

3 Kuwait and France discuss bilateral ties as FM visits



9 'Trash has value': Kenyan turns plastic into bricks



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16 Senegal beat Egypt on penalties to qualify for 2022 World Cup



Premier refutes all allegations made against him in grilling

10 MPs file non-cooperation motion against prime minister



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah speaks during a National Assembly session on Tuesday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Ten opposition lawmakers filed a non-cooperation motion against HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah on Tuesday after a nine-hour grilling in which he strongly refuted accusations made against him. The prime minister insisted that since he was appointed to the post in Dec 2019, he has focused most of his efforts in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the society, adding that his governments greatly succeeded in this field.

He also said that he and his Cabinet took key measures to fight corruption, adding that most of the allegations in the grilling were not correct. He asked the three grillers if the grilling was a questioning of the prime minister or an election campaign. Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled said the pardon committee formed by HH the Amir will resume meetings soon, denying that he planned to abolish the committee. He said the corruption case known as the Malaysian Fund case has been referred to court.

The PM said he is aware of the people's concerns and he is here to serve them. Replying to an accusation that he does not want to resign because he

fears his successor will investigate alleged corruption against him, the premier challenged the lawmaker to present a single shred of evidence and "then refer me to any side other than a grilling, because it is politically-motivated".

At the start of the grilling, the prime minister said the grilling's contents violated the constitution, but he still agreed to the debate. Responding to accusations that Kuwait is ranked in a low position on the Corruption Perception Index, the Sheikh Sabah said the country would have reached a better position had the National Assembly passed a large number of legislation in this regard.

Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said the voting on the non-cooperation motion will take place on April 6. The opposition needs 24 votes to pass the motion, which would mean sending the matter to HH the Amir.

The lawmakers who signed the motion are Ahmad Al-Azemi, Shuaib Al-Muwaizri, Mubarak Al-Hajraf, Saleh Al-Mutairi, Saud Al-Mutairi, Fares Al-Otaibi, Abdulkarim Al-Kandari, Hamdan Al-Azmi, Thamer Al-Suwait and Saifi Al-Saifi. The three lawmakers who had filed the grilling are Hasan Jowhar, Mohannad Al-Sayer and Khaled Al-Otaibi.

News in brief

Durra field Kuwaiti-Saudi site: FM

KUWAIT: The offshore Durra gas field is purely a Kuwaiti-Saudi field, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said on Tuesday. Iran is not a party in the Durra field, the minister said in a statement, affirming that only Kuwait and Saudi Arabia enjoy rights in investing in this field according to previously ratified accords between the two sides. — KUNA

Gory death on the road

KUWAIT: A man was killed after he jumped into fast-moving traffic between Daiya and Hessa Al-Mubarak areas. Several motorists said they tried to avoid the man, who deliberately remained in the middle of the lane until one driver could not avoid him and he was decapitated after being run over.

Eight UN peacekeepers killed

ISLAMABAD: Eight United Nations peacekeepers were killed in a helicopter crash in Democratic Republic of Congo while undertaking a reconnaissance mission on Tuesday, the Pakistani military's media wing said. It added that six Pakistani troops were among those killed. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan expressed his "deep sense of shock and grief". — AFP

US OKs fourth, fifth boosters

WASHINGTON: The United States Tuesday authorized a fourth dose of either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines for people 50 and older, as authorities warn of a possible new wave driven by the BA.2 variant. Additionally, people with immune compromising conditions who have already received four shots, with their latest at least four months ago, are now eligible for a fifth dose. — AFP

'Meaningful' talks in Turkey raise hopes

ISTANBUL: Russia said it would scale down fighting around two Ukrainian cities following talks with Ukraine on Tuesday and raised the possibility of a meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian presidents. The outcome of the face-to-face talks at a palace in Istanbul raised hopes after more than a month of conflict that has left thousands dead and forced millions from their homes.

But London and Washington immediately cast doubt on Russia's

words and, on the ground, Ukraine said seven people were killed by a Russian strike on a government building in the city of Mykolaiv. Following the talks, Ukrainian negotiator David Arakhania said there were "sufficient" conditions for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian President Vladimir Putin to meet.

Arakhania also called for "an international mechanism of security guarantees where guarantor countries will act in a similar way to NATO's article number five - and even more firmly". Russian Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin said there had been progress in talks on "the neutrality and non-nuclear status of Ukraine". Therefore, "a decision has been made to radically, by several times reduce

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ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan opens the Ukrainian-Russian talks on March 29, 2022. — AFP

Smith sorry over slap as Oscars launches probe

LOS ANGELES: Actor Will Smith offered apologies Monday to Chris Rock for smacking the comedian during the Oscars ceremony, as the body that oversees the awards said it was launching a formal review of the incident. Smith - who was named best actor on the night - marched onto stage during the glitzy Hollywood ceremony and hit Rock over a joke about wife Jada Pinkett Smith's hair.

"I would like to publicly apologize to you, Chris. I was out of line and I was wrong. I am embarrassed and my actions were not indicative of the man I want to be," the "King Richard" star wrote on Instagram. "Violence in all of its forms is poisonous and destructive. My behavior at last night's Academy Awards was unacceptable and inexcusable," Smith said. "Jokes at my expense are a part of the job, but a joke about Jada's medical condition



This combination of pictures shows US actors Will Smith, Jada Pinkett Smith and Chris Rock. — AFP

was too much for me to bear and I reacted emotionally."

Pinkett Smith suffers from alopecia, a condition that causes hair loss, and had a closely cropped head at Sunday's ceremony. The 94th Academy Awards was in its final hour when actor and comedian Rock quipped that Pinkett Smith appeared

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Regime change: Strategy the US no longer wants

WASHINGTON: The United States says it is not seeking a "regime change" in Russia, hasty clarification that shows the strategy once popular among neoconservatives has become a hot button issue after negative experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. President Joe Biden caused a stir Saturday when, during an impassioned speech in Warsaw, said his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin "cannot remain in power."

The White House rushed to downplay the phrase, which was not part of Biden's prewritten remarks, insisting the US leader was not suggesting a regime change in Moscow. But Biden refused to walk back the comment Monday, although he said he was only expressing his "moral outrage," not outlining a policy to overthrow Putin.

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Local

UNHCR Iraq rep applauds Kuwait humanitarian role

Kuwait's relief efforts of help alleviate the suffering of Yemenis

KUWAIT: Representative of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Iraq said Kuwait lends admirable support to the humanitarian causes around the globe. Thanks to Kuwait support, the UN Refugee Agency was able to provide basic assistance, including food, education and health-care, to millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq as well as other parts of the world, Nicolas Beuze told reporters on Monday.

Beuze, who served previously as UNHCR Representative in Lebanon and Yemen, made the comments at the conclusion of his visit to Kuwait. On the two-day visit, he said he had the opportunity to meet government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development Fund (KFAED), as well as representatives of the private sector companies and civil society organizations. All of them showed admirable sympathy and generosity regarding support to the issues of refugees and IDPs in many countries, particularly in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, the UN official pointed out.

Regarding the humanitarian situation of refugees in Iraq, Beuze said it started improving though there are more than 300,000 Syrian refugees in the north parts of the country. The Syrian refugee still face difficulty in securing the

necessities of living but the situation is getting out of the stage of emergency, he revealed, noting that it is time to start reconstruction and enable the Iraqi society to recover. On Yemen, he said the country undergoes a state of emergency with an eighth of the population living in extreme famine.

The relief efforts of Kuwait help alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people in general, he affirmed. In a similar vein, UNHCR Representative in Kuwait Nisreen Al-Rubaian said Kuwait continues backing up the UN aid agencies alleviate the suffering of millions of people in friendly countries worldwide. She noted that Kuwait contributed \$10 million to the UNHCR activities in Yemen last year and pledged an additional similar funding this year.

"Under Sovereign instructions, the Kuwaiti government set aside, on March 7, five million dollars to relief efforts in Afghanistan and two million dollars in aid of refugees from Ukraine," Al-Rubaian said. She added that the funding for Ukraine would be channeled through UN aid agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). On March 10, Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) aid a cargo plane, carrying 33.5 tons of foodstuffs and medical supplies, flew from Abdullah Al-Mubarak Airbase to Warsaw airport to help the Ukrainian refugees in Poland. — KUNA

Prime Minister heads to 2022 World Govt Summit



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah went to Dubai on Tuesday to lead the Kuwaiti delegation at the 2022 World Government Summit. The delegation accompanying him includes Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, Sheikh Dr Basil Al-Sabah the advisor to the premier

Diwan, as well as major officials including representatives from the foreign minister office.

UAE Minister of Cabinet Affairs Mohammed Al-Gergawi said Tuesday that the World Government Summit 2022 aims to bring governments closer to the future by looking forward to the most important economic, scientific, technical and political developments. — KUNA



Representative of the (UNHCR) in Iraq holds a press conference.

Thieves finding new ways and tricks to rob people

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Thieves are always finding new ways and tricks to rob people. After tens of scams through the phone or Internet to steal money from bank accounts or through buying cards, a new modus operandi is spreading in Kuwait. A video that has gone viral shows a suspected burglar placing business cards for various services such as plumbing, satellite installation and programming, air conditioning maintenance, repairing washing machines, buying used electronics or furniture or other similar services.

In addition to affixing these cards on the door, they also place classified newspapers or leaflets on the handle of the door or under the door. According to the person who filmed this video, which shows many business cards and leaflets on the door of a house, the thieves wait for five or six days to see if these cards and leaflets are removed.

If they're still in place, this means the house is empty and the residents are on holiday. The burglars then start watching the house to make sure it's vacant before they rob it. The person who filmed the video advised people to check the doors of their neighbors' homes and remove any business cards or leaflets placed there.



Gulf central bank governors meet

RIYADH: Gulf Central Bank Governors on Monday held their 78th meeting which was chaired

by the governor of the Central Bank of Saudi Arabia Dr Fahd Al-Mubarak. The governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait Dr Mohammed Al-Hashal attended the meeting. The central bank governors discussed the exchange of cybersecurity information in the banking sector in light of the growing cyber risks. — KUNA



KRCS hands out 'Ramadan baskets' to Syrian refugees

AMMAN: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) handed out on Tuesday 'Ramadan 2022 baskets' to Syrian refugees in Jordan, supported by Kuwait Finance House (KFH). In cooperation with Jordanian Red Crescent, KRCS was able to dis-

tribute 2000 food baskets for more than 1900 Syrian refugees and Jordanian orphans in different cities and governorates. In a statement for KUNA, Kuwait Ambassador to Jordan Aziz Al-Daihani said that Kuwait stands its ground in supporting our brothers in need in the most difficult times. On his part, campaign supervisor of the Jordanian Red Crescent Mahmoud Al-Assoud said that the packages include the most important elements that families need for Ramadan. The distribution will take place in several governorates in Jordan, and will provide 500 Iftar meals everyday of Ramadan. — KUNA



Kuwaiti Ambassador to Jordan Aziz Al-Daihani and other officials pose for a group photo during aid distribution in Balqaa province. — KUNA photos



Kuwait Red Crescent distributes Ramadan food baskets to Syrian refugees and poor families in Jordan.

Local

Gulf raises concerns over Iran's nuclear program

Kuwait, France discuss bilateral ties



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Tuesday received Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and visiting French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian and his accompanying delegation at Bayan Palace. Senior officials of His Highness the Crown Prince's office and Foreign Ministry attended the meeting. — KUNA



KUWAIT: French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian (left) and Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah (right) give a joint press conference in Kuwait City on March 29, 2022. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and his French counterpart, Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian on Tuesday discussed the bilateral ties and ways to enhance them. This came in a press conference during a luncheon, held in honor of the French delegation on the occasion of their official visit to Kuwait.

During the ceremony, both sides tackled topics of common interest and cooperation between Kuwait and France in all fields. They also discussed latest regional and international developments. The Kuwaiti Minister praised the booming cooperation between the two friendly countries. On his part, the French Minister said that he looks forward for further cooperation and coordination at various levels, and he also praised Kuwait's wisdom in handling political issues to support peace in the Gulf region. Also on this occasion, both sides signed several military and educational agreements.

Iran nuke program
Kuwaiti FM said that there are Gulf concerns about the Iranian nuclear program and they must be taken into consideration, "and we have clearly conveyed them to our allies and friends, and we hope they will be taken into account." In press conference held with his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian in Kuwait, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nasser stressed the depth of relations between the two countries and emphasized that two countries keenness to strengthen them in all fields, noting that over the past 60 years, they witnessed a lot of development in the economic, investment, cultural and educational fields.

He also praised Republic of France firm stance in liberating the State of Kuwait during the Iraqi inva-

sion in 1990, and France keenness to develop its relations and support for Kuwait's issues, in addition to its firm stance on the stability of Kuwait and the region. Moreover, two memoranda of understanding were signed that root the relationship between Kuwait and France.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nasser also praised the important French role regarding the regional challenges that the region is going through and its support for the initiatives launched by Kuwait for Lebanon in regard to rebuilding confidence with the brothers in the region. Kuwait supports France in all the steps it takes to restore security and stability in the region, he said.

On the Palestinian issue, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nasser praised France's important role to this regard and its support for the Palestinian people to

have a state on the borders of June 4, 1967 and the two-state solution. For his part, French Foreign Minister hailed the Kuwaiti mediation during the conference to allow Lebanon to get out of the crisis that befell it, stressing his keenness to continue working closely to serve the peace and security of the region. Le Drian also praised support Ukraine receives from the Kuwaiti people, stressing his keenness "to support Ukraine and to exert maximum pressure on Russia." He expressed his hope to reduce the repercussions of the conflict in Ukraine, especially in the field of food security, noting that "we are close to signing the nuclear agreement with Iran."

On oil prices, Le Drian said that "prices are set by OPEC and its members, which are sovereign countries, and France does not interfere in that, and we notice an increase in prices as a result of speculation, fear, and anticipation of matters as a result of the Ukrainian crisis." At the same time, he noted that the European Union decided that it would soon reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels. — KUNA



Memoranda of understanding signed



Kuwait Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah discusses issues of mutual concern with director general at department of inspection of Saudi Armed Forces Major General Khaled bin Mohammad Al Driwish. — KUNA

Kuwait, Saudi Army Chiefs hold talks

KUWAIT: Kuwait Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah on Tuesday

received the visiting director of the general department of inspection of the Armed Forces of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Major General Khaled bin Mohammad Al Driwish, and his accompanying delegation. The General said in a press statement that they discussed joint military issues and topics of common interest. The meeting was also attended by senior officers from both sides. — KUNA

Kuwait making sure no 'illegal donations'

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti authorities are sparing no effort to prevent raising funds for donations via illegal channels and means namely websites, a senior official affirmed on Tuesday. Director of Public Relations and Media at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor Ahmed Al-Enzi affirmed, Tuesday, the ministry's keenness to protect donor funds and preserve Kuwait's humanitarian reputation vis-a-vis some sites that promote fundraising for charitable projects.

In a press statement, Al-Enzi said that the Ministry addressed the Public Communications Authority with a request to block some external

websites that illegally promote the collection of donations for charitable projects outside Kuwait. This step came after the ministry noticed recently the spread of many un-authorized advertisements published on social networking site for collecting charitable donations outside Kuwait, run by entities or individuals, he explained.

He affirmed that the ministry, through the teams affiliated with the Department of Charitable Societies and Charitable Associations, has been closely monitoring all advertisements and invitations aimed at collecting donations. All legal measures will be taken against any party that does not comply with the laws and regulations governing the collection of donations. Al-Enzi stressed that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor will not compromise in protecting Society the donors' money and preserving Kuwait's pioneer reputation in charitable and humanitarian work. — KUNA

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GCC calls on parties to stop military operations in Yemen

RIYADH: Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Dr Nayef Al-Hajraf appealed on Tuesday on Saudi-led Coalition to support the legitimacy in Yemen and all Yemeni parties involved to stop military operations in Yemen. In a press statement, the secretariat said that the appeal reflects the keenness of the leaders and peoples of the GCC countries to achieve peace and stability in Yemen. Al-Hajraf's statement coincided with Yemeni-Yemeni consultations under the auspices of the GCC, launched Monday, days before the start of the holy month of Ramadan.

It came in order to create the appropriate conditions for the success of the consultations and to create a positive environment during the month of Ramadan to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people and maintain peace, security and stability in Yemen. Al-Hajraf renewed the invitation to Ansar Allah to attend and participate in consultations with all other Yemeni parties, to give priority to the interests of Yemen and to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people. — KUNA

Kuwait oil price down

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil dropped by \$1.42 to \$113.23 per barrel on Monday as opposed to \$114.65 pb last Friday, the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said on Tuesday. At the global level, both the Brent crude and the West Texas Intermediate witnessed huge drops with the first going down by \$8.17 to \$112.48 per barrel, and the latter dropping by \$7.94 to \$105.96 pb.

Firm on oil policy

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Russia, the twin pillars of the OPEC+ group of oil producers, look set to hold firm in refusing increases in crude production despite appeals to boost supply and stabilize price volatility. The thirteen members of OPEC proper will meet their ten allies from the OPEC+ grouping - chief among them Russia - on Thursday for their monthly stocktake of the oil market.

Prices have seen several spikes since Russia's invasion of neighboring Ukraine began on February 24, at one point reaching \$139.13 for the benchmark Brent North Sea crude contract and \$130.50 for the American WTI, close to all-time records. Despite this analysts say OPEC+ is unlikely to deviate from the policy of cautious increases it has set out for the months ahead. "The war in Ukraine reminded the world that we are still dependent on OPEC+ to provide the world's energy supplies," says Edward Moya, analyst at Oanda.

'Holding the world hostage'

When prices have been rising, Riyadh has profited, ignoring the warnings from the G7 about the "key role" the cartel has in regulating prices. The International Energy Agency has also been vocal on the need for Thursday's meeting to produce "good messages which would help to relieve the strain in the oil markets".

More so than any other member of OPEC+, "the Saudis have no real incentive to boost production as they are benefiting from the high oil prices and strong demand," says Moya. Another consideration for Saudi Arabia is a desire not to alienate Russia. Coming out in favor of a big boost in production would at this moment be read as a signal that Saudi Arabia was lining up beside its traditional ally, the US.

"As the war rages, any measure which removes oil as a weapon for Putin will be read in Moscow as a provocation," Philippe Sebillé-Lopez, head of the Geopolia consultancy, told AFP. Indeed, "by not compensating for Russia's oil shortage", Saudi Arabia appears to be allowing Russian President Vladimir Putin to hold "the importing world in hostage to Russian oil and gas," says Stephen Innes, analyst at SPI Asset Management.

While the US and some other states such as the UK have announced embargoes on Russian energy imports, much of Europe has not been able to follow suit, reliant as it is on Russia for 30 percent of its oil imports.

Shifting loyalties

Innes says that the latest Saudi moves could also "be interpreted as a shift in loyalties from the US to Russia". He adds that the current crisis is "exposing gaps in its long-standing partnership with the United States". Riyadh has thus far avoided criticizing Russia's invasion and has reiterated its commitment to OPEC+.

Innes says the real heart of the problem is around Iran, Saudi Arabia's biggest regional rival. Iran and the US are currently locked in indirect negotiations to see if the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers can be revived. "It is fair to assume that the nuclear deal negotiations with Iran may not necessarily be entirely welcome by the Saudis," says Bjornar Tonhaugen of Rystad Energy. — AFP

PHOTO OF THE DAY



KUWAIT: A cattle egret is seen at a beach in Jahra Governorate on March 28, 2022. - Xinhua

Pedestrians avoid 'dirty' footbridges



By Chidi Emmanuel and Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: While driving across Kuwait, one can see pedestrians crossing the road even if an overpass exists. There have been reports of hit-and-run incidents by motorists who knock down pedestrians who cross busy highways without using overhead bridges. While there are still many places that lack pedestrian bridges, many existing ones are not being used by pedestrians. In reality, footbridges save lives.

Pedestrians give various reasons on why they don't use the footbridges, which include laziness in climbing the bridge or being in a hurry to reach their destinations. Some also claim a fear of heights is the reason why they cannot climb stairs, while others are afraid old bridges may collapse. Some pedestrians claim they avoid using the overpasses due to the harsh weather or because the bridges are dirty.

The government spends a lot of money building modern concrete pedestrian bridges to ease the traffic flow and reduce accidents. Old bridges have been renovated and new ones have been constructed, but some remain dilapidated. "Old bridges are not maintained properly. Some bridges have been abandoned due to disuse and disrepair," said Kamal, a Pakistani expat.

"Some of the bridges are old and dirty. I am always scared of using them. I prefer to take the road instead," he said, referring to a pedestrian bridge between Hawally and Jabriya spanning the Fourth Ring Road. "I understand why people do not choose bridges to cross streets. I have two children, and just like all parents, I feel the unclean environment could endanger their well-being," he added.

Maria, a Filipino expat, blamed the cleaners for the rubbish on the bridges, calling for more awareness. "Sanitation workers are required to clean bridges too. Municipal officials need to create more awareness on the dangers of crossing the road carelessly. Enforcing the use of pedestrian bridges will be a good way to reduce road fatalities. This will end the continued failure by pedestrians to use footbridges," she reasoned.

"I live opposite a pedestrian bridge in Maidan Hawally. I used the bridge when it was new, but it is so dirty now. Before they built the bridge, there were many accidents happening in this spot. The problem is maintenance," Suresh, an Indian expat, told Kuwait Times.

The Hawally bridge near the police station in Nugra was temporarily closed when the commercial complex nearby ceased to operate during the coronavirus pandemic. It was the most famous air-conditioned bridge in Kuwait in the 1980s. However, when Kuwait Times visited the bridge recently, it was in a very bad state. The escalator has stopped and the bridge needs maintenance.

Gina, a Filipino resident of the area, said she felt bad and disappointed. "I have been using the bridge for years, but it is no longer in use," she said in dismay. For women, pedestrian bridges without lights have become a nightmare after sundown. "I am always scared of using the bridge at night. I feel I might be attacked or harassed," said Corlet Akim, an African expat.





Environmentalist held in Iran ends 'hunger strike'

Women ministers urge Taliban to let girls return to school

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Blinken in Morocco for security talks

Blinken, Prince Mohammed to discuss efforts to revive 2015 landmark Iran nuclear deal

RABAT: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was visiting Morocco on Tuesday to discuss regional security and meet the United Arab Emirates de facto leader Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan. The trip comes in the shadow of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which along with sanctions has sent wheat and fuel prices soaring in a serious blow for import-dependent North African countries.

"We know this pain is keenly felt in the Middle East and North Africa, where most countries import at least half of their wheat," State Department Acting Assistant Secretary Yael Lempert said before the trip. Blinken flew in late Monday from Israel where he had joined top diplomats from the UAE, Morocco, Bahrain and Egypt for a meeting that underlined a seismic shift since 2020 in relations between Arab countries and the Jewish state.

On Tuesday he started talks with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita ahead of a meeting with Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, with the Western Sahara dispute and security cooperation on the agenda—including the fight against the Islamic State group and Al Qaeda in the Sahel. The same subjects will loom large in meetings the following day with Morocco's regional rival Algeria.

Blinken also met Tuesday evening with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed—often dubbed "MBZ"—at the Emirati leader's Moroccan residence, a meeting that comes as Washington warily watches longtime ally the UAE diverging from many of its policies. The UAE has refrained from criticising Russia, recently sent its top diplomat to Moscow, and hosted the Russia-backed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Blinken and Prince Mohammed are set to discuss efforts to revive the 2015 landmark Iran nuclear deal, which aimed to limit Iran's nuclear development in exchange for loosening sanctions—an agreement dropped by former US president Donald Trump in 2018.

Their meeting also comes amid an escalation in cross-border missile and drone attacks by



RABAT: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (C-L) is received by Morocco's Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita (C-R) at the foreign ministry headquarters in the capital Rabat on March 29, 2022. —AFP

Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebels against the UAE and Saudi Arabia, allies in a grinding war that has laid waste to the impoverished nation with no end in sight. Blinken will also meet a group of Moroccan women involved in science and technology.

Western Sahara

In Morocco, Blinken is set to discuss the Western Sahara, a phosphate-rich former Spanish colony with a vast Atlantic coastline home to rich fisheries. Morocco controls 80 percent of it including a key highway towards West Africa, while the rest—a desert area bordering Mauritania and Algeria—is run by the Polisario Front independence movement.

Trump in 2020 recognised the region as sovereign Moroccan territory in a break with decades of US policy, after Rabat agreed to re-establish relations

with Israel under the so-called Abraham Accords. President Joe Biden's administration has been tight-lipped on how it will follow up on the move, which came just weeks after the Polisario declared a 1991 ceasefire null and void, sparking fears that the long-frozen conflict could flare up again.

Morocco has urged the US to take a step further and open a consulate there, like the UAE—a move to which the Biden administration has not committed. The State Department said in a report Monday that it supports a Moroccan autonomy plan and the work of recently appointed UN envoy Staffan de Mistura. The UN sees the territory as a "non-self-governing territory". Blinken's visit to Rabat also comes as the US seeks stronger support for Ukraine from a region where many countries have been reticent to criticise Moscow. —AFP

Macron's lead takes fizz out of French election

PARIS: France's leading TV channel always devotes an entire evening to dissecting the first-round results of the presidential vote. But not this year. Instead, it will cut off early to show a clownish cult comedy from 1993.

The decision to rebroadcast the surefire hit "The Visitors" saw TFI accused of deepening a democratic deficit, but it also crystallized what polls have shown for weeks — that the election has yet to capture the imagination of voters. With less than two weeks to the April 10 vote, the 11 rivals hoping to knock the centrist Emmanuel Macron out of office have struggled to generate much momentum, let alone enthusiasm, against the background of the war in Ukraine. Surveys show most people are convinced the 44-year-old former banker, whose reformist zeal upended politics-as-usual five years ago, will cruise through the first round toward a run-off victory on April 24.

According to a BVA poll released Friday, 75 percent of registered French intend to cast a ballot, which would be slightly down on the 2017 figure with absentee voters seen as helping Macron. "People are increasingly utilitarian, they vote when it interests them, and we've seen that when it's a close race, more people vote," said Gerard Grunberg, a veteran political scientist at the CNRS research institute. "That's going to help Macron because his base is fairly determined, especially in these times of war — other voters might just say, 'We don't like Macron but he's going to win, and anyway we don't know who to vote for,'" he told AFP. —AFP

Honduras ex-president to be extradited to US over drug trafficking

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras: The Honduras Supreme Court on Monday authorized the extradition of former president Juan Orlando Hernandez to the United States to face charges of drug trafficking. The court rejected an appeal by Hernandez, 53, following a judge's March 16 decision to accept an extradition request by the Court of the Southern District of New York, said judiciary spokesman Melvin Duarte.

Hernandez could face a life sentence if convicted. His former congressman brother Tony Hernandez was sentenced to life in prison in the United States in March 2021 for drug trafficking. It was during that trial that the ex-president was implicated in the illicit trade. Hernandez, who held office from 2014 to 2022, is accused of having facilitated the smuggling of some 500 tons of drugs—mainly from Colombia and Venezuela—to the United States via Honduras since 2004.

US prosecutors have alleged he received millions of dollars from drug traffickers for protection—including from Mexican narco-kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman. Hernandez faces three charges: Conspiracy to import a controlled substance into the United States, using or carrying firearms including machine



TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras: Honduran former president (2014-2022) Juan Orlando Hernandez's wife, Ana Garcia (C), waits with her daughters Daniela and Isabela, outside the Supreme Court of Justice as they wait for its decision to extradite or not Hernandez to the US, where he is wanted for alleged drug trafficking. —AFP

guns, and conspiracy to use or carry firearms.

On the first charge, the Supreme Court's 15 magistrates voted unanimously in favor of extradition. For the two firearms related charges, the vote was 13 for and two against. The court's decision cannot be appealed. Hernandez was arrested in mid-February, less than a month after leaving the presidency, following a US extradition request. In mid-March, a judge ordered his extradition, which Hernandez appealed. —AFP

France tries Chilean accused of murdering Japanese ex-lover

BESANCON: A Chilean man appeared in court in France Tuesday accused of the murder of his Japanese ex-girlfriend, Narumi Kurosaki, who disappeared in 2016 in a high-profile case that has gripped three continents. Nicolas Zepeda, who denies killing Kurosaki, was extradited from his country to France in 2020.

Kurosaki, a brilliant scholarship student then aged 21, arrived in eastern French city Besancon in summer 2016 to learn the language. She disappeared on December 4. Her former boyfriend Zepeda, whom she had broken up with a year before, was the last person to see her alive. Prosecutors allege that Zepeda was unable to deal with the couple's breakup, coming to Besancon to kill Kurosaki in her student dorm room before dumping the body in the forests of the rugged Jura region.

But so far no trace has been found of Kurosaki's body. "Her parents know after five years that their daughter couldn't have vanished or committed suicide... they have no doubt that Mr Zepeda killed her," the family's lawyer Sylvie Galley said.

After travelling from Tokyo to attend the trial, Kurosaki's mother and younger sister could be seen holding back sobs on the plaintiffs' bench and avoided looking at the accused. Wearing a blue shirt and dark tie, Zepeda spoke with his lawyers at the Besancon courtroom before confirming his



BESANCON, France: Defendant Chilean national Nicolas Zepeda (C), speaks with his lawyers Jacqueline Laffont (C-R) and Julie Benedetti (C-L), on the first day of his trial in which he is accused of murdering his Japanese ex-girlfriend in France in 2016. —AFP

name and date of birth to the judges. Speaking in Spanish via an interpreter, he described himself as the "founder of a small business". —AFP

Huawei reconfirms commitment to investing in the future



During the release of Huawei's 2021 Annual Report, Guo Ping, Huawei's Rotating Chairman, stated that the past three years created an extremely challenging business environment — not to mention substantial nonmarket factors — complicated its business operations.

"And yet when the storm came, we chose to run headfirst into the rain. We have done everything in our capacity to ensure business continuity, with no interruptions in delivery or service. We have been working day and night to grow the harvest and secure our survival," said Guo.

Despite these challenges, the company maintained solid operations throughout the past year. As per the report, Huawei achieved USD 99.9 billion in revenue in 2021, and USD 17.8 billion in net profits, an increase of 75.9% year-on-year. The company's R&D expenditure reached about USD 22.38 billion in 2021, representing 22.4% of its total revenue, and bringing its total R&D expenditure over the past 10 years to over USD 132.5 billion. The company plans to continuously increase investment in R&D, moving forward.

According to Guo, the company's performance was in line with forecast. Its carrier business remained stable, the enterprise business experienced steady growth, and the consumer business expanded into new domains.

Meng Wanzhou, Huawei's CFO, said, "Despite a revenue decline in 2021, our ability to make a profit and generate cash flows is increasing, and we are more capable of dealing with uncertainty." Thanks to the enhanced profitability of its major businesses, the company's cash flow from operating activities dramatically increased in 2021, amounting to USD 9.3 billion. Its liability ratio also dropped to 57.8%, and its overall financial structure has become more resilient and flexible.

At an exclusive media roundtable, Karl Song, VP of Global Communications, Huawei, shared, "By streamlining management and making full use of digital technology, we've made ongoing improvements to operating efficiency to generate more revenue and increase soil fertility, we reduced 1.46 billion USD only in sales and administrative expenses."

In 2021, Huawei's carrier business generated USD44.1 billion in revenue and helped carriers around

the world deploy leading 5G networks. Third-party test results found that 5G networks built by Huawei for customers in 13 countries, including Switzerland, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, provide the best user experience. By working with carriers and partners, Huawei has signed more than 3,000 commercial contracts for industrial 5G applications. These kinds of 5G applications are currently seeing large-scale commercial use in sectors like manufacturing, mines, iron & steel plants, ports, and hospitals.

Huawei's enterprise business also grew rapidly, generating USD 16.06 billion in revenue during 2021. In the past year, Huawei launched II scenario-based solutions for key sectors such as government, transportation, finance, energy, and manufacturing.

Additionally, Huawei's consumer business zeroed in on consumer wants and needs, further building out the global ecosystem for a smart, all-connected era, as part of the company's Seamless AI Life strategy for consumers around the world. This business generated USD 38.17 billion in revenue in 2021 and continued to see steady sales growth in smart wearables, smart screens, true wireless stereo (TWS) earbuds, and Huawei Mobile Services (HMS). In particular, the smart wearable and smart screen segments both saw 30%+ year-on-year growth. In total, HarmonyOS was used in over 220 million Huawei devices as of 2021, becoming the world's fastest growing mobile device operating system.

Guo stressed, "Moving forward, Huawei will advance its journey of digitalization, intelligent transformation, and low carbon. Relying on talent, scientific research, and an innovative spirit, we will continuously increase investment to reshape our paradigms for fundamental theories, architecture, and software, and build our long-term competitiveness."

Guo emphasized that the company is committed to serving customers with trustworthy offerings, a reliable value chain, and a thriving ecosystem.

"We still have plenty of challenges ahead of us. Our fight to survive isn't over yet, but no matter what comes our way, we will keep increasing our strategic investments and working closely with partners across the ecosystem. We firmly believe that, together, the future is better," he concluded.

In 2021, Huawei rose from 49th to 44th place on Fortune Global 500.

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International

British police to issue 20 initial 'Partygate' fines

Johnson is reportedly not among those hit in the first wave of sanctions

LONDON: British police investigating breaches of coronavirus lockdown laws by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his staff in Downing Street announced Tuesday it would be issuing 20 initial fines. London's Metropolitan Police said it would not be disclosing the number or identities of those being fined, but Johnson is reportedly not among those hit in the first wave of sanctions.



Rivals accuse Boris of misleading parliament

The news nevertheless risks reviving the so-called "partygate" scandal that left him fighting for political survival after a number of lawmakers from his ruling Conservatives called for his resignation. "We will today initially begin to refer 20 fixed penalty notices to be issued for breaches of COVID-19 regulations," the Met said in a statement, adding that its investigation was continuing.

"We are making every effort to progress this investigation at speed and have completed a number of assessments," it added. Because there was still a "significant amount" of evidence to be assessed, they did not rule out further action.

Questions for Johnson

The London force is investigating claims that Johnson and his Downing Street officials organised and attended at least a dozen alcohol-fuelled events in 2020 and 2021 that violated Britain's then-strict virus curbs.

Johnson has already apologised for the parties, which included Christmas celebrations and a drink-fuelled gathering the evening before Prince Philip's funeral. The prime minister, who initially denied any rule-breaking events had occurred in the complex where he lives and works, has consistently denied any personal wrongdoing.

But the 57-year-old faces a fine unless he can adequately explain why he appeared to attend some social gatherings when his government was telling the public that they were illegal. His office confirmed last month that he had submitted his response to a police questionnaire on the matter, but sources have said he has not been interviewed in person by investigating officers. His spokesman has previously said he will disclose any significant developments in the probe relating to the prime minister.

Pressure eased

The "Partygate" revelations and a steady stream of other scandals dating back to last year had left Johnson's position as prime minister hanging by a thread earlier this year. The mood among some of his own MPs grew increasingly mutinous and his position was weaker than at any time since he became prime minister in 2019 on a wave of support for his populist Brexit agenda. His opponents accused him of misleading parliament by insisting the Downing Street events were work-related and within



BRUSSELS, Belgium: File photo shows Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (C) Britain's Foreign Secretary Liz Truss (L) and Britain's military representative to NATO Ben Bathurst (R) leave NATO Headquarters following a summit in Brussels on March 24, 2022. — AFP

the rules. Normally, ministers found to have misled other lawmakers are expected to resign.

A handful of his own Tory MPs publicly said they had no confidence in his leadership, and speculation grew that the 54 votes required to force a no-confidence vote to remove him as party leader and prime minister could be reached.

However, the launch of the police investigation in late

January bought the embattled Johnson some time. In recent weeks, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further eased the political pressure on him with the international crisis replacing "Partygate" in the daily headlines.

Johnson has tried to play a prominent role in the West's response, hosting near daily calls with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and sending the UK military aid to the eastern European country. — AFP



BEIRUT: Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati (R) and UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education Stefania Giannini (2nd-R) listen as Maysoun Chehab (C), UNESCO's National Education Professional Officer for Lebanon, speaks during a ceremony marking UNESCO's announcement of the completion of a project to rehabilitate all 280 educational buildings damaged by the 2020 Beirut port blast. — AFP

Lebanon faces education 'emergency'

BEIRUT: Lebanon is grappling with an education "emergency," a United Nations official said, as years of economic collapse weigh heavily on students and teachers. "We are now in an emergency situation. Education in Lebanon is in crisis because the country is living in crisis," Maysoun Chehab of the UN education and culture body (UNESCO) told AFP.

She spoke on the sidelines of an event Monday celebrating the completion of a \$35-million UNESCO project to rehabilitate 280 education centres damaged by a 2020 blast. The explosion caused by haphazardly stored fertiliser at Beirut port killed more than 200 people, destroyed swathes of the capital and disrupted the education of at least 85,000 youths.

UNESCO chief Audrey Azoulay visited Beirut weeks later, driving efforts to restore heritage sites and damaged schools. Students and teachers now have brand new classrooms but they are still suffering from the twin effects of an unprecedented economic crisis in Lebanon and the coronavirus pandemic.

Since late 2019, the Lebanese pound has lost over 90 percent of its value, pushing most of the population into poverty. Daily power cuts lasting more than 20 hours and soaring petrol prices mean many students can neither afford to reach their classes nor study from home. "Schools do not have enough funds to operate as they should, teachers do not have sufficient salaries to live in prosperity, students do not have transportation means due to high fuel prices," said Chehab, UNESCO's education chief for Lebanon. "This is all affecting the quality of education."

The minimum wage once worth \$450 is now valued at \$28. The crisis has forced students to quit school or university to make ends meet. Enrolment in educational institutions slumped from 60 percent last year to 43 percent in the current academic year, a UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report found. — AFP

Nigeria train attack leaves 'injuries and fatalities'

KANO: An attack on a major Nigerian railway line left "injuries and other fatalities" after gunmen detonated a bomb on the track and opened fire on a halted train, authorities said on Tuesday. The Monday night attack on a train linking the capital Abuja with the northwest city of Kaduna appeared to be another escalation by criminal gangs known locally as bandits.

Around 970 passengers were onboard the train when gunmen blew up the tracks and started shooting into the coaches before the army arrived to repel them, a security source said. "Passengers who sustained injuries, and other fatalities, have been moved to hospitals," Kaduna State security commissioner Samuel Aruwan said in a statement on Facebook, without giving further details. Passengers had been evacuated by the armed forces but Aruwan also said search and rescue operations continued, suggesting some people were still missing. Nigerian Railway Corporation said services on the Abuja-Kaduna route had been "temporarily suspended".

Two days earlier, gunmen killed a perimeter security guard in an attack at Kaduna airport before armed forces intervened. Gunmen also attacked the same railway line with an explosive in October.

Bandit gangs in the northwest and central Nigerian states have long terrorised communities, conducting mass kidnappings for ransom, raiding villages and stealing cattle. But their violence has intensified. Gunmen often arrive in their scores by motorbike, sometimes striking several villages, killing and abducting residents. Gunmen have also targeted highways for kidnappings between the capital and cities such as Kaduna and the northwestern commercial hub Kano. Nigeria's military has been carrying out operations and air strikes to clear bandits out of their camps hidden in forests that straddle several states in the northwest. — AFP



LONDON: Roxanne Tahbaz, the daughter of Morad Tahbaz speaks during a press conference. — AFP

Environmentalist held in Iran ends 'hunger strike'

LONDON, United Kingdom: Morad Tahbaz, an environmental campaigner held in Iran, has ended a week-long hunger strike, his daughter said Tuesday, reiterating his family's frustration with the UK government's handling of the case. Tahbaz, 69, who holds British, US and Iranian citizenship, remains in prison in Tehran while two other UK-Iranians — Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori — were released and flew home earlier this month.

His daughter, Roxanne Tahbaz, said relatives were told by the foreign ministry in London at the time that Iran had agreed to release him on unrestricted furlough and that his wife would be allowed to travel there to visit him. "Since then, neither has come to pass — he's still in prison, and she's still on the travel ban," Roxanne Tahbaz told BBC radio. She said her father had initially been released from Tehran's Evin prison but only for about 24 hours. Following his return to jail, her father began a hunger strike at the start of last week but ended it Monday at the request of relatives over health concerns, Roxanne Tahbaz said. — AFP

Regime change: Strategy the US...

Continued from Page 1

Even hinting at such a tactic appears taboo in Washington. "Regime change might sound appealing because it removes the person associated with policies we don't like," Sarah Kreps, a government professor at Cornell University, told AFP. "But it almost always leads to instability."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has made refusing regime change a central tenet of his diplomatic approach, promising as early as March 2021 not to "promote democracy through costly military interventions or by attempting to overthrow authoritarian regimes by force". "We have tried these tactics in the past. However well-intentioned, they haven't worked," he said.

The history of US foreign policy is littered with such attempts both clandestine and overt — and more or less successful — to resolve a crisis by replacing the leaders of an adversary country. It first took place in Latin America, when the CIA played a role, particularly during the Cold War, in military coups aimed at overthrowing left-wing presidents.

But the regime change strategy did not disappear with the rise of the Iron Curtain: Now the only global superpower, and confident of being untouchable, the United States began asserting its power even more overtly at the turn of the 21st century. As early as 1998, a Congressional text signed into law by Democratic president Bill Clinton stated that "it should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq".

When Republican George W Bush arrived at the White House in 2001, he surrounded himself with neoconservative figures — sometimes branded

as war hawks — who theorized a return to American interventionism as a way to promote the democratic model. The Sept 11 attacks accelerated the shift. The "war on terror" quickly led to the fall of the Taleban in Afghanistan. Soon after, Washington put its words about Saddam Hussein into action during the 2003 Iraq War, by overthrowing him after wrongly accusing him of hiding weapons of mass destruction.

In Libya, the 2011 intervention by Washington and its European allies was officially to protect rebels who took up arms against Muammar Gaddafi during the Arab Spring uprising. But the mission was actually extended until the death of the Libyan dictator. In Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, the primary objective of bringing the regime down appeared to have been quickly achieved.

On the other hand, the goal of "nation-building", or the necessary construction of a stable — and Western-allied — state to succeed the fallen power, ended in failure at best. The jihadist Islamic State group took advantage of Iraqi instability in the mid-2010s. Twenty years of costly military presence in Afghanistan ended in fiasco when the United States withdrew last summer, only to see the Taleban sweep back to power. Libya is still unable to extricate itself from a decade of chaos.

US politicians, almost unanimously aligned with a public opinion weary of the "endless wars" waged on the other side of the world, are now promoting a less interventionist foreign policy. Without the military option, though, the United States does not necessarily have the means to achieve its ambitions. Under the presidency of Donald Trump, Washington wanted to force Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro from power through a campaign of international sanctions — a plan that ended in failure.

From the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Biden drew a red line: Never enter into direct confrontation with Russia, to avoid a "Third World War". For Kreps, the professor, "even the most hawkish policy makers seem to have learned from the foreign policy outcomes of the last few decades". — AFP

Smith sorry over slap as Oscars...

Continued from Page 1

ready to star in "G.I. Jane 2" — a putative sequel to a film about a female soldier who has a shaved head. After at first appearing to laugh at the joke, Smith walked onto the stage and slapped Rock with an open hand. He then returned to his seat and shouted profanities.

Smith tearfully apologized to his fellow nominees and the Academy — but not Rock — a few minutes later as he accepted his historic Oscar. "Love will make you do crazy things," he said. On Monday, he repeated that apology. "I would also like to apologize to the Academy, the producers of the show, all

the attendees and everyone watching around the world.

"I would like to apologize to the Williams Family and my King Richard Family. I deeply regret that my behavior has stained what has been an otherwise gorgeous journey for all of us. I am a work in progress." Smith's mea culpa came hours after the Academy condemned his behavior and said it was looking at possible sanctions. "We have officially started a formal review around the incident and will explore further action and consequences in accordance with our Bylaws, Standards of Conduct and California law," a statement said.

Celebrities from Tinseltown and beyond reacted with shock and stunned amazement to Smith's outburst, with some defending him and others condemning a display of "toxic masculinity". "He could have killed him. That's pure out of control rage and violence," filmmaker Judd Apatow said in a tweet he later deleted. — AFP

'Meaningful' talks in Turkey...

Continued from Page 1

the military activity" around the capital Kyiv and the city of Chernigiv, he said.

Chief negotiator Vladimir Medinsky said there had been a "meaningful discussion". US Secretary of State Antony Blinken responded saying he doubted Russia's "seriousness". "There is what Russia says and there is what Russia does. We're focused on the latter," he said, speaking at a press conference in Morocco. "What Russia is doing is the continued brutalization of Ukraine and its people, and that continues as we speak." A spokesman for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said: "We will judge Putin and his regime

by his actions and not by his words".

Just hours earlier, Ukraine said seven people were killed in a Russian strike against the regional government headquarters in Mykolaiv, adding to a toll estimated by Zelensky at 20,000 so far. Ukrainian forces have pushed back Russian forces from around the city in recent days and have recaptured territory in other parts of the country, including in the suburban town of Irpin outside Kyiv — an important gateway to the capital. Ukraine has also resumed evacuations from areas in the south of the country occupied by Russian forces.

In response to the invasion, the West has imposed crushing economic sanctions and many Western companies have pulled out of Russia. There have also been several rounds of diplomatic expulsions, which continued on Tuesday with Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands announcing a total of 42 diplomats would be expelled. — AFP

International

Solomon Islands premier says China security deal 'ready for signing'

Security arrangements with Australia would 'remain intact'

HONIARA, Solomon Islands: The Solomon Islands' prime minister said Tuesday that a contentious security agreement with Beijing was "ready for signing", denying reports that his country had been pressured to allow a Chinese naval base to be built in the Pacific island nation. In an impassioned speech to parliament, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare offered little detail on the final deal beyond saying that there was "no intention whatsoever... to ask China to build a military base in the Solomon Islands".

"a reminder of the constant pressure and threats that present in our region to our own national security".

Morrison said he had been in contact with New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who this week called the draft deal "gravely concerning". But Beijing on Tuesday dismissed all concerns, calling the pact "beyond reproach".

Foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said at a routine briefing that China hoped the "relevant countries can earnestly respect the Solomon Islands' sovereignty... instead of condescendingly believing that they have the right to tell the Solomon Islands what it should or should not do".



"We are not pressured by our new friends"

He dismissed reports in the Australian media that his country was being pressured by China to build the base. "Where does that nonsense come from? The security treaty... is pursued at the request of the Solomon Islands' government," he said.

"We are not pressured in any way by our new friends." A draft version of the agreement, leaked last week, sent shockwaves through Canberra because it included proposals that would allow Chinese security and naval deployments to the Pacific nation.

Asked in parliament about the status of the deal, Sogavare said: "We will finalise and finish now. The document is ready for signing." Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison this week said reports of the deal were

'Very insulting'

In his speech Tuesday, Sogavare said existing security arrangements with Australia would "remain intact" under the new pact with China, but added that "to achieve our security needs, it is clear that we need to diversify the country's relationship with other countries—and what is wrong with that?"

China's growing influence in the Pacific in recent years has fed into a tense relationship with Australia, as has Canberra's strengthened military ties with the United States and other allies. The prospect of a Chinese naval base in the South Pacific has long been a concern for Australia and the United States because it would allow Beijing to project its power deeper into the region.

Sogavare labelled concern from "many leaders" about China's presence threatening regional security as "unfortunate perceptions". He said that it was "very insulting... to be branded as unfit to manage our sovereign affairs" by other nations and condemned those who had leaked the draft pact with China as "lunatics and agents of foreign regimes".



HONIARA, Solomon Islands: An undated handout photo released on March 29, 2022 by the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) shows China Police Liaison Team officers training local RSIPF officers in drill, unarmed combat skills, advanced usage of long sticks, round shields, tactical batons, T-shape baton, handcuffs, basic rifle tactics and crowd control. — AFP

'Partner of choice'

The Solomon Islands were rocked by unrest last November when protesters tried to storm the parliament and then went on a deadly three-day rampage, torching much of Chinatown in the capital Honiara. More than 200 peacekeepers from Australia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand were deployed to restore calm and Sogavare managed to avoid being deposed.

Sogavare said Tuesday that Australia and New Zealand would remain the "partner of choice when it

comes to the need to call for assistance in critical times". Last year's riots were sparked by a range of tensions in the Solomon Islands, including opposition to Sogavare's rule, inter-island rivalries and high unemployment, but anti-China sentiment in the nation also played a key role.

Leaders on the most populous island of Malaita fiercely oppose Sogavare's decision to shift diplomatic ties from Taiwan to Beijing in 2019, a switch that became a lightning rod for broader frustration about Chinese investment in the Pacific nation. — AFP



DOHA: Handout image provided by the Doha Forum shows Pakistani activist for female education and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai (L) meeting English former football player and UNICEF ambassador, David Beckham, as UNICEF executive director, Catherine Russel (C) looks on, during the Doha Forum in Qatar's capital, on March 27, 2022. — AFP

Women ministers urge Taliban to let girls return to school

DOHA: Two women ministers, from mainly Muslim nations, on Monday put international demands that Afghan girls be allowed back in school to a top member of the Taliban government, officials said. Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi and Qatar's Deputy Foreign Minister Lolwah Al Khater together held talks with the Taliban's acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Doha amid mounting concern over rights in the country, especially for women.

Foreign governments have warned that the Taliban actions could cause a backlash at a fund-raising conference for Afghanistan on Thursday, as aid agencies warn of a growing food and health crisis in the country of 37 million people.

Marsudi and Al Khater were the first foreign representatives to meet a Taliban leader since the fundamentalist group sent girls home last Wednesday, a few hours after letting them back into secondary schools.

In a Twitter comment Marsudi said that she and Al Khater "discussed (the) humanitarian issue and education for all in Afghanistan" with Muttaqi. "Girls in education as well as women's rights were discussed in the meeting," added a source briefed on Monday's discussions. The United States cancelled planned talks with Muttaqi in Doha at the weekend in protest at the school action. In a further blow, the hardline Islamists have also ordered airlines to stop women flying unless they are accompanied by a male relative. It has also stepped up restrictions on foreign media.

The US special envoy on Afghanistan, Thomas West, told a gathering of policy leaders in Doha at the weekend that he expected the school ban to be quickly reversed. Muttaqi's planned appearance at the Doha Forum was cancelled though he eventually arrived in Qatar, where the Taliban have a representative office.

"No US official met with so-called interim foreign minister Muttaqi during this visit to Qatar, including at the Doha Forum," a US State Department spokesperson told AFP. "The international community wants to send the message that what is happening is unacceptable," commented one diplomat after Monday's meetings. The girls' education ban has been widely condemned after the Taliban, who retook Kabul in August, gave commitments that girls would be allowed

to study. And there are now fears that the action could damage a UN appeal to raise \$4.4 billion to cover Afghanistan's food and health needs this year.

Germany and Britain are organising a fund-raising conference on Thursday. Germany gave 600 million euros in aid to Afghanistan last year, but its ambassador designate to the country, Markus Potzel, said: "It's very difficult to convince our politicians, our public, our media to give public money to a country where they deprive women of education".

Nobel Peace laureate Malala Yousafzai, who was shot in the face by a Pakistani Taliban as a 14-year-old, said the headline group was "misusing the name of Islam" by stopping girls studying. But she predicted the ban would not last as Afghan women feel "empowered". — AFP

Hong Kong jails ex-opposition lawmaker

HONG KONG: A former Hong Kong opposition lawmaker was jailed Tuesday for snatching a folder from an official during a legislature meeting, the latest sign of Beijing's tightening grip over the city's once-boisterous chamber. Previous Hong Kong legislatures had diverse political parties but after Beijing clamped down on dissent and imposed a sweeping national security law in 2020, authorities changed the electoral rules to ensure that only "patriots" could run for office.

The traditional pro-democracy camp no longer has any seats, with many of its members either in prison or in self-imposed exile. Tuesday's verdict against Leung Kwok-hung, a prominent pro-democracy figure nicknamed "Long Hair", further shrinks the space for dissent in the legislature—already homogenous in perspective as it is now stacked with pro-Beijing loyalists.

The 66-year-old was charged with contempt after snatching a folder from an official during a legislature meeting in 2016. His case has dragged on for years because of legal ambiguity over whether lawmakers can be charged over disruptions. — AFP

Politics, pandemic weigh on talks to save nature

GENEVA: While dozens of world leaders have pledged to halt the devastating destruction of biodiversity across the planet, observers say political momentum has yet to filter into negotiations that will set the stage for a major UN meeting later this year. Countries have proposed to hold an extra biodiversity meeting in Nairobi in June as talks in Geneva involving nearly 200 countries—although without the United States—entered their final day Tuesday without fully discussing some major topics.

Negotiators have held talks since March 14 to thrash out details of a sweeping plan to "live in harmony with nature" by mid-century—with key milestones in 2030—that will be adopted at the United Nations COP15 conference in China later this year. The task is a daunting one because biodiversity is undermined by a host of human activities from intensive agriculture and overfishing, to mining and rapid urbanisation.

"Biodiversity is not restricted to one place, it is everywhere, it is life," said Ghanaian academic Alfred Oteng-Yeboah, who has played a key role in international efforts

to protect wildlife and species diversity. The imperative to set goals that will be acted upon is even more urgent because the world missed almost all the targets that were set for the last decade.

"We think that this is the last chance that we have and if we miss it we don't know what is going to happen," said Oteng-Yeboah. After two years of pandemic delay, the in-person negotiations seek to pack in both technical scientific work as well as high-level negotiations on the overarching targets.

Delegates have concluded they need more time and a document uploaded on the conference website suggests a new meeting in the Kenyan capital between June 21 and 26 to "continue negotiations" on the draft text and other issues. The decision is subject to official approval by the Geneva meeting before it wraps up later Tuesday.

While more than 90 nations have signed up to a pledge to halt biodiversity loss by 2030, delegates said the weight of that political will has not been felt at the negotiations in Geneva. "There's a disconnect between the lofty rhetoric and actions we're seeing in the negotiations," said Brian O'Donnell, director of Campaign for Nature. Ten days of intensive work allowed the delegations to put their ideas on the table, without managing to wrangle a consensus. The UN's Convention on Biological Diversity has "gone through an unprecedented period in its history with the impact of the pandemic", said the organisation's executive secretary Elizabeth Maruma Mrema. — AFP



KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia: Activists hold posters against the execution of Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam, sentenced to death for trafficking heroin into Singapore, outside the Singapore High Commission in Kuala Lumpur. — AFP

Singapore court dismisses mentally disabled man's death sentence appeal

SINGAPORE: Singapore's top court Tuesday dismissed a mentally disabled Malaysian man's last-ditch appeal against a death sentence, with his family saying they were "devastated" and "shocked" by the ruling. Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam was arrested in 2009 for trafficking a small amount of heroin into the city-state, which has some of the world's toughest drugs laws, and handed a then mandatory death sentence the following year.

He was originally scheduled to be hanged in November, but the plan sparked criticism due to concerns about his intellectual disabilities, with the European Union and British billionaire Richard Branson among those condemning it. The 34-year-old lodged a final appeal, with his lawyers arguing that executing someone with mental disabilities violated international law.

But the Court of Appeal rejected the challenge, with Singapore's Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon saying it had "no factual and legal basis", and domestic legislation takes precedence over international law. Nagaenthran had been "afforded due process" and his defence had put "nothing forward to suggest that he has a case", he said, adding the Malaysian's lawyers were filing "hopeless" motions after several appeals

had already been rejected. Nagaenthran, wearing a purple prison outfit and white face mask, looked sombre throughout the proceedings. M. Ravi, a human rights lawyer assisting in the case, said no more appeals would be lodged and the execution could take place in days.

Speaking to AFP from Malaysia, his sister Sarmila Dharmalingam sobbed as she said the family was "devastated". "We are shocked by the court decision despite my brother... having a low IQ." His long-running case has been "a horrifying ordeal for us," she added. Reprieve, an NGO that campaigns against the death penalty, said hanging Nagaenthran would be a "travesty of justice" that breached Singapore's commitments to champion the rights of the disabled. "We urge? President Halimah Yacob to listen to the cries for mercy within Singapore and around the world... and spare? the life of this vulnerable man," the group's director Maya Foa said.

The appeal was supposed to take place months ago but was delayed after Nagaenthran contracted COVID-19. There have not been any executions in Singapore since 2019, but concerns are growing that the city-state is gearing up to hang several drug traffickers in the coming months. — AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30, 2022

Anxiety and empty shelves as Shanghai COVID cases surge

Panic-buying in city of 25 million amid lockdown

SHANGHAI: Shanghai recorded a steep climb in COVID-19 cases Tuesday as panic-buying in the Chinese city of about 25 million stripped supermarket shelves bare. Millions endured a second day of lockdown after authorities effectively split the country's biggest urban area in two, with residents of the city's eastern half confined to their homes for four days and subjected to mandatory testing.

China reported 6,886 domestic COVID cases nationwide on Tuesday, with more than 4,400 of them detected in Shanghai, now the centre of the country's worst Covid-19 outbreak since the early days of the pandemic.

Images showed some supermarket shelves in the city emptied of all goods as residents rushed to stock up before being locked down. "After being unable to grab any groceries this morning, I went back to sleep, and all I dreamt about was buying food at the supermarket," one user wrote on China's Twitter-like Weibo platform.

"I'd never have thought that society today would be worried over buying groceries."

In a bid to keep Shanghai's economy running, authorities have avoided the hard lockdowns regularly deployed in other Chinese cities, instead opting for rolling, localized restrictions.

The area locked down on Monday is the sprawling eastern district of Pudong, which includes the main international airport and glittering financial centre. The lockdown will last until Friday, then switch to the city's more populated western Puxi section, home to the historic Bund riverfront, where

residents were preparing for the impending shutdown. Shanghai resident Adrian Sim told AFP there were no spots available for online grocery delivery, some local restaurants had already stopped offering dine-in, and supermarkets in his neighborhood were packed when he went to buy supplies.

"If you saw people on the streets, they were holding groceries," the 41-year-old said.

'Pretty bad'

Several exhibition halls in the megacity have been converted into mass quarantine centers, lining up row upon row of beds. One Shanghai resident surnamed Wang told AFP that she had been in a mass centre in Pudong since Saturday after testing positive.

"The conditions of the makeshift quarantine centre I'm in are pretty tough," she said, adding that there are around 2,500 camp beds grouped together in the main hall. "The bathroom conditions are not good enough, they are cleaned twice per day but there are too many people (using them). It's pretty bad." The city's airports, railway stations and international shipping ports remain operational, while key manufacturers are being allowed to resume production after a brief halt, state media reported.

The Shanghai government has also said it will offer some tax and rent relief to businesses affected by the lockdown in a bid to reassure employers in the important commercial centre. China has largely kept virus outbreaks under



SHANGHAI: Shoppers rummage through empty shelves in a supermarket before a lockdown as a measure against the COVID-19 in Shanghai on March 29, 2022. — AFP

control over the past two years through strict zero-tolerance measures including mass lockdowns of cities and provinces for even small numbers of cases.

But Omicron has proven harder to stamp out. At a press briefing on Monday, health expert Wu Fan said it was "necessary to take more resolute

measures" to eliminate community transmission.

Experts have warned that the widening lockdowns will severely impact the country's already slowing economy. "China's economy faces the most severe pressure since the spring of 2020, when it was hit by the first wave of COVID-19," Nomura analyst Lu Ting warned this week. — AFP

Lanka hospitals running out of life-saving drugs

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's state-run hospitals are running out of life-saving medicines due to a shortage of dollars needed to import essentials as the country reels from a dire economic crisis, officials said Tuesday. Teaching Hospital Peradeniya which serves a population of 2.4 million people in the Central province said it was suspending all routine surgeries and was out of anesthetic drugs and other essentials for operations.

A key health trade union said the prob-

lem at Peradeniya was common in most state hospitals where suppliers had not been paid for over six months.

A surgeon at the main National Hospital in Colombo said they were short of many vital medicines and patients requiring human insulin were told to bring their own. "The situation is very grave and we need a disaster management initiative to deal with the worsening situation," said Ravi Kumudesh, the head of the Medical Laboratory Technologists Association (MLTA).

He said they were unable to carry out diagnostics as most chemicals and solutions needed for their tests were not freely available at state hospitals. Meanwhile, the government said it allowed suppliers-hit by higher costs-to hike by 30 percent prices of all medical devices, including

stents for heart patients.

Sri Lankans are forced to spend long hours to buy food, fuel and even medicines as the dollar shortage has led to scarce imports in the country's worst economic crisis since independence in 1948.

The country's inflation hit a record 17.5 percent in February with food inflation hitting 25 percent. The government is seeking an IMF bailout after the country's foreign currency reserves fell to \$2.0 billion, down from \$7.5 billion when the current government took over in November 2019.

Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, who was in Sri Lanka for a regional meeting, said he was "disturbed" by the medical shortages and asked the embassy to look into helping. The Sri Lankan health ministry said it was also rushing fresh supplies to resume surgeries at Peradeniya. — AFP



COLOMBO: People stand in a queue to buy diesel at a Ceylon Petroleum Corporation fuel station in Colombo on March 29, 2022. — AFP

Embattled Aussie PM splashes cash in pre-poll budget

SYDNEY: Australia's ruling Liberal Party splashed the cash in a pre-election budget Tuesday filled with goodies for voters souring on nine years of conservative rule.

With an election expected in May, and Prime Minister Scott Morrison's party trailing Labor heavily in the polls, his government announced a budget that cuts fuel duty in half and promises Aus\$8.6 billion (US\$6.4 billion) in tax rebates.

About half the adult population-or ten

million people-will get a \$420 tax hand-out to sweeten the deal. Having promised and failed to put the budget "back in black" with fiscal prudence, Morrison's plan foresees the deficit exploding to Aus\$78 billion or 3.4 percent of GDP this year, and set to remain in the red for a decade.

"The past two years have been tough for our country," said Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, informing parliament of the plans. "We have overcome the greatest economic shock since the great depression." Morrison has been pilloried for his handling of devastating bushfires, floods and a painfully slow vaccine rollout.

According to the latest Newpoll survey, his Liberal-led coalition is trailing Labor 45-55 in the two-party vote. Morrison faces an uphill battle to win over

women voters after his handling of rape allegations made by a female political staffer in government, as well as young voters repelled by his pro-coal stance.

His government has swatted aside calls to wean the Australian economy off its dependence on coal and natural gas, touting a "gas-fired recovery" from the pandemic and vowing to dig coal for as long as people are buying. According to the latest Newpoll, Anthony Albanese's Labor has the vote of more than 60 percent of 18 to 49-year-olds. But Morrison has come from behind before, winning an election three years ago, which he himself dubbed a "miracle."

To that end, Frydenberg touted the lowest unemployment rates in decades as he warned voters now was not the time to change leaders. — AFP



CANBERRA: Australian Treasurer Josh Frydenberg delivers his 2022 Budget in Parliament House in Canberra on March 29, 2022. — AFP

Vietnam's Q1 economic growth higher year-on-year

HANOI: Vietnam's economy expanded more than five percent in the first three months of the year, the government said Tuesday thanks to a pick-up in exports as the country emerges from the worst of the global pandemic, though officials warned of headwinds.

The communist state has long been a success story among Asian economies, posting growth of seven percent in 2019. But growth came in at just 2.9 percent in 2020 as the pandemic shut most of the world down, while last year saw just 2.6 percent expansion. The figures were the worst the country has experienced since the mid-1980s.

However, the General Statistics Office said gross domestic product came in at 5.03 percent on-year.

Turnover from exports of goods in the first quarter was at \$88.58 billion, up by 12.9 percent on-year, the GSO added. "While the economy continues to show resilience and is recovering, downside risks have heightened as the Omicron infections are sweeping the country and the Russia-Ukraine conflict has increased uncertainty about global economic recovery," the World Bank said in a report on



HANOI: A salesman checks goods on a shelf at a homeware mall in Hanoi on March 29, 2022. — AFP

Vietnam in March. "Authorities should encourage exporters to seek new markets and innovate into new products through global value chains and existing free trade agreements to strengthen export resilience," it added. After almost two years of closure and strict measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, Vietnam began reopening to the world in mid-March, easing medical requirements and quarantine rules. The country still reports more than 260,000 cases of virus infection a day, but hospitalization and death rates are relatively low, the health ministry said.

More than 90 percent of adults have been fully vaccinated, with the government urging vaccinations for teenagers and accelerating booster shots rollout. —AFP

Pressure mounts for Swiss to freeze Russian assets

GENEVA: Most Swiss want their country to freeze more Russian assets over the war in Ukraine, according to a new poll published Monday, as Switzerland's second-largest bank swore off new business in Russia.

A full 57 percent of Swiss people surveyed last week backed freezing assets belonging to high-ranking Russians and Kremlin allies, said the survey by the Link institute. In the poll of more than 1,200 people, 56 percent of those questioned favored cutting ties between Switzerland's famous banks and their Russian counterparts.

And the same percentage backed tighter Swiss sanctions against Russia, even if it hit energy provision and led to significantly higher energy prices.

The poll was conducted between March 17 and 21. Switzerland is not in the EU and has a long-standing tradition of neutrality on matters of war. It has nevertheless been aligning itself with the waves of EU sanctions imposed following Russia's February 24 invasion of Ukraine.

Switzerland has frozen the equivalent of 5.75

billion Swiss francs (\$6.2 billion) in Russian assets since the invasion began, a senior economy ministry official said last week.

But Kyiv has been pressing Switzerland, a favored destination for wealthy Russians and their assets, to do more. "The Russian elite has enormous amounts of money in Swiss banks," Alexander Rodyansky, a close advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, told Swiss tabloid Blick Sunday.

"For us, it is vital that the Swiss support the global pressure on Russia."

Switzerland has told the country's banks to declare all holdings and accounts of people and entities on the sanctions list, but Rodyansky has insisted that this is not enough.

"Switzerland must, like other countries, actively search for assets," he said, stressing that many in the Russian elite "continue to act in the shadows". "They hide their funds," he said, urging Switzerland to "act more firmly".

Credit Suisse meanwhile said Monday it would reduce its exposure in Russia, which it said earlier this month stood at over \$900 million at the end of last year. It vowed not to take on any fresh business in the country. Switzerland's second largest bank also told AFP in an email that some of its Russia-based staff were being relocated out of the country.

And it added: "we are helping our clients to unwind their Russia exposure." — AFP

Business

Oil volatility 'worse' without OPEC+ bloc: Saudi minister

Oil prices sink, stocks surge on Ukraine talks 'progress'

DUBAI: Volatility on oil markets sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine would be worse without OPEC+, the Saudi energy minister said on Tuesday, insisting the alliance that includes Russia deserves credit. Oil shot up to nearly \$140 on supply fears after Russia sent troops into its neighbor on February 24, and the price of crude is still trading at well over \$100 a barrel.

"I certainly believe that if it wasn't for OPEC+ existing, we would not be celebrating a sustainable energy market... even with today's volatility," Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman said. "Volatility would have even been worse if OPEC were not together and did not exist," the Saudi minister told the World Government Summit in Dubai. The 13-member, Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has so far resisted calls to lift production further following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. OPEC+ comprises another 10 countries including Russia.

Prince Abdulaziz said OPEC, which also includes Saudi Arabia's regional foe Iran, was strictly non-political. "When we get into the OPEC meeting room or building, everybody leaves his politics outside the door of the building, and that culture has been with us," he said. He also warned that attacks by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels on Saudi oil facilities, including a wave of drone and missile strikes on Friday, "put into question our ability to supply the world with the necessary energy requirements".

"Trust us"

The United Arab Emirates' Energy Minister Suhail Al-Mazrouei called for "trust" from the West, rather than being told to "do this or do that". "What we need is pragmatism, we need to look at the objective of the energy and what we are asking for, not to tell us do this or do that," Mazrouei said.

"We need their understanding that what we are doing is to the benefit of the consumers," Mazrouei added, referring to Washington, which he described as an "important partner". When we say this is the right way to do it, we know it from experience, so trust us." The OPEC+ alliance plans to increase output by 400,000 barrels a day in April, the same pace as in past months, despite calls for it to accelerate production by even more.

Since launching its assault on Ukraine, Russia has been hit by a raft of Western sanctions and expelled from world organizations, including the Group of 20 major economies. Mazrouei said that ousting any OPEC+ member from the alliance would not benefit

consumers. "Our aim is to calm the market, trying to come up with volumes as much as possible, and if we are asking anyone to leave, then we are raising the prices, then we are doing something against what the consumers want," he said.

Meanwhile, world oil prices dived and European stocks rallied on Tuesday as apparent progress in peace talks between Moscow and Kyiv sparked hope of an end to the Ukraine conflict. Oil price fell by more than five percent, with New York's WTI contract dipping under \$100 per barrel as traders eyed easing Russian oil supply fears amid face-to-face talks in Istanbul aimed at resolving the nearly five-week-old war. Russia said it would scale down military activity around Kyiv following the "meaningful" talks in Turkey, as Ukraine's negotiators called for international guarantees for the country's security.

Ukrainian negotiator David Arakhamia also said there were now "sufficient" conditions for a direct meeting between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"It's looking more promising than at any stage since the invasion," OANDA foreign exchange platform analyst Craig Erlam told AFP. "Oil prices have fallen sharply on the latest headlines and with talks continuing tonight, there is potential for even more substantial progress to be made," Erlam said.

"While the removal of sanctions is unlikely as part of the peace process, it could remove further risks to Russian exports." Europe's major stock markets jumped higher, with Frankfurt soaring 3.5 percent, Paris winning 3.1 percent and London adding 1.2 percent in afternoon deals. Wall Street also opened slightly higher. The Russian ruble, which tanked after the February 24 invasion, soared by 10 percent against the dollar. "It is the first time in this conflict where we have seen any indications for any form of easing of military action from the Russian side," SEB analyst Bjarne Schieldrop told AFP.

"Until this point the Russian stand has been very firm of its goals," Schieldrop said. "Now for the first time the market is hoping that there might actually be a way forward not being a full destruction and takeover of Ukraine."

Asian stock markets had earlier mostly rallied even before the statements from Istanbul, on investor optimism of progress. However, Shanghai bucked the trend, with stocks falling a day after China's biggest city and financial hub of 25 million people was placed back in lockdown.—AFP



DUBAI: (Left to right) CNBC's anchor and session moderator Hadley Gamble, Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman Al-Saud, Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government Premier Masrour Barzani, and the UAE's Energy and Infrastructure Minister Suhail bin Mohamed Al-Mazrouei attend a plenary session titled 'Is the World Ready for A Future Beyond Oil?' at the World Government Summit in Dubai on March 29, 2022.— AFP

After 50 years, FedEx founder to step down as CEO

NEW YORK: FedEx founder Frederick Smith will step down as chief executive after some five decades atop the transport behemoth, the company announced Monday.

FedEx, which grew under Smith from a modest operation in the US state of Tennessee into a global titan with some 570,000 employees, announced Chief Operating Officer Raj Subramaniam will take the company's helm. The transition will take place on June 1, with Smith, 77, becoming executive chairman and Subramaniam ascending to president and CEO.

Smith first devised the idea for Federal Express, which adopted FedEx as its brand name in 1994 — while an undergraduate at Yale University, identifying urgent shipments as an economic imperative.



Frederick Smith

"Smith named the company Federal Express because he believed the patriotic meaning associated with the word 'federal' suggested an interest in nationwide economic activity," according to the company's official history. "He also hoped the name would resonate with the Federal Reserve Bank, a potential customer. Although the bank denied his proposal, Smith kept

the name because he thought it was memorable and would help attract public attention."

From an initial fleet of 14 small aircraft in 1973, the company now boasts hundreds of aircraft, plus a worldwide logistics network. It reported nearly \$84 billion in revenues last year.

Subramaniam joined FedEx in 1991 and has held senior roles in Canada and throughout Asia and the United States.— AFP

As Ukraine sowing season starts, fuel shortages threaten food supply

BAHATE, Ukraine: In an endless field in southwest Ukraine, farmers began to plant sunflower seeds at the start of the sowing season, but a fuel shortage threatens production in the war-torn country, whose land feeds millions around the world.

The world's top producer of sunflower oil and a major exporter of wheat is a breadbasket of the world under threat from the Russian invasion.

This means the fate of global food security depends on Ukrainian farms, such as the fertile grounds of Alexander Petkov's land in Bahate, near the Romanian border. "The season starts here, in the areas not hit by war," Petkov, 47, said. The regions torn by the conflict such as the southern cities of Kherson and Mykolaiv further to the east will not be able to begin planting as usual. Mykolaiv is facing a daily barrage of Russian shelling while Ukrainian forces have launched a counter-offensive to retake Kherson.

Last year, Petkov's farming business, spread across five villages, yielded 30,000 tons of barley, 27,000 tons of wheat and 5,500 tons of sunflower. Petkov points to the blackened sunflower seeds and wheat piling up in his barns as there is nowhere to take them. There is concern too over the risk that fuel needed for the sowing season will quickly run out.

"All the ports are closed because of the presence of Russian warships in the Black Sea," the farmer said. The Ukrainian government has suggested exporting agricultural products via the Romanian port of Constanta, but there has been no progress in the plan, Petkov said. "We're currently using the remaining fuel we had before the war, but there is no new supply," he said, adding that he could run out within five days.

Millions affected

In a report last week, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization warned that Ukraine depends heavily on fuel imports, with about 70 percent of imports of petrol and diesel coming from Russia and its ally Belarus.



IZMAIL, Ukraine: Ukrainian farmer Alexander Petkov poses in his storage during an AFP interview at Bogatoye village in Izmail.— AFP



DAKAR: A Senegalese woman carries large bottles of water from a water truck during a public distribution in Dakar on March 8, 2022.— AFP

Senegal's water-stressed capital faces difficult future

DAKAR: Many residents of the Senegalese metropolis Dakar get up in the middle of the night hoping to collect water from their taps, which mostly run dry. "We wake up at 4 or 5 am to get water, says Sidy Fall, 44, in his kitchen in a working-class neighborhood, filled with large bottles of stored water.

If he doesn't get up in time, the water often runs out by 5:30 am. Fall's taps are sometimes dry for two or three days at a time. A population boom in Senegal is intensifying pressure on scarce water resources in its semi-arid capital of five million people, with problems set to increase over the coming decades. This is common to many African cities, where infrastructure investments have lagged behind strong demographics and demand for water from industry and agriculture.

In Dakar, a recent World Bank report pointed to poor water management as part of the reason for shortages, along with overexploitation and groundwater pollution. But demand for water has kept increasing too, sending municipal officials racing to improve infrastructure to secure supply. "Water is a source of life, but here water is a source of problems," said Khadija Mahecor Diouf, the mayor of the Dakar suburb Golf Sud, at a public meeting last week.

Population explosion

Golf Sud's population has risen from 70,000 to 125,000 people in 10 years, Diouf told AFP, and is predicted to double in the next decade. Half of all households in the suburb have problems with water, she said. "We have a population that has exploded, urban planning schemes that have not been respected," Diouf added, predicting that the problem would get worse.

About a third of Senegal's population of 17 million people lives in the Dakar region, which is also the country's economic nerve centre. But there are myriad complications tied to the runaway expansion. The sewage system is often lacking, and parts of Dakar routinely flood during the rainy season.

Diouf said water cuts are a problem "all year round". Senegal's government, for its part, said 99 percent of urbanites and 91 percent of rural dwellers had access to water.

Supply remedies

The authorities are pushing to remedy supply issues in the capital and the government says it has made considerable infrastructure investments. Babou Ngom, from the state water company Sones, said new investments meant that supply would soon match demand. Dakar is supplied by four plants that pump water from a lake some 250 kilometers (155 miles) north of the city—as well as from over-exploited aquifers.

The fourth plant came online last year: Ngom said it would produce 200,000 cubic metres per day by the end of 2022 — which would guarantee Dakar's water supply until 2026. Sones is also building a desalination plant on the Dakar coastline, due to open in 2024.

While Dakar residents are quick to blame the government, national consumer association president Momar Ndao concedes there have been improvements. Often water is only available on ground floors, however, and consumers are increasingly complaining about exorbitant prices, he added.

More water

Sen'eau, a private firm that has managed Dakar's water on behalf of the state since 2020, argues it is not to blame for recurrent shortages. The firm-in which French utility company Suez has a 45-percent stake — is the target of broad popular frustration. But Diery Ba, a Sen'eau director, said the company had inherited crumbling water infrastructure, which it has set about improving.

"Almost no neighborhood had water 24 hours a day," he said. While upgrades to the network had led to water cuts, this "adjustment period" was coming to an end, he added. Higher bills were also a result of consumers simply consuming more water than they once did, he said.

Despite improvements, a question mark still hangs over Dakar's future water supply. According to the World Bank, Senegalese water consumption is due to increase between 30 and 60 percent by 2035. The country "urgently needs to prioritize water security," the bank said.— AFP

Business

Germany to triple number of hydrogen fuel stations

Ukraine war saps German consumer confidence

BERLIN: Germany will significantly expand its hydrogen refueling network as it seeks to wean lorries and buses off fossil fuels and decarbonize its transport network.

The number of stations in Europe's largest economy will more than triple to 300 by 2030, the network operator H2 mobility and financial backers said in a statement on Tuesday. Hydrogen produces only steam and no carbon dioxide when burnt, making it an attractive possible alternative to dirtier fossil fuels.

The expansion is being funded by a 70-million-euro (\$77-million) cash injection from the specialist investment fund Hy24, which will also take a 40 percent stake in the project.

Existing shareholders in the network, including Air Liquide, Daimler Truck, Hyundai, Linde, OMV, Shell, and TotalEnergies, will invest a further 40 million euros. The backers hope Germany, which already boasts Europe's densest web of hydrogen refueling stations, will become the "backbone" of the European transport network, where hydrogen is key to reducing emissions.

New installations will be focused along a number of key "high-traffic corridors" criss-crossing the central European powerhouse. Unlike in passenger vehicles, battery-powered engines are currently not considered strong enough to be used in heavy-goods vehicles.

Hydrogen is better adapted to lorries and buses, allowing them to "refuel quickly and cover long distances without sacrificing payload", the parties said.

Founded in 2021 by the French companies Air Liquide, TotalEnergies and Vinci together with the private investment house Ardian, the Hy24 fund specifically targets hydrogen infrastructure projects.

Meanwhile, the mood of consumers in Germany has darkened significantly as the Russian invasion of Ukraine dimmed the outlook for Europe's largest economy, according to a key survey published Tuesday. Pollster GfK's forward-looking barometer fell to minus 15.5 percent for April from a revised minus 8.5 percent in March.

Hopes that the lifting of coronavirus-related health restrictions would propel an economic recovery had "evaporated" with the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the end of February, GfK consumer expert Rolf Buerkl said.

The shock was felt particularly hard by income expectations, which fell by 25 points to minus 22.1 in March, its lowest level since January 2009 in the midst of the financial crisis.

The conflict has given a new push to already high inflation, sending the cost for oil and gas rocketing amid fears that supplies from Russia could be severely curtailed. Rising fuel bills means "con-



sumers see their purchasing power melting away", the GfK said in a statement.

Consumer prices rose at a rate of 5.1 percent in February, with new figures for March set to be published Wednesday. Germany's reliance on imports of Russian gas to heat its homes and power its industry meant the country was particularly vulnerable to the economic impact of the war.

The GfK survey of some 2,000 people found that Germans were significantly more pessimistic about the state of the economy, with the indicator falling 33 points to minus 8.9 in March, having risen in the last two months. The impact of sanctions, high energy costs and supply chains broken by the outbreak of the war mean "the risk of a recession has risen sharply", the pollster said. — AFP

Fitch upgrades Gulf Bank's viability rating with a stable outlook

KUWAIT: Fitch Ratings has upgraded Gulf Bank's Viability Rating to 'bbb-' from 'bb+' and affirmed the bank's Long-Term Issuer Default Rating at 'A' with a Stable Outlook.

Fitch stated: "The upgrade of Gulf Bank's Viability Rating (VR) reflects the bank's improved risk profile and resilient asset quality. The VR reflects Gulf Bank's good domestic franchise, cautious risk approach, resilient asset quality, recovering profitability, and stable funding, despite high deposit concentration."

The Stable Outlook on Gulf Bank's Long-Term Issuer Default Rating reflects the Kuwaiti sovereign rating. Commenting on Fitch's credit rating announcement, Dalal Al-Dousari, Gulf Bank's Head of

Investor Relations, said: "We are very pleased to receive an upgrade on Gulf Bank's Viability Rating, and to note the affirmation of the Bank's Long-term Issuer Default Rating at 'A' with a 'Stable' outlook by Fitch Ratings. This is an international acknowledgement of Gulf Bank's positive market position and highly experienced management that supported the bank's strategy, a strategy based on domestic organic growth, rapid developments in retail, selective corporate lending, and digital transformation."

Gulf Bank continues to be well recognized in terms of its creditworthiness and financial strength internationally as it is rated 'A' by three major credit rating agencies.

In addition to Fitch Ratings' recent Viability Rating upgrade and affirmation of its Long-Term Issuer Default Rating at 'A' with a Stable Outlook, Gulf Bank has a Long-term Foreign Currency Rating of 'A+' with a 'Stable' Outlook by Capital Intelligence Ratings, and a Long-Term Deposits rating of 'A3' with a 'Stable' Outlook by Moody's Investor Services. In addition, S&P Global Ratings changed the Bank Issuer Credit Rating to 'BBB+' from 'A-' with a 'Stable' outlook, following the downgrade of the Kuwait Sovereign rating.



Dalal Al-Dousari

Talabat signs partnership with Kuwait Flour Mills

KUWAIT: Talabat, the region's leading local tech company, recently announced the signing of a partnership agreement with Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries Company. Through this partnership, all KFM products will be made available for purchase on the talabat application.

This partnership marks the beginning of ongoing talabat expansions and keeps in line with talabat's commitment to keep pace with its customers' needs. The entire KFM product line, consisting of over 120 products, will be available on talabat -



Bader Al-Ghanim

delivered to customers' doorsteps within 30 minutes.

Bader Al-Ghanim, Managing Director of talabat Kuwait, says "We are proud to have signed this partnership with Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries Company, seeing as KFM represents great significance in Kuwait's food sector."

"KFM is considered a qualitative addition to talabat, as its products are



the most preferred by customers - so it's wonderful that we can now easily deliver KFM products to the majority of areas in Kuwait", Al-Ghanim adds.

Being the leading local tech platform in the region, talabat is keen to cooperate with all companies in the market, including both the public and private sector. Through cooperation, talabat strives to advance the market

and create greater opportunities for its partners across multiple sectors.

Additionally, the Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries Company consistently develops its products in response to the requirements and trends of the market by providing the best unique products that reflect the company's appreciation for the trust and support of its customers.

Rio launches clean-up of gorgeous, filthy bay — again

RIO DE JANEIRO: Edson Rocha seems to have everything for a beautiful day at the beach. In front of him, emerald hills cascade into Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay; to the right is the Brazilian seaside city's majestic Sugarloaf Mountain; above, the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue outstretches his arms, as if to embrace the perfect beauty of it all.

Perfect except for one detail: the water in the bay is a foul-smelling stew of raw sewage, industrial pollution and trash. Rocha, a 46-year-old oil worker, would love to take a swim.

"But then you have to go straight to the shower and scrub for 10 minutes to try to wash the pollution off," he says with a laugh, sitting meters (yards) from a river of sewage emptying into the bay. The heart of Rio, Guanabara Bay is one of the most postcard-gorgeous spots on Earth.

But urban sprawl has blighted the landscape, and bathers prefer less-polluted beaches like Copacabana, on Rio's Atlantic coast. Home to 12.5 million people, the bay's watershed system has long been a dumping ground for garbage, toxic chemicals and sewage, 54.3 percent of which goes untreated. Now, after decades of failed fixes, Rio state authorities say they have a solution.

Last year, they privatized tottering water and sanitation service Cedeae, selling the operating rights for Rio city and 26 other municipalities to company Aguas do Rio. The new operator promises to invest billions to do what no one has managed yet: clean up Guanabara Bay.

'Graveyard of failed projects'
Aguas do Rio, which took over in November,



RIO DE JANEIRO: A man sits in a boat surrounded by polluted water in a river that flows into Guanabara Bay on March 18, 2022. — AFP

plans to invest 2.7 billion reais (\$570 million) over five years fixing broken waste-treatment systems and cleaning sewage from the bay.

The company, a subsidiary of sanitation group Aegea, has promised total investments of 24.4 billion reais across its 35-year contract to bring the sewage-treatment rate to 90 percent.

"I have no doubt people will start swimming again in the bay," says chief executive Alexandre Bianchini. Locals are skeptical, given the history of failed plans to save the bay.

In 1994, Rio state launched a clean-up program with international funds, spending \$1.2 billion on sewage treatment plants-but largely failed to finish the pipes connecting them to residents. Then came Rio's rush to host the 2016 Olympics. As international media ran embarrassing images of the polluted bay, Rio earmarked nearly \$1 billion to clean it.

Biodiversity loss 'threat to financial stability'

PARIS: One thing that has been underscored as nations try to thrash out an international biodiversity agreement is that even big business and the financial sector agree the world needs to act decisively to save nature from human destruction. Almost 200 countries are due to adopt a global framework this year to safeguard nature by mid-century, with a key milestone of 30 percent protected by 2030.

These ambitions require new approaches to biodiversity funding and a rethink of the huge sums spent on subsidies harmful to nature, according to observers.

Last week a report by central bankers, financial supervisors and academics said the scale of the economic threats from the biodiversity crisis had only recently begun to be appreciated.

AFP spoke to Nick Robins, a professor at London School of Economics and co-chair of the NGFS-INSPIRE Study Group on Biodiversity Loss and Financial Stability behind that report. This interview has been edited for clarity and concision:

Q: What is the potential impact of biodiversity loss on economies?

A: Biodiversity loss is a threat to financial stability. I think people are now realizing biodiversity loss and nature degradation are important issues in their own right but they are also deeply interconnected to climate change.

It is important to start thinking about the ways these two threats come together. Not least because some of the drivers of this problem are the same-land use change and deforestation-and because

healthy ecosystems are really important for resilience to physical shocks.

Q: How did the report suggest central banks and financial institutions should approach biodiversity loss?

A: With central banks the importance is prudence. Being prudent is actually looking at the evidence base and taking action ahead of time, so that you don't get irreversible risks which you can't manage and you can't control.

We need to invest in a healthy climate and invest in nature, because otherwise at some point the flows of ecosystem services will be disrupted.

This key idea is that we are undermining the resource base for our prosperity. Many assume that soils, freshwater and the oceans are inexhaustible but actually these are not necessarily secure. They rest on conserving biodiversity.

Q: What are the structural problems in the financial system that are harming nature?

A: We have a whole series of systemic failures-policy failures, market failures, institutional failures-which are leading to this degradation. And clearly, with climate change, with all these environmental issues, we need to make sure that the things we buy in markets are actually based on a sustainable use of nature, with prices telling the ecological truth.

The architecture by which we manage our economies is just not up to speed. GDP (gross domestic product) is not always a helpful measure now because it is not rooted in the physical realities of the planet.

Q: What are financial institutions looking at in the UN biodiversity process?

A: It's been rising as an environmental policy issue, a conservation issue, a scientific issue. And clearly this year, we all hope there's going to be a very big step forward in terms of the governmental response with the global biodiversity framework. All this makes biodiversity a priority financial issue. — AFP

Business

US budget seeks \$6.9bn to aid Ukraine, bolster NATO

Biden proposes minimum tax on wealthiest households

WASHINGTON: The United States would spend \$6.9 billion to help Ukraine fend off Russia's invasion and support NATO member countries under a budget proposal released Monday by President Joe Biden's administration. The funds would represent Washington's latest allocation of aid following the shock invasion last month, and be used to "enhance the capabilities and readiness of US forces, NATO allies, and regional partners in the face of Russian aggression," the White House said.

The proposal also outlines spending of nearly \$1 billion for the departments of defense and state as well as USAID "to counter Russian malign influence and to meet emerging needs related to security, energy, cyber security issues, disinformation, macroeconomic stabilization, and civil society resilience."

The money was included in Biden's 2023 budget proposal, which funds the administration's priorities for the year and is subject to modification and approval by Congress, where the president's Democratic Party narrowly controls both chambers.

Washington has stepped up aid for Ukraine following the invasion, including with \$2 billion in security assistance and new equipment, and \$1 billion in humanitarian aid the White House announced last week. The weaponry-including shipments that arrived before the war started-has helped Kyiv mount an unexpectedly tough resistance to Russia's army, which had been predicted to rapidly overpower the Ukrainian government.

Instead, Russia has faced determined resistance from Ukrainian fighters and lost several generals and senior military figures, while NATO estimates deaths among its



WASHINGTON, US: US President Joe Biden (right) announces his Budget for Fiscal Year 2023 as Acting Office of Management and Budget director Shalanda Young listens in the State Dining Room of the White House in Washington, DC on March 28, 2022. — AFP

troops could be as high as 15,000. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has pressed NATO countries to flood more weapons into Ukraine, including advanced fighter jets, missile defense systems, tanks, armored vehicles and anti-ship missiles. NATO members have supplied a steady stream of weapons including anti-tank rockets, which have helped to stall Russia's advance. But these are seen as essentially defensive.

The United States has thus far ruled out sending airplanes or other large weapons systems to Ukraine.

Biden says he does not want to cross a line into what he says could become "World War III," pitting nuclear-armed Russia against NATO.

Taxing the wealthiest

The wealthiest American taxpayers would pay a minimum tax on their income each year under a budget proposal unveiled by President Joe Biden's administration on Monday. "This minimum tax would apply only to the wealthiest 0.01 percent of households—those with

more than \$100 million—and over half the revenue would come from billionaires alone," the White House said in a statement. "It would ensure that, in any given year, they pay at least 20 percent of their total income in federal income taxes." The provision in the annual budget proposal satisfies a demand of progressive lawmakers in Biden's Democratic party, who have called for measures to increase taxes on the wealthiest Americans as a way of addressing inequality.

Similar proposals were discussed last year during negotiations over Build Back Better, a massive spending bill Biden proposed to revamp the country's social services and fight climate change, but which has stalled due to divisions among Democrats in Congress.

The budget would also raise the corporate tax rate to 28 percent, reversing legislation passed under Biden's Republican predecessor Donald Trump in 2017 that lowered it to 21 percent. "While their profits have soared, their investment in our economy did not: the tax breaks did not trickle down to workers or consumers," the White House said, noting the new rate is "still the lowest tax rate faced by corporations since World War II except in the years after the 2017 tax cut."

Washington has backed a deal negotiated under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development that would put a 15 percent minimum tax on corporations globally.

The White House said the budget proposal "contains additional measures to ensure that multinationals operating in the United States cannot use tax havens to undercut the global minimum tax." — AFP

Bolsonaro ousts Petrobras chief

BRASILIA: Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro decided on Monday to replace the president of state-owned oil giant Petrobras, Joaquim Silva e Luna, amid strong pressure due to recurrent increases in fuel prices.

The information, leaked by the Brazilian press, was confirmed in the evening by the Ministry of Mines and Energy, which proposed economist Adriano Pires, a specialist in the oil and gas field, as the new candidate for the job. The appointment must be approved by the Petrobras board of directors next April 13, the ministry said. Bolsonaro had appointed Silva e Luna, an Army reserve general, in February last year, also dissatisfied at that time with the constant price increases applied by the company. The ultra-right-wing president has long criticized the pricing policy of Petrobras, which has set severe increases in line with the international price of crude oil. But the increases have fueled inflation, hitting Bolsonaro's popularity hard ahead of his reelection bid in October. In early March, Petrobras upped the price of gas by 18.8 percent and diesel by 24.9 percent, citing the "worldwide increase in the price of oil and its derivatives as a result of the war between Russia and Ukraine." Petrobras shares fell 2.63 percent at the close of trading on the Sao Paulo Stock Exchange on Monday.

'Something is wrong'

Economist Alex Agostini, from the Austin Rating consulting firm, said the changes in company management are "a sign that something is wrong." "But for the market it is not going to change much. If it is confirmed that the new president will be Adriano Pires, a specialist in the oil and gas area, this will bring stability" because he will hardly intervene in Petrobras' pricing



ITAGUAI, Brazil: In this file photo taken on December 14, 2018, Brazil's President-elect Jair Bolsonaro (left) and Defense Minister General Joaquim Silva e Luna, attend the launch ceremony of the Brazilian Riachuelo Class Submarine at a navy base in Itaguaí, Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil. — AFP

policy, Agostini explained to AFP. Pires had previously worked as an adviser to the general director of the National Agency of Petroleum, Natural Gas and Biofuels. He is also the founder and director of the Brazilian Center for Infrastructure (CBIE), a consulting firm specializing in energy.

He has also expressed support for Petrobras' pricing policy. In an interview with CNN Brazil after the early March increase, Pires said that "there was no way for Petrobras not to raise prices, because the price gap between the internal and external markets was too big." "That gap was starting to cause a risk of shortages in Brazil," he said. "The country imports 30 percent of what is consumed of oil derivatives. If the gap is too big, nobody imports and stocks were already running out." Petrobras closed 2021 with a record profit of 106.67 billion reais (\$19.88 billion). According to the latest survey by the Datafolha consulting firm, conducted in March, 75 percent of Brazilians believe that the government has "a lot" or "some" responsibility for the surging inflation.—AFP

alternative building material for low-cost housing.

Every day her enterprise, Gjenje Makers, churns out 1,500 bricks made from industrial and household plastic that otherwise would be dumped in the city's overflowing garbage heaps.

The young entrepreneur quit a job in oil and gas—the very industry that makes plastic from fossil fuels—to explore recycling after being shocked at how little trash was being reused.

"In Nairobi we generate about 500 metric tons of plastic waste every single day, and only a fraction of that is recycled," said Matee, who binds with energy around the factory floor in denim overalls and trainers. "And that made me think—what happens to this plastic?"

Stronger, lighter, cheaper

Most winds up in landfill, rivers and oceans, and less than 10 percent is recycled.

In Nairobi, one of Africa's fastest-growing capitals, Matee found an endless supply of raw material to

UAE-India FTA covers wide spectrum of trade relations

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed between the United Arab Emirates and India recently, will cover a wide spectrum of trade relations between the countries such as goods, services and digital trade, among others, and will allow 90 percent of India's exports a preferential access to the UAE, announced Indian Ambassador to Kuwait Sibi George.

Addressing a press conference at the Embassy of India, convened on the occasion of Holi - India's festival of colors - the ambassador pointed out that the agreement between the UAE and India is a comprehensive agreement, the first deep and full free trade agreement to be signed by India with any country in the past decade. The agreement will cover trade in goods, rules of origin, trade in services, technical barriers to trade (TBT), IPR, investment and digital trade, among other segments.

"The CEPA covers almost all the tariff lines dealt in by India (11,908 tariff lines) and the UAE (7,581 tariff lines) respectively. India will benefit from preferential market access provided by the UAE on over 97 percent of its tariff lines which account for 99 percent of Indian exports to the UAE in value terms, especially for all labor-intensive sectors such as gems and jewelry, textiles, leather, footwear, sports goods, plastics, furniture, agricultural and wood products, engineering products, medical devices, and automobiles," he said.

India will also be offering preferential access to the UAE on over 90 percent of its tariff lines, including lines of export interest to the UAE. "As regards trade in services, India has offered market access to the UAE in around 100 sub-sectors, while Indian service

work with, scouring the city's tips and industrial zones for unwanted plastic. It took several years to perfect a prototype—the machinery required was custom built and sourced from spare industrial parts—but by 2019 production was steadily underway.

The shredded plastic is mixed with sand and subjected to extreme heat, producing a sludge that is molded into different sized blocks. The end result is a paver that is anywhere between two and seven times stronger than concrete, half the weight, and as much as 15 percent cheaper, says Matee.

It is also more durable. Plastic is fibrous in nature, and the unique production process prevents air pockets from forming within the bricks. This results in greater compression strength than conventional paving stones that crack under heavy force or prolonged weather exposure.

"Because of that, it doesn't break," said Matee, clapping two of the plastic bricks together sharply.

In 2021, they recycled 50 tons of plastic but Matee hopes to double that amount this year as production expands.

Big plans

There are limitations. Of the seven major types of plastic, only four can be recycled into bricks.

PET plastic—the kind used in plastic bottles and a major scourge on the environment—is not yet compatible, but they hope to change that.

"There is more that can be done, there is more that needs to be done. We are just a single drop in the ocean... small, small drops will make a big effect," Matee said.

They are trying to break into the affordable housing market by designing a block that can replace or complement bricks, mortar and other standard building materials. A prototype is in the works, with plans to build a model home by the end of the year. "We want to be the leaders in alternative building products. Our first area of attack is plastic," Matee said. Her trailblazing work has attracted accolades, and earned another boost earlier this year after she designed a custom gavel for a major UN environment summit where the plastic trash crisis topped the agenda.

Gjenje Makers has also created over 100 direct and indirect jobs through recycling plastic—helping both livelihoods and the environment in a way Matee says wasn't possible working with fossil fuels. "Let's just say I sleep better," she said with a grin. — AFP



KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Sibi George addresses the meeting at the Indian embassy on Monday.

providers will have access to around 111 sub-sectors from the 11 broad service sectors," he pointed out.

Speaking about India's startup ecosystem, the ambassador said, "India has a success story when it comes to startups. Today, India is the third largest startup ecosystem, but our aspiration is to be the world's number one startup destination. Seven hundred startups that have showcased their innovation at 'Expo 2020 Dubai' have all gone back enriched with newer opportunities and ideas for the future. He informed that a 'National Startup Awards 2022' is currently open. Last date to apply is April 15, 2022, he said.

He also spoke about the success of three Ts (trade, technology and tourism). "India has made a quantum jump in international trade. A new record of \$400 billion of good exports has made a mark in the global arena, he added.

'Trash has value': Kenyan inventor turns plastic into bricks

NAIROBI: "Plastic still has value," said Nzambi Matee of the mountains of discarded oil drums, laundry buckets, yoghurt tubs and other trash being shredded into colourful flakes at her Nairobi factory.

"I believe that plastic is one of the misunderstood materials." The 30-year-old Kenyan engineer and inventor would know: her start-up recycles tons of plastic destined for landfill into eco-friendly bricks that are stronger, cheaper and lighter than concrete.

A creation of her own design, these sustainable paving blocks already line roads, driveways and sidewalks in Nairobi, but could soon also serve as an



The 30-year-old Kenyan engineer and inventor Nzambi Matee says plastic is one of the misunderstood materials.

US consumer confidence up

WASHINGTON: Consumer confidence rose slightly in the United States this month as Americans' views of the economy improved, even as their outlook for the future grew increasingly grim. The Conference Board reported its consumer confidence index came in at 107.2 in March, about a point and a half higher than in February but slightly less than analysts had forecast.

Consumers' views of the economy have suffered in recent months as inflation has climbed, but The Conference Board's Senior Director of Economic Indicators Lynn Franco said strong employment growth helped boost the index this month.

Consumers' views of current economic conditions jumped 10 points to 153, while the percentage saying jobs were plentiful climbed to a record high of 57.2 percent. However consumers' views of future conditions fell four points to 76.6, while 23.8 percent of consumers expect business conditions to worsen in the next six months, about four percentage points higher than in February.

Expectations "weakened further with consumers citing rising prices, especially at the gas pump, and the war in Ukraine as factors," Franco said. The survey found 19.6 percent of consumers described business conditions as "good," two percentage points higher than in February, while the proportion describing conditions as bad dropped three points to 22.1 percent.

However, consumer expectations for inflation a year ahead rose markedly to 7.9 percent, while the percentage of consumers planning to buy a car in the next six months fell.

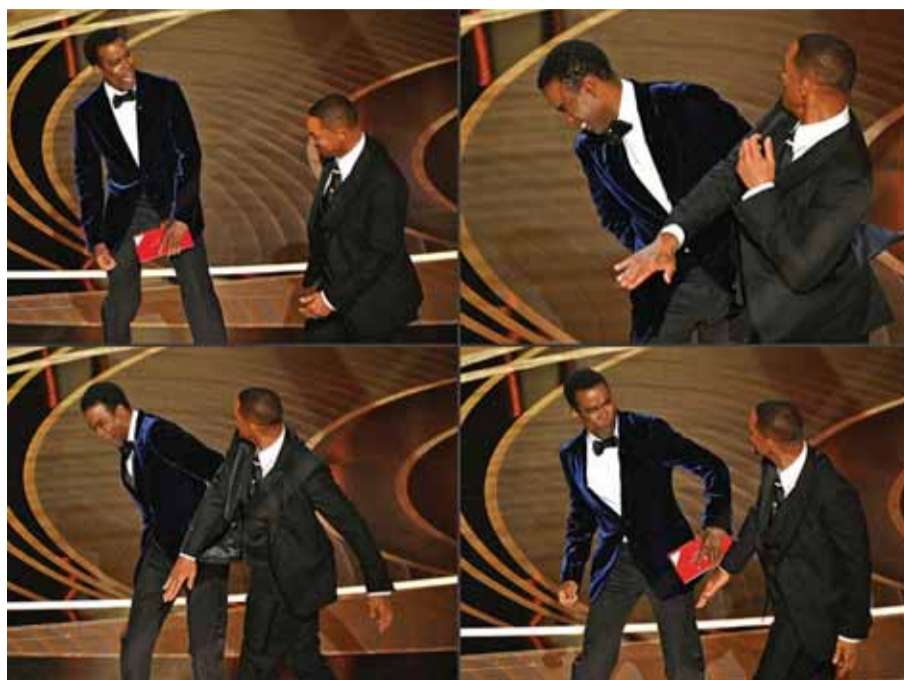
Mahir Rasheed of Oxford Economics said consumer confidence is being supported by the strong labor market and drop in COVID cases, though it will face headwinds as the Federal Reserve raises interest rates in the months ahead to quell inflation.—AFP

The recent history of comedians being assaulted on stage

Comedians being assaulted on stage, as Chris Rock experienced at the hands of Will Smith during the Oscars on Sunday night, is extremely rare-but not unheard of. An attack often requires something more offensive than Rock's gag about Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett-Smith, appearing in "GI Jane 2" (a reference to her lack of hair, caused by alopecia). In 1991 at the Montreal Just for Laughs Festival, infamously offensive British comedian Jerry Sadowitz opened his set with the line: "Hello Moose****ers. I tell you why I hate Canada: half of you speak French and the other half let them."

An audience member promptly climbed the stage and knocked him out cold. Or there was the time that Australian comic Jim Jefferies was attacked by a man at the Manchester Comedy Store in 2007 in northwest England. It appeared the man had not liked a line Jefferies used against another, unrelated heckler: "I'm going to leave you alone now, just like your dad did. Too bad your uncle didn't." Jefferies, like Rock, managed to regain his composure and complete his set, styling out the shock by saying: "If you enjoyed my show and you want to see more of me, I'll be getting my head kicked in in the alleyway."

Comedians often face verbal abuse-



This combination of pictures shows US actor Will Smith (right) approaches US actor Chris Rock, and slaps him onstage, during the 94th Oscars at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

for which they are well-trained-but security normally steps in before things turn violent. That was decidedly not the case with Smith, who was allowed to return to his seat after slapping Rock. He was then given an Oscar for best actor and treated

to a standing ovation. Some comedians saw that as setting a dangerous precedent.

Comedy boycott?

"Now we all have to worry about who

wants to be the next Will Smith in comedy clubs and theaters," tweeted US stand-up Kathy Griffin. For his part, Jefferies took to Instagram on Monday to say that comedians should boycott the Oscars, telling actors to "host their own show after the way they just treated Chris". Some have come to Smith's defence. US stand-up and actress Tiffany Haddish tweeted: "He protected his wife. And that's what a man is supposed to do."

But many saw an act of unhinged madness, and evidence of rampant celebrity privilege. "A multi-millionaire who can't take a joke - that's a bad look," British comic Fin Taylor, known for his edgy material, told AFP. "OK, your wife's having a bad time. You know who's having an even worse time? People with alopecia who don't also have tens of millions of dollars."

Taylor said jokes inevitably came at someone's expense and even if Rock's joke was widely considered a cheap crack, it was hardly a reason for assault. "For a start, this is TV so he probably didn't even write the joke," said Taylor. "But even if no one had laughed, that isn't a license to go punch him. I still think Will Smith is pathetic. "Everyone has something that is too close to the bone for them - mine will be different to yours or Jada Pinkett-Smith. If I have to worry about everyone's problem in a room, I

would never say anything," he added. There has been much debate in recent years as to whether so-called cancel culture has forced comedians to tone down their material.

Cancel culture?

Rock is among those who have banned phones at their shows to prevent people sharing his material online. But Taylor said cancel culture was not a real problem. "Comics are just as rude and outspoken as they have always," he said. "But what sometimes happens is you have a room with 400 people, and everyone laughs at a joke, but one person goes home and tweets that their particular issue has been triggered. "And that gets traction because they're followed by people with a similar issue, and it makes it seem to journalists that there is a problem."

In fact, the opposite is true, he said, since the internet has allowed comics to build a fan base without relying on traditional gatekeepers. "There's this massive notion of being cancelled, but cancelled from what? No one watches TV anymore." Is Taylor more worried about being knocked out, then? "If I didn't want to piss people off, I wouldn't be a comedian," he said. "I am, as yet, un-lamped. But I'm sure it will happen one day." — AFP



Viola Davis

Hair loss: Women speak of the pain of going bald

Hair loss among women is painful, depressing and embarrassing, according to Jada Pinkett Smith and other celebrities who have gone public with their feelings. The subject has rushed into the public consciousness after Will Smith slapped comedian Chris Rock for making a joke about Pinkett Smith's lack of hair at the Oscars. Pinkett Smith spoke out for the first time in 2018 about her diagnosis of alopecia, a medical term referring to the loss of hair.

"It was one of those times in my life where I was literally shaking with fear," the actress and director said on her online show "Red Table Talk." "And that was when I was like, 'Oh, my God. Am I



Alyssa Milano

going bald?" Democratic Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley, who went public with her diagnosis in 2020, took to Twitter on Monday. "Let's talk about what it's like to live with #alopecia," she posted. "The deeply vulnerable & difficult moments that our families see. Appreciation post for those who hold us down & support us when we're at our lowest points. They see us, fully."

As Hollywood inches towards a healthier balance between female beauty ideals and the lived reality, more actresses have begun speaking out about the impact of losing their hair-due to stress, hormonal changes after giving birth and even COVID-19. "This is so not glamorous, but it's true: I need to take longer showers so that I can collect the hair that falls out and throw it away so I don't clog the drain. Why do actresses never talk about that?" Selma Blair told People magazine in 2011 after giving birth.

Alyssa Milano, who says she lost her hair after being infected with coronavirus, said it had affected her whole sense of self. "It's hard, especially when you're an



Actress Ricki Lake

actor and so much of your identity is wrapped up in those things like having long silky hair and clean skin." Actress Ricki Lake wrote on Instagram in 2020 that she had struggled for her whole life with hair loss. "It has been debilitating, embarrassing, painful, scary, depressing, lonely, all the things. There have been a few times where I have even felt suicidal over it."

Oscar winner Viola Davis said she had tried to hide the effects of her alopecia with wigs. "I had a wig I wore around the house. I had a wig that I wore to events. I had a wig that I wore when I worked out," she told an interviewer. "I never showed my natural hair... I was so desperate for people to think that I was beautiful." Davis, who has been more open about the subject in the last decade, even included it in the series "How to Get Away with Murder," when her character, a strong-willed lawyer and teacher, removes her wig exposing her very short hair.

The National Alopecia Areata Foundation (NAAF) called Monday for more people to learn about the condition. It said alopecia areata, a specific type of balding caused by an autoimmune disorder that makes hair often fall out in clumps, affects about seven million people in the United States and about 147 million worldwide. "It can be unpredictable and cause significant physical, emotional/mental health, psycho-social, and financial burdens-and there is no cure, effective treatment or standard of care," the NAAF said. "Alopecia areata does not discriminate and can affect anyone at any age and may be a temporary or life-long condition. Many people living with the condition are suffering, and we must do better to support this community and erase the stigma, discrimination, and societal barriers that persist." — AFP

Oscars ratings bounce back as Will Smith hooks viewers

The Oscars were in desperate need of a ratings boost-and, on a night when Will Smith stunned viewers by slapping Chris Rock on stage, some 15.36 million Americans tuned in. Preliminary audience figures, revealed by broadcaster ABC on Monday, represent a significant recovery from last year's record-low 9.85 million live viewers, although they are still the second-lowest in televised Academy Awards history. The moment when Smith struck comedian Rock for quipping about his wife's hair-loss condition immediately went viral online, launching countless memes and opinions both defending and condemning the best actor winner.

The ratings recovery mirrors those of several other awards shows including television's Emmys in September and the recent Screen Actors Guild award ceremonies. Many award shows were forced to stage virtual or low-key ceremonies in 2021 because of the pandemic, and drew unusually low audiences. Oscars figures last year fell by around 50 percent from the previous ceremony's 23.6 million, which was already a record low, as award shows struggle to remain relevant in an

era of social media and binge-watching on streaming networks.

Academy producers this year resorted to innovations such as pre-taping the announcements of winners in several less starchy Oscars categories, and adding a "fan favorite" prize for a film voted by



US actor Chris Rock speaks onstage during the 94th Oscars at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

Twitter users. Sunday night's show also ended with a historic win for "CODA," which featured a mainly deaf cast, and was the first best picture triumph for a streaming service. But it was an unscripted and highly controversial moment that created the Oscars' talking point Sunday, as Smith strode onto the Oscars stage and slapped Rock for a joke comparing his wife Jada Pinkett Smith to the character "G.I. Jane." Pinkett Smith suffers from alopecia, a condition causing hair loss. Official ratings will be released on Tuesday. — AFP



US actor Will Smith (left) and Jada Pinkett Smith attend the 94th Oscars at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP



British actor Anthony Hopkins speaks onstage during the 94th Oscars at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

Beekeeping in Yemen: A hereditary tradition

Despite technology transforming several aspects of the world we live in today, beekeeping in Yemen is still considered as a hereditary tradition kept alive and shared by many Yemeni families. Just as in herding and

agriculture, it would not be strange to find small beehives near any given Yemeni household, which benefits from the extra income generated the produced honey. — KUNA



Lifestyle | Features



Truong Van Dao rides past a house in a wooden tank made from the conversion of an old minibus in a residential area in Bac Ninh province. — AFP photos



Truong Van Dao and his son ride in a wooden tank made from the conversion of an old minibus in a residential area in Bac Ninh province.



Passengers in a passing vehicle take photos of a wooden tank made from the conversion of an old minibus.



Truong Van Dao cleans his wooden tank.



Truong Van Dao and his son ride in a wooden tank.

Vietnamese dad spends thousands converting van into wooden tank for son

A Vietnamese father has spent hundreds of hours and invested thousands converting an old van into a wooden tank for his son — an unusual hobby in a country once ravaged by war. Every weekend, Truong Van Dao trundles what was once a 16-seat minibus around his neighbourhood in Bac Ninh province, east of capital Hanoi, with his three-year-old son sat proudly in the turret.

The wooden vehicle, based on a French EBR105 model and complete with a 2.8-metre-long replica gun, cost \$11,000 to convert. "My son and me find it more fun riding the tank, which has nothing to do with weapons nor war," Dao told AFP. "I only considered it as a normal car, renovated it into a tank to make it more interesting," the 31-year-old carpenter added. It took Dao and two colleagues three

months to turn the unused van into the tank. He retained the main engine and the minibus floor, but rearranged inside to make space for the gears. While the ornate wooden covering wasn't a problem for the carpenter, ensuring all eight wheels moved simultaneously was. "The most difficult part was how to make the four subordinate wheels run," he said. As a result, Dao and his son won't be breaking any speed records. The top

speed is a sedate 25 kilometers (16 miles) per hour—any faster and the cable connecting the wheels will disconnect and they'll be stuck. The vehicles have been firmly associated with the historical moment when communist tanks crashed the entrance of Saigon's Independence Palace in 1975. It ended a bloody period for Vietnam, with the country having endured conflicts with France, the United States and

China. Vietnamese fighting the Americans were given tanks by allies Russia and China. But now tanks are more associated with children's toys, as they play with plastic versions every weekend in Hanoi. "If all tanks in this world were the same as my tank, there would be no harm, just fun," Dao said proudly. —AFP

Rare birth of Sumatran rhino brings hope for endangered species

A Sumatran rhino has successfully given birth in an Indonesian sanctuary, environment officials said, in a boost for conservation efforts targeting the critically endangered animal. The World Wide Fund for Nature estimates fewer than 80 Sumatran rhinos remain in the world, mainly on the Indonesian island of Sumatra and Borneo. A rhino named Rosa gave birth to a female calf on Thursday in Way Kambas National Park in Sumatra, after suffering eight miscarriages since 2005, when she was brought in from the wild for a breeding program. "The birth of this Sumatran rhino is such happy news amid the government's and partners' efforts to increase the population," Wiratno, a senior official at Indonesia's environment ministry, said in a statement Monday. Like many Indonesians he goes by only one name. The calf, who has yet to be named, brings the number of Sumatran rhinos in the Way Kambas sanctuary to eight. Successful births are rare. The calf's father, named Andatu, was the first Sumatran rhino born in a sanctuary in more than 120 years. The



This handout photo shows a new baby born rhino at the Way Kambas National Park, in Way Kambas, in Lampung province.

International Union for Conservation of Nature classifies the Sumatran rhino, the smallest of all rhino species, as critically endangered. Multiple threats have brought them to the brink of extinction, including poaching and climate change. Rhino horn is often illegally traded for traditional Chinese medicine. Indonesia is also racing to save another critically endangered species—the Javan rhino. Once numbering in the thousands across Southeast Asia, fewer than 80 are alive today, mainly in a national park on Indonesia's main island of Java. Efforts to conserve the species have shown promising results with the birth of five calves in Ujung Kulon National Park last year. — AFP



This handout photo shows female rhino named Rosa (right) with her new baby born at the Way Kambas National Park, in Way Kambas, in Lampung province. — AFP photos

Invasive ants hit Texas hard - now a killer fungus is coming for them

When crazy ants roll into new parts of Texas, the invasive species wipe out local insects and lizards, drive away birds, and even blind baby rabbits by spewing acid in their eyes. Scientists at the University of Texas at Austin now have good news: a naturally occurring fungus-like pathogen can be used to reverse their rampant spread across the southeastern United States, where they have wrought havoc for the past 20 years. The findings were described Monday in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Ecologist and lead author Edward LeBrun told AFP that the fungus had already driven pockets of the invaders to extinction, and would soon be tested at environmentally-sensitive sites to protect endangered species. Like fire ants, whom they have displaced in parts of Texas, tawny crazy ants are native to Argentina and Brazil and came to the United States via ships. They are called "crazy" because of their erratic, jarring movements—unlike the orderly marches of their cousin species.

While they don't have the venomous bite of fire ants, they secrete formic acid that shields them against fire ant venom, and incapacitates native animals. "It's kind of a horror show," said LeBrun, who described apocalyptic rivers of ants swarming trees at an infestation site he visited at the Estero Llano Grande State Park, which had lost native ants, insects, scorpions, snakes, lizards and birds to the invaders.

Not only are they destroying ecosystems, "they're miserable to live with" for humans, said LeBrun. The ants seek out electrical systems to nest in, causing shorts in breaker boxes, AC units and sewage pumps. Pesticides are highly toxic and serve only to slow their progress, leading to snowdrift piles of dead ants that have to be cleared, and the ants eventually break through anyway.

Trojan ants

About eight years ago, LeBrun and one of his co-authors Rob Plowes were studying crazy ants they had collected in Florida when they noticed some had

unusually large abdomens swollen with fat. When they looked inside their bodies, the scientists found fungal spores from a microsporidian—a type of fungal pathogen—and the species they found was entirely new to science.

Microsporidians commonly hijack an insect's fat cells, turning them into spore factories. The pathogen's origins aren't clear—perhaps it came from South America or perhaps from another insect. Whatever the case, the team found it cropping up across Texas. They observed 15 populations for eight years, finding that every

advantage when swarming new areas, but it also turned out to be their biggest weakness, since it allowed the pathogen to spread unchecked.

The test was a huge success, driving the crazy ant population at the state park down to zero within a few years. Larvae that were tended by infected worker ants appeared particularly susceptible. LeBrun explained this was good news in two ways: first, a pathogen of natural origin was selectively targeting the invasive species, limiting their ability to steamroll local ecosystems. Second, scientists can



This handout picture provided by EurekAlert shows Tawny crazy ants (*N. fulva*) feeding on a cricket.—AFP

population harboring the pathogen declined, and 60 percent of the populations went completely extinct.

As an experiment, the team decided to place infected ants with uninfected ants at a nesting site inside a state park, placing hot dogs around the exit chambers of a box to entice the two groups to mingle. The crazy ants form "supercolonies," which means separate groups don't fight each other for territory. This is a great

accelerate the spread of the pathogen to kill the crazy ants quicker. He cautioned, however, that the process was labor intensive, not something that could eradicate the species overnight. The team will continue testing their new biocontrol approach at sensitive Texas habitats this spring. — AFP

Sports

WCup favorites Australia suffers a major setback

England-South Africa square up again



Ellyse Perry

WELLINGTON: Tournament favorites Australia suffered a major setback Tuesday on the eve of their Women's World Cup semi-final against the West Indies, losing all-rounder Ellyse Perry to injury. Captain Meg Lanning confirmed the six-time champion Australians would be without Perry, who suffered back spasms during the group stage win over South Africa last week. Twenty-year-old all-rounder Annabel Sutherland is likely to replace the accomplished Perry, 31, in Wednesday's semi-final, as she did against Bangladesh last Friday, when Australia completed a seven-from-seven record in the group stage.

Lanning would not rule Perry out of contention if they qualify for Sunday's final in Christchurch against either South Africa or England, who clash on Thursday. "She batted a little bit in the nets and felt okay, but she certainly just wasn't in a position, unfortunately, to be able to perform at the level needed," Lanning said. "We

will keep assessing her as we go if we are to progress but the team and the squad is very focused on tomorrow and making sure that we're putting out our best game because everything else is irrelevant."

Perry claimed figures of 3-22 against the West Indies two weeks ago, in a seven-wicket win which was achieved with nearly 20 overs to spare, typical of their dominant performances at the tournament. The Caribbean side have exceeded expectations by qualifying in fourth place for the semi-finals. Their progress went down to the final ball of the last group game on Sunday when South Africa dramatically eliminated India, prompting scenes of wild celebration at the West Indies' team hotel.

Knockout experience

Defending champions England will carry momentum into Thursday's game in Christchurch—a replay of the

2017 semi-final—having won four straight matches after losing their opening three. England captain Heather Knight believes her team's experience of playing "knockout cricket" in the latter half of the group stage—they could not afford to lose a match if they were to qualify—is invaluable. "Having that mentality to have the pressure on you and that if you lose you're out, we've had that for a while now," said Knight. "So I think that will be a really useful thing for us."

Second-ranked South Africa lost only one match, to Australia, in the group stage. Their powerful batting line-up, led by Laura Wolvaardt, will fancy their chances of turning the tables on England, who got up to pip them by two wickets with two balls to spare at the same stage in 2017. Wolvaardt has plundered 433 runs at an average of 61.85 in the tournament, more than any other batter. Australia's Lanning comes next with 358 at 59.66.—AFP

ABK supports support key youth-driven initiatives

KUWAIT: In line with its ongoing efforts to support key youth-driven initiatives, Al Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) sponsored the final match of the 29th edition of the Kuwait Crown Prince football Cup between Kuwait SC and Al-Arabi SC. The event took place in collaboration with Kuwait Football Association at Sheikh Jaber Ahmad International Stadium. The final match was held under the patronage and presence of His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who ordered that the entry to the match be free of cost. The match welcomed a number of sports enthusiasts to celebrate the event. ABK's support for the Kuwait Crown Prince Cup stems from its commitment to making a difference in the communities in which it operates and its adherence to supporting youth-centric initiatives.

The championship highlighted the importance of sports in the Kuwaiti society and its contributions to creating a positive and encouraging environment. The Kuwait Crown Prince Cup is a countrywide annual football tournament created in 1994. The current season runs from 19th January 2022 to 30th May 2022. The football tournament has gained immense popularity because of the participating teams and their skills par excellence.

The original time of the match ended with a 1-1 draw and continued during the overtime, which resulted to penalty kicks. Al-Arabi SC showcased their powerhouse skills during penalties and celebrated their eighth victory after beating Kuwait SC in an action-packed 5-4 penalty shootout. Speaking on the occasion, Fawzy Al Thunayan, General Manager of Board Affairs at ABK said: "ABK is delighted to sponsor the annual Kuwait Crown Prince Cup. This initiative further reinforces our dedication to offering continuous support for activities that have the potential to elevate the calibre of sports in the country. We believe that fostering sports within the society helps build a community spirit and endorses healthy living in Kuwait. We aim to create a memorable occasion for everyone involved through this collaboration, leading to a more significant impact across the wider community. We are pleased to be a prominent part of this event."



Fawzy Al Thunayan,
General Manager of
Board Affairs at ABK

ABK participates and hosts several other football tournaments, including the ABK football tournament, which is part of the Bank's annual social program designed to engage with the youth by encouraging sport and a healthy lifestyle from an early age. The Bank is also closely involved with several local sporting entities, which includes the Future Champion Football Academy, overseen by a Kuwaiti team certified by the Kuwait and Asian Football Federation.

Miller, who made 30, and Tewatia—both left-hand batters—put together 60 off 34 balls to swing the momentum back in Gujarat's favor. "The wicket was so good that Miller and I were discussing that we would take it deep and it's a matter of just one over," said Tewatia. "After I hit that six with the reverse sweep, that got (Ravi) Bishnoi thinking."

Tewatia completed the chase with his fifth four—he also struck two sixes—with partner Abhinav Manohar hitting 15 off seven balls. Earlier Shami rattled the Lucknow top-order with three early strikes including getting Rahul caught behind for nought on the first ball of the match and bowled Quinton de Kock for seven. Shubman Gill took a stunning catch while backwards to send back Evin Lewis out for 10 off Varun Aaron before Lucknow hit back with fifties from Deepak Hooda (55) and Ayush Badoni (54).

Both Gujarat and Lucknow, owned by Indian tycoon Sanjiv Goenka's RPSG conglomerate, have added to the Twenty20 spectacle in the world's most valuable cricket tournament that has expanded to 10 teams and 74 matches. Former champions Rajasthan Royals and Sunrisers Hyderabad open their IPL campaign on Tuesday with the first game of the season in Pune—one of the two cities hosting the league matches with limited crowds due to Covid-related restrictions.—AFP

Gujarat win battle of IPL newcomers against Lucknow

MUMBAI: Mohammed Shami's three wickets and a batting blitz by Rahul Tewatia helped Gujarat Titans begin their IPL journey with a thrilling win over fellow debutants Lucknow Super Giants on Monday. Chasing 159 for victory, Gujarat were in trouble at 78-4 but Tewatia smashed an unbeaten 40 off 24 balls to make his team win by five wickets and two balls to spare in Mumbai.

Shami set up the win for Gujarat after he returned figures of 3-25 to restrict Lucknow, led by KL Rahul, to 158-6. "This was the right game for us to be on either side and learn, but we have learnt a lot by winning," said Gujarat skipper Hardik Pandya. "Shami is known for his seam positions and he got us to a great start. We would have any day taken 160 on this wicket." Gujarat, owned by CVC Capital—a US capital venture fund, slipped when Pandya fell for 33 to elder brother Krunal Pandya's left-arm spin.

The wicket ended a 57-run partnership with Matthew Wade, who soon got out for 30. David

Middlesex's Walallawita granted British citizenship

LONDON: Middlesex's Thilan Walallawita, who narrowly escaped a devastating tsunami as a boy in Sri Lanka, has been granted British citizenship, the English county announced Tuesday. His change in status will soon see the 23-year-old left-arm spinner registered as a local cricketer, which means his selection will no longer be governed by rules restricting the use of overseas players in the English domestic game.

"I've been waiting for this moment for a very long time and it feels like today a massive weight has been lifted off my shoulders," Walallawita said in a Middlesex statement. "I've been a part of this county for 10 years and since I first started it's been my ambition to play as a local player—at last that day has come."

Walallawita moved to Britain with his family six years after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami which killed over 30,000 Sri Lankans and devastated large parts of his home country. In England, Walallawita joined Potters Bar Cricket Club, north of London. After working his way up through Middlesex's youth system, he became the county's leading Second XI wicket-taker



MOUNT MAUNGANUI: New Zealand's Kane Williamson makes a run during the first day of the first cricket test match between New Zealand and Pakistan at the Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui yesterday. — AFP

in the 2019 season, a performance which led to his first full professional contract with the club in 2020.

He made both his first-class and T20 debuts for Middlesex later that summer and his List-A debut in 2021. "We are absolutely thrilled that Thilan is now in a position to be registered as a local cricketer and his career with the club can continue to thrive," said Middlesex's head of men's performance cricket, Alan Coleman. "As a left-arm spinner with immense talent, Thilan is a rare breed in modern day cricket, and is someone that we have high hopes for in the game." — AFP



Disabled Table Tennis team grab 11 medals

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Disabled Table Tennis team collected 11 medals (one gold, four silver and six bronze), at the Arab Clubs Championship that was held at the Olympic village in Egypt with 42 players from Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Algeria participating. Irada

Disabled Club Player Fahad Al-Otaibi won the gold medal in the singles. Malak Hadi Al-Enezi from Irada won the women's singles silver medal and third place in teams. Chairman of Irada Club Duaij Al-Hajiri lauded the achievements of the clubs in the first Arab Championship. He said the large number of medals is a good incentive.

Kuwait Tumooh Sports Club shines in Dubai

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Tumooh Sports Club for the mentally disabled spent nine days at the Expo 2020 in Dubai, where they showcased and displayed awareness works besides sports, and gained respect. The participation added a patriotic flavor to Kuwait pavilion as it coincided with national day celebrations.

Tumooh Club participated with 34 players from both genders in addition to coaches and administrators. The delegation was headed by Chairwoman of the Club, Rihab Buresli and the National Director of Kuwait special Olympics. The presentations included patriotic musicals under the supervision of Talal Al-Asousi as well as dances from Kuwait heritage.

The players also introduced the Bocci game, which

is sanctioned by special Olympics. Buresli was pleased with the success of the club's participation and appreciated the congratulations from the Information and Culture Minister Hamad Rouheddeen during his visit to Kuwait Pavilion at Dubai Expo 2020. She also thanked Public Authority for Sport, as well as the players' parents who accompanied their children to Dubai.



Sports

Medvedev breezes into the Miami Open last 16

Osaka books quarters as Swiatek cruises

MIAMI: Daniil Medvedev moved into the last 16 of the Miami Open on Monday with a comprehensive straight-sets triumph over Spain's Pedro Martinez. The Russian top seed remains the favourite for the title and his 6-3, 6-4 victory was as clinical as the one which sent Andy Murray out of the tournament in the previous round.

Martinez competed well but once he was broken by Medvedev midway through the second set, the reigning US Open champion never looked back and wrapped up the win in one hour and 24 minutes. "I hit 14 aces and felt pretty good, the second set was tight but I managed to stay consistent," said Medvedev during a courtside interview. The 26-year-old will regain the world number one ranking by making the semi-finals in Miami. Medvedev will face 21-year-old Jenson Brooksby after the American defeated Roberto Bautista Agut 6-3, 5-7, 6-4 on Monday.

Brooksby made headlines at the start of the tournament for throwing his racket towards a ball-boy during a first round win which resulted in a \$15,000 fine. Brooksby knows he has to channel his emotions in the correct way and hopes his decent form continues against Medvedev. A run to the fourth round of the US Open last year has been backed up with a last 16 defeat in Indian Wells and now the chance to reach the quarter-finals in Miami.

"This is a big learning curve for me," he told AFP. "I am definitely the type of player that needs to play with emotion. But as my coach has said I have to work on balancing it better and finding other ways to let out frustration because what happened was unacceptable and I am definitely sorry. I need to learn from what happened." Daniil's got a very solid game and is obviously in the top two in the world for a reason but the more matches I play on these big stages can only help me."



FLORIDA: Daniil Medvedev of Russia serves to Pedro Martinez of Spain during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium on March 28, 2022 in Miami Gardens. —AFP photos



FLORIDA: Naomi Osaka of Japan returns a shot to Alison Riske of United States during the Women's Singles match on Day 8 of the 2022 Miami Open presented by Ita' at Hard Rock Stadium on March 28, 2022.

Swiatek cruises

In another development, Naomi Osaka will face American Danielle Collins for a place in the semi-finals of the Miami Open after the Japanese star beat Alison Riske 6-3, 6-4 on Monday. Osaka has responded strongly in Florida, advancing to the quarter-finals after leaving Indian Wells in tears earlier this month after being heckled by a fan.

The four-time Grand Slam champion, who received a walkover in the previous round, is yet to drop a set and remains one of the favorites to land the title. "I am definitely happy," Osaka said afterwards. "Last year I got to the quarters in Miami after winning in Australia and I am winning matches here this year too but I

feel more grateful-this is one of the funnest times of my life." "There were a lot of things running through my mind last year," added Osaka who was able to stay firmly on the front foot against American Riske while saving seven of eight break points faced.

"Maybe it was trying to return to number one or other things which aren't that important but at the time was so heavy in my head. I am just happy to be healthy," added Osaka, who recently revealed she has benefited from therapy to address her mental health issues. Ninth seed Collins, who reached the semi-finals in Miami in 2018, beat Ons Jabeur 6-2, 6-4 earlier in the day.

Newly minted world number one Iga Swiatek also advanced comfortably on

Monday, sweeping aside the 14th-seeded Coco Gauff 6-3, 6-1 in 1hr 16min. The second-seeded Swiatek, who took over the top ranking on Friday in the wake of the shock retirement of Ashleigh Barty, is now on a 14-match unbeaten streak. The 20-year-old Pole won the WTA 1000 event in Doha and then took victory at Indian Wells earlier this month.

She is bidding to become only the fourth woman to win Indian Wells and Miami in the same season after Steffi Graf, Kim Clijsters and Victoria Azarenka. Swiatek believes she is a more complete competitor now than when she triumphed in the pandemic-delayed French Open in 2020 for her maiden Grand Slam win. "Right now I feel more prepared and I feel like I'm in a better

place," Swiatek said. "So there is more excitement and more like satisfaction and actually like positive thoughts and emotions."

"Because after Roland Garros, it was really a mess... I have been doing well like cutting off the expectations from the outside. It was always, for me, harder to deal with my own expectations that I had for myself." While Swiatek is looking to extend her winning streak, Czech teenager Linda Fruhvirtova's impressive run came to an end in the last 16. The 16-year-old-the youngest player to reach the fourth round since 2004 - was eliminated by fifth seeded Spaniard Paula Badosa. Badosa powered to a 6-2, 6-3 victory in 1hr 22mins to advance to the last eight. —AFP

Zain 'main partner' of IAME Series Kuwait

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its main partnership with the IAME Series Kuwait karting competition, organized by the Kuwait Club for Motorsports (KCM) throughout the weekend at Kuwait Motor Town in Arifjan. The event witnessed great participation from crowds and karting enthusiasts alike.

Zain is a strong believer in the vital role played by private sector institutions in developing the local youth and sports sectors. The company makes this belief a reality by supporting and shouldering many of the major competitions and sporting events hosted by the nation, including this competition that is part of the global IAME Series.

Zain was present at Kuwait Motor Town in Arifjan via its dedicated booth, where it presented many entertainment activities for visitors. The company also awarded the winners of the event's various categories. The competition offered a safe and competitive environment for racers from all ages to compete at the fourth and fifth rounds for a chance to win the honor of representing Kuwait at the final round to be held in October in France.



Zain awarding the winners

Zain is proud to continue supporting and sponsoring many Kuwaiti athletes who represent the nation across local, regional, and international arenas, and attain the highest accolades, many of which compete in motorsports. Zain's role not only focuses on economic and business activities, but

also extends to contribute significantly to various areas within the Kuwaiti society, including sports. The company has endless confidence in the competencies of Kuwaiti athletes and their capabilities in excelling in different fields, on both regional and international levels.

NFL clubs to hire minority coaches to boost diversity

NEW YORK: National Football League teams will be required to hire at least one minority offensive assistant coach as part of a drive to boost diversity across the sport, NFL owners announced Monday. The measure, which comes amid recent controversy over the NFL's record over the hiring and promotion of minority coaches, will be in place for the 2022 season.

The initiative was adopted and passed by all 32 clubs during the NFL owners' annual meeting in Florida. Pittsburgh Steelers owner Art Rooney II said the measure reflected the increasing tendency for head coaches to come from the ranks of offensive assistants. "It's a recognition that at the moment, when you look at stepping stones for a head coach, they are the coordinator positions," he told ESPN.

"We clearly have a trend where coaches are coming from the offensive side of the ball in recent years, and we clearly do not have as many minorities in the offensive coordinator (job)," added Rooney, the chairman of the NFL's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell told

clubs last month the league's record of hiring minority candidates to head coaching jobs had been "unacceptable." It came after sacked Miami Dolphins coach Brian Flores accused the NFL and certain clubs of racist hiring policies in a lawsuit.

On Monday, Goodell provided details of a new advisory committee made up of outside experts that will study diversity hiring practices before reporting back to the league with recommendations. "We've worked for years and made progress in many areas to ensure that staff and leaders in our office and at our clubs reflect the racial and gender makeup of America, but we have more work to do, particularly at the head coach and front-office level," Goodell said in a statement announcing the six-strong committee.

"This esteemed group's work will help us build a more inclusive league. We look forward to their recommendations-and to continuing our conversations with other outside experts, community and civil rights leaders... to make our efforts and those of the clubs more effective so that real and tangible results will be achieved." —AFP

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TORONTO: Daniel Theis #27 of the Boston Celtics drives to the basket during the game against the Toronto Raptors on March 28, 2022 at the Scotiabank Arena in Toronto, Ontario. —AFP

Siakam and Raptors upset Celtics

Knicks keep their faint hopes alive; down Chicago

TORONTO: Pascal Siakam poured in 40 points as the Toronto Raptors snapped the Boston Celtics' six-game win streak with a 115-112 overtime victory on Monday. Siakam and the Raptors took advantage of a depleted Celtics line-up to grab a crucial victory that boosts Toronto's hopes of securing an automatic postseason berth. The win moves Toronto level with the Chicago Bulls on 43 wins and 32 losses in the East, just ahead of the Cleveland Cavaliers who are one place outside the automatic playoff spots in seventh.

The Celtics have been the form team in the NBA recently, motoring to 11 wins in their last 12 games prior to Monday's clash. But Boston were jolted earlier Monday by confirmation that center Robert Williams III faces a lengthy layoff with a knee injury, while Jaylen Brown and Jayson Tatum were also sidelined with knocks. That cleared the way for Siakam to take over at Toronto's Scotiabank Arena with a 40-point display as well as 13 rebounds, three steals and two blocks. Fred VanVleet and OG Anunoby added 14 points each while

Thaddeus Young and Gary Trent Jr had 12 points apiece. "It was a great team win," said Siakam, who was sidelined for several months last year after undergoing shoulder surgery.

"It's been a long road, so I'm excited about just getting back to the grind and working hard, just playing with everything I've got. "We're a team. We have a next man up mentality, just go out there and win the game." Marcus Smart led the Celtics scorers with 28 points, while Grant Williams finished with 17. Boston's loss means Miami reclaimed top spot in the Eastern Conference with a 123-100 victory over the Sacramento Kings in Florida.

Eye on playoffs

Jimmy Butler finished with 27 points and seven assists while Bam Adebayo added 22 points and hauled in 15 rebounds for the Heat, who improved to 48-28. The win ended a four-game losing streak for Miami, who had dropped games against Philadelphia, Golden State, the New York Knicks and Brooklyn in the past week. "We were very disappointed about the last four games, and it was trending that way before that, while we were still winning," said Miami coach Erik Spoelstra, who used the mini slump to reshuffle his roster with one eye on the playoffs.

"I don't mind these stretches—they force you to address things," Spoelstra said. "There were detail things that we needed to address and will continue to address. We're not satisfied with where we're at. "Our roster is deep and checks a lot of boxes we feel we'll need in the playoffs. If we're fortunate enough to play multiple series, we'll have different needs and complexities and we feel our versatility and depth is one of our greatest strengths."

Elsewhere in the Eastern Conference on Monday, the New York Knicks kept their faint hopes of forcing their

way into the postseason play-in with a fourth straight victory, downing Chicago 109-104 at Madison Square Garden. DeMar DeRozan led the scoring for the visiting Bulls with 37 points, but the Knicks were carried to victory with 28 points from RJ Barrett, 28 points from Alec Burks and 16 points from Mitchell Robinson.

The Knicks are one place outside the play-in spots with a 34-42 record. Atlanta, 132-123 winners over Indiana on Monday, occupy the last play-in place in the East at 38-37. In the Western Conference, Golden State's problems continued with a third straight loss. A Warriors line-up missing the injured Stephen Curry as well as

Klay Thompson and Draymond Green were pummeled 123-95 on the road by the Memphis Grizzlies, who swept to a fifth consecutive victory with a balanced offensive performance. Desmond Bane scored 22 points and Dillon Brooks 21 as five Grizzlies players posted double-digit points totals. Warriors coach Steve Kerr was ejected after arguing with the officiating crew at the end of the first half. "Everyone was a little down because we were getting our behinds kicked, and our coach was kicked out, but Steve did a fantastic job in getting our guys fired up for the second half," Warriors assistant coach Mike Brown said afterwards. —AFP



TORONTO: Pascal Siakam #43 of the Toronto Raptors shoots the ball during the game against the Boston Celtics on March 28, 2022.— AFP

Saudi provides thrills on track

JEDDAH: Max Verstappen may have led Charles Leclerc across the line to confirm the identity of Formula One's 'new era' protagonists, but Sunday's thrilling Saudi Arabian Grand Prix posed plenty of questions for the future. The world champion's victory by half a second in a cat-and-mouse duel with his fellow-24-year-old tyro to finish a close contest between the Red Bull and Ferrari teams kept fans and spectators enthralled.

It left few doubting their credentials as this year's main title contenders. But it was unable to hide a brooding unrest in the pit lane and paddock after a weekend of high-speed crashes, safety and security concerns following Friday's nearby missile attack and an uneasy disquiet over Saudi Arabia's human rights record. If the close racing, frequent overtaking and swapping of positions signaled the second 'ground effect' era in F1 was delivering the sought-after entertainment levels on track, it also supplied surprises.

The loss of competitiveness of Mercedes, after eight consecutive championship-winning seasons, undermined seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton's hopes at the floodlit Jeddah Street Track and may wreck his bid for a record eighth driver's title. The 37-year-old Briton, who finished 10th, was one of many drivers who spoke in favor of a boycott during four hours of late-night talks on Friday following the missile attack. He remained despondent on Sunday night, admitting: "I am so happy this weekend is done. "I am

so happy that everyone is safe. I am just looking forward to getting out. I just want to go home..."

The missile strike at an oil plant within sight of the circuit intensified feelings on human rights—most recently brought into focus by the Saudi state's execution of 81 men on March 12. While many drivers were reluctant to voice their views, Hamilton spoke with careful precision about a need to highlight the issues raised in the paddock about 'sports-washing' and the perils of racing in Jeddah.

F1 management and team bosses, mindful of the commercial aspects of a race worth a reported \$900 million over 10 years, argued that 'the show goes on' and cited local security guarantees. Verstappen made clear the story was not over when he spoke after his first win of the season following a late retirement in Bahrain's season-opener.

"We had a lot of guarantees that it would be safe, but after this weekend all the drivers together will speak with F1 and the team bosses to see what happens in the future." The prompt cancellation of the Russian Grand Prix following Russia's invasion of Ukraine showed that F1 can take action and drew attention to the issues surrounding not only Saudi Arabia's role in the seven-year war in Yemen, but also the inclusion of Bahrain on the race calendar.

Other events will be examined carefully. For the sport, having reinvented itself this year as a high-speed high-tech global media entertainment, there is a need to clarify its position as more race promoters jostle to join the feast in a bloated calendar. More questions are expected at round three in Melbourne next month when Mercedes will hope to have found an answer to their performance problems in a bid to catch Ferrari and Red Bull before it is too late. — AFP

Senegal stun Egypt, qualify for WCup



CAIRO: Egypt supporters watch the second leg of the 2022 Qatar World Cup African qualifier between Senegal and Egypt on March 29, 2022. — AFP

DIAMNIADIO: Liverpool star Sadio Mane converted a shoot-out penalty in Diamniadio on Tuesday to take African champions Senegal to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar at the expense of Egypt. Senegal won the second leg of the African play-off 1-0 thanks to a fourth-minute goal from Boulaye Dia and the teams finished level at 1-1 on aggregate after extra time. As was the case in the Africa Cup of Nations final last month, Mane was entrusted with taking the crucial fifth Senegal kick and once again he made no mistake to give his side a 3-1 victory in the shoot-out.

Ghana upset Nigeria

In another development, Arsenal midfielder Thomas Partey scored the goal that took Ghana to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar as they forced a 1-1 draw in Nigeria on Tuesday to win the African play-off on away goals. Partey struck after 10 minutes in Abuja and although another Premier League star, William Troost-Ekong, leveled from a 22nd-minute penalty, Nigeria failed to score again. The first leg ended goalless. The Black Stars of Ghana are back in the World Cup finals after qualifying in 2006, 2010 and 2014, but missing out four years ago.

Defeat was a massive blow for favorites

Nigeria, who were chasing a seventh appearance in eight attempts since debuting at the 1994 World Cup. Public servants in the Nigerian capital were given a half-day and free transport was arranged from the suburbs to ensure a capacity 60,000 crowd cheered on the Super Eagles. But the home team fell behind early on when Partey's shot from outside the box slipped between the hands of goalkeeper Francis Uzoho and into the net.

It was the latest in a series of blunders by Nigerian goalkeepers with Maduka Okoye blamed for the Tunisian goal that knocked his team out of the recent Africa Cup of Nations at the last-16 stage. Troost-Ekong was the calmest person in the cauldron of noise midway through the opening half as he sent Ghana goalkeeper Jojo Wollacott the wrong way from the penalty spot to equalize.

Napoli forward Victor Osimhen had the ball in the net for Nigeria soon after, but it was ruled off-side after a VAR check. Nigeria applied constant second-half pressure, but could not break down a Ghana defence marshalled by Leicester City centre-back Daniel Amartey. Ghana started the two-leg tie as underdogs after a dismal showing at the Cup of Nations in January, with a loss to minnows the Comoros condemning them to a humiliating first-round exit. — AFP