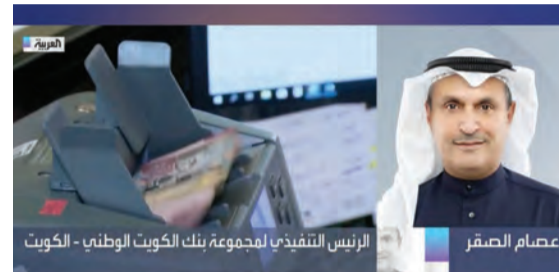




**2** Sharing household chores sets good example for kids



**9** NBK's resilient business model helps it overcome challenges



**16** Liverpool demolish Leeds after Gakpo's controversial opener



RAMADAN TIMINGS	
Fajr	03:55
Shurooq	05:18
Dhuhr	11:47
Asr	15:22
Maghrib	18:17
Isha	19:37

# Amir's decision to dissolve National Assembly hailed

## Calls to speed up process to hold fresh elections

By B Izzak

**KUWAIT:** Lawmakers and politicians on Tuesday hailed the Amir's decision to dissolve the 2020 National Assembly and call for fresh parliamentary polls as the best decision to resolve the current political crisis, resulting from the Constitutional Court's ruling to annul the September elections. In a speech delivered by HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Amir decided late Monday to dissolve the National Assembly and called for fresh polls within the coming months. No date has been set for the new elections. Marzouq Al-Ghanem, speaker of the National

Assembly which was dissolved in August last year and then reinstated by the court ruling last month, welcomed the decision to return to the people to decide the future, saying that he had repeatedly called for such an option. Ghanem also praised the Amir's verdicts that the judiciary must be respected and his rejection of unconstitutional calls to the contrary.

MP Ahmad Al-Hamad said that the Amiri address has drawn "a roadmap for the future", adding that the Amir in his speech reemphasized on democratic and constitutional process of the country. Minister of Oil Bader Al-Mulla, who is a member of the 2020 and 2022 assemblies, described the address as "historical which lays foundations for the future by sid-

ing with the people's will and the constitution".

MP Hamad Al-Harshani called on all parties to unite under the leadership of HH the Amir and the HH the Crown Prince and learn the lesson from the past by avoiding disputes. Mubarak Al-Rasheedi, a member of the scrapped 2022 Assembly, welcomed the Amir's decision and called on the government to take all legal actions necessary to provide the needed immunity to the next elections.

He also called for speeding up the process of holding the new elections. MP Khalil Al-Saleh said HH the Amir's decision has sided with the constitution and the will of the nation while MP Osama Al-Shaheen said the address has reemphasized

the leadership's firm commitment to the constitution and democracy. Member of the annulled 2022 Assembly Alia Al-Khaled said the address has again emphasized HH the Amir's respect to the popular will, while member of the same assembly Jenan Bushehri said the decision is a victory to the will of the people.

Following HH the Amir's decision, the government is now expected to approve a decree calling to dissolve the 2020 assembly and then set a date for the fresh elections. Under Kuwaiti law, the elections must be held within two months of the date of dissolving the Assembly. The forthcoming elections will be the third parliamentary polls in three years.

### RAMADAN KAREEM

## Body and soul in Islam

By Hassan Twaha Bwambale

A human-being is made up of body and soul. Many verses of the Noble Quran allude to the fact that the soul was breathed into Adam (AS) after he was created and fashioned from clay. Also, it is construed from many prophetic narrations that the soul is breathed into a fetus after 120 days (4 months from conception.) (Refer to Al-Bukhari # 3, 208 and 3, 3332)

Almighty Allah says what can be translated as: "(Allah, the Exalted in Might, the All-Merciful, perfected everything He created and began the creation of man from clay. Then He made his (first man's) progeny from a (quintessence) of a humble fluid drawn forth. Then He proportioned him and breathed into him from His (created) soul, and (then) gave you (the faculties) of hearing and sight, along with hearts that comprehend." (As-Sajdah 32: 7 - 9)

The body is regarded as a house for the soul. The soul departs it during sleep and returns when we wake up. When someone dies, the body becomes like a demolished house. Almighty Allah says what can be translated as: "Allah takes the souls (of people) at the (predestined) time of their death. But for those whose (souls) that have not yet died, He takes them during their sleep. Then He withholds the ones upon which He has decreed death and sends the others (back) for a specified time.

Indeed, in (all) this there are sure signs for people who reflect." (Az-Zumar 39: 42) If we compare a human-being to a computer, then his body is like a computer itself, his life like electricity, and the soul like software programs. So, with such complex software programs, the computer is different from other machines just like a human-being is different from animals.

### A bitter fact

Despite unanimity about the dichotomous relationship between the body and the soul, the vast majority of the people focus more on the body at the expense of the soul. They eat good food, drink tasty beverages, and some undergo cosmetic surgery to look more beautiful or handsome, but very few make an effort to

Continued on Page 6

## Worshippers spend night in prayer at Grand Mosque

By Shakir Reshamwala

**KUWAIT:** Tens of thousands of worshippers spent the night of the 27th of Ramadan in prayer and supplication at the Grand Mosque early Tuesday. The attendees savored the atmosphere at the mosque, which reopened for nightly prayers after three years due to the COVID pandemic and maintenance works. Eight rakats of tahajjud were performed, followed by three rakats of witr. The first four rakats were led by Sheikh Fahad Al-Kandari, and the remaining by Sheikh Meshari Al-Afasy. No sermon was scheduled after four rakats as on other nights.

Kuwait authorities have secured 27 mobile medical clinics with the required equipment and staff to operate during nightly prayers, Health Minister Dr. Ahmad Al-Awadhi said during a tour of the Grand Mosque and Bilal bin Rabah Mosque on Sunday to inspect medical preparations. (See Page 3)

## Saudi and Syria end diplomatic deep-freeze

**DAMASCUS:** Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad met with Saudi Arabia's top diplomat in Damascus on Tuesday, state media reported, ending more than a decade of diplomatic deep-freeze between the two countries. "President Bashar Al-Assad meets Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan," Syria's official news agency SANA reported. The Saudi prince arrived in Damascus on Tuesday afternoon on the first visit to Syria's capital by a Saudi official since the start of the country's civil war in 2011.

Assad has been politically isolated in the region since the conflict began, but a flurry of diplomatic activity has been underway in the past week as regional relations shift following a decision by Saudi Arabia and Damascus's ally Iran to resume ties. The trip comes less than a week after Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad visited Saudi Arabia, also on the first such visit since the conflict began.

Last week, diplomats from nine Arab countries met in the Saudi city of Jeddah to discuss ending Syria's long spell in the diplomatic wilderness and its possible return to the 22-member Arab League after Damascus was suspended in 2011. The diplomats stressed the "importance of having an Arab leadership role in efforts to end the crisis" in Syria, according to a statement by the Saudi foreign ministry.

Saudi Arabia severed ties with Assad's government in 2012 and Riyadh had long openly championed Assad's ouster, backing Syrian rebels in earlier



**KUWAIT:** An aerial view shows Muslims performing qiyam ul-layl prayers at the Grand Mosque on April 18, 2023 on the 27th night of the holy fasting month of Ramadan. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



**DAMASCUS:** Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad met with Saudi Arabia's top diplomat in Damascus on Tuesday, ending more than a decade of diplomatic deep-freeze between the two countries.

stages of the war. Several other Arab countries also cut ties with Syria as some powers bet on Assad's demise. But regional capitals have gradually been warming to Assad as he has clawed back most of the territory lost to rivals, with crucial backing from Russia and Iran. The United Arab Emirates, which re-established ties in late 2018, has been leading the charge to reintegrate Damascus into the Arab fold.

A February 6 earthquake that wreaked devastation in Turkey and Syria sparked Arab outreach to Assad's government, and the surprise rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran was announced the following month.

Continued on Page 6

## Qatar and UAE to reopen embassies

**DOHA:** Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are working to reopen their long-closed embassies "in the coming weeks", an official said Tuesday, as a wave of rapprochement sweeps the turbulent Middle East region. The two countries re-established relations in January 2021, after the UAE took part in a nearly four-year Gulf blockade of Qatar, but despite several meetings they are yet to restore the diplomatic missions.

"Regarding the opening of embassies between the two countries, I think it will be in the coming weeks," foreign ministry spokesperson Majid Al-Ansari told a briefing. "The technical committees are now doing their work in this context, and it is expected that there will be exchange visits to consider the procedures we need to reopen embassies." A UAE official confirmed that the reopening of embassies is "under process".

"At present, the activation of diplomatic ties, which will include the reopening of embassies, is under process between both countries," the official said in a statement sent to AFP. Opening the embassies would be just the latest in a series of reconciliatory steps for Gulf relations since heavyweights Saudi Arabia and Iran moved to restore ties last month.

Last week, Qatar put aside a chronic feud to resume relations with Bahrain. The two sides aim to quickly reach the "highest levels of cooperation", Al-Ansari said on Tuesday. Saudi Arabia has been negotiating a fresh ceasefire in Yemen's civil war and nearly 1,000 prisoners from the conflict, pitting a Saudi-led coalition against Iran-backed rebels, have been released in recent days under an exchange deal. — AFP



# Overspending becoming a habit during Ramadan

## 30 days of financial and social extravagance

By Majd Othman

**KUWAIT:** Ramadan, which is a holy month for Muslims where they fast from sunrise to sunset for 30 days, has turned over time to a month that has a different purpose, away from Islamic practices. It has become a month that includes various celebrations and cultural events, diverging from the main goal of empathizing with needy people who don't have enough food and provisions to survive.

In Kuwait, several celebrations have started to be highlighted more in the past few years, such as the ghabqa, which is a gathering held between the time of breaking the fast and sunrise; Girgian, mainly a celebration for children, when people distribute candy to them over three days; and iftar gatherings, where people eat their first meal after fasting, not to mention the recent trend of Ramadan home decor.

These gatherings and events give

people a good vibe during the month and help them forget the hardship of fasting, but are becoming a way to show off and cost people too much money, turning into a financial and social extravagance. Kuwait Times asked people for their opinion about the extra expenses and asked them how much Ramadan cost them this year.

Manal Assad, an expat, said she spent almost KD 100 on Ramadan clothes like the daraa, which is a traditional dress in Gulf countries, along with accessories. But probably she will not be able to wear them during next Ramadan, because she will "need to have a different look." Assad explained there is also a weekly iftar gathering, which costs more than KD 200 to invite the family, in addition to expenses of Girgian. She said although she did not spend much this year on it, total expenses reached KD 400 for all events and gatherings this Ramadan.

Abbar Abdullah, a citizen, said she also spent almost KD 400, but only on cele-

brating Girgian this year, noting that her friends spend triple this amount in a day to enjoy Girgian, as they consider it a social obligation that must be held every year, but expenses differ from one year to another. "Unfortunately, this celebration has turned into a competition between grownups away from the basic goal of bringing joy to children," she rued.

Abdullah added that her friends book lounges and pay thousands to celebrate for one day only, pointing out that some celebrations include people distributing one gram of gold as a souvenir for the guests, saying this behavior is only for competition and showing off and is not the core principle of Ramadan and Girgian.

On the other hand, Fatima Hussain, also a Kuwaiti, said she rejects all these behaviors due to the huge waste that remains after events, whether food, candy or drinks. She pointed out that many people prefer simplicity in celebrating, as these gatherings and events are a tra-



ditional habit that have a cultural value, whether for adults or children, stressing it should be far from spending lots of money on useless things. "It's better to give it to needy people or save it to spend it on other useful things," she said.

## Sharing household chores sets a good example for kids

By Faten Omar

**KUWAIT:** Men helping with household chores is an important aspect of creating a balanced and equitable household environment. In the Middle East, home duties have historically been thought of as "women's work", yet this viewpoint is out of date and discriminatory. Regardless of established gender roles, both men and women should participate in household duties and obligations.

Speaking to Kuwait Times, Omar Daly said a healthy relationship is to share the responsibility with your partner. "It is not a shame for someone to help his wife raise the children, help in chores or prepare milk for the baby. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the best example in his treatment of his family. It is sunnah to help the wife in the housework," he said. "Aisha bint Abu Bakr (RA) used to tell that the Prophet (PBUH) was at the service of his family, mending shoes, sweeping the house, sewing clothes and milking the sheep, meaning he helped his wives in all their household chores," Daly added.

"No matter how long you've been married, it's important that the division of household chores and responsibilities doesn't get neglected. Otherwise, the burden of it all is usually dumped on one person. This cannot be a permanent arrangement because eventually the person doing it all will burn out and stop contributing to the household altogether or live miserably in silence," Ayman Al-Othman said. "Spouses



sharing housework equally shows there is a certain amount of respect in the relationship. Both partners are working nowadays — both should be equally involved in what goes on at home, it is honestly the bare minimum," he pointed out.

On the other hand, some criticized men who share chores, saying such behavior is uncivilized if done in public, and shows a lack of respect for Middle Eastern society. "As a mother, I feel ashamed if I let my husband clean or feed the baby. It is the mother's responsibility and that is what we have learned. But he can help with some housework," Um Abdullah, a mother of a newborn, said. She added the main role of the man is to cover household expenses, while the role of the woman inside her home is to maintain tranquility for her and her family.

Sharing household chores sets a good example for children. Khider Fatafta, a teenager, told Kuwait

Times that seeing his father help his mother proves that men are not 'above' any household work. "Helping is not something to be ashamed about, but is a cause of happiness for your beloved ones."

Meanwhile, Saud Khalid said: "The male ego should hold no importance in this context. Helping with chores can strengthen the relationship between partners, as well as their children. It can demonstrate to their loved ones that they are willing to contribute to the household and help support them. Also, it can improve communication and reduce stress for the other partner, while enhancing the sense of self-worth that gives a sense of accomplishment and purpose. But the concept of division of household chores is completely absent in marriages in Kuwait." Overall, men helping with household chores is a step towards creating a more equal and harmonious home environment, which should be encouraged and celebrated.

## Kuwait's envoy to US presents credentials



**WASHINGTON:** Kuwait's Ambassador to the United States of America Sheikha Al-Zain Al-Sabah presented a copy of her credentials to Chief of Protocol of the United States Rufus Gifford in a meeting in Washington on Monday. "She expressed hopes that Kuwait and the United States remain strong strategic partners, and said she looks forward to developing the deep ties between the two nations," Kuwait's embassy said on its Twitter account. — Agencies

## US envoy sends Eid greetings

**KUWAIT:** On behalf of the Embassy of the United States of America to Kuwait, I would like to express our warmest greetings to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti government, the Kuwaiti people, and all Muslims around the world on the joyous occasion of Eid Al-Fitr. I want to thank the Kuwaiti people for their kindness and hospitality during the holy month of Ramadan. From my family to yours, Eid Mubarak.



US Charge d'Affaires James Holtsnider

## Italy, Kuwait explore areas for cooperation in food security

**KUWAIT:** Acting Director-General of the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources Meshaal Al-Qurayfa, discussed with the Ambassador of the Italian Republic to the country, Carlo Balducci, possible areas of cooperation in enhancing food security by improving the agricultural climate in Kuwait and developing plant, animal and fish production.

Qurayfa said: "During the meeting, several topics were discussed that are consistent with Kuwait's vision of preserving and enhancing food security by all means, as Italy has extensive experience in the field of agricultural land reclamation using the latest technologies."

"The Italian ambassador presented the latest technical developments in the field of developing seeds that are resistant to saline and brackish water, in addition to establishing infrastructure for advanced productivity farms, solar pumping



**KUWAIT:** Acting Director-General of the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources, Meshaal Al-Qurayfa (center right) meets with Italian Ambassador Carlo Balducci (center left) in the presence of other senior officials. — KUNA

stations, drip irrigation systems and the supply of agricultural machinery," he added.

Ambassador Balducci, called for enhancing cooperation in the agricultural field through the

exchange of experiences and visits between the two countries, praising the strong relations between the Republic of Italy and the State of Kuwait. — KUNA

## AIPU and OIC call for peace in Sudan

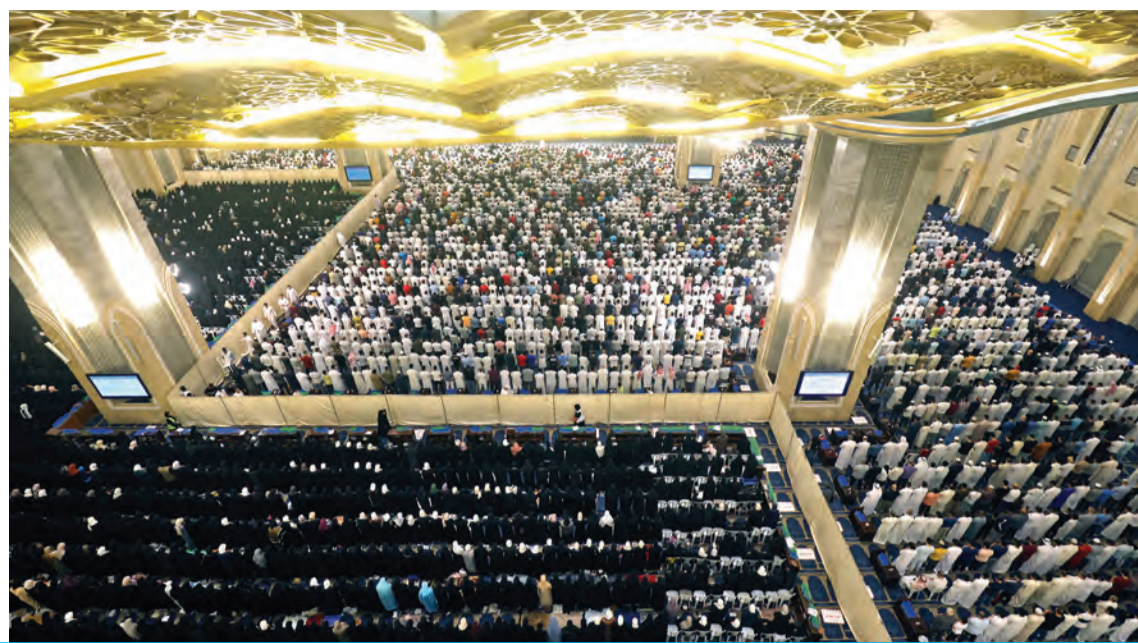
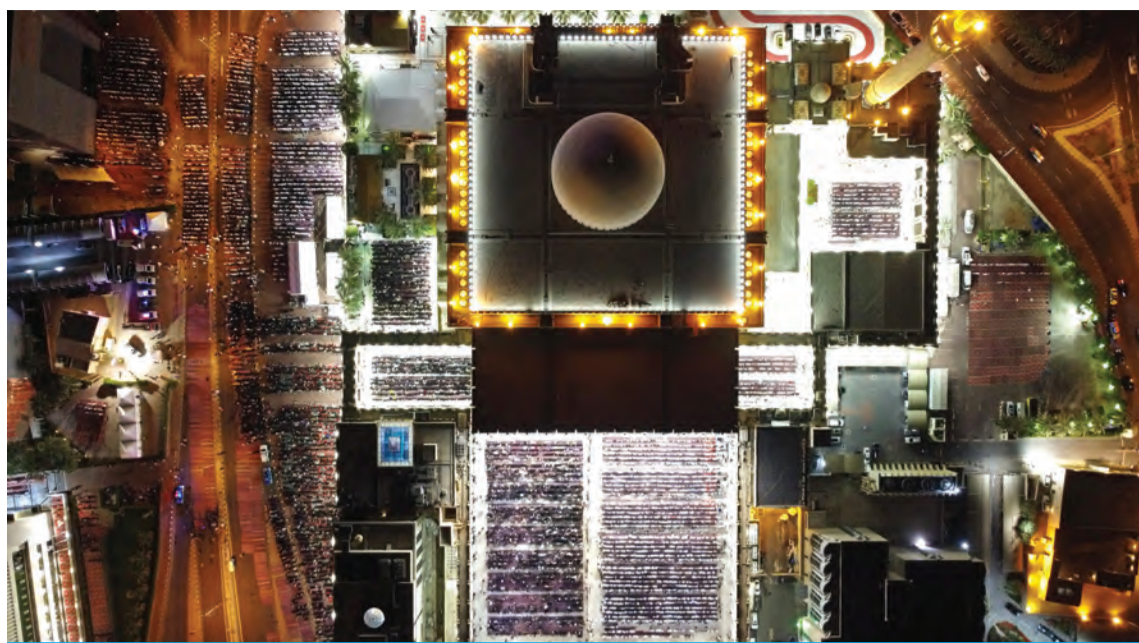
**BEIRUT:** The Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (AIPU) on Tuesday strongly condemned the violence in Sudan, which led a huge number of casualties and damages to private and public properties. The AIPU called for self-restraint and avoiding all acts that might escalate the situation. It expressed its support to all efforts leading to peace and stability in Sudan, expressing at the same time, the union's sorrow over the victims of violence and those injured in the fray.

Meanwhile, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) stated support to all efforts aiming to reach a humanitarian truce in the raging fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. In a press release on Monday, the organization's Secretary-General Hussein Ibrahim Taha highlighted the need of ensuring evacuation of injured persons and other people trapped in the conflict, and safe delivery of assistance to civilians. — KUNA



**KUWAIT:** Indian Ambassador Dr Adarsh Swaika called on Mohammad Abdulla Abulhasan, Advisor, Amiri Diwan on Monday. The ambassador apprised him of great prospects for further strengthening bilateral relations between Kuwait and India. Abulhasan fondly remembered India's strong support to Kuwait in the UN during his tenure as PR of Kuwait to the United Nations.

Local



KUWAIT: Worshippers perform qiyam ul-layl prayers at the Grand Mosque on April 18, 2023 on the 27th night of the holy fasting month of Ramadan. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

# Faithful throng Grand Mosque

## Thousands of worshippers pray qiyam ul-layl on 27th night of Ramadan

By Shakir Reshamwala

KUWAIT: Tens of thousands of worshippers spent the night of the 27th of Ramadan in prayer and supplication at the Grand Mosque early Tuesday. The attendees savored the atmosphere at the mosque, which reopened for nightly prayers after three years due to the COVID pandemic and maintenance works. Eight rakats of tahajjud were performed, followed by three rakats of witr. The first four rakats were led by Sheikh Fahad Al-Kandari, and the remaining by Sheikh Meshari Al-Afasy. No sermon was scheduled after four rakats as on other nights.

Kuwait authorities have secured 27 mobile medical clinics with the required equipment and staff to operate during nightly prayers. Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi said during a tour of the Grand Mosque and Bilal bin Rabah Mosque on Sunday to inspect medical preparations. Awadhi urged worshippers who suffer from chronic diseases to take their medication regularly as prescribed by doctors.

The Grand Mosque in Kuwait is the hub of worship in Kuwait in Ramadan, and thousands pack its cavernous interiors throughout Ramadan. Many believe 'Laylatul Qadr' (Night of Power or Decree) falls on night of the 27th of Ramadan, but this is not a confirmed fact as Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) instructed Muslims to hunt for this night on the odd-numbered nights of the last 10 days of Ramadan. Qiyam ul-layl or special nightly prayers are therefore held during these nights at the Grand Mosque and many other mosques across Kuwait.

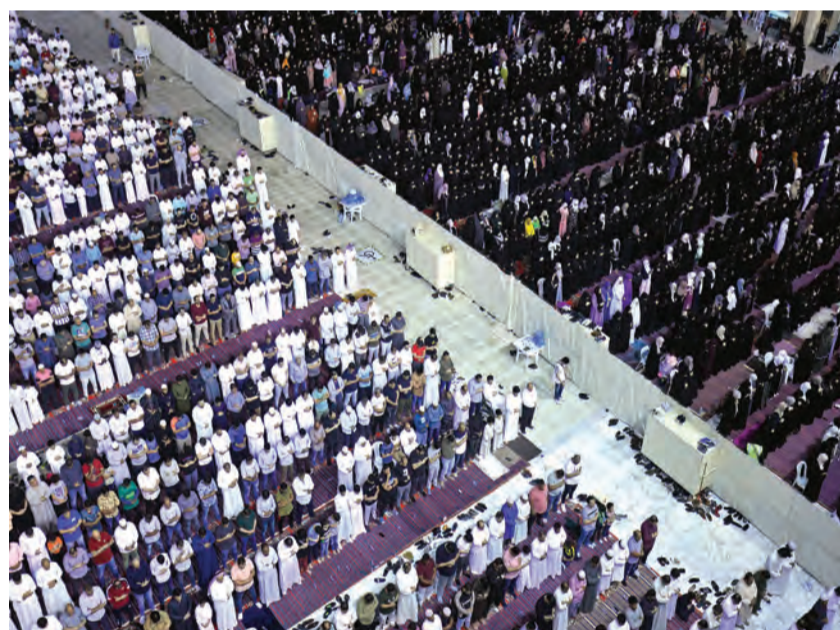
Laylatul Qadr holds great significance for Muslims, and the last ten



nights of Ramadan are spent in prayer and meditation. Ubaadah bin Saamit (RA) reports that he asked the Prophet (PBUH) about Laylatul Qadr. He replied: "It is in Ramadan, during the last ten days, on the unevenly numbered nights, either the 21st, 23rd, 25th, 27th, 29th or the last night of Ramadan. Whoever stands in ibadah (worship) on this night, with sincere faith and with genuine hopes of gaining reward, his previous sins will be forgiven.

Among the signs of this night is that it is a serene, quiet, shining night, neither hot, nor cold but temperate as if a moon is shining clear, and no meteors are shot at the devils on that night: it lasts until the break of the dawn. Another sign is that at morn, the sun rises without any radiant beams of light, appearing rather like the moon in its fullness. On that day, Allah prohibits the devils from rising up with the sun."

Laylatul Qadr could thus fall on any night, but the night of the 27th is believed by most to be the one, and millions of Muslims around the globe spend this night in prayer. The Holy Quran says that Laylatul Qadr is better than a thousand months, and



Allah's blessings and angels descend on earth on this night. Laylatul Qadr is also the night that Allah first sent down the first verses of the Holy Quran via Archangel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

In my view

### Saudi, Iran and Chinese honey

By Yousuf Awadh Al-Azmi

Local@kuwaittimes.com



Firmness in support of fundamentals, with flexibility in tactics and methods, is the key to any hope of progress in negotiation." — Dwight D Eisenhower.

Recently, a Saudi/Iranian agreement was announced in Beijing, as Chinese efforts succeeded, which surprised many. In fact, the Chinese efforts are complementary to previous Omani diplomatic efforts. The Chinese mediation crowned the Omani efforts and resulted in an agreement between the two regional powers. In such agreements, considering their special circumstances, the terms are rarely made public. If announced, they will be in broad headlines.

However, as time goes by and with the tracking of events, it will be easy to decipher some of the terms of the agreement. Some results came quickly and are summarized as follows. (1) Opening of airspace between the two countries. (2) Re-opening diplomatic missions. (3) An Omani-Saudi panel visiting Sanaa to meet important officials. (4) The Syrian foreign minister's visit to Riyadh.

This is what was monitored, and of course it was not announced that these are among the terms of the agreement, but we remember the famous Arab proverb: "The sun cannot be covered by a sieve." There is no doubt that what happened has its justifications and its understandable rationale. The two powers were preoccupied with huge files, their interests clashed, with quarrels on every side, but in the end, the writing must stop at the last point.

If we read the situation of the two states quickly, we will find that Saudi Arabia has a strong economy and is working on achieving ambitious plans with tangible societal change. However, it is preoccupied with the war in the south of the country with the new Yemeni regime, which imposed its control over the capital Sanaa with the support of regional powers and Iran becoming the main controller of Yemen's capabilities. Saudi Arabia was, even at the height of the war, seeking a political solution.

And now, after the agreement between Riyadh and Tehran, it seems political solutions are possible. As for Iran, it is clear that the arrangements for Syria's return to its Arab surroundings and the consequent changes are expected at all levels. The rare visit of the Syrian foreign minister to Riyadh was announced, coinciding with calls for holding a conference of foreign ministers of a number of influential Arab countries regarding approving Syria to reactivate its membership in the Arab League.

It seems that these steps receive an unannounced, albeit clear approval for followers of the course of events, with the most important fact being that Syrian-Arab relations have returned in the form of opening of air links between them and some countries. The hospitality President Bashar Al-Assad received in Muscat and then in Abu Dhabi has its implications that cannot be hidden from anyone.

It is currently expected, "in sympathy" with what is happening on the ground, that the steps for Syria's return have matured, and there is nothing left but to raise the curtain. As for the situation with Sanaa, the situation can no longer bear the continuation of the escalation in a war with no winner, so it seems that the voice of reason has begun to hear the chants of its victory.

The main question we should ask ourselves: Will the honeymoon between the two large countries in the region last? Will the interests of the major powers who did not sign the agreement be affected by it? Let's not forget that China, the leader of the agreement, is considered one of the largest countries in the world with regards to production and export of honey of high quality. Will Chinese honey suffice for the honeymoon and go beyond what we expect? It is certain that a fair peace based on credibility and commitment has no loser, so will credibility and commitment stand? I hope so.

News in Brief

#### Campaign to aid debtors amasses KD 8.72 million

KUWAIT: The national campaign to gather financial support and aid for debtors had amassed KD 8.72 million (around \$28.46 million) in its second day, an official said on Tuesday. Spokesman of the application for electronic services of various government agencies (Sahel) Yusef Kathem told KUNA that the Ministry of Information had played a huge role in supporting the recent campaign via its various outlets. He also commended the role played by the Ministry of Social Affairs, which came in line with directives of the Cabinet, noting that the ministry had enabled direct donations via the Sahel application through this particular campaign. He lauded the public and official entities support of the campaign to ease the financial burdens of debtors. — KUNA

#### Interior Ministry releases detained police officers

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Interior announced on Tuesday the release of all members of the police force who have been detained for disciplinary measures. The Ministry's undersecretary general Anwar Al-Barjas issued a decision to release the detainees based on the instructions and directives of the first deputy prime minister, interior minister and acting Defense Minister Sheikh Talal Khalid Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr, the interior ministry said in a press statement. — KUNA

#### Kuwait denies report about FM's visit to Syria

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry on Tuesday denied reports about a planned official visit by Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to Syria. The ministry, in a statement, described as false reports published by local newspapers and news agencies that the foreign minister would pay the visit to Damascus next Thursday. It urged the media to ensure accuracy in news coverage, shun rumors and false information, seek news from official and reliable sources. — KUNA



KUWAIT: The Bilal bin Rabah Mosque is one of the most important holy places in the country. —KUNA

### Worshippers observe qiyam at Bilal Mosque

KUWAIT: In a spiritual atmosphere that has filled the alleys of the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque, worshippers continue observing the last ten days of the holy month of Ramadan accompanied by a number

of officials and volunteer organizations, giving the mosque a special aesthetic as it is one of the most important holy places in the country.

It is not possible but to stand with reverence and respect for all the meanings of morality, altruism, and dedication to the organizers who provided meticulous logistical support to the mosque, in a way that ensures the comfort and service of the worshippers to the fullest. — KUNA



The medical team present at the mosque.



Volunteers help with directing traffic.

## Flexible hours to stay after Ramadan

**KUWAIT:** The Civil Service Council is meeting Wednesday to discuss what flexible working hours for the public sector will look like outside Ramadan, sources told Kuwait Times.

Talks of a flexible working system have been on the table since at least December 2022, when the council of ministers reportedly asked ministries to prepare studies looking at the feasibility of applying such a system. The government had justified the system by claiming it would address the traffic jams suffocating the country during rush hour.

The system went live for a trial period in Ramadan, with the Civil Service Commission deciding that the daily hours for government sector employees would come to a total of four and a half hours during the month. The commission provided a list of start and end times for government entities to choose from based on their nature of work: 9:45 am till 2:15 pm, 10:15 am till 2:45 pm and 10:45 am till 3:15 pm.

Despite initial enthusiasm for the system, it was met with public ire when implemented, with many people calling it "pointless". Traffic jams showed no signs of easing, meaning that the system didn't serve its intended purpose.

Officials seem to be looking to learn from the Ramadan experience. Sources told Kuwait Times that several senior officials with the interior ministry and the Civil Service Commission met earlier this week to determine what could be done to mitigate the cracks in the system revealed by the trial period.

The Civil Service Commission will make the new changes public after they're agreed upon, said sources.

### Photo of the day



**KUWAIT:** The crescent moon rises behind clouds during sunrise above Kuwait City, on April 17, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

# Reconnecting with oneself and reality through art

By Ghadeer Ghoulm

**KUWAIT:** In this era, digital devices occupy a huge part of people's lives. Overusing digital devices overwhelms humans' minds with an artificial reality that can have a serious impact on their mental wellness. To protect oneself from the negative impact of digital devices, many people believe art can be a source of cleansing one's mind, as it provides a chance to focus on one's connection to natural reality. To further understand the significance of art to escape digital devices' impact on individuals' mental health, Kuwait Times interviewed art teacher Abdulaziz Al-Shammar and art instructor Maha Al-Otaibi.

Shammar said art is necessary for people in this digital era because it can clear their head, as it fosters feelings of relaxation and creativity rather than putting their minds and skills under numbness of using digital devices and exposure to artificial realities. Otaibi concurred, saying the importance of art in people's lives is that it is not just a source of entertainment — it is a source of connecting to oneself and the real world.

Art gives individuals a chance of expressing themselves. For instance, outdoor art is an example of art that pushes individuals to go out in the open air and use their natural senses to connect with the nature around them and reflect what they see on the canvas, which enhances the quality of mindfulness. She said cleansing one's mind happens always when the mind is present in the moment, as this digital era creates an urge to know everything that is happening in faraway places, besides unreal worlds.

When the mind is not present in the moment or place it actually is in, the mind loses its real vision. Thus,



even if a person can see, they will not see the surrounding beauty and details. A person loses the moment while sinking in unreal moments inside the screen, because screens can take one everywhere except reality. Art, regardless of what kind of art one is working on, is considered one of the best ways to cleanse one's mind and keep it present with all the human senses, even if one's imagination is going somewhere else, and makes you feel your humanity.

Shammar shed light on arts' importance on students' performance at school. He said art lets their creativity flow and makes them imaginative, which can help students refocus their attention, build memory, enhance

problem-solving skills and boost productivity. This makes art as important as any other subject that students study at school.

Moreover, Otaibi compared between displaying artwork through screens and in real life. She said displaying artwork in actuality is much better than displaying it behind a screen. She loves to see the details of the artwork with her eyes and feel the real texture. At the same time, Otaibi said she does not deny the role that media platforms play in displaying art in an easy and quick way; however this cannot show the real beauty of the artwork as much as seeing it in reality does.



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## Manarat Ghadeera holds iftar banquet

**KUWAIT:** The Manarat Ghadeera volunteer team held its first iftar banquet Monday for families in need. The initiative was meant to bring together volunteers and families and foster love between them. Sixty families, including 450 parents and children, attended the banquet. Volunteers distributed girgian bags to the children in a joyous atmosphere. — KUNA



## Cybercrime warns of fake payment links

**KUWAIT:** The Cybercrime Combat Administration warned on Monday citizens and residents to be careful of dealing with fake bank links, in order to avoid being victimized by and swindling operations. The links are used by swindlers to steal people's banking information. The unit urged people to report the situation to the concerned authorities.

Acting Head of Supporting Services Ammar Al-Sarraf said: "A fake bank link is a page that is very similar to well-known payment pages, but it

does not end with the "kw" domain. The administration has provided a lot of awareness and guidance to the public as well as government and private institutions about dealing with fake commercial accounts through social media platforms."

He indicated that there is a specialized team to combat, calling on everyone to inform the Cybercrime Department via the WhatsApp service (97283939). He stressed that the department can provide a lot of technical assistance, including the recovery of "hacked accounts".

"I warn everyone against dealing with fake websites and ads on social networking sites whose owners promote the sale of products at unrealistic prices or through discounts, which makes them victims of fraud in the hope of quick profit," Saffar said.



EU urges leaders not to let China divide bloc

Gunman wounds two near Jewish site in east Jerusalem: Police

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## G7 urges halt to deadly Sudan fighting

### Sudan capital hit by blasts as conflict enters fourth day

**KHARTOUM:** Explosions rocked the Sudanese capital Khartoum on Tuesday as fighting that has claimed nearly 200 lives entered a fourth day, despite growing international calls for an end to hostilities. A weeks-long power struggle erupted into deadly violence Saturday between the forces of two generals who seized power in a 2021 coup: army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his deputy, Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, who commands the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Battles have taken place throughout the vast east African country and there are fears of regional spillover of the conflict that has seen air strikes, artillery and heavy gunfire. In a statement, G7 foreign ministers meeting in Japan called for the warring parties to "end hostilities immediately", as loud explosions were heard on Tuesday morning in Khartoum, where militiamen in turbans and fatigues roamed the streets.

Terrified residents of the capital are spending the last and holiest days of Ramadan watching from their windows as tanks roll through the streets, buildings shake and smoke from fires triggered by the fighting hangs in the air. According to witnesses, pick-up trucks with anti-aircraft missiles—stationed in residential areas of Khartoum—were loaded with additional ammunition supplies Tuesday morning.

"Bombardments usually start around 4:00 am and they continue for a few hours, but today they haven't stopped," said Khartoum resident Dallia Mohamed Abdelmontem. "We haven't slept in the past four days," she said, adding her family had been staying indoors "trying to keep our sanity intact".

Families waited on Tuesday, heavy suitcases in hand, for the few buses heading south of the capital, according to AFP reporters, as more people use rare lulls in the fighting to flee Khartoum. But as many have lost power and internet connection after four days of sporadic supply, residents are finding it increasingly difficult to get reliable information.

Shortages and misinformation  
Misinformation has proliferated on social media,

confusing civilians who are anxious for news about attacks and reported looting, how safe it is to move and what pharmacies are still open. The current toll stands at over 185 people killed and 1,800 injured, according to the UN.

The number of casualties is thought to be far higher, with many wounded unable to reach hospitals, themselves under shelling, according to the official doctors' union. Four hospitals in the greater Khartoum area have been "shelled and evacuated".

Across the country, 16 hospitals are "out of service", according to the union, while those that can still operate are facing "severe shortages", including of medical staff, water and food supplies. Civilians have also seen their food supplies run out, as the violence has prevented the few grocery stores that remain open to replenish dwindling stocks. The fighting has also damaged aircraft and brought a halt to flights to and from Khartoum airport.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he had spoken with the two generals and "underscored the urgent need for a ceasefire". Daglo said on Twitter after his call with Blinken that the RSF "reaffirms its approval" of a 24-hour "armistice to ensure the safe passage of civilians and the evacuation of the wounded".

#### Army vows 'crushing defeat'

The army bluntly dismissed his statement, however. "We are not aware of any coordination with the mediators and the international community about a truce, and the rebellion's declaration of a 24-hour truce aims to cover up the crushing defeat it will receive within hours," it warned on Facebook.

Blinken said a US diplomatic convoy had been fired upon on Monday, as the European Union said its ambassador to Sudan was attacked in his home in Khartoum. The fighting broke out on Saturday after bitter disagreements between Burhan and Daglo over the planned integration of the RSF into the regular army—a key condition for a final deal aimed at ending a crisis since the 2021 coup, which derailed a transition to democracy.

Both claim to be in control of key sites, in-



**KHARTOUM:** People flee from southern Khartoum on April 18, 2023 as fighting between the army and paramilitary forces led by rival generals rages for a fourth day, despite growing international calls for an end to hostilities. —AFP

cluding the airport and the presidential palace—none of which could be independently verified. Analysts say the fighting in the capital is unprecedented and could be prolonged.

#### Humanitarian organisations shuttered

In the western region of Darfur, international medical aid organisation Doctors Without Borders (MSF) reported receiving 183 wounded patients at the only hospital in El Fasher still operating in North Darfur state, 25 of whom it said had died. "The majority of the wounded are civilians who were caught in the crossfire—among them are many children," MSF's Cyrus Paye said.

Three UN World Food Programme staff were

also among those killed on Saturday in Darfur, where humanitarian missions have had medical and other supplies looted, according to Save the Children and MSF. A number of organisations have temporarily suspended operations in the country, where one-third of the population needs aid.

Influential northern neighbour Egypt said it had discussed with Saudi Arabia, South Sudan and Djibouti—all close allies of Sudan—"the need to make every effort to preserve stability and safety". President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi called on the two sides to "return to the negotiating table" and said he was working on the return of Egyptian military "trainers" captured Saturday at an air base by RSF forces. —AFP

## Putin makes rare visit to Ukraine frontline regions

**MOSCOW:** The Kremlin said on Tuesday that President Vladimir Putin had visited two frontline regions in Ukraine, prompting a strong rebuke from Kyiv which said he was viewing "the crimes of his minions". The Kremlin did not say when Putin visited the southern region of Kherson and the eastern region of Lugansk, which Putin claimed to have annexed last September without fully controlling them.

The Kremlin chief sent troops to Ukraine in February, 2022, triggering the largest conflict in Europe since World War II. Ukrainian forces have said they are preparing for a spring counter-offensive. Mykhailo Podolyak, an advisor to President Volodymyr Zelensky, dismissed Putin's trip as "a 'special tour' of the mass murders author... to enjoy the crimes of his minions for the last time." After Putin's visit was made public on Tuesday, Ukrainian officials said Russian forces had shelled the central market area of Kherson, injuring six people. Last year, Russia was beaten back in northern and southern regions and Moscow's forces have made only incremental gains in eastern Ukraine.

Much of the fighting is now concentrated around the eastern town of Bakhmut which has become the longest and bloodiest battle of the conflict. During his trip to Ukraine, Putin met Russian military commanders and discussed the situation on several fronts of the



**KHERSON:** This screen grab taken from a footage released by the Russian presidential press office on April 18, 2023 shows Russian President Vladimir Putin visiting the headquarters of the Dnieper military grouping in the Kherson region of Ukraine. —AFP

pro-Western country, the Kremlin said. Video footage released by the Kremlin showed Putin disembarking from a helicopter as he visited the headquarters of the Dnieper army group in the Kherson region. He also visited national guard headquarters in Lugansk in eastern Ukraine.

"It's important for me to hear your opinion on the situation, to listen to you and to exchange information," Putin said in the video, surrounded by senior military commanders. The Russian leader wished the troops a happy Easter, which Orthodox Christians marked last Sunday, and gifted them copies of old icons, the Kremlin said. His trips to Kherson and Lugansk came after the Kremlin said in March that the Russian leader had made a surprise trip to the port city of Mariupol that Moscow captured after a long siege last spring. —AFP

A caretaker cabinet has been at the helm since May last year after legislative polls gave no side a clear majority, while independents gained an unprecedented 13 seats after campaigning against the governing elite. Lebanon is supposed to hold municipal elections every six years. The last local ballot was held in 2016. Many blame the political elite for the meltdown, which has pushed most of the population into poverty.

#### UK sanctions Lebanese

In another development, the UK government on Tuesday said it had imposed a full asset freeze on a Lebanese businessman suspected of financing Hezbollah. The Treasury action against Nazem Said Ahmad on national security grounds follows similar restrictions imposed in 2019 by the United States. "All assets and economic resources belonging to Ahmad in the UK have been frozen and no UK person may do business with him or any of the companies he owns or controls," a statement read. London proscribed Hezbollah's External Security Organization as a terrorist organization in 2001. The ban was extended to all of its military apparatus seven years later.

The Iran-backed Shiite movement is a key political player in Lebanon. According to the Treasury, Ahmad has an extensive art collection in the UK and conducts business with UK-based artists, galleries and auction houses. The sanctions mean he will no longer be able to trade in the UK art market and no other dealers will be able to do business with him or his companies. In December 2019, the US Treasury described Ahmad as "one of Hezbollah's top donors, generating funds through his longstanding ties to the 'blood diamond' trade". —AFP

## Cash-strapped Lebanon delays local elections

**BEIRUT:** Lebanon's parliament on Tuesday postponed municipal elections scheduled for next month, official media said, with the cash-strapped country mired in an unprecedented economic meltdown. It is the second time the polls have been postponed, after they were initially scheduled to take place last year. No new date was announced for the vote. "Parliament has approved a law extending the mandate of municipal councils... until May 31, 2024 at the latest," the state-run National News Agency said.

Deputy parliament speaker Elias Bou Saab warned last week that "holding municipal elections has become almost impossible", citing a lack of funds. Delayed polls were commonplace in Lebanon even before 2019, when the country plunged into an economic crisis that the World Bank has described as among the planet's worst in recent times. The international community had urged Lebanese officials to hold the local vote on time.

"Conducting the municipal elections is important for adhering to Lebanon's constitutional timelines and democratic practices, at a time when the country is already facing a presidential vacancy and widespread institutional paralysis," United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon Joanna Wronecka said earlier this month. Lebanon has been without a president for more than five months amid deadlock between entrenched political barons.

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## International

# Gunman wounds two near Jewish site in east Jerusalem: Police

## Zionist security forces conduct manhunt for the perpetrator

**JERUSALEM:** A suspected Palestinian gunman wounded two Zionist men near a Jewish site in annexed east Jerusalem on Tuesday. Zionist authorities said, with security forces conducting a manhunt for the perpetrator. The shooting comes amid a period of deadly attacks and military raids across the occupied West Bank, along with killings in Zionist territory.

Zionist police announced a suspected "shooting terror attack" in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of east Jerusalem targeting two motorists, who according to medics were rushed to hospital. "Police officers are at the scene conducting searches for the suspect who fled," the force said in a statement.

Zionist security forces closed off streets in the neighborhood, where an AFP journalist saw officers entering a Palestinian home, with a drone and helicopter as well as police dogs aiding the search. Officers enforcing the shutdown prevented cars and people from moving in the centre of the neighborhood, as heavily armed forces combed the area.

Police announced they had found the perpetrator's gun near the scene of the attack, which took place near the tomb of Simeon the Just—Shimon Hatzadik in Hebrew — a site frequented by religious Jews. The weapon was identified as a Carlo make-shift submachine gun, which Palestinians manufacture in the West Bank.

Hadassah hospital said they received a 48-year-old gunshot victim lightly wounded, and Shaare Zedek medical centre said it was treating a man in his 50s in moderate condition.

The search was punctuated by the 10:00 am (0700 GMT) two-minute siren marking Zionist's Holocaust Remembrance Day, honoring more than six million Jews killed by the Nazis during World War II. Jerusalem mayor Moshe Lion, speaking at a city hall ceremony, said one of the Holocaust's main lessons was "to never be helpless in the face of those seeking to harm us".

Later in the morning, most of the security forces had left Sheikh Jarrah, with roads reopened and traffic flowing as normal, the AFP journalist said. Sheikh Jarrah was the focal point of protests against the eviction of Palestinian residents by Zionist settler organizations in the build up to and during the May 2021 war between the Zionist entity and Gaza militants. It is also



**JERUSALEM:** A Palestinian family waits outside as Zionist security forces search for suspects following a shooting attack in the neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah in annexed east Jerusalem, on April 18, 2023. — AFP

the site of a weekly Zionist demonstration against the occupation of the Palestinian territories. The attack took place a day after a Palestinian woman stabbed and moderately wounded a Zionist man at the Gush Etzion junction in the southern West Bank.

opposition figures held. Ennahdha was the largest party in Tunisia's parliament before President Kais Saied dissolved the chamber in July 2021. Since early February, authorities in the North African country have arrested more than 20 political opponents and personalities.

They have included politicians, former ministers, businessmen, trade unionists and the owner of Tunisia's most popular radio station, Mosaïque FM. Saied, 65, claims those detained were "terrorists" involved in a "conspiracy against state security".

Ennahdha vice-president Mondher Lounissi told a news conference late Monday that Ghannouchi had been taken to a police barracks for questioning and that his lawyers had not been allowed to attend. His arrest came after media reports in which he allegedly said Tunisia would be threatened with "civil war" if political Islam, from which his party originated, were eradicated in the country.

The woman was shot by security forces and taken to hospital in moderate condition. The conflict has this year claimed the lives of at least 96 Palestinians, 19 Zionists, one Ukrainian and one Italian, according to an AFP count based on Zion-

A source at the interior ministry quoted by Tunisian media confirmed that Ghannouchi's arrest was linked to these statements.

Ghannouchi was the speaker of Tunisia's parliament before Saied dissolved it and went on to seize wide-reaching powers through a series of moves opponents have dubbed a "coup". Opponents of Saied accuse him of reinstating autocratic rule in Tunisia, which was the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East region more than a decade ago.

After his dramatic power grab, he has ruled by decree, and last year rammed through a constitution that gave his office unlimited powers and neutered parliament. Human rights groups have criticised the arrests, which targeted leading figures of the National Salvation Front (FSN), the main opposition coalition, which

includes Ennahdha. "The arrest of the leader of the most important political party in the country, and who has always shown his commitment to peaceful political action, marks a new phase in the crisis," FSN head Ahmed Nejib Chebbi told AFP late Monday. "This is blind revenge against opponents," he added.

Ghannouchi appeared in court at the end of February on terror-related charges after being accused of calling police officers "tyrants". He had already been in court last November over allegations his party had helped jihadists travel to Iraq and Syria. Before that, he was interrogated over alleged money laundering in relation to foreign donations for an Ennahdha-linked charity. Ghannouchi was exiled for more than two decades under late dictator Zine El Abidine Ali, but returned following the country's 2011 uprising to become a dominant figure in Tunisian politics. — AFP

## Tunisia shuts offices of oppn party

**TUNIS:** Tunisian authorities closed the offices of Islamist-inspired opposition party Ennahdha on Tuesday, a day after arresting its leader Rached Ghannouchi, a senior party official said. "A police unit showed up at the party's main headquarters (in Tunis) and ordered everyone there to leave before closing it," Riadh Chaïbi said.

"The police also closed the other offices of the party elsewhere in the country and prohibited any meeting in these premises," he told AFP. The move came after Ennahdha's veteran leader Ghannouchi was arrested at his home in the capital Tunis, the latest in a string of

## Body and soul in Islam...

Continued from Page 1

cater for their spiritual needs. Allah says what can be translated as: "And by the soul and Him who fashioned it, and informed it (with consciousness) of its wickedness and righteousness. Truly, whoever purifies it succeeds. And truly, whoever defiles it, fails." (Ash-Shams 91: 7 - 9)

Anyone who contemplates the Islamic religious teachings conveyed from Allah (SWT) through Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) will notice a balance in the various aspects of human life between the needs of the physical body for food, drinks, marriage, and personal rights - among others, the need of the soul for worship and moral purification - among others - and the need of the intellect for knowledge, research and discovery, etc. The Majestic Allah says what can be translated as: "Allah is the One Who has subjected the sea for you so that ships may sail upon it by His command, and that you may seek His bounty, and that perhaps you will be grateful. He (also) subjected for you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth, all by His grace. Surely, in this (miraculous) signs for people who reflect." (Al-Jathiyah 45: 12 - 13)

So Allah (SWT) did not create this universe to remain neglected without yielding benefits or for its inhabitants to be indifferent to it. The phrase "subjected to you" expresses the meanings of empowerment, facilitation and discovery in this universe in order to benefit from its elements and its abundant wealth. Almighty Allah says what can be translated as: "Rather, seek the (reward or abode) of the Hereafter by means of what Allah has granted you, without forgetting your share of this world. And be good (to others) as Allah has been good to you. Yet do not seek to sow corruption in the land. For, indeed, Allah does not like the sowers of corruption." (Al-Qasas 28: 77)

Allah's description of His righteous servants: Even when involved in business, they do not forget spiritual and moral duties due to the fear and concern of being accountable before Allah in the Hereafter. Imagine the conduct of businessmen with this kind of belief and moral character, and how life in its every aspect would be among such people! Almighty Allah says what can be translated as: "Then in the footsteps of these (prophets), We sent Our messengers, and (after them), We sent Jesus, son of Mary, and granted him the Gospel, and instilled compassion and mercy in the hearts of his followers.

As for monasticism, they invented it (by themselves), never did We prescribe it for them, but only that they seek Allah's pleasure. Yet they did not strictly observe (this ordinance). So We gave those who believed among them their reward. But many of them were disobedient." (Al-Hadeed 57: 27)

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) presented the most splendid examples and directives concerning the balance between spirituality and materialism. He was annoyed by those who opposed the inborn human nature

and traditions of the prophets and messengers. Once, he heard that some people, out of keenness to worship Allah (SWT), had taken an oath to refrain from sleep, marriage and from food and drinks.

His position toward them was strict determination to uphold the balance between the physical and the spiritual needs. From the Islamic point of view, the religious man should be more active than the materialistic man who neglects his spiritual needs in his domestic and social life, which extends from the confines of the household to the market square, and even to international conferences. (Refer to Islamreligion.com)

### Find balance

When we think about health, diet and exercise, are typically the first things that come to mind. However, good health isn't just about the physical body. Our mind and body are interconnected and affect each other tremendously. For example, a stressful situation causing negative thoughts can lead to physical pain or illness. It's important to maintain a healthy balance between your mind, body, and soul by nurturing your whole self, including your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs.

There are many things you can do in your daily life to achieve overall wellness. Here are some of the ways to begin cultivating a mind-body-soul balance. (1) Read and learn often. Your education shouldn't stop once you're out of school. Open your mind to new possibilities, beliefs, and interests by reading, taking online classes, watching documentaries, and attending workshops. Education does not end until you die. Try your best to translate what you learn into action where necessary and possible.

(2) Meditate regularly - Meditation improves memory, attention, mood, immune system, sleep, and creativity - among others. All it takes is a few minutes a day to start reaping the benefits. Almighty Allah says what can be translated as: "Say, [O Muhammad], 'Travel through the land and observe how He began creation. Then Allah will bring forth the creation of the Hereafter (i.e. resurrection after death). Indeed, Allah, over all things, is Omnipotent.'" (Al-Ankabut 29: 20) (3) Avoid sitting for extended periods of time - Try to stand or move around while at work, if possible. Too much sitting is linked to heart disease, diabetes, and a shortened lifespan - among others.

(4) Get involved in a volunteer organization or activism group. Use your voice or talents to do good in this world. We're all connected, and it's incredibly beneficial to experience that connectedness when we work toward a common goal. When you use your abilities to help others, your soul certainly feels at peace. Communal based activities offer the best platform to voluntarily assist in whatever means within your capabilities.

Abu Huraira (ra) narrated that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said what can be translated as: "A believer enjoys others' company and others enjoy his, and there is no good in one who doesn't get along with others. And the best among the people is the most beneficial to them." (Al-Bukhari said that its chain of narrators is Hasan (good), see As-Silsila As-Saheeha # 426) — Courtesy of the TIES Center

## Iran invites Saudi king to visit amid thaw in ties

**TEHRAN:** Iran said it has formally invited Saudi King Salman to visit Tehran, following a reconciliation agreement reached last month between the two sides. Saudi Arabia severed relations with Iran in 2016, after its embassy in Tehran and consulate in the northwestern city of Mashhad were attacked during protests over Riyadh's execution of Shiite cleric Nimr Al-Nimr.

The two Middle East powerhouses had held several rounds of dialogue in Iraq and Oman before reaching the agreement to mend ties on March 10 in China. On Monday, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani said President Ebrahim Raisi had "invited the

Saudi King to visit Iran". Kanani said the Iranian president had already received an invitation to visit the Sunni-ruled kingdom.

The spokesman also expressed hope that Iran and Saudi Arabia would reopen their respective diplomatic missions by May 9, as scheduled in the China-brokered agreement. "We and the Saudi side insist on activating the embassies in a very timely manner so that Iranian pilgrims can attend a calm hajj pilgrimage using the services provided by the embassy," he told a weekly press conference.

The annual hajj pilgrimage to holy sites in Saudi Arabia, one of the pillars of Islam, is expected to begin this year in late June. In recent days, delegations from the two countries have visited the embassies in Riyadh and Tehran and consulates in Jeddah and Mashhad to launch the process of their reopening. On April 6 the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Prince Faisal bin Farhan, held talks in Beijing on the implementation of normalization of ties. — AFP

## Toxic drink kills 27 in 'dry' India state

**PATNA:** Toxic hooch has killed at least 27 people in the eastern Indian state of Bihar where alcohol is banned, officials said Tuesday, with unconfirmed reports putting the death toll at 40. Selling and consuming liquor is prohibited in several parts of India, driving a thriving black market for potent and sometimes lethal backstreet moonshine that kills hundreds every year.

Initial investigations into the latest tragedy showed that poisonous methyl alcohol was mixed with spirit that proved deadly. Police official Jitender

Kumar told AFP that 27 deaths had been reported since Saturday. Kumar said most of the victims were from poor families and used to consume locally made cheap tittle known as "Desi Daru". Some local media put the toll at 40.

Police have arrested 174 people in connection with illegal manufacturing, sale and supply of liquor over the last three days. They have also seized and destroyed over 900 liters of toxic liquor during raids. Local authorities have been using drones, helicopters and motorboats to crack down on the black market, but the most recent incident is just the latest in a string of similar deadly cases. Last year in December, 37 people were killed after consuming illicit liquor in the same state. — AFP

## Saudi and Syria end diplomatic...

Continued from Page 1

Assad himself has visited both Oman and the United Arab Emirates since the quake.

Syria's foreign minister visited this month Algeria and Tunisia on the heels of trips to Saudi Arabia and Egypt in a diplomatic push. Syria is to reopen its diplomatic mission in Tunisia and appoint an ambassador there, following a similar move announced by Tunis. Prince Faisal had said in February that a consensus was building in the Arab world that a new approach to Syria requiring negotiations with Damascus would be needed to address humanitarian crises.

Riyadh sent aid to both rebel-held and government-controlled parts of Syria, but the effort did not

involve direct contact with Assad's government. In March, Saudi state media had said that Riyadh and Damascus were in talks on resuming consular services. Regional rivals Shiite Muslim Iran and Sunni powerhouse Saudi Arabia have supported opposing sides in several regional conflict zones including Yemen, and also vie for influence in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

During a trip to Moscow last month, Assad told broadcaster Russia Today that "Syria is no longer a scene of Saudi-Iran conflict". Syria's war has killed more than half a million people, while around half of the country's pre-war population has been forced from their homes. Assad is hoping normalization with wealthy Gulf states could bring economic relief and money for reconstruction, as broader international funding remains elusive without a United Nations-backed political settlement to the conflict. Analysts say sanctions on Syria will likely continue to deter investment. — AFP

## International

# Brazil rejects US criticism, defends Russia ties and Chinese propaganda on Ukraine war

## Brazil has not joined Western nations in imposing sanctions on Russia

**BRASILIA:** Brazil pushed back against US criticism that President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda on the Ukraine war as he held talks with Moscow's top diplomat.

Lula's meeting Monday with Sergei Lavrov in Brasilia follows state visits to China and the Middle East, during which Lula said the United States should "stop encouraging war and start talking about peace" in Ukraine. He also claimed Kyiv shares the blame for the conflict, which began when Russian forces poured into Ukraine in February 2022.

Lula's remarks echoed a line frequently used by Moscow and its strategic ally Beijing, which blame the West for the war. In addition to earning a US reproof the comments drew frustration Tuesday from Kyiv, which warned Brazil's leader was giving "equal weighting" to Ukraine and Russia over the war's origins.

China seeks to position itself as neutral on the Ukraine conflict, but has maintained its partnership with Moscow and refrained from imposing sanctions. In the Brazilian capital, Lavrov thanked Lula for his discussions last week on seeking

to help mediate peace talks. But Lula's recent remarks on Ukraine sparked criticism from the White House, which has spearheaded international efforts to isolate Moscow and bolster Kyiv. "In this case, Brazil is parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda without at all looking at the facts," US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Monday. He described Lula's message on the war as "deeply problematic."

Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira, who had also met with his Russian counterpart, shot back, saying: "I don't know how or why he reached that conclusion but I do not agree at all." Despite Lula's comments about the United States, the 77-year-old, who returned to power in January after serving two terms from 2003 to 2010, is also seeking closer ties with Washington.

His visits to China and the United Arab Emirates came after meeting in February with US President Joe Biden. But Lula's latest remarks antagonized Kyiv, which stressed Brasilia was denying Russian aggression as the cause of the conflict. "An approach that gives equal weighting to the

victim and the aggressor and accuses countries that help Ukraine defend itself against deadly aggression of encouraging war, does not correspond to the real state of affairs," Ukraine's foreign ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko wrote on Facebook.

### Latin America tour

G7 foreign ministers warned Tuesday that any nation helping Russia's war effort would face "severe costs." Meeting in Japan, the top diplomats from the world's leading economies pledged to crack down on those helping Russia evade sanctions and acquire weapons.

Brazil has not joined Western nations in imposing sanctions on Russia for its invasion, and has refused requests to supply ammunition to Ukraine. "We are grateful to our Brazilian friends for their clear understanding of the genesis of the situation (in Ukraine). We are grateful for their desire to contribute to finding ways of settling this situation," Lavrov said after meeting with his Brazilian counterpart.

Russia desires a swift end to the conflict but any solution would have to be based on "multipolarity," he said, accusing the West



**BRASILIA:** Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov meets with his Brazilian counterpart Mauro Vieira at Itamaraty Palace in Brasilia on April 17, 2023. — AFP

of "trying to dominate the international arena." Washington does not have "any objection to any country that wants to try to bring an end to the war," Kirby said.

"That could happen right now, today, if Mr (Russian President Vladimir) Putin

would stop attacking Ukraine and pull its troops out." Brazil is Lavrov's first stop on a weeklong Latin American tour that will include Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba—countries with leftist governments hostile to Washington. — AFP

## EU urges leaders not to let China divide bloc

**STRASBOURG:** EU chief Ursula von der Leyen urged the bloc's leaders to show unity in the face of China on Tuesday, one week after French President Emmanuel Macron stirred a fierce debate over ties with Beijing. Macron triggered a firestorm following a trip to China by asserting that Europe should not automatically follow US policy on Taiwan and should avoid "crises that aren't ours".

"A strong European China policy relies on strong coordination between member states and EU institutions and on the willingness to avoid divide and conquer tactics," von der Leyen, who accompanied Macron to Beijing, told MEPs. "We have already in the recent days and weeks seen those tactics in action and it is now time for Europe to move to action too. Now is the time to demonstrate our collective will," she said, in an address to the European Parliament.

Von der Leyen reiterated her call for the 27-nation EU to reduce its dependence on an increasingly assertive Beijing for key resources, while not fully "de-coupling" its economy from China and its vast markets.

"On the issue of Taiwan, The EU's one China policy is long-standing," the head of the EU's executive

arm said. "We have consistently called for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. And we stand strongly against any unilateral change of the status quo in particular, by the use of force".

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said "Taiwan is crucial for Europe" in part due to the important shipping routes and its role producing semiconductors. "It's not just for moral, ethical reasons that we should reject any external interference in the affairs of Taiwan," he said.

He insisted European fleets needed to take part in freedom of navigation operations in the straits and said the bloc should be ready to "face down provocations no matter where they come".

### 'Well-tuned chorus'

Macron's comments drew sharp criticism from several of France's EU allies, especially nations in the east of the bloc that see the United States as their primary security guarantor in the face of China's ally Russia. Borrell said the bloc's member states should try to get on the same "same wavelength" over Beijing.

"We can't speak with just one voice because of the multiplicity of voices that we have, but at least we could be a well-tuned chorus," he told the European Parliament. Borrell said the bloc needed to find common ground on whether it wanted to forge its own independent voice in global affairs and how it should deal with China's stance on Russia's war in Ukraine. European leaders have pushed Beijing to get its close ally Moscow to pull back, but there have



**STRASBOURG:** European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen speaks during a debate on the need for a coherent strategy for EU-China relations, as part of a plenary session at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. — AFP

been no concrete results from their diplomatic outreach. "We all have our relations with China, but they can't develop normally if China doesn't use its influence with Russia to get it to withdraw its

troops from Ukraine," Borrell said. "Any neutrality which doesn't draw a distinction between the aggressor and the country aggressed is basically on the side of the aggressor," he said. — AFP

### News in Brief

#### Belgium jailed aid worker

**BRUSSELS:** Belgium on Tuesday said it had formally asked Iran to repatriate jailed aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele from Tehran, after a disputed prisoner exchange treaty entered into force. Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib said she had informed her Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian of the "transfer request for our compatriot Olivier Vandecasteele". "I denounced his conditions of detention and requested a visit by our ambassador in Iran," she wrote in a social media post. Iran arrested Vandecasteele, 42, in February 2022 and sentenced him to 40 years for spying, in a move condemned as "hostage diplomacy" by his backers. Brussels is eyeing a swap for Iranian official Assadollah Assadi, jailed in Belgium after he was convicted of masterminding a plot to blow up a 2018 Iranian opposition event outside Paris. But a potential exchange was held up for months after a legal challenge by an Iranian opposition group to a prisoner exchange treaty with Tehran. The complaint was dismissed by Belgium's Constitutional Court last month, fuelling hopes that Vandecasteele could be returned home. The treaty formally entered into force on Tuesday. — AFP

#### EU backs visa-free travel

**STRASBOURG:** The European Parliament voted Tuesday to allow visa-free visits to the EU for citizens of Kosovo, starting by the end of next year. Kosovo, once a Serbian province in the former Yugoslavia, is the last territory in the Western Balkans without visa-free travel to the EU's Schengen travel area. The reform will be welcomed in Pristina as another step towards full recognition and a boost for the European ambition of a territory that won independence after a 1998-1999 war. Serbia still does not recognize the independence of its former breakaway province, and nor do five EU member states: Spain, Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia and Romania. "This finally enables the people of Kosovo to easily travel, visit relatives and do business in the EU," said Austrian socialist MEP Thijs Reuten, who guided the measure through parliament. "But it is more than that: this milestone is also an important foundation for the future and ever-closer cooperation between the EU and Kosovo." Kosovo citizens will be allowed to travel to the EU, and European citizens to go to Kosovo, without requesting a visa, for periods of up to 90 days in any 180-day period. The measure will come into force once the new European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) is in place to allow member states to better share information. — AFP

## Indonesia searches missing soldiers after Papua attack

**TIMIKA:** Indonesian forces on Tuesday were searching for four soldiers who went missing last week after a deadly rebel ambush in Papua, the country's military chief said. The missing troops were part of the search for Phillip Mark Mehrtens, a pilot with Indonesian airline Susi Air, who was taken in February by armed separatists at Nduga airport in Papua.

They were on their way to the pilot's location in the hilly Nduga region on Saturday when rebels started shooting at them, Indonesian military chief Yudo Margono said. "We had received information on the whereabouts of the kidnapped pilot. We hoped that, together with local people... we could establish communication and negotiate for the pilot's release," Margono told reporters in the Papuan city of Timika.

"That's what we hoped (for), but rebels shot at us when we were trying to reach the location." One soldier was killed in the ambush, and the military was searching for the four troops still missing, he added.

The military has not identified the rebel group responsible for the ambush, but the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) — the militant wing of Papua's main separatist group — has claimed it.

TPNPB said it had killed at least 13 Indonesian soldiers in the attack, but Margono dismissed that as a "hoax". AFP cannot independently verify claims from either side due to the remoteness of the location. The rebels have previously demanded that Indonesia recognize Papuan independence in exchange for the pilot.

TPNPB has called on New Zealand and the United Nations to stop Indonesian military operations in the area. Indonesia maintains a heavy military presence in resource-rich but underdeveloped Papua to quell a long-running separatist insurgency.



**SIDOARJO:** Indonesia's Military Chief Yudo Margono (R) speaks during a press conference at an Indonesian naval aviation base in Sidoarjo on April 18, 2023. Indonesian forces were searching for four soldiers who went missing last week after a deadly rebel ambush in Papua. — AFP

A former Dutch colony, Papua declared independence in 1961, but neighboring Indonesia took control two years later, promising an inde-

pendence referendum. The subsequent vote in favor of remaining a part of Indonesia was widely considered a sham. — AFP

## 34 million Afghans in poverty under Taliban rule: UN

**KABUL:** The number of Afghans in poverty nearly doubled to 34 million as the nation was racked by the collapse of the US-backed government and the Taliban takeover, the UN said Tuesday. After the US-backed republic fell in 2021, vast foreign subsidies were halted and aid programmes dramatically cut back as many countries refused to deal with

## Two dead after landslide at Pak-Afghan border

**LANDI KOTAL:** At least two people were killed and eight injured in a massive pre-dawn landslide that buried dozens of trucks waiting to cross from Pakistan to Afghanistan, officials said Tuesday. Rescuers feared more people could be trapped dead or alive

the Taliban authorities in Kabul. In December last year, those NGOs still providing vital help were dealt a further blow by a Taliban government order barring Afghan women from working for them. This month the curfews were extended to the UN's Afghan female employees and the organization said it now faces an "appalling choice" over whether to continue its aid schemes.

On Tuesday, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) released a stark new assessment of 2022 data estimating 34 million Afghans were living below the poverty line. The figure is a staggering increase of 15 million on 2020, the last full year of rule by the Western-backed government which crumbled during a matter of weeks the following summer.

There is no contemporary census data for Afghanistan, but the UN uses a population estimate of 40 million, meaning 85 percent of the nation is projected to be in poverty. "Some have been compelled to sell their homes, land, or assets that generate income," the UNDP report said. "Others have resorted to the distressing practice of commodifying their own family members, turning children into laborers and young daughters into brides."

The UN airlifts vast sums of US dollars into Afghanistan to pay staff and operating costs — cash injections which have also been vital in shoring up the nation's faltering economy. Between December 2021 and January 2023 about \$1.8 billion was imported this way, according to the UN's mission in Afghanistan. — AFP

those trapped inside is dead, or maybe there is another reason," Faizi told AFP.

Fires broke out following the landslide, the brunt of which struck about 120 metres (130 yards) from the main border crossing. Drivers and their assistants were cooking pre-dawn meals on gas stoves ahead of a day of fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

"The fire is under control now. The rescue operation is ongoing with the help of excavators and other heavy machinery," Faizi added. The cause of the landslide was not immediately clear, but one official said heavy machinery had been in use for months on an expansion project in the hills surrounding the border post. — AFP

He said it was unclear how many people may be beneath the rubble, but some survivors had reported getting phone calls from colleagues. "They are not receiving calls any more... maybe the mobile battery of

those trapped inside is dead, or maybe there is another reason," Faizi told AFP.

## Business

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 19, 2023

## Apple opens first India store in Mumbai

## Cook personally opens doors to welcome customers

**MUMBAI:** Apple opened its first retail store in India on Tuesday, underscoring the US tech titan's increasing focus on the South Asian nation as a key sales market and alternative manufacturing hub to China.

Apple CEO Tim Cook personally opened the doors to welcome customers as staff cheered. Hundreds of admirers of the iPhone giant queued around the store in a swanky shopping mall in the financial capital Mumbai, some of them waiting overnight. The California-based firm is betting big on the nation of 1.4 billion people—home to the second-highest number of smartphone users in the world, after China—with a second store to open in the capital Delhi on Thursday.

The world's biggest company in terms of market value is also expanding its manufacturing footprint in India as it seeks to diversify its supply chain away from a heavy dependence on neighboring China.

Apple called the stores a "major expansion" of its presence in India in a statement on Monday. "We're excited to build on our longstanding history," Cook said in the statement. Apple launched its online store in India in 2020, but had not opened an official physical shop until now due to previous investment rules, since relaxed, requiring foreign retailers to source 30 percent of raw materials locally, and pandemic delays.

Sales and marketing executive Purav Mehta, 30, camped overnight outside the store ahead of the opening, bringing with him his still-unopened 2013 iPod Touch. "We've been looking forward to it... for a long time we've been waiting for this," he told AFP. Stationery dealer Madhav Mimani, 27,

travelled about 900 kilometers (560 miles) from Rajasthan for the event.

"I think with Apple manufacturing in India, the prices are going to go down because it's local manufacturing, which makes the iPhones affordable," he said. "It also increases chances of the Indians buying iPhones made in India because of the sentimental value."

India has more than 600 million smartphone users, with Android devices dominating the price-sensitive market. Chinese smartphone makers Xiaomi, vivo, OPPO and Realme had a combined market share of 66 percent in 2022, according to research firm Canalis, while Samsung held a 19 percent share.

Apple's iPhones compete in the premium segment of the market and had just a four percent share last year. But Canalis analyst Sanyam Chaurasia told AFP that Apple could benefit from the premiumisation of India's smartphone market and financing schemes for both retailers and consumers.

"Apple is emphasizing more on the Indian market because they see more opportunity," he said.

## Supply chain

Cook said in a February earnings call that "India is a hugely exciting market for us and is a major focus". "We are, in essence, taking what we learned in China years ago and how we scale... and bringing that to bear. Apple was "putting a significant amount of energy" into India, he added, saying he was "very bullish" on the country.

India is also becoming central to Apple's plans to shift its production of devices and components away from China amid diplomatic tensions between Wash-



**MUMBAI, India:** Chief Executive Officer of Apple Tim Cook (center right) waves during the opening of Apple's first retail store in India, in Mumbai on April 18, 2023. — AFP

ington and Beijing and the supply chain fallout from strict COVID policies. Just one percent of Apple's iPhones were made in India in 2021, but that jumped to seven percent last year, Bloomberg News reported last week, citing sources.

The company began manufacturing iPhones in

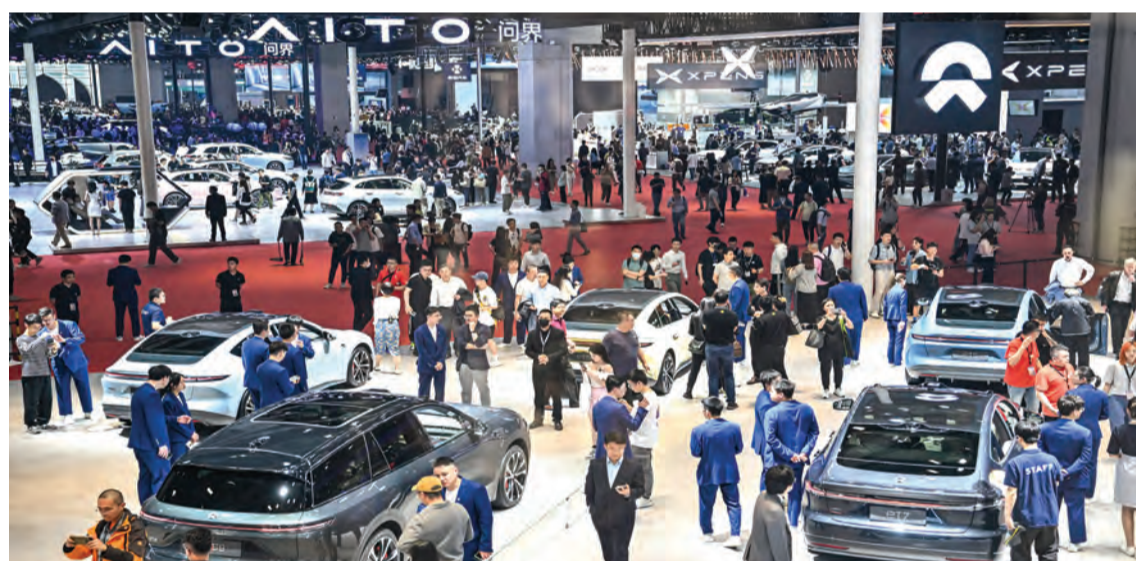
India in 2017 through Taiwanese suppliers Foxconn, Wistron and Pegatron. Foxconn said in March that its chairman had visited India but there was no "definitive agreement" for investments in the country after the chief minister of Karnataka in the south said iPhones would be manufactured in his state. — AFP

## Electric vehicles are key battleground at Shanghai Auto Show

**SHANGHAI:** China was the road to the future for foreign brands at the Shanghai Auto Show on Tuesday who are racing to catch up with Chinese competitors in the crucial electric vehicle market. EVs now make up one out of four car sales in China, the world's largest car market, and dozens of new models from domestic and Western brands were unveiled at the first auto show since the end of China's COVID restrictions. Local brands command 81 percent of the EV market in China, according to analysts at Counterpoint Research, and industry titans such as BMW were at pains to emphasize the importance of doing business in China. "China is the place to be," BMW executive Frank Weber told a news conference. "Munich is where we come from, but China is where we are at home."

He said almost 70 percent of BMW's newest operating system involved functions specific to the Chinese market, and that it had tripled its research and development there in the past three years.

"What moves Chinese customers today will move the world tomorrow," another BMW executive, CEO Oliver Zipse, told the audience as he showed off the i Vision Dee, a color-changing electric sports sedan. Volkswagen Group said in a news release its brands would present 20 electrified models, with the Volkswagen ID.7 and new Cayenne Porsche getting their



**SHANGHAI:** People visit a Nio booth during the 20th Shanghai International Automobile Industry Exhibition in Shanghai on April 18, 2023. — AFP

world premieres. "With its high level of innovation, China is an important pacesetter for the entire automotive industry," the release said. "A strong position in China strengthens our global competitiveness."

Mercedes Benz announced it has fully electrified two classic models, the off-road G-class and its Maybach SUV. Elon Musk's Tesla, the biggest seller of electric cars globally, is not attending and a representative did not say why it was a no-show when contacted by AFP.

Opposite BMW in the exhibition hall, China's

crude futures recorded their fourth straight weekly gain after the International Energy Agency raised its 2023 global oil demand estimates. Global oil demand is expected to rise by 2 million barrels per day to a record 101.9 million bpd this year, the Paris-based agency said in its monthly oil market report.

Investors will be closely following the release of China's first-quarter gross domestic product data this week, which should show an "impressive" recovery as the Asian country's economy recovers from COVID-19, Edward Moya, senior market analyst at Oanda, said. China, the world's second-largest economy and top crude importer, reopened its borders in January after following a strict zero-COVID policy for nearly three years. Last week, OPEC stuck to its 2023 growth projection for oil demand in its monthly oil report, despite lowering its forecast in North America and Europe amid a slowing global economy.

The oil producers' group said better crude demand in Organization for Economic Cooperation and

percent in 2022. Oil exporters, who benefited from a windfall in 2022, will experience slower growth, but a large gap remains between high-income countries and the rest of the region. Real GDP per capita growth, a better proxy for living standards, is expected to slow down to 1.6 percent in 2023 from 4.4 percent in 2022.

Inflation in the region rose dramatically in 2022, especially in countries that experienced currency depreciations. The report focused specifically on the impact of food price inflation on food insecurity, finding that eight out of 16 countries suffered from double-digit food price inflation or higher, affecting poorer households the most as they spend more of their budgets on food than those that are better off. "Food price inflation is having a devastating impact on poor families. The long-term implications of food insecurity will be felt for generations and sadly limit

BYD unveiled a series of new electric models that included a supercar from its high-end Yangwang brand. BYD is catching up on Tesla's primacy fast—it almost tripled its sales to 900,000 cars last year—and intends to develop further in Europe and North America. It already has a foothold in the European market with a presence in Norway and other Chinese brands are also looking to expand west. Zeekr, a premium electric brand owned by Geely, confirmed it would enter the European market. — AFP



Development countries, led by China was balancing out the market. Meanwhile, US consumers expect inflation to jump following the recent spike in energy prices. A survey released by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York showed that American consumers' inflation expectations rose for the first time since October last year. — Agencies

prospects for many, many young people," said Ferid Belhaj, World Bank Vice President for the MENA region. "The human and economic cost of inaction is immense and bold policies are needed in a region where young people make up more than half of the population," he added.

The twice-yearly report found that average year-on-year food inflation across 16 MENA economies between March and December 2022 was 29 percent. This was higher than headline inflation, which rose on average to 19.4 percent year-on-year during that period, compared to 14.8 percent between October 2021 and February 2022, the month of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Across all four MENA subgroups covered in the report — developing oil importers, developing oil exporters, conflict countries and the GCC — inflation accounts for 24 percent to 33 percent of 2023's forecasted food insecurity.

## GCC-Belgian trade relations make a quantum leap

**BRUSSELS:** The growth in Belgian-Gulf trade relations is a clear sign of a bright and promising future in trade and economic relations between the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Belgium, said Qaisar Hijazin, Secretary General of the Arab-Belgian-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce (ABLCC). In an interview with the KUNA, Hijazin referred to the recent figures released by the Belgian Foreign Trade Agency, which showed that Belgian exports to the GCC went up by 23.9 percent in 2022, from 6.73 billion euro (\$7.34 billion) in 2021 to 8.34 billion euro (\$9.09 billion) in 2022. On the other hand, Belgium's total import from GCC increased by a whopping 92 percent from 6.41 billion euro (\$6.99 billion) in 2021 to 12.31 billion euro (\$13.4 billion) in 2022.

"The GCC countries rank twelfth among exports to Belgium and also the twelfth position among imports from Belgium," he said. Hijazin said the relations between the GCC and Belgium go back to long decades of cooperation and trade exchanges. These relations have developed significantly in recent years, he said.

Hijazin noted that the best evidence and importance that Belgian economic activities attach to the GCC countries, is the visit that Belgian King Philippe Queen Mathilde paid to the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates last year, which resulted in signing of several commercial agreements and launching joint projects in the field of green energy. Prior to that, Princess Astrid, the Belgian king's sister, headed two economic missions to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Sultanate of Oman in 2014, and to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in 2015.

This importance is also evident through the presence of four Belgian embassies in those countries, and the Belgian bodies for foreign trade representative offices in these Gulf countries, he said. It is clear that the oil and gas sector are of great importance to the GCC economies at the global level. However, the GCC countries began years ago to diversify their economic activities and sources of income and invest in various economic projects in the long term, which contributed to strengthening their relations with their trading partners, including Belgium, said Hijazin.

Economic diversification in the Gulf countries includes renewable energies, health care, waste recycling, port business, infrastructure, tourism, food security and technologies, in other words, the areas in which Belgium excels. There are many Belgian companies that are very active in the region and that have completed large projects, he said. In the opposite direction, Belgium attracts Gulf capital, with Kuwait's Q8 international petroleum brand the biggest Arab investor in Belgium.

The Gulf airlines increased the number of their flights to Brussels at the beginning of 2023 to reach 30 flights linking the Gulf countries and Belgium, which was the number that was available before the COVID-19 crisis. "There is no doubt that the relations between Belgium and the Gulf countries influence relations between the European Union and the GCC," stressed Hijazin. The EU and the GCC began negotiations on a free trade agreement in 1990. It was supposed to provide for the gradual and mutual liberalization of trade in goods and services, but talks were suspended in 2008 negotiations due to many challenges, he said. Subsequently, in May 2017, the EU and the GCC countries launched a Dialogue on Trade and Investment Issues, with the participation of the private sector. — KUNA

## Oil prices edge up amid improving demand outlook

**KUWAIT:** Crude oil prices firmed slightly on Tuesday, recovering from a 2 percent slide in the previous session, as faster economic growth in top crude importer China supported the demand outlook and offset fears over US interest rates.

China's economy grew by a faster-than-expected 4.5 percent in the first quarter, with hopes of oil demand recovery buoyed further by a surge in oil refinery throughput to record levels in March.

Brent crude climbed 12 cents to \$84.88 a barrel at 11.30 am Kuwait time and the US West Texas Intermediate rose 8 cents to \$80.91. Last week,

## World Bank forecasts slower growth for MENA region in 2023

**WASHINGTON:** Economies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are expected to grow at a slower pace in 2023, as double-digit food inflation adds pressure on poorer households and the impact of food insecurity can span generations, according to the World Bank's latest economic update.

Titled "Altered Destinies: The Long-Term Effects of Rising Prices and Food Insecurity in the Middle East and North Africa," the report forecasts MENA's GDP will slow to 3.0 percent in 2023, from 5.8



## Business

# Our resilient business model positions us well to tackle global challenges: Al-Sager

## NBK Group vice-chairman and CEO Al-Sager in an interview with Al-Arabiya TV

- We have no concern of any material spillover effect from the events in the US banking sector
- We are positioned for sustained strong earnings growth during the remainder of 2023
- Our investment portfolio is secure being concentrated in high quality and low risk assets

- The Kuwaiti banking sector is very solid which reinforces its position to deal with uncertainty
- GCC banks enjoy much better liquidity, capitalization, and government support than international peers
- Our high assets quality will help maintain the cost of risk at healthy levels during the year

**KUWAIT:** Isam J Al-Sager, Group Vice-Chairman and CEO of National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) said that in the first quarter of 2023, the bank succeeded in sustaining the exceptional performance in 2022 by maintaining improved operational activities, robust asset growth, increased liquidity levels, and solid capital base.

In his interview with Al-Arabiya TV to comment on the Group's results for the first quarter of 2023, Al-Sager mentioned: "The Group's operating revenues rose by over 18.4 percent year-on-year, which was a key driver of boosting net profit, supported by the robust growth of net interest income by 26 percent and fees and commissions income by 19 percent."

"With the support of our solid financial position, strong capitalization rates, and ample liquidity levels, we are positioned for sustained earnings growth during the remainder of 2023," he added.

### Conservative approach

Commenting on the increase in provisions during the first quarter, Al-Sager explained that NBK historically follows a prudent policy with regard to provisions, noting that in the first quarter, the Group continued to follow a conservative approach in managing its credit exposures, taking into account the extended impact of a number of different factors in the

markets where we operate.

"Despite of the global uncertainty, we are optimistic that the cost of risk will remain at healthy levels in 2023, thanks to our strong asset quality levels," he added.

"I would like also to accentuate that our diversified business model, strong financial position, ample liquidity levels, and constant focus on risk management enable us to overcome any potential challenges that may be imposed by global developments," he elaborated.

### Stringent banking supervision

On the possibility of a spillover effect from the crises in the US banking sector and Credit Suisse to the Kuwaiti banking sector, Al-Sager mentioned that this crisis is unlikely to extend to Kuwait, as the Central Bank of Kuwait is considered one of the most conservative regulators, thanks to following an approach that proved efficiency in the face of many historical crises.

"Kuwait has stringent regulatory requirements that are even ahead of international best practices (Basel and IFRS requirements), which remain rigorous under most stress testing scenarios. Kuwaiti banks are also strictly and carefully regulated by the Central Bank of Kuwait, regardless of their size or systemic importance, limiting any collective repercussions (domino effect) in the event of a crisis," he highlighted.

"The Kuwaiti banking sector enjoys strong liquidity and capitalization, with capital adequacy ratio ahead of regulatory requirements, as well as low NPL ratios coupled with high credit loss provisions," he mentioned.

### Secure portfolio

With regard to the possibility of Group's investment portfolio being impacted by global repercussions, Al-Sager said that the Group's investment portfolio is very conservatively structured with high quality exposures and very limited risks. "Around 60 percent of the investment portfolio is in government securities largely in the GCC, whereas around 80 percent of the Group's investment securities portfolio comprise of investments, which are carried at fair value. The remaining smaller portion is regularly assessed and its carrying values are not materially different from their fair values," he elaborated.

"We also have a sizable base of that portfolio are classified as HQLA, that can be sold or reposed for cash if the need arises. And the interest rate risk on those bonds is hedged via interest rate swaps. So we have no concern of any material spillover effect from the events in the US banking sector," he added.

### Diversification offering protection

On the devaluation of the Egyptian Pound and its impact on the bank's per-



Isam J Al-Sager during the interview.

formance in Egypt, Al-Sager said: "The devaluation of the Egyptian pound adversely affects NBK-Egypt's profits denominated in US dollar in the Group's consolidated balance sheet. However, its contribution to the Group's profits is not substantial, in light of our geographically diversified income sources."

Al-Sager stressed that NBK has long-term investments in Egypt, and that the devaluation of the Egyptian pound and

soaring inflation are seen as exceptional circumstances that many emerging markets around the world are witnessing at the present time.

"We are planning for further expansion in the retail sector, in which we see growth opportunities, given the large population and the increasing rate of financial inclusion, basically through increasing our investments in digital banking services," he noted.

## Soaring prices pressure Morocco's agriculture model

**RABAT:** Soaring inflation in Morocco is driving up living costs and stirring public anger, and as food prices increase the country's export-led agricultural model is coming under fire.

On April 8, protesters gathered outside parliament in the capital Rabat, with some saying "The rise in prices is a disgrace" and: "We're an agricultural country but vegetables are too expensive."

Official figures from February put year-on-year inflation in the North African country at just over 10 percent—a figure that also included a 20 percent jump in food prices. The price of fresh produce in Morocco is almost as high as in some Western European supermarkets, but the minimum wage for Moroccans is just \$300 (275 euros) a month. Faced with growing criticism, Agriculture Minister Mohamed Sadiki attributed high food prices to "external and cyclical factors" such as the rising cost of raw materials and a cold snap that delayed the picking of tomatoes.

Sadiki told a press conference in early April that despite the impact of climate factors such as drought, agriculture accounts for 13 percent of Morocco's GDP and 14 percent of its exports.

### Growing frustration

The Islamic holy month of Ramadan, when demand for agricultural produce traditionally spikes, is drawing to a close, and frustration towards policymakers is building. In an attempt to stem the price rises, Rabat suspended exports of some products in early February, including tomatoes, to ensure sup-



RABAT: The price of fresh produce in Morocco is comparable to European supermarkets but monthly minimum wages are only \$300.—AFP

plies for the local market.

But that move drew protests from professional bodies who urged Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch reconsider the measure. In 2008, Morocco adopted the Green Morocco Plan, an ambitious scheme to ensure food self-sufficiency. Since then, agricultural production has doubled in value from \$6 billion to \$12 billion, despite the loss of 7 billion cubic meters of rain annually since 1985, according to the agriculture ministry. Abderrahim Handouf, an agricultural engineer specializing in irrigation, said the kingdom remains at the mercy of recurrent drought that causes food price rises by "reducing the cultivated area

and therefore the supply" of fresh produce.

The agriculture ministry also notes the rising prices of imported raw materials such as seeds and fertilisers, which have jumped "from 30 to 70 percent". The price of grain imports has also skyrocketed. In 2020, Morocco's agricultural plan was rebaptized "Generation Green" for the 10-year period to 2030, and made exporting fresh fruit and vegetables a priority. But this focus on exports is considered to have contributed to rising prices, and now an increasing number of voices are calling for change. Handouf says that "ensuring food sovereignty starts with the seed industry, where Morocco is lagging far behind". —AFP

## German investor morale falls again in April

**FRANKFURT:** German investor confidence unexpectedly fell in April for the second straight month, a survey showed Tuesday, due to lingering fears about the banking sector and concerns about stubbornly high inflation. The ZEW institute's economic expectations index for Europe's biggest economy dropped 8.9 points to 4.1.

While still in positive territory, the reading was worse than expected, with analysts surveyed by financial data firm FactSet having forecast a slight increase. The gauge registered its first fall for six months in March as markets were rocked by the failure of three regional US lenders and the enforced takeover of Credit Suisse by rival UBS. ZEW president Achim Wambach said that while worries about a major financial crisis had eased, investors were still concerned banks might be more cautious in granting loans.

"The still high inflation rates and the internationally restrictive monetary policy are also weighing on the economy," he said. Energy and food costs soared last year after Russia invaded Ukraine and then slashed gas supplies to Europe, prompting the European Central Bank to aggressively hike interest rates. Last year's crisis prompted heavy falls in the ZEW index and other economic indicators, although most subsequently recovered as Berlin rolled out relief measures and fears of a sharp downturn eased. —AFP

## Swedish telecom giant Ericsson steps up savings plan

**STOCKHOLM:** Swedish telecommunications giant Ericsson said Tuesday that it is stepping up its cost-cutting program as it expects a "choppy environment" this year after profits fell in the first quarter. The telecom equipment maker will now reduce costs by 11 billion Swedish kronor (\$1.1 billion) in 2023, saying it found an additional two billion kronor in savings.

Ericsson announced in February that it would slash 8,500 jobs worldwide, or eight percent of its workforce. The Swedish group is locked in a battle with Finnish rival Nokia and China's Huawei for 5G networks, but it noted that its customers—mobile operators—have slowed the deployment of such equipment. "We continue to see a choppy environment during 2023 with poor visibility," Ericsson said in its quarterly earnings statement.

Ericsson's net profit fell 46 percent to 1.6 billion kronor in the January-to-March period. Sales rose 14 percent but they were flat when adjusting figures to take currency exchanges and other parameters into account. Ericsson said it expects customers "to remain cautious" with investments and continue to adjust their inventories in the second quarter.

"We expect the slower growth we saw in Q1 (the first quarter), caused by the slower global economy, to continue in Q2," Ericsson added. Shareholder confidence in the company has also been shaken by graft allegations in Iraq. —AFP

## Tanzania signs rare earths deals with Australian firms

**DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania:** The Tanzanian government on Monday signed contracts worth \$667 million (610 million euros) with three Australian companies to mine for graphite and rare earths. The framework agreements are part of a push by President Samia Suluhu Hassan to boost the mining sector's contribution to Tanzania's economy to at least 10 percent by 2025.

The deals were signed at a ceremony in the capital Dodoma with Evolution Energy Minerals, EcoGraf Ltd and Peak Rare Earths. "It's the hope of Tanzanians that the implementation of these projects will start soon and contribute to the economy," Hassan said.

Tanzania will have a 16 percent stake in each of the projects, according to the head of the government's negotiating team Palamagamba Kabudi. Western nations are looking to reduce their dependence on China for rare earths -- 17 heavy metals which are crucial for electronics such as smartphones, computers and batteries as well as the cutting-edge technologies that could reduce reliance on fossil fuels. Peak Rare Earths is involved in the \$439 million Ngualla rare earths project in southwestern Tanzania.

It said Ngualla is one of the world's largest and



Tanzania's ministry of minerals technical committee on site at Ngualla.

highest grade deposits of neodymium and praseodymium, key components of high-strength permanent magnets used in the production of electric vehicles and wind turbines. "This signals the long journey of partnership between Peak and the government of Tanzania in developing a world class project," said the company's executive chairman Russell Scrimshaw. "Our project will play a role in addressing climate change."

Evolution Minerals and EcoGraf will mine for

graphite—which is used in lithium-ion batteries—in projects worth \$100 million and \$128 million respectively, Kabudi said.

"The signing of these agreements today sends a positive message to the global mining sector," said Evolution managing director Phil Hoskins. Mining contributed 7.3 percent of Tanzania's economy in 2021, up from 4.8 percent in 2018, Mining Commission executive secretary Yahya Samamba said in October last year. —AFP

# Global equities gain in 1Q23 despite ongoing uncertainty

## GCC growth outlook to support market sentiment in 2023

Chart 1: Global equity markets



Chart 2: Global equity market performance in 1Q23

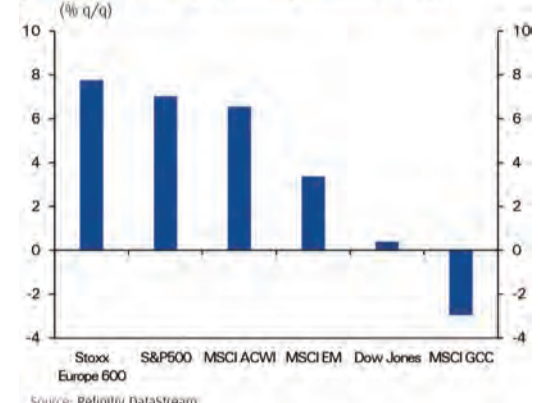
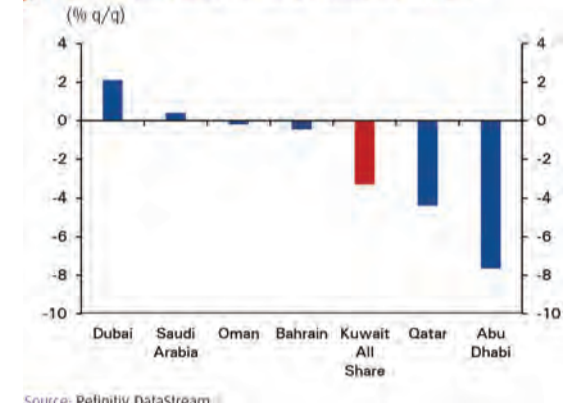


Chart 3: GCC equity markets



Chart 4: GCC equity market performance in 1Q23



**KUWAIT:** Global equities ended 1Q23 on a positive note despite heightened volatility and uncertainty. Markets gained as the Fed slowed down its pace of rate hikes from 50 to 25 bps increments in February, and on investor bets that the end of the rate hike cycle may be near as inflation continued to ease. The gains came despite various headwinds including higher bond yields, softer economic data and turmoil in the banking sector which stoked recession fears. In contrast, GCC markets underperformed, with most countries posting moderate losses as an anticipated slowdown in the global economy prompted oil demand concerns. In addition, regional stocks (especially banking stocks) were pressured by fears of contagion from the global banking sector, as well as the drag from monetary tightening with most regional central banks moving in lockstep with the Fed in its current tightening cycle.

### US and Europe lead gains in Q1

US and European markets outperformed their EM counterparts, building on the gains of the previous quarter. Gradually softening inflation in the US, which slowed to 6 percent y/y in February, the lowest since September 2021, and in turn increased expectations of the rate-hike cycle nearing its end, lent support to sentiment, despite ongoing recession concerns, compounded by the banking crisis highlighted by the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank in March.

The MSCI ACWI gained 6.6 percent led by European equities, with the Stoxx Europe 600 up 7.8 percent (the narrower Euro Stoxx 50 gained

14 percent), followed by US markets, with the S&P 500 up 7 percent q/q in the second consecutive quarter of gains. Emerging markets lagged behind (MSCI EM +3.4 percent) on a slower than expected post-lockdown economic recovery in China as well as losses in GCC markets. The Chinese CSI 300 rose a relatively modest 4.6 percent q/q.

Looking forward, equity market performance will continue to depend largely on Fed policy and recession prospects. Although the Fed maintains that rates will 'remain higher for longer' until inflation falls back down to its 2 percent target, signs of weakness in economic data (recent examples being labor market and manufacturing data), indicative of a slowing economy, could raise concerns over its resilience and pressure the Fed to moderate its stance, which is positive for markets. Additional risks include energy market volatility and geopolitical risk between the US and the likes of China and Russia, which could disrupt prices and supply chains, and is generally detrimental to market sentiment. Moreover, the prospect of a weaker dollar in the event of looser Fed policy or a recovery in European and Asian economies, is generally positive for emerging markets. For the GCC, oil demand and prices, as well as global sentiment remain key market drivers. Finally, while easing inflation, a looser labor market, and recession risks would support a faster end to monetary tightening, which is positive for markets, Fed hawkishness could persist should the economy and the labor market especially show signs of strength against higher interest rates, with adverse

implications for economic growth and equity markets. However, the former scenario appears more likely at this juncture as suggested by interest rate futures markets.

GCC equity markets lagged behind their global counterparts in 1Q23, sinking further into bear territory following the equally lackluster performance of the previous quarter, weighed down by headwinds including rising borrowing costs, softer outlooks for growth and the oil market and fears of banking crisis contagion. The MSCI GCC fell 3 percent q/q, with losses led by Abu Dhabi (-7.6 percent) and Qatar (-4.4 percent), while Kuwait's All-Share lost 3.3 percent amid relatively thin liquidity. Losses in the MSCI GCC were curbed by a small gain in heavy weight Saudi Arabia (+0.4 percent), while Dubai led the pack, up 2.1 percent.

Looking ahead, GCC equities will continue to be influenced by international market developments, including oil, economic growth, and Fed policy. Generally improved fiscal positions thanks to large hydrocarbon windfalls in 2022 and still favorable though moderating growth outlooks in 2023 are supportive of market sentiment. A buoyant IPO market should help maintain investor interest after a record 48 listings and \$23 billion in capitalization in 2022, 34 from Saudi Arabia linked to its private sector reform and investment plans. Lastly, oil market volatility and rising borrowing costs are additional regional headwinds, though at the time of writing, risks from the former appear modest given

OPEC's preemptive production policies, sometimes moving ahead of the market.

### Headwinds ease

Fed policy and the economic backdrop are more favorable for equities compared to last quarter, with inflation now clearly trending downwards and the Fed slowing its pace of tightening considerably. However, the risk of a recession in the US and Europe, the possibility of an uptick in inflation or a further loosening of the labor market, as well as an uncertain earnings trajectory, are notable downside risks. Further risks stem from uncertain geopolitics, given that US - Russian/Chinese tensions are largely unresolved, with surprises having the potential to disrupt the global economy and the supply chain. Additionally, apparent and recent shifts in Middle Eastern relations and politics add to the complication. Still elevated bond yields, as well as dollar strength which has pressured other markets and currencies are further risks, though the latter could potentially depreciate as EM economies recover and central banks expect- edly pause the current tightening cycle.

While GCC markets will continue to be influenced by global sentiment, the reopening of China and its implications for commodity demand, including oil, will potentially be very positive, EM equities in particular could perform well later in the year as its largest market, China, stands to benefit from the reopening catalyst (though the effect has been slower than anticipated) and a potentially weaker US dollar.



## Glencore, Teck Resources seek exit from coal

**ZURICH:** Swiss commodities giant Glencore has come under heavy fire over its coal strategy but is trying to exit this business as part of its takeover bid for Canada's Teck Resources. But Teck Resources isn't biting, twice this month rebuffing Glencore's proposals to focus instead on its own plans already in the works to spin off its coal division into an independent company.

### Teck coal split

In February, the Canadian group, which employs 11,000 people, proposed to spin off its activities in metallurgical or coking coal, used to produce steel, into a new company called Elk Valley Resources (EVR) that would be listed separately on the Toronto Stock Exchange. Teck Resources would hold onto zinc and copper mines and become Teck Metals. Metals have significant growth potential since they are in high demand for the transition to clean energy, the company explained, even though coal accounted for 60 percent of its Can\$17.3 billion (\$12.9 billion) in revenues in 2022, due to a surge in the price of coal following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Its shareholders would get one EVR share for 10 Teck Resources shares as well as a cash payment of 0.39 Canadian dollars per share, for a total of Can\$200 million. They must decide at an extraordinary general meeting on April 26. Japanese steel giant Nippon Steel Corporation, which has a minority stake in a Teck Resources site in British Columbia, plans to invest more than Can\$1 billion to secure a 10 percent stake in EVR. Its South Korean competitor Posco plans to take a 2.5 percent stake.

### Glencore's counter proposal

But in early April, Glencore presented an offer valuing Teck Resources at more than US\$22.5 billion, a more than 20 percent premium to its March 24 closing price. Glencore proposes to combine their activities and simultaneously carve them up to create a company specialized in metals called MetalsCo and another specialized in coal, called CoalCo. Together, they would have a broader base, argues the Swiss group, which points out that MetalsCo would also rely on its activities in cobalt and nickel. Teck Resources immediately refused, warning that such a merger would bring Glencore's thermal coal into its business. Used to produce electricity and heat, thermal coal is attracting much more criticism because of its CO2 emissions that contribute to climate change. — AFP

## Gulf Bank raises awareness on banking security

**KUWAIT:** As part of its keenness to promote financial literacy in society, Gulf Bank continues to support the Diraya "Let's Be Aware" campaign for the third consecutive year by broadcasting and disseminating awareness and educational materials through social media, the Bank's website, and other channels.

The Diraya campaign is an awareness campaign initiated by the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Kuwait Banking Association. The campaign aims to spread financial literacy in society, raise awareness of the role of the banking sector, and promote the various services that banks offer to their customers.

Corporate Communications Officer at Gulf Bank, AbdulMohsen Al-Nassar, indicated that the bank spares no effort in supporting the goals of the Diraya

campaign, by spreading awareness messages to customers and the public through its channels: especially when banking information and data protection is at stake. Al-Nassar warned of the potential risks of not following security and safety instructions when processing banking transactions, advising customers not to provide any personal information about their accounts and transactions to unknown parties. He also recommended to avoid responding to anonymous messages from unknown origins, as they may violate data confidentiality and banking protection measures.

Furthermore, he advised customers not to share their banking data with anyone, pointing out that there are many tricks followed by the occupiers to deceive customers, in order to obtain their banking data or OTP codes. Al-Nassar also advised customers not to interact with anonymous emails in order to avoid fraud. In addition to ensuring that the websites being used are safe, and that the electronic payment gateway is approved.

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.

AbdulMohsen Al-Nassar

## Malabar Gold & Diamonds appoints Alia Bhatt as its new brand ambassador

**KUWAIT:** Malabar Gold & Diamonds, the 6th largest jewelry retailer globally with 312 showrooms across 10 countries, has signed Indian actress Alia Bhatt as its new brand ambassador. After making her debut in 2012, Alia Bhatt has quickly transformed into one of the most sought-after actresses in India, with a score of blockbuster movies under the belt. She has garnered praise for her versatility as an actress, her humble persona and stunning looks, representative of a new era of super talented actors hailing from India. She is also set to make her Hollywood debut in the movie, Heart of Stone, which is slated to be released soon.

The announcements come in the wake of the 30th anniversary of Malabar group, which began their operations in 1993. With an extensive retail network in India, UAE, KSA, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Malaysia, Singapore and the USA, the signing of Alia Bhatt as the brand ambassador will bring a new global outlook to the brand as they set their eyes on new markets such as the UK, Australia, Canada, South Africa, Egypt, Bangladesh, Turkey and New Zealand, as well as strengthen their presence in existing markets.

"I am delighted to be the face of a global brand such as Malabar Gold & Diamonds. Having witnessed first-hand their acceptance amongst Indians and Indian sub-continental audience, the immense success they have reaped abroad should be a source of great pride for us and I am humbled to be a part of the Malabar family. As Malabar Gold & Diamonds gears up to execute their ambitious expansion plan, I earnestly look forward to working closely with them to further their reach amongst jewelry lovers worldwide", commented Alia Bhatt.

"We are very excited to welcome Alia Bhatt into the Malabar Family. Over the years, our brand am-



Celebrated Bollywood actress Alia Bhatt is the new brand ambassador of Malabar Gold & Diamonds.



Alia Bhatt with Malabar Gold & Diamonds (India) Managing Director Asher O.

bassadors have played an instrumental role in elevating our brand's status in the eyes of our customers and we are looking forward to taking Malabar Gold & Diamonds to new heights with Alia Bhatt as the face of the brand. Our goal is to be crowned as the world's largest jewelry retailer by crafting, promoting and selling jewelry that is an intersection of Indian art, culture, tradition, heritage and Alia Bhatt, both as an actor and as a person, perfectly represents what we are striving to achieve. Her impressive career in the highly competitive film industry resonates with our brand's journey and ambition as a brand. As Malabar Gold & Diamonds celebrates its 30th anniversary, we are reaffirming our commitment to

providing our loyal customers with the best jewelry shopping experience", commented Malabar Group Chairman M P Ahmed.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds is globally renowned for providing an exceptional jewelry shopping experience with convenience and customer-friendly policies, known as the 'Malabar Promise.' This promise assures customers of unmatched quality, transparency, and service assurance. With more than 12 exclusive brands in gold, diamond, and precious gems, Malabar Gold & Diamonds presents the latest designs curated from 20 countries, catering to the diverse tastes and preferences of their vast, multicultural customer base.

Lifestyle



These pictures show Choo Yew Choon working on a trishaw inside his workshop in George Town on Malaysia's Penang island. —AFP photos

# Final lap for Malaysian trishaw maker



People riding in a trishaw in George Town on Malaysia's Penang island.



People riding in a trishaw in George Town on Malaysia's Penang island.

In a rustic Malaysian workshop about a century old and cluttered with racks of tyres, a stoic, white-haired man dressed in a T-shirt and shorts inspects his nearly finished trishaw. Choo Yew Choon is a veteran craftsman of pedicabs and is said to be the last one still plying the disappearing trade on Penang island—north of Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur. But he intends to retire in a few years. Trishaws, or pedal-driven taxis, were once common in Malaysia and elsewhere in the region. Their popularity has declined as modern transport systems were built in tandem with the region's economic development.

"I plan to work until I am 70, then I plan to retire," Choo, 66, told AFP from his tool-strewn shophouse. "You need a lot of energy for making trishaws." As there is hardly any interest in using them for actual transport, Choo's finished orders end up as decorations or collectables. The fourth generation in a family of trishaw builders dating back about a century, Choo took over in the late



Trishaw maker Choo Yew Choon working on metals inside his workshop.

1980s after his father suffered health issues. Already acquainted with fitting tyre tubes as a teenager, he picked up the art of building frames from scratch. The steel bodies of Choo's ma-



Choo Yew Choon working on a trishaw inside his workshop in George Town on Malaysia's Penang island.

chines are bent and welded piece by piece, along with each model's wooden seating area, before being fitted with factory-made items such as the hubs and chain. Choo said that when he works at

full steam he can build a trishaw in about 20 days, but most of his creations take roughly six weeks.

He rolls out three to four pedicabs annually, selling them for 7,500 ringgit (\$1,700) each. "I've no feelings. It's just a job," Choo, a man of few words, said when asked how he feels after completing a trishaw. There are just over 130 trishaws in Penang, where they differ in style from the few dozen found in the southern state of Malacca, where the vehicles remain popular among tourists.

Malacca's trishaws are designed to have their rider sit beside their passengers, while Penang handlers pedal from behind. None of Choo's children are interested in trishaws, nor is he keen to teach them as it involves a lot of hard work and spare parts that are hard to find. And he is looking forward to his retirement. "Maybe I'll go stay at my son's house or go on holiday," he said with a small grin. —AFP

## Lionel Richie, Katy Perry to play Charles coronation show

Take That, Lionel Richie, Katy Perry and Andrea Bocelli will be among those performing at a concert to mark King Charles III's coronation, the BBC said on Friday. A televised Coronation Concert is being held in the grounds of Windsor Castle, west of London, on May 7 -- the day after Charles is officially crowned king. BBC chief content officer Charlotte Moore said the coronation was a "once-in-a-generation occasion" and called the concert line-up "world class". But recent reports have said that a number of big-name stars have turned down the gig, including Adele, Elton John, Harry Styles and the Spice Girls.

They are said to have declined because of scheduling clashes or touring commitments. But the Mail on Sunday said singer Kylie Minogue had refused given increased republican sentiment in her native Australia, where Charles is also king. Some 20,000 members of the public and invited guests are set to attend in person, with the live event also broadcast on radio and online.

Other confirmed performers in the line-up include opera star Bryn Terfel, the singer-songwriter Freya Ridings and composer-producer Alexis Ffrench. Perry—who performed for US President Joe Biden's inauguration in 2021 -- as well as Take That and Richie all have links to Charles's char-



Lionel Richie and Katy Perry

itable foundations. Richie, who at 73 is just a year younger than the king, said the concert would be an "honor and a celebration".

Bocelli has previously performed for Charles's mother, Queen Elizabeth II, who died in September last year aged 96. He was among a star-studded lineup headlined by Diana Ross for the late monarch's Platinum Jubilee concert marking her 70th year on the throne last June. Further names for the Coronation Concert will be announced in due course, the BBC said.

Despite the coronation being the first since 1953 and an event most Britons alive

have never witnessed, public interest currently appears lacking. Coronation coins have been minted, special chinaware produced and even a crown emoji made to mark the occasion at Westminster Abbey. But a YouGov poll of more than 3,000 people published Friday indicated that just over a third (35 percent) "do not care very much" about the event.

Just under a third (29 percent) said they "do not care at all", with apathy greatest among younger age groups. About a quarter (24 percent) of all respondents said they cared "a fair amount" and only about one in 10 people (nine percent) said they cared "a great deal". Nonetheless, 46 percent of Britons said they would likely watch or take part in celebrations, including street parties and community lunches on May 8, which has been declared a public holiday.

Preparations were ongoing for the solemn religious ceremony, whose roots date back more than a millennium, and the guest list finalized. Charles's younger son Prince Harry is set to attend, despite his public criticisms of the royal family since moving to the United States in early 2020. The former British army captain's actress wife, Meghan, however, will remain in California with their two young children. —AFP

## Alain Delon thanks women for success in new book

His off-screen life may have been full of tumultuous relationships and scandal, but controversial French film icon Alain Delon says his successful career was "due to women and for women" in a new book about his life.

The 87-year-old has never published an autobiography, so "Amours et Mémoires" (Loves and Memories), out May 5 in France, may come closest, featuring a long preface by the actor and interviews with friends and co-stars such as Brigitte Bardot, Sophia Loren and Jane Birkin.

The book dissects the films that made Delon the epitome of brooding cool, including 1960s classics such as "Purple Noon" and "The Samouraï". For this, he thanks the many women in his life, such as Romy Schneider, with whom he starred in "The Swimming Pool" and had a stormy, on-off relationship, and his wife from 1964 to 1969, Nathalie Delon, who had to share him with many other women. "I had never dreamed of being an actor. I started acting and continued to act due to women and for women," Delon writes.



French artists Muriel Robin, Alain Delon, Carole Laure, Sheila, Enrico Macias, Rosy Varte and Joëlle Ursull attend the TV show "coup de coeur", on June 10, 1990 in Paris. —AFP

"Love has always pushed me to go further," he adds. He also praises filmmakers who "trained and refined me", such as Luchino Visconti, who directed him in "The Leopard" (1963) and Joseph Losey for "Mr Klein" (1976). Much less space is given to the more controversial segments of his life, such as the child he reportedly fathered with singer Nico and refused to acknowledge, the allegations of violence against women and his own children,

links to the criminal underworld and support for the far-right National Front. In a letter printed in the book, Bardot describes him as having "the majesty of a lion... the mystery of a black panther... the teeth of a wolf". Not one to shy away from melodrama, Delon concludes his preface by saying: "If I should die tomorrow, may God make it from love... I want people to say of me: 'He suffered often, he sometimes made mistakes, but he loved.'" —AFP



## Veiled man unmasked in Kenyan women's chess tournament

A young man wearing a niqab and glasses played four rounds of the Nairobi Women's Chess Open before being exposed. "I don't think anything like it has ever happened anywhere in the world," said John Mukabi, secretary general of the Kenyan Chess Federation. Mukabi said that after the impostor was unmasked he explained that he had done it because he had a better chance of winning the women's competition prize money. The 31st Kenya Open, an international chess competition in Nairobi from April 6-10, attracted 445 participants, with 84 entries in the women's tournament. One veiled player, silent and elusive, attracted increasing suspicion as the rounds progressed.

"The first hint that there was something wrong was when I went around with a photographer to take pictures of the competition," Mukabi told AFP on Sunday. "When we went back to the computer to put in the names, the name was Milicent Awour. We were expecting a Muslim name. It was a bit odd but it is possible that there are people with Christian names who are Muslims."

He said match officials were also developing doubts. "The arbiters also noticed something: after

games, this person disappears and only comes back with a few minutes to the start of the next round," said Mukabi. "Somebody also noticed that the shoulders looked more male than female... Even the rubber shoes he was wearing, they were mostly associated with men."

The mystery competitor was also scoring good results. "The other thing is he had defeated a very experienced lady, who participated six times in the World Chess Olympiad for Kenya," said Mukabi. After round four, the officials made their move. It was checkmate in one. "After that game, the arbiters took him aside and one female arbiter went with him to the washrooms where he was asked to remove the hijab. On reaching there, he immediately just admitted that he was a male. He was withdrawn and the scores reversed."

"He said financial problems led him to do that," said Mukabi. "In the men's section, he had no chance at all, we had Grand Masters, International Masters..." The young man, who is a student at the University of Nairobi, is due to appear before the Kenyan chess federation's disciplinary committee next week. He faces a suspension of several years. —AFP

## Lifestyle



People take part in mass water fights during the first day of Songkran, or Thai New Year, on Khao San Road in Bangkok.—AFP photos.

# Bangkok revels in first post-pandemic Songkran festival

Water pistols, hose pipes and smiles were in abundance on the streets of Bangkok Thursday, as the city celebrated the Thai new year festival Songkran after a three-year pandemic-related hiatus.

While the three-day celebrations include paying respect to elders and sprinkling water over Buddha statues, the festival is also a chance for younger Thais and foreigners to indulge in a little booze-fueled revelry.

The ever-chaotic megalopolis saw a huge water fight take place at close to 200 official sites, with smaller bouts of liquid-based clashes breaking out in neighbourhoods across the city, as residents welcomed a return to normality after years of tough Covid measures.

Thai reveller Phoranee Sukjee, 29, said she was hopeful the revival of the festival would boost the country's economy, which was battered by the pandemic. "Though some places in Bangkok are still quiet, things would definitely get better," she said.

City governor Chadchart Sittipunt urged citizens to wear colourful shirts and respect traditional Songkran activities in an alcohol-free family-friendly environment.



By midday, however, the floral shirts on backpacker hotspot Khao San Road were already drenched, the beers cracked, and the music blasting as Thais and foreigners soaked each other with brightly coloured water guns. "It's already blown out our expectations, it's so much fun," said drenched

Californian Parker Core, 24, who booked a last-minute trip from Malaysia.

"We have nothing like it in America," he said. Further along the road -- lined with tubs offering refills -- Julia Grinina laughed as her nine and eight-year-old children tore through the crowds, each armed with water guns.

"We came here to get sprayed, we knew what we were coming for," said the 34-year-old from Kazakhstan, who now lives in Pattaya. At either end of the street stalls selling water pistols, protective plastic phone covers, and 20-baht (60 US cents) water refills were doing a brisk trade, with the vendors and their children soaking merry customers.

"I'm glad because the authorities have allowed us to splash water like we used to," said orange vendor Wattana Kunpang. "They allowed us to splash water, drink, eat, and they also relaxed the regulations so I think foreign tourists would enjoy this," the 46-year-old added.

#### Dangerous roads

Many Thais use the long holiday weekend to travel home to see friends and family, with road accidents peaking during the period.

At least 63 people were killed and hundreds injured in crashes on Wednesday, local media reported, with authorities urging people to drive safely during the holiday and promising to levy harsh penalties on those driving while intoxicated.

Across the border in neighbouring Myanmar -- where the Buddhist festival is known as Thingyan -- the formerly boisterous celebrations were muted, with a few hundred celebrating in parks in the commercial capital Yangon.

Since the 2021 coup, many have chosen not to celebrate the festival, with last year's Thingyan marked by a heavy security presence on the streets. This year's festival was also overshadowed by a junta air strike on a village in Myanmar's central Sagaing region earlier in the week, which reportedly killed more than 100 people, including young children.—AFP



## Can music festivals actually go green?

Coachella brings adrenaline-fueled sets to hundreds of thousands of festival-goers who gather in the California desert -- and it also leaves behind a lot of trash.

Beyond the plastic cups and water bottles strewn about each day, there's also the immense energy use of floodlights and earsplitting speakers.

Coachella is far from alone: music festivals across the United States and beyond are big business, and for all the talk of sustainability, the bottom line usually wins out. The carbon footprint of throngs of people, along with artists and their entourages, traveling to attend such festivals should not be underestimated, says Kim Nicholas, a climate scholar at Sweden's Lund University.

"That's way bigger than the energy and waste use in production at the festival itself," she told AFP. "I think by far the most important step to make festivals truly low carbon and sustainable is to reduce the distance and the carbon intensity of travel." That's not happening at Coachella, which is some three hours east of Los Angeles.

The festival does have a carpooling initiative rewarding those who arrive in groups by car.

Still, the fields surrounding the grounds are trans-



Workers pick up trash on the grounds during the first week of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival.—AFP photos

formed into gargantuan parking lots with gridlocked traffic that lasts for days.

And the rare snowcaps on the San Jacinto Mountains that tower over the festival are an eerie reminder of California's abnormal winter, which in the past months saw atmospheric rivers, near-record snow, flooding and fatalities.

Nicholas emphasizes that festivals should be located in areas easily reachable by public transportation; New York City's Governor's Ball, for example, was recently moved to Citi Field in Queens from a more remote island location. The move was originally done to allow for more distancing in the era of COVID-19, but it stuck, not least due to easy subway access. For Nicholas, artists should also take the initiative.

Musicians should make moves towards "promoting local tours, and making low-carbon travel desirable and sexy and cool," she said. "It's kind of the reverse of flying by private jet, and seeing that as a past social goal or aspiration." Turkish-born, LA-based DJ Omer Mesci, who played a set at the festival, agrees: "As artists we have an audience and we have a voice, and people tend to listen to us."

Some acts have made moves: Coldplay at one point halted touring for environmental reasons -- though they picked back up recently -- and Massive Attack called for "an urgent and significant reassembly" of the industry after commissioning a study into live music's climate impact.—AFP



Attendees bring items to a recycling center on the grounds of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival.

## Conexion Divina, the Gen Z band contemporizing 'regional Mexican'

As is the norm for people their age, the members of Generation Z's first all-female sierrano group met online, sliding into each other's DMs in the hopes of making music.

Flash forward and the three young women of Conexion Divina are bringing their unique brand of Mexican-American "regional" music to Coachella, the premier US desert music festival known for showcasing some of the world's best acts.

"It's really amazing to be here... it's an honor," said Liz Trujillo, who recently graduated high school and is now the lead singer of the band bringing a "feminine perspective" and "youthful touch" to sierrano, a style of Mexico's Norteno genre that is mainly played with guitars.

Regional Mexican is a broad term covering many genres developed primarily across rural Mexico and the southwestern United States, from mariachi to Tejano.

And it's expanding on streaming platforms: According to a recent Spotify report, regional Mexican's popularity on the app grew by 56 percent between 2021 and 2022, to 5.6 billion streams globally and 66 million listeners outside of Mexico.

Sierrano has become a favorite of younger



(From left to right) Musicians Sandra Calixto, Liz Trujillo and Ashlee Valenzuela from Conexion Divina pose for a group portrait during the first weekend of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio.—AFP photos

artists, from Conexion Divina to acts like Yahritza y Su Esencia and DannyLux, who also played Coachella. The subgenre is marked by acoustic guitar and bass along with the smaller, higher-pitched requinto guitar. And in true Gen Z form, the youth revitalizing the style are infusing it with melancholy, yearning and, perhaps most importantly, inclusivity.—AFP



(From left to right) Musicians Sandra Calixto, Liz Trujillo and Ashlee Valenzuela of Conexion Divina perform during the first weekend of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival.

Lifestyle

# Pakistan street cricket comes to life after dark during Ramadan



Hassan Mohsin, a member of the Pakistan under-19 cricket team plays a shot during the tape ball night cricket tournament.



Cricketer Arbaz Khan plays a shot during the tape ball night cricket tournament during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan in Karachi.



Youngsters play during the tape ball night cricket tournament during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan in Karachi.



In this picture commuters ride past cricket players during the tape ball night cricket tournament.



Residents watch the tape ball night cricket tournament.



Cricketer Owais Khan plays a shot during the tape ball night cricket tournament.



A young supporter of the winning team hold prize money after the tape ball night cricket tournament.

After midnight during Ramadan, makeshift floodlights transform a central Karachi basketball court into an urban cricket arena, where dozens of young Pakistani men chase taped-up tennis balls zipping through the night air. Donkeys watch on from the outfield and goats rummage through nearby piles of rubbish, breaking occasionally for a pitch invasion. "After the Taraweeh (special Ramadan prayers), people crave entertainment so that is why many play cricket," batsman Waqas Danish told AFP. "They play all night, because some people can't wake up for breakfast if they sleep." Tape-ball games are ubiquitous across Karachi's streets throughout the year, but Ramadan sees night tournaments pop up in most neighbourhoods.

The uninitiated may struggle to unravel the mayhem of multiple overlapping matches in a cramped space, but for Karachi's street cricketers, there is method in the madness. The frenetic matches of between four and six overs per innings are concluded before sehri, the meal consumed ahead of daytime fasting.

They range from pick-up games on improvised concrete pitches to professional competitions on dusty ovals. "The kids and youths can't afford kits and all the accessories for playing hard-ball cricket, but they can easily afford the tape ball," competition organiser Taqdeer Afridi told AFP in Karachi.

Money is often involved — even though gambling is illegal in Pakistan — and big-hitting mercenaries are occasionally lured from surrounding neighbourhoods to



In this picture young cricketers pose for a photograph after winning a tape ball night cricket match during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan in Karachi. —AFP photos

play under lights that craftily tap into overhead power lines. A tennis ball is tightly bound with electrical tape, giving it extra weight so it swings much like a cricket ball, yet is less damaging if it hits a spectator, window — or even a passing rickshaw.

### 'Amazing' speed

Matches played in the poorest neighbourhoods can draw hundreds of spectators, with many onlookers admitting

that watching cricket all night helps with the day's fast. "All day they are sleeping. Maybe they go to their jobs for four or five hours," 19-year-old spectator Rahman Khan said. After Partition in 1947, cricket was considered the domain of the upper class, played at Karachi's posh clubs and elite schools.

But as the population boomed through the 1960s, cricket adapted to the sprawling metropolis and tennis balls emerged as a

substitute to the hard ball. The cheaper alternative — which also removes the need for costly equipment like batting pads — took on several experimental forms in the following decades, and is credited with bringing the sport to the everyday Pakistani. There is no consensus on when the first tape ball delivery was bowled or by who, but legends abound — and the one thing historians and fans agree on is that it originated in Karachi.

"The tennis ball without tape lacked speed," said veteran Nasir Ali, who recalls the 1980s as the formative years for the tape-ball game. "On an experimental basis we wrapped the ball with red tape and when it was bowled the speed was amazing," said the 64-year-old, who hosts an annual competition in his apartment block's courtyard.

### 'Watch the ball'

From legendary all-rounder Wasim Akram to modern-day pace star Shaheen Shah Afridi, many of Pakistan's top players credit street cricket as a positive influence on their techniques. "In cricket there is a saying: 'watch the ball' — it doesn't matter if it is a tennis ball or a taped ball or a hard ball," Pakistan national youth coach Mohammad Masroor told AFP. "If a batsman can hit any ball, he can play cricket." Watching young cricketers at a street pitch wedged between an elevated expressway and an apartment block in central Karachi, Masroor said rules adapted to the urban landscape hone a batsman's skills.

A hit back over the bowler's head and beyond the residential area on the full is six runs, but only one run if the ball rebounds off the apartment building. Players must also beware of the "grumpy uncle or aunty" who is unwilling to return a ball hit into their home. A shot like that can cost a batsman more than just his wicket: they need to go buy a new ball, too. "Nothing stops them," said Masroor, grinning. —AFP



## Fit for a king... and queen: UK royals serve up 'Coronation Quiche' recipe

Move over Coronation Chicken, there's a new culinary concoction with UK royal approval for the crowning of King Charles III and Queen Consort Camilla — "Coronation Quiche". Seven decades after the lightly curried chicken dish was created for Queen Elizabeth II's crowning, her son on Monday unveiled the recipe for a baked savoury tart to mark his coronation next month.

Chosen with his wife, Camilla, who will also be formally crowned on May 6, the quiche was selected "in celebration of Coronation Big Lunches" occurring over the long weekend of events, Buckingham Palace said. The lunches, which aim to bring neighbours and communities together to celebrate the country's first coronation in 70 years, will be staged nationwide, primarily on Monday May 8.

Camilla has been patron of the associated Big Lunch initiative since 2013. In keeping with Charles' green environmental credentials, the new

Coronation Quiche does not contain meat but instead features spinach, broad beans and tarragon. The palace, which unveiled the recipe online, described it as "a deep quiche with a crisp, light pastry case and delicate flavours".

"Eat hot or cold with a green salad and boiled new potatoes — perfect for a Coronation Big Lunch," it added, also releasing a video of a palace chef making the savoury dish from scratch.

Coronation Chicken — a bright yellow dish of cold chicken in a curry cream sauce with a well-seasoned dressed salad of rice, green peas and mixed herbs, served cold — has become a British culinary classic.

It was created in 1953 by Constance Spry, then director of Le Cordon Bleu culinary school in Winkfield, near Windsor, to appeal to the tastes of guests from around the world. She had been tasked with putting on a banquet for foreign dignitaries after Elizabeth's coronation on June 2, 1953. —AFP

## J-Hope of BTS to begin mandatory South Korean military service

BTS star J-Hope was set to start his mandatory South Korean military service on Tuesday, local media reported, the second member to report for duty since the K-pop juggernaut went on hiatus last year. The septet has become a global cultural phenomenon, selling out stadiums and dominating charts while raking in billions for South Korea's economy and building an international legion of fans known as ARMY.

But all able-bodied South Korean men must serve at least 18 months in the military, and after a years-long debate about whether BTS deserved an exemption, Jin, the oldest member of the group, began his service in December.

J-Hope — whose full name is Jung Ho-seok — was set to begin his five-week basic training at an army boot camp in Gangwon province on Tuesday, Yonhap News Agency reported.

The 29-year-old posted pictures of himself with a buzzcut on the South Korean social media platform Weverse on Monday.

"I love you, ARMY. I'll go and come back safely!" he said. The post attracted thousands of comments from fans, with many expressing sorrow over the group's ongoing hiatus.

"Be careful and stay healthy... Say hi to Jin for us, please? We will miss you so much!" one wrote. "It suits you so well," another wrote of J-Hope's buzzcut. Jin left the comment "D-1" on one of J-Hope's Weverse posts on Monday — a nod to the fact he had one day left before the start of his service.

The septet's agency HYBE had confirmed on April 1 that J-Hope would begin his service, but did not disclose de-



In this file photo South Korean K-pop boy band BTS member J-Hope poses for a photo session during a press conference on BTS new album 'BE (Deluxe Edition)' in Seoul. —AFP

tails "to prevent any issues that might occur from crowding".

"The entrance ceremony is a time to be observed by military personnel and their families only," it had said. "Fans are advised to refrain from visiting the site."

### 'Excited'

J-Hope said during a livestream with fans last week that he was "excited" about his time in the military. "It will be a new experience, and I will be learning to fit into a new society, and I'm excited about that," he said. "In the meantime, what I look forward to is living each day in a normal way, which is different from my usual lifestyle. This could make me healthier."

The band had cited exhaustion and the pressures of stratospheric success

while dropping their bombshell hiatus announcement last year, saying they were taking a break to focus on their solo careers. Analysts have questioned what the future holds for the group after all seven members complete their military service. Some male K-pop stars have struggled to resume their careers after military service in a cut-throat industry where artists are easily replaceable. "During the absence, (BTS) could lose their public interest, and the decline in popularity will damage their business," Lee Taekgwang, a communications professor at Kyung Hee University, told AFP.

"It would not be easy for the boy band to reunite... this is not only the problem of BTS but also the problem of almost all (South Korean) boy bands and male celebrities." —AFP





## Liverpool hit Leeds for six



LEEDS: Liverpool's Egyptian striker Mohamed Salah shoots to score their second goal against Leeds United at Elland Road on April 17, 2023. — AFP

**LEEDS:** Liverpool crushed Leeds 6-1 as Cody Gakpo's controversial opener provided the spark for the Reds' first win in five Premier League games on Monday. Jurgen Klopp's side took the lead at Elland Road when Gakpo's goal was allowed to stand despite the ball striking Trent Alexander-Arnold's arm in the build-up. It was reported the VAR official did not check the incident because it happened too far back in the move, but Leeds were furious at the perceived injustice.

Mohamed Salah rubbed salt into Leeds' wounds when he increased Liverpool's lead four minutes later before Luis Sinisterra got one back for the struggling hosts. Diogo Jota's double, another Salah strike and Darwin Nunez's late effort ensured Liverpool ended their five-game winless run in all competitions. After coming within a whisker of winning a quadruple last season, Liverpool have been reduced to scrambling to reach next season's Europa League or Europa Conference League, with the Champions League seeming out of reach.

With that target in mind, the eighth-placed Reds

are now within two points of seventh-placed Brighton. "It's the best game we've played this season from all different perspectives," Klopp said. "My favorite part was in the 92nd minute when we chased the poor boy on the ball from Leeds. The counter-pressing was the best for, I want to say, decades!"

Klopp has compared fan criticism of Liverpool potentially not making big-money transfers in the coming close-season as like a five-year-old asking for a Ferrari for Christmas. But on the evidence of this composed display and the recent fightback from two goals down to draw 2-2 with leaders Arsenal, Liverpool still have the foundations in place for a return to prominence next term.

"The second half against Arsenal was super important to us. We have to do what we did tonight again and again," Klopp said. "I hope these one-and-a-half games gives us the right sign for the end of the season. I would like to see us with the same desire and passion. That's the job, to bring it consistently."

Leeds crumbled again eight days after their 5-1

home defeat against Crystal Palace and sit just two points above the relegation zone with seven games left. Javi Gracia's team were booed off after becoming only the second club to concede five or more home goals in successive Premier League games.

### Rampant Reds

After marking the 34th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster before kick-off, Liverpool quickly seized the momentum before their dubious opener in the 35th minute. Alexander-Arnold blocked Junior Firpo's pass with his elbow before picking out Salah. When Salah passed back to Alexander-Arnold, the right-back squared for Gakpo to slot home from close range.

Leeds were fuming, only for VAR to opt against checking the incident despite their protests. Gakpo's fifth goal since signing from PSV Eindhoven in January was followed by the latest example of Salah tormenting Leeds. Salah's eighth goal in six appearances against Leeds came in ruthless fashion. Jota

was allowed to advance unchecked before slipping a pass to Salah, who finished with unerring precision.

Ibrahima Konate handed Leeds a goal in the 47th minute when the Liverpool center-back allowed himself to be dispossessed by Sinisterra on the edge of the area. Sinisterra gratefully accepted the gift as he clipped his shot over the exposed Alisson Becker. But Leeds' comeback hopes were extinguished within five minutes as Curtis Jones' raking pass picked out Jota, who drilled past Illan Meslier from just inside the area for his first league goal in 12 months.

VAR did disallow a Liverpool goal when Salah's effort was ruled out for offside against Virgil van Dijk, but the rampant Reds still bagged their fourth of the night in the 64th minute. Gakpo took Andrew Robertson's pass and teed up Salah for an emphatic finish from six yards. Jota swept in Jordan Henderson's cross after 73 minutes before Nunez put the final flourish on Liverpool's powerful performance when he controlled Alexander-Arnold's pass on his chest and fired home in the 90th minute. — AFP

## Kenya double as Chebet, Obiri rule Boston Marathon

**BOSTON:** Evans Chebet and Hellen Obiri stormed to victory in the men's and women's races at the Boston Marathon on Monday to complete a third straight Kenyan double in the 127th edition of the long distance-running showpiece. In rainy, cool conditions, defending men's champion Chebet upstaged world record-holder Eliud Kipchoge to become the first man to defend the Boston title since Robert Kipkoech Cheruiyot's 2006-2008 hat trick.

Chebet finished in a time of 2hr 5min 54sec, with Tanzania's Gabriel Geay second in 2:06:04, and Chebet's training partner and fellow Kenyan Benson Kipruto third in 2:06:04. But there was disappointment for two-time Olympic champion Kipchoge, widely regarded as the greatest marathon runner of all time, who had been bidding to add the Boston crown to previous marathon victories in Berlin, Tokyo, London and Chicago.

Kenyan icon Kipchoge trailed home sixth in 2:09:23, around three-and-a-half-minutes adrift of Chebet. The 38-year-old had looked perfectly poised through the opening and mid-stages of the race but was broken after a bold attack by Geay at around the 19-mile mark. As the pack gave chase to Geay, Kipchoge was rapidly left behind and was soon nearly 100 meters off the pace. Geay remained in the lead through 24 miles in a leading trio alongside Chebet and Kipruto.

But Chebet and Kipruto kicked on in the final two miles and Chebet led with a mile to go before pulling away to retain his crown. "I'm happy because I know this course very well," Chebet told ESPN following his win. "I won last year, and now I've won this year — so maybe next year I'll come back again."

While Chebet was able to draw on his experience from last year to master Monday's course, Obiri pulled off a stunning victory in the women's event in what was only her second ever marathon. The



BOSTON: Evans Chebet and Hellen Obiri of Kenya pose with the trophy on the finish line after winning the professional men's division and professional women's division respectively during the 127th Boston Marathon on April 17, 2023. — AFP

33-year-old has spent most of her career racing over shorter distances, winning two world championship gold medals in 2017 and 2019 over 5,000m, as well as silvers over the same distance at the 2016 and 2020 Olympics.

Obiri, who only raced a marathon for the first time in New York last November where she placed sixth, kept her composure in a hard-fought race to win in 2hr 21min 38sec. Ethiopia's Amane Beriso was second in 2:21:50 while Israel's Lonah Salpeter took third in 2:21:57. It was a remarkable performance by Obiri, who only confirmed her participation in Boston last month following urging by her coach.

"First of all I didn't want to come because my heart was somewhere else, but the coach told me 'My heart says you should go for Boston,'" Obiri said afterwards. "I said no, because it's a strong field. But he said, 'You've trained well, something tells me go to Boston.' I'm very happy because it's a surprise to me. But I was feeling like my body was ready, and everything was ready."

Obiri bided her time before hitting the front with around half a mile to go, pumping her arms and driving her legs through the rain to drop the chasing pack. "The coach told me that marathons are about patience, patience, patience until the last minute," Obiri said. "So I just tried to be patient." — AFP

## Argentina replaces Indonesia as U-20 World Cup host

**BUENOS AIRES:** Argentina will host the Under-20 World Cup from May 20 to June 11, FIFA said Monday, after taking the tournament from Indonesia just weeks before kick-off. Having been awarded hosting rights, Argentina will also participate in Indonesia's place. The team had failed to qualify on merit. "FIFA is delighted to announce that this year's edition of the FIFA U-20 World Cup will take place in Argentina, as the home of the world champions opens its doors to tomorrow's superstars of world football," FIFA pres-

ident Gianni Infantino said in a statement. FIFA withdrew hosting rights from Indonesia last month after protests against the Zionist entity's participation in the tournament. Indonesia and the Zionist entity do not have formal diplomatic relations, and support for the Palestinian cause in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation runs high. Argentina put itself forward as an alternative host, and FIFA conducted an on-site inspection of facilities last week. The draw will take place on April 21 in Zurich.

Hours before Monday's FIFA announcement, the Argentine government expressed its full backing for the hosting bid by the Argentine Football Association (AFA). This despite the country facing deep economic woes, with tens of billions in IMF debt and year-on-year inflation exceeding 100 percent. World champions Argentina have won the most Under-20 World Cups, with six in total. — AFP

## UK climate activists disrupt World Snooker Championship

**SHEFFIELD:** Climate activists from the 'Just Stop Oil' group were arrested after disrupting the World Snooker Championship on Monday, with one throwing orange powder on the table at the Crucible Theatre. Joe Perry's first-round match against Robert Milkins had to be stopped when a man jumped onto the table and emptied a bag of orange powder across the green baize.

Stunned fans watched on as half of the table and many of the balls were covered in the cloud of powder, with the man kneeling on the baize for several seconds before a security guard dragged him away. The man was wearing a white t-shirt emblazoned with the slogan 'Just Stop Oil' on the back.

On the other table at the Sheffield arena, the match between Mark Allen and Fan Zhengyi was interrupted when a woman, also wearing a 'Just Stop Oil' t-shirt, tried to get on the baize at the same time as the male protestor. She was dragged off by referee Olivier Marteel before any powder was thrown.

"Two people were detained after protesters gained entry to The Crucible earlier this evening," a South Yorkshire Police statement said. "A 30-year-old man and a 52-year-old woman were arrested on suspicion of criminal damage. Both are in police custody."

In a press release, Just Stop Oil said two supporters had staged the stunt to highlight the group's demand that the government stop all new UK fossil fuel projects. It named those responsible as Margaret Reid, a 52-year-old former museum professional from northwest England, and Eddie Whittingham, 30, a student at Exeter university.

"I did not take this action lightly, but I cannot remain a passive spectator while our government knowingly pushes us down a path to destruction," Reid said in comments provided in the press release. "I can no longer justify watching from the sidelines."

Play was immediately suspended as vacuum cleaners were brought into the arena, with master of ceremonies Rob Walker among those helping to sweep up the mess. Allen and Fan were given a standing ovation on their return to the arena later on Monday after the clean-up operation. Former world champion Stephen Hendry, working as a commentator for the BBC, said: "I have never seen that before at a snooker event. It's a first. 'It is scary. Wow! You just hope the cloth can be recovered from that. It caught us all by surprise and then this happens.'" — AFP