



5 Pope leaves hospital, quips 'I am still alive'



9 NBK focus is on maintaining leadership in delivering innovative products: Al-Fulaij



16 Liverpool humbled by Haaland-less Man City



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Labor force hits 2m, domestic helpers 25% of expat workers

Accountants, others to be tested • Govt eyes selective tax • 300K driving licenses face axe

FM hosts Ramadan reception



KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and his wife Reema Al-Sabah receive heads of diplomatic missions and regional and international organizations on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan. — KUNA (See Page 3)

KUWAIT: The latest labor force statistics in Kuwait issued by the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) as of the end of 2022 indicate that the size of labor force in Kuwait increased by 8.2 percent and reached 2.037 million employees, excluding the number of household workers (1.882 million workers as of the end of 2021). Adding the household labor sector, which is about 753,000 workers, the total reaches 2.79 million workers (2.476 million workers as of the end of 2021).

Household workers constitute nearly 27 percent of total labor force in Kuwait as of the end of 2022 (24 percent of the total labor force as of the end of 2021), according to a report by Al-Shall Consulting, which cautioned that numbers of CSB sometimes differ substantially from those of the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI).

The monthly average wage for male and female Kuwaitis in both the public and private sectors is KD 1,493 (KD 1,491 at the end of 2021) and KD 338 for non-Kuwaitis (KD 338 at the end of 2021). The figures above do not include household labor, which would have a significant downward impact on the non-Kuwaiti wage rates if taken into consideration, nor do they include the governmental support allocations to Kuwaiti workers in the private sector. Approximately more than a quarter of total ex-

patriate workers in Kuwait are household workers according to the CSB, totaling 753,000 at the end of 2022 (594,000 workers end of 2021), an increase of 26.9 percent. This household labor is divided between 347,000 males and 406,000 females. India has the highest share of household workers of both genders, constituting 44.8 percent of total household workers, followed by the Philippines with 26.6 percent.

Merging the numbers of household workers with other expat categories according to nationalities, Indians make up 835,000 workers (717,000 workers at the end of 2021), or 29.9 percent of the total labor force including Kuwaiti employees and 35.6 percent of the total foreign labor force, taking the lead in both cases. (See Page 2)

Meanwhile, the Public Authority of Manpower (PAM) will launch continuous campaigns after the month of Ramadan to check qualifications of residents, which will include financial and technical professions, the first being expats who work in accounting in the private sector, as their numbers have reached more than 16,000.

The campaigns will be conducted by the professional safety center at PAM, which conducted a study of academic qualifications of expats who have

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Trump 'shocked' by indictment but 'ready to fight'

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump's legal team went on the offensive on Friday following his historic indictment, vowing the former president would never seek a plea deal and was ready "to fight" all charges. The 76-year-old Trump, who is hoping to recapture the White House in 2024, chimed in with attacks on the prosecutors who brought the charges against him and even the judge expected to hear the case.

"ELECTION INTERFERENCE,

KANGAROO COURT!" Trump posted on his social media platform Truth Social, adding that Juan Manuel Marchal, the judge who may preside over an eventual trial, "hates me." Trump is to be booked, fingerprinted and will have a mugshot taken at a Manhattan courthouse on Tuesday afternoon before appearing before a judge as the first ever American president to face criminal charges.

"The president will not be put in handcuffs," said Joe Tacopina, one of Trump's attorneys, adding that he does not believe prosecutors will "allow this to become a circus." Tacopina said the hush-money case being brought by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg against Trump faces "substantial legal challenges" and the former

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NEW YORK: Newspaper front pages with former US President Donald Trump are displayed at a newsstand on March 31, 2023. — AFP

Tate moved from detention to house arrest in Romania

BUCHAREST: Controversial influencer Andrew Tate and his brother were released on Friday after three months of detention in Romania and moved to house arrest while they are investigated for alleged human trafficking and rape. Tate, a British-American former kickboxer with millions of online followers, along with his younger brother and two Romanian women, are under investigation for allegedly "forming an orga-

nized criminal group, human trafficking and rape". Tate, 36, and his brother Tristan, 34, were arrested in late December, and have been held in pre-trial detention ever since, which was again extended last week. However, an appeals court "rejected the prosecution's proposal to extend the pre-trial detention" and ordered the pair be placed "under house arrest", according to a court ruling seen by AFP.

Accompanied by their Romanian lawyers, the brothers — who deny all charges against them — were released around midnight (2100 GMT) from the police central arrest premises in Bucharest amid chaotic scenes, an AFP journalist reported. "Freedom at last," a smiling Andrew Tate said to whoops and hollers from supporters as he arrived at his house.

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BUCHAREST: British-US former professional kickboxer and controversial influencer Andrew Tate (right) and his brother Tristan Tate walk out of a detention center late March 31, 2023. — AFP

Musk defends paid Twitter as deadline looms

WASHINGTON: Elon Musk on Friday defended his controversial pay model for Twitter, claiming that any social media platform that didn't follow suit would fail because they would be swarmed by bots. Musk

made his prediction on the eve of Twitter's April 1 ultimatum that verified accounts with the cherished blue tick that had not forked over cash would lose it.

"The fundamental challenge here is that it's (easy) to create literally 10,000 or 100,000 fake Twitter accounts using just one computer at home and with modern AI (artificial intelligence)," Musk told a question and answer session on Twitter. "That's the reason for really pressing hard on verified where the verified requires a number from a reputable phone carrier and a credit card," Musk said.

"My prediction is that any so-called social media

network that doesn't do this will fail," Musk added. The change in system puts pressure on companies, journalists and celebrities who used Twitter as their main channel of communication and relied on the blue tick for credibility. And it also raises the specter of imposters and jokesters paying for an officially verified, but totally fake account.

In the US, the subscription plan, known as Twitter Blue, costs \$8 a month or \$84 a year, or \$11 a month if bought through Apple's app store. Since its creation in 2009, the blue tick or checkmark became a

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RAMADAN KAREEM

Month of forgiveness, prayer and charity

By Tahira Khan

Fasting has been an integral part of many cultures and religions around the world for centuries. In Islam, fasting is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, and is observed during the blessed month of Ramadan. This month-long period is a time of spiritual reflection, self-improvement, and community bonding for Muslims around the world. Fasting in the Holy month of Ramadan is of extreme importance to Muslims.

Islamic fasting is abstinence from food, drink, and other physical needs during a certain period of time. The fast begins at dawn and ends at sunset, and during this time, Muslims are required to abstain from food, drink, smoking, and sexual activity.

The blessed month of Ramadan is an important time for Muslims as it is a time of reflection and self-discipline. Fasting during Ramadan is not just about abstaining from food and drink but also about refraining from negative behavior and thoughts. It is a time for Muslims to reflect on their actions, seek forgiveness, and strive to become better individuals.

"Allahumma innaka afuwun tuhibbul 'afwa fa'fu 'annee," translated as: "O Allah, You are Forgiving and Love forgiveness, so Forgive me." The afore-mentioned supplication is a common invocation that Muslims recite during the auspicious month of Ramadan and throughout the year.

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Ramadan: Some Christian faithful fast in solidarity

Kuwait leaders lauded for promoting religious tolerance



KUWAIT: Some Christian faithful pray inside the Catholic Church in Kuwait City. — Photos by Chidi Emmanuel

In my view

Can she pass her citizenship?



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According to Article 2 of the Kuwaiti nationality law issued by Amiri decree No 15 of 1959, "Every person born in Kuwait or born abroad from a Kuwaiti father is Kuwaiti". Consequently, the Kuwaiti nationality law clearly disclosed the transgression of the most important right of a Kuwaiti woman, which is her right to give her nationality, either to her children or her husband, and this is in clear violation of the provision of article 29 of the Kuwaiti constitution, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex.

Thereupon, discrimination between women's right and men's right to nationality is obvious, as article 7 of Amiri decree no. 15 of 1959 considers minor children of a naturalized Kuwaiti as Kuwaiti and gives them the right to decide to choose their original nationality during the year after reaching adulthood. But children of a naturalized Kuwaiti who are born after his acquiring of Kuwaiti nationality shall be deemed Kuwaitis in an original capacity. This provision shall apply to those who were born before the entry into force of this law.

Accordingly, the minor children of a foreigner who acquired Kuwaiti nationality are considered Kuwaitis by naturalization and by the force of law unless they decide to choose their original nationality during the year following their reaching the age of maturity. As for his children who are born after acquiring the Kuwaiti nationality, they are considered Kuwaitis in an original capacity, and this paragraph was added by law no. 44 of 1994 in which discrimination on the basis of gender was granted to a naturalized foreigner, while Kuwaiti women did not obtain this advantage, although the rights that the law granted to men have negative repercussions on the social level, as it will result in distinction and discrimination between members of the same family.

Paragraph 2 of article 5 stipulates that the son of a Kuwaiti woman married to a foreigner must maintain residency until reaching the age of maturity. If his father is a foreign prisoner, or his mother is irrevocably divorced, or her husband has died, the law stipulates that the minister of interior shall be given discretionary power in granting nationality, which makes it a grant subject to the discretionary power of the minister, while it is a human right.

Consequently, the administrative decision becomes in a legal rank above international treaties, the constitution and the law, which is deemed an infringement of the "principle of legitimacy", which is considered the most important legal principle, in which the state with its bodies, institutions and individuals are subject to the provisions of the law, otherwise its actions are considered illegal and tainted by invalidity, as submission to the principle of legitimacy is the watershed that defines the idea of a legal state that respects human rights by defending the rights and public freedoms of individuals without discrimination based on sex.

By Chidi Emmanuel

KUWAIT: Fasting is a religious practice observed by many faiths around the world. It involves abstaining from food, drink or other physical needs for a certain period of time. Muslims observe fasting during the month of Ramadan, which is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, while Catholics fast mostly during Lent, while other Christian faithful fast according to their doctrines.

Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam, which are the foundations of the Muslim faith and practice. While Ramadan is primarily associated with Islam, it is not uncommon to find Christians fasting alongside their Muslim brethren. This practice is often seen as a gesture of solidarity and respect for the Islamic faith.

Kuwait Times interviewed some Christian faithful who said they are fasting during the holy month. "The act of fasting has deep roots in Christianity as well. In the Bible, Jesus (PBUH) fasted for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness before beginning his ministry. Christians also observe various periods of fasting throughout the year, such as Lent and Advent," Liza Rodriguez and her friends said after praying in the Catholic Church in Kuwait City.

"Fasting during Ramadan is not a requirement for Christians, but some choose to do so as a way of participating in interfaith dialogue and building bridges between different religious communities," Pastor Milli of the National Evangelical Church said. Additionally, some Christians see fasting as a spiritual discipline that can help them grow closer to God. "Although Christians are a minority in Kuwait, they are allowed to practice their religion freely. Some Christians in Kuwait choose to fast as a sign of respect and in solidarity for the Islamic faith or as a personal spiritual practice, but it is not obligatory," Nelson Peter, a Catholic, told Kuwait Times.

The constitution of Kuwait guarantees freedom of religion and protects the right of Christians to practice their faith without interference. While there are no specific rules governing how Christians should fast during Ramadan, some choose to follow similar guidelines as Muslims, such as abstaining from food and drink during daylight hours. Others choose to fast in different ways or at different times.

"We always fast during Ramadan. Fasting is easier when almost everybody around you fasts. My wife advised me to do so and I love it. Fasting can be seen as a way to purify oneself and draw closer to God. It can also



be a way to demonstrate self-control and discipline. When Christians fast alongside Muslims during Ramadan, it can be seen as a way to build bridges between the two faiths and promote understanding and tolerance. It can also be a way to show support for Muslims who may face discrimination or prejudice in their communities," Das Thomas explained.

"Christians fasting during Ramadan is not really a common practice, as Ramadan is a religious observance specific to Islam. However, there are some Christians who choose to fast during Ramadan as a way of showing

solidarity with their Muslim neighbors and friends. Coincidentally, this year's Ramadan coincided with the Lent season and Easter period when most Catholic faithful fast too," Evangelist Innocent Affia said.

"Ramadan is so fascinating. Even the ambience feels different during the holy month. I have lived in Kuwait for over 10 years and Ramadan is my best period. Just like my Muslim friends, I fast to get closer to God. It is a rare privilege and I thank God for that," said Jossy Nathan, a Catholic, thanking the Kuwait leadership for promoting peace and religious tolerance.

Economic impact of 10-day holiday

By Ghadeer Ghloom

KUWAIT: Since the suggestion by MP Hamad Al-Obaid for a 10-day holiday in Kuwait on the last 10 days of the holy month of Ramadan, differing opinions have emerged. Some people are in support of a 10-day work suspension, while others fear it would hinder and badly affect the state's finances. Kuwait Times interviewed three Kuwaiti economists for their opinions on this issue. Some say this can have an effect on the state's economic stability, while others see that Kuwait's economy is mainly dependent on oil and will not be affected much by Obaid's suggestion.

Kuwaiti economist Salman Al-Naqi told Kuwait Times that the term "transaction costs" in economics refers to delays in procedures that can harm enterprise performance. Therefore, the parliamentary proposal for a 10-day holiday during Ramadan could create additional transaction costs for businesses and the entire state's economy. The extended closure of government authorities could lead to significant disruptions in several phases.

From the financial sector's perspective, this could cause losses due to trading suspension at the stock market, the Central Bank's inability to update exchange rates of foreign currencies against the Kuwaiti dinar, and confusion for banks in sorting out deposit maturity dates and liabilities. Additionally,



Hajjaj BuKhadour



Mohammad Ramadan



Salman Naqi

since more than 70 percent of economic activities in Kuwait are dominated by the government, this holiday could suspend most activities within the economy. MPs in Kuwait need to keep track of global economic changes and propose more realistic and efficient measures in line with the state's ambitious vision to become a global financial hub.

In agreement with Naqi's hypothesis, another economist Hajjaj BuKhadour said any suspension of workdays will hinder workers' productivity. Giving this holiday will affect services and their cost and quality. Therefore, such a decision should not be taken randomly. BuKhadour suggested providing shorter working hours rather than canceling them or dividing work into two parts during the last 10 days of Ramadan for people to have time to pray and worship. "Work is also considered worship in Islam, so there will be a balance and security of production, which is better than stopping work and production completely through a 10-day holiday," he said.

Ramadan can be challenging time for students

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: For Muslims, Ramadan is a holy month that symbolizes dedication, reflection and discipline to grow spiritually and get closer to God. But for students, Ramadan can be a challenging time, especially with exams during or immediately after the holy month. Kuwait Times spoke with counseling psychologist Barehan Hassan to learn more about the best ways to study in Ramadan.

Hassan said many students think fasting may affect their study and energy, but studies have proved that fasting has a lot of benefits for the brain. "Fasting causes a shift in the resources the body uses for energy. During metabolism, the body switches from using glucose to ketones to provide the body with energy. Ketones are a type of amino acid that the liver produces from fat," she said.

"The increased use of ketones during periods of

fasting can make the brain more flexible, productive and able to focus," Hassan explained, noting that fasting may also improve cognition and mood to enhance the functioning of the brain. This boosts intelligence, which has been indicated by many surveys that revealed that individuals during fasting are more able to focus and solve complex problems and more easily make decisions.

Hassan pointed out that students must be helped to choose their best concentration times, which is usually after suhoor and Fajr prayer, adding students must avoid mental stress that usually comes late in the day and after iftar, advising them to rest for an hour before iftar so that they are ready two hours later to study without being tired.

"Plan the schedule. The early morning hours are peaceful and quiet, making it an ideal time to study. Following their daily routine and assignments, students must also establish sleep schedules from midnight until dawn or from after dawn until morning. It is possible to study effectively during Ramadan with the correct attitude and approach," she said.

Hassan advised students to devise more effective and less demanding study techniques, because they might find it challenging to sit down and pay attention while reading a complete textbook. "Students may use visual aids like flashcards or posters



if they are attempting to study while fasting. Keep the simple duties for later in the day and complete the challenging ones first thing. Remember to tidy up your desk to put away any distractions so that you can study in a distraction-free setting," she noted.

Hassan indicated that taking numerous breaks throughout Ramadan is essential for maintaining focus and mental clarity. To keep their focus off hunger, students must take regular breaks from studying and should try to engage in enjoyable and energizing activities. Parents may as well consider engaging them in interactive study sessions with a friend or two. They could participate in interactive research online as well.

Local

Zain hosts Ramadan iftar banquet for personnel at Nuwaiseeb Border Port

Recognizing efforts of MoI and Customs personnel during Holy Month

KUWAIT: Zain, Kuwait's leading digital service provider, hosted a special Ramadan iftar banquet for personnel operating at Nuwaiseeb Border Port. The step comes in recognition of the great efforts exerted by the Ministry of Interior and Customs personnel during the Holy Month. The banquet was attended by Head of Nuwaiseeb Border Port, Colonel Yousef Al Muhaini, and Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Affairs and Relations Officer, Waleed Al Khashti.

The initiative came under Zain's annual social campaign in Ramadan, through which the company shares the blessings of the Holy Month with the community by partnering with various institutions to reflect the spirit of giving. Zain's team visited the headquarters of Nuwaiseeb Border Port, sharing the blessings of the Holy Month of Ramadan with the staff of the Ministry of Interior and Customs teams who operate at the border and keep the nation and community safe. Zain hosted the Iftar banquet as a gesture of gratitude and appreciation to those who dedicate their time and effort to Kuwait's safety.

Zain has always been keen on organizing interactive social programs during Ramadan to recognize and support the various segments of the Kuwaiti community, reflecting Islamic values and humanitarian principles to enrich the art of giving and strengthen bonding between community members. Zain's Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility campaign during the Holy Month of Ramadan includes an extensive array of programs that cover different areas. The initiatives include humanitarian, voluntary, cultural, religious, sports, and recreational programs. — KUNA



Al Muhaini and Al Khashti with Zain, MoI, and Customs staff.

FM receives senior officials, diplomats



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives heads of diplomatic missions and regional and international organizations. — KUNA photos



Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and his wife Sheikhha Reema Al-Sabah are pictured during the ceremony.



KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and his wife Sheikhha Reema Al-Sabah received heads of diplomatic missions and regional and international organizations for the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan. The reception was held at Sabah Al-Ahmad grand hall at the Foreign

Ministry's diwan and was attended by Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi, the minister's assistants, ambassadors and senior ministry officials.

During the event, Sheikh Salem conveyed greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah,

His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah to the attendants and their appreciation of the strong ties between Kuwait and other countries, as well as with different organizations. — KUNA

Kuwait's labor force grows 8.2 percent

KUWAIT: The latest labor force statistics in Kuwait issued by the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) as of the end of 2022 indicate that the size of labor force in Kuwait increased by 8.2 percent and reached 2.037 million employees, excluding the number of household workers (1.882 million workers as of the end of 2021). Adding the household labor sector, which is about 753,000 workers, the total reaches 2.79 million workers (2.476 million workers as of the end of 2021).

Household workers constitute nearly 27 percent of total labor force in Kuwait as of the end of 2022 (24 percent of the total labor force as of the end of 2021), according to a report by Al-Shall Consulting, which cautioned that numbers of CSB sometimes differ substantially from those of the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI).

The average monthly wage of Kuwaiti male workers in the public sector is KD 1,910 (KD 1,874 end of 2021). The Kuwaiti female wage average is KD 1,337 (KD 1,312 end of 2021), a difference of 42.8 percent in favor of men's wages. The monthly salary average of non-Kuwaiti males in the public sector is KD 790 (KD 780 end of 2021). For non-Kuwaiti females, the average wage is KD 700 (KD 696 at the end of 2021), with a 12.9 percent difference in favor of males. The gender gap is more equitable in the case of non-Kuwaitis, the report mentioned. The average monthly wage for Kuwaitis of both genders in the public sector is KD 1,567 (KD 1,539 end of 2021). The same average for non-Kuwaitis is KD 744 (KD 738 at the end of 2021), a 110.6 percent difference in favor of Kuwaitis.

The monthly average wage of Kuwaiti males in the private sector is KD 1,380 (KD 1,529 at the end of 2021), which is 27.7 percent less than that of males in the public sector. The average for Kuwaiti females in the private sector is KD 822 (KD 974 at the end of 2021), which is 38.5 percent less than that of their female colleagues in the public sector. Undoubtedly, the government support leads to reduce the gap between the private and the public sector, the report pointed out.

The monthly average wage of non-Kuwaiti males in the private sector is KD 306 (KD 305 at

the end of 2021). This equals 38.7 percent of the average salaries of their non-Kuwaiti colleagues in the public sector. The average monthly wage for non-Kuwaiti females in the private sector is KD 428 (KD 429 at the end of 2021), which is higher than the average salary of non-Kuwaiti males in the private sector by 40 percent, but lower than the average rate of non-Kuwaiti females in the public sector by 38.8 percent.

In case of the overall wage average in both the public and private sectors, the monthly average wage of Kuwaiti males is KD 1,804 (KD 1,805 at the end of 2021) and KD 1,267 for Kuwaiti females (KD 1,263 at the end of 2021), with a 42.4 percent difference in favor of males. The monthly average wage for non-Kuwaiti males is KD 319 (KD 319 at the end of 2021) and KD 485 for non-Kuwaiti females (KD 488 end of 2021), a 52.2 percent difference in favor of females. The monthly average wage for male and female Kuwaitis in the two sectors is KD 1,493 (KD 1,491 at the end of 2021) and KD 338 for non-Kuwaitis (KD 338 at the end of 2021).

The figures above do not include household labor, which would have a significant downward impact on the non-Kuwaiti wage rates if taken into consideration, nor do they include the governmental support allocations to Kuwaiti workers in the private sector.

The number of Kuwaiti employees in the government sector according to the CSB is 371,000 workers, rising by 3.6 percent (358,000 workers by end of 2021), while the number of Kuwaiti employees in the private sector is 718,000 workers (722,000 workers by end of 2021), ie, increasing in the public sector and decreasing in the private sector, which is contrary to the stated goals by the public administration. The Kuwaiti workforce is distributed between 83.8 percent in the public sector and 16.2 percent in the private sector.

The percentage of Kuwaiti workers in the government sector according to PACI is 79.1 percent as of the end of 2022, and the difference is fundamental between the two government entities. About 46.6 percent of Kuwaitis working in the public sector are university graduates, 4.6 percent have postgraduate degrees, 13.7 percent have diplomas above high school but below university degrees, and 20.8 percent are holders of high school certificates or equivalent. This shows that about 85.6 percent of government employees are holders of high school certificates and above.

But the report pointed out the ongoing low pro-



KUWAIT: Aerial photo captures Kuwait City. The latest labor force statistics in Kuwait issued by the Central Statistical Bureau (CSB) indicate that the size of labor force in Kuwait increased by 8.2 percent and reached 2.037 million.

ductivity of the public sector is due to the crowded and unorganized work environment, incompatible educational and labor market requirements, poor education quality, or even the spread of fake degrees.

Approximately more than a quarter of total expatriate workers in Kuwait are household workers according to the CSB, totaling 753,000 at the end of 2022 (594,000 workers end of 2021), an increase by 26.9 percent. This household labor is divided between 347,000 males and 406,000 females. Indian male workers take the lead with 239,000 workers (196,000 at end of 2021), while Filipinos represent the largest female non-national workers at 199,000 (135,000 workers at the end of 2021).

India has the highest share of household workers of both genders, constituting 44.8 percent of total household workers, followed by the Philippines with 26.6 percent. Four nationalities, namely India, Philippines, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka constitute 94.9 percent of total household workers out of 10 nationalities. The six other nationalities form the rest, 2.8 percent as the highest and 0.2 percent as the lowest contributions. Three African countries are among the countries exporting household labor, led by Ethiopia

at 1.1 percent, then Benin and Sudan at 0.6 percent and 0.2 percent respectively.

Merging the numbers of household workers with other expat categories according to nationalities, Indians make up 835,000 workers (717,000 workers at the end of 2021), or 29.9 percent of the total labor force including Kuwaiti employees and 35.6 percent of the total foreign labor force, taking the lead in both cases. The Egyptian labor force follows with a total of 483,000 workers (451,000 workers at the end of 2021), forming 17.8 percent of the total labor force and 21.2 percent of the total expat labor force.

The Kuwaiti workforce comes third at 443,000 (430,000 workers at the end of 2021), forming 15.9 percent of the total labor force. This percentage might rise if the numbers include the military. The Philippines occupies the fourth position in total employment with 267,000 workers (200,000 workers at the end of 2021), about 9.6 percent of the total labor force and 11.4 percent of the total expat workforce. Bangladesh comes fifth with a total of 241,000 workers (235,000 workers at the end of 2021), making up 8.6 percent of the total labor force and 10.3 percent of total expat workers. — Al-Shall Report

Arab League calls for an end Zionist occupation

CAIRO: The Arab League has called on the international community to take serious measures to end the Zionist occupation of Palestine. The remarks were made in a statement by the League's General Secretariat while commemorating the 47th Palestinian Land Day. The statement underlined the need to grant Palestinians with the right of freedom and independence, with Jerusalem as the capital.

The League also called for ending the continuous crimes against Palestinians. It added that over 90 Palestinians were killed, among them 17 children and over 400 others were injured since the beginning of 2023. The Land Day remembers the 1976's events that followed the Zionist government's announcement of a plan to expropriate thousands of dunams of Arab land for state purposes. A general strike and marches were organized in Arab towns from the Galilee to the Negev, resulting in confrontations with the Zionist army and police.

In another development, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the UN's principal judicial organ has authorized the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), at its request, to participate in the advisory proceedings on the Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The ICJ, based in the Dutch city of The Hague, in a press release said it has decided that the OIC will likely be able to furnish information on the questions submitted to the Court by the General Assembly. The Organization may therefore present a written statement on those questions, and written comments on any written statements made by States or other organizations, within the time limits fixed by the Court, namely 25 July 2023 and 25 October 2023, respectively said.

On 30 December 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution requesting the ICJ to give an advisory opinion. The UNGA resolution asked, "what are the legal consequences arising from the ongoing violation of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, from its prolonged occupation, settlement, and annexation of the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character, and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and from its adoption of related discriminatory legislation and measures." The OIC based in the Saudi city of Jeddah is the second largest organization after the United Nations with a membership of 57 states. —KUNA

Avoid traveling to Tanzania and E Guinea, MoH warns

KUWAIT: Kuwait Ministry of Health (MoH) recommended on Saturday "to avoid traveling to Equatorial Guinea and Tanzania." This was after the announcement that the ministry is monitoring outbreaks of Marburg hemorrhagic fever virus in the two countries. In a statement, the Ministry of Health recommended that Kuwaitis should avoid the two countries and the neighboring countries and follow the preventive measures issued by the local health authorities so as to take the necessary preventive measures to reduce the risk of infection.

The Ministry of Health is currently following up with regional and international authorities on the latest developments as regards to the health situation there and the

epidemiological situation of the disease around the world. According to the World Health Organization, the Marburg virus disease, which was first detected in 1967, has an incubation period of two to 21 days - and a mortality rate of 88 percent.

The virus is spread through contact with the blood of an infected person, secretions and any other fluids excreted from the body. The symptoms include; fever, severe headache, severe malaise, and on the third day the patient may develop severe watery diarrhea, abdominal pain, colic, nausea and vomiting. On the fifth and seventh days, many patients develop severe hemorrhagic symptoms. In fatal cases, death might occur between the eighth and ninth days.



KUWAIT: Nama charity signed a partnership agreement with the Takaful Association for the care of prisoners' families.—KUNA

Nama charity, Takaful ink agreement

KUWAIT: Nama charity signed a partnership agreement with the Takaful Association for the care of prisoners' families in the framework of enhancing joint cooperation and coordinating efforts to bring joy to dozens of prisoners and their families. The vice president of the Social Reform Society, Mohammed Al-Omar, said in a press

statement on Friday that Nama has been partnering in its charitable and humanitarian work with government and private institutions, pointing out that the agreement will help families who have lost a breadwinner.

Al-Omar stressed the importance of the participation and cooperation of all parties concerned with prisoners and their families to provide assistance to them, explaining that God urged his worshippers to provide their zakat. Nama CEO Saad Al-Otaibi said that the agreement will benefit a large group of well-wishers in Kuwait.

Al-Otaibi pointed out that Nama seeks to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations by supporting in several areas, in-

cluding the needy families. He stressed that Nama has set within its strategy the need for cooperation and partnership with charitable bodies in order to develop charitable work and activate the mechanism of dealing with it, both with institutions and official bodies, stressing the importance of compassion and solidarity on which the people of Kuwait have placed great emphasis.

The chairman of the Takaful Association, MUSAID mendani, said that the association is keen to continue to implement its strategic policies aimed at providing care, aid and assistance to needy prisoners and their families and payment of fees for male and female students from the children of prisoners to continue their studies. —KUNA

Insurance company referred to Public Prosecution

KUWAIT: The Insurance Regulatory Unit has referred an insurance company (with expired license) to the Public Prosecution, the unit head Mohammad Sulaiman Al-Otaibi said on Saturday. The company is suspected of committing offenses such as money laundering and misappropriation of public funds, Al-Otaibi said in a statement to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA).

He also affirmed that the unit would pursue efforts to regulate the sector, in line with Law 125/2019. Al-Otaibi said the company was submitted to the general prosecution for sake of safeguarding rights of the State, clients and integrity of the sector. The IRU is a public indecent department that oversees the insurance sector and operations of licensed companies, according to the Law 125/2019. —KUNA



Artificial womb a revolutionary step in medical world

KUWAIT: The Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences said that the artificial womb is a revolutionary step in the medical world, after success in labs and on animals. The benefits of this technology is that it will save the lives of millions of children and allow many women, who couldn't conceive because of womb problems, to have children, head of the organization Dr Mohammad Al-Jarallah said in a press statement on Saturday.

He called on Islamic organizations to start studying the legal and Sharia-related views and impact of this new technology. The artificial womb is a device that allows pregnancy outside the body and provides nutrients and oxygen to nurture a fetus, he noted. This technology needs to have many set rules and regulations to ensure proper use. These include the rights and duties of parents, fear of pregnancy trade and genetic engineering, Al-Jarallah said. —KUNA



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KUWAIT: This photo shows goats herding outside the gates of Kuwait Wall. (Source: 'Kuwait' by Ralph Shaw, London, 1976. Prepared by: Mahmoud Zakaria Abu Al-Ella, researcher in heritage at the Ministry of Information.)



Sanna Marin, the Finnish PM fighting for re-election

Biden tells Russia to release Wall Street Journal reporter



BUCHA: Handout picture shows (L-R) Prime Minister of Slovakia Eduard Heger, President of Moldova Maia Sandu, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, Prime Minister of Slovenia Robert Golob and Prime Minister of Croatia Andrej Plenkovic carrying candles to the place of mass grave at the St. Andrew and Pyrovozvannoho All Saints church in the Ukrainian town of Bucha. — AFP

Zelensky vows to defeat 'Russian evil'

Russia's war in Ukraine made severe rights violations: UN

BUCHA: President Volodymyr Zelensky vowed Friday to defeat Russia, speaking alongside European leaders in Bucha one year after Moscow's troops withdrew from the Ukrainian town that has become synonymous with war crimes allegations.

Russian President Vladimir Putin meanwhile unveiled a new foreign policy doctrine in which the West poses an "existential" threat to Moscow and the Kremlin lies at the centre of a broader Russian civilisation. And in Geneva, UN rights chief Volker Turk warned Russia's war in Ukraine had made severe rights violations "shockingly routine" and was distracting humanity from battling existential threats to its survival. Russian forces withdrew from Bucha, a commuter town northwest of Kyiv, on March 31, 2022 -- just over a month after Putin ordered his troops to invade Ukraine—and left a trail of death and destruction in their wake.

AFP journalists on April 2 last year discovered the bodies of at least 20 people in civilian clothing, some with their hands tied behind their backs, lying in a street of the suburb. "The battle for the founda-

tion of the free world is taking place on Ukrainian land. We will definitely win. Russian evil will fall, right here in Ukraine," Zelensky said in the town. He later called during a summit in Kyiv for Bucha to become a "symbol of justice" and said: "We want every Russian murderer, executioner, terrorist to be held responsible for every crime".

War crimes accusations

Ukraine and its Western allies have accused Russian troops of carrying out war crimes, pointing to extensive footage and witness accounts. Prosecutors in Kyiv say that Russian forces killed some 1,400 civilians around Bucha and that they have identified dozens of Russian soldiers responsible. Moscow has claimed atrocities carried out in Bucha were staged. Leaders from Croatia, Slovakia and Slovenia were also in Bucha and Moldova's President Maia Sandu said those responsible should be held accountable.

"Without justice there can never be peace," she said in Bucha. After Russia withdrew from the towns near Kyiv, fighting shifted to the south and east of

Ukraine. The town of Bakhmut is now the scene of the longest and bloodiest battle since the invasion.

New Russian strategy

In the weeks following Russia's withdrawal from other towns near Kyiv, hundreds more bodies were found in homes, basements and shallow graves across the north. Ukraine wants to establish a special tribunal to prosecute Russia's leaders but there are complex legal disputes over how it could work. Chief ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan has described Ukraine as a "crime scene".

Russia has repeatedly denied any abuses by its forces, and foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova this week described scenes in Bucha as a "crude and cynical provocation". In Moscow, Putin signed off on a new foreign policy strategy aimed at countering the West's global "dominance" and naming China and India as key partners in future.

The document also described Russia as a "state-civilisation" tasked with defending what it called the "Russian world". The concept of a "Russian world" is used by Russia to justify its actions in

Ukraine with claims that it is defending the country's Russian-speaking minority.

Belarus strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko, who is a close ally of the Kremlin, urged Moscow and Kyiv to stop fighting and start peace talks. "All territorial, reconstruction, security and other issues can and should be settled at the negotiation table, without preconditions," he said, but the proposal was immediately rejected by Moscow.

Lukashenko also said he was ready to host "strategic" Russian nuclear weapons after Putin announced plans to station tactical nuclear weapons in the ex-Soviet country—a plan that drew Western expressions of concern at the UN Security Council on Friday. Speaking before the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Turk denounced horrific abuses carried out since Russia's invasion and warned the conflict "continues to send shockwaves across the world." "At a time when humanity faces overwhelming existential challenges, this destructive war is tugging us away from the work of building solutions, the work of ensuring our survival," Turk said. — AFP

Pope Francis leaves hospital, quips 'I am still alive'

ROME: A jovial Pope Francis joked with well-wishers on Saturday as he left hospital after a three-night stay for bronchitis, and headed back to the Vatican to prepare for Christianity's most important week. The 86-year-old pontiff, who was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital on Wednesday with breathing difficulties, got out of the car transporting him and smiled and joked with the crowd.

Asked by someone how he felt, he quipped twice with a big smile "I am still alive!" Francis will now begin preparations for Holy Week and Easter, the most important week in the Christian calendar. The pontiff felt unwell Wednesday after a general audience in St Peter's Square, but his condition improved after he was given antibiotics.

On Friday, the pope visited the children's cancer ward at the hospital, handing out chocolate Easter eggs and baptising a

weeks-old baby boy. As he left on Saturday, he reached out to bless sick people, and stopped to hug and pray with distraught parents whose young daughter had just died. The Argentine pope confirmed on Saturday he will preside over Palm Sunday mass in St Peter's Square, the start of a busy week of events leading up to Easter.

Francis' hospitalisation was his second since 2021, when he underwent colon surgery, also at Gemelli. His increasing health issues over the past year have sparked widespread concern, including speculation that he might choose to retire rather than stay in the job for life.

Pressed by journalists Saturday as to whether he had been scared by his latest illness, he shook his head and said "no". He is set to dive back into work at the Vatican, with a meeting with a top cardinal on the agenda for later Saturday.

His predecessor, Benedict XVI, quit in 2013, in a radical step not seen since the Middle Ages. Visitors to St Peter's Square on Friday expressed relief over his recovery. "I was afraid for the pope," said one 56-year-old Italian tourist who gave his name as Davide. "But I'm happy he's better, that he's returning. For believers and the Catholic community, it's important,"

he added. Francis marked 10 years as the head of the worldwide Catholic Church earlier this month. He has pushed through major governance reforms and sought to forge a more open, compassionate Church, although he has faced internal opposition, particularly from conservatives.

Presiding over mass

He has repeatedly said he would consider stepping down were his health to fail him—but said last month that for now, he has no plans to quit. During Palm Sunday mass, Francis is expected to remain seated while another cleric—probably a senior cardinal—conducts the ceremony at the altar.

The Vatican, citing medical staff, said on Thursday that Francis had been diagnosed with "infectious bronchitis" requiring antibiotics, and that the treatment had brought about a "marked improvement in his state of health".

The Gemelli hospital is the favoured choice of pontiffs to the point of being dubbed "Vatican 3" by pope John Paul II, who was treated nine times at Gemelli and spent a total of 153 days there. A Jesuit who seems most happy being among his flock, Francis continues to travel in-



ROME: Pope Francis hugs Serena Subania as her husband Matteo Ruggia (L) reacts, a couple who lost their five-year-old child a day earlier, as the Pope leaves the Gemelli hospital. — AFP

ternationally and keep a busy schedule. But he has been forced to use a wheelchair and a walking stick in the past year because of knee pain, and admitted last summer that he had to

slow down. He said on Thursday he was "touched by the many messages" he was receiving in hospital, thanking on Twitter those praying for his recovery. — AFP

Arkansas tornado kills 3, Midwest storms leave 3 dead

WASHINGTON: A tornado tore through the southern US state of Arkansas and killed three people on Friday, while severe storms further north in Illinois and Indiana left three dead, authorities said.

The Arkansas tornado whipped across the state in the afternoon, causing what Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders called "widespread damage." Sanders said two people were killed in the town of Wynne in the eastern part of Arkansas, while an official in Pulaski County, which surrounds the capital Little

Rock, confirmed a fatality there. "Significant damage has occurred in Central Arkansas," Sanders wrote on Twitter. Little Rock Mayor Frank Scott Jr. said "close to 30 individuals have been transported to our local hospitals." The National Weather Service issued tornado warnings for parts of the nearby states of Tennessee, Illinois, Kentucky and Iowa.

In the evening, calamity struck Belvidere, Illinois, when severe weather caused the roof and part of the facade of the Apollo Theater to collapse while a heavy metal band played on stage inside. "More than 20 ambulances were reportedly called to the scene," Fox 32, a Chicago TV affiliate, reported on its website.

Belvidere Fire Chief Shawn Schadle reported one dead and 28 injured in the disaster, with five hospitalized with severe injuries. TV footage showed emergency personnel carrying out injured concert-goers on stretchers, while video

posted on social media showed rubble—some nearly waist-high—on the floor of the concert venue, and a gaping hole in the roof.

"My administration is closely monitoring the roof collapse at the Apollo Theatre in Belvidere tonight," Illinois Governor JB Pritzker tweeted in the late evening. In neighboring Midwest state Indiana, two people were confirmed dead after a storm swept through Sullivan County, Indiana state police told CBS/FOX-affiliated TV station WTHI. Images posted on Twitter by WTHI showed downed telephone poles, crumbled homes and debris covering roads. The Arkansas tornado struck during the afternoon, steamrolling over parts of Little Rock. "This was actually an incredibly devastating tornado," witness Lara Farrar told AFP. She said she drove to West Little Rock and got out of her car at a blocked intersection. — AFP



ROLLING FORK: US President Joe Biden speaks during a press conference in a storm-stricken area of Rolling Fork, Mississippi. The Bidens are visiting Rolling Fork, Mississippi, a week after it was devastated by a tornado that ripped through the southern state, killing at least 25. — AFP

International

Biden tells Russia to release Wall Street Journal reporter

WSJ editors call for expulsion of Russia's envoy and all Russian journalists working

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden on Friday called for Russia to release Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who is being held on espionage charges, while rebuffing a call from the paper's editorial board to expel Russian journalists from the United States. Asked by White House reporters what his message was to Russia regarding Gershkovich, a US citizen, Biden said: "Let him go." The Wall Street Journal's board of opinion editors called in a piece published Thursday afternoon for the expulsion of Russia's ambassador to the United States, as well as "all Russian journalists working here," describing the move as "the minimum to expect."

"The timing of the arrest looks like a calculated provocation to embarrass the US and intimidate the foreign press still working in Russia," it added. The Journal's editor in chief, Emma Tucker, sent a note to the newspaper's staff Friday, saying that "we will carry on doing everything in our power to secure Evan's release."

"Your safety and security are what matters most to me, and we will continue to protect that no matter where you may be reporting from," she added. Speaking to reporters before leaving to view tornado damage in Mississippi, Biden said that expelling Russian journalists was "not the plan right now."

Gershkovich is believed to be the first foreign journalist held for spying in post-Soviet Russia, and his arrest is expected to escalate the Kremlin's confrontation with the West amid Moscow's

war in Ukraine. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, responding to the editorial board's demand that all Russian journalists be expelled, said "the newspaper can say that, but it should not happen. There's just no reason for this." He said that Gershkovich had been caught "red-handed."

'Secret' case

According to Russian state news agency TASS, Gershkovich denied the charges against him at a court hearing in Moscow. He was remanded in custody until May 29 pending trial. The case has been classified as "secret", TASS reported, which restricts information that can be published about it.

The only details available are that Russia's security agency announced it had "foiled an illegal activity" by arresting Gershkovich in Yekaterinburg — about 1,100 miles (1,800 kilometers) east of Moscow — on an unspecified date.

The 31-year-old journalist's detention, on charges that carry a maximum penalty of 20 years behind bars, is a serious escalation of Moscow's sweeping crackdown on the media. The White House condemned the arrest and warned Americans not to travel to Russia, while also advising those now inside the country to leave for their own safety.

"The targeting of American citizens by the Russian government is unacceptable. We condemn the detention of Mr. Gershkovich in the strongest terms," White House Press Secretary



MOSCOW: A Russian law enforcement officer gestures outside the Lefortovsky court after Evan Gershkovich, US journalist working for the Wall Street Journal detained in Russia. — AFP

Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement. US officials said they were in touch with the family of Gershkovich as well as the newspaper and that the State Department had contacted Russia. Sev-

eral other US citizens are in jail including Paul Whelan, a former Marine, who was arrested in 2018 and handed a 16-year sentence on espionage charges that he denies. — AFP



LUSCHERZ: Train staffs inspect at the site of a train derailment near lakeside town of Luscherz, northwest of the capital Bern, on March 31, 2023. — AFP

Fifteen hurt as two Swiss trains derail in storm

LUSCHERZ: Fifteen people were injured Friday when two trains derailed as stormy winds lashed northwestern Switzerland, police said. The incidents, on regional passenger rail lines, took place within 20 minutes of each other, and about 30 kilometres (18 miles) apart, north of the Swiss capital Bern. Three people were injured in the first derailment, including the driver, and 12 were hurt in the second, including one person with serious injuries.

Wind speeds of 136 kilometres per hour were recorded nearby. One train carrying 16 people derailed in the lakeside village of Luscherz at around 4:30 pm (14:30 GMT), police said. "While a strong wind was

blowing... the front carriage of the train overturned on the right of the track, slipped down a small embankment for a few metres and finally came to a halt," Bern cantonal police said in a statement.

"Three people, including the driver in the overturned carriage, were injured, treated by four ambulance teams and taken to hospital." The front carriage of the two-carriage train could be seen lying on its right side on the grass verge between a path running alongside the railway line and a field.

Workers in orange workwear and hard hats were at the scene, with a ladder alongside the carriage to help reach the upturned left side. Firefighters helped to get people out. The rear carriage rolled on down the track for a few metres before coming to a stop. "An investigation has been opened to determine the circumstances and causes of the accident," police said.

A second train carrying 54 passengers derailed 20 minutes later in the village of Buren zum Hof. Police said the driver's carriage and two other carriages came off the tracks, with the front carriage hitting a mast. All three ended up on their sides. — AFP

Trump 'shocked' by indictment but...

Continued from Page 1

president would plead not guilty. There is "zero" chance Trump would accept a plea deal, he told NBC's Today show. "It's not going to happen. There's no crime."

Trump, who is currently at his palatial Mar-a-Lago residence in Florida, was initially "shocked" at the indictment, his attorney said, but "he's now in the posture that he's ready to fight this." Trump's pending arrest throws a political grenade into next year's White House race and President Joe Biden sidestepped questions from reporters about the indictment of the Republican he beat in 2020 and could potentially face again in November of next year. "I have no comment on Trump," Biden said.

A New York grand jury indicted Trump on Thursday over a \$130,000 hush-money payment made to a porn star to buy her silence during his 2016 campaign. Trump has denied any wrongdoing and accused Bragg, a Democrat, of waging a "political witch-hunt" to derail his new White House bid. In predicting his indictment, Trump called for protests and warned it could lead to

"potential death and destruction" for the country.

And in a statement, the ex-president said he had already raised \$4 million for his 2024 presidential campaign in the 24 hours following news of the indictment. Extra security has been deployed for days around the downtown Manhattan courthouse where Trump is to be booked and arraigned, with the New York Police Department saying Friday there were "no current credible threats" to the city.

Trump survived two impeachments while in the White House and kept prosecutors at bay over everything from the US Capitol riot to missing classified files — only to land in court over a sex scandal involving Stormy Daniels, a 44-year-old adult movie actress. He faces felony investigations in Georgia relating to the 2020 election and in Washington over both the classified files and the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol by his supporters. Top Republicans have rallied around the former president who remains the favorite to win the party's 2024 presidential nomination.

Kevin McCarthy, the top House Republican, said the indictment had "irreparably damaged" the country. Trump's former vice president and possible 2024 challenger Mike Pence called it an "outrage" that would only "further serve to divide" the United States. — AFP

Tate moved from detention to house...

Continued from Page 1

"It's a little bit emotional, I've been in one room since last year." He thanked the judges for the release and maintained that he was innocent of all charges against him. Media thronged the entrance while young fans greeted Andrew Tate with cries of "Top G" (for gangster), his nickname. Tristan said the judges had made "the right decision" and vowed to prove that he was "an innocent man".

Their lawyer Eugene Vidineac said they were forbidden from contacting other people involved in the case and could not "leave their home without prior approval from judicial authorities". Earlier, he insisted the brothers were not a flight risk. "There's no reason for them to flee, because to be on the run is not a life worth living and the Tate brothers don't want this life. They are just tired and want to rest," he said.

The two men moved to Romania several years ago, and Tristan has a baby son who was born since his arrest. As part of the probe, Romanian police have raided several properties connected to the Tate

brothers and seized many of their assets, including a collection of luxury cars. A court document from January said that one woman was "recruited" from Britain after she fell in love with Andrew Tate, who then brought her to Romania "with the goal of sexual exploitation".

The brothers, and the two Romanians also detained, allegedly trafficked, recruited and exploited women by coercing them into "pornographic acts with a view to producing and disseminating such material" online. Flaunting his bulging muscles, cigars and fast cars, Tate's videos posted on social media fascinate millions of teenage boys. A video he posted of himself pacing in his living room after his release garnered millions of views in just hours.

Giving tips on how to be successful, along with misogynist and sometimes violent maxims, his videos has made him one of the world's best-known influencers. In 2016, Tate appeared on the "Big Brother" reality television show in Britain but was removed after a video emerged showing him attacking a woman. He then turned to social media platforms to promote his divisive views, before being banned for misogynistic remarks and hate speech. Tate was allowed back on Twitter, where he has 5.5 million followers, after the South African-born billionaire Elon Musk bought the company. — AFP

Musk defends paid Twitter as...

Continued from Page 1

signature element that helped the platform become a trusted forum for news makers and campaigners. But Musk and his fans said the blue check was decided by fiat in a secretive procedure and called it a symbol of an unfair class system.

Opening the blue tick to paying subscribers was among the first decisions made by Musk when he took ownership of Twitter last year, but his overhaul backfired. Within hours, Twitter was flooded by fake yet verified accounts impersonating celebrities, major companies and even Musk himself. Musk swiftly

backtracked, but many advertisers fled the site, denying Twitter a major source of income that the CEO is struggling to replace.

For now, blue checks of celebrities — including Justin Bieber and his 113 million followers or footballer Cristiano Ronaldo and his 108 million — are tagged on the site as "legacy" accounts. The verified account conundrum also involves officials, charities and news media companies. Already the White House, which will keep a special designation as a government entity, told employees it would not pay to have its staff's official Twitter profiles keep the blue tick. Axios reported.

News media companies, firms and charities already lost their blue tick and were tagged as verified business accounts under Musk's new system. According to Twitter's website, these cost a hefty fee of \$1,000 a month in the United States, and \$50 for each additional affiliated account. — AFP

Labor force hits 2m, domestic...

Continued from Page 1

job descriptions in the field of financial and technical work as part of the government's steps to correct the population structure. The move follows the vocational tests that PAM announced will be part of the process of bringing in new workers into the country and testing old workers, and work permits will not be issued without passing the tests.

These steps come following a previous decision by PAM to issue a smart ID through the Kuwait Mobile ID app to enable Kuwait families to check laborers' data before allowing them to carry out any work, in order to stop loose laborers and commercial cheating. PAM has set up the Kuwait Visa application to verify visas issued to workers coming to Kuwait and others who have business and tourist visas issued through the electronic platform that cannot be transferred to work permits.

Local media has quoted sources as saying the interior minister has formed a committee to study the status of expatriate driving licenses and review all their data, revealing the ministry will put a "block" on the license of any expatriate who does not hold a university degree and their salary is less than KD 600,

leading to the withdrawal of the license. Sources said that this decision will affect around 300,000 licenses, noting when the decision enters force, it will be applied immediately and retroactively.

Separately, senior government sources said executive procedures to impose selective tax instead of the value added tax are ready at the finance ministry to become the government's first choice to collect taxes, adding the government has excluded the option of imposing VAT. Sources said the application of VAT needs the approval of the National Assembly, which is difficult to get, as there is a popular rejection of VAT, and this reflects on MPs' opinions, who will not vote in favor of the tax.

The sources said VAT was excluded as a first choice due to increasing fear of inflation, which is registering historic levels in major industrial countries, and its effects are reverberating in Kuwait and the region. They said going ahead with such a tax at this time will cause a sharp increase in prices, and the consumer will not be able to bear its burdens.

The sources said imposing the selective tax will include tobacco and its derivatives and carbonated drinks, in addition to highly expensive goods such as watches, jewelry, precious stones, luxury cars and yachts, bearing in mind the value of the proposed tax is between 10 percent to 25 percent. Sources said applying the selective tax will bring in KD 500 million yearly and will not affect limited- and middle-income people, as it targets accessories and luxury goods. — AFP

Ramadan is also a time of community bonding. Muslims gather in mosques for special nightly prayers called Taraweeh and break their fast together in the evening with an Iftar meal. This creates a sense of unity and strengthens the bonds between Muslims. It is also a time when Muslims give to charity and help those in need.

In conclusion, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan is not only a religious obligation for Muslims but also a time of reflection, self-improvement, and community bonding. Fasting has numerous spiritual and physical benefits and helps Muslims to become better individuals. It is a time to purify the soul, strengthen faith, and strengthen the bonds between Muslims.

NOTE: Courtesy of the TIES Center: The TIES Center is one of the projects of Kuwait Society for Cultural Dialogue, and is the social and educational hub for English speaking expats in Kuwait and aims at empowering Kuwait's expats through social and educational services that promote a positive and productive role in society. It also facilitates opportunities for intra- and interfaith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, you can contact TIES at Tel: 25231015/6; Hotline: 94079777; e-mail: info@tiescenter.net.

Month of forgiveness, prayer and charity...

Continued from Page 1

It is a request for Forgiveness from Almighty Allah, the Most Merciful, and is a reminder of the importance of seeking forgiveness and repenting for our sins.

The word 'afuwun' in the supplication means "forgiving and effacing" and 'tuhibbul 'afwa' means "you Love forgiveness." The invocation emphasizes the idea that the Majestic Allah is the ultimate Forgive and that seeking His Forgiveness is a crucial part of spiritual growth and development.

In addition to the spiritual benefits of fasting, there are also physical benefits. Fasting has been shown to have numerous health benefits such as reducing the risk of chronic diseases, improving metabolic health, and promoting weight loss. During Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to eat healthy and avoid overeating during the night. This helps in regulating the digestive system and promoting healthy eating habits.

International

After contentious US visit, Taiwan's president arrives in Central America

Ties between Guatemala and Taiwan are unbreakable: Giammattei

GUATEMALA CITY: Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen arrived in Guatemala Friday on a visit to shore up ties with dwindling allies following a trip to the United States that angered China. Tsai's visit to Guatemala and its Central American neighbor Belize comes after Honduras became the latest country to cut diplomatic ties with Taipei in favor of Beijing.

The president had stopped in New York on the way, and has announced plans to meet US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California on her return leg. Washington has said there is no reason for China to "overreact" to the "normal, uneventful" trip, but Beijing warned the United States was "playing with fire."

Tsai arrived in Guatemala on Friday afternoon, where she was received with military honors and met by Foreign Minister Mario Bucaro. She held a brief meeting with Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei, whose government has declared Taiwan "the only and true China," before the two staged a joint press conference reaffirming their bond.

"The ties between Guatemala and Taiwan are unbreakable," Giammattei said. "We promote resolving disputes by dialogue and negotiation, and work together to satisfy people's desire for freedom, prosperity, development, and territorial integrity," he added. "For Guatemala, this visit is very significant to renew and reaffirm the full support to the government of Taiwan, reiterating the recognition of Taiwan as an independent nation and as the only true China," Giammattei said.

Tsai called Guatemala "a solid diplomatic ally of Taiwan" in a speech. "In recent years we have continued to consolidate our cooperation in the areas of health, economy, trade and basic infrastructure,"

she said. She also thanked Giammattei for his support last year when China was carrying out military maneuvers against the island.

On Saturday Tsai will visit the majestic Mayan ruins of Tikal in the north of the country, and on Sunday she will head to the new Chimaltenango hospital in the west, built with a \$22 million donation from Taipei. Then she will travel to Belize, where she is scheduled to meet Prime Minister John Briceno on Monday before departing the next day. On her way back to Taiwan, Tsai plans to stop in Los Angeles, where McCarthy has said he will meet her.

Dwindling recognition

Honduras, a neighbor of Guatemala, cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan in March and recognized China. The switch reduced the number of countries that diplomatically recognize Taiwan to 13. Paraguay could follow next, with presidential elections due in April and opposition candidate Efraín Alegre having vowed to reevaluate ties with Taiwan.

That would leave only Guatemala, Belize, Haiti, the Holy See, Eswatini and seven small Caribbean and Pacific island nations diplomatically allied to Taiwan.

China considers the self-ruled, democratic island as part of its territory to be retaken one day. Under its "One China" policy, it does not allow countries to officially recognize both Beijing and Taipei. Latin America has been a key diplomatic battleground since Taiwan and China separated in 1949, following a civil war when the communists seized power in China while the nationalists retreated to Taiwan.

Nicaragua shifted allegiance to Beijing in 2021. El Salvador in 2018, Panama in 2017 and Costa



GUATEMALA CITY: Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen and Guatemala's President Alejandro Giammattei arrive to deliver a joint statement at the Culture Palace in Guatemala City on March 31, 2023. — AFP

Rica in 2007. The United States has no formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, but maintains "a robust unofficial relationship", according to the State Department. It is Taiwan's most significant ally and largest weapons supplier, despite having switched recognition to Beijing in 1979.

After Honduras' move, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington offered its "support to people on Taiwan" but also stood by its "One China" policy. "Countries have to make their own sovereign decisions about their foreign policies," he said. "We leave that to them." — AFP

At least 11 killed in Pakistan Ramadan donation stampede

KARACHI: At least 11 people were killed in a crowd crush in Pakistan's southern city of Karachi Friday as a Ramadan alms donation sparked a stampede in the inflation-hit nation, police said. Pakistan has been wracked by economic turmoil for months, with the rupee crumbling and staple food prices shooting up nearly 50 percent as the country battles a balance of payments crisis which has forced it into bail-out talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Fida Janwari, a senior police officer in western Karachi's Baldia Town neighbourhood, said the stampede happened when needy women with children flocked

to a factory distributing alms. "Panic struck and people started running," he told AFP. A local administration official said 600 to 700 people were corralled in a small industrial compound. "When they opened the main gate, all the people rushed in," added 22-year-old Fatima Noor, whose sister died in the crush. The bodies of six women and three children were brought to the Abbasi Shaheed state hospital, spokesman Muhammad Farraukh said.

An official for the Rescue NGO told AFP an additional two bodies were sent to another hospital, and police surgeon Summaiya Syed Tariq confirmed the total toll of 11 late Friday. Asma Ahmed, 30, said her grandmother and niece were among the dead. "We come every year to the factory for the Zakat," she said, using the Islamic term for alms.

"They started beating the women with clubs and pushing them," Ahmed added. "There was chaos everywhere." "Why did

they call us if they couldn't manage it?" she asked. Janwari said three factory employees were arrested after failing to inform police of the donation event in order to organize crowd control.

Last week, on the first day of Ramadan—when Muslims traditionally make donations to the poor—one person was killed and eight others injured in a stampede for flour in northwestern Pakistan. Pakistan's finances have been hobbled by decades of financial mismanagement and political chaos. The situation has been exacerbated by the global energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, and crippling monsoon floods last year which submerged a third of the country.

The South Asian nation—home to 220 million—is deep in debt and must enact tough tax reforms and push up utility prices if it hopes to unlock another tranche of a \$6.5 billion IMF bail-out and avoid defaulting. — AFP



KARACHI: Mourners carry the coffin of a stampede victim for his funeral in Karachi on April 1, 2023. At least 11 people were killed in a crowd crush in Pakistan's southern city of Karachi on March 31 as a Ramadan alms donation sparked a stampede in the inflation-hit nation. — AFP

Greece charges Pakistanis over anti-Semitic plot

ATHENS: Greece on Friday remanded into custody two Pakistani suspects accused of plotting an anti-Semitic attack after they testified before a magistrate, their lawyer said. The two men, aged 29 and 27, admitted exchanging messages concerning a possible attack on a Jewish restaurant in Athens, lawyer Iraklis Stavaris told AFP. They are charged with participation in a terrorist organisation, a crime that carries a possible life sentence. Stavaris on Friday said his clients had admitted exchanging Viber messages with a third man, whom police have identified as a Pakistani allegedly living in Iran.

On the third man's instructions, Stavaris said, they scouted out and took photographs of a kosher restaurant in Athens that is also a Jewish prayer centre. Police arrested the two Pakistanis in February for illegal entry into Greece.

Citizen's Protection Minister Takis Theodorikakos told Skai TV this week that the alleged plot targeted "locations of Jewish and Zionist interest in Athens". Asked if the case was watertight, he replied: "absolutely". "Monetary gain was the apparent motive," he told the channel.

Police said separately that the pair had "already chosen the target of the attack" and were planning how to execute it. Following an investigation by Greek intelligence agency EYP, anti-terror police carried out raids in Athens, Sparta on the Peloponnese peninsula and on the island of Zakynthos, the minister said. Another 10 Pakistani men questioned in connection with the case were released Thursday after no incriminating evidence was found, a police source told AFP.

No weapons have been found, according to official statements so far. Greece was included on a list of countries with travel warnings issued by Zionist's National Security Council ahead of the Jewish holiday of Passover in early April.

Zionist entity this week accused Tehran of being behind the plot and said its Mossad intelligence agency had assisted the investigation. "After the investigation of the suspects in Greece, the Mossad helped untangle the intelligence of the network, its operational methods and ties to Iran," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said on Tuesday. "As part of the investigation, it emerged that the infrastructure in Greece was part of a broad Iranian network, operated from Iran toward many countries," it added. Iran's embassy in Greece on Wednesday denied any connection to the alleged plot. Greece's Jewish community numbers around 5,000. The government has good relations with Zionist entity, including a number of security and military agreements. — AFP

Death toll in India temple collapse up 36

NEW DELHI: The death toll after a floor collapsed at a Hindu temple in India had risen to 36 on Friday after rescuers discovered the body of the last person still missing, police told AFP. Dozens of worshippers celebrating a major religious holiday plunged into the stepwell — a stair-lined communal water source — on Thursday after the floor covering it collapsed in the central city of Indore.

"Seventeen people were rescued yesterday. Thirty-six bodies have been recovered," senior police officer Manish Kapoor told AFP. Women, children and an 18-month-old baby were among those stand-

ing on the grill covering the well when it buckled and gave way, plunging them into about 7.5 metres (25 feet) of water. The bodies of dozens of victims were cremated on pyres near the scene of the accident on Friday after brief funeral rites. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Thursday he was "extremely pained" by news of the accident. "My prayers with all those affected and their families," he added.

Modi's office said compensation payments of 200,000 rupees (\$2,400) would be given to the next of kin. Narottam Mishra, home minister of Madhya Pradesh state, told reporters on Thursday that an investigation had been launched into the mishap.

Television footage on Thursday showed emergency workers using ropes and ladders to reach those trapped in the well in Madhya Pradesh state. Other videos showed the caved-in floor and mangled steel bars as well as police officers using ropes to seal the

area. Temples across India were brimming with devotees on the occasion of Ram Navami, the birthday of the Hindu deity Lord Ram. Deadly accidents are common at worship sites in India during major religious festivals. At least 112 people died in 2016 after a huge explosion caused by a banned fireworks display at a temple marking the Hindu new year.

The blast ripped through concrete buildings and ignited a fire at a temple complex in Kerala state where thousands had gathered. Another 115 devotees died in 2013 after a stampede at a bridge near a temple in Madhya Pradesh. Up to 400,000 people were gathered in the area, and the stampede occurred after the spread of a rumour that the bridge was about to collapse. About 224 pilgrims died and more than 400 others were injured in a 2008 stampede at a hilltop temple in the northern city of Jodhpur. — AFP

Sanna Marin, the Finnish PM fighting for re-election

TAMPERE: From steering her country into NATO to headlines about partying, Sanna Marin is a modern, feminist leader who has nonetheless proved a polarising prime minister of Finland. The 37-year-old became the world's youngest elected head of government in 2019, running a centre-left coalition with five women party leaders, four under the age of 35.

She is now fighting to stay in power at legislative elections on Sunday. Having deftly navigated Finland through the COVID-19 pandemic and led its historic NATO membership application process, Marin is the country's most popular prime minister this century, according to polls.

She has also proved one of the world's most vocal critics of the war in Ukraine and of President Vladimir Putin in Russia, which neighbours Finland. But her Social Democrats are facing stiff competition from two parties on the right, with all three hovering around 20 percent in the polls in the final days of the campaign.

Before Marin, few people abroad knew the name of any head of government in the small country of 5.5 million. But in just a few years, she went from relative unknown in Finland to one of the most recognised leaders around the world.

First elected a member of parliament in 2015, she became prime minister in December 2019 and was almost immediately thrown into the global COVID-19 crisis. "Solemnly, usually dressed in black, she gave very clear instructions, managed to calm the people and create the impression that the government had the pandemic under control," said Marko Junkkari, a journalist at Finnish daily Helsingin Sanomat.

Her popularity peaked during the pandemic, building her reputation as an unwavering crisis leader. Navigating those difficult years while keeping her clashing coalition in check shaped Marin into a pragmatic, assertive leader. But she was soon entangled in headlines relating to her private life, polarising her reputation. In August 2022, leaked social media videos showing Marin partying with a group of Finnish celebrities made news around the world, prompting her to take a drug test to clear suspicions of wrongdoing.

In December 2021, she came under sustained criticism after it was revealed she stayed out dancing until the early hours despite having been exposed to COVID-19. For some, the criticism overshadowed her political accomplishments. To them, she is "Party Sanna" whose behaviour is inappropriate for a person in her position.

Others defended her right to a private life. While the controversies propelled Marin to international fame, at home her supporters and haters dug deeper into her trenches. "These scandals do not change these two groups in any way," Junkkari explained. University of Turku professor



VANTAA: The Finns Party chair Riikka Purra gives an interview to journalists during an election campaign rally in Vantaa, Finland, on April 1, 2023, ahead of Finnish parliamentary elections on April 2. — AFP

Anu Koivunen told AFP that while the scandals would likely have caused a stir with any prime minister, the fact that Marin is a young woman played a role in the ensuing brouhaha. Battling controversies about stereotypes or her lifestyle is nothing new for Marin.

Humble origins

She grew up in the southern Finnish town of Pirkkala, in a "rainbow, low-income family" in council housing, in her own words. "My parents divorced because of my father's drinking problem when I was only a few years old," she wrote on her blog.

She was the first in her family to go to university, earning a masters' degree in administrative sciences. Although Marin's childhood with her mother and mother's female partner did not include "material abundance", it was full

of "love and ordinary life," she wrote. Marin is married and the mother of a five-year-old daughter. She stands in stark contrast to the Social Democrats' traditional demographic, attracting young voters from the left and rejuvenating the party's image. "A few years ago, the Social Democrats had more members over the age of 90 than under 35," Junkkari explained.

Young people from other left-wing parties now "have little difficulty" switching to the Social Democrats, said Tuomo Turja of Finland's leading pollster Taloustutkimus. Often considered a progressive idealist abroad and an embodiment of Finnish values, Marin's policies at home are more pragmatic, sometimes garnering criticism for not being ambitious enough when it comes to climate and human rights. — AFP

Business

SUNDAY, APRIL 2, 2023

Italy blocks AI chatbot ChatGPT

First Western country to take action against AI chatbot

ROME: Italy said on Friday it was temporarily blocking ChatGPT over data privacy concerns, becoming the first western country to take such action against the popular artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot.

The country's Data Protection Authority said US firm OpenAI, which makes ChatGPT, had no legal basis to justify "the mass collection and storage of personal data for the purpose of 'training' the algorithms underlying the operation of the platform".

ChatGPT caused a global sensation when it was released last year for its ability to generate essays, songs, exams and even news articles from brief prompts. But critics have long fretted that it was unclear where ChatGPT and its competitors got their data or how they processed it.

Universities and some education authorities have banned the chatbot over fears that students could use it to write essays or cheat in exams. And hundreds of experts and industry figures signed an open letter this week calling for a pause in the development of powerful AI systems, arguing they posed "profound risks to society and humanity".

The letter was prompted by OpenAI's release earlier this month of GPT-4, a more powerful version of its chatbot, with even less transparency about its data sources. OpenAI said Friday that it has "disabled ChatGPT for users in Italy". "We are committed to protecting people's privacy and we believe we comply with... privacy laws. We actively work to reduce

personal data in training our AI systems like ChatGPT because we want our AI to learn about the world, not about private individuals," an OpenAI spokesperson said.

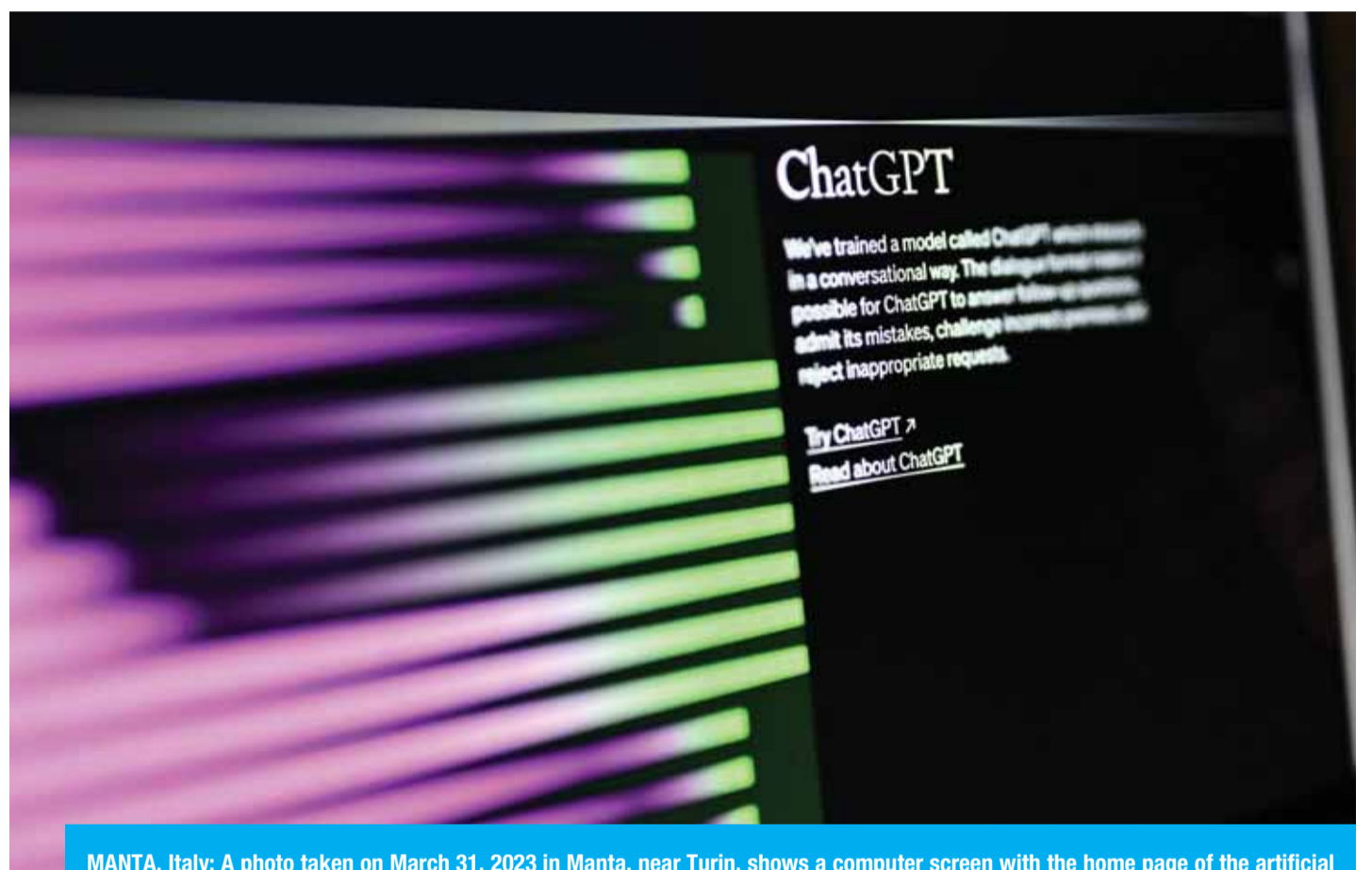
"We also believe that AI regulation is necessary — so we look forward to working closely with (authorities in Italy) and educating them on how our systems are built and used," the spokesperson said. "Our users in Italy have told us they find ChatGPT helpful for everyday tasks and we look forward to making it available again soon."

'Unsuitable answers'

The Italian authority imposed a "temporary limitation of the processing of Italian user data" by OpenAI and said it had launched an investigation. As well as a lack of legal basis for data collection, the authority also highlighted a lack of clarity over whose data was being collected.

It said wrong answers given by the chatbot suggested data was not being handled properly, and accused the firm of exposing children to "absolutely unsuitable answers". The watchdog further referenced a data breach on March 20 where user conversations and payment information were compromised—a problem the firm blamed on a bug.

Nello Cristianini, an AI academic from Bath university in Britain, said securing user data and enforcing age limits were easy to fix. But the other two accusations were more problematic—that the model is trained on personal data that is



MANTA, Italy: A photo taken on March 31, 2023 in Manta, near Turin, shows a computer screen with the home page of the artificial intelligence OpenAI web site, displaying its chatGPT robot. — AFP

gathered without consent and then not treated properly. "It is not clear how these can be fixed anytime soon," he said. The company has been given 20 days to respond and could face a fine of 20 million euros (\$21.7 million)

or up to 4 percent of annual revenue.

The runaway success of ChatGPT garnered OpenAI a multibillion-dollar deal with Microsoft, which uses the technology in its Bing search engine and other pro-

grams. It also sparked a gold rush among other tech firms and venture capitalists, with Google hurrying out its own chatbot and investors pouring cash into all manner of AI projects. — AFP

Eurozone, US inflation slow

BRUSSELS/WASHINGTON: Eurozone inflation slowed sharply in March while US price increases eased last month as well, official data showed Friday, offering some relief to policymakers.

The data released on both sides of the Atlantic will provide central banks some respite as they carefully balance taming inflation with interest rate rises, against the risks that more hikes could hurt their banking sectors. Consumer prices rose by 6.9 percent on an annual basis in the eurozone, down from 8.5 percent in February, according to the European Union's statistics agency. It is the lowest rate recorded in a year, and a lower figure than analysts expected as well.

But the eurozone's core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy prices, edged up to 5.7 percent in March from 5.6 percent a month earlier. Core eurozone inflation "is still significantly too high", European Central Bank president Christine Lagarde told students in Italy on Friday after the figures were released. In the US, the Federal Reserve's preferred measure of inflation slowed in February also, according to Commerce Department data released Friday.

The annual personal consumption expenditures price index (PCE) slowed to 5 percent in February from 5.3 percent a month earlier, with increases recorded in the cost of food, energy and goods.

Core PCE, which excludes volatile food and energy costs, only slowed slightly to log an annual increase of 4.6 percent in February, down from 4.7 percent in January. "I think that's good news for the Fed but, you know, it's part of an ongoing challenge," Citigroup global chief economist Nathan Sheets told AFP in an interview. In a statement released Friday, US President Joe Biden said: "We are making progress in the fight against inflation."

Inflation still too high

Despite the positive developments announced Friday, inflation still remains well above the central banks' two-percent targets. The Fed and ECB have both raised interest rates repeatedly to tame high inflation, although recent turbulence in the banking sector has added some complications. In the eurozone, inflation remains elevated despite falling from a peak of 10.6 percent in October.

But in March, energy prices fell by 0.9 percent after rising by 13.7 percent in February, according to Eurostat, the first drop since February 2021. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent oil and gas prices

soaring last year, they have become more stable in recent months, helped also by mild weather. Eurozone food and drink prices rose by 15.4 percent in March, compared with 15 percent in the previous month, according to Eurostat. "This indicates that price pressures remain high for the moment, although this should improve in the coming months," ING senior eurozone economist Bert Colijn said.

More rate rises expected

After nine interest rate increases since March 2022, Fed chair Jerome Powell suggested the US central bank may only raise rates once more before bringing its current hiking cycle to a halt—but only if the data supported it. "The Fed needs to see more marked, sustained, cooling inflationary pressures—and specifically in non-sheltered services—before they're comfortable and are able to kind of stand down on the fight against inflation," Sheets from Citi told AFP. Eurozone analysts also expect to see further rate rises to tackle rising prices. "Descending headline inflation thanks to cooling energy prices will not be enough for the ECB to stop tightening, as policymakers are looking for clear signs of core inflation easing," said Riccardo Marcelli Fabiani, economist at Oxford Economics. ING's Colijn added in a note: "The potential for core inflation to remain stickier than



BERLIN: Food prices rose 15.4 percent in the eurozone in March. — AFP

hoped will be the main reason for the ECB to continue to hike in the near term. We expect another 25bp hike in May and another in June."

Inflation slows across Europe

Inflation slowed in some of Europe's biggest economies in March, fueling hopes that the region is past the worst price increases. In Germany, annual price growth slowed to 7.4 percent in March from 8.7 percent in the first two months of 2022.

The annual inflation rate came in at

5.6 percent in France in March, compared to 6.3 percent the previous month. The slowdown was more pronounced in Spain, with inflation coming in at 3.3 percent compared to six percent in February.

Among the 20 countries that use the euro, Luxembourg had the lowest inflation rate in February at 3.0 percent, Eurostat said. According to other Eurostat data published Friday, the unemployment rate in the eurozone remained stable in February at 6.6 percent. — AFP

Inflation touches 50-year high in crisis-hit Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's year-on-year inflation hit 35.37 percent in March—the highest in nearly five decades—as the government scrambled to meet International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditions to unlock a desperately needed bailout. Month-on-month inflation was 3.72 percent, according to government data released Saturday, while the average inflation rate for the past year was 27.26 percent. Years of financial mismanagement and political instability have pushed Pakistan's economy to the brink of collapse, exacerbated by a global energy crisis and devastating floods that submerged a third of the country in 2022.

The country needs billions of dollars of financing to service existing debt, while foreign exchange reserves have dwindled and the rupee is in freefall. Poor Pakistanis are feeling the brunt of the economic turmoil, and at least 20 people have been killed since the start of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan in crowd crushes at food distribution centers. "The way inflation is rising, I believe a famine-like situation has been simmering," said Shahida Wizarat, a Karachi-based analyst.

At least 12 people were killed Friday in a crowd crush in Pakistan's southern city of Karachi at a factory distributing Ramadan alms. The South Asian nation—home to more than 220 million—is deep in debt and must enact tough tax reforms and push up utility prices if it hopes to unlock another tranche of a \$6.5 billion IMF bailout and avoid defaulting. — AFP

Swiss watchmakers counting the clock until Chinese tourists return

GENEVA: Switzerland's major luxury watch brands are cautiously optimistic that Chinese tourists will boost sales this year, if they return to Europe in large numbers after the easing of domestic COVID restrictions. Exports to China, a key market for watchmakers, contracted by 13.6 percent in 2022 due to Beijing's zero-COVID policy and the surge in infections when it was lifted at the end of the year.

However, exports began to rebound in February—up 8.2 percent year-on-year, according to the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry. "China will regain a positive dynamic," the federation's president Jean-Daniel Pasche, told AFP at the industry's annual Watches and Wonders trade fair in Geneva, where 48 brands such as Rolex, Cartier and Patek Philippe were showing off their latest creations.

With China reopening, many financial analysts have sharply raised their growth forecasts for the luxury sector as a whole in 2023. During COVID lockdowns, Chinese consumers built up significant savings, with HSBC analysts pointing to estimates of 6.6 trillion yuan (\$960 billion) in excess savings accu-

mulated over the past three years. Morgan Stanley analysts expect Chinese consumer spending on luxury goods to increase by 20 percent in 2023. According to the US investment bank's estimates, luxury goods lovers in China made up about 60 percent of the sector's growth between 2000 and 2019. Nearly three-quarters of their spending was done abroad, representing a windfall for Europe's luxury boutiques.

Appetite for travel

That said, Chinese luxury consumers have become more accustomed to buying domestically during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Swiss luxury goods giant Richemont sounded a note of caution. "We see people going back to the stores with an appetite to buy and an appetite to travel," said Cyrille Vigneron, chief executive of the group's flagship brand Cartier. "When a market so important is changing trajectory it has an impact" across the whole of Asia, he told a Watches and Wonders press conference. But it is hard to predict how the Chinese market will evolve in the short term, said Richemont chief finance officer Burkhard Grund, even



GENEVA: Participants watches a showcase at the Rolex booth on the opening day of luxury watch fair 'Watches and Wonders Geneva'. — AFP

though he remains "optimistic for the mid-term development of China".

"We've seen good business during the Chinese new year, but this has taken place not just in China," he said, with outbound tourism returning to Asian countries including Thailand and Japan, and the first signs of Chinese tourists returning to Dubai. "But in Europe, we don't see it yet." Guillaume de Seynes, a director at leather goods giant Hermes, had no doubt that the desire to return to Europe "is there", but flights, "especially to France, are still limited", he told AFP. For now, the top priorities at Hermes, which was presenting

its new watches in Geneva, remain "to enlarge the average size" of its stores and "gradually increase our presence in China" by opening one boutique a year in a new city, he explained. Hermes opened a new store in Nanjing in January, taking its number of outlets in China to 27. In Lucerne, the top tourist destination in Switzerland, the tourism office hopes to see Chinese visitors returning soon "in summer or late spring", depending on "the availability of visas and flight capacities", said a spokeswoman for the picturesque city where browsing watch shops is on the must-do list. — AFP

Business

NBK focus is on maintaining leadership in delivering innovative products: Al-Fulaij

NBK CEO speaks during an interview with 'The Banker'

- Our financial results demonstrate the value creation inherent in our business model and our ability to seize opportunities despite the challenging environment
- Our digital excellence is a springboard for regional growth and expansion, with a special focus on young demographics

- We continue to look at any potential opportunities that align with our strategic direction, create synergies with our existing operations and markets
- Despite the global challenges, we remain optimistic of an overall stable operating environment in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Salah Al-Fulaij, Chief Executive Officer of the National Bank of Kuwait, Kuwait, said that NBK's proactive digital transformation strategy and expansion of its digital infrastructure will continue to drive growth going forward. During an interview with "The Banker" magazine, Al-Fulaij stated that digital transformation is perceived as a springboard for regional growth and expansion, with a special focus on young demographics and retail businesses.

When asked about expansion, Al-Fulaij responded that NBK follows a very successful market expansion strategy that started more than a decade ago. "Today we are satisfied with our geographical coverage and enjoy a wide banking presence with an international footprint spanning the world's leading financial centers in 13 countries", he noted. "We continue to look at any potential opportunities that align with our strategic direction, create synergies with our existing operations and markets, and of course generate added value to our shareholders," he added.

Remarkable experience

Al-Fulaij indicated that NBK had a very successful experience launching Weyay, the first fully digital bank in Kuwait, confirming that the group plans to introduce similar experiences in other regional markets to open new revenue streams. Al-Fulaij also confirmed that the bank continues to expand its wealth and asset management market share in both local and international markets, with a keen focus on the Saudi market adding that NBK global wealth management division combines the extensive asset management capabilities of NBK Capital with the expertise and client-focused interfaces developed by the private banking group.

"We continue to consider Egypt as one of our important growth markets. NBK Egypt has successfully positioned itself as a leading financial institution on the map of private banks operating in Egypt. Given our success so far in the Egyptian market and the fast pace of growth, I am confident that we are on the right track towards further growth and more significant market share, with focus on the growing retail sector," Al-Fulaij added.

Weyay's success

Speaking of Weyay's experience, Al-Fulaij highlighted that a key element in Weyay's success is Kuwait's young demographic, with 64 percent of the Kuwaiti population under the age of 34, confirming that this factor played a significant influence in the

digital bank's growth, as did the fact that the country's internet and mobile penetration and usage rates are among the highest in the world.

"We maintained our relevance by recognizing the market's changing demands and by creating new business models, developing strategic partnerships and committing to continuous innovation," Al-Fulaij indicated, adding that since its launch, Weyay has witnessed consistent growth and managed to exceed its customer acquisition goal by 300 percent, thanks to the bank's innovative approach of direct engagement with young clients by recognizing and meeting their needs in such a way that suits their personality and lifestyle, especially since Weyay's executives are themselves of a similar age and understand their generation's demands first-hand.

Strong sector

When asked to give his projections for Kuwait's banking industry in 2023, Al-Fulaij stated that the sector is notable for its high liquidity and robust capitalization, with an overall capital adequacy ratio well above the required minimum level while additionally, non-performing loans remain low, and loan-loss provisioning is high.

"The banking sector's strong foundations have enabled it to handle the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other global challenges over the past few years," Al-Fulaij confirmed. He also highlighted that government-led pandemic mitigation and recovery actions afterwards have aided the banking system, allowing it to lead a post-pandemic recovery benefitting from a well-capitalized and highly liquid sector balance sheet. The banking sector's strength was supported by various factors, including the positive impact of higher oil prices and improved business activity on the overall operating environment in Kuwait. Additionally, the banking industry is benefiting from the increases in benchmark interest rates, albeit with a slight lag in Kuwait.

"Looking ahead, we remain optimistic of an overall stable operating environment in the coun-



Salah Al-Fulaij



try, because we expect that high oil prices will continue to support government spending on wages and investments and help boost business confidence," Al-Fulaij added.

Sustainable growth

According to Al-Fulaij, during the past few years, Kuwaiti banks have been reporting strong profitability, and the stage is set for sustained growth with companies returning to normal business operations, a rebound in demand for corporate credit, and a preferable interest rate environment.

He also indicated that business credit recorded 6.8 percent growth in 2022, the fastest annual expansion since 2013. Meanwhile, domestic credit ended 2022 with growth at 7.7 percent for the full year, the fastest yearly expansion since 2015.

Exceptional performance

As for NBK, Al-Fulaij stated that the bank started 2023 on a very strong footing after recording exceptional performance in 2022, adding: "Against the challenging economic backdrop of 2022, we successfully achieved the highest net profits in our history, demonstrating the value creation inherent in our business model, the continued success of our strategy and our ability to seize opportunities".

In 2022, NBK Group recorded a net profit of KD 509.1 million (\$1.7 billion), up 40.5 percent year on year. This strong profitability growth is driven by solid operational performance and improving cost of risk. Net operating income reached KD 1.0 billion growing 12.2 percent year-on-year.

"The group's balance sheet remains exceptionally strong. During 2022, total assets grew by 9.3 percent to reach KD 36.3 billion while customer deposits surged by 10.4 percent to KD 20.2 billion, with the overall funding mix remaining stable and favorable to the group," Al-Fulaij confirmed. In the meantime, asset quality remained solid, with the bank's ratio of non-performing loans to gross

loans at 1.42 percent as of December 2022. Loan loss coverage ratio is at 267 percent, reflecting the conservative provisioning policy of the group.

Credit remains resilient

As for his predictions for the coming year in terms of overall credit growth for the banking sector, Al-Fulaij said: "Going into 2023, given higher interest rates, a weaker global economic backdrop, and likely softer domestic non-oil growth, we expect slower business credit growth than the multi-year high seen in 2022. However, growth should remain decent by historical standards, helped by still relatively elevated oil prices and an ongoing post-pandemic recovery".

During the interview, Al-Fulaij shared his expectations on the infrastructure projects market, which is expected to thrive in 2023, providing momentum to the private sector. He also provided insights on the draft state budget for 2023-24, which proposes salary and subsidy increases, and if executed, is likely to boost household spending this year.

"We expect credit to maintain its momentum and remain solid at 5 percent to 6 percent in 2023, a marginal deceleration from the 2022 levels. While tighter monetary policy may become a consideration for borrowers, we think that credit demand will remain relatively resilient," Al-Fulaij said.

Global challenges

Al-Fulaij revealed that uncertainty is the greatest threat to the global economy, when asked about the biggest challenges facing Kuwait's banking sector. "We have witnessed a series of unprecedented shocks over the past few years, beginning with the pandemic, followed by supply chain interruptions, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, persistently high inflation rates, and most recently the bank failures in the US and the rise of a potential contagious risk for other countries' banking sectors," Al-Fulaij noted.

As for the local economic scene in Kuwait, while the projected rise in government spending is expected to support demand in the economy in the near term, it also adds to longer-term fiscal sustainability pressures, especially in the context of continued over-reliance on volatile oil revenues, limited non-oil revenue streams, a lower capex target and slow reform progress due to legislative gridlock. "Given the current political impasse, it may take longer than usual before the budget is approved by parliament, potentially pushing the boost to the economy from higher spending until later in the year," Al-Fulaij concluded.

Harris calls for 'speedy' Zambia debt resolution

LUSAKA: US Vice President Kamala Harris reiterated calls for a "speedy finalization" of Zambia's debt restructuring on Friday, as she visited the country in the last stop of a continental tour. The United States has been pushing for creditors, which prominently include China, to provide relief to Zambia, which in 2020 became the first African country to default on its foreign debt—estimated at \$17.3 billion—since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We will continue to advocate for a speedy finalization of Zambia's debt treatment and restructuring," Harris told a press conference in Lusaka, after a meeting with Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema.

"The international community needs to help countries such as Zambia regain their footing. So I will reiterate a call that we have made now many times for all bilateral official creditors to provide a meaningful debt reduction." Harris is the second top US official to visit the country in a few months. Treasury chief Janet Yellen toured the nation in January. The United States has accused China—the main creditor to many African nations—of dragging its



LUSAKA, Zambia: US Vice President Kamala Harris (fourth left) and US Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff (third left) are seen upon arrival at the Kenneth Kaunda International Airport in Lusaka on March 31, 2023. — AFP

feet after Lusaka sought help with its debt through a G20 mechanism. "Our priority for us as a country now is to rebuild our economy. What is keeping us behind is the debt," said Hichilema.

Zambia is the last stop in Harris's three-nation trip to Africa—the latest push by the United States to deepen its engagement with the continent to counter the growing influence of China and Russia.

The US vice president previously travelled to Ghana and Tanzania. Harris's visit has a special poi-

gnancy, as she is the first Black person and woman ever in the White House number two job and visited Zambia as a young girl, when her maternal grandfather, who was from India, worked there.

In Lusaka, Harris made a brief stop at a site where a house inhabited by her grandfather in the 1960s once stood. "My grandfather was one of my favorite people," she told reporters. "I was the eldest grandchild and so I got the benefit and the blessing of a lot of time with him." —AFP

Virgin Orbit to lay off 85% of its employees

WASHINGTON: Virgin Orbit, the satellite launch company founded by Richard Branson, said it will lay off 85 percent of its employees, according to a filing to the US stock market regulator. The California-based company will lay off around 675 people to reduce expenses, "in light of (its) inability to secure meaningful funding", it said in a filing to the US Securities and Exchange Commission dated Thursday.

The job cuts are expected to be mostly complete by April 3. Virgin Orbit suffered a major setback earlier this year when an attempt to launch the first rocket into space from British soil ended in failure.

The company organized the mission along with the UK Space Agency and Cornwall Spaceport to launch nine satellites into space. Earlier this month, the company suspended operations for several days while it held funding negotiations and explored strategic opportunities. But at an all hands meeting on Thursday, CEO Dan Hart told employees that operations would now cease "for the foreseeable future," according to US media. — AFP

Why is India so thirsty for Russian oil?

MUMBAI: India is snapping up discounted crude from Russia, refining it and selling it, becoming a key supplier to Europe as it reshapes global fuel flows more than a year into Moscow's war in Ukraine.

New Delhi has resisted Western pressure to freeze out Moscow, opting instead to strengthen trade ties with its long-standing ally—with the added benefits of tempering inflation while saving money.

How much Russian oil is India buying?

India is the world's third-largest crude consumer after the United States and China, and imports 85 percent of its needs. Previously its main suppliers were in the Middle East. Now, Russia is number one.

For isolated Moscow, India and China have become its top customers. In March, India imported from Russia 1.62 million barrels per day (bpd), 40 percent of its total oil imports, according to the International Energy Agency, up from around 70,000

bpd and just one percent of inflows before the war. On Wednesday, Russian energy giant Rosneft announced a deal to "substantially increase" supplies to the state-owned Indian Oil Company following a visit to India by CEO Igor Sechin.

Has buying Russian oil helped Indians pay less for fuel?

India saved \$3.6 billion by importing discounted crude oil from Russia, in the 10 months after the outbreak of the war, a member of parliament said in December. Savings have likely grown more since with energy cargo trackers reporting that India is purchasing Russia's flagship Urals crude well below the \$60 per barrel price cap introduced by the G7 in December.

"As the world's third-largest consumer of oil and gas, a consumer where the levels of income are not very high, it is our fundamental obligation to ensure that the Indian consumer has the best possible access on the most advantageous terms to international markets," Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar said in Moscow in November.

What happens to Russian oil in India?

India has 23 oil refineries refining 249 million tons of oil a year, making it the world's fourth-big-

gest refiner. Asia's richest person Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries runs the world's largest refinery in Gujarat, where he has ramped up purchases of Russian oil. Together with India's second-largest refiner Nayara—of which Russia's Rosneft owns 49 percent—Reliance imports 45 percent of Russian crude that comes into India, data from cargo tracking firm Vortexa shows.

And then it goes back to the West?

Much of the refined product goes to Indian consumers. But thanks to a surplus India has emerged as a major supplier of petrol and diesel—some of it refined from Russian crude—to Europe and elsewhere.

India's petroleum product exports to the European Union rose 20.4 percent year on year between April and January to 11.6 million tons, the Indian Express daily reported, citing official data, adding that Indian refiners were enjoying "robust margins".

How is this allowed?

Despite sanctions on Moscow, this does not fall foul of European Union rules because the refined products are not deemed to have come from Russia. It also helps the bloc avoid supply problems, which would push up prices for consumers already reeling from galloping inflation. —AFP

Mexico central bank slows pace of interest rate hikes

MEXICO CITY: Mexico's central bank raised its benchmark interest rate to a new record high, but slowed the pace of monetary policy tightening following signs that inflation is easing. The increase, to 11.25 percent, was the 15th consecutive hike aimed at slowing consumer price rises that hit the fastest pace in more than two decades last year. The quarter-percentage-point hike was the smallest since the current round of monetary tightening began in June 2021.

"Since the last monetary policy meeting, annual headline inflation has decreased more than expected," a central bank statement said, adding that the governing board's decision was unanimous.

"With this action, it slows the pace of interest rate increases and the monetary policy stance adjusts to the trajectory required for inflation to converge to its three percent target within the forecast horizon," it added. The central bank expects inflation to gradually decline to 3.1 percent by the fourth quarter of 2024. Inflation stood at an annual rate of around 7.1 percent in the first fortnight of March, it said. — AFP

Business

Mixed reception to UK's plan to join trans-Pacific trade pact

Britain to be first European country to join the trade bloc

LONDON: The UK's announcement that it will soon join 11 other countries in a major Asia-Pacific trade partnership—the country's biggest post-Brexit trade deal to date—earned a mixed reception on Friday.

Britain will be the first new member since the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) was created in 2018, and the first European country in the bloc.

The trade grouping will include more than 500 million people and account for 15 percent of global gross domestic product once the UK becomes its 12th member, according to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's office. It said Britain's accession—after 21 months of “intense negotiations”—puts the country “at the heart of a dynamic group of economies” and is evidence of “seizing the opportunities of our new post-Brexit trade freedoms”.

The development fulfils a key pledge of Brexit supporters that, outside the European Union, the UK can capitalize on joining other trade blocs with fast-growing economies than those closer to home. But others have noted that such ventures will struggle to compensate for the economic damage sustained by leaving the EU, the world's largest trading bloc and collective economy. “The impact on the UK economy from the UK joining the CPTPP will probably be fairly small,” said Ashley Webb, of Capital Economics.

“Having said that, it may help to improve UK in-

ternational relations and other countries' perceptions of the UK as a trading partner.”

‘Strategic’

The CPTPP is the successor to a previous trans-Pacific trade pact that the United States withdrew from in 2017 under former President Donald Trump. Its members include fellow Group of Seven members Canada and Japan, and historic UK allies Australia and New Zealand. The remaining members are Chile, Mexico and Peru, along with Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam.

Despite rising geopolitical tensions, in particular with Canberra, China formally applied to join the bloc in 2021. All existing members must reach a consensus for a new country to enter the CPTPP. London is set to formally join later this year following nearly two years of talks. In Tokyo, Japanese government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno welcomed the expansion.

“The UK is a global strategic partner and also an important trading and investment partner,” he told reporters. Its accession “will have great meaning for forming a free and fair economic order”, he added. Matsuno said Japan would need to examine whether China and any other nations hoping to join can meet the required conditions, and would also consider the “strategic viewpoint” and Japanese public opinion.

In Britain, two hawkish former leaders of Sunak's

ruling Conservatives said London should use its membership to block Beijing's bid. “It's essential that any idea of Chinese accession is ruled out (and) I'd expect the British government to oppose any such proposal,” former prime minister Liz Truss tweeted.

‘Longer-term benefits’

Since Britain quit the EU's single market in 2021, it has been trying to strike bilateral deals to boost its international trade—and flagging economy. It has so far inked agreements with far-flung allies including Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, and is in talks with India and Canada. However, a prized pact with the United States remains stalled. King's College London economist Jonathan Portes noted the CPTPP was not a “deep multilateral agreement” like its predecessor or the EU, so its impacts in lowering trade barriers would be “quite small”. “Joining CPTPP may have longer-term benefits, both economic... and geopolitical,” he told AFP. “But of course you can't directly quantify those at this point.” Analysts estimate the eventual UK economic boost is £1.8 billion (\$2.2 billion) -- a 0.08 percent annual GDP increase.

Meanwhile, the Office for Budget Responsibility has forecast Brexit will reduce long-term UK growth by about 4 percent. Scotland's devolved government, which wants to join the EU as an independent country after leaving the UK, seized on the difference.



OXFORD, UK: Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak speaks as he gives a television broadcast interview during a visit to the UK Atomic Energy Authority, Culham Science Centre near Oxford, west of London, on March 30, 2023. —AFP

“It is clear that this agreement will not make up for the damaging impact of the UK leaving the EU and forfeiting access to the European single market,” its trade minister Richard Lochhead said. However, the National Farmers Union was among those to applaud the deal, saying it “could provide some good opportunities to get more fantastic British food on plates overseas”. —AFP



TARAZA, Colombia: Aerial view showing the environmental impact from mining in Taraza municipality, Antioquia department, Colombia. —AFP

Battle in Colombia over river-wrecking gold ‘dragons’

EL BAGRE, Colombia: The giant skeletons of burnt and dismantled gold dredgers litter the rivers of northwest Colombia, where the government is waging a full-out war on illegal mining.

Nicknamed “dragons” by locals, the massive machines used to suck gold from riverbeds are blamed for destroying the environment and financing organized crime. But their dismantling in a massive army operation has been met with hostility by communities who depend on mining for their daily survival.

Around El Bagre in the gold-rich Bajo Cauca region, a protest by miners that started early this month has been marked by acts of vandalism the government blamed on the Gulf Clan drug cartel for instigating. But Luis Manuel Campo, 32, one of the miners, insisted to AFP that “we have nothing to do with criminal groups.” Campo co-owns a dredger with three other people. “We are not hiding. We just want the persecution to stop,” he said. “We want to be formally recognized as miners so that we can work in peace, without stigma.”

New gold rush

The names of the villages in this region such as Zaragoza and Caceres serve as a reminder of the Spanish colonizers who were already extracting gold in Bajo Cauca in the 17th century. It became a bastion of rightwing paramilitary fighters in the 1990s, and is now a stronghold of the Gulf Clan, Colombia's most powerful cartel. President Gustavo Petro this month called off a ceasefire with the Clan, accusing it of being behind attacks on civilians committed by protesting miners.

Criminal groups in Colombia make almost as much money from illegal mining as they do from trafficking cocaine, authorities say. With a recent rise in gold prices, Bajo Cauca has been gripped by a new type of gold rush, with poor communities scouring the gravelly river beds with shovels, bulldozers and dredging machines. “Apart from gold, there is nothing here,” said Campo. Locals say about 350 dredging machines are active in the region—big and small—on top of those operated legally by the Mineros Aluvial multinational. The illegal dredgers range from simple machines with makeshift conveyor belts to larger mechanical contraptions that require several divers to guide a massive vacuum pipe under the dark water. Then there are the “dragons”—three-storey, 20-meter (66-foot) long boats with massive engines. —AFP

Stock markets climb as traders weigh interest rates outlook

NEW YORK: Stock markets mostly moved higher on Thursday as banking sector worries eased and traders weighed central banks' interest rate plans in the wake of recent turmoil. Investors have taken to heart reassurances by authorities around the world that fallout from the collapse of US regional banks and the takeover of Credit Suisse has been contained.

“Worries about the banking industry continue to ease, offering support to the broader market,” said

Gulf Bank wraps up ‘GB Fit’ Sports Week at Al-Shaheed Park

KUWAIT: As part of its continuous initiatives to consolidate the principles of community sustainability, Gulf Bank concluded its annual “GB Fit” week of Ramadan sporting activities. This year's event was held in Al-Shaheed Park and took place from March 27 to April 1, amidst a remarkable turnout from the public.

As part of the “GB Fit” activities, the audience was able to practice several exercises and participate in a variety of sports competitions under the supervision of specialized trainers, in addition to receiving valuable prizes for two daily winners. Participants expressed their thanks to Gulf Bank for its keenness to launch initiatives that encourage the public to practice sports and adopt a healthier lifestyle.

Rooted in Gulf Bank's keenness to communicate with the public and customers throughout the year, the virtual “GB Fit” competition is also set to continue until the end of Ramadan on the Technogym mobile app. The competition is based on Technogym metrics related to calorie burning and activities.

On this occasion, Fahad Al-Sharrah, Assistant Manager of Corporate Communications from Gulf Bank, said: “We were pleased with the audience's participation in GB Fit's Ramadan sporting events



Fahad Al-Sharrah



week, and we are proud of our success in encouraging people to adopt a healthier lifestyle during the holy month of Ramadan. This year's events align with the spirituality of the holy month, and we are proud to have a positive impact on the local community throughout the year.”

He pointed out that this initiative is part of the multiple community sustainability initiatives that Gulf Bank organizes and participates in throughout the year, especially during the holy month of Ramadan. Through the “GB Community” initiative, Gulf Bank aims to enhance communication with the public and to maintain Gulf Bank's position as the bank that is closest to the community.

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The Bank is constantly engag-

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

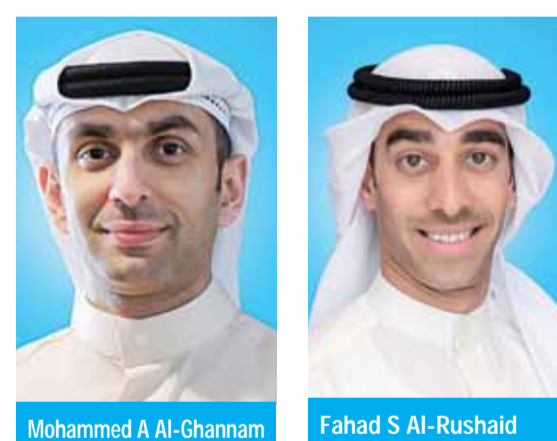
Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining robust developments in sustainability at environmental, social and governance levels through diverse sustainability initiatives, strategically selected to benefit the Bank both internally and externally. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 “New Kuwait” and works with various parties to achieve it.

A first in the region, Markaz unveils ‘GCC Momentum Fund’

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre “Markaz” unveiled its newest “GCC Momentum Fund,” the first fund of its kind to invest in the GCC markets. The Fund's strategy is to invest in shares with high momentum score and tracks the S&P Momentum GCC Composite Index.

The Fund is the first in the GCC to implement factor-investing, whereby the index provider follows a transparent process to select stocks in line with best international practices, considering the level of liquidity and market depth. The GCC Momentum Fund offers our individual and institutional investors exposure to stocks with the best risk-adjusted returns. The “GCC Momentum Fund” launch reflects Markaz's ongoing effort to offer its clients innovative investment tools and solutions to improve risk-adjusted returns to its investors. The Fund's methodology has been developed internally by Markaz's MENA Equities technical team, who spent over two years analyzing and doing due diligence to test and prove the concept's validity in collaboration with the index provider S&P.

Commenting on the Fund, Senior Vice President Fund & Portfolio Management, MENA Equities, Mohammed A Al-Ghannam, said: “We are pleased to



Mohammed A Al-Ghannam

Fahad S Al-Rushaid



launch the “GCC Momentum Fund” as the first passive Fund in the GCC that adopts earning momentum methodology. The process was developed by con-

market analyst Patrick O'Hare at Briefing.com. Cooling inflation in Europe also boosted hopes for a pause in interest rate hikes. “Fresh from their triumph yesterday, stocks have barreled into a second day of gains, with the catalyst being the much weaker Spanish inflation reading this morning,” said Chris Beauchamp, chief market analyst at online trading platform IG.

Wall Street's main indices climbed, European stock markets closed higher and Asian markets ended the day mostly in the green as well. The banking flare-up has fanned speculation that the US Federal Reserve will have to end its inflation-fighting rate-hike campaign sooner than expected in order to avoid further destabilizing the finance industry. Some investors now predict the central bank will cut borrowing costs by year-end. Some forecasts put the rate at just above four percent by 2024, compared with more than five percent to the recent

upheaval. That has focused eyes on the Fed's next policy meeting, with observers predicting it could mark the last increase, even though inflation is still high. “The Fed remains in a very difficult position,” said Wolfe Research's Chris Senyck. “With banks stabilizing, inflation still way above target, the labor market still historically strong, and the Fed desperately needing to rebuild credibility, our sense is that the (policy board) will hike by 25 basis points on May 3,” he added.

US and eurozone inflation data due Friday should provide a clearer idea of whether monetary policymakers will have more flexibility in terms of pausing rate hikes. Data on Thursday showed inflation slowing to 7.4 percent in March in Germany, Europe's biggest economy, down from 8.7 percent in the two previous months.

Inflation eased to 3.3 percent in Spain. Some analysts believe the latest woes among banks, which

have been blamed on sharp increases in rates, will force lenders to tighten access to credit which will in turn reduce the need for the Fed to hike further. “The good news for stocks is that growth concerns have moved into the driver's seat after the recent banking shock, where investors are now positioning for the Fed to cut and instead rely on credit tightening to tame inflation,” said SPI Asset Management's Stephen Innes. The softer outlook for future US interest rates weighed on the dollar, which was down against most of its major peers. The weaker greenback also helped dollar-denominated oil prices reverse earlier losses.

Shares in British energy infrastructure group Petrofac soared 70 percent after it and Hitachi Energy secured a multi-billion-euro deal to expand offshore wind capacity in the Dutch-German North Sea. —AFP

ducting a thorough historical analysis and comparing several investment methodologies factoring in stock performance and risk. The momentum strategy has increasingly attracted the demand of investors. In the past ten years, the S&P GCC Momentum Index outperformed S&P GCC Composite Index by 1.7 percent per annum. The Fund is catered to investors seeking to invest in the GCC markets and with an investment objective to achieve a long-term favorable risk-adjusted return. The Fund's investors will benefit from the compounding effect by investing long-term. The Fund is a gateway to Markaz's “factor strategies.”

Also commenting on the Fund, Vice President MENA Equities at Markaz, Fahad S Al-Rushaid, said: “The Markaz's momentum methodology selects stocks according to factors and foundations that are in line with the global markets' practices. To enhance liquidity and volatility, the stocks are selected from those that collectively compose 50 percent of the market capitalization of the GCC markets. The constituents of the index are reviewed every six months. Markaz GCC Momentum Fund offers a lower expense ratio than other GCC equities funds.”

Markaz has continuously and effectively innovated investment products and financial services, and this is evident through the development of unique investments to cater to the various investor needs. Amongst these products are “Mumtaz,” the first domestic mutual fund, and “MREF,” the first real estate investment fund in Kuwait, as well as “Forsa Financial Fund”, the first options market maker in the GCC since 2005.

China's 'art factory' painters turn from fakes to originals



This picture taken on February 19, 2023 shows artist Deng Fei painting a replica of Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" in an alley at Dafen village, in Shenzhen, in China's southern Guangdong province. —AFP photos



Artist Zhao Xiaoyong stands next to his paintings at Dafen village.



This picture shows people practicing painting in an alley at Dafen village.



An artist paints in an alley at Dafen village.



A man carries an art work in an alley at Dafen village.



This picture shows an artist painting in a workshop at Dafen village.

Painters in a Chinese village once known for churning out replicas of Western masterpieces are now making original art worth thousands of dollars, selling their own works in a booming domestic art market. Home to more than 8,000 artists, southern China's Dafen has been producing near-perfect copies of timeless masterpieces for years.

In its heyday, three out of five oil paintings sold worldwide were made in the village, and for years village painters sold their copies to buyers across Europe, the Middle East and the United States. Exports began to dip after the 2008 global financial crisis, and all but dried up when China slammed shut its borders in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

A few artists gave up and closed their studios. But others saw in the obstacles an opportunity to establish themselves as painters in their own right by catering to China's art market — the second-biggest in the world, with sales jumping by 35 percent in 2021.

Self-taught artist Zhao Xiaoyong used to sell replicas of Vincent van Gogh's work for about 1,500 yuan (\$220) each, while his original pieces fetch up to 50,000 yuan, he said. When Zhao moved

to Dafen from central China in 1997, his family shared a tiny two-bedroom apartment with five other tenants.

"Those days, there was an assembly line-style system, with each artist painting a small section of a larger piece, like an eye or a nose, before passing the piece to another painter to draw a limb or a shirt sleeve," he told AFP.

After years of cranking out mock masterpiece here the artist famously painted "The Starry Night". "I felt I could finally enter into his world instead of just copying his brush strokes," Zhao said.

"I realized I had to come out of Van Gogh's shadow and give life to my thoughts." Now he chronicles how the Dafen oil painting village has changed, using Van Gogh's style: one canvas shows Zhao in a crowded workshop holding one of the Dutch painter's self-portraits, while fellow artists nap on their desks.

Tourist boost

Since China's dismantling of its zero-Covid policy in late 2022, the streets of Dafen are once again bustling with visitors, crouched in front of easels, slapping paint on canvases.

As well as immersing themselves in the artistic culture with painting les-

sons, many of the tourists come to buy pieces from the villagers, but their hunt for a good deal is another factor behind the fading market in handmade fakes. In one alleyway, workers brush paint onto printed canvases of Duccio's "Madonna and Child".

These are sold for a knock-down price as low as 50 yuan per piece, while a hand-painted copy costs up to 1,500 yuan. "We paint a few strokes over the

printed image to make it look like an authentic oil painting," said one artist, who declined to be named. "Buyers think the printed background is painted using watercolors."

'Chinese aesthetic'

Another Dafen-based artist on a mission to move on from painting imitations is Wu Feimin, who has carved out a niche selling Buddhist-themed art. "I used to

copy Picasso's work, and now I have my distinct style," Wu said, painting a giant face of the Buddha with a palette knife.

"It takes weeks, sometimes months, to complete one painting," the artist said as he was getting ready for exhibitions in the village and the rich industrial hub of Guangzhou. "It's risky, but the margins are better." Other artists told AFP that they went back to school during the pandemic to learn how to draw mountains and weeping-willow trees seen in traditional Chinese landscape paintings.

"Wealthy Chinese buyers want art that reflects a Chinese aesthetic," said Yu Sheng, a fine-art teacher who used the opportunity to retrain in the classical style. While he continues to make ends meet by exporting replicas of Western works, he also creates his own pieces, determined to crack the more lucrative domestic market and become a portrait painter for the wealthy.

And he is confident in his abilities over those of artists from well-known schools. "Our technique is better because we paint every day, but we don't have contacts with art dealers in big cities," he said. "Our survival depends on whether our work is recognized by China's art buyers — we must learn to bend like bamboo." —AFP



This picture shows empty chairs waiting for budding artists to practice, in an alley at Dafen village.



Artists paint on top of pre-printed art works in a workshop at Dafen village.



This picture shows an artist painting in a workshop at Dafen village.



People practise painting in an alley at Dafen village.



This picture shows an artist painting a Vincent Van Gogh replica in a studio at Dafen village.

Horses part of Native American life earlier than thought: Study

Native American people integrated horses into their communities much earlier than European colonial records suggest, according to an innovative study Thursday that combined archaeological and genetic analysis with Indigenous oral traditions.

The study is the first using both Western science and traditional knowledge to be published in the prestigious Science journal, the researchers said. Based on European records from colonial times, historians have long contended that Native American people did not interact much with horses in the American West until the late 1600s.

Scholars often say the turning point was the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, when Indigenous people staged an uprising against Spanish colonizers in what is now New Mexico, releasing many European horses in the process. However, the new research, which traces the spread of horses from the American Southwest into the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains regions, contradicts this widely accepted theory.

The team analyzed hundreds of horse remains using radiocarbon dating, DNA sequencing and other tools to demonstrate that the animals had spread widely across the American West in the early 1600s. They also showed that the horses were raised, received veterinary care, and used for transport by Indigenous communities during that time. This meant that horses were part of Native American social and ceremonial traditions "before any documented European presence in the Rockies or the Central Plains," the study said.

'Historic'

The findings are consistent with a range of Indigenous oral histories that have long challenged the European account. "Before this study, there was literally no place for Indigenous peoples in the Americas, or the horses we lived alongside and protected, in this conversation," said Yvette Running Horse Collin, a member of the Oglala Lakota Nation and co-author of the paper.

"This is due to the systems put in place by

colonization," she told a press conference in the southern French city of Toulouse. Rather than one "scientific system dominating another," the research showed that "science can be utilized to heal and to unite rather than divide," she added.

William Taylor, an archaeologist at the University of Colorado and the study's first author, said that "a myopic, narrow focus on European perspectives has unfortunately limited our understanding collectively of the integration of horses into Indigenous societies".

Ludovic Orlando, a study co-author and paleogeneticist at France's national scientific research center CNRS, said the research was "historic". "We've brought traditional science to the cover" of Science, he told the press conference.

While horses are known to have inhabited the Americas more than 12,000 years ago, Orlando said there is an "absence of fossils" between that time and the 1600s, the reason for which is not known. The fossils from the 1600s covered by the research had Spanish or Portuguese ancestry, genetic analysis showed.

That would "fit well with acquisition from the conquistadors," Orlando said, adding that the discovery of more fossils could disprove this theory. Orlando, who has previously used genetic analysis to disprove longstanding theories about the history of horses, was contact-



French biologist and CNRS research scientist Ludovic Orlando poses in Toulouse, southwestern France, on March 29, 2023. —AFP photos

ed by Lakota researchers in 2018.

Running Horse Collin then moved to the south of France for two years to work at the Centre for Anthropobiology and Genomics of Toulouse. "I, as an Oglala Lakota scientist, was not asked to change my methods, methodology and conclusions," she said.

Orlando said that different theoretical approaches sometimes led him to reflect on how he communicated, which "was really not easy at several moments". But he said they found "a mutual language" and intend to continue their scientific collaboration. —AFP

Arts duo Gilbert & George open permanent London exhibition space



Italian artist Gilbert Prousch (Right) and British artist George Passmore, better known as 'Gilbert and George', pose together at the opening of the Gilbert & George Centre in east London on March 24, 2023. —AFP photos



An artwork entitled 'Lion Teeth' 2019 by Italian artist Gilbert Prousch and British artist George Passmore, better known as 'Gilbert and George', is pictured during a photocall at the opening of the Gilbert & George Centre in east London on March 24, 2023.



Italian artist Gilbert Prousch (Left) and British artist George Passmore, better known as 'Gilbert and George', pose for a photo.

Eccentric British art duo Gilbert & George will open their permanent exhibition space in London on Saturday, driven by an "art for all" ethos — and a desire for immortality. Located not far from their home and studio in the former working-class district of Spitalfields in London's East End, the converted 19th century building covers a total of 280 square meters over three levels. The Gilbert & George Centre will host one to two exhibitions each year. Its opening show will be "Paradisical Pictures", a London first

which features the duo inhabiting "a disquieting vision of a heavenly place imagined as an enchanted forest or overgrown park".

Entrance is free, in line with the tweed-wearing pair's belief in accessible art. "You don't have to be a specialist, you don't have to be rich, you can be poor or whatever you want to understand our art," Gilbert explained in a video presentation.

"It was very important that it was a human space, we don't like aggressively minimalist galleries and museums," chimed in George. "We want it

to feel part of life, it's also so that we can live forever, because everyone wants to live forever," he added.

"We're getting old, but we're living forever", joked Gilbert. Gilbert Prousch, 79, and George Passmore, 81, met at Saint Martin's School of Art in 1967, and have been inseparable ever since, personally and professionally. Much of their output consists of large-scale photos, often of themselves, drenched in glaring, super-saturated colors and dealing with far-from-neutral subjects such as religion and ethnicity. —AFP



Gilbert Prousch (Left) and British artist George Passmore pose in front of an artwork entitled 'On the bench' 2019.



In this file photo French actor Francois Civil poses prior to the 48th edition of the Cesar Film Awards ceremony at the Olympia venue in Paris. — AFP photo

Cinema's undying love for Dumas and his Musketeers

The work of French author Alexandre Dumas has attracted stars since the birth of cinema, through silent-era hero Douglas Fairbanks and Leonardo DiCaprio, not forgetting a certain Volodymyr Zelensky and — almost — The Beatles.

The 19th century writer's popularity shows no signs of dimming — a flashy new version of "The Three Musketeers" hits French screens next week, while "The Count of Monte Cristo" starts filming this summer.

There have been more than 250 adaptations of his books, including popular takes on "Queen Margot" and "The Man in the Iron Mask", which gave a starring role to DiCaprio in 1998. But it is the plume-hatted musketeers that have been the most popular, stretching back to the first film version in Britain in 1898.

Fairbanks became a swashbuckling megastar thanks to a 1921 version, while the story was relocated to a French Foreign Legion in North Africa for John Wayne in 1933, and thousands of marionettes were used for an Italian puppet version a few years later.

The Beatles almost donned the capes in the 1960s, but eventually passed the roles to Charlton Heston and Oliver Reed. And Hollywood keeps them coming, from the "Brat Pack" version in the 1990s with Charlie Sheen and Kiefer Sutherland, to the little-loved 2011 remake featuring Milla Jovovich, Orlando Bloom and some flying battleships.

Argentine, Indian, Mexican and even Soviet versions have also been seen over the years. One of the most unlikely — particularly from the current perspective — is a 2004 Russian-language version in which the musketeers are all women and D'Artagnan is played by a young Zelensky, now president of war-torn Ukraine.

'Courage, panache'

"It's a book that travels easily through time," Martin Bourboulon, director of the latest iteration, "The Three Musketeers: D'Artagnan", told AFP. "It's the values of camaraderie, courage, panache and solidarity that make it so interesting."

It helps that Dumas was a pioneer of the sort of writing that has shaped modern cinematic storytelling — from his fast-paced action scenes to the multiple cliffhangers that punctuate each section. Dumas, then 41, wrote the 1844 novel to appear in serialized form, which was all the rage thanks to new periodicals.

"He has a sense of rhythm, of knowing when to accelerate, when to pause and build intrigue," added biographer Sylvain Ledda. "Plus, he's very funny with the best of the French spirit: his signature style, the fantasy, the derision." —AFP

Gwyneth Paltrow not guilty in ski-crash lawsuit



Gwyneth Paltrow reacts to the verdict.

Gwyneth Paltrow is not liable for an accident on a swanky US ski slope, a jury ruled Thursday, as it dismissed a claim from a retired optometrist. Terry Sanderson, 76, had alleged a collision in Utah with the star left him with four broken ribs and lasting psychological damage, injuries his lawyers said were worth \$3.3 million.

Paltrow countersued for a symbolic \$1. After an eight-day civil trial, the jury in Park City unanimously found the "Shakespeare in Love" actress did not cause the 2016 crash, a position she had maintained all along. "I felt that acquiescing to a false claim compromised my integrity," Paltrow, 50, said after the verdict. "I am pleased with the outcome," she added.

The live-streamed hearing sparked headlines around the world, and became a hot topic on social media, generating memes and making perhaps-unwitting stars of the lawyers involved. The Oscar-winner was in court every day, listening attentively to evidence, including Sanderson's claims that she had run into him with such force that he went airborne.

"I got hit in my back so hard and it was right at my shoulder blades, a serious, serious smack. I've never been hit that hard, and I'm flying," he told the jury earlier. "Last thing I remember, everything was black." The plaintiff said the crash, which happened at the tony Deer Valley resort, had left him with permanent brain damage and had altered his personality such that he could no longer enjoy life.



Attorney Steve Owens takes the court through his closing statement, arguing his client Gwyneth Paltrow is innocent.



US actress Gwyneth Paltrow speaks with retired optometrist Terry Sanderson as she walks out of the courtroom following the reading of the verdict on March 30, 2023, in Park City, Utah. — AFP photos

"These are golden years," attorney Lawrence Buhler told the jury Thursday before they began their deliberations. "These are the most valuable years when you can enjoy your retirement and actually do things like travel. "Terry doesn't want to be brain injured. He wants to live life to its fullest," Buhler said. "He's got this issue that a big part of him was left up on that ... ski run."

Buhler asked the jury to award Sanderson \$33 for every waking hour since the incident and continuing until his death, which actuarial tables indicate might come in 10 years. That amounts to "\$3,276,000 for the 17 years that Terry has to deal with this permanent brain injury."

Sanderson had originally sued for \$3.1 million, but the suit was later adjusted to a legal minimum of \$300,000. However, from the beginning of the proceedings last week, his lawyers had put the figure they were seeking at \$3.3 million.

Defied physics

Paltrow's defense team assembled a bevy of experts who testified that Sanderson's version of the crash defied the laws of physics. They said that evidence showed he had run into the back of her while she was on the slopes with her children, Apple and Moses.

Others noted that several of Sanderson's medical complaints — including

problems with executive functioning — existed before the crash. They also noted that he had previously suffered a stroke and had poor vision in one eye.

In a dramatic afternoon of testimony, lawyer Stephen Owens produced a raft of photographs posted on Sanderson's social media accounts after the incident showing him travelling all over the world, and even skiing. The jury was sequestered for around two hours before they returned to completely deny Sanderson's claim, and to award Paltrow the \$1 that she had asked for.

As she left the courtroom, Paltrow bent over to speak to Sanderson. He later told reporters that she had "wished me well." The judge will later rule on the question of legal fees, with Paltrow claiming Sanderson should meet her costs.

One of the jurors on the panel, which found unanimously that Sanderson was 100 percent at fault for the crash, told ABC News the case had been "a little shocking." Samantha Imrie said her mind had changed several times as the evidence was presented, but ultimately, she thought Paltrow's testimony to be more convincing.

"I think there was, in the back of my mind, yes, this woman's an actress and I took that into account, but I didn't feel she had a reason to lie under oath," Imrie said. "She's always in the spotlight so she always has to be honest." —AFP

Streaming films more diverse than cinematic releases: Study

Films released by streaming services are more racially representative and more likely to have female leads than those that debut in theatres, a study released Thursday showed. Movies destined for the small screen were almost entirely reflective of the US population, the Hollywood Diversity Report said, with majority-minority casts doing especially well with audiences.

Studios must take notice the changing demographics of those audiences if they want to keep viewers shelling out for their big screen offerings, the report's authors say. "Our research shows that diversity in the movies is just good business," said Ana-Christina Ramon, director of the Entertainment and Media Research Initiative at University of California, Los Angeles, which produces the report.

"People of color saved the theatrical industry during the pandemic, and they are key to bringing the theatrical business back to its pre-pandemic

levels," Ramon said. The report says research shows an increasingly diverse movie-going audience favors more diverse films.

Theatrical and streaming films that featured more than 30 percent minority casts outperformed others at the box office and in Nielsen ratings, respectively, repeating a pattern from previous years, it says. "The pandemic has normalized diversity on screen, not just in theaters but at home," co-author Michael Tran said.

"Audiences tuned in. If Hollywood reverses course on diversity in the theaters, they'll lose audiences to streaming and to international offerings." A third of streaming films had a minority actor in the lead role last year, while only 22 percent of theatrical releases did, the report said.

Women and men make up roughly equal shares of the leads of streaming films, with the split closer to 60-40 in favor of men at the cinemas. The two most-streamed films of 2022 — "Turning Red" and "Encanto" — were both an-

imated movies that told coming-of-age stories about young girls of color.

"These films were culturally specific yet universally relatable," said Ramon. "With more than half of the current population under the age of 18 belonging to communities of color, these young people will grow up and demand films with protagonists who look like them and who live like them."

The report, which examined English-language theatrical releases among the top 200 films and the top 100 English-language original streaming films, comes weeks after surprise hit "Everything Everywhere All at Once," with a cast of actors mostly of Asian descent, swept the Oscars.

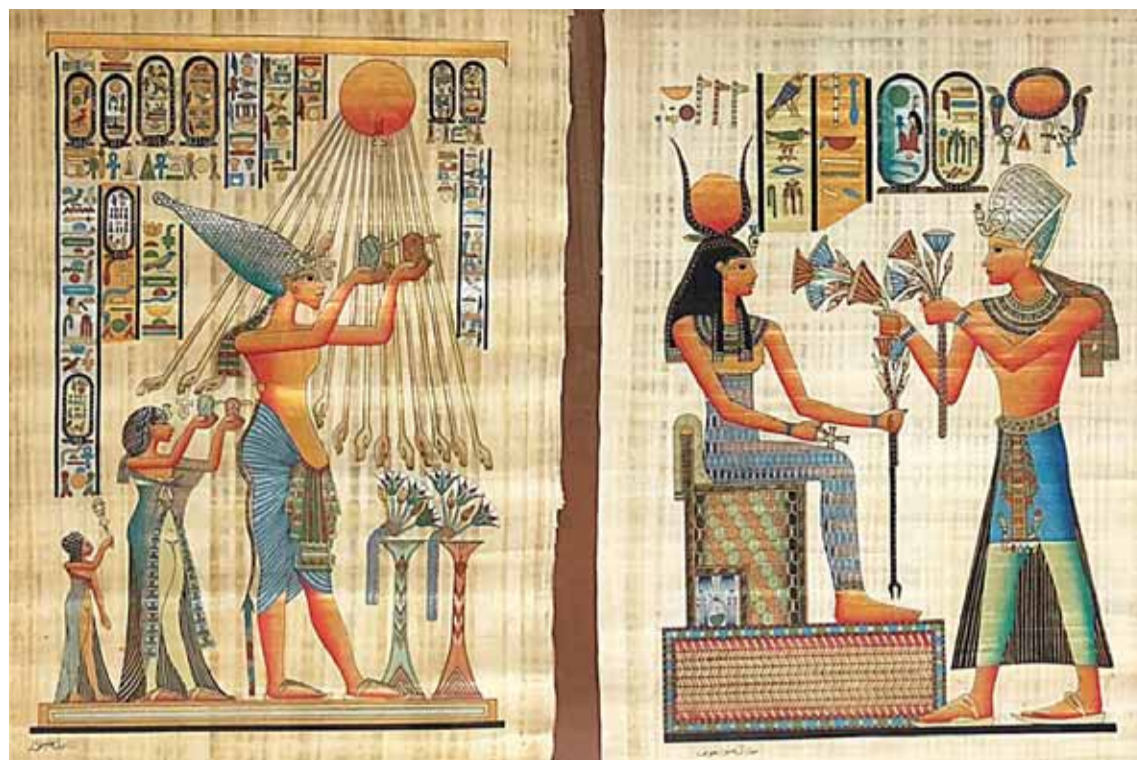
The word-of-mouth smash won seven prizes including best picture, as its Malaysian star Michelle Yeoh became the first Asian woman to win best actress. The film's theatrical release last spring came ahead of its streaming release. —AFP

Lifestyle

Papyrus reflects ancient Egyptian cleverness, ingenuity



These photos show the modern papyrus paintings. —KUNA photos



This photo shows a framed papyrus with detailed drawings and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Papyrus, a thick paper-like invention from 3,000 B.C., had born witness to ancient Egyptians' cleverness and ingenuity. Through papyrus, people today have learned about the art, social norms and historic occurrences dating back to the times of the Pharaohs. Prior to the use of papyrus, ancient Egyptians used to preserve their knowledge for future generations by recording information on the stones and walls of various royal palaces and temples. —KUNA



This photo shows part of the Pharaoh Ahmose Papyrus.



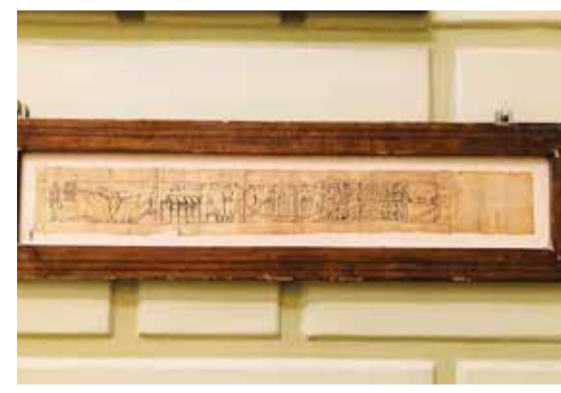
This photo shows a modern papyrus painting.



This photo shows an ancient Papyrus that withstood the passage of time.



This photo shows four Papyrus paintings on which Egyptian hieroglyphs are recorded.



This photo shows a framed papyrus with detailed drawings and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Camelback counters trek wilderness for Pakistan census



In this picture taken on March 23, 2023, census officials from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (in green) speak to a Marri tribe man living in the remote mountainous area of Mawand as part of a national census in southwest Pakistan's Kohlu district.



A member of the levies tribal force (Left) and census officials from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (Right) ride camels to collect information from Marri tribespeople. — AFP photos

Plodding over the horizon of western Pakistan, camel-riding officials spy a far-flung cluster of rough wooden homes and start tallying its tribespeople as the national census gets under way. Beyond the reach of roads, power lines and TV signals in central Balochistan province, this arid settlement of five reed huts has no name and hosts barely 15 nomads — three families herding goats and sheep.

"We ride for hours," said local census supervisor Faraz Ahmad. "We even have to live for days out in the mountains among the people we're counting." In cities and towns, teams wend their way from door to door on motorbikes. But in rural Balochistan, the tarmac gives way to craggy trails that then dissolve altogether in a wilderness of khaki rockland.

A fleet of gurning camels is the only option to get the job done. "It takes a while to convince them to share their details," census taker Mohammad Junaid Marri told AFP in rural Kohlu district, 210 kilometres (130 miles) east of the provincial capital Quetta and one hour by camel from the nearest discernible road.

"In some cases, it's kind of funny. Since every census team has a security escort, sometimes people run away," the 30-year-old said after his garland-

ed camel Bhoora bowed to let him slide off its hump and start peppering families with questions.

Between five and 10 percent of Kohlu residents live in areas so inaccessible that camels are the only practical transport, estimates 34-year-old Ahmad. They are rented for 1,000 rupees (\$3.50) a day and the price includes a cameleer — a man trudging ahead to lead the bristly beasts on a leash.

Calculating constituencies

In a nation divided along ethnic lines, enumerating citizens — 207 million at last count and an estimated 220 million today — is a politically charged act that can alter claims to power and scant state resources. The data will also be used to outline constituencies in future elections.

Balochistan is Pakistan's largest and least populous province, rich in natural resources but poor by all other measures. A separatist insurgency has long simmered in the region, fueled by the grievance that Islamabad has failed to share the spoils of wealth extracted from Balochistan.

As Marri and Ahmad approach the hamlet on one camel, trailed by another carrying a guard wielding a weathered machine gun, they are eyed by a teenager

through a pair of binoculars as children in traditional red floral dress gather round. "There's a lack of awareness among people about the census — they don't understand the benefits and downsides," said Ahmad. "They don't trust us and fear we may cheat them."

Elsewhere, police guarding census teams in the nation's remote and restive northwest have been killed by the Pakistani Taliban. Despite the decidedly low-tech mode of transport, this is the first time Pakistan's census will be compiled digitally, on tablets rather than reams of paper. Nonetheless, the old grievances remain.

"What benefits will we get from the census?" asked Mir Khan, 53, in another nearby speck of a settlement at the foot of mountains. "We will get nothing. The influential people snatch everything the government wants to distribute to the poor."

"We have never seen any support from the government," grumbles his cousin Pando Khan, 58. "We see people when they're campaigning for us to vote for them, and later they never return." However, after swapping their personal details with families according to local tribal customs, Ahmad and Marri convince them to answer 25 questions to give them a clearer picture of present-day Pakistan. —AFP



Census officials from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics attempt to contact Marri tribespeople.



Census officials from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (Center) speak to a Marri tribe man.



Census officials from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics ride a camel to collect information from Marri tribespeople living in the remote mountainous area of Mawand.

Wind project near S African elephant park riles activists

Plans to build wind farms next to a South African national park have riled wildlife activists who worry the turbines will ruin the landscape and impact elephants. More than 200 turbines are slated to be erected in the vicinity of the Addo Elephant National Park, in the country's south, after the Environment Ministry dismissed a legal bid to block the project last year.

The decision has upset tour operators and environmental campaigners, including William Fowlds, a wildlife vet who runs a lodge in the area and complains the farms risk degrading "the wild experience of going on a safari". "It's catastrophic," he told AFP. "No one is saying we are against wind farms, but if you place them in an area of high environmental value and high eco-tourism value, you are actually damaging the local environment and the people that live there."

With solar, wind is seen as key to efforts by Africa's most industrialized economy to wean itself off coal — which is currently burnt to generate about 80 percent of the country's electricity. The environment ministry said authorization to build the wind farms was given upon the completion of an environmental impact assessment.

But critics of the plan are not convinced. Some have raised concerns that noise from the turbines might disturb the about 600 elephants living in the park, who communicate via low frequency infrasound. "Wind turbines produce a lot of noise," said Anglea Stoeger-Horwath, an animal behavior specialist at the University of Vienna told AFP.

"There's a real risk that it might impact their way of communication, ... (and) might stress them". Nature guide and wildlife photographer, Jeni Smithies, said in turn the animals might get "frustrated" and "aggressive", adding tourists coming to the area will also have their view spoiled.

In rejecting the appeal last year, the ministry wrote that the visual impact of the project would be limited, given there already are other turbines nearby. Campaigners opposing the project said this week they were considering further legal action.

French firm EDF, which is among the companies involved in the project, already runs a 60-megawatt wind farm some 11 kilometers from Addo park, which lies just one hour drive from Gqeberha, formerly Port Elizabeth. "(The farm) has been operational since 2015 and no complaints, issues or grievances have been communicated by members of the public," EDF told AFP, adding it continued to monitor biodiversity on the site.

The company dismissed additional concerns that turbulence created by the turbines may interfere with small anti-poaching patrol aircrafts, saying the national parks department "has not given any indication" that this might be an issue. Other developers did not respond to AFP requests for comment. —AFP

Sports

Holdings Gujarat Titans beat Super Kings by five wickets

Gujarat win IPL opener in front of more than 100,000 fans

AHMEDABAD: Opener Shubman Gill smashed 63 as holders Gujarat Titans beat Chennai Super Kings by five wickets in the Indian Premier League opener in front of more than 100,000 fans in Ahmedabad on Friday. Chasing 179 for victory, Gujarat rode on Gill's 36-ball innings to achieve their target with four balls to spare at the world's biggest cricket stadium and their home ground.

The 16th edition of the money-spinning T20 tournament began with a glitzy opening ceremony and fireworks at a ground which has an official capacity of 132,000. A roar erupted when home captain Hardik Pandya won the toss and elected to field first but it was Chennai opener Ruturaj Gaikwad who soon silenced the home fans with a flurry of boundaries in his 92 off 50 balls. Ruturaj lost partners Moeen Ali for 23 and then new signing Ben Stokes - the England all-rounder bought for \$1.96 million in the auction - for seven but kept up the attack against the opposition bowlers.

But Mohammed Shami, who reached 100 IPL wickets, Rashid Khan and Alzarri Joseph took two wickets each to check the

opposition scoring. Gujarat suffered a blow when new overseas player Kane Williamson jarred his knee while attempting a catch at the boundary and limped off the ground. "We were very happy because at one point they were looking to go past 200, but we got wickets at the right time," Pandya said. "Obviously when we lost Kane, we had to make sure we cover those runs and as many less runs as we can give."

Impact player

Sai Sudharsan replaced Williamson under the new "impact player" rule, which was also taken by Chennai, who replaced Ambati Rayudu with pace bowler Tushar Deshpande before they fielded. The impact player, who can only be an Indian unless the team has fewer than four overseas players in their XI, is chosen from one of five substitutes listed with the team. Other innovations include captains being allowed to announce their XI after the toss and teams being able to review umpires' decisions on no-balls and wides using the Decision Review System. "Having this Impact rule makes my job difficult," said Pandya. "I

have too many options, and because of this someone will bowl less."

Deshpande got the prized wicket of Gill after being hit for a six on the previous ball to boost Chennai's hopes of a turnaround but unbeaten cameos from Rashid (10) and Rahul Tewatia (15) steered their team home. Rashid was named man of the match for his all-round show. There was more of Chennai's yellow than blue of Gujarat at the stadium, which welcomed 41-year-old MS Dhoni with loud cheers at the start of the game in what could be the last IPL as player for the former India captain.

"We were slightly short," Dhoni said of his team's 178-7. "Another 15-20 runs would have been good. We all know there would be a little bit of dew." The league, which began in 2008 and this year returns to a home-and-away format following the COVID pandemic, has grown to be the world's richest cricket tournament and a huge revenue earner for the BCCI. Gujarat pulled off a fairytale title win in their debut season last year in front of a record crowd of 101,566 at the same venue. The 2023 tournament runs until May 28. — AFP



AHMEDABAD: Gujarat Titans' Rahul Tewatia reacts after hitting a boundary that lead to his team's win in the Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 cricket match between Gujarat Titans and Chennai Super Kings on March 31, 2023. — AFP



LONDON: Former England cricket captain Michael Vaughan arrives to attend a Cricket Discipline Commission hearing in this file photo. — AFP

Racism claims against Vaughan 'not proved'

LONDON: Former England cricket captain Michael Vaughan has been cleared "on the balance of probabilities" of using racist language before a Yorkshire match in 2009. The 2005 Ashes-winning captain was alleged to have used the term "you lot" when referring to a group of four Yorkshire team-mates of South Asian ethnicity, including Pakistan-born Azeem Rafiq.

In a report released on Friday, the Cricket Discipline Commission said it was "not satisfied on the balance of probabilities" that Vaughan had used the alleged words. It pointed out "significant inconsistencies" in how the two key witnesses - Rafiq and England bowler Adil Rashid - had recalled the wording that Vaughan allegedly used. But it added that its findings "do not in any way undermine the wider assertions" made by Rafiq, who told lawmakers in November 2021 that English cricket was "institutionally racist".

In its concluding remarks the CDC report said: "This is not a case which necessitated a conclusion from the panel that anyone has lied or acted out of malice. Far from it. The panel had to consider whether the case as presented to it by the ECB (England and Wales Cricket Board), in light of all the evidence, was sufficiently accurate and reliable, on the balance of probabilities, to rule out mistake. It was not."

Vaughan, who appeared in person at a CDC hearing earlier this month to answer the charges brought by the ECB, said the process had taken a "toll" on him and his family and it had been "upsetting to hear about Rafiq's experiences. The outcome of these CDC proceedings must not be allowed to detract from the core message that there can be no place for racism in the game of cricket, or in society generally," the 48-year-old said in a statement on social media.

The former batsman, who has worked as a TV and radio pundit since his retirement added: "I have never wanted to do anything that runs contrary to genuine efforts to clean up the game of cricket. I truly hope people can understand why, on a personal level, I could not just accept, or apologise for, something which I know I did not do." Yorkshire accepted in September 2021 that Rafiq, now 32, had been the victim of racial harassment and bullying during his time at the club. But they subsequently confirmed nobody would be disciplined, a decision that was greeted with widespread incredulity.

The scandal sparked an exodus of senior boardroom figures and 16 members of the club's coaching and backroom staff were dismissed. Former off-spinner Rafiq, who had two spells at Yorkshire, told a British parliamentary committee in December 2022 that the abuse he and his family had faced had forced him to leave the country. The CDC panel upheld charges against five other former players and coaches, including England Test stars Tim Bresnan and Matthew Hoggard, in relation to the use of racist and/or discriminatory language. None of the five attended the CDC hearing in London, with Hoggard saying the ECB's disciplinary procedures had "failed everybody".

Former Yorkshire and England player Gary Ballance, who now plays for his native Zimbabwe, admitted using racist and/or discriminatory language prior to the hearing. Yorkshire admitted four amended charges against them, with the panel to disclose any sanctions against the club and the individuals at a later date. In a statement on Twitter, Rafiq pointed out that charges against seven of the eight defendants had been upheld. — AFP

Yankees win to open MLB season; Judge blasts first homer

NEW YORK: Aaron Judge blasted the first home run of the 2023 Major League Baseball season, sparking the New York Yankees to victory to begin the 2023 Major League Baseball season Thursday with new rules and familiar feats. The 30-year-old American outfielder, in his first time at bat since being named captain of the historic MLB club, smashed the second pitch he saw from San Francisco right-hander Logan Webb over the center-field wall for a solo homer in the first inning to start the scoring in New York's 5-0 triumph.

Fans at Yankee Stadium chanted "M-V-P" as Judge, last year's American League Most Valuable Player, walked to home plate and picked up right where he left off in 2022. Judge belted 62 homers last year to break the AL single-season homer record of 61 set by Yankees legend Roger Maris in 1961. Judge was courted by several teams as a free agent in the off-season, including San Francisco, but signed an MLB record free agent deal for nine years at \$360 million last December to stay with New York.

New York's Gleyber Torres blasted a two-run homer in the fourth and right-handed pitcher Gerrit Cole struck out 11 over six shutout innings while allowing only three hits with two walks to earn the victory. At Washington, Atlanta's Travis d'Arnaud went 4-for-5 at the plate, scoring twice and driving in two more runs in the Braves' 7-2 rout in the National League season opener. Braves pitcher Collin McHugh ran afoul of the new time clock in the eighth inning when he was issued a ball against Washington batter Jeimer Candelario, who walked. McHugh pleaded his case to the umpire to no avail.

Yin and Kim share LPGA Open lead

LOS ANGELES: China's Yin Ruoning fired eight birdies in a career-low LPGA round of seven-under 64 on Friday to grab a share of the second-round lead with Kim Hyo-joo at the Los Angeles Open. Yin, 20, teed off on the 10th at Palos Verdes Golf Club and was three-under through her first eight holes. She picked up four birdies in a five-hole stretch, including three straight at the fifth, sixth and seventh on the way to a 10-under par total of 132.

Kim, whose five LPGA titles include a major at the 2014 Evian Championship, carded her second straight 66, posting five birdies without a bogey. Yin, playing the second event of her second LPGA campaign, was impressive on the greens, needing

New Zealand beat Sri Lanka in series

HAMILTON: Will Young hit 86 not out as hosts New Zealand beat Sri Lanka by six wickets in Friday's third one-day international, ending the visitors' hopes of qualifying directly for the World Cup this year. New Zealand replied with 159 for four after bowling Sri Lanka out for 157 in Hamilton. The Black Caps won the ODI series 2-0, having also won both of the two Test matches.

A three-match Twenty20 series between the teams starts Sunday. The home win saw New Zealand top the Super League table in qualifying for the ODI World Cup in India this year. Sri Lanka are ninth, outside the top eight who automatically go to the World Cup, and now face a qualifying tournament in Zimbabwe starting in June.

Young's 86 runs off 113 balls dug New Zealand out of trouble, Sri Lanka's seamers having made life hard for the hosts early on. His fifth-wicket partnership of 100 runs with Henry Nicholls sealed the result for New Zealand. "We were one down when I came in. It was a bit more nerve-racking later on when we were three or four down," said man-of-the-match Young. "One of the good things about this team is that we can



NEW YORK: Aaron Judge #99 and Giancarlo Stanton #27 of the New York Yankees take the field during the first inning against the San Francisco Giants on Opening Day at Yankee Stadium in the Bronx borough. — AFP

Cubs, Orioles win

Two of the oldest and most storied venues in baseball, Boston's Fenway Park and Chicago's Wrigley Field, also hosted early openers. Marcus Stroman struck out eight and allowed only three hits over six shutout innings to spark the Chicago Cubs over visiting Milwaukee 4-0. Dansby Swanson hit a two-run single in the third inning and scored on a Trey Mancini single while Ian Happ scored on a fielder's choice to provide all the scoring the Cubs needed. At Boston, Baltimore's Adley Rutschman went 5-for-5 with a solo homer in the first inning and four runs batted in while Ramon Urias added a two-run homer off Red Sox

starter Corey Kluber in the Orioles' 10-9 triumph.

All 30 MLB clubs were in action on opening day, which marked the debut of new rules aimed at hastening the pace of play. Pre-season contests were reduced by an average of 26 minutes to two hours and 35 minutes. A new pitch clock will limit the amount of time pitchers have to engage with batters while defenders will be limited in how far they will be able to shift out of typical positions to try and better field batters based on past hitting charts. The size of bases was also increased, creating a bigger target for base stealers who will face less targeting for pickoff throws from pitchers under tighter restrictions. — AFP

just 24 putts. She had seven straight one-putts on the first through seventh holes, but she said the real key to her round was ball-striking. "I felt my game was in a pretty solid spot right now. I can strike the ball well and my approach shot is pretty good," she said. "Last year I only play fade with every shot. This off-season I was working on maybe hitting a little draw, and I think that works," she said.

Kim had two birdies on the front nine and three coming in, taking advantage of all three par-fives. But she said avoiding a bogey was key. "There were a couple situations actually where I could have carded a bogey, but in those instances my putter worked well," she said. The leading duo were one stroke in front of Japan's defending champion Nasa Hataoka, who posted a 66. Canadian Maude-Aimee Leblanc was in fourth on 134 after a second straight 67. South Korean Lee Mi-hyang, the Monday qualifier who led after the first round, slipped seven shots off the pace with a three-over par 74. — AFP

bat a long way down, so I had full confidence that we would get the job done. It was nice to be out there at the end and knock off the runs," he said.

New Zealand made a terrible start after they were set a target of 158. Openers Chad Bowes and Tom Blundell were both caught behind off Lahiru Kumara's bowling to leave the Black Caps on 6-2. Sri Lanka wicketkeeper Kusal Mendis then took his third straight catch when Daryl Mitchell got a faint touch on Kasun Rajitha's delivery. Black Caps captain Tom Latham briefly halted Sri Lanka's momentum in a partnership of 38 with Young, only to be clean bowled by Dasun Shanaka for eight. New Zealand were in trouble at 59-4 before Nicholls came to the crease to help put the game beyond Sri Lanka.

Nicholls finished on 44 not out, sealing the win by clubbing a four to the boundary after providing crucial support for Young. It was another frustrating display by Sri Lanka, who were skittled for just 76 in a 198-run defeat in the first ODI on Saturday before the second game on Tuesday was washed out. Sri Lanka won the toss but lost three wickets in the first 10 overs as top-order batters Kusal Mendis and Angelo Mathews both went for ducks. Sri Lanka were wobbling at 4-49 when Henry Shipley caught Charith Asalanka off Mitchell's bowling. The Black Caps seamers kept the tourists under pressure as Matt Henry, Mitchell and Shipley all took three wickets each. — AFP

Athletics integrity body boosts drug testing in Kenya

NAIROBI: The head of the Athletics Integrity Unit warned on Friday that the international anti-doping body was stepping up its investigations and testing in Kenya. According to the AIU, a total of 67 Kenyan athletes - mainly distance runners - have been banned in the last five years for drugs offences in a crisis that has tarnished the East African track and field powerhouse.

"One thing that everyone should be aware of is that with more testing, more cases will be reported, but that doesn't mean more doping. That is what is coming but it is the pathway to address this problem once and for all," AIU chief executive Brett Clothier told reporters in Nairobi. Kenya narrowly escaped being sanctioned by World Athletics last December, after the government pledged to increase its funding of five million dollars a year to combat doping. But Clothier, who is on a week-long fact-finding trip to Kenya, said athletes needed to brace themselves for tougher action against drug-taking in the sport.

"What you will see over the coming months is big changes in the anti-doping landscape," he added. "First of all there will be a lot more testing, especially conducted by the Anti-Doping Association of Kenya, and a lot more resources being put into investigations and intelligence gathering about the real source of the doping." The AIU has joined a broader government push to fight drug-taking in sport which also involves Athletics Kenya, police and other law enforcement bodies.

Clothier said some of the suspended athletes are refusing to say who supplied the banned substances because of fears for their security. "The situation we have here is that it's a crime. There are criminals involved," said Clothier. "There's lots of money to be made and people who think they can take advantage and make money from the athletes... are criminals, and it can be a dangerous business. The athletes have fear and what we need to do is break that down." — AFP

Sports

Sinner to end Alcaraz's reign, sets up final with Medvedev

Kvitova downs Cirstea to reach Miami Open final

MIAMI GARDENS: Italy's Jannik Sinner turned on the style to end Carlos Alcaraz's hopes of the "Sunshine Double" and his reign as world number one, triumphing 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 6-2 in their Miami Open semi-final on Friday. Sinner will meet Russian Daniil Medvedev in Sunday's final while Alcaraz will lose his number one ranking to Novak Djokovic. Medvedev reached his fifth straight ATP Tour final with a 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 6-3 win over fellow Russian Karen Khachanov.

The disappointment for the 19-year-old Alcaraz, the defending champion in Miami and coming off a title at Indian Wells, will be tinged with frustration after he struggled in the third set with leg cramps. It had been an enthralling and entertaining power-hitting performance from both men in the first set, with an incredible 25-shot exchange in the seventh game, bring the crowd to their feet.

The intense, high quality set was eventually won by the Spaniard after a tie-break, but an inspired Sinner fought back in the second. Sinner broke in the first game and although Alcaraz broke back to make it 2-2, the 21-year-old Italian sensed his moment was arriving and showed confidence in his powerful groundstrokes.

Worried and confused
The world number one was moving with difficulty and was broken on his first serve in the deciding set. Looking in discomfort, he crouched down on his baseline in between points and shot some worried and confused looks to his team in the stands. Sinner chose some more conservative strokes and although Alcaraz appeared to recover a little, the Italian ran out the winner in three hours.

Alcaraz said his problems had appeared during a bathroom break after the second set. "I went to bathroom for five minutes and yeah, everything went down for me a little bit. I stopped myself. I started cramping a little bit. You know, after a really tough match it's, well, it is tough to stop the match for five minutes," he said. "I started cramping at the beginning of the third set, but it wasn't the reason for I lost the match. I came back...I started to feel better but of course Jannik, he was better than me in the third set. That's the truth," he said.

Sinner had lost to Alcaraz in straight sets in their meeting at the same stage in Indian Wells and he said he could feel just how high the quality of their encounter at Hard Rock Stadium had been. "When both players play tennis like this

it is very nice to play, you can feel it with the crowds. There was just a great energy with everything. It is just nice to be part of matches like this," he said. Sinner also said that he had suffered some cramping during the second set but recovered quickly. "I knew that I had to go on and wait for the right moment," he said. "I feel ready to compete and I am happy to be in the final," he added.

The 27-year-old Medvedev, playing against his boyhood friend, survived a second-set comeback but his trademark precision stroke play saw him through against the big-serving Khachanov in a high quality encounter. The contest saw a series of long rallies as Medvedev fended off Khachanov's thumping shots from the baseline and then pinned his opponent back on his service game. Medvedev hit 13 aces and saved four of six break points as the match turned decisively in his favor when he broke Khachanov in the fourth game of the third set. Medvedev won 82% (14 of 17) of his first-serve points in the final set and was relieved to have beaten a player who knows his game so well.

In another Petra Kvitova powered into the final of the WTA Miami Open on Friday with a straight sets victory over Romania's Sorana Cirstea. Czech vet-



MIAMI GARDENS: Jannik Sinner of Italy celebrates match point against Carlos Alcaraz of Spain during the semifinals of the Miami Open on March 31, 2023 in Florida. — AFP

eran Kvitova advanced to a Saturday showdown against Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina with a 7-5, 6-4 win in 1hr 41min. In a battle of two of the WTA's more experienced players, Cirstea, playing in her first WTA semi-final in a decade, was fastest out of the

blocks, taking a 5-2 lead in the first set. But the Romanian, who is enjoying a revival in form having also reached the last eight at Indian Wells, failed to convert on either of the two set points she had on serve at 5-4, with Kvitova breaking twice to take the set. — AFP



Ramadan Football Tournament kicks off in style

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Teams of Lusil, Al-Omar, Bu-Saud, Lem-on Line, reached the semi-final of Saad Al-Tamimi Ramadan Football Tournament which started on Thursday with 64 teams in the presence of Amiri Diwan Advisor Sheikh Faisal Al-Humoud Al-Malik Al-Sabah and many sport, media and show business personalities including former Kuwait National Football Team player Saad Al-Houti, Actor Abdelrahman Al-Aqel, former players Khalid Al-Shimmari, Waleed Al-Fulajji, Nasser Bunayan, Dr Mohsen Al-Enezi and football commentator Hamid Kameel. Sports Journalists Sattam Al-Sahli, Sabeeh Abul and Hamza Behbehani were also present.

Former football players Khalid Al-Fadly, Ahmad Mousa, Faraj Laheeb, Saleh Al-Sheikh, Talal Nayef, Khalid Al-Ajaji, Musaad Nada, Hamad Al-Harby and Dughaim Al-Rashidi participated in a friendly match - declaring the tournament open as the stars displayed certain moves that were appreciated by fans. The second day of the tournament saw the media



team of Sattam Al-Sahli, Ghazi Shareef, Ahmad Al-Enezi, Raed Al-Shimmari and Khalaf Al-Enezi on one side playing against Saleh Jarman, Maher Al-Enezi, Dr Abdallah Al-Ansari and Sabah Al-Shimmari on the other side. The match ended in 1-1 draw.

Advisor at the Amiri Diwan Sheikh Faisal Al-Humoud Al-Malek Al-Sabah said he was happy to be present at the first Ramadan Saad Al-Tamimi football tournament. Former Kuwait International player Saad Al-Houti said the tournament brought the sports community together in friendly atmosphere adding. Meanwhile, actor Abdelrahman Al-Aqel lauded the Saad Al-Tamimi tournament. Former member of Kuwait Football Association Khalid Al-Shimmari praised the organization of the tournament - adding that it proved successful.

IOC faces backlash over readmission of Russia athletes

PARIS: Ukrainian athletes' human rights have "not been addressed" by IOC president Thomas Bach and a UN expert in weighing Russia and Belarus's readmission into global sports events, a leading authority on human rights says. Patricia Wiater said "unfortunately" neither the International Olympic Committee (IOC) nor UN special rapporteur in cultural rights Alexandra Xanthaki had addressed protecting the rights of Ukraine's athletes.

Wiater was behind the German Olympic Sports Confederation's legal opinion justifying the ban on Russian and Belarusian athletes from international competition. She spoke to reporters - alongside Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian athletes - following the IOC's recommendation on Tuesday to allow athletes from Russia and Moscow ally Belarus to compete as individual neutrals in upcoming international competitions. They have been largely banned since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February last year.

"The question is, are the proposed conditions of readmission enough to guarantee the human rights of Ukrainian athletes are being respected," Wiater said during the press conference via zoom. "Are they proportionate and are they adequate to prevent

(that) sporting events are abused for war propaganda," added the professor for Public International Law and Human Rights. "Unfortunately, it was not addressed in the statement by the IOC nor by the special rapporteur but it is very important when we look at the question of readmission."

Ukrainian tennis player Lesia Tsurenko — who pulled out of a match against Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka earlier this month due to a panic attack — believes she and her compatriots feel they have been forgotten about. Her remarks echo those of Poland's world number one Iga Swiatek, who has criticized the WTA for not doing enough to support Ukrainian players. "Why is no one thinking about the discrimination of Ukrainians," said Tsurenko. "We only hear of discrimination of Russians. What about the Ukrainians?"

Although the IOC has yet to decide whether Russians and Belarusians can compete at the 2024 Paris Olympics, their re-entry to international competition will allow them to qualify for the quadrennial sporting showpiece. The fencing federation this month pre-empted the IOC recommendation by reopening its events to athletes from the two countries. The decision prompted a hard-hitting letter by more than 300 past and present fencers accusing Bach — himself an Olympic gold medal winning fencer — and interim fencing federation president Emmanuel Katsiadakis of prioritizing Russians over Ukrainians. "Here, we are talking about life and not just about competing," German fencer Lea Kruger told the same press conference, dismissing the conditions given by the IOC for the Russians' return as "not enough". — AFP

MLS, not Argentina, Mexico challenging Brazil's domination

SAO PAULO: A new force is in town and threatening the power of the Brazilian league to attract top Latin American football talent: Major League Soccer. The North American MLS has already replaced Argentina and Mexico's top flights as the main challengers to Brazil's hegemony. It is partly thanks to a change of strategy.

Rather than trying to attract attention by signing star names from European leagues looking for a pay day before retirement, the MLS is now competing for the young Latin American pearls that would otherwise head to Brazil en route to Europe. It is a tactic that has not only improved the level of a league only

founded in 1996, but also generates profits when the European teams come calling. "It is part of the vision that team owners have had to convert (MLS) into one of the great world level leagues," Alfonso Mondelo, the MLS director of competitions, told AFP.

Since 2021, MLS is the league that has spent the most on transfer fees in the Americas, according to analysis by AFP on transfer reports provided by world football's governing body FIFA. In 2021, MLS spent \$159.9 million on transfers: three times more than Brazil, five times more than Mexico and 11 times more than Argentina.

The next year, when the other three leagues were recovering from the pandemic, they still outspent the Argentine and Mexican leagues by more than two-to-one and the Brazilian league by 1.6-to-one. Those numbers are still a far cry from the English Premier League, where clubs spent almost \$900 million in the January transfer window alone. "In the first years of the MLS, you almost had to beg the players to come, now they contact us," said Mondelo. — AFP

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I, AZIZ, holder of Passport No: L5937953, do hereby change my name to AZIZ (as given name) MAIMOON (as surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name AZIZ MAIMOON and I also undertake in all my documents. (C #3191) - 28-03-2023

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Haaland-less City pound Liverpool

Manchester City keep Premier League title race alive



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's German midfielder Ilkay Gundogan (2nd left) turns to celebrate after scoring their third goal during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Liverpool on April 1, 2023. — AFP

MANCHESTER: Manchester City coped without the injured Erling Haaland to keep the Premier League title race alive by coming from behind to thrash Liverpool 4-1 on Saturday. Goals from Julian Alvarez, Kevin De Bruyne, Ilkay Gundogan and Jack Grealish moved the defending champions back to within five points of Arsenal at the top of the table.

City and Liverpool have finished as the top two in four of the past five Premier League seasons, but the Reds are struggling just to qualify for the Champions League after a dreadful campaign and were given another lesson in the gap they have to bridge to be back challenging next season. A chastening defeat leaves Jurgen Klopp's men still seven points adrift of the top four down in sixth. A groin injury meant Haaland was watching on from the stands alongside his father

and former City midfielder Alfie Haaland. Despite the absence of their 42-goal striker, Pep Guardiola's men made a positive start as Alisson Becker was forced into saves from Gundogan and Rodri before Riyad Mahrez fired a free-kick inches wide. But City were caught out on the counter-attack as Liverpool went in front on 17 minutes. The home fans were screaming for offside as Diogo Jota broke in behind the City defence before teeing up Mohamed Salah to slot home his 23rd goal of the season.

A VAR review showed Manuel Akanji had played the Portuguese forward onside. Guardiola was on his knees when Mahrez blasted over another great chance inches over. But he did not have to wait long for his side to show their quality even shorn of Haaland. De Bruyne, Mahrez and Grealish combined to open up the Liver-

pool defense and Alvarez was left with the simple task of slotting in his 13th goal of the season despite spending most of the campaign as Haaland's deputy.

It took just 53 seconds of the second half for City to edge in front thanks to another scintillating team move. Alvarez was the creator this time as his cross-field pass freed Mahrez to race into acres of space behind the Liverpool defence. The Algerian's cross was perfectly weighted to cut out Alisson for De Bruyne to tap into an unguarded net. If City's first two goals were the fruit of collective brilliance, Liverpool's defending for the third summed up a miserable season for Klopp's men. Alvarez was afforded an incredible amount of time inside the box by Fabinho to pick out a shot and, when his effort was blocked by Trent Alexander-Arnold, Gundogan also had the space to take a

touch before firing into the top corner. Liverpool have now conceded three or more goals in nine games this season and the punishment did not end there for the visitors. Grealish was the standout individual on the day and rounded off arguably his best performance as a City player with the fourth goal.

City's movement off the ball was again too good for a cumbersome Liverpool defense as Grealish and De Bruyne exchanged a one-two before the Premier League's most expensive player of all time side-footed into the far corner. Arsenal, who face Leeds later on Saturday, maintain the upper hand in the title race. But City could be coming to the boil at just the right time after scoring 17 goals in their last three games and with Arsenal still to visit the Etihad later this month. —AFP

Lakers rally for crucial victory

LOS ANGELES: Anthony Davis shook off a twisted ankle to score 38 points and help the Los Angeles Lakers rally for a crucial 123-111 NBA victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves on Friday. The Lakers improved their record to 39-38 - their first time over .500 this season—and more importantly leapfrogged ahead of the Timberwolves into seventh place in the tight Western Conference playoff race.

LeBron James scored 18 points and grabbed 10 rebounds while D'Angelo Russell had 12 points and 10 assists as all five Lakers starters scored in double figures. The Lakers trailed by as many as 13 early in the third and were charging when Davis twisted his left ankle late in the period, grimacing as he lay on the court and limping off before returning to the game. He finished with 17 rebounds, going hard at Minnesota even before star Timberwolves center Rudy Gobert departed the game with a knee injury. "He kicked our ass in every way possible," Timberwolves

coach Chris Finch said of Davis. Added Lakers coach Darvin Ham: "It all starts with AD. We have a team that can make some things happen, but you've got to have that one pivotal force that can lead the charge ... in our case, it's AD." With Davis leading the way, the Lakers out-scored the Timberwolves 35-18 in the third quarter to take control and Ham said early indications were that Davis's injury wasn't serious. "I think it's just a twisted ankle," Ham said.

Elsewhere in the West, the reigning champion Golden State Warriors remained in sixth place—good for the final direct entry to the playoffs without going through the play-in tournament—with a 130-115 victory over the San Antonio Spurs. Stephen Curry scored 33 points, Klay Thompson added 31 and Jordan Poole chipped in 27 off the bench for the Warriors, who trailed for much of a sloppy first half but outscored the Spurs 43-27 in the fourth quarter to put it away.

In Boston, the Celtics followed up their big win over Milwaukee with 122-114 victory over the Utah Jazz. Jayson Tatum scored 39 points and handed out 11 assists and Malcolm Brogdon scored 19 for the Celtics, who inched closer to the Bucks in the battle for the top seed in the Eastern Conference.

The Celtics drilled 17 three-pointers—five from Tatum—and trail the Bucks by one and a half games atop the East.

Sixers hold off Raptors

In Philadelphia, Joel Embiid scored 25 points and grabbed 12 rebounds as the 76ers built a big early lead and held on for a 117-110 victory over the Toronto Raptors. James Harden scored 15 of his 23 points in the second quarter as the Sixers tightened their hold on third place in the East. Philadelphia connected on 30 of 39 shots from the field in the first half, leading by as many as 24 on the way to a 20-point halftime lead.

The Raptors, locked in battle for a play-in tournament berth, hit back, with Fred VanVleet pulling them within two points with a three-pointer with 5:50 left to play. A jumper from Embiid and a three-pointer from PJ Tucker gave Philadelphia some breathing room and they held on for the win. Scottie Barnes led the Raptors with 29 points and VanVleet added 19. All five Raptors starters scored in double figures, but the Sixers bench outscored Toronto's reserves 34-17.

The Sixers win left them three and a half games in front of the fourth-place Cleveland Cavaliers, who fell 130-116 to



MINNEAPOLIS: Anthony Davis #3 of the Los Angeles Lakers drives to the basket during the game against the Minnesota Timberwolves on March 31, 2023. — AFP

the fifth-place New York Knicks. Jalen Brunson scored a career-high 48 points for the Knicks to help make up for the absence of Julius Randle, who sprained an ankle on Wednesday. The sixth-placed Brooklyn Nets beat the Atlanta Hawks 124-

107. Mikal Bridges scored 42 points as the Nets boosted their bid for the final direct playoff berth. Dorian Finney-Smith added 19 points for Brooklyn, who were up by four at halftime and outscored Atlanta 42-24 in the third quarter. —AFP

Pistorius denied parole decade after killing girlfriend

PRETORIA: South African Paralympic champion Oscar Pistorius was refused parole on Friday after seeking early release from prison, a decade after he shot and killed his girlfriend, lawyers and authorities said. The Department of Correctional Services said a parole board found Pistorius had not completed the minimum detention period required to be let out.

"We were... advised at this point in time that it has been denied" and it will be considered again in one year's time, Tania Koen, a lawyer for the victim's family, told AFP.

The motivation came as a surprise and was described as "extraordinary" by legal experts, as the correctional services had previously said Pistorius was eligible for early release having served more than half his sentence. Pistorius killed Reeva Steenkamp, a model, in the early hours of Valentine's Day 2013, firing four times through the bathroom door of his ultra-secure Pretoria house, in a killing that shocked the world. A parole hearing opened Friday morning at the jail on the outskirts of the capital where the 36-year-old is detained. Steenkamp's parents, who opposed an early release, saying they do not believe the ex-athlete told the truth about what happened and has not shown remorse, welcomed the decision.

"While we welcome today's decision, today is not a cause for celebration. We miss Reeva terribly and will do so for the rest of our lives. We believe in justice and hope that it continues to prevail," they said in a statement via their lawyer. Earlier, Steenkamp's mother, June,

had made the couple's position known to the board addressing the hearing in person. "I don't believe his story," she told journalists from the back of a car as she arrived at the correctional facility. She did not meet face to face with her daughter's killer on Friday, as the parole board decided to hear the two separately. Koen later told reporters outside the prison.

"It was very unpleasant for her... but she knew that she had to do it for Reeva," Koen said. Steenkamp's father Barry was unable to travel because of ill health but submitted a statement, she added. "Before he dies he has one wish and that's Oscar would just tell us exactly what happened that night," Carmen Dodd, who read the statement to the board, told journalists. Comprising at least three people, including prison services and community members, the board was to determine whether the purpose of imprisonment had been served, according to the Department of Correctional Services. —AFP



South African Paralympian Oscar Pistorius