



3 Security officials review traffic situation amid rain



9 NBK-Bahrain reports net profits of BHD 122.14 million for 2022



16 Dominant Madrid earn solid lead on Chelsea in Champions League



RAMADAN TIMINGS	
Fajr	04:01
Shurooq	05:24
Dhuhr	11:48
Asr	15:23
Maghrib	18:14
Isha	19:34

Qatar, Bahrain end feud

Kuwait welcomes Qatar-Bahrain deal to reopen embassies

DOHA: Qatar and Bahrain announced late Wednesday that they had agreed to end a long-running diplomatic feud and re-establish relations. Bahrain in 2017 joined Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in imposing a diplomatic blockade on Qatar. The countries' rivalry goes back even further, however, and Bahrain is the last to renew ties.

Agreement on the reconciliation was reached in talks at the Gulf Cooperation Council headquarters in Saudi Arabia, Qatar's foreign ministry said. The neighbors "decided to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries according to the principles of the United Nations charter," said a foreign ministry state-

ment. "The two sides affirmed that this step stems from the mutual desire to develop bilateral relations and enhance Gulf unity and integration," it added.

Bahrain's foreign ministry released a similar statement, the country's state news agency reported. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a blockade in 2017, accusing Qatar of supporting extremist organizations in the region and becoming too close to Iran. The four countries banned Qatari planes and ships from using their airspace and territorial waters.

A reconciliation accord was sealed in January 2021. The three other states have already renewed relations, though the UAE and Qatar have yet to re-

open their embassies. UAE and Qatari officials held their latest reconciliation meeting last week, with a Qatari foreign ministry spokesperson describing a "positive atmosphere".

Relations between Qatar and Bahrain have been more difficult to restore because of thorny issues including their maritime border. The two sides regularly accuse each other of illegally detaining fishermen from the other country. The Qatar-Bahrain reconciliation comes amid a flurry of regional efforts to resolve disputes. Arch-rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed last month to resume relations seven years after formally breaking off ties.

Meanwhile, Kuwait on Thursday, welcomed an agreement between Qatar and Bahrain to reopen their embassies in Doha and Manama after a meeting of their joint follow-up committee, held at the GCC Secretariat in Riyadh last night, the foreign ministry said. The agreement reflects fraternal relations between Qatar and Bahrain as well as contributing to unity among the Gulf Cooperation Council member countries, it added in a statement. The Qatar-Bahrain follow-up committee announced restoration of diplomatic relations to boost GCC integration and unity. The GCC consists of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman. — Agencies

Rare pancreas transplant in Kuwait



Dr Talal Al-Qaoud

KUWAIT: Urologist and kidney and pancreas transplant specialist Dr Talal Al-Qaoud performed a successful deceased-donor pancreas transplant on a 35-year-old Kuwaiti woman at the Hamed Al-Essa Organ Transplant Center; the first operation of its kind after the program was suspended for two years, Kuwait Transplant Society announced on Thursday.

Mideast nations re-establish ties

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia hosted landmark delegations from Iran and Syria on Wednesday as Gulf countries prepare for re-establishing diplomatic ties after years of bitter divisions. Only hours after Iranian state media said a delegation had touched down in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia announced the arrival of Syria's foreign minister in Jeddah - the first such trip since the country's civil war broke out in 2011.

Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad met with his Saudi counterpart and discussed "the necessary steps to achieve a complete political settlement to the Syrian crisis", the Saudi foreign ministry said in a statement. The aim is

to achieve "a national reconciliation and... bring back Syria to its Arab fold and resume its natural role in the Arab world", the statement said.

The two diplomats also confirmed that steps would be taken to resume consular services, and also announced plans to resume flights between their countries. With Iran's president also expected in Saudi soon, and the Saudis negotiating with Yemen's Houthis rebels this week in an attempt to end fighting there, optimism has blossomed for the turbulent Gulf region during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

"Iranians and Syrians are in Saudi Arabia on the same day. That's totally crazy and was inconceivable a few months ago," a Riyadh-based Arab diplomat told AFP. On Friday, representatives of nine Arab countries

Continued on Page 6



JEDDAH: A handout picture provided by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) shows Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister Walid Al-Khuraji (right) receiving Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad (left) upon his arrival at the airport of Jeddah. — AFP

Car insurance fee hike suspended

KUWAIT: The Insurance Regulatory Unit has suspended a recent decision to raise vehicle insurance fees in Kuwait. The decision will be postponed pending further coordination with the interior ministry, the unit said in a statement on Thursday. Kuwait's Insurance Regulatory Unit approved a host of de-

terminations last week, including raising the annual insurance for private vehicles from KD 19 to a minimum of KD 32 from April 16, 2023.

The committee had approved amending the rates of the mandatory insurance policy following the development of an integrated electronic car registration system. The system was created in cooperation with the ministry of interior, insurance and brokerage companies. The committee also set the period for receiving compensation to be within a maximum of 10 working days from the date of completion of the insurance claim.

The insurance policy for private cars and mo-

torcycles with non-Kuwaiti license plates entering through the borders was to be valued under the proposed system at KD 12 per week or KD 120 per year, with KD 20 per week or KD 140 per year for taxis; KD 16 per week or KD 183 per year for public transport vehicles; and KD 30 per week or KD 210 per year for cargo vehicles. The premium increases by KD 1 per passenger, in addition to KD 2 control fees.

The document specifies the depreciation rates for spare parts to be zero percent in the first year of manufacture until the end of June of that year for private cars.

Continued on Page 6

RAMADAN KAREEM

Risk management in the Holy Quran

By Omar Ezzeldin Omran

Risk management is the process of identifying, evaluating and mitigating potential risks that could affect the objectives of the organization or project by taking appropriate decisions to reduce or completely avoid these risks.

Risk management aims at: (1) Reducing risks: It aims at mitigating the potential negative impact of risks and reduce the likelihood of their occurrence. (2) Improving the organization's ability to deal with risks: By strengthening the organization's capabilities in dealing with risks and using the available resources in an effective manner. (3) Achieving the set goals: Risk management helps in achieving the set goals in a better and lower cost manner. (4) Improving relations with customers: By ensuring business continuity and reducing the possibility of affecting the relationship with customers.

Risk management consists of 5 stages: (1) Risk identification: Potential risks that could

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N Korea likely fired 'new type of missile'

SEOUL: North Korea likely fired a "new type" of ballistic missile on Thursday that may have used advanced solid fuel, Seoul's military said, representing a potential technical breakthrough for Pyongyang's banned weapons programs. All of Pyongyang's known intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) are liquid-fuelled, and solid-fuel ICBMs that can be launched from land or submarines have long been on top of leader Kim Jong Un's wish list.

"North Korea appears to have fired a new type of ballistic missile, possibly using solid fuel," Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff told AFP. Such missiles are easier to store and transport, more stable and quicker to prepare for launch, and thus harder to detect and destroy pre-emptively. North Korea showed off a record number of nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missiles at a military parade in Pyongyang in February, including what analysts said was possibly a new solid-fuelled ICBM.

Seoul's military said on Thursday it had detected one "medium range or longer" ballistic missile launched on a lofted trajectory - up not out - from the Pyongyang area at 0723, which flew

Continued on Page 6



SEOUL: A man watches a television news screen showing a picture of North Korea's recent test-firing of a Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), at a railway station on March 17, 2023. — AFP

Former military base staff 'leaked US sensitive info'

WASHINGTON: The person behind a leak of highly sensitive US government documents relating to the Ukraine war and US allies worked on a military base and shared the material in a private online group, The Washington Post newspaper reported. US offi-

cial have not confirmed the authenticity of the documents, images of which have circulated on social media platforms for weeks and which have sparked an uproar amongst some US allies since receiving media attention in recent days.

Two members of a group on the online social platform Discord told The Post that hundreds of pages of material had been posted there by a man who told them he worked on a US military base and brought the documents home with him. The man, who went by the nickname "OG", regularly posted documents on the group for months, the group members told the newspaper, speaking on

condition of anonymity.

Some information in the documents was so sensitive it was marked "NOFORN", meaning it was not to be shared with foreign nationals, The Post reported. The group of around 24, including people from Russia and Ukraine, bonded over their "mutual love of guns, military gear and God," and formed an "invitation-only clubhouse in 2020 on Discord," the newspaper reported.

OG told the group members that he spent "some of his day inside a secure facility that prohibited cellphones and other electronic devices," the paper reported. — AFP



Entrepreneurship programs have significant impact on the future

Should we prepare kids to become entrepreneurs at a young age?

By Ghadeer Ghloom

KUWAIT: Although schools may be the fundamental base of individuals' preparedness for adulthood and success in the future, there remain some crucial points that are missing from the educational curriculum. In Kuwait, economics and finances are an example of important fields that students need to understand in order to develop money management and entrepreneurship skills. To look more into the importance of exposing youths to entrepreneurship and financial skills, Kuwait Times interviewed Fatema Al-Matouq, Program Manager at INJAZ Kuwait, and Dana Al-Asfour, Program Coordinator, also at INJAZ.

Matouq pointed out that in order for young people to become financially responsible adults, they need to understand how the economy works and how to manage their personal finances effectively. Students need to know about the key concepts of supply and demand, pricing, competition and market forces.

This knowledge is essential for understanding how businesses operate and how economic policies and decisions affect individuals and society as a whole. Also, the focus on personal finance programs teaches students about budgeting, saving, investing and managing credit. These skills are essential for building financial stability and achieving long-term financial goals.

Matouq also shed light on INJAZ Kuwait, which is part of Junior Achievement Worldwide, a global nonprofit organization that focuses on educating and inspiring young people in and out of school and universities about entrepreneurship, financial literacy and work readiness. INJAZ's mission is to empower young people to own their economic success, plan for their futures and make smart academic and economic choices.

Teaching young people entrepreneurship skills through INJAZ



Dana Al-Asfour



Fatema Al-Matouq

Kuwait programs can have a significant impact on their future. The programs are designed to provide young people with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the 21st-Century economy. One of the primary benefits of teaching entrepreneurship skills to young people is that it encourages them

to think creatively and develop an entrepreneurial mindset. This mindset can help them to identify opportunities, solve problems and create innovative solutions. It can also help them to become more independent and self-confident, which can benefit them in any field they choose to pursue in the future.



Another important benefit of entrepreneurship skills is that they

can help them succeed in their career.

Entrepreneurship skills also teach young people about the importance of networking and building relationships with others. This skill can benefit them in any field they choose to pursue, as building a strong network is crucial for success in any career. Teaching entrepreneurship skills to young people can help them

develop financial literacy. By learning about budgeting, saving, investing and managing credit, young people can make informed decisions about their personal finances in the future. This can help them to build financial stability and achieve their long-term financial goals.

Asfour said children need a better standing ground concerning their finances, so they need to be prepared for this next step in their life regardless of their young age, especially since they are not being taught these things at school. Thus, these gaps in the educational system must be filled. "Introducing the idea of business and economy opens doors to many opportunities in life, besides improving a child's development, social, entrepreneurial and critical thinking skills, especially since these things have become vital in the last decade.

With the rise of entrepreneurship, we see it crucial to bring these things to children's lives. Kids need to understand the value of money and how to save it. They need to differentiate between their wants and needs. They need to know so many things such as fraud and tax and other things that we were not exposed to us enough as students in Kuwait," she added.

Tunisia and Africa: 'Unity of belonging and destiny'

Talking about Tunisia's relationship with Africa is equivalent to talking about the self. The link is intrinsic and the manifestations of interdependence are multiple. It is geographical by location and ancient by the logic of history. It is also fraternal through social and human bonding and promising in terms of economy, development and future partnership.

Tunisia's history with Africa is exceptional, and what could be more symbolic than the fact that the African continent is called by Tunisia's former name 'Africa' and 'Ifriqiya'? The consecration of the African dimension in the Tunisian identity has its roots in the capsicum civilization, thousands of years ago, when it was the starting point for the human domestication of grazing animals and the mastery of the manufacture of hunting tools, in an environment similar to the forests of the African savannah.

The explorations led by the Carthaginian travelers "Mago and Hanno" towards the Niger basin and the Gulf of Guinea represented fertile ground for human and commercial contacts, which were enhanced during the Islamic domination in Tunisia, where Kairouan, Mahdia, Tunisia, Gabes and the Jerid were the starting point of commercial caravans towards the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, for export and import.

The Kairouan Mosque and the Zaytuna University (the oldest university in the world) also played a pioneering role in disseminating the teachings of the true religion, the principles of Maliki jurisprudence and Sufi sects such as the Qadiriyya, Shadhiliyya and Al-Isawiya schools. These platforms have hosted many African delegations in search of knowledge. One need only look to the countries of sub-Saharan Africa to see that many of their notables and populations wear the Tunisian chachia, which over time has become a symbol of Tunisian and African identity.

In turn, Tunisia has drawn on the diversity and richness of African civilization with its authentic customs, which has further strengthened the bonds of kinship and human communication between the peoples of the same continent. This common cultural heritage prompted the independent Tunisian state, led by Habib Bourguiba, to make the African dimension a priority of its foreign policy, as Tunisia was a pioneer in supporting issues of national liberation and the fight against racial discrimination on the continent, providing the necessary material and diplomatic support.

Our country, by virtue of its relations of fraternity and solidarity, has been keen to send several humanitarian missions to maintain peace and security on the continent. Tunisia has been and still is the voice of free Africa and in solidarity with the causes of African peoples aspiring for freedom and development, no wonder when it launched its first official press agency under the name of the "Tunis Afrique Presse" News Agency.

In terms of institution building on the continent, Tunisia was behind the creation of the Organization of African Union and the Agency for Cultural Cooperation (now a Francophone organization with mainly African roots) and has joined several sub-organizations, including COMESA, the African Development Bank and many others. It has also had the honor of hosting the first African Youth Forum and several African summits. Multiple festivals and forums have been devoted to the presentation of African sport, cinema, theatre, literature and other arts.

The testimonies of appreciation and admiration echoed by many African leaders such as "Nelson Mandela", "Léopold Sédar Senghor", "Jamal Abdel Nasser", "Kwame Nkrumah", "Ahmed Sékou Touré", "Julius Niri Felix", "Ovoiboanyi", "HamaniDiori" and many others for Tunisia, confirms the glorious image my country enjoys and its leading position in the African continent.

Tunisia is seen in many spheres as a gateway to Africa thanks to its cultural weight and its promising economic and technological attractiveness. Tunisian universities play an important role in attracting thousands of African students. Its health, tourism and economic institutions are a favorite destination for African brothers for investment, tourism and healthcare. The rich legal framework that guides Tunisia's relations with various African countries and the mutual economic missions have contributed to the creation of fruitful cooperation and partnership mechanisms that encompass the equipment, transport, subcontracting, agriculture, electricity, gas and various industries sectors.

Since the African orientation is a firm Tunisian conviction, my country has worked to enshrine this dimension in the 2022 constitution and has successfully hosted the activities of the eighth partnership conference between the African continent and Japan and the eighteenth summit of the Francophonie in Djerba, in addition to the distinguished participation in the American-African summit and others, and has insisted on participating in the various UN and international frameworks and forums to defend African issues. In this context, I cannot fail to recall President Kais Saied's call for the African continent to be given its right to sustainable development and to participate on an equal footing with all in building the future of humanity, within the framework of a genuine solidarity-based approach that guarantees the rights of the African man and takes into account his aspirations to live decently on the whole of his territory or to organize his immigration in accordance with the laws and the required humanitarian and economic standards.

Tunisia has repeatedly warned against the danger of ignoring the consequences of irregular migration, both for its citizens and for its African brothers, and has also warned against the increase in the activities of human trafficking groups, transnational criminal organizations and terrorist groups, which do not hesitate to sow discord between the peoples of the continent and cast doubt on the unity of belonging and destiny.

Tunisia, proud of its African, Arab and Mediterranean membership, is aware that the future of the African continent must be shaped by its people, in the framework of effective cooperation and solidarity with other regional and international groupings. Long live the African brotherhood... Tunisia will always remain faithful to its principles by embracing its African sons and leading the locomotive of development and solidarity across our cherished continent.



By Hachmi Ajili, Ambassador of Tunisia



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti charity organizations are intensifying their humanitarian projects in Palestine during the holy month of Ramadan, including distributing food for worshippers to break their fast at Al-Aqsa Mosque. — KUNA photos

Kuwaiti charities support Palestinians during Ramadan

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti charity societies are intensifying their humanitarian projects in Palestine for the holy month of Ramadan, including distributing food for worshippers to break their fast at Al-Aqsa Mosque. "The humanitarian and charitable efforts undertaken by Kuwaiti donors in Palestine stems from the concern of Kuwait for their brothers in Palestine, who are dear to the heart of every Kuwaiti," Charge d'Affaires of the Embassy of Kuwait in Jordan Dr Mubarak Al-Hajri said, indicating projects carried out by these donors are within the framework of strengthening and supporting the resilience of the Palestinian people and standing by them in light of the difficult circumstances they are going through.

"Charitable and humanitarian concepts are deeply rooted in the hearts of Kuwaiti people, which prompted them to adopt many humanitarian and charitable projects in Palestine," he said, clarifying that the Embassy of Kuwait in Jordan, based on the directives of the political leadership and foreign affairs officials, works to supervise, direct, facilitate and organize the deliverance of aid from Kuwaiti donors to those who deserve it in an optimal manner. "What Kuwaiti organizations are doing in Palestine is a matter of pride and appreciation for all of us," he stressed.

Muheisen Atawna, Director of Wafaa, a capacity building and microfinance organization in Palestine, said Kuwaiti charitable organizations are executing important projects to help people in need. "Food aid that



families benefit from have included staples such as rice, sugar, oil, wheat and dates to help reduce the problems of families in need. The iftar project for fasting people is being implemented at Al-Aqsa Mosque, charitable centers and social societies. There is a team of young volunteers working daily to prepare meals and distribute them to the beneficiaries," he said.

"The projects cover all the cities of the West Bank, including the Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Around 4,000 families benefited from food parcels, and more than 6,000 iftar meals were provided at Al-Aqsa Mosque," Atawna said, appreciating Kuwait for its continuous support to the Palestinian people.



Local

Zain shares blessings of Qiyaam prayers with worshippers

Company offered hospitality services at Grand Mosque

KUWAIT: Zain, Kuwait's leading digital service provider, has partnered with the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs to present hospitality services and facilitate the transportation of worshippers at the Grand Mosque of Kuwait during Qiyaam prayers throughout the last 10 days of the Holy Month of Ramadan. Zain's team was present to share the blessings of Qiyaam prayers with worshippers, and the initiative was attended by Head of the Grand Mosque's Management Ali Shadad and Zain Kuwait's Corporate Affairs Department Manager Hamad Al Musaiibeh.

The step stemmed from Zain's annual social campaign for Ramadan, through which the company has launched numerous initiatives to share the joys and blessings the Holy Month brings with all segments of the community by partnering with various institutions, reflecting the spirit of giving in the month of giving. As it does every year during the last 10 days of Ramadan, specifically during Qiyaam prayers, Zain shared the spiritual atmosphere of this blessed period of time with worshippers by offering hospitality services to lighten the hot weather conditions and providing golf carts to facilitate transportation from parking areas to the mosque.

Zain has always been keen on organizing in-



Al Musaiibeh and Shadad with Zain and Grand Mosque teams.

teractive social initiatives during Ramadan to recognize and support the various segments of the Kuwaiti community, reflecting Islamic values to enrich the spirit of giving and strengthen

bonding between community members. Zain's Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility campaign during the Holy Month of Ramadan includes an extensive array of programs that

cover different areas. The initiatives and programs include humanitarian, voluntary, cultural, religious, sports, and recreational programs.

Ministry reviews traffic situation amid rainy days

KUWAIT: Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior Lieutenant General Anwar Al-Barjis has stressed on the need to continue working (in a team spirit) so as to assist road users and ensure the safety and security of all. In a press release issued by the General Directorate of Security Relations and Media at the Ministry of Interior after a visit to the Crisis and Disaster Operations Center to check the readiness of security personnel, he stressed the need to facilitate traffic and provide humanitarian assistance round the clock.

Al-Barjis thanked all employees of the security institution and the concerned government agencies for their efforts. He explained that during the visit, the undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior reviewed the traffic situation on all the main roads, during which he listened to a detailed explanation of the field procedures followed by the patrols teams.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Public Works has confirmed the readiness of emergency teams in all governorates to follow up on the situation and intervene quickly. This came in a press release of the ministry following an expanded meeting held by the Minister of Public Works Dr Amani Bogammaz in the operations to follow up on the rainy situation in the country.

The ministry pointed out that the country witnessed moderate rains in most regions of the country, and cases of limited water accumulation were detected on the roads which are being dealt with by



KUWAIT: Officials discuss the security situation following the rainfall in Kuwait. — KUNA photos



KUWAIT: Ministry of Interior offices review and monitor the traffic situation on all the main roads.

emergency teams, noting that the some roads were closed roads as precautionary measures. 69 rain-related complaints were received. The statement stressed the keenness of the Minister of works to follow up the situation moment by moment through the operating room, as well as conduct field tours to a number of areas, including Adiliya, Khalidiya, and West Abdullah Mubarak.

On a related level, the official spokesman of the Ministry of Works, Assistant Undersecretary for Planning and Development, Engineer Ahmed Al-Saleh, confirmed that 100 pumps have been distributed to some critical sites. Besides, most of the tunnels are under control, and there are no closures. Al-Saleh said that there were three roads that were closed due to the intensity of the rains in the northern region.



Japan: Much-sought destination for Kuwait tourists

KUWAIT: Whether it was the soothing pink hue of the Sakura (cherry blossom) trees in spring, the grandiose presence of Mount Fuji, or the hustle and bustle of major cities such as Tokyo and Osaka, Japan had become a much-sought destination for tourists from across the globe including ones hailing from Kuwait.

In recent years, Kuwaitis have been fixated on getting answers to questions regarding travel to Japan. Most of the questions revolved around the availability of halal food, the cost of hotels and flight tickets, finding ways to overcome the language barrier, and other related issues. In interactions with staff from the Japanese embassy, a Kuwaiti social media Japan expert, and a traveler with several trips to Japan under his belt, Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) would attempt to demystify Japan as a travel destination in hopes of clearing the picture and providing answers to most concerns.

Japanese pop culture

Though Japanese pop culture—anime (animation), manga (Japanese comic books), and J-POP (Japanese pop music) - had played a role in shaping interest in Japan, traditional Japanese culture also offers deep fascinating experiences, said Arata Tatsumi, Second Secretary at the Embassy of Japan in Kuwait, during a KUNA interview. He affirmed that the rich variety found in Japanese culture could accommodate foreigners with different interests whether learning about the inner workings of the tea ceremony (Sado), the art of calligraphy (Shodo), or soothing the senses when practicing the flower arrangement art of (Ikebana).

"We know many Kuwaiti Japan lovers; some of them have really deep knowledge of Japanese traditional culture ... Others love Japanese animation and manga," stated Tatsumi. He added that nature in Japan was one of the main attractions for Kuwaitis, stating, "Now is the season of cherry blossom ... many Kuwaiti people love to see the cherry blossom bloom in Japan and actually the embassy receives many visa applications from the beginning of March till the middle of April."

Tatsumi said that the changing of seasons in Ja-

pan has much to offer, pointing out for instance that during the autumn season, leaves change in mesmerizing colors that enticed tourists and made them want to come back for more. In regards to visa applications, Tatsumi revealed that they were on the rise since last October, after two and half years of suspension caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Comparing the number of issued visas in January 2020 to the same period in 2023, there was an increase of more than 20 percent, he indicated. Tatsumi pointed out that the embassy would receive around 20 visa applications daily with the number reaching sometimes around 30 to 40 requests. On the embassy's efforts, Tatsumi said that during participation in cultural events, the staff would gladly answer questions regarding travel to Japan.

Halal food/restaurants

The embassy distributes Japan tourism brochures during such events, indicated Tatsumi, adding that people usually asked about the price of travel to Japan as well as the availability of halal food/restaurants. On the Japanese government level, the diplomat affirmed that Japan was always eager to receive travelers from Kuwait and the Middle East. Despite the limited population of Muslims in Japan, those involved in Japanese tourism both in the public and private sectors were aware of the needs of Muslim travelers and they were working on ways to respond



Lanterns and cherry blossom trees.



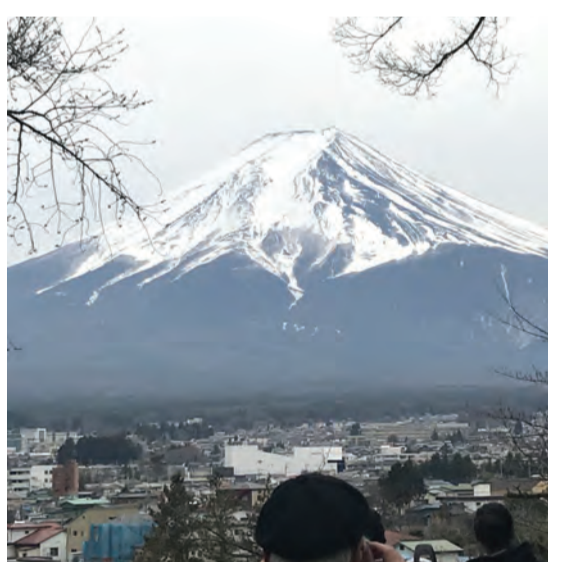
to their requests, affirmed Tatsumi.

He went on to say that in 2018, the government of Japan had issued an action plan to respond to the needs of Muslim travelers with the scheme involving partners from the private sector and also local governments. In November of 2021, the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) opened an office in Dubai, the first of its kind in the Middle East, reflecting the keen interest in having inbound travelers from the region visit Japan, noted the diplomat.

The JNTO would be coordinating and networking efforts with travel agencies across the region, especially the GCC countries, to promote visits to Japan, said Tatsumi, stressing that the Japanese embassy would like to assist the organization's activities in Kuwait. As the number of Muslim travelers grow in Japan, restaurants, hotels, and tourist facilities took notice and developed favorable environments by offering halal food and setting up prayer rooms with the JNTO gathering information from such establishments and posting them on its "Muslim Travelers' Guide" website, he added.

Several applications are developed for Muslims such as "Halal Navi", which enables users to find halal restaurants as well as "OKASHI Checker" allowing Muslims to check the ingredients used in snacks sold in Japan. One of the main advocates of Japan travel in Kuwait is Saad Al-Hajri whose Instagram account "Saadipn" had amassed over 56,000 followers thanks to his deep and detailed knowledge of Japan in addition to his valuable tips and information. "Those who admire organization and order would find themselves in Japan," commented Al-Hajri who has been frequenting Japan since 2007 and sometimes travels there three times a year.

Al-Hajri indicated that the planning for his first trip began in 2004-05 and he managed to travel eventually alongside a friend who had a previous experience in Japan travel. Around 2012, Al-Hajri



The ever-present Mount Fuji seen from a nearby town. — KUNA photos

decided to create an Instagram account, which was for personal use at the beginning but turned into a blog dedicated mainly to his numerous travels to Japan. "I did not think that the content was interesting to others, but I tried to relate my experiences in my posts about Japan as a hobby ... I was shocked that there was a huge feedback and interest in the subject," he affirmed.

Al-Hajri added that the Instagram account was mainly dedicated to Arabic language speakers because he saw the scarcity of material within this field. Information on how to travel to certain destinations within Japan, especially via train and subway, main spots of interest, and more could be found in the account, said Al-Hajri who affirmed that many benefited from the data found on Saadipn with the account receiving a tremendous amount of inquires reaching over 90 inbox messages at a time.

He revealed that many Japanese citizens found the account useful in terms of finding information about the Arab and Muslim worlds. The Japanese embassy also began to recommend the account to those interested in Japan, asserted Al-Hajri, adding that he had established a good rapport with the embassy. In 2018, through his strong efforts and ties with the embassy, Al-Hajri became the first Arab Gulf citizen to deliver a lecture at the Japanese embassy's headquarters attended by 85 people. — KUNA

Ministry supports 'surrogate mother' projects, orphans

KUWAIT: Acting undersecretary of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Community Development Abdulaziz Al-Mutairi announced on Wednesday that the Ministry received a donation of KD 100,000 from the General Authority for Minors Affairs to support the 'surrogate mother' projects.

Al-Mutairi said in a press statement that the ministry seeks, through the family nursery department, to strengthen its partnership with government agencies and civil society organizations to develop work and provide the best services to the inmates of the family nursery department. He added that the donation contributes to the development of one of the most important projects of the department in a real translation of co-operation and collaboration between government agencies and is also a bright point in the achievements.

Meanwhile, civil society and government agencies extend a hand of cooperation to the orphan children. Regarding the surrogate mother project, Al-Mutairi stressed that "Kuwait is one of the leading countries in caring for children, especially those of unknown parents, through the development of vital projects aimed at creating a healthy environment in which the child coexists".

He explained that the surrogacy project is based on this basis and depends on the provision of surrogate mothers inside orphanages who guide, educate and raise children according to special programs. As for the children's marriage project, Al-Mutairi stressed the keenness of public affairs to support and encourage the children and help integrate into the society.



NBK shares joy of Girgian at NBK Children's Hospital and Center 21



KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) shared the joy of Girgian at NBK Children's Hospital and Center 21. Girgian is an annual tradition celebrated in Kuwait during the middle of the month of Ramadan. At NBK Children's Hospital, NBK participated in the Girgian celebration and shared with the children the happy moments of Girgian. The event was attended by NBK Public Relations Team and a number of volunteers.

Celebrating with the residents of Center 21 comes with the occasion of International Autism Day. NBK's participation in this event reflected NBK's efforts to communicate with all segments of the society. Contributing to Center 21 is an integral part of NBK's culture and practices that reflect its deep commitment to its corporate social responsibility. Both Girgian events were filled with fun and entertainment and decorated with Girgian theme, as part of NBK's extensive social outreach program during the Holy month of Ramadan.

Girgian events come as a part of NBK's annual social program 'Doing Good Deeds' during the



Holy month of Ramadan that features a multitude of philanthropic activities. By doing good deeds all month long, NBK hopes to encourage a greater sense of community and charity during Ramadan. NBK carries on its humanitarian initiatives and support of social welfare programs, as it firmly believes in the importance of corporate social responsibility and its effective impact in serving the



community and its people, as well as emphasizing the leading role NBK has been playing in that field for many decades.



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Alghanim Industries, KRCS in Ramadan donation drive

KUWAIT: Alghanim Industries (Kutayba Alghanim Group), one of the region's largest private companies, recently collaborated with the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) for their annual Ramadan donation drive. Guided by the spirit of giving during the holy month and a commitment to the well-being of its communities in Kuwait, the company donated hundreds of food packages and electronic appliances to underserved families.

A diverse group of employees from various Alghanim Industries business units, spanning sectors such as food and beverage, engineering, automotive, and others, participated in the drive by packaging essential food and cooking provisions. Employees' families and friends also joined in assembling staple foods like rice, flour, cooking oil, legumes, and other essentials to support families throughout Ramadan.

In addition to this, Xcite, Alghanim Industries electronics retailer and the largest in Kuwait, supplied a range of essential home appliances. These included refrigerators, chest freezers, air conditioners, and cooking appliance, among others. Reflecting on the campaign, Alghanim Industries Executive Chairman Kutayba Y Alghanim said, "As strategic partners of the Kuwait Red Crescent Society, we engage in various activities in Kuwait throughout the year such as scholarships and charitable campaigns. During the holy month of Ramadan, this cooperation is more special.

Our employees volunteer and become deeply involved, and we encourage them to invite their family members to join. It is an opportunity to express our shared values, and give and support one another - which is, of course, a key pillar of our Kuwaiti heritage. We want to thank KRCS for the incredible humanitarian work they do throughout the year and giving us the opportunity as private sector leaders to do the same."



Kutayba Y Alghanim



Dr Hilal Al Sayer

Over the years, the collaboration between KRCS and Alghanim Industries has supported communities affected by conflict as well as natural and man-made crises across the region, including in Palestine, Yemen, and Lebanon. Kuwait Red Crescent Society Chairman Dr Hilal Al Sayer remarked, "Our partnership with Alghanim Industries has consistently proven effective in providing essential services to underserved communities across Kuwait and the region.

Both organizations are deeply committed to serving these communities, and I express my sincere gratitude to Alghanim Industries, its dedicated employees, and the leadership of its executive chairman. We hope to continue collaborating to address the significant challenges facing our communities."





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NEW YORK: Anti-abortion activist demonstrates on March 25, 2023. — AFP

US appeals court keeps access to abortion drug with stricter rules

Access will require three visits to physicians during prescription period

WASHINGTON: The abortion pill mifepristone will remain temporarily available in the United States, but under tighter regulations, after a ruling by a federal appeals court late Wednesday.

A panel of three judges on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, in the southern state of Louisiana, ruled 2-1 to keep mifepristone available. Under the new order, access to the drug will also require three visits to physicians during the prescription period, and will be limited to women in the first seven weeks of pregnancy, down from 10.

Mifepristone was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) more than two decades ago and is used in more than half the abortions carried

out annually in the United States. However, Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk, an appointee of former Republican president Donald Trump, overturned the FDA's approval of the drug last Friday. That ruling was paused for a week to allow an appeal, with Wednesday's judgment extending that pause beyond Friday as the FDA had requested.

The appellate court said its ruling would hold until the case was heard in full. Its tightened regulations mark a return to restrictions the FDA had eased in 2016. The two circuit court judges who voted to tighten restrictions, Kurt Engelhardt and Andrew Oldham, were also both appointed by Trump.

The third, Catharina Haynes, is an appointee of

former president George W. Bush. The latest US standoff over women's reproductive freedom comes almost a year after the conservative-dominated Supreme Court overturned the landmark Roe v. Wade ruling that had enshrined the constitutional right to abortion for half a century.

US President Joe Biden on Tuesday branded Kacsmaryk's ruling as "out of bounds." His spokeswoman, Karine Jean-Pierre, said the administration would continue fighting the ruling in court. "We believe that the law is on our side, and we will prevail," she told reporters during the president's visit to Dublin, Ireland, on Thursday.

Jean-Pierre has described the ruling as an "attack

on FDA authority" and warned it could "open the floodgates for other medications to be targeted and denied to people who need them." Democrats and activists warn the ruling is part of a broader effort by Republicans to achieve a nationwide abortion ban.

Shortly after Kacsmaryk's decision on Friday, a judge in Washington state ruled in a separate case that access to mifepristone must be preserved. The dueling legal opinions, along with the appeals, mean the issue is almost certain to end up before the Supreme Court.

Polls repeatedly show a clear majority of Americans support continued access to safe abortion, but conservative groups have sought to limit what had previously been a right enshrined in law. — AFP

At least 130 killed in Myanmar strike: Rescue worker

BANGKOK: Villagers used old car tires on Thursday to cremate the last of an estimated 130 victims of an airstrike in Myanmar's central Sagaing region, with South East Asian countries saying they "strongly condemned" the attack.

The country has seen widespread violence, with its economy almost paralyzed, since the military toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government in a February 2021 coup. No official death toll from the Tuesday morning strike on Pazi Gyi village has been released, although authorities confirmed they had carried out an aerial military operation in the area.

At least 130 fatalities have been reported by media outlets BBC Burmese, The Irrawaddy and Radio Free Asia, while the United Nations has cited a death toll of at least 100. A villager involved in rescue and recovery efforts — who asked not to be named to protect his safety — told AFP his team had counted and identified 130 bodies as of Thursday afternoon.

Body parts were strewn across the site and identifying victims had been a difficult process, he said. "We used car tires to cremate the dead bodies," he said, adding that 28 people remain missing. US-based media outlet CNN reported more than 160 fatalities, citing a figure from an exiled former lawmaker.

The Sagaing region — a rebel stronghold near the country's second-largest city of Mandalay — has put up some of the fiercest resistance to the military's rule, with intense fighting raging there for months. Since the coup, the military's crackdown on dissent and armed groups opposed to its rule has killed more than 3,200 people, according to a local monitoring group. — AFP

Trump sues former lawyer Michael Cohen for \$500m

MIAMI: Donald Trump filed a lawsuit on Wednesday against his former personal lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen, a likely star witness in the criminal case facing the former US president in New York.

The suit, filed in a US District Court in Florida, seeks \$500 million from Cohen over his alleged breach of attorney-client privileges and a confidentiality agreement. Cohen was among the witnesses who testified before the grand jury that ultimately indicted Trump, making him the first former or sitting US president to face criminal charges.

He has been charged with 34 felony counts of falsifying business records in connection with a hush money payment to porn star Stormy Daniels. Cohen

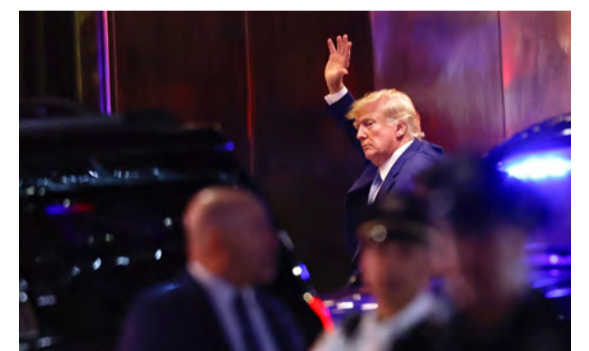
says he arranged the \$130,000 payment in exchange for her silence about a tryst Daniels says she had with Trump in 2006.

Trump pleaded not guilty to the charges in a Manhattan court on April 4. In his lawsuit, Trump accuses Cohen of "spreading falsehoods" about him and claimed to have suffered "vast reputational harm."

"Such continuous and escalating improper conduct by (Cohen) has reached a proverbial crescendo and has left (Trump) with no alternative but to seek legal redress," the suit said. Trump is seeking a jury trial and compensatory and punitive damages of more than \$500 million.

The 76-year-old former real estate tycoon has been embroiled in scores of lawsuits over the past decades and has a long history of attacking his opponents in court. Cohen, 56, is expected to be a star witness for the prosecution if the criminal case against Trump in Manhattan ever comes to trial.

He has acknowledged paying Daniels on Trump's behalf and was sentenced to three years in prison for



NEW YORK: Former US president Donald Trump arrives at Trump Tower on April 12, 2023. — AFP

various crimes, including the hush-money case and tax evasion. Trump has denied any wrongdoing and claims he is the victim of a political "witch hunt" by the Manhattan district attorney, a Democrat, intended to derail his 2024 White House campaign. — AFP

What the leaked US documents say

WASHINGTON: A trove of highly sensitive US government documents circulating online includes secret assessments of the Ukraine conflict as well as reports that point to surveillance of close American allies.

The Pentagon says the breach poses a "very serious risk to national security," and the Justice Department has opened a criminal investigation into the matter. US officials have not however publicly confirmed that the materials shown in photographs posted on social media and other sites are genuine, and their authenticity could not immediately be independently verified.

These are some key points from documents reviewed by AFP:

Ukraine conflict losses

One document — purportedly an assessment of the

status of the conflict as of March 1 — puts Russian combat deaths at between 35,500 and 43,500, and Ukraine's at 16,000 to 17,500. Russia also lost more than 150 planes and helicopters, while Ukraine lost more than 90 aircraft.

Another version of the document — which was apparently digitally modified — said Ukrainian losses of troops and equipment were higher than Russia's. The Pentagon has warned that the documents "have the potential to spread disinformation."

Anti-air missile shortage

Two documents dated February 28 highlight significant issues with Ukrainian air defenses, which have been instrumental in protecting against Russian strikes and preventing Moscow's forces from gaining control of the skies. Ukraine's ability to provide medium-range air defenses to protect the front line "will be completely reduced by May 23," the two documents say.

One of them notes that SA-10 and SA-11 Soviet-era systems make up nearly 90 percent of Ukrainian medium- and high-range protection, and says that — based

on munitions use at the time — they were projected to run out of missiles by early May and late March, respectively. The document lists possible responses including resupplying with munitions from allies and partners in the near term, and soliciting contributions of Western air defense systems — a number of which have already been promised — in the midterm.

Ukraine drone strike inside Russia

An undated document says Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on February 28 expressed concern to the country's top general and another official about Kyiv's lack of missiles with the range to hit Moscow's forces inside Russia, and suggested using drones to do so.

The account — which points to American surveillance of a close partner — may help explain US reluctance to provide Ukraine with the longer-range weapons it has sought, as Washington tries to avoid its arms being used inside Russia. Kyiv appears to have carried out such strikes with other means, however, and Washington's hesitation predates the exchange mentioned in the document. — AFP

International

'Brazil is back!': President Lula makes state visit to China

SHANGHAI: President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva promised Thursday that "Brazil is back!" during a state visit to China aimed at strengthening trade ties and winning support for his push for peace in Ukraine.

The veteran leftist, who arrived in Shanghai on Wednesday night, is seeking to reposition Brazil as a key global player after four years of relative isolation under his predecessor Jair Bolsonaro. "The time when Brazil was absent from major world decisions is in the past," Lula said at a ceremony to inaugurate his political ally Dilma Rousseff as president of the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB).

"We are back on the international stage, after an inexplicable absence," Lula will spend Thursday in Shanghai before heading to the Chinese capital to meet his counterpart Xi Jinping, with whom he is expected to discuss the Ukraine war on Friday.

Both China and Brazil have positioned themselves as mediators in the conflict, despite Western concerns that they are overly cozy with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Trade ties

The Shanghai leg of Lula's trip has highlighted another key goal of the visit — to deepen economic links between the two countries. China is Brazil's biggest export market, buying tens of billions of dollars' worth of soybeans, beef and iron ore.

Rousseff, a former leader of Brazil, will head the NDB, a multilateral lender jointly set up by Brazil,

Japan's big plans for a 'hydrogen society' fell flat

TOKYO: It was once touted as a miracle solution to Japan's energy problems: creating a "hydrogen society" by sharply ramping up use of the fuel for vehicles, industry and housing.

But the country's plan to expand its hydrogen market and slash greenhouse emissions has suffered delays and criticism over the fuel's green credentials. As G7 climate ministers meet this weekend in the northern Japanese city of Sapporo, here are some key points about the strategy:

Ambitious plans

In 2017, Japan became the first country to devise a national strategy for hydrogen power, aiming to drastically scale up its use by 2030. The colorless, odorless gas is an exciting prospect on paper.

It can be produced, stored and transported in large quantities, and does not emit carbon dioxide when

Putin arrest warrant 'spanner in the works' for S Africa

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa said on Wednesday an international arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin over the Ukraine war was a "spanner in the works" ahead of a BRICS summit in the country in August.

Risk management in the Holy Quran...

Continued from Page 1

affect the organization or project are identified. (2) Risk assessment: The likelihood of risks occurring and their impact, if they do occur, are evaluated. (3) Risk mitigation: Measures are taken to mitigate or completely avoid the impact of risks. (4) Monitoring and follow-up: The identified risks are monitored periodically and followed up to ensure that they do not occur. (5) Evaluation and improvement: The process is periodically evaluated and improved.

The Holy Quran contains concepts and values that help in risk management in different ways. These concepts are identified and interpreted through interpretation and scientific study of the Quranic text. Among the basic values that can be used in risk management are trust, reliance on Almighty Allah, optimism and patience in difficult times, planning and preparation for potential risks, cooperation and communication to achieve common goals. We shall refer to a number of Quranic verses that talk about Risk management.

Almighty Allah says in the Noble Quran what can be translated as: "Do not throw your selves into destruction." (Surat Al-Baqara verse 195) This verse, even if it was revealed about spending in the cause of Allah, it indicates the prohibition of that which leads to the destruction of Man. Cleanliness and order: The Majestic Allah says in Noble Quran what can be translated as: "Truly, Allah loves those who turn to Him in repentance and loves those who purify themselves." (Surat Al-Baqarah, verse 222)

Cleanliness is a civilized behavior. Islam is the role model for all human societies in teaching and main-

Car insurance fee hike suspended...

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The rate amounts to five percent until the end of December of the year of manufacture, 10 percent for the second year, 20 percent for the third, 30 percent

China, Russia, India and South Africa, until 2025. After the inauguration ceremony, Lula visited a research center run by Chinese telecom giant Huawei.

Video on the official Brazilian presidential Twitter account showed Lula being greeted by musicians in traditional dress playing classical Chinese instruments. Huawei's chair then walked him through an exhibition showcasing the company's extensive presence in Brazil — a contrast with the United States, where companies are effectively barred from doing business with the firm.

Lula later tweeted that he had been given a presentation on 5G and solutions in telemedicine, education and connectivity, describing it as "a very strong investment in research and education". He was also set to meet the head of China's biggest electric carmaker BYD, which said in October that it planned to set up a vehicle manufacturing plant in northern Brazil's Bahia after Ford Motors closed its factory there. The company is already making electric buses and cars in Brazil for the Latin American market.

Smoothing relations

Back in office from January after having led Brazil from 2003 to 2010, Lula is seeking to smooth relations with China, after ties deteriorated under Bolsonaro. He was initially scheduled to make the trip in late March but had to postpone it after coming down with pneumonia.

burned. These qualities are attractive to Japan, which is heavily reliant on fossil fuel imports. Most of its nuclear reactors are still offline after the 2011 Fukushima disaster, and the nation set a goal two and a half years ago of reaching carbon neutrality by 2050.

Fuel cell blues

Hydrogen-powered fuel cell vehicles, which Japanese automakers helped pioneer, were a key part of the original plan. The government had hoped for 40,000 of these cars to be on the road by 2020, and 800,000 by 2030. But by the end of last year, just 7,700 units had been sold in the country since 2014.

Despite subsidies for buyers, they remain "very expensive", even compared to battery-powered electric cars, Kentaro Tamura, a Japan-based expert at the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), told AFP. Hydrogen refueling stations have high installation and upkeep costs, and are rare in comparison to charging spots for electric vehicles, Tamura added.

Hydrogen-powered homes

The results have been better but still modest in housing — the other major area initially earmarked for hydrogen expansion. A residential fuel cell pro-

gram called "Enefarm" was meant to equip 5.3 million Japanese homes by 2030. It uses gas to create hydrogen that reacts with oxygen from the air to generate electricity and heat water. But by the end of 2022, just 465,000 systems had been installed, far short of the government's target of 1.4 million by 2020. Price is a key factor here too, Tamura said, with installation costs "very high compared with alternative technologies like heat pumps".

'Grey' area

Energy experts were skeptical of Japan's hydrogen strategy from the start, because it was launched without creating a reliable supply chain for environmentally friendly "green" hydrogen, produced from renewable energy sources.

Instead, Japan opted for so-called "grey" hydrogen, made using greenhouse gas-emitting coal, petrol or gas, and "blue" hydrogen, which also comes from fossil fuels but with the carbon emissions captured and stored. In the meantime, countries such as China and some European nations have moved faster on green hydrogen, which remains rare and expensive but is key to decarbonization, the Japanese Renewable Energy Institute think-tank says.

In March, Tokyo agreed to spend \$1.6 billion on

ya, President Cyril Ramaphosa's spokesman, told a press briefing on Wednesday.

"What that dictates is that there be further engagements, in terms of how that is going to be managed and those engagements are underway. Once they've been concluded, the necessary announcements will be made."

The ICC warrant against Putin stems from accusations that Russia unlawfully deported Ukrainian children. A continental powerhouse, South Africa has refused to condemn the invasion of Ukraine which has largely isolated Moscow on the international stage, saying it wants to stay neutral and prefers dialogue to end the war.

Earlier this year, it held a controversial joint military

Mideast nations re-establish ties...

Continued from Page 1

will meet in Jeddah to discuss letting Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's long-isolated country attend an Arab League summit next month. Before then, Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad will meet his Saudi counterpart to discuss "efforts to reach a political solution to the Syrian crisis that preserves the unity, security and stability of Syria", the Saudi foreign ministry said.

Earlier, Tehran announced the arrival of the Iranian delegation in Riyadh to pave the way for reopening diplomatic missions, seven years after an acrimonious break in ties. The visit comes after a Saudi delegation made a similar trip to Iran's capital, and follows a historic meeting in China between the two governments' foreign ministers who vowed to bring stability to the troubled region.

"The Iranian delegation will take the necessary steps to reopen the embassy in Riyadh and the consul-

N Korea likely fired 'new type'...

Continued from Page 1

1,000 kilometers. Japan, which briefly issued a seek-shelter warning to residents of the northern Hokkaido region, said the missile had not fallen within its territory and posed no threat to residents.

Climate and environment ministers from the Group of Seven are due to meet this weekend in Sapporo, Hokkaido's regional capital, a month before the bloc holds its summit in Hiroshima. The United States said it "strongly condemns" North Korea for the test of what it described as a "long-range ballistic missile". China blamed the "negative impact" of US military drills for driving up tensions on the Korean peninsula and called on all parties to "remain calm and restrained".

The launch is the latest in a string of banned weapons tests conducted by North Korea, which has already fired several of its most powerful ICBMs this year. It has also tested what state media has claimed are nuclear-capable underwater drones - known as Haeil, the Korean word for tsunami - which it says are capable of unleashing a "radioactive tsunami".

Kim attended a meeting on Monday of the Central Military Commission to discuss ways to "cope



SHANGHAI: This handout picture released by the Brazilian Presidency shows Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (right) posing for a picture with his wife, Rosangela "Janja" da Silva (center) and China's Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng (left) during his arrival to Shanghai, China for an official visit to the country on April 12, 2023. — AFP

About 40 high-level officials are accompanying him on the rescheduled visit, including cabinet ministers, governors and members of Congress. In a delicate balancing act, he is also seeking closer

ties with the United States, Brazil's second-biggest trading partner. His visit with Xi comes after a high-profile White House meeting with President Joe Biden in February. — AFP

an ambitious but controversial venture in Australia to produce liquid hydrogen from lignite coal and export it to Japan. But critics say the project's "blue" hydrogen claims are based on carbon capture technology that does not yet exist.

Co-firing controversy

Despite the setbacks, Japan will revise its hydrogen strategy by the end of May, with the Nikkei business daily reporting plans to increase its supply of the fuel to six times the current level by 2040. It is also promoting another use for hydrogen and its derivative ammonia: burning it alongside gas and coal at existing power stations, to reduce carbon emissions.

An official from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry told AFP that ammonia co-firing is "a realistic means of energy transition that is more CO2-reducing and economically efficient than the early phase-out of coal-fired power and its replacement with renewable energy".

But climate campaigners question the value of the expensive practice on the path to cleaner energy. Japan is "the only G7 member" pushing for co-firing, Greenpeace's Hirotaka Koike said, describing it as a "national policy to keep the 'sunset' industry (of thermal power stations) alive". — AFP

exercise with Russia and China, which critics cite as evidence of a tilt towards the Kremlin. South Africa's ties with Russia date back decades when the Kremlin backed the ruling African National Congress in its fight against apartheid. The ICC warrant has been the cause of political tumult in the country.

The leading opposition party, the Democratic Alliance has called for Putin to be arrested and for the ICC to force the government's hand. But leftist parties, including the South African Communist Party — a close ally of the ruling African National Congress — have urged the government to welcome the Russian leader and pull out of the ICC instead. — AFP

ate general in Jeddah as well as the activities of Iran's permanent representative in the (Jeddah-based) Organization of Islamic Cooperation," Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani 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 attended a regional meeting in Mecca in 2012. 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. — AFP

with the escalating moves of the US imperialists and the south Korean puppet traitors to unleash a war of aggression", Pyongyang's Korean Central News Agency said. He ordered that the North's deterrence capabilities be strengthened with "increasing speed" and in a "more practical and offensive" manner.

Relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points in years, with Pyongyang declaring itself an "irreversible" nuclear power last year, effectively ending the possibility of denuclearization talks. Kim also ordered the military this year to intensify drills to prepare for a "real war". Washington and Seoul have intensified defense cooperation in response, staging joint military exercises with advanced stealth jets and high-profile US strategic assets. North Korea views such exercises as rehearsals for invasion and described them on Tuesday as "frantic" drills "simulating an all-out war against" Pyongyang.

The latest test was likely a bid by the North "to put pressure on the South and the United States over their joint military exercises", Choi Gi-il, professor of military studies at Sangji University, told AFP. South Korea also accused North Korea on Tuesday of being "irresponsible" after Pyongyang cut hotline contact with Seoul last week. North Korea has not answered the twice-daily calls made through a military hotline and an inter-Korean liaison channel since Friday, according to Seoul's unification ministry. — AFP

International

China to ban ships near Taiwan due to 'falling rocket wreckage'

Announcement comes amid rumors of China imposing no-fly zone

BEIJING: China will ban ships from entering an area north of Taiwan on Sunday due to "possible falling rocket wreckage", a provincial maritime authority said, days after Beijing conducted large-scale military drills around the self-ruled island.

The area around 160 kilometers (100 miles) from the Taiwanese capital, Taipei, will be closed from 9:00am (1:00am GMT) to 3:00 pm (7:00am GMT), the maritime safety administration of China's eastern Fujian province said Thursday.

It added that vessels would be "forbidden to enter" for the duration of the shutdown. The announcement came after Taiwan's transport ministry said Wednesday that Beijing planned to impose a no-fly zone north of the island due to "space activities".

The air restrictions would be in force from 9:30 am to 9:57 am (0130 to 0157 GMT) on Sunday, the ministry said, adding that the zone lies "on the convergence areas of many international routes". China had initially planned a three-day shutdown but had related following objections from Taiwanese authorities, according to the ministry.

Beijing's foreign ministry declined to confirm on Thursday whether the no-fly zone would be imposed, with spokesperson Wang Wenbin telling reporters at a regular briefing to refer to "the competent authorities". It is unclear what link, if any, exists between the restricted zone and Beijing's recent war games. Taiwanese authorities did not immediately respond to an AFP request for comment.

Beijing on Monday announced the end of three

days of military drills around Taiwan, the island democracy it views as part of its territory and has vowed to one day seize — by force if necessary.

The "Joint Sword" maneuvers came in response to Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen's visit last week to the United States, where she met a bipartisan group of lawmakers including House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) said it simulated targeted strikes on Taiwan and an encirclement that would have effectively "sealed off" the island.

The operations "comprehensively tested the integrated joint combat ability of multiple military branches under actual combat conditions", the PLA's Eastern Command said.

They were also expected to include live-fire drills in a closed-off area near the coast of Fujian—about 80 kilometers south of the Taiwan-administered Matsu islands—but it is not clear whether those drills actually took place.

'Actual combat'

The United States — Taiwan's main security ally — repeatedly called for Beijing to show restraint in response to Tsai's visit. Washington later sent a guided-missile destroyer through contested parts of the South China Sea under what it called a "freedom of navigation operation".

On Wednesday, Chinese state media said President Xi Jinping had called on the country's armed forces to "strengthen military training oriented



PINGTAN: Two men fish from rocks on Pingtan island, opposite Taiwan, in China's southeast Fujian province. — AFP

towards actual combat" during a naval inspection trip the day before. Separately, Beijing warned that Taiwanese independence and cross-strait

peace were "mutually exclusive", blaming Taipei and unnamed "foreign forces" supporting it for the tensions. — AFP

Brazil clamps down on social media after school attacks

BRASILIA: Brazil's government on Wednesday announced new restrictions on social media, aiming to curb an "epidemic" of violent school attacks one week after a hatchet-wielding assailant killed four children.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's justice minister, Flavio Dino, said that web sites will be ordered to take steps to ban content and users who "are promoting or supporting attacks or violence against schools." Social media companies will also be required to send data to police on all users sharing violent content, and block users who have been banned for sharing violent content from creating new profiles.

Platforms that do not comply may be fined up to 12 million reais (\$2.4 million) and possibly have their

sites suspended by federal authorities, the minister said. Last Wednesday four children between four and seven years old were killed in a preschool in Blumenau, a city in southern Santa Catarina state, when a man carrying a hatchet stormed the facility.

The murders shocked the South American country, where two other attacks on schools — neither with fatalities — occurred on Monday and Tuesday. "There is an emergency situation which has generated an epidemic of attacks, threats of attacks (and) panic among families and in schools," said Dino, who vowed a "close regulation" of social media in order to contain the threats.

On social media sites and in groups on messaging services such as WhatsApp, users have speculated about potential new violence expected in Brazil on April 20, the anniversary of a 1999 massacre in the US state of Colorado, where shooters slaughtered 12 fellow students and a teacher in Columbine High School.

According to Brazil's justice minister, federal authorities are recommending state and local police reinforce their patrols in coming days given the circulation of posts regarding April 20. The feder-

The hanged inmates were found in pavilion number five of the Guayas 1 prison, which houses 6,800 inmates and is part of the massive penitentiary complex. Local media have reported that the pavilion is controlled by a gang known as Las Aguilas (the eagles), which extorts other prisoners.

Tuesday's attack in the impoverished Esmeraldas province happened because fishermen "preferred the security" of one criminal organization and were targeted by another in retaliation, said Zapata.

Ecuador is located between Colombia and Peru, the world's two largest producers of cocaine, much of which is sent to the United States and Europe from Ecuadorian ports, principally Guayaquil. Consequently, Ecuador has seen a recent rise in violence and murders related to drug trafficking.

Its murder rate almost doubled from 14 per 100,000 citizens in 2021 to 25 a year later. Both Guayaquil and the northwestern Esmeraldas province have been hard hit by a surge in violence. On March 3, President Guillermo Lasso declared a state of emergency in Guayaquil and Esmeraldas.

Prisons are another battle zone between rival gangs. Since February 2021, there have been eight prison massacres in which more than 400 inmates have been killed, many dismembered or burned. In the worst such massacre in September 2021, 119 inmates were killed.



In this file photo taken on March 15, 2023, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (Left) and his Justice Minister Flavio Dino chat during the launching ceremony of the National Public Security Program (PRONASCI) at the Planalto Palace in Brasilia. — AFP

al prosecutor's office, meanwhile, asked Twitter on Tuesday to disclose measures the social media giant is taking to reduce content related to inciting violence against schools. — AFP



GUAYAQUIL: An inmate's relative cries while waiting for news outside the Guayas 1 prison after six inmates were found hanged inside a pavilion in Guayaquil, Ecuador on April 12, 2023. — AFP

Gangs that vie for control of the lucrative trafficking trade have often controlled operations from within the prison system. Overcrowding has been a problem in Ecuadorian prisons. There is capacity for 30,000 inmates but as recently as 2021 there were 39,000 people incarcerated. That number dropped to just over 31,300 according to a prison population census last year. — AFP

Six inmates found hanged in Ecuador

GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador: Guards at a violence-plagued penitentiary complex in Ecuador's largest city on Wednesday found six inmates hanged, prison authorities said. The SNAI prison administration authority told AFP the six bodies were found in their cells at the jail in the southwestern port city of Guayaquil, which is plagued with drug trafficking-related violence.

The Guayaquil prison complex has been the site of Ecuador's worst jail massacres in recent years caused by gang rivalries. The bodies were found "while checking the pavilions," SNAI said in a statement. Authorities did not say whether the inmates' bodies showed any signs of violence, nor whether they belonged to gangs.

The grisly discovery comes a day after around 30 gunmen opened fire at a fishing port in northwestern Ecuador, killing nine, in an attack Interior Minister Juan Zapata blamed on a territorial fight between gangs.

US, Philippines hold largest-ever joint war games

PALAYAN, Philippines: US and Philippine troops turned their Javelin anti-tank missiles on cars standing in as enemy vehicles on Thursday, in the allies' largest ever war games. Under a plume of black smoke, three sedans parked on scrubland were crushed by missiles fired from about 600 meters (0.37 miles) away by three soldiers at a military base in the north of the Philippines.

The annual Balikatan maneuvers follow 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. "As you're recently witnessing, there are some irresponsible behaviors that are ongoing and we should call those irresponsible behaviors out," US Army Pacific Commander General Charles Flynn told reporters at the site, without elaborating further.

Flynn added that the war games were an important show of "collective commitment to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific". Philippine Army chief Lieutenant-General Romeo Brawner praised the "effectivity" of Javelins against Russian tank and armor in the Ukraine war, adding Manila plans to acquire the weapon in the future.

"We want to also bring that capability to the Philippine Army in order for us to be able to bolster our



FORT MAGSAYSAY, Philippines: A US soldier in sniper camouflage takes position at a static display of equipment during a live exercise as part of the US-Philippines joint military exercise. — AFP

defensive posture and be able to defend our territory," Brawner added. The exercise aims to boost Manila's military capability while serving as a US show of support for its Asian ally amid China's growing assertiveness. Nearly 18,000 troops are taking part in the annual exercises, which for the first time will include the sinking by live fire of a decommissioned Philippine navy warship in the South China Sea, waters that Beijing claims almost entirely.

It follows a deal announced last week for US forces to use an increased number of bases in the Philippines, including one near Taiwan. The exercises and growing US access to Philippine bases have angered China. "Facts speak louder than words. Judging from the locations of the new military bases, the intention behind those sites is more than obvious," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told reporters in Beijing on Wednesday. — AFP

Lawyer urges change in Morocco laws protecting minors

CASABLANCA: The lawyer for an 11-year-old Moroccan girl, whose rapists received light sentences that outraged the country, urged authorities to review laws protecting minors. Mohamed Sebbar made the appeal at a news conference on the eve of an appeal hearing by the victim after a court sentenced one of the girl's three attackers to two years in prison, and the others to 18 months each.

"We hope that justice will be rendered but also that the debate on reforming legislation concerning the protection of minors will be stepped up," Sebbar said in Casablanca. The now 12-year-old girl from a village near Rabat was raped repeatedly over a period of months, the Jossour Forum of Moroccan Women said in a statement last month.

The case has caused an uproar in the North African country, and a petition condemning the sentences, which were announced on March 20, has amassed tens of thousands of signatures. Last week dozens of demonstrators rallied in the Moroccan capital Rabat to denounce what rights groups have criticized as lenient punishment for the attackers, aged 25, 32 and 37.

Morocco's penal code allows for prison terms of up to 30 years for the charges brought against the three accused, who were also ordered to pay a combined 50,000 dirhams (\$4,900) in compensation. NGOs and the media in Morocco often sound the alarm in cases involving sexual violence against minors, calling for tougher penalties.

The defense lawyer Sebbar said the appeal hearing is due to continue on Thursday, and that a minor witness was expected to testify probably behind closed doors. Amina Bouayach, who heads the state-run National Council of Human Rights (CNDH), also urged the government to make "urgent amendments to legislation in order to guarantee the rights of children and their protection against all forms of violence, and namely sexual violence". — AFP

Sudan army warns of danger amid deepening rift

KHARTOUM: Sudan's regular army warned Thursday that the country was at a "dangerous ... turning point" after paramilitaries deployed more fighters in major cities amid a deepening rift within the military government.

Military leader Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan has increasingly been at odds with his number two, paramilitary commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, during talks to finalize a deal to return the country to civilian rule and end the crisis sparked by their 2021 coup. A plan to integrate the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces led by Daglo into the regular army led by Burhan is one of the key points of contention, analysts have said. Eleven-hour haggling within the security forces over the details have twice forced postponement of the signing of an agreement with civilian factions setting out a roadmap for the transition.

In its statement, the regular army said it was "sounding the alarm as the country is at a dangerous historical turning point". "The risks are increasing as the RSF command mobilized and spread forces in the capital and other cities," the army said.

It said the deployment, which "took place without the approval of, or even just coordination with, the armed forces command" has "exacerbated security risks and increased tensions among security forces".

The RSF defended its deployment, saying it works in coordination with the regular army and its fighters "move throughout the country to achieve security and stability". Created in 2013, the RSF emerged from the Janjaweed militia that then president Omar al-Bashir unleashed against non-Arab ethnic minorities in the western Darfur region a decade earlier, drawing accusations of war crimes. — AFP

Business

FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 2023

Fossil fuel pledges divide G7 in 'critical decade' for climate

Britain, France propose new targets on phase-out of domestic coal power

TOKYO: G7 allies meet this week for climate talks that are likely to urge more action in a "critical decade", but could also lay bare divisions on ambitious fossil fuel commitments. The world's leading developed economies are all targeting net-zero emissions by 2050 or sooner after signing the Paris Agreement to cap global warming at well under two degrees Celsius.

But they differ on how to respond to the energy squeeze caused by Russia's war in Ukraine, with host Japan among those arguing for more leeway on fossil fuels to protect energy security. Britain, backed by France, has proposed new targets on the phase-out of domestic coal power in a draft statement seen by AFP ahead of the minister-level talks, which kick off in Sapporo on Saturday.

Pushback from Japan — which remains heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear plant disaster — could sink those efforts. There are also divisions over natural gas, with Japan leading those pushing the group to recognize overseas investments in the fuel as a "necessary" step in the global transition to clean energy.

Campaigners say Japan's reluctance to embrace ambitious fossil fuel targets sends the wrong message. Japan is "actively working to increase reliance on liquid natural gas and other kinds of gas-based fuels" in Asia, Susanne Wong, Asia Program Manager at Oil Change International, told AFP.

"While there's an urgent need to shift from fossil fuels, and the war has shown how risky the strategy is of relying so heavily on imported fossil fuels, they're encouraging governments to import LNG across the region."

'Exceptional circumstances'

At last year's meeting in Germany, the G7 climate ministers pledged to largely decarbonize their electricity sectors by 2035. They also agreed to end new direct public support in 2022 for overseas fos-

sil fuel projects that take no steps to offset carbon dioxide emissions.

But this commitment was watered down the following month, when G7 leaders said the "exceptional circumstances" of the Ukraine war made gas investments "appropriate as a temporary response". The language now sought by Japan — with backing from G7 partners that include the United States, Canada, Germany and Italy — would solidify that exception.

The meeting comes after a major UN climate report last month warned the world will see 1.5C of warming in about a decade, calling for "rapid and far-reaching" efforts to keep temperature increases within relatively safe limits.

And the draft final statement by the G7 environment ministers calls for all major economies to take action "in this critical decade". It also urges a peak in global greenhouse gas emissions by 2025 at the latest — language that experts say is aimed at China, the world's largest carbon emitter.

China is targeting a peak of its carbon emissions by 2030. Other phrasing will be more contentious, including Japan's push for recognition of nuclear power and endorsement of its plan to start releasing treated water from the Fukushima plant into the sea this year.

It also wants G7 recognition for its controversial strategy of burning hydrogen and ammonia alongside fossil fuels to reduce carbon emissions, which climate activists say only serves to extend the lifespan of polluting plants.

Japan 'biggest obstacle'

Coal may prove the largest stumbling block, with Britain seeking a 2030 deadline to complete an "accelerated phase-out of domestic unabated coal power generation" to keep the 1.5C goal within reach. But Japan's preferred language would be a more general pledge to prioritize "concrete and timely steps" towards the phase-out.

dends. "There are extraordinarily positive examples in Spain of great businessmen who are dedicated to their country," Sanchez said last month. "I don't think it is the case of Mr del Pino," he added.

'Not leaving Spain'

Del Pino, 64, who controls around 20 percent of Ferrovial, is Spain's third-richest person, with a fortune of around \$4.5 billion, according to Forbes. The company grew over the decades from a modest railway construction company into a global conglomerate which won contracts for the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao and the Barcelona Olympics.

In addition to operating Heathrow, Ferrovial's toll road division includes projects in Australia, Canada and the United States. Ferrovial has justified the planned move of its headquarters on the grounds that it derived more than 80 percent of its revenues last year outside of Spain. It argues the move will not affect its operations in Spain, where it employs around 5,500 and where it will still pay tax. "Ferrovial is not leaving Spain," Del Pino said at the start of the annual general meeting.

"Ferrovial will maintain its activity, its jobs, its projects, its investment plan and its listing in Spanish stock markets." The company would pay a "similar" amount of tax in Spain after the relocation as it did, Del Pino added. Ferrovial paid 282 million euros (\$311 million) in taxes in Spain last year, he said.

'No problem'

But the government -- which fears other firms could follow Ferrovial's example -- argues a listing in the United States is possible for a company based

the sharp rebound "may be partly due to a low base effect", noting that COVID outbreaks in March last year forced many Chinese factories to shut down and restricted operations at the country's ports.

"The other factor behind the strong export growth may be the inventory and order cycles for exporters," Zhang said in emailed comments to AFP. While the torrent of COVID cases in December and January "likely depleted factories' inventories", they are now running at full capacity and have "caught up the cumulated orders from the past", he added.

Imports in March contracted 1.4 percent, a more moderate pace than in January and February. China's economy grew just three percent in 2022 -- one of its slowest rates in decades—and the country has set a modest target of "around five percent" for this year.

There is optimism that goal can be reached, with the International Monetary Fund on Tuesday maintaining its annual growth forecast for China at 5.2 percent. China's year-on-year trade with the United States fell 17.4 percent, and dropped 10 percent with the European Union, Thursday's figures showed.

But there was a sharp 25.9 percent increase in trade with Russia as Moscow focuses on business with its giant neighbour after being hit with sanctions following its invasion of Ukraine. "As Covid-19 waves subsided in January of this year, mobility normalized, and high-frequency economic indicators — such as retail sales and travel bookings — started picking



NAMIE: File photo shows a worker walks at the "Fukushima Hydrogen Energy Research Field" (FH2R), one of the largest test facilities in the world producing hydrogen from renewable energy, as smoke billows from a neighbouring plant. — AFP

Friederike Roder, vice president of the NGO Global Citizen, warned the meeting's language would be critical ahead of the G20 summit in India and COP28 in Dubai. "We're trying to avoid going backwards" on pledges, she told AFP.

"Japan is certainly the biggest obstacle — and this year it is G7 president." Governments around the world will also be looking for action on resilience funding for the developing nations most

affected by climate change.

Multi-billion-dollar investment plans have been announced for countries such as South Africa and Indonesia to transition to clean energy from fossil fuels. But these remain "very ad hoc", said Alex Scott from the climate think-tank E3G. The G7 needs to "offer some credibility and clarity on what they're going to do to help countries adapt to climate change", she said. — AFP

Spanish giant Ferrovial approves move to Netherlands

MADRID: Ferrovial shareholders approved Thursday a plan to move the Spanish construction giant's headquarters to the Netherlands despite objections from Spain's leftist government. The firm, which manages London's Heathrow airport and has road projects in the United States, argues the move will give it access to cheaper credit and boost its appeal to equity investors ahead of a planned US stock listing.

But Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's government, which is facing a year-end general election, accuses Ferrovial of seeking to pay less tax, a charge it rejects. Under a plan first unveiled in February, the firm will change its domicile through a so-called reverse merger, with the group's Dutch subsidiary absorbing the Spanish holding company.

"It is approved," the company's chairman and biggest shareholder, Rafael del Pino, said after the proposal was put to a vote at an annual general shareholders' meeting. The government has been fiercely critical of the move, accusing Ferrovial and its billionaire chairman of disloyalty. It has noted that the awarding of public contracts to the company, founded by Del Pino's father in 1952, helped it become one of Spain's biggest.

And it accuses Ferrovial of trying to benefit from lower Dutch taxes on corporate income and divi-

China exports rise for first time in 6 months

BEIJING: China's exports rose in March for the first time in six months, customs data showed Thursday, as the world's second-largest economy continued its recovery following the end of onerous coronavirus curbs late last year.

The 14.8 percent surge in overseas shipments marked the first since September, according to the General Administration of Customs, and will provide a boost to hopes for a lasting rebound. Beijing long maintained some of the world's strictest Covid curbs, persisting with snap lockdowns and lengthy quarantines despite their increasingly dire economic consequences. The government abruptly ditched the restrictions in December, and a wave of cases afflicted the operations of many businesses for several weeks. Thursday's customs figures contrasted with a poll of analysts conducted by Bloomberg News, who predicted that exports would decline 7.1 percent.

The sharp uptick was a "positive surprise", said Zhiwei Zhang, president and chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management. However, he added that



Ferrovial shareholders approved a plan to move its headquarters to the Netherlands.

in Spain. "There is no problem for a double listing. A company based in Spain can list in the US stock market," Budget Minister Maria Jesus Montero told private television channel Antena 3.

In a letter sent to the government on Tuesday, Ferrovial Chief Executive Ignacio Madrdejos said no Spain-based firm has up until now had a full listing in the United States. Spanish bank Sabadell estimates the company could save 40 million euros per year in tax payments by moving its headquarters to the Netherlands, but other experts put the figure far lower. Ferrovial's planned move follows in the footsteps of other major European firms such as aircraft manufacturer Airbus, which has its head office in Toulouse in France but its headquarters are registered in the Dutch city of Leiden. — AFP



QINGDAO: File photo shows a cargo ship powered by LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) loaded with containers at a port in Qingdao, in China's eastern Shandong province. China's exports rose in March for the first time in six months. — AFP

up," the IMF wrote in its World Economic Outlook report. "The reopening and growth of (China's) economy will likely generate positive spillovers, with even greater spillovers for countries with stronger trade links and reliance on Chinese tourism," it added. Top Chinese leaders have also signalled a focus on recovery, with new Premier Li Qiang last month telling a major economic forum that the country was showing "strong momentum". — AFP

Infosys forecasts revenue slowdown on uncertain outlook

MUMBAI: Indian software giant Infosys reported a lower-than-expected profit rise for the March quarter on Thursday and flagged softer revenue guidance on the back of global economic and financial uncertainty. Infosys, India's second-largest information technology firm, benefitted from an IT boom that made India the back office to the world for subcontracted work.

The company, like local rival TCS, also gained from the increased use of digital services during the Covid pandemic. But continued economic uncertainty and financial sector turmoil have made some clients, particularly in Western markets, tighten their belts.

Net profit came in at 61.3 billion rupees (\$748 million) for the March quarter, a 7.8 percent rise from the same period last year. Revenue grew 8.8 percent year-on-year, but fell 3.2 percent quarter-on-quarter in constant currency terms, reflecting the challenging market conditions.

The Bengaluru-headquartered firm forecast revenue growth of four to seven percent in constant currency terms for the year to March 2024, lower than analysts' expectations. "During the quarter we saw unplanned project rampdowns in some of our clients and delays in decision-making, which resulted in lower volumes," Infosys chief executive Salil Parekh said in a media briefing.

"While we saw some signs of stabilization in March, the environment remains uncertain," he said. Infosys earns more than 85 percent of its revenue from North American and European markets. Employee attrition, an important metric for software companies in India's competitive IT market, slipped to 20.9 percent compared with 24.3 percent for the December quarter.

But the total number of Infosys employees fell by more than 3,600. Rival IT giant TCS reported on Wednesday a weaker-than-expected increase in net profit for the first three months of the year, as the fallout from the economic uncertainty and banking turmoil weighed on its US operations. Shares in Infosys closed nearly 2.8 percent lower in Mumbai trading ahead of the earnings announcement. — AFP

NBK-Bahrain reports net profits of BHD 122.14 million for 2022

'Profits reflect success of our strategy for diversification of income sources'

● Al-Sager: Our broad geographical footprint gives us a strong competitive edge boosting our future growth and regional leadership

● Fardan: Our profits prove our focus on strategic goals, sustained business growth and leading position



Isam Al-Sager,
NBK Group Vice Chairman and CEO



Ali Fardan,
General Manager of NBK-Bahrain

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait-Bahrain (NBK Bahrain) reported net profits of BHD 122.14 million (KD 99.39 million) for the year 2022, compared to BHD 117.68 million (KD 94.57 million) for the year 2021. As of end of 2022, NBK-Bahrain's total assets stood at BHD 7.24 billion (KD 5.89 billion) compared with BHD 7.43 billion (KD 5.97 billion) in 2021. Total shareholders' equity increased by 12% y-o-y to BHD 1.087 billion (KD 884 million), whereas customers deposits increased by 23% y-o-y to BHD 3.39 billion (KD 2.76 billion) by end of December 2022.

Commenting on NBK Bahrain's year-end financial results, Isam Al-Sager, NBK Group Vice Chairman and CEO said, "National Bank of Kuwait - Bahrain realized good profits for 2022, despite the challenging operating environment including escalating global geopolitical tensions and soaring inflation rates worldwide, and their impact on markets' performance." "Our international operations are key contributors to the Group's profits, which proves our resilient business model, and at the same time, the success of our regional expansion strategy

in hedging against the risks and fluctuations, and its contribution to diversifying income sources," he added.

Al-Sager noted that the Bahraini market is one of the key growth markets for NBK Group, given the promising growth opportunities and positive prospects of this market. Al-Sager stressed that NBK will continue reinforcing its competitiveness in the markets where it operates; as the Group's broad geographical footprint gives us a strong competitive edge boosting our regional leadership and future business growth. On his part, Ali Fardan, General Manager of NBK-Bahrain, said: "NBK-Bahrain's results for 2022 prove our focus on strategic goals, sustained business growth and leading position in the Bahraini market, despite the challenges faced during this year."

Fardan pointed out that the bank is moving steadily in strengthening its position in Bahrain by providing high-quality banking and financial services to its retail and corporate customers, noting that the bank has great potentials to achieve further growth in the Bahraini market in the future. "Over the course of this year, NBK-Bahrain has been successful in



providing various high-quality banking products and services that effectively helped meet customers' needs and enrich their banking experience," he highlighted.

Fardan praised the Central Bank of Bahrain's efforts, in particular, and all government agencies, in general, for their continued support extended to NBK-Bahrain and the Bahraini banking sectors. He also highlighted that the great support extended by NBK Group has

contributed to strengthening the Bank's performance, through capitalizing on NBK's high credit ratings, broad relationship network, and leading reputation as one of the top banks in the Middle East, and one of the safest banks in the world.

NBK is the largest financial institution in Kuwait with effective market dominance in the commercial banking market and has been consistently awarded one of the highest credit

ratings among all regional banks from Moody's, Standard & Poor's, and Fitch Ratings. NBK also stands out in terms of its local and international network, which includes branches, subsidiaries and representative offices in many regional and global financial hubs including China, Geneva, London, Paris, New York, and Singapore alongside its regional presence in Lebanon, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.



شركة الصفاة للاستثمار
AL SAFAT INVESTMENT COMPANY

KUWAIT BOURSA WEEKLY REPORT

WEEK ENDED ON 13 APRIL 2023

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No.	Ticker	Sector	Price Movement & Performance										Valuation Multiples *				
			Open Price	Close Price	Week High	Week Low	Range	Volume	WTD Change	WTD %	YTD %	Support Level	Resistance Level	P/E	P/B	Yield	Beta
101	National Bank of Kuwait	Banking	970	963	976	940	36	16,429,352	-12	-1.23%	-6.20%	952	1,010	15.7	1.89	0.0%	1.03
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	281	276	281	267	14	11,032,271	-6	-2.09%	-7.71%	270	285	14.8	1.28	0.0%	1.30
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	181	183	183	175	8	16,150,490	3	1.78%	-2.90%	177	186	23.9	0.58	0.0%	1.16
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	224	231	232	218	14	7,151,076	6	2.67%	5.48%	230	234	18.1	0.83	0.0%	1.26
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	736	740	745	710	35	57,283,987	1	0.14%	-1.09%	715	744	25.0	1.85	0.0%	1.16
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	616	630	637	608	29	22,150,896	16	2.58%	-16.32%	620	649	50.8	2.80	0.0%	1.16
201	Kuwait Investment	Financial Services	116	118	118	110	8	3,970,908	1	0.85%	-22.37%	113	119	101.8	0.53	0.0%	1.85
204	National Investments	Financial Services	233	240	242	230	12	1,901,314	6	2.56%	1.27%	237	244	21.9	0.96	0.0%	1.85
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	128	129	132	124	8	37,405,382	2	1.57%	15.18%	126	132	22.3	0.79	0.0%	0.92
212	Arzan Financial Group	Financial Services	102	106	107	101	6	12,370,418	4	3.92%	-7.83%	101	106	10.3	0.72	0.0%	1.13
222	Aayan Leasing and Investment	Financial Services	125	126	128	122	6	18,070,088	3	2.44%	-5.26%	123	128	9.4	0.91	0.0%	1.69
252	Al Imtiaz Investment	Financial Services	58.9	58.9	59.5	55.8	3.7	1,767,371	1	2.08%	-21.36%	57.1	59.1	NM	0.36	0.0%	1.22
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	110	110	111	108	3	4,872,978	0	0.00%	1.85%	108	111	14.1	0.80	0.0%	1.09
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	717	744	756	711	45	2,033,115	23	3.19%	-7.00%	734	755	16.1	1.70	0.0%	1.01
418	The Commercial Real Estate	Real Estate	99	98.9	99	98.0	1	14,053,356	0.5	0.51%	0.00%	97.1	99	14.0	0.60	0.0%	0.57
501	National Industries	Financial Services	194	201	204	190	14	6,700,082	6	3.08%	-7.37%	190	202	11.1	0.87	0.0%	1.55
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	1,130	1,210	1,215	1,114	101	442,338	80	7.08%	-0.41%	1,202	1,260	19.3	1.10	0.0%	0.99
506	HEISCO	Industrials	597	595	597	574	23	591,187	5	0.85%	-2.94%	590	611	18.8	1.50	0.0%	0.99
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	766	761	771	757	14	865,070	-8	-1.04%	-4.88%	750	769	7.8	1.51	0.0%	0.98
603	Agility	Industrials	578	598	604	560	44	33,983,100	20	3.46%	-16.94%	598	618	23.2	0.96	0.0%	1.57
605	Zain	Telecommunications	541	550	550	537	13	20,441,662	8	1.48%	-2.31%	546	557	12.1	1.93	0.0%	0.70
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,970	3,960	3,990	3,870	120	566,169	-10	-0.25%	12.50%	3,930	3,995	9.4	3.55	0.0%	0.62
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	185	180	185	179	6	1,647,248	-4	-2.17%	-11.33%	178	184	NM	0.78	0.0%	1.20
654	JAZEERA	Consumer Discretionary	1,800	1,761	1,850	1,682	168	587,384	-39	-2.17%	-7.32%	1,700	1,780	19.6	10.79	0.0%	1.45
813	GFH Financial Group	Financial Services	74.1	76.0	77	73.5	3.4	18,909,683	1.5	2.01%	0.00%	74.2	76.6	9.5	0.88	0.0%	1.33
821	Warba Bank	Banking	221	224	224	217	7	10,490,158	3	1.19%	-1.82%	221	229	32.0	1.26	0.0%	1.11
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	364	368	371	360	11	3,733,125	4	1.10%	-6.36%	360	375	NM	1.11	0.0%	0.47
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	371	379	380	366	14	5,180,379	8	2.16%	2.43%	371	380	29.6	1.49	0.0%	0.70
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	173	176	176	170	6	4,175,338	2	1.15%	-6.38%	173	176	13.4	1.66	0.0%	0.48
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	1,813	1,814	1,835	1,775	60	838,852	1	0.06%	-11.60%	1,798	1,840	20.2	5.55	0.0%	1.02
830	AL GHANIM	Consumer Discretionary	888	882	894	865	29	2,179,758	6	0.68%	9.57%	860	887	12.1	3.32	0.0%	0.30

* As of end of week closing

Business

US banks face increased scrutiny of Q1 results after SVB collapse

Earnings season kicks off Friday, with reports from JPMorgan Chase, Citigroup, Wells Fargo

NEW YORK: Roughly a month after Silicon Valley Bank's collapse sparked fears of contagion, quarterly earnings reported this week are expected to focus on bank liquidity and the industry's preparation in case of recession. Nerves have calmed somewhat compared with a few weeks ago, when US banking regulators unveiled emergency measures to fortify the industry after a run of depositors felled SVB and two other mid-sized banks failed.

While investors view the sector as having stabilized, industry watchers are expecting a muted or downcast tone as banks -- whose well-being is considered critical for the economy as a whole -- begin releasing their quarterly updates. "They're going to be setting expectations that their earnings are going to soften," said Clifford Rossi, a former risk management executive at Citigroup and a professor at the University of Maryland.

Heightened regulatory scrutiny in the wake of the problems is expected to lead to tightened lending standards, one of several factors crimping profitability. Earnings season kicks off Friday, with reports from giants JPMorgan Chase, Citigroup, Wells Fargo and the mid-sized lender PNC.

The releases from other lenders, including those in the embattled group of regional firms such as First Republic Bank, will come later in the month and could focus more directly on their liquidity positions. Banks are also being pressured to boost the interest rates they pay to shore up their depositors. And recession worries are likely to compel banks to set aside more reserves in case of defaults.

The changes in the industry environment are "probably going to dampen the profitability prospects, the question is to what extent?" said Stuart Plesser, a senior director at Standard & Poor's.

Stress 'has subsided'

SVB's demise led to an unfriendly spotlight on other mid-sized US banks like First Republic, which suffered dramatic stock price falls amid fears of a domino effect. Federal regulators seized control of SVB on March 10 after its disclosure of trading losses days earlier sparked a run of depositors.

The collapse came two days after Silvergate Bank announced it was winding down and was followed by troubles at Signature Bank. On Sunday, March 12, US federal authorities stepped in to protect all depositors at SVB and Signature, and the Federal Reserve announced an emergency program to provide additional liquidity to banks with similar asset profiles to SVB. Since then, the only significant banking casualty was Credit Suisse, which was sold to Swiss rival UBS in a quick \$3.25 billion takeover engineered by the government. "Near-term stress on the banking system has subsided," said an April 7 report by Goldman Sachs, which observed that "the public's focus on withdrawing deposits from small and midsize banks has faded." But "regional bank equity prices remain depressed, pointing to ongoing concerns that past deposit losses, higher deposit betas, a higher cost of capital, the possibility of tighter regulation ahead, and an inverted yield curve will prove challenging," the report added.

Deposit flow

Given that the SVB meltdown occurred late in the quarter, analysts say there may be limited impacts on the financials reported by other banks. The largest



NEW YORK: File photo of top US banks in New York City.

banks like Bank of America and Wells Fargo could see a boost in deposits transferred from smaller banks. But this effect could be countered by other withdrawals earlier in the quarter, analysts say. These banks will still offer updates on credit quality, which has held up despite months of worry about the hit from inflation on consumers. Analysts do not anticipate a sudden uptick in delinquencies over mortgages and car loans, but expect banks to set aside more reserves in case of a recession. "Most banks are going to take a pretty

conservative approach as it relates to their outlooks," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare.

While the biggest banks are expected to be largely unscathed following SVB, there are more questions about regional lenders. A key area to watch is deposit outflows, said Plesser. "If the banks experience much more significant outflows than expected, the concern will be about the bank's ability to fund themselves," he said. "You need banks to be able to give out loans, and deposits to do that." — AFP

World Bank members endorse moves to boost lending

WASHINGTON: World Bank member countries have endorsed measures allowing a \$50 billion lending boost over the next decade, its outgoing president David Malpass said Wednesday. The move, announced during the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank spring meetings in Washington, is part of an ongoing evolution of the development lender amid pushes for it to meet global challenges like climate change.



US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen

Earlier on Wednesday, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen urged the World Bank to continue taking on added reform measures this year. "We should use the rest of the year to undertake additional reforms through a staged implementation approach," Yellen said at a roundtable discussion on the evolution of multilateral development banks. The United States is the largest shareholder of the World Bank Group.

'Signs of progress'

Malpass, who announced his upcoming resignation in February, said in a statement late Wednesday that discussions with shareholders this week have "yielded signs of progress" on issues including a need for greater debt transparency, greater development finance and more impactful climate action. "Our member countries endorsed measures that can add up to \$50 billion of IBRD lending capacity over the next ten years," he added, referring to the bank's middle-income lending arm, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Malpass said there was full recognition of the importance of concessional resources and private sector investment. With financing capabilities falling "far short of the resource needs for development and climate," Malpass stressed that addressing these needs will require a global effort.

For now, a development committee paper outlines changes "that provide a foundation for further evolution," said Malpass. These include an affirmation that ending extreme poverty and promoting development remain at the core of the World Bank's work, but efforts towards these goals require "a stronger focus on sustainability, resilience, and inclusiveness." The paper also contains proposals to support private sector development and private capital facilitation, among others.

'Historic opportunity'

French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire, who attended talks with Yellen and Malpass on Wednesday, said that there is a "historic opportunity" to bring the necessary financial resources to developing countries—through the reform of development lenders. He noted the need to narrow the growing gap between developed and developing countries, adding that "the situation now has become really critical." And Yellen highlighted that there needs to be efforts for further progress.

Global leaders can tap upcoming events such as the Group of 20 Leaders' Summit in September to "keep the momentum strong," she said in a speech. In an interview with AFP ahead of the spring meetings, Yellen added that Malpass, who will leave his position at the end of June, has laid a "solid foundation" for the ongoing reform effort. She expects US candidate Ajay Banga to succeed Malpass and continue the revamp. Other key issues on the spring meetings' agenda include debt restructuring, and leaders at a global sovereign debt roundtable committed Wednesday to further efforts to help speed up restructurings. — AFP

Inflation bites into profits of UK supermarket Tesco

LONDON: Britain's biggest retailer, supermarket group Tesco, reported Thursday a halving of annual net profit as soaring inflation hiked costs and reduced the amount of goods sold. Profit after tax slumped to £745 million (\$930 million) in the 12 months to the end of February, Tesco said in a statement.

Chief executive Ken Murphy said the group experienced "unprecedented levels of inflation in the prices" it paid suppliers, and the cost of running its own operations. The supermarket added that sales volumes dropped year-on-year. This was offset by Tesco hiking prices of products, helping revenue jump seven percent to £65.8 billion.

'Painful grocery inflation'

"Tesco has seen profits take a knock as inflation means struggling customers are picking up fewer items while prices soar," noted Sophie Lund-Yates, lead equity analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown. "It's not lost on consumers that grocery inflation remains one of the most painful areas of overall rising costs at the moment." In a bid to retain customers, Tesco is matching the prices of similar goods offered by UK supermarkets run by German discounters Aldi and Lidl. Tesco on Thursday also announced that during its current financial year, the company would repurchase shares worth £750 million. Tesco's share price climbed 1.8 percent to 272.20 pence following the updates. "Since issuing a profit warning back in October the Tesco share price has gone from strength to strength, with the shares closing at eight-month highs earlier this week," said Michael Hewson, chief market analyst at CMC Markets UK.

"This is despite pressure on margins that have continued to come under pressure over the last 12

Equities waver on US recession risks, inflation slowdown

LONDON: Asian and European stocks wavered Thursday as traders digested recession risks and slowing inflation in the United States, and pored over earnings. US inflation slowed sharply in March to five percent, data showed Wednesday, but minutes from the Federal Reserve's most recent policy meeting indicated officials foresaw a recession at the end of the year.

"Investors are weighing up an improving picture for US inflation... versus fears of a recession stateside," said Victoria Scholar, head of investment at trading firm Interactive Investor. "US central bank policymakers are concerned about the negative economic fallout from the recent turmoil in the banking sector."

London stocks flatlined Thursday as data showed the UK economy unexpectedly stalled in February. UK supermarket giant Tesco topped the risers, gaining 2.4 percent as news of a share buyback eclipsed news that net profits halved at Britain's biggest retailer last year on soaring inflation. In the eurozone, Frankfurt stocks drifted lower but Paris jumped 0.9 percent to strike a fresh record-high.

Shares in French luxury giant LVMH leapt 4.1 percent after the maker of champagne and expensive fashion logged an "excellent" first quarter after the close of trading Wednesday. In the US, the inflation reading was the lowest since May 2021, sparking hope that the



LONDON: A pedestrian passes a branch of British supermarket chain Tesco in east London on April 13, 2023. Britain's biggest retailer, supermarket group Tesco, reported, a halving of annual net profit as soaring inflation hiked costs and reduced the amount it sold. — AFP

months from intense competition from the likes of Aldi and Lidl who have seen their own sales growth surge. "Tesco in January cut about 2,100 jobs in a bid to keep a lid on runaway costs, which include also pay rises for staff who have seen wages eroded by sky-high inflation. Consumer prices surged worldwide last year, pulled higher especially by surging food and energy prices as Russia's invasion of Ukraine hit supplies.

Prices reached the highest levels in decades also as economies reopened from pandemic lockdowns. British inflation remains elevated at above 10 percent

Fed could soon end its policy of aggressive interest rate hikes.

Traders were awaiting the release of US wholesale inflation later Thursday. That will be followed by crucial first-quarter earnings on Friday from top banks including JPMorgan and Citibank. "For weeks it's all about the trajectory of inflation and subsequent interest rate hikes for investors," noted Nigel Green, head of financial consultancy deVere Group.

"But the focus is now shifting to earnings season. "The big banks will be keenly watched as not only do they often set the mood music for the rest of the season, but also because they are more intricately linked to the rest of the economy than most other sectors," Green added.

Wall Street turned negative Wednesday after the Fed minutes, that highlighted fears over the impact of last month's banking crisis in which three US lenders went bust and Credit Suisse was taken over.

Asian markets ended mixed Thursday after a downbeat start. Hong Kong edged up despite sharp losses in the tech sector that came after the Financial Times reported that Japan's SoftBank was looking to unload a majority of its holdings in Alibaba.

News that Chinese exports soared for the first time in six months, by a forecast-busting 14.8 percent, was unable to provide much lift to sentiment. Oil prices dipped but held most of Wednesday's two-percent rally fuelled by a drop in US inventories and supply issues from Iraqi Kurdistan.

The two main contracts are now sitting around levels not seen since November, while traders are awaiting an outlook from crude exporters' cartel OPEC. — AFP

after a jump in February, while official data Wednesday showed the rate of price increases slowing in the United States.

The UK economy unexpectedly stalled in February with the country facing more strikes amid a cost-of-living crisis, figures showed on Thursday. Output had rebounded in January after the country narrowly avoided recession in the final quarter of 2022.

The UK government and Bank of England expect the country to dodge a recession this year, while the Federal Reserve has projected a "mild recession" in the United States. — AFP

Property giant Sunac plummets in Hong Kong stock

HONG KONG: Property giant Sunac China suffered a record plunge in Hong Kong trading on Thursday after a year-long suspension, in the latest blow to China's beleaguered real estate developers.

The firm's stocks collapsed as much as 59 percent on its first day of trading on the Hang Seng Index, after being suspended on April 1 last year. The drop has revived concerns about China's debt-plagued real estate developers and a hobbling housing market recovery. Sunac joined the growing list of crumbling developers in May last year when it said it had missed a \$29.5 million interest payment and warned of more defaults. Trading in the firm was suspended after it missed a deadline in March last year to publish its annual results.

But the restriction was lifted Thursday after Sunac met exchange requirements by filing the overdue earnings figures. Sunac proposed plans to restructure debt worth \$9.1 billion in December that included converting up to \$4 billion of offshore liabilities into ordinary shares or equity-linked instruments.

The rest of the debt was to be swapped for new dollar-denominated bonds with maturities ranging from two to eight years, with no interest payments for the first two years, according to a filing with the Hong Kong stock exchange. In March, the developer announced it had reached an agreement with a group of creditors but analysts were sceptical about the plan, saying Sunac would struggle to win approval from offshore creditors. Since 2020 Beijing has cracked down on excessive debt in the property sector, leaving major players such as Evergrande and Sunac struggling to make payments and forcing them to renegotiate with creditors as they teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. — AFP

Karaage kings: Judges hunt for Japan's best fried chicken



This picture shows Hiromi Matsumoto serving a plate of karaage, a Japanese style fried chicken at an izakaya bar in Tokyo. —AFP photos



This picture shows Hiromi Matsumoto serving a plate of karaage, a Japanese style fried chicken at an izakaya bar in Tokyo.



This picture shows raw chicken being prepared at an izakaya bar in Tokyo.

Munching their way through hundreds of golden-brown morsels, a team of judges has searched relentlessly to find the ultimate "karaage" — the fried chicken known as "Japan's comfort food". While a global buzz has grown around Korean fried chicken in recent years, in Japan, karaage reigns supreme.

Pronounced "kara-agay", its name refers to a technique where pieces of chicken, other meat or vegetables are marinated and coated in flour and starch before being fried. The dish is a national obsession: winners of the Karaage Grand Prix, an annual competition to find Japan's choicest chunks, can see their sales as much as triple if their chicken wins an award. This year, judges were appointed to replace a public vote after allegations of fowl play by some of the competing pubs, restaurants and chicken shops. The judges met for several tasting sessions around the country — each putting away around a kilogram of chicken a day. Lead judge Koichiro Yagi, who also serves as managing director of the Japan Karaage Association, told AFP he was looking for fried chicken that "tells a story".

"There's an initial flavour, then a secondary flavour, then an aftertaste," he said, wearing a traditional Japanese coat bearing the slogan "karaage changes the world". "The initial flavour draws you in with the aroma and the taste, but the real pleasure of karaage is the journey it takes you on."

The town of Nakatsu, on the southern island of Kyushu, has a reputation for producing Japan's best karaage, and its shops have won several prizes at the Karaage Grand Prix. But competition from the rest of the country is

fierce, and some cooks go to great lengths to give themselves an edge.

"There are lots of chicken shops in Nakatsu and we went there and tried each and every one," said Takehiro Matsumoto, whose Tokyo-based brand has won Karaage Grand Prix awards for the past three years running. "It wasn't just Nakatsu — if there was a place that people said was good, we went there and studied them all to find the best."

'Never get sick of it'

The contest, now in its 14th year, hands out prizes in categories such as soy sauce or salt-based flavours — and splits the awards between east and west Japan. An overall winner is crowned in each category, with several lesser "gold" awards also handed out. Until this year, winners were determined by public vote, and tales abounded of shops creating email addresses en masse to rig the system. Kazuhiko

Nakano, managing director of a pub chain that has won gold awards in different categories, said he was glad that this year's competition was decided by the judges' discerning palates.

"In the past, people would vote without even tasting it," said Nakano, adding that his firm saw an 80 percent rise in karaage sales after winning their first award in 2020. "When you have judges, there is a standard of what is tasty." The judges were largely drawn from food industries associated with karaage, and sampled around 25 entries a day. Each entrant was given five minutes to present their product, while judges chewed on pineapple between bites of chicken to aid digestion. "I've been eating karaage almost every day for more than 10 years — I've eaten at 3,300 different karaage places," said judge Iku Arino, who styles herself as a karaage influencer. "I never get sick of it." After much deliberation, the judges reconvened to announce the winners at a ceremony in Tokyo this week.

Tatsuya Oyama, whose Tokyo shop "Karaageya Oshu Iwai" scooped the East Japan prize for best soy sauce flavour, said his award was "more meaningful" than his previous two, because it had been chosen by experts. Lead judge Yagi said the new system had been successful but stomach-busting, and vowed to reduce the load on the panel's plates at next year's edition. But while the champions can concentrate on turning their award-winning status into profit, Yagi said there was no such thing as the perfect karaage. "It changes depending on the situation in which you're eating it," he said. "It also depends on who you're eating it with and how you're eating it. Asking 'what is the perfect karaage?' is a difficult question." —AFP



This picture show a restaurant staff presenting karaage during the Karaage Grand Prix competition in Tokyo.



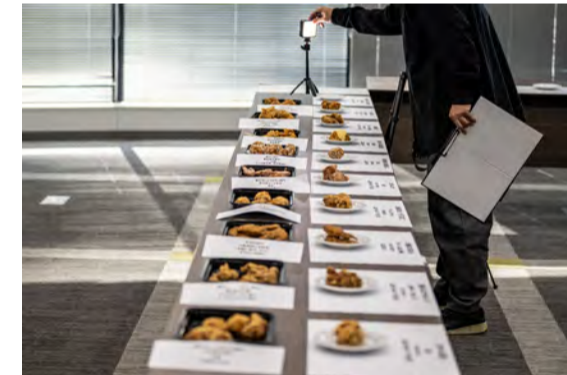
This picture shows Japan Karaage Association executive director Kouichirou Yagi eating a chicken wing during the Karaage Grand Prix competition in Tokyo.



This picture shows competitors cooking during the Karaage Grand Prix competition in Tokyo.



This picture shows a gold medal certificate of the Karaage Grand Prix competition at an izakaya bar in Tokyo.



This picture show plates of karaage being presented during the Karaage Grand Prix competition in Tokyo.



People line up to purchase the fresh copies of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's new novella "The City and Its Uncertain Walls", which is the writer's new book in six years, at a book store in Shinjuku district of Tokyo.—AFP photos



Fresh copies of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's new novella "The City and Its Uncertain Walls".

Japanese fans snap up first Murakami novel in six years

Dozens of excited Haruki Murakami fans queued outside a bookstore in Tokyo on Thursday for the midnight release of the world-renowned author's first novel in six years. Copies of "The City and Its Uncertain Walls", so far only available in Japanese, were piled up on tables at the entrance to Kinokuniya store in central Shinjuku district. Shunsuke Mitsumoto was among the first to get his hands on the latest title by Murakami, who has a cult following for his surreal works peppered with references to pop culture.

"I want to read it as soon as I get home. As much as I want to savour each sentence, I will probably read the whole thing in one go," the 39-year-old told AFP. "I'm excited

to think that this book will take us to a new world again," added Mitsumoto, a member of a Murakami reading group. Murakami's previous novel, "Killing Commendatore", was published in February 2017. The best-selling author is known for his intricate tales of the absurdity and loneliness of modern life, which have been translated into about 50 languages.

In a message released by publisher Shinchosha ahead of the new book's release, Murakami said he had produced the novel in self-isolation during the coronavirus pandemic. The 74-year-old described his work process in typically enigmatic style, saying it had been "just like a 'dream reader' reads an 'old dream' at a li-

brary". Perennially tipped for a Nobel prize, Murakami — whose most famous novels include "Norwegian Wood" and "Kafka on the Shore" — is a reclusive figure. At the early-hours event on Thursday, 28-year-old fan Chikako Muramatsu said the author was "loved by a wide range of people". "Many fans seem to be in my parents' generation, but there are some big Haruki fans in my generation too," she said.

Yuji Katayama, 54, said he was a long-time fan. "I feel like I am growing older with the characters in his books. I feel empathy for them," he said. "I consider his novels as my textbooks. By reading his books, I am exposed to new things, like his knowledge of foreign novels." —AFP

Netflix plans Africa expansion after hit series

Netflix said on Wednesday it planned to expand operations in Africa, building on the success of hit shows like the South African drama "Blood and Water." The online video streaming giant said it had spent \$175 million in film production in Africa since starting work on the continent in 2016.

"Expanding our business here is good for Netflix," the firm said in a report. It gave no details on the scale of its African plans but said that \$63 million had been earmarked for South Africa alone in 2022-23. Netflix's operations in sub-Saharan Africa have so far focused on South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, creating more than 12,000 jobs, according to company.

"This is the start, we plan to reach more countries on the continent," Netflix's sub-Saharan Africa policy director, Shola Sanni, told a press conference in Johannesburg. South Africa is the continent's largest contributor to the site, adding more than 170 mov-

ies, series and documentaries to the streaming service. In 2020, "Blood and Water" received international praise, becoming the first South African show to reach No. 1 in the United States. "We... intend to build on these milestones to grow our business -- even as we continue to invest to bolster local creative economies and give more and more African storytellers an amplified voice on the global stage," the firm said.

Netflix has bet on diversifying its production outside the US in recent years, scoring big with series including Spanish smash "Money Heist" and South Korean dystopian drama "Squid Game." In 2021 the company partnered with the United Nations cultural agency, UNESCO, to finance six short movies from young African directors. "It's honestly about time (that) worthy platforms realise the richness and value in our stories," one of the six recipients, South African filmmaker Gcobisa Yako, told AFP. —AFP



Rising costs spell doom for Egypt's village traditions



In this file photo guests gather between corn fields to attend a traditional wedding celebration in the village of Shamma in Egypt's northern Nile Delta province of Menoufia.



In this file photo a young worker prepares flatbread at a bakery in the downtown district of Cairo.—AFP photos



In this file photo guests gather between corn fields to attend a traditional wedding celebration in the village of Shamma in Egypt's northern Nile Delta province of Menoufia.



In this file photo a woman prepares traditional bread for the family at her home at Zorzara village on the west bank of the Nile river off of Egypt's southern city of Aswan.



In this file photo people attend the memorial service after the funeral of the muadhin (prayer caller) of a mosque who died in an attack by militants near the North Sinai provincial capital of el-Arish.



In this file photo a young worker stacks trays of fresh-baked bread at a bakery at downtown Cairo.



In this file photo a tuk-tuk (motorised rickshaw) drives along a road past a funeral memorial service in the northern suburb of Shubra (home to a large Christian population) of Egypt's capital Cairo.

Multi-day weddings, feeding the bereaved and homemade bread are all becoming things of the past in rural Egypt, as centuries-old traditions are steadily squeezed by a punishing economic crisis.

From the south to the north of their country, more and more Egyptians — crushed under the weight of 33.9 percent annual inflation, as of March — are having to abandon once-cherished rituals of celebration and mourning. In the Nile Delta, grooms once threw elaborate bachelor parties before their weddings, erecting large traditional tents, hiring bands and butchering cattle to feed guests from far and wide.

"Hardly anyone does it anymore," 33-year-old engineer Mohamed Shedid told AFP from his home town of Quweisna in Menoufia, 70 kilometres (43 miles) north of Cairo. "We used to blame it on Covid, but then immediately afterwards everyone was hit by the economic crisis," which has pushed the price of meat beyond the reach of most families.

Even before the current crisis — worsened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, which destabilised crucial food imports — 30 percent of Egyptians were living under the poverty line and the same number were vulnerable to doing so, according to the World Bank.

Not in a party mood

At the other end of the country, in the Nubian south where tourists flock to see ancient pharaonic temples by the Nile River, "soaring costs mean our weddings and funerals aren't what they once were," said Omar Maghrabi, a 43-year-old Nubian language teacher. "Things are really hard: families need the money we once spent on these events just to keep households running."

In a year, the Egyptian pound has lost nearly half of its value, pushing consumer prices to more than double in the import-dependent country. Weddings in Nubian villages — renowned for their long extravagant parties — are no longer three-day, nine-meal affairs to which the entire town is invited. "A few months ago, there was a kind of agreement among the villages to make weddings more affordable," Maghrabi told AFP.

"Now the hosts only have to offer a light dinner" instead of the old festivities, which used to last "up to a week for the richest families".

With everyone keeping an iron grip on their purse strings, brides have also grown less dis-

cerning when it comes to wedding rings.

"Rings had to be a certain weight of gold before," the teacher said, but they have now grown finer and lighter.

With newlyweds unable to keep up with skyrocketing gold prices, the highest Muslim authority in Egypt said in March there was no religious objection to swapping gold for cheaper alternatives, namely silver.

Communal grief, downsized

In the tightly-knit agricultural villages of Up-

per Egypt, which extend southwards from Cairo along the narrow green strip of the Nile Valley, funerals are a communal affair. With each death, families rush to bring convoys of food trays to the deceased's relatives, who quickly run out of storage space and call on neighbours and guests to help rid them of the feasts. But now, "it's agreed that only the immediate family will cook for the bereaved", former parliamentarian Mohamed Refaat Abdel Aal, 68, told AFP from his village of Al-Ada-

diya in Qena, 500 kilometres south of Cairo. "Some families are also suggesting that we limit ourselves to just the funeral, and forgo the wake," which at the bare minimum means serving drinks to guests offering condolences.

No commodity has been left undisturbed by price hikes, including simple beverages, coffee and — catastrophically for rural households that once cherished their baking skills — flour.

Traditional flatbread is a staple on every table in every Egyptian village, town and megacity. But in Upper Egypt, it was a source of pride for families



In this file photo a couple poses before a video cameraman for their wedding video along the Cairo University connecting Cairo with its twin city of Giza.

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always to make their own. "It used to be shameful for families in villages to go and buy bread from a bakery. It would mean the house had grown lazy and complacent," Abdel Aal said.

But with the cost of grain rising 70 percent in a year, he added that "everyone is lining up outside bakeries" run by the government. At least they can get subsidised bread there — even if it tastes nothing like what they would make at home.—AFP

Search for alien life extends to Jupiter's icy moons

Could vast, long-hidden oceans be teeming with alien life in our very own Solar System? A new chapter in humanity's search for extraterrestrial life opens on Thursday as Europe's JUICE spacecraft blasts off on a mission to investigate the icy moons of Jupiter.

First discovered by Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei more than 400 years ago, these ice-covered moons are so far from the Sun that they were long dismissed as possible candidates to host life in our backyard. Until recently, the Solar System's habitable zone was thought to "end at Mars", French astrophysicist Athena Coustenis, one of the scientific leads of the European Space Agency (ESA)'s JUICE mission, told AFP.

But NASA's Galileo probe to Jupiter in 1995 and the more recent Cassini spacecraft's trip to Saturn caused scientists to broaden their horizons. The gas giant planets themselves were correctly ruled out, but their icy moons — particularly Jupiter's Europa and Ganymede, and Saturn's Enceladus and Titan — offered fresh hope of nearby life.

Under their icy surfaces are thought to be huge oceans of liquid water — a crucial ingredient for life as we know it. Nicolas Altobelli, a JUICE project scientist at ESA, said it would be "the first time that

we explore habitats beyond the frost line" between Mars and Jupiter. Beyond that line, temperatures plummet and "liquid water can no longer exist on the surface", Altobelli told AFP earlier this year.

'Gigantic' ocean

The Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer (JUICE) mission launches from Europe's spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana on Thursday on an eight-year odyssey through space. By July 2031 it will have entered Jupiter's orbit, from which it will probe Ganymede, Europa and fellow icy moon Callisto.

Then, in 2034, JUICE will enter the orbit of Ganymede, the first time a spacecraft has done so around a moon other than our own. As well as being the largest moon in the Solar System, Ganymede is also the only one that has its own magnetic field, which protects it from dangerous radiation. This is just one of several signs that Ganymede's hidden ocean could provide a stable environment for life.

Unlike similar missions to Mars, which focus on finding signs of ancient life long since extinguished, scientists hope Jupiter's icy moons will still be home to living organisms, even if only tiny or single-celled. Such habitability requires a power

source. Lacking energy from the Sun, the moons could instead take advantage of the gravity that Jupiter exerts on its satellites.

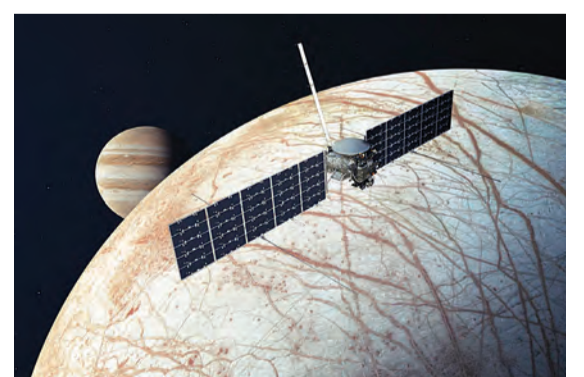
The force creates a process called tidal heating, which warms the interior of the moons and keeps their water liquid. Ganymede's "gigantic" liquid ocean is trapped between two thick layers of ice dozens of kilometres beneath the surface, said Carole Larigauderie, JUICE project head at French space agency CNES.

"On Earth, we still find life forms at the bottom of the abyss," she added. Tiny microbes such as bacteria and archaea have been found to be able to survive on Earth without sunlight, raising hopes that life elsewhere will be able to do the same.

As well as water and energy, life needs nutrients. "The big question is therefore whether Ganymede's ocean contains" the necessary chemical elements, Coustenis said. The ocean would need to be able to absorb the nutrients from anything that fell on the moon's surface, for example, which would eventually dissolve into the water, she added.

Not alone

JUICE's array of instruments will probe Ganymede's ocean to determine its depth, distance



from the surface and — hopefully — its composition. The ESA's 1.6 billion euro (\$1.7 billion) probe will spend eight months orbiting Ganymede, getting as close as 200 kilometres (125 miles) from the moon, all while sheltered from radiation. It will not be the only spacecraft lurking around Jupiter.

NASA's Europa Clipper mission is scheduled to launch in October next year. It will take a quicker path to Jupiter, arriving at Europa in 2030. If one — or more — of Jupiter's moons ticks all the boxes to host life, the "logical next step" would be to send a mission to land on the surface, said Cyril Caval, JUICE project manager at manufacturer Airbus. Although there are no plans for such a mission, which could definitively prove the existence of life outside of Earth, "that's part of the dream," he said.—AFP

Lifestyle

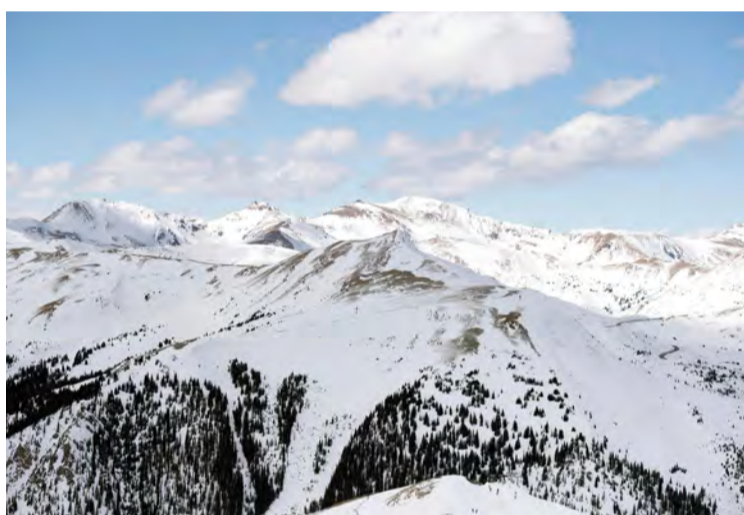
US ski season extended as record snowpack dents Western drought



A skier rides the Black Mountain Express chairlift at Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado.—AFP photos



A skier makes fresh turns after hiking the East Wall at Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado.



Snow covered peaks lining the Continental Divide are seen from the Lenawee chairlift at Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado.



A skier carves turns at Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado.

Record snowfall across much of the western United States has not only helped to alleviate drought -- it has also brought a massive boon for the region's ski resorts, with many hoping to keep their lifts running deep into summer.

Sitting more than 10,500 feet (3,200 meters) above sea level, Colorado's Arapahoe Basin has long been famous for its long seasons. The resort's frozen pistes were the state's first to open last fall, and typically don't close until June.

"I bet you, here, we might make it into July. I hope so," said local ski enthusiast Ian Burkle, 52.

"We always aim for July 4. If you can ski up here on the fourth, it's always great. It's been a couple years since that."

But this year, with mountains across California, Utah and Colorado reporting staggering snowfall, "A-Basin" has plenty of competition for spring skiing, in what is shaping up to be a bumper-sized season across the West.

While Colorado can thank consistent, steady snowfall and low temperatures for its positive ski and snowboard outlook, California's Mammoth Mountain has recorded its snowiest ever winter, with 704 inches (nearly 18 meters) and counting.

That shatters the previous record of 668 inches.

"It's going to be a legendary spring up here and we'll be open daily through at least July!" the resort wrote on Instagram.

Utah passed its statewide record for snowpack on March 24, according to the federal government's Natural Resources Conservation Service, with a number of ski resorts there pushing back their closing dates too.

One Utah resort, Little Cottonwood Canyon, even had to close for a day because of too much snow, which posed an avalanche risk.

It is all a stark contrast with Europe's Alps, where "extreme" warm winter weather left many hopeful skiers frustrated by the sight of brown hillsides with just slivers of snow in January.



A child waits with an adult to meet up with friends



A snowboarder walks to the East Wall gate at Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado.

Katherine Fuller, spokeswoman for Arapahoe, said the resort has received heightened interest from overseas travel agencies "reaching out and seeing how to put together that last-minute US ski trip."

Of course, the wild swings and variations point to worrying long-term trends.

Human-caused global warming exacerbates existing weather patterns, making the wet spells wetter and the dry spells drier. And for many skiers interviewed by AFP, the excitement over snow con-



Skiers hike towards the North Pole couloir at Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado.

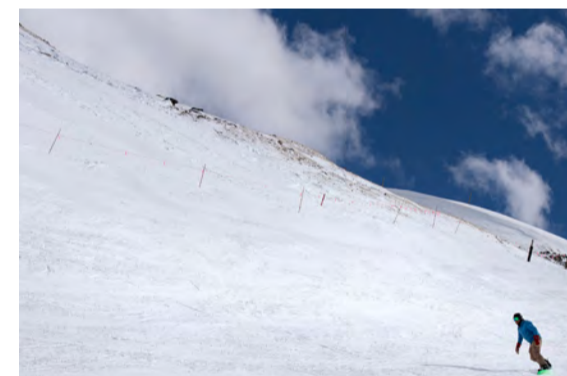


John Spencer of Breckenridge, Colorado climbs towards the North Pole couloir at Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado.

ditions pales in comparison to the implications for the US West's decades-long drought.

"Having quality water and making sure it gets to the right spot, and there's enough for crops and everything is pretty important," said Jared Brower, from Denver.

"Skiing is a nice thing to do, but being able to eat



A snowboarder carves turns at Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado.



A skier rides the Black Mountain Express chairlift at Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado.

is kinda more important in the long term, probably!"

But still, the chance to keep skiing is "awesome," said Fuller. "It's kind of a party scene. The weather's beautiful. There's nothing like skiing in a t-shirt from the top of the mountain in late spring, even early summer." —AFP

Harry but no Meghan at King Charles III's coronation: Palace

Prince Harry will attend the coronation in London of his father King Charles III but without his wife Meghan, Buckingham Palace said on Wednesday. The announcement follows weeks of uncertainty over the presence of Harry and Meghan, who have launched a barrage of criticism of the British royal family since announcing they were quitting royal duties in early 2020.

"Buckingham Palace is pleased to confirm that the Duke of Sussex will attend the coronation service at Westminster Abbey on 6th May," a palace statement said, using Harry's official title.

"The Duchess of Sussex will remain in California with Prince Archie and Princess Lilibet." The day of the coronation, which formally sees Charles crowned king, falls on Archie's fourth birthday. Harry's trip to the UK will be brief and he will not be attending any other coronation-related events, sources told the domestic PA news agency.

Tell-all memoir

The delay by Harry and Meghan in replying to the invitation had reportedly caused difficulties for organisers given the security considerations for an event due to be attended by numerous foreign dignitaries and heads of state.

Harry's attendance is seen as particularly sensitive since the publication of his blockbuster memoir "Spare" in January. In the explosive autobiography, the 38-year-old prince claimed his elder brother Prince William attacked him during an argument about Meghan, an American former television actress.

It followed a string of high-profile interviews and a six-hour Netflix docu-series in which the couple repeatedly criticised the royals.

In comments that were widely seen as damaging to the monarchy, Meghan, who is mixed race, also told US chat show queen Oprah Winfrey in 2021 there had

been comments made before Archie's birth about the colour of his skin. The claim prompted William to furiously respond that the royals were "very much not a racist family".

Despite the tensions, Charles had reportedly been keen for his younger son to be at the coronation.

The couple have made infrequent visits to the UK since relocating to the United States, including for the funeral of Harry's grandmother Queen Elizabeth II in September. But tensions were visible when Harry and Meghan joined William and his wife Kate on a joint walkabout at Windsor Castle to review floral tributes for the late monarch.

Charles, who ascended to the throne upon his mother's death, will be formally crowned king in a pomp-filled ceremony attended by 2,000 people and watched by a worldwide television audience.

The celebrations for the first coronation since 1953



will feature a star-studded concert with Kylie Minogue and Lionel Richie reportedly set to perform.

A nationwide "Big Lunch" and volunteering initiative, as well as the traditional ceremony and royal processions, are also planned. —AFP

Sports

LaVine sinks Raptors, Giddey stars as Thunder roll Pelicans

LOS ANGELES: Zach LaVine inspired a fight-back as the Chicago Bulls eliminated the Toronto Raptors from the NBA play-in tournament Wednesday, while rising Australian star Josh Giddey helped the Oklahoma City Thunder end the New Orleans Pelicans' season. LaVine finished with 39 points — 30 of them scored after half-time — in a 109-105 road victory for the Bulls, who will now face Miami on Friday with the eighth seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs up for grabs.

LaVine and former Toronto star DeMar DeRozan showed superb composure down the stretch as Chicago recovered from a 19-point third-quarter deficit to snatch a win that left Toronto's Scotiabank Arena in stunned silence. DeRozan finished with 23 points while Nikola Vucevic finished with 14 points, 13 rebounds and four assists.

Chicago coach Billy Donovan hailed LaVine's role in the comeback as "extraordinary". "He was phenomenal," Donovan said. "What he did in that third quarter and going into the fourth quarter — it would have been very difficult for us to have won that game had he not done that. His performance was extraordinary. It gave us life, and it gave us hope...he had that mentality where he was going to do whatever he had to get us back in the game."

Toronto, who looked to be in complete control for long periods of the game, were left ruing a litany of missed free throws. The Raptors shot only 18-of-36 from the foul line, a 50 percent success rate which was in stark contrast to the Bulls, who made 18 of their 22 free throws. "That's a lot of misses," Toronto coach Nick Nurse said afterwards. "We left a lot of points on the floor there for sure. Okay, you're not going to make them all. But if you miss more than 10 free throws in a game, it's hard to win."

Pascal Siakam (32 points) and Fred VanVleet (26)

were both outstanding for Toronto, with VanVleet electrifying the home crowd with a buzzer-beating three-pointer from near half-way as the second quarter ended. That gave Toronto a 58-47 lead at half-time, and the Raptors kept up their scoring momentum early in the second half, extending their lead to 19 points as Chicago's offense sputtered.

But the pendulum swung back in the visitors' favor once LaVine found his range, and as Chicago's defensive fine-tuning stifled the Raptors, the Bulls began to steadily whittle away the deficit. A Pat Beverley three-pointer put Chicago ahead for the first time in the second half at 98-95 and Toronto were never able to get back in front thereafter.

Young guns stun Pelicans

In Wednesday's other game, Oklahoma City's youthful line-up showed tremendous poise under pressure to grind out a 123-118 victory over the Pelicans in New Orleans. That result means the Thunder will face the Minnesota Timberwolves on Friday with the chance to advance into the playoffs, while the Pelicans are now eliminated.

The Melbourne-born Giddey — still only 20 — produced a stunning performance with 31 points, 10 assists and nine rebounds. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, the oldest member of the Thunder starting line-up at 24, also came up big with 32 points, while the 23-year-old Lu Dort finished with 27 points. It was another remarkable display by Oklahoma City, whose starting line-up had an average age of just over 21. The game was also Giddey's first experience of high-pressure postseason basketball.

"It was pretty much everything I expected," Giddey told ESPN afterwards. "A loud crowd, a hostile environment. As a kid you grow up wanting to be in these type of moments. I'm glad we came out of



TORONTO: Zach LaVine of the Chicago Bulls shoots a three-point basket during the game against the Toronto Raptors during the 2023 Play-In Tournament on April 12, 2023 at the Scotiabank Arena. —AFP

here with a win and we move on to the next one." Gilgeous-Alexander said Oklahoma City's young squad had developed poise under pressure after being "battle-tested" throughout the regular season.

"We've played in a lot of close games and we've developed good habits — we know what gets it done down the stretch," Gilgeous-Alexander said.

Giddey was already looking ahead to Friday's date in Minneapolis. "It's going to be a similar environment — hostile, on the road, a do-or-die game," Giddey said. "It's going to be another test, but as Shai said — we've had a lot of close games and none of these moments rattle our guys. We'll be ready for Minnesota." — AFP

Rajasthan survive Dhoni-Jadeja scare to top IPL table

CHENNAI: Rajasthan Royals survived a late blitz from M S Dhoni, in his landmark 200th match as captain of Chennai Super Kings, and Ravindra Jadeja to prevail in a last-ball IPL finish on Wednesday. Chasing 176 for victory, Chennai were 113-6 when Dhoni (32) joined Jadeja (25) and the pair put on an unbeaten stand of 59 but fell short of Rajasthan's 175-8 by three runs. Dhoni, 41, rolled back the years as he smashed Sandeep Sharma for two sixes in the final over with Chennai needing 21 to win from the last six balls.

But the medium-pace bowler, who started with two wides, kept his nerve to bowl two yorkers to deny Dhoni and Chennai a miracle as the hosts ended on 172-6. England white-ball skipper Jos Buttler stood out with his 52, guiding last year's runners-up Rajasthan to a total which was just enough for the team's third win in four matches and sent them top of the 10-team table.

Buttler was helped along by Devdutt Padikkal (38) and Ravichandran Ashwin, who started slowly but smashed two sixes in his 30-run cameo. Rajasthan's spinners and Sandeep then combined to restrict Chennai, with Ashwin taking an impressive 2-25 including the key wicket of Ajinkya Rahane for 31. Leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal struck twice in one over, removing Chennai impact player Ambati Rayudu (one) and then New Zealand's Devon Conway soon after the opener reached 50.

Full-strength Pak to bring 'A game' vs depleted Kiwis

LAHORE: A full-strength Pakistan take on a New Zealand side depleted by the Indian Premier League when their five-match T20 series gets under way in Lahore from Friday. Eight Kiwis are missing because of the IPL and skipper Kane Williamson has a bad knee injury, leaving the captaincy to batsman Tom Latham — and providing plenty of opportunity for newcomers to shine.

While Pakistan's top cricketers featured in the inaugural edition of the multibillion-dollar IPL in 2008, they have been barred since — mirroring the frosty diplomatic relations between the neighbors. Pakistan and New Zealand

Medvedev sets up Zverev clash in Monte Carlo

MONTE CARLO: Daniil Medvedev cruised through his first match of the year on clay Wednesday, defeating Italian wild card Lorenzo Sonego 6-3, 6-2 at the Monte Carlo Masters to set up a meeting with Alexander Zverev. Medvedev broke Sonego at the first attempt and then twice more in the second set to reel off his 25th win in his past 26 tour-level matches.

"Every match is a struggle (on clay), but I have had some good matches on clay," said Medvedev. "I managed to play good against a very strong player on clay. It's completely different on clay, but confidence is confidence," the third seed added. "It's about winning matches, because it is always two players that play, and one is going to win... I hope to bring this confidence even further."

Medvedev earned his tour-leading 30th victory of the season and will face Zverev in the last 16 — a first meeting between the pair on clay. "We've had some tough matches," said Medvedev, who has won seven of 13 previous matches against Zverev. Zverev is still finding his way back after tearing ankle ligaments in the French Open semi-finals last year against Rafael Nadal.

Following a difficult first-round tie against the dan-



CHENNAI: Chennai Super Kings' captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni plays a shot against Rajasthan Royals at the MA Chidambaram Stadium on April 12, 2023. — AFP

Rajasthan's impact sub Adam Zampa, who came in for Buttler, was expensive with his leg spin but got the wicket of Moeen Ali. Dhoni, the once premier finisher in the game, raised the noise at the MA Chidambaram Stadium with a four and six off Zampa and more big hits, but the asking rate remained too high.

Earlier Chennai's bowlers, led by left-arm spinner Jadeja, who returned figures of 2-21, kept chipping

away with wickets, but Buttler stood firm. Rajasthan benefitted from some sloppy fielding as Chennai's Moeen dropped two catches at slip and missed a run out. Moeen though made some amends when he bowled Buttler with his off spin after the in-form batsman reached his fifty in 33 balls. West Indies big-hitter Shimon Hetmyer finished unbeaten with 30 off 18 balls. — AFP

demands full commitment and that's what we are focused on," he said. "We are going to bring our 'A' game and keep ourselves focused for good results."

New Zealand's interim coach Shane Jurgensen is in confident mood despite missing so many players. "It will be a quick turnaround from the fantastic series win against Sri Lanka," said Jurgensen of New Zealand's 2-1 T20 victory. Former spin-king Saqlain Mushtaq will be Jurgensen's assistant — just two months after completing his stint as Pakistan's head coach. "It will be a challenging series," Jurgensen said. "Obviously Pakistan is a fantastic team to play in the white-ball format, so it's a good opportunity to challenge them."

The tour comes as something of compensation for New Zealand pulling out of their visit to Pakistan on the day of the first game in Sept 2021, citing security concerns. The Black Caps played two Tests and three ODIs in Pakistan just three months ago. The remaining four T20 matches are on April 15 and 17 in Lahore, and 20 and 24 in Rawalpindi. — AFP

gerous Alexander Bublik, he beat Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut 6-4, 6-4 on Wednesday. "I saw him (Zverev) in the first two matches, he seemed to be in good shape. I'm just going to have to be at my best," said Medvedev.

Ruud revenge

Casper Ruud, coming off a title in Estoril last weekend, kicked off his Monte Carlo campaign with a 7-5, 7-6 (7/1) win over Botic van de Zandschulp. "It is never easy to start at a new tournament and against a player I have lost to before," said Ruud, who avenged his early exit at the hands of Van de Zandschulp in Miami. "Sometimes it is a little tricky playing someone you recently lost to, like 'Not again', but in this case I was a bit happy because I felt like some unfinished business from the Miami match."

Ruud, a semi-finalist in the Principality two years ago, will take on Jan-Lennard Struff next after the German knocked out 14th seed Alex de Minaur 6-3, 6-2. Danish teenager Holger Rune swept aside two-time French Open runner-up Dominic Thiem 6-2, 6-4, while Jannik Sinner advanced as Diego Schwartzman retired while trailing by a set and a break.

Karen Khachanov, the ninth seed, downed Ilya Ivashka in straight sets to book a showdown with Andrey Rublev. Novak Djokovic plays Italian youngster Lorenzo Musetti on Thursday for a place in the quarterfinals. Musetti, who famously led Djokovic by two sets at Roland Garros in 2021 before being forced to retire, thrashed qualifier Luca Nardi 6-0, 6-0.

World number one Djokovic is appearing at his first tournament since failing to get a waiver to enter the



MONTE CARLO: Russia's Daniil Medvedev plays a forehand return to Italy's Lorenzo Sonego during the Monte Carlo ATP Masters Series Tournament on April 12, 2023. — AFP

United States for last month's Indian Wells and Miami events due to his anti-Covid vaccination stance. Matteo Berrettini won a topsy-turvy three-setter against Argentine Francisco Cerundolo despite blowing a 5-0 lead in the opening set.

The Italian recovered to dominate the second-set tie break before completing a 5-7, 7-6 (7/1), 6-4 victory. US eighth seed Taylor Fritz overcame 2014 Monte Carlo champion Stan Wawrinka 7-6 (12/10), 6-2. Chile's Nicolas Jarry will take on two-time defending champion Stefanos Tsitsipas after outlasting Australia's Alexei Popyrin in three sets. — AFP



Jon Rahm

Weary Rahm back to day job after Masters triumph

MIAMI: Jon Rahm admits he is shaking off fatigue following his Masters victory as he prepares to return to the day job at the RBC Heritage in South Carolina on Thursday. The Spanish star won the second major of his career after a weather-disrupted Masters that meant he was forced to play 30 holes on a marathon closing Sunday on his way to clinching the famous green jacket.

A weary Rahm said Wednesday he had considered skipping this week's tournament at Hilton Head Island but wanted to honor an earlier pledge to play in the event. "It did cross my mind, but I made a commitment earlier in the year, and I want to honor that commitment," Rahm said when asked if he had thought about withdrawing. "I put myself in the shoes of not only the spectators, but the kids as well. If I was one of the kids, I would want to see the recent Masters champion play, good or bad."

Rahm acknowledged however that he may struggle to hit the ground running as he grapples with the lingering after-effects of a mentally and physically draining Masters win. The Spaniard revealed he had been inundated with congratulatory messages from well-wishers, including a voicemail from tennis icon and compatriot Rafael Nadal. "The one I was thrilled to hear from, Rafael Nadal left me a very nice voice message," Rahm said. "I've seen him do unbelievable things, and I've texted him every time. He left me a very nice message."

The adrenaline of Sunday's victory led to a poor night's sleep but Rahm said he hopes to be firing on all cylinders by the weekend. "I think it's going to be opposite to most tournaments," Rahm said. "I feel like I'm going to be feeling better every day." "So I think it could be a little challenging early on, but if I can get through the first two days, I think on the weekend I'll feel back to normal. It's getting better every day. It was a very demanding week, a lot going on with the weather and a lot of fighting and a lot of work mentally obviously. So it's going to take a little bit to get to a good spot, but I'm feeling good."

Rahm meanwhile says he is already thinking about what he plans to put on his menu for next year's Champions Dinner, one of the highlights of Masters week that is hosted by the defending champion. "I think this is the part of the week that I've given the most amount of thought already," Rahm said.

"Chef Jose Andres is a really good friend of mine, so I'll be working with him. I also want to talk to Ollie (former Masters champion Jose Maria Olazabal), because we're from the same part of Spain, to see what he did in his dinner, see if I can go a different route. I think I have one of the appetizers down, which would be jambon, Spanish ham, the dessert, which I won't be disclosing, and the wine. Everything in between is still up in the air."

The RBC Heritage is one of the PGA Tour's designated events, with a star-studded field vying for a \$20 million purse. Forty-one of the world's top 50 players are in the field, although Rory McIlroy has withdrawn after missing the cut at Augusta. — AFP

Sports

Mbappe sees future at PSG and targets Olympic 'dream'

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe has said he will still be a Paris Saint-Germain player next season despite regular speculation over his future, as the France superstar also admitted he hopes to play for his country at the 2024 Paris Olympics. Asked where he saw himself playing next season in an interview with television channel France 3 on Wednesday evening, Mbappe responded: "At Paris Saint-Germain. I am Parisian, I have a contract and so it's Paris Saint-Germain."

Mbappe signed a new contract with PSG at the end of last season to keep him at the Qatar-owned club until 2025, although French media reports have indicated that the last year of that deal is optional and down to the player. That would raise the possibility of the 24-year-old being able to leave for free at the end of next season.

Mbappe's comments come a week after he complained over the club's use of an interview with him as part of their season-ticket advertising campaign, before the club removed the footage. He joined PSG in 2017 from Monaco and still hopes to win the Champions League with his home city club. "I have

already got to one final and a semifinal. I have been to the quarterfinals, the last 16. I have done everything but win it," he said. "That is all I am lacking. I hope it will come as soon as possible."

A World Cup winner with France in 2018 and runner-up last year, Mbappe said it was his "dream" to represent his country at the Paris Olympics. "I hope to be there. Everyone knows I have always dreamed of playing at the Olympic Games but it doesn't depend on me," he admitted. Clubs are not usually obliged to release players to compete at the Olympics as it is not part of the FIFA international match calendar.

Mbappe added: "I won't force it because if people don't want me to play at the Olympics that means I must not. The truth is that it is not part of the FIFA calendar. I have to think about my club, and my national team too because there is the Euro just before it, so it needs to be discussed. All these things need to be considered but of course it would be a dream to play at the Olympics, all the more so in Paris." — AFP



Kylian Mbappe

Turkey only rival to UK and Ireland Euro 2028 bid

PARIS: Turkey is the only rival to the UK and Ireland candidacy to host the 2028 European Championship, UEFA announced on Wednesday after receiving final bids from interested countries. European football's governing body said that Turkey would go up against the joint bid from England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to host Euro 2028 and that Turkey is also a candidate to host Euro 2032.

Italy is the only other bidder for the hosting rights to the 2032 tournament. "In the forthcoming months, the UEFA administration will evaluate each of the bids, with the UEFA Executive Committee to vote on who has won the right to host both editions in October," the body said in a statement. The British and Irish joint bid for Euro 2028 is the favorite after the countries abandoned plans to run for the 2030 World Cup.

Wembley, the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, Newcastle's St James' Park, Birmingham's Villa Park and Everton's new stadium in Liverpool would host matches in England, as would Manchester City's Etihad Stadium. The Principality Stadium in Cardiff, Hampden Park in Glasgow, Dublin's Lansdowne Road and Casement Park in Belfast are the other venues being proposed in the bid.

The English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and Irish football associations said in a joint statement: "High-capacity, world-famous football grounds and state-of-the-art new venues will provide the platform for the biggest and most commercially successful UEFA EURO ever — making us a low risk, high reward host."

The bid carries the slogan "Football for all, football for good, football for the future", and says more than 80 percent of ticketholders would be able to travel to matches by public transport. It also predicts benefits of up to \$2.6 billion (\$3.25 billion) for the nations involved. England and Scotland hosted 12 games during Euro 2020, which took place across Europe in 2021 after a delay caused by the pandemic.

Fan violence marred the Wembley final, won by Italy, but UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has played down fears the disorder would affect England's chances of hosting major events. Turkey is hoping for success this time after losing out to Germany in the bidding to host Euro 2024. — AFP

History repeats itself as Crouser's record invalidated

PARIS: Two-time Olympic shotput champion Ryan Crouser's world record throw of 23.38m has been ruled out due to technical faults with the competing area in Idaho, the second time in

15 months he has lost a record. The 30-year-old American's throw at the indoor Simplot Games on Feb 18 was a centimeter further than the outdoor record he set in 2021.

However, governing body World Athletics has refused to validate it after receiving a report from USA Track and Field. "The diameter of the circle was larger at every measuring point than the allowed.... The downward inclination of the landing area was more than the allowed at every measuring point," a World Athletics spokesperson said.

Crouser — who is also the world indoor record

holder with 22.82m — was bemused as to why the record had not been ratified. "This isn't a new issue, it's the reason we have to put mats down to throw off a double plywood ring because then it is an 1.5 elevated ring and breaks the 1:1000 rule," he posted on Instagram. "So I really don't understand where this ruling is coming from."

It is the second time that Crouser, gold medalist at the Rio and Tokyo Olympics, has been left disappointed — a throw of 23.38m at the Millrose Games in Jan 2022 was annulled because of an error with the measurement equipment. — AFP

Philadelphia into semis after VAR drama

GUADALAJARA, Mexico: Philadelphia Union advanced to the CONCACAF Champions League semi-finals on Wednesday after two crucial VAR decisions handed the Major League Soccer side a 2-2 draw against Mexico's FC Atlas. Union set up a last-four clash with Los Angeles FC after two goals from Julian Carranza secured a 3-2 aggregate victory after Philadelphia's 1-0 win in the first leg. Both of Carranza's goals were given despite being initially flagged for offside.

VAR overturned both decisions in Philadelphia's favor to secure a famous result for Jim Curtin's side. Julian Quinones got Atlas off to a dream start after just 11 minutes, Jonathan Herrera laying off to the Colombian striker to rifle home a low shot from just inside the area. But Carranza put Philadelphia ahead 2-1 on aggregate with a brilliant-ly worked equalizer in the 28th minute.

A clever lofted pass from Jack McGlynn found the Argentine in the area and the South American controlled deftly before prodding a finish past the advancing Atlas goalkeeper Jose Hernandez. Carranza looked well onside but the referee's assistant flagged for offside before VAR's intervention awarded the goal to Philadelphia.



GUADALAJARA: Atlas' Mexican Brayan Trejo fights for the ball with Philadelphia's Venezuelan Martin Torres at the Jalisco stadium on April 12, 2023. — AFP

The crucial away goal meant that Atlas would have to score twice to advance and they got one of them just before half time when Julio Furch tapped in from close range after a well-worked move. Yet Philadelphia's defense held firm throughout the second half and then in the 78th minute Carranza grabbed his second after a swift counterattack.

Again, though, the Argentine was flagged for offside — and once again the decision

was overturned to leave Philadelphia 3-2 ahead on aggregate. That left Atlas needing to score twice in the closing minutes, which never looked on the cards. Atlas's frustration mounted and Aldo Rocha was sent off for dissent as tempers flared. Philadelphia's victory means Union will face Los Angeles in a replay of last year's classic MLS Cup final, won by LAFC on penalties after a dramatic 3-3 draw. — AFP

Australian Rules chief 'exasperated' by more racial abuse

SYDNEY: Australian Rules chief Gillon McLachlan was left "exasperated" after a spate of racial abuse again blighted the game, as retired Indigenous star Eddie Betts said "enough is enough". Australia's most popular spectator sport, similar to Ireland's Gaelic football, has a long history of racist incidents targeting Aboriginal and other indigenous players. The scourge reared its head again in recent days with online slurs targeting four players across three clubs.

And late last month Western Bulldogs player Jamarra Ugle-Hagan raised his jersey and pointed to his skin in a show of defiance after saying he was abused from the stands. The sport's integrity unit has launched an investi-

gation into the online abuse and McLachlan pledged to hunt down the culprits, but conceded it was difficult.

"It's pretty hard when often these (social media) accounts are shut down as quickly as they are opened up," he said, adding that the abuse was "a disgrace, it's abhorrent". "We are taking the action we can. We work hard to track them down but we know they disappear, and I'm exasperated." The Australian Football League, the game's governing body, began proactively tackling racism in the 1990s. That included adopting a policy that made it an offence for players or officials to insult someone because of their race, religion, ethnicity, color, nationality or background.

But problems persist. Betts, one of Australia's highest-profile indigenous athletes, said he was not surprised by the latest scandal because "it happens all the time". "Enough's enough. When are we going to see a stance?" he said on Fox Sports. Ugle-Hagan's defiant gesture in a game against St Kilda mirrored one of the most powerful images associated

with racism in Australian sport.

In 1993, Indigenous St Kilda player Nicky Winmar responded to abuse from Collingwood supporters by lifting his shirt while facing the crowd and pointing to his skin. Betts, who once had a banana thrown at him by a spectator and was depicted as a monkey by trolls on Twitter, said: "They don't like Aboriginal people standing up for what they believe in and trying to stamp out racism."

"It feels like they want to put us back down in our boxes where they think we belong," he added. "It is disappointing to see. We just have to continue to keep educating. We're seeing change, but it's always going to happen." A damning independent report in 2021 detailed systemic problems at one of the largest Australian Rules clubs, Collingwood, which led to the resignation of its president Eddie McGuire. The report, which described the club's culture as more toxic and harmful than any other in the Australian Football League, came after former player Heritier Lumumba complained of facing racism while there. — AFP

Bayern suspend Mane after Sane dressing room spat

BERLIN: Bayern Munich have suspended forward Sadio Mane for one game following an altercation with Leroy Sane after this week's Champions League loss to Man City, the club announced Thursday. Newspaper Bild reported former City winger Sane was hit in the face by the Senegal attacker, suffering a cut lip after Tuesday's loss. "Sadio Mane, 31, will not be in the FC Bayern squad for the home game against 1899 Hoffenheim next Saturday," Bayern said.

"The reason is misconduct by Mane after FC Bayern's Champions League game at Manchester City. In addition, Mane will receive a fine," they added. Bayern declined requests to comment on the altercation. Bild reported the clash started in the dying stages of Bayern's loss in Manchester, with footage showing the two arguing on the pitch.

Mane and Sane were seen on the training pitch early on Thursday. The loss was Bayern's biggest Champions League defeat since 2017. The six-time European champions now have little hope of turning over the deficit in next Wednesday's return leg in Munich to make it to the semifinals. Mane, 31, has endured a frustrating time since joining the German champions from Liverpool in the summer of 2022.

The two-time African Player of the Year scored six goals in his first seven matches in all competitions for Bayern, but has not scored since October. Mane suffered a leg injury in November which kept him out of Senegal's Qatar World Cup campaign and saw him miss nine matches for Bayern. — AFP

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
Khalidiya	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

Madrid earn solid lead on Chelsea



MADRID: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema celebrates scoring his team's first goal against Chelsea at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium on April 12, 2023. — AFP

MADRID: Karim Benzema and Marco Asensio struck for Real Madrid as they dominated 10-man Chelsea and opened up a 2-0 Champions League quarterfinal first leg lead on Wednesday. The record 14-time winners and reigning champions eased to a comfortable win against Frank Lampard's side, who had Ben Chilwell sent off in the second half for pulling down Rodrygo Goes as he ran through on goal.

Benzema netted from close range after 21 minutes after Kepa Arrizabalaga tipped a Vinicius Junior effort into his path. Despite controlling the game, Madrid had to wait until the 74th minute for their second, with Asensio drilling home from the edge of the box after a short corner routine. In a battle between the last two Champions League winners, Madrid demonstrated their strength with an impressive display, while Chelsea showed why they are struggling in 11th in the Premier League.

"We are satisfied with the result, for the performance but it's not over yet, we have to fight, to sacrifice for another 90 minutes at Stamford Bridge," said Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti. "We are satisfied

only for tonight, it's not over yet. We know Chelsea will try to (give) everything next week."

Ancelotti, who coached Lampard at Chelsea between 2009-2011, relied on veteran midfielders Toni Kroos and Luka Modric to pull the strings. Lampard, in his second game at the helm since replacing Graham Potter last week, threw Thiago Silva and N'Golo Kante straight into the starting line-up after injury worries. Kante shone against Madrid in the 2021 semis as Chelsea beat them en route to winning the trophy for the second time, and his performance was one positive for Lampard.

The French midfielder slipped on-loan Atletico striker Joao Felix through at the start, but he fired at former Chelsea stopper Thibaut Courtois. Madrid fans had shown their support for Fede Valverde before the game, after he allegedly punched Villarreal's Alex Baena on Saturday, and he nearly rewarded them with a piledriver which flew narrowly off-target. "For me he was the best player on the pitch, he put in a lot of energy," said Ancelotti. "He was impeccable at recovering the ball."

Benzema, who netted a hat-trick at Stamford Bridge last season and scored the goal which sent Madrid through against the Blues in the second leg, tapped home his sixth goal against Chelsea to open the scoring. Dani Carvajal lofted a tempting ball over the top and although Kepa got his fingertips to Vinicius's effort, Benzema was left with a simple tap-in.

Chelsea almost produced an instant equalizer but Courtois made a stunning save to deny Raheem Sterling from close range. Madrid toyed with their opponents, penning them back in their box for large stretches, with Vinicius, Rodrygo and David Alaba going close.

Blues blows

Chelsea have struggled badly for goals this season and after their early chances, found it difficult to build in attack. The Blues have not scored in their last four matches across all competitions for the first time since 1993 — and their only pure striker, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is not registered to play in the Champions League. "The last bit is sometimes confidence," said Lampard. "If you work, keep

going, something can change. No player doesn't want to score a goal, sometimes they need support, confidence and a push in a positive way."

Chelsea's uphill struggle was made harder before the hour mark when Chilwell tugged back Rodrygo as he ran through on goal and was shown a straight red card. A difficult evening was compounded when Asensio squeezed an effort through Fofana's legs and into the bottom corner to double the hosts' advantage. Benzema might have netted another in stoppage time but headed off target after Kepa pushed a cross into his path.

Antonio Rudiger made a good block to thwart Mason Mount late on to ensure his former side could not take anything positive into the second leg. "We're 2-0 down against Real Madrid, that's a fact now, that's done," said Lampard. "(But) we're in a different place now, we're in a place to prove things wrong, change the tone, change the story." Chelsea host Madrid next Tuesday, with the winners facing Manchester City or Bayern Munich in the semifinals. — AFP

Bennacer gives Milan first blood in derby with Napoli

MILAN: AC Milan have the slenderest of advantages in their all-Italian Champions League quarterfinal after Ismael Bennacer fired his team to a 1-0 win over wasteful Napoli on Wednesday. Algeria midfielder Bennacer lashed in the decisive strike five minutes before half-time of an engaging first leg at a packed, loud and wet San Siro after Brahim Diaz and Rafael Leao combined brilliantly.

The 25-year-old's second goal of the season ensured Milan's second win over Italy's champions-elect Napoli in less than a fortnight and a narrow lead to defend at the Stadio Maradona in Naples next week. "It will be a great return leg with a lot of tension and emotion," said Milan coach Stefano Pioli to Amazon Prime. "We performed at a level worthy of the Champions League... we'll go to Naples with confidence and concentration high, we know how difficult it will be down there."

Napoli, who had Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa sent off in the 74th minute and will be without Kim Min-jae for the second leg, should have Victor Osimhen back for the second leg on Tuesday and without their star striker Luciano Spalletti's team got nothing despite having plenty of chances. Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan made a series of impressive stops, in particular late on when he clawed out Giovanni Di Lorenzo's effort just as the more than 70,000 home fans were celebrating victory.

But Bennacer's strike was just enough to give Milan hopes of their first Champions League semifinal since they were crowned kings of Europe for the seventh and most recent time in 2007. That prospect will be all the more mouth-watering for Milan fans as their likely opponents would be local rivals Inter following their convincing win at Benfica on Tuesday. "It's a defeat, but with the attitude we showed today we're confident," said Napoli captain Di Lorenzo to Amazon Prime. "It's not easy to come here without a centre-forward but we created chances."

Maignan saves Milan

The home fans had barely discarded their pre-match display which read "our destiny is in our hands" when Khvicha Kvaratskhelia wasted a great chance to give Napoli a stunning early lead. Anguissa's low cross was dealt with terribly by the home defense but the home fans breathed a huge sigh of relief after Davide Calabria and Rade Krunic combined to block the Georgian winger's shot on the line.

Anguissa then had a powerful shot tipped over the bar by Maignan before Di Lorenzo headed a presentable Mario Rui cross over the bar as Napoli flooded towards the Milan goal in the opening minutes. Kvaratskhelia had a shot blocked after neat exchange with Eljif Elmas and Piotr Zielinski forced Maignan into another good stop with a rocket in the 12th minute.

Milan had barely been in the game up to that point but midway through he first half Leao reminded everyone he was there by fashioning a glorious chance through pure pace only to drag his shot just wide after bursting past Anguissa and Stanislav Lobotka. And then Bennacer put the hosts into the lead after another brilliant piece of individual skill, this



MILAN: AC Milan's Italian midfielder Sandro Tonali controls the ball against Napoli on April 12, 2023 at the San Siro stadium. — AFP

time from Brahim Diaz. The Spanish international span beautifully in the midfield and fed Leao, whose first-time pass alluded Diaz and found Bennacer for a thumping near-post finish.

Simon Kjaer then smashed Bennacer's corner off the bar in stoppage time with a header which

for a moment had fans celebrating before the ball bounced out just before the line. Napoli began the second half in the same manner in which they started the first but again couldn't find their way past Maignan, who did brilliantly to tip Elmas' looping header over the bar. — AFP

Man Utd bidding process goes to third round

LONDON: Rival bidders for Manchester United have been invited to submit a third offer by the end of April, according to reports. Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim Bin Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jaber Al-Thani and British bil-

lionaire Jim Ratcliffe both submitted a second bid for the Premier League club last month. Several offers are understood to have been received in recent weeks but Sheikh Jassim and Ratcliffe remain the frontrunners to buy United should the Glazers give up control of the club they bought in 2005 for £790 million (\$980 million).

United's unpopular owners announced in November they were conducting a strategic review, with the sale of the club one option being considered. The Qatari group has reportedly made an offer of about \$5 billion for 100 percent ownership of the club while Ratcliffe, a boyhood United fan, wants to buy the combined Glazer

shareholding of 69 percent.

The Americans' asking price is believed to be around \$6 billion — a figure that would make the 20-time English champions the most expensive sports club in history. Finnish entrepreneur Thomas Zilliacus last month entered the race and US hedge fund Elliott Investment Management is understood to have made a bid for a minority stake. However, Zilliacus on Wednesday said he was pulling out of a process he described as a "farce".

"Jim Ratcliffe, Sheikh Jassim and myself all were ready to negotiate a deal to buy United. Instead Glazers chose to start a new round," he wrote on Twitter. "I will

not participate in a farce set up to maximize the profit for the sellers at the expense of Manchester United." "The bidding is turning into a farce, with Glazers giving no respect to the club," he added. "The delays will make it very difficult for any new owner to build a winning team for next season."

The Glazers have angered many United supporters by saddling the club with huge debts over the past 18 years. They appeared ready to cash out at an enormous profit when they invited external investment in November but they could yet shun the option of selling a controlling stake. — AFP