



**10** How Japan's big plans for 'hydrogen society' fell flat



**11** Spanish climber ends 500 days of isolation in a cave



**16** Butler and Strus lift Heat; T'olves dominate Thunder



**RAMADAN TIMINGS**

Fajr	03:59
Shurooq	05:21
Dhuhr	11:48
Asr	15:22
Maghrib	18:15
Isha	19:35



## Arabs seek end to Syria crisis

Kuwait reiterates support for Syria unity, sovereignty



**JEDDAH:** A handout picture shows the meeting of top diplomats from the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries plus Egypt, Iraq and Jordan, in Jeddah. — AFP

**RIYADH:** Diplomats meeting in Saudi Arabia agreed Saturday that the Arab world must play a leading role in efforts to broker a solution to Syria's war, following talks aimed at easing Damascus's isolation. Top diplomats from the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—plus Egypt, Iraq and Jordan met in Saudi Arabia at the kingdom's request.

They stressed the "importance of having an Arab leadership role in efforts to end the crisis", according to a statement released by the Saudi foreign ministry early Saturday. They also discussed "the necessary mechanisms for this role" and agreed to intensify "consultations among Arab countries to ensure the success of these efforts".

Backed by Iran and Russia, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has been shunned by many Middle Eastern countries and is a Western pariah over the war—which has killed more than half a million people and forced about half of Syria's pre-war population from their homes. Syria was suspended from the Arab League in 2011 over Assad's brutal crackdown of pro-democracy protests.

But on Wednesday, in the latest sign of an easing

in tensions with Damascus, Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad arrived in Jeddah, the first such visit since the war began. Mekdad and his Saudi counterpart discussed "the necessary steps" to end Damascus's isolation, according to a Saudi statement on Wednesday. And following the latest foreign minister meeting, top Arab diplomats "agreed on the importance of resolving the humanitarian crisis" in Syria and securing conditions that would allow for refugee returns, the Saudi foreign ministry said Saturday.

Syria's rehabilitation sends "a message to the opposition that Assad will triumph in the end and that their foreign backers will betray them", Aron Lund of the Century International think tank told AFP earlier before Saudi Arabia's statement. Inhabitants of rebel-held Idlib, in northern Syria, said they felt "betrayed" by the moves to rehabilitate Assad's government. "We, the people who live in northern Syria, felt extremely betrayed when we heard about the normalization with Assad," Rama Sifu, 32, who lives in Idlib, told AFP. "How come after 12 years of struggle and revolution, they come today and tell him: here is your seat back at the Arab League? This is unacceptable, we really felt let down."

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**RAMADAN KAREEM**

### Loving your spouse

By Hassan Twaha Bwambale

Among the reasons behind marriage is to enjoy security, tranquility and to mutually benefit each other. The All-Loving Allah tells in the Noble Quran what can be translated as: "And among His signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between your affection and mercy. Verily, in that are indeed Signs for people who reflect." (Ar-Roum 30:21)

It is among the many aspects of worshipping Almighty Allah: Translation: Anas bin Ma'lik (ra) narrated that Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said what can be translated as: "When a person gets married, he has completed half of his religion, so let him fear Allah with regard to the other half." (Al-Albani rated it as Saheeh Lighairih, which means it is authentic because it is corroborated by similar narrations, see Saheeh At-Targheeb # 1, 916 + Tahreek Mishkaat Al-Masa'beeh # 3, 032 + Saheeh Al-Ja'mei # 430)

In brief, marriage has several purposes, such as propagating the human race, maintaining moral integrity, the maintenance of women, nurturing relationships based on love and affection, building communal relationships, and defining family structure in Islam. Aisha (Prophet Muhammad's wife) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said what can be translated as: "The best of you is the best to his wives, and I am the best of you to my wives, and when your companion dies, leave him alone (ie do not speak ill of him)."

(Al-Albani rated it as Saheeh (authentic) in Saheeh At-Tirmidhi # 3, 895) On the other hand, Al-Miqdam bin Ma'dey Karb (ra) narrated that Allah's Messenger (pbuh) said what can be translated as: "Whatever you feed yourself, your children, your wife and your servant is charity for you." (Reported by Al-Bukhari in Al-Adab Al-Mufrad # 82. Al-Albani also rated it as saheeh (authentic) in As-Silsilah As-Saheeha # 452)

Continued on Page 6

### Security operatives search for missing Kuwaiti in Kabd

**KUWAIT:** Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior Lieutenant General Anwar Al-Barjas confirmed on Friday that, based on the directives and instructions of the first deputy prime minister, interior minister and acting Defense Minister Sheikh Talal Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the extensive security search campaign was launched for the missing citizen Mubarak Al-Rashidi in the Kabd region. — KUNA (See Page 3)

### Fighting rocks Sudan capital

**KHARTOUM:** Explosions rocked the Sudanese capital Saturday as paramilitaries and the regular army traded attacks on each other's bases, days after the army warned the country was at a "dangerous" turning point. The paramilitaries said they were in control of the presidential place as well as Khartoum airport, claims denied by the army, as civilian leaders called for an immediate ceasefire to prevent the country's "total collapse".

The eruption of violence came after weeks of deepening tensions between military leader Abdel Fattah al-Burhan

and his number two, paramilitary commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, over the planned integration of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) into the regular army. Witnesses reported "confrontations" and loud explosions and gunfire near an RSF base in south Khartoum. Military leader Burhan has been at loggerheads with his number two, the RSF commander, over talks to finalize a deal to return the country to civilian rule and end the crisis sparked by their 2021 coup.

The RSF said its forces had taken control of Khartoum airport, after witnesses reported seeing truckloads of fighters entering the airport compound, as well as the presidential palace and other key sites. Its claims were quickly denied by the army.

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### Saudis among scores of war prisoners freed

**SANAA:** Scores of prisoners of war, including Saudis, were freed on Saturday as part of a cross-border exchange between a Saudi-led military coalition and Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels, the International Committee of the Red Cross said. The flights connecting Saudi Arabia and Houthi-held territory in Yemen were part of a multi-day transfer involving nearly 900 detainees, that comes amid peace talks which have raised hopes for an end to Yemen's eight-year-old war.

The first flight of the day took off from the southern Saudi city of Abha before 9:00 am, headed for Yemen's Houthi-held capital Sanaa with 120 Houthi rebel prisoners, ICRC public affairs and media adviser Jessica Mousan said. It was followed by a flight from Sanaa to Riyadh carrying 20 former detainees, among them 16 Saudis and three Sudanese, that landed around midday local time, according to the state-affiliated Al-Ekhabriya channel.

Sudan is part of the Saudi-led coalition and has provided ground troops for the fighting. In addition, 100 Houthis were due to be flown on three flights to Sanaa from Mokha on the Red Sea coast, a town held by Yemen's coalition-backed government.

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**KHARTOUM:** Heavy smoke bellows above buildings in the vicinity of the Khartoum's airport on April 15, 2023, amid clashes in the Sudanese capital. — AFP



**SANAA:** Yemeni Houthi prisoners board a plane of the International Committee of the Red Cross from the government-held town of Mokha to Sanaa during a prisoner swap on April 15, 2023. — AFP



# Urbanization, modernization changing people's lifestyles

## Technology affects the youth greatly



KUWAIT: Men take 'selfie' pictures along the beach at sunrise, in Kuwait City on April 15, 2023. With the growth of urbanization and modernization, people's lifestyles have changed significantly. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



KUWAIT: Photo shows an aerial view of the landmark Kuwait Towers and the cape of Kuwait City overlooking the Gulf waters.

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: With the growth of urbanization and modernization, people's lifestyles have changed significantly. The way people work, eat and spend their free time has changed, which has an impact on how they observe Ramadan. Kuwait Times spoke with Dr Jamil Al-Marri, Sociologist and Family Consultant, who noted that with the widespread use of technology, people can now easily connect with loved ones and communities, regardless of physical location, which has allowed people to stay in touch and participate in events virtually.

"Although technology helps people to communicate with those abroad, it has also contributed to reducing distances between people in the same country. In the past, there was no phone to send Ramadan blessings,

so people used to congratulate each other in person, but nowadays they click once to send a message to everyone," he said.

"What distinguishes Kuwaiti society is that diwanis are still the same and have not been affected by technology. Men still go to diwanis daily during the month of Ramadan. However, technology has had a bad influence, as families have gotten far apart, even at the iftar table, which was characterized by closeness and respect for food and the elders of the family," Marri said.

"Today's youth stay all night up using the phone, and when it is time to break the fast, they refuse to get up and join the family, preferring not to sit at the table despite the presence of all family members, from the eldest to the youngest," he said, not-

ing that technology has contributed to the absence of young people from family gatherings and even religious duties like tahajjud (nightly prayers) in the last 10 days, reading the Holy Quran or performing obligatory prayers," he added.

Dr Marri indicated that technology has greatly affected the youth, with the age of the affected group being 25 and lower. "If young people sit at the iftar table, they are only physically present, as in reality, they are preoccupied with the phone and are not present either visually or auditorily, which harms not only their family cohesion, but also the health of their digestive system, as studies have proven that the presence of phones in the presence of food is an unhealthy habit because it makes the person consume more and chew faster," he pointed out.

Dr Marri stressed technology is a fact parents are forced to bear, but they should use technology for their own benefits too. "I send messages to my children and grandchildren before iftar, with my desire that we all be at the same table away from the presence of phones," he said. In the event of a lack of response, he said parents must find an alternative, but away from violence and comparison between children who are preferable. They should rather use encouragement and indirect words that encourage motivation.

"We must teach our children the etiquette of food, and how to discipline the soul before the month of Ramadan. We need an Islamic culture where science does not contradict religion. There is no need for fear in guiding children, but guidance should be in private and not in public for better results," he stressed.

## Kuwait reaffirms support for Syria national unity

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah reaffirmed his country's principled and unwavering backing for Syria's national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and opposition to interference in its internal affairs. The minister made the remark during unofficial talks on the sidelines of a suhur (pre-sunrise meal) banquet hosted by Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud in Jeddah on Friday, and attended by the foreign ministers of the GCC countries, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.

He said Syria is an important Arab country and principal part of the Arab national security system and had undeniable historical contributions to the enrichment of human civilization. With the Syrian crisis entering its 13th year, Syria, its people and neighboring countries have suffered security, political, economic and humanitarian impacts, he said, regretting that regional international interference in its affairs has disrupted regional security and stability, thus creating a breeding ground for terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Kuwait has adopted a principled stance based on giving no political, financial and military backing to any party, and, instead, favoring a political and peaceful solution to the crisis and allowing humanitarian aid access, he said, pointing Kuwait hosted three donor conferences to ease out the humanitarian situation in Syria.

Kuwait also attended several international conferences on the humanitarian situation in Syria and put



JEDDAH: A handout picture provided by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), shows Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister Walid Al-Khurajji (center) speaking with Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah upon his arrival in Jeddah. Arab countries gathered in Jeddah to discuss ending Syria's long spell in the diplomatic wilderness, as regional relations shift following Saudi Arabia and Iran's decision to resume ties. — AFP

forward several initiatives in this regard through its non-permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (2018-2019), he said, boasting that air traffic between Kuwait and Syria has not been suspended since the crisis hit the country. Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah spoke highly of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries for their initiatives aiming at resolving the Syrian crisis through political and realistic solutions.

In this context, he reiterated the necessity of finding a political solution to the Syrian crisis, based on

maintaining this Arab country's unity, security, stability and Arab identity only for the good of its people. However, he stressed, this solution should be built on sound foundations and frameworks and in line with relevant Arab resolutions, mainly genuine and tangible confidence-building steps by the Syrian government by releasing prisoners, identifying the fate of missing people, facilitating the repatriation of refugees and displaced persons, delivering humanitarian aid to the needy, resuming constitutional committee activities and, finally, reaching national reconciliation. — KUNA

## Education ministry to review expat layoff policies

KUWAIT: The Education Ministry will review its policy regarding the replacement of expatriate staff. "The ministry will take the advice of the Teachers Association's demands to be cautious and not rush the Kuwaitization policy, in addition to not having large numbers in the lists of those dismissed. They have agreed that the next layoffs will only be done after ensuring the availability of qualified national elements and determining the extent of their ability to perform at the same level, so that there would not be a sudden drop in the level of education, especially since the current education quality has some issues, including the low level of some teachers in schools," sources revealed to Kuwait Times.

"The termination of 1,800 teachers in the current year will not happen again next year, as no more than 1,000 teachers will be laid off. The ministry will slow down termination decisions unless qualified Kuwaiti, GCC nationals or children of Kuwaiti mothers are available, and through hiring highly qualified expatriates that the ministry needs," sources added.



## LOYAC celebrates winning projects

KUWAIT: During its annual Ramadan ghabqa, LOYAC honored three entrepreneurial projects that won the Najiba Al-Sayed Yaqoub Al-Rifai Award, which was launched this year to honor the winners of the "Kun-Tinyo" program for social entrepreneurship. Farea Al-Saqqaf, Chairman and Managing Director of LOYAC and LOYAC Art Academy (LAPA), commenced the ceremony with an opening speech in which she expressed her happiness on this occasion and introduced the winning projects. "There is nothing



more beloved to my heart than supporting and empowering young people to launch their own projects that will serve their communities," Saqqaf said.

"Tonight, we celebrate the honoring of three distinguished projects in the Continue program for community leadership. Each one carries an important humanitarian and societal issue, such as the issue of developing digital technical skills for autistic youth who are distinguished by their intelligence, which is an untapped project that won first place, then the Two Point OH project, which won second place for solutions to the problem of environmental pollution through a digital platform that connects individual consumers, companies and institutions with companies that recycle their waste or food banks. Finally, a project that helps parents and the school monitor the

health and safety of young students through a digital wristband," Saqqaf said.

Before the awards were distributed, a short documentary was shown that included the biography of the late Najiba Al-Rifai. Najiba Al-Sayyid Yaqoub Al-Sayed Youssef Al-Rifai was born in 1930 in the Sharq region of Kuwait. She joined the tribal school in 1938. In 1946, she married the late poet, writer and teacher Ahmed Muhammad Zain Al-Saqqaf, who in turn encouraged her to read and was keen to develop her abilities and skills, especially in the Arabic language and memorizing Arabic poetry, so she memorized thousands of poetic verses of Arab poets from pre-Islamic times until the modern era.

Najiba was passionate about science, so she joined the British Institute to learn English. She also



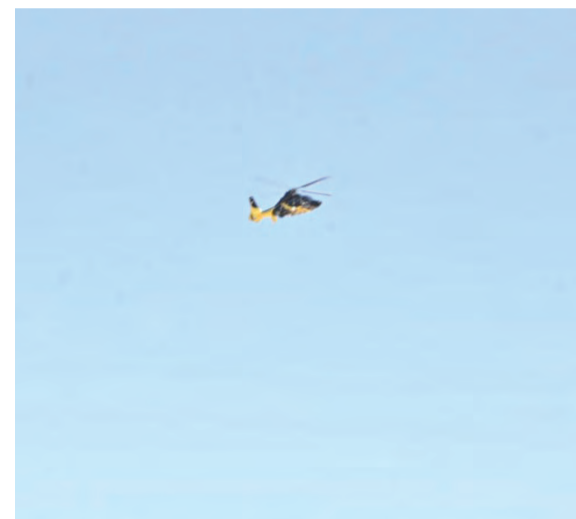
loved volunteer work, so she was an active member of the Red Crescent Society, a member of the Association for the Disabled and the Women's Cultural Association, and she was an advocate for women's full political and social rights.

She had an important influence and role in raising her daughter, Farea Al-Saqqaf, on principles and values adhering to women's rights and pushing her towards volunteer work, as she accompanied her since she was a young woman to the activities of the Kuwaiti Red Crescent Society and involved her in them. This was followed by the distribution of cash prizes to the winners to support their distinctive projects of community benefit, as the value of the prize for the first place winner was KD 1,500, for the second place KD 1,000 and for the third place KD 500.

Local

# Security operatives search for missing Kuwaiti in Kabd

200 security men, 90 patrol vehicles participate in a large campaign



**KUWAIT:** Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior Lieutenant General Anwar Al-Barjas confirmed on Friday that, based on the directives and instructions of the first deputy prime minister, interior minister and acting Defense Minister Sheikh Talal Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the extensive security search campaign

was launched for the missing citizen Mubarak Al-Rashidi in the Kabd region.

Lieutenant General Al-Barjas said in a statement after participating in the extensive security campaign that the ministry conducted a 24-hour search operation to uncover the circumstances of the incident. The assistant undersecretary of

the Ministry of Interior for Operations, Major General Jamal Al-Sayegh, said in a statement to the Kuwaiti news agency that 200 security men, 90 patrol vehicles and 120 squads launched a large-scale search operation in the Kabd area for the missing citizen.

He added that the general directorate of criminal

evidence, investigations, public security, traffic, vertical aviation and the department of central operations and research participated in the search operation. Major General Al-Sayegh said that the search for the missing Kuwaiti will continue. He expressed his appreciation to all those who contributed and participated in the process. — KUNA

## Kuwait-S Korea trade volume hits \$13 billion

By Faten Omar

**KUWAIT:** Trade volume between South Korea and Kuwait reached \$13 billion in 2022, Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to Kuwait Chung Byung-Ha said, noting the country is hoping to increase trade between the two countries. On the sidelines of an iftar banquet hosted on Thursday for local media, Ambassador Chung highlighted that Korea and Kuwait have been close since the start of their bilateral relations, stressing the importance of strengthening the relationship between both countries in the fields of trade, education, tourism and most importantly, people-to-people connections.

Chung revealed the Korean Embassy has signed an agreement on establishing the Korean Language Institute at Kuwait University, adding an expert in the Korean language has been selected and will arrive in Kuwait at the end of April to start Korean classes at the end of May or June. "We are also planning to host some cultural events. A sporting event will be held too, where a well-known Korean taekwondo team will display a demonstration and performance in May," he said.

Regarding Korean companies, Chung said 14 Korean companies are working in Kuwait, mostly in major construction projects. "Korea also exports



**KUWAIT:** Ambassador of Republic of Korea to Kuwait, Chung Byung-Ha poses for a group photo with local media representatives.

automobiles and cosmetics, which are widespread in Kuwait," he said. The ambassador said the ministry of public works is interested in Korean companies maintaining the roads of Kuwait.

"The dialogue still ongoing with representatives of seven embassies in Kuwait. The ministry is keen on keeping the roads in a good condition. Later this year, we will see more projects by Korean companies," he said. Chung confirmed that online visa application is available for Kuwaitis, while non-Kuwaitis have to apply for a tourist visa through the

embassy, and it is issued within a week.

On the medical sector, Chung said: "We are in the final stage of Jahra Hospital that will be under Korean management. Kuwait also sends patients to top private Korean hospitals. We have a memorandum of understanding with Kuwait to receive some patients." Chung concluded by praising local media efforts, saying some Korean officials will soon visit the country to discuss comprehensive topics. Korean cuisine was offered at the iftar that was held at ambassador's residence in Mishref.

and vital signs, in addition to many other tests. This is based on the institute's belief in the necessity of conducting early examination and raising awareness of diabetes to contribute to the prevention of this disease and its complications."

The participating specialized medical team also provided medical consultation on diabetes and its complications, answering questions about various medical issues. Moreover, educational brochures and pamphlets on vital topics such as healthy foods, intermittent fasting, how to prevent diabetes, insulin doses and many others were distributed to the attendees. "The institute spares no effort in spreading awareness among all segments of society, noting the importance of the role played by the institute through these awareness campaigns," Aryan added.

## Dasman Diabetes Institute organizes awareness campaign

**KUWAIT:** Dasman Diabetes Institute organized an awareness campaign at the Scientific Center. The institute's mobile clinic conducted analyses and medical examinations for employees and those present at the Scientific Center. Head of public relations and media at DDI Tareq Al-Aryan said: "The institute participated through the medically equipped mobile clinic to conduct basic and preventive medical examinations such as checking sugar levels, pressure



**KUWAIT:** Dasman Diabetes Institute organized an awareness campaign at the Scientific Center.

## MoH announces online booking for patients

**KUWAIT:** Health Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad announced that people can register online through the Q8 Seha application by inputting their personal data along with the necessary documents and medical reports. "A text message will be sent to the phone upon completion of the registration. Upon acceptance of the request, the reviewer will be notified later, via another text message, of the time to go to the concerned hospital to carry out the necessary preparations and examinations before the scheduled appointment with the visiting doctor, in order to achieve optimal utilization of their time in patient service," he said.

Dr Sanad stressed the digital transformation in the ministry and the completion of the automation of health services is under the direct supervision and guidance of Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi and came under the follow-up of the undersecretary for technical affairs in the Ministry, Dr Abdul Rahman Al-Mutairi and the assistant undersecretary for Digital Health, Ahmed Gharib. This new measure will help as this is a right commitment and a solid basis for the ministry's work methodology, he added. — KUNA

### News in Brief

#### Eid Al-Fitr on Friday

**KUWAIT:** Al-Ojeiri scientific center for research announced that the beginning of the month of Shawwal for the year 1444 AH will be according to the general standard of Al-Ujiri on April 21, and accordingly, the first day of Eid Al-Fitr falls on next Friday. The astronomical crescent will be born at 07:14 on Thursday and will stay for 24 minutes in the evening of the same day.

#### Dharaan Sarayas begins

**KUWAIT:** The Dharaan season will start on April 16th and will go on for 26 days with by unstable weather conditions, said Kuwaiti meteorologist, historian and head of Kuwait Astronomy Society, Adel Al-Saadoun on Saturday. Al-Saadoun said that the seventh season of the Suhailian year will begin on August 24th. The season consists of 26 days, and two stars await it, the first tomorrow, which is "Al-Fargh Al-Mu'akhar", and the second is the star of Al-Rasha (the belly of the whale) and will appear on April 29. The season is characterized by the varying temperature range. The average temperature during the day ranges from 35 degrees Celsius at the beginning of the season to 40 degrees at the end." He explained that one of the most important features of the season is the occurrence of galleries and the rapid fall of rain, with weather fluctuations that combine rain with strong and fast winds that raise dust.

#### Kuwait concerned over Sudan

**KUWAIT:** The Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry on Saturday voiced extreme concern over ongoing armed clashes between the Sudanese army and Rapid Support Forces. In a press statement, the ministry called on all warring parties to stop infighting immediately, exercise self-restraint and resort to reasoning and dialogue in order to overcome their disputes and maintain Sudan's security and stability. Saudi Arabia on Saturday voiced concern over violent escalation between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In a press statement, the Saudi Foreign Ministry said the kingdom has called on all military and political parties to have dialogue, exercise self-restraint. (Foreign) calls on Kuwaiti citizens in Sudan to stay away from areas of security tension. Kuwait - 4 - 15 (KUNA) -- In light of the ongoing security developments in the sisterly Republic of Sudan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs calls on Kuwaiti citizens in the Republic of Sudan to take the utmost care and caution and stay away from areas of Tension and adherence to the instructions issued by the official authorities in the country. The Ministry called on Kuwaiti citizens to contact the Embassy of the State of Kuwait in Khartoum in the event of a request for assistance on the following emergency number: (002499002020). — KUNA

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#### News in Brief



#### Asian dies in Sulaihiya fire

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Fire Force managed to control a fire that started in a chalet in a farm in Sulaihiya industrial area. Firefighting teams from Istiqlal and Kabd stations rushed to the location scene - a chalet used as staff quarters for workers. One Asian worker died during the fire incident.

#### Kuwait mourns Al-Karati

KUWAIT: In the name of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the Al-Sabah Family, the Amiri Diwan thanked all citizens and expats who participated in offering sympathy on the demise of Fadhlila Al-Karati, the widow of Sheikh Falah Al-Malek Al-Sabah. The Amiri Diwan prayed to Allah the Almighty to protect those from any evil and bestow His mercy upon Al-Karati's soul. —KUNA

#### Council nullifies hiring law

KUWAIT: The Council of Ministers has nullified the law that suspended the hiring of top executives and supervisors jobs, in addition to suspending transfers. The civil service commission will issue a memo of the decision this week. The Council took the decision to suspend the law on 23 Jan 2023 when the government resigned.

#### Photo of the day



KUWAIT: Photo shows an aerial view of the Marina mall and boats moored in the Marina harbor in Kuwait City. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## AU organizes Ramadan meal distribution drive

KUWAIT: The Australian University (AU) held its annual meal distribution drive on holy month of Ramadan, throughout which meals were distributed in areas with a higher population of laborers, and needy individuals and families. The university considers the meal distribution drive an essential component of its annual Ramadan program which is held as part of the university's corporate social responsibility strategy and has showcased its continuous efforts in every project involving charity and volunteering. The initiative brings together volunteers from AU's students and staff to prepare meals and effectively organize the distribution plan.

Commenting on the initiative, May Al Musallam, Senior Manager of Public Relations, and Marketing at AU, affirmed the university's commitment to social responsibility and its keenness to tackle the most pressing issues affecting society while delivering a message of alliance, compassion and cooperation. Al Musallam further



added: "The university's continued commitment to volunteering and charity in its various initiatives continues to give back value to the com-

munity, and we strive every year to increase our Ramadan efforts in a way that serves the community and its diverse segments."

## Ramadan charity extremely high

KUWAIT: The Social Affairs Ministry's initial estimations for collections by licensed charity organizations for the month of Ramadan has been estimated to raise a large amount of money, almost doubling the amounts of previous years, sources told Kuwait Times. Sources said the ministry asked charities to provide them with financial figures and their sources before the end of the first week of May, no later than 10 days after the Eid al-Fitr holiday.

"The ministry seeks to localize charitable work and not to send funds abroad without an official request indicating where these funds will be sent, informing the foreign affairs ministry and coordinating with them in disbursing the amount abroad," the sources explained.

"The ministry will follow the instructions of the Cabinet in keeping charities local. It will be a helpful factor in supporting families in need and distributing food and basic needs to people who need it throughout the year and not only in Ramadan."

The sources also added that revenues of charitable committees are huge, and their expenses must be tracked so that these funds do not go to other than legitimate channels. "The ministry of social affairs is coordinating to place liaison officers who will follow up and monitor the funds of these committees," they said.

Sources indicated that the ministry of social affairs is working to provide these charities with monthly assistance for Kuwaitis with minimum income, as well as widows and divorced Kuwaiti women who are not working in government or private jobs. "The ministry noted that the assistance to Kuwaitis is very little compared to the charities' income, as well as what it provides to non-Kuwaitis," sources said.



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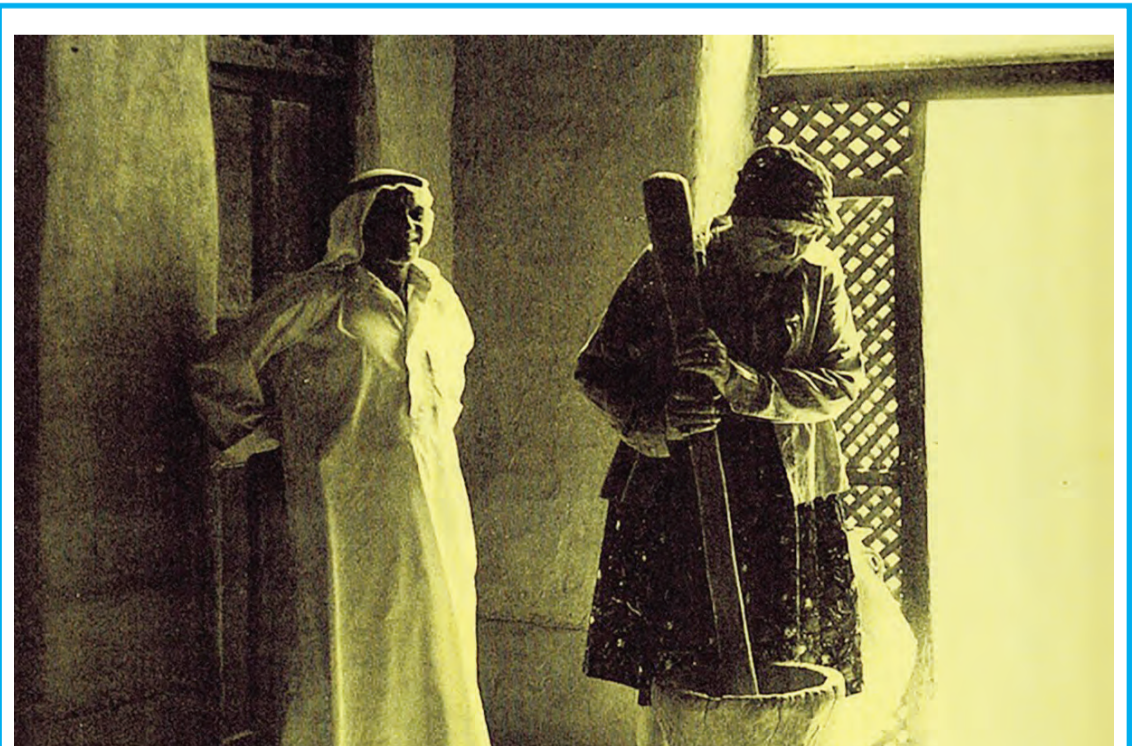


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KUWAIT: The image shows Dame Violet Dickson and Esakhalfan inside the museum entrance at Failaka Island in 1962. Dame Violet (1896 -1991) was the wife of British colonial administrator HRP Dickson. She lived in Kuwait for 61 years and had a good reputation among Kuwaitis because of her social activity. Source: The voice of 'OUD' a story of Kuwait, Jehan S Rajab, Kuwait, 1995. Prepared by Mahmoud Zakaria Abu Al-Ella, researcher in heritage at the Ministry of Information.



**Bolsonaro ordered to face questioning over Brazil riots**

## Turkey's quake survivors fear being left out of May vote

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**URAYASU:** Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (C) attends an election campaign in support of the Liberal Democratic Party candidate in Urayasu, Chiba prefecture. Kishida resumed campaigning after being evacuated unharmed from the scene of an apparent "smoke bomb" blast. — AFP

# Japan PM resumes campaigning after blast

## Man arrested on suspicion of obstruction of business

**TOKYO:** Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida resumed campaigning on Saturday after being evacuated unharmed from the scene of an apparent "smoke bomb" blast. The incident in western Japan's Wakayama came less than a year after the assassination of former prime minister Shinzo Abe, which traumatised the country and forced a security shake-up for public officials.

Kishida was in the city to deliver remarks in support of a ruling party candidate at a local port when a disturbance rippled through the crowd gathered to hear him speak.

Footage from national broadcaster NHK showed the prime minister turning to look backwards as a person was detained by security and people moved away, some shrieking.

Seconds later, a blast was heard and white smoke filled the air. Footage and photos from the scene showed a silver, pipe-like object on the ground, but it was not immediately clear whether it had caused the blast and smoke.

Government officials said a man had been arrested on suspicion of obstruction of business. He has been identified as a 24-year-old man from the Hyogo region, a Wakayama police official told AFP. There was no immediate information on a potential motive. People at the scene described moments of panic.

"I ran frantically, and then, 10 or so seconds later, there was a loud sound and my kid started crying. I was stunned, my heart is still beating fast," one woman told NHK. A man at the scene told the broadcaster that "when we all stopped in front of the podium, someone started saying 'culprit!' or something, or 'an explosive was thrown,' so everyone started dispersing fast." "And then, about 10 seconds after the culprit was captured, there was a blast," he said.

### 'Unforgivable atrocity'

Kishida was unharmed, and soon resumed campaigning, including a stop at a local train station. "There was a loud blast sound at the previous speech venue. Police are investigating details, but

I'd like to apologise for worrying many people and causing them trouble," he said.

"An election that's important to our country is taking place, and we must work together and follow through on it." He is expected to appear later Saturday afternoon in Chiba, east of Tokyo, despite the incident, which his party's election strategy chairman Hiroshi Moriyama described as an "unforgivable atrocity".

Security at local campaign events in Japan can be relatively relaxed, in a country with little violent crime and strict gun laws. But the country bolstered security around politicians after the assassination of Abe, who was shot and killed while speaking at a campaign event in July 2022.

His alleged assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, reportedly targeted him over his links to the Unification Church, and the incident sparked revelations about the connection between the sect and political figures in Japan. Yamagami was reportedly angry at the sect over large donations his mother made to the group,

which left the family bankrupt. The head of Japan's National Police Agency, and the local police chief, resigned in the wake of Abe's assassination after an investigation confirmed "shortcomings" in the security for the former leader.

The investigation slammed a system under which local police were given responsibility for the security of visiting senior officials. With proper security, "it is deemed highly probable that this incident could have been prevented", the report concluded.

The incident comes as climate and energy ministers from the Group of Seven countries meet in the northern city of Sapporo, and a day before the bloc's foreign ministers arrive in Karuizawa in Nagano for talks. Japan will host the G7 leaders' summit next month in Hiroshima and security concerns have regularly been raised.

"The fact that an incident like this happened at this time must be taken seriously," anti-terrorism expert Isao Itabashi of the Council for Public Policy told NHK. — AFP



**BOSTON:** Relatives of Jack Teixeira leave the John Joseph Moakley United States Courthouse, in Boston, Massachusetts. Teixeira, 21, an employee of the US Air Force National Guard, was charged with leaking a trove of classified US government documents. — AFP

## US airman charged over Pentagon leak

**BOSTON:** A young national guardsman was charged Friday with orchestrating the most damaging leak of US classified documents in a decade, as the government signaled it intends to make an example of the 21-year-old. Jack Teixeira was arrested Thursday following a week-long probe into the leak of documents—which unveiled US concern over Ukraine's ability to fend off the Russian invasion, and showed Washington has spied on allies Israel and South Korea.

It is the biggest such breach since the 2013 dump of National Security Agency documents by Edward Snowden and raises tough questions about junior staffer Teixeira's access to high-level secrets. Teixeira, who wore a beige jumpsuit and appeared glum at his first court appearance in Boston, was charged with the "unauthorized retention and transmission of national defense information."

He is also accused of the "unauthorized removal and retention of classified documents or material." The counts carry maximum prison sentences of 10 years and five years, respectively. At one point during the short hearing, his father shouted out, "We love you Jack," to which Teixeira responded: "Love you too, Dad." He was not required to enter a plea and was held pending a detention hearing set for next Wednesday. US Attorney General Merrick Garland

said there were "very serious penalties" associated with the crimes. "People who sign agreements to be able to receive classified documents acknowledge the importance to the national security of not disclosing those documents, and we intend to send that message (about) how important it is to our national security," Garland added.

US President Joe Biden said in Ireland, where he was traveling, that he had ordered the Pentagon "to make sure they get to the root of why (Teixeira) had access in the first place, number one, and number two, to focus extensively on the extent to which it all occurred." Teixeira is suspected of posting the documents, some dated as recently as early March, to a private chat group on the social media platform Discord. The New York Times reported that Teixeira was the leader of the group called Thug Shaker Central and reportedly posted the documents under the nickname "OG."

He first wrote down the contents of classified documents to share with the group but later began taking photos, telling other members not to share them, according to a court affidavit by an FBI agent released Friday. Some of the documents later appeared on other sites, including Twitter, 4Chan and Telegram. Among new revelations from the documents, US intelligence services were aware of up to four additional Chinese spy balloons other than the one that was spotted in late January as it entered US airspace, then tracked sailing across the US before fighter jets shot it down over the Atlantic February 4, the Washington Post reported. One of the earlier Chinese balloons flew over a US aircraft carrier and its strike group on maneuvers in the Pacific, the Post said. — AFP

## Tearful Biden ends Ireland trip with nod at re-election

**BALLINA:** US President Joe Biden ended an emotive visit to Ireland on Friday with a campaign-style exhortation for hope, as he inched closer to formally launching his 2024 bid. The 80-year-old Democrat, who has Catholic Irish roots, had a tearful encounter with a priest before a concluding speech that coincided with an angry address back home by Donald Trump, his potential Republican rival for next year's White House battle.

"I told you my plan is to run again," Biden told reporters before flying to the United States. "I've already made that calculus. We'll announce it relatively soon. But the trip here just reinforced my sense of optimism about what can be done."

Biden was feted by an estimated 27,000 people as he spoke in front of the floodlit St Muredach's Cathedral in Ballina, one of his family's ancestral hometowns, in northwest Ireland. In 1828, Biden's forebear Edward Blewitt sold the bricks that went into the construction of the Roman Catholic cathedral, using the money to fund his famine-stricken family's later emigration to the United States.

The Irish and Americans were united by an optimistic vision, Biden said in the speech. "More than anything, hope is what beats in the hearts of all our people," he said, reprising the core message of his and Barack Obama's historic campaign in 2008. "Even during times of darkness and despair, hope has kept us marching forward toward a better future, one of a greater liberty, greater dignity and greater possibilities."

### 'Shock of his life'

Biden was in a more sorrowful mood earlier on a visit to the celebrated Roman Catholic pilgrimage shrine at Knock, near Ballina. Organisers made the last-minute discovery of a link between the Biden family and one of their priests, Father Frank O'Grady, who returned to Ireland after years serving as a chaplain in the US army.

The president's son Beau Biden died of brain cancer aged 46 in 2015. Father O'Grady administered the last rites at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center outside Washington. O'Grady was not on the official guest list but was given hurried security



**BALLINA:** US President Joe Biden smiles as he delivers a speech at Saint Muredach's Cathedral in Ballina. — AFP

clearance. Biden said it was "incredible" to meet by chance with the priest.

"It seemed like a sign," he said of the 10-minute meeting, which was joined by his remaining son Hunter and the president's sister, Valerie Biden Owens. O'Grady told Irish broadcaster RTE that Biden "certainly misses his son" but that the president said his Catholic faith had "sustained him". "He has been grieving a lot, but I think the grief is kind of going down a bit," the priest said.

Knock Shrine parish priest Richard Gibbons told the BBC that Biden "got the shock of his life" at discovering O'Grady's presence in Knock. "He was crying, it really affected him and then we said a prayer, said a decade of the rosary for his family. "He lit a candle and then he took a moment or two of private (reflection) for prayer."

The US president went on to visit the Mayo Roscommon Hospice nearby with his son, sister, and Irish cousin Laurita Blewitt. In 2017, he came for the building's groundbreaking, and a plaque there commemorates Beau Biden.

Biden then headed to the picturesque riverside town of Ballina, which was proudly displaying US flags and red, white and blue bunting as locals thronged the streets in anticipation. Ballina commissioned a five-metre-high (16-foot-high) mural of Biden when he won the 2020 presidential vote.

Blewitt descendants still live in the town, where the Mocha Beans cafe changed its shop sign to read "Mocha Biden" for the occasion. "That buzz is incredible around Ballina today," the cafe's owner Trevor Mangan told AFP. — AFP



## International

# Germany ends nuclear era as last reactors power down

## 'The risks of nuclear power are ultimately unmanageable'

**BERLIN:** Germany will switch off its last three nuclear reactors on Saturday, exiting atomic power even as it seeks to wean itself off fossil fuels and manage an energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. While many Western countries are upping their investments in atomic energy to reduce their emissions, Germany is bringing an early end to its nuclear age.

Europe's largest economy has been looking to leave behind nuclear power since 2002, but the phase-out was accelerated by former chancellor Angela Merkel in 2011 after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan. The exit decision was popular in a country with a powerful anti-nuclear movement, stoked by lingering fears of Cold War conflict and atomic disasters such as Chernobyl in Ukraine.

"The risks of nuclear power are ultimately unmanageable," said Environment Minister Steffi Lemke, who this week made a pilgrimage to the ill-fated Japanese plant ahead of a G7 meeting in the country. But the challenge caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which put an end to cheap gas imports, and the need to quickly cut emissions has upped calls in Germany to delay the withdrawal from nuclear power.

Greenpeace, at the heart of the anti-nuclear movement, organised a celebratory fete at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin to mark the occasion. "Finally, nuclear energy belongs to history! Let's make this April 15 a day to remember," the organisation said. In contrast, conservative daily FAZ headlined its Saturday edition "Thanks, nuclear energy," as it listed benefits it said nuclear had brought the country over the years.

Initially planned for the end of 2022, Germany's nuclear exit had already been pushed back once. As Russian gas supplies dwindled last year, officials in Berlin were left scrambling to find a way to keep the lights on, with a short extension agreed until mid-April.

Germany, the largest emitter in the European Union, also powered up some of its mothballed coal-fuelled plants to cover the potential gap left by gas. The challenging energy situation had increased calls domestically for the exit from nuclear to be delayed.

Germany had to "expand the supply of energy and not restrict it any further" in light of potential shortages and high prices, the president of the German chambers of commerce Peter Adrian told the Rheinische Post daily.

The conservative leader of Bavaria Markus Soeder meanwhile told the Focus Online website that he wanted the plants to stay online and three more to be kept "in reserve". Outside observers have been similarly irked by Germany's insistence on exiting nuclear while ramping up its coal usage, with climate activist Greta Thunberg in October slamming the move as "a mistake".

### 'Sooner or later'

At the Isar 2 complex in Bavaria, technicians will progressively shut down the reactor from 10:00 pm (2000 GMT) on Saturday, severing it from the grid for good. By the end of the day, operators at the other two facilities, in northern Emsland and southwestern Neckarwestheim, will have taken their facilities offline as well.

The three final plants provided just six percent of Germany's ener-



**ESSENBAACH:** Photo taken on April 14, 2023 shows the nuclear power plant Isar in Essenbach near Landshut, southern Germany. Germany shut down its three remaining nuclear plants on April 15. — AFP

gy last year, compared with 30.8 percent from all nuclear plants in 1997. "Sooner or later" the reactors will start being dismantled, Economy Minister Robert Habeck told the Funke group ahead of the scheduled decommissioning, brushing aside the idea of an extension.

The government has the energy situation "under control", Habeck assured, having filled gas stores and built new infrastructure for the import of liquefied natural

gas to bridge the gap left by Russian supplies. Instead, the minister from the Green party, which was founded on opposition to nuclear power, is focused on getting Germany to produce 80 percent of its energy from renewables by 2030.

To this end, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has called for the installation of "four to five wind turbines a day" over the next few years—a tall order given that just 551 were installed last year. But the current

rate of progress on renewables could well be too slow for Germany to meet its climate protection goals.

Despite planning to exit nuclear, Germany has not "pushed ahead enough with the expansion of renewables in the last 10 years", Simon Mueller from the Agora Energiewende think tank told AFP. To build enough onshore wind capacity, according to Mueller, Germany now has to "pull out all the stops". — AFP

### News in Briefs

#### Migrants killed in car smash

**ATHENS:** Five migrants and a Greek motorist were killed in a car crash on a highway near the border between Greece and Turkey on Saturday, police told AFP. The car, carrying 10 migrants, was travelling at a high speed on the wrong side to avoid a police checkpoint and slammed into a four-wheel drive, the 46-year-old driver of which was also killed, the police said. The other five migrants—whose nationalities were not immediately clear—and the driver of their vehicle were taken to hospital after sustaining injuries, the police added. Thousands of migrants have in recent years transited into Greece from Turkey in the hope of making it to western Europe. With the stepping up of patrols in the Aegean Sea making it harder for migrants to reach Greek islands more are taking their chances by crossing the River Evros, a natural mainland border, and having traffickers take them from there by road. Recently there have been an increasing number of accidents similar to Saturday's. — AFP

#### Ugandan minister arrested

**KAMPALA:** Ugandan state minister for finance Amos Lugoloobi has been arrested for allegedly stealing metal roofing sheets destined for a poor and restive region, police said Saturday. The sheets of corrugated iron roofing were earmarked for low-cost housing in Karamoja, an underdeveloped and lawless region in northwest Uganda bordering Kenya and South Sudan. Mary Goretti Kitutu, the minister responsible for Karamoja and its development, and her brother were charged over the case on April 4. "Following the ongoing investigations in the alleged theft and diversion of iron sheets meant for Karamoja region, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions sanctioned criminal charges against honourable Amos Lugoloobi, the minister of state finance, planning and economic development," Fred Enanga, Uganda's police spokesman told AFP. "Minister Lugoloobi was subsequently arrested ... and (is) currently detained ... pending court appearance". According to police, over 10 government ministers, 31 MPs and 13 government officials are being probed in the case. — AFP

#### Kenyan sect leader arrested

**NAIROBI:** Kenyan police said Saturday they have arrested a local cult leader after the death of four followers he reportedly told to starve themselves in order to "meet Jesus". Eleven other followers of the Good News International Church led by Makenzie Nthenge were taken to hospital, three of them in critical condition, after being rescued Friday in the Shakahola forest near the town of Malindi. Police said they feared more victims would be discovered. "The pastor is under arrest after he surrendered because he knew we were looking for him," said Charles Kamau, criminal investigations chief of Malindi sub-county. He was taken into custody, ahead of a court appearance scheduled for Monday. Police raided the forest on the Kenyan coast on Friday after receiving reports of "ignorant citizens starving to death under the pretext of meeting Jesus after being brainwashed by a suspect, Makenzie Nthenge, a pastor of Good News International Church". The four dead have not yet been identified. — AFP

## China's Korea envoy accuses US of 'using' tensions

**PARIS:** China's ambassador for the Korean peninsula on Friday accused the US of "using" regional tensions to reinforce an anti-Beijing alliance, after weeks of mounting rhetoric and missile tests by Pyongyang. "We are concerned about the US' intention to use Korean peninsula issues as a tool for containing China," Special Representative Liu Xiaoming told AFP in Paris following a tour of European capitals.

"It's part of their Indo-Pacific strategy... to gang up allies, to strengthen their alliance with (South Korea) and Japan," he added. Tensions have been rising over recent weeks across the Korean peninsula, with the North carrying out a string of missile tests while the South and its US allies have run large-scale military drills.

China ally Pyongyang said Friday it had successfully tested a solid-fuel ballistic missile, a technology offering a far less predictable nuclear launch capability. In September, leader Kim Jong Un said the North's status as a nuclear power was now "irreversible". "People focus on the launches and nuclear tests of the DPRK, but they ignore the reason why they are doing this is a lack of a mechanism, a secu-

urity structure" to guarantee peace on the peninsula, Chinese envoy Liu said, using an acronym for the North's official name.

For their part, the US and Seoul point to Kim's order to his army earlier this year to step up preparations for "real war" as justification for their own drills. China pushes for a "dual-track" approach to ending Pyongyang's nuclear drive, saying world powers should offer relief from UN Security Council sanctions in exchange for concrete disarmament steps.

Liu complained that North Korea gestures during the Trump administration had not been met with such action from Washington. "The message sent to the DPRK is still pressure, sanctions, confrontation, so that made dialogue impossible," he said, casting doubt on the "seriousness" of US commitment to denuclearisation.

After talks in capitals including Berlin, Brussels and Paris, Liu said European leaders should "persuade Americans to address the security concerns" of North Korea. His call came days after French President Emmanuel Macron reiterated his ambition of "strategic independence" setting Europe apart from both the US and China as he returned from a visit to Beijing. Macron's comments were met with outcry in other European capitals and in Washington, following a year in which the continent's dependence on the US for its defence has been starkly underscored by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"We appreciate the independent strategy by

Morales had previously ruled on January 13 that Bolsonaro be placed under investigation in the case. But he had postponed a ruling on the request by prosecutors for Bolsonaro to be questioned, as the ex-president was in the US state of Florida at the time.

Bolsonaro left for Orlando in the final days of his term, after refusing to concede his defeat to Lula at the polls. Lula, who previously led Brazil from 2003 to 2010, narrowly beat Bolsonaro in a brutal, divisive election last October.

Thousands of Bolsonaro's supporters stormed the halls of power in Brasilia in January, a week after Lula took office. In scenes reminiscent of the January 6, 2021 riots in Washington by supporters of ex-president Donald Trump—Bolsonaro's political role model—they trashed offices, vandalized artworks and called for the military to intervene to oust Lula.

Prosecutors had asked for Bolsonaro to face questioning over a video he posted online—and later deleted—two days after the attacks, in which he questioned the legitimacy of Lula's election. However, they said their probe of the ex-president would not be limited to the video, but a "full investigation of

the general public, and the news media," the department said in a statement. The footage shows the officers knocking on the door several times and identifying themselves. The officers then request confirmation of the address from dispatch and discuss whether they are at the wrong house.

Moments later, a man opens the door and points a firearm at the officers before they draw and immediately fire their weapons. The victim, Robert Dotson, died at the scene, police said. A woman later identified as Dotson's wife appears at the door about a minute later and more shots are fired. Police said she fired a gun at the officers.

The department said the names of the three officers involved, which were redacted from the footage and audio, could not be released due to the ongoing investigation. It remains unclear why the officers, who are on paid leave for the length of the investigation, approached the wrong address, police said.

In one of the 911 audio files released, Dotson's



**This picture shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his daughter presumed to be named Ju Ae inspecting the test-fire of the new Hwasongpho-18 ICBM at an undisclosed location in North Korea. — AFP**

some of the European countries," China's Liu said. "I think it serves the interests of Europe." With China's ambassador already back in Pyongyang after years of closed borders due to Covid, those European nations who previously had missions there "hope they can reopen the embassies and start exchanges with the DPRK," he added.

Liu said that Russia remained a reliable partner pushing for denuclearisation in Korea despite Moscow's own nuclear sabre-rattling during its invasion of Ukraine. "No threat of use of nuclear weapons" was China's "consistent position", he said. — AFP



**BRASILIA:** File photo shows, supporters of Brazilian former President Jair Bolsonaro clash with security forces during an invasion to Planalto Presidential Palace in Brasilia. — AFP

all acts before and after January 8." More than 1,800 people were arrested over the events of January 8. They include Bolsonaro's former justice minister Anderson Torres, who was Brasilia's public security chief at the time of the riots. — AFP

daughter can be heard crying before saying that her mother was screaming and her father had been shot. "All of us — the men and women of the Farmington Police Department — recognize the severity of this incident," Hebbe said.

"Once again, we wish to express our condolences to the Dotson family and as your chief of police, I wish to convey how very sorry I am that this tragedy occurred." About 40 percent of US households have guns, according to the Pew Research Center.

There were an estimated 44,000 gun-related deaths in the United States last year, about half of them murder cases, accidents and self-defense, and half of them suicides, according to the Gun Violence Archive database.

It showed that 14 people have been shot or killed in what the archive terms "officer-involved incidents" in New Mexico this year. More than 5,000 people in the United States have died of firearm-related violence in 2023, according to the archive. — AFP

## Business

SUNDAY, APRIL 16, 2023

## G7 faces pressure on fossil fuels at Japan climate talks

Draft resolution calls on nations to take action 'in this critical decade'

SAPPORO, Japan: G7 allies met Saturday for two days of "difficult" climate talks in northern Japan, facing pressure to show progress on key fossil fuel commitments in an example to other major economies including China. Campaigners have warned climate and environment ministers from the leading developed countries against backsliding on pledges to shift away from coal and natural gas at home and abroad.

But a leaked third draft of a statement to be issued on Sunday at the meeting in Sapporo has relieved some experts, who had feared a more ringing endorsement of the need for overseas gas investments. "All in, given low expectations, it now seems a better outcome than many expected," said Ed King from the climate-oriented communications firm GSCC. The ministers want to show unity after a major UN climate report warned last month that 1.5 degrees Celsius of global warming would be seen in about a decade. It called for "rapid and far-reaching" action to keep increases within relatively safe limits.

However, as the energy crisis sparked by the Ukraine war squeezes G7 countries including Japan, Germany and the United States, divisions have arisen among the bloc. A French government source earlier described "difficult" discussions, but the country's energy transition minister Agnes Pannier-Runacher painted a brighter picture of Saturday's talks.

She hailed "significant progress" in the joint statement, which she said sent "positive signals for the upcoming G20 and the upcoming COP" in Delhi and Dubai. "For the first time ever, the G7 said that we must accelerate the 'phasing out' of all unabated fossil fuels," and that there should be no more new coal-fired power plants. Pannier-Runacher told reporters.

## Macron signs pension law despite protests

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron signed his controversial pension reform into law Saturday, prompting accusations from unions and the left he was showing "contempt" towards those behind a three-month protest movement. The alterations became law after the text was published before dawn in France's official journal, with the livid opposition claiming that Macron had moved to smuggle it through in the depth of the night.

The publication came just hours after the approval on Friday by the Constitutional Council of the essence of the legislation, including the headline change of raising the retirement age from 62 to 64.

The standoff with unions and left has become the biggest challenge of the second mandate of Macron, who will now address France on the crisis on Monday evening, the Elysee said. Unions warned they were calling for mass Labour Day protests on May 1, and sometimes violent demonstrations erupted in several cities overnight after the verdict was announced. Socialist leader Olivier Faure said that Macron's swift signing of the law showed "disdain" towards the protest movement while hard-left MP Francois Ruffin called it a "democratic hold-up".

"A law enacted in the middle of the night, like thieves," tweeted French Communist Party chief Fabien Roussel. "Everyone on the street May 1." "Macron tried to intimidate all of France in the middle of the night," tweeted hard-left leader Jean-Luc Melancon, calling Macron a "thief of life" who showed an "absurd display of arrogance". The night-time announcement "confirms the violent contempt of the president both for the population and in particular for the trade unions," said the leader of the CGT union Sophie Binet.

## Lebanon lifts travel ban on CB governor

BEIRUT: A travel ban on Lebanon's central bank governor Riad Salameh was lifted on Thursday, public prosecutor Ghada Aoun stated. This will enable the beleaguered official to attend a hearing in Paris related to a cross-border graft probe. Judge Ghada Aoun issued a travel ban against Salameh in January 2022, against the backdrop of a lawsuit accusing him of embezzlement and dereliction of duty during the country's financial meltdown.

The ban could have prevented Salameh from traveling to Paris to appear at a scheduled hearing on May 16 before French prosecutors, who have opened their own investigation into alleged money laundering involving the governor.

The travel ban against Salameh was approved by Aoun in January 2022 after an activist group filed a lawsuit against the Central Bank chief, al-

## 'Critical decade'

The latest draft statement, calls on nations to take action "in this critical decade", urging a peak in global greenhouse emissions by 2025 at the latest. Experts say this language is aimed at China, the world's largest carbon emitter, which is targeting a peak in its carbon emissions by 2030.

The draft also stresses the "urgency" of slashing global emissions by 60 percent by 2035 from 2019 levels, as recommended by the UN's IPCC panel of climate experts.

Language on fossil fuels has been more contentious, however. Britain and France proposed new concrete targets, while other members including this year's G7 president Japan, which is heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels, and the United States have pushed a more conservative line.

Ministers pledged at the last G7 climate ministerial in Germany to end new direct public support in 2022 for overseas fossil fuel projects that do not offset emissions. But this was watered down a month later when G7 leaders said the "exceptional circumstances" of Russia's war in Ukraine made gas investments "appropriate as a temporary response".

Japan had sought language to solidify that exception, but instead the draft statement calls for "gas demand reduction" and sets multiple parameters around such investments.

## Hydrogen controversy

Coal is another hotly debated topic, with different degrees of ambition put forward by Japan, the United States and Britain on global efforts to phase out fossil fuels in electricity systems. Japan had sought G7 recognition for its controversial strategy of burning hydrogen and ammonia alongside fossil fuels to

## 'Not defeated'

The nine-member Constitutional Council ruled in favor of key provisions of the reform, including raising the retirement age to 64 and extending the years of work required for a full pension, saying the legislation was in accordance with French law. Six minor proposals were rejected, including forcing large companies to publish how many over-55s they employ, and the creation of a special contract for older workers. The appearance of the text in France's Official Journal—the gazette of record—means it has now been enacted into law.

"The Social Security Code is thus amended. In the first paragraph, the word 'sixty-two; is replaced by the word 'sixty-four,'" states the text, referring to the retirement age. But the constitutional court's decision could prove a hollow victory for Macron, as analysts say it has come at a major personal cost for the 45-year-old. The president's approval ratings are near their lowest levels ever, and many voters have been outraged by his decision to ram the pensions law through parliament without a vote, using a legal but controversial mechanism denounced by opponents as anti-democratic.

Polls consistently show that two out of three French people are against working a further two years. Macron has called the change "necessary" to avoid annual pension deficits forecast to hit 13.5 billion euros (\$14.8 billion) by 2030, according to government figures.

France lags behind most of its European neighbors, many of which have hiked the retirement age to 65 or above. "Stay the course. That's my motto," Macron said Friday as he inspected Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, four years after a devastating fire nearly destroyed the gothic monument.

Government spokesman Olivier Veran said Macron's address Monday evening would be in the spirit of "pacification". But the left-wing Liberation daily said in its headline above a picture of a protest: "Not defeated: opponents of the reform are not going to disarm". Bikes, e-scooters and garbage were set on fire in the capital overnight while protests rallying



BEIRUT: Lebanon's Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh speaks during a press conference at the bank's headquarters in Beirut in this file photo. —AFP

leging financial misconduct.

Riad Toufic Salameh is the current governor of Lebanon's central bank, Banque du Liban since April 1993. He is the longest-serving central bank governor in the world. Lebanon has been facing economic woes since the COVID-19 pandemic and its crisis deepened later on after Beirut's port blast in August 2022, which killed at least 218 people and injured 7,000 others. — Agencies



SAPPORO, Japan: Japan's Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Yasutoshi Nishimura (front left) and Minister of the Environment Akihiro Nishimura (front right) attend the G7 Ministers' Meeting on Climate, Energy and Environment in Sapporo, Hokkaido prefecture on April 15, 2023. — AFP

reduce carbon emissions—which climate activists say only serves to extend the lifespan of polluting plants. The draft statement simply notes that "some countries are exploring" the potential of the two fuels in the journey to net-zero emissions, adding that this should be "aligned with a 1.5C pathway".

Governments around the world are also looking to the G7 talks for action on resilience funding for the developing nations most affected by climate change.

Sultan Al-Jaber, president of the COP28 climate talks, told AFP he had called for "available, accessible and affordable" global climate finance in Sapporo. The draft statement reaffirms the G7's commitment to an unfulfilled promise to provide developing nations with \$100 billion a year to fight climate change. In the draft, the G7 vows to work with other developed nations "to fully meet the goal in 2023". — AFP



NANTES, France: A protester uses fireworks towards French police officers during an action day, after France's Constitutional Council approved the key elements of a pension reform, in Nantes, western France, on April 14, 2023. — AFP

hundreds erupted in other cities, including Marseille and Toulouse.

In the western city of Rennes, protesters set fire to the entrance of a police station and a conference centre. Paris police said 112 people had been arrested as of 10.30 pm (2030 GMT) while four have been detained over the Rennes incidents.

## 'Tidal wave' on May 1

Binet and other union bosses have called for a "popular and historic tidal wave" of people on the streets to oppose the reforms on May 1. Unions rejected an offer by Macron for talks on Tuesday, saying they would only meet after May 1. Last month, a strike by Paris garbage workers left the capital strewn with 10,000 tons of uncollected rubbish. As a prelude to the May 1 protests, railway unions are calling for a day of "railway anger" on April 20. In a second decision on Friday, the court rejected a bid from opposition lawmakers to force a referendum on an alternative pension law that would have kept the retirement age at 62. — AFP

## US retail sales drop in March

WASHINGTON: Retail sales in the United States slipped more than anticipated in March, according to government data released Friday, extending a downward trend that signals cooling in the economy.

The US central bank has raised interest rates steeply since early last year to lower demand and rein in high inflation, and there are signs that its policy is starting to bite. Retail sales fell by one percent in March from a month prior, to \$691.7 billion, said the Commerce Department, adding that February's contraction was revised to a smaller 0.2 percent as well. But compared with the same period last year, retail sales were still 2.9 percent higher. A separate report released Friday by the Federal Reserve showed industrial production rising 0.4 percent in March, boosted by a surge in utilities output on higher heating demand. But manufacturing output contracted 0.5 percent.

The retail sales slide in March came on the back

## UAE, China promise Pakistan \$1.3bn to get IMF deal on track

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan announced financial support Friday from the United Arab Emirates and China totaling \$1.3 billion, giving the ailing economy a shot in the arm as it seeks to meet conditions for the resumption of an International Monetary Fund bailout. Finance Minister Ishaq Dar said the UAE had promised a billion dollars to prop up Pakistan's forex reserves—which at their current level of \$4.04 billion can barely pay for four weeks of imports. China on Friday released \$300 million to Pakistan—the last tranche of a \$1.3 billion rollover loan, Dar said.

"UAE authorities have confirmed to IMF for their bilateral support of \$1 billion to Pakistan," Dar tweeted. He added that the country's central bank was preparing the documentation to receive the deposit. Pakistan signed a \$6.5 billion bailout package with the IMF in 2019, but has repeatedly reneged on conditions and so far just \$3 billion has been released.

The IMF insists the nuclear-armed nation of 220 million people must boost its pitifully low tax base, end tax exemptions for the export sector, and raise artificially low petrol, electricity and gas prices meant to help low-income families. The country's hopes for another round of IMF funding also depend on friendly countries rolling over existing loans or providing additional support.

Faisal Shaji, chief strategy officer at Standard Capital Securities, said it appeared the latest funding would put Pakistan back "on (the) IMF-laid track". "One must be optimistic of getting IMF funding resumption now," he told AFP. Pakistan's economy has crumbled alongside a simmering political crisis, with the rupee plummeting and inflation at decades-high levels, while devastating floods and a major shortage of energy have piled on further pressures. — AFP

of contractions seen in sales of motor vehicles and parts, electronics and appliances, as well as in general merchandise stores. Sales at food and beverage stores, however, only shrank slightly, the data showed. "The consumer started 2023 on a very strong note, but that has since faded," Oren Klachkin of Oxford Economics told AFP. He noted that there have been softer job gains and weaker wage growth while excess savings are falling and inflation remains high—and all this impacts consumer spending.

Klachkin also cautioned that the full impact of last month's "banking shock" is still to come, referring to the swift failures of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank that sent shockwaves through the financial sector. "The main impact will be basically that banks will tighten their lending standards," he said. "In turn, credit will flow less to households, which means they'll have less to go to a store with, to buy stuff, go out to eat." Kieran Clancy of Pantheon Macroeconomics added in a note that "the March retail sales numbers confirm that the apparent strength at the start of the year was nothing more than a weather-driven fluke." The retail data follows a trend of slowing price increases, with inflation cooling to 5.0 percent last month—the smallest annual jump since May 2021. — AFP



## Business

# MENA growth to slow in 2023: IMF

## Non-oil sector in GCC to record 4.5% growth in 2023, 2024

**KUWAIT:** Despite a series of global shocks, Middle East and North Africa regions surprised on the upside last year with the GDP growing by 5.3 percent, reflecting strong domestic demand and the rebound in oil production, said Jihad Azour, director of the IMF's Department for the Middle East and Central Asia, while summarizing the findings of the Asian Economic Outlook Report during the IMF 2023 Annual Meetings in Washington.

However, growth is projected to slow in 2023 to 3.1 percent due to tight policies to restore micro-economic stability, agreed OPEC plus production cuts, and the fallout from the recent deterioration in global financial conditions, he said.

"In MENA our exporters' growth is projected to slow from 5.7 percent in 2022 to 3.1 percent this year with the main driver of growth shifting from oil to non-hydrocarbon activities in most countries. Growth is also set to slow in the region emerging markets, falling from 5.1 percent to 3.4 percent. Meanwhile, low-income countries will continue to lag with growth at 1.3 percent this year, as they struggle with high commodity prices, macroeconomic instability, and country-specific fragilities," Azour said during his presentation.

These IMF projections reflect developments prior to the OPEC plus oil production cuts that were announced a few weeks ago. The cuts will lower growth for the GCC region, but will have a positive outcome on fiscal and external positions as high oil prices offset the impact of lower growth. Higher oil prices are, however, likely to increase fiscal and external strains for MENA importers. After surging last year, inflation is forecast to remain unchanged at around 15 percent this year, before declining modestly in 2024. Let me now turn to the outlook for the Caucasus and Central Asia.

### Inflation

Headline inflation is projected to ease in 2023, reflecting lagged impact of monetary policy tightening and easing global commodity prices but, to remain at around 12 percent this year before slowing further in 2024.

Talking about the recent financial market instability and the risks ahead, Azour said, so far, spillovers to the region's banks have been limited, reflecting no direct exposure to Silicon Valley Bank, and limited exposure to Credit Suisse. The region's financial markets have moved in line with global trends though countries with large debt burden have seen a larger impact. That said, the risks to our baseline are high; and let me highlight three key risks.

First, further financial sector instability in advance economy could lead to contagion and more adverse credit conditions, depressing global growth, and exacerbating financial market volatility and debt sustainability concerns for many emerging markets in the MENA region.

Second, tighter for longer global financial conditions could prompt investors to reassess debt sustainability, pushing the most vulnerable economies to the brink of debt distress.

The decline of productivity affects the growth of the oil sector. Also the non-oil sector in oil exporting countries, especially GCC countries, would continue to accomplish good growth rates, about 4.5 percent in 2023 and 2024, as well as medium levels, about 4 percent for the following years. In terms of the production reduction, it has negative impact on growth but it will still remain at reasonable rates. On the other hand, the higher prices, that are expected, would have a positive impact on the reserves of such countries.

### Saudi economy

The Saudi economy in 2022 had the highest growth of the G20 economy, 8.7 percent, which is the highest growth rate by a country member of the G20. There are two main reasons for the positive growth in the Kingdom. First, the reforms were adopted in the last few years that proved to be very effective in diversifying the economy and in allowing the non-oil sector to grow and diversifying revenues for the government.

"Saudi Arabia at this point can diversify very quickly and invest in promising sectors on the middle and long range like, technology services and



**WASHINGTON:** International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva (right) speaks during a panel titled "Digital Infrastructure: Stacking Up the Benefits" at the annual spring meetings at the IMF headquarters in Washington, DC, on April 14, 2023. — AFP

environment friendly sectors. In Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, on the other hand, we need to take into consideration the changes in oil prices. So, we cannot have financial policies that may encourage this volatility of the oil prices," he pointed out.

Recently, the IMF approved a new program as part of its partnership with Morocco. And this attests to the hard work Morocco has done. The upcoming Annual Meetings in Marrakesh, in October, will provide a platform for wide-ranging policy discussions on challenges facing the region and also the world, he said. Regarding Tunisia, the IMF has been working with Tunisia for about a decade and has supported this country during difficult times. Namely, during the COVID-19 crisis, Tunisia was the first country in the region to benefit from IMF support.

Inflation keeps hurting the economic stability and the livelihood of people, and that has exceeded 30 percent. And this is where it is important to maintain monetary policy that addresses and arrests inflation. And we encourage the authorities to use the monetary policy instruments specially interest rate in order to address the issue of inflation that would have a negative impact on the macroeconomic stability, but also high social cost.

Talking about Egyptian economy, he said the country's economy has huge potential, and private sector is very dynamic, and there is a need to provide more space for the private sector. Redesign the role of the state to focus on priority sectors and allow through leveling the playing field, the capacity for the Egyptian private sector to create growth and create more foreign currencies, Azour added.

## Europe to see 'sharp slowdown' but not recession: IMF official

**WASHINGTON:** Europe will see a "sharp slowdown" in economic growth this year, but most countries will avoid a recession, the director of the International Monetary Fund's European department told AFP Friday. IMF forecasts published earlier this week predict the Euro area will grow by 0.8 percent this year, although Germany is now expected to enter a mild recession.

The slight improvement for the Euro area from the IMF's previous forecast in January is down to a warmer-than-expected winter and "decisive policy action by policymakers," Alfred Kammer said in an interview. "What this winter showed was policy action actually achieved results," he said.

The IMF now expects Euro area economic growth to materialize later this year before speeding up further in 2024, Kammer said. "There is certainly in some countries a recession risk, but it's very different from what we foresaw and feared for, even in January," he said.

Germany is the only Euro area country the IMF now forecasts will enter recession this year.

A downward revision in its growth forecast from January means Germany will join the UK as



**WASHINGTON:** Director of the European Department of the IMF, Alfred Kammer and Senior Communications Officer Camila Perez speak during a press briefing by the European Department at the annual spring meetings at the World Bank headquarters in Washington, DC, on April 14, 2023. — AFP

the only G7 economies expected to shrink in 2023. Much of Germany's contraction comes down to the ongoing economic impact of Russia's war in Ukraine, Kammer said.

Russia sharply reduced gas exports to Europe, forcing policymakers to look elsewhere for supplies of the crucial energy source. "Germany is more affected than other countries by the energy crisis because their dependence on Russian gas was much more than other European countries," Kammer said.

"That explains really, the slowdown we are see-

ing," in Germany, he added. The high rate of inflation in the eurozone ought to come down over the coming months, European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said Friday, but warned there was "considerable uncertainty" around the forecast. "We expect euro area inflation to continue to fall," Lagarde said in a statement at the IMF's spring meetings in Washington that was published on the ECB's website.

"This outlook remains surrounded by considerable uncertainty, with both upside and downside risks," she added.

Higher than expected wage increases could keep the rate elevated, while "financial market tensions" or fast-falling energy prices could see it slow further, she said. In March, consumer prices in the eurozone rose by 6.9 percent on an annual basis in the eurozone, down from 8.5 percent in February. The figure was the lowest rate recorded in a year, and much below the peak of 10.6 percent recorded in October.

Sky-high inflation driven by sharp increases in the cost of energy prompted the ECB to crank up interest rates at a record pace to try to tame consumer price prices. But recent turbulence in the banking sector has brought complications and strengthened calls to temper rate hikes.

In its most recent projections, the ECB forecast inflation to average 5.3 percent in 2023, still well above its two-percent target. Inflation is then expected to fall to 2.9 percent in 2024 and 2.1 percent in 2025. — AFP



**WASHINGTON:** Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman (left), with Governor of the Reserve Bank of India Shaktikanta Das, speaks at the G20 press briefing during the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank Spring Meetings at IMF headquarters in Washington, DC.—AFP

## India finance chief sees debt resolution for 'many' countries

**WASHINGTON:** India's finance minister said Thursday she expects many debtor countries will reach a resolution "at the earliest" opportunity, following a G20 meeting on debt restructuring. With India currently holding the rotating presidency of the Group of 20, Nirmala Sitharaman co-chaired Wednesday's meeting of the global sovereign debt roundtable with the leaders of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Private sector actors and debtor countries attended Wednesday's talks for the first time since the global debt roundtable was founded as a pandemic-era forum to discuss debt resolutions.

The debtor countries in attendance were Zambia, Ghana, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka. Sitharaman said during a press conference. They had raised concerns about how much time it took from when a request was made for debt assistance and the disbursement of concessional loans from multilateral institutions like the World Bank and IMF, she said.

An agreement was reached by all countries, including China—a major bilateral lender—about the need to speed up the process of debt restructuring. Sitharaman said she expected "many" debtor countries would reach debt resolutions "at the earliest." World Bank members also held talks on Wednesday to alter the bank's financial structure to unlock additional financing capabilities.

Outgoing World Bank president David Malpass said on Thursday that an agreement was reached to move ahead with some new measures, which could unlock \$50 billion in fresh financing over the next decade. Sitharaman said plans to further reform multilateral development banks had also been "very well appreciated" during Thursday's meeting of G20 finance ministers and central bank governors.

"Hopefully, by July we should have something on the table for the members to discuss," she said. — AFP

## China, Brazil urge developed nations to meet finance vows

**BEIJING:** China and Brazil on Friday called on developed countries to honor their climate finance pledges, after their leaders put their close economic and diplomatic ties on full display at a meeting in Beijing. Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has used his visit to push the message that "Brazil is back" as a key player on the global stage—and to warn others that the South American country's deepening relations with China are non-negotiable. He lashed out at the power of the US dollar and the IMF and met representatives from Chinese tech giant Huawei in Shanghai on Thursday, before meeting his counterpart Xi Jinping on Friday.

"Yesterday we paid a visit to Huawei, demonstrating that we want to say to the world that we are not prejudiced in our relations with the Chinese—and that no one is going to forbid Brazil from improving its relations with China," Lula said as he arrived at the meeting with Xi, according to a video posted by Brazilian media.

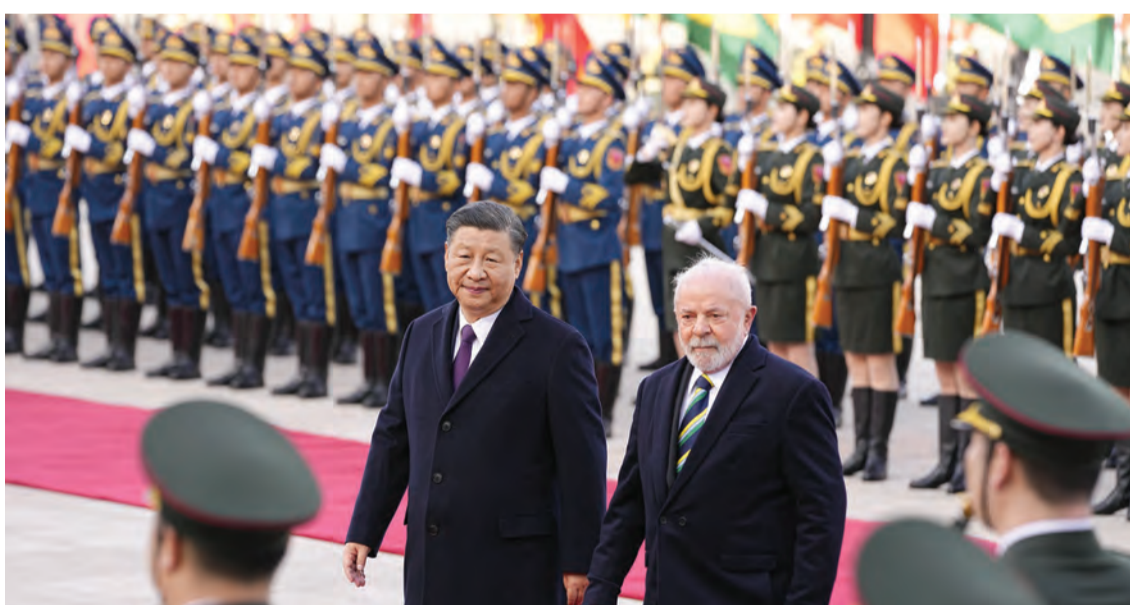
Huawei has an extensive presence in Brazil—in contrast with the United States, where companies are effectively barred from doing business with the firm. Xi told Lula that China viewed relations between the two countries as a diplomatic high priority, a readout from China's foreign ministry said.

The joint statement released after the talks took aim at the United States, Europe and other wealthy nations who have never reached their funding pledges set at UN climate talks in Copenhagen in 2009.

"We continue to be very concerned that climate finance provided by developed countries continues to fall short of the \$100 billion per year commitment, as it has every year since the goal was set," it read.

"We urge developed countries to honor their unfulfilled climate finance obligations, and... provide a clear roadmap of doubling adaptation finance."

Lula is carrying out a delicate balancing act as he also seeks closer ties with Washington—his visit with



**BEIJING:** Chinese President Xi Jinping (left) and Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva attend a welcome ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on April 14, 2023. — AFP

Xi comes after a high-profile White House meeting with US President Joe Biden in February. "Our intention isn't to distance ourselves from anyone, especially a partner as important as the United States," Lula's finance minister Fernando Haddad said Friday. "We want to re-establish the best relations possible, and we want partnerships with the three big trade blocs—the United States, the European Union and China," he added.

Xi on Friday greeted Lula at a red carpet ceremony as a military band played the two countries' national anthems, and assured him that China's development would bring fresh benefits for Brazil.

"As comprehensive strategic partners, China and Brazil share extensive common interests," Xi said, according to the ministry readout. "China will pursue high-quality development... and promote high-standard opening-up. This will unlock new opportunities for Brazil and countries around the world."

"China welcomes more high-quality products from Brazil into its market. China will actively explore greater synergy between its Belt and Road Initiative

and Brazil's reindustrialization strategy," Xi said, according to a readout from state agency Xinhua.

Lula on Thursday took aim at the US dollar, criticizing its ubiquitous use in almost all global trade transactions. His government recently announced a deal with Beijing to trade in their own currencies, ditching the dollar. China has similar deals with Russia, Pakistan and several other countries.

"Who decided the dollar would be the (world's) currency?" Lula said in Shanghai at a ceremony to inaugurate his political ally Dilma Rousseff as president of the development bank set up by the BRICS nations Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

"Today, countries have to chase after dollars to export, when they could be exporting in their own currencies." Lula also had strong words for the International Monetary Fund, alluding to accusations the global lender forces overly harsh spending cuts on cash-strapped countries such as Brazil's neighbour Argentina in exchange for bailout loans. "No leader can work with a knife to their throat because (their country) owes money," he said. — AFP

## Business

# Large US banks report higher profits despite recent turmoil

## Large banks still benefiting from Fed's shift towards higher rates

**NEW YORK:** JPMorgan Chase reported a jump in first-quarter profits Friday alongside fellow banking giants Citigroup and Wells Fargo, in reassuring news to investors after recent banking sector turmoil sparked contagion fears. The first substantial look at the sector—since last month's collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and two other midsized banks—showed large banks are still benefiting in some ways from the Federal Reserve's shift towards higher interest rates and from a still-healthy US consumer.

But JPMorgan's better-than-expected results came as it warned again of a potential economic downturn while adding \$1.1 billion in reserves in case of bad loans. Both Citigroup and Wells Fargo also added reserves in light of the uncertain backdrop, with the latter pointing to commercial real estate—broadly seen as a vulnerable area in finance.

Friday's results significantly boosted shares of JPMorgan and Citi, but several midsized banks declined in trading. These banks, including First Republic, Zions Bancorporation and Comerica, which have been seen as more at-risk, are scheduled to report results later this month.

### Big profit

JPMorgan, the biggest US lender in terms of assets, reported a 52 percent surge in profits to \$12.6 billion. This was boosted by record revenues of \$38.3 billion, up 25 percent from the year-ago level.

But the additional reserves were taken due to "a deterioration in the weighted-average economic outlook" and "an increased probability of a moderate recession due to tightening financial conditions," the bank said in an earnings release. Chief Executive Jamie Dimon, speaking on a conference call with reporters, said US consumers remain "rather healthy," but that the economy faced challenges.

These include lingering inflation, the Fed's tightening policies and fallout from war in Ukraine. "We're

going to eventually have a recession, but that may be pushed off for a little bit," Dimon said. JPMorgan's results were boosted by much higher net interest income (NII), as the major US bank benefited from a rising interest rate environment that enabled it to charge more for loans.

Recent banking industry turmoil following the collapse of SVB raised worries about a flight of deposits, but that was seen as more of a concern for midsized lenders.

JPMorgan Chase reported a drop in deposits compared with the year-ago period, but an uptick from the prior quarter. In fact, JPMorgan sharply increased its 2023 forecast for NII to a total of \$81 billion, up \$7 billion from its prior forecast.

Chief Financial Officer Jeremy Barnum said this outlook partly reflected expectations on Fed policy, including talk of an interest rate cut later this year that removed "a little bit of pressure" on banks to raise interest to depositors. Executives underscored, however, that they expect lower NII in 2024 and beyond. In the news release, Dimon added that the US economy remained on "generally healthy footing" but the banking industry turmoil added to economic headwinds.

"The banking situation is distinct from 2008 as it has involved far fewer financial players and fewer issues that need to be resolved, but financial conditions will likely tighten as lenders become more conservative, and we do not know if this will slow consumer spending," he said.

### More reserves

Meanwhile, Citigroup reported profits of \$4.6 billion, up seven percent from the year-ago period on a 12 percent rise in revenues to \$21.4 billion. Citi scored higher NII and saw an uptick in average deposits. But it set aside \$241 million in reserves, pointing to "macroeconomic deteriora-

tion" among other factors. Chief Financial Officer Mark Mason said the non-payment rate on loans had ticked up, but remained below typical levels and is expected to "normalize."



**NEW YORK:** In this file photo taken on April 17, 2019 the JPMorgan Chase & Co world headquarters are pictured in New York City. —AFP

The bank sees a somewhat higher chance for a recession that "is likely to be mild," Mason said, adding it is prepared for how the situation may evolve. At Wells Fargo, profits came in at \$5.0 billion, up 31.8 percent on revenues of \$20.7 billion. The revenues were 16.9 percent higher from a year ago.

Wells has seen delinquencies and loan charge-offs continue to "slowly increase, as expected," said Chief Executive Charlie Scharf. The bank added \$643 million in reserves, "reflecting an increase for commercial real estate loans, primarily office loans, as well as an increase for credit card and auto loans," according to its earnings release.

Shares of JPMorgan surged 7.6 percent to \$138.73, while Citi gained 4.8 percent to \$49.56 and Wells Fargo dipped 0.1 percent to \$39.64. —AFP

## Gulf Bank's second edition of 'Datathon' competition on May 12

**KUWAIT:** Following the success of the first edition of the "Datathon" competition last year, which was initiated for those interested in digital data and analytics, Gulf Bank is once again, opening registrations for the second Gulf Bank "Datathon" competition – set to happen on May 12, 2023, at Al-Shaheed Park, Phase Two (Multi-Purpose Hall).

The bank announced that registration is open until May 9, and the mentoring and learning workshops – which will be held on May 11 – will include three educational workshops: Data Visualization with Tableau, Digital Analytics with Google Analytics, and Data Analysis using Python with ChatGPT.

The bank will offer three valuable prizes to the winning projects, where the Data Modeling and Visualization category winners will receive a prize of KD 1,000 (all ages), the Data Visualization category winners will receive a prize of KD 500 (all ages), and the Digital Analytics category winners will receive a prize of KD 500 – which is specifically designated for youth aged 14 to 18 years.

**The second "Datathon" competition aims to attract and encourage the following categories to participate:**

- University students who are currently enrolled, or recent graduates who are looking for an educational opportunity to gain experience in data anal-



Mai Al-Owaish

ysis, programming, and problem solving.

- High school students, in cooperation with IN-JAZ Kuwait, with the aim of teaching the students how to use Google Analytics through a workshop, and to participate in a five-hour competition.

- Data enthusiasts and individuals experienced with data analysis and interpretation.

- General public and individuals interested in data science and its applications.

On this occasion, the Deputy General Manager of the Digital Transformation and Innovation Unit at Gulf Bank, Mai Al-Owaish, said: "The competition reflects Gulf Bank's distinguished role in social sustainability, helps support the digital transformation process and contributes to Kuwait 2035 vision and goals. The competition also aids in consolidating the bank's leading position in the field of data and digitization, by working to expand and disseminate data culture in society. We also wanted to focus on youth this year, hence, we added a new age group designated for young individuals aged 14 to 18 years."

Al-Owaish indicated Gulf Bank's keenness to invest in youth and provide them with the necessary tools for a data-drive future. This can be accomplished by working hard to prepare and qualify current and future generations in Kuwait, with the necessary knowledge that will help increase their ability to effectively engage with the digital future and promote data-driven innovations.



She also affirmed Gulf Bank's commitment to organizing and hosting many events and competitions that help to achieve these goals, as well as harnessing its resources and capabilities to help foster a home-grown tech community capable of responding

to the latest data innovations and requirements. Considering that technology is being used in various unseen ways to bridge the gap between human needs, and products and services.

Those wishing to register, please visit the following website: <https://e-gulfbank.com/datathon> or scan the QR code.

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

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



**WASHINGTON:** World Bank Africa Group Executive Director Abdoul Salam Bello speaks during an interview with Agence France-Presse during the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund Spring Meetings in Washington, DC, on April 14, 2023. — AFP

## Foreign aid stalls as Africa's debt spirals

**PARIS:** Africa is battling decades-high levels of debt after the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the international community is struggling to agree on extending its financial support for the region. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a report Friday that public debt and inflation in sub-Saharan Africa were "at levels not seen in decades".

Public debt in the region stood at 56 percent of gross domestic product at the end of last year, its highest level since the beginning of the 2000s, said the IMF, which has lowered its growth forecast for sub-Saharan Africa to 3.6 percent for this year. The Washington-based institution said the continent was hit by several problems at once, from rising borrowing costs to the impact of the Ukraine conflict and a drying up of international aid. Borrowing costs in the region are three times higher than those of developed nations, the IMF said. Meanwhile, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development this week noted a decline in development aid for Africa last year—while it surged for Ukraine.

The problems facing Africa "could worsen debt problems—these are already high—and there could be a risk that more countries are moving from liquidity problems to the inability to roll over debt and solvency problems", warned Catherine Pattillo, deputy director of the IMF's Africa department, in an interview with AFP. That could hit crucial services and dent future growth, she said, in a region where 132 million people face acute food insecurity.

"We are concerned that the funding squeeze could lead to more shortages of funding that could force countries to have to reduce spending for critical development needs, education, health," Pattillo said. "And that would have very negative implications for growth and development."

Twenty-two countries either face a high risk of, or already have excessive debt, the World Bank said in a report published early this month. Ghana and Zambia, which have both defaulted on loans, are among the 22, as are Malawi and Chad, which are receiving IMF help. John Likumbi, a barber at Kabwata market in a middle-class district of Zambia's capital Lusaka, is feeling the pinch. He said he had been taking home less income over the past year compared to previous years, as people face a choice between spending on a haircut or buying food.

"On a bad day I stay without cutting anybody's hair because people would rather spend the 30 kwacha (around \$1.64) on buying pamele (local term for a small packet of the staple cornmeal)," he told AFP. "Previously I used to knock off with at least 300 kwacha but now I can even knock off with 30 kwacha," Likumbi said. Zambia is a case in point for the challenges facing the international community. — AFP

## How Japan's big plans for '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 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 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



**NAMIE, Japan:** This file photo taken on February 15, 2023 shows a section of the hydrogen storage and supply facilities at the "Fukushima Hydrogen Energy Research Field" (FH2R). — AFP

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 program called "Enefam" 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".

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 decarbonisation, the Japanese Renewable Energy Institute think-tank says. In March, Tokyo agreed to spend \$1.6 billion on an ambitious but controversial venture in Australia to produce liquid hydrogen from lignite coal and export it to Japan. — AFP

Lifestyle

# Bad Bunny makes history with sweeping Coachella set



US rapper Pusha T performs during the first week-end of Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California. —AFP photos



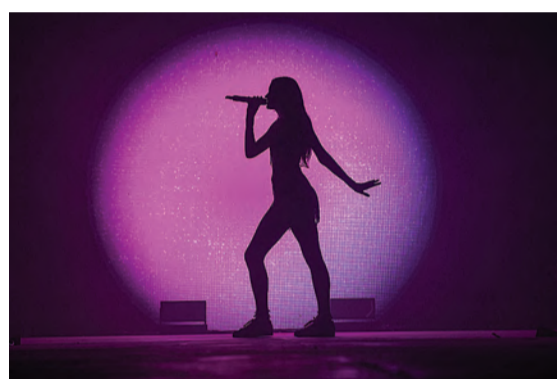
Puerto Rican singer Bad Bunny



Bassist and co-lead vocalist Mark Hoppus from Blink-182



Guitarist and co-lead vocalist Tom DeLonge from Blink-182



Belgian singer Angele



Becky G

Bad Bunny was among Coachella's most hotly anticipated acts and the Puerto Rican reggaeton giant delivered late Friday, performing two hours of his numerous hits set against an homage to trailblazing Latino artists. The megastar was the first Spanish-language and first Latin American act to headline the major festival, which takes place over two three-day weekends and traditionally kicks off the summer touring circuit.

It's but another notch on the belt of the artist born Benito Martinez Ocasio, the 29-year-old who is by most measures the biggest pop star in the world. With tracks from "Vete" to "Titi Me Pregunto" to "Yo Perreo Sola," the artist shut down the festival's main stage in front of thousands of screaming fans, with trippy visuals and fireworks and flames bursting behind him.

The show also featured documentary-style footage with voiceovers contextualizing the history of the Latin American, and more specifically Caribbean, music that features heavily in his work. He also included extended dance breaks to classics including Ismael Rivera's "Las Tumbas" and El Gran Combo's "Brujeria."

Like many artists at Coachella, Bad Bunny brought on famous guests including Post Malone, who — despite technical difficulties that rendered the artists at times inaudible — performed an acoustic version of "La Cancion" to the crowd's delight. Early in the set, Bad Bunny asked the crowd if they preferred he speak English or Spanish, and the response was a resounding vote for the latter. Though he's already one of the world's top contemporary acts and played Coachella as a



Drummer Travis Barker from Blink-182

solo artist in 2019, he acknowledged the boundary that was broken Friday night as the night's top-billed performer: "There's never been someone like me before," he said in Spanish.

### Blink and Blondie

Hours before the groundbreaking set, fans witnessed the festival revive its turn-of-the-millennium rock roots, as Blink-182 gave a surprise show announced just one day prior. The nostalgic headbanging moment was the pop-punk group's first performance with their original lineup in nearly a decade, and had droves of 30-somethings reliving the soundtrack to their youths. Band members Travis Barker, Mark Hoppus and Tom DeLonge — who are now all pushing or past 50 — delivered the hits of middle school dances yore, including "The Rock Show" and "What's My Age Again."

By the set's close, the band had thousands of



Debbie Harry of Blondie

people belting out a moody "I Miss You" before a mass singalong of "All The Small Things." After the set, many rushed to a neighboring tent to catch a blockbuster show from Blondie, who also delivered hits including "Heart of Glass" and "Call Me," and invited guest Nile Rodgers onstage.

### Breaking barriers

But neither rock nor legacy acts dominated Friday's slate, which featured main stage shows from rappers Pusha T and DoeChii, a performance from Nigeria's Burna Boy and DJ sets from the likes of Nora en Pure and Idris Elba. (Yes, that Idris Elba.)

Belgium's pop star Angele made her Coachella debut in a coveted nighttime slot, donning a disco ball of an outfit to perform her brand of jazz-inflected electro-pop alongside tightly choreographed dancers and occasional French subtitles on display behind her.

Los Angeles native Becky G donned a bright blue outfit for her highly anticipated set, which featured a smattering of her hits and some regional Mexican guest appearances paying homage to her Mexican-American roots. "A lot of Latin artists are breaking a lot of barriers," fan Katherine Narvaez told AFP ahead of Becky G's show.

"It's amazing to see her grow as an artist and kill it at the show," the 28-year-old said. Along with Bad Bunny and Becky G, the strong showing from Latinos this year includes rapper Eladio Carrion, Argentina's Los Fabulosos Cadillacs and the Grammy-winning Kali Uchis.

### Globalized lineup

The mammoth festival takes place over two three-day weekends and traditionally kicks off the year's summer concert circuit. This year is the first time Coachella hasn't booked a white headliner: following Bad Bunny, K-pop superstars Blackpink and the influential but reclusive R&B artist Frank Ocean top the bill at Coachella.

The weekend is hosting perhaps the most international lineup Coachella has ever booked, including Spanish phenomenon Rosalia and Iceland's Bjork. For CedarBough Saeji, a professor of Korean and East Asian studies who specializes in K-pop, the festival lineup emphasizing the hottest acts from across the globe is long overdue.

"The American music industry, the American decision-makers, are not necessarily the biggest risk-takers," she told AFP. "They want to follow clear indication of public demand, as opposed to sticking their necks out." —AFP

## Free bird: Indian man asks zoo for feathered friend's release

An Indian farmer whose extraordinary bond with a large bird made him a social media star has asked for his feathered friend to be set free after it was captured by wildlife authorities. Mohammad Arif rescued the injured Sarus crane — a crimson-necked wetlands species that can grow up to 1.8 meters (six feet) in height — and nursed it back to health.

He set it free six weeks later, but the crane remained near his home in the city of Amethi, trailing the farmer when he went for bike rides and eating out of his hands. "The bird would stay with its family during the day and return in the evenings. Or in the afternoons when it was hungry it would come and wait at our door," Arif, 30, told AFP.

Videos of the bird and his human guardian went viral on social media and Arif amassed nearly 300,000 Instagram followers by documenting their exploits. Their remarkable friendship was rudely interrupted last month when authorities captured the crane and later brought it to a zoo in

Kanpur, a city more than four hours' drive away. The crane is currently in a small quarantine cage, but Arif has asked for the bird — which he refers to simply as "friend" — to be released. Arif went to visit the crane on Tuesday and video of their emotional reunion was shared online, with footage showing the bird flapping its wings excitedly and jumping up and down.

"The moment I reached the zoo, it recognized my voice," said Arif. "It appeared quite distressed. Maybe it thought I will get him released from the prison." Media reports of the bird's plight have led to an outpouring of sympathy from the Indian public, with nearly 4,000 people signing an online petition demanding the crane's freedom.

"The crane committed no crime. Is being friendly with human beings a crime?" text accompanying the petition said. The Sarus crane is the tallest flying bird in the world and is listed as "vulnerable" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Less than 20,000 of the species remain in India, according to the Worldwide Fund for Nature. Arif said his friend should be released either into the forest or a bird sanctuary. "It has never lived in a cage before, it has always lived free," he said. He was also confident the bird would return to his home. "The moment they release it, it will come back to me," he said. —AFP



This handout picture taken on March 6, 2023 and received as a courtesy of Mohammad Arif shows Indian farmer Mohammad Arif along with Sarus crane at his residence in Amethi, in India's Uttar Pradesh state. —AFP



Spanish sportswoman Beatriz Flamini reacts as she leaves a cave in Los Gauchos, near Motril on April 14, 2023 after spending 500 days inside. —AFP photos



Spanish sportswoman Beatriz Flamini (right) hugs a relative upon getting out of the cave.

## Spanish climber ends 500 days of isolation in underground cave

A 50-year-old Spanish mountain climber emerged Friday from an underground cave where she spent 500 days in seclusion as part of an experiment on the effects of isolation on the human body. Wearing dark sunglasses, Beatriz Flamini smiled and embraced family members who had gathered to greet her as she climbed out of the cave near Motril in southern Spain. "I haven't talked to anyone for a year and a half, only myself," the experienced mountaineer and solo climber told reporters, calling the experience "excellent, unbeatable".

Flamini began her challenge on November 21, 2021 — before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and while the world was still in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic. She remained 70 meters (230 feet) underground, except for a week when she was forced to leave the cave because an internet router that allowed her to call for help in an emergency broke down. While the problem was being fixed, Flamini remained in isolation in a tent, she and members of her team told daily newspaper El Pais and other Spanish media.

"I don't know what has happened in the world... for me it is still November 21, 2021," she told report-

ers after leaving the cave. Flamini said she spent her time reading with the aid of artificial lights, exercising, and knitting woolly hats. She was monitored by a technical team, who left food at an exchange point in the cave without having contact with her. Flamini had two cameras to document her experience, which will be turned into a documentary by Spanish production company Dokumalia. "There have been many challenges of this type, but none with all the rules that were set," said David Reyes of the Andalusian Federation of Speleology, who was in charge of her security. "Being alone and in total isolation, without contact with the outside, without (natural) light, without time references," he told reporters.

Spanish Tourism Minister Hector Gomez called it an "extreme endurance test", which he hoped would have "great value" for science. Flamini said one of the toughest moments came when the cave was invaded by flies, but she "never" considered abandoning the challenge. "There have been difficult moments, and it is true that there have been very beautiful moments, and both are what made it possible to carry one," she said. "I got along very well with myself," she added. —AFP

## Lifestyle

# California bursts into 'super bloom' after wet winter



Triana Montserrat ziplines over a superbloom of wildflowers at Skull Canyon Ziplines in Corona, California on April 11, 2023. —AFP



A woman sets off on her zipline over a superbloom of wildflowers at Skull Canyon Ziplines in Corona, California.



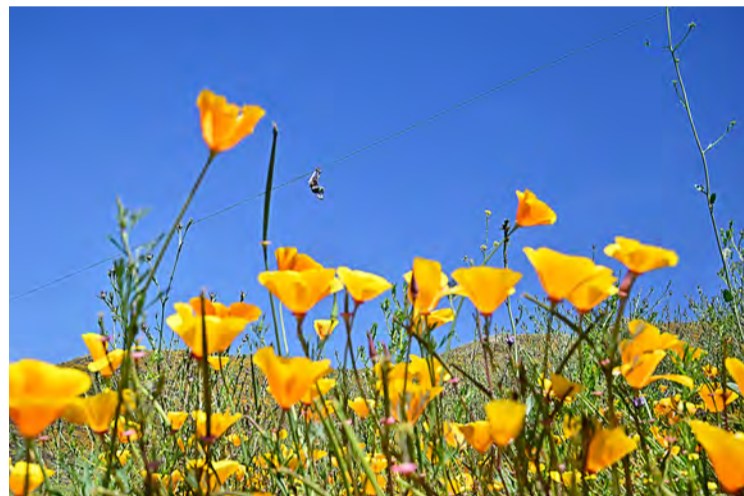
People hold on while ziplining over blooming wildflowers at Skull Canyon Ziplines.



Zipliners make their way to their next ride walking through blooming wildflowers at Skull Canyon Ziplines.



A man holds on while ziplining over blooming wildflowers at Skull Canyon Ziplines.



A woman holds on while ziplining over blooming wildflowers at Skull Canyon Ziplines.



This handout satellite image courtesy of Maxar Technologies shows the Antelope valley poppy preserve in Lancaster, California on March 30, 2023.

An explosion of oranges, yellows, purples and whites has covered California's hillsides, as a rare "super bloom" bursts into life in the wake of a very wet winter. Vast stretches of countryside that spend months of the year as a muted, dry brown have been transformed into a carpet of color that can be seen from space. "It almost feels like a painting," says Triana Montserrat as she surveys the California poppies, brittlebush and lupins that smother the ground.

"It's so intricate, and it's so beautiful. It's like my mind couldn't even have come up with that itself," adds the 29-year-old. America's most populous state spent months covering from the onslaught of repeated storms that brought near-record rainfall.

Californians more used to wearing shorts and shades retreated indoors, where many suddenly discovered roof leaks that had gone unnoticed during several dry years. But as the waterlogged winter gave way to spring, nature revealed its spectacular reward. Behold: the super bloom, an ill-defined but you'll-know-it-when-you-see-it treat that comes along every so often, when the arid ground is treated to a jolly good soaking.

## Tourists

From the earliest Spanish missionaries to some of the giants of American literature, the super bloom has long captivated those lucky enough to see it. Unfortunately, say nature lovers, the era of Instagram

and TikTok means these delicate blooms can easily become victims of their own popularity.

A short distance from where AFP visited, a hiking trail is closed to the public to avoid being swamped. The neighboring town of Lake Elsinore has shut the gates on Walker Canyon, with a patrol car stationed there to make sure no one gets in.

It's all part of an effort to avoid a repeat of what was dubbed the "poppy apocalypse" of 2019, during the last super bloom, when tens of thousands of day trippers swarmed the countryside creating monster traffic jams that paralyzed the region.

Influencers and selfie-seeking tourists dumped



This handout satellite image courtesy of Maxar Technologies shows an overview of wildflowers along Shell Creek road in Santa Margarita, California on April 9, 2023.

their cars along highways and marched right into the wildflowers, crushing whatever lay in their path as they sought the perfect shot. "It was a nightmare. They just trampled over everything, and smashed a lot of the flowers," says Pete Liston, owner of the Skull Canyon zip line.

"In the area over Walker Canyon, you can still see where in 2019 they made trails. Nothing grew back even in the super bloom." His adventure park is capitalizing on 2023's abundance, offering tours that take riders whizzing above the flowers, where they can enjoy them without fear of killing anything.

For Montserrat, it's the perfect way to savor the



This handout satellite image courtesy of Maxar Technologies shows a closer view of wildflower blooms in hills and canyons in Palmdale, California on April 10, 2023.

spectacle without leaving a mark on the landscape. "I've always wanted to do the super bloom, to hike through it," she tells AFP. "But I wanted to make sure that it was here for future generations to enjoy."

## 'Connect with nature'

While most people agree on the need to protect the flowers, not everyone wants to see trails closed with only webcams offered in their place, as Lake Elsinore has done. Each super bloom is a "moment enabling the public to connect with nature and to grow enthusiasm for California biodiversity," says Evan Meyer of the Theodore Payne Foundation, an organization highlighting Southern California's natural flora.

"In closing down Walker Canyon, Lake Elsinore is sending the exact opposite message." Instead of stopping people from enjoying these marvelous displays, he says: "We need to develop an ethic of nature appreciation within our culture." Which is what the guides at Skull Canyon strive for.

As they strap visitors in for lengthy zip line rides, they offer a reminder that picking flowers is forbidden, and tell them always to stick to the paths. For amateur photo enthusiasts like Lisa Mayer, the zip lines offer a perfect way to see the colorful mountains.

Her pictures will definitely end up on Instagram, she says, but she'll make sure they are responsibly captioned. "I probably will post something about protecting the flowers and not to step on them and be aware of where you're walking," she said. —AFP

## Europe's JUICE mission blasts off towards Jupiter's icy moons

The European Space Agency's JUICE space probe successfully took off on Friday for a mission to discover whether Jupiter's icy moons are capable of hosting extra-terrestrial life in their vast, hidden oceans.

The launch on an Ariane 5 rocket from Europe's spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana, came after a previous attempt on Thursday was called off due to the risk of lightning. Despite cloudy skies, the rocket lifted off as planned at 09:14 am local time (12:14 GMT) on Friday, as guests including Belgium's King Philippe watched from the Guiana Space Centre.

A little under half an hour later, the uncrewed six-ton spacecraft separated from the rocket at an altitude of 1,500 kilometers (930 miles), which prompted an outbreak of applause at the center. After a few tense minutes, ground control then received the first signal from the spacecraft. The sense of relief in the room was palpable. "I was very stressed. That was a rollercoaster!" European Space Agency (ESA) director-general Josef Aschbacher told AFP.

"I'm extremely proud for Europe because JUICE is the biggest mission of the decade and the most complex ever sent to Jupiter," he added. The spacecraft then successfully unfurled its array of solar panels, which cover a record 85 square meters (915 square feet). It will need all the energy it can get when it nears Jupiter, where sunlight is 25 times weaker than on Earth.

## 'Off and running'

"That's it. We're off and running,"

ESA's JUICE project scientist Olivier Witasse told AFP. It will be another 17 days before the spacecraft deploys its antennae, and three months before a final performance review, said ESA's Nicolas Altobelli. "Then we will begin the phase of interplanetary travel," he added. The Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer (JUICE) will take a long and winding path to the gas giant, which is 628 million kilometers from Earth.

It will use several gravitational boosts along the way, first by doing a fly-by of Earth and the Moon, then by sling-shotting around Venus in 2025 before swinging past Earth again in 2029. When the probe finally enters Jupiter's orbit in July 2031, its 10 scientific instruments will analyze the Solar System's largest planet as well as its three icy moons — Callisto, Europa and Ganymede.

The moons were first discovered by astronomer Galileo Galilei more than 400 years ago but were long ignored as potential candidates for hosting life. However, the discovery of huge oceans of liquid water — the main ingredient for life as we know it — kilometers beneath their icy shells has made Ganymede and Europa prime candidates to potentially host life in our celestial backyard. JUICE will turn its sights on Ganymede — the Solar System's largest moon and the only one that has its own magnetic field, which protects it from radiation.

## 'Extraordinary mission'

In 2034, JUICE will slide into Ganymede's orbit, the first time a



This photograph taken on April 14, 2023, shows Arianespace's Ariane 5 rocket lifting off from its launchpad, at the Guiana Space Center in Kourou, French Guiana. —AFP

spacecraft will have done so around a moon other than our own. NASA's Europa Clipper mission, which is scheduled to launch in October 2024, will focus on Ganymede's sibling, Europa. Neither mission will be able to directly detect the existence of alien life. They instead hope to establish whether the moons have the right conditions to harbor life.

Carole Larigauderie, JUICE project head at French space agency CNES,

pointed out that a form of mucus had been found in a lake underneath a glacier in Antarctica, showing that life can survive in such extreme environments. "If JUICE manages to prove that Ganymede is habitable so that we can go and find out in the future that there is life, that would be fabulous," she said.

The 1.6-billion-euro (\$1.75-billion) mission will mark the first time Europe has sent a spacecraft into the outer Solar System, beyond Mars. "This is an

extraordinary mission that shows what Europe is capable of," said CNES head Philippe Baptiste.

Friday marked the second-last launch for the Ariane 5 rocket before it is replaced by the next-generation Ariane 6. Repeated delays for the Ariane 6, as well as Russia pulling its Soyuz rockets in response to sanctions over the war in Ukraine, have left Europe struggling to find ways to launch its missions into space. —AFP



In this picture taken on April 12, 2023, colourful dresses, part of the Ramadan collection, are displayed in the window of a shop in the Mall of the Emirates in Dubai, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. —AFP photos



In this picture taken on April 12, 2023, soft-coloured robes, part of the Ramadan collection, are inside a shop in the Mall of the Emirates in Dubai.

## Luxury brands court Middle East with Ramadan collections

With flowing kaftans, fluid separates and glamorous maxi dresses, Western luxury fashion brands are increasingly targeting the monied Middle Eastern market with Ramadan capsule collections.

"You're about to be the best-dressed person at every iftar and suhoor that you attend," declared Cosmopolitan Middle East magazine earlier this month in a Ramadan fashion spread, referring to the meals before and after the daily fast during the Muslim holy month.

Top luxury brands from Louis Vuitton to Versace have rolled out handbags and shoes, sunglasses and clothing that varies between sober pastels, florals and embroidered prints. Gucci's 2023 Ramadan collection, "Nojum" (meaning stars), is inspired by the night sky, featuring deep purples and daywear options for men.

"Luxury brands know more now about our local culture, our Islam. You can see abayas and jalabiyas, Ramadan and Eid collections in the windows of luxury brands," said Moza El-Katbi as she shopped in the Mall of the Emirates in Dubai.

Also soaking up the offerings in the opulent shopping center was Feriale Faraj, an Iraqi who lives in Jordan but was visiting her son in Dubai. "I feel happy when we see something like that. It's nice to encourage this if we have the means" to buy, she said, admiring the Dior and Louis Vuitton displays. "Western fashion isn't the only fashion that is beautiful, the oriental style is also pretty," she added.



In this picture taken on April 12, 2023, a soft-coloured maxi dress, part of the Ramadan collection, is displayed in the window of a shop in the Mall of the Emirates in Dubai.

### Booming industry

The trend of releasing Ramadan collections in recent years reflects the development of the

Middle East into a significant market for fashion brands, with increasingly demanding consumers who are among the highest spenders in the world.

E-commerce is booming, influencers from the region have growing clout, and women are playing an increasingly active role in the workforce. "The post-pandemic shift of international luxury spending, the boom in tourism and changing consumer behavior, new local interest in health and fitness regimes, strong economic prospects and relatively low inflation make the region particularly attractive for brands to invest in," said Euromonitor analyst Marguerite Le Rolland. She said global brands were also keen to diversify, as Europe's economy was vulnerable to the fallout of the Ukraine war, and Covid-19 lockdown policies in China had caused uncertainty in that major market for luxury brands.

### Avoiding cliches

While some luxury houses clearly brand their collections for Ramadan, others merely reference the "sacred season" or "this special time of the year". Some allude to the Middle East with tags about "a thousand and one nights" or "starry skies". Sofiane Si Merabet, founder of the Dubai-based Karta cultural marketing group, highlighted the difficulty in balancing "the growing commercialization of Ramadan and cultural appreciation of this key moment. "Some brands rush in with all the cliches: the moon, camels, the woman in the desert ... we can play with the rules but it really depends how it is done. "What is fundamental when we talk about Ramadan is authenticity ... and not hyper-commercialization. Brands must rely on local communities and artists and not import everything from Paris." —AFP



Visitors walk past the Jikji, a Korean book dating from 1377 and "the first print from movable metal type still preserved" displayed on April 12, 2023 in Paris, as part of the exhibition Print! Gutenberg's Europe at the Bibliotheque Francois Mitterand (BnF). —AFP photos

## World's oldest machine printed book on show in Paris

The oldest known work printed on a mechanical press — a Korean book that predates the first European example by several decades — went on display in Paris for the first time in 50 years on Wednesday.

The "Jikji", a collection of Buddhist teachings, was printed in 1377 -- some 78 years before Johannes Gutenberg produced his famous Bible using his printing press in Germany. The Korean treasure is being shown as part of a new exhibition at the National Library of France (BnF), running until July.

Since no examples of the Korean machinery have survived and the technique did not become widely used at the time, it did not have the revolutionary impact of the Gutenberg press — and the exhibition mostly focuses on European history.

But it marks the first time the "Jikji" has been shown publicly since 1973, according to reports in the Korean press — reigniting hopes of its return. "With this exhibition as an occasion, if we collaborate and build a good relationship based on trust, I think we could have a valuable opportunity to see Jikji in person in Korea in the future," said Kim Jung-hee, chair of the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation.

The BnF says Gutenberg was probably not aware of the Korean invention, and was combining various forms of reproduction using wood and copper engravings that had been in use in Europe since around 1400, though they themselves were influenced by techniques imported from East Asia.

The "Jikji" was brought to France by Victor Collin de Plancy, who became the first French diplomat to Korea in 1887. A collector of ancient texts, he bought it from an unknown source and "was emotionally



This photograph taken on April 12, 2023 in Paris, shows the Jikji, the oldest known work printed on a mechanical press.

moved to discover that the work dated back to the Xiangyang era (1371-1378)," says the BnF.

It was shown at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1900 and Collin de Plancy sold it at auction in 1911 for 180 francs, equivalent to more than 60,000 euros today, according to France's national statistics bureau.

It was bequeathed to the national library in 1950, and rediscovered a decade later by a Korean historian who was cataloguing her country's treasures in Paris. She helped repatriate other items to South Korea, such as royal manuscripts from the Joseon dynasty which had been taken during a French military campaign in 1866.

The exhibition at the BnF also includes a copy of the famous 1455 typographic press designed by Gutenberg and loaned by the museum dedicated to him in Mainz, Germany, as well as two Bibles printed on it, and the oldest known Western woodcut, the Bois Protat, dated to around 1400. —AFP

## Cannes set for women director record, A-list lineup

A record six women directors will compete for the Palme d'Or at Cannes in May, organizers announced, with the film festival promising a who's who of Hollywood A-listers and award-winning filmmakers. The world's top cinema shindig had already secured some glitzy Hollywood premieres, including the new Indiana Jones and Martin Scorsese movies, as well as Johnny Depp's comeback film.

Among the 19 films competing for the top prize Palme d'Or from May 16 to 27 is Wes Anderson's "Asteroid City", which alone will bring a cavalcade of stars to the red carpet, including Tom Hanks, Margot Robbie and Scarlett Johansson. The presence of six women directors, including Italy's Alice Rohrwacher and Austria's Jessica Hausner, beats last year's record of five.

Natalie Portman and Julianne Moore are expected for "May December" from director Todd Haynes. A fiery start is guaranteed thanks to opening night film "Jeanne du Barry", which sees Depp play French king Louis XV in his first role since an explosive defamation trial against ex-wife Amber Heard involving bitter allegations of domestic abuse. Depp will be joined by his daughter, Lily Rose Depp, who stars in "The Idol", a TV series playing out of competition, produced by musician Abel "The Weeknd" Tesfaye. It has had a tumultuous production with reports of major rewrites and re-shoots.

As if that was not enough to inflame social media, the star and director of "Jeanne du Barry", Maiwenn, had a criminal complaint lodged against her last week for al-

Cannes 2023 76th Cannes Film Festival May 16 - 27			
Club Zero Jessica Hausner (AUT)	Anatomy of a Fall Justine Triet (FRA)	Opening film Jeanne du Barry Maiwenn (FRA)	Films competing for Palme d'Or
The Zone of Interest Jonathan Glazer (GBR)	Monster Hirokazu Kore-eda (JPN)	La Chimera Alice Rohrwacher (ITA)	Shanghai Youth Wang Bing (CHN)
Fallen Leaves Aki Kaurismäki (FIN)	Il sol dell'avvenire Nanni Moretti (ITA)	The Pot au Feu Tran Anh Hung (VIE-FRA)	The Old Oak Ken Loach (GBR)
Four Daughters Kaouther Ben Hania (TUN)	Last Summer Catherine Breillat (FRA)	Rapito Marco Bellocchio (ITA)	Banel et Adama Ramata-Toulaye Sy (SEN-FRA)
Asteroid City Wes Anderson (USA)	About Dry Grasses Nuri Bilge Ceylan (TUR)	May/December Todd Haynes (USA)	Perfect Days Wim Wenders (GER)
			Firebrand Karim Ainouz (BRA)

legedly assaulting a journalist by yanking his head back and spitting in his face in a Paris restaurant. Star of the moment, and so-called "Internet Daddy", Pedro Pascal is also expected alongside Ethan Hawke for a short film by Spain's Pedro Almodovar.

### Palme laureates

The competition is packed with previous award-winners, including two-time Palme laureate Ken Loach, and other past winners such as Nanni Moretti, Wim Wenders and Hirokazu Kore-eda. Critics have been gushing, with The Hollywood Reporter calling it "an all-killer, no-filler program".

Scorsese's "Killers of the Flower Moon", starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro, currently has an out-of-competition slot but may end up in the contest, festival director Thierry Fremaux said. Also playing out of competition is a documentary about wartime Amsterdam, "Occupied City", by celebrated British director Steve McQueen

("12 Years a Slave"), which Fremaux described as "a very radical film".

Arthouse fans are particularly excited about the return of British director Jonathan Glazer ("Under the Skin") with romance film, "The Zone of Interest", based on a novel by Martin Amis. Victory in Cannes can give a major boost to art-house cinema, such as last year's winner "Triangle of Sadness", which went on to pick up several Oscar nominations.

Its director, Sweden's Ruben Ostlund, heads this year's jury. Hollywood loves the French Riviera as a launchpad for its glossier fare, with "Top Gun: Maverick" and "Elvis" getting their world premieres at the festival last year. This year will see "Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny", with Harrison Ford as guest of honor for his fifth and final appearance as the iconic adventuring archaeologist, alongside Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Antonio Banderas. —AFP

## Sports

# Pakistan thump New Zealand in Azam's 100th T20 international

LAHORE: Pakistan celebrated skipper Babar Azam's 100th international match in the shortest format with a clinical 88-run win in the first Twenty20 against New Zealand in Lahore on Friday. Azam failed with just nine runs but Fakhar Zaman and Saim Ayub scored 47 runs each and put on a 79-run partnership for the third wicket to anchor Pakistan to 182 all out in 19.5 overs.

Fast bowler Haris Rauf, one of five players who returned after being rested in Pakistan's last series against Afghanistan, took career best figures of 4-18 as New Zealand were 94 all out in 15.3 overs. Left-arm spinner Imad Wasim finished with 2-2 in his only over — taking both his wickets off successive deliveries. Mark Chapman top-scored with 27-ball 34 inclusive of four boundaries and a six while skipper Tom Latham made 24-ball 20. Rauf's previous best T20 figures of 4-22 had also come against New Zealand in Sharjah in 2021.

Azam praised his bowling unit. "The pitch was assisting the bowlers so it was a good batting performance to get that total and then our complete bowling unit was excellent," said Azam, happy at reaching a personal landmark. "I had never expected this. I still remember the journey of starting off here as a ballboy on the sidelines, and to now be here, it is a huge honor," said Azam of serving as a ballboy during the 2007 series against South Africa.

Latham said his team did not adapt to the different

conditions. "We did not quite adapt to the conditions early enough," said Latham whose team are missing top eight players due to Indian Premier League. "On that surface, the score was slightly above-par. We did not build partnerships with the bat."

Earlier, Zaman and Ayub lifted Pakistan from a poor start after they won the toss and batted. Pakistan lost both their openers — Mohammad Rizwan leg-before for eight and then Azam bowled — to pacer Adam Milne by the fifth over for just 30. Ayub lifted the tempo with two boundaries each off Milne and Ben Lister before he and Zaman hit a six each off spinner Ish Sodhi in the tenth over.

Zaman struck four boundaries and two sixes in his 34-ball knock while Ayub's rapid 28-ball innings featured two sixes and six fours. Ayub was run out while taking a second run before Zaman was caught at deep square-leg off Sodhi. Faheem Ashraf hit a 16-ball 22 while Wasim scored 16 off 13 balls to help Pakistan add 47 runs in the last five overs.

New Zealand pacer Matt Henry took a hat trick in his figures of 3-32. Henry dismissed Shadab Khan (five) and Ifthikhar Ahmed (nought) off the last two deliveries of his third over and then Shaheen Shah Afridi with the first of his fourth. Lister had figures of 2-30 while Milne finished with 2-51. The remaining four matches are in Lahore on April 15 and April 17 and Rawalpindi on April 20 and 24. —AFP



LAHORE: Pakistan's wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan (L) attempts a stump New Zealand's Mark Chapman (R) during the first Twenty20 cricket match between Pakistan and New Zealand at the Gaddafi Cricket Stadium in Lahore on April 14, 2023. —AFP



KOLKATA: Sunrisers Hyderabad's Harry Brook celebrates after scoring a century against Kolkata Knight Riders at the Eden Gardens Stadium on April 14, 2023. —AFP

## England sensation Brook's IPL century seals Hyderabad win

KOLKATA: England sensation Harry Brook lit up the IPL with an unbeaten century to set up a 23-run win for Sunrisers Hyderabad over Kolkata Knight Riders in Kolkata on Friday. Brook hit 12 fours and three sixes in 55-ball 100 that took Hyderabad to 228-4 after Kolkata skipper Nitish Rana won the toss and decided to field first. The young opener was supported by powerful hitting by Hyderabad captain Aiden Markram (50) and Abhishek Sharma (32) who stitched two key half-century partnerships with Brook.

West Indian all-rounder Andre Russell was the most effective Kolkata bowler and took 3-22 before he went off the field because of an injury concern at the start of his third over. Mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy took the only other Hyderabad wicket while New Zealand's Lockie Ferguson was the most expensive Kolkata bowler and leaked 37 runs in two overs.

Kolkata made the worst possible start after Afghanistan opener Rahmanullah Gurbaz fell to India veteran Bhuvneshwar Kumar for a duck in the first over of the chase. South African Marco Jansen removed Venkatesh Iyer (10) and Sunil Narine (0) off consecutive balls before Rana stabilized the innings with opener Narayan Jagadeesan (36). Rana hit 41-ball 75 before falling to T Natarajan in a spirited batting display with new Kolkata hero Rinku Singh.

Singh, who blasted five sixes off the final five balls to help Kolkata stun champions Gujarat Titans in an IPL thriller on Sunday, hit an unbeaten 31-ball 58 with four fours and four sixes. Hyderabad pacers Kumar, Jansen, Natarajan and Umran Malik shared five wickets, while spinner Mayank Markande finished with 2-27. The Kolkata bowlers could have restricted Hyderabad to a lower score, skipper Rana said after the match. Player-of-the-match Brook described it as "a special night" and said that "this knock is definitely up there" with my other top performances. —AFP

## Rays winning streak over after Blue Jays loss

TORONTO: The Tampa Bay Rays' record-equalling winning start to the season came to an abrupt end on Friday with a 6-3 defeat on the road against the Toronto Blue Jays. A day after clinching their 13th straight victory to equal the record unbeaten start to the season in modern baseball history, the Rays were brought back to earth at the Rogers Centre. Toronto star George Springer handed the Blue Jays the early initiative, blasting a solo home run to left center field in the first inning off Rays starter Drew Rasmussen.

Bo Bichette then doubled in the second inning to score Kevin Kiermaier for a 2-0 Toronto lead. Tampa Bay got on the board in the top of the fourth inning when Luke Raley's single sent Brandon Lowe home to make it 2-1. But Toronto blew the game wide open in the bottom of the fifth after a rocky start to the inning from Rasmussen allowed the Blue Jays to load the bases with just one out.

Rays skipper Kevin Cash had seen enough and pulled Rasmussen, looking to reliever Colin Poche to somehow navigate the jam. However Poche struggled to find his command, and walked both Alejandro Kirk and Santiago Espinal to give Toronto a 4-1 lead. A blunder by Brandon Lowe then turned what should have been an innings-ending double play into two more runs for Toronto, the Rays shortstop fumbling at second base to allow Kirk and Daulton Varsho to score for a 6-1 lead. —AFP

## Tsitsipas' title defence ended by Fritz in Monte Carlo

MONTE CARLO: Stefanos Tsitsipas' bid for a third consecutive Monte Carlo Masters title was ended after a straight-sets loss to American Taylor Fritz in the quarter-finals on Friday, while Daniil Medvedev was knocked out by Holger Rune. Second seed Tsitsipas was on a 12-match winning streak in the principality but slumped to a 6-2, 6-4 loss in only 70 minutes. "I thought my level today was very high. I think I played a very good match. Beating him here gives me a lot of confidence," Fritz said. "It has given me the reassurance I need to know I can play well on clay."

Fritz's win was his first against Tsitsipas after three previous defeats by the Greek, including a five-set thriller at the Australian Open last year. The world number 10 — who reached a career-high ranking of fifth earlier this year — is into his third Masters semi-final, with the other two both coming at Indian Wells where he won the 2022 title.

Australian Open runner-up Tsitsipas had been the favorite to win the tournament after Novak Djokovic's shock last-16 exit at the hands of Lorenzo Musetti on Thursday. But he made a poor start against Fritz, falling 4-0 behind in the opening set and was never able to change the momentum. Eighth seed Fritz secured the crucial break in the ninth game of

## US win figure skating World Team Trophy

TOKYO: The United States won figure skating's season-ending World Team Trophy on Saturday, tightening their stranglehold on the event with a record fifth title. Teenage "QuadGod" Ilia Malinin helped the Americans clinch the gold on 120 points, comfortably clear of South Korea on 95 and Japan

## Scheffler in contention, Rahm rises but Walker leads at RBC Heritage

MIAMI: Scottie Scheffler, targeting a return to top spot in the world rankings, set himself up for a weekend push at the RBC Heritage shooting a six-under-par round of 65 to move within three strokes of leader Jimmy Walker. Victory would see Scheffler overtake freshly crowned Masters champion Jon Rahm and become world number one again.

But the Spaniard, who made a slow start with a one-over 72 opening round, moved up the leaderboard with the best score of the day, a bogey-free seven-under 64. After starting on the tenth tee, Scheffler chipped in for an eagle on the par-5 2nd hole and ended his round with a bogey and a birdie. Scheffler is one of three players on nine-under overall, alongside England's Justin Rose and American Xander Schauffele.

It is Scheffler's first appearance at Hilton Head and he said that lack of knowledge has been a factor in his play so far. "There's a lot of nuances to this golf course, and I'm still kind of learning on the fly," he said. "It's just those nuances kind of help when you're not really playing your best. I feel like I put myself in a few spots this week that haven't been great. But outside of that, I've played a lot of solid golf," he added.

Rahm had been weary in his first round, after all his exertions at Augusta, but he was back into his groove after making four successive birdies on his front nine. The Spaniard had to make a ten-footer for par on his last hole, the ninth to keep his round bogey-free but said he was still battling with the after-effects of his Masters win. "We did play 30 holes on Sunday on one of the hilliest walks all year. So adrenaline keeps you going so far, and then it's going to take a little bit for the body and mind to recover," he said.

### Cantlay ace

"I wish I would have been able to take the week

the second set and served out the victory.

"I just seemed off. My serve was not working very well today, and against opponents like Taylor, you have to serve well," said Tsitsipas. Tsitsipas has struggled for form and with a shoulder injury since his loss to Djokovic in the Australian Open final. The world number three is still waiting for a first Grand Slam title but will be among the main contenders for the French Open next month. "I would have never pictured myself dealing with such an injury," added Tsitsipas. "It would have been perhaps the last thing that I could think of in terms of injury with tennis. It's probably the worst injury that I've had on the tennis court so far."

### Medvedev beaten by Rune

Medvedev's run of five successive finals came to a halt as the former world number one slipped to a 6-3, 6-4 loss to Danish rising star Rune. Russian Medvedev won his fourth title in five events at the Miami Masters earlier this month but has still never won an ATP clay-court tournament. World number nine Rune controlled the first ever meeting between the two, breaking once in the first set and twice in the second.

The 19-year-old, who reached the French Open quarter-finals last year, is hunting his first title of the season and will next play Jannik Sinner. "He played good. He's a great player on clay. I feel like that's the surface that suits him the best," Medvedev said of Rune. Sinner cruised to a 6-2, 6-2 victory over fellow Italian youngster Musetti who failed to back up his brilliant performance against Djokovic.

on 94. The US have now won the event, which is held in Japan every two years, more than half of the eight times it has been staged.

Russia, who won the competition two years ago, were banned from defending their title because of the war in Ukraine. The 18-year-old Malinin has forged a reputation as one of the sport's hottest young talents and last year became the first skater ever to land the fabled quadruple axel in competition. He did not include the ultra-difficult jump in his program for the six-team competition in Tokyo and finished fifth in the men's free skate.

The Americans had already racked up a sizeable lead heading into the third and final day, helped by



MONTE CARLO: USA's Taylor Fritz reacts after winning his match against Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas on April 14, 2023. —AFP

The 21-year-old Sinner has reached the semifinals at all three Masters events so far this year. Rublev, who lost to Tsitsipas in the 2021 final, earlier booked his place in the semifinals with a 6-1, 7-6 (7/5) win over German qualifier Jan-Lennard Struff. The fifth seed won six straight games after being broken in the opening game and clinched victory in a tense second-set tie-break. Rublev has lost four of his previous six meetings with Fritz, but the pair have never played each other on clay. "Doesn't matter the surface. It's tough," said Rublev. "You know, when the guy returns full power to you, you need a couple of shots to start the rally, because if he returns well, you're in danger." —AFP

first-place performances from Malinin, ice dance world champions Madison Chock and Evan Bates, and pairs team Alexa Knierim and Brandon Frazier. Cha Jun-hwan, who finished as runner-up behind Japan's Shoma Uno at last month's world championships, won the men's free skate to help Korea claim second ahead of Japan.

Korea's Lee Hae-in won both the women's short program and free skate ahead of Japan's world champion Kaori Sakamoto, who fell in both routines. Japan were missing Uno, who pulled out earlier this week after failing to recover from an ankle injury. Italy finished fourth, followed by France in fifth and Canada in sixth. —AFP



HILTON HEAD ISLAND, South Carolina: Scottie Scheffler of the United States plays his shot from the third tee during the second round of the RBC Heritage at Harbour Town Golf Links on April 14, 2023. —AFP

off, but it wasn't the case. I took Monday and Tuesday off. I've been getting slightly better each day. "So hopefully on the weekend I feel like I do normally on a weekend," he said. Walker is a surprise leader but one whose return to form will hearten many of his colleagues on the tour. The 44-year-old has had to cope with the impact of Lyme disease which emerged in 2016 and a series of complications badly affected his form.

Walker, who has six wins on the PGA Tour but none since his major win at the PGA Championship in 2016, shot back-to-back rounds of 65 to lead on 12-under overall. "When you haven't been playing well, there's even more pressure...to take advantage of what's happening because it hasn't been happening very often," he said.

While it has been seven years since he was winning titles, Walker certainly isn't of the mindset to

simply enjoy being back among the frontrunners. "I've won golf tournaments in all sorts of fashions, big events. Played in the biggest stages. Nothing this weekend is any different than anything I've ever done honestly. I'll just go do it again because it's fun if you win," he said.

Rose was bogey-free in his 67 while Schauffele eagled the par-5 fifth and reached the turn four-under but bogeys on the 11th and 12th hampered his progress before he sank an 11 foot birdie putt on the 18th to earn a share of second place. English pair Tommy Fleetwood and Aaron Rai were both four shots off Walker along with Norway's Viktor Hovland and Americans Mark Hubbard and Patrick Cantlay. Cantlay, criticized for slow play during the final round of the Masters, had a hole in one on the par-3 seventh and tweeted a video of his ace with the message 'Playing Faster!' —AFP

## Sports

# As Napoli prepare for historic title, fans feud with owner

MILAN: Napoli fans are preparing for their biggest party in over three decades but a row between hardcore supporters and club owner Aurelio De Laurentiis threatens to take the shine off the colorful festivities already beginning in Naples. Napoli host Verona on Saturday on the verge of their first Scudetto since the days of Diego Maradona but while the city is starting to be decked out in blue and white, the atmosphere at recent home matches has been positively toxic.

The 4-0 home thumping at the hands of AC Milan this month was marred by fights breaking out in the stands between Napoli supporters as fans chanted "out, out, out" at hardcore "ultras" who decided to watch the match in near silence. The ultras' protests are ostensibly about being prevented from bringing drums, flags and banners to the stadium to create an atmosphere worthy of a season in which Napoli should win Serie for the first time since 1990, with weeks to spare.

Coach Luciano Spalletti said in the aftermath of the 1-0 Champions League loss to Milan on Wednesday that he would resign if those supporters continued "to hold the team hostage" during next week's second leg of their all-Italian quarterfinal. But this latest row is just another episode of an ideological feud with Rome-born film mogul De Laurentiis, who is distrusted despite taking control in 2004 when the club was bankrupt and bringing them up from the third tier to the brink of glory.

"Culturally De Laurentiis has always been a foreigner in Naples. He has never been seen in a good light, neither by the hardcore supporters nor by large chunks of the city in general," says Massimo

Gallo, who runs popular Napoli website Il Napolista. "In Naples there is a sort of fundamentalist religion in which the city is a god that needs to be worshipped... But he has thrown in the faces of Neapolitans, and above all the top strata of Neapolitan society, the fact that he has taken their business and made money with it. "This Scudetto is totally different to the ones won with Maradona. It's more Milanese, a result of planning and balance sheet management... the club has given a lesson in management to both Milan and Turin."

### 'Customers who are never right'

De Laurentiis' cold business philosophy, which goes against the ultras' philosophy, was highlighted by the cheapest seats for Tuesday's return leg with Milan being priced at €90 (\$100). "De Laurentiis says he wants to bring families to matches but he doesn't offer any discounts either for them or young people," says Emilio Coppola, a Napoli fan and a lawyer who works on supporter-related issues. "It seems to me that he simply wants to select who goes to matches on the basis of their financial status."

Coppola says that a mass fight between Napoli and Roma fans at a service station in January, which cost both sets of supporters a two-month ban for travel to away matches, caused the latest flare-up of "a climate of tension" dating back to at least 2019 when supporters suddenly started being fined for not sitting in their assigned seat. "The owner's way of seeing football is quite simply in stark contrast to that of the people who watch matches on the terraces... we're the only customers who are never right," he says.

"He calls the club 'the family plaything'; you could



NAPLES: Napoli fans stage a protest outside the Diego Maradona stadium on April 2, 2023 to protest against tickets' high prices and the interdiction to carry any banners and symbols of team membership. — AFP

say that about a hotel, or a restaurant. But Napoli is about the passion of the supporters. Napoli isn't historically a successful club... if Napoli were to go down to Serie B or not do well in the league the team could

end up being abandoned, because if those hardcore fans are pushed away you end up with a fan base that is only interested in results and doesn't support the team whatever the circumstances." —AFP

## Man Utd defender Martinez ruled out for rest of season

LONDON: Manchester United have been hit by a double defensive injury blow after Lisandro Martinez was ruled out for the rest of the season and Raphael Varane sidelined for the next few weeks. Both players were hurt in Thursday's 2-2 draw against Sevilla in the Europa League quarterfinal first leg at Old Trafford, in which United conceded two late own goals.

Martinez, who won the World Cup with Argentina in December, pulled up in pain gripping his right ankle late in the match and was taken away on a stretcher. United had already lost fellow first-choice centre-back Varane to injury at half-time and his replacement Harry Maguire scored an own goal in stoppage time. Manager Erik ten Hag was unable to provide an update when he faced the media at lunchtime on Friday but the club later confirmed the severity of the injuries.

"Lisandro Martinez has been ruled out for the remainder of the season after fracturing a metatarsal bone in his foot," United said in a statement. "However, the Argentinian defender is expected to make a full recovery in time to be ready for the start of next season." The statement added: "Lisandro's defensive partner Raphael Varane was also substituted with an injury at half-time in the same game and is expected to be out for a few weeks."

Martinez — in his first season at Old Trafford — and Varane have established themselves as Ten Hag's preferred center-back pairing and their absence leaves a void as United look to end the campaign on a high.

### Injury crisis

Ten Hag's side, who won the League Cup in February, are looking to qualify for the Champions League and enter the weekend fourth in the Premier League



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Argentinian defender Lisandro Martinez is carried off injured by Sevilla's Argentinian defenders Gonzalo Montiel and Marcos Acuna at Old Trafford stadium on April 13, 2023. — AFP

standings. Sunday's trip to relegation-threatened Nottingham Forest is followed by the second leg of United's Europa League quarter-final against Sevilla in Spain. Bruno Fernandes misses that match through suspension and club captain Harry Maguire is then banned for next weekend's FA Cup semi-final against Brighton at Wembley.

Maguire's absence is a concern as he and Victor Lindelof are now the only out-and-out centre-backs at United's disposal. Asked how much faith he had in the pair, Ten Hag said: "A lot. I think we have decent centre-halves and they have proved in the past. They have proved this season. "We have four or five very good centre-halves who can do the job."

Another option is left-back Luke Shaw, who has

impressed when used centrally this season. The England international has missed recent matches through injury but could return against Forest along with midfielder Scott McTominay. Top scorer Marcus Rashford is out with an apparent groin injury, joining Alejandro Garnacho and Donny van de Beek on the sidelines.

Ten Hag underlined the importance of squad players stepping up at his pre-match press conference. "Every game is a battle, every game is a fight and you have to be ready for that fight," he said. "We have a squad. I have said all season we have more than 11 starters. So now others are on and when their time is there you have to show and contribute to the team." — AFP



GELSENKIRCHEN, Germany: Schalke's German defender Moritz Jenz and Hertha Berlin's Croatian defender Filip Uremovic vie for the ball on April 14, 2023. — AFP

offs. Hertha dropped to the bottom spot four points from safety with six games to go. Hertha have the worst away record with five points and are win-

less in 11 games on the road. Stuttgart, who are now second-bottom, hosted title-chasing Borussia Dortmund on Saturday. — AFP

clude one of the three qualifiers from the 12-team preliminary round. The top two teams from each group advance to the knockout stage with the final due to be played at SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles. "Overall, I'm pleased with the draw," interim US head coach Anthony Hudson said. "I think Jamaica is a really tough team and our previous experience in this competition tells us that there are no easy opponents and every game is complicated. As we know, these teams are improving every year, and that's good for everyone."

Jamaica, who can draw on a number of players with dual-nationality from English football, are looking to make progress ahead of qualifiers for the 2026

World Cup. The Caribbean nation has not qualified for a World Cup finals since 1998 and have appointed former Iceland coach Heimir Hallgrímsson as they look to break that barren run. The Jamaicans have a solid record in the Gold Cup however, reaching the final in 2015 and 2017 although they were beaten by the United States in the quarterfinals two years ago.

Nicaragua have never made it out of the group stage in their four appearances in the Gold Cup and their only clash with the United States resulted in a 3-0 loss in 2017. Friday's draw also pitted record eight-times winners Mexico against Haiti, Honduras and guest team Qatar. Group C features a tough Cen-

tral American battle between Costa Rica, Panama, El Salvador and an additional qualifier.

Canada have arguably the easiest task of the four seeded nations having been drawn with Guatemala, Cuba and a qualifier. The preliminary games will be held in the United States from June 16-20 with the main tournament beginning on June 24. The Gold Cup will be the second national team tournament in the CONCACAF region this year with the Final Four of the Nations League set for June 15-18 in Las Vegas. That tournament will feature the United States against Mexico and Panama v Canada with the two winners meeting in the final. — AFP

## Immobile back in the goals as Lazio stroll past Spezia

MILAN: Ciro Immobile scored his first Lazio goal in nearly two months when he netted the opening penalty in his team's 3-0 win at Serie A strugglers Spezia on Friday. Italy striker Immobile helped Lazio strengthen their hold on second spot with a fourth straight win by scoring from the spot in the 36th minute at the Stadio Picco to take his league tally in an injury-hit season to 10.

Felipe Anderson won the spot-kick when he went down under Ethan Ampadu's challenge which was harshly judged to be both a foul and a bookable offence, and the Welshman was sent off late on following his second yellow card. Anderson doubled the away side's lead six minutes after the break when he finished off a swift-passing move also involving Luis Alberto and Immobile.

Anderson's Brazilian compatriot Marcos Antonio ensured Lazio would move 13 points behind runaway league leaders Napoli when he skipped around Spezia goalkeeper Bartłomiej Dragowski and rolled in the third. "The goal was important for me because this season hasn't been all that good," Immobile told Sky Sport. "The team did really well in my absence so I promised them that I would give everything to reach our goals with them. It's been an unlucky season for me, once you start getting injured it can go on for what seems like forever, but I'm not giving up."

The win boosts Lazio's bid for next season's Champions League. They are eight points in front of third-placed local rivals Roma, who host Udinese on Sunday night. AC Milan are a further point back in fourth and a point behind them, and just outside the top four, are Inter Milan ahead of their Lombardy derby with Monza on Saturday evening.

Spezia sit one place and four points above the relegation zone and will be hoping Napoli continue their march towards a first league title since 1990 on Saturday. Champions-elect Napoli host Verona, who are just inside the drop zone. Napoli coach Luciano Spalletti said that he will have Victor Osimhen available. Nigeria forward Osimhen has been out injured since the international break but should play a part in Naples in the hope he will be able to start Tuesday's Champions League quarterfinal showdown with AC Milan.

Defeat for Spezia also allowed Cremonese to keep dreaming of a great escape after Ciriaco Dessers gave the promoted outfit just their third win of the season, 1-0 over Empoli. Cremonese are 19th, seven points behind Spezia who travel to rock-bottom Sampdoria next weekend. — AFP

## Five-goal Schalke move off bottom of Bundesliga table

BERLIN: Schalke beat relegation-rivals Hertha Berlin 5-2 on Friday to move off the bottom of the Bundesliga table at the expense of the side from the capital. In the duel between the two teams who started the night at the bottom of the German league, Schalke came out fighting. Tim Skarke curled in the opener after three minutes in Gelsenkirchen after a run from midfield past the static Hertha defense.

Marius Buelter bagged a brace with goals in either half, nodding in his side's second goal quarter of an hour. Simon Terodde was on target three minutes after the break. Marcin Kaminski capped a fine display in injury time with a free-kick over the Hertha wall. Stevan Jovetic had pulled one back for Hertha just before the half-time whistle with Marco Richter adding a second with six minutes to go.

Schalke, who had scored just 21 goals all season in the league before Friday's match, jumped two places move into the relegation/promotion play-

## United States to face Jamaica in Gold Cup

LOS ANGELES: Defending champions the United States will face Jamaica and Nicaragua in the group stage of June's CONCACAF Gold Cup finals. The Americans, seven-times winners of the regional tournament, have been drawn in Group A, which will in-

## Butler, Strus lead Heat into playoffs



MIAMI: Alex Caruso of the Chicago Bulls passes the ball while being defended by Bam Adebayo of the Miami Heat during the second quarter at Kaseya Center on April 14, 2023. — AFP

MIAMI: Jimmy Butler and the Miami Heat caught fire down the stretch to beat the Chicago Bulls 102-91 and reach the NBA playoffs on Friday, as the Minnesota Timberwolves dominated the Oklahoma City Thunder to book their postseason berth. Miami, smarting from a loss to the Atlanta Hawks on Tuesday, clinched the Eastern Conference's eighth and final seed to set up a meeting with the top seeded Milwaukee Bucks starting on Sunday.

Minnesota meanwhile will face Western Conference top seeds Denver in the first round of the playoffs after a comprehensive 120-95 blowout of Oklahoma City. While Minnesota romped into the postseason, Miami's clash with Chicago went down to the wire before Butler, helped by the three-pointers of Max Strus, secured victory for Erik Spoelstra's team.

Butler put up 31 points, a tally matched by Strus who shot 7-12 on three pointers, including a crucial 26-foot jumper with 1:14 left that put Miami 96-91

up. For Strus, who grew up as a Bulls fan in the suburbs of Chicago and was released by them before joining Miami, it was a sweet night. "It's huge. It doesn't really matter who we're playing - we had to win this one, no matter what. It was win or go home and we're not done yet."

"So we want to keep playing and it's good to get that one. But it does feel a little bit better against them, I'm not gonna lie," he said. Strus secured the win with three free throws after he was fouled by Alex Caruso as he tried to make a throw from the corner. The Heat had been 14 points up in the first quarter but a 12-2 run from the Bulls in the third levelled the game up at 56-56.

A Zach LaVine dunk then put Chicago up for the first time since the opening basket of the game and three three-pointers early in the fourth from Coby White ensured the Bulls were 90-87 with three minutes to go.

### Wolves down Thunder

But then Butler and Strus took control. Butler was fouled while making a lay-up and then Bam Adebayo, who grabbed 17 rebounds, sank two free throws after he was fouled by Nikola Vucevic to make it 93-90. Butler set up Strus for a three pointer before he then made sure of the victory from the free-throw line. The Heat had found themselves in the elimination game after losing their opening play-in game to the Atlanta Hawks and faced the prospect of being the first divisional winner not to make the playoffs.

"I don't think any of us felt any type of pressure. We went out, we competed, we played the right way, corrected some things, and did what we were supposed to do," said Butler. DeMar DeRozan top scored for the Bulls with 26 points and nine assists. There is little time for Miami to savor the victory however as their playoff series against the Bucks begins in Milwaukee on Sunday.

"Man, it's going to be tough," said Butler, "But I think we got a shot. A really good shot at that. As long as we stick together. I'm telling you, we're a really good team and we're going to go out there and play," he said. In Minneapolis, the Timberwolves put their team's recent turbulence behind them to demolish Oklahoma City.

Minnesota finished the regular season in disarray, with team-mates Rudy Gobert and Kyle Anderson involved in a sideline punch-up in their final regular season game last Sunday. Gobert was subsequently suspended for Tuesday's play-in defeat to the Los Angeles Lakers, but returned on Friday to contribute 21 points in a convincing victory. Minnesota led by as many as 29 points at one stage in the fourth quarter and were up by double digits for most of the second half. Karl-Anthony Towns led the Timberwolves scoring with 28 points while all five starters finished in double figures. — AFP

## China is key to women's tennis on and off court

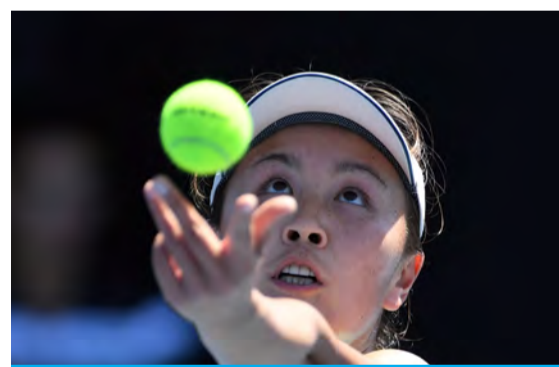
SHANGHAI: The WTA's decision this week to return to China, despite unresolved questions around the safety of player Peng Shuai, betrays the financial and strategic importance of the country to the tennis organization, analysts and former players say. Peng, a former doubles world number one, has not been seen outside China since 2021, when she made — and then withdrew — accusations of sexual assault against a high-ranking official.

The WTA had previously said they would not return to China without a formal investigation into the allegations and an opportunity to meet privately with Peng. But on Thursday it backed down, saying it had concluded "we will never fully secure those goals, and it will be our players and tournaments who ultimately will be paying an extraordinary price for their sacrifices".

The move was widely seen as a capitulation, and some questioned whether the boycott had ever been sincere. Most major sports events in China were cancelled anyway over the last few years because of Beijing's strict zero-Covid policy. The WTA's Chinese-language press release announcing the return was just a few lines long, and did not mention Peng at all — in contrast to a lengthy English one that detailed the saga.

Human Rights Watch described the move as "a huge disappointment for the Chinese human rights community". "It is not surprising, though, given the money at stake and the record of other international businesses in China," the NGO said in a statement. Former player Anne Keothavong put it more bluntly. "Tennis is a business," she told British media. "The WTA need to generate commercial revenue and the players need a circuit to compete."

From 2015 onwards, China became a huge source of income for the WTA, culminating in a 10-year contract in 2018 to make Shenzhen the host of its traditional end-of-season tournament. Giving that event to a country which already had nine other tournaments worth tens of millions of dollars did not look like a



MELBOURNE: China's Peng Shuai serves the ball during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open in this Jan 13, 2019 file photo. — AFP

risky strategy at the time. Shenzhen's bid doubled the seven-million-dollar total prize money for the event, with Ashleigh Barty claiming a record-setting \$4.4 million paycheck there in 2019 — the largest sum ever awarded in men's and women's tennis. The WTA has suffered deep financial losses recently, with Chinese tournaments cancelled due to the pandemic. The total prize money for the 2021 Guadalajara and 2022 Fort Worth Finals was just five million dollars, which the WTA had to pay itself.

The ATP men's circuit, which never joined the boycott, has scheduled four tournaments in China this year, which had raised fears the financial gap between the men's and women's games could widen even further. "(The ATP) were straight back to China as soon as they could and almost before the pandemic had ended," China-based sports analyst Mark Dreyer told AFP. "They were like, we don't want to get caught up in this thing because we're going to lose out on Chinese money."

Dreyer said the WTA may have had more leverage, pointing to how Covid had already forced the sports industry to find alternatives to China. "The WTA had continued around the world, so they've got replacement tournaments," he argued. While not as lucrative, "they were not in a disastrous situation where they desperately had to come back to China or else they would fold". But the WTA told the BBC that the "great majority" of players were in support of going back to China. World number five Caroline Garcia called the return "very important". — AFP

## Kipchoge targeting Boston victory in marathon quest

BOSTON: Eliud Kipchoge will aim to move one step closer to his dream of winning all six world marathon majors on Monday when he makes his long-awaited Boston Marathon debut as the famous race marks the 10th anniversary of the 2013 bombing that left three people dead. The undisputed Kenyan king of marathon running has never run Boston — the world's oldest annual marathon first held in 1897 — but is tackling the hilly 26.2 mile course for the first time as part of a bid to complete his set of major victories.

The 38-year-old two-time Olympic marathon champion and world record holder has won the Berlin, Tokyo, London and Chicago marathons in his glittering career, leaving just Boston and New York as the only gaps on his CV. Kipchoge aims to fill one of those holes on Monday when he lines up in what is being billed as one of the strongest Boston marathon fields ever assembled.

Kipchoge — the only man to run a sub two-hour marathon distance — has played down suggestions that he is planning to take a crack at the Boston course record of 2hr 3min 2sec set by compatriot Geoffrey Mutai in 2011. "I'm targeting the win," Kipchoge told Letsrun.com in an interview this week when asked if he was aiming for the record.

Kipchoge has visited parts of the course and is unfazed by the undulating nature of the Boston terrain. The course makes a significant drop in the opening four miles, features a sharp climb between the 16th and 21st miles, before another descent to the finish. "I just ran it in my mind," Kipchoge said of the course. "It's a very good course. The hills are there, they are good."

Kipchoge meanwhile said that he does not consider his age to be a factor, maintaining that he feels just as fresh in training as he did earlier in his career. "The challenge is just the training," Kipchoge said. "If my muscles can handle the training, I don't think about age. I know my age is coming, and one day I'll quit — and that's okay. But I don't concentrate on anything about age. I'm doing the program provided by my coach."

Yet though Kipchoge has been nearly unbeatable over the years — winning an incredible 15 of the



BERLIN: In this file photo taken on Sept 25, 2022 Kenya's Eliud Kipchoge crosses the finish line to win the Berlin Marathon. — AFP

17 marathons he has entered — he will likely face stiff competition in a Boston field that includes five of the six world major marathon winners from 2022. Leading the challengers are compatriot Evans Chebet, the reigning Boston and New York Marathon champion, and Benson Kipruto, the 2021 Boston champion who is also brimming with confidence after a victory in last October's Chicago Marathon.

There is also a similarly stacked field in the women's race, where five women who have ducked under 2hr 18min will be on the starting line. Ethiopia's Amane Beriso will be one of the main women to watch after she clocked a blistering 2:14:58 in Valencia in December. Others likely to be featured include Joyciline Jepkosgei, the 2019 New York and 2021 London marathon winner, Lonah Salpeter, the 2020 Tokyo marathon champion and reigning world champion Goytom Gebreslase of Ethiopia.

Monday's race takes place 10 years after the bombing near the finish line that left three people dead and nearly 300 injured on April 15, 2013. Boston Red Sox baseball icon David Ortiz — who famously gave a defiant rallying speech at Fenway Park in the aftermath of the atrocity — will serve as the Grand Marshal for Monday's race.

The bulk of the commemorative events in Boston will take place on Saturday, on the formal anniversary of the bombing, with a memorial service at a new commemorative finish line at Boylston Street in downtown Boston. The Boston bombing was carried out by two Chechen-Kyrgyz-Americans, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and Tamerlan Tsarnaev. Tamerlan was killed following a shoot-out with police while Dzhokhar was captured and later sentenced to death after conviction at trial. — AFP