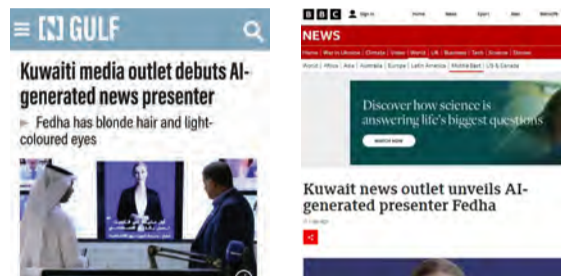
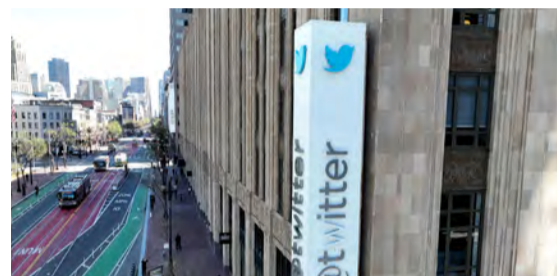


**3** Fedha, virtual news presenter making waves across the globe



**11** 'Many mistakes' made since Twitter takeover, Musk says



**16** Michael Jordan sneakers fetch record \$2.2 million



RAMADAN TIMINGS	
Fajr	04:04
Shurooq	05:26
Dhuhr	11:49
Asr	15:23
Maghrib	18:12
Isha	19:32

## People urged to stay home amid heavy rain forecast

### PM visits Crisis, Disaster Center and Fire Force



**KUWAIT:** The public were urged to stay at home and not leave except for dire necessity amid rainy conditions expected between Tuesday evening and Thursday afternoon, Kuwait Fire Force said. KFF also highlighted the need to maintain the safety of external electrical installations at home to avoid the risk of contact or electrocution and to make sure that there are no obstacles impeding water drainage outlets and to inspect the operation of water pumps in basements.

The authorities added that the power supply should be disconnected in the event of basements being flooded by rainwater. In an earlier notice, nationals and residents were urged to exercise caution due to the forecasted unstable weather, adding they should not hesitate to dial the emergency services 112 hotline if in need of urgent assistance. Kuwait's Meteorological Department said the three-day showers will begin gradually on Tuesday evening. Meanwhile, His Highness the Prime Minister

Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah visited the Ministry of Interior's (MoI) Crisis and Disaster Response Center on Wednesday. His Highness the Prime Minister was briefed on the Ministry's response to reports and security deployment plan during the country's expected heavy rain, along with security measures being taken to protect citizens and residents. During the visit, His Highness the Prime Minister also listened to the officials on measures taken in coordination with concerned state bodies, as well as response to potential security and traffic accidents.

His Highness the Prime Minister also visited the Kuwait Fire Force's headquarters on Wednesday. He was briefed on the force's preparedness and response to expected heavy rain, along with measures being taken to protect people and properties. He, further, listened to the force's officials about their plans, in collaboration with other state bodies concerned, to deal with any potential accidents. — KUNA

### RAMADAN KAREEM

## Let's not forget real benefits of fasting-III

By Dr Imam M Musa Azam-Ibrahimi

**S**ahru Ramadan, the month of Ramadan, is, as every Muslim knows, the month of fasting. As our Creator says: "The month of Ramadan is the month in which The Quran was revealed as guidance for humanity and as clear evidence of guidance and criterion. So whoever sights the new moon of the month, let him fast it..." (Quran 2:185)

### The Akhirah

It is important to understand that we have been sent to this world to gain the life of the Hereafter, the Akhirah. The month of Ramadan is the most suitable time to prepare for the Akhirah, because the rewards given for good deeds during Ramadan can be one thousand to one! For instance, when the Quran is recited, ten rewards are given for each letter and ten fruits of Jannah. [see Jami at-Tirmidhi] and what about Laylat ul-Qadr (night of decree)! A single Ramadan, if observed properly, can be as if we spent eighty-plus years of our life in worship, since every Ramadan includes Laylat ul-Qadr! Indeed, reading of the Quran gives thousands, perhaps millions, of eternal blessings to believers. Let us look at this holy, eternal, profitable trade. Let us reflect on this to understand what great profit is missed by those who do not appreciate the value of reading the Quran during this blessed month! Ramadan is like a profitable marketplace for trading in the Akhirah. It is fertile ground for otherworldly gain. It brings spring showers to the blessing earned for our ibadah. (worship). This fertile time of Ramadan is like pageantry, when all believers are dressed in the vestments of servanthood and happily parade before their Creator.

Since Ramadan is a sacred time, we are commanded to fast to pull ourselves away from

Continued on Page 6

## Iran delegation in Saudi Arabia

**TEHRAN:** An Iranian delegation arrived in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday, Tehran said, to pave the way for re-opening diplomatic missions as the Gulf rivals prepare to normalize relations, seven years after an acrimonious split. The announcement came just days after a Saudi delegation made a similar visit to Iran's capital, following a historic meeting in China between the two governments' foreign ministers who vowed to bring stability to the turbulent region.

"In accordance with the implementation of the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the resumption

of diplomatic activities... the Iranian technical delegation arrived in Riyadh at midday Wednesday and was welcomed by Saudi officials," said Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani. "The Iranian delegation will take the necessary steps to reopen the embassy in Riyadh and the consulate general in Jeddah as well as the activities of Iran's permanent representative in the (Jeddah-based) Organization of Islamic Cooperation," he said in a statement.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi has been invited to Saudi Arabia, according to Tehran. It would be the first trip by an Iranian president to

Saudi Arabia since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2012 travelled to Makkah where he attended a regional meeting.

Continued on Page 6



**RIYADH:** Photo shows the closed Iranian embassy in the diplomatic quarter of the Saudi capital Riyadh. — AFP

## Jerusalem church lambasts Zionists

**JERUSALEM:** The Greek Orthodox Church on Wednesday slammed Zionist entity's "heavy-handed restrictions" on its upcoming Easter celebrations in Jerusalem, urging Christians to attend in spite of police curbs. In an escalating row over attendance numbers at the Holy Fire ceremony on Saturday in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre—where Christians believe Jesus's tomb lies—the church said negotiations with police had failed.

"After many attempts made in goodwill, we are not able to coordinate with the Zionist authorities as they are enforcing unreasonable restrictions," said Father Mattheos Siopis from the Greek Orthodox Church. "These heavy-handed restrictions will limit access to... the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and to the Holy Light ceremony," he told journalists. The annual Holy Fire ceremony, during which priests bring a flame from the tomb which they believe sparks miraculously each year, marks the most important event in the Orthodox calendar.

In the past some 10,000 worshippers clutching candles would fill the church, with many more crowding into the surrounding alleys of the Old City, before the flame was flown to Orthodox communities inter-

nationally. "The ceremony has been faithfully taking place in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for nearly 2,000 years," said Siopis. The sacred site lies in the annexed east Jerusalem and the country's police force has for the second consecutive year told church leaders that access must be considerably restricted.

Limiting church attendance to 1,800 people including clergy from the various Orthodox denominations is a necessary safety precaution, police said Wednesday. "I want to emphasize that our main concern is the safety of the pilgrimage that are coming to the Old City. The numbers were provided by the safety engineer," who assessed the church, said Yoram Segal from the Jerusalem district police.

Continued on Page 6

## China to set up no-fly zone near Taiwan

**TAIPEI:** China will set up a brief no-fly zone north of Taiwan on Sunday due to what the island's transport ministry described as "space activities". The closure comes after Beijing completed three days of massive war games around self-ruled Taiwan last week, during which China simulated targeted strikes and practiced a blockade of the island.

The no-fly zone does not appear

to be linked to the drills, with Taiwan's transport ministry saying on Wednesday China had imposed the restriction "on the convergence areas of many international routes" on the grounds of "space activities". The restrictions will be in place from 9:30 am to 9:57 am (0130 to 0157 GMT) on Sunday. The transport ministry said China had initially announced a three-day closure but revised it following objections from Taipei.

The ministry had informed China "this unreasonable designation will bring huge and unnecessary flight risks to the region, and damage the rights and interests of international aviation", it said.

Continued on Page 6



**TAIPEI:** This handout photo from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense shows Taiwanese soldiers manning anti-aircraft artillery near Taipei, as China conducts military exercises around the self-ruled island. — AFP



# Concerns over 'replacing the spiritual beauty of Ramadan'

## Many seek materialistic fulfillment than spiritual reward

By Ghadeer Ghloom

**KUWAIT:** The month of Ramadan and days of Eid are two remarkable examples of religious celebrations that have a spiritual impact on Muslims. However, three women shared with Kuwait Times their concerns about society's obsession with showing off and replacing the spiritual beauty of Ramadan and Eid celebrations with materialistic things.

Om Abdullah, a middle-aged woman and a mother of three, said: "Celebrating has started to become very demanding and costly. Whether it is Girgian, ghabga, Graish, Eid or any other celebration, many preparations are expected." According to her, people's excessive interest in appearances has become overwhelming. "In Ramadan, women love to wear a dara'a (Ramadan dress) that used to be bought for very affordable prices, an average of KD 15. Today, women wear

dara'as that exceed KD 50," Om Abdullah said.

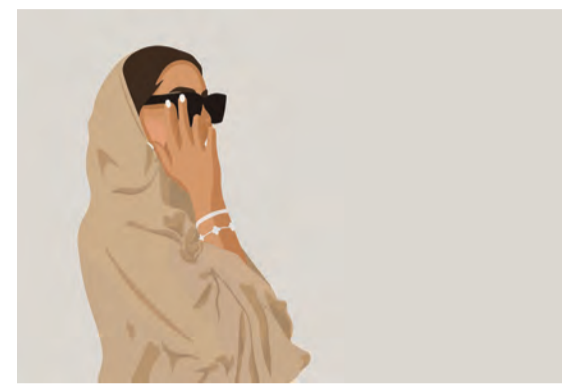
Amid people's competition over fashionable looks, the beauty of Ramadan's simplicity and spirituality might fade away. In agreement with Om Abdullah's comment, Om Aziz, also a mother of three, complained about the high standards that are set by society over Ramadan and Eid celebrations. "I start to worry about Eid and Ramadan expenses before they arrive because simplicity is no longer acceptable. Wearing a simple and low priced dara'a or Eid clothes makes you somehow insecure and uncomfortable, because you will feel left out and unsophisticated," she said.

Because everyone is wearing overpriced clothes, Om Aziz sees that in order to be seen as part of the community, she has to put on an expensive look. According to Om Aziz, many people today are seeking materialistic fulfillment rather than spiritual reward of the holy month of Ramadan and Eid, which deval-

ues the genuine impact on Muslims' inner peace and closeness to Allah. "We used to enjoy the simplicity of this time of the year because we used to focus mainly on doing our religious duty and feel spiritually fulfilled," she said.

Om Shaheen, a mother of two, expressed her dissatisfaction with teenage boys and girls competing to show off their possessions of high-end brands. "At the ages of 15 and 16, I see girls and boys spending their allowance on high-end brands to put on their best looks and fit in with other teenagers," she said.

Youngsters' preoccupation with materialism during religious celebrations worries Om Shaheen. "Kids usually learn from their elders' actions. I cannot blame teenagers for moving in this direction, but I do blame their elders because they must teach these teenagers the spiritual value of Ramadan and Eid and help them understand what exactly are they celebrating as Muslims."



According to Om Shaheen, it is important to teach young Muslims the value of their religion and the celebrations that are related to it, otherwise their belief will become fragile and brittle because they do not have a clear understanding of its authentic meaning.

## Housing authority to hand over 9,769 certificates

**KUWAIT:** The Public Institution for Housing Welfare has announced its readiness to hand over 9,769 certificates to interested citizens with housing vouchers within four suburbs of Al-Mutlaa residential city in preparation for issuing construction orders. The official spokesman of the foundation, Omar Al-Ruwaih, said in a press statement on Tuesday that the foundation will start handing over certificates on April 26.

Al-Ruwaih added that the dates for submitting certificates to those interested in information N1 are from April 26 to May 9 - and from 10 to 23 for information N4. The application date for the N3 will be from May 24 to June 6; this indicates that the application for certificates for those interested in the N2 will be from June 7 to 20.

The institution will hand over certificates successively for residential vouchers, starting from the first suburb N1 in Al-Mutlaa city with a total of 2,409 vouchers, and then announce the date of reception of the voucher owners for the fourth suburb N4 with a total of 2,590 vouchers, 2,367 citizens with vouchers in the third suburb N3 will be invited to receive their certificates, followed by 2,403 in the second suburb N2, and the last from Al-Mutlaa city.

He pointed out that with the completion of the delivery of construction certificates in the four suburbs, the institution has completed the delivery of all its residential vouchers in the Al-Mutlaa residential city project for the families of applicants with a total of 28,288 housing vouchers. Al-Ruwaih stressed the need to follow up on the notifications in the Sahel app, where a notification will be sent when the call is announced and the transaction is completed.

The voucher holders must update the phone number so as to complete the application procedures for the transaction. He said that the application process will be organized through the Sahel application, where voucher holders will be able to extract certificates "for those in addition to the scheme for the voucher and the possibility of printing it." Meanwhile, Minister of Electricity, Water, and Renewable Energy and Minister of State for Housing Affairs Mutlaq Al-Otaibi has stressed his keenness to follow up on the implementation of all housing projects and the quality of work while accelerating the pace of distributions for projects within the plan of the public corporation for housing welfare. The minister added in a press statement that he will work in cooperation with the officials of the public institution for housing welfare to achieve what citizens aspire to. — KUNA

## Kuwait's children spread joy through Girgian initiative

**KUWAIT:** Kuwaiti children filled hundreds of bags with sweets and candy as part of a community and humanitarian initiative aimed at bringing the Kuwaiti Ramadan custom, known as Girgian, to the streets of Turkish regions affected by the recent devastating earthquakes. The initiative, welcomed by Turkey's ambassador to Kuwait, Tuba Sonmez, is aimed at bringing joy and happiness to the faces of the children of these regions, Iman Al-Abdulghafoor, leading sponsor of volunteer team, Bahja, told KUNA.

It also includes new clothing for the subsequent Eid Al-Fitr celebrations. The ambassador said her country would facilitate all means to deliver the shipment to the affected areas. Furthermore, Al-Abdulghafoor said Sadaka Tashi, a well-known Turkish charity, would take over all aspects of delivering the four-ton shipment, which arrives tomorrow on a Turkish Airlines flight, to the children. — KUNA



## NBK distributes thousands of iftar meals

**KUWAIT:** As part of fulfilling its ongoing corporate social responsibilities and on the occasion of the Holy Month of Ramadan, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK)'s Public Relations Team distributed thousands of meals and special convoys to fasters daily in many areas in Kuwait. This initiative comes within the framework of the ongoing "Do Good Deeds in Ramadan" philanthropic campaign launched by the bank.

"NBK iftar banquets, an annual NBK philanthropic tradition and a landmark activity within the bank's corporate social responsibility, acquired much more momentum this year distributing daily thousands of iftar banquets in many areas in Kuwait, including Farwaniya, Salmiya and Mahboula, Hawally, Bneid El Gar, Mubarakiya, Sharq in addition to hospitals: Amiri, Mubarak and Sabah as well as Jleeb Fire Station", said Talal Al Turki, NBK Public Relations Senior Manager.

"The distribution scale and range of NBK iftar banquets this year also included distributing fast-breaking meals via special convoys to various crowded locations in Kuwait. A large number of NBK staff volunteers were ready to serve the fasters", Al Turki added. For al-

most three decades, the Ramadan program comprised a series of activities and initiatives aimed at encouraging community engagement and solidarity in Kuwait. "NBK hopes to encourage a greater sense of responsibility during the holy month", Al Turki noted. It is worth mentioning that NBK's iftar banquet campaign launched with the commencement of the Holy Month of Ramadan as part of an extensive social program comprising



## KFAS provides best environment for endangered animals

**KUWAIT:** Acting director and member of the administrative council at the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) Dr Hamad Yaseen said on Monday the center has released a number of animals in the wild over the past few years after treating and rehabilitating them after they suffered various injuries and diseases, calling on everyone to safeguard the local environment and flora and fauna and not cause any



damage to them.

"A number of turtles that were part of the rehabilitation program last year have recovered from pneumonia and malnutrition through medical examinations and careful follow-up by the specialized team of the scientific center," Yaseen said.

"Tracking turtles is of great importance in saving these creatures and studying their movements and behaviors in the natural environment. When tracking turtles and providing them with tracking devices, the success of rehabilitation programs, their areas of existence, their movement paths and their feeding sites are determined. The care team is able to keep them safe and intervene in the event of health or environmental problems, and this helps improve turtle conservation programs and determine the best ways to rehabilitate and release them into nature," Yaseen explained.

Turtles are symbolic animals for preserving the marine environment and promoting awareness of the importance of preserving living organisms and biodiversity. As for pen-

guins, he said: "It is one of the organisms classified under threat of extinction due to habitat loss, overfishing of its food sources and pollution. The number of African penguins in the world is estimated at about 14,000 breeding pairs in the wild. The center has been very successful in re-breeding programs of these penguins and breeding them in captivity. The African penguin reintroduction program aims to reduce pressure on species in the wild and improve their chances of survival."

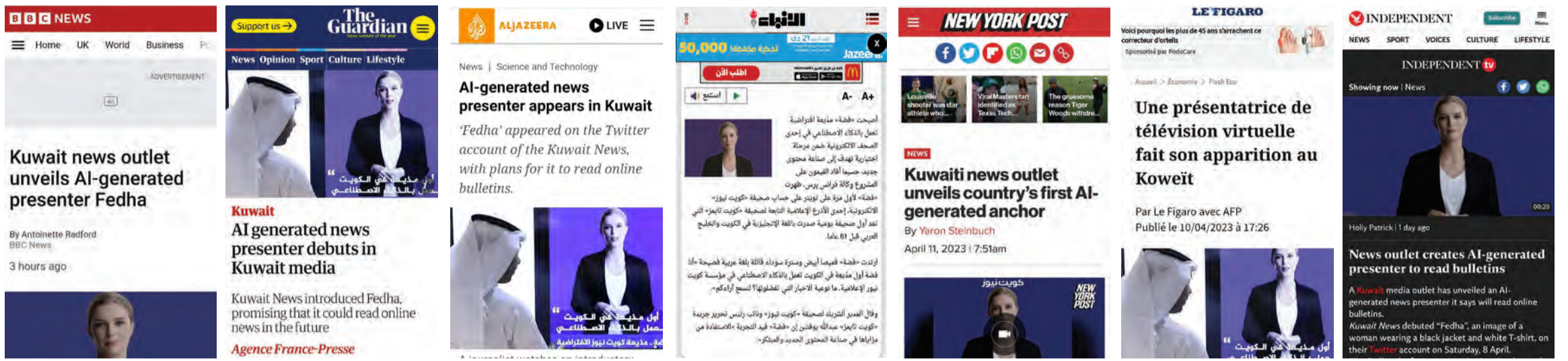
As for eagles Yaseen said: "Threats lie in habitat loss as well as poisoning from human activities such as the use of pesticides, poison baits and hunting. Strict regulations and laws have been put in place to curb these actions that can harm the entire wildlife." Notably, in 2022-2023, a number of wild and marine animals were handed over to the specialized team of the Scientific Center by the Environment Public Authority in Kuwait, where 12 birds including eight falcons and three eagles, five sea turtles and finally five reptiles were delivered for rehabilitation and restoration to wildlife.

## Customs officials arrest suspect

**KUWAIT:** Customs officials at the Nuwaiseeb border have confiscated cartons of cigarettes that were smuggled through the land border. After a routine check, it was found that the car had been reconstructed to smuggle cartons of cigarettes of varied brands. The inspection team arrested the suspect and transferred him to concerned authorities.



Local



# Fedha making waves around the world

## Unprecedented global interest in Kuwait News' AI presenter



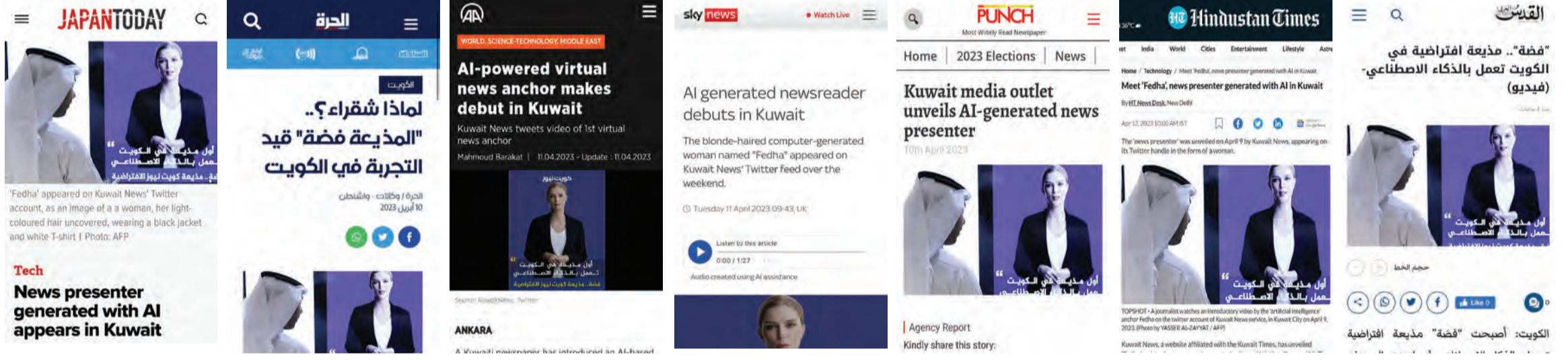
By Shakir Reshamwala

KUWAIT: "Fedha", a virtual news presenter generated using artificial intelligence by Kuwait News, has been making headlines around the world since she debuted on Saturday. "I'm Fedha, the first presenter in Kuwait who works with artificial intelligence at Kuwait News. What kind of news do you prefer? Let's hear your opinions," she said in Arabic, her light-colored hair un-

covered, wearing a black jacket and white T-shirt. Kuwait News Managing Partner and Kuwait Times Deputy Editor-in-Chief Abdullah Boftain said the interest in Fedha globally has been unprecedented. "We did not expect such a huge response to Fedha. This was an experiment for us, and we are overwhelmed by the reaction. Everyone wants to interview Fedha now!" he quipped. Boftain said Kuwait News has always been

ahead of the curve when it comes to technology, harnessing the benefits of the metaverse, ChatGPT and now AI. "New technology creates new content," he pointed out. Kuwait News is a sister concern of Kuwait Times, founded in 1961 as the Gulf's first English-language daily. In an earlier interview with AFP, Boftain said the move is a test of AI's potential to offer "new and innovative content". In future, Fedha could adopt the

Kuwaiti accent and present news bulletins on the site's Twitter account, which has 1.2 million followers, he said. "Fedha is a popular, old Kuwaiti name that refers to silver, the metal. We always imagine robots to be silver and metallic in color, so we combined the two," Boftain said. The presenter's blonde hair and light-colored eyes reflect the oil-rich country's diverse population of Kuwaitis and expatriates, according to Boftain. "Fedha represents everyone," he said.



### Military College admits students

KUWAIT: Ali Al-Sabah Military College announced the admission of 300 officer students and 100 reserve officer students out of the 3,155 who applied for the public lottery for the 23rd batch from all specialties with university degrees. The Ministry of Defense said in a press release that the College held a public lottery for applicants to join the military service for the 23rd batch of officer students holding a university degree. The lottery was held in a multi-purpose building at Al-Mubarakiya camps. First Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister,

and Acting Defense Minister, Sheikh Talal Khalid Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, was keen to promote the concept of transparency and equal opportunity by allowing all those who meet the registration and admission requirements to enter the draw. The Warden of the Ali Al-Sabah Military College, Brigadier General Khaled Al-Otaibi, wished the students good luck and success. The draw was attended by Undersecretary of the Ministry of Defense Sheikh Dr Abdullah Mishaal Al-Sabah, Chief of the General Staff of the Army, Major General Dr Ghazi Al-Shammari, Commander of the Ali Al-Sabah Military College Brigadier General Khalid Al-Otaibi, a number of senior commanding officers of the army and a number of representatives of the Public Anti-Corruption Commission.



KUWAIT: Ali Al-Sabah Military College announced the admission of 300 (officer students) and 100 (reserve officer students) out of the 3,155 who applied for the public lottery (the 23rd batch) from all specialties with university degrees.



### German Embassy organizes iftar for local media

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: On the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan, the German Embassy hosted an iftar for local media representatives on Tuesday. "My first Ramadan in Kuwait has been an overwhelming experience of compassion, solidarity and social openness," German Ambassador Hans-Christian von Reibnitz said. He added that the many different diwanis and ghabqas he has attended since the beginning of Ramadan opened his heart and mind to the deeply-rooted hospitality that is characteristic of the people of Kuwait.

Commenting on Kuwaiti-German relations, Reibnitz pointed out the long-standing and excellent diplomatic relations between the two countries, which will complete 60 years in 2024. "Celebrating this occasion will certainly include deepening the close economic and trade relations as well as the cultural and people-to-people relations that so happily exist between the two nations. Germany stands ready to participate in the plans of the Kuwaiti government to diversify the country's economy to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Energy transformation, water management, environmental awareness, and climate protection stand out as possible fields of cooperation," he stressed. "We are looking forward to even closer cooperation with the Kuwaiti government in the run-up to the UN Climate Change Conference, to be hosted in the region in December 2023," Reibnitz said. He noted economic ties are waiting to be taken to future heights in many sectors such as automotive, industrial technology, health, IT and AI among others. "Continued prosperity depends on many conditions, including preparedness to interact with other cultures, learning from each other and shaping the future together," he said.

The German ambassador invited Kuwaitis to visit Germany and enjoy the cultural variety, nature and history, and also witness ongoing changes. "Don't delay your Schengen visa application. Apply now to avoid waiting time in the peak season in summer," Reibnitz advised Kuwaiti citizens wishing to travel to Germany this year. He concluded the event by hoping everybody enjoys the blessed time of Ramadan and extended his best wishes for Eid al-Fitr.

### MP underscores need to reform World Bank, IMF

WASHINGTON: Dr Obaid Al-Wasmi, a senior member of the Kuwaiti National Assembly has called on the developing countries to work together for reforming the international financial institutions, notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Al-Wasmi is taking part in the Annual Meeting 2023 of the Bretton Woods Committee (BWC), being held in-person at the IMF HQ in Washington DC on April 10-11. The meeting coincides with the IMF and WB spring meetings. Speaking to KUNA on the fringes of the BWC meeting, he said the global changes made the international financial institutions

less effective than they used to be when they were founded. "Everybody is now convinced that it is inevitable to introduce a gradual change to these institutions. The developing countries need to act as one to define the nature and desired impact of such a change," he pointed out. Though the IMF and WB maintain their dominant role in the global financial and monetary decision-making, the accelerated developments in the recent years, including the financial crises, made it inevitable to review and reassess their efficacies, Dr Al-Wasmi argued. The IMF and WB meetings provide an opportunity for gauging the efficacy of the international financial architecture as a prelude to moving from an era of induced response to one of inspired reform. The developing countries usually bear the

brunt of global financial turmoil. Therefore, these countries need to have a say in the future reforms in order to enhance governance, guard against financial fluctuations and protect their interests, he added. The BWC Annual Meeting explored the need for global governance reform and the ways in which the International Financial Institutions can evolve to meet the economic, geopolitical, and cross-border challenges of the new era. Founded in 1983, the Bretton Woods Committee is the preeminent non-profit organization dedicated to effective global economic and financial cooperation. Towards this end, it demonstrates the value of multilateralism and improves the performance of the international financial institutions through public dialogue, advocacy, and policy analysis. —KUNA

## Finance Ministry to stop cashing holidays

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Finance asked government entities to limit cashing out unused vacation days to Kuwaiti employees only and not accept any requests from non-Kuwaiti employees. Sources said the ministry is making the move because the budget allocated for this item cannot bear any increase.

Legislation issued by the National Assembly stipulates that it is possible to cash out vacation days to all employees, with priority given to Kuwaitis. This means that cashing vacations is the right of employees working in government sector regardless of their nationalities. Informed sources said some ministries received vacation-cash-out applications from their non-Kuwaiti employees, but the ministries were informed by the finance ministry not to proceed with fulfilling the requests. Sources said the new budget that is awaiting approval by the National Assembly does not include any allocation for cashing vacation days to non-Kuwaiti employees, including those working in the medical field, such as doctors, nurses and technicians.

## KU Quran contest for disabled ends with 22 winners

KUWAIT: Kuwait University (KU) has announced the winners of the first Ramadan Quran competition for students with disabilities, which was launched on April 5 and lasted two days. The competition was divided into three categories. Two female students and six male students won in the advanced level for the visual impairment category. Two female students were the winners for the beginner level. Eight students won in the category dedicated to people with motor and physical disabilities. Four students were announced winners in the category dedicated to students with hearing disability. — KUNA

# Revival of Islamic Heritage Society honors Quran competition winners

## Holy Quran will remain our guiding beacon: Sheikh Mubarak Abdallah Al-Sabah



KUWAIT: The Revival of Islamic Heritage Society Sabah Al-Nasser branch held a ceremony to honor the winners of the Ramadan contest for learning and reciting the Holy Quran for this year, under the patronage of Sheikh Mubarak Abdallah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah and contribution from Sabah Al-Nasser Cooperative Society. The ceremony began with recitation from the Holy Quran and several advocates, preachers, mentors, social dignitaries and workers at the RIHS were present.

The society's permanent committee for the memorization of Quran held the Ramadan contest this year for Sabah Al-Nasser residents with a generous contribution from the area cooperative society, Master of Ceremonies Abdallah Al-Enezi said. Memorization lessons were held in five mosques with the participation of 105 students of various ages.

Head of the Administrative Department at Sabah Al-Nasser branch Bandar Al-Munahi Al-Mutairi said the society used the theme "Loving the Good for Others", adding that each Muslim should take this theme as a way of life.

He said the branch participated, since its establishment in 1998, in completing many charitable projects, including the construction of 1,077 mosques



and 613 farms, digging 2,529 artesian wells, establishing 11 Islamic centers and 27 Islamic schools and sponsoring around 5,000 orphan children.

Head of the branch's scientific committee Dr. Mohammad Humoud Al-Najdi said reciting the Quran is a great act of worship, through which one gets closer to Allah. Reciting the Quran has great rewards, as reading one letter from the Quran re-

wards the reader with 10 blessings.

Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah said he was happy to sponsor the winners' rewarding ceremony adding that the Holy Quran will remain our guiding beacon for bright future and our gateway to the promised paradise. A documentary was shown about the committee's achievements and projects in Uganda, Pakistan and Africa in general.



## Indian embassy hosts ghabqa to mark Ramadan

KUWAIT: The Embassy of India in Kuwait hosted a Ramadan ghabqa event on April 11, 2023 at the embassy premises, which was attended by a large number of Kuwaiti friends, ambassadors, high commissioners and members of the Indian community. The event was in celebration of the holy month of Ramadan.

The Ramadan ghabqa event was organized to showcase the diversity of religions and faiths that co-exist in India, with the Islamic faith being one of the strongest threads in it. India has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world with the presence of different denominations, as well. Islam came to India possibly during the very life time of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and the first mosque was built in India as early as in the seventh century.

Ramadan is a festive month in India and is celebrated across the country with great fervor and zeal. Different parts of the country have different variations of celebrations, particularly in terms of food. It is a month of family get-together, fasting, and most importantly charity in different forms. The attendees were treated to traditional Indian instrumental music which was well received by the audience. A dinner with Indian delicacies was enjoyed by the guests.

Addressing journalists at the event, the Ambassador of India to Kuwait, Dr Adarsh Swaika said: "We are delighted to host this Ramadan ghabqa event, which is a celebration of the holy month of Ramadan and also an opportunity to strengthen the bond between the Indian and Kuwaiti communities. We are grateful to all those who attended the event and made it a success." The event received positive



feedback from attendees, with many expressing their appreciation for the warm hospitality and the opportunity to experience the vibrant culture of India.

## KRCS dispatches 100 volunteers for qiyam

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) announced the participation of 100 volunteers from the society in providing services to worshippers and organizing the qiyam prayer at the Grand Mosque during the last ten days of Ramadan.

Director of the Society's Youth and Volunteers Department, Dr Musaed Al-Enezi, said in a statement to KUNA that the volunteers will be providing first aid and helping worshippers, especially the elderly and people with special needs.

Enezi added that the role of the association in

servicing the worshippers of the last ten days is a religious duty that it participates in every year with the rest of the state, pointing out that volunteers of both sexes are distributed to fixed points outside and inside the Grand Mosque.

He pointed out that each volunteer was provided with a first-aid kit containing the necessary medical supplies and some painkillers to deal with any situation on site, in addition to transferring any emergency cases to clinics designated for critical cases. Due to the large number of worshippers expected on the night of the twenty-seventh of Ramadan, the association will increase the number of volunteers that night to more than 120 male and female volunteers distributed across the mosque. — KUNA



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Taiwan party picks VP as presidential candidate

## Syria to reopen Tunisia embassy after 10 years

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# Biden urges Northern Ireland parties to restore power-sharing

## British govt need to do more to protect N Ireland's place in wider UK

**BELFAST:** US President Joe Biden urged political compromise in Northern Ireland on Wednesday, using a visit to Belfast to promote the benefits of enduring peace and investment, but faced heated criticism from pro-UK hardliners.

"I hope the (Northern Ireland) Executive and Assembly will soon be restored," Biden said in a speech at Ulster University, urging feuding political leaders to restore power-sharing government which has been suspended since February last year.

Biden touted the "unlimited possibilities" for investment and growth offered in the UK-ruled territory, 25 years on from a historic peace deal brokered by the US government. But peace and stability must always be guarded, he added, saying the January 6, 2021, riot at Congress in Washington had proved that in every generation, "democracy needs champions".

The president met Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who said the UK's relationship with the United States was "in great shape". Biden also greeted local political leaders. He said Tuesday that the priority for his trip — which includes three days in his ancestral homeland the Republic of Ireland — was "to keep the peace" in Northern Ireland.

But senior figures in the pro-UK Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which is under pressure to resume local power-sharing, were strikingly undiplomatic about the president. Sammy Wilson, a DUP member of the UK parliament in Westminster, branded Biden "anti-British", accusing America's second Catholic president of having "made his antipathy towards Protestants in particular very well known". Another DUP lawmaker, Nigel Dodds, suggested any mediation efforts would prove futile.

### 'Part of my soul'

"Pressure from an American administration which is so transparently pro-nationalist constitutes no pressure on us at all," he told the Daily Telegraph newspaper. DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson wel-

comed Biden's visit and his "measured" speech. But he said the political dynamic remained unchanged and the British government needed to do more to protect Northern Ireland's place in the wider UK.

Devolved government in Belfast is a key plank of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, but it collapsed 14 months ago over the DUP's opposition to post-Brexit trade arrangements in Northern Ireland. The party fears that keeping Northern Ireland in the European single market and customs union drives a wedge between the province and Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales).

Despite the UK and the European Union agreeing to overhaul trading rules earlier this year, the DUP is yet to back the new trading terms and allow the restoration of Belfast's Stormont legislature. Nonetheless, Biden's visit marked the "tremendous progress" since the accords largely ended armed conflict between pro-Irish and pro-British militants in April 1998, the White House said.

Biden's defenders note that his delegation includes Joe Kennedy III, a scion of the Irish-American Kennedy clan who was appointed special envoy for economic affairs in Northern Ireland. He will remain in Belfast for several days.

"I think the track record of the president shows that he's not anti-British," Amanda Sloat, National Security Council Senior Director for Europe, told reporters. "The president has been very actively engaged throughout his career, dating back to when he was a senator, in the peace process in Northern Ireland."

### Pipe bombs

Less than 24 hours after arriving in Northern Ireland, Biden headed to Ireland, which he calls "part of my soul" and where he is due to visit the hometowns of his 19th-century ancestors. Sectarian violence remains a concern north of the border, with Britain's MI5 security agency elevating its terrorism threat



BELFAST: US President Joe Biden (L) reacts as he is greeted by Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (2L) after disembarking from Air Force One upon arrival at Belfast International Airport. —AFP

level for the territory ahead of Biden's visit.

On Monday, masked youths pelted police vehicles with petrol bombs during an illegal march by hard-line nationalists in Londonderry, which is also known as Derry. Police in Northern Ireland on Tuesday said that four suspected pipe bombs had been retrieved from a cemetery in the Creggan area of the city.

Biden brushed off any security concerns and saw up close how much redevelopment has transformed Belfast since 1998. The five-star hotel in Belfast

where he stayed only opened in 2018. Before 1998, the only place for visiting dignitaries to stay was the nearby Europa, which was attacked so often by the Irish Republican Army paramilitary group that it became known as the most bombed hotel in Europe.

"I came here in '91 to this neighbourhood and you couldn't have a glass building like this here... I don't think they would have stood up very well," Biden said of the new university campus. "The dividends of peace are all around us." —AFP

## International anger as air strikes kill dozens in Myanmar

**BANGKOK:** Dozens of people in central Myanmar were killed in air strikes Tuesday, according to local media reports and a witness contacted by AFP, as the United Nations and Western powers condemned the attacks and demanded accountability.

The Southeast Asian country has been in chaos and its economy in tatters since the military seized power in February 2021 coup. UN rights chief Volker Turk said he was "horrified" by the deadly air strikes whose victims he said included schoolchildren performing dances, with the global body calling for those responsible to be brought to justice.

The death toll from the early Tuesday morning strike on the remote Kanbalu township in Sagaing region is unclear. At least 50 fatalities and dozens of injuries were reported by BBC Burmese, The Irrawaddy and Radio Free Asia.

The United Nations, while not confirming a toll, said several civilians were killed, with Turk accusing Myanmar's military of once again disregarding "clear legal obligations... to protect civilians in the conduct of hostilities".

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres "strongly condemns the attack by the Myanmar Armed Forces today," according to a statement by his spokesman Stephane Dujarric. Guterres "reiterates his call for the military to end the campaign of violence against the Myanmar population through-



MAE SOT: Handout photo shows people from Myanmar crossing the Moei river on the Thai-Myanmar border to return from Thailand's Mae Sot district in Tak province. Thousands of people who had fled into Thailand following fighting between Myanmar rebels and the military returned back to Myanmar. — AFP

out the country," the spokesman added.

Washington said it was "deeply concerned" about the air strikes. "These violent attacks further underscore the regime's disregard for human life and its responsibility for the dire political and humanitarian crisis in Burma following the February 2021 coup," State Department spokesman Vedant Patel said in a statement, using the country's former name.

"The United States calls on the Burma regime to cease the horrific violence, allow unhindered humanitarian access, and to respect the genuine and inclusive democratic aspirations of the people of Burma."

Sagaing region — near the country's second-largest city, Mandalay — has put up some of the fiercest resistance to the military's rule, with intense fighting

ing the 2021 US Capitol riots and a 2023 attack on the Brazilian Congress.

### 'Perilous times'

The pomp and ceremony of the visit later continued regardless, with King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands hailing the 45-year-old French president at a state dinner in Amsterdam. "Reform is not simple," the monarch said as he toasted his guest after a meal of asparagus soup with grey shrimp, followed by beef tournedos in a red wine sauce and a dessert made of traditional Dutch sweets.

"For us, for Europe and the whole world, it is vital that France is strong, prosperous and confident," Macron's speech earlier made no mention of Taiwan, sticking instead to themes of Europe's need to look after its own interests.

"Being more sovereign" was "critical in this period of time where we have war and the economy is being weaponised", particularly due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, said Macron. The Ukraine war had "opened probably one of the most perilous times of our European Union", he added. Macron had sparked controversy in recent days after he said in an interview with media including Politico and French business daily Les Echos that Europe should not be "followers" of the United States or China when it came to Taiwan.

The remarks drew praise in China — which bristles at US support of what it sees as a breakaway province — but raised eyebrows among Western allies.

raging there for months. Graphic video clips circulating on social media — footage AFP has been unable to verify — show bodies scattered among ruined homes. "We are going to rescue you if we hear you screaming," one person could be heard saying in the video. "Please scream!" A rescuer connected to an anti-coup People's Defence Force group told AFP that women and children were among the dead.

After recovering bodies and transporting victims for medical treatment, he estimated the death toll could be up to 100. Germany's Foreign Office in a tweet said they "strongly condemn the #Myanmar army's airstrike killing dozens of civilians, incl. many children," adding: "we expect the regime to end the violence against its people immediately." — AFP



AMSTERDAM: France's President Emmanuel Macron (L) and King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands (R) pose with start-ups CEOs. — AFP

Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said the alliance with the United States was an "absolute foundation" of European security. US Senator Marco Rubio, meanwhile, said on Twitter that "we need to find out if Emmanuel Macron speaks for Europe".

And in a rambling interview on Fox News, former US president Donald Trump said the US had lost influence in the world since he left office to such an extent that "Macron, who's a friend of mine, is over with China, kissing his ass". The Elysee Palace insisted Tuesday that the president had never called for Europe to keep an "equidistance" from the United States and China. — AFP

## Xi says China must strengthen training for 'actual combat'

**BEIJING:** China's President Xi Jinping called on the country's armed forces to "strengthen military training oriented towards actual combat", state media reported Wednesday, after Beijing conducted military drills intended to intimidate Taiwan.

Xi's comments, made on a naval inspection trip on Tuesday, come amid heightened tension in the region after the show of force by Beijing, which sees self-ruled Taiwan as its territory. China on Monday concluded three days of military drills launched in response to a visit last week by Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen to the United States, where she met a bipartisan group of lawmakers and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

Xi on Tuesday told the People's Liberation Army's Southern Theatre Command Navy that the military must "resolutely defend China's territorial sovereignty and maritime interests, and strive to protect overall peripheral stability", state broadcaster CCTV reported.

Beijing has also criticised a plan for US forces to use a growing number of bases in the Philippines, including one near Taiwan. The United States and the Philippines are holding their largest-ever joint military drills this week, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken committing to "standing with the Philippines against any intimidation or coercion, including in the South China Sea". Xi added Tuesday that China must be "innovative in its concepts and methods of combat".

### Disputed waters

China and Taiwan split following a civil war in 1949. Beijing views the democratic island as part of its territory and has vowed to take it one day, stepping up its rhetoric and military activity around the island in recent years.

The PLA simulated targeted strikes and a blockade of Taiwan during its recent three-day "Joint Sword" exercise. Taiwan's defence ministry said it continued to detect Chinese warships and aircraft around the island even after drills officially concluded.

Beijing warned this week that Taiwanese independence and cross-strait peace were "mutually exclusive", blaming Taipei and unnamed "foreign forces" supporting it for the tensions. Washington has been deliberately ambiguous on whether it would defend Taiwan militarily.

It has, however, sold weapons to Taipei for decades to help ensure its self-defence, and offered political support. China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea—a strategic waterway through which trillions of dollars in trade pass annually — despite an international court ruling that the assertion has no legal basis. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei all have overlapping claims in the sea, while the United States sends naval vessels through it to assert freedom of navigation rights in international waters. — AFP

## Macron heckled by protesters on Dutch state visit

**AMSTERDAM:** Protesters noisily disrupted French President Emmanuel Macron during a speech about Europe's future Tuesday as his domestic troubles intruded on his state visit to the Netherlands. "Where is French democracy?" shouted the banner-waving demonstrators as Macron, who has faced violent protests at home over pensions reforms, addressed a largely student audience at a theatre in The Hague.

The first state visit to the Netherlands by a French president for 23 years was also clouded by a row over controversial comments that Macron made about Taiwan, the United States and China. Macron is confronting the biggest challenge of his second term after pushing through his flagship pension overhaul, which includes raising the retirement age from 62 to 64.

The demonstrators had stood in an upper tier of the theatre and shouted "You have millions of protesters in the streets" while holding up a banner that read "President of Violence and Hypocrisy". After security guards removed them, Macron said people who try to undermine laws passed by elected governments "put democracy at risk", cit-

## International

# Under pouring rain, Erdogan rival vows 'return of spring'

## 'We are emerging from the darkness and moving into the light'

**CANAKKALE:** Facing a sea of umbrellas in the steady rain, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the Turkish opposition's challenger to Recep Tayyip Erdogan in next month's polls, smiles and promises "the return of spring". He calls the rain "pretty" even though it refuses to stop, dousing the crowd gathered in the northwestern city of Canakkale to hear the discreet 74-year-old, whose azure campaign posters announce: "I am Kemal, I am coming!"

The choice of Canakkale owes nothing to chance for Kilicdaroglu, who heads the Republican People's Party (CHP) of modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. It was here, at the entrance to the Dardanelles Strait, that Ataturk—then a young commander—distinguished himself in 1915 by repelling the Allied forces' advance on the rumps of the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

"I do not order you to attack, I order you to die!" Ataturk told his troops. Nothing that dramatic happened on stage of Kilicdaroglu's campaign stop this week, where he was framed by the Turkish flag and portraits of Ataturk. Kilicdaroglu emerged flanked by the two shining stars of the CHP—Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu and his Ankara counterpart Mansur Yavas—who had both unseated Erdogan's allies in watershed municipal polls in 2019.

### '16 presidential planes'

"Our march to power begins in Canakkale!" Yavas exclaims for stage. "We are emerging from the darkness and moving into the light." Trying to end Erdogan's two-decade rule, Kilicdaroglu has united six opposition parties that includes right-wing nationalists and liberals with promises of

justice, democracy, and the return of a certain political sobriety.

"I promise to sell the 16 presidential planes and I buy fire engines!" Kilicdaroglu vows from stage. "I promise" has become something of Kilicdaroglu's refrain, also featuring in his TV ads and social media clips. Under her soggy white hood, Selma Ozcen, 63, sounds open to what Kilicdaroglu has to say.

"I happened to vote for the (current) government. But we want a fairer organisation, a fairer power which doesn't trample on rights," she says. "We no longer want the power of a single man," adds Rezzan Iscen, two small Turkish flags in hand.

"We must change the old system and bring democracy, justice, the rule of law. Let the economy recover. We want a life without poverty, where children do not go to bed hungry," the former civil servant says. "Life has become so expensive, so hard. We want a better life."

### Onions and inflation

Some in the crowd of a few thousands brandish onions, a household staple and unwitting symbol of Turkey's eye-watering inflation, which has dropped to 50 percent from 85 percent last year, according to official figures.

Some independent economists believe the real annualised figure could be double the official one. "I know Turkey's problems. We all know them and we will solve them," Kilicdaroglu says. "We have the knowledge, the experience and the strength. This strength is you!" Just over a month before the vote, most opinion polls give Kilicdaroglu the lead, although not one large enough to guarantee victory in the first round. Kilicdaroglu's path to victory is also complicated



**CANAKKALE:** Supporters wave Turkish national flags as they attend a rally of Turkey's Republican People's Party (CHP) Chairman and Presidential candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu in Canakkale, western Turkey. — AFP

by the last-minute entry of Muharrem Ince, CHP's candidate in the last election in 2018, who is now on course to pick up roughly five percent of the vote. Erdogan, a veteran campaigner whose popularity has suffered from Turkey's economic meltdown and the government's delayed response to a February quake in which more than 50,000 died, is pledging to rebuild a "strong Turkey".

### 'You will win!'

At the foot of the Canakkale stage, Arda Cakirer, a 20-year-old student with an earring and a thin beard, says he is "very moved". He will be voting for the first time in May, just like six million other young Turks who have known no leader other than Erdogan. Cakirer appreciates Kilicdaroglu's campaign pledge to give up power after serving out one term. "This is very important," Cakirer says. "After

restoring order in the system, a younger president will be able to take cover."

Sema Sur, a 40-year-old covered in a headscarf, agrees. "If we didn't love him, we wouldn't have come. We're soaked, but we love him for the sake of our future, so that hopes can flourish." The meeting ends, the rain stops, the umbrellas fold up and a sign brandished above the crowd's heads looms into view. "I promise you—you will win!" it assures the candidate. — AFP

## Syria to reopen Tunisia embassy after 10 years

**DAMASCUS:** War-torn Syria will reopen its diplomatic mission in Tunisia and appoint an ambassador there, Damascus and Tunis said in a joint statement Wednesday after more than a decade of strained ties. Syria's decision followed a similar move by Tunisia on April 3, when Tunisian President Kais Saied instructed his foreign minister to begin procedures to appoint an ambassador to Damascus.

"In response to the initiative of the President of the Tunisian Republic... the Syrian government... decided to reopen the Syrian embassy in Tunisia, and to appoint an ambassador soon," Syria's official news agency SANA said quoting the statement.

Tunisia's Saied had said last month he planned to restore diplomatic relations with Syria. It was the latest example of Arab outreach to the internationally isolated government in Damascus that has gathered pace since Syria and Turkey were hit by a devastating earthquake in February.

Since the quake, Syrian President Bashar al-As-

sad has received calls and aid from Arab leaders, momentum analysts say he could leverage to bolster regional support. Assad has visited the United Arab Emirates, which restored ties in 2018, and Oman this year, and last month Saudi Arabia said it has started talks with Damascus about resuming consular services.

Tunisia expelled Syria's ambassador in 2012 over the government's repression of peaceful protesters that triggered more than a decade of civil war which has killed around half a million people and displaced millions more since 2011. The Syrian government was bolstered when Russia intervened on its side from 2015 and has since regained control over much of the territory it lost in the early stages of the war.

The diplomatic rupture with Tunis, undertaken when former president Moncef Marzouki was still in office, was strongly criticised by the Tunisian opposition at the time. In 2015, Tunisia took a step toward re-establishing relations when it designated a consular representative to Damascus to "follow" the situation of Tunisians in Syria.

Nine Arab countries are set to meet in Saudi Arabia later this week to discuss moves to end Assad's decade-old isolation. The Arab League, which suspended Syria in 2011, is expected to hold a summit in Riyadh in May. — AFP

## French court tries 9 Afghans over people smuggling

**PARIS:** Nine Afghans were on trial in France over allegations of attempting to smuggle migrants across the Channel to Britain in 2021. The case is the latest as Britain and France seek to clamp down on illegal boat crossings into the United Kingdom on a perilous route that has become increasingly used since 2018.

The men, whose trial opened in Paris on Tuesday, are accused of having helped 53 mainly Vietnamese and Afghan migrants set off on the dangerous sea crossing on dinghies on four occasions between January and March 2021.

Four were being tried for a leading role in the smuggling operations, while another five were accused of having played a secondary role. They have been charged with organised support for illegal immigration.

Several of the defendants were suspected of having bought dinghies as well as life jackets and then

depositing them in sand dunes near the seaside town of Wimereux, according to the charge sheet. One of the defendants, who did not appear in court, told investigators about a dinghy launch he witnessed.

A passenger designated as the boat's captain did not have to pay for his passage, while a second, tasked with navigating the vessel using GPS, only paid half price, according to his statement read out during the hearing.

All the rest paid between 1,500 and 4,000 euros (\$1,600 to 4,300) each, the charge sheet showed. In all four cases, the passengers were rescued either in French or British waters. According to the British government, more than 45,000 migrants arrived on the shores of south-east England on small boats in 2022.

The previous year, more than 28,000 people were detected arriving. In November 2021, at least 27 people drowned when their dinghy deflated during the journey. They were mostly Kurds from Iraq and included a child aged seven. The investigation into that case is still ongoing.

In December 2019, a French court jailed two smugglers—an Afghan and a Dutchman of Guinean origin—for six and three years for manslaughter and aiding illegal migration after a 31-year-old Iranian woman drowned during a crossing. — AFP

## Let's not forget real benefits of...

Continued from Page 1

vain activities and animal urges. The most perfect fast is to fast with all of our physical, spiritual, and emotional being, to keep our stomach, tongue, eyes, ears, thoughts, intentions, etc., away from haram (prohibited) things and rebellion against Allah and His Messenger. In other words, it is to direct these components of ourselves into submission to Allah's commands, with the hope that, if we can do this "perfect fast" for one month of the year, we can do it for a whole year, and, indeed, for the rest of our lives!

For example, during Ramadan, we fast with our tongue by abstaining from lying, backbiting, and using vulgar words. Instead, we keep our tongue busy with tilawat, dhikr, tasbeeh, istighfar, and salawat. We fast with our eyes by turning away from looking at things and people that are na-mahram. We keep our ears from hearing immoral things and our hands away from prohibited and disliked actions. Instead, we fill our eyes with the sacred writing that fills the pages of our mus-hafs, our ears with listening to Allah's word, and our hands with doing good deeds.

### Fasting brings benefits

Fasting in Ramadan brings many benefits to human beings' material and spiritual life. Fasting is a spiritual "dieting" that — like physical dieting — keeps us healthy. As long as our nafs compels us to eat and drink without restraint, not only can our physical being be damaged, but our spiritual being as well, for the commands of the nafs can even coerce us to ignore the boundaries of halal and haram. In such a situation, obedience to Allah's commands will be difficult for us, as the nafs takes the reins of restlessness, riding us like a horse.

This is why periodic fasting throughout the year was a Sunnah of our blessed Rasulallah (S). He knew that spending time in ibadah by reducing eating and drinking plays an important role in

developing self-discipline. Like this, our Ramadan fasting helps us to gain self-discipline and learn to obey Allah and His Messenger. In normal times, the stomach is constantly seeking to be filled with food. However, during Ramadan, it rests. Since we abstain from even halal food and drink during this blessed month, our nafs can be trained to more easily abstain from food and drink that is haram. In this way, our spiritual life is improved.

Thus, dealing with the hunger and thirst brought about by fasting during daylight hours for a month is a form of training for patience and endurance. Ramadan pushes us to persevere, to be mindful of our actions, and to keep our thoughts focused on the real reason we are fasting. In this way, it is a remedy for impatience and annoyance, things that constantly disrupt our lives and our relationship with our Creator.

With the fasting of Ramadan, we will hopefully understand that we were not created just to eat and drink. In return for abstaining from the physical pleasures and cravings of the body, our spiritual "self" delights in the angelic and unworldly pleasures that descend during Ramadan. Our hearts long for acts of ibadah and seek to be close to our Lord. What can possibly be more beneficial for us in this month? Indeed, it is the highest benefit, a benefit which will bring us eternal happiness!

So while we enjoy the health benefits that fasting in Ramadan brings to our physical bodies, may we continually keep in mind that one day our vigor will give way and our bodies return to the earth, no matter how healthy we were. Instead, let us focus our thoughts on the benefits brought by this month that will bring us closer to our Creator and the purpose of our creation! May all of you have a blessed Shahr Ramadan filled with positivity, blessings and benefits, both worldly and spiritual! Ameen!

*NOTE: Dr Musa is serving as a community activist and motivational speaker. He is the Director of Development of an international organization representing imams through NAIF (North American Imams Federation) and WCMIF (World Council of Muslims for Interfaith Relations). He has also served as the Director of Development at Sound Vision Foundation, Justice for All, and Islamic Relief USA.*

## Iran delegation in Saudi...

Continued from Page 1

The flurry of diplomatic activity follows last month's landmark, Chinese-brokered announcement that Iran and Saudi Arabia, who have backed opposing sides in conflicts around the Middle East, would work towards resuming ties.

Riyadh broke off relations in 2016 after Iranian protesters attacked Saudi diplomatic missions following the execution of Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr Al-Nimr—one in a series of flashpoints between the long-time foes. Since the March 10 announcement, the two countries' foreign ministers have met in China and a Saudi technical delegation met Iran's chief of protocol in Tehran last week, according to the official Saudi Press Agency. The Saudi delegation, which arrived in Tehran on Saturday, is due to fly on to Iran's second city Mashhad on Thursday, Kanani said.

## China to set up no-fly zone...

Continued from Page 1

Taiwan's Lieutenant General Yen Yu-hsien said the no-fly zone was within Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ). "It's around 85 nautical miles off the north of Taiwan," he told a news briefing. "In the north, there are many international flight routes, including to Japan, Korea and the US."

## Jerusalem church lambasts...

Continued from Page 1

"We understand the feeling, the religious feelings of people that want to participate in this Holy Light ceremony. But unfortunately not everyone can enter the church because of the safety regulation," he added. Segal said the ceremony will be broadcast on screens in the Old City and that the force is "doing our best" to

ensure the flame can travel onwards to Christian communities beyond Jerusalem.

Last year there were scuffles between worshippers and police officers who imposed barriers throughout the city's Christian quarter. Siopis said these measures "made impossible" the access of Christians to the church. With the breakdown of talks between Christian leaders and Zionist security forces, the priest urged "all who wish to worship with us to attend". "With that made clear, we leave the authorities to act as they will. The churches will freely worship and do so in peace," he said. — AFP

Japan's top government spokesperson said Tokyo had also been notified of the no-fly zone. "Chinese authorities notified us of the designation of an area that may affect the safety of aircraft flights for aerospace activities from April 16 to 18," Hirokazu Matsuno said. China's defense ministry and civil aviation authority did not respond immediately to a request for comment. Beijing's space ambitions have become increasingly bold in recent years, successfully landing a rover on Mars, bringing samples back from the Moon and planning a lunar space station with Russia. Taiwan has been on high alert since China launched its military drills on Saturday. — AFP

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## International

# Kicking off Philippines drills, US vows defense in South China Sea

## Nearly 18,000 troops are taking part in the annual exercises

WASHINGTON: The United States on Tuesday promised to defend the Philippines in the dispute-rife South China Sea as the allies launched their largest-ever joint exercises in the face of Beijing's growing assertiveness in the region. Nearly 18,000 troops are taking part in the annual exercises dubbed Balikatan, or "shoulder to shoulder" in Filipino, which for the first time will include a live-fire drill in the South China Sea, which Beijing claims almost entirely.

The drills follow Monday's conclusion of a three-day Chinese military exercise that simulated targeted strikes and a blockade of self-ruled, democratic Taiwan, which Beijing considers part of its territory.

In rare joint talks in Washington with their Philippine counterparts, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin discussed a deal reached last week for US forces to use a growing number of bases in the Philippines, including one near Taiwan.

Blinken said the United States affirmed its "unwavering commitment to standing with the Philippines against any intimidation or coercion, including in the South China Sea." The mutual defense treaty, signed in 1951 after the Philippines' independence from Washington, "applies to armed attacks on either of our armed forces, our aircraft or public vessels, including our Coast Guard, anywhere in the South China Sea," Austin told a joint news conference.

The United States and the Philippines plan new exercises in the South China Sea later in the year that will include other countries, Austin said. He said the United States is allocating more than \$100 million to the bases in the current fiscal year and that the United States would provide new military equipment to the Philippines including drones and air defenses.

Asked if the Philippines worried about China's reaction, acting defense chief Carlito Galvez said, "We don't expect any violent reaction considering that this exercise is intended for our collective defense." News of the expanded base access had prompted China to accuse the United States of "endangering regional peace and stability."

"Countries in this part of the world must uphold strategic independence and firmly resist the Cold War mentality and bloc confrontation," China's ambassador to Manila, Huang Xilian, said last week.

### Exercises in tense waters

Balikatan will include military helicopters landing on a Philippine island off the northern tip of the main island of Luzon, nearly 300 kilometers (180 miles) from Taiwan, and the retaking of another island by amphibious forces. It will be the first time the exercises have been held under President Ferdinand Marcos, who has sought to strengthen ties with the United States after his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte trashed the alliance.

"In order for us to protect our sovereign territory, we really have to drill and exercise how we are going to retake an island that's been taken away from us," Philippine exercises spokesman Colonel Michael Logico told reporters after the opening ceremony at a military camp in Manila.

About 12,200 American, 5,400 Filipino and just over 100 Australian soldiers will participate in the two weeks of Balikatan exercises—about twice as many as last year. The Americans will also use their Patriot missiles, considered one of the best air defence systems in the world, and the HIMARS precision rocket system, which has helped Ukrainian



WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo participate in the US-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue Plenary Session on Promoting Regional Security at the State Department in Washington. —AFP

forces fighting the Russian invaders. The two armies originally planned to fire live rounds at sea off the northern province of Ilocos Norte, about 355 kilometers from Taiwan's south coast, but moved it farther down the South China Sea, Philippine Army Major-General Marvin Licudine said.

The original site was "not sufficiently prepared" for unloading the needed equipment, he said. The

new venue is less than 300 kilometers east of the Chinese-held Scarborough Shoal. The exercises will enhance "tactics, techniques and procedures across a wide range of military operations," said Philippine military spokesman Colonel Medel Aguilar. About 50 leftwing protesters staged a rally outside the opening ceremony venue, calling on the Philippine government to scrap the exercises. —AFP

## Taiwan party picks VP as presidential candidate

TAIPEI: Taiwan's ruling party nominated Vice President William Lai as its candidate for next year's presidential elections on Wednesday, choosing a contender who has been more outspoken on Taiwanese independence than incumbent Tsai Ing-wen. The announcement comes two days after China formally ended massive war games around democratic Taiwan that saw it simulate targeted strikes and practise a blockade of the island. The nomination is almost certain to anger China, which openly loathes Lai for his views on Taiwanese independence.

"I am very honoured to have received the DPP's nomination to take part in the 2024 presidential election and to uphold the duty of safeguarding Taiwan," Lai said at a Democratic Progressive Party press conference. The 63-year-old has long been considered the frontrunner for the DPP nomination to succeed Tsai, who is barred from running again after her second four-year term ends in May 2024. Lai has long held that Taiwan cannot attain a peaceful future by appeasing China and has urged the island's residents to unite against its authoritarianism.

On Wednesday, he reiterated that stance. "Now, the democratic bloc in the international community has noticed China's threat to the international community, and is concerned with the importance of peace in the Taiwan Strait," Lai said. "You must prepare for war to avoid war, to stop a war you must be able to fight a war."

China, which claims self-ruled Taiwan as part of its own territory, has ramped up military, diplomatic and



TAIPEI: Taiwan Vice President and Chairman of ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) William Lai gestures following his speech at the DPP headquarters in Taipei on April 12, 2023. Lai will represent the DPP running for presidential elections in 2024. —AFP

economic pressure on Taiwan since Tsai's 2016 election as she views the island as a sovereign nation.

Lai lauded Tsai's two terms as president, saying the world has recognised Taiwan's democratic credentials under her leadership. "In the future, I will continue to strengthen democratic Taiwan in the same democratic path, so the world can see Taiwan's value, and embrace Taiwan," he said.

The Harvard-educated doctor-turned-politician has previously described himself as a "pragmatic Taiwan independence worker". In January, he explained that this means he considers the island to already be a "sovereign country and there is no

need for Taiwan to declare independence again". Beijing has said any Taiwanese move towards a declaration of formal independence would prompt a military response. "In the face of China's attacks with rhetoric and threats with its military, we will not change our peaceful stance," Lai said, suggesting he would work toward peace-building with Beijing.

"We will also not give up any chance for peace," he added, saying both sides need to work together to improve the lives of people on either side of the Taiwan Strait. Lai also sent a message to voters, saying next year's polls will be "a choice between democracy or authoritarianism". —AFP

was "shocked" by the sentence. "I had hoped for his freedom because what my husband has been doing is positive, they are good deeds," she said. Born into a well-known family, Thang reported on a range of issues, defending human rights and freedom of religion, and supporting land rights petitioners.

He travelled to sites of forced land confiscation to film the authorities' use of excessive force and also participated in many pro-environment protests, according to Human Rights Watch.

Thang wrote more than 130 blog entries, the rights group said, quoting him as saying that he wanted to "help expose and demythologise things for common people, so they dare to stand up and demand their rights".

In an open letter to judges in the case, Thang's parents wrote that their son was a "patriot". "We believe... speaking out against inadequacies and injustice, and standing for vulnerable people is not a 'crime against the government'," they wrote.

Prior to the verdict, Amnesty International's Deputy Regional Director for Campaigns Ming Yu Hah called for the charges to be dropped. "Nguyen Lan Thang's trial shows that the Vietnamese authorities are silencing those producing content deemed 'unfavourable' as they seek to ensure subservience to the state.

the first face-to-face talks between the two countries since the conflict began last year. Dzhaparova requested medicines and medical equipment and passed along a letter from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky addressed to Modi, a statement from India's foreign ministry said on Wednesday.

"Ms Dzhaparova, during her visit, highlighted Ukraine's desire to build a stronger and closer relationship with India," it said. Dzhaparova told a think tank in New Delhi on Tuesday she believed India could play a greater role in ending the war.

"We welcome any effort that is directed at resolving the war," she told the audience, urging India to use this year's G20 presidency to draw attention to the conflict. India has stopped short of publicly denouncing the invasion but Modi told Russian President Vladimir Putin last year this was "not a time for war", comments seen as a rebuke to Moscow. —AFP

## Vietnam jails journalist for six years: Lawyer

HANOI: A prominent Vietnamese journalist who documented protests and human rights violations in the communist-run country was sentenced to six years in jail Wednesday, his lawyer said. Nguyen Lan Thang, an activist and freelance writer who is well-known in Vietnam for his criticism of the government, was convicted of spreading "anti-state propaganda" in the one-day, rare closed-door trial in Hanoi.

His lawyer, Nguyen Ha Luan, told AFP that the journalist had also been sentenced to two years probation. Vietnam has strict curbs on freedom of expression and the government moves swiftly to stamp out dissent and arrest critics, especially those who find an audience online. Independent media is banned.

Thang, 47, was arrested at his home in Hanoi in July last year and has been denied regular family visits since then, according to his relatives. His wife, Le Bich Vuong, wrote on Facebook that she

## Ukraine asks India for aid since Russian invasion

NEW DELHI: A Ukrainian minister ended a visit to India Wednesday after appealing for humanitarian aid and diplomatic backing from New Delhi, which has avoided condemning Russia's invasion of its European neighbour. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has walked a tightrope between India's increased security cooperation with Western countries and its reliance on Moscow for defence and oil imports.

Emine Dzhaparova, Kyiv's first deputy foreign minister, met her Indian counterpart this week in

## Ban on Afghan women working for UN 'an internal issue': Taliban

KABUL: A ban on Afghan women working for the United Nations was an internal issue, the country's Taliban authorities said Wednesday, adding that the decision "should be respected by all sides". Taliban authorities triggered international outrage earlier this month after extending a December ban on Afghan women working for non-governmental organisations to the UN.

"The Islamic Emirate does not want to create obstacles for the United Nations," Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement on Wednesday. "Rather, it wants to make it clear that this is an internal issue of Afghanistan which does not create a problem for anyone and should be respected by all sides."

Under their austere interpretation of Islam, Taliban authorities have imposed a slew of restrictions on Afghan women since seizing power in 2021, including banning them from higher education and many government jobs.

The UN said Tuesday the ban was forcing it to make an "appalling choice" on whether to continue operations in Afghanistan. The world body said it cannot comply with the ban as it was "unlawful under international law, including the UN Charter".

Mujahid, however, said there was no "discrimination" in the decision. "On the contrary, considering the religious and cultural interests, we are committed to all the rights of our people." The increasing curbs on women are reminiscent of the Taliban's first government between 1996 and 2001, when the UN said they were responsible for repeated human rights violations—particularly against girls and women.

Since the ban was announced, the UN has ordered all its Afghan staff—men and women—not to report to work until further notice. Taliban authorities justified the December ban on the grounds they had received "serious complaints" that women were not observing the group's interpretation of Islamic dress codes.

Several NGOs suspended operations in the country in protest, piling further misery on Afghanistan's citizens—half of whom face hunger, according to aid agencies. Mujahid said Afghans had the "capacity to stand on their own feet", but the country's problems were caused by sanctions and restrictions on the financial and banking system. Soon after the Taliban's takeover, the United States seized roughly \$7 billion in Afghan central bank assets. "It is necessary that the member countries of the United Nations resolve the problem of freezing Afghan assets, banking, travel bans and other restrictions so that Afghanistan can progress in the economic, political and security areas," Mujahid said. —AFP



HANOI: File photo taken shows Vietnam's activist Nguyen Lan Thang watch members of the No-U FC squad play in their weekly football match at a local pitch in Hanoi. —AFP

"His lack of adequate access to a lawyer and family visits are a further stain on a deeply flawed and unfair trial." The sentencing comes more than a year after Pham Doan Trang, a high-profile dissident journalist, was given nine years behind bars in the authoritarian state.

Most recently, in March, activist Truong Van Dung was sentenced to six years in prison, also for spreading "anti-state propaganda". —AFP

## Three Nepali climbers missing on Everest

KATHMANDU: A search was underway for three Nepali climbers who fell into a crevasse while ascending Everest on Wednesday, the first such accident on the world's highest mountain this climbing season. The trio were crossing the treacherous Khumbu Icefall while carrying supplies to Camp 1, a waystation on the route to the mountain's 8,849-metre (29,032-foot) peak.

"We are still getting details, but we know that they were hit by a mass of snow this morning and are missing in a crevasse," Bigyan Koirala of Nepal's tourism department told AFP. "Teams at the base camp are work-

ing together for search and rescue."

The Khumbu Icefall is a dangerous, ever-shifting expanse of glacial ice that requires climbers to navigate crevasses over rickety ladders. A helicopter deployed for the search returned without locating the missing climbers. Nepali guides—usually ethnic Sherpas from the valleys around Everest—are considered the backbone of the climbing industry in the Himalayas.

They account for around a third of the deaths on Everest, underscoring the risks they take in service of the hundreds of adventurers aiming to summit the world's highest peak. For each expedition, they make several dangerous trips to ferry tents, food and oxygen bottles to high-altitude camps. In 2014, an immense tumbling wall of snow, ice and rock killed 16 Nepali guides on the icefall in one of the deadliest accidents in the Himalayas. Nepal is home to eight of the world's 10 highest peaks and welcomes hundreds of adventurers each spring climbing season, when temperatures are warm and winds are typically calm. —AFP

# Business

THURSDAY, APRIL 13, 2023

## Zain Group holds AGM with a quorum of 80.1%

### Assembly approves H2 2022 dividend of 25 fils to total 35 fils for 2022



KUWAIT: Zain's Annual General Assembly Meeting.

**KUWAIT:** The Zain Group Annual General Meeting (AGM) was held at the Zain Group's headquarters in Kuwait, attended with a quorum of 80.1 percent of shareholders whereby they were presented with the Zain Group's 2022 annual report which highlights the financial statements, Governance and Auditors reports and the major achievements of Zain Group and its operations and subsidiaries across Middle East and Africa, for the year ended December 31, 2022. Additionally, Zain Group released its 2022 Sustainability Report.

The shareholders approved all items on the AGM agenda, including the recommended cash dividend of 25 percent (25 fils per share) to the shareholders already registered in the company's record date of Sunday, May 7, 2023. Cash dividends will be paid to shareholders commencing Thursday, May 11, 2023.

#### Shareholders to earn attractive dividends

This 25 fils dividend for H2 2022 follows the semi-annual dividend of 10 fils distributed earlier in 2022, totaling 35 fils per share for the year and reflects a 2 fils increase on the previous three years and a 78 percent payout ratio, one of the highest in the region.

Notably, the AGM approved Zain's adoption of a minimum cash dividend policy of 35 fils per share for three years, commencing 2023. It is worth noting that the total recommended cash dividends of 25 fils for H2, 2022 and 35 fils each year for the next three years, will total 130 fils in cash dividends. This expected distribution based on the closing share price of Zain as of 10 April 2023, will reflect an average annual yield of approximately 8 percent for entitled shareholders for the three-year period.

#### New Board elected for three years

Furthermore, the AGM elected the Zain Group Board of Directors for the next three years. The incoming Board members now constitute the following: Osamah Othman Al-Furaih, Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi, Talal bin Said Al-Mamari, Zaki Hilal Saud Al-Busaidi, Atef bin Saeed bin Rashid Al-Siyabi, Nasser bin Sulaiman bin Hamad Al-Harthy, Alaa El-Din bin Abdallah Bait Fadel, Abdulrahman Mohammad Ibrahim Al-Asfour and Yousef Khalid Abdul Razzaq. The Board of Directors will meet at a later date to assign positions within the Board.

#### 2022 financial performance

During the AGM, Zain Group presented its financial results for the full-year 2022, whereby the company served 52.4 million customers, an annual increase of 7 percent, reflecting an addition of 3.5 million customers.

For the full-year 2022, Zain Group generated consolidated revenue of KD 1.7 billion (\$5.6 billion), a year-on-year (Y-o-Y) increase of 14 percent. Consolidated EBITDA for the period increased by 7 percent Y-o-Y, to reach KD 673 million (\$2.2 billion), reflecting an EBITDA margin of 39 percent. Consolidated net income reached KD 196 million (\$640 million), up 6 percent Y-o-Y and reflecting earnings per share of 45 fils (\$0.15).

#### Excerpts from the BoD statement at the AGM

The Board of Directors welcomes all shareholders and affiliated parties to the Annual General Assembly of Zain Group. Zain Group has made substantial progress in laying solid foundations to achieve its '4Sight' strategic goal of "Building a Sustainable Digital Communications company", as the many strategic initiatives implemented have driven revenue growth and created value for all stakeholders.

The continued momentum of demand for connectivity, digital services, and emerging technologies, by individuals and enterprises alike has been remarkable, and this impact can be expected to grow exponentially, fueling the productivity of the economies and entrepreneurial startup ecosystems of the markets we serve.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, executive management and employees of Zain, we express our sincere appreciation for the confidence shown in us by our valued customers and shareholders, as well as the government ministries and regulatory authorities across our markets, who all play a vital role in providing meaningful connectivity to the communities we serve.

Excerpts from Zain Group Vice-Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi's AGM statement 2022 offered Zain the opportunity to continue normalizing and growing its operations following the major disruption caused by the pandemic.

Management, with the support of the Board, focused on multiple initiatives during the year centered around digital transformation and innovation, 5G network upgrades and data monetization initiatives, passive network



Ahmad Al-Tahous and Bader Al-Kharafi during the meeting.

tower sales, and lucrative enterprise opportunities. These programs were executed in tandem with sound regulatory, governance, sustainability and inclusion practices that were implemented across our footprint, which were all in accordance with our 4Sight strategy, which are combining to future-proof the company.

As a pioneer in digital technologies driving meaningful connectivity and socio-economic development across our footprint, Zain continues to pursue opportunities to innovate, maximizing the many developments within the core telecom business while exploring new frontiers and diversifying into emerging lucrative business verticals in the ICT, digital infrastructure, fintech, and digital services space.

The ever-growing demand for reliable, high-speed connectivity across our markets justifies our significant investment in spectrum license fees, 4G network expansion, FTTH, and 5G upgrades. We are diligently monetizing these networks, offering appealing fintech, content, gaming, and other highly demanded consumer services, as well as compelling B2B services to governments and enterprises.

At the same time, we continue to deal with multiple challenges including fluctuations in currency exchange rates, a changing taxation environment, regulatory and spectrum developments, intense competition, and the impact of inflation that is affecting consumer spending.

#### The brand value grows as Zain earns multiple awards

We recognize that everything we do for our customers at every touchpoint of the business impacts the Zain brand, and it was pleasing to witness the value of the Zain brand increase by \$200 million, up 9.6 percent Y-o-Y to reach \$2.4 billion, according to BrandFinance's 2022 global rankings. In February 2023, the brand valuation increased a further 14 percent to \$2.74 billion.

Furthermore, the attainment of multiple prestigious awards by global organizations during 2022 reaffirms the sound business practices we are implementing. Most notably, the recognition for Zain as being one of the top-ten employer brands in the region by Forbes Magazine; the Best Diversity & Inclusion strategy award by Informa; and the A- score in the 'CDP Score Report—Climate Change 2022', ranking Zain first in the region and among leaders globally with regards its climate-change mitigation initiatives. These accolades recognize the passionate efforts of the management team and our 7,400-strong talented workforce.

#### Investments in network and technologies driving data and digital services revenue growth

Throughout 2022, Zain Group invested \$936 million in CAPEX (17 percent of revenue), predominantly in 5G rollouts in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain; 4G upgrades and new sites across Iraq, Jordan, South Sudan and Sudan; expansion of Fiber-to-the-Home (FTTH) infrastructure; and spectrum license fees.

Such investment delivers meaningful connectivity to the communities we serve, in a reliable and high-speed manner. At the same time, this CAPEX is driving significant growth in data revenues, generating over USD 2.2 billion in 2022, representing 40 percent of Zain Group's consolidated revenues for the year.

#### Fintech innovation and expansion

A key strategic initiative of Zain is to continue innovating and expanding mobile financial services across our operating markets, providing much needed services to our customer base and beyond.

With the roll-out of appealing new services, the customer and transaction growth experienced by 'Tamam', our micro-financing arm in Saudi Arabia, 'ZainCash' mobile money platforms in Jordan and Iraq were truly impressive, now serving one million customers who made over \$3.6 billion worth of transactions in 2022, resulting in a 241 percent increase in revenues.

In Bahrain, we acquired a digital banking license from the Kingdom's Central Bank and expect commercial launch in 2023, while in Sudan we are currently fulfilling the necessary regulatory requirements to be awarded a digital banking license, and expect to launch in early 2023. In Kuwait, we have applied for a digital banking license with the Central Bank.

#### ZainTech and Operation's B2B teams poised for impressive growth

ZainTech, Zain's one-stop digital and ICT solutions powerhouse, has gained enormous traction since its launch in October 2021, working closely with our country operation's B2B teams and establishing the groundwork for exponential profitable growth by being the digital partner of choice for governments and enterprises across our markets.

ZainTech's strategic acquisition of leading managed cloud provider BIOS Middle East during the year represents a major step, as managed cloud is a highly relevant and critical business area for our region. Cybersecurity, IoT, AI, Big Data, Smart Cities, Drones, Robotics and other emerging technologies are additional services and growth areas that ZainTech is focused on, which will drive revenues and enable the company to provide the most comprehensive suite of digital and ICT transformation services in the region all under one-roof.

The 28 percent annual growth in B2B revenues across our footprint reflects the sound cooperative business model between ZainTech and our local operations' B2B teams.

#### Sale of passive Tower networks creating efficiencies and value

One of the key parts of the 4Sight strategy centers on portfolio optimization, extending to the sale and leaseback of the passive infrastructure of our tower network, thereby unlocking capital and allocating resources for more effective and sustainable use.

Following our pioneering sales of the towers in Kuwait and Jordan in recent years, in early 2022 we entered into an agreement with the Public Investment Fund in Saudi Arabia to sell 8,069 towers for \$807 million, which was finalized in January 2023. Similarly, in January 2023, Zain Iraq entered into a 15-year agreement to sell and leaseback, as well as the management rights of the passive physical infrastructure of its 4,968 tower portfolio in Iraq to TASC Towers for \$180 million.

By injecting the sale proceeds into the business, these deals provide greater flexibility for the operations to invest in network upgrades and technologies to meet the ever-increasing demand for reliable and fast broadband.

In some markets we share passive assets with competitors, a process that helps reduce our carbon footprint.

#### Regulatory initiatives and corporate governance are key

The growth of the future digital economy in which Zain operates depends on developments across multiple industries, technologies, and sectors that have material impacts on the regulatory landscape, which is becoming increasingly complex.

As an organization subject to laws, regulations, policies, and mandates issued by regulators on telecommunications, financial services, data protection, cloud computing, civil aviation, and climate change, Zain engages with authorities through participation in industry forums, regulator-led workshops, meetings with Ministers and policy officials, and responses to public and industry consultations initiated by regulatory bodies.

Furthermore, Zain has taken proactive steps to ensure regulatory compliance by instituting a robust Regulatory Compliance program across the Group, establishing internal controls, governance, monitoring, and risk-prioritized resolution approach to regulatory matters.

#### A group-wide emphasis on sustainability

Across its footprint, Zain is guided by the four pillars of its five-year corporate sustainability strategy, which are centered on climate change, social business, inclusion, and generation youth.

Our emphasis on sustainability and safeguarding the environment was evident in our 2022 thought leadership report, entitled "The Climate Crisis - Achieving Net-Zero for a Sustainable Future," which explored various important topics related to working towards a Net-Zero economy, including understanding the role of the telecom sector in achieving this ambition; assessing science-based targets; emphasizing the importance of multisectoral cooperation; and leveraging digitization and innovation.

Notably, the A- score that Zain maintained in the latest 'CDP Score Report—Climate Change 2022', positioned us first in the region and among leaders globally with respect to climate control initiatives. Zain has been one of the most active and vocal telecom operators in the region with regards its support of climate change actions, as we wholeheartedly believe protection of our environment should be a key priority for every organization and individual on the planet.

#### Diversity, equity and inclusion programs creating a vibrant culture

Our focus on nurturing a diverse, equitable and inclusive culture through a series of programs and initiatives has become a key part of the fabric of the company, transforming how we hire, plan for succession, support and develop our people, which all work towards positively contributing to a vibrant, productive, and inclusive culture.

As a responsible listed entity accountable to multiple stakeholders, we believe corporate purpose is a strategic imperative. Accordingly, we created a new executive position of Chief Purpose Officer (CPO), whose role will be to bind company purpose with employee purpose, to guide, inspire, and drive innovation within and outside the organization. The CPO will be responsible for mobilizing employees and effectively leading the strategic purpose of the company's management goals and shared values in an inclusive and collaborative manner. The role also involves overseeing the company's reason for being, and the positive impact Zain delivers for employees, stakeholders, and society.

As part of its 4Sight strategy, Zain is proactively embedding its shared values into its DNA to drive our business, sustainability, and DEI agenda, enriching our purpose for being as an organization.

#### Conclusion

As we enter 2023 on the back of these impressive 2022 results, Zain is primed to further execute on its 4Sight strategy, building on and maximizing the many opportunities within the core telecom business while diversifying into new lucrative business verticals in the ICT, digital infrastructure, fintech and digital services spaces. We look ahead with confidence as we continue to make considerable progress and help deliver a significant and lasting positive impact on the societies we serve.

Please feel free to download the online version of 2022 Zain Group Annual Report entitled 'Accelerating Growth through Innovation' and the 2022 Sustainability Report, entitled 'An Inclusive Transition For Future Generations.'



Business

NBK Macroeconomic Outlook

# Economic activity normalizing in Kuwait; oil output down in 2023

## Inflation to slow as interest rates reach peak

**KUWAIT:** Economic activity, though solid, is expected to slow in 2023 as the post-pandemic bounce in consumer spending, real estate and credit demand fades alongside lower oil output in accordance with OPEC+ production policy. GDP growth is forecast to moderate from an estimated 7.6 percent in 2022 to an average of 1.5 percent per year over the forecast period. In the oil sector, having risen to a five-year high of 2.82 mb/d in 3Q22, crude output fell to 2.68 mb/d in February 2023 – and will decline even further to 2.55 mb/d (-128 kb/d) after Kuwait agreed with the OPEC+ decision in April to deepen pre-existing cuts for the entirety of 2023. But in our view, tighter fundamentals (and higher oil prices) will likely compel OPEC+ to reverse some of these additional cuts before year-end and into 2024. We expect oil GDP to contract by 3.7 percent in 2023 before rising by 2.7 percent in 2024.

The solid performance of non-oil GDP post-pandemic, averaging growth of 3.2 percent per year in 2021-22, has largely been a tale of higher oil prices, government fiscal largesse, pent-up consumer demand and gains in oil refining, which more than offset a subdued projects market. Inevitably, however, the breakneck pace of consumer activity – cards data show spending growth peaked at 33 percent in 2021 – was difficult to sustain, especially against a backdrop of higher inflation and tighter global monetary policy.

The government's draft budget for FY23/24 is expansionary (see below) and should support the economy in the near term. However, political gridlock and the prospect of fresh elections later this year after the Constitutional Court in March voided the 2022 parliament on procedural grounds will delay its approval and weigh on the previously hoped-for rebound in investment in 2023. Our base case is for non-oil growth of no more than 3.0 percent (3.8 percent after refining gains from the now fully operating Al-Zour refinery are included).

### Inflation eases

We expect inflation to moderate from 4.0 percent (annual average) in 2022 to 2.5 percent in 2024 on slowing consumer activity and tighter monetary policy. As of mid-April 2023, the CBK had hiked its (discount) policy rate by 250 bps to 4.0 percent in the current tightening cycle versus +475 bps for the Fed. Although US and therefore Kuwaiti rates may now be close to their peak, the slower pace of tightening in Kuwait so far could lead to a correspondingly slower pace of loosening in 2024, especially if

the Fed is forced to cut aggressively.

### A first fiscal surplus in 8 years, easing liquidity constraints

Still-to-be finalized closing accounts for FY22/23 should reveal a first fiscal surplus in eight years for the government (KD5.2bn or 9.6 percent of GDP). This could be short-lived, however, after the authorities in their FY23/24 draft budget penciled in a budget-on-budget spending increase of 12 percent and a revenue decline of 17 percent (based on an oil price of \$70/bbl), resulting in a fiscal deficit of KD6.8bn or 13 percent of GDP. But the underlying fiscal position is better since about half of the rise in spending is linked to one-off items (arrears for electricity, fuel subsidies and employee leave payments) and since oil prices are likely to come in higher than the budget's forecast. We forecast a deficit of 3.0 percent of GDP in FY23/24 (zero if the non-recurring items are stripped out), and a surplus of 1.0 percent of GDP in FY24/25.

Although the fiscal position has therefore improved sharply post-COVID, structural vulnerabilities remain, including limited revenue diversification and a budget weighted heavily towards wages and subsidies (80 percent of all spending). The latter means that when the government's long-delayed capital-intensive economic diversification program takes off, overall spending will be pushed higher. Nevertheless, in the short-to-medium term at least, fiscal and external buffers are ample. The General Reserve Fund (used to finance near-term deficits) has been recapitalized thanks to the recent spell of higher oil prices, and Kuwait's external assets, consisting of CBK foreign reserves and KIA's overseas assets, are in excess of \$800 billion (456 percent of GDP). Public debt, at about 3.0 percent of GDP, is extremely low by international standards, minimizing stress from higher interest rates.

### Outlook shaped by oil prices

Higher oil prices, expansionary fiscal policy, increased traction on projects implementation and a further recovery in the labor force would all be positive for economic growth. Even more important would be the executive and the legislature working hand-in-hand to push through urgent fiscal and economic reforms to rationalize public spending, improve institutional efficiency and stimulate the private sector (as in the government's five-year 'Plan of Action'). Key draft laws covering mortgages and debt issuances are also pending. Reform-focused, effective

was up to 12 percent from 10 percent in 2021 and five percent in 2015. Renewable sources, including nuclear power, accounted for 39 percent of world electricity, the group estimated.

The rest came from fossil fuels that cause planet-warming carbon emissions: oil, gas, and coal, which was the biggest source at 36 percent. With electricity demand continuing to rise, coal generation grew 1.1 percent—slower than expected, Ember said.

Scientists and the International Energy Agency say use of these fossil fuels must be reduced sharply to reach the critical target of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Countries at the COP26 UN climate summit in 2021 agreed to "phase down" coal, the most polluting of the fossil fuels, but progress has been limited and new coal plants are planned, notably in India and China.

"We forecast that 2023 will see a small fall in fossil generation... with bigger falls in subsequent years as wind and solar grow further," Ember said. "That would mean 2022 hit 'peak' emissions. A new era of falling power sector emissions is close." —AFP

## Sun, wind power make record 12% of world electricity

**PARIS:** Solar and wind energy surged to make a record 12 percent of the world's electricity in 2022, a climate think tank calculated in a report Wednesday—though coal remained the leading source globally. The report provides the latest gauge of renewable energy growth as countries scramble to meet emissions targets to curb climate change and secure alternative power sources after gas-exporter Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

"Record growth in wind and solar drove the emissions intensity of the world's electricity to its lowest ever level in 2022," said climate and energy think tank Ember in its yearly Global Electricity Review.

Helping slow the rise in planet-heating emissions, power from wind turbines and solar panels

## Gold rush, migrant influx stoke strains in Niger desert town

**ARLIT, Niger:** The short dusty street in Arlit, a mining town in northern Niger, is a sad and seedy place. Faces of young women, many of them from Nigeria, appear in the cracks of doorways, offering their bodies in exchange for money. A once-quiet town has been turned upside-down by a population influx. A major cause is a gold rush that has sucked in fortune seekers from southern Niger and the country's neighbors.

But there is also a buildup of migrants from across West Africa, who pass through this crossroads town on their desperate trek to Europe. The inflow is creating economic and social strains in a remote and conservative region whose culture prides itself on welcoming strangers. "Cohabitation with non-Muslims is a bit difficult, especially with these 'free women'," said Issa, a trader, using the local term for sex workers. "It's giving the neighborhood a bad name." Nadya, a prostitute in her thirties with two children, said, "We don't have any problems with people here." She added, "I do it for them—I really need the money." Arlit lies in harsh terrain a couple of hundred kilometers (around 120 miles) from Algeria's southern border, between the Sahara and the eastern rim of the Air mountains. The gold rush has helped cause the population of towns in the Agadez region, which includes Arlit, to double in a decade, officials estimate.

### Migrants

But there is also a huge transient population of West African migrants desperate to get to Europe to start a new life. Many are in Arlit on their way to the Algerian border, some 200 kilometers (120 miles) away—and many are stranded in the town after being sent back by Algeria. A Togolese couple, Ickbal and



ARLIT, Niger: In this file photo taken on March 30, 2023 Migrants queue outside the International Organization for Migration (IOM) information centre near the transit centre, in Arlit, Niger, on March 29, 2023. —AFP

Yasmine, queued for help at a centre set up by the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM).

"We have nowhere to sleep and nothing to eat, it's very difficult," said Ickbal, a student. "I have been asking for food for my fiancée from our Nigerian brothers. They are very kind, but we can't do this all the time." "We don't have the additional money to cope with the extra needs in terms of sanitation or schooling—it goes beyond our budget," said Arlit's mayor, Abdourahmane Mouali.

"But the migrants are there and we have to deal with the situation, if only from a humanitarian point of view." In 2015, Niger approved a law based on the 2000 Palermo Convention on human trafficking, criminalizing support for illegal border crossings and for unauthorized stays on its territory.

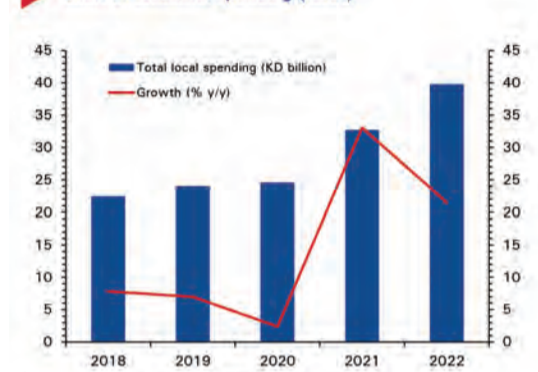
The law wiped out a flourishing part of the local economy, which provided transport, food and shelter to the migrants. The IOM, the biggest international humanitarian organization in Arlit, is

Table 1: Key economic indicators

	2020	2021	2022e	2023f	2024f	
Nominal GDP	\$ bn	106	139	176	170	172
Real GDP	% y/y	-8.9	1.2	7.6	-0.3	3.3
- Oil sector	% y/y	-8.9	-1.0	12.1	-3.7	2.7
- Non-oil sector	% y/y	-8.8	3.8	2.8	3.8	3.9
- Non-oil ex refining	% y/y	-8.6	3.4	3.2	3.0	3.0
Budget balance (FY)	% of GDP	-33.2	-7.1	9.6	-3.0	1.0
Current acct. balance	% of GDP	1.4	26.9	34.1	30.8	32.3
Inflation (avg.)	% y/y	2.1	3.4	4.0	3.1	2.5

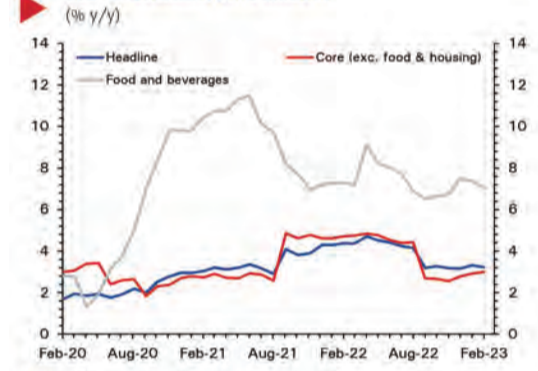
Source: Official sources, NBK forecasts

Chart 2: Consumer spending (cards)



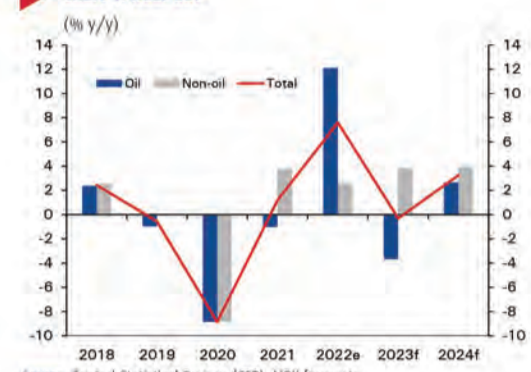
Source: Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK)

Chart 4: Consumer price inflation



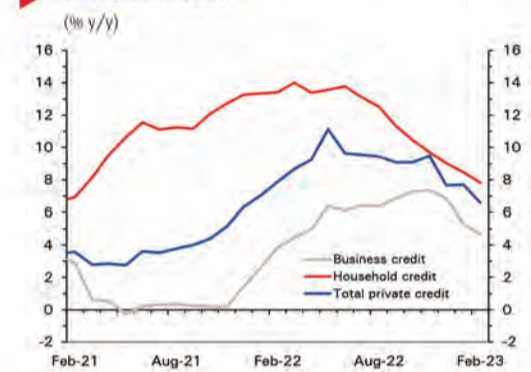
Source: CSB

Chart 1: Real GDP



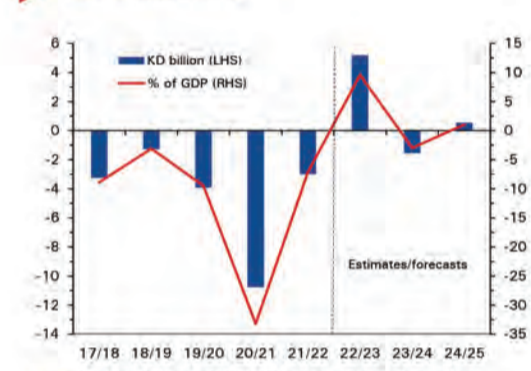
Source: Central Statistical Bureau (CSB), NBK forecasts

Chart 3: Bank credit



Source: CBK

Chart 5: Fiscal balance

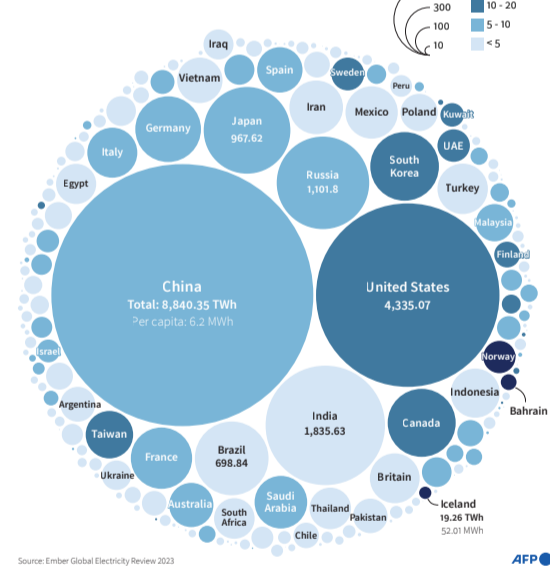


Source: Ministry of Finance (MOF), NBK forecasts; \*on a fiscal year basis

policymaking is the key to minimize the intensifying risks of high oil price dependency, sub-optimal private sector development and employment of Kuwaiti

nationals, and low foreign investment. These are the catalysts that would push the non-oil economy onto a sustainably higher growth path.

### Electricity demand by country



Source: Ember Global Electricity Review 2023

## No evidence yet of credit crunch after banking turmoil

**WASHINGTON:** US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday that she has not seen evidence of a contraction in credit, despite fears that households and firms could have a tougher time borrowing after recent banking sector turmoil. Her comments come as central bankers, finance ministers and other participants gather in Washington for the International Monetary Fund and World Bank's spring meetings this week, where global growth and debt restructuring feature among key topics on the agenda.

While the IMF warned in a report released Tuesday that chances of a "hard landing" for the world economy have risen on the back of financial sector stress, Yellen told reporters: "I've not really seen evidence at this stage suggesting a contraction in credit." But she acknowledged that this is a possibility, while stressing that the US banking system remains resilient. She said she is not anticipating a downturn in the economy even if that remains a risk.

Yellen added in a speech that there remains "considerable room for improvement" in the global debt restructuring process. The World Bank has warned of an especially tough outlook for the poorest economies as global growth slows while countries grapple with heavy debt burdens and weak investment. And this week, ministers from both creditor and debtor countries, as well as representatives of private creditors will convene for a global sovereign debt roundtable.

Yellen said she looks forward to "robust discussion on improvements to the Common Framework process for low-income countries and the debt treatment process more broadly." Yellen noted China's willingness to provide specific assurances in Sri Lanka's case recently "as a positive sign," with Beijing's moves enabling the IMF to proceed with a financial support and economic reform program.

### China visit on the cards

She still hopes to visit China at "the appropriate time" as well, given that President Joe Biden has emphasized the importance of opening up and maintaining communication channels. Meanwhile, the United States remains "vigilant" in the face of risks to the economy, she said, as countries continue tackling fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine while recovering from the pandemic.

"In some countries, including the United States, there have been recent pressures on our banking systems," she added. "I've been in close communication with my counterparts over the past few weeks on these developments and I look forward to continuing that dialogue this week," she said.

On Washington's pursuit of "friend-shoring," or deepening economic ties with trusted partners, Yellen pushing back on the idea that this process would cause fragmentation. Saying such arguments are "not valid," she defended the process as an approach to dealing with supply chain threats. —AFP

## Business

# Gulf Bank celebrates Ramadan ghabqa

Event held in the presence of bank's employees and executive management



Walid Mandani with the executive management.



Walid Khalid Mandani with a group of bank employees.



Ahmed Al-Amir, Tariq Al-Saleh and Ahmed Al-Duwaisan



A group of female Gulf Bank employees.



Dhari Al-Rashid Al-Badr with Gulf Bank employees.



Walid Khaled Mandani (right) and Salma Al-Hajjaj

**KUWAIT:** Celebrating the spirit of connection and unity during the holy month of Ramadan, Gulf Bank held its annual Ramadan ghabqa at Grand Hyatt Hotel, 360 Mall in the presence of a large number of the bank's employees from various departments and branches, including the Bank's executive management.

The ceremony witnessed many activities and competitions, aimed at enhancing the Ramadan spirit and friendships among the employees. Valuable prizes and travel tickets were distributed to the contestants, in addition to honoring the winning teams in the Gulf Bank Football Championship.

Gulf Bank's annual Ramadan Ghabqa is an ideal opportunity to connect employees from various divisions and branches of the bank – away from

**An ideal opportunity for employees to come together in a joyful atmosphere**

their daily work routine – and to meet with members of the executive management in a joyful and familial atmosphere.

Gulf Bank believes that employees are the foundation of its success and the secret of its excellence; hence, why it works diligently to enable them to excel professionally, and to create a work environment that is full of cooperation. Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The bank is

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

Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining 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.

## Thailand's China-built high-speed rail on track but delayed

**NAKHON RATCHASIMA, Thailand:** One of Thailand's oldest railway stations is facing demolition as the kingdom presses ahead with a long-delayed Chinese-backed high-speed line that has caused unease about lost heritage and closer ties to Beijing. Concrete piers supporting the new elevated track tower over bright green rice paddies, cutting a strip through a quiet corner of Thailand's poor, rural northeast. The \$5.4-billion line aims to connect Bangkok to Kunming in China via Laos by 2028 -- another piece in Beijing's vast "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiative that sprawls across Asia.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, facing a tough battle in next month's general election, has championed the 600-kilometre (373-mile) railway as a way to boost the economy through trade with China. Thailand already has nearly 5,000 km of railway but the run-down network has long driven people to favor travel by road — despite the extremely high accident rate.

When the line is complete, Chinese-made trains will run from Bangkok to Nong Khai, on the Mekong River border with Laos, at up to 250 km/h.

### Heritage battle

One of the old stations lined up for the wrecking ball is in Nakhon Ratchasima, the main city in the northeast, three and a half hours by road from Bangkok — or nearly five by regular train. Inaugurated by King Rama V in 1900, the old station is fraying at the edges, with stray dogs snoozing under tatty wooden benches — but from the walls, colorful posters trumpet the bright future of high-speed travel.

The State Railway of Thailand — which did not respond to AFP's requests for comment — plans to replace it with a new station 16 times bigger, built in glass and steel. But there is resistance from local campaigners who do not want to see a piece of Thai history — and one with royal connections — fall to the bulldozers. "We are not against the high-speed



**SUNG NOEN, Thailand:** In this photo taken on March 29, 2023 a train sits below an elevated track, still under construction as part of the Thai-Chinese Bangkok-Nong Khai high-speed railway project at Sung Noen Station in Nakhon Ratchasima province. — AFP

train project, but we want to show that the old and the new can co-exist," Werapol Chongjareonjai, the chair of an association of Siamese architects in the northeast told AFP.

Werapol wants to turn the site into a tourist spot by shifting some pillars by a few metres so the new station can be built alongside the old one.

Demolition work was due to begin at the start of the year but Werapol and his fellow activists have managed to delay it. With the general election looming on May 14, they hope to string the process out further as officials are reluctant to take decisions until the poll is settled.

"We will try to take advantage of the elections to talk to the candidates," he added.

### 'David and Goliath'

It is the latest in a series of delays to the project, first proposed to the Thai government back in 2010. The junta led by Prayut pushed closer ties with

statistics institute, IBGE.

That was Brazil's lowest annual inflation reading since January 2021 (4.6 percent), which was also the last time the rate fell within the central bank's target range — currently 1.75 to 4.75 percent.

However, analysts said the drop was unlikely to sway the central bank in its standoff with veteran leftist Lula, who insists Brazil's key interest rate is too high and is stunting economic growth.

"Core inflation remains high and the headline inflation rate is set to rise again next quarter," said William Jackson, chief emerging markets economist at consulting firm Capital Economics.

"As a result, we doubt this reading will prompt (the central bank) to shift away from (its) hawkish

China, leading some to fear that Thailand was abandoning its policy of trying to balance relations with Washington and Beijing. Eventually, Prayut signed a deal for Thailand to cover all project expenditures, while using China-advised technology.

Benjamin Zawacki, author of "Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China", says the long delays show that Bangkok is less keen on the project than Beijing, wary of getting drawn too deep into the Belt and Road web. "The fact that it is taking this long is some evidence that Thais are not overwhelmingly enthusiastic about it," he said.

High debts to China have been a constant worry for countries involved in the Belt and Road initiative, and the fact that Thailand is paying for the railway marks it out from neighbouring Laos, where the Vientiane-Boten line opened in 2021. There, Beijing paid 70 percent of costs and much of the Laos government's contribution came from loans from Chinese banks. — AFP

line," he said in a note. Lula, who took office in January, has openly criticized central bank chief Roberto Campos Neto over the benchmark interest rate. The key rate currently stands at 13.75 percent, one of the highest in the world.

Fearing a recession after Brazil's sluggish economy contracted 0.2 percent in the fourth quarter — the last under ex-president Jair Bolsonaro — Lula is pushing for an interest-rate cut to help spur growth. But central bank policy makers argue inflation is still not under control. The drop in the inflation rate, from 5.6 percent in February, was driven by falling food prices. But that was partially offset by rising gasoline prices, as the Lula administration began winding down Bolsonaro-era tax breaks, IBGE said. — AFP

## Ooredoo Kuwait achieves 'Advanced 5G' technology

**KUWAIT:** Ooredoo Kuwait, the fastest internet network in Kuwait, continues its constant development efforts across all aspects of operations, services, digital enhancement of its network, announced that it has successfully completed advanced 5G technology by testing Two Carrier Aggregation (2CC CA) to deliver ultra-fast download speed over 3 Gbps.

The test was conducted by aggregating connectivity from two large continuous 5G spectrum blocks operate in the Sub-6 GHz bands. The trail would deliver ultra-fast internet speeds over different types of commercial 5G smartphones and routers. The 5G Carrier Aggregation can provide superior data rates and enhanced capacity that can support connectivity for large number of consumer and enterprise devices in wider coverage areas with enhanced experience. Advanced 5G is a real game-changer in terms of improving efficiency of spectrum resources, enabling 5G standalone (SA), paving the way to next generation technologies, and offering extensive bandwidth required for Massive Machine Type Communication (mMTC) and Ultra Reliable Low Latency Communication (uRLLC) applications. Hassan El Chami, Ooredoo Kuwait Chief Technology Officer, stated: "Ooredoo Kuwait continues to trial Advanced 5G innovative and cutting-edge technologies to enhance network performance and improve customer experience. Advanced 5G, using 5.5G improves 5G service coverage and delivers ultra-fast data rates which allows more customers to access Ooredoo Kuwait cutting-edge network with upgraded experience. Aggregation of multiple spectrum bands will be a key milestone towards achieving high-performing 5G network supporting digital transformation requirements across wide range of industries."

Ooredoo Kuwait maintains its position as the fastest mobile network provider in Kuwait. The company targets to continuously expand its network capabilities with state-of-the-art industry leading technologies to maintain its position as the fastest network and best provider of mobile experience to its valuable consumers and enterprises. Ooredoo's ambitious strategy includes providing uninterrupted innovative digital solutions to its customers, and aims to enrich their digital experience by enabling them to keep pace with the acceleration in digital transformation in line with 2035 Kuwait Vision.

## Brazil inflation returns to target range

**BRASILIA:** Brazil's inflation rate fell in March to return within the central bank's target range for the first time since 2021, officials said Tuesday, as President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva pushes for growth-spurring interest-rate cuts. The annual inflation rate in Latin America's biggest economy fell nearly a percentage point last month, to 4.65 percent, said the national

## Business

# IMF warns of growing global debt fueled by US and China

## IMF chief economist warns inflation could stay high until 2025

WASHINGTON: Global government debt is on track to reach levels not seen since the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned on Wednesday. China and the United States are responsible for the vast majority of the expected debt increase over the next five years, the head of the IMF's Fiscal Affairs department, Vitor Gaspar, told AFP in an interview.

He was speaking ahead of the publication of the IMF's Fiscal Monitor report on Wednesday morning. "We have in 2023 a situation where public debt is higher than what was expected pre-pandemic," he said. Public debt is also expected to grow more quickly than was predicted before the pre-pandemic, he added. In the US, government debt as a percentage of economic output—its debt-to-GDP ratio—is expected to surpass its pandemic-era peak by 2027, Gaspar said.

China, meanwhile, is expected to see its debt-to-GDP ratio rise every year. Its debt burden is forecast to be almost double its pre-pandemic levels by 2028, according to the IMF. This is largely due to China's transition from an export-driven economy towards one fueled by domestic demand, Gaspar said. Aside from the US, China and a few other countries, most other nations' debt burdens are on a more positive path over the medium term.

More than 60 percent of countries have declining debt-to-GDP ratios over the next five years, Gaspar said. In response to rising global debt, the IMF is making the "strong case for fiscal tightening," he said. Fiscal tightening would allow monetary policy to lower inflation "without such sharp increases in interest rates," he said. "It also allows for a better distribution of costs throughout the society," he said.

### Inflation

The underlying drivers of historically-high global inflation could persist until 2025, the International Monetary Fund's chief economist told AFP on Tuesday.



WASHINGTON: International Monetary Fund chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas gestures during an interview with AFP at the IMF headquarters in Washington, DC. — AFP photos

day. Prices around the world have surged since the rapid reopening of the global economy after the COVID-19 pandemic. Inflation was further fueled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, which caused commodity prices to spike.

"Inflation is still with us," Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said in an interview in Washington, shortly after the IMF raised its forecast for inflation this year to seven percent. Despite an aggressive, concerted, campaign by central banks to slow price increases by raising interest rates, inflation in many countries remain well above the two percent target set by the US Federal Reserve and others.

"Core inflation in particular has not started to come down significantly back towards the target," Gourinchas said, referring to a measure that strips out volatile food and energy prices. "It probably won't be until the end of 2024, maybe into 2025," he added. The persistence of core inflation means that central banks may have to keep their interest rates higher for longer, he said.

geographical presence, annual growth, innovation, impact, valuation, and funding from venture capitalists. Fintech operations owned by exchange houses, traditional banks, governments, and telecom firms were excluded. Egypt and Saudi Arabia comprise over 46 percent of the list, with eight and six entries, respectively. Bahrain, Iraq, and Morocco all recorded one entry each.

Payment firms dominate the ranking. Of the 30 companies, three are primarily buy-now-pay-later platforms: Tabby, Tamara, and valU. Tabby raised \$58 million in a Series C funding round in January 2023, bringing its valuation to \$660 million, while Saudi's Tamara announced in March 2023 a debt facility of \$150 million from Goldman Sachs, bringing its total funding in equity and debt to \$366 million.

ble—we're adjusting the label to 'publicly funded,'" Musk said. Britain's national broadcaster is predominantly funded by an annual license fee set by the government but paid by individual households.

The labeling spat follows an earlier controversy over a similar move involving US radio network NPR, which Twitter briefly branded "state-affiliated", the same way it styles government-run Chinese and Russian platforms. NPR stopped tweeting in protest. Twitter now tags NPR, which has nearly 9 million followers, "government-funded media", and applied the same label to the BBC's account.

Musk has expressed deep disdain for news media for years and recently installed an automatic response of a poop emoji to emails sent to the site's main media address. Speaking with the BBC late on Tuesday, he also addressed Twitter's controversial move to strip the New York Times of its blue verified check mark after the company refused to pay to keep it. From April 20, any legacy verified accounts



WASHINGTON: International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva (left), walks out of a meeting during the IMF and World Bank Spring Meetings at IMF headquarters in Washington, DC, on April 11, 2023.

Such a move would put additional strains on a financial sector already rocked by the dramatic collapse of Californian lender Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) last month. SVB's fall was swiftly followed by the failure of another US regional lender and the merger under pressure of Swiss investment banking giant Credit Suisse with its regional rival UBS. Gourinchas said "very forceful intervention" by the Fed, Swiss National Bank and others had helped to tackle the immediate challenges unleashed by SVB's failure, but warned that "pockets" of potential challenges remained.

"We're in a situation where there is elevated lev-

els of nervousness in the market," he said. An area of concern is the real estate sector, in part due to the slow post-pandemic return to offices in many cities around the world. Gourinchas warned that there may be other financial institutions like SVB that are over-exposed to interest rate risks, which could cause problems if rates stay high while central banks fight inflation. Countries without the fiscal tools to help fight inflation could also suffer, Gourinchas warned. "One should be very vigilant going ahead to make sure that the places that look weak are reinforced, are buttressed," he said. — AFP

## Forbes Middle East unveils region's top fintech firms 2023

RIYADH: Forbes Middle East has revealed its ranking of the region's Top 30 Fintech Companies, highlighting the most innovative Middle East-based companies using the latest technology to digitize banking, finance, and investment.

The list was curated considering the amount of money executed through digital channels in 2022, the number of app downloads and active users,

## Musk says 'many mistakes' made since Twitter takeover

SAN FRANCISCO: Twitter boss Elon Musk said running the social media network has been "quite a rollercoaster" and acknowledged "many mistakes" along the way, six months after he bought the company for \$44 billion. In a live interview with the BBC after agreeing to a last-minute invitation for the "spontaneity" of it, Musk appeared to tacitly acknowledge that one of those errors was the decision to label the broadcaster's account "government-funded media".

He said he would change the designation on the BBC's Twitter handle after the broadcaster objected. "We want it as truthful and accurate as possi-

## US inflation slows but remains above Fed target

NEW YORK: US consumer inflation slowed in March, according to data released Wednesday, but remained well above the Federal Reserve's target level despite numerous interest rate hikes over the last year. The rate of inflation year-over-year fell to 5.0 percent last month from 6.0 percent in February, the smallest 12-month increase since May 2021, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Still, several commentators noted that the inflation rate remains much above the Fed's two percent target, while adding that prices for gasoline and many household items stand above pre-pandemic levels, weighing on households. The report showed a 0.1 percent increase in March over the prior month on a seasonally adjusted basis, much lower than the 0.4 percent reading in February and also below the 0.3 percent that had been expected by analysts.

But several analysts still expect the Fed to hike interest rates again next month, albeit by just a quarter percent point, smaller than several recent increases. "The good news is that inflation continues to trend down, with prices increasing at their slowest pace since April 2021," said Neil Saunders, managing director of GlobalData Retail. "However, this is not a complete win as prices are still going up," Saunders added. "This means many households continue to make choices about what and how to buy in order to balance their budgets. Inflationary behaviors are still prevalent among Americans."

### Food and energy

Chief among the contributors to the milder inflation number was a significant drop in energy



NEW YORK: In this file photo taken on December 14, 2022, fruit is sold at a supermarket in New York City. — AFP

prices, offset by higher costs for housing. Price hikes also accelerated in new vehicles and medical care commodities. Food prices were flat in the quarter, with prices for meats, poultry and fish falling, while cereals, bakery products and non-alcoholic beverages climbed.

After years of anemic pricing pressure in the United States and other major economies, inflation roared back to life, beginning in 2021. Key factors behind the resurgence included supply chain problems that cramped availability of key goods; generous government fiscal packages that kept demand elevated; and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which increased volatility in the energy market and curtailed supply of some commodi-

ties. In response to soaring inflation, central banks have undertaken a period of aggressive interest rate hikes, including in March, when the Fed and European Central Banks lifted rates again amid worries over banking industry instability.

Despite the headline figure in Wednesday's report, analysts noted that when food and energy were stripped out, a "core" inflation reading remained troublesome. Noting that core services increased in March from the prior month, FHN Financial's Chris Low predicted the latest data "will keep the Fed on its toes, supporting a May rate hike, and perhaps making the case the Fed should start thinking past the next meeting if it really wants to contain wage pressures." —AFP

### News in Brief



#### Egypt to issue LE20 polymer banknote

CAIRO: TV host Youssef Al-Husseini announced that a twenty-pound plastic (polymer) banknote will soon be issued, after citizens traded the ten-pound plastic notes introduced last year. Speaking on his show "Ninth" on Channel One, Husseini warned civilians not to circulate any alleged images of the new twenty-pound plastic denomination. "Most of the images that exist now, such as the images of the ten plastic notes of last year, are not real. Do not circulate unreal images until the Central Bank of Egypt issues images of the twenty-pound denomination," he explained. The Deputy Governor of CBE Khaled Farouk previously told Al-Masry Al-Youm that the Central Bank is already working on polymer notes that will be printed in the near future. He explained that the CBE has already imported equipment and devices intended for processing denominations using the Braille method, in preparation for their use during the coming period.

#### Bahrain has one of lowest inflation in 2023

MANAMA: The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has shared the inflation rates and consumer prices for 2023 and Bahrain has one of the lowest inflation rates for this year. This data is part of the World Economic Outlook (WEO) of April 2023 and according to the database, Bahrain's inflation rate is 2.2 percent, which makes it the 6th country of 10 countries that have the lowest inflation rates. Here are the ten countries that have the lowest inflation rates in 2023: Burkina Faso: 1.5 percent, Taiwan: 1.9 percent, Oman: 1.9 percent, China: 2 percent, Brunei: 2 percent, Bahrain: 2.2 percent, Marshall Islands: 2.2 percent, Panama: 2.2 percent, Hong Kong: 2.3 percent, St Kitts and Nevis: 2.3 percent.

#### Jordan's industrial output index up 1% in 2 months

AMMAN: The General Industrial Production Quantities index edged up by 1.4 percent in the first two months of 2023, totaling 88.41 points against 87.14 in the same period of 2022. The growth was mainly attributed to a 1.15 percent increase in quantities of manufacturing industries, in addition to 4.22 percent in extractive industries and 1.84 percent in electricity, according to the Department of Statistics' (DoS) monthly report issued Wednesday. The report indicated a 0.77 percent rise in the index during February 2023, going up to 85.84 points compared to 85.07 in February last year. The monthly boost was due to manufacturing industries inching up by 0.07 percent, extractive industries by 5.52 percent, and electricity by 7.10 percent in the same month.

## Lifestyle

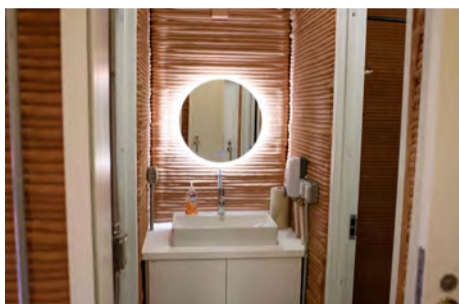


## NASA unveils 'MARS' habitat for year-long experiments on Earth

A simulated Mars exterior portion of the CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



Books in the workroom inside of CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



A bathroom inside of CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



Boots used for a simulated Mars exterior portion at the CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.

Four small rooms, a gym and a lot of red sand -- NASA unveiled on Tuesday its new Mars-simulation habitat, in which volunteers will live for a year at a time to test what life will be like on future missions to Earth's neighbor.

The facility, created for three planned experiments called the Crew Health and Performance Exploration Analog (CHAPEA), is located at the US space agency's massive research base in Houston, Texas.

Four volunteers will begin the first trial

a distant mission comes with "very strict mass limitations," she added.

The volunteers will live inside a 1,700 square-foot (160 square-meter) home, dubbed "Mars Dune Alpha," which includes two bathrooms, a vertical farm to grow salad, a room dedicated to medical care, an area for relaxing and several workstations.

An airlock leads to an "outdoor" reconstruction of the Martian environment -- though still located inside the hangar.

Several pieces of equipment astronauts

will use are scattered around the red sand-covered floor, including a weather station, a brick-making machine and a small greenhouse. There is also a treadmill on which the make-believe astronauts will walk suspended from straps to simulate the red planet's lesser gravity.

"We really can't have them just walking around in circles for six hours," joked Suzanne Bell, head of NASA's Behavioral Health and Performance Laboratory.

Four volunteers will use the treadmill to simulate long trips outside to collect sam-



A simulated Mars exterior portion of the CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



A solar panel inside the simulated Mars exterior portion of the CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



An area to grow plants inside of CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.

ple, gathering data or building infrastructure, she said.

The members of the first experiment team have yet to be named, but the agency stated that selection "will follow standard NASA criteria for astronaut candidate applicants," with a heavy emphasis on backgrounds in science, technology, engineering and math. Researchers will regularly test the crew's response to stressful situations, such as restricting water availability or equipment failures. The habitat has another special fea-

ture: it was 3D-printed. "That is one of the technologies that NASA is looking at as a potential to build habitat on other planetary or lunar surfaces," Douglas said. NASA is in the early stages of preparation for a mission to Mars, though most of the agency's focus is on upcoming Artemis missions, which aim to return humans to the Moon for the first time in half a century. — AFP

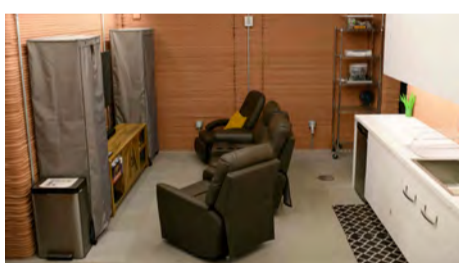
Dr Grace Douglas, CHAPEA principal investigator, talks outside of the Mars Dune Alpha.

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Dr Suzanne Bell, Lead for NASA's Behavioural Health and Performance Laboratory, walks through a simulated Mars exterior portion of the CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



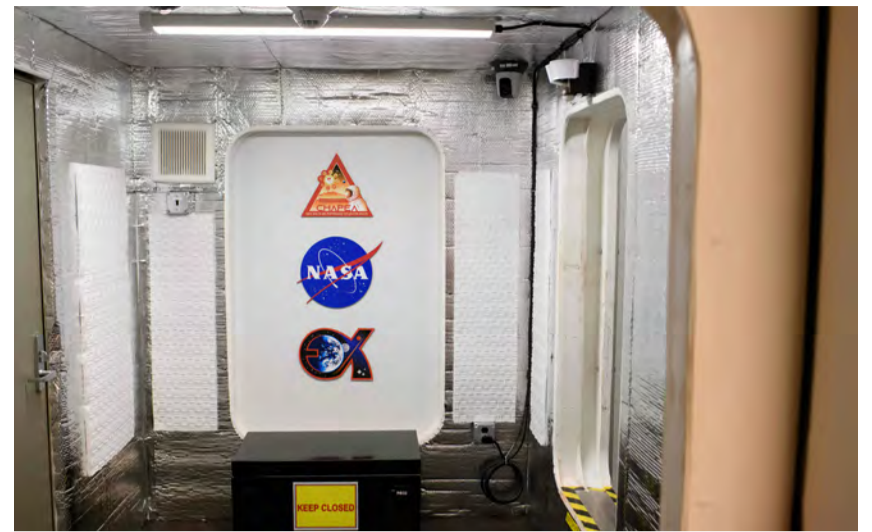
Dr Grace Douglas, CHAPEA principal investigator, walks through a simulated Mars exterior portion of the CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



The living room/dining area inside of CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



The workroom inside of CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



A hallway inside of CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha at the Johnson Space center in Houston, Texas.—AFP photos



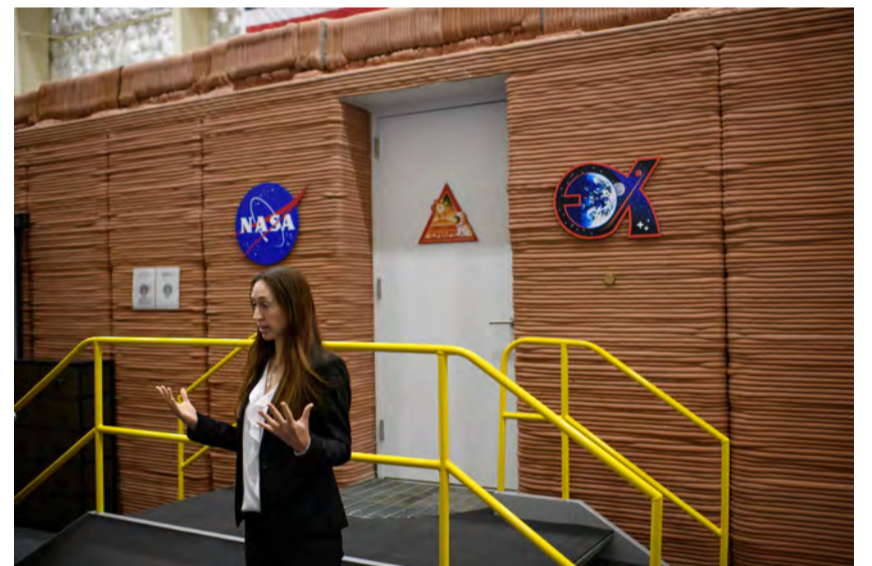
A place for research at the workroom inside of CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



The oxygen generator system inside of CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



A hallway inside of CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.



Dr Grace Douglas, CHAPEA principal investigator, talks outside of the Mars Dune Alpha.



Dr Suzanne Bell, Lead for NASA's Behavioural Health and Performance Laboratory, walks through a simulated Mars exterior portion of the CHAPEA's Mars Dune Alpha.

## Once home to civilizations, fabled Antioch left in ruins

The smashed dome of the ancient mosque, considered to be Turkey's oldest, covers rubble that used to be a prayer hall. Once a home to a myriad of civilizations, the southern city of Antakya lies in ruins after last Monday's 7.8-magnitude quake. Fourteen centuries of history were ravaged in less than two minutes in Antakya, a fabled ancient Greek centre known throughout most of its history as Antioch. Erected in AD 638, the Habib-i Neccar was "the first mosque built within modern-day Turkey's borders", according to the government's culture portal. Only its walls have survived, leaving delicate yellow, red and blue paintings and calligraphy exposed to the winter sky.

"A bit of the Prophet Mohammed's beard was once preserved in a box" at the mosque, said Havva Pamukcu, a 50-year-old woman wearing a headscarf. "I'm heartbroken," she said. A few hundred meters away, a Greek Orthodox church erected in the 14th century—and rebuilt in 1870 after another earthquake—is also gone. A white cross that once stood on its pointed roof now lies atop shattered walls and broken pieces of wood. "All the walls have fallen. We're in despair," said Sertac Paul Bozkurt, a member of the council managing the church.

### 'Soil full of history'

Antakya is in Hatay, a province tucked between the Mediterranean Sea and Turkey's border with Syria. It was one of the worst affected by the earthquake and its aftershocks, which have claimed more than 35,000 lives across the region. In the old city, several streets are still inaccessible, blocked by buildings flattened like pancakes and cars trapped under the

debris. Across more than two millennia, the city was home to Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Persian, Arab and Ottoman empires. It was even placed under a French mandate between the end of the First World War and 1939, when the city became a part of modern-day Turkey. A former general of Alexander the Great founded Antioch in 300 BC.

The city has suffered several earthquakes—almost one every 100 years—and is no stranger to rebuilding. There were devastating quakes in 37 BC, 115 AD and 458 AD. A quake in AD 526 is thought to have killed 250,000 people. In 1054, 10,000 are thought to have died. "Antakya is the cradle of several historical events," said Hakan Mertkan, a doctoral student at the University of Bayreuth in Germany and author of a book on Antakya. But it's also "a cradle of earthquakes, its soil full of history", he added.

### Crossroads of civilizations

Turkey, like Syria, is on one of the world's most active fault lines. But the region is also "at the centre of much of humanity's shared ancient history", said Aparna Tandon, senior program leader at the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. The area impacted is home to six UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Like Aleppo in Syria, Turkey's "crossroads of civilizations" was already "60 percent destroyed in 1822 after an earthquake", said Youmna Tabet, of the World Heritage Convention.

Fortunately, there does not seem to be as much damage at Turkey's other heritage sites, said Maria Liouliou, Tabet's colleague. The fortress in Diyarbakir seems to have suffered only moderate damage, she



said. But the dangers are far from over now that the worst aftershocks have faded, experts warn.

What look like "simple cracks" to the "layman's eyes" can weaken a monument and cause it to collapse weeks later, said Samir Abdulac, who works at the International Council on Monuments and Sites, which seeks to protect historical places. The experts AFP spoke to all insisted the "priority" was to save lives first. Safeguarding historical monuments must

come later. This was clear when AFP encountered a local official in Antakya, one of many families devastated by the disaster. "I just lost my two brothers and a nephew. I am evacuating my wife and daughter today," said the official, who preferred to remain anonymous. "I have no money, nothing. Frankly I have other priorities than cultural heritage." —AFP

Lifestyle

# Albania pushes out boat to save world's rarest seal



Nexhip Hysolokaj, a biodiversity expert, installs a camera trap inside a cave, a habitat used by Mediterranean monk seals (*Monachus monachus*), at the Karaburun peninsula.—AFP photos



Nexhip Hysolokaj, a biodiversity expert, installs a camera trap inside a cave, a habitat used by Mediterranean monk seals (*Monachus monachus*).



Biologist Labrina Bedinaj, checks the level of cleanliness and pollution affecting the marine ecosystem at Karaburun peninsula.

A team of Albanian marine biologists scan the azure waters of the Ionian Sea for a sign of one of the rarest marine mammals in the world. Mediterranean monk seals were once abundant, but now there are only a few hundred left in small scattered groups off Albania, Greece and Turkey and in Mauritania, on Africa's Atlantic coast. Yet there are glimmers of hope for their survival despite a dramatic decline caused by overfishing and the overdevelopment of their coastal habitat.

Numbers are beginning to slowly rebound thanks to the creation of protected marine areas in recent years, experts say. The seals have gone from being "critically endangered" in 2015 on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s red list to now being simply endangered.

Even so, they are still extremely difficult to track. Having previously lounged around on beaches, the seals have now retreated to the safety of isolated sea caves. In Albania, "scientists have spotted a handful of the species thanks to meticulous work to identify the caves and coves where these shy animals hide, especially to give birth," biodiversity expert Nexhip Hysolokaj told AFP.

They have spent the past five years placing cameras in caves and other secluded spots along southern Albania's Adriatic and Ionian coasts to better track the animals. Hysolokaj, who works in the Karaburun-Sazan marine reserve, regularly sets out from the port of Vlora aboard a vessel named the "Foka", or "seal" in Albanian, to check memory cards in the cameras hidden along the coastline. It's "a real challenge because in order to capture the right images, they must be positioned toward the inner beaches of these caves, where the seals come to rest," he said.

### Cameras and caves

The latest monk seals discovered by the team were spotted in January when they captured images of what was probably a female and her pup. They photographed two others in 2020, and there has also been a smattering of other sightings by tourists — each greeted like a small victory.

Researchers tracking the mammal mostly ply the marine national park created in 2010 along the shores of the Karaburun Peninsula and Sazan Island — a sanctuary where commercial fish-



Fisherman, Baci Dyrnishaj, works in his fish shop in Rradhime, some 14 kilometres from the city of Vlora, southern Albania.



This photograph shows a boat on the Bay of Laurel on the coast of the Karaburun peninsula, the habitat used by Mediterranean monk seals (*Monachus monachus*).



This photograph shows the coast of the Karaburun peninsula, the habitat used by Mediterranean monk seals (*Monachus monachus*).

ing is prohibited, and from which large boats are banned. Locals say monk seals were once numer-

ous on Albanian beaches even though they were rarely tracked or monitored by scientists, especial-



Nexhip Hysolokaj, a biodiversity expert, installs a camera trap inside a cave.

ly during the decades of hardline communist rule. But even there their populations were mauled by hunting and overfishing — with dynamite often even used — while pollution, tourism and climate change have further eroded numbers. The illegal hunting of the seals and the "destruction of habitats or other factors have forced it to completely change its biological behaviour," said Aleksander Trajce, of the Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania advocacy group.

### Good omen

So cameras and regular field trips are some of the only ways of observing the species' health. "Only regular monitoring allows us to identify the presence of the monk seal and to define the sites to be protected," French researchers Jordi Salmona and Philippe Gaubert from the University of Toulouse's Evolution and Biological Diversity Laboratory told AFP in an email exchange.

The waters off Albania have become increasingly emptied of fish over the years, fishermen say, which puts them and the seals in the same boat. "Seals feed mainly on fish, squid and shellfish. Less fish means fewer opportunities for them," said Baci Dyrnishaj, a fisherman in Vlora. So in a land where superstitions are legion, fishermen have invented a new one to try to protect the monk seals. "The seals bring luck to those who see them," said Dyrnishaj. "But if you disturb or hunt them, you will have bad luck." —AFP



Japanese-Brazilian singer Kauan Okamoto (top), a former member of Japanese idol group Johnny's Junior, poses for the media prior to a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan in Tokyo.



Japanese-Brazilian singer Kauan Okamoto, a former member of Japanese idol group Johnny's Junior, holds a press conference.

—AFP photos

## Former teen idol alleges sex abuse by Japan music mogul

A former teen idol on Wednesday said he was repeatedly sexually assaulted by Johnny Kitagawa, the founder of Japan's biggest boyband empire, in a rare public allegation against the late mogul. The talent agency Johnny and Associates, which was established by Kitagawa and has dominated the country's showbiz industry for decades, did not respond to multiple requests for comment from AFP.

The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, which hosted a press conference by the accuser, Kauan Okamoto, said the company also failed to respond to its invitations to comment. Kitagawa died of a stroke aged 87 in 2019, having engineered the birth of J-pop mega-groups including SMAP, TOKIO and Arashi, who amassed adoring fans across Asia.

His young recruits were known collectively as "Johnny's Jrs", and flocked to Kitagawa in the hopes of making it big in the lucrative J-pop industry. Japanese-Brazilian singer Okamoto said he was molested by Kitagawa "15 to 20" times during his four-year stint in the agency until 2016, starting when he was just 15 years old. He is one of the first people to

publicly address Kitagawa's long-alleged history of sexual abuse against young boys, a controversy that resurfaced after a recent BBC documentary.

"I hope other victims will also come forward, all of them," said Okamoto, who believes most of the "100 to 200" young recruits he worked with at the agency were similarly assaulted by Kitagawa. "I also want the agency's top management, and Johnny himself if he were here today, to acknowledge what took place and make sure such things won't happen again." The musician said it was common for Kitagawa's younger talents awaiting a mainstream debut to spend the night at his penthouse apartment equipped with a jacuzzi, bar and a karaoke machine.

Okamoto, now 26, said the first time he was assaulted by Kitagawa, the mogul came into his bed and proceeded to touch his genitals and perform oral sex on him. He said Kitagawa gave him 10,000 yen (now \$75) the following day, without specifying what the money was for.

Allegations of child abuse and sexual exploitation have surrounded Kitagawa for years, but accusers have mostly remained

anonymous. The Shukan Bunshun weekly magazine in 1999 published a series based on accusations made by several boys managed by the entrepreneur.

Kitagawa was awarded damages for defamation following the reports but the verdict was partially overturned on appeal, with the court ruling the magazine had sufficient reason to publish the allegations, according to Kyodo News. Kitagawa, however, was never criminally charged. And Okamoto said he had no plans to ask police for a posthumous investigation of Kitagawa.

"Thanks to Johnny, my life did change," he said. "But I also believe what Johnny did — performing sex acts on me when I was 15 — and to the other juniors, was a bad thing." The singer said there was a "general awareness" among the boys under Kitagawa's management that rejecting his advances would hurt their chances of success, though the mogul never explicitly said so. Kitagawa's words carried such decision-making power that "some juniors even said, 'you have to be at his place to succeed,'" Okamoto added. —AFP

## FBI raids art foundation in Puerto Rico

US and French authorities raided Tuesday an art foundation in Puerto Rico dedicated to the work of the late French-Hungarian painter Victor Vasarely, the FBI said. FBI agents loaded dozens of paintings into a truck outside the foundation, located in the old quarter of San Juan, capital of the US island territory in the Caribbean.

The reason behind the raid was not disclosed, but the operation was carried out under the order of a French judge, which the FBI honored and cooperated with, FBI spokesman Limary Cruz-Rubio told AFP. The works of Vasarely — considered a master of optical illusion

— have long been at the center of a legal dispute between his grandson, Pierre Vasarely, and the founder of the Puerto Rican foundation, Michele Taburno-Vasarely.

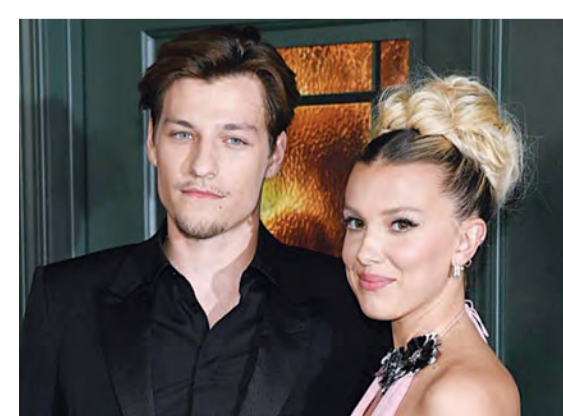
The foundation hosts art from both Victor Vasarely and his son, Jean-Pierre, known also as Yvaral, who died in 2002.

Taburno-Vasarely — Jean-Pierre's second wife — and Pierre — Jean-Pierre's son — have sparred over the ownership over hundreds of works made by Jean-Pierre and Victor. Pierre, for his part, presides over the separate Vasarely Foundation, based in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. —AFP

## Millie Bobby Brown says to marry

"Stranger Things" star Millie Bobby Brown is to marry her long-term boyfriend Jake Bongiovi, she has announced. The 19-year-old actress took to Instagram to post a picture of her with Bongiovi — the son of rock legend Jon Bon Jovi. The picture, in which she is wearing an engagement ring, was captioned "I've loved you three summers now, honey, I want 'em all."

The line is from Taylor Swift's hit "Lover." Bongiovi also posted the announcement on his page. The couple have been an item for around two-and-a-half years,



and social media speculation over an announcement has swirled for weeks. Brown has previously called Bongiovi her "partner for life." The British actress rose to global fame as the character Eleven in the Netflix hit "Stranger Things," the fifth season of which is expected shortly. Bongiovi, 20, is an actor who stars in the forthcoming comedy "Rockbottom." —AFP

## Sports

# James leads Lakers into playoffs after thriller as Hawks advance

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James scored 30 points as the Los Angeles Lakers muscled their way into the NBA playoffs on Tuesday with a thrilling come-from-behind 108-102 overtime victory against the Minnesota Timberwolves. The Lakers clinched seventh seed and advanced to a Western Conference first-round playoff series against the second-seeded Memphis Grizzlies starting on Sunday after a pulsating duel at the Crypto.com Arena. The Timberwolves will have a second chance to reach the postseason when they face either New Orleans or Oklahoma City on Friday where the eighth seeding in the Western Conference will be up for grabs. New Orleans and Oklahoma City face each other on Wednesday to determine who advances to that game. "This is what our sport is all about — getting to April and having an opportunity to play in the postseason," the 38-year-old James said after the win. "We've been battle-tested all year and since the All-Star break we've been playing some good basketball."

A nerve-jangling fourth quarter saw the Lakers battle back from a 10-point deficit to move to the brink of victory after James engineered a three-pointer for German international Dennis Schroder to put Los Angeles 98-95 ahead with just 1.4 seconds remaining. But as the home crowd prepared to celebrate, Anthony Davis was called for a rash foul on Mike Conley as the Timberwolves veteran attempted a desperate game-tying late three.

Conley's effort missed but he duly stepped up to drain three free-throws under excruciating pressure to knot the game at 98-98 and force overtime. Yet the Lakers regrouped to start overtime with a flurry of points, Rui Hachimura's three-pointer and a Schroder layup putting Los Angeles five points clear at 103-98. The Lakers kept their noses in front

and after a missed three-point attempt by Taurean Prince that could have tied it for Minnesota, the hosts closed out the win.

## Hawks advance

In Tuesday's other play-in game, Trae Young scored 25 points as the Atlanta Hawks booked their place in the Eastern Conference playoffs with a 116-105 win over the Miami Heat. Atlanta's bench combined to score 53 points to silence the Miami crowd and send the Hawks into a first-round playoff series against the Boston Celtics. Miami will now face the winner of Wednesday's game between Toronto and Chicago to determine the eighth and final seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs.

"We brought the physicality to them," Young said after the win. "They're known for being a very physical team and trying to bully a lot of teams on the defensive end. "And if you don't match their physicality you can get beat. Tonight I think we matched their physicality and it showed." Young led a superb all-round offensive team effort from Atlanta, who saw seven players finish in double figures.

Dejounte Murray posted 18 points, while Saddiq Bey added 17. Atlanta took a stranglehold on the game after a dominant first-half display, outlasting a sluggish Miami line-up at both ends of the court to quickly open up a double-digit lead. The Hawks moved nine points clear at the end of the first quarter at 36-27 and then accelerated away in the second to lead by 24 points at 63-39.

Only a late 11-0 Miami run to close the half — Kyle Lowry taking his first-half tally to 19 points — kept the scoreline respectable but Atlanta nevertheless still reached half-time with a hefty 65-50 lead. Young led the Atlanta scoring in the first half with 13



LOS ANGELES: LeBron James of the Los Angeles Lakers scores on a layup during a 108-102 win against the Minnesota Timberwolves in a play-in tournament game at Crypto.com Arena on April 11, 2023. —AFP

points and six assists, including one superb behind-the-back pass in the second quarter to set up a three-pointer for Bey. Clint Capela also delivered a huge defensive performance for Atlanta, hauling in 21 rebounds and making two crucial blocks in the first

half to stymie Miami's offense. Miami rallied to start the second half with a 13-4 run and closed to within five points at one stage in the third quarter. But Atlanta were always able to raise the game at key moments to close out the win. —AFP

## Sluggish Warner under fire in IPL after Delhi lose

NEW DELHI: David Warner is under fire in the Indian Premier League after the Australian's Delhi Capitals lost for a fourth time in as many matches and sit bottom of the pile. The opening batsman and skipper has hit three half-centuries in this year's edition of the Twenty20 tournament but his runs have come at a sluggish strike rate of 114.83. At his explosive best, the 36-year-old left-hander is a match-winner. He boasts a strike rate of 141.30 in his 99 T20 innings for Australia.

But he cannot get going in this year's IPL and his snail-paced 51 runs off 47 deliveries in Tuesday's last-ball loss to the Mumbai Indians did little to quell concerns about his decline. The once-destructive Australian appears labored, even nervous. "Even in the last couple of games, when he has been trying to hit, it's not been coming off," deputy skipper Axar Patel told reporters after the agonizing defeat to five-time champions Mumbai. "As a batsman, I don't know what he is thinking at that moment."

Warner's innings got a boost in a 67-run sixth-wicket stand with Axar, who smashed a 25-ball 54, but Delhi were all out for 172 and their opponents went on to win by six wickets. Delhi are bottom of the 10 teams in the IPL and the only side yet to win a match. Axar said that Warner has spoken to Ricky Ponting and Shane Watson, two Australian greats on Delhi's coaching staff, as he bids to get firing again.

He has also been counselled by former Indian Test captain Sourav Ganguly, Delhi's director of cricket. "The conversation about his strike rate also came up. They looked at his videos and he's working on it," said Axar. Pundits have been scathing in their assessment of Warner's struggles. "I feel it is time that we tell him in English now so that Warner listens to it and feels hurt," former India opener Virender Sehwag told Cricbuzz after the weekend's 57-run loss to Rajasthan Royals. —AFP

## Ukraine vows to keep pressure on IOC over Russians

KYIV: Ukraine will keep up pressure on the International Olympic Committee to prevent Russians from taking part in the Paris games next year, the country's sports minister said on Tuesday. "It is necessary to continue to put pressure," Ukraine's Youth and Sports Minister Vadym Gutzeit told AFP. "And maybe the IOC will understand that, while there is a war in Ukraine, it is not the time for Russian and Belarusian athletes to return."

Athletes from Russia and Belarus have faced sanctions from a multitude of sports since Russia invaded Ukraine in February last year. As Moscow's assault on Ukraine stretches into a second year, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recommended allowing athletes from Russia and Moscow ally Belarus to compete as individual neutrals in upcoming international competitions.

The IOC says however it is yet to make a decision on whether Russians can take part at the Paris Olympics next year. The announcement, made late last month, angered Ukrainian authorities, who have accused the global body in charge of Olympics of promoting war. Gutzeit, who also chairs the Ukrainian National Olympic Committee, expressed hope that Western allies would help Kyiv to put pressure and keep Russians away. "We have not lost yet," he said. —AFP

## Mumbai win first IPL game in tense chase after Rohit's 65

NEW DELHI: Skipper Rohit Sharma smashed 65 as Mumbai Indians edged out Delhi Capitals by six wickets in a last-ball IPL thriller to register their first win of the season on Tuesday. Mumbai's chase of 173 moved to the final delivery when impact player Tim David and Cameron Green got the winning runs to hand hosts Delhi their fourth straight loss in as many matches. Delhi, led by David Warner and coached by Ricky Ponting, have endured a horrendous run in the T20 tournament to be in danger of an early exit from the play-off race.

The franchise is yet to win the Indian Premier League and suffered an early blow when captain Rishabh Pant was involved in a car crash in December to be ruled out of the season. Mumbai remain the most successful IPL outfit, owned by Nita Ambani, wife of India's richest man, Reliance Industries billionaire Mukesh Ambani.

The team, which is without pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, out injured this season and missing England pace bowler Jofra Archer for the second straight match, bounced back from their opening two defeats. Rohit and the left-handed Ishan Kishan gave the former champions a flying start in their 71-run stand before a run out sent Kishan back to the pavilion.

## Big partnership

Rohit, called "hitman" for his big hundreds and six-hitting, looked in supreme touch as he pulled Nortje for a six over deep square leg and another hit over the fence off Kuldeep Yadav. The Indi-

## Djokovic labors to win in Monte Carlo as Tsitsipas advances

MONTE CARLO: Novak Djokovic made a winning return to competition in the Monte Carlo Masters on Tuesday but was made to work by his 198th-ranked Russian opponent as two-time defending champion Stefanos Tsitsipas advanced when his rival retired injured. Djokovic is back on court after failing to get a waiver to enter the United States for last month's Indian Wells tournament and Miami Open due to his anti-Covid vaccination stance.

The world number one was in danger of losing the opening set against Russian qualifier Ivan Gakhov before easing through 7-6 (7/5), 6-2 in 1hr 47min. "I had never seen him play before today, and it's always difficult to face an opponent you don't know," said the Serbian, a winner on clay in Monte Carlo in 2013 and 2015. Favorite for a third crown in the Principality in the absence of Rafael Nadal and Carlos Alcaraz, Djokovic will face either 21st-ranked Lorenzo Musetti or Luca Nardi, 159th, both Italian, for a place in the quarter-finals.

Tsitsipas advanced to the third round after Frenchman Benjamin Bonzi retired with a left wrist issue after just 22 minutes, trailing the Greek 4-1 in the first set. World number three Tsitsipas next meets either Chilean Nicolas Jarry, ranked 58, or Australian Alexei Popyrin, 94th, for a place in the quarter-finals.

## 'Ugly tennis'

Djokovic is tuning up for a 23rd Grand Slam bid at the French Open. But the game was not as easy as expected with Gakhov taking the first break to lead 4-3. Djokovic broke back immediately, but could not prevent the tie-break which he wrapped up on his first set point. The second set was one-sided even though Gakhov hung on until the end.

"It was probably, if you can call it this way, an ugly tennis win for me today," said Djokovic, who is looking for a record-extending 39th ATP Masters ti-



NEW DELHI: Delhi Capital's Lalit Yadav (R) is clean bowled during the Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 cricket match between Delhi Capitals and Mumbai Indians at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi on April 11, 2023. —AFP

an captain put on another big partnership of 68 with Tilak Varma, who made 41, but Mukesh Kumar raised hopes of a turnaround with successive strikes. He sent back Varma and then T20 sensation Suryakumar Yadav for a first ball duck to bring a live the home crowd that went crazy when Rohit departed five balls later off Mustafizur Rahman.

But David (13) and Green (17) kept their calm in a dramatic final over from Anrich Nortje, which witnessed a dropped catch, to steer the team home and the two batsmen stole a double after Da-

vid pushed the ball to mid-off. Earlier Delhi were bowled out for 172 in 19.4 overs despite Warner's 51 and an attacking 54 by fellow left-hander Axar Patel after the hosts were invited to bat first.

Piyush Chawla rattled the opposition batting to return figures of 3-22 and was later substituted by David. The once explosive Warner, who struck his third half-century of the season, stood firm but often struggled to find momentum until an attacking Axar joined the Australian opener in a 67-run partnership. —AFP



MONACO: Serbian Novak Djokovic returns the ball to Ivan Gakhov during the Monte-Carlo ATP Masters Series tournament on April 11, 2023. —AFP

tle this week. "I haven't played my best, particularly in the first set. And I kind of expected that that was going to happen in a way with swirly conditions, a lot of wind today, changing directions. It's different practicing and then playing an official match on clay. But all in all, I'm just pleased with the way I held my nerves I think in the important moments and I managed to clinch the two-set win."

## Rublev, Zverev survive

Earlier Andrey Rublev and Alexander Zverev both survived dropping a set, but last year's runner-up Alejandro Davidovich Fokina fell at the first hurdle. Fifth-seeded Rublev, recipient of a first-round bye, rallied to beat Spaniard Jaume Munar 4-6, 6-2, 6-2 in their second-round tie. German Zverev made a hesitant start to his clay-court season before seeing off Kazakh Alexander Bublik 3-6, 6-2, 6-4 in the first round.

"The feeling was, 'No way, I might be out in the first round of Monaco,'" said Rublev, 25, who will

face fellow Russian Khachanov, Dan Evans or qualifier Ilya Ivashka in the third round. Zverev was back on clay for the first time since he retired in the French Open semifinals last year against Rafael Nadal with an ankle injury. The 13th-seeded German took just under two hours to move past Bublik. "It felt awful at times to be honest," Zverev said. "It usually takes me five or 10 minutes to get used to a clay court, but this year was a bit different. I needed to get the injury out of my head. I needed to get used to sliding again." Zverev, a two-time Monte Carlo semifinalist, will next play Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut for a place in the third round.

Spaniard Davidovich Fokina fell 6-2, 6-2 to ninth seed Karen Khachanov. Khachanov took 75 minutes to brush past Davidovich Fokina, who lost the final last year to Tsitsipas. Italian Lorenzo Sonego saved four match points to beat French qualifier Ugo Humbert 3-6, 7-5, 7-5 and plays third seed Daniil Medvedev in the second round. —AFP

Sports

# Man United visit offers Europa League kings Sevilla redemption

**BARCELONA:** Visiting Manchester United might seem a nightmare cup draw but for Europa League royalty Sevilla, a trip to hallowed turf like Old Trafford on Thursday provides a welcome break from reality. The Andalucians, led by Jose Luis Mendilibar — their third coach of the season — have been mired in a relegation scrap in La Liga, but find themselves on more familiar ground in Europe.

Record six-time Europa League champions, Sevilla's players are more accustomed to battling for silverware than survival, and have shown signs of improvement under Mendilibar. That gave them some hope of overcoming Erik ten Hag's three-time European Cup winners in the last eight, which would earn redemption with supporters after a year to forget.

"I'm convinced that, in Europe, Sevilla are respected more than in La Liga, because of what they have done in the Europa League, with a lot of titles quite recently," said Mendilibar in March after taking

over from Jorge Sampaoli. "In Manchester they will feel they are favourites, but with respect for Sevilla."

Behind Sevilla, Inter Milan, Liverpool, Juventus and Atletico Madrid have each won the trophy three times, while Manchester United lifted it once, in 2017. Despite holding their own against such esteemed company on the continent, domestically Sevilla have fallen and are currently 13th, five points above the bottom three. "(We're doing) quite well in European competition, unlike the national league, sadly," said veteran midfielder Ivan Rakitic told UEFA. "But we know Sevilla's overall history in Europe."

### Season of struggle

Sevilla's struggle started when the club's poor financial state forced them to sell key defenders Jules Kounde and Diego Carlos to Barcelona and Aston Villa respectively, ripping in half one of the continent's sturdiest backlines. A bet on former Real Ma-

drid playmaker Isco did not work, with the player leaving in December by mutual consent. Despite a poor finish last season the club decided to keep Julen Lopetegui at the helm, but replaced him in October after just one win in 10 games.

A 4-1 hammering by Borussia Dortmund in the Champions League was the final straw, and Sampaoli was appointed for his second spell at the club. The Argentine coach helped the team to a draw in Dortmund and a win over Copenhagen to ensure they would drop into the Europa League, rather than out of Europe entirely.

Despite overcoming PSV and Fenerbahce to set up a quarter-final clash with Manchester United, Sampaoli's dismal league form saw him removed with the team 14th, just two points above the drop zone. Mendilibar is operating with a back-to-basics, more direct style. It paid instant dividends with a 2-0 win at relegation rivals Cadiz in his first game.

They moved two goals up against Celta Vigo last Friday in his second match, before the visitors struck twice late on at the Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan to push Sevilla back into the scrap. Morocco international Youssef En-Nesyri has found his shooting boots and is an aerial threat, which could be useful at Old Trafford. Lucas Ocampos, back from loan at Ajax, is another explosive option who can give Mendilibar's side a fighting chance of a result on the road, along with the tricky Bryan Gil, on loan from Tottenham.

Sevilla will not be able to call on midfield powerhouse Pape Gueye, who is not registered for the competition, while United will have Casemiro available after his Premier League suspension. "Here in the city, people say the Europa League is Sevilla's competition," added Rakitic. "It's something which belongs to us because we have won it six times in the last 15 or so years. "Respect to everyone who's also won it, but it is somehow our competition." — AFP

## Guardiola hits the right notes to teach Tuchel a lesson

**MANCHESTER:** Manchester City have one foot in the Champions League semi-finals after a 3-0 win over Bayern Munich on Tuesday that served as a reminder of manager Pep Guardiola's brilliance despite his long wait to conquer Europe. Guardiola claimed to have been "emotionally destroyed" by the tension of a night on which his current side showed a clinical edge they have often lacked to get over the line at this stage of the competition.

In the 12 years since Guardiola last lifted the European Cup as Barcelona boss, he has often been accused of over-complicating things in the Champions League knockout stages. That included three semifinal exits during his time in charge of Bayern between 2014 and 2016. The closest Guardiola has come to delivering City's long-awaited Champions League glory came in losing the 2021 final to Thomas Tuchel's Chelsea.

Tuchel's appointment as Bayern boss less than three weeks ago appeared very much with this tie in mind. But this time the German was outfoxed as all of Guardiola's big calls paid off to inflict Bayern's heaviest Champions League defeat for six years. After much tinkering early in the season, Guardiola has settled on a defense made up entirely of natural center-backs in Nathan Ake, Ruben Dias, John Stones and Manuel Akanji. As a result, Joao Cancelo was on the Bayern bench having been surprisingly

allowed to leave on loan in January by Guardiola.

### Bayern 'punished brutally'

Stones has tended to be the Portuguese's successor by acting as right-back out of possession and moving into midfield when City have the ball. But the England international started at center-back, with Akanji shifted to right-back to handle the pace of Leroy Sane and Kingsley Coman. "The game that played all four is amazing because to handle Leroy and Coman you have to be defensively really good in the duels," said Guardiola. "The back four, how they handled it without stress, without being anxious. Knowing that in that type of game there are minutes where you are going to suffer, to struggle."

For once City ended a home game having had less possession, but led through Rodri's stunning first-half strike and then ruthlessly pounced upon Bayern errors when they came in the final 20 minutes. "We got punished brutally," said Tuchel. "This is the highest level in world football." Guardiola's decision to recall Bernardo Silva at the expense of Riyad Mahrez paid off when the Portugal midfielder capped a brilliant performance by heading home the second.

By that point Julian Alvarez had replaced Kevin De Bruyne in a change that helped swing the momentum City's way. "I'm here to take decisions and I take it. That's my biggest quality as a manager," added Guardiola on De Bruyne's withdrawal. "I see the performance on the pitch in that moment we needed extra energy with Julian and that's why I decided."

Twice Alvarez came close to scoring himself, but the Argentine did have a part to play in the third goal that gives Bayern a mountain to climb in Munich. Alvarez's cross was headed down by Stones and into the path of Erling Haaland to slot



**MANCHESTER:** Bayern Munich's German head coach Thomas Tuchel (left) and Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola (right) embrace after the UEFA Champions League quarterfinal at the Etihad Stadium on April 11, 2023. — AFP

home his 45th goal of the season. Haaland was signed to be the difference maker when ties like this are decided by fine margins.

The same was said of Guardiola when he was first lured from Munich to Manchester seven years ago. City's Abu Dhabi owners are still waiting for their moment of Champions League glory, but Guardiola's men are getting closer. Only a remarkable Bayern comeback in eight days' time will deny them a third consecutive semifinal. — AFP

## Indonesian football rivals meet for first time since tragedy

**JAKARTA:** Two Indonesian football teams whose last game ended in one of the deadliest disasters in the sport's history met again under heavy security and without spectators. A stampede at Kanjuruhan Stadium in the East Java city of Malang in October killed 135 people, including more than 40 children. It happened after police fired tear gas into packed stands when home supporters invaded the pitch at the end of a match between East Javan rivals Arema FC and visitors Persebaya Surabaya.

The two sides met again on Tuesday, this time at a stadium owned by the Indonesian national police force in the south of the capital Jakarta. The match ended in a 1-0 victory for Persebaya after Arema missed a last-minute penalty. "Rivalry is only 90 minutes. After that we're brothers. Humanity above all else," Persebaya wrote on their official Instagram account.

The match was guarded by hundreds of security forces around the stadium and only a few officials linked to the clubs were allowed inside. There were no reports of fan trouble outside the stadium. The game was set to take place in March but was postponed by officials who recommended it take place outside of Persebaya's hometown in East Java because of risks including crowd trouble.

Police described the October 1 pitch invasion — after Arema lost 3-2 — as a riot and said two officers were killed, but survivors and investigators said the police used excessive force. Five Indonesian men, including three police officers, were charged with negligence after the tragedy and remain on trial. The tragedy forced Indonesian officials and fans to confront failings in every aspect of the domestic game, which has been blighted for years by shaky infrastructure, mismanagement and violence. Last month Muslim-majority Indonesia lost the right to host the U20 World Cup because of opposition from two prominent governors to the Zionist entity's participation. — AFP

## Brazil beat Germany to continue World Cup preparation

**BERLIN:** First half goals from Tamires and Ary took Brazil to a 2-1 win over Germany in Nuremberg on Tuesday, continuing the South American side's women's World Cup preparations. Tamires took advantage of some poor defensive communication from Germany to strike after just 11 minutes, Ary added another midway through the opening half to put Brazil in a dominant position. Brazil showed fluency and strong combinations against a disjointed home side, with the visitors' win spoiling Germany midfielder Dzsener Marozsan's farewell match.

A disappointed Germany midfielder Lena Oberdorf told reporters "if we play like that, we won't get far at the World Cup". Her teammate Sara Doorsoun echoed the statements, but the center-back said Germany had time to right the ship before this summer's tournament. "We let in too many unfortunate goals. That can't happen at this level. "We know what we have to do - and we don't need to panic."

Germany came into the match after a strong 1-0 win away in the Netherlands on Friday but were hit by the withdrawal of star goalkeeper Merle Frohms, who pulled out with a back injury. Frohms' absence was clear early, with Brazil's Tamires pouncing on a mistake from replacement keeper Ann-Katrin Berger to give the visitors the lead. Brazil doubled their advantage 15 minutes later, after Berger misjudged a cross from Ary, letting the ball fly into her own net.

### Fluency and cohesion

A frustrated Germany had few chances early, with Brazil showing a fluency and cohesion which has grown under Swedish coach Pia Sundhage. Making her 112th and last national team appearance, Marozsan, who won the 2013 Euro and 2016 Olympics



**NUREMBERG:** Brazil's defender Antonia and Germany's forward Klara Buehl vie for the ball during a women's international friendly on April 11, 2023. — AFP

announced her retirement before the game. She came off the bench to rapturous applause in the 64th minute but failed to spark a disjointed German attack.

Germany midfielder Jule Brand pulled back a goal on the counter in injury time but it would not be enough, as Brazil held on for a dominant victory. The match was a showcase of the continued progress Brazil have made under Sundhage, who arrived four years ago having won two Olympic gold medals as USA boss. Despite their dominance in men's football, Brazil have never won a women's World Cup, but a victory in the 2022 Copa America final over Colum-

bia has them among the World Cup favourites.

More than 30,000 filed into Nuremberg's Max Morlock Stadium, the biggest domestic crowd for a women's international in Germany for more than a decade amid an unprecedented surge in popularity. Last July's 2-1 European Championship final loss to England attracted 17.9 million television viewers, more than any of the men's matches at the Qatar World Cup. Also among the pre-tournament contenders, two-time winners Germany only have two friendly matches remaining before the competition in Australia and New Zealand starts in July. — AFP

Today's Matches	
<b>UEFA Europa League</b>	
<b>Feyenoord Rotterdam v Roma</b>	<b>19:45</b>
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium beIN Sports HD 1 English	
<b>Manchester United v Sevilla</b>	<b>22:00</b>
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium beIN Sports HD 1 English beIN Sports Connect	
<b>Juventus v Sporting</b>	<b>22:00</b>
beIN Sports 2 HD Premium beIN Sports Connect	
<b>Bayer 04 Leverkusen v Royale Union</b>	<b>22:00</b>
beIN Sports 3 HD Premium	

# Classifieds

### Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

### Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134

### Change of Name

**I, Rajinder Singh Dhillon**, holder of Indian passport No. M6718449 permanent address is Village Thamanwala Dist. Moga, Punjab ₹ 142048 India, now residing in Kuwait hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under given name Ravinder and surname Singh. **(C 3502) 13/4/2023**

**I, MOHAMMED ZOAIB HUSAIN** holder of Indian passport No. M8399055 having permanent address Maharashtra, India ₹ 400003 residing in

Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as: **MOHAMMED ZOAIB HUSAIN BADRI. (C 3200)**

**MAHABOOB BASHA SHAIK** Father of SYED AAHIL holding of his Indian passport number V5160992 resident in 2-361, Sastri Nagar, Akkayapalli, Kadapa have changed my son's name SYED AAHIL to Given name AAHIL Surname SHAIK. **(C 3199) 10/4/2023**

## City make mark against Bayern

Haaland scores his 45th goal of the season



MANCHESTER: Bayern Munich's French defender Dayot Upamecano vies with Manchester City's Norwegian striker Erling Haaland at the Etihad Stadium on April 11, 2023. — AFP

**MANCHESTER:** Erling Haaland scored his 45th goal of the season as Manchester City took a commanding 3-0 lead over Bayern Munich from their Champions League quarterfinal, first leg on Tuesday. Rodri and Bernardo Silva were also on target for the English champions, who took a giant stride towards finally conquering Europe for the first time.

Victory was sweet for City boss Pep Guardiola as he came up against his former club for the first time since leaving Bayern for Manchester in 2016, but he warned that the job is not yet done. "I've been three years there and I know in Europe this team is special. To knockout these type of teams you have to make two good games not just one," said Guardiola. "I know exactly what we have to do there. They are capable to score one, two, three goals. We have to do our game with huge personality."

City also partially settled a Champions League

score with Bayern boss Thomas Tuchel, who beat Guardiola's men to lift the trophy as Chelsea manager in the 2021 final. Tuchel was appointed less than three weeks ago by the German champions with one eye on this tie and he believed his side deserved more.

"I try to not allow my players to focus on the result because it is not the deserved result, it does not tell the story of this match," said Tuchel. "I've seen so many good things that I refuse to just focus on the result. You may say 'that's not Bayern' but I was very proud on the sideline, we were courageous and showed the right character."

City fought off interest from Bayern among other European giants to win the race to sign Haaland a year ago for nights like this and the Norwegian played his part in a clinical performance. Haaland uncharacteristically fluffed his lines with the first big chance of the game when his weak shot was straight at Yann Sommer.

At the other end, City were grateful to a brilliant block from Ruben Dias to prevent Jamal Musiala putting Bayern in front. Rodri then showed the forwards how it is done as the Spaniard took aim from long range on his weaker left foot and curled a sumptuous shot into the top corner on 27 minutes.

### City turn the screw

Bayern picked up Sommer in the January window as an emergency measure after Manuel Neuer's season was ended by a skiing accident. The Swiss international proved the value of that move with a number of vital saves to keep Bayern in the tie, starting with an outstretched leg to deny Ilkay Gundogan. But Bayern were made to regret not making their bright start to the second period count. Leroy Sane twice came close to haunting his former club with powerful efforts that were beaten away by Ederson before Matthijs

de Ligt and Kingsley Coman had headers from close range blocked by desperate City defending.

Instead, City turned the screw in the final quarter to take a potentially decisive lead to Bavaria next week. Haaland showed there is more to his game than goals with a perfectly weighted cross for Silva to head in City's second 20 minutes from time. Sommer then produced a fine stop low to his left to turn Julian Alvarez's shot to safety. But City were not to be denied their third and Haaland his goal as he stretched out a telescopic right leg to turn John Stones' knockdown beyond Sommer.

Alvarez fired another effort inches wide and Sommer needed fingertips to turn over Rodri's header as City went in search of a final flourish. But Bayern will need one of the Champions League's all-time great comebacks in eight days' time if City are to be denied a third consecutive semifinal. — AFP

## Inter close in on semis with solid win at Benfica

**LISBON:** Inter Milan put one foot into the Champions League semifinals with a comfortable 2-0 win at Benfica on Tuesday, with Nicolò Barella and Romelu Lukaku netting in Lisbon. The Italians, three-time winners, took a commanding quarterfinal first leg lead at the Estadio da Luz, inflicting Benfica's first defeat in the competition. After an even first half, Barella headed home from Alessandro Bastoni's cross and substitute Romelu Lukaku netted the second from the penalty spot late on.

Roger Schmidt's Benfica, aiming to reach the semi-finals for the first time since 1990, were not able to put a glove on the visitors, who controlled the pace of the game. Despite Inter's poor form, they conjured a patient, professional display when they needed it most. Having scored two goals in their previous five games across all competitions, they managed the same tally in Lisbon with clinical finishing. "It's been one of our best games this season," Inter midfielder Henrikh Mkhitaryan told British broadcaster BT Sport. "We were dominating all over the pitch. We were doubling up and were everywhere, helping each other and we got (rewarded) for it. We've done a great job. But it's still not over, we still have to face them in a week and we know it's not going to be easy."

Neither side was able to create clear chances in a tight opening period. The closest Benfica came was Andre Onana blocking a Rafa Silva drive after Federico Dimarco accidentally headed the ball into his path in the box. Inter Milan defender Francesco Acerbi hammered over from 30 yards at the other end. The Italians had the opportunity to hit the hosts on the break after half an hour, but Lautaro Mar-

tinez played a poor pass which was blocked, with 37-year-old target man Edin Dzeko alone in space.

Alex Grimaldo smashed an effort wide from distance, with Benfica frustrated and unable to get striker Goncalo Ramos involved. With Inter pressing high up the pitch, the Eagles could not hit their flowing best, or anything close to it.

### Impressive Inter

Inter Milan broke the deadlock early in the second half when Barella headed Bastoni's looping cross back across goal and into the bottom corner. The goal crowned a superb performance from the Italy international, while Inter's defense kept a sixth clean sheet in nine Champions League matches this season. Schmidt sent on David Neres for midfielder Florentino in search of the equalizer, but Inter doubled their lead with eight minutes remaining.

Joao Mario, one of Benfica's best players this season, handled Denzel Dumfries's cross, gifting his former side a penalty. Lukaku drilled it beyond the reach of Greek goalkeeper Odysseas Vlachodimos, answering some criticism of his recent form. Coach Simone Inzaghi had selected Dzeko ahead of Lukaku after the Belgian had missed gilt-edged chances in recent weeks, but he did not miss in a high-pressure moment. Benfica might have pulled a goal back deep in stoppage time but Onana made a fine save to deny Ramos, who seemed poised to score. "I said that we had to come here and play without fear because we could win — we did just that," Onana told UEFA. "But we cannot think that we are already in the semi-final because we are not. We still need another great game like today's next week."

The victory gives Inter a fine chance of setting up an all-Italian semi-final against Serie A leaders Napoli or city rivals AC Milan. Inter, who beat another Portuguese side, Porto, in the last 16, host Benfica on Wednesday April 19 at the San Siro in the second leg. Benfica defender Antonio Silva said he believes his team can go to Milan and score three to produce a comeback. — AFP

## Michael Jordan sneakers fetch record \$2.2m

**NEW YORK:** A pair of sneakers worn by NBA superstar Michael Jordan sold for \$2.2 million on Tuesday, setting a record price at auction for game-worn sports footwear, Sotheby's announced. The basketball great wore the "Bred" Air Jordan 13s during Game 2 of the 1998 NBA Finals on the way to his sixth and last NBA championship title. The online sale cements Jordan's position as the most valuable athlete at auctions for sportswear memorabilia. It broke his own record of \$1.5 million for sneakers, set in September 2021.

Last year, one of his jerseys sold for \$10.1 million, the most ever paid at auction for any game-worn collectibles. "Today's record-breaking result further proves that the demand for Michael Jordan sports memorabilia continues to outperform and transcend all expectations," Brahm Wachter, Sotheby's head of streetwear and modern collectables, said in a statement.

Jordan wore the sneakers for the second half of the Chicago Bulls' '93-'88 victory over Utah Jazz on June 5, 1998. Jordan scored a game-high 37 points as his Bulls side tied the series 1-1. The Finals featured in the hit 2020 ESPN/Netflix documentary "The Last Dance," about Jordan's final season with the Chicago side. Wachter said nostalgia for a different era was driving the popularity of Jordan memorabilia. "We have clients in all different areas, from real estate, to finance to private equity. There are many people that are interested in this emerging market," he told AFP.

The price, which includes fees and commission, came in just above Sotheby's low pre-sale estimate of \$2 million but well below the predicted high of



NEW YORK: Michael Jordan's 1998 NBA Finals Air Jordan XIII sneakers are displayed during a press preview on April 6, 2023 at Sotheby's. — AFP

\$4 million. The auction house said Jordan had autographed the shoes and given them to a ball-boy after the game. Sotheby's did not identify the seller but said it was not that original recipient. Nor did it name the buyer of the size 13 shoe.

The sneakers are known as "Bred" for their black and red color, a style Jordan wore throughout most of his trophy-laden career. Jordan, now 60, spent the bulk of his playing career with the Bulls, with whom he won all six of his titles, but came out of retirement in 2001 to play two seasons with the Washington Wizards.

The retired star now owns the Charlotte Hornets, located in his childhood home of North Carolina, and reportedly still earns millions in royalties each year from sales of Nike's Air Jordan brand of sneakers. Tuesday's sale coincided with the release this month of the movie "Air," about Nike's pursuit of Jordan. The \$10.1 million sale of Jordan's jersey from Game 1 of the 1998 NBA Finals in September 2022 beat a record held by Diego Maradona's "Hand of God" Argentina jersey. — AFP