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# Ukraine and Russia talk as sanctions rain on Moscow

Kyiv demands 'immediate ceasefire' • Ruble crashes • Shelling kills 11 in Kharkiv



**KHARKIV:** A man looks at a Ukrainian armored personnel carrier destroyed as a result of a fight not far from the center of this city located some 50 km from the Ukrainian-Russian border yesterday. — AFP

**KYIV:** Russia and Ukraine met yesterday for their first talks since the outbreak of war last week, with Kyiv demanding an "immediate ceasefire" and the West ratcheting up its financial sanctions in a bid to force the Kremlin to buckle. The meeting came as Russian shelling killed 11 people in Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv after days of fighting that have seen the biggest cities, including Kyiv, stay out of Russian hands.

The war has already forced more than 500,000 people into neighboring countries, the UN said yesterday, as fears mount of a protracted conflict in eastern Europe. Negotiators from Moscow and Kyiv held talks on the border between Belarus and Ukraine on day five of Moscow's invasion, but Ukrainian demands for a ceasefire "and the withdrawal of troops" were almost certain to be rejected.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had sought to play down expectations beforehand, saying: "I do not really believe in the outcome of this meeting, but let them try." Sanctions imposed by the West over the weekend had an immediate impact on Moscow financial markets yesterday, with the Russian ruble falling to a record low and the central bank more than doubling the key interest rate to 20 percent.

The United States also announced yesterday that it had banned all US transactions with Russia's central bank and would freeze its foreign reserves, while traditionally neutral Switzerland also said it would adopt the same measures as the EU. The sanctions are intended to change the calculus of Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin, but on the ground the roughly 100,000 Russian troops thought to be inside Ukraine pressed ahead with their invasion from the north, east and south on Monday.

"The Western sanctions on Russia are hard, but our country has the necessary potential to compensate the damage," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists yesterday. Putin on Sunday put Russia's nuclear forces on high alert in response to what he called "unfriendly" steps by the West, whose unity and speed in isolating the Russian economy has surprised observers.

There were more signs of rare dissent among the usually ultra-loyal oligarchs who surround the Russian leader - in addition to anti-war demonstrations in Russia that saw an estimated 2,100 people arrested on Sunday. "It is necessary to change the economic policy, it is necessary to end all this state capitalism," tycoon Oleg Deripaska wrote on Telegram while criticizing "fantasists" in charge.

Continued on Page 2

## News in brief

### Riyadh committed to OPEC+ deal

**RIYADH:** Saudi Arabia confirmed its commitment to the OPEC+ agreement with Russia Sunday, the Saudi Press Agency reported, as Moscow faces international criticism over its invasion of Ukraine. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman made the comments during a conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron that also covered the situation in Ukraine and its impact on the energy markets, said the agency. — AFP

### Hong Kong mulls lockdown

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong may impose a China-style hard lockdown that confines people to their homes, authorities signaled yesterday, with the city's zero-COVID strategy in tatters and bodies piling up in hospitals. Two years of strict zero-COVID policies kept the coronavirus largely bay but a breakthrough of the highly transmissible Omicron variant exposed how little authorities had done to prepare for a mass outbreak. — AFP (See Page 6)

### India growth slows, forecasts cut

**NEW DELHI:** India's growth rate slowed further in the last three months of 2021, the National Statistics Office said yesterday as it cut its forecast for the current financial year in the face of higher oil prices and geopolitical tensions. Asia's third-largest economy grew 5.4 percent year-on-year in the October to December period, NSO data showed. The NSO also lowered its growth estimates for the ongoing financial year from 9.2 percent to 8.9 percent. — AFP

### New Zealand relaxes borders

**AUCKLAND:** New Zealanders stranded overseas by the pandemic returned home to tears and hugs yesterday as the country began dismantling some of the world's toughest COVID-related border restrictions. At Auckland airport, relatives carrying signs such as "welcome home my dearest daughter" scooped up loved ones allowed into the country without mandatory hotel quarantine. — AFP (See Page 6)

## Rooftop rescues in Australia amid heavy flooding

**BRISBANE:** Tens of thousands of Australians were ordered to flee their homes yesterday, as torrential rain sent floodwaters to record levels, leaving residents stranded on the rooftops of their homes. Eight people have died, and the country's weather bureau has warned further severe thunderstorms and intense rainfall will cause "life-threatening flash flooding" across a swathe of the central Pacific coastal region.

In the country town of Lismore, resident Danika

Hardiman woke yesterday morning to find mud-brown floodwaters had reached the balcony of her second-floor apartment. She and her partner managed to climb up to the roof, where they were spotted by passing kayakers, who flagged down a makeshift rescue boat. "We were rescued by two guys in a boat, two locals," Hardiman told AFP, describing the scenes in Lismore as "horrific". "Imagine you're in a boat sailing past people's roofs," she said. "The scary thing is this is just the beginning, there's lots of rain to come."

With the town's levees already breached, 43,000 residents were ordered to leave by this morning. Emergency services were overwhelmed by calls for aid, leading some locals - including Lismore's mayor Steve Krieg - to turn to social media for help.

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**BRISBANE:** A man paddles his kayak next to a submerged bus on a flooded street in the town of Milton in suburban Brisbane yesterday. — AFP

## Landmark UN report harrowing catalogue of climate misery

**BRISBANE:** After decades of talking tough on global warming while greenhouse gas emissions rose, the world and its leaders were confronted yesterday by a horrifying "atlas of human suffering", and the promise of far worse to come. Nearly half the planet's population are highly vulnerable to a devastating array of climate impacts, according to a

landmark UN report that said time had very nearly run out to ensure a "livable future" for all.

Species extinction, ecosystem collapse, insect-borne disease, deadly heatwaves and megastorms, water shortages, reduced crop yields - all are measurably worse due to rising temperatures, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said. Just in the last year, the world has seen a cascade of unprecedented floods, heatwaves and wildfires across four continents. All these impacts will accelerate in the coming decades even if the fossil fuel pollution driving climate change is rapidly brought to heel, the 195-nation IPCC warned.

As nations struggle to finally bend the curve of carbon dioxide emissions downward, they must also

## Afghans resort to selling kidneys to feed families

**HERAT, Afghanistan:** Jobless, debt ridden, and struggling to feed his children, Nooruddin felt he had no choice but to sell a kidney - one of a growing number of Afghans willing to sacrifice an organ to save their families. The practice has become so widespread in the western city of Herat that a nearby settlement is bleakly nicknamed "one kidney village". "I had to do it for the sake of my children," Nooruddin told AFP in the city, close to the border

with Iran. "I didn't have any other option."

Afghanistan has been plunged into financial crisis following the Taliban takeover six months ago, worsening an already dire humanitarian situation after decades of war. The foreign aid which once propped up the country has been slow to return, with the hardline Islamists also cut off from Afghan assets held abroad.

The trickle-down effect has particularly hurt Afghans like Nooruddin, 32, who quit his factory job when his salary was slashed to 3,000 Afghani (about \$30) soon after the Taliban's return, mistakenly believing he would find something better. But, with hundreds of thousands unemployed across the country, nothing else was available. In desperation, he sold a kidney for a short-term fix. — AFP (See Page 5)



**HERAT:** In this photo taken on Feb 4, 2022, Afghan men who sold their kidneys show their operation scars in Sayshanba Bazar village in Injil district. — AFP

## Local

# Kuwait underlines importance of unifying Arab position on Ukraine

## Emergency League Council meeting reflects Arab concerns: Al-Qahtani



CAIRO: The extraordinary session of the Arab League Council being held in Cairo yesterday.— KUNA photos

CAIRO: Kuwait stressed yesterday the importance of unifying Arab position on the Ukrainian crisis in line with international law and the United Nations (UN). This came in a speech by the Kuwaiti Assistant Foreign Minister for Arab World Affairs, Minister Plenipotentiary Nasser Al-Qahtani, when he chaired the extraordinary session of the Arab League Council at the level of permanent delegates, according to Egypt's request to discuss the current developments in Ukraine.

He stressed that the emergency meeting reflects the great concern of the Arab states of the Ukraine developments and its repercussions on global and Arab security and stability. He pointed out that Kuwait affirmed its firm position from the beginning of the crisis to stick with the international law in rejecting force and threats to resolve disputes between states. He added that Kuwait emphasized the need to respect the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine, supporting all international efforts to negotiate and find a peaceful

solution. In his speech, he expressed his sincere thanks to Egypt on calling for the extraordinary session of the Arab League Council at the level of delegates and for the rapid response to it.

Earlier, the League of Arab States



### Kuwait heads extraordinary meeting

(LAS) called yesterday to engage in serious international action aimed at ending the Ukrainian crisis politically and diplomatically as the best way to address the current situation. This came in a message to the Secretary General of LAS Ahmad Aboul Gheit, which was read by the Assistant Secretary General and Head of the Secretary General's Office Ambassador

Husam Zaki, before the extraordinary meeting of the League Council at the level of permanent delegates on the situation in Ukraine, headed by Kuwait.

Aboul Gheit stressed the importance of restoring stability and achieving security for all to respect international law and the Charter of the United Nations, noting that the General Secretariat is following with great concern the successive developments in Ukraine and their serious military and humanitarian consequences. He expressed the hope that each party will bear its responsibility and that all efforts will be focused on sparing civilians, while emphasizing the commitment of all to the need to respect international humanitarian law. He underlined the need to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those who need it, especially considering the continuing influx of Ukrainian refugees to neighboring countries during these dangerous conditions.

In this context, he urged all peace-loving countries and organizations to



CAIRO: Kuwaiti Assistant Foreign Minister for Arab World Affairs, Minister Plenipotentiary Nasser Al-Qahtani.

work quickly to stop the escalation, restore dialogue and seek to settle the crisis through diplomacy to avoid the deterioration of the situation and the expansion of the conflict. They are aware of the positions of all parties,

who are all friendly parties, and believe that it was necessary to intensify work to reach arrangements that satisfy everyone without resorting to military force, since wars have their sad and high costs, he said. — KUNA

## Ukraine and Russia talk as...

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Western defense officials and the Kyiv government say battling Ukrainian troops have kept the country's major cities out of Russian hands so far despite incursions in the capital and the second largest city, Kharkiv, over the weekend. Kharkiv came under heavy shelling as the negotiators were meeting on Monday, according to regional governor Oleg Sinegubov who said that there were 11 dead and dozens wounded.

"As a result of the bombardments that are ongoing, we cannot call on the emergency services," he wrote on Telegram. The small southern city of Berdyansk has also been occupied, however, Ukrainian officials said.

In Kyiv yesterday, after a relatively calm evening, people rushed out to buy food, forming long queues, after the lifting of a strict curfew imposed Saturday. "You don't conquer a country in two days," said Olivier Kempf, a security analyst at the Foundation for Strategic Research, a Paris-based think-tank, warning against Western optimism about Russia's slower-than-expected progress. "There have been difficulties, yes, that's war. They perhaps have logistical problems, but no matter what anyone says, they are still advancing," he told AFP.

The UN's refugee agency UNHCR said over half a million people had fled the conflict zone since Thursday. "We definitely have an interest in reaching some agreements as soon as possible," Medinsky said in televised remarks before the start of the meeting.

Zelensky meanwhile issued another video address, wearing his now trademark green khaki sweatshirt, calling on the European Union to agree to "the immediate



UKRAINE: A volunteer demonstrates the preparation of Molotov cocktails at the Pravda - (Truth) brewery in Lviv on February 27, 2022. — AFP

accession of Ukraine via a new special procedure". But European Council president Charles Michel stressed there were "different opinions and sensitivities within the EU on enlargement."

The EU over the weekend announced it would provide €450 million (\$500 million) for Ukraine to buy weapons, including Russian-made fighter jets that Ukrainian pilots could operate. Fresh sanctions announced over the weekend on Russia's economy are intended to cut it off from the global financial system in the way that Iran, Venezuela or North Korea have seen their ability to trade with outside world all but ended.

Russia's central bank said yesterday it was more than doubling its key interest rate to 20 percent, dramatically raising the cost of borrowing. The value of the ruble collapsed against the dollar, down 17 percent in late afternoon trading, while the Moscow Stock Market was closed for the day to prevent an expected mass sell-off.

The ruble was trading at around 94 to the dollar yesterday afternoon, around a third of its value compared with 2014, with long lines of Russians seeking to take out money from their bank accounts.

Many Russian banks have been excluded from the SWIFT bank system, which is used to settle international trade, and the Russian central bank has seen its foreign assets frozen, depriving Moscow of access to these emergency funds.

Ukraine has reported 352 civilian deaths, including 16 children, while its army claims to have killed 4,300 Russian troops. Russia has acknowledged that a number of its forces had been killed or injured, without giving figures. The UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said Monday at least 102 civilians, including seven children, had been killed in Ukraine. — AFP

## Landmark UN report harrowing...

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Svitlana Krakovska, who headed Ukraine's delegation, spoke passionately at the conference's final plenary about the link between conflict and global warming. "Human-induced climate change and the war on Ukraine have the same roots - fossil fuels - and our dependence on them," she said.

Among the report's key takeaways was the intertwined fates of human and natural systems. It stressed that climate change cannot be tamed unless degraded forests and oceans that stock carbon are restored and protected; and the ecosystems on which we and other life forms depend for clean water, air and soil will not survive intact in a world of runaway warming.

The report made clear that a viable future rests on a knife's edge. Some dire impacts are already irreversible, such as the likely demise of nearly all shallow water corals. Others points-of-no-return lie just beyond the Paris Agreement's aspirational target of capping global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, the report warned. The 2015 treaty enjoins nations to hold the increase in temperatures to "well below" 2C, but recent science has left no doubt that a 1.5C threshold is far safer.

Even in optimistic scenarios of rapid reductions in

## Rooftop rescues in Australia amid...

Continued from Page 1

"If anyone has a boat and can get to Engine Street, there's a pregnant lady sitting on her roof. HELP Please," he posted on Facebook yesterday.

Emergency rescue services said they had also deployed a helicopter to pluck other stranded residents from rooftops. More than 400 mm of rain has fallen in the past 24 hours around Lismore, with the town's Wilson River still rising, according to the weather bureau. Water levels in Lismore have not yet reached their expected peak of 14 m - but they are already the worst floods the town has experienced.

Flooding across eastern Australia has now killed eight people, after a man in his 50s died yesterday when his car was swept away by floodwaters in the northern state of Queensland. Millions of people

carbon pollution, projections of climate impacts are sobering. Up to 14 percent of land species face a "very high" risk of extinction with only 1.5C of warming, the IPCC said, bolstering calls for conservation of 30 to 50 percent of the world's land and ocean territory. The threat grows with every fraction of a degree. By 2050 there will be more than a billion people in coastal areas highly vulnerable to storm surges amplified by rising seas by 2050. Per usual, the poorest will often be the hardest hit.

By 2100, the value of global assets within future 1-in-100-year coastal floodplains will be about \$10 trillion in a moderate greenhouse gas emissions scenario, according to the report. The IPCC assessment - the sixth since 1990 - highlights the need to cope with unavoidable climate impacts on almost every page. Overall, the IPCC warns, global warming is outpacing our preparations for a climate-added world: "At current rates of adaptation planning and implementation, the adaptation gap will continue to grow."

The report also trains a spotlight on irreversible and potentially catastrophic changes in the climate system known as tipping points, triggered at different thresholds of global heating. These include the melting of ice sheets atop Greenland and the West Antarctic with enough frozen water to lift oceans 13 m; the morphing of the Amazon basin from tropical forest to savannah; and the disruption of global ocean currents that distribute heat across the globe. "The cumulative scientific evidence is unequivocal: Climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and planetary health," the report concluded. — AFP

have been told to stay home and nearly 1,000 schools in Queensland remain closed because of the floods. A 70-year-old man miraculously survived after his houseboat, swept along by the raging Brisbane River, collided with a ferry terminal and quickly sank.

Members of the public were able to rescue the man, with one telling public broadcaster ABC they had linked arms to create a human chain and fish the man from the river unharmed. "I don't know how he survived it, to be honest," onlooker Matthew Toomey said. Rain has battered eastern Australia for the better part of a week as an extreme weather system - the tail end of a wet summer fueled by La Nina - has moved south down the country's coast, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake.

Queensland premier Annastacia Palaszczuk said yesterday that some regions of her tropical state had experienced a year's worth of rainfall in just days. Australia has been on the sharp end of climate change, with droughts, deadly bushfires, bleaching events on the Great Barrier Reef and floods becoming more common and more intense as global climate patterns change. — AFP

Local

# Worried Ukrainian expats in Kuwait condemn invasion

## Ukrainians spend sleepless nights, pray for country's sovereignty

By Ben Garcia

**KUWAIT:** The Ukrainian community in Kuwait has denounced Russian aggression against their country. Olga Urshuliak, 34, who has been working in Kuwait for the past four years as a fitness instructor, said her country's sovereignty is under attack. She added as a Ukrainian, she will never surrender, although she was worried about the safety of her mother.

"I am very afraid for my mom who is alone at home. I am the only daughter to my parents. My mom is in western Ukraine, relatively safe from the heavy bombardment by Russia, but I am afraid of separatist groups taking advantage of the situation and killing people. I have never been afraid like this before for the safety of my mother and the rest of my relatives in Ukraine," a sobbing Urshuliak told Kuwait Times. "What keeps me sane is the fact that I am in constant communication with my mom. My relatives in Kyiv are hiding and cannot come out because they are afraid of missiles falling," she added.

Urshuliak said many of her countrymen who were in Kuwait left to fight alongside Ukrainian soldiers. "Several of my friends left Kuwait to fight against the invaders. Given the chance, I also want to go home to fight, but I am a woman and the situation is very hard, so I am helping in other ways to defeat our enemies," she said. "Putin is threatening us with nuclear weapons. But we will fight till the end. I hope the world will do something and fight alongside with us. We just want to protect the sovereignty of our land," she said.

According to Olga, her mom is ready to die and does not want to move out from her place. "My father died last year. If he would've been alive, he would've surely joined the Ukrainian military and taken up arms to fight against the aggressor. He was a very patriotic guy. We are not terrorists; we are fighting for our country and we will never give up," Urshuliak noted.

Russian shelling killed at least 11 civilians in Ukraine's second most populated city Kharkiv yesterday, the regional governor said, adding that dozens more were wounded. The shelling comes on the fifth day of a Russian invasion of Ukraine



KUWAIT: Dmitro Malets displays the Ukrainian national flag

and one day after Ukrainian troops repelled an attack on Kharkiv by Moscow's army, according to reports. The Kremlin said earlier yesterday that the Russian military's main task was to ensure the safety of civilians.

### Second home

Olga loves Kuwait dearly and considers Kuwait as her second home. "I am very happy and satisfied with Kuwait. I am willing to die for my country. Thanks to the people fighting with us; thanks to our patriotic soldiers of Ukraine. I love my country and I will fight till the end. Ukraine is for the Ukrainian people. I will never give up, just like the president of our country Volodymyr



'Kuwait is our second home'

Zelensky, who really acted as a leader in this time of crisis. I want this war to stop. I want Russians to leave our country," she added.

Dmitro Malets, 48, a teacher in Kuwait, said he has been sleepless during the invasion of his country. He is monitoring his 25-year-old son, who joined the Ukrainian military to defend his country's sovereignty. "I am very proud of my son, although as a father I cannot sleep well because I am afraid of my son's safety. I have been working in Kuwait for the past 10 years and have never been so proud of my son until today. He is a fighter and we will overcome this huge crisis in our country.



Olga Urshuliak with her mom in Ukraine

We are highly motivated because the support of our president is intact. He is leading everyone to fight against Russian soldiers," he said. Dmitro's family lives around 140 km north of Kyiv. His wife is also a teacher in Kuwait. They also have a 13-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son.

Olga and Dmitro are just two of around 600-700 Ukrainians in Kuwait, mostly working in the sectors of engineering, medicine, sport and education. Olsha Sehedra, Third Secretary at the Ukrainian Embassy in Kuwait, confirmed Ukrainian citizens are willing to fight for their country's freedom. "Yes, there are a number of brave Ukrainian men who went back to Ukraine to fight along with our soldiers. They were called by our president to fight for our country's freedom. In fact, even foreigners are volunteering to fight alongside our soldiers. Our embassy is encouraging volunteers willing to join us in our struggle," she noted.



KUWAIT: Harley, the international bikers team holds a parade on Jaber Causeway. — KUNA

## Kuwait's Harley team drives across country to celebrate national days

**KUWAIT:** The international bikers team, Harley, organized a parade across Kuwait in celebration of the National and Liberation Days. The national celebration is an opportunity for the team to present their sport to people, while also bringing awareness of the importance of abiding by traffic laws, head of the team Jameel Al-Ali told KUNA yesterday.

The team includes over 200 members participating in events with 20 to 50 motorcycles, he

said, adding that they had stopped parades for two years due to the coronavirus. The team will continue driving across Jaber Bridge, near Kuwait Towers and the sea front for the rest of the holidays, said Al-Ali. As for dangers of motorcycles, he noted that the team promotes safety measures while riding, including wearing helmets and protective vests and focuses on driving safely and responsibly. — KUNA



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# Kuwaiti para athletes return with 34 medals after West Asia Games

## Kuwaiti athletes win 16 gold, 11 silver and 7 bronze medals

By Abdellatif Sharaa

**KUWAIT:** The Kuwait national team returned earlier in the week after participating in the West Asia Paralympic Games in Bahrain. The delegation was received by Deputy Chairman of Kuwait Paralympic Committee, board members Sheikh Jaber Thamer Jaber Al-Ahmad and Fatima Hayat, Honorary President of Irada Disabled Sports Club Sheikhha Suhaila Al-Sabah, Chairman of Kuwait Disabled Sports Club Shafi Al-Hajeri and parents of athletes.

Kuwaiti athletes won 16 gold, 11 silver and 7 bronze medals in the third West Asia Paralympic Games. Iraq stood first, while UAE came second and Kuwait third with 34 medals. The games saw more than 700 athletes from 12 countries participating.

Deputy Chairman of Kuwait Olympic Committee Mohammad Jaafar lauded this major achievement. "We are proud of this performance by Kuwait athletes and happy with the number of medals. This adds to the joy of celebrating the national and liberation days, and we hope for more achievements in the future," he said.

Chairman of the Paralympic Committee Nasser Al-Ajmi said the achievement was due to the efforts of everyone, adding that winning 34 medals is an unprecedented achievement and is considered a new beginning for disabled sports in various games. Ajmi said the Paralympic Committee is keen on developing all games with the cooperation of all disabled clubs, adding that efforts are being made according to a clear mechanism, as games are under specialized committees.

Member of the board of KOC Sheikh Jaber Thamer Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah said the disabled athletes added to the happiness of the Kuwaiti people, as they represented Kuwait at their best. KOC board member Fatima Hayat congratulated Kuwaiti athletes for their achievements. "We congratulate the board of the paralympic committee and Kuwait



people". She said Kuwaiti women proved their abilities during the third West Asia Paralympic Games.

Honorary President of Irada Disabled Sports Club Sheikhha Suhaila Al-Sabah expressed satisfaction at the return of Kuwait athletes with the medals, adding that this paves the way to compete for top places at the international level.

Meanwhile, Chairman of Kuwait Wheelchair Basketball Federation and Chairman of Kuwait Disabled Sports Club Shafi Al-Hajeri dedicated Kuwait national wheelchair basketball team's West Asia Cup win to HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and the Kuwaiti government and people.

Hajeri promised more achievements to keep Kuwait's flag flying high in the coming continental and international events. The team won all its matches during the 3rd West Asia games held in



Manama. Kuwait's win coincides with the celebration of its 61st National Day and 31st Liberation Day.



## Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah meets French ambassador

**KUWAIT:** Sheikh Mubarak Abdullah Mubarak Al-Sabah met with the Ambassador of the French Republic to Kuwait Claire Le Flecher. During the meeting, they discussed a number of important issues and ways of future cooperation in several economic and cultural fields. The French ambassador expressed her delight at the meeting and congratulated Kuwait on the occasion of the celebrations of National and Liberation Days. For his part, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah praised the cooperation of the French ambassador, her extensive knowledge and her interest to strengthen Kuwaiti-French relations.



## Saud Al-Turaiji Museum narrates Kuwait's history, cultural legacy



**KUWAIT:** Saud Al-Turaiji Museum is one of the historical museums in Kuwait, with many rare collectables that narrate different aspects of Kuwait's history and the lives of its people. The museum includes equipment for old Kuwaiti professions

and crafts, in addition to special rooms related to the rulers of Kuwait and their belongings. It also displays the contents of the ancient Kuwaiti houses including sitting rooms, kitchens and rare old doors. — AFP



**KUWAIT:** Students of India International School, Mangaf have made a marvelous model of Kuwait Tower with around 50 thousand used pens. After strenuous effort that stretched for six months, the structure was unveiled on February 24 coinciding with Kuwait national days. Many dignitaries attended the function. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## Kuwait oil exports to Japan jump 49.9%

**TOKYO:** Kuwait's crude oil exports to Japan in January surged 49.9 percent from a year earlier to 6.66 million barrels, or 215,000 barrels per day (bpd), for the fifth straight monthly expansion, government data showed yesterday. As Japan's fourth-biggest oil provider, Kuwait supplied 7.9 percent of the Asian nation's total crude imports, the

Japanese Natural Resources and Energy Agency said in a preliminary report. Japan's overall imports of crude oil in January increased 5.2 percent year-on-year to 2.72 million bpd, up for the sixth month in a row.

Shipments from the Middle East accounted for 91.8 percent of the total, down 1.7 percentage points from the year before. Saudi Arabia remained in the top spot, although imports from the kingdom declined 4.6 percent from a year earlier to 1.12 million bpd, followed by the United Arab Emirates with 822,000 bpd, up 5.1 percent. Qatar ranked third with 237,000 bpd and Russia fifth with 117,000 bpd, respectively. Japan is the world's-third biggest oil consumer after China and the US. — KUNA



Virus-hit Hong Kong considers lockdown as bodies pile up

## Russia's growing ties to Syria amid military backing

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HERAT: In this photo Afghan men who sold their kidneys over a period of the last four years pose for a picture showing their scars from the operation at Sayshanba Bazaar in the Injil district of Herat province. — AFP

# Desperate Afghans sell their kidneys to feed families

**'If I don't sell my kidney, I will be forced to sell my one-year-old daughter'**

**HERAT, Afghanistan:** Jobless, debt ridden, and struggling to feed his children, Nooruddin felt he had no choice but to sell a kidney—one of a growing number of Afghans willing to sacrifice an organ to save their families. The practice has become so widespread in the western city of Herat that a nearby settlement is bleakly nicknamed “one kidney village”. “I had to do it for the sake of my children,” Nooruddin told AFP in the city, close to the border with Iran. “I didn't have any other option.”

Afghanistan has been plunged into financial crisis following the Taliban takeover six months ago, worsening an already dire humanitarian situation after decades of war. The foreign aid which once propped up the country has been slow to return, with the hardline Islamists also cut off from Afghan assets held abroad. The trickle-down effect has particularly hurt Afghans like Nooruddin, 32, who quit his factory job when his salary was slashed to 3,000 Afghanis (about \$30) soon after the Taliban's return, mistakenly believing he would find something better.

But, with hundreds of thousands unemployed across the country, nothing else was available. In desperation, he sold a kidney as a short term fix. “I regret it now,” he said outside his home, where faded clothes hang from a tree, and a plastic sheet serves as a window pane. “I can no longer work. I'm in pain and I cannot lift anything heavy.” His family now relies on their 12-year-old son for money, who polishes shoes for 70 cents a day.

Noorudin was among eight people AFP spoke to who had sold a kidney to feed their families or pay off debt—some for as little as \$1,500. It is illegal to sell or buy organs in most developed nations, where donors are usually related to the recipient or are people acting out of altruism. In Afghanistan, however, the practice is unregulated. “There is no law... to control how the organs can be donated or sold, but the consent of the donor is necessary,” said Professor Mohammad Wakil Matin, a former top surgeon at a hospital in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

Mohamad Bassir Osmani, a surgeon at one of two hospitals where the majority of Herat's transplants are performed, confirmed “consent” was the key. “We take written consent and a video recording from them—especially from the donor,” he said, adding hundreds of surgeries have been performed in Herat over the past five years. “We have never investigated where the patient or donor comes from, or how. It's not our job.”

The Taliban did not respond to requests by AFP for comment on the practice, but Osmani said the country's new rulers have plans to clamp down on the trade and are forming a committee to regulate it.

Afghans desperate for money are usually matched by brokers with wealthy patients, who travel to Herat from across the country—and sometimes even from India and Pakistan. The recipient pays both the hospital fees and the donor. Azzya's family had so little food that two of her three children have recently been treated for malnourishment. She felt she had no choice but to sell an organ, and openly met a broker who matched her with a recipient from the southern province of Nimroz. “I sold my kidney for 250,000 Afghanis (around \$2,500),” she said from her small damp room. “I had to do it. My husband isn't working, we have debts,” she added. Now her husband, a daily laborer, is planning on doing the same. “People have become

**'I sold my kidney for \$2,500'**

poorer,” he said. “Many people are selling their kidneys out of desperation.”

**'One-kidney village'**

On the outskirts of Herat lies Sayshanba Bazaar, a village made up of hundreds of people displaced by years of conflict. Known as “one-kidney village”, dozens of residents have sold their organs after word spread among destitute families of the money

to be made. From one family, five brothers sold a kidney each in the last four years, thinking it would save them from poverty. “We are still in debt and as poor as we were before,” said Ghulam Nebi, showing off his scar. In developed nations, donors and recipients usually go on to lead full and normal lives, but their after-surgery health is usually closely monitored—and also dependent on a balanced lifestyle and diet.

That luxury is often not available to poor Afghans who sell a kidney and still find themselves trapped in poverty—and sometimes in ill-health. Professor Matin said only some donors arranged for follow-up checks. “There are no public health facilities to register kidney sellers and donors for regular examinations to check on implications for their health,” he added. Shakila, already a mother of two at 19, underwent the procedure shortly before the Taliban seized power, bypassing a broker by searching out a patient at a Herat hospital.

“We had no choice because of hunger,” she said, made up with black eyeliner with a scarf covering the rest of her face. She sold her kidney for \$1,500 — most of which went to settle the family's debt. Mother-of three Aziza, meanwhile, is waiting for her opportunity after meeting a hospital staffer who is trying to match her with a donor. “My children roam on the streets begging,” she told AFP, tears welling. “If I don't sell my kidney, I will be forced to sell my one-year-old daughter.” — AFP

## Taliban ban Afghans from evacuating amid massive security sweep

**KABUL:** The Taliban have clamped down on Afghans leaving the country as, separately, their forces continue a massive security sweep, going house-to-house across the capital yesterday in a “clearing operation”. The new travel ban was announced late Sunday by Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, who packaged the restrictions as being aimed at preventing hardship for Afghans abroad. Evacuations organized by nations or non-governmental organizations have been banned, while even families attempting to leave the country by their own means now need “an excuse”, or they will be stopped by immigration.

“I have to say clearly that persons who leave the country along with their families and have no excuse... we are preventing them,” Mujahid told a press conference late Sunday. Women will also not be able to fly abroad unless accompanied by a male relative—mirroring similar domestic restrictions introduced last year which bar solo travel between cities and towns. “If they (women) want to travel abroad, they should have a chaperone,” Mujahid said. “This is the order of Islamic sharia law.” The announcement came the same weekend a search for “kidnappers, thieves and looters” kicked off in Kabul and other Afghan cities—a so-called “clearing operation” separate from the travel measures. — AFP

## 'Another war': Afghan flees Russian bombs in Ukraine

**MEDYKA, Poland:** After leaving Afghanistan a year ago, Ajmal Rahmani believed he had found a haven of peace in Ukraine. This week, he and his family had to flee again—this time to Poland to the sounds of Russian bombs. “I run from one war, come to another country and another war starts. Very bad luck,” Rahmani told AFP shortly after crossing into Poland. His seven-year-old daughter Marwa clutched a beige-colored soft toy dog as Rahmani spoke. Together with Marwa, his wife Mina and son Omar, 11, the family walked the last 30 kilometers (19 miles) to the crossing on foot because of the gridlock on the Ukrainian side of the border.

After arriving at the Medyka on the Polish side, the family waited with other refugees for a bus that will take them to the nearby city of Przemysl. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled during the four days of conflict into neighboring countries, mainly Poland, Hungary and Romania. While most of the refugees are Ukrainian, among them are also students and migrant workers from further afield, including Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, India and Nepal.

Rahmani, who is in his 40s, said he worked for NATO in Afghanistan for 18 years at Kabul airport. He decided to leave the country four months before the US withdrawal because he received threats and was so scared he kept his children out of school. Before that “I had a good life in Afghanistan, I had a private house, I had a private car, I had a good salary,” said



POLAND: Ajmal Rahmani from Afghanistan and his children are seen as refugees from many different countries - from Africa, Middle East and India. — AFP

Rahmani. “I sold my car, my house, my everything. I lost everything,” he said. But he added: “nothing is better than my love, than my family life”.

Rahmani said he struggled to get a visa to leave Afghanistan and decided to go to Ukraine because it was the only country that would take him in. They set up home in Odessa—a Black Sea port city. Four days ago, when Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, they had to leave everything again and travelled the 1,110 kilometers to the border. Polish authorities said nearly 213,000 people have crossed into Poland from

Ukraine since Thursday. Rahmani and his family, like others without a Polish visa, now have 15 days to get registered, said Tomasz Pietrzak, a lawyer with the Ocalenie (Salvation) Foundation, a charity for migrants. The timeline is unlikely given the numbers.

“Poland will have to very quickly amend its legislation on this issue,” he said. Rahmani said he was concerned about the future but was encouraged by the warm welcome he received from volunteers and officials assisting the stream of refugees on the Polish side of the border. — AFP

## International

# Virus-hit Hong Kong considers lockdown as bodies pile up

## HK recorded 193,000 cases and 636 deaths since December 31

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong may impose a China-style hard lockdown that confines people to their homes, authorities signaled yesterday, with the city's zero-COVID strategy in tatters and bodies piling up in hospitals. Two years of strict zero-COVID policies kept the coronavirus largely bay but a breakthrough of the highly transmissible Omicron variant exposed how little authorities had done to prepare for a mass outbreak. Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam previously ruled out a citywide lockdown and instead has ordered all 7.4 million residents to be tested in March. But in a U-turn, health secretary Sophia Chan confirmed yesterday that it was still an option. Asked by a presenter at Commercial Radio whether a lockdown was still ruled out she replied: "No. We are still discussing."

"From a public health perspective, to bring out the best effect of compulsory universal testing, we need to reduce people's movements to some extent," she added. Chan's comments came a day after Li Dachuan, a senior mainland Chinese official involved in a joint taskforce on the virus with Hong Kong authorities, described a lockdown as "the most ideal and best approach to achieve the best effect of universal tests".

### Breaking point

The revelation adds fresh uncertainty and anxiety for residents and businesses in a city gripped by the kind of chaos that was more familiar at the start of the pandemic. Hong Kong has now recorded

193,000 cases and 636 deaths in the current wave since December 31. That compares to just 12,000 infections and 205 deaths for the whole of the rest of the pandemic.

Hospitals have been stretched to breaking point for weeks and on Sunday officials revealed bodies were piling up at hospitals because mortuaries are full. "At this moment, we face a problem of transportation of dead bodies from hospital to public mortuary," Hospital Authority chief manager Lau Ka-hin told reporters. "That's why there are some bodies who were initially planned to be transported to a public mortuary, but stayed in hospital."

### High mortality rate

Hong Kong's seven-day average death rate is currently running at around eight per one million people. That compares with five per million for the United States, 1.80 for Britain and 1.36 for Singapore which, like Hong Kong, initially opted for zero-COVID but shifted more recently to a mitigation strategy and reopening to the wider world. Officials have revealed that 91 percent of those who have died in the current wave were not fully vaccinated. The vast majority of the dead — 92 percent — are people aged 60 or above with the median age 84 years old as the virus rips through care homes in the densely populated city.

Despite ample supplies Hong Kong had a dismal vaccination rate among over-70s before Omicron struck. China is now increasingly calling the shots on



**HONG KONG:** People queue on a street for COVID-19 test kits in Hong Kong's Sham Shui Po area as yet another record high number of new COVID-19 infections were recorded in the city. — AFP

Hong Kong's response with the joint taskforce operating out of the neighboring city of Shenzhen. Mainland crews are working on constructing temporary hospitals and isolation wards for the infected, although the current caseload far outstrips supply. Among those advising the government is Liang Wannian, a senior mainland official who was greeted by Lam as he arrived in Hong Kong on yesterday.

Liang was a key architect of the successful two-month lockdown in Wuhan where the coronavirus first emerged, a strategy China has continued to deploy in other cities as soon as cases are detected. Wuhan's official toll was 53,000 cases and it took two months to suppress with a full lockdown. Hong Kong has recorded that many cases in just two days and is also battling a much more infectious variant. — AFP

## 'Unprecedented' attacks hound Eritrean refugees in war-hit Ethiopia

**SEMERA, Ethiopia:** The scene has become all-too-common during Ethiopia's drawn-out war: thousands of Eritrean refugees, shell-shocked and separated from loved ones, fleeing on foot through harsh terrain to escape artillery and gunfire. It played out again this month, after the Bahrale refugee camp in the north-eastern Afar region sustained what survivors described as a brazen assault by rebels from neighboring Tigray. At least five people were killed and an untold number of women kidnapped. Those lucky enough to escape are now scattered across Afar, awaiting an uncertain future in a country they once saw as a haven from their repressive homeland.

The attack marked the first time Eritrean refugees were targeted outside Tigray, where the war began, and was the first such assault on Eritrean refugees belonging to the ethnic Afar minority. Yet in other respects, the incident followed a familiar pattern—one analysts say highlights failings of the Ethiopian government, the rebels and the international community at large. It has also renewed debate on how to accommodate one of the most vulnerable groups in Africa's second most populous country. "I just can't emphasize enough how unprecedented this is," said Sarah Miller, senior fellow with Refugees International, highlighting the "scale and scope" of abuses against Eritreans during every stage of the 15-month war. "Ethiopia is no longer a safe place for Eritrean refugees—that's quite clear."

### 'War crimes'

Eritrean refugees have a long history in northern Ethiopia, first arriving in 2000 towards the end of a two-year border war that killed tens of thousands. Before the current conflict broke out, some 113,000 Eritrean refugees were registered in Tigray and Afar, according to the UN. Most were fleeing the authoritarian rule of President Isaias Afwerki, whose abysmal rights record has led some to dub Eritrea "Africa's North Korea". Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize in large part for initiating a surprise rapprochement with Isaias following a two-decade stalemate.

Yet Isaias and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Tigray's former ruling party, remained bitter enemies, and Eritrean refugees felt at home in the region. That changed after Abiy sent troops to topple the TPLF in November 2020, enlisting support from Eritrean soldiers. Early in the conflict, refugees at two camps near the border faced abuses—including killings, rapes and looting—at the hands of Tigrayan rebels and Eritrean soldiers that Human Rights Watch has termed "evident war crimes". Those two camps were ultimately destroyed in what one aid group called a "rampage" after the area came under Eritrean control. Thousands remain missing. Last July, fighting reached two other camps farther south in Tigray. Since then, refugees there have faced extended cuts to food and medical aid, and three were killed in a drone strike in January.

The attack on the Bahrale camp began February 3, part of a broader offensive in Afar that diplomats say represents the latest setback to hoped-for peace talks. "Heavy weapons were thrown into the refugee camp and Tigray forces controlled the area. The same day they started looting property," recalled one survivor, according to testimony collected by an aid agency and shared with AFP. — AFP

## On the frontline in Liberia's fight to save the pangolin

**GBARPOLU COUNTY:** Clutching a single-barreled rifle in lush northern Liberia, Emmanuel says his 10 children were able to get an education thanks to his gun. The small wiry man, whose full name AFP is withholding, ignores a ban on hunting bushmeat and earns most of his cash catching pangolins or monkeys in the surrounding jungle. In the dry season, Emmanuel waits for dark and then hikes into the jungle with his rifle and machete.

Pangolins, scale-covered insect-eating mammals that are typically the size of a full-grown cat, are mostly active at night, snuffling through deadwood for ants and termites. The species is under increasing threat worldwide, but remains a delicacy in the impoverished West African country.

Their scales—made of keratin, like human nails—are also prized by consumers abroad for their supposed medicinal properties, fetching much-needed money. "We kill it, we eat it," said Emmanuel, in a village in Gbarpolu County, five-hours drive north of the capital Monrovia along pitted dirt roads. "Then the scales, we sell it," added the hunter. "There's no other option". Believed to be the world's most trafficked animal, pangolins are only found in the wild in Asia and Africa, but their numbers are plummeting under pressure from poaching. Asian pangolins once met the strong demand in East Asian countries such as China and

Vietnam, where the animal's scales are used in traditional concoctions. But Africa became the major source for the trade from 2013, according to the UN's drugs and crime office UNODC, in a shift likely prompted by falling pangolin numbers in Asia.

### Prime target

Countries such as Liberia, as well as Nigeria, Cameroon and Guinea, are all origin markets. Phillip Tem Dia, who works for Flora and Fauna International, a non-governmental organization in Liberia, said pangolin killings "really, really increased" since the start of the scales trade. Liberia is a prime target for traffickers. Over 40 percent of the country is covered in rainforest and governance is weak. It is also still recovering from brutal civil wars from 1989 to 2003, and the 2014-16 Ebola crisis. With conservationists sounding the alarm, Liberia's government has banned the hunting and sale of pangolins.

But it is battling a generations-old tradition of its impoverished citizens consuming the animal. Patchy data hampers conservation efforts too. Pangolins are solitary and reclusive, and their number in the wild remains a mystery. "There are huge gaps in our understanding," said Rebecca Drury, FFI head of wildlife trade. Available evidence suggests a stark decline in numbers, however.



**MONROVIA:** A woman displays a bowl of Pangolin scales, ready to be sold on the outskirts of Bopolu. — AFP

### 'Staggering' losses

Known as "ants-bears" in Liberia after their favorite food, pangolins move at a waddle and have no jaws or teeth. They roll up into a hedgehog-like ball when threatened. Their scales provide protection. But humans can simply pick pangolins up and carry them off. "They are very sensitive animals," said Julie Vanassche, the director of Liberia's Libassa Wildlife Sanctuary, near Monrovia, which rehabilitates rescued pangolins.

Many die of stress in captivity, she says, despite round-the-clock care. The sanctuary has released 42 back into the wild since opening its doors 2017, but the number is likely a drop in the ocean. A 2020 study by the US Agency for

International Development estimated that between 650,000 and 8.5 million pangolins were removed from the wild between 2009 and 2020.

"Either way, the numbers are staggering," the study said, listing deforestation, bushmeat consumption, and the scales trade as reasons behind the decline in pangolins. According to the UNODC, seizures of pangolin scales have also increased tenfold since 2014, suggesting a booming global trade. In July, China seized two tons of smuggled scales, for example. Vanassche, a Belgian with a pangolin tattoo on her forearm, said the future is "not looking great". "We need to act very fast—it's almost over," she said. — AFP

## Hugs, tears as 'Fortress NZ' relaxes border

**AUCKLAND:** New Zealanders stranded overseas by the pandemic returned home to tears and hugs yesterday as the country began dismantling some of the world's toughest COVID-related border restrictions. At Auckland airport, relatives carrying signs such as "welcome home my dearest daughter" scooped up loved ones allowed into the country without mandatory hotel quarantine for the first time in almost two years. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said the change was cause for celebration, particularly for the tens of thousands of New Zealanders overseas keen to return home. "We can't wait to see you," Ardern told reporters in Wellington. "It's also a huge milestone for our

tourism sector and regional economies."

Until now, Kiwi expats entering the country needed to undergo 10 days of isolation in expensive and over-subscribed hotel accommodation. The requirement was dropped for New Zealanders arriving from Australia yesterday and will be extended to all expatriates on Friday. Ardern said the arrivals will not have to self-isolate, as originally planned. She also said the government was planning to speed up the staged reopening of the border to all travelers, although no timetable has yet been set.

Ardern said the rapid spread of the Omicron variant in the community meant the impact of cases at the border was less pronounced, allowing restrictions to be removed earlier. "Every time we have seen a significant change in the pandemic, we're moving very rapidly to safely adjust what we do," she said. Strict border controls were a key part of New Zealand's success containing the coronavirus, with only 56 deaths recorded in a population of five million. But the Omicron outbreak has surged in recent weeks, with 14,657 new cases reported yes-



**AUCKLAND:** Passengers and loved ones reunite at the arrivals hall on the first day of New Zealanders returning from Australia after the border reopened for travelers observing home self-isolation rules, at the Auckland international airport yesterday. — AFP

terday, and Ardern said the country's high vaccination rate of about 95 percent "provides a strong blanket of protection". — AFP

## Iran says awaits West's 'political decisions' in nuclear talks

**TEHRAN:** Western parties have yet to make "political decisions" to conclude talks aimed at restoring the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran said yesterday after its chief negotiator returned to Vienna. All sides to the negotiations have signaled progress in the talks being held in the Austrian capital, but add that they are at a critical stage. Iran has repeatedly emphasized the need for the West to make certain "decisions". "Unfortunately, Western sides and the US haven't still made their political decisions on several

remaining issues," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said at his weekly press conference. These issues are "in the fields of removal of sanctions, guarantees and some political claims about Iran's peaceful nuclear program", he said.

Parties to the 2015 deal saw it as the best way to stop the Islamic republic from building a nuclear bomb—a goal Tehran has always denied. Iran has also restricted some inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog. The IAEA wants Iran to resolve questions surrounding the previous presence of nuclear material at undeclared sites but Iran is asking for this issue to be "closed." Khatibzadeh said that, unless this dispute is settled, "we can't think of the possibility of an agreement about the return of the US to JCPOA." He confirmed that Iran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri returned to Vienna yesterday. Bagheri had gone home last Wednesday for consultations, during which talks continued at the level of experts in Vienna.

The negotiations to revive the deal, known for-

mally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, involve Iran as well as France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China directly, and the United States indirectly. The 2015 agreement gave Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program, but the US unilaterally withdrew from it in 2018 under then-president Donald Trump who reimposed heavy economic sanctions. That prompted Iran to begin rolling back on its own commitments. During the Vienna talks Iran has repeatedly called for guarantees from the US administration of President Joe Biden that there will be no repeat of Trump's pullout.

The talks continue after Russia on Thursday began its invasion of Ukraine, which has threatened to divert attention from Vienna and sap momentum built up after 10 months of on-off negotiations. Khatibzadeh, however, said there is "no relation between the two" issues diplomatically, as "different files are being followed up in their own framework even between the countries that have difference of attitudes." — AFP

## International

# Russia's growing ties to Syria amid military backing

## More than 63,000 Russian military personnel have deployed to Syria

**DAMASCUS:** Russia, which invaded Ukraine last week, has honed its military know-how and sharpened its tactics after intervening over six years ago in Syria to shore up key ally President Bashar Al-Assad. The launch of Russia's military intervention in Syria marked a turning point in Assad's fortunes, and has enabled Moscow to deepen its military, economic and cultural ties with the regime.

Since pro-democracy groups first sought Assad's ouster in 2011, more than 500,000 people have been killed and the relentless conflict has triggered a wave of millions of refugees across the Middle East and Europe.

### Military presence

In 2015, Russia began air strikes in Syria to support Assad's struggling troops. It helped pro-regime forces wrest back lost territory in a series of victories against rebels and jihadists involving deadly bombardments and massive destruction. More than 63,000 Russian military personnel have deployed to Syria, Moscow says. It is unclear how many are currently stationed there. Moscow has two military bases in Syria: the aerodrome in Hmeimim in the northwest and the naval port of Tartus, further south. They are protected by S-300 and S-400 air missile defense systems.

Russia rules the skies across most of the war-torn country and the role of its air force there has been celebrated at home. Bomber planes such as the Tu-22 and Tu-160 have flown from Russia to hit targets in Syria. Russian warships and submarines have also played a prominent role backing Moscow's bombing campaign by firing missiles at Islamic State group targets from the Mediterranean. Most of Russia's latest weapon systems have been tested in Syria, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said in August, according to Russia's TASS news agency.

Officials and observers point out the presence of

a "shadow army" of Russian mercenaries in Syria, including those working for private military company Wagner, which also deployed fighters in Ukraine in past months.

### Economic footprint

Six years on, the Kremlin benefits from an outsized role in Syria's economy owing to its political and military ties with the Assad regime. In recent years, Damascus and Moscow have signed several deals in energy, construction and agriculture. They include one for Russian firm Stroytransgaz to take over Syria's largest port of Tartus for 49 years. Another deal awarded the same company a 50-year concession to extract phosphate in the central region of Palmyra.

In March 2020, the Syrian government signed a \$22 million production-sharing agreement with the General Petroleum Organization and Stroytransgaz, according to the Syria Report, an online economic publication. The deal authorized the Russian company to demine, rehabilitate, explore and develop the Al-Thawra oil fields without paying taxes to the Syrian government, it said.

Between September 2019 and January 2020, Syria awarded four new oil exploration contracts to several Russian companies, the Syria Report added. "A company called Capital was granted a contract for an offshore block, while Mercury and Velada signed three contracts between them for onshore blocks," the publication said this month. The three companies were unheard of prior to these contracts.

Moscow has lent Damascus very limited amounts of financial aid, but it has supplied Syria with wheat as a form of assistance. The Syrian government relies on Moscow for the bulk of its wheat imports. On Thursday, the Syrian government adopted measures to shield its war-hit economy from the repercussions of Russia's invasion of



**DAMASCUS:** Objects with images of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin are displayed in a souvenir shop in the old quarter of the Syrian capital Damascus. —AFP

Ukraine, state media said. To shore up stocks of fuel and wheat, the Syrian government suggested it will limit distribution of basic imports to allow supplies to last for at least two months.

### Cultural influence

Russian President Vladimir Putin has gained celebrity status across government-held Syria, and has visited the country at least twice since 2017. In towns and villages near Moscow's bases in Tartus and Latakia, pictures of Putin hang from utility poles and buildings beside Russian flags. In Damascus,

Russian flags and posters of Putin appear in popular markets, and a few government buildings.

In the heart of the capital, a newly-renovated Russian cultural centre offers language lessons, workshops and lectures, while Syrian state TV airs a daily news bulletin in Russian. The Syrian education ministry added Russian as an optional second foreign language in schools after English or French in 2014. The Faculty of Arts at the University of Damascus houses a Russian language department, and more than 100 schools across Syria teach the language. —AFP

## African governments seek to help nationals flee war in Ukraine

**ABUJA, Nigeria:** Nigeria, South Africa and other African governments scrambled yesterday to help their nationals escape the Russian invasion in Ukraine as reports emerged of racist and unfair treatment of their citizens at border crossings. African nationals, many of them students, are among hundreds of thousands of people trying to flee into Poland and other neighbors. Nigeria yesterday urged border officials in Ukraine and elsewhere to treat its citizens equally. "There have been unfortunate reports of Ukrainian police and security personnel refusing to allow Nigerians to board buses and trains heading towards the Ukraine-Poland border," said presidential advisor Garba Shehu in a statement. "In one video widely circulating on social media, a Nigerian mother with her young baby was filmed being physically forced to give up her seat to another person."

He said there are also reports of Polish officials refusing Nigerian citizens entry into Poland from Ukraine. "It is paramount that everyone is treated with dignity and without favor," said Shehu. A group of South Africans, mostly students, have been stuck at the Ukrainian-Poland border, the country's foreign ministry spokesman, Clayton Monyela, said on Twitter. The South African ambassa-

dor to Warsaw was at the site trying to get them through, according to Monyela who on Sunday had said Africans were being "treated badly" at the Polish-Ukraine border.

Poland's ambassador to Nigeria Joanna Tarnawska dismissed claims of unfair treatment. "Everybody receives equal treatment. I can assure you that I have reports that already some Nigerian nationals have crossed the border into Poland," she told local media. She said Nigerians could stay for 15 days. Even invalid documents were being accepted to cross the border and Covid-19 restrictions were lifted, she added. The Ukrainian embassy in Nigeria could not immediately be reached for comments.

### 'Kept outside'

Some Nigerians who made it across the borders described frightening journeys in the dark to reach traffic-packed frontiers where they were made to wait as officials gave priority to Ukrainian women and children. Stephanie Agekameh, a medical student now in Poland, said officials at the Medyka border crossing were responding first to Ukrainians. "One of the officers came and told us it's harder for us foreigners because they have to get in touch with our government in different countries," she said



**TARPA, Hungary:** University students, including many from Nigeria, fleeing from the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, stow their luggage as they get on their transport bus close to the Hungarian-Ukrainian border in the village of Tarpa in Hungary yesterday. —AFP

by text message. Speaking from Korczowa in Poland, Nigerian managerial sciences student Agantem Moshe, said Ukrainian police had pushed Africans out of the way to make way for women and children.

"From the Polish side it was smooth, they were professionals. In Ukraine, they kept us outside in the cold," he said. The UN said that more than half a million refugees from Ukraine had so far crossed into neighboring countries. Nigeria's embassies in Bucharest said it had received 130 Nigerians from Ukraine. Another 74 were accounted for in Budapest, where another 200 were expected on Monday, the foreign min-

istry said. Another 52 had arrived in Warsaw with another 23 being processed. "We assure Nigerians that all hands are on deck and arrangements are being put in place to effectively evacuate our citizens in safety and dignity," Nigerian official Gabriel Aduda said in a statement.

Ghana's government said it would meet with parents of students stuck in Ukraine on Tuesday and sent embassy officials to border points to help. Ivory Coast, which according to state media has 500 nationals in Ukraine, said it was also making arrangements for their evacuation. Kenya's foreign affairs ministry said 201 citizens were in the country, most of them students. —AFP

## Anonymous hacker group targets Russian state media

**MOSCOW:** Hacker group Anonymous claimed responsibility yesterday for disrupting the work of websites of pro-Kremlin Russian media in protest of the invasion of Ukraine. The group targeted the websites of state news agencies TASS and RIA Novosti, as well as taking over websites of newspapers Kommersant and Izvestiya and Forbes Russia magazine. It posted messages appealing to Russians to try to stop the war and not participate as fighters.

## 'No future': Rostov's young overcome fear to protest Ukraine war

**RUSSIA:** At first glance, there is no sign of a demonstration at the central square of Rostov-on-Don, a southwestern Russian city near the border with Ukraine. Just a scattering of young people wearing headphones and hanging around on their own, studiously avoiding the clusters of police officers surveying the scene. But these young Russians are here because of a call on messaging app Telegram to protest against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After an hour of standing around in the cold, furtively trying to catch each other's eyes, some discreetly form tiny groups and exchange a few

muttered words. No slogans, no banners, no chants.

The police conduct ID checks on those who linger too long. Journalists have their papers scrutinized and photocopied. Security agents wearing civilian clothing home in as soon as a reporter's microphone appears. Russians have turned out en masse in big cities like Moscow and Saint Petersburg to protest against the war despite hundreds of arrests. In Rostov, far from the relative safety in numbers, the handful prepared to protest are brave and terrified in equal measure. Clutching coffees to warm their hands, a young couple readily agrees to be interviewed on camera. "Yes, please talk to us," says 30-year-old theatre technician Nikolai Kovashevich.

### 'Everyone's frightened'

"Threatening the world with nuclear weapons won't get us anywhere," he says. "It's a dead end. There'll be no future. There'll be no children born.



websites of the main phone and mobile phone operators, Rostelecom, MTS, Beeline and Megafon. Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation, Mykhailo Fedorov, said Saturday that the country needed IT recruits. "We are creating an IT army. We need digital talents. All operational tasks will be given here," he tweeted. —AFP

There'll be no tomorrow, in fact," he concludes, visibly upset. His partner, 29-year-old vlogger Margarita Khaishbasheva, waves her arm around the empty square. "Everyone's frightened. Everyone's scared of being jailed (or) getting huge fines they can't pay."

"We live in a police state. People live in terrible fear," she says, her voice cracking with emotion. Standing alone a few meters away, Anton declines to give his surname. The 23-year-old English literature student is scared of being caught out by plainclothes security officers and asks us for "proof you really work for AFP" before opening up.

Yet when a shaven-headed man in a black beanie zones in on us and pointedly stares, and a policeman asks for our papers for the second time in less than an hour, the young student stays by our side. Anton hails from Lugansk, Ukrainian territory held by Kremlin-backed separatists just 200 kilometers (124 miles) north of Rostov. —AFP

## Boring to 'historic': The awakening of Germany's Olaf Scholz

**FRANKFURT:** Often described as predictable and "robotic", Chancellor Olaf Scholz has become emboldened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, smashing policy taboos to steer Germany into "a new era" that could reshape its role on the world stage. Just a few weeks ago, German media were openly asking "where is Scholz?", slamming the Social Democrat's perceived lack of leadership on pressing issues like the coronavirus pandemic and worsening Ukraine crisis. But Moscow's attack on Ukraine last week has jolted the chancellor into action, culminating in what commentators have called a "historic" speech on Sunday.

Scholz, who has only been in office three months, spoke with uncharacteristic clarity when he unveiled a slew of defense and foreign policy shifts that promise to upend Germany's decades-long reluctance to raising its military profile. "The Ukraine crisis has changed the chancellor. And now he's changing our country," the top-selling Bild daily wrote. Addressing an emergency parliamentary session, Scholz told the nation that "we are now in a new era".

In a country haunted by post-war guilt, Scholz assured Germans that they were "on the right side of history" as Ukraine's allies. Among the headline-grabbing announcements was a pledge to earmark 100 billion euros (\$113 billion) this year alone to modernize the chronically underfunded army, called the Bundeswehr. Scholz also said that Europe's biggest economy would commit to spending more than two percent of Germany's gross domestic product on defense annually, surpassing even NATO's target. His coalition government had earlier already reversed a ban on sending weapons to Ukraine, and halted the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Germany and Russia.

The move came as a relief to the United States and European partners, who had begun to question Berlin's resolve in standing up to Moscow. Some observers have speculated that it was perhaps no coincidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin timed his invasion after the departure of veteran chancellor Angela Merkel. He had built a working relationship with her based on mutual respect and a shared history of living in ex-communist East Germany. But if he sensed weakness in Berlin while the new government found its footing, his radical actions appear to have galvanized not just Scholz, but the nation. More than 100,000 people took to the streets in Berlin at the weekend to protest against Russia's invasion.

### Surprises

Der Spiegel weekly, which once described Scholz as "the embodiment of boredom in politics", praised the chancellor for displaying "the leadership that had been missing in recent weeks". "Scholz, who is often rhetorically vague, has left no doubt about his determination," Spiegel wrote. But Scholz has surprised observers before. As Merkel's finance minister, he suspended Germany's cherished debt brake to unleash a "bazooka" in pandemic aid, and crossed a previous red line by backing a European Union recovery package partially funded by joint borrowing. He also came from behind to win last year's general election, staying true to his boring-but-reliable persona while avoiding the gaffes that brought down rivals from the Green party and from Merkel's conservative camp. He now heads Germany's first-ever three-way coalition, consisting of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the pro-business FDP. Scholz's policy reversals mark a turning point for his centre-left SPD, which has historically championed close ties with Russia. —AFP

## Business

# Russia reels from sanctions as Putin calls West 'empire of lies'

## Ruble collapses, US bans transactions with Russian CB

**MOSCOW/WASHINGTON:** The ruble collapsed yesterday, Russians sought to withdraw their savings and a prominent tycoon urged an end to "state capitalism" in Russia as the country reeled from the effects of Western sanctions over the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine.

The United States yesterday banned all US transactions with Russia's central bank effective immediately, the Treasury Department said as it unveiled an unprecedented sanction to further punish Moscow for invading Ukraine. "This action effectively immobilizes any assets of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation held in the United States or by US persons, wherever located," the Treasury said of the measure taken in coordination with Western allies.

It will severely limit Russia's ability to defend the ruble and prop up its economy. This new move, along with others taken by US allies, will make it hard for the Russian central bank to use its vast reserves of hard currency to buy rubles.

President Vladimir Putin raged against the West as he convened a meeting with officials including central bank chief Elvira Nabiullina and the CEO of Russia's largest lender Sberbank, German Gref, to address what the Kremlin called a new "economic reality".

"The Western community, which I called 'the empire of lies' in my speech, is trying to implement sanctions against our country," he said. The financial turmoil came on the first working day after Western allies agreed on a new volley of financial sanctions, including removing some Russian banks from the SWIFT bank messaging system, and freezing central bank assets.

Billionaire Mikhail Fridman last week became the first oligarch to speak out against Putin's invasion of Ukraine and yesterday fellow tycoon Oleg Deripaska said it was time to put an end to "state capitalism" in Russia.

"It is necessary to end all this state capitalism," Deripaska said on messaging app Telegram.

"If this is a real crisis then we need real crisis managers and not fantasists with a bunch of silly presentations," said the 54-year-old. Billionaire

Oleg Tinkov also spoke out against war, saying countries should spend money on medicine and research and not hostilities, while a spokeswoman for tycoon Roman Abramovich said he had been involved in ending the Ukraine hostilities.

### Ruble in freefall

The ruble fell sharply at the start of currency trading, reaching 100.96 to the dollar, compared to 83.5 on Wednesday, the day before the invasion of Ukraine, and 113.52 to the euro, compared to 93.5 before the assault. This fluctuation came after the ruble-based MOEX index increased the upper trading limit. The ruble later rallied slightly to 98.6 to the dollar and 108.7 to the euro.

Russia's central bank announced that it would not open trading in stocks at the Moscow Exchange yesterday "due to the situation that has arisen". It said it would make an announcement about trading for the next day by today morning.

The Kremlin acknowledged the impact, with spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying that "the Western sanctions are hard, but our country has the necessary potential to compensate the damage."

The ruble had already fallen sharply against the main world currencies due to the erupting conflict.

Many Russians queued at ATMs over the weekend, seeking to withdraw ruble savings and exchange them for foreign currency before rates plunged further. In the second-largest city of Saint Petersburg, some 20 customers waiting outside a branch of Raiffeisen Bank Russia said they wanted to withdraw their cash.

### 'No trust in banks'

"We went through all these cataclysms in 1998, so we have no trust in the authorities or in banks," said Anton Zakharov, 45. He drew a parallel between the current situation and Russia's financial crisis in August 1998, when the government defaulted on domestic debt and the ruble was devalued.

"It's safer to keep it at home: we've no idea what will happen now," added Svetlana Paramonova, 58. The Russian central bank yesterday took emer-

Mohammed bin Salman during a conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron "affirmed the kingdom's keenness on the stability and balance of oil markets and the kingdom's commitment to the OPEC+ agreement," the agency added.

### Underinvestment, instability

While Saudi Arabia is seen as the kingpin of the 13 OPEC member states, Russia is the major player among the 10 other countries that make up OPEC+. The 23 countries will gather via teleconference on Wednesday, facing prices not seen since 2014.

They will aim to live up to their mission of "stabilization of oil markets", particularly at this time of "extreme oil price volatility", according to Stephen Brennock, analyst at PVM Energy. Between December and January, OPEC members boosted their production by 64,000 barrels per day (bpd), reaching a total of some 27,981 million bpd, according to the organization's last monthly report.

But this is far below the target of a 400,000-bpd increase that the group has been aiming for since May 2021, when it embarked on a gradual re-opening of the taps to accompany the global economic recovery after the shock of the first waves of COVID-19.



**MOSCOW:** People walk past a currency exchange office in central Moscow yesterday with zeros on the scoreboard since there are no three-digit sections on it to display the current exchange rate. — AFP

gency measures to prop up the economy, hiking the key interest rate to 20 percent from 9.5 percent to "support financial and price stability and protect citizens' savings from depreciation". This took the interest rate to a historic high. The Bank of Russia also banned brokers from selling securities on behalf of foreign clients.

As part of a flurry of measures, the finance ministry announced that Russian resident companies that earn income from exports from yesterday will have to sell 80 percent of their foreign currency earnings. "The ratcheting up of Western sanctions

over the weekend has left Russian banks on the edge of crisis," said Capital Economics.

Alexei Vedeve, a financial analyst at Moscow's Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy, praised the central bank for "acting rationally" to reduce uncertainty. "The introduction of restrictions by the central bank, the finance ministry and the Moscow stock exchange lowers volatility," he told AFP.

He added that the Russian financial system will change due to sanctions, in a way that will "become clear later, when the geopolitical situation becomes clear". — AFP

## OPEC+ powerless as Ukraine conflict pushes up prices

**LONDON:** The OPEC+ cartel of top oil producers at their monthly meeting yesterday are likely to be powerless to rein in prices, which have soared above \$100 after member Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

With some members failing to meet their monthly production quotas, the group is not expected to be able to control the wild swings in oil prices, analysts say. "Only Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and maybe Kuwait would be able to increase production in the short-term," Tamas Varga from PVM Energy told AFP.

But group leader Saudi Arabia reiterated at the start of this year its policy of strict adherence to the terms of OPEC+ agreements and the quotas agreed in them. It confirmed its commitment to the OPEC+ agreement with Russia on Sunday, according to the Saudi Press Agency, as Moscow faces international criticism over the Ukraine conflict. Crown Prince

"COVID has hit African economies the hardest and Nigeria and Angola have struggled to keep up investment in infrastructure with both existing and new wells," Edward Moya, analyst at Oanda, told AFP. "Years of underinvestment and political instability have lent themselves to severely limited spare capacity in the likes of Nigeria, Angola, and Libya," according to analyst Han Tan from Exinity.

OPEC's latest report says that Congo and Equatorial Guinea produced much less than expected in January. Since May 2021, the level of crude produced by OPEC members has been just shy of 750,000 bpd under the authorized limit.

According to Carsten Fritsch, quoted in an analysis from Commerzbank, the gap will only widen unless Saudi Arabia and other countries with spare capacity step in with increased production.

### Iranian production 'unlocked'?

"Right now, there is seemingly no desire to ease market conditions either, with producers capitalizing on high prices which they don't deem to be overly harmful for the economy after years of very low prices," Craig Erlam at Oanda told AFP. Wednesday's meeting also takes place at a key moment for negotiations to revive the 2015 Iran



nuclear deal which are widely expected to come to a head in a matter of days. The deal provided sanctions relief for Tehran in return for strict curbs on its nuclear program but has been disintegrating since former US president Donald Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and reimposed sanctions, including on Iran's oil exports. If an agreement were to be found and could "unlock" the Iranian exports in the coming weeks, that would add some 800,000 barrels of extra supply per day," Ipek Ozkardeska, analyst at the Swissquote bank, told AFP.

That would greatly increase the amount of crude on global markets and act as a considerable brake on price rises. — AFP

## Tech firms flock to Spain trade show in shadow of war

**BARCELONA:** One of the technology industry's biggest annual get-togethers is set to kick off in the Spanish city of Barcelona yesterday, under the shadow of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The Mobile World Congress, where smartphone and telecoms companies show off their latest products and reveal their strategic visions, is expected to welcome more than 40,000 guests over its four-day run. Organizers hope to return to a full-scale event after two years of disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic. But Russia's invasion of Ukraine has hampered preparations for this year's edition, with organizers forced to remove the country's dedicated pavilion. Industry body GSMA, which stages the annual event, said in a statement it was complying with all sanctions and policies regarding Russia.

It confirmed, however, that Russian firms may still be able to participate. The invasion has sparked wider jitters, with the industry assessing sanctions slapped on Russia by the United States and Europe and a likely shortage of key raw materials caused by the conflict.

The MWC was cancelled at the last minute in 2020 as the pandemic spread from China to Europe, and last year's edition was drastically scaled down. The pandemic continues to cast its shadow with big names like Sony, Asus and Lenovo pulling out or participating "virtually".

But organizers are bullish, with GSMA director general Mats Granryd saying 95 percent of speakers will be in Barcelona. Among the tech giants confirming their attendance are smartphone behemoth Samsung, as well as Nokia,



**BARCELONA:** Visitors take pictures of Boston Dynamics' SPOT robot dog on the opening day of the MWC (Mobile World Congress) in Barcelona yesterday. — AFP

Ericsson, Google, Huawei and Verizon. Focuses of this year's event include the rise of 5G, the opportunities offered by the Internet of Things (IoT), the meta-verse and the impact of tech on the environment. Few new products are expected to be unveiled by the major players, many of whom have showcased their latest releases in the weeks leading up to the get-together.

The show will, however, provide Chinese phone makers such as Oppo, Xiaomi and Vivo with a "coming out party", according to Ben Wood of CCS Insight. "It's the first time they will be able to flex their muscles at a big Western trade show," he told AFP, pointing out that they have all become much bigger during the pandemic.

They are filling a void left by Huawei, which has been hobbled by sanctions imposed by the US in 2019 over accusations its wireless systems could allow spying by Chinese state entities. — AFP

## Oligarchs in the crosshairs as West targets Putin

**MOSCOW:** As Western governments tighten their squeeze on Russia's economy following its attack on neighboring Ukraine, capitals also have their sights on Moscow's wealthy elite and its assets abroad.

In a joint statement Saturday, the United States and European G7 allies announced they would set up a "transatlantic task force". It would "identify and freeze" assets belonging to already sanctioned people and "additional Russian officials and elites close to the Russian government, as well as their families".

Working with other governments, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Britain and Canada as well as the EU vowed to "detect and disrupt the movement of ill-gotten gains, and to deny these individuals the ability to hide their assets". Anti-corruption campaigner and financier Bill Browder welcomed the move, telling AFP that "the most direct way of creating a punishment for (Russian President) Vladimir Putin starting this war in Ukraine is to sanction the oligarchs."

He said many of these businessmen hold wealth on Putin's behalf. "This is what he cares about... because in order to be the most powerful person in Russia you need to be the richest person in Russia as well," Browder added.

But it would "require resolve and strength to be able to overcome the legal bullets that will be flying", he said. Firms and professionals have thrived on helping wealthy Russians manage their assets in the British capital-sometimes mockingly dubbed "Londongrad" for the amount of

Russian money present-and other Western financial centers. They could try to throw up legal obstacles to Western governments' pursuit of their clients, or try to get ahead of the sanctions.

### Fear factor

Duncan Hames of Transparency International's UK branch also reacted positively, saying the statement was "the first which really seemed to have both a coherent understanding of the problem and the ability to marshal a decent number of major economies in responding to it".

Even ahead of the G7 declaration, the owner of London's Chelsea football club, Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, said he was "giving trustees... the stewardship and care of Chelsea FC" in a move widely seen as motivated by anticipated sanctions.

Chelsea itself on Sunday issued a further statement on the "situation in Ukraine", calling it "horrific and devastating" while avoiding the word "war". Meanwhile Ukrainian-born financier and one of Russia's richest men Mikhail Fridman told employees at his private equity firm LetterOne that the war with Ukraine was a "tragedy" in a Friday letter, a spokesman said, confirming a Financial Times report.

But although he called for an end to the "bloodshed" and cited his parents living in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv, Fridman insisted that as a "businessman" he does not "make political statements". The FT also reported that metals tycoon Oleg Deripaska called for peace talks "as soon as possible" between Russia and Ukraine on Telegram.

And former top official and business chief Anatoly Chubais posted a picture on Facebook of Boris Nemtsov, a politician critical of Putin who was assassinated in murky circumstances in 2015. Browder said the impact of such noises from elite circles would be limited. Putin "is not afraid of his



**BRUSSELS:** The Ukrainian flag flutters alongside the European Union flag outside the European Parliament headquarters to show their support for Ukraine. — AFP

oligarchs or of his people, he's running a dictatorship," he said.

### 'Enablers'

Hames warned that it might be tricky to identify the property of people on sanctions lists due to "the widespread use of offshore secrecy havens to hide ownership of assets even in places like London".

Browder was more optimistic, noting that "once you put a person on the sanctions list, it is the role of the financial institutions, estate agents, law firms, accounting firms... to not violate those sanctions. "If a bank holds money that belongs to an oligarch, they know... because the oligarch has had to make those disclosures"-leaving the bank at legal risk if they keep transacting on a sanctioned client's behalf, he added.

Whether oligarchs would be able to snatch their hidden assets away in time "depends on how complicit their enablers, their business service providers are in helping them to get around sanctions", Transparency International's Hames said. "I think every business or professional serving these clients needs to think long and hard about the morality of that." — AFP



## Business

## AL-SHALL WEEKLY ECONOMIC REPORT

## Kuwait's real estate market activity drops in January 2022

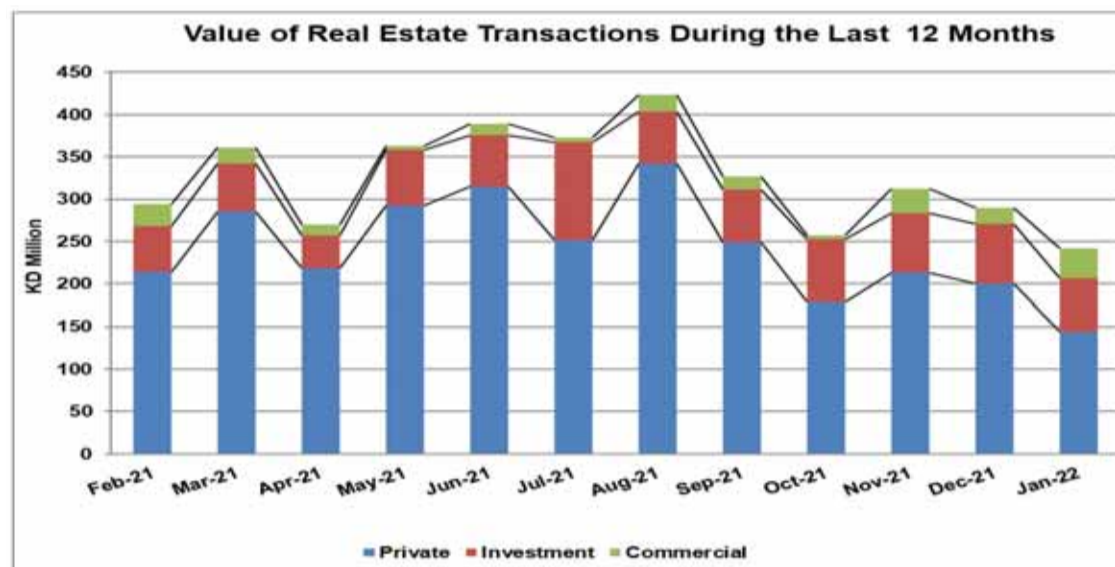
## State's revenues reach KD 14.491bn until end of October 2021

KUWAIT: The latest released data by the Ministry of Justice - Real Estate Registration and Authentications Department - indicates a decreased real estate market activity during January 2022 versus December 2021 (after excluding the crafts activity and the coastal strip system). Total value of traded contracts and agencies was recorded at KD 243.3 million in January, a 17.3 percent decrease against KD 294.3 million in December 2021, and a 6.2 percent decrease when compared with KD 259.7 million in January 2021.

Trading during January 2022 was distributed between KD 238.7 million in contracts and KD 4.8 million in agencies. Number of real estate deals during the month reached 471, of which 456 are contracts and 15 are agencies. The highest share in real estate deals went to Ahmadi Governorate with 193 deals representing about 41 percent of the total number of real estate deals. Hawally Governorate came second with 82 deals and representing 17.4 percent of total deals. The lowest share went to Jahra Governorate with 18 deals, representing 3.8 percent of the total.

The value of private housing activity reached KD 144.1 million, 28.2 percent lower compared with KD 200.6 million in December 2021. Its share of total real estate activity decreased to 59.2 percent versus 68.2 percent in December 2021. The 12-monthly average of private housing activity stood at KD 242 million. This means that January's trading value is 40.4 percent lower than the average. The number of deals for this activity decreased to 378 deals versus 464 deals in December 2021. Accordingly, the value of private residential deals averaged KD 381 thousand versus KD 432 thousand in December 2021, indicating a 11.8 percent decline.

The value of total investment activities scored KD 62.3 million, decreasing by 10.6 percent when compared to KD 69.7 million in December 2021. Its contribution to overall real estate trading activity increased to 25.6 percent versus 23.7 percent in December 2021. The trailing 12 months trading average of investment activity scored KD 66.1 million. This means that the average trading value during January 2022 was 5.7 percent lower compared with the 12 months' average. In addition, the number of deals dropped slightly to 86, compared with 88 deals in December 2021. Therefore, the average value per deal for investment activity scored KD 725 thousand versus KD 792 thousand in December 2021, i.e. an 8.5 percent decrease.



## Financial accounts

In its monthly follow-up report to the State's financial administration, as published on its website, the Ministry of Finance mentions that total collected revenues until the end of the 10th month of the current fiscal year 2021/2022 reached KD 14.491 billion, or 32.6 percent higher than total estimated revenues of KD 10.929 billion for the entire current fiscal year.

In details, actual oil revenues until 31/01/2022 reached KD 12.844 billion, 40.7 percent higher than estimated oil revenues of KD 9.127 billion for the entire year and 88.6 percent out of total collected revenues. Kuwaiti oil price averaged \$75.1 per barrel for the first 10 months of the current fiscal year 2021/2022. In addition, an amount of KD 1.646 billion has been collected from non-oil revenues, a monthly average of KD 164.619 million. The budget estimate of non-oil revenues for the entire fiscal year is KD 1.802 billion which means that what has been received, if it continues at this rate will be more by KD 173.342 million than the estimated amount for the entire current fiscal year.

According to the report, expenditures for the current fiscal year were estimated at KD 23.048 billion against actual expenditures of KD 11.780 billion until 31/01/2022 in addition to an amount of KD 3.117 billion. Total actual expenditures reached KD 14.897 billion, a monthly average of KD 1.490 billion. Though the report concludes that the budget recorded a deficit of KD 408.427 million by the end of the 10th

month of the current fiscal year, we publish it without endorsing it, noting that the monthly expenditure average will increase by the end of the fiscal year. The deficit or surplus figure in the final account will basically depend on the average oil price for the remaining two months of the current fiscal year that will likely be higher than the average of the last 10 months, and partly on the government's promise to achieve 10 percent savings in expenditures. In its monthly follow-up report to the State's financial administration, the Ministry of Finance mentions that by the end of January 2020, the 10th month of the current fiscal year, total collected revenues reached KD 14.194 billion, 32.6 percent higher than the estimated revenues of KD 10.929 for the entire fiscal year.

## Performance of Boursa Kuwait

Performance of Boursa Kuwait in February was positive compared to that of January, with an increase in the average daily traded value alongside a positive performance for all indices. The Premier Market index increased by 3.8 percent, the Main Market index by 4.0 percent, the All-Share Market index (reflective of both previously mentioned indices) rose by 3.9 percent, and the BK Main 50 index rose by 4.1 percent. Boursa Kuwait's total liquidity increased during February versus January, reaching KD 1.299 billion compared with KD 1.289 billion in January. The average daily trading value in

February was KD 72.2 million, increasing by 17.5 percent above January's average of KD 61.4 million. Traded value during the first 2 months of 2022 (39 working days) totaled to KD 2.588 billion, with an average daily trading value of KD 66.4 million. This represents an increase of 50.1 percent over the same average for the same period of 2021, which stood at KD 44.2 million. This also represents an increase of 19.4 percent over the average for the entire previous year of KD 55.6 million.

Liquidity trends since the beginning of the year indicate that half of the listed companies represent only 2 percent of total liquidity, of which 50 companies contributing to 0.4 percent of that liquidity and 9 companies without any trading. As for the small liquid companies, 12 companies whose market value equals 9.3 percent of all listed companies' value, captured about 20.3 percent of total market liquidity. This means that major liquidity activity is still deprived in almost half of the listed companies. On the contrary, liquidity favors small-cap companies even if the trend is decreasing.

The Premier market contributed to KD 827.4 million or 63.7 percent of Boursa's liquidity, with half of its companies capturing 79.4 percent of its liquidity and 50.6 percent of total Boursa's liquidity, while the other half representing only 20.6 percent of its liquidity. Liquidity concentration rate in the Premier Market reached a high level, as 8 companies made up 64.8 percent of the liquidity. During the first 2 months of the current year, the Premier Market captured 62.5 percent of total Boursa's liquidity.

The Main Market contributed to KD 471.1 million or 36.3 percent of Boursa's liquidity; of which 20 percent of its companies captured 81.7 percent of its liquidity while the remaining 80 percent captured 18.3 percent. Probably time will adjust for the liquidity and prices of illiquid companies. When the prices of liquid companies reach high levels, it is customary to start paying attention to low-priced companies. Perhaps the increase in the liquidity of the Main Market in the past year is the beginning of a shift in direction to those illiquid and cheap companies. The Main Market contributed to 37.5 percent of total Boursa's liquidity during the first 2 months of the current year.

When comparing the distribution of liquidity between the Premier and Main markets, we see that the distribution is similar to that of 2021 even if it is slightly lower, where the Premier market contributed to 59.4 percent and the Main Market to 40.6 percent, while it was 83.6 percent and 16.4 percent for the two markets respectively in 2020.

## How a pensioner made Spanish banks rethink services

MADRID: It was his bank's limited counter service and indifference to his struggles with ATMs and apps that forced a Spanish pensioner to act, highlighting the panic the digital revolution is causing many older people.

For Carlos San Juan, from the eastern port city of Valencia, the tipping point was an incident with an ATM in which the bank staff "flatly refused to come out and help" and would not let him in because he did not have an appointment. A retired urologist from Valencia, he went home and wrote a manifesto called "I'm elderly, not an idiot," which was initially signed in December by around 100 friends and acquaintances.

It struck a chord, quickly finding its way onto the Change.org online platform, where it picked up nearly 650,000 signatures of support and was put before the authorities. Such was the pressure that Spain's three main banking associations last week signed a protocol in the presence of economy minister Nadia Calvino pledging to improve customer service for older people.

## 'Be patient with us'

Bank branches "will expand their counter service opening hours", "older people will be prioritized" and "ATMs, banking apps and web pages will be adapted with a simplified interface and language," said the Spanish Banking Association (AEB), one of the signatories.

San Juan hopes the measure will end "the plight of

those who still have banking books, and that of older people with mobility issues having to queue in wheelchairs, with walkers or sticks, who have to "keep coming back" to see a bank employee face-to-face. "I have Parkinson's disease," says this friendly, eloquent 78-year-old who normally goes to the bank when there are fewer people because he needs more time.

People of his age need to be shown patience, he says. "We might learn something today and then forget it two days later." Older people are "absolutely not against digitalization... That's here to stay", all they want is "a more humane transition" into the future.

AEB president Jose Maria Roldan agrees. "San Juan has made us all realize we need to look after those who can't go as fast and those who will always need help because of their personal circumstances," he said during the signing ceremony.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the Spanish banking sector has halved its number of branches to around 20,000, shedding nearly 40 percent of its employees—who today number 172,000, European Central Bank figures show. That is an average of eight employees per branch, compared with an average of 12.5 in neighboring France, which has 402,000 employees and 32,000 branches.

## 'State of distrust'

Some are already trying imaginative solutions to address the problems. In Anover de Tormes, a tiny village of around 100 residents some 30 kilometers (18 miles) from the north-western town of Salamanca, a library bus pulls out of the mist and parks up. In November, the "Bibliobus" was fitted with an ATM which David Mingo, head of culture for Salamanca province, describes as "an important first step towards resolving a big problem".

After serving six people, the bus moves on to

action represents a fundamental change."

The announcement came as the European Union applied fresh sanctions against Russia, closing its airspace, banning its state media outlets and restricting its access to the international finance network.

Kwasi Kwarteng, Britain's business minister, welcomed the announcement. "Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine must be a wake-up call for British businesses with commercial interests in Putin's Russia," he tweeted. "The decision to exit the Rosneft stake will be an eye wateringly expensive one for BP," wrote Susannah Streeter, a senior analyst with Hargreaves Lansdown.

"But the shocked board clearly felt they had no option but to pay the high price and distance the business from Russia's aggression."

Just two weeks ago, Looney had said that BP's share in Rosneft remained a core part of its operation, she noted. The decision "shows the extent to which corporate Britain is now under pressure to make very stark choices faced with the sharply escalating situation," Streeter added. — AFP



ANOVER DE TORMES, Spain: A librarian from the library bus (Bibliobus) which provides also a cash point, attends to a visitor in the village of Anover de Tormes, in the northern Spanish province of Salamanca. — AFP

Santiz, which has 300 residents, three bars and a school. In front of the "Bibliobus," Agustina Juan, 79, admits with frustration that she does not know how to withdraw money with a card. In fact, in the three villages visited by AFP, only one person used the ATM to withdraw money.

"I have no idea how to use it. You know why I have it? So I can pay by card when I go to the supermarket," she shrugs. The bigger problem is trying to resolve an erroneous banking charge or any other

problem. "I have to travel 40 kilometers (to the branch) to see what's happened. Or if you phone up, it's awful: the line's always busy and you have to keep calling," she says.

At her side, 76-year-old Raquel Vicente says the elderly have lost track of their finances. "The only thing you can do in your old age is count your money, but with the system like this, you just can't see it, so you live in this constant state of distrust," she sighs. — AFP

## BP says will pull its capital from Russia's Rosneft

LONDON: British energy giant BP announced Sunday that it was pulling its 19.75-percent stake in Rosneft following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. BP's chief executive Bernard Looney also announced that he was resigning from the Russian oil company's board "with immediate effect".

Looney was one of two BP-nominated directors, having held the position since 2020. The other is former BP CEO Bob Dudley, who has also resigned, said BP.

"Russia's attack on Ukraine is an act of aggression which is having tragic consequences across the region," said the company's chairman, Helge Lund. "BP has operated in Russia for over 30 years, working with brilliant Russian colleagues," he added. "However, this military

## UK vows tougher clampdown on 'dirty money'

LONDON: Britain will today introduce new legislation to crack down on "dirty money" and corrupt elites as it ramps up its campaign to hit Russian finance over Ukraine. The move comes after the government took flak over its response to date to choke off the years-long flow of rich Russians' hot cash into the United Kingdom, where it has infiltrated financial and property markets.

Moscow's invasion of neighboring Ukraine has brought a long-debated issue to a head, moving London to introduce a "Register of Overseas Entities" to crack down on money laundering by foreign criminals.

The new register will require anonymous foreign owners of UK property to reveal their real identities and ultimate "beneficial owner", meaning they can no longer hide behind shell companies as Britain sets "a new global standard for transparency". Failure to comply could bring punishment of up to five years in prison. "There is no place for dirty money in the UK," said Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

"We are going faster and harder to tear back the facade that those supporting (Russian President Vladimir) Putin's campaign of destruction have been hiding behind for so long."

"Those backing Putin have been put on notice: there will be nowhere to hide your ill-gotten gains," added Johnson as? Home Secretary Priti Patel hailed what she termed "unprecedented action in the face of barbaric Russian aggression". Insisting that "time is up for Putin's cronies hiding dirty money in the UK", Patel said the legislation would strike a blow against financial crime. — AFP

## Lifestyle | Awards



(From left) US actor Troy Kotsur, US actor Daniel Durant, English actress Emilia Jones, US actress Marlee Matlin and Mexican actor Eugenio Derbez pose with the award for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture for 'CODA' in the press room during the 28th Annual Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Awards at the Barker Hangar in Santa Monica, California. —AFP photos



Scottish actor Brian Cox (center right), US actor Jeremy Strong (third right) and members of the cast from 'Succession' pose with the award for Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Drama Series 'Succession'.

# Deaf drama 'CODA' wins top prize at SAG awards

"CODA," a heartfelt indie drama about a struggling deaf family, won the top prize at the Screen Actors Guild awards Sunday, boosting its hopes as a potential dark horse for next month's Oscars. Taking its title from an acronym for child of deaf adult, "CODA" follows high school teen Ruby as she juggles her musical ambitions with her family's dependence on her to communicate with the "hearing" world. "We deaf actors have come a long way," signed a visibly shocked Marlee Matlin, a deaf former Oscar winner who plays Ruby's mother, as she and her co-stars accepted the statuette for best cast in a motion picture.

"This validates the fact that we deaf actors can work just like anybody else," added Matlin, before teaching the star-studded audience the sign for "I love you." The win at the SAG awards, voted for by Hollywood's acting union, is an important precursor for the Academy Awards, whose largest voting bloc is also actors. "CODA," released by Apple TV+ after a bidding war at last year's Sundance independent film festival where it fetched a record \$25 million, also won best supporting actor for Troy Kotsur. Kotsur, who plays Ruby's father, thanked the filmmakers for "believing in us deaf actors and casting us authentically as actors who happen to be deaf."

Will Smith won best actor for "King Richard," which recounts the improbable rise of Serena and Venus Williams from the rough streets of Compton to tennis superstardom. Smith played their father Richard, who he praised for "a power of belief that borders on insanity and sometimes tips over the border-which is absolutely necessary to take something from impossible to possible." "That may have been one of the greatest



US actress Jessica Chastain accepts the award for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Leading Role for 'The Eyes of Tammy Faye'.

moments of my career just now, because my name was called for 'King Richard' sitting next to Venus Williams," said Smith, who is the favorite to win his first Oscar next month.

Jessica Chastain won best actress for "The Eyes of Tammy Faye," in which she disappeared beneath layers of the eccentric US televangelist's trademark heavy makeup. While her husband Jim Bakker was jailed for defrauding their millions of followers, Tammy Faye clashed with fellow evangelists over her acceptance of the LGBTQ community at the height of the AIDS epidemic. "It was a dream of mine to play Tammy Faye," said Chastain. "She was a real trailblazer and she wrapped her arms around those who were repeatedly cast aside and she launched herself into decades of LGBTQ love." Ariana DeBose bolstered her Oscar frontrunner status by claiming best supporting actress for her role as Anita in Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story" remake.

Presumed Oscars best picture frontrunners "The Power of the Dog" and "Belfast" both left the SAG gala empty-handed, blowing the race to the season-capping Academy Awards on March 27 wide open.

## 'Fighting the fight'

The SAG awards-which took place online last year due to Covid-19 — returned to an in-person event Sunday in Santa Monica, just outside Los Angeles. And the stars did not disappoint on the first big red carpet event of Hollywood's awards season, with Cate Blanchett stunning in a low-cut black Armani gown, and Chastain donning a sparkling Dior suit. Helen Mirren-in a floor-length pink Dolce & Gabbana gown-was honored with SAG's lifetime achievement award, chalking her Oscar-winning career up to a mantra of "be on time and don't be an ass." "Thank you S-A-G," she said, spelling out each letter, before joking: "I hate to say the word 'sag' at my age." The annual "In Memoriam" montage paid tribute to actors who have died in the past year, including Sidney Poitier, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Ned Beatty and Betty White.

In the television categories, "Squid Game" actors Lee Jung-jae and Jung Ho-yeon

looked visibly shocked to win best actor and actress in a drama. Both South Koreans spoke through a translator before Jung switched into broken English, thanking the Hollywood group for "open(ing) the door for me." "Succession" won the best drama ensemble prize, with star Brian Cox one of many to praise Ukrainian president and former actor Volodymyr Zelensky. Cox drew a standing ovation for "a wonderful comic performer" as his country resists the "truly, truly awful" Russian invasion.

Michael Keaton, who won best actor in a limited series for "Dopesick," also praised "a fellow actor in Zelensky who deserves some credit tonight for fighting the fight." Keaton broke down into tears as he dedicated the win to his nephew Michael, one of more than half a million Americans to die of an overdose deaths in the opioid crisis that is the subject of "Dopesick." Capping an excellent night for Apple TV+, the relatively new streamer also won best comedy series prizes for "Ted Lasso" and its star Jason Sudeikis. —AFP



US actor Will Smith poses in the press room with his award for Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a leading role for 'King Richard'.



Michael Keaton, winner of Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Television Movie or Limited Series for 'Dopesick'.



Troy Kotsur, winner of Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Supporting Role for his performance in 'CODA'.

## Screen Actor Guild Awards winners

### MOTION PICTURE AWARDS

- Best ensemble cast: "CODA"
- Best actor: Will Smith, "King Richard"
- Best actress: Jessica Chastain, "The Eyes of Tammy Faye"
- Best supporting actor: Troy Kotsur, "CODA"
- Best supporting actress: Ariana DeBose, "West Side Story"
- Best stunt ensemble: "No Time to Die"

### TELEVISION AWARDS

- Best ensemble, drama: "Succession"
- Best ensemble, comedy: "Ted Lasso"
- Best actor, drama: Lee Jung-jae, "Squid Game"
- Best actress, drama: Jung Ho-yeon, "Squid Game"
- Best actor, comedy: Jason Sudeikis, "Ted Lasso"
- Best actress, comedy: Jean Smart, "Hacks"
- Best actor, TV movie or limited series: Michael Keaton, "Dopesick"
- Best actress, TV movie or limited series: Kate Winslet, "Mare of Easttown"
- Best stunt ensemble, comedy or drama series: "Squid Game" —AFP



US actress Ariana DeBose poses with her award for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Supporting Role for 'West Side Story'.



British actress Hannah Waddingham accepts Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Comedy Series for 'Ted Lasso'.



South Korean actress Jung Hyeon (left) poses with the award for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Drama Series for 'Squid Game' alongside South Korean actor Lee Jung-jae posing with the award for Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Drama Series 'Squid Game'.

## Sports

# Russia facing World Cup exile after 'unacceptable' FIFA plan

## FIFA moves Russia home games and bans flag and anthem

PARIS: Russia's future in the World Cup teetered on a knife-edge yesterday after FIFA plans to allow them to play on neutral territory were dismissed as "unacceptable" by rivals, plunging the qualifying process for football's showpiece event into chaos. Governing body FIFA warned that they were considering the ultimate sanction against Russia as punishment for their bloody invasion of Ukraine.

However, after three days of silence, they stopped short and ordered Russia to play home internationals at neutral venues where their national flag and anthem would be banned. Russian teams would be known as the Football Union of Russia. FIFA said dialogue with other sports organizations to determine additional measures "including potential exclusion from competitions" would continue.

However, within minutes of the announcement, the Polish FA insisted they would not play Russia in a scheduled World Cup play-off, regardless of the venue. "Today's FIFA decision is totally unacceptable," tweeted Polish FA president Cezary Kulesza. "We are not interested in participating in this game of appearances. Our stance remains intact: Polish National Team will NOT PLAY with Russia, no matter what the name of the team is."

Poland are due to play in Moscow on March 24 with the winners to host either the Czech Republic or Sweden five days later. The draw for the World Cup finals, to be staged in Qatar in November and December, is on April 1. Sweden and the Czech Republic followed suit. "We have previously made it known that we do not want to face Russia under these circumstances (following the invasion) and this remains the case until further notice," said Swedish FA president Karl-Erik Nilsson.

### 'Displeased' with FIFA

He added he was "displeased" with FIFA's decision. The Czech FA added: "There will be no change in the Czech national team's standpoint." In response, FIFA

said in a statement that it had "taken good note of the positions expressed via social media by the Polish Football Association, the Football Association of the Czech Republic and the Swedish Football Association". "FIFA will remain in close contact to seek to find appropriate and acceptable solutions together," it said.

French Football Federation president Noel Le Graet led calls on Sunday for Russia to be kicked out of the World Cup. "The world of sport, and especially football, cannot remain neutral. I certainly would not oppose the expulsion of Russia," Le Graet told Le Parisien newspaper. France are the World Cup holders after winning the 2018 tournament which was hosted by Russia.

The English FA said their national teams would not play any games against Russia "out of solidarity with Ukraine and to wholeheartedly condemn the atrocities being committed by the Russian leadership". The Welsh FA said they too would join a boycott as it "stands in solidarity with Ukraine and feels an extreme amount of sadness and shock to the recent developments in the country".

### 'Football Stands Together'

European governing body UEFA on Friday stripped the Champions League final from Saint Petersburg's Gazprom Arena on May 28 and switched it to the Stade de France in Paris. At Wembley on Sunday, Chelsea skipper Cesar Azpilicueta and Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson carried flowers in Ukraine's yellow and blue colors before kick-off in the League Cup final. Both teams stood for a minute's applause, while a scoreboard message in yellow and blue blazed "Football Stands Together" and Liverpool and Chelsea fans were seen with Ukraine flags.

One banner in blue and yellow read "You'll never walk alone" in reference to Liverpool's terrace anthem. Chelsea also said they were "praying for peace" after owner Roman Abramovich's decision to



LONDON: A 'Football Stands Together' message is displayed in Ukrainian colors ahead of the English League Cup final football match between Chelsea and Liverpool at Wembley Stadium on Sunday. — AFP

hand over control of the Premier League club. The Russian-Zionist billionaire announced on Saturday that he was handing the "stewardship and care" of Chelsea to the trustees of the club's charitable foundation. But he will remain as owner. There was no mention in his statement of the crisis in Ukraine.

Chelsea released a 24-word statement on their website Sunday but omitted any reference to Russia or its president, Vladimir Putin. "The situation in Ukraine is horrific and devastating," the statement said. "Chelsea FC's thoughts are with everyone in Ukraine. Everyone at the club is praying for peace." It is understood that Abramovich, who allegedly has links to the Kremlin, took the decision to step aside in

order to protect Chelsea from reputational damage as the war rages in Ukraine.

Sporting anger wasn't just limited to football. In Cairo, Ukraine on Sunday withdrew from the world fencing championships to avoid facing Russia, downing their swords and displaying protest signs saying "Stop Russia! Stop the war!" and "Save Ukraine! Save Europe." Swimming's governing body FINA cancelled the world junior championships in Russia due to take place in August and said no other events will be held in the country "if this grave crisis continues". Swimming Australia yesterday welcomed the cancellation and said it would be boycotting all competitions in Russia. — AFP

## Jazz eclipse Suns, Embiid and Harden shine for Sixers

LOS ANGELES: The NBA-leading Phoenix Suns and Western Conference rivals Golden State tumbled Sunday as Joel Embiid and James Harden signaled the Philadelphia 76ers are a force to be reckoned with in the East. The surging Utah Jazz, fueled by 26 points from Donovan Mitchell, downed the Suns 118-114 to post their eighth victory in nine games.

Utah's Rudy Gobert returned after missing six games with a sore right knee and non-Covid illness, scoring 16 points and pulling down 14 rebounds. That included a season-high eight offensive rebounds. The Suns, who still own the best record in the NBA at 49-12, lost back-to-back games for the first time since dropping two on Dec 25 and 27.

Devin Booker led the Suns with 30 points. Cameron Johnson and Deandre Ayton added 23 apiece but Phoenix are clearly still finding their way in their third game since losing All-Star point guard Chris Paul to a broken thumb that could sideline him the rest of the regular season. The Golden State Warriors, chasing the Suns for top spot in the West, couldn't capitalize, surrendering a 21-point third-quarter lead in a 107-101 loss to



NEW YORK: RJ Barrett #9 of the New York Knicks drives to the basket past Joel Embiid #21 and James Harden #1 of the Philadelphia 76ers at Madison Square Garden on Sunday. — AFP

the Dallas Mavericks in San Francisco.

On the eve of his 23rd birthday, Luka Doncic scored 34 points and pulled down 11 rebounds for Dallas, connecting on a pair of key baskets down the stretch and draining the clinching free-throws in the waning seconds. Spencer Dinwiddie scored 24 points with four rebounds and five assists off the bench for Dallas, playing a key role in the fourth-quarter surge that overwhelmed the Warriors.

Dallas out-scored Golden State 33-13 in the final period, when the Warriors made just four of their 18 attempts from the field. Stephen Curry finished with 27 points and 10 assists for the Warriors but, without Klay Thompson and Draymond Green,

Golden State had no answer to the Mavs' late charge.

There was another embarrassing defeat for LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers, who were beaten 123-95 by the New Orleans Pelicans. CJ McCollum scored 22 points to lead six Pelicans players in double figures, and New Orleans easily withstood a 32-point performance from James to hand the Lakers their second straight defeat since the All-star break.

In New York, Harden posted his first triple-double as a 76er and clicked again with star teammate Joel Embiid in their 125-109 victory over the Knicks. Former Most Valuable Player Harden, playing his second game for the Sixers since arriving in a

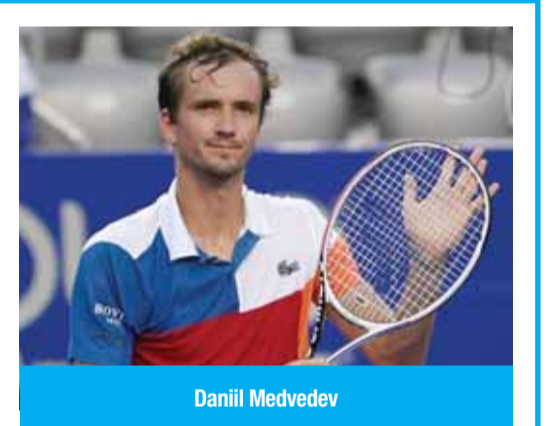
blockbuster trade from Brooklyn, notched the 68th triple-double of his career with 29 points, 16 assists and 10 rebounds.

He also came up with five steals and proved the perfect complement to Cameroonian center Embiid, who scored 37 points, pulled down nine rebounds and blocked four shots. Tyrese Maxey got in on the offensive display, scoring 21 points and grabbing seven rebounds.

### 'Unstoppable'

Embiid said that so far the addition of Harden - a two-time NBA scoring champion as well as a proven playmaker - was working just as Philadelphia had hoped. "Unstoppable," Embiid said of the Sixers' offense with Harden in the mix. "What are you really gonna do? He's a great passer and obviously I've got someone that attracts a lot of attention, too. "So you've got to make a decision, do you stay on me or do you stay on him? And if you want to guard both of us, with the other guys, now you've got Matisse (Thybulle) driving to the rim or wide-open shooters."

Philadelphia's second straight victory saw them improve to 37-23. They are third in the Eastern Conference and just 2 1/2 games behind conference leaders Miami. The Knicks seized the lead early in the fourth quarter, but seven straight Sixers points from Harden put Philadelphia back in front in the nip-and-tuck battle. An aggressive Embiid set career highs with 23 made free throws and 27 attempts. — AFP



Daniil Medvedev

## Medvedev replaces Djokovic as No. 1

PARIS: Daniil Medvedev succeeded Novak Djokovic as world number one yesterday, becoming the first man since 2004 outside the game's "Big Four" of Djokovic, Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer and Andy Murray to occupy the top spot. US Open champion Medvedev is the third Russian man after Yevgeny Kafelnikov and Marat Safin, and 27th player overall, to rise to the top of the ATP rankings.

The 26-year-old Medvedev, beaten by Nadal in the Acapulco semifinals last week, was guaranteed to move above Djokovic after the Serb's quarter-final loss in Dubai. Djokovic, who has spent a record 361 weeks as the world number one, was competing in his first tournament of the season following his deportation from Australia in January. Alexander Zverev stayed in third despite being thrown out of the Acapulco event after smashing his racket on the umpire's chair several times during a doubles match. Nadal rose one place to fourth after claiming his third title of the season and 91st of his career. The Spaniard is unbeaten since losing to Lloyd Harris in Washington last August. He ended his 2021 season after that because of a left foot injury. — AFP

## Barca thrash Bilbao, Sevilla defeat Betis

MADRID: Ousmane Dembele turned the jeers to cheers at Camp Nou on Sunday by scoring a stunning goal and setting up two more in a 4-0 victory over Athletic Bilbao. Dembele's explosive finish in the second half was his first goal since the January transfer window, when Barca told the Frenchman he should leave if he refused to sign a new contract.

But Xavi Hernandez has insisted on reintegrating Dembele in the last few weeks, with Barca needing the 24-year-old in their fight to finish in La Liga's top four. "Today he is the best Dembele we have seen and that is what we want," said Xavi. This victory puts Barcelona back into fourth place, above Atletico Madrid and now only one point behind Real Betis, who have been dragged into the scrap after they lost 2-1 to Sevilla earlier on Sunday.

Second-placed Sevilla's win reduces the gap to Real Madrid back to six points. After bitter contract talks ended in stalemate, Dembele played at Camp Nou against Napoli in the Europa League earlier this month, when Xavi brought him on as a substitute to screeching whistles from the angry home supporters. Yet many gave their backing to the forward in that game too, demonstrating the emotional bind Barcelona fans have found themselves in, caught between supporting a player Xavi wants to use and venting their frustration at his intention to leave for free.

This time, they whistled again when Dembele was introduced in the 67th minute but then had little choice but to applaud. Dembele used his pace and

power to score a brilliant second goal after Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang had earlier given Barca the lead. He then teed up Luuk de Jong and Memphis Depay with two superb crosses in injury-time.

Xavi appears to have managed the situation as smoothly as possible, with Dembele noticeably going over to celebrate with Barcelona's coach, who gave him a hug and an approving pat on the head. "It's not a question for me, it's a question for the club, for Ousmane," Xavi said. "His contract ends (in the summer). Nothing can be ruled out in football. He couldn't play and now he's playing. He can be the best in his position."

Barca have scored four goals in three consecutive games for the first time since May 2017, when 11 of those were claimed by Lionel Messi, Neymar and Luis Suarez. Aubameyang's opener was a difficult finish made to look easy, Gerard Pique's header coming back off the crossbar and the ball forcing Aubameyang to adjust his feet before throwing his body into the air and volleying in.

Dembele's was no less emphatic as he collected the ball on the left and squared up to Athletic's Inigo Martinez before darting left towards the line and unleashing a shot that flew past the near post and in. There was time for two more in injury-time and Dembele turned provider for both, lifting one cross for De Jong to head in before curling another low one into the six-yard box, where Depay finished on the slide.

Sevilla had earlier prevailed against rivals Real Betis as two mistakes from Betis goalkeeper Claudio Bravo proved decisive in a feisty derby at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan. Bravo was recalled after a month out injured but the 38-year-old had a first half to forget, giving away a penalty, which was



BARCELONA: Barcelona's French forward Ousmane Dembele controls the ball at the Camp Nou stadium on Sunday. — AFP

converted by Ivan Rakitic, before letting Munir El Haddadi's shot squirm through his fingers. Betis improved in the second period and might have engineered a comeback had Sergio Canales' stunning free-kick, which curled beautifully into the corner, hit the net sooner than the 94th minute. — AFP

## Ruiz strikes late to fire Napoli top

MILAN: Fabian Ruiz shot Napoli top of Serie A on Sunday with a stunning, last-gasp winner in a thrilling 2-1 victory at Lazio. Spain international Fabian crashed home a first-time strike in the 94th minute at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome to snatch first place from AC Milan on goal difference. His goal came at the end of a hugely eventful match which Lazio thought they had drawn when Pedro crashed home a sumptuous volley with two minutes remaining to cancel out a superb 62nd-minute opener from Lorenzo Insigne.

Insigne's first goal from open play this season banished the boos which accompanied his substitution during Thursday's 4-2 thumping by Barcelona. Fabian's strike ensured that Luciano Spalletti's side capitalised perfectly on both Milan and champions Inter, who sit two points back in third but with a game in hand, only managing to draw with relegation threatened opposition on Friday evening.

"Everyone breaks this team's balls saying it doesn't have character, I'd like to see what they're saying now," said Spalletti, irritated at criticisms of his team post-Barca. "There's a nasty atmosphere around this team because people are saying that the players are soft, that they don't have character. Well tonight they had character, or no?" — AFP



LONDON: Liverpool's English midfielder Jordan Henderson holds up the trophy as Liverpool players celebrate on the pitch after their penalty shootout victory in the English League Cup final against Chelsea at Wembley on Sunday. — AFP

## Liverpool beat Chelsea to win League Cup

LONDON: Liverpool won the League Cup final in dramatic fashion as Chelsea goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga missed the decisive penalty to give the Reds an 11-10 shoot-out victory after a pulsating 0-0 draw at Wembley on Sunday. Jurgen Klopp's side clinched their first domestic knockout prize since the 2012 League Cup when Kepa blazed his spot-kick high over the bar. It was the only miss in the nerve-jangling shoot-out, which saw Liverpool keeper Caoimhin Kelleher score his penalty just before Kepa failed.

Ironically, Kepa was sent on at the end of extra-time to replace Edouard Mendy given his reputation as a penalty saving specialist, but the Spaniard was unable to repel any of Liverpool's kicks. Kepa had already endured penalty misery in the 2019 League Cup final when he petulantly refused to be substituted before a shoot-out defeat against Manchester City.

Liverpool saw Joel Matip's second-half goal controversially disallowed for a marginal offside against Virgil van Dijk, while Chelsea had three goals ruled out for offside later in the match. The Reds were lifted the League Cup a record nine times, while Klopp is the first German manager to win the tournament after finally tasting Wembley success following two previous defeats as a boss there.

"There should be space for some sentiment. Caoimhin Kelleher is a young boy, plays in all the competition. I cannot tell him he can't play the final," Klopp said. "I'm a manager and a human being and the human being won. He deserves it. I'm happy for the people in dark times to celebrate something like this. Chelsea are incredibly strong, we matched each other. We needed to have luck."

Liverpool remain in contention for an unprecedented quadruple after closing the gap on Premier League leaders Manchester City to six points with a game in hand. They are on course for the Champions League quarterfinals after a last 16 first-leg win at Inter Milan and host Norwich in the FA Cup fifth round on Wednesday.

While the match was memorable, there was a somber beginning as both teams united in a show of support for war-torn Ukraine before kick-off. Amid the Russian invasion of its neighbor, Chelsea skipper Cesar Azpilicueta and Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson carried flowers in the country's yellow and blue colors onto the pitch.

For Chelsea, this was a painful end to a difficult week, which saw Russian owner Roman Abramovich on Saturday announce that he is "giving trustees of Chelsea's charitable foundation the stewardship and

care" of the club. Abramovich, who will remain the owner, made the move after calls in the UK Parliament for Russian oligarchs to be stripped of their assets.

Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel refused to blame Kepa, saying: "It's harsh. There is no blame of course. Everybody knows how good Kepa is. Unfortunately he could not save one. The penalties were brilliantly taken. You take these decisions and sometimes they don't work out. Our level made me very proud. We played a huge part in a brilliant match. We should not lose sleep over it."

### Relentless Reds

Chelsea paid for a series of missed chances, with Christian Pulisic wastefully guiding his close-range effort straight at Kelleher in the opening minutes. Mendy sprawled to his right to repel Naby Keita's 20-yard drive, then scrambled across to push Sadio Mane's close-range follow-up over the bar with one hand when it seemed certain he would score. Chelsea should have been ahead before the interval when Mason Mount somehow volleyed wide from eight yards with the goal at his mercy. Mount managed an even worse miss early in the second half, scuffing his shot against the post after being left completely unmarked inside the area. — AFP

## India record 12th straight T20I win

DHARAMSALA, India: Shreyas Iyer hit an unbeaten 73 to lead India to a record-equaling 12th successive Twenty20 international victory as they whitewashed Sri Lanka in the three-match series on Sunday. Chasing 147 for victory, India romped home with 19 balls to spare propelled by Iyer's third successive unbeaten half-century. They won by six wickets in the Himalayan hill town of Dharamsala.

India, who climbed to number one in world T20 rankings after their 3-0 sweep of West Indies earlier this month, have remained unbeaten since the loss to New Zealand in the World Cup last year. India drew level with Afghanistan, who won 12 straight T20I matches between Feb 2018 to Sept 2019.

Skipper Rohit Sharma said it is good to have players taking their chances and performing in the year of the T20 World Cup as the hosts won the series without Virat Kohli and Rishabh Pant. "We just want to move forward. It's going to be a big challenge but it's nice to have guys in form rather than not in form," Rohit said after the win. "If the guys take the opportunity the way some of these guys have taken, you can move from strength to strength."

The bowlers set up the win, restricting Sri Lanka to 146 for five despite skipper Dasun Shanaka's unbeaten 74 off 38 deliveries. In reply, India lost Rohit, who became the most capped T20I player overtaking Pakistan's Shoaib Malik (124 matches), for five in the second over of the chase. The in-form Iyer, who hit nine fours and one six in his 45-ball knock, then took charge to put on 48 runs with wicketkeeper-batsman Sanju Samson who fell for 18. Iyer, who stands unbeaten in the series after not out scores of 57 and 74 in the first two wins, kept up the pace to reach his



DHARAMSALA: India's players pose for pictures with the trophy after winning the third T20 international cricket match against Sri Lanka at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium on Sunday. — AFP

fifty with a six off 29 deliveries.

Lahiru Kumara took two wickets including Deepak Hooda for 21, but Iyer remained unstoppable in a 45-run unbeaten partnership with Ravindra Jadeja, who made 22. "I am not keeping any expectation from myself nor from the team coaches because the competi-

tion in our team is immense and every individual is capable of winning you games," Iyer, who was named man of the match and series, told reporters. "I want to enjoy each and every moment and opportunity that I have been provided with and I like to finish off from the game and that's my mindset." — AFP

## Lahore trump Multan to win PSL title

LAHORE: Former Pakistan allrounder Mohammad Hafeez starred in Lahore Qalandars' 42-run triumph over Multan Sultans in the final to win a maiden Pakistan Super League title in Lahore on Sunday. The 41-year-old scored a fighting 46-ball 69 to guide Qalandars to 180-5 after they won the toss and batted before a packed 30,000 Gaddafi stadium. Hafeez then chipped in with wickets of in-form opener Mohammad Rizwan (14) and Aamer Azmat (six) to bowl the defending champions for 138 in 19.3 overs.

Once the league's eternal wooden-spoon - finishing last in the first four

editions before reaching the final in 2020 - Qalandars finally completed the set of winners. All six teams have now won the league. Islamabad United won in 2016 and 2018, Peshawar Zalmi in 2017, Quetta Gladiators in 2019, Karachi Kings in 2020 and Sultans (2021) last year. When Shan Masood was run out by a direct throw from Fakhar Zaman for 19 Qalandars had got rid of the prolific rival opening pair and sensed they can win.

From 63-5, Tim David (27) and Khushdil Shah (32) gave the champions hope, but Qalandar skipper Shaheen Shah Afridi sealed the win with wickets of David and David Willey (nought) to finish with 3-30. Shaheen finished as top wicket-taker in the league with 20. The winners get a glittering trophy and a purse of 500,000 US dollars while Sultans received a runners-up purse of 200,00 dollars. Earlier, Hafeez struck nine boundaries and a six during his



LAHORE: Lahore Qalandars' players celebrate their victory in the final of the Pakistan Super League (PSL) Twenty20 cricket match against Multan Sultans at the Gaddafi Cricket Stadium on Sunday. — AFP

knock, lifting Qalandars from a struggling 25-3 during a fourth wicket stand of 54 with Kamran Ghulam (15) and another 58 for the next with Harry Brook who made a fiery 22-ball 41 not

out. Brook, who smashed three sixes and two fours, took 77 in the last five overs with David Wiese partnering through his eight-ball 28 not out, spiced with three sixes and a boundary. — AFP



Mohammed Shami

## Trolls are not 'real fans', says Shami

NEW DELHI: India's most prominent Muslim cricketer Mohammed Shami has slammed trolls as neither real fans nor real Indians in his first comments since being subjected to vitriolic online abuse following the defeat to Pakistan at the T20 World Cup. Shami, 31, became the main target of abuse after India were thrashed by their archrivals last October on their way to an embarrassingly early exit from the marquee tournament.

Cricket clashes between Hindu-majority India and Muslim Pakistan frequently heighten tensions between the neighbors, who have fought three wars since 1947. After India's loss, thousands of hate messages flooded social media, including Shami's Instagram account, calling him a traitor and alleging he had taken money to throw the game.

In an interview with the Indian Express yesterday, Shami said those who trolled him were neither "real fans nor were they real Indians". "When people with unknown social media profiles or even one with a few followers point fingers at someone, they don't have anything to lose," the paceman said. "For them nothing is at stake because they are nobodies... we don't need to engage with them."

Shami added that he did not need to prove his loyalty to India to anyone. "We know what we are, we don't need to say what India means to us because we represent the country and fight for the country. So we don't need to prove anything to anyone by saying or reacting to such trolls."

Since making his debut in 2013, Shami has taken 209 wickets in 57 Test matches with a strike rate of nearly 50. He is currently sidelined due to a wrist injury, but added that the present Indian pace attack was the best ever. "With the kind of Test match bowling we have now, I don't think we ever had such a period in our cricketing history," he said. — AFP