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# Russia steps up Ukraine attacks ahead of Victory Day parades

## Jill Biden hails 'amazingly strong' refugees in Romania

### News in brief



**SILAT AL-HARITHIYA:** A Palestinian man sits in a house demolished by Zionist security forces in this village near Jenin early on May 7, 2022. — AFP

### Palestinian home destroyed

**SILAT AL-HARITHIYA:** Zionist forces on Saturday destroyed the home of a Palestinian accused of killing a Zionist settler last year, sparking clashes. Explosives destroyed the apartment of Omar Jaradat in Silat Al-Harithiya village, near the flashpoint town of Jenin in the northern occupied West Bank. A large-scale manhunt also continued for a pair of Palestinians suspected of killing three Zionists in an axe attack Thursday night near Tel Aviv. — AFP

### Attack kills 11 Egypt troops

**CAIRO:** Eleven Egyptian soldiers were killed on Saturday attempting to thwart a "terrorist" attack on the Suez Canal zone abutting the Sinai Peninsula, a hotbed of jihadist activity, the army said. Five soldiers were also wounded in the firefight on the eastern, Sinai bank of the canal, the army said, adding that security forces "are continuing to chase the terrorists and surround them in an isolated area of the Sinai". — AFP



**MAGHERAFELT:** Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and Sinn Fein member Michelle O'Neill takes a selfie with Sinn Fein President Mary Lou McDonald on May 7, 2022. — AFP

### Sinn Fein hails 'new era'

**BELEFAST:** Sinn Fein leader Michelle O'Neill on Saturday hailed a "new era" for Northern Ireland as pro-UK unionists conceded a historic election victory for her Irish nationalist party, while threatening anew to boycott the devolved government. Sinn Fein will have enough seats to make O'Neill first minister, a century after Northern Ireland was carved out as a Protestant fiefdom under British rule. — AFP (See Page 5)

### 25 killed in Havana hotel blast

**HAVANA:** The death toll after an explosion ripped through a luxury hotel in central Havana climbed to 25 people including a Spanish tourist, one day after the powerful blast due to a suspected gas leak. Rescuers were still combing through what remained of the prestigious Saratoga Hotel looking for survivors. — AFP (See Page 6)

**ZAPORIZHZHIA, Ukraine:** Ukraine tried to evacuate more civilians from a besieged Mariupol steel plant on Saturday as Russian forces unleashed new bombardments across the country ahead of Victory Day festivities in Moscow. The Azovstal steel mill is the last pocket of Ukrainian resistance in the devastated port city and its fate has taken on a symbolic value in the broader battle since Russia's invasion.

Fighting continues on many fronts, and Ukraine's defense ministry said it had destroyed another Russian warship - a Serna-class landing craft - in the Black Sea. "The traditional parade of the Russian Black Sea fleet on May 9 this year will be held near Snake Island - at the bottom of the sea," the ministry added. Russia did not immediately confirm the incident.

Ukraine's defense ministry had earlier said Russian forces had resumed their assault on the Azovstal site, despite talk of a truce to allow trapped civilians to flee the complex. Vice Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said rescuers would try to evacuate more civilians on Saturday. On Monday, President Vladimir Putin will celebrate the World War II Soviet victory over Nazi Germany with a traditional Victory Day parade.

According to Russia's defence ministry, 77 aircraft will conduct a flypast, including the rarely-seen Il-80 Doomsday plane that can withstand

Continued on Page 6



**BUCHAREST:** US First Lady Jill Biden and First Lady of Romania Carmen Iohannis visit a classroom at the Scoala Gimnaziala Uruguay, or Uruguay School, to meet children and the educators who are helping teach displaced Ukrainian children. — AFP

## Taleban order women to cover fully in public

**KABUL:** The Taliban on Saturday imposed some of the harshest restrictions on Afghanistan's women since they seized power, ordering them to cover fully in public, ideally with the traditional burqa. The militants took back control of the country in August last year, promising a softer rule than their previous stint in power between

1996 and 2001, which was marked by human rights abuses.

But they have already imposed a slew of restrictions on women - banning them from many government jobs, secondary education, and from travelling alone outside their cities. On Saturday, Afghanistan's supreme leader and Taliban chief Hibatullah Akhundzada approved a strict dress code for women in public.

"Those women who are not too old or young must cover their face, except the eyes, as per sharia directives, in order to avoid provocation when meeting men who are not

Continued on Page 6



**KABUL:** Taliban minister for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Mohammad Khalid Hanafi speaks during a ceremony to announce a decree for Afghan women's dress code on May 7, 2022. — AFP

## Chelsea sold for record \$5.2bn

**LONDON:** Chelsea confirmed on Saturday that a consortium led by LA Dodgers co-owner Todd Boehly has won the battle to buy the Premier League club in a £4.25 billion (\$5.2 billion) deal. Owner Roman Abramovich put Chelsea on the market in early March, just days before he was sanctioned by the British government following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

After a lengthy bidding process involving several groups, Boehly and his fellow investors were picked by Raine Group, the New York bank overseeing the sale. Boehly's consortium includes a fellow co-owner of the Dodgers baseball franchise, Mark Walter, Swiss billionaire Hansjoerg Wyss and US investment firm Clearlake Capital.

"Chelsea Football Club can confirm that terms have been agreed for a new ownership group, led by Todd Boehly, Clearlake Capital, Mark Walter and Hansjoerg Wyss, to acquire the club," they said in a statement. "Of the total investment being made, £2.5 billion will be applied to purchase the shares in the

Continued on Page 6



**LONDON:** Chelsea's new owner Todd Boehly watches a match at Stamford Bridge on May 7, 2022. — AFP

## Qatar migrants queue to see World Cup

**DOHA:** Thousands of migrant laborers, many of whom have worked on Qatar's new stadiums, have formed long queues to see the World Cup trophy that will be contested in the Gulf state this year. The price of tickets means that most of those who waited up to two hours for the chance of a selfie next to the gold trophy will not see the games that start Nov 21.

South Asia has contributed the biggest contingent to the army of laborers that built seven new stadiums and refurbished an eighth for the first World Cup in an Arab country. Qatar has faced criticism over labor rights but insists it has made big changes in recent years, leaving it the most progressive state for foreign workers among the Gulf countries.

For the latest stage of its final display in Qatar before the tournament, the trophy was set up in a car park near Doha's main cricket stadium in Asian Town. Each person had about 15 seconds on Friday to snap a picture with the cup that is currently held by France.

Continued on Page 6



**DOHA:** People pose next to the World Cup original trophy on display in the Qatari capital on May 6, 2022. — AFP



## Local

## News in brief

**Long COVID could overburden health systems: Dr Jarallah**

**KUWAIT:** Long COVID, a term used to describe persistent symptoms of COVID-19 that may last for weeks, months or even years, could put an added pressure on health systems worldwide for an extended period of time, Dr Khaled Al-Jarallah said. Vaccination can help protect people from long COVID according to a recent UK Health Security Agency report, he added.

**Kuwaiti expert says don't give Zakat to illegals**

**KUWAIT:** Kuwaiti religious and legal expert Dr Rashed Al-Olaimi tweeted urging people to avoid giving Zakat Al-Fitr or Zakat in general to anyone living illegally in Kuwait. Dr Olaimi later explained that his tweet specifically targets expatriate residents living illegally in Kuwait after his controversial comments were inaccurately interpreted to also be aimed at Kuwait's bedoon (stateless) community.

**Kuwaiti oil price up \$1.22 to \$117.14 pb**

**KUWAIT:** The price of Kuwaiti oil went up Friday by \$1.22 to \$117.14 per barrel from on Thursday's \$115.92 per barrel, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) Saturday. The Brent crude and the West Texas Intermediate prices trended upward, increasing by \$1.49 and \$1.51 each, reaching respectively \$112.39 per barrel and \$109.77 pb.

## Photo of the Day



**KUWAIT:** Muslim devotees pray on the first day of Eid Al-Fitr, which marks the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, near the Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium in Kuwait on May 2, 2022. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

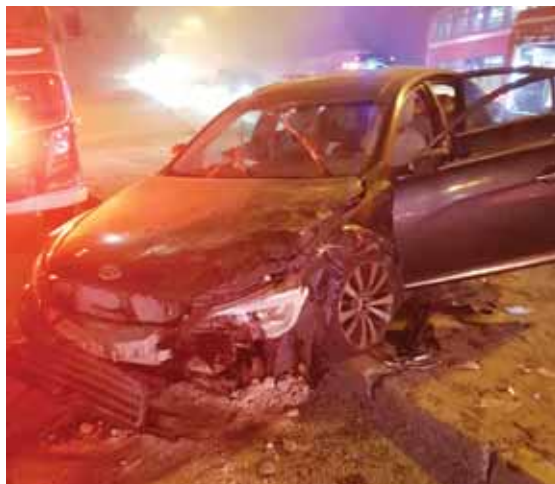
# Nine injured in three-car collision on Airport Road

## Two dead, two hurt in King Fahad Road crash

**KUWAIT:** Nine people were injured in an accident reported on Airport Road Thursday night, Kuwait Fire Force said. Firemen rushed to the scene in response to an emergency call reported a three-car collision on the road towards Khaitan. The injured people, some of whom wounded critically, were rescued and rushed to hospital, KFF noted in a statement, adding that an investigation was opened to reveal the cause of the accident.

Meanwhile, two people died and two others were injured in an accident reported on King Fahad Road. The accident took place Thursday night between two vehicles near the Nuwaiseeb border outlet. Firemen removed the bodies of the two victims from one vehicle, and rescued the other two from the other vehicle, Kuwait Fire Force said. An investigation was opened.

Separately, firemen battled a fire reported in a perfumes' store in Souq Mubarakia. Firefighters were able to contain the blaze and prevent flames from spreading to nearby shops, Kuwait Fire Force said, noting that no injuries were reported. KFF officials later inspected the scene, it added.



**KUWAIT:** One of the vehicles involved in the accident on Airport Road.



One of the vehicles involved in the King Fahad Road crash.

## 700 liquor bottles on Kuwait-bound yacht

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait customs foiled an attempt to smuggle hundreds of liquor bottles into the country. Customs officers searched a yacht that arrived in Kuwait from a Gulf state based on a tip in that it was carrying contrabands. Officers found nearly 700 bottles of liquor after searching the yacht at Um Al-Maradem Customs Center, the General Administration of Customs said in a statement. Further legal action is underway, it added.



## Bangladesh Embassy hosts Eid Al-Fitr gathering

**KUWAIT:** The Bangladesh Embassy in Kuwait observed Eid Al-Fitr with much enthusiasm and religious fervor on May 2, 2022. On this day, an open house program was organized at the Bangladesh House. Members of Bangladesh Community in Kuwait and representative of the print and electronic media attended the open house program. Major General Md Ashikuzzaman, Ambassador of Bangladesh to Kuwait, and other officers of the Embassy welcomed all the guests and exchanged Eid greetings with them.



Officers and officials of the Embassy, officers of Bangladesh Military Contingent, Kuwait, Country Manager of Biman Bangladesh Airlines and their family members also join the open house program and celebrate Eid Al-Fitr. Finally, the guests were entertained

with sweets and lunch. A team from the Embassy of Bangladesh also visited the sick Bangladeshi nationals who were admitted to the local hospital. The team exchange Eid greetings with the sick Bangladeshi National and gifted sweets and fruits.

## Dust spoils Kuwait's Eid



**KUWAIT:** Vehicles drive through dusty weather in several locations in Kuwait. Various areas around the country were swept with heavy dust during the Eid Al-Fitr holiday which dropped visibility to less than 1,000 meters on some roads. —Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



**KUWAIT:** Indian Ambassador Sibi George poses for a group photo with members of the diplomatic community in Kuwait during the birth anniversary celebration of Rabindranth Tagore at the Indian embassy on Saturday.

## Indian embassy marks Tagore's birth anniversary

**KUWAIT:** Embassy of India, Kuwait celebrated the birth anniversary of Gurudev Rabindranth Tagore, one of the greatest literary figures of India. Indian Ambassador Sibi George inaugurated the event which was attended by many members of diplomatic community in Kuwait, media persons and members of the Indian community.

In his opening remarks, Ambassador Sibi George remembered Tagore's immense contribution in the making of the Indian nation. "Every major work of Tagore - his poems and songs, novels, short stories and dramas - were imbued with the dominating idea of transcending the narrow for a greater, all-embracing, human and humane ideal," he said.

The ambassador said, "It was this realization - that narrow, local, national and regional differences are to be sublimated in the search for eternal values, that led Tagore to create Visvabharati - the 'India of the World' or the 'Universal India'. Tagore reshaped not only Bengali literature and music but the entire Indian art with 'Contextual Modernism' in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The ambassador also unveiled the portrait of Tagore on the occasion. A drawing/painting competition was held to mark the Tagore birth anniversary whose winners were felicitated by the ambassador during the event. He also distributed prizes to the winners of 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' (AKAM) online quiz being held every week by the embassy. During the event, floral tributes were paid to the portrait of Rabindranth Tagore by the ambassador, resident ambassadors and their spouses present at the celebrations and officers and family members of the embassy. A reading session by the readers of the embassy's Indian Readers Network (IRN) was also held. The event included cultural performances based on Rabindra sangeet by local artists.



Local

# Consumers can complain against car rental agencies breaking rules

## Agencies not allowed to take payments for vehicle repairs

By Nawara Fattahova

**KUWAIT:** Some car rental agencies are setting their own rules that are not in line with the commercial rights of consumers. For instance, signing a blank promissory note is illegal, as is demanding payment for fixing a car damaged in an accident from the renter, along with many other practices by the agencies.

The Kuwait Association for Consumer Protection has posted an awareness video on some wrong practices by car rental agencies. The video mentions the agency is not allowed to demand payment for fixing a car damaged in an accident by the renter, as all vehicles should be covered by full insurance. It adds the agency is also not allowed to demand the daily rent of the vehicle during the repair period in the garage.

Kuwait Times contacted four car rental agencies, and all of them confirmed having full insurance for all their vehicles. Three of them demand fees of KD 25 for opening a file at the insurance company in case of an accident by the renter. Also, two of these agencies said they don't rent a vehicle for less than three days.

President of Kuwait Association for Consumer Protection Mishal Al-Manea said the condition of compulsory full insurance for all vehicles at car

rental agencies was set by a joint decision of the ministries of interior and commerce and industry. "The consumer has the right to complain against car rental agencies' practices such as signing a blank promissory note, demanding fees for fixing a damaged car, whether for an accident or other mechanical causes, demanding the rent while the



**Ministry to prepare new agreement soon**

car is being repaired at the garage, or demanding fees for opening a file at the insurance company. All of these are illegal," Manea told Kuwait Times.

"Also, the agency is not allowed to force the client to rent for a certain period, such as a minimum of three days, and they can rent for only a day. In case of an accident, the client should inform the agency and get a report from the police station, and



shouldn't pay rent for any further days. The client can then choose to rent another vehicle from the same office with a new contract," added Manea.

Some car rental agencies have complained of reckless motorists who exploit the strict rules of not demanding any compensation from the renter. "We have received complaints from many agencies of renters speeding with the vehicle and driving recklessly in way that damages the tyres or other parts of the vehicle. So the ministry will be preparing a new agreement for car rental agencies soon," he explained.

"The agreement should guarantee the rights of both parties. The new decision should include an option for the renter to pay an additional fee and have the rented vehicle totally insured, or not pay this additional fee and instead sign a pledge to repair the damages caused by them if they cause an accident or drive the vehicle in an illegal way. We also proposed that rental vehicles should not be older than five or seven years and be under the warranty of the local agent of the vehicle brand. This agreement will be finalized soon," concluded Manea.

## Kuwait strongly condemns protection of extremists' attack on Al-Aqsa

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait issued on Thursday a strong "condemnation and denunciation" of the Zionist entity's decision to allow extremists to storm Al-Aqsa Mosque under the protection of government forces. Kuwait's foreign ministry, in a statement, described the act as part of a continuing trend of "serious violations" committed by the Zionist entity's occupational authority, which "constitute a fla-

grant violation of international law and the Geneva Conventions, stoke a spirit of violence and tension and threaten international peace and security." It went on to call on the United Nations Security Council to "assume its responsibilities to curb these violations and compel the occupying power to stop its attacks on the brotherly Palestinian people, their land and their holy sites." — KUNA



**JERUSALEM:** Two Palestinians lie on the ground after Zionist security forces assaulted them on May 5, 2022 following a group of Jewish people's storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque under protection of the Zionist entity's police. — AFP

## Kuwait oil minister commends OPEC+ output hike for June

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister and Oil Minister Dr Mohammad Al-Fares praised OPEC+ countries' recent joint decision to raise oil output by 432,000 barrels per day in June, saying it aims to "restore market balance through a monthly increase." The decision made after OPEC and non-OPEC ministers, including Kuwait, held talks virtually, comes with several factors taken into account, said Dr Fares, who is also State Minister for Cabinet Affairs.

These include disruptions to supply as a result of citywide lockdowns in China due to an increase in COVID infections, US interest rate hikes and a drop in the global growth and demand for oil due to a rise in commodity prices. The recent agreement "enhances the security of supplies in the markets," he explained, "which ensures market stability and achieves a balance between supply and demand."

Oil-producing nations had agreed on Thursday to collectively raise their production



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Oil Minister Dr Mohammad Al-Fares attends virtual talks held between OPEC and non-OPEC oil ministers. — KUNA

of the commodity by 432,000 barrels per day for June. The decision was made in the wake of "continuing oil market fundamentals and the consensus on the outlook pointed to a balanced market," along with "the continuing effects of geopolitical factors and issues related to the ongoing pandemic, a statement read after virtual talks held between OPEC and non-OPEC oil ministers. — KUNA

## CBK ups discount rate to 2.00 percent

**KUWAIT:** The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced Wednesday raising the discount rate from 1.75 percent to 2.00 percent effective May 5. A CBK press release said as part of the Bank's vigilant monitoring of domestic and international economic and geopolitical developments, in addition to monetary policy trends in the global economies, the CBK Board of Directors decided to raise the discount rate by 0.25 percent to 2.00 percent effective May 5, 2022. Furthermore, the CBK decided to modify the rates of monetary policy instruments by varying percentages for the entire interest rate yield curve, including repurchases (Repo), CBK bonds and tawarruq, term deposits, direct intervention instruments, as well as public debt instruments. In this regard, Governor Basil Al-Haroun said that by raising the discount rate, CBK strives to maintain an environment conducive to sustainable economic growth considerate of inflation rates, and affirm the attractiveness of the Kuwaiti Dinar as a lucrative and reliable store for domestic savings, being a mainstay of monetary policy.

The Governor added, the decisions taken by the Central Bank of Kuwait, whether around changes to the discount rate (raising or cutting) or regulating liquidity in the banking sector



**KUWAIT:** CBK's Governor Basil Al-Haroun. — KUNA

through the various instruments to maintain monetary and financial stability are informed by thorough assessments of the latest local and global economic data. This data includes economic performance indicators such as economic growth and inflation rates, local liquidity levels, developments in deposits, and interest rates for the Kuwaiti Dinar and main foreign currencies, and forecasted trends that could impact the national economy. To ensure a prudent monetary policy, the CBK utilizes advanced analytical and forecasting models to determine the current and future economic state, capable of incorporating various economic indicators and their complexities and interdependencies. — KUNA

## On the occasion of the



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## Europe Day celebrated for the first time in Kuwait

**KUWAIT:** On the occasion of Europe Day 2022, the Delegation of the European Union together with the 17 European Union countries with diplomatic representation in Kuwait and for the first time in Kuwait will hold an unprecedented and first class event to celebrate European culture and friendship with Kuwait. This public event will take place on Monday, 9 May from 20:00h to 22:30h in Al-Shaheed Park, multipurpose hall located in phase 2, across Ayyame restaurant. The event is open for the public with free entrance.

Europe Day, celebrated on 9 May every year, is the National Day of the European Union. This Day celebrates solidarity and unity in Europe. The date marks the anniversary of the historic 'Schuman declaration' that set out the idea for a new form of political cooperation in Europe, which would make war between European countries unthinkable. This unprecedented proposal is considered as the beginning of what is now the European Union.

The event will feature live onstage performances of award winning European and Kuwaiti artists to celebrate Europe Day, as well as booths representing the European Union and European countries, where the public can discover more about the European culture, traditions, handicrafts, gastronomy, tourism and languages. European Union countries will be represented by embassies of Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Romania and Slovakia

# Kuwait Airways' direct flight to Manchester helps students

## Manchester-Kuwait route opens with three flights a week

**MANCHESTER:** Kuwaiti students on scholarships to the UK, specifically in Manchester, have stressed out due to the lack of direct flights in the past years, as this destination serves hundreds of students on scholarships in Manchester. In separate interviews with scholarship students, they agreed that the direct flight on Kuwait Airways will help students on scholarship to the UK, precisely Manchester and its neighboring cities.

Abbas Al-Ramzi, a student on scholarship to Manchester, pointed out that the timing of the flight's departure from Kuwait and its arrival in Manchester is suitable for students and tourists, as it arrives at 11:45 am, which helps the traveler spend their day there. He thanked Kuwait Airways for opening this destination, calling for an increase in its flights per week to make it easier for students on scholarships to Manchester to travel through direct flights.

Faisal Al-Ajlan, a scholarship student to Manchester, said that scholarship students are facing difficulty in traveling through other airlines due to the reduction of flights to Manchester and the increase in flight hours due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he added. One of the reasons why students prefer to travel via Kuwait Airways instead of other airlines is their keenness to adhere to the timing of their flights, the quality of food and its comfortable seats in economy class, in addition to its support as a national carrier, he explained.

Abdullah Al-Qahs, another student on scholarship to Manchester, mentioned that some students prefer to travel to Manchester via Kuwait Airways for its direct flight, while others prefer through other airlines that provide discounts on flight prices for students, he added. He hoped Kuwait Airways reconsiders the prices of airline tickets for the Manchester flight and to add special discounts for scholarship students. On March 23, Kuwait Airways announced the operation of its scheduled commercial flights to Manchester on May 1, with three flights a week on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays.

**Expanding capacity**  
Manchester is opening doors to Kuwait



**MANCHESTER:** Kuwait Airways Corporation staff pose for a group picture during an event marking the launch of the airline's direct route to Manchester. — KUNA

Airways Corporation (KAC), expanding capacity of customer service, CEO Maen Razouqi said. Speaking to the press, Razouqi said the destination would serve about 4,000 Kuwaiti students,



### Route serves passengers from East Asian countries

noting that the city of Manchester is very attractive for Kuwaitis; either students or tourists. Kuwait Airways posted a 330-percent sales growth in the first quarter of this year compared with the corresponding quarter of 2021, he added

in a statement on the sidelines of a news conference of launching the destination. The Manchester route will also serve many passengers from East Asian countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, who travel to Manchester via Kuwait Airways, he pointed out. Total KAC flights to the UK hit 15 per week; 12 to London and three others to Manchester.

Meanwhile, British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis said in a similar statement that the destination would bring Kuwaiti and British peoples even closer together in terms of cultural and sport tourism. This route will, as well, provide Kuwaiti investors and businesspeople with the opportunity to visit northwest of the country and assess available investment opportunities, she said, indicating the destination will also help facilitate goods' access to Kuwait through British companies. Last February, Kuwait Airways announced the launch of 17 new destinations that raised the total number to 57. — KUNA

## Lebanese in Kuwait cast their votes



**KUWAIT:** Members of the Lebanese community in Kuwait headed to their country's embassy on Friday to vote in Lebanon's parliamentary elections. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat





Marcos Jr on verge of historic win as campaign ends

## Death toll climbs to 25 in Havana hotel blast, gas leak suspected

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PARIS: Emmanuel Macron reviews troops at the Elysee presidential palace in Paris on May 7, 2022, during his investiture ceremony as French President, following his re-election last April 24. — AFP

# Macron vows new start at second term

## First time a French leader is serving a second term in 20 years

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron on Saturday vowed a new start to face immense challenges in foreign and domestic policy, as he was inaugurated for a second term after his election victory over the far right. In a ceremony at the Elysee Palace, Macron was confirmed by Constitutional Council chief Laurent Fabius as the winner of April election and then signed the formal re-investiture document.

Attended by 450 people, including his wife Brigitte and his only surviving predecessors Francois Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, the ceremony was relatively modest but marked the first time a French leader is serving a second term in 20 years.

Macron faces a daunting agenda of implementing the reforms he vowed when he came to power as France's youngest-ever president in 2017, as well as dealing with the Russian assault against Ukraine. "Rarely has our world and our country been confronted with such a combination of challenges," he said, referring to the Russian invasion, the pandemic and the ecological emergency. He vowed to be a "new president" for a "new mandate" and create a "stronger France". "Every day of the mandate that lies ahead I will have just one compass point. And that is to serve."

### 'Worn-out rites'

He also suggested a more inclusive and understand-

ing style of ruling after his first term saw critics complain the former investment banker had abrasive and arrogant methods. He vowed a "new method" to govern, far from the "worn-out rites and choreography" of the past. In a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages, 21 cannon shots were fired from the Invalides military memorial complex to celebrate the inauguration. With no drive down the Avenue des Champs-Élysées or long red carpet, the ceremony resembled the re-inaugurations of Francois Mitterrand in 1988 and Jacques Chirac in 2002, the last French president to win a second term.

Macron's second term will only start officially when the first one expires at midnight on May 13. He is set to keep playing a leading role in efforts to stop Russia's war against Ukraine, while he carries an immense burden of expectation as a leader on the European stage with Germany still finding its footing in the post-Angela Merkel era. Macron vowed to "act to avoid any escalation following the Russian aggression in Ukraine, to help democracy and courage to prevail, to build a new European peace and a new autonomy on our continent."

On the domestic front, Macron must deal with the crisis over the rising cost of living and also brace for possible protests when he finally tackles his cherished pension reform, raising France's retirement age. He reaffirmed a vow for full employment in France and

vowed to fight against inequality by reforming the health and school systems as well as against "daily insecurities and terrorism that is still there".

Attending the ceremony were the parents of teacher Samuel Paty who was beheaded by an Islamist extremist in 2020. His mother was moved to tears when the president embraced them.



### Macron is expected to name a new PM

#### 'Having difficulty'

Macron won the second round of presidential polls on April 24 with a score of 58.55 percent against far-right rival Marine Le Pen. The ceremony comes at a time of political flux in the wake of Macron's election victory, as France gears up for legislative polls that will follow in June.

Macron is expected to name a new premier in place of incumbent Jean Castex to lead a revamped government into the elections, but not until his second term officially kicks off. He has mooted naming a female politician with a focus on social responsibility—although reports have indicated that overtures to leftist figures, such as former official Veronique Bedague and Socialist parliamentary group chief Valerie Rabault, have been rebuffed. "Here they are obviously having difficulty finding the right person," French political historian Jean Garrigues told AFP.

Meanwhile, the Socialist Party along with the Greens and Communists, is forming an unprecedented alliance for the parliamentary elections with the hard left France Unbowed (LFI) party of Jean-Luc Melenchon.

He was by far the best performing left-wing candidate in the first round of presidential elections and is spearheading efforts to mount a convincing challenge to Macron. Pro-Macron factions have regrouped under the banner of Ensemble (Together) while his own Republic on the Move party, which has struggled to create a grass-roots base, is renaming itself Renaissance. Garrigues said the problems of the ruling party were "linked by nature to his (Macron's) political positioning which is both on the right and the left". — AFP

## Sinn Fein set for historic North Ireland victory

BELFAST: Irish nationalists Sinn Fein were poised for a historic first ever win in elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly after vote counting resumed on Saturday. Tallies from Thursday's complex proportional voting showed that the former political wing of the IRA paramilitary group had secured 18 seats for the 90-seat legislature, setting it on course for victory. England, Wales and Scotland also voted in local and regional elections on Thursday, punishing embattled Prime Minister Boris Johnson's scandal-mired Conservative party but without a landslide for the main opposition Labour party.

Johnson is expected to lay out his post-election plan of action in the Queen's Speech in parliament on Tuesday, which will have to take into account the thorny issue of forming a government in Northern Ireland, riven for decades by sectarian bloodshed.

Sinn Fein, which wants a referendum on reunifying Ireland a century after Northern Ireland was created as a Protestant statelet, is targeting 28 seats to claim the role of first minister for leader Michelle O'Neill. After winning her own seat Friday, O'Neill called it "the election of a generation" and "time for real change".

But Sinn Fein has been downplaying prospects for an imminent referendum on ending UK sovereignty over Northern Ireland, saying it could see one being held in the next five years. The pro-UK Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) occupied the role of first minister in the outgoing Stormont assembly, before it collapsed the executive in protest at post-Brexit trading rules between the UK and EU.

DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson said the government in London should rip up the so-called Northern Ireland Protocol, which unionists argue threatens their place in the wider UK. "The government need to act decisively on the protocol and until they do, I won't be nominating ministers to the executive," he told the BBC late Friday, after the DUP's vote share slid.

Without DUP endorsement of a new executive, Northern Ireland's government cannot function, and the parties would have 24 weeks to resolve their differences or face a new election. The other big winner was the cross-community Alliance party, which said its strong showing in third place underlined the need for Northern Ireland to move past old divisions.

"We are serious about making Stormont work. We are not interested in playing games," Alliance leader Naomi Long said, stressing voters cared most about a



MAGHERAFELT, United Kingdom: Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and Irish republican Sinn Fein party member Michelle O'Neill (C) celebrates with party members after being elected on the first count to the Northern Ireland Assembly, at the Magherafelt Meadowbank sports centre in Magherafelt, Co Londonderry. — AFP

cost-of-living crisis affecting the UK. British media reported that London's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis, would be in Belfast on Monday for talks ahead of the Queen's Speech, which lays out the government's programme.

The Conservatives lost control of key councils, including in London, and suffered an overall loss of almost 400 councillors in Thursday's vote.

### Johnson under fire

Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi insisted on Saturday that Johnson remained an electoral asset, despite becoming the first prime minister to be fined by police, during an ongoing probe into lockdown-busting parties at Downing Street.

An unknown number of Conservative MPs have submitted letters of no-confidence in Johnson, and Zahawi said that "people don't like to vote for split parties, for teams that are divided." "We've got a Queen's Speech next week where we will demonstrate to the nation that the second half of this parliament is all about dealing with repairing the economy, recovering from Covid, the backlog of the NHS and national security," Zahawi told Sky News.

Simon Usherwood, professor of politics and international studies at The Open University, said that the local election results were at "the worst end of the kind of the range of expected outcomes". "The picture does look more pessimistic for Johnson and I think it is going to raise more questions about whether he can survive a challenge," Usherwood told AFP.

Tory backbenchers could start plotting against Johnson when they return to parliament next week "particularly if the Queen's Speech doesn't deliver something that looks like a real plan of action," including on the Northern Ireland protocol, he said. — AFP

## North Korea fires submarine-launched missile after US warns

SEOUL: North Korea fired a submarine-launched ballistic missile Saturday, Seoul said, its second missile launch in three days, after the United States warned Pyongyang could be preparing for a nuclear test. Pyongyang has dramatically ramped up its sanctions-busting missile launches this year, conducting 15 weapons tests since January including firing an intercontinental ballistic missile at full range for the first time since 2017.

The latest launch comes just days before South Korea swears in a new, hawkish President Yoon Suk-yeol, who has vowed to get tough on Pyongyang and bolster the US security alliance. Satellite imagery indicates North Korea may also be preparing to resume nuclear testing, with the US State Department on Friday warning a test could come "as early as this month". "Our military detected around 14:07 (0507 GMT) a short-range ballistic missile presumed to be an SLBM fired from waters off Sinpo, South Hamgyong," Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said in a statement.

Sinpo is a major naval shipyard in North Korea and satellite photos have in the past shown submarines at the facility. The missile flew 600 kilometres (372 miles) at a maximum altitude of 60 kilometres, the JCS added, a distance that indicates it was a short-range ballistic missile. It landed outside Japan's exclusive economic zone, Tokyo's Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi said. He added that the "extremely high frequency" of tests by North Korea this year was "absolutely unacceptable". Pyongyang's "remarkable development of nuclear and missile-related technology" is a regional and global security risk, he said, adding that Japan also believed "North Korea will be ready to carry out a nuclear test as early as this month".

### Seeking 'upper hand'

Last month, while overseeing a huge military parade, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to develop his nuclear forces "at the fastest possible speed" and warned of possible "pre-emptive" strikes. Pyongyang is "preparing its Punggye-ri test site and could be ready to test there as early as this month", the US State Department said Friday. The test could coincide with US President Joe Biden's visit to Japan and South Korea later this month, or with the May 10 inauguration of Yoon, the State Department added. "The North is showing its words on nuclear strength are not without substance," said Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies.

"Recent launches show strategic intent to claim the upper hand with the new Seoul government," especially before Biden's visit, he said. North Korea carried out six

nuclear tests before embarking on a bout of high-profile diplomacy with the United States in 2018 and 2019, with former president Donald Trump meeting four times with Kim before talks collapsed. Diplomacy has since languished.

Repeated negotiations aimed at convincing Kim to give up his nuclear weapons have come to nothing. "Instead of accepting invitations to dialogue, the Kim regime appears to be preparing a tactical nuclear warhead test," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul. "A seventh nuclear test would be the first since September 2017 and raise tensions on the Korean peninsula, increasing dangers of miscalculation and miscommunication between the Kim regime and the incoming Yoon administration," Easley added.

### 'Subservient'

South Korea's conventional military capacity outstrips that of the North, and Yoon has called for more US military assets to be deployed in the South, a topic likely to be on the agenda when Biden visits Seoul. South Korea last year tested its own SLBM, putting it among a small group of nations that have such technology. North Korea's "submarine technology probably remains short of being able to stay at sea for extended periods while avoiding detection", Easley said. "But the ability to launch ballistic missiles from a submarine would further complicate missions to neutralise and defend against North Korea's nuclear forces," he added. On Wednesday, North Korea test-fired what Seoul and Tokyo said was a ballistic missile, although Pyongyang's state media—which typically report on weapons tests—did not comment on the event. For five years under President Moon Jae-in, Seoul has pursued a policy of engagement with Pyongyang. But for incoming leader Yoon, this "subservient" approach has been a manifest failure. Analysts have said the string of missile launches indicates North Korea's Kim may be warning Seoul he is not open to dialogue with South Korea's new government on Yoon's terms. — AFP



SEOUL: People watch a television screen showing a news broadcast with file footage of a North Korean missile test, at a railway station in Seoul on May 7, 2022, after North Korea fired a submarine-launched ballistic missile according to South Korea's military. — AFP



## International

# Death toll climbs to 25 in Havana hotel blast, gas leak suspected

‘There was a terrible explosion and everything collapsed’

HAVANA: A powerful explosion due to a suspected gas leak ripped through a luxury hotel in central Havana, killing at least 25 people Friday, according to official tallies. Rescuers pulled four bodies out of the rubble in the early evening as they combed through what remained of the prestigious Saratoga Hotel looking for survivors.

At least one woman with whom rescuers made contact was alive in the debris, officials said, adding they believed more survivors were still trapped and that a canine squad was searching them out. Cuba's president attributed the massive blast to a gas leak.



Survivors were still trapped

“It was neither a bomb nor an attack, it was an unfortunate accident,” said Miguel Diaz-Canel, who arrived at the scene an hour after the blast, accompanied by the prime minister and National Assembly president. “Compatriots and friends around the world. #Havana is in shock today,” he tweeted.

The latest death toll of 22, which includes at least one child, was announced on television news after a day in which ambulances and paramedics raced through the center of Cuba's historic capital. Both the health ministry and the Cuban presidency said dozens had been injured but cited different numbers, ranging from 50 to 65 people.

The first four floors of the establishment, which were closed to guests while being renovated, were gutted in



HAVANA: Firefighters and rescue workers remove debris from the ruins of the Saratoga Hotel, in Havana. The death toll from a powerful explosion at a five-star hotel in central Havana climbed to 25 with more than 50 people injured after a suspected gas leak, according to official tallies. — AFP

the late-morning blast that sent a cloud of dust and smoke billowing into the air. The explosion also tore off large parts of the facade, blew out windows and destroyed cars parked outside the five-star hotel, which has in the past hosted celebrities such as Madonna, Beyonce, Mick Jagger and Rihanna.

The dome of a nearby Baptist church also collapsed.

Inside the hotel at the time were employees preparing for its post-refurbishment reopening, scheduled for next Tuesday. Miguel Hernan Estevez, director of the hospital Hermanos Almejeiras, said a two-year-old boy had undergone surgery for a fractured skull.

“So far we have no information that any foreigner was either injured or killed, but... this is preliminary

information,” added Tourism Minister Juan Carlos Garcia Granda.

## Not a bomb

Roberto Calzadilla of state company Gaviota, which owns the hotel, said the explosion happened while a gas tank was being refilled. Ambulances and fire trucks rushed to the scene Friday and police cordoned off the area, dispersing people who swarmed to the hotel near Havana's emblematic National Capitol Building that housed Congress prior to the Cuban revolution.

It is also next to a school, but no pupils were injured, according to the presidency. Rogelio Garcia, a bicycle taxi driver who was passing the hotel at the time of the blast recounted that “we felt a huge explosion and (saw) a cloud of dust... many people ran out.”

“There was a terrible explosion and everything collapsed,” said a woman, her face covered in dust, who declined to give her name. According to the website of the Saratoga Hotel, it is an upmarket establishment with 96 rooms, two bars, two restaurants, a spa and gym.

It was built in 1880 to house shops and converted into a hotel in 1933. “The United States sends heartfelt condolences to all of those affected by the tragic explosion this morning,” said US State Department spokesman Ned Price on Twitter.

Mexico's Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, meanwhile, said President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador would not cancel a trip to Cuba planned for Sunday. “Our sympathy goes out to the victims and those affected, as well as to the people of our dear sister nation,” Ebrard tweeted.

Condolences also poured in from Bolivia, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and Nicolas Maduro, the president of close Cuban ally Venezuela, who said “the Cuban people have the solidarity and support of all the peoples of the world” and especially Venezuelans. — AFP

## Lebanese abroad cast votes in parliamentary polls

BEIRUT: Lebanese expatriates on Friday voted in parliamentary polls, kickstarting a critical election that comes amid an unprecedented financial crisis that has spurred a mass population exodus. While opposition figures have pinned their hopes on the diaspora, experts said the elections were expected to uphold the status quo, despite years of economic meltdown.

Expatriates in nine Arab countries and in Iran cast their votes on Friday, with Syria and Tehran seeing the highest turnout rates, according to Foreign Affairs Minister Abdallah Bou Habib. Bou Habib said nearly 60 percent of the 30,930 voters registered overseas had cast a ballot, a jump from 56 percent in 2018.

The foreign minister had expressed hope for 70 percent participation earlier Friday but the final count announced after ballots closed was estimated at 18,225 votes. Expatriates in 48 other countries will vote on Sunday.

On Saturday morning, two boxes carrying expat votes arrived at the Beirut airport from Tehran, escorted by Lebanon's envoy to the Islamic Republic, the official National News Agency reported. All other ballots will be delivered to Lebanon by logistics giant DHL, with the



RIYADH, Saudi Arabia: A Lebanese woman votes at the Lebanese embassy in Riyadh during parliamentary elections. — AFP

exception of those from neighbouring Syria which will be handed over across the border, Bou Habib said.

It is the second time in Lebanon's history that citizens residing abroad are able to vote for their 128 representatives, in elections set to be held at home on May 15. The vote is the first since mass protests erupted in late 2019 against the country's entrenched ruling elite, widely blamed for the economic collapse.

Bou Habib had said that Lebanese based abroad would be able to vote in more than 205 polling stations worldwide. The number of Lebanese who have registered to vote abroad has climbed from the roughly 92,000 in 2018 elections-though only 50,000 of them voted at the time. — AFP

## UN decries ‘shocking’ Christian-Muslim clashes in Ethiopia

GENEVA: The UN human rights chief voiced alarm Saturday at recent deadly clashes between Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia and called on authorities to investigate and bring perpetrators to justice. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said she was “deeply distressed” by the violence that erupted late last month in northern Ethiopia, reportedly killing at least 30 people and injuring more than 100 others.

The clashes began in Gondar city in the Amhara region on April 26, reportedly in connection with a land dispute, before quickly spreading to other regions and the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, she said. The Islamic Affairs Council of Amhara said the funeral of a Muslim elder had been attacked, describing the scene as a “massacre” by heavily armed “extremist Christians”.

The cemetery where the attack occurred neighbours a mosque and church and has been the subject of an ongoing dispute between Muslims and Orthodox Christians, who are the dominant group in Ethiopia. “I

understand two mosques were burnt and another two partially destroyed in Gondar,” Bachelet said in her statement.

“In the apparent retaliatory attacks that followed, two Orthodox Christian men were reportedly burnt to death, another man hacked to death, and five churches burnt down” in the southwest of the country, she said, adding that other regions had since seen clashes.

In all, police had reportedly arrested and detained at least 578 people in at least four cities in connection with the clashes, she said. “I call on the Ethiopian authorities to promptly initiate and conduct thorough, independent and transparent investigations into each of these deadly incidents,” Bachelet said.

Authorities should strive to “ensure that those found to be responsible are held to account,” she said, stressing that “individual accountability of perpetrators is essential to prevent further violence.” At the same time, “those arrested must be fully accorded their due process and fair trial rights in accordance with international human rights law, without discrimination.”

The UN rights chief also called for broader action to reconcile communities in Ethiopia, where Muslims make up about a third of the population. “To prevent further inter-religious violence, it is crucial that the underlying causes of this shocking violence are promptly addressed,” she said, urging “meaningful participation of survivors, families and affected communities.” — AFP

## Russia steps up Ukraine attacks...

Continued from Page 1

a nuclear attack. Eight Mig-29 fighter jets will fly over Moscow's Red Square forming the letter “Z” - the mark of Russia's military assault in Ukraine. The campaign has run into tough resistance - and provoked Kyiv's western allies into slapping massive economic sanctions on the Russian economy and Putin's inner circle.

But with Victory Day fast approaching, Ukrainian officials fear more intense missile and artillery bombardments and renewed assaults as Moscow scrambles for symbolic wins. The Ukrainian rescue service said a missile hit a technical college in Kostiantynivka, in the eastern region of Donetsk, causing a fire and at least two deaths.

Donetsk regional governor Pavlo Kyrylenko said there had been “massive bombardments” along the frontline. Strikes were also reported in the north of Ukraine near the city of Kharkiv and in the southern city of Mikolejev, a key Russian target. Ukrainian forces have launched a counter-offensive of their own.

According to the defense ministry, Russian troops were forced to demolish three road bridges near Tsyrykuny and Ruski Tyshky outside Kharkiv, to slow the Ukrainian advance. According to British intelligence, Ukrainian forces equipped with high-end weaponry by the western allies, have been able to

destroy at least one of Russia's most advanced tanks, the T-90M. “The conflict in Ukraine is taking a heavy toll on some of Russia's most capable units and most advanced capabilities,” UK Defense Intelligence said. “It will take considerable time and expense for Russia to reconstitute its armed forces following this conflict,” it said, warning sanctions on advanced components would make it harder for Russia to re-arm.

The West, meanwhile, is stepping up arms deliveries to Ukraine's defenders. US President Joe Biden on Friday announced another package of military assistance worth \$150 million, including counter-artillery radars used for detecting the source of enemy fire. This brings the total value of US weaponry sent to Ukraine since the Russian invasion began to \$3.8 billion. Biden had urged Congress to approve a further \$33 billion package, including \$20 billion in military aid, “to strengthen Ukraine on the battlefield and at the negotiating table.”

The G7 leaders, including Biden, and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky are to meet in video-conference on Sunday to discuss Western support for Kyiv. And Biden's wife, US First lady Jill Biden, hailed the “amazingly strong” refugees from war-torn Ukraine as she visited neighboring Romania on Saturday. “You are amazingly strong,” Biden said after listening to mothers and children recount how they fled Russia's invasion of their country. “We stand with you, I hope you know that,” she said in a visit to a school in Bucharest, accompanied by her Romanian counterpart Carmen Iohannis, according to images transmitted by TVR public television. — AFP

Some tickets costing 40 riyals (\$11) have been reserved for Qatar's 2.8 million population, most of whom are foreign workers. Many in the line told AFP, however, that all the cheap tickets had gone and the cost of others was out of range for the mainly male workers earning Qatar's minimum wage of \$275 a month. “The World Cup is exciting but it is definitely too much for me,” said an administrative worker who gave his name as Tarir.

Another expat, Nasim, said he was more fortunate and obtained some \$10 tickets. “Everyone can afford the price I paid,” he said. But Ahmed Kareem, a construction laborer who said he had been in Qatar for a decade, predicted that most migrants would only watch matches on TV. “This trophy is a big event for us. It is the closest that most of us will get to the World Cup,” he said. — AFP

## Chelsea sold for...

Continued from Page 1

club and such proceeds will be deposited into a frozen UK bank account with the intention to donate 100 percent to charitable causes as confirmed by Roman Abramovich. UK government approval will be required for the proceeds to be transferred from the frozen UK bank account.”

In addition, the new owners will commit £1.75 billion in further investment “for the benefit of the club”, Chelsea said. The total value of the deal smashes the previous record for the sale of a sports team - \$2.4 billion for the New York Mets baseball franchise in 2020.

Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel, speaking before Saturday's home game against Wolves, welcomed the sale news. “It gives us an outlook if terms are agreed and hopefully the process will be streamlined and go forward as soon as possible. Good news,” Tuchel said. Asked if he had met the prospective owners, Tuchel added: “Not yet, I was not involved so far, this will maybe happen soon. We look exactly for a response from all of us, not only the players, we do this together. It is not extra motivation, we just reminded our-

selves what it takes to win football matches.”

Chelsea's 42,000-capacity Stamford Bridge home is in need of major redevelopment to match the stadium size and income streams enjoyed by their rivals. But Boehly has a track record of delivering both stadium improvement and sporting success with the Dodgers. Thanks to heavy investment in players, the Dodgers have made the MLB (Major League Baseball) playoffs every season for the past nine years and won their first World Series for 32 years in 2020.

Boehly's consortium still needs to satisfy the Premier League's owners' and directors' test, but Chelsea said they expect the sale to be completed by the end of the month. Boehly is expected to attend the Premier League clash with Wolves. The Chelsea Supporters' Trust said: “We will continue to hold close discussions with the prospective owners,” it said in a statement. “We are optimistic about the future of #CFC. We hope that the sale is completed swiftly.”

Chelsea have been forced to operate under a special license from the UK government since Abramovich, who bought the club in 2003, was sanctioned. The billionaire, described by the UK government as part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle, has vowed to write off the club's £1.5 billion debt owed to him and said all proceeds of the sale would go to victims of the war in Ukraine. — AFP

## Qatar migrants queue to see...

Continued from Page 1

A Bangladeshi pop group and Indian drummers entertained the waiting hordes.

Azam Rashid, a carpenter who worked on two stadiums, said he was among the many workers who could not afford tickets but was intrigued by the cup. “The tickets may be too expensive, but Qatar and the World Cup has given me an opportunity,” he said. “There are long lines, but it will be worth it to see the trophy,” he said.

## Taleban order women to cover...

Continued from Page 1

mahram (adult close male relatives),” said a decree approved by Akhundzada and released by Taleban authorities at a ceremony in Kabul.

It said the best way for a woman to cover her face and body was to wear the chadari, a traditional, blue, all-covering Afghan burqa. “They should wear a chadari as it is traditional and respectful,” it said. Akhundzada's decree also said that if women had no important work outside then it was “better they stay at home”.

The Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which released the new order, announced a slew of punishments if the dress code is not followed. It said a woman's father or male guardian would be summoned and could even be imprisoned if the offence was committed repeatedly. Women working in government institutions who did not follow the order “should be fired”, the ministry added. Government employees whose wives and daughters do not comply will also be suspended from their jobs, the decree said.

The new restrictions were expected to spark a flurry of condemnation abroad. Many in the international community want humanitarian aid for Afghanistan and recognition of the Taleban government to be linked to the restoration of women's rights. “It is an unexpected regressive step and will not help Taleban in winning international recognition,” said Imtiaz Gul, head of the Islamabad-based Centre for Research and Security Studies. “Such steps will only intensify opposition to them.”

During their first regime, the Taleban made the burqa compulsory for women. Since their return to power, the much-feared vice ministry has issued several “guidelines” on dress but Saturday's edict is one of the harshest restrictions on women. “Islam never recommended chadari,” said a women's rights activist who asked not to be named. “I believe the Taleban are becoming regressive instead of being progressive. They are going back to the way they were in their previous regime.”

Another women's rights activist, Muska Dastageer, said Taleban rule had triggered “too much rage and disbelief”. “We are a broken nation forced to endure assaults we cannot fathom. As a people we are being crushed,” she said on Twitter. The hardline Islamists triggered international outrage in March when they ordered secondary schools for girls to shut, just hours after they reopened for the first time since their seizure of power. — AFP



## International

# Diplomats urge Sri Lanka to reconsider state of emergency

## Emergency declaration blow to Sri Lanka's vital tourism industry

COLOMBO: US and European diplomats Saturday urged Sri Lanka's beleaguered president to repeal a state of emergency imposed after a general strike brought the bankrupt country to a halt. Months of blackouts and acute shortages of food, fuel and medicines have caused widespread suffering across the South Asian island nation, which is enduring its worst-ever economic downturn. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared a fresh state of emergency on Friday after weeks of protests demanding his government step down over its mismanagement of the crisis.

US ambassador Julie Chung said she was "concerned" by the second state of emergency in as many months, adding that Sri Lanka's deepening economic crisis and political gridlock needed long-term solutions. "The State of Emergency won't help do that," Chung said on Twitter.

The European Union said the ordinance "could have a counterproductive effect" and noted that a month of anti-government protests had so far been peaceful. A spokesman for Rajapaksa said the state of emergency was imposed to "ensure public order" after Friday's general strike brought public transport and economic activity to a halt.

The measure gives sweeping detention powers to the military and allows the president to make laws without parliamentary approval. Rajapaksa declared an earlier state of emergency on April 1, a

day after thousands of protesters attempted to storm his home in the capital Colombo. It was allowed to lapse days later, but protests have since escalated and spread to every corner of the island.

Thousands have been camped outside Rajapaksa's seafront office for nearly a month to demand his resignation. Police fired a barrage of tear gas and water cannon on Friday in an effort to disperse student protesters who were blockading parliament.

### Political instability

The government said in a Saturday statement that Sri Lanka was facing its "worst economic crisis and political instability ever". "The state of emergency was declared to ensure political stability which is a vital condition in overcoming the current socio-economic crisis," the statement added.

The emergency declaration is a blow to Sri Lanka's vital tourism industry, which had been making a slow recovery after it was crippled by the coronavirus pandemic. "Tour operators are going to be reluctant because the emergency also means higher insurance premiums applicable to trouble spots," a Colombo hotel manager told AFP.

Government sources said the president could ask his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, to stand down in an effort to clear the way for a unity administration to navigate Sri Lanka through the



### Protests have since escalated



COLOMBO: Police use tear gas and a water cannon to disperse university students protesting to demand the resignation of Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa over the country's crippling economic crisis, near the parliament building in Colombo. — AFP

crisis. But Sri Lanka's largest opposition party has already said it will not join any government helmed by a member of the Rajapaksa clan.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis took hold after the pandemic hammered income from tourism and remittances. Unable to pay for fuel imports, utility companies have imposed daily blackouts to ration electricity, while long lines of people snake around

service stations for petrol and kerosene. Hospitals are short of vital medicines and the government has appealed to citizens abroad for donations.

Last month, Sri Lanka announced it was defaulting on its \$51 billion foreign debt. Finance Minister Ali Sabry warned this week that the country would have to endure the unprecedented economic hardship for at least two more years. — AFP

## Marcos Jr on verge of historic win as campaign ends

MANILA: The son of late Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos was set to address hundreds of thousands of supporters Saturday on the final day of presidential election campaigning, as polls showed him heading towards a landslide win. Victory in Monday's election would cap a decades-long effort to rehabilitate the Marcos legacy after the patriarch was deposed and the disgraced clan chased into US exile.

But the prospect of Ferdinand Marcos Jr moving back into the presidential palace has alarmed rights activists, church leaders and political analysts who fear he could rule "without constraint". The Marcoses' remarkable return from pariahs to the peak of political power has been fuelled by public anger over corruption and poverty that persisted under governments that followed the dictatorship.

Thousands of red-clad Marcos supporters braved the ferocious sun and high winds on Saturday to amass on a dusty wasteland overlooked by a gleaming luxury casino resort—a stark reminder of the country's vast income gap. Wielding national flags or umbrellas for shade, they gathered before a stage featuring an enormous screen of the smiling candidate as Filipino reggae, hip hop and pop played at deafening levels.

Mary Ann Oladive, a 37-year-old call centre worker, said she hoped Marcos Jr would bring unity to the country. "We hope for greater opportunity and jobs. We trust him, we hope that after the election they will give us a better future in the Philippines," she said.

### 'Without constraint'

Ten candidates are vying to succeed President Rodrigo Duterte in the landmark elections seen by many as a make-or-break moment for Philippine democracy. Polls indicate Marcos Jr will win more than half the votes, which would make him the first



MANILA: Supporters of Philippine Vice President and presidential candidate Leni Robredo attend a campaign rally in the Makati business district in Manila on May 7, 2022. — AFP

presidential candidate to secure an absolute majority since his father was ousted in 1986.

Analysts warn such an outcome would lead to weaker democratic checks and balances, more corruption and a fresh attempt to overhaul the 1987 constitution—which could include scrapping the one-term limit for presidents. Previous administrations, including Duterte's, have tried to amend the constitution but they lacked sufficient support in Congress to push through changes.

The latest poll by Pulse Asia Research showed Marcos Jr on 56 percent — 33 percentage points ahead of his nearest rival Leni Robredo, who narrowly beat him in the 2016 vice-presidential race. Such a winning margin would give Marcos Jr the power to "govern the way Duterte wanted to", one long-time observer of Philippine politics told AFP.

"That is without constraint," he said. Robredo's recent poll bump has raised hopes among progressive supporters that their volunteer-driven campaign could yet deliver an upset. There was a carnival atmosphere in the capital's financial district on Saturday as thousands of Robredo fans wearing her pink campaign colour and waving flags and balloons packed out avenues, dancing to pop music blaring over loudspeakers. — AFP

The CDC does not think the cases are linked to COVID vaccination because the "vast majority" of cases are too young to be eligible, said Butler. Jaundice and vomiting are the most common symptoms experienced by the children affected.

### Search for answers

More than half the cases tested positive for adenovirus 41 — a virus that is normally associated with gastroenteritis, but not hepatitis in otherwise healthy children. "Because of the link to adenovirus, I would call that top of the list of viruses of interest," said Butler.

"But we don't know if it is adenovirus itself that is causing the cases, or is there an immune reaction to this particular strain of adenovirus." Environmental factors are also being examined. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) issued a technical report Friday that found that 70 percent of households where data was available had dogs, and said "the significance of this finding is being explored."

Other working hypotheses include co-infection with another pathogen such as COVID, or whether a prior case of COVID had made children more susceptible. Adenovirus cases might also be rebounding after Covid lockdowns stopped the spread for a few years, or lack of exposure to pathogens during lockdowns might have made children's immune systems more susceptible.

The adenovirus might have also evolved into a newer, more dangerous strain. Adenoviruses are commonly spread by close personal contact, respiratory droplets and surfaces. There are more than 50 types of adenoviruses, which most commonly cause the cold, but also several other diseases. — AFP

## Australia, Solomons meet as tempers fray over China deal

SYDNEY: Australia says it remains the "partner of choice" for Solomon Islands following talks with the Pacific state, which has reacted angrily to criticism of its recent security pact with China. Australia's foreign minister, Marise Payne, held talks with her Solomons counterpart in Brisbane on Friday night, three days after the island state's leader made a fierce attack on detractors of his China deal.

"We have reiterated our deep concerns about the security agreement with China, including the lack of transparency," Payne said after the meeting with the Solomons' foreign minister Jeremiah Manele. But "we agreed that Australia remains Solomon Islands' security partner of choice", she added. Last month's security pact alarmed Australia and the United States, which fear it may give Beijing a military foothold in the South Pacific less than 2,000 kilometres (1,200 miles) from Australia's coast.

Details of the final deal have not been released but a leaked draft included measures that would allow Chinese naval deployments to Solomon Islands. Australia's government is fighting criticism in

the run-up to May 21 federal elections after apparently being outmanoeuvred by China in a region where it has traditionally held strong influence.

### 'Lack of trust'

The concerns over the security deal have irked Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. "We deplore the continued demonstration of lack of trust by the concerned parties," Sogavare told parliament on Tuesday, adding that he had already explained there was "nothing to be concerned about" with the China pact.

Without naming countries, Sogavare said Tuesday that there had been "warning of military intervention" if other nations' interests were undermined in Solomon Islands. "In other words, Mr Speaker, we are threatened with invasion. And that is serious," the prime minister said.

"We are being treated as kindergarten students walking around with Colt 45s in our hands, and therefore we need to be supervised," he added. "We are insulted."

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said there had been no invasion threat from Australia, insisting that his government treated its Pacific allies as equals and urging a "calm and composed" approach. Sogavare also accused Australian-led peacekeepers of failing to protect the capital Honiara's Chinatown, much of which was burned when protests against his government escalated into riots last November. — AFP



NEW DELHI: Residents use hoses to collect drinking water from a tanker truck during a hot summer day in New Delhi. — AFP

## US probes five child deaths, 109 cases linked to liver disease

WASHINGTON: The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is investigating 109 childhood cases of a mysterious form of hepatitis, including five reported deaths, the agency said Friday. It is part of an unexplained global phenomenon involving hundreds of cases, with Indonesia this week also reporting three deaths.

Britain on Friday announced its case count had increased to 163, the majority aged under five, with no deaths. "Investigators both here... and around the globe are working hard to determine the cause," said Jay Butler, deputy director for infectious diseases for the CDC.

Health authorities think the cases might be linked to a wave of type of virus called adenovirus, but are trying to confirm the theory. Ninety percent of the US cases have involved hospitalization, with 14 percent requiring liver transplants. The median age of the cases is two-years-old, and the majority fully recovered.

The CDC issued a health alert in late April notifying doctors and public health authorities to be on the lookout for similar cases, and began examining records extending back to October 1, 2021. A study released last week focusing on nine cases in Alabama ruled out other common exposures, including hepatitis viruses A, B, and C, which are normally the cause of the disease.

## India, Pakistan must brace for even worse heatwaves

PARIS: The devastating heatwave that gripped India and Pakistan over the last two months is unprecedented, but worse—perhaps far worse—is on the horizon as climate change continues apace, top climate scientists told AFP.

Even without additional global warming South Asia is, statistically speaking, ripe for a "big one" in the same way that California is said to be overdue for a major earthquake, according to research published this week. Extreme heat across much of India and neighbouring Pakistan in March and April exposed more than a billion people to scorching temperatures well above 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit). The hottest part of the year is yet to come.

"This heatwave is likely to kill thousands," tweeted Robert Rohde, lead scientist at Berkeley Earth, a climate science research non-profit. The number of excess deaths, especially among the elderly poor, will only become apparent in hindsight.

Heatwave mortality in India has increased by more than 60 percent since 1980, according to the country's Ministry of Earth Sciences. But "cascading impacts" on agricultural output, water, energy supplies and other sectors are already apparent, World

Meteorological Organization chief Petteri Taalas said this week.

Air quality has deteriorated, and large swathes of land are at risk of extreme fire danger. Power blackouts last week as electricity demand hit record levels served as a warning of what might happen if temperatures were to climb even higher.

For climate scientists, none of this came as a surprise. "What I find unexpected is most people being shocked, given how long we have been warned about such disasters coming," Camilo Mora, a professor at the University of Hawaii, told AFP. "This region of the world, and most other tropical areas, are among the most vulnerable to heatwaves."

In a benchmark 2017 study, Mora calculated that nearly half the global population will be exposed to "deadly heat" 20 days or more each year by 2100, even if global warming is capped under two degrees Celsius, the cornerstone target of the Paris Agreement.

To what extent is climate change to blame for the scorched Earth temperatures just now easing up in India and Pakistan? Scientists at Imperial College London's Grantham Institute led by Friederike Otto, a pioneer in the field of attribution science, are crunching the numbers. "How much more likely and intense this particular heatwave has become is something we're still working on," she told AFP. "But there is no doubt that climate change is a huge game changer when it comes to extreme heat," she added. "What we see right now will be normal, if not cool, in a 2C to 3C world." — AFP



# Business

SUNDAY, MAY 8, 2022

## 16,000 jobs at risk as British retailer McColl's collapses

### Last-ditch rescue attempt by supermarket giant Morrisons fails

**LONDON:** British convenience store chain McColl's went bust Friday in the wake of supply strains and weak consumer spending as inflation soars, putting at risk around 16,000 jobs. McColl's, which has about 1,100 stores across the UK selling food and household products, entered administration, whereby a troubled company calls on outside help to try and minimize job losses. McColl's said in a statement that its main lenders had refused further funding.

A last-ditch rescue attempt by supermarket giant Morrisons failed. "We put forward a proposal that would have avoided... administration, kept the vast majority of jobs and stores safe, as well as fully protecting pensioners and lenders," Morrisons said in a statement.

"For thousands of hardworking people and pensioners, this is a very disappointing, damaging and unnecessary outcome," McColl's operates about 200 of its stores under the 'Morrisons Daily' brand.

"In order to protect creditors, preserve the future of the business and to protect the interests of employees, the board was regrettably... left with no choice other than to place the company in administration," McColl's said.

PricewaterhouseCoopers has been appointed as administrators.

McColl's said it expected PwC "to implement a sale of the business to a third-party purchaser as soon as possible". The group's share price was suspended on the London Stock Exchange prior to the announcement. In early trading Friday, its market value shot up on hopes of a rescue deal.

#### Supply strains

McColl's last month revealed in a trading update that the company was being "impacted by reduced consumer spending and continued supply chain disruption across the industry". Friday's developments come as Britain faces a cost-of-living crisis, with UK annual inflation sitting at seven percent, or 30-year high. The Bank of England on Thursday warned that British inflation would top 10 percent, a four-decade high, by the end of the year, fuelled by soaring energy prices.

And the BoE added that Britain risks falling into recession, as the central bank raised its main interest rate by a quarter point to one percent—the highest level since the global financial crisis in 2009. The Federal Reserve mean-



while on Wednesday raised US interest rates by half a percentage point as inflation soars also in the world's biggest economy.

Consumer prices are surging world-

wide on supply strains as economies reopen from pandemic lockdowns—and in the wake of the Ukraine war that is aggravating already high energy costs. Britain's cost-of-living crisis is mean-

while being blamed in part on British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative party losing control of key London councils in local elections Thursday. —AFP

### NIC opens registration for Ali Alghanim & Sons Automotive Co's IPO

**KUWAIT:** National Investments Company (NIC) has set May 8 as the date to open the registration for those desiring to participate in the initial public offering (IPO) of Ali Alghanim and Sons Automotive Company, NIC, as the main consultant for listing the company, allows financial and investment communities to submit the form of expressing their wish to join the IPO until noon of May 19 through its website.

Leading Kuwaiti automotive business Ali Alghanim and Sons Automotive Company has decided to float 45 percent of its shares on Kuwait stock exchange. It has set an offer price of KD 0.793 per share as it plans to list the company on Boursa Kuwait in May.

NIC will issue details of allocat-

ing the shares for investors participating in the process on May 20 or near that date, in accordance with the subscription volume which is expected to be overwhelming and exceeding the shares on offer.

According to available information, investors who expressed their wish to join the IPO will submit their completed and signed papers and then deposit the value of the required shares at Kuwait Clearing Company latest by noon on May 26. NIC will issue the final allocation report for underwriters in Ali Alghanim and Sons Automotive Company on May 30 and list the company's shares on Boursa Kuwait's main market with the concurrence of concerned authorities represented by the Capital Markets Authority and Boursa Kuwait.

### Musk mulls 'slight' Twitter fee for commercial users

**WASHINGTON:** Elon Musk has said Twitter may charge a "slight" fee for commercial and government users, in the latest hint of the changes the world's richest person could introduce after he completes his takeover of the social media platform.

"Twitter will always be free for casual users, but maybe a slight cost for commercial/government users," Musk said in a tweet. In another tweet, he added: "Some revenue is better than none!" Musk's latest suggestion of changes to Twitter came as British MPs invited the multimillionaire to discuss his proposals for the platform "in more depth" before a parliamentary committee.

Meanwhile, Musk has raised \$7.1 billion for his Twitter acquisition from investors that include Oracle founder Larry Ellison and Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, according to a securities filing

Thursday. Musk, chief executive of Tesla and SpaceX, listed 18 investors who agreed to cash investments including Ellison (\$1 billion), Sequoia Capital (\$800 million) and Vy Capital (\$700 million). The Saudi prince, the head of the Kingdom Holding Company conglomerate, agreed to contribute about 35 million Twitter shares worth \$1.9 billion so as to retain a stake in the company post-acquisition, the filing said.

Alwaleed had previously balked at Musk's \$54.20 per share offer as too low, but praised Musk on Twitter on Thursday, saying "I look forward to roll our ~\$1.9bn in the 'new' @Twitter and join you on this exciting journey." The investments will reduce a \$12.5 billion margin loan organized through Morgan Stanley and other banks to \$6.25 billion, the filing said. The new financing means less of Musk's Tesla shares will be used as collateral under the margin loan.

Musk "may receive additional financing commitments to fund additional portions of the total Merger Consideration," the filing said, adding that the Tesla chief is in talks with former Twitter Chief Executive



Elon Musk

Jack Dorsey and others who may contribute shares to maintain an equity stake.

The Twitter takeover is expected to close later in 2022. CNBC reported that upon completion of the deal, Musk is expected to serve as temporary CEO of Twitter for a few months, the network said, citing unnamed sources. — Agencies

### Soy boon for Argentina as war boosts prices

**LOBOS, Argentina:** Russia's war on Ukraine has sent grain prices skyrocketing—a worry for consumers worldwide but potentially a boon for producers like Argentina, which hopes an influx of soybean "agrodollars" will boost its faltering economy. South America's third-largest economy is the biggest exporter of soybean meal and oil in the world, and only the United States and Brazil export more soybean grains.

Soy represents nearly a third of Argentina's exports and in 2021 contributed \$9 billion to the state coffers. This year, the sector is expecting record sales of \$23.7 billion—about \$700 million more than in 2021 — despite a 10 percent smaller harvest due to severe drought. "The prospects for the producer are good... There is optimism," said Martin Semino, who sells farming equipment and presides over the Rural Society of Lobos, a fertile agricultural zone southwest of Buenos Aires. The harvest season is at its height, and

workers are laboring from dawn to dusk to clear the fields before the autumn rains arrive.

"Soy is the dollar, the currency of the countryside," Semino told AFP.

In the past, the grain has been a savior for inflation-troubled Argentina. A soybean boom in the 2000s is widely considered to have helped the country recover from its worst economic crisis in 2001. In the last 40 years, the planted surface area of soy has multiplied 14 times. Argentina is also a major producer of sunflower oil and wheat—other grains affected by the ongoing war. After a record sunflower harvest of 3.4 million tons in 2021-2022, the area under cultivation is set to increase by 17 percent this season to two million hectares (4.9 million acres).

The country also had a record wheat harvest this season. Estimates are that in 2022, Argentina's agroindustrial exports will bring in a record \$41 billion—about \$3 billion more than in 2021.

"With prices close to historic records, Argentina, which always needs dollars, must seize the moment," Tomas Rodriguez Zurro, an analyst at the Rosario Stock Exchange, said. The rise in prices "is temporary, it will end when the war is over," he cautioned. — AFP

### Solid job growth continues in US economy

**LOS ANGELES:** From bars to factories to warehouses, American businesses hired staff with vigor in April as the US economy recovers from the damage done by COVID-19 while grappling with inflation that has hit the highest rate in decades. Employers in the world's largest economy added 428,000 jobs last month, the Labor Department said Friday, keeping the unemployment rate at 3.6 percent, just above where it was before the spread of COVID-19 caused mass layoffs two years ago.

The data pointed to continued strong job growth and contained hints that some inflationary pressures may be easing—welcome news for an economy where consumer prices have climbed at a rate not seen since the 1980s. President Joe Biden described the data as a sign that his policies had revived the economy from the grievous damage wrought by the pandemic.

"Our plans and policies have produced the strongest job creation economy in modern times," Biden said in a statement. The report was released two days after the Federal Reserve hiked its key lending rate by a half-percentage point to crush the wave of price increases, and signaled it plans further hikes in the months to come.

Workers' wages are a component of accelerating inflation, and the jobs report showed average hourly earnings rising only 0.3 percent compared to March, a slower pace than in recent months and potential signal the price pressures are abating. However, economist Joel Naroff



NEW YORK: A 'help wanted' sign is displayed in a Manhattan store on May 06, 2022 in New York City. — AFP

warned wages were still trending upwards and the generally rosy picture of the labor market the data painted may convince the Fed aggressive rate hikes are needed to lower inflation.

"Sometimes good news is not necessarily good news and this report, though it shows that the economy is still moving forward solidly, may be a problem for investors," he said.

After spiking to 14.7 percent in April 2020 following business closures across the country as the pandemic began, unemployment has declined steadily and is now just a hair above its 3.5 percent rate before COVID-19 arrived. The number of unemployed people was at 5.9 million last month, the Labor Department said, also not far from where it was in February 2020, while a range of businesses took on new hires. These included the leisure and hospitality sector, which encompasses the bars and restaurants that bore the brunt of

the pandemic restrictions.

That industry added 78,000 jobs last month, while manufacturers hired 55,000, transportation and warehousing took on 52,000, and employment at professional and business services firms rose 41,000.

But the labor force participation rate, which indicates the share of the population employed or searching for work, declined 0.2 percentage points from March, bringing it to 62.2 percent, where it was at the start of the year. Supply of workers has been an ongoing problem for employers: Other data released recently shows there are nearly two job openings for every unemployed person in the labor force. "Looking ahead, we expect more workers to come off the sidelines in search of work and labor demand to cool as businesses feel the pinch from high inflation and tighter financial conditions," Kathy Bostjancic of Oxford Economics said. — AFP



LOBOS, Argentina: Argentine farmer Martin Semino walks at a soy field in Lobos, some 100 km west of Buenos Aires. — AFP



## Business

# Chinese web users get creative to dodge COVID censorship

## Business hub of Shanghai endures weeks of lockdown

BEIJING: From quoting the national anthem to referencing Hollywood blockbusters and George Orwell's dystopian novel "1984", Chinese web users are using creative methods to dodge censorship and voice discontent over COVID measures.

China maintains a tight grip over the internet, with legions of censors scrubbing out posts that cast the Communist Party's policies in a negative light. The censorship machine is now in overdrive to defend Beijing's stringent zero-COVID policy as the business hub of Shanghai endures weeks of lockdown to tackle an outbreak. Stuck at home, many of the city's 25 million residents have taken to social media to vent fury over food shortages and spartan quarantine conditions.

Charlie Smith, co-founder of censorship monitoring website GreatFire.org, said the Shanghai lockdown had become "too big of an issue to be able to completely censor". Hell-bent on getting their messages out, wily web users were turning to tricks such as flipping images and using wordplay, he said, using a pseudonym due to the sensitivity of his work. In one example, censors deleted a popular hashtag on the Weibo social media platform quoting the first line of China's national anthem: "Arise, those who refuse to be slaves."

The line was being shared alongside a torrent of anti-lockdown fury. Others hijacked a hashtag about American human rights failings to make tongue-in-cheek barbs about home confinement in China. In a similar attempt, netizens rallied to push Orwell's fiction "1984" to the top of a list of popular titles on the Douban ratings site, before it was blocked.

Censors also raced to kill off a menagerie of memes and hashtags based on a government official

who previously said foreign journalists were "secretly loving" the fact they had safely seen out the pandemic in China. Users then devised a series of oblique puns on that quote, eventually prompting censors to block the hashtag "La La Land".

### 'Us against the AI'

Last month the internet police floundered in quashing viral video "Voices of April" that featured stories from distressed Shanghai residents in lockdown. Web users rapidly re-edited and shared the six-minute clip to outrun largely automated screening software, which struggled for hours to identify the different versions. One frustrated Shanghai local said netizens shared the various formats "to make a point" even though each post vanished within minutes.

"It was us against the AI," the resident told AFP, requesting anonymity. People in Shanghai have become more "willing to pay the price" for airing critical views, said Luwei Rose Luqiu, an assistant professor at Hong Kong Baptist University. The "hardship, discontent and anger" they have endured in lockdown have "far outweighed the fear" of punishment for posting sensitive content, she told AFP.

Gao Ming, 46, said he received calls from police last month telling him to delete anti-lockdown posts on Twitter and Facebook, which are blocked in China.

But the public relations professional has so far refused, telling AFP he is "against censorship" and wants to spread debate about China's COVID strategy. "I'm totally against the current policy," he said, arguing that the lockdown has caused unnecessary deaths by cutting access to regular medical care.

about 250 kilometers (150 miles) from Johannesburg.

"This is a gigantic leap for South Africa's hydrogen future economy," Ramaphosa declared. "This has really been a historic moment. It gives us a clear vision of what the future looks like." Anglo American said it aims to be carbon neutral by 2040. It will use solar power to provide the fuel, using the energy to split water into its component atoms of hydrogen and oxygen.

Burning hydrogen releases only water vapor, not heat-trapping carbon dioxide as in the case of fossil fuels. "Over the next several years, we envisage converting or replacing our current fleet of diesel-powered trucks with this zero-emission haulage system, fuelled with green hydrogen," chief executive Duncan Wanblad said. "If this pilot is successful, we could remove up to 80 percent of diesel emissions at our open pit mines by rolling this technology across our global fleet." Last November, rich nations including France, Germany, Britain and the United States pledged at least \$8.5 billion and technical assistance to help South Africa switch to a low-carbon economy. —AFP

## S Africa launches world's biggest hydrogen-fueled truck

JOHANNESBURG: Mining giant Anglo American on Friday unveiled the world's largest hydrogen-powered truck, a monster weighing in at 220 tons, at a platinum mine in northern South Africa. Billed as the first of a fleet that will replace the firm's diesel-powered trucks, the vehicle uses two-megawatt hydrogen fuel cells to haul up to 290 tons of ore.

"What we are launching is not merely an impressive piece of machinery, it is the genesis of an entire ecosystem powered by hydrogen," President Cyril Ramaphosa said. Comparable in size to a small house, the behemoth was shown off at Mogalakwena mine,



JOHANNESBURG: The world's largest hydrogen-powered truck, a monster weighing in at 220 tons, at a platinum mine in northern South Africa.

## Global stocks fall despite solid US jobs data

NEW YORK: Global stocks mostly tumbled Friday to conclude a volatile week as investors fretted over inflation and worries about slowing growth despite a solid US jobs report. The US economy added a better-than-expected 428,000 jobs in April, with the unemployment rate remaining at a low 3.6 percent, the Labor Department reported. The data pointed to continued strong employment growth and contained hints that some inflationary pressures may be easing, with workers' wages rising less than in March.

But investors remain anxious that rising prices and higher interest rates will hit consumers, slowing the economy's expansion in the second half of 2022. "There is a real concern about slowing growth and the possibility that the economy could tip into recession," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare.

Wall Street stocks flirted with positive territory at times, but finished lower, with the S&P 500 dropping 0.6 percent. All three US indices ended with weekly losses, with the Nasdaq suffering the most at 1.5 percent. Earlier, European indices also slumped, with London losing 1.5 percent, Frankfurt 1.6 percent and Paris 1.7 percent.

"A sinking feeling has taken over financial markets at the end of a volatile week," said Hargreaves Lansdown analyst Susannah Streeter. "Investors are

digesting the unpalatable implications of inflation and fretting that there will be a need for a bigger dose of the bitter medicine being administered to try and bring it under control." Asian equities tumbled after steep Wall Street losses Thursday, as traders contemplated a period of fierce monetary tightening by the US Federal Reserve.

Meanwhile, the pound hit a two-year low at \$1.2276, one day after the Bank of England warned that UK inflation would top 10 percent and the economy would contract later this year.

The euro jumped to 85.92 pence, which was last seen late in 2021. Crude prices rebounded after key



NEW YORK: Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) on May 06, 2022 in New York City. — AFP



GUANGZHOU, China: Residents queue to undergo nucleic acid tests for Covid-19 in Guangzhou, in China's southern Guangdong province on May 7, 2022. — AFP

Top Chinese leaders vowed at a meeting on Thursday to stick "unwaveringly" to zero-COVID and "resolutely fight against all words and deeds that distort, question or reject our nation's disease control policies". State media has played up the positives and "sidelined private difficulties", said a Beijing-based journalism professor who requested anonymity.

The approach has created "two Shanghais,"

where official portrayals contrast sharply with what people view online, the professor added. Online outrage is unlikely to prompt the Communist Party to relax its hardline approach, particularly with the country's president so invested in zero-COVID, said Yaqu Wang, senior China researcher at Human Rights Watch. "It's harder for the government to walk back when it becomes an ideological issue that's attached to Xi Jinping personally," she said. — AFP

## EU members wrangle with Hungary over Russian oil ban

BUDAPEST: European diplomats were locked in difficult negotiations Friday to agree a new package of sanctions against Russia, with Hungary opposed to a ban on Russian oil imports. Negotiators expect the talks to continue until Sunday, but remain hopeful of a compromise. Brussels wants to introduce a sixth raft of sanctions against Moscow to increase the cost of its invasion of Ukraine and wean Europe's economy off a dependence on Russian energy supplies.

But Hungary and Slovakia, landlocked and dependent on crude from a Russian pipeline, are resisting the oil embargo and holding up the approval of the package. "It's not easy to establish unity," admitted European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, addressing a policy conference organized by the German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. "The countries that are now hesitating are not yet ready. We are sitting together with these countries in Brussels to work out pragmatic things, such as getting alternative oil to these countries. "I am confident we will get this package on its way, if it takes a day longer, then it will take a day longer."

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said that if there was no agreement over the weekend he would call a meeting of EU foreign ministers next week. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban declared the oil ban would cross a "red line" for Budapest. "The European Commission president, intentionally or unintentionally, has attacked the European unity that had been worked out," he told state radio.

Diplomats in Brussels thought that a compromise could be found, but warned that Orban was using the May 9 Europe Day, celebrating the genesis of the EU, as a lever. "The approach by the Hungarians in the room is very different from what you are hearing from Orban in Budapest," one said. "This will go into the weekend for technical work, not political." Monday will also be celebrated with great pomp in Russia, when it holds its Victory Day commemorating its World War II triumph over the Nazis. Brussels hopes to rain on President Vladimir Putin's parade with the new sanctions package. For the sanctions to go into effect, all 27 EU members must give their unanimous approval. —AFP

producers led by Saudi Arabia and Russia refused to lift output more than their planned marginal increase as they weighed tight supply concerns caused by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Oil prices have also gotten support from a proposed European Union ban on Russian crude in the wake of the Ukraine invasion.

"If EU efforts to ban Russian crude and products are able to continue moving forward, it would mark the most significant measure directly targeting Russian energy exports amid a wave of sanctions," said a note from Robbie Fraser of Schneider Electric. "Replacing Russian crude volumes is a significant logistical challenge." — AFP

### News in brief

#### Moody's upgrade Ireland's debt

DUBLIN: Ratings agency Moody's upgraded Ireland's debt Friday to A1 from A2 with a positive outlook, citing its economy's ability to weather shocks such as those created by the war in Ukraine. The country "appears well positioned" to deal with the fallout from Russia's invasion of its neighbor, which has pushed prices for energy and other commodities higher worldwide, Moody's said, noting Ireland has also handled the COVID-19 pandemic well. "While there is still uncertainty around the ultimate macroeconomic impact coming from the terms of trade shock caused by higher prices for energy and other inputs to economic activity, the Irish economy is well-positioned to absorb the negative impact of the conflict," the agency wrote. —AFP

#### Africell gains 2M Angolan subscribers

JOHANNESBURG: US-owned mobile network operator Africell, the first wholly foreign-owned operator licensed to provide mobile services in Angola, has acquired two million subscribers in just a month, a diplomat said Friday. The company went online in the oil-rich southwestern African country on April 7 to join three other mobile phone companies already operating there. "This is a company that has been in business... for one month and has two million subscribers," Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said in an online briefing as she wrapped up a three-nation Africa tour to Angola, Gabon and South Africa. — AFP

#### India's IPO 100% subscribed in two days

MUMBAI: India's \$2.7 billion initial public offering of insurance giant LIC was oversubscribed by Thursday, exchange data showed, as small investors bid enthusiastically for the country's biggest IPO to date. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government is desperate for proceeds from the sale of 3.5 percent of its stake in Life Insurance Corporation of India and other state assets to help fix tattered public finances. The long-awaited IPO-delayed since March due to market volatility—opened on Wednesday and will close for bids on May 9. — AFP

#### France upbeat on ECB rate

PARIS: ECB interest rates could be back in positive territory by year's end, the head of the French central bank said Friday, as soaring inflation puts pressure on policymakers. The European Central Bank has long held its interest rates at historic lows, including a negative bank deposit rate that means lenders pay to park excess cash at the Frankfurt-based institution. Record inflation in the eurozone has increased calls for the ECB to draw a line under its stimulus and follow other central banks towards interest rate hikes. In a speech in Paris, Francois Villeroy de Galhau, president of France's central bank and a member of the ECB's governing council, said an end to negative rates would be "reasonable" by the end of this year. — AFP



## Business

# India to reopen abandoned coal mines as heatwave hits supply

## Govt bid to ramp up production amid acute power outages

**NEW DELHI:** India plans to lease abandoned coal pits to private mining companies, a government official said Friday, in an effort to ramp up production as power outages exacerbate a sweltering heatwave. Coal supplies more than two-thirds of India's energy needs and the country has balked at the cost of transitioning to renewables—even as unseasonably hot weather illustrates the threat from climate change caused by burning fossil fuels.

Soaring temperatures have prompted higher energy demand in recent weeks and left India facing a 25 million ton shortfall at a time when coal spot prices have skyrocketed since the start of the year.

"We've always believed that coal is a much-maligned sector," coal ministry official Anil Kumar Jain said at an industry event. "Earlier we were hailed as bad boys because we were promoting fossil fuel and now we are in the news (because) we are not supplying enough of it."

The government plans to lease more than 100 dormant state-owned coal mines to private miners on a revenue-sharing basis. Officials said they will "cut out the red tape" to encourage bids from mining giants Vedanta, Adani and others. India needs a

billion tons of coal to meet domestic demand each year. Most of its needs are met by domestic producers, with a record 777 million tons of coal mined in the year to the end of March.

The government says it plans to increase domestic coal production to 1.2 billion tons in the next two years to support the country's post-pandemic economic recovery. "We are very happy that the economy is on the rebound and power is being demanded. The malls are full, restaurants are full," Jain said. Despite a commitment to increase its renewable energy capacity to 175 gigawatts by 2022 and 500 gigawatts by 2030, India's coal minister Pralhad Joshi said coal needs are set to double by 2040.

"There has never been as much demand for electricity as there is today. There has never been as much heat from the sun as there is today," Joshi said. The scheme announced Friday is the government's latest step towards liberalizing India's mining industry and inviting private companies to profit from the world's fifth-largest coal reserves. "This is going to lead the country in the way the mineral-rich countries like Brazil, Canada, Australia, South Africa have been creating wealth and generating employment," Vedanta mining chief V Shrikant said. —AFP



India needs a billion tons of coal to meet domestic demand each year —AFP

## DHAMAN and GlobeMed Kuwait sign agreement

**KUWAIT:** Health Assurance Hospitals Company (DHAMAN) and GlobeMed Kuwait, the leading healthcare benefits management company in Kuwait, have announced signing a collaboration agreement to offer insured members of the clients contracted with GlobeMed access to the wide network of DHAMAN'S primary Healthcare centers (PHC).

As part of the collaboration agreement, DHAMAN will provide integrated healthcare in family medicine, dentistry, pediatrics, radiology and laboratory services to insured members of the clients contracted with GlobeMed, through qualified medical staff with extensive experience and state-of-the-art technology in the medical field. The agreement is part of GlobeMed Kuwait's and DHAMAN's common mission and vision as patient centric organizations offering quality health care and health insurance services for insured members of the clients contracted with GlobeMed who are citizens and residents in Kuwait.

On this occasion, DHAMAN CEO Thamer Arab said, "This agreement with GlobeMed Kuwait is part of DHAMAN's overall efforts to deliver holistic prime and integrated healthcare services to all patients visiting our PHCs, which is part of offering them an



DHAMAN receives GlobeMed clients in its healthcare facilities

excellent person-centered medical journey that includes consultation, diagnosis, prevention, treatment and follow-up in a number of specialties and supporting services." Arab added "Both insurance cardholders, as well as patients who do not have private health insurance can still benefit from services at DHAMAN as the PHCs welcome patients of all age groups to receive comprehensive healthcare.

Salem Haidar, GlobeMed Kuwait General Manager, said "DHAMAN'S scale and range of healthcare services expands our medical network to deliver unmatched care to insured members of the

clients contracted with GlobeMed. This partnership promises to accelerate our efforts to expand member's access to care through DHAMAN's state-of-the-art medical clinics. We are proud of this partnership and committed to deliver exceptional patient experience to insured members of the clients contracted with GlobeMed through a wide network of healthcare providers." DHAMAN PHCs in Hawally, Farawaniya and Dhajej are receiving patients to benefit from its integrated medical services with two additional PHCs scheduled to open in Fahaheel and Jahra during 2022.

## Closing 'escape valve': Venezuela pursues de-dollarization

**CARACAS:** Having opened its arms to the US dollar as an "escape valve" Venezuela is now trying to renege its own currency, which has been crippled by devaluation in recent years. The aim is to incorporate \$3 billion circulating on the streets of the South American country into its financial system, but experts warn it is a risky gamble.

Distrust in the bolivar due to severe devaluations, demonetization and four years of hyperinflation persists, despite a slowdown in price rises and economic recovery following seven years of recession in which GDP fell by 80 percent. The dollarization, described by President Nicolas Maduro as an "escape valve", alongside an easing of price controls brought an end to the scarcity of bare essentials and the interminable queues for what little was available, such as a bag of rice.

"It's a risky bet with bad timing because the recovery is very weak and the economy is still suffering from chronic inflation. Not hyperinflation but still chronic inflation," Asdrubal Oliveros, director of consultancy Ecoanalitica, told AFP. "Inflation is very high for you ... (to be able) to re-establish confidence in the currency from one day to the next."

The latest move, applied at the end of March, was to impose a tax ranging from three to 20 percent on transactions using foreign currencies.

The government hopes to encourage use of the bolivar, which was also boosted by a massive injection of foreign currency into the market to stabilize the exchange rate. The official exchange rate has only fallen from 4.18 bolivars to the dollar in October to 4.43, a depreciation of 6.7 percent, compared 76 percent last year and more than 95 percent in each of the three previous years.



CARACAS, Venezuela: A customer pays with US dollars at a fast food restaurant at Los Ruices neighborhood in Caracas. — AFP

Inflation ended 2021 at 686 percent, according to the Central Bank—the highest in the world but an enormous improvement on the preceding three years: 130,000 percent in 2018, 9,500 percent in 2019 and just under 3,000 percent in 2020.

### 'Different dynamic'

The government has recorded some successes in its policy to boost use of the bolivar. The Superintendency of Banks said that since the imposition of the new foreign currency tax, online bolivar payments were up 21 percent and debit card payments increased 22 percent. "We're entering a different dynamic," Henkel Garcia, director at consultants Econometrica, told AFP.

"Venezuela is currently a demonetized country. They are trying to remonetize it and to do so with bolivars .... Having your own currency gives you a scope to maneuver." Outlawed for 15 years by state currency controls, the dollar became a refuge for Venezuelans during the economic crisis in 2019.

The dollar started being widely used when frequent nationwide power cuts made card payments and bank transfers impossible, as the bolivar's depreciation left the local currency in scarce supply.

Now, Econalitica says almost 45 percent of urban commerce is done in dollars and 8.5 percent in Colombian pesos, a popular currency in border areas. In 2021, foreign currencies made up 70 percent of the market. "Four in every five (dollars) are outside the banks, the people have them in their hands, in businesses, in their homes. We're talking about around \$3 billion in circulation," said Oliveros. — AFP

### NBK ECONOMIC REPORT

## Reform program to drive Bahrain economic growth

**KUWAIT:** Higher oil prices should underpin Bahrain's economic recovery, which was already making progress amid fading pandemic pressures, the adoption of a comprehensive reform program and ongoing financial support from GCC neighbors. After growing 2.2 percent last year, GDP is forecast up 3.0 percent in 2022, which would see output exceed pre-pandemic levels.

Although Bahrain is one of the Gulf region's most diversified economies, it could benefit even more than others from higher oil revenues given its particular financial vulnerabilities that the reform program aims to address. Indeed, the government could record its first fiscal surplus in 14 years in 2022, beating its (pandemic-delayed) target of balancing the budget by 2024.

### Reform program

Non-oil growth is forecast at 3 percent in 2022 - slightly better than last year - with COVID-related restrictions largely lifted through 1Q22 and not re-imposed in our baseline forecast. The tourism and hospitality segments should also continue to recover, while the important financial sector (20 percent of non-oil GDP) will benefit from stronger activity and higher interest rates. This should help offset the drag on activity from fiscal consolidation measures. Meanwhile, the hydrocarbon sector is projected to expand slightly in accordance with OPEC+ planned output hikes. The sector is forecast to grow by 3.6 percent in 2022 as crude production is lifted from 193 kb/d to 200kb/d.

## Canada jobs rush stalls but jobless rate hits low

**OTTAWA:** Job creation in Canada stalled in April after strong gains in the previous two months, but the unemployment rate still edged down to a record low of 5.2 percent, the government reported Friday. The economy added 15,300 net new jobs last month, according to Statistics Canada, less than half what economists had forecast after hundreds of thousands of jobs were added in February and March.

The unemployment rate, meanwhile, fell 0.1 per-

centage point to its lowest level since record-keeping began in 1976.

Already above pre-pandemic levels, the slowdown in the creation of new jobs is largely due to a shortage of workers, estimated by Statistics Canada in a previous report at nearly one million. In such a tight job market with few available workers, the unemployment rate fell despite the slower hiring.

The new jobs report is likely to stoke expectations that the Bank of Canada will continue to aggressively hike interest rates in the coming months. "The slightly weaker-than-anticipated employment reading shouldn't alter market pricing for a 50 basis point hike since the economy is still by most measures overheating," Desjardins analyst Royce Mendes said in a research note.

Increased absenteeism due to a spike in COVID-

and enhanced revenue collection. The government also looks set to stick with FBP initiatives of rationalizing spending including reducing manpower and streamlining subsidies, reinforcing its commitment to reform. It is targeting spending of 20 percent of GDP by 2024, down from a recent peak of 28.7 percent in 2020.

These steps have helped to stabilize the country's credit rating (S&P:B+, Fitch:B+), albeit at below investment grade level. High government debt levels remain a concern, especially amid rising global interest rates and relatively limited assets in the sovereign wealth fund (43 percent of GDP). Still, given the improving fiscal position and higher GDP base, the government's aim of stabilizing then reducing debt to GDP from 115 percent in 2020 now looks very achievable. Ongoing progress on FBP-related reforms will trigger further disbursements of the \$10 billion aid program from Gulf neighbors agreed in 2018, supporting liquidity.

### Current account surpluses

Meanwhile, there has also been a major improvement in the external position, with the current account recording its first surplus in seven years last year at 6.7 percent of GDP, driven by a surge in aluminum and iron exports and a recovery of inbound tourism. Overall, we expect the current account to remain in comfortable surplus during the forecast period. This will help replenish the central bank's foreign reserves which stood at \$4.3 billion in February 2022 (less than three months of imports), and improve resilience against any further external shocks.

The main risks to the outlook are a sudden fall back in oil prices, which would reverse the recent improvement in the fiscal and external positions, and incomplete implementation of FBP goals in light of any social or political pushback. Higher interest rates could also worsen public sector debt dynamics. On the other side, higher oil prices or rapid and successful reform execution could improve non-oil growth and the government's credit rating.

19 infections also led to a drop in hours worked compared to the prior month. This "potentially starts Q2 off on a weak footing in terms of GDP," commented Andrew Grantham of CIBC Economics.

But he agreed that does not change the overall economic picture, and "as such shouldn't deter the Bank of Canada from delivering another 50bp hike at its next meeting" in June, he said.

Statistics Canada said increases in employment in professional, scientific and technical services as well as public administration in April were offset by declines in construction and retail trade. There were more people working in the Atlantic region and western Alberta province, while employment fell in Quebec. At the national level, employment gains among core-aged women aged 25 to 54 were offset by a decrease among core-age men. —AFP



## Lifestyle | Features

## Police arrest three Eiffel Tower tourist tricksters

French police arrested three people Friday accused of tricking unsuspecting tourists into playing a rigged shell game at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, a police source told AFP. The two men and a woman, originally from Romania, were arrested in the northeastern Paris suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis following a months-long investigation. Police seized more than 16,000 euros (almost \$17,000) in cash, three luxury cars, foreign currency and money transfer slips, the source said.

They suspect the three of deceiving

tourists into betting on a shell game—where the victim tries to guess which cup hides a ball—with the promise of winning significant amounts of cash if successful. The tourist is lured in by fake players, and never wins. “The entry ticket was 50 euros and each table could earn up to 1,000 euros an hour,” the source said. The investigation led by the Paris police prefecture’s illegal immigration unit began in October 2021.

Investigators identified about forty fake players and lookouts involved with half a dozen tables, the source added. All of

them were from Romania. In recent weeks, French police have conducted several operations to fight against scams or irregular street vendors, as tourists flock back to the City of Light with the easing of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Eiffel Tower is one of the world’s most famous buildings and welcomes some seven million visitors a year. — AFP

People sit below the Eiffel Tower on the Champ-de-Mars on a sunny day in Paris. — AFP



A photograph shows a general view of the Gold State Coach, at the Royal Mews, in Buckingham Palace, in London, which will be used for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations. — AFP

## No Harry, Meghan or Andrew on Queen's jubilee balcony

Queen Elizabeth's son Prince Andrew, her grandson Harry and his wife Meghan will not join her on the Buckingham Palace balcony for this year's Trooping the Color, royal officials said on Friday. Instead, the 96-year-old monarch has decided to limit numbers to working royals only for the traditional set-piece appearance after the military parade for her official birthday celebrations.

“Only those members of the royal family who are currently undertaking official public duties on behalf of the queen” will join her on June 2, a spokesman said. The decision was taken “after careful consideration”, he added. Speculation had mounted that all three could be at the event, which kicks off four days of celebrations for the queen's Platinum Jubilee, including tea parties, a pop concert and people's parade through central London.

Andrew, 62, in March made his first public appearance since settling a US civil claim for sexual assault, and after public outrage at his friendship with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The former Royal Navy helicopter pilot provided his mother, who has been in ill health and had difficulty walking and standing, with a steadying arm at a memorial service that month for her late husband, Prince Philip.

His prominent role at the televised Westminster Abbey event was seen as a sign that his mother believed he still has a part to play at family occasions. But his appearance caused controversy and

dominated coverage of the memorial service—and Friday's announcement may be seen as a sign the palace does not want a repeat. Andrew, officially known as the Duke of York, has strenuously denied the assault claims and remains stripped of his honorary military titles and charities, giving him no official royal role.

## Senior royals

Speculation that Harry would return from his self-imposed exile in California has also increased after he visited his grandmother at her Windsor Castle home last month. The 37-year-old former British Army captain is the second son of her eldest son and heir Prince Charles, 73, and his first wife, Princess Diana, who died in a Paris car crash in 1997.

He quit royal life and moved to the United States with his wife Meghan, 40, where both have publicly complained about life in Britain's most famous family, and even accused them of racism. The couple, who still use their titles of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, are now involved in charitable and philanthropic work, and have signed lucrative media deals. Denying them a place on the balcony will likely be seen as the queen refusing to accept a “half-in, half-out” approach to royal duties.

There was no immediate word on whether all three would be involved in the other public events to mark the queen's record-breaking 70 years on the throne. But a spokeswoman for Harry and Meghan indicated they would be in the UK with their children Archie, who turned three on Friday, and Lilibet, who was born on June 4 last year and has yet to meet her great-grandmother. The couple were “excited and honored to attend the queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations this June with their children”, she added. — AFP

They realized I couldn't be stopped,” she laughed, adding that her mother now supports her in the studio and on set.

Eva B's rise to fame was accelerated this year when Coca-Cola's international music franchise Coke Studios—one of the most popular television programs in Pakistan—invited her collaborate for its 2022 series. The music video for “Kana Yaari”, which features Eva B rapping in a bright orange hijab about the betrayal of a love interest, has more than 16 million views on YouTube. But unlike other artists in the series, she has shunned a celebrity status.

“It is strange to live two lives. People know me, but at the same time they don't really know me,” she said. She finds it amusing to nod along to conversations in cafes or at friends' weddings when people talk about the latest track



Rapper Eva B rehearses a song during an interview with AFP on the rooftop of a building in Lyari district in Karachi. — AFP photos

## Behind the veil: The double life of Pakistan rapper Eva B

Pakistan's breakthrough rapper Eva B has racked up millions of views online, but walking through the labyrinthine streets of her Karachi neighborhood, she is anonymous. Her hair covered with a hijab and a veil falling below her eyes, she evades the attention of fans and detractors. “It's funny that people don't recognize me, they play my songs but when I'm in front of them they don't know it's me,” the 22-year-old told AFP from a rooftop overlooking the mega port city of Karachi.

Inspired by American rappers Eminem and Queen Latifah, she started writing lyrics from her bedroom and posting her raps to Facebook where she built up a following. Afraid of angering her family, she would sneak to music studios to record full tracks with the help of other emerging artists in her neighborhood, under the pretext of studying.

But when word reached her brother, she received a backlash from her family who considered the genre indecent for a young girl and who feared she would struggle to marry in deeply conservative Pakistan. “Later they realized that I was quite persistent, so they surrendered.

## Inbreeding won't doom the last of vaquitas, but fishing might

Vaquita porpoises are on the edge of extinction, with just 10 left in their sole habitat within Mexico's Gulf of California. However, a new study published Thursday in the journal Science offers some hope: the world's rarest marine mammals aren't doomed by a lack of genetic diversity, and can recover if illegal “gillnet” fishing ceases immediately.

“We're trying to push back on this idea that there's no hope, that nothing we do could save them at this point. It's just not an accurate assumption,” lead author Jacqueline Robinson of the University of California San Francisco told AFP. Porpoises are closely related to dolphins, and share many things in common including great intelligence. The vaquita, whose name means “little cow” in Spanish, measures four to five feet (about 1.5 meters) in length, making it the smallest of all cetaceans.

Shy and elusive, they are known for

distinctive dark circles around their eyes, and relatively large dorsal fins, which are thought to help them dissipate heat in their warm habitat. Vaquita numbers were decimated in the 20th century as a result of being accidentally trapped and drowning in gillnets: long walls of nets hanging in open water that are used to catch fish and shrimp.

Fishermen sought in particular the totoaba, a large fish about the size of the vaquita, whose swim-bladder is prized in traditional Chinese medicine. The totoaba itself is endangered and its fishing is illegal, but the ban isn't always respected. The vaquita's historical abundance was unknown, but by the time of the first survey, in 1997, only around 570 remained.

There were fears that harmful mutations among the surviving vaquitas could seal the species' fate due to inevitable inbreeding. To find out whether that was the case, the researchers analyzed the genomes of 20 vaquitas that lived between 1985 and 2017, and discovered that over the past 250,000 years their population had never exceeded a few thousand. They also learned that their genetic diversity had always been low, relative to other cetacean species such as dolphins, orcas, and other whales.

## Benefits to low genetic diversity

“Generally, we would think of low genetic diversity as being a bad thing. But in this case, it is somewhat advantageous for the vaquitas for their possibili-

ty of future recovery,” said Robinson. Inbreeding increases the chances offspring will inherit two copies of harmful mutations, leading to genetic disorders. But it turned out that the frequency of these mutations are very low in vaquitas to begin with, because the population has always been small.

“So those mutations were historically weeded out much more effectively, than in a larger population, where those mutations could persist and remain hidden from natural selection,” explained Robinson. There are other species that appear more resistant to so-called “inbreeding depression,” including mountain gorillas and narwhals, for similar reasons. The team then carried out simulations to forecast the species' future. Encouragingly, there is only a six percent chance of vaquitas' extinction if gillnet fishing is eliminated.

But if such fishing is only reduced, then the extinction risk rises drastically. Even with an 80 percent reduction in fishing, the porpoises have a 62 percent chance of disappearing. “While we now know that the species' ability to recover is not limited by their genetics, vaquitas have very little time left,” said co-author Christopher Kyriazis of the University of California, Los Angeles, in a statement. “If we lose them, it would be the result of our human choices, not inherent genetic factors.” — AFP



This undated image released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) shows a mother and calf vaquita surfacing in the waters off San Felipe, Mexico. — AFP

## Straight outta Karachi

Eva B grew up in Lyari, a Karachi neighborhood haunted by gang violence and poverty for decades and once considered one of Pakistan's most dangerous areas, but which inspired a generation of artists and spawned a burgeoning hip hop scene. With its close proximity to the sea and history of smuggling, the largely ethnic Balochi neighborhood in Karachi stands apart for its history of violence and lawlessness - even by Pakistan's standards. But the worst of the violence has abated, and an increase in security has led to flowering creativity.

The embattled neighborhood now clings fiercely to its reputation for producing top footballers, iron-chinned boxers, and most recently socially conscious rappers. “We didn't attend any prestigious music schools, we learned everything

ourselves, driven by our passion. So I keep highlighting Lyari and I'm proud of it,” she said. The rise of hip hop in Lyari mirrors the genre's birth decades ago in New York's Bronx borough, where it largely centred around street performances and featured lyrics that addressed social ills and life in urban ghettos.

Eva B also speaks straightforwardly about the difficulties women face and the disparity in wealth in Pakistan, and even the sensitive issue of local corruption. Her favorite song, “Bayani Rog”, in her native Balochi language, tells the story of her evolution from shy, nervous teenager to the self-assured, frank woman she is today. “I realized that keeping silent won't work, so I better speak up,” she said. — AFP



People and vehicles make their way along a street in the Lyari district where local rapper Eva B grew up, once considered one of Pakistan's most dangerous areas but which inspired a generation of artists and spawned Karachi's burgeoning hip hop scene.



## Lifestyle | Features



A picture shows a mural of German sociologist Max Weber, drawn by Iraqi painter Wijdan Al-Majed, on a concrete structure in the capital Baghdad. Iraqi artist Wijdan Al-Majed is transforming Baghdad's concrete jungle into a color-filled city with murals depicting well-known figures from the war-scarred country and abroad.



Photo shows a mural of Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, drawn by Iraqi painter Wijdan Al-Majed, on a concrete structure in the capital Baghdad.— AFP photos

## Murals bring 'joy' to Baghdad concrete jungle

Iraqi artist Wijdan Al-Majed is transforming Baghdad's concrete jungle into a color-filled city with murals depicting well-known figures from the war-scarred country and abroad. Perched on a scaffold at a busy intersection, the 49-year-old artist and instructor at the Baghdad College of Fine Arts is adding final touches to a mural dedicated to celebrated Iraqi poet Muzaffar al-Nawab.

Peasant women in traditional dress adorn the background of the mural, commissioned by Baghdad mayor Alaa Maan. He launched the initiative nine months ago in a bid to "bring beauty to the city and move art to the streets to get rid of the grey and dusty colors" that hang over Baghdad. Majed, an artist more accustomed to exhibiting her work in the cosy and reflective settings of galleries, at first had helpers to create the street art.

But she has turned to working alone, undaunted by the "huge challenges" she faces as a woman in a largely conservative, male-dominated society. "Sometimes I work late into the night," said Majed, wearing jeans and shoes splattered with paint. "The street is scary at night, and it's not easy for a woman to be out so late," she said. Motorists and passers-by often slow down or stop to watch the woman on her scaffold, paintbrush in hand and hard at work.

### 'Iraqis accepted me'

Disparaging comments are sometimes fired her way. "I learn to live with it and ignore them," she said. "People have become used to seeing a woman paint. Iraqi society has accepted me." Many Iraqis are happily surprised by the transfor-



Iraqi artist Wijdan Al-Majed draws a mural depicting Iraqi poet Muzaffar Al-Nawab on a concrete structure in the capital Baghdad.

mation of their capital. "This is the most beautiful Muzaffar," a motorist shouted as he drove past Majed while she touched up the poet's mural. Nicknamed the "revolutionary poet", Muzaffar al-Nawab, who spent years in jail for writing about successive repressive regimes in Iraq, holds a special place in the hearts of many Iraqis.

At least 16 murals have been painted across Baghdad, with one devoted to Jawad Salim, considered the father of Iraqi modern art and a celebrated sculptor, and another to the late, world-famous Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid. German sociologist Max Weber and Catholic saint Mother Teresa are among the foreigners

celebrated on Baghdad's new murals. Maan, the mayor and an architect by profession, chooses the subjects which Majed paints in vivid colors—a jarring contrast with the rest of the city.

### 'Bringing joy' to the city

Baghdad's infrastructure was laid to waste by a 13-year international embargo against the regime of late dictator Saddam Hussein, the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled him and the subsequent years of sectarian violence, culminating in the rise and fall of the Islamic State jihadist group. Maan acknowledges that much needs to be done to rehabilitate the city, which once



A picture shows a mural of Iraqi painter Jawad Saleem (left) and Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri (right), drawn by Iraqi painter Wijdan Al-Majed, on a concrete structure in the capital Baghdad.

stood as a beacon of Arab culture but now struggles like most of Iraq with corruption and mismanagement.

"The city is the first victim: any problem elsewhere in the country is reflected here," Maan said. "When unemployment soars, you will see street vendors... and when the housing crisis flares, slums emerge." Graffiti covers many buildings and facades in Baghdad—including political messages dating back to bloody anti-government protests that rocked the country for months from late 2019.

Cables from private electricity generators—desperately needed to make up for

chronic power cuts—add to the disfigurement of the capital. For Majed, painting murals "brings joy" across the city of nine million people. In the teeming Al-Sadriya neighborhood, known for its popular market, a mural depicting two men selling watermelons has won hearts. "This is a slice of Baghdad's heritage," said textile merchant Fadel Abu Ali, 63. The mural is a reproduction of a work by late artist Hafidh al-Droubi, who often portrayed Baghdad daily life.— AFP



This picture shows 'The Rock' - a 228.31 carats pear-shaped white diamond (estimate: USD 20,000,000-30,000,000) mined and polished in South Africa over two decades ago, which is the largest white diamond ever to appear for sale at auction, according to Christie's auction house.— AFP

## 'The Rock' diamond dazzles in Geneva

The biggest white diamond ever to be sold at auction, dubbed "The Rock", will go under the hammer in Geneva on Wednesday and could fetch up to \$30 million or more. The 228.31-carat stone is up for grabs alongside a historic intense yellow diamond associated for more than a century with the Red Cross, which will receive some of the profits from its sale. The Rock is "a truly exceptional pear-shaped diamond", said Max Fawcett, head of the jewels department at Christie's auction house in Geneva.

It is "the largest white diamond ever to be offered at auction", he told AFP at a preview on Friday. The Rock is currently in the hands of an unnamed owner from North America. It could even break records when it goes under the hammer. "It's perfectly symmetrical and is estimated at \$20 to \$30 million—and I expect there be fireworks on Wednesday," Fawcett said.

The equivalent in euros is 19 to 28 million. The expert said that there were only a handful of diamonds of similar size and quality to The Rock. The Christie's record for a similar white diamond is \$33.7 million, fetched in Geneva in 2017 for a 163.41-carat gem. Larger than a golf ball, The Rock was extracted from a mine in South Africa in the early 2000s. It has been shown in Dubai, Taipei and New York ahead of the sale in Geneva.

### Red Cross gem

Bidders will also be vying for The Red Cross Diamond, a cushion-shaped, 205.07-carat canary yellow jewel, which has a price estimate of seven to 10 million Swiss francs (\$7.09 to \$10.13 million). "I expect that it will achieve much more on the day of sale," said Fawcett. A large chunk of the proceeds will be donated to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which is headquartered in Geneva.

The original rough stone was found in 1901 in a De Beers company mine in South Africa and is said to have weighed around 375 carats. As well as ranking among the largest diamonds in the world, a striking feature is its pavilion, which naturally bears the shape of a Maltese cross. The stone was first put up for sale on April 10, 1918 at Christie's in London. It was offered by the Diamond Syndicate in aid of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John.

The Red Cross Diamond fetched £10,000 - approximately £600,000 (\$740,000) in today's money. It was bought by the London jewelers S.J. Phillips. It was sold again by Christie's in Geneva in 1973, fetching 1.8 million Swiss francs, and is now being offered by the auction house for a third time. "For nearly half a century, our family has had the privilege of safeguarding The Red Cross Diamond," the gem's anonymous private owner said in a statement.

Several other diamonds will be auctioned on Wednesday, plus a tiara that belonged to princess Irma of Furstenberg (1867-1948), a member of one of the most pre-eminent aristocratic families in the Habsburg Empire. It is estimated to go for 400,000 to 600,000 Swiss francs.— AFP

## Japan's virtual YouTubers make millions from fans

Mayu Iizuka sheds her soft-spoken personality and starts cackling, screaming and waving wildly in a makeshift studio in Tokyo as her avatar appears on a livestream before hundreds of fans. Virtual YouTubers like Iizuka, who voices and animates a character called Yume Kotobuki, have transformed a niche Japanese subculture into a thriving industry where top accounts can rake in more than a million dollars a year.

The videos are designed to make fans feel they are interacting directly with their favorite animated idols—with viewers sometimes paying hundreds of dollars to have a single comment highlighted on a livestream. "When I'm playing video games on my channel and succeed at something, my fans congratulate me" and pay tips "as a way to show their support and appreciation", Iizuka told AFP.

The 26-year-old uses a laptop, webcam and a motion sensor worn around her neck to appear on screen as Yume, whose facial expressions are controlled by a producer. With her squeaky voice, short skirt and huge purple eyes, Iizuka's avatar follows a popular model for "VTuber" characters, which often resemble the hyper-feminine heroines of Japanese anime.

Since emerging about five years ago, the VTuber world has grown quickly, with about 16,000 active streamers globally, according to data firm User Local, and growing fanbases on other platforms like TikTok and gaming site Twitch. Regional governments in Japan have used them for promotion, and "The Batman" stars Robert Pattinson and Zoe Kravitz even gave a recent interview to a top Japanese VTuber.

### Super Chat

VTubers generate money in ways similar to traditional livestreamers, including through YouTube's "Super Chat" system, where the more a fan shells out, the more attention is drawn to their comments. In fact, the world's nine top-earning YouTube accounts for "Super Chat" last year were all VTubers. All nine are affiliated with one Tokyo-based talent

agency, and each earned between \$700,000 and \$1.7 million from the cash gifts, according to data analysis site Playboard.

Most fans spend only a few hundred yen (\$1) per comment, but the most dedicated sometimes splurge 50,000 yen (\$400) to post impassioned missives to their virtual idols. Kazuma Murakami, a 30-year-old car parts inspector, has been known to spend 10,000 yen to get his comments highlighted in red and seen by his favorite VTuber. "I really want her to notice I'm here again, visiting her channel," Murakami told AFP.

Another VTuber fan, who asked to be identified only by his first name, Kazumi,

from their beloved and feeling superior to fellow fans."

### Human 'soul'

VTubers usually keep the person behind the character—often referred to as their "soul"—out of the picture, and like many fans, Kazumi says his love is directed towards Mio the avatar, not whoever plays her. But the line between virtual and real can become blurred.

A Japanese court recently ruled in favor of a VTuber actor who argued that online slander against her character amounted to an attack on her. Virtual YouTubers can "transcend gender, age or physique... but what's important is that



Mayu Iizuka, a virtual YouTuber who voices and animates a character called Yume Kotobuki, hosting a livestream at a studio in Tokyo.— AFP

there's a real person there who is speaking and reads the comments in real life," said Kazuhiro Ozawa, the plaintiff's lawyer. For Iizuka, a professional voice actress, making the rare decision to reveal her identity after four years of making videos as Yume was nerve-wracking.

"Part of me was afraid that fans of Yume, who has these big, shiny eyes and a perfect belly, might be disappointed to find out what the 'real' person inside looks like," she said. But "so far the response from fans has been very kind". And the more outspoken, vivacious personality of Yume's virtual self is even gradually rubbing off on Iizuka, she said. "I used to balk at speaking publicly, but Yume is such an experienced livestreamer that my identity as her has been helping me speak more confidently."— AFP



## Lifestyle | Features

## 'King of streets': Last skateboarder on Ukraine front

The baby-faced teenager in baggy shorts raced his skateboard past the bombed burger joint and hit Peace Square just as air raid sirens rolled over the Ukrainian front. He crashed a few times doing flips on the vast and entirely deserted expanse at the heart of Ukraine's administrative centre for the eastern war zone. White vapour trails streaking across the evening sky bore testament to the multiple rocket launcher systems firing their salvos around Kramatorsk—a city whose seizure would prove momentous for the Russians in the third month of war.

But Roman Kovalenko felt an odd mixture of invincibility and disbelief with the skateboard under his sneakers. "On the one hand it's sad, but on the other, it's a special atmosphere," the 18-year-old said of the air raid sirens and the sleepless nights spent by many who have still not fled for safety to the west of Ukraine. At least five powerful long-range missiles had smashed into Kramatorsk before sunrise that day.

The walls and ground across the city shook and rows of residential buildings—now standing largely abandoned—had their windows blown and apartments turned inside out. As he rolled alone into the sunset in his white baseball cap, Kovalenko cut a picture of an ordinary kid dropped in the middle of a war that few could have imagined in the 21st century. "I feel a sort of melancholy because there is no one around," he said. "But walking alone before military curfew, I feel like the king of the streets."

## Waves of missiles strikes

The industrial city of Kramatorsk had 300,000 people before a years-long east



Roman Kovalenko, 18, skates next to the damaged shop by a missile explosion in the morning as he always skates alone since all his friends have fled at Peace Square in Kramatorsk, eastern Ukraine, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. — AFP photos

Ukrainian insurgency exploded into the gravest European conflict since World War II. The rebels' capture of the Donbas region's capital Donetsk in 2014 forced the pro-Western leaders in Kyiv to move their administrative centre about 80 kilometers to the north in Kramatorsk. The Soviet-era city—much of its architecture identical to similar working-class towns across Russia—is dominated by a row of factories running along a railway line in a riverside valley.

These sprawling warehouses and plants make perfect targets for Russian forces that are slowly creeping up to Kramatorsk from across the rolling hills to the north. Weeks of trench warfare involving increasingly power-

ful weapons has enabled the Russians to encroach within striking distance by their heavy tanks and other big guns. The Ukrainians counterattack with shellfire in the morning.

They then try to move their equipment around in the daytime to make sure the Russians do not have clear targets to hit with long-range missiles at night. This routine has been grinding on with frightening predictability for days. Kovalenko has been witnessing the ruin this has wrought on his city while trundling around its deserted streets on his sticker-marked skateboard. "I have nothing else to do," he shrugged. "All my friends have moved out to different parts of Ukraine. And I'm bored."



Roman Kovalenko, 18, practices the skate trick as he always skates alone since all his friends have fled at Peace Square in Kramatorsk.

## 'I accept my fate'

Peace Square in the city centre used to be a favorite haunt for skateboarders and other teens looking for a free evening out. The sunset over the river turns the drab government buildings gold and adds a jarring charm to a city whose main inhabitants are now muscle-bound men with assault rifles and weary expressions on their grizzled faces. Kovalenko has trouble explaining why he is still here among these warriors and not out west with his friends. "Of course I would like to meet up with my friends and go out, but that's not really possible now," he said.

Family turmoil has left him living alone with his mother. He hints at financial prob-

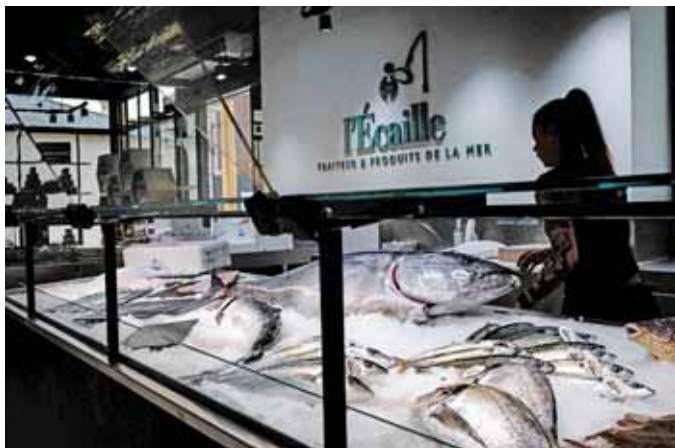
lems but quickly adds that other people have much bigger problems. "The time hasn't come yet for me to be afraid," he said. "I am a fatalist by nature. I accept my fate." A new round of air raid siren wails erupts from speakers directly overhead. He ignores them. "When a siren sounds, 80 percent of the time, nothing happens," he said. He then paused and amiably conceded that one out of five rockets striking their targets was still not terribly good. "I realise there is a war on, but not completely," he admitted. — AFP



People wait to enter on the opening day of the international Gastronomy center in Dijon, Eastern France, on May 6, 2022. — AFP photos



People visit the fish shop on the opening day of the international Gastronomy center in Dijon, Eastern France.



A woman works in a fish shop on the opening day of the international Gastronomy center in Dijon, Eastern France.



A professor leads a cooking lesson to students of the Ferrandi culinary school of the new Cite Internationale de la Gastronomie et du Vinin Dijon.

## 'Unique in the world': France's Dijon opens gastronomy complex

Devotees of French food can flock to a new temple following the opening Friday of a gastronomy and drink complex in the capital of France's central Burgundy region, Dijon. "It's astounding. It's a marriage of gastronomy, culture and education," said former French president Francois Hollande during whose tenure the project was launched. "It's not unique in France. It's unique in the world," he added at the inauguration. The city famed for its mustard and rolling vineyards hopes to lure one million visitors a year to the site resembling a village with expositions, a culinary school, shops, restaurants and even a cinema.

"I have no doubt that one million is a completely attainable objective," Socialist Dijon mayor Francois Rebsamen told AFP, adding that Dijon boasted 3.5 million annu-

al visitors before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The project began after UNESCO added the "French gastronomic meal" to its intangible cultural heritage list in 2010. The inclusion on the prestigious list sparked the launch of sites in Paris, Lyon, Tours and Dijon designed to showcase different aspects of the country's rich food and drinking culture.

Meals are a big deal in France, where 2,000 books on drinks or cooking are published every year. The French will typically sit down together to tuck in unlike Americans "who often eat standing next to the kitchen counter" and alone, says Tours University sociologist Jean-Pierre Corbeau. The gastronomic meal is "this ritual good food that brings together the French to celebrate the good life together", said European Institute for the History and Cultures of Food founder Francois Chevrier in his book on the Dijon complex.

## 'Experimental kitchen'

The massive Dijon site spreads across 6.5 hectares and combines modern structures with buildings with glazed tiles from the mediaeval times. "We wanted to enhance the existing heritage while adding contemporary architectural touches to it,"

architect Anthony Bechu said. The overall project cost 250 million euros (\$265,000) with the private sector financing 90 percent. Visitors can meander through four sections on the history of French meals, baking, Burgundy's vineyards and the art of cooking.

Once an appetite is worked up, tourists can eat to their heart's content in two restaurants run by triple-starred chef Eric Pras. And they can wash the meal down with drinks from a cellar that offers "one of the widest selections in the world, with 250 drinks by the glass among more than 3,000 references," according to its director Anthony Valla.

The site also includes a butcher's shop and a bakery, an "experimental kitchen" offering demonstrations and workshops, and a branch of the world-renowned Ferrandi culinary school. Such a huge project has raised some eyebrows, especially after the Lyon site closed down only nine months after its inauguration. "We learned our lesson from the failure of Lyon, which offered something a little down-market and very expensive," Dijon mayor Rebsamen said. — AFP

## Warhol Monroe portrait set to smash records

An Andy Warhol portrait of Marilyn Monroe worth an estimated \$200 million headlines this month's spring sales in New York that collectors say are among the most anticipated ever. Christie's expects Warhol's 1964 "Shot Sage Blue Marilyn" to become the priciest 20th century artwork when the auction house puts it under the hammer on Monday. Not to be outdone, competitor Sotheby's is offering \$1 billion of modern and contemporary art including the second helping of the famed Macklowe Collection, during its marquee week in May.

"The excitement is certainly unprecedented," Joan Robledo-Palop, a collector and CEO of Zeit Contemporary Art in New York City, told AFP, about the buzz surrounding this season's auctions. The 40 inch (100 centimeter) by 40 inch silk-screen Warhol is part of a series of portraits the pop artist made of Monroe following her death from a drug overdose in August 1962.

They became known as the "Shot" series after a visitor to Warhol's "Factory" studio in Manhattan fired a gun at them, piercing the portraits which were later repaired. Alex Rotter, head of 20th and 21st century art at Christie's, has called the portrait "the most significant 20th century painting to come to auction in a generation." The current most expensive 20th century auctioned work is Picasso's "Women of Algiers," which fetched \$179.4 million in 2015.

The auction record for a Warhol is the \$104.5 million paid for "Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)" in 2013. Other highlights offered by Christie's include Jean-Michel Basquiat's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Derelict" (1982), expected to go for more than \$30 million, and "Untitled (Shades of Red)" by Mark Rothko, tipped to fetch up to \$80 million. The auction house is also offering three Claude Monet oil on canvases that are predicted to sell for upwards of \$30 million each.

## Rothko, Picasso, Richter

"Every couple of decades you have a sale where the quality is so high that you don't see all of this at once normally. This season really grew into one of those unique moments," Rotter told AFP. After selling the first batch of works from the Macklowe Collection—the most expensive to hit the market at \$600 million—last fall, Sotheby's will auction the remaining 30 items when its sales open on May 16. Highlights include Gerhard Richter's 1975 "Seascape," estimated at up to \$35 million, and Rothko's "Untitled" from 1960 that has a high-end pre-sale estimate of \$50 million. Sotheby's said its modern evening auction of 19th and 20th century works, including by Pablo Picasso and Philip Guston, is its "most valuable" in the category in 15 years.

Picasso's "Femme nue couchée" is appearing at auction for the first time, and Sotheby's expects it to fetch more than \$60 million. Other highlights include a Monet view of Venice tipped to fetch \$50 million. Brooke Lampley, head of sales for global fine art at Sotheby's, said she expects records to be broken across categories. "The art market is very strong. That's why we see such an amazing array of works on offer this season," she said. — AFP



A person walks past Andy Warhol's 'Self Portrait' during the New York press preview on May 6, 2022. — AFP



Groom Matthew Mitchener with his bride Janelle Nuyts celebrating their wedding in the car park of their housing compound during lockdown in Shanghai after a ceremony officiated via Zoom from the US. — AFP

## From lockdown to wedlock: Shanghai couple defy COVID

A couple in Shanghai have beaten COVID lockdowns and bureaucracy to tie the knot, celebrating their marriage in the car park of their housing compound after a ceremony officiated via Zoom from the United States. With the "Bridal Chorus" on speaker, a smattering of socially distanced friends and an

immaculate white dress complete with blue surgical mask, bride Janelle Nuyts walked down the aisle followed by an official in a hazmat suit who disinfected the ground around her. Shanghai's weeks-long lockdown has brought the business hub of 25 million people to a halt as China sticks with its zero-COVID policy.

But an easing of the rules in recent weeks has allowed some residents out of their homes, although mostly within the confines of their housing developments. Groom Matthew Mitchener, 35, said he initially had doubts about a lockdown wedding but they melted away Saturday when he caught sight of his bride in a figure-hugging wedding dress highlighting her five-month baby bump.

"It was all a little surreal," the Australian said, beaming, as neighbors

threw rice around for good luck and cheered. After a month stuck at home, the couple had their wedding officiated online by a US celebrant, with friends and family as witnesses, before they headed to the car park of their compound for a small celebration.

A ban on marriage between foreigners in China in place since 2019 prevented the pair from using a Chinese official, and the option to tie the knot at one of their embassies was not available. The car park celebration had only been decided on a day before, when the couple's neighbors suggested they hold a reception party there after an easing of restrictions made it possible. — AFP



## Sports

## Embiid inspires 76ers to rout of Heat, Mavericks set down Suns

## 76ers trim deficit in best-of-7 Eastern Conference series

LOS ANGELES: Philadelphia's star center Joel Embiid returned from injury to help the re-energized 76ers beat the Miami Heat 99-79 on Friday, clawing back a game in their NBA playoff series. Luka Doncic and the Dallas Mavericks also avoided falling into a 3-0 hole with a 103-94 victory over the Phoenix Suns.

Embiid missed the Sixers' double-digit losses in the first two games against Miami after he suffered a concussion and orbital fracture in the first-round, series-clinching win over Toronto. With his return confirmed just shortly before tip-off in Philadelphia, Embiid scored 18 points and pulled down 11 rebounds as the 76ers trimmed the deficit in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference series to 2-1.

"I tried to push as much as I can. I'm glad that we got the win," said MVP candidate Embiid, who played in a protective mask but was still clearly hurting when he took a hand to the face late in the game. Danny Green drained seven of his nine three-point attempts on the way to 21 points for Philadelphia. Tyrese Maxey scored all 21 of his points in a scintillating second-half performance.

Maxey picked up the slack after former MVP James Harden keyed the Sixers before the break, when he scored 15 of his 17 points. Jimmy Butler led the Heat with 33 points. Tyler Herro added 14 off the bench but point guard Kyle Lowry, back after missing four games with a hamstring strain, didn't score.

While Embiid took time throughout the game to wipe his face and the inside of the mask, he ran the court and didn't shy away from contact, his presence making a difference in a Sixers defense that held Miami to their second-lowest points total of the season. Embiid, who is also playing with torn ligaments in his right thumb, certainly showed signs of rust and, late

in the game, fatigue.

The Cameroonian, who was unable to do conditioning work while suffering concussion symptoms during the week, said he expects to improve. "I didn't think I had a lot of energy, honestly," said Embiid, who said he dealt with "a bunch" of concussion symptoms during the week. "I was really trying to really get through it and kind of just use my presence out there as a decoy."

"I feel like what I pride myself on is really defensively and I feel that's where my presence is really felt on the defensive end so that's one of the main reasons why playing I thought I could have a huge impact." Up by four after the first quarter, the Sixers led 41-32 at halftime and never trailed in the second half.

After the Heat tied it at 57-57 in the third quarter, Maxey made his first basket of the night—a three-pointer—then came up with a steal and a layup that pushed the lead to 62-57. Embiid drove through traffic to score at the rim and Philadelphia took a 68-65 lead into the final period that they pushed to 75-65 in the opening minutes of the fourth. Both Philadelphia and Dallas avoided falling into a 3-0 hole. No NBA team has rallied from a 3-0 deficit to win a best-of-seven series. Both teams will try to level their series when they host game fours on Sunday.

## Mavs get job done

In Dallas, Luka Doncic came up just shy of a triple-double with 26 points, 13 rebounds and nine assists. And the Mavs' Slovenian star finally got some support as Jalen Brunson scored 28 points to lead five Dallas players to score in double figures. Most importantly, the Mavericks clamped down defensively on the top-seeded Suns, who were harried into 17 turnovers.

Jae Crowder led the Suns with 19 points while star



PHILADELPHIA: Bam Adebayo #13 of the Miami Heat shoots the ball against Joel Embiid #21 of the Philadelphia 76ers in the second half during Game Three of the 2022 NBA Playoffs Eastern Conference Semifinals at the Wells Fargo Center on May 6, 2022.—AFP

point guard Chris Paul—celebrating his 37th birthday—was held to 12 and Devin Booker scored 18. The Mavericks out-scored the Suns 50-32 in the paint and led them 16-10 in fastbreak points. "We played with pace and we played defense," Doncic said. "When we

get stops, we're a different team. If we play like this every game, we have a chance. "Phoenix is an amazing team, they're the number one team. It's going to be tough to beat them any time, but we did our job today."—AFP

## US Women Basketball season kicks off with key star held in Russia

WASHINGTON: Women's Basketball season kicks off in the United States on Friday without one of its brightest stars: Brittney Griner, who was arrested in Russia just before Moscow launched its war in Ukraine. It has been some 80 days since the two-time Olympic gold medalist was arrested at the Moscow airport. But it has also taken the United States that long to go public with its push for her freedom.

The six-foot-nine player was halted on February 17 on charges of carrying in her luggage vape cartridges with cannabis oil, illegal in Russia. The arrest, however, went largely unnoticed—US authorities initially kept a low profile in the case, fearing that the player could be used as leverage in the war with Ukraine.

There were no vigils, there were no demonstrations. Unlike Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai, whose disappearance caused a commotion in the world of sports and was on the front page of newspapers, Griner's arrest was surrounded by silence. It was not even revealed to the general public until March 5. But now, two weeks before the start of her trial, where Griner faces up to ten years in prison, the United States has changed its tack.

## 'Wrongfully detained'

The State Department announced for the first time on Tuesday that Griner was "wrongfully detained." As a result, the case will now be dealt with by the US administration's special envoy for hostage affairs, Roger Carstens. Carstens already helped secure the release of former US marine Trevor Reed, who was

freed from detention in Russia last week in a Cold War-style prisoner swap with a detained Russian pilot. The basketball player's wife, Cherelle Griner, who since March has mainly asked for respect for the couple's privacy, immediately spoke up.

"I love and miss you beyond words," Cherelle Griner posted Wednesday on her Instagram account, which includes a multitude of photos of the couple. Griner had been in Russia to play club basketball before the US season resumed, a common practice for American players, who can earn much higher salaries in foreign leagues than on domestic teams. Since her arrest, the player has been detained in a cell where she reads Dostoyevsky in a bed that is too small, according to Russian state news agency TASS. The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has announced that it wants to pay tribute to Griner by displaying her initials and her number, 42, on the floors of the league's 12 teams during the 2022 season. Griner's team, the Phoenix Mercury, which she helped lead to the championship final last year, faces the Las Vegas Aces at 7:00 pm local time Friday (0200 GMT Saturday).

The league promises that Griner will continue to collect her salary. The move has been welcomed by a number of female athletes, among them US soccer great Megan Rapinoe, who has become the face of the fight for equal pay between male and female athletes. "If a Top-5 men's player in the world had been detained in Russia right now," former men's basketball player Rex Chapman wrote on Twitter, "... it would be getting more urgent coverage."—AFP



HANGZHOU: Photo shows the Hangzhou Olympic Sports Centre Stadium, main stadium of the 19th Asian Games, in Hangzhou in China's eastern Zhejiang province.—AFP

## Asian Games postponed as China battles COVID

BEIJING: The Asian Games in September in the Chinese city of Hangzhou have been postponed because of COVID with new dates to be announced "in the near future", organizers said on Friday. The Games were scheduled to be held from September 10 to 25 but have now been delayed as China tries to stamp out a large resurgence in infections in several parts of the country. Hangzhou lies less than 200 kilometers from the country's biggest city Shanghai, which has endured a weeks-long lockdown as part of the ruling Communist Party's zero-tolerance approach to the virus.

The Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) said in a statement that the decision to postpone "was taken by all the stakeholders after carefully considering the pandemic situation and the size of the Games". The Asian Games typically attract more than 10,000 athletes from across the region. The World University Games, scheduled to begin next month in Chengdu and already delayed from last year, have also been postponed again, until 2023.

Organizers said last month that Hangzhou, a city of 12 million in eastern China, had finished constructing 56 competition venues for the Asian Games and Asian Para Games. At the time, they indicated that they planned to hold the event under a virus control plan that "learns from the successful experience" of the Beijing Winter Olympics, which were held in February in a strict COVID-secure bubble. Hangzhou was poised to become the third city in China to host the continental competition after Beijing in 1990 and Guangzhou in 2010. Some events were due to be held in other provincial cities including Ningbo, Wenzhou, Huzhou, Shaoxing and Jinhua. Taiwan's star weightlifter Kuo Hsing-chun, a gold medalist at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics—which were pushed back to last year by the pandemic—told AFP she had already accepted the latest disruption. "With the coronavirus outbreak getting more and more serious (in some places), I was more or less mentally prepared for this," she said.

But some national Olympic bodies lamented the impact the delay would have on their competitors. A delay was "not good for the athletes", Rajiv Mehta, secretary of the Indian Olympic Association, told AFP. "The athlete will be older by a year. Your practice changes." The OCA also said that the Asian Youth Games, scheduled to be held in December in the Chinese city of Shantou, would be cancelled having already been postponed once.

## 'Resolutely fight'

Almost all international sport has ground to a halt in China since COVID emerged in the Chinese city of

Wuhan in late 2019. The Beijing Olympics was an exception but it was held in a "closed loop" with everyone inside it—including athletes, staff, volunteers and media-taking daily COVID tests and not allowed to venture into the wider city or have contact with the public. China has stubbornly stuck to its zero-COVID policy, imposing strict lockdowns, quarantines and mass testing programs even while other countries start to reopen. Hangzhou last week beefed up virus curbs after logging a handful of cases, ordering around three-quarters of its population to get tested every 48 hours to access public spaces and transportation.

Officials in the city, home to some of China's biggest companies including technology giant Alibaba, said the moves would ensure "the virus has nowhere to hide or settle". Beijing has touted the zero-COVID strategy as proof that it values human life above material concerns and can avert the public health crises seen in many Western countries. Top Chinese leaders on Thursday again vowed to "unwaveringly adhere" to zero-COVID and "resolutely fight against" criticism of the policy, despite a growing public outcry.—AFP

## Rohit lauds Sams for holding nerve in Mumbai IPL win

MUMBAI: Mumbai Indians skipper Rohit Sharma on Friday praised the "skills" of Daniel Sams after the Australian fast bowler defended nine runs off the last over to hand his team their second win this IPL. The five-time champions edged out table-toppers Gujarat Titans by five runs as they kept down the opposition to 172-5 in a chase of 178 at Mumbai's Brabourne Stadium.

Gujarat were sailing along at 156-3 when skipper Hardik Pandya was run out and Mumbai seized the moment to make a comeback. David Miller, who made an unbeaten 19 in his 100th IPL match, and Rahul Tewatia, attempted to complete the chase but left-arm quick Sams denied the opposition with just three runs in the 20th over that included a run out.

"He was under the pump in a couple of games, but I have seen him for Australia and in the BBL (Big Bash League), he has a lot of skill," Rohit said of his bowler who was taken for 35 runs in an over by Kolkata Knight Riders' Pat Cummins. "It was not easy to defend nine runs." Openers Wriddhiman Saha (55) and Shubman Gill (52) added 106 but leg-spinner Murugan Ashwin sent the duo back to the dugout in his fourth over.—AFP



MIAMI: Lewis Hamilton of Great Britain driving the (44) Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 Team W13 on track during practice ahead of the F1 Grand Prix of Miami at the Miami International Autodrome on May 06, 2022.—AFP

## Hamilton keeps nose stud after showdown with GP 'bling' police

MIAMI: After threatening to skip the inaugural Miami Grand Prix over a bling clampdown, Lewis Hamilton removed almost all his jewelry in time to drive in practice Friday. The decision to enforce rules on jewelry and underwear had stirred controversy in the pre-practice press conferences. Hamilton threatened to spend the weekend seeing the sites of Miami instead while Sebastian Vettel said he thought the English driver was being "targeted".

Hamilton was wearing three watches, a bracelet, necklaces and a nose stud for the press conference and said he would need to "chop my ears off" to remove his earrings. "I couldn't get any more jewelry on," he joked. "We have spare drivers, so we're ready and prepared for the weekend. There is lots to do in this city so, I'll be good either way!" Hamilton said of the prospect of being forced out of the race.

Yet, after making his threat, he removed most of his jewelry, including the earrings, for the practice session but scored a small victory with an exemption for the nose stud. That exemption was reported to be for two races. Vettel showed his feelings by wearing underpants

over his race suit as a sign of protest. Race director Niels Wittich wrote in his guidelines for Sunday's race that driver jewelry and underwear should be checked, to ensure they comply with the FIA's fire-proof safety standards. In his race notes, Wittich wrote: "Metallic objects, such as jewelry, in contact with the skin can reduce heat transmission protection and thus may increase the risk of burn injuries in the event of a fire." Vettel said the actions appeared to be aimed at Hamilton. "Probably, at this stage, it's more of a personal thing and I feel in a way targeted to Lewis," said Vettel.

Aston Martin's Vettel suggested the topic was trivial. "We spoke about underpants as well, but really is that the most exciting thing we can talk about?" he asked. "There's a concern for safety, obviously, if you have stuff - and if the car does catch fire it would be unpleasant. "But, on the other hand, to some degree it's personal freedom and we are old enough to make our choices outside the car... We should be old enough also to make our choices inside the car."

Hamilton said his jewellery had never been a problem. "It's platinum so it's not magnetic and it's never been a safety issue. I've had so many MRI scans, for example, and I don't have to take out my platinum ones..." He said he wore three watches because they were set to three different time zones. Two drivers were sanctioned at last weekend's Monaco E-Prix in similar incidents, Pascal Wehrlein and Mitch Evans both taking penalty points on their 'super licences' and receiving fines of 1000 euros (\$1050) each for wearing metal chains during qualifying.—AFP



## Sports

# Night of comebacks in Serie A: Inter reclaim first and Juventus collapse

## Juventus concede two late goals to lose at Genoa

**MILAN:** On a night of wild swings in Serie A, Inter Milan came from two goals down Friday to beat Empoli and later Juventus conceded two late goals to lose at Genoa. In Milan, Lautaro Martinez scored twice as Inter fought back to beat Empoli 4-2 and jump to the top of Serie A. "The team showed character. We're here," said Inter coach Simone Inzaghi on DAZN. In the late game, Juventus dominated relegation-haunted Genoa only to concede an 87th minute equaliser and a 96th minute penalty, converted by Domenico Criscito, who had missed a late derby penalty a week earlier. "Football gives and takes," said Criscito.

Inter moved one point ahead of rivals AC Milan and have a superior goal difference but have played a game more. Juventus started the evening mathematically still in the title race. They ended it still in fourth, a point behind Napoli, and nine points behind Inter with two games left. AC Milan will go back on top if they win at Verona on Sunday. At the San Siro, Empoli, who are in 14th, dominated the first half-hour with Andrea Pinamonti, who is on loan from Inter, putting the visitors ahead after just five minutes.

Albanian midfielder Kristjan Asllani added a second after 28 minutes. Inter were level by halftime with Empoli captain Simone Romagnoli putting

through his own net five minutes before the break and Martinez grabbing his first just before the whistle. The Argentine was on target again in the 64th minute with his 19th goal of the season before former Arsenal striker Alexis Sanchez added a fourth in the dying seconds.

"This comeback victory against a very well organized opponent gives me great confidence," said Inzaghi. Genoa remained 19th and second from bottom, but closed to a point behind resurgent Salernitana in 17th. Juventus dominated but only led by one goal, a beautiful strike by Paulo Dybala, in the 48th minute. The Argentine later hit a post and Dusan Vlahovic and Moise Kean also squandered chances. With the Italian Cup Final looming next week, Juventus made changes.

Vlahovic and Dybala were among stars watching from the bench by the time Albert Gudmundsson scored an 87th minute equalizer. Six minutes into added time, Juventus defender Mattia De Sciglio conceded a penalty. Genoa captain Criscito had been given a similar chance in the Genoa derby the week before but squandered a 96th minute penalty against Sampdoria that would have given his team a draw. But he didn't hesitate and this time scored to earn an unexpected three points. "We're still here," said Criscito. — AFP



**MILAN:** Inter Milan's Italian midfielder Nicolò Barella (left) and Empoli's Albanian midfielder Kristjan Asllani go for the ball during the Italian Serie A football match between Inter and Empoli on May 6, 2022 at the San Siro stadium in Milan. — AFP



**NAIROBI:** Olympic 100m champion Italy's Lamont Marcell Jacobs (center) attends a press conference with USA's Fredrick Lee Kerley (right) and Kenya's Ferdinand Omanyala (left) in Nairobi on May 6, 2022. — AFP

## Jacobs makes 100m return in strong Nairobi lineup

**NAIROBI:** Olympic champion Lamont Marcell Jacobs said a high-quality 100 meters field at Saturday's Kip Keino Classic meet in Nairobi persuaded him to make his first appearance at the distance since his shock win at the Tokyo Games last year. Jacobs and silver medalist Fred Kerley will go head-to-head for the first time since the Olympics.

Their clash comes six weeks since Jacobs stormed to victory to take the world indoor 60m gold in Belgrade when the Italian chased down the American world 100m champion Christian Coleman in the final. Jacobs said he was motivated to come to Nairobi by a rematch with the American Kerley, fellow Italian Filippo Tortu and the Kenyan and African 100m record holder Ferdinand Omanyala.

"The reason why I came here to Nairobi at this early stage of the season is because of the quality field of the competitors we have in the 100m," Jacobs said at a press conference on Friday. "The thought about meeting these guys is the decision that brought me to Kenya." Kerley, who holds a

world-class 9.84sec from Tokyo, is looking forward to a meeting on a track where he ran an impressive 19.76sec over 200m last year.

"I'm happy and look forward to running fast at Kasarani where I ran a PB in 200m in September," the multi-talented American, who celebrates his 27th birthday on Saturday, said. "For me there's more pressure on my shoulders to perform in the 100m. I came to perform and that's what I will do," Kerley said. Home favorite Omanyala clocked an African record of 9.77sec to finish second to American Trayvon Bromell last year. "This year is going to be better than last year. I am not looking at any of my opponents but I am prepared to stop the clock at 9.90," said Omanyala.

The women's 100m is equally explosive with Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, the three-time Olympic gold medalist, taking on rising Namibian star Christine Mboma, the Olympic 200m silver medalist. Their anticipated clash with Sha'Carri Richardson failed to materialize after the American dropped out of the meeting. Fraser-Pryce, 35, was full of praise for the rapid progress made by 18-year-old Mboma, who comes to Kenya fresh from her two-race domination at a meeting in Botswana last weekend. Her 10.97sec in the 100m was an African under-20 record and she also flashed to a world-leading 21.87sec in the 200m. She goes in both sprints in Nairobi too. — AFP

like this before, I was on the limit," he said. "Van der Poel was the strongest today, but I will try again on Sunday." The Lotto-Soudal team tweeted that Ewan would keep racing. "Apart from several abrasions, Caleb came away without any severe injuries and will take the start in the ITT tomorrow," they said.

Ineos Grenadiers leader Richard Carapaz gained a tiny advantage over all his long-term rivals when he hung on to the shirt-tails of the winning clique to finish four seconds ahead of Bike Exchange's Simon Yates, UAE's Jaoa Almeida and DSM's Romain Bardet. "It was the first day and I think we got rid of some of the stress of starting the Giro," said Carapaz. The race returns to Budapest on Saturday for a testing in-city circuit of 9.2km with the first rider down the starters ramp at 14.00 local time.

The 176-rider peloton left Budapest for the first of 21 stages totaling 3,446km. That prospect was no deterrent to Italian pair Mattia Bais and Filippo Tagliani who broke away as soon as the starter's flag waved. They were only reeled in by a reluctant peloton 13km from the finish. The Giro opens with three days in Hungary and on Friday mounted Hussars galloped alongside the peloton, which itself looked impressive as it swept along the banks of the Danube river towards the castle at Visegrad.

The race transfers to Italy for stage four, which culminates with a potential skirmish of the big guns on the volcanic slopes of Sicily's Mount Etna. Hungary was originally scheduled to host the start of the Giro in 2020 but that year's race was postponed until October due to the pandemic and held entirely within Italy. The Tour de France opening stages will be contested in Copenhagen in July, while the Vuelta a Espana in August also features a foreign start at Utrecht. — AFP

## Van der Poel on target as he takes Giro opener

**VISEGRAD:** Dutch Alpecin rider Mathieu van der Poel said he had entered the Giro d'Italia because he thought he could win the opening stage, and on Friday he delivered. "The idea really started to take shape to do the Giro because the first stage really suited me," he said after the victory. "And it's crazy today, I did it."

Van der Poel edged Eritrean Biniam Girmay and Pello Bilbao to the finish line atop a 4km climb after a 195km run from Budapest to the hilltop citadel at Visegrad. Australian sprinter Caleb Ewan fell heavily when making his burst for the line. One-day specialist Van Der Poel took the first race leader's pink jersey, and collected a time bonus of 10 seconds as the first rider across the summit.

"I knew positioning would be key," said Van der Poel, whose team flew to the front at the foot of the climb as he then lurked patiently until the final moment. "I didn't have enough energy left to raise my arms. This is a typical finish where it hurts a lot to sprint after a final climb." "Tomorrow will be interesting to see if I can keep the lead in the time-trial. It'll be difficult but I'll try," promised the Alpecin rider, who led the Tour de France for six days in 2021.

### 'On the limit'

Grimay is seeking what would be a historic major tour stage win for Eritrea. "I had never done a sprint

## Russell tops the times for Mercedes in opening practice

**MIAMI:** George Russell confirmed Mercedes recovery from their early-season problems when he topped the times in Friday's second free practice for this weekend's inaugural Miami Grand Prix. Making the most of reliability problems for world champion Max Verstappen and the Red Bull team, the 24-year-old Briton clocked a best lap in one minute and 29.938 seconds to outpace championship leader Charles Leclerc of Ferrari by 0.106.

His performance suggested that, following four poor early-season races, the Silver Arrows' package of aerodynamic upgrades was working. Sergio Perez of Red Bull was third, a further tenth adrift, narrowly ahead of seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton in the second McLaren. Hamilton was given a late exemption to take part in the event with his nose ring following a clampdown on 'driver bling', having removed all of his other jewelry shortly before the opening session. Fernando Alonso was fifth for Alpine ahead of McLaren's Lando Norris and Pierre Gasly of Alpha Tauri in a session interrupted by two red flags on a warm, dry day at the new Miami International Autodrome.

Leclerc had topped the times ahead of Russell in the opening morning session, but was unable to repeat the feat in the afternoon when Ferrari teammate Carlos Sainz crashed again. In front of an

enthusiastic sellout crowd in Miami Gardens, the session began with Esteban Ocon setting the pace on mediums, the track having cooled to 44 degrees following a frantic morning session topped by Leclerc.

It did not last long for the Alpine driver as he was soon outpaced by Sainz before Leclerc took command and the Ferrari men traded fastest laps. Verstappen missed the early action as Red Bull decided to change his gearbox after he had grazed a wall during the first session. Valtteri Bottas, of Alfa Romeo, was also inactive after his morning crash.

Perez, in the second Red Bull, managed to split the Ferrari after 23 minutes before Sainz triggered the second red flag of the day when he spun backwards into the barriers at Turn 14. He was unhurt, but after setbacks in Melbourne and Imola, it was another blow to his confidence. After a 12-minute delay, during which Perez's crew helped on the world champion's car, Verstappen emerged to join the fray only to be called back to the pits. "I can't steer," said Verstappen, who was almost involved in a collision with Lance Stroll's Aston Martin as he struggled.

He returned to the track, but the rear brakes on his car overheated and caught fire - as chief rival Leclerc went fastest on soft in 1:30.044 only to be surpassed by Russell in 1:29.938, a lap that confirmed the Silver Arrows revival. With 20 minutes remaining, Russell led Leclerc and Perez with Hamilton fourth and Verstappen frustrated without a timed lap. His problem was diagnosed as a hydraulics issue. Another red flag followed, with 12 to go, when Nicholas Latifi pulled up and stopped in his Williams, before a final flurry of action. — AFP

## Alcaraz downs Nadal to book Djokovic clash

**MADRID:** Carlos Alcaraz overcame an injury scare on his way to a milestone victory over Rafael Nadal on Friday to set up a blockbuster semi-final against Novak Djokovic in Madrid. Alcaraz entered the contest with a 0-2 record against Nadal, but the 35-year-old arrived in Madrid with little to no preparation on clay after six weeks nursing a rib injury.

In an eventful quarter-final at the Caja Magica, the 19-year-old Alcaraz beat 21-time Grand Slam champion Nadal 6-2, 1-6, 6-3 for his 26th victory of the season. "It means a lot to me, all the hard work that I put in every day paid off today to beat Rafa, beat the best player in history on clay, it means a lot to me," said Alcaraz, who is the first teenager to beat Nadal on a clay court.

"It affected me a lot the fall in the second set but when I lost the second, I went to the bathroom and I believed I was able to get back, I was able to do my best, try everything on court, fight until the last ball and I think it was the key." The first three games went against serve and lasted over 20 minutes before Alcaraz finally held for a 3-1 advantage. Nadal mustered just one more game in that set.

In the third game of the second set, Alcaraz took a tumble trying to retrieve a ball and had a medical timeout at 1-2 to get his ankle taped. Replays showed Alcaraz had badly rolled his ankle. Nadal broke upon resumption before play was interrupted again for attention to someone in the crowd. After a long pause, Nadal held and ran away with the set with Alcaraz visibly restricted in his movement. Alcaraz moved better at the start of the decider after his toilet break, leaping to a 3-1 lead. He completed the win in two hours and 28 minutes and set up a clash with Djokovic.

### 'Fantastic for our sport'

"I will text (David) Nalbandian to see how he did it. I will fight and let's see what happens tomorrow," joked Alcaraz, referring to Miomir Kecmanovic's coach David Nalbandian, who beat Nadal, Djokovic and Roger Federer on his way to the Madrid title in 2007. Djokovic reached his seventh Madrid semi-final, easing past Pole Hubert Hurkacz 6-3, 6-4 to record a 30th career victory in the Spanish capital.

The world number one will face Alcaraz for the



**MADRID:** Spain's Carlos Alcaraz serves to Spain's Rafael Nadal during their 2022 ATP Tour Madrid Open tennis tournament singles quarter-final match at the Caja Magica in Madrid on May 6, 2022. — AFP

first time and heaped praise on the young Spaniard, having spent some time with him practicing earlier this week. "I love to watch him play, as a lot of other players on the tour. He's fantastic for our sport, no doubt. I think it's great that we have a young player who is doing so well and giving a new fresh breath to the tennis world," said Djokovic.

"Seeing that and knowing that he's a very nice guy, very humble with good values, is a perfect combination." Hurkacz saved two match points on his own serve at 5-3 in the second set, forcing Djokovic to serve out for an 81-minute success. Djokovic has not competed much in 2022 as his vaccination status that has prevented him from playing in Australia or entering the United States.

His win on Friday was just his seventh of the year. He'll be trying to make a second final of the season, having placed runner-up in Belgrade last month. Monte Carlo champion Stefanos Tsitsipas squeezed past familiar foe Andrey Rublev 6-3, 2-6, 6-4 to record a tour-leading 27th match-win of the season. The 2019 Madrid runner-up edged ahead 5-4 in his head-to-head against Rublev and now awaits defending champion Alexander Zverev or Canadian eighth seed Felix Auger-Aliassime in the semi-finals. — AFP





LONDON: Wolverhampton Wanderers' Portuguese goalkeeper Jose Sa (2nd right) gathers the ball during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and Wolverhampton Wanderers at Stamford Bridge on May 7, 2022. —AFP

## Watford relegated from Premier League

### Chelsea held 2-2 in front of prospective owner Boehly

LONDON: Chelsea blew a two-goal lead in front of prospective owner Todd Boehly as Wolves snatched a dramatic 2-2 draw, while Watford were relegated from the Premier League after defeat at Crystal Palace on Saturday. The consortium led by Los Angeles Dodgers co-owner Boehly has won the battle to buy Chelsea in a £4.25 billion (\$5.2 billion) deal. Roman Abramovich put the west London club on the market in early March, just days before he was sanctioned by the British government following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

After a lengthy bidding process involving several groups, Boehly and his fellow investors were picked by Raine Group, the New York bank overseeing the sale. Boehly's consortium includes a fellow co-owner of the Dodgers baseball franchise, Mark Walter, Swiss billionaire Hansjoerg Wyss and US investment firm Clearlake Capital.

They still need to satisfy the Premier League's owners' and directors' test and gain approval from the UK government, but Chelsea expect the sale to be completed by the end of the month. After fears for

Chelsea's future were sparked by the protracted sale, Blues boss Thomas Tuchel welcomed the takeover, saying: "It gives us an outlook if terms are agreed and hopefully the process will be streamlined and go forward as soon as possible. Good news."

But Tuchel's third-placed team were unable to celebrate the deal with a victory as they squandered an opportunity to move closer to qualifying for next season's Champions League via a top-four finish. Romelu Lukaku, who has endured a wretched season following his £97 million club record move from Inter Milan, converted a VAR-awarded penalty after he was fouled by Romain Saiss in the 56th minute. The Chelsea striker followed his first Premier League goal since December 29 with another two minutes later.

This time he produced a fine 20-yard finish from Christian Pulisic's cross as Boehly rose from his seat to celebrate. But Wolves forward Francisco Trincao set up a tense finish when he hammered home from the edge of the area in the 79th minute. And Chelsea cracked deep into stoppage time as Conor Coady nodded a close-range equaliser to leave Boehly

shaking his head in frustration. Chelsea are six points ahead of fifth-placed Tottenham, who play their game in hand at quadruple-chasing Liverpool later on Saturday.

#### Watford go down

At Selhurst Park, Watford needed a win to keep alive their faint hopes of avoiding the drop, but Wilfried Zaha's first-half penalty was enough to condemn them to relegation. With three games still to play, second-bottom Watford are certain to drop into the Championship 12 months after winning promotion as second-tier runners-up.

The Hornets will head into the close-season looking for a new boss after their current manager Roy Hodgson confirmed he would not be extending his short-term contract. Hodgson, 74, was unable to rescue Watford after replacing the sacked Claudio Ranieri in January to become the club's third manager this term following Xisco's dismissal in October. Watford were heading for relegation in the 31st minute when Hassane Kamara handled Michael

Olise's header, conceding a penalty that Zaha converted for his 14th goal this season.

Burnley wasted a chance to boost their survival chances as Aston Villa cruised to a 3-1 victory at Turf Moor. Caretaker boss Mike Jackson saw Burnley beaten for the first time in five games since replacing the sacked Sean Dyche. Former Burnley striker Danny Ings put Villa ahead in the seventh minute with a composed finish from Emiliano Buendia's pass. Buendia slotted home from Lucas Digne's cross in the 31st minute.

Ollie Watkins scored Villa's third with a diving header in the 52nd minute and although Maxwell Cornet struck for the hosts in stoppage time, Burnley sit perilously just two points above the bottom three. Burnley would be back in the relegation zone if third-bottom Everton beat Leicester on Sunday and fourth-bottom Leeds avoid defeat at Arsenal. Brentford crushed Southampton 3-0 at their Community Stadium, with the goals coming from Pontus Jansson, Yoane Wissa and Kristoffer Ajer. — AFP

### Union stun Freiburg as Leverkusen seal top-four spot

BERLIN: Dutch winger Sheraldo Becker grabbed a goal and an assist as Union Berlin stunned top-four hopefuls Freiburg with a 4-1 win in a dramatic afternoon in the Bundesliga race for Europe on Saturday. Union smashed in three goals in the first half to put themselves on course for the Europa League in sixth and dent Freiburg's hopes of a fairytale Champions League berth.

Freiburg remain in a Champions League place overnight, but will now drop out of the top four if RB Leipzig beat Augsburg on Sunday. Union's own fairytale continues however, with the Berliners now guaranteed a second successive season in European competition, having only been promoted in 2019. They still have an outside chance of reaching the Champions League, having moved within a point of Freiburg with one match remaining.

Grischa Proemel gave Union the lead early on, bundling the ball over the line from close range after Taiwo Awoniyi's effort hit the post. Lucas Hoeler had an equaliser ruled out for handball before Union captain Christopher Trimmel headed in Becker's cross on the half-hour mark. Becker then rampaged down the right wing to give his side a 3-0 lead at half-time and leave the home fans shellshocked. But Freiburg have come from behind at home before this season, and they came out fighting in the second half.

Hoeler gave them fresh hope on the hour mark when he wriggled free of the back line to poke a long ball into the bottom corner. But substitute Andras Schafer added a fourth for Union to end any hopes of a home comeback. While Freiburg were left to rue a missed opportunity, third-placed Bayer Leverkusen



FREIBURG: Freiburg's German forward Lucas Hoeler (right) and Union Berlin's German defender Paul Jaeckel vie for the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match between SC Freiburg and FC Union Berlin in Freiburg, on May 7, 2022. —AFP

secured Champions League qualification as Czech striker Patrik Schick fired them to a 4-2 win at Hoffenheim.

French striker Georginio Rutter gave Hoffenheim an early lead after a mistake from Leverkusen defender Piero Hincapie. Schick then brought the visitors level with an elegant, first-time finish, but Christoph Baumgartner restored the lead with a header just two minutes later. Yet Leverkusen turned the game on its head with two goals in three minutes in the second half.

Moussa Diaby slotted in an equaliser on 73 minutes, and Schick danced through the box to make it 3-2 moments later before Lucas Alario struck in stoppage time. Hoffenheim's defeat means that Cologne are also effectively guaranteed European football next season with a top-seven finish, despite losing 1-0 at home to Wolfsburg. Former Cologne player Yannick Gerhardt scored just before half-time to give Wolfsburg an unexpected win, but delirious Cologne fans still invaded the pitch to celebrate at full-time. —AFP

### 'Dossier closed' on Algeria's World Cup appeal, FIFA says

ALGIERS: FIFA has rejected Algeria's desperate bid to have their World Cup play-off with Cameroon replayed, saying on Saturday "they consider the dossier closed". Algeria won the first leg of the play-off 1-0 in March but lost the return leg 2-1 at home after extra time to miss out on one of the five berths at the finals for African nations.

"FIFA can confirm that the Algerian Football Federation (FAF) submitted a complaint to FIFA's Disciplinary Committee in relation to the FIFA World Cup qualifier Algeria vs Cameroon played on

29 March 2022, and subsequently FAF also requested to have FIFA's Referee Committee feedback," a FIFA spokesperson told AFP on Saturday. The committee itself said in a report that "all the incidents that occurred during the match were carefully examined by the two video referees, in accordance with the Laws of the Game and the protocol of video assistance to the referee".

After 90 minutes in Blida, Cameroon led 1-0. In the 28th minute of extra time, Ahmed Touba scored a goal that would have put Algeria through, but Karl Toko Ekambi replied in the fourth minute of added time at the end of extra time. The Algerian federation said the refereeing of the second leg by Gambian Bakary Gassama was "scandalous". Algeria coach Djamel Belmadi repeatedly blasted the refereeing in the match and in Africa in general. Algerian fans have demonstrated outside FIFA's headquarters in Zurich. —AFP

### Fraser-Pryce clocks world-leading 10.67 to win 100 meters

NAIROBI: Jamaican sprint legend Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce posted the fastest 100m in the world this year as she clocked 10.67secs to win her season opener in Nairobi on Saturday. The 35-year-old, who has won eight Olympic medals including silver in Tokyo last summer, was a comfortable winner after 18-year-old Namibian sprint sensation Christine Mboma, pulled up suddenly before collapsing to the track. Fraser-Pryce's winning time was close to her personal best of 10.60, set in Lausanne in August 2021.

Only four other women have run the distance

faster than Fraser-Pryce's time on Saturday - Americans Marion Jones (10.65) and Carmelita Jeter (10.64), fellow Olympic champion Elaine Thompson-Herah (10.54), and the controversial world record holder American Florence Griffith-Joyner (10.49). Earlier, men's Olympic 100m champion Marcell Jacobs withdrew at the last minute from his long-awaited return to the distance with intestinal problems.

The Italian, who was a surprise winner at last year's Olympics, was due to go head-to-head with silver medallist Fred Kerley for the first time since Tokyo. Jacobs confirmed on social media that he would next be in action as planned on home soil in a 200m race in Savona. Instead, Kerley lost to home runner Ferdinand Omanyala, who powered to victory in 9.85secs, also a world-leading time. American Kerley could only manage 9.92secs to finish behind African record holder Omanyala, who clocked his personal best of 9.77secs last year. —AFP