have survived my apartment being disinfected".

"Her conditions would have been pretty bleak without anyone coming to feed her," the 28-year-old said. "For some pets in the city, it comes down to life or death," said Leigh, adding that owners felt "helpless". Across China, local governments' urgency to stamp out every virus case has pushed animal well-being down the list of authorities' priorities.

In January, Hong Kong culled around 2,000 hamsters after one tested positive for COVID-19, and at least three cats



A resident walks his dog in a residential housing compound.

and a dog were among animals killed by health workers in the mainland last year. After the recent video of the corgi killing, Leigh said she has been inundated with pleas from owners "desperate to get their animals saved". "People are like, 'Get my dog to safety. I don't even want it in my house.'"

'Help needed'

Pet ownership in China has ballooned in recent years, particularly in cosmopolitan hubs like Shanghai. The financial centre has been at the heart of China's worst COVID-19 outbreak since the peak of the first virus wave in Wuhan over two years ago, and has been under a patchwork of lockdown restrictions since March which has left most of its 25

million residents confined to their homes.

As Shanghai officials ramped up control measures, Leigh and others mobilized online to share information about the pets left behind when people were taken into centralized quarantine. A handful of administrators work day and night to record cases of distressed animals, classifying them by location and noting those that most urgently need food, shelter or other care.

The network then raises the alarm on social media, sharing "help needed" posters in both Chinese and English until a savior is found. They also connect owners and sitters with homebound vets "so they can all help each other in case there are any medical emergencies",

said volunteer Joey Ang, a 20-year-old student from Singapore.

The team has aided hundreds of cats and dogs-plus a few birds, fish and snakes. Evacuated pets must be steered through the often-baffling lockdown restrictions, sometimes travelling hours to reach short-term homes just a few streets away.

Hungry huskies

In one memorable example, volunteers rallied to bring food to a locked-down pet shop housing around 50 hungry huskies, Leigh said. But the road to freedom is rarely smooth in a city where officials sweat over the potential consequences of bending vaguely defined lockdown rules. Security guards often get jittery about carrying disinfected crates containing animals into and out of housing compounds-a key step in the process as most residents in lockdown can't leave their apartment complexes, volunteers said.

And drivers have jacked up fees for ferrying pets. Rescuers this week spent an hour and a half transferring a dog from its owner's apartment to another block just 600 meters (0.4 miles) away, according to Leigh. A "carrot-and-stick" approach is often key to making officials "consider the negative reaction if the pet comes to any harm," said Ocean Zhang, who helped negotiate the canine's release. "There is strength in numbers. If we continue to work together, then even emergencies... can be resolved within a couple of hours." — AFP



A resident walking her dog in a residential housing compound during the COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai. — AFP photos



Floyd Mayweather is set to make a shock return to boxing

The unbeaten former world champion is reportedly returning to the ring for an eight-round exhibition against Don Moore in Dubai next month. Mayweather's return is part of an exhibition that is dubbed 'The Global Titan Fight Series', with an undercard featuring former UFC champion Anderson Silva, Bruno Machado and former world champion Badou Jack. His opponent Moore is a former sparring partner who boxed professionally between 1999 and 2016 and the pair will fight on the helipad on top of the Burj Al Arab Hotel in Dubai. The 45-year-old sportsman 'officially' retired from boxing after beating Conor McGregor in 2017 but has returned to the ring for exhibition bouts - most recently against YouTube star Logan Paul in June last year.



Floyd Mayweather

Mayweather, who has a perfect 50-0 record in his career, had indicated after the fight that he was unlikely to box again. He said: "I had fun. You've got to realize I'm not 21 anymore. A great young fighter. Strong, tough. He's better than I thought he was. "We don't know what the future holds, but I'll talk it over with my team, and see where we go from there. "You've got to realize, I've been in this sport 25 years. I understand I'm not 21, I'm not 25, but I had fun tonight." Mayweather had suggested in December that he was done with boxing and wanted to concentrate on working with other fighters.

He said: "I won't go back to boxing, no I won't. Boxing was very good to me, because I could make smart investments on the outside, but now I want to help others to become champions like Gervonta Davis. "Terence Crawford, Errol Spence, [David] Benavidez, the list goes on.... there are many very tough fighters out there, great young champions that I am proud of. I don't miss [competing in] boxing, I just go and have fun, that's why I did an exhibition with Logan Paul, we had fun, I had fun." — Bang showbiz

Lifestyle | Features

Arooj Aftab, the Grammy-winning Pakistani singer serenading Coachella



Pakistani vocalist Arooj Aftab poses for a portrait at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California. — AFP photos

Fresh off of her historic Grammy win, the Brooklyn-based Pakistani singer Arooj Aftab has added another feather to her cap with a debut at the much-touted Coachella music festival. She graced the California desert with a set that centered her melodious Urdu lyricism, a barrier-breaking move as she became the first Pakistani to play the prestigious festival. For Aftab, the language barrier no longer exists: "This is a door that's opened."

The 37-year-old-who just released a cover of Spanish flamenco revisionist Rosalia's "Di mi nombre"-sees a revolution in popular music, with artists sailing freely past genre and borders. "There's a movement happening in the music industry at large," she told AFP on the grounds of Coachella, where she delivered a moving performance of her work that fuses ancient Sufi traditions with inflections of

folk, jazz and minimalism.

"The audience and the musicians are creating music and the audiences are listening to music with a lot of freedom in their minds. Less genre-genre, less border-border," she said. "It's so free, and open, and really, really beautiful." She credits the Latinx community for making huge inroads in this respect, citing Rosalia along with Becky G, Karol G, J. Balvin and Bad Bunny as influential in the transformation.

"The trap movement definitely changed the way listeners listen," Aftab said, referring to the explosion of Southern US hip hop that later made its way into Latin America and fused with reggaeton. The surge of Latin music on US airwaves and especially on streaming platforms "created a big opening in the minds of listeners in America," she continued.

"They now listen to music that they

don't understand, and it's fine! They love it. That's a big step." Aftab said that opening has allowed her to feel more liberated with her own creations, putting out music based on emotions, without limitation. "It's a personal music," she said. "It's not 'my country, my country'-it's global music. It's everything that we feel, it's all the people that we meet." "Whatever makes my heart sing is in the music."

'A high'

With three studio albums, Aftab mere weeks ago made history in becoming the first Pakistani solo vocalist to nab a Grammy, winning for her song "Mohabbat" in the Best Global Performance category. She was also nominated in the prestigious Best New Artist field-although that award went, as expected, to pop sensation Olivia Rodrigo.

But Aftab is basking in the moment of recognition, savoring her career accolades as well as her two performance dates at the premier Coachella festival. "It feels really amazing, it's a high-it's a high moment in my career," the singer said. "I've been working towards this moment and imagining that this moment would come, or not." "And it did! Which is miraculous." She's also stoked to be back in front of live audiences, with Coachella returning after a three-year, pandemic-induced hiatus. Featuring artists from all over the world, the 2022 Coachella poster is a reflection of music's globalization and genre fluidity. For Aftab, that's a big win: "This is a door that's opened, for sure." "And I'm going to leave the door open, for sure." — AFP

With unprecedented Coachella showing, Latin music continues US dominance

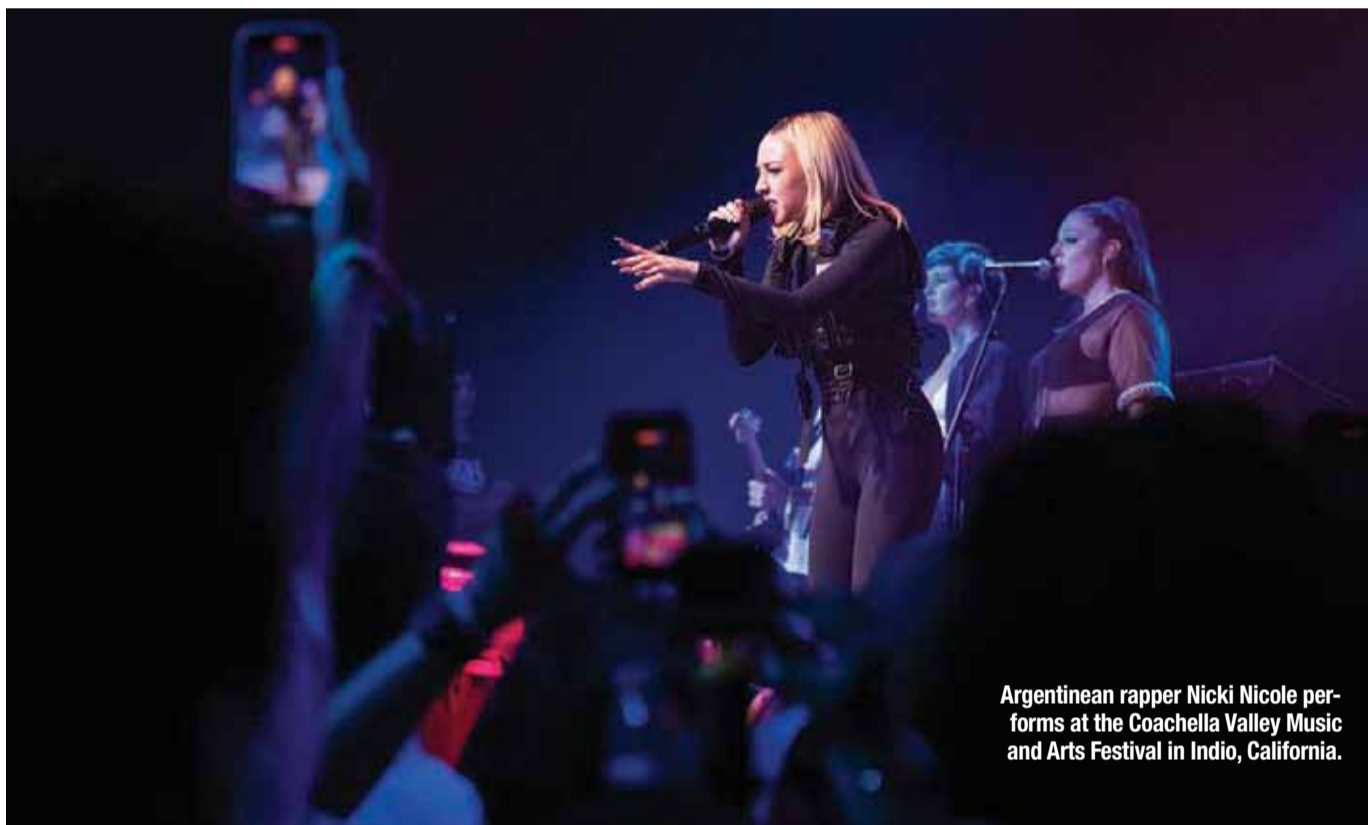
An unprecedented number of Latin acts performed at this year's Coachella, commanding the festival's main stage as the popularity of Spanish-language music soars. In total this year's line-up saw 20 artists from Latin America and its diaspora performing at the premier music festival in the California desert-up from 17 in 2019, when Bad Bunny and J Balvin ruled.

On Sunday, thousands assembled to wait for Colombia's Karol G, long before she was scheduled to take Coachella's main stage at the California desert, which was hosting the famed festival for the first time in three years after a long pandemic-induced hiatus. The reggaeton star shook the stage with a killer set that gave female empowerment a top billing and also paid homage to the Latin American acts who paved the way. "She is pure fun, I love her!" shouted Carolina Sanchez, a 23-year-old Mexican woman who staked out a front-row spot as she waited for the artist, who appeared with her signature mermaid-blue locks.



Argentinean rapper Nicki Nicole performs at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival.

The singer delivered intricate choreography rife with kisses, twerking, and generous use of her hips-before bringing on superstar DJ Tiesto for two songs. Up next on the invite list was Becky G, the California-born artist who performed



Argentinean rapper Nicki Nicole performs at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California.

"Mamiii" with Karol. The Colombian artist took advantage of her primetime spot to extol her Latin heritage and her region's impact on music. "I'm from Colombia, and I'm very proud to represent my country and Latinas," she told her adoring fans.

As the sun set on the weekend's hottest day, Karol G began an emotional tribute to the Latin acts who came before her, starting with "Como La Flor" by Selena, the smash that catapulted the late star to the top of the charts in the 1990s. One after the other, she ran through a who's who of Latin music history: "Maria" by Ricky Martin, "La Macarena" by Los del Rio, "La vida es un Carnaval" by Celia Cruz, "Gasolina" by Daddy Yankee, "Hips Don't Lie" by Shakira, "Despacito" by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee, and "Mi Gente" performed by J Balvin. She closed the mammoth set with her own international hit, "Tusa."

'Infinite possibilities'

The Latin celebration of Coachella

comes as Spanish-language music continues to find mainstream success. According to MRC Data, which provides music business analytics, in 2021 the consumption of Latin music spiked 21.1 percent, higher than any other major genre. By the end of 2021 it is the fifth most-consumed genre in the United States. Nathy Peluso, a vocalist from Argentina who just kicked off a global tour in Mexico, saw Latin American music's strength reflected in this year's Coachella lineup, which also included Brazilians Anitta and Pablo Vittar. "I have never felt limited as an artist because I am Latina-on the contrary," Peluso told AFP.

"I have always felt powerful, and with infinite possibilities, like any other person in the world." The singer, donning a faded leather jacket over a black top, said that for her, music is no less than a sensory experience. "My role is to communicate," she said. "Emotion does not have a language." Fellow Argentine and trap star Nicki Nicole-who spoke with AFP minutes after her set that included tracks like

"Colocao," "Baby" and "Wapo Traketero"-said she was nervous when she first arrived to debut at the festival, one of music's biggest parties. But once she got there, hundreds of people were chanting her name. Dressed in a black jumpsuit and combat boots, the 21-year-old burst onto the stage to the delight of her fans.

"I was scared and nervous, coming from Argentina to here," she said. "I said to myself, 'Maybe no one's there,' but when I entered the room and it was full, I relaxed." The star-on-the-rise exudes humility and a hunger to keep growing, citing artists like Amy Winehouse as influences. "I'm always looking for things to learn," said the artist, whose song "Ella no es tuya (remix)" was included on Barack Obama's summer playlist. Nicole says it is fellow women in music who inspire her most. "They make me want to keep going, knowing that as women, we support each other," she said. —AFP

Doja Cat brings pyro back to Coachella, serving a seductive punk rap mash

Doja Cat brought headbanging, flames and the devil herself to Coachella's main stage Sunday night, serving a headliner-worthy performance for her solo debut at one of the world's most watched music festivals. Performing for thousands of screaming fans during the final hours of the first weekend's slew of featured artists, the 26-year-old dealt her hits in addition to dropping new material: her forthcoming track "Vegas," which samples the classic "Hound Dog," is slated to feature in Baz Luhrmann's film "Elvis."

Born and raised in Los Angeles, the performer spent years in relative obscurity but caught industry attention on the music-sharing site SoundCloud. In 2019, she burst onto the global scene with her sugary disco track "Say So," whose glossy music video was an ode to SoCal in all its warmly lit, poolside glory. But the version Doja Cat delivered Sunday was a rock-forward, punk-tinged rendition, striding across the stage as she rap-grooved out the originally bubble-gum bridge.



Doja Cat

Donning thigh-high lace-up boots in iridescent pink, she wore a yellow mini that just grazed her thighs and a studded harness bra top with glittering flames. The singer-rapper gripped her mike with a spiked elbow-length glove, daring the crowd to take their eyes off her as they jumped when she demanded they jump, screaming all the while.

Lasers, flames, shots

Doja Cat, born Amala Dlamini, is the daughter of an American painter and the South African actor, composer and producer Dumisani Dlamini. She dropped out of school at 16, devoting much of her time to scouring the internet for beats and instrumentals she then crafted into her own songs. Doja Cat is beloved for her stagecraft, producing hits both radio-friendly and TikTok-set. But mostly, it's her complete and utter willingness to go there that's made her a household name.

She's fostered an image as one of music's oddballs: a sexy, space-age, shimmering artist with a sharp sense of humor and social media power that's seen her swiftly skate past controversy even when she unleashes unfiltered-and-sometimes-offensive-gaffes.

Sunday's performance was fresh off of her first Grammy win, which she took home for "Kiss Me More," her collaboration with SZA that was the ubiquitous soundtrack of 2021. The set was highly polished but still unafraid to get weird, with a plethora of outfit changes-all of them barely-there, all of them booty-baring.

For her crescendoing rendition of "Tia Tamera" she brought on rap's punk rebel Rico Nasty, the latter snarling in a devil costume as she leered and pranced across the stage. Earlier the stage had gone dark before Doja Cat emerged in a zebra-print two-piece hot pant set with sashaying knee-high boots that lent an air of Elton John. "Go down, go down, go down, down, let me see you go to town," she trilled, a group of dancers dressed in Grinch-esque costume gyrating around her. Doja Cat closed the night with lasers and pyrotechnics, leading her dancers in a raucous, leaping final frenzy-not before everyone onstage took shots. "Coachella!" she shrieked. "Thank you! I really can't believe we're here." — AFP



DJ Tiesto performs onstage.—AFP photos



Argentinean rapper Nicki Nicole poses for AFP at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival.



Argentinean singer Nathy Peluso poses for a portrait at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California.



Tom Hiddleston

Tom Hiddleston's new Apple TV+ series on the way

The 'Loki' star leads the cast for 'The White Darkness', an adaptation of David Grann's best-selling non-fiction tome of the same name, on the streaming platform. Tom is set to play Henry Worsley, a devoted husband and father, a former soldier, a man of deep honor and sacrifice, but also a man deeply obsessed with adventure, mani-

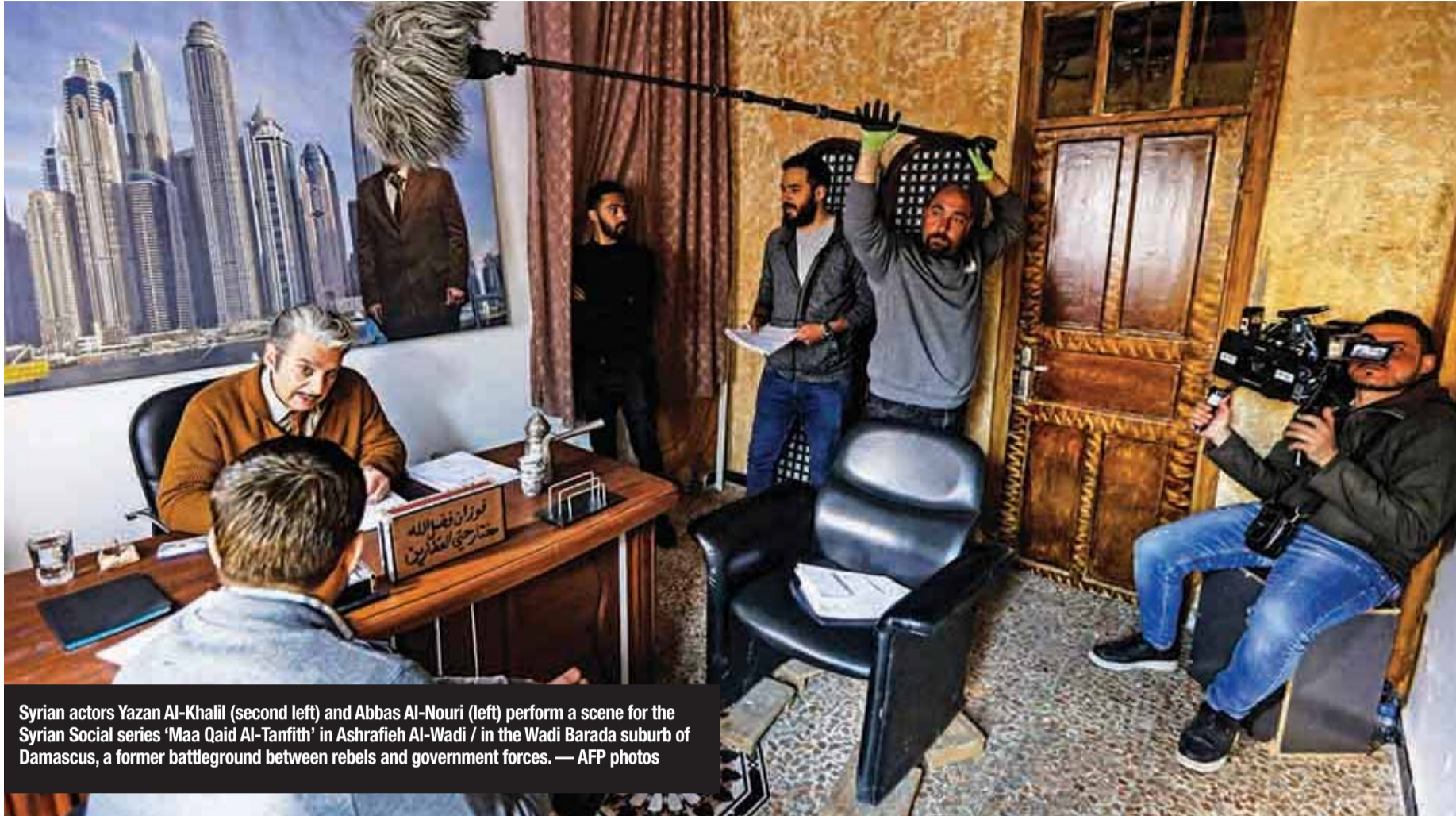
festing in an epic journey crossing Antarctica on foot. Starring Hiddleston as Worsley, this is a spellbinding story of courage, love, family and the extremes of human capacity. The 41-year-old actor is also set to executive produce the limited series. 'Pachinko's Soo Hugh and 'Black Swan' scribe Mark Heyman will co-showrun. He's also set to star in 'The Essex Serpent' for Apple TV+, in which he will play protagonist Will Ransome alongside Claire Danes as Cora, who has recently been widowed by a man who has abused her.

Now out of the marriage, Cora travels from London to Aldwinter, Essex - a small village - after hearing about the famed mythical legend, the Essex Serpent, which has returned to the area. The

'Essex Serpent' is based on Sarah Perry's bestselling novel and the adaptation will be directed by Clio Barnard. Meanwhile, Tom recently confessed he loves being called "Mr Loki".

The screen star plays the iconic character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and Tom has revealed he particularly enjoys when people put a title before Loki's name. Asked if he's called Loki in real life, Tom shared: "Probably all the time, yes, but what I really enjoy is when they put a title before it. 'So I was once in a restaurant and the head chef, so sweet, popped his head out to say hello and said 'hello Mr Loki', which is incredibly polite." —Bang Showbiz

Lifestyle | Features



Syrian actors Yazan Al-Khalil (second left) and Abbas Al-Nouri (left) perform a scene for the Syrian Social series 'Maa Qaid Al-Tanfith' in Ashrafieh Al-Wadi / in the Wadi Barada suburb of Damascus, a former battleground between rebels and government forces. — AFP photos

Syrian war drama makes TV breakthrough on Saudi-owned channel

Breaking a decade-old boycott by Gulf broadcasters over a diplomatic standoff with the Damascus government, a Syrian war drama figures this month on the Ramadan menu of a Saudi-owned television channel. Syrian dramas have long been popular across the region, but since Arab states in the Gulf suspended ties with President Bashar al-Assad's government in 2012, broadcasters in the region have shied away from Syrian-produced shows, especially those related to war.

Syrian actors, however, have still found their way on to screens through pan-Arab productions and historical dramas produced by Gulf networks, such as the popular Bab Al-Harra series. But shows made exclusively by Syrians were largely shunned.

In a sign of change, the Saudi-owned MBC channel has started airing a Syrian-made series, "Suspension", during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan—a period that this year started April 2 and during which viewership peaks across the Middle East. The Arabic-language

show shot outside Damascus is "the first social drama made entirely by Syrians to air on a Saudi-owned TV channel since 2011", when the country's war erupted, said director Seif Elsbei.

MBC has yet to respond to a request for comment. But its decision to air the show comes amid warming ties between Assad and the United Arab Emirates, a Saudi ally which reopened its embassy in Damascus in 2018. Last month, Assad visited the UAE, in his first official trip to an Arab state since the start of the Syrian war.

Soft rapprochement

Although Riyadh has not officially restored ties with Assad, many view the latest development on television screens as a sign of a soft rapprochement. "Drama has beat politics in the race to renew relations," said Badih Sanij, a Syrian journalist and researcher. "Syrian and Saudi bonds are returning through drama and the restrictions imposed by politics on art are beginning to ease." The Syrian war drama was filmed in the

Wadi Barada suburb of Damascus, a former battleground between rebels and government forces.

Crammed with clips of destruction and despair, the series revolves around the lives of Syrians who have returned to the area after years of displacement. Among the show's main characters are a man who had opposition leanings in the early years of the war. In one scene, security forces interrogate him and force him to name another opposition sympathizer whom they later arrest.

'Beginning of the road'

"The return of Syrian social dramas is a breakthrough," Elsbei told AFP on the set of the show as children ran around charred vehicles used as props. It "ushers in a new way of engaging with Syrian dramas by TV networks in the Gulf," Elsbei said. The series is not only airing on MBC channels but also on the popular streaming service Shahid, likewise owned by the MBC group. The wide exposure is seen as a boon to Syria's war-hit filming industry which has

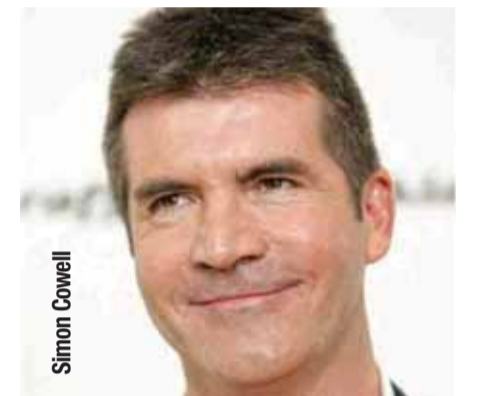
been hit by dried-up funding and the exodus of major talent, mainly to Egypt and Dubai.

"We suffered greatly from the years-long boycott of Syrian drama," said Yamen Alhajali, screenwriter of the series. "Art should be treated as art," not as politics, he said. For Alhajali, MBC's popularity guarantees the show a wide audience. MBC "is one of the most important platforms in the Arab world," he told AFP. "It has a wide audience and large viewership which will give the show a rightful reach." This Ramadan season, around 20 Syrian shows of various genres are airing on TV screens at home in Syria as well as across the region.

For Ahmad Al-Sheikh, the producer of Suspended, this marks the start of a long road towards recovery. "Gulf channels are an essential supporter of Arab drama," he said. "We are at the beginning of the road again, and we hope this drive will continue." — AFP

Simon Cowell says lockdown was 'make or break' for relationship

Simon Cowell thinks lockdown was a "make or break" moment for his relationship with Lauren Silverman. The 62-year-old music mogul has son Eric, eight, with Lauren, and he admits that getting engaged "just felt like the right thing to do" after they spent lockdown together. Speaking about their forthcoming wedding, Simon explained: "I've kind of felt myself engaged for a long time, if I'm really being honest with you. Lockdown and COVID was probably make or break for many relationships. "We were in the same house for over a year and I thought, 'Well, actually, we got on really, really well'. And for Eric, as he gets older, he will be asked more and more about his parents, and I thought it was the right thing to do for him." Simon couldn't imagine himself dating anyone else at this point in his life.



The TV star has also been inspired to tie the knot by his own parents. Simon told The Sun newspaper: "I also just couldn't see myself ever dating anyone again. The idea of going out on a first date now is too weird. "My mum and dad had an amazing marriage and I used to call them best friends, and I think that's a big part of it. "You've gotta like each other, not just love each other. We like the same things, we laugh a lot, we always have stuff to say to each other. "Look, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. So for all those different reasons, it just felt like the right thing to do." Simon has taken it upon himself to plan their wedding day, and he admits Lauren doesn't even know when it'll happen. He said: "I am planning it all, otherwise I know what will happen - there will be 600 people and it'll get out of control, like my 50th birthday party." — Bang Showbiz

Alexander Wang is returning with a runway show on April 19

The 38-year-old designer has not shown a runway collection since 2019, after facing several sexual assault allegations - but he's now announced plans for a show in Chinatown in Los Angeles. The upcoming event has been given the title of Fortune City and will feature a runway presentation of the designer's 2022 collections. The show will also feature a night market and live music, and the public has been invited to attend the show. The designer was born in San Francisco to Taiwanese parents. And Fortune City has been created to help celebrate the influence of Asian cultures, WWD reports. Chinatown Corporation, an historic preservation organization, has joined forces with Alexander to help to create the show and support its themes.



Meanwhile, the designer previously admitted that he pays attention to every detail at his show. Speaking about his approach to catwalk presentations, he explained: "It's always been more than just about product. "With shows, everything from the music, to the lighting, to the venue has equal importance, because it's the experience. Being able to communicate it, deliver it, and present it in a way that the audience really understands the context is important to me. It's not just, 'Okay, here you go, 30 looks. Write your order.' I like giving people a certain kind of escape, even if it's just for 10 or 15 minutes." Alexander is also determined to continue to surprise people. He said: "I think it's important to constantly have that kind of motivation to be able to give people something new to experience." — Bang Showbiz



Syrian actor Abbas Al-Nouri plays a scene during the filming of the Syrian Social series 'Maa Qaid Al-Tanfith' in Ashrafieh Al-Wadi, in the Wadi Barada suburb of Damascus.



Syrian actors Abbas Al-Nouri (left) and Yazan Al-Khalil prepare to play a scene for the Syrian Social series "Maa Qaid Al-Tanfith" in Ashrafieh Al-Wadi, in the Wadi Barada suburb of Damascus.



Children walk by the carcass of a burnt car during the filming of the Syrian Social series "Maa Qaid Al-Tanfith" in Ashrafieh Al-Wadi, in the Wadi Barada suburb of Damascus.

Sports

Tatum's winner lifts Celtics over Nets; Heat, Bucks, Suns win playoff openers

MIAMI: Jayson Tatum spun in for a buzzer-beating layup to give the Boston Celtics a thrilling 115-114 victory over the Brooklyn Nets on Sunday in the first game of their NBA Eastern Conference playoff series. Tatum scored 31 points to lead the Celtics, who thwarted a fourth-quarter comeback bid by the Nets to take a 1-0 lead in their best-of-seven first-round series.

The reigning champion Milwaukee Bucks, Eastern Conference top seeds Miami and Western Conference top seeds Phoenix also won their playoff openers. The Bucks, led by NBA Most Valuable Player award finalist Giannis Antetokounmpo, beat the Chicago Bulls 93-86, and the Heat dominated the Atlanta Hawks 115-91.

In Phoenix, veteran point guard Chris Paul scored 19 of his 30 points in the second half as the Suns, who finished the regular season with the best record in the league, led wire-to-wire in a 110-99 victory over the New Orleans Pelicans. In Boston, Tatum added eight assists and two blocked shots, Jaylen Brown added 23 points, and Al Horford and Marcus Smart scored 20 apiece for the Celtics, who took a 96-85 lead into the fourth quarter but trailed 114-111 with less

than a minute to play.

Former Celtic Kyrie Irving, booed throughout by Boston fans who still resent his departure for Brooklyn, led the Nets with 39 points. However, Kevin Durant was the only other Nets starter in double figures with 23. Irving will no doubt hear from the NBA after a middle-finger salute to heckling fans in the third quarter, but he saved his best gesture for the fourth period, when he scored 18 points to key the Nets' comeback bid.

Irving's long three-pointer over Smart put Brooklyn up 114-111 with 1:04 to play. But the Celtics clamped down defensively and pulled within one on Brown's driving layup. After Durant missed a three-pointer, Tatum, fed by Smart from across the lane, willed his way through traffic for the game-winner. "When he took that dribble, we just kind of made eye contact and he made a great pass and I just had to make a layup," Tatum said of the final play.

A first half that featured 17 lead changes ended with the score knotted at 61-61, but the Celtics, who had been idle since their last regular-season game as the Nets battled through the play-in tournament, pulled away with a 39-24 third quarter. Irving was unrepentant after his response to Celtics

fans. "It's nothing new when I come into this building what it's gonna be like, but it's the same energy they had for me, and I'm gonna have the same energy for them," he said.

However, Irving insisted his fan interaction shouldn't be the focus of the contest. "It's not about the fans," Irving said. "The fans aren't playing." Durant said he didn't think Irving worried about fans' hostility. "I think he just plays his game and does what's required out there tonight," said Durant, who said the Nets could find ways to improve before game two on Wednesday. "Obviously the last play was crucial, but there was a lot of plays that mattered," he said. "It's a journey."

Bucks blow lead

In Milwaukee, Antetokounmpo scored 27 points and pulled down 16 rebounds to lead the Bucks to victory, although foul trouble kept him on the bench for much of the fourth quarter. Montenegrin center Nikola Vucevic led the Bulls with 24 points and 17 rebounds, but missed two straight baskets in the paint in the final minute. The Bucks led by as many as 16 points in the first half, the Bulls taking the lead for the first time with less than three minutes left in the third quarter.



BOSTON: Jayson Tatum #0 of the Boston Celtics celebrates the game-winning basket as Kyrie Irving #11 of the Brooklyn Nets looks on during the fourth quarter of Round 1 Game 1 of the 2022 NBA Eastern Conference Playoffs at TD Garden on April 17, 2022. —AFP

Milwaukee's Jrue Holiday drilled a go-ahead three-pointer with 5:03 remaining, and the Bulls wouldn't get in front again. In Miami, Heat reserve Duncan Robinson scored a career playoff high 27 points, and the Heat defensively dominated Atlanta for a 115-91 victory. Robinson made 9-of-10 shots,

including 8-of-9 from 3-point range, while Jimmy Butler added 21 points and P J Tucker contributed 16 for Miami. The Hawks and their star guard Trae Young suffered through a miserable night against Miami's defense, Young connecting on just one of 12 shot attempts on the way to eight points. —AFP

Argentina shock Fiji to win Vancouver Sevens

MONTREAL: Argentina upset Olympic champions Fiji 29-10 to win the Vancouver leg of the World Rugby Sevens, their first win in the series since 2009. Marcos Moneta and Felipe Del Mestre scored two tries apiece for Argentina in the emotional triumph over a Fijian side coming off a victory in the Singapore Sevens a week earlier.

"You have to dream, because dreams do come," said Argentinian coach Santiago Gomez Cora, who was playing the last time they won a Cup event on the circuit. "Ever since I have been a coach this has been the moment I have been working towards, and my players must take all the credit because they work so hard and they wanted to win this one for their country so much."

Fiji had taken the lead on two minutes on Kamineli Rasaku's unconverted

try. Ninety seconds later, Moneta scored his ninth try of the weekend, which Tobias Wade converted. Argentina, who earned Olympic bronze in Tokyo, added two more tries before halftime. They led 17-5 with seven minutes remaining, but after Wade received a yellow card, Fiji capitalized with a score from Jerry Tuwai.

But Del Mestre's converted try, set-up by Moneta, put Argentina up 24-10, and another try from Del Mestre ended it. Australia took the bronze medal, rallying in the second half for a 21-19 victory over Samoa. South Africa finished fifth but maintained their lead in the series after six rounds with 111 points. Argentina jumped into second place on 105 points, and Australia finished the weekend third on 100 points.

England, thumped 40-17 by



VANCOUVER: Argentina's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Vancouver leg of the HSBC World Rugby Sevens Series against Fiji on April 17, 2022. —AFP

Argentina in the quarterfinals, also bid farewell to Dan Norton, the top all-time Series try-scorer with 358. The 34-year-old, who was part of the Great Britain side that won Olympic silver at the 2016 Rio games and represented

Team GB at Tokyo last year, had announced this was to be his last tournament. "I've enjoyed the last 14 years annoying the world and annoying my teammates," Norton said. "I've loved every minute of it." —AFP



ROUBAIX, France: INEOS Grenadiers' Dutch rider Dylan van Baarle celebrates on the podium after winning the 119th edition of the Paris-Roubaix one-day classic cycling race on April 17, 2022. —AFP

Cobble-hating Van Baarle comes of age with Paris-Roubaix win

ROUBAIX, France: Dutch rider Dylan van Baarle of Ineos Grenadiers admitted he hated the cobbles after winning cycling's epic 257km Paris-Roubaix on Sunday, emerging from the 30 sections of dusty, uneven old mining roads alone for a solo triumph in glorious sunshine. Journeyman Van Baarle held his head in his hands crossing the line before leaping off his bike and hoisting it in the air as he screamed with joy and relief for his sixth ever elite level win.

"Normally I hate the cobbles. Like everyone else I prefer the tarmac. But when you win then it's fun," he said of the 54km of rough-hewn giant cobbles in France's north-eastern flatlands that make this race so exceptionally challenging. He did, however, close his eyes and kiss the giant stone cobble offered as the winner's trophy, savoring a career making moment.

Much-touted Belgian ace Wout van Aert of Jumbo was second, a full 1min 47sec adrift of the winner. Swiss time-trial specialist Stefan Kung of FDJ was third. Known as "The Queen of the Classics", because of its extreme length and difficulty, Paris-Roubaix is rarely taken by a solo breakaway winner. The 29-year-old Van Baarle had been threatening to win such a race. He finished a narrow second at both the recent Tour of Flanders, another of cycling's five one-day 'Monuments', and at the 2021 world championships.

"After the worlds I finally started to believe in myself," explained the winner. "But I'm lost for words, after the second at Flanders and now winning this race, it's a Monument," said van Baarle. "I couldn't believe it when I got the velodrome and I was completely alone." Fifty of the 169 starters dropped out and another 12 finished after the cut off time as only 107 competitors finished in the classified times.

After joyously embracing his rider Ineos team principal Dave Brailsford said Van Baarle had galvanized all his experience to take the win. "He's earned it, he's developed his career and that was ten years of experience all coming together for him. He's got his moves together and he's such a strong rider," Brailsford said. The man who beat Van Baarle at Flanders, Mathieu van der Poel, could only finish ninth. —AFP

Spieth beats Cantlay in playoff to win PGA Heritage title

WASHINGTON: Three-time major winner Jordan Spieth defeated Patrick Cantlay with a par on the first playoff hole to win the US PGA Heritage title on Sunday after a final-round shootout. Spieth pitched from a bunker to within inches of the hole at the par-4 18th and tapped in for par while reigning FedEx Cup champion Cantlay blasted from the same bunker to 25 feet past the cup and couldn't make the long comeback putt to extend the playoff. "I felt in a good place. Just needed to give myself a chance," Spieth said. "It feels amazing."

Cantlay could only rue the wind after his 9-iron shot from the fairway followed Spieth's ball into the bunker and plugged. "It caught a different wind than what I was expecting," Cantlay said. "The wind was supposed

Tsitsipas aims for 'top two' after defending Monte Carlo crown

MONTE CARLO: Stefanos Tsitsipas said he is aiming to finish the season in the world's top two after successfully defending his Monte Carlo Masters title with a hard-fought victory over Spain's Alejandro Davidovich Fokina in Sunday's final. Third seed Tsitsipas hammered 21 winners and made only 11 unforced errors in the Monaco sunshine to win 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) in an hour and 36 minutes.

It was the 23-year-old Greek's eighth ATP title and first in 11 months as he made the perfect start to the clay-court season. "I can definitely have a great season and maybe finish it in the top two," said the world number five, whose triumph in Monaco was his fourth tournament success on clay. "This year I really want to have good results on grass and on hard courts because I'm sure I can score big ATP points there. If I manage to win matches there with as much consistency as on clay, I think I have a great chance of finishing the

to be off the right. I must have caught a little burst. "Obviously with it plugged like that, it was darn near impossible to get it close."

The Americans each finished 72 holes on 13-under 271 at Harbour Town Golf Links in Hilton Head, South Carolina. World number 20 Spieth fired a five-under par 66, matching his best final round this year, and sixth-ranked Cantlay shot 68. Sharing third on 272 after a shootout in which many of them shared the lead were Ireland's Shane Lowry, Australian Cam Davis, Austrian Sepp Straka and Americans J.T. Poston, Cameron Young, Matt Kuchar and Harold Varner.

Spieth won the 2015 Masters and US Open and the 2017 British Open and can complete a career Grand Slam by winning next month's PGA Championship at Southern Hills. It was the 16th worldwide victory for Spieth and his 13th US PGA triumph, his first since last April's Texas Open in his home state. It marked back-to-back Easter Sunday wins for Spieth, who was happy to learn Easter in 2023 is on the final day of the Masters.

"That's good vibes," said Spieth, whose missed cut last week at Augusta National inspired extra effort at

year in the top two. It's one of my big goals."

Novak Djokovic, Daniil Medvedev, Alexander Zverev and Rafael Nadal currently sit above Tsitsipas in the ATP rankings. Tsitsipas became the sixth player to win back-to-back Monte Carlo Masters in the Open era, emulating Nadal, Juan Carlos Ferrero, Thomas Muster, Bjorn Borg and Ilie Nastase. "It's great, especially because the fans were there. It was livelier than last year," said Tsitsipas, who beat Andrey Rublev in the 2021 final, which was held behind closed doors due the Covid pandemic.

He is gearing up for another tilt at the French Open title after losing last year's final at Roland Garros to Djokovic despite leading by two sets. "I think my tennis is excellent on all surfaces, although it adapts better to clay," added Tsitsipas. Davidovich Fokina had knocked out world number one Djokovic earlier this week but could not repeat those heroics in his first ATP final, losing for the third time in as many meetings with Tsitsipas.

"I always thought about being in the final here one day... I hope to be here again next year," said Davidovich Fokina, who also reached the quarter-finals last year before retiring injured after one set against Tsitsipas. The world number 46 struck first on Sunday, breaking in the third game, but Tsitsipas hit straight back with a magnificent forehand up the line to level

height, and then hit a four and finished the match off with a two.

"I wanted to see the ball, hit ball," said man of the match Miller. "Coming in at the powerplay (inside six overs) allowed me to shine, when the ball is harder than normal. Got more time too, so that was cool." Miller praised Rashid's cameo. "Rashid's batting releases a lot of pressure. Exceptional over, in my opinion that over was the game-changer and he struck it beautifully," he said. He struck eight fours and six sixes in his 51-ball knock

Gujarat, one of the two new franchises in the

48-4. But Miller put on an attacking 70-run sixth wicket stand with Afghanistan's Rashid Khan (40) and propelled his team to their target with one ball to spare in Pune.

Rashid, an ace leg-spinner who stood in as captain in place of injured Hardik Pandya, smashed three sixes and a four off Chris Jordan in a 25-run 18th over. Rashid fell after his 21-ball blitz but Miller completed the job, taking 13 runs in a dramatic final over from Jordan. Miller hit a six after two dot balls, was caught at short third man only for the delivery to be called no ball for



HILTON HEAD ISLAND, South Carolina: Jordan Spieth poses with the trophy after winning the RBC Heritage in a playoff at Harbor Town Golf Links on April 17, 2022. —AFP

the Heritage. "Last week was really a killer for me. My favorite tournament in the world and not getting to play the weekend," Spieth said. "So I tried to come in here and work a little extra hard this week." —AFP



MONACO: Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates with his trophy after winning the Monte-Carlo ATP Masters Series tournament on April 17, 2022. —AFP

the first set at 2-2. The set remained on serve until game eight, when Tsitsipas broke as Davidovich Fokina fired a backhand into the tramlines. The Greek star wrapped up the opener with a hold to love, capped off by an ace. —AFP

Miller and 'nightmare' Malik shine in IPL Sunday blockbuster

PUNE: South Africa's David Miller on Sunday said coming in to bat early made him "shine" as his unbeaten 94 led Gujarat Titans to a thrilling three-wicket IPL victory over holders Chennai Super Kings. Chasing 170 for victory, Gujarat slipped to

expanded 10-team IPL, consolidated their position at the top with five wins from six matches. Chennai slipped to five losses in six games. Rituraj Gaikwad's 73 went in vain after the opener guided Chennai to 169 for five. He put on a 92-run third-wicket stand with Ambati Rayudu, who hit 46, after the wickets of Robin Uthappa and Moeen Ali. Skipper Ravindra Jadeja, who took over the captaincy ahead of the season after Mahendra Singh Dhoni stepped down, provided a late blitz with his unbeaten 12-ball 22, but Miller's knock overshadowed every other innings in the match. —AFP

Sports

Chelsea sink Palace to book FA Cup final clash with Liverpool

LONDON: Thomas Tuchel praised Chelsea's focus and composure as they beat Crystal Palace 2-0 on Sunday to earn an FA Cup final showdown with quadruple chasers Liverpool. Tuchel's side had to work hard to break Palace's stubborn resistance in the semi-final at Wembley, but Ruben Loftus-Cheek's ferocious strike put them on course for a third successive FA Cup final appearance.

Mason Mount put the result beyond doubt with a fine finish of his own, ensuring Chelsea of a date with Liverpool in the final at Wembley on May 14. It will be Chelsea's fifth FA Cup final in the last six years as they look to make amends for losing in the showpiece against Arsenal and Leicester in 2020 and 2021 respectively. It was a welcome tonic after Tuesday's painful Champions League quarter-final exit at Real Madrid, where the Blues scored three times to overturn a 3-1 first-leg deficit only to go out after extra time.

"I thought the performance was very controlled and very serious. It was hard, the opponent changed system twice, but we took care of their counterattacks," Tuchel said. "It was very challenging physically and mentally. We are the team with the most minutes in Europe." Tuchel has won the Champions League, Club World Cup and UEFA Super Cup in his reign, but he is yet to lead Chelsea to a domestic trophy.

With three consortiums in the running to buy Chelsea following the British government's sanctions on Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich after the invasion of Ukraine, the Blues could have a new owner by the time they return to Wembley. Beating Palace keeps them in contention to end a troubled season with silverware, although

Liverpool, who beat Premier League leaders Manchester City 3-2 in Saturday's semi-final, will provide far tougher opposition.

The Reds have already beaten Chelsea in the League Cup final on penalties this season and Tuchel knows how tough it will be to avenge that loss. "We will be well prepared because we play against one of the best teams in the world. They are in outstanding form. It will be another hard fight," he said. "I don't care about the trophies they try to win. We were unlucky to lose in the shootout in the League Cup."

"We will try to make it hard for them. It is unbelievably difficult to beat them. But that is what a cup final is about. We need everything at the top level." Palace boss Patrick Vieira added: "In the first half we frustrated them a lot. Against these teams it is about taking your chances. We didn't and they did."

Patient Chelsea

Faced with a Palace side that were tigerish in the tackle and well-drilled in their low defensive block, Chelsea found it hard to impose themselves. It took Tuchel's men 25 minutes to muster a chance and even then Kai Havertz's looping header was easy for Palace keeper Jack Butland. They lost Mateo Kovacic to an injury moments later, with Loftus-Cheek introduced against the team he once played for on loan. Palace were nearly rewarded for their gritty display just before half-time.

Cheikhou Kouyate's drive from the edge of the area was pushed out by Edouard Mendy and Joachim Andersen slammed the rebound against the post from close range. Chelsea had more pos-



LONDON: Chelsea's German striker Timo Werner fights for the ball with Crystal Palace's Danish defender Joachim Andersen during their English FA Cup semifinal match at Wembley Stadium on April 17, 2022. —AFP

session in the second half, although Kouyate went close again, heading narrowly wide from Eberechi Eze's corner. To their credit, Chelsea never lost their patience and they finally took the lead from just their second shot on target in the 65th minute.

Loftus-Cheek picked out Havertz in the Palace

area and the German clipped a pass back to the midfielder, who slammed a superb strike past Butland from 12 yards. Chelsea had a spring in their step at last and Mount finished Palace off in the 76th minute, taking Timo Werner's pass in his stride before slotting home. —AFP

Real fight back to stun Sevilla, Atletico scrape past Espanyol

MADRID: Karim Benzema completed another incredible Real Madrid comeback on Sunday as they fought from two goals down to defeat Sevilla 3-2 in La Liga. After trailing Chelsea 3-0 on Tuesday only to secure their place in the Champions League semi-finals, Madrid stunned Sevilla to seal the victory that has surely won them La Liga.

Defeat would have given fresh hope to the chasing pack, with Sevilla and Barcelona both beginning the day 12 points behind, Barca with two games in hand. Instead, goals in the second half from Rodrygo, Nacho Fernandez and Benzema in the 92nd minute mean Madrid extend their advantage to 15 points with six games left to play. An Ivan Rakitic free-kick and Erik Lamela's smart finish had put Sevilla two up at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan.

"It's difficult to understand why we played like that in the first half and to be honest how we played as well as that in the second," said Carlo Ancelotti. "In the first half we looked tired. In the second, the intensity was spectacular." Benzema's goal finished Chelsea off on Tuesday after Rodrygo had forced

extra-time at the Santiago Bernabeu and those two, along with Vinicius Junior, were crucial again. Benzema now has 44 goals in 46 appearances this season and 15 in his last 10.

Rakitic gave Sevilla the lead in the 25th minute, curling a free-kick into the corner after Luka Modric had brought down Papu Gomez. Lamela doubled the advantage four minutes later, slotting after Tecatito drew out Thibaut Courtois and left the net open. But a superb Vinicius backheel for Dani Carvajal allowed Rodrygo to pull a goal back in the 50th minute.

Vinicius thought he had made it 2-2 in the 74th minute, only for the goal to be ruled out, the referee deciding the Brazilian had controlled with his arm and not his chest. Madrid though were undeterred as Rakitic headed away a corner, only for Carvajal to drive to the line and pull back for Nacho to finish. And then in the 92nd minute, Benzema completed another remarkable revival, collecting Rodrygo's pass, controlling and firing past three Sevilla defenders on the line.

Last-gasp Carrasco

Ten-man Atletico Madrid left it late too as Yannick Carrasco scored the winning penalty with the last kick of the game for a 2-1 win over Espanyol. Atletico looked set to drop another two points at the Wanda Metropolitano when Geoffrey Kondogbia was sent off in the second half and then three minutes later Raul de Tomas cancelled out



SEVILLE: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema celebrates during the Spanish League match against Sevilla at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium on April 17, 2022. —AFP

Carrasco's opener, his free-kick squirming through the fingers of Jan Oblak.

But De Tomas handballed deep into added time, the referee awarding the spot-kick after a long consultation with VAR, before Carrasco held his nerve. The ball hit the net with the clock approaching 100 minutes. "It was an important game for us and when you score with the last kick of the game it feels even more important to achieve our goal this season," Carrasco said. Atletico stay three points clear of Real Betis in fifth and level on points with third-placed Sevilla. —AFP

Bayern one win from 10th straight Bundesliga title

BERLIN: Bayern Munich can secure a 10th straight Bundesliga title next weekend after they bounced back from their Champions League exit with a 3-0 win at Arminia Bielefeld on Sunday. An own goal by Bielefeld defender Jacob Laursen and strikes by Serge Gnabry and Jamal Musiala saw Bayern move nine points clear. "A bit of frustration was released after we were knocked out," Gnabry told DAZN.

Bayern returned to winning ways five days after conceding a last-gasp equalizer at home to Villarreal to crash out of the Champions League with a 2-1 aggregate defeat in the quarterfinals. "I've had a hard time dealing with it," Bayern midfielder Joshua Kimmich, who was outstanding Sunday, said. "It's still in the back of your mind."

There are four league games left but Bayern can secure the title by beating second-placed Borussia Dortmund in next Saturday's top-of-the-table clash in Munich. "We definitely want to clinch it against Dortmund," Kimmich added.

Bayern were ahead after less than 10 minutes in Bielefeld when a Kimmich pass found its way to Robert Lewandowski, who got a touch before Laursen helped it over the line.

Bayern had a let-off when Japan midfielder Masaya Okugawa clipped the ball over Dayot Upamecano before firing past Manuel Neuer, but the goal was ruled offside. Just before half-time, Bielefeld midfielder Fabian Kunze was stretched off after being elbowed in the head by Bayern's Tanguy Nianzou, who was booked for the challenge. It was Bielefeld's third worrying head injury in recent weeks.

In the seventh minute of first-half stoppage time, Bayern doubled their lead when Gnabry got on the end of another Kimmich pass to tap home. Bielefeld kept searching for a goal to get back into the game after the break, but Bayern substitute Musiala secured the points with a late third.

Dominik Szoboszlai scored a late winner as RB Leipzig snatched a hard-



BIELEFELD, Germany: Bayern Munich's German goalkeeper Manuel Neuer and Bielefeld's Japanese midfielder Masaya Okugawa vie for the ball during the German first division Bundesliga match on April 17, 2022. —AFP

fought 1-0 victory at Bayer Leverkusen, who they usurped in third place. Leipzig are unbeaten in their last 14 games in all competitions and this was their eighth straight away win. Eintracht Frankfurt crashed to a 2-0 defeat at Union Berlin three days after their stunning Europa League win at Barcelona.

Frankfurt won 3-2 at Camp Nou on

Thursday to reach the Europa League's last four, but had no reply on Sunday as Union raced into a 2-0 lead after just 21 minutes in eastern Berlin. "The tiredness was obvious," admitted Frankfurt coach Oliver Glasner. "The lads tried everything, but we just weren't in a position to win here. It was a deserved defeat." —AFP

Anti-dopers wrestle with paying moles

PARIS: Anti-doping organizations are torn over a suggestion from the director general of the International Cycling Union (ICU) to pay sports insiders to inform on their rivals or colleagues. "We need information from the peloton. We need Radio Peloton," Amina Lanaya told a French newspaper earlier this year. To fight what she called "a form of omerta" in her sport she said the UCI needed to "infiltrate the peloton, infiltrate certain teams, pay for grasses."

Paid criminal informants are a staple of police work in many countries, but Lanaya's suggestion that sport adopts the same approach has led to debate in the anti-doping community, even as they acknowledge that some of the biggest cases in recent years were broken thanks to tip-offs. One of the biggest

scandals in history, the vast system of institutionalized doping in Russia, gained world-wide attention in 2014 when German broadcaster ARD released a series of documentaries based on information from Vitaly Stepanov, a former employee of Russia's anti-doping agency RUSADA, and his wife, runner Yulia Stepanova.

"It is essential to have informants," said Damien Ressayot, head of the investigation department at the French anti-doping agency (AFLD), who pointed out that of the 11 violations of anti-doping rules, only one involved testing. "And on the other ten, we only get them by investigating," he explains. Those categories include the athlete's whereabouts failures, tampering with samples, possession as well as threats or retaliation against informants.

Yet Ressayot is not convinced that paying informants will work. "I don't see the point," he says. Guenter Younger, a former German policeman and Interpol officer who is the head of the investigations at the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), agreed. —AFP

Rincon's death shocking end for 'golden generation'

BOGOTA: When Freddy Rincon died following a traffic accident last week, he became the fourth player from Colombia's "golden generation" of the early 1990s to die in a shocking way. Before Rincon, known as the "Colossus", center-back Andres Escobar and striker Albeiro Usuriaga were shot dead in 1994 and 2004 respectively, while midfielder Herman Gaviria was struck by lightning during a training session in 2002.

On Saturday, hundreds of people paid homage to Rincon, the former Napoli, Real Madrid and Corinthians attacking midfielder, who died at the age of 55 after a collision between his vehicle and a bus in Cali. Colombia's first golden generation qualified for the 1990 World Cup, the country's first in 28 years, and qualified

Nine-man Masry snatch dramatic CAF Cup triumph

JOHANNESBURG: Egyptian club Al Masry overcame having two players sent off to snatch a dramatic 2-1 CAF Confederation Cup quarterfinal first leg victory over Moroccan visitors Renaissance Berkane on Monday. Haythem Layouni scored direct from a free-kick on 82 minutes to give the home team a narrow aggregate lead after a match that kicked off late on Sunday and finished past midnight.

Tunisian Layouni curled a long-range kick over a defensive wall and past goalkeeper Hamza Hamiani Akbi to put Masry ahead for the second time in an incident-packed match. Amr Marey gave Masry an early lead by sprinting on to a headed pass and controlling the bobbling ball to fire into the net from close range. Berkane, the 2020 Confederation Cup winners, equalized within seven minutes as Hamza Regragui tapped a low cross from Democratic Republic of Congo-born Chadrack Lukombe over the line.

Ill discipline cost Masry dearly in the second half, leading to red cards for midfielders Amr Moussa and Tunisian Elyes Jlassi and leaving the hosts having to play 25 minutes with nine men. In each case the referee initially showed a yellow card, only to upgrade to red having watched replays of the incidents on a touchline VAR monitor.

Berkane winger Youssef El-Fahli was the victim in both incidents at the 87,000-capacity Borg el Arab Stadium in the ancient Mediterranean city of Alexandria. Moussa was guilty of a late, studs-up tackle while Jlassi stamped on the right leg of Fahli after the Moroccan had fallen over.

Woodwork foils Pyramids

The best Confederation Cup showing by Masry was in 2018 when they reached the semi-finals before losing heavily to V Club from DR Congo. Pyramids, the other Egyptian title contenders in the African equivalent of the UEFA Europa League, were foiled twice by the woodwork in a 0-0 home draw against TP Mazembe from DR Congo. Although five-time African champions Mazembe spent much of a cagey clash in Cairo defending, they also had chances, notably when Zemanga Soze forced a fine save from veteran goalkeeper Sherif Ekramy.

The draw has tilted the odds toward overall victory for Mazembe, whose 11 CAF titles include two in the Confederation Cup. Mazembe boast a perfect record in Lubumbashi this season and have not conceded in four previous home matches in the competition while Pyramids have failed to win in three of five away games. —AFP



CALI: Fans attend a tribute to Colombian former football player Freddy Rincon at the Pascual Guerrero stadium on April 16, 2022. —AFP

again four years later. After a stunning 5-0 win away to Argentina in September 1993, Colombia were widely touted as one of the favorites in the United States, only to be eliminated in the group stages. —AFP

BNK official sponsor of padel's world number one Juan Lebron



KUWAIT: BNK Group Chairman Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi with padel's world number one Juan Lebron and padel champions. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: BNK Group is the official sponsor of padel's world number one Juan Lebron after BNK Group Chairman Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi signed a sponsorship contract with Lebron. Volvo Studio Kuwait and BNK Group hosted Lebron as a guest

in the presence of Kuwaiti padel stars and young players.

Ever since he started playing padel at age eight, Juan Lebron has never stopped working on his game. And now at 27, he is on top of the world.

Lebron and his partner Alejandro Galan are almost unstoppable in the World Padel Tour.

But despite being a leading padel competitor - the first Spanish-born player to top the WPT men's rankings - Lebron's love of another sport

runs deep, too. If he had not discovered padel, Lebron says he would have tried to be a professional football player, 'probably playing center-forward'. He is a lifelong supporter of top Spanish football team Betis.



(From left) Juan Lebron with Nasser Bader Al-Kharafi and Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi



Padel's world number one Juan Lebron and BNK Group Chairman Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi sign a sponsorship contract.



Lebron autographs a Vespa scooter



Mohammad Al-Gharabally and Hassan Al-Mousawi with attendees



Juan Lebron with Kuwaiti padel stars and young players.



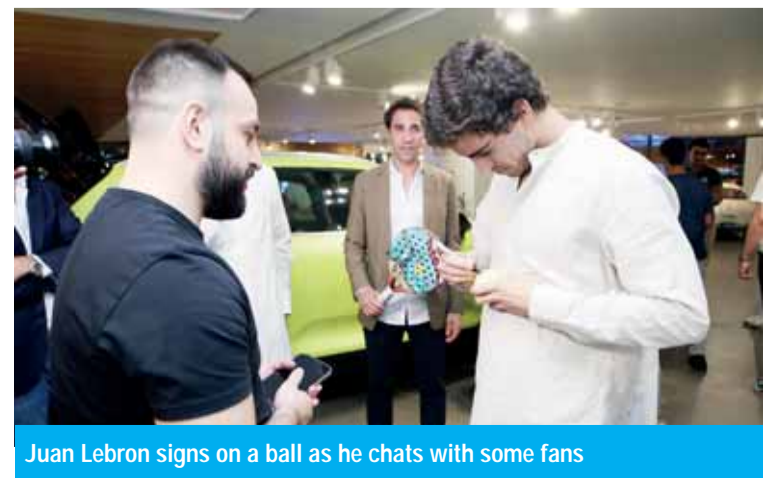
Juan Lebron is pictured while signing on the Volvo stand.



Padel's world number one Juan Lebron takes a selfie with fans.



Padel's world number one Juan Lebron poses for a group photo with fans and other officials.



Juan Lebron signs on a ball as he chats with some fans