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Mass exodus of foreigners as fighting rages in Sudan

Kuwait committed to safety of nationals evacuated from Sudan



KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and Acting Defense Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah receives Kuwaitis evacuated from Sudan on April 23, 2023. — KUNA

KHARTOUM: Multiple nations pushed on Monday with frantic evacuations of their citizens from chaos-torn Sudan, where fighting raged for a 10th day between forces loyal to two rival generals. As army and paramilitary forces again clashed in Khartoum and across the country, terrified Sudanese have endured acute shortages of water, food, medicines and fuel as well as power and internet blackouts, the UN said.

Kuwait First Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and Acting Defense Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah stressed the keenness of the political leadership on the safety and security of nationals coming from Sudan. This came as the minister received 25 Kuwaitis arriving from Jeddah international airport as part of an emergency plan to evacuate Kuwaitis

stuck in Sudan due to the ongoing clashes, the defense ministry said in a statement.

The political leadership is following closely the efforts made by the foreign ministry led by Minister Sheikh Salem Al-Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the Kuwaiti embassy staff in Sudan in securing Kuwaitis coming from Sudan, the minister said. He extolled the efforts and facilitations made by Saudi Arabia, led by King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman that contributed to successfully evacuating citizens of sisterly and friendly countries. The minister expressed Eid greetings to nationals who returned from Sudan, praying to Almighty Allah to protect Kuwait, its people and its wise leadership.

At least 427 people have been killed and more than 3,700 wounded, according

to United Nations agencies, which also reported Sudanese civilians "fleeing areas affected by fighting, including to Chad, Egypt and South Sudan". "Morgues are full, corpses litter the streets" and overwhelmed hospitals often have to stop operations for security reasons, said Dr Attiya Abdallah, head of the doctors' union.

The United States and European, Middle Eastern, African and Asian nations have launched emergency missions to bring to safety their embassy staff and Sudan-based citizens by road, air and sea. US special forces swooped in with Chinook helicopters Sunday to rescue diplomats and their dependents, while Britain launched a similar rescue mission involving more than 1,000 military personnel.

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Twitter reinstates blue ticks for some media, celebrities

SAN FRANCISCO: Twitter's blue ticks were reinstated on some media, celebrity, and other high profile accounts Saturday — a move protested by many of the recipients. Once a free sign of authenticity and fame, blue ticks must now be bought by subscribers for \$8 a month, Twitter says. Non-paying accounts that had a blue tick lost it on Thursday, as owner Elon Musk implemented a strategy, dubbed "Twitter Blue", to generate new revenue, announced last year.

Only a tiny fraction of blue-ticked users subscribed — less than 5 percent of the 407,000 profiles affected, according to Travis Brown, a Berlin-based software developer who tracks social-media platforms. But on Friday and Saturday, a number of celebrities regained their blue ticks, seemingly without action on their part, including author Stephen King, NBA champion LeBron James and former US president Donald Trump. Musk tweeted Friday that he was "paying for a few (subscriptions) personally."

American rapper Lil Nas X, whose profile displays the blue tick, tweeted: "on my soul i didn't pay for twitter blue, u will feel my wrath tesla man!" The accounts of some dead celebrities, such as US chef Anthony Bourdain, also received a blue tick. Many official media accounts regained a tick, including AFP, which has not subscribed to Twitter Blue.

The New York Times got back its gold badge this month after Musk had bashed the news organization as "propaganda". The Times is among the major media groups that have a gold tick reserved for an "official business account" paying at least \$1,000 a month. The reinstated ticks did not lure back US public radio NPR and Canada's public broadcaster CBC, which recently suspended activity on their accounts and had not resumed tweeting as of Sunday.

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Syrians protest Arab detente with Assad

IDLIB: Hundreds of Syrians protested Sunday in the rebel northwestern city of Idlib against a thawing of ties between several Arab countries and President Bashar Al-Assad's regime. "We have come today... to reject normalization... with this murderous, criminal, terrorist regime," Fahad Abdel Karim, 49, told AFP. "We came to send a message to the whole world that with this normalization, you will gain Bashar al-Assad the criminal, and you will lose the

Syrian people," said Abdel Salam Mohammed Youssef, who heads a camp for displaced people.

Several hundred Syrians, some displaced from other parts of the country by the 12-year war, took part in the protest, according to an AFP reporter. Assad has been politically isolated in the region since the war began in 2011, but a devastating February 6 earthquake that killed thousands in Turkey and Syria sparked Arab outreach. A flurry of diplomatic activity has also been underway in past weeks as Middle East rivals Saudi Arabia and the Syrian government's ally Iran patched up ties, shifting regional relations.

On Tuesday, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan met with

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IDLIB: Syrians demonstrate on April 23, 2023 against a thawing of ties between several Arab countries and President Bashar Al-Assad's regime. — AFP

India arrests Sikh separatist after manhunt

AMRITSAR: Indian police arrested Sunday a firebrand Sikh separatist after a month-long manhunt that sparked protests and vandalism among the diaspora in Britain, Canada and the United States. Amritpal Singh rose to fame in the northern state of Punjab calling for a separate Sikh homeland known as Khalistan, the struggle for which sparked deadly violence in India in the 1980s and 1990s.

Police said they arrested Singh at around 6:45 am (0115 GMT), having surrounded a village following intelligence that he was there in a gurdwara, or Sikh temple. "Once he got the message that he had no escape route and he was surrounded, he was arrested," senior police official Sukhchain Singh Gill told reporters.

Singh, 30, styles himself on Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a figurehead of the Khalistan movement killed when the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple in Amritsar, a major Sikh site, in 1984. He sports a similarly styled blue turban and reportedly travelled to the former Soviet republic of Georgia last year for cosmetic surgery to

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AMRITSAR: In this file photo taken on March 3, 2023, 'Waris Punjab De' chief Amritpal Singh visits the Golden Temple. — AFP

Jordan reading initiative shapes young minds

AMMAN: At a school in Amman, a Jordanian volunteer opened a book and asked: "Who's excited to hear a story?" — part of an initiative to get children to find joy in reading. The "We Love Reading" initiative, which is present in 65 countries worldwide, was founded by Rana Dajani, an associate professor of biology and biotechnology at the Hashemite University in Jordan. She spent five years living in the United States, where she enjoyed reading to her children.

But when she returned, Dajani noticed schoolchildren in her home country were rarely reading for pleasure. She decided to change all that, and in 2006 "We Love Reading" was born. "In the beginning, I noticed that children only read for their school lessons, so I did research and found that the best way is for an adult to read stories to them aloud," Dajani told AFP.

Dajani began with small weekly sessions in a mosque near her house in Amman's Tabarbour neighborhood. "On the first day, only 25 children came," she recalled. Undaunted, she carried on and the initiative gradually expanded, training volunteers nationwide. "We Love Reading" is now present across Jordan, with 4,000 trained volunteers ranging in age from 18 to 100. — AFP (See Page 13)



AMMAN: In this picture taken on March 15, 2023, Jordanian teacher Huda Abu Al-Khair reads stories to children in a classroom. — AFP



Local

High clothing prices weigh down shoppers during Eid

Online shopping becomes increasingly 'unreliable'

By Majd Othman

KUWAIT: Many years ago, malls in Kuwait used to compete with each other to attract shoppers and consumers with catchy prices, offers and sometime gifts, to buy their holiday needs such as clothes, shoes and accessories for all ages. But in the last few years, it has been noticed that prices go up immediately before the holidays at most malls and markets, especially of clothes. Offers and sales also vanish during this time, while prices fall very quickly after the end of the holiday or sometimes at the start of the holiday.

For Eid Al-Fitr, shoppers were forced to spend a lot on their needs to celebrate the holiday, Kuwait Times asked people how they manage their budget during such times — do they prepare a couple of months early or depend on ordering online, especially families.

Rawan Mohammad, an expat, said it is not easy all the time to depend on online shopping, especially as it takes more time to make sure about the sizes, quality and the exact time of receiving the shipment. She said despite the better prices she could find online, several times she has ordered items for herself or her children that turned out to be of poor quality. "Ordering online sometimes depends on luck, especially from retail stores," she said.

Rawan stressed she tries her best during most holidays to buy clothes and other things very early to manage her budget, sometimes spending half what she would spend during the days before the holiday. "But if there is an attractive item in shops in the local

market that can tempt shoppers to buy it even if the price is high, that is another issue!" she quipped.

Alia Khaled, a citizen, said she has noticed that shops in Europe increase the amount of offers and discounts for shoppers during holidays due to high demand, and do not take advantage of customers during these days, from an ethical point of view. She added that during Ramadan or Eid, some shops in Europe have special offers for shoppers that Muslims mostly benefit from, not only on retail products but also consumables, vegetables and food staples.

"The prices in Kuwaiti during holidays are exorbitant, so since many years, I started to buy my clothes from abroad when travelling, and if I am not, I only buy the necessities, not only because of the high prices, but also due to the quality of the materials that differs," Alia said.

Expat Amir Mohammad from India pointed out that shops and markets offer discounts and sales throughout the year, so his family shops any time of the year, then saves the items until Eid, as prices are overexaggerated during the holidays, even for shoppers who can afford it. Regarding online shopping, he said he does not prefer it. He added he buys most of the family needs from his home country due to the better prices and quality, as well as the designs of clothes that are closer to their taste and traditional styles.

Expat Maha Ebrahim and citizen Hanoof Ali said they start managing their budget a month before Eid to have the opportunity to buy whatever they want before prices rise before the holiday. They both agreed that depending on online shop-



KUWAIT: Shoppers visit Mubarakiya Souk.

ping is not the best option for high-end holiday clothes, although it is a good option for daily outfits.

Maha said that she spent KD 120 buying an outfit for Eid Al-Fitr, while Hanoof said that it

cost her KD 160 to buy accessories and an outfit this Eid. Both stressed that during regular days, they spend 40 to 50 percent less compared to this time of the year.

In my view

Keep expats in Kuwait



By Nejouad Al-Yagout

Local@kuwaittimes.com

As our neighbors forge ahead to become more welcoming to expatriates, Kuwait yet again seems obsessed with its population infrastructure. In the latest report, highlighted in Kuwait Times' article headlined 'Govt tries to remedy population structure' (April 19, 2023), the government has "agreed on serious steps that guarantees the reduction of expatriate numbers to 30 percent, while Kuwaitis will be 70 percent of the population, contrary to the current situation, as expatriates form the majority of the population". While demographics is considered viable for new nations, it seems preposterous that we are considering such a move 62 years after our independence.

The consequences of such a proposal are detrimental. First and foremost, it will entail deporting many foreigners from Kuwait for no legal reason other than "the replacement of expat labor [with] Kuwaitis". Secondly, many expatriates risk losing their jobs although they may be more qualified than Kuwaitis in the field, merely for the sake of demographics. Thirdly, instead of rewarding all the expatriates who worked here to better their lives and our lives, we are punishing them because they hold another passport.

Where is our humanity? There are expatriates who were born here and whose children were raised here. They are now at risk of losing their livelihoods even after decades of loyalty to our country. And finally, we risk proving yet again to ourselves and the world that xenophobia is overshadowing our hearts and even our progress. Our nation is being hijacked by lawmakers who seem determined to make the lives of foreigners a living hell. And for what? To better our lives at the cost of the lives of others? How can we sleep at night knowing we snatched away the livelihood of others when our lives are already extremely privileged?

Mohammad Al-Marzouk, a renowned local businessman, in an interview with Nabeel Al-Shuaib, a famous local musician, addressed our xenophobic attitude. He gave countless reasons why the integration of immigrants has benefited and can benefit our nation. He gave brilliant examples of how immigrants brought success to nations worldwide. Let's hope that more Kuwaiti nationals in positions of power, like him, speak up. After all, only Kuwaitis can speak up. If expatriates express their opinion, they are at risk of deportation. And sadly, if this policy sees the light of day, they are at risk of deportation even if they don't express their opinion.

At the end of the day, what makes Kuwait beautiful is our diversity. It doesn't matter whether there are more expatriates than us. What matters is whether we are becoming more or less humanitarian, whether our country is progressing or regressing, and whether our resources serve our community, regardless of nationality.

Borders are manmade, and in this world of globalization, human beings are being given an opportunity to expand our hearts and minds, to awaken spiritually and look beyond passports and labels, while welcoming anyone who lives in our nation. Kuwait's legacy should be built on inclusivity, harmony, and oneness rather than exclusivity, polarization, and divisiveness. Keep expatriates in Kuwait. They are our brethren and belong here as much as we do.



KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior and Acting Minister of Defense Sheikh Talal Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on Friday visited Duty Force (Sabah) in the north of the country to congratulate its members on Eid Al-Fitr where he was received upon his arrival by the Acting Chief of the General Staff of the Army, Major General Engineer Dr Ghazi Al-Shammari, the Commander of the Land Force, Major General Muhammad Al-Dhafiri and a number of force leaders. —KUNA

Digital greetings at the cost of direct interactions

KUWAIT: Video clips and e-cards on Eid greetings have widely spread among people amid the boom of social media applications, opening new fast communication channels. Jarrah Al-Qazzaa, the director of public relations at the Kuwaiti Journalists Society, in remarks to KUNA, attributed the noticeable dissemination of the electronic Eid greetings to production of advanced mobile phone devices that provide diverse applications and designs.

Some people pay fees to design Eid video clips or greeting cards, seeking distinction from others. Bulk of this segment of the society are youth who desire to impress the audience and receivers. Many well-wishers on the Eid favor to post pictures instead of texts, however, they often encounter issues such as negligence of the recipients' age.

Moreover, the content in some cases appear irrelevant. Furthermore, posting too many items simultaneously is one of the issues because it creates distraction and some communication difficulties, said Al-Qazzaa.



Ahmad Al-Ruwaih



Jarrah Al-Qazzaa

Ahmad Al-Ruwaih, a psychologist, said the information technology has created a virtual platform with a new address language. Online Eid greetings have contributed to distancing members of the society from each other and emptied the contacts of the direct human impact, interaction and expressions, namely with respect of body language and emotions. Nevertheless, Al-Ruwaih has affirmed that these contacts in the virtual realm has helped some people who suffer from loneliness to compensate for emotional emptiness and created channels for dialogue for many individuals. —KUNA



Hawally building evacuated as fire erupts

KUWAIT: A fire has erupted in a seven-storey building in Hawally, the Kuwait Fire force announced on Monday. "In addition to Hawally and Salmiya fire squads, search and rescue fire teams also rushed to the site of the fire to put it under control. On arrival, it was found that the fire was on the third floor. Immediately, the building was evacuated and the fire was extinguished," the KFF announced. As a result of the fire, people suffered minor suffocation, and they were taken to the emergency medical facility for further attention.



India's PM Modi sends Eid greetings

On the auspicious occasion of the holy festival of Eid Al-Fitr, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi extended warm greetings to His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait, His Highness Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Crown Prince of State of Kuwait,



Narendra Modi

His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Prime Minister of State of Kuwait and to the people of state of Kuwait, through a letter on his own behalf and the people of India.

In his personal letter, the Prime Minister of India conveyed that over the past one month, Muslims in India and across the world have observed the holy month of Ramadan. As they prepare now for celebrating Eid Al-Fitr with traditional fervor, people across the world also get reminded of the values of brotherhood and togetherness. Prime Minister Modi, on this holy occasion of Eid Al-Fitr, prayed for the peace, harmony, good health and happiness for peoples across the world.

Kuwait last in GCC in logistics index for 2023: Survey

KUWAIT: Kuwait ranked last in the Gulf Cooperation Council, sixth in the Arab world and 55th globally in the 2023 Logistics Performance Index, issued by the World Bank every two years to measure the ability of countries to transport goods across borders quickly and reliably. The 2023 Logistics Performance Index measures the ranking of 139 countries globally with regards to the quality of infrastructure supporting logistics activities, based on surveys conducted across the world.

The survey measures logistics services' performance in six categories, including the efficiency of customs and border management in the speed and simplicity of clearance, quality of trade and transport infrastructure, ease of arranging shipments, competitiveness of prices, efficiency and quality of logistics services, and ability to track and trace shipments and goods, in addition to shipments arriving at their scheduled time.

According to the results of the index, which was topped by Singapore, Kuwait achieved 3.2 points out of 5 points in the general index, ranking it 51st, tying with Brazil, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary and Romania. Kuwait also ranked 37th globally in the efficiency of customs and border administration category in terms of speed and simplicity of clearance, achieving an average of 3.2 points, while it ranked 30th in the world in the category of transport infrastructure by achieving 3.6 points.

It ranked 43rd in the world in the international shipments category, achieving 3.2 points, and 65th in the world in the efficiency and quality of logistics services category, achieving 2.9 points. Moreover, Kuwait ranked 101st globally in the category of the timing of the arrival of shipments to the scheduled location on time, recording 2.8 points. It also ranked 49th globally in the ability to track shipments and goods, scoring 3.3 points. At the level of countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the UAE came first (12th globally), followed by Bahrain (34th globally), Qatar (36th globally), Saudi Arabia (41st globally) and Oman (46th globally).

Local

Eid celebrations: Diverse traditions among bedouin and urban people

Citizens speak about distinct Kuwaiti traditions and cultures



KUWAIT: In this aerial view, Muslim worshippers pray on the first day of Eid Al-Fitr, which marks the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, at a football stadium in Kuwait City on April 21, 2023. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Arabs celebrate Eid in many different ways, depending on the country and culture. However, different traditions and practices can be observed in the same country, especially among Kuwaiti citizens themselves. Citizens told Kuwait Times about bedouin and urban people and how they spent Eid, sharing the background of their traditions, cultures and diversity.

Salem Al-Kandari said the Eid prayer is a special beginning for his family as urbanites. "On the first day of Eid, women, men, girls, boys, and children attend a special Eid prayer in mosques or outdoor prayer areas," he said. After the Eid prayer, Kandari said the day will start by greeting each other and getting blessings from elder family members. From noon, visits start by greeting neighbors and friends, followed by a gathering in the house of the eldest family member to have lunch and begin the activities of the feast.

Talal Abdullah Al-Fadhli, who comes from a mixed family of bedouins and urbanites, told Kuwait Times that Eid customs in Kuwait differ between the people of the desert and the people of the city. Some customs are completely convergent, such as the traditional dishdashah, while others differ, especially concerning visits. "City people start visits directly after Eid breakfast early in the morning. The Eid breakfast usually includes some light food, along with Kuwaiti food like darabeel, milk, dates, debs and rahash, which are the main dishes on the breakfast table," he noted.

For bedouins, Fadhli pointed out the Eid breakfast is completely different, as they focus on sacrificing livestock. Between 9 to 11 am, the feast is served to guests. "The bedu start Eid day at diwanias rather



Jarah Fawaz Al-Enzi



Talal Abdullah Al-Fadhli



Salem Al-Kandari

than visiting family and relatives. They gather with relatives late in the evening at the family dinner table," he said, adding that in the morning period, they visit senior officials, managers and tribal sheikhs, unlike city people.

"On the second and third days of Eid, the sons of the tribes take their children to entertainment places inside Kuwait, while urbanites prefer to spend Eid abroad, at chalets, farms or stables in Kabd. Regarding traditional clothes, both of them care about traditional clothing, even for children, although city people do not force children under five to wear traditional clothing," he noted. Fadhli said customs have changed over time and generations. "There are political visits, where some people focus on visiting important people who are of importance — so-called 'electoral keys' — and who will serve their electoral interests in the future. They hold an official reception on the second day of Eid," he said.

As for eidiya (money given to children on Eid), he

indicated that it differs from what it was in the past. In the past, eidiya was a quarter or half a dinar, with the highest eidiya amounting to one dinar. But now the eidiya is not less than KD 20 and can reach KD 100. "There is also the use of technology. Children are now asking to send a payment link instead of cash. As for women, they offer Eid money in envelopes designated especially for Eid, along with a gift," Fadhli said.

Jarah Fawaz Al-Enzi explained that the bedouin Eid atmosphere starts immediately after the Eid prayer, where they open their diwanias and prepare coffee and tea to receive guests. "People in the neighborhood know which person will open his diwaniya and offer lunch, so you will see people flocking there, and it becomes a custom. The atmosphere of Eid starts from the diwaniya with exchanging Eid greetings, shaking hands and making conversation. After lunch, everyone goes their way and to fulfill their obligations towards family," he said.

HH Sheikh Nawaf warmly reciprocated Prime Minister's Eid greetings and conveyed best wishes for the people of Pakistan. This year marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the two nations. Both leaders agreed to celebrate it in a befitting manner, with the aim of further solidifying the bilateral ties in all areas of mutual interest. — Embassy of Pakistan, Kuwait



Shehbaz Sharif

Pakistan ambassador sends Eid greetings

On the blessed occasion of Eid Al-Fitr and on behalf of the Embassy of Pakistan in Kuwait, I extend my greetings to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the government and the friendly people of the state of Kuwait. I would like to extend my well-wishes to all the Muslims around the world and particularly the Pakistani community in Kuwait.

I also take this opportunity to wish the friendly people of the State of Kuwait further prosperity, peace and happiness under His Highness's leadership. Eid Al-Fitr is celebrated as a reward from Almighty Allah upon completion of the holy month of Ramadan -- a month of fasting, forgiveness, patience, charity, and generosity. I feel honored to experience the unique Kuwaiti tradition of Iftar and Ghabqa in Ramadan and I look forward to celebrating Eid Al-Fitr with the friendly people of Kuwait. By virtue of this blessed day, I pray to Allah Almighty for peace and prosperity of all the Muslims around the world and Pakistani compatriots living in Kuwait.

Pakistan Ambassador to Kuwait Malik Muhammad Farooq,
Embassy of Pakistan, Kuwait



Ambassador Malik Muhammad Farooq

Pakistan premier's greetings on Eid

KUWAIT: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif telephoned Prime Minister of Kuwait His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Sabah to extend his best wishes and warm greetings on the auspicious occasion of Eid-Al-Fitr. PM Sharif recalled the historical brotherly ties between the two countries and reaffirmed Pakistan's desire to fortify the fraternal ties by transforming them into mutually rewarding economic relationship.

Share Eid joy with residents of care centers: Al-Baghli

KUWAIT: Minister of Social Affairs, Women's Affairs and Childhood Mai Al-Baghli said Friday that visiting care centers for the elderly, the disabled and children at Eid is important. The minister made the press statement during a visit she paid to the social care complex to offer greetings of the center's residents on Eid Al-Fitr, which began Friday.

Al-Baghli expressed greetings to His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Crown Prince on the Eid, praying to Allah the Almighty to protect Kuwait and its people, and both Muslim and Arab nations from evil. Meanwhile, Acting Undersecretary of Social Affairs Ministry Abdulaziz Al-Mutairi affirmed keenness of the ministry's

instructions of Minister Amani Bugammaz, the ministry, represented by the maintenance engineering department, has put forth a plan to fix all potholes on main roads that cause obstruction of traffic and damage to vehicles, pointing out that emergency teams in the ministry have dealt with 150 sites so far.

"After the Eid al-Fitr holiday, an increase in the pace of work will begin to complete maintenance work as soon as possible," he said, indicating that some roads have potholes that must be repaired as



KUWAIT: Minister of Social Affairs, Women's Affairs and Childhood Mai Al-Baghli with the elderly people at the social care complex. —KUNA

officials on sharing Eid happiness with fathers, mothers and children at those centers, revealing a number of projects being carried out for the care sector. — KUNA

soon as possible because of their danger to motorists. He stressed that by the middle of July, the ministry will sign contracts with international companies to start carrying out radical maintenance of streets in all governorates of Kuwait.

"The Cabinet instructed minister Bugammaz and relevant authorities to overcome any obstacles they may face in the signing of these contracts within the specified times," Saleh said, indicating that a framework has been drawn up to completely end the deterioration of roads in Kuwait.

In my view

Chronic diseases and Kuwait's treatment goals



Dr. Khalid Al-Saleh

Local@kuwaittimes.com

Man finally discovered that invading space and reaching planets and exploring them is much easier than discovering what is inside him. Man discovered that he is still ignorant towards probing himself — how does his body function? How do his cells deal with his brains? How does his mood affect the function of his organs? Man finally admitted his inability and began searching for beneficial knowledge that makes him more understanding and humble.

With the spread of chronic diseases that man did not know much about, it became the duty of scientists, particularly doctors, to fight the symptoms even if they did not understand the cause of the illness. Chronic disease is a long-term medical condition, which comes with time and progresses slowly. It normally has dangerous complications on the human being if not diagnosed and dealt with early.

The World Health Organization (WHO) indicates chronic diseases are not transmitted from one person to another as they are not infectious, even when heredity has a role in it. Chronic disease is considered responsible about 60 percent of all deaths around the world, while 80 percent of deaths due to chronic diseases take place in low- to middle-income countries. Half of chronic disease deaths are in persons who are under 70 years of age, and chronic diseases affect men and women equally globally.

Among the chronic diseases that are on the rise are heart, arteries, cancer, diabetes and respiratory diseases. There is no Kuwaiti family in which one of its members does not have one of the said chronic diseases. Chronic diseases have symptoms that lead to changing the patient's life, headed by the pain that prevents man from enjoying life regardless of what he owns from it bounties. Because of this, man is no longer looking for the reason that is still unknown in many chronic diseases, and all he asks for is his body to rest and return to enjoying life.

So, medicines for symptoms have expanded with the increase in chronic diseases. We in Kuwait paid attention to chronic diseases early, and health ministry established a full department for these diseases. In fact it created departments to control pain and a hospital for palliative care. It also established a special center for diabetes, chest and heart diseases to care for these chronic diseases, which are expected to form more than 80 percent of illnesses in the future in Kuwait.

We in Kuwait are proud that we paid attention to these diseases before others, as statistics confirm that we in Kuwait began to recognize the goals of medicines. Hundreds benefited from palliative care, as medicine helped alleviate symptoms and help return to enjoying life. Success in controlling chronic diseases needs the cooperation of at least seven specialties that work with the one-team system to supply the patient with all his needs in health, psychological, moral, spiritual, sport and social aspects, which achieves integration in treating patients that distinguishes medical care of chronic diseases from other treatments. This is the main goal of the chronic diseases department, which makes specialized harmony an effective means to confront chronic diseases, besides its role in awareness and early discovery.

Hopes are big and I am confident in the ability of this department to be successful.

Major road repair works from mid-July

KUWAIT: Spokesperson of the public works ministry and undersecretary for planning and development Ahmad Al-Saleh said based on the

News in Brief

School hours return to normal

KUWAIT: School timings after Eid Al-Fitr will return to its normal hours that existed prior to the month of Ramadan. Students gathering will be at 7.30 am and the non-basic material will be removed according to school schedule. There will be six classes for the elementary stage and school day ends at 1.30 pm while seven classes will be there for the intermediate and secondary stages and school day ends at 1.35 pm. The kindergarten school day ends at 12.20 pm.

Stateless resident drowns

KUWAIT: A stateless young man drowned in Al-Bidaa Beach on Monday, authorities announced. Security, ambulance and forensic officials moved to the location of the incident as the investigator ordered the body to be removed and referred to forensic medicine for further investigations. The youth was only 18 years old, the officials stated.

Kuwait oil price drops

KUWAIT: Kuwait oil price dropped by 89 cents to \$83.03 pb on Friday vis-a-vis \$83.92 pb, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation said on Saturday. In international markets, forward Brent crude contracts moved up by 56 cents to settle at \$81.66pb, while the rate of identical transactions of the West Texas Intermediate crude climbed by 50 cents, settling at \$77.87 a barrel. — KUNA

KRCS social care initiative

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Red Crescent Society affirmed its keenness to bring joy and happiness to the hearts of residents of social care homes on happy occasions and various holidays. Deputy Director of the Youth and Volunteer Department at the KRCS, Ahmad Al-Faqan said: "Volunteers at the society visited the social care homes on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr, as part of their humanitarian duty and to share the joys of the holiday with residents."

Ma'amoul: A traditional cookie that ushers in Eid festivities



By Ghadeer Ghloom

KUWAIT: Like many other foods that are associated with certain celebrations, ma'amoul cookies are a staple of Eid Al-Fitr, especially among Arab Muslims. Ma'amoul is a traditional Middle Eastern cookie stuffed with dried fruits, such as dates, or nuts, such as pistachios. In the past, women used to gather in the last few days of the holy month of Ramadan to bake ma'amoul for Eid. However, with the passage of time and people's preoccupation with contemporary lifestyle, this ritual has faded away, since women today no longer have the time or the inclination to bake ma'amoul for Eid. They prefer

Awqaf honors world renowned reciter Meshari Al-Afasi

KUWAIT: Director of Mosque Administration at Farwaniya governorate Saud Al-Mutairi honored renowned Quran reciter Meshari Al-Afasi as he led prayers in Al-Ghanim and Al-Kharafi mosque at Qiyam prayers during the holy month of Ramadan.

The mosque noticed intense attendance from worshippers who came from all governorates of Kuwait to listen to the world famous reciter. Director Al-Mutairi received Meshari Al-Afasi in the VIP lounge at the mosque in appreciation of his sincere efforts in liven up the holy nights of Ramadan over the past days. Undersecretary for Media and Public relations at the ministry Mohammed Al-Mutairi, and Imam of the Al-Ghanim and Al-Kharafi mosque Dr



buying it from sweet stores, which have flourished. Kuwait Times asked Rachel, a sales manager at a sweets store in Ardhiya, about the different types of ma'amoul and their average prices. Rachel said ma'amoul comes with different types of filling, but the most popular are those with dates, pistachios and walnuts, according to people's requests and preference. She said ma'amoul come in different shapes and sizes, some are round in shape, some are cone shaped, while others are oval shaped, and so on.

Ma'amoul is a sweet that is always available at the store; however, demand for ma'amoul rises drastically during religious occasions such as Ra-



madan and Eid. Some customers reserve ma'amoul trays a day or two before Eid to secure fresh and good quality ma'amoul for serving their guests. Prices depend on several factors: for instance, a 1-kg tray retails for approximately KD 10. Prices might vary slightly from one store to another, but this is the average price of ma'amoul on Eid days.

In order to get ma'amoul of the best quality, Rachel advised choosing a sweetshop that is specialized in baking ma'amoul and consuming it within one or two days. Despite the availability of many other types of sweets and foods, having a tray of ma'amoul at the table has become a traditional way of celebrating Eid.



Meshari Al-Afasi and Saud Al-Mutairi.

Nayef Hajjaj attended the meeting.

Al-Afasi praised the good reception and organization by the employees of the Ministry of Interior and the employees of the Ministry of Awqaf, represented by the Farwaniya governorate mosque's administration.

CAN campaign celebrates Eid with patients

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Cancer Aware Nation Campaign joined Eid celebrations with patients at Kuwait Cancer Control Center and National Bank Children Hospital, distributed gifts and exchanged greetings with patients and staff.

CAN Chairman Dr Khalid Al-Saleh said cancer patients need psychological and social intervention during diagnosis or treatment and studies showed that more than 80 percent of psychological pressure was received including sadness, anxiety and fatigue. He lauded the Health Ministry's efforts and interest in providing social and psychological support to these patients.



National Guard delegation visits children's hospital

KUWAIT: A National Guard delegation headed by Assistant for Financial Affairs and Managing Resources Major General Riyadh Mohammad Tawari visited the National Bank of Kuwait Children's Hospital to greet and celebrate with children on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr. Maj Gen Tawari conveyed greetings of the National Guard Command to the hospital staff and commended them for their efforts in caring for children. The delegation handed over gifts to the children and wished them speedy recovery.

Meanwhile, a delegation from the Directorate of Moral Guidance and the Economic Services Branch of the National Guard headed by the Head of the Public Relations and Media Branch Colonel Meshaal



Yousef visited the Elderly Care Home and the Family Nursery at the Ministry of Social Affairs.

The delegation congratulated the elderly and distributed gifts to them, wishing them continued health and wellness. At the family nursery, the children shared the joy of Eid Al-Fitr.



National Guard Command's delegation with children.



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Stench of death engulfs hospitals in Sudan

China says it respects sovereignty of ex-Soviet states

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A file photo taken on May 9, 2019 shows Australian Army soldiers firing a Javelin anti-tank missile during a live fire demonstration showcasing the army's joint combined arms capabilities. — AFP

Australia unveils biggest defense reform in decades

Countries shouldn't use 'China threat' as excuse to expand military power: Beijing

CANBERRA: Australia launched its biggest defense overhaul in decades Monday, vowing to turn a military that is "no longer fit for purpose" into a fighting force that could deter China or any would-be foe.

Defense Minister Richard Marles unveiled a strategic review that called for a sharp shift toward long-range deterrence — using missiles, submarines and cyber tools to keep adversaries at arm's length. "Today, for the first time in 35 years, we are recasting the mission of the Australian Defense Force," Marles said. Describing China's military build-up as the largest and most ambitious of any country since World War II, the review warns "the risks of military escalation or miscalculation are rising". Australian planners have viewed China's military rise warily, fearing Beijing's now-vast capabilities could effectively cut Australia off from trading partners and global supply chains.

In response to that threat, Australia's military will develop the ability to strike from air, land and sea, strengthen northern bases and recruit more troops. "We aim to change the calculus so no potential aggressor can ever conclude that the benefits of conflict outweigh the risks," the review said.

Asked about the overhaul and the reasons given for it, Beijing said it hoped some countries would "refrain

from using China as an excuse to expand their military power or groundlessly hype up the 'China threat theory'. China's military policy is "defensive in nature" and poses "no threat to any country", foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said at a regular press briefing. Australia has already announced a key tool in its new strategy — the development of stealthy long-range nuclear-powered submarines that could retaliate with a barrage of cruise missiles and little warning. There will be a short, independent review this year of the navy's surface combatant fleet to ensure its size, structure and composition complement the capabilities provided by the new nuclear-powered submarines.

Marching orders

The biggest changes may be felt in the Australian army, which will now have a sharper focus on coastal defense, particularly in the country's vast north. Australia's northern city of Darwin was bombed by Japan in World War II, but until recently defense planners believed they would get a decade's warning before any new attack was imminent. "The rise of the 'missile age' in modern warfare, crystallized by the proliferation of long-range precision strike weapons, has radically reduced Australia's geographic benefits," the review concluded.

As a result, the army will also be tasked with providing "a long-range strike capability", while existing land-focused projects will be put to the knife. A plan to purchase 450 infantry fighting vehicles will be scaled back to just 129. A billion-dollar program to develop short-range howitzer artillery systems is likely to be scrapped in favor of acquiring longer-range HIMARS — a system coveted by Ukraine as it tries to repel Russia's invasion.

Unspoken adversary

While the review mentions "China" only nine times and never as an adversary, there is little doubt that Beijing's vast military investment and increased saber rattling are a driving force behind the changes. "This build-up is occurring without transparency or reassurance to the Indo-Pacific region of China's strategic intent," the review said, using another term for the Asia-Pacific.

"China's assertion of sovereignty over the South China Sea threatens the global rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific in a way that adversely impacts Australia's national interests." According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Chinese military spending reached a record \$292 billion last year, the 28th consecutive year of increases. That has fuelled an arms race across the region, with South Korea, Ja-



A handout photo shows Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Minister for Defence Richard Marles and Minister for Defence Industry Pat Conroy attending a press conference.

pan and Australia all investing more in defence. Military spending in Asia and Oceania has increased 45 percent since 2013, according to SIPRI. — AFP

Protests 10 years since Bangladesh factory tragedy

SAVAR, Bangladesh: Hundreds of workers in Bangladesh shouted slogans for justice and survivors wept at the ruins of a factory that made clothes for Western shoppers and collapsed 10 years ago killing more than 1,130 people.

The Rana Plaza tragedy on April 24, 2013 was one of the world's worst industrial disasters, highlighting the global fashion industry's reliance on factories in developing countries where working conditions are often poor.

Early on Monday morning, survivors including some who lost limbs or were disabled placed wreaths at a memorial at the site of the former nine-storey Rana Plaza complex that made products for brands like Mango and Primark.

"Ten years have passed, but what happened to the killers?" the workers shouted as they slowly walked to the memorial in the industrial town of Savar outside the capital Dhaka.

"It is a scandal that 10 years have passed and yet the garment factory owners and the factory building owner have not been punished for the murders of

1,138 workers," Nilofa, a 32-year-old survivor, told AFP, as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I barely got anything. My leg was crushed and I can't work in factories. My husband left me five years ago as he does not want to bear my medical expenses," she said. Shila Akhter, 42, showed the brace she has to wear permanently after the disaster ruptured her spinal cord.

"We want full compensation and lifelong medical treatment as we've lost the ability to work," she said. "The government should know what we have been going through. Some survivors are forced to beg on the streets."

Slow justice

Union leaders acknowledged improvements in fire and factory safety across the world's second-largest apparel exporter after China, with fewer deadly accidents in recent years. But they slammed the government for the slow pace of legal proceedings, including against Sohel Rana, the Rana Plaza owner who is one of 38 people indicted for murder over the tragedy.

He allegedly forced employees to work despite a crack appearing in the building a day before the collapse. His trial resumed last year but prosecutors say a verdict may take years. "Fewer than 10 percent of the witnesses have been cross-examined," prosecutor Bimal Samadder told AFP.

Following the disaster, two watchdogs were set

up to improve standards. Wages of the country's four million workers — mostly women — were also tripled. Bangladesh garment factory owners, a powerful group as the sector accounts for around 84 percent of the country's exports, say they have invested some \$2 billion to make their plants safe.

Bourgeois at advocacy organization Sherpa warned however of factory managers' potential to influence worker interviews during safety inspections and of "rigged" factory audits. — AFP

Freedom of expression

Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control also took action against Iran's Supreme Council of Cyberspace leader, taking aim at the authority overseeing cyberspace policy and the blocking of popular websites. "The Iranian people deserve freedom of expression without the threat of violent retaliation and censorship from those in power," said Treasury Under Secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence Brian Nelson. Washington's latest sanctions involve blocking the US property of those targeted alongside their majority-owned entities, among other restrictions. The UK has come under repeated pressure from members of parliament to extend sanctions on the IRGC and proscribe it as a terrorist organization.



SAVAR, Bangladesh: Activists and victims of the Rana Plaza garments factory tragedy pay their respects at a memorial on its 10th anniversary. — AFP

More than 70 Iranian officials and entities have been made subject to UK asset freezes and travel bans since October last year. The latest involve four commanders "under whose leadership IRGC forces have opened fire on unarmed protesters resulting in numerous deaths, including of children," the foreign office said. — AFP

US sanctions targeted four senior officials of the Law Enforcement Forces of Iran and IRGC, "the primary Iranian security forces responsible for the regime's brutal suppression of the protests that broke out in September 2022" after Amini's arrest and death. The

Climate change behind spike in malaria cases

LONDON: Extreme weather events in Malawi and Pakistan have driven "very sharp" rises in malaria infections and deaths, a global health chief said ahead of World Malaria Day on April 25. Cases in Pakistan last year, after devastating floods left a third of the country under water, rose four-fold to 1.6 million, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

In Malawi, Cyclone Freddy in March triggered six months' worth of rainfall in six days, causing cases there to spike too, Peter Sands, head of the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, told AFP in an interview. "What we've seen in places like Pakistan and Malawi is real evidence of the impact that climate change is having on malaria," he said. "So, you have these extreme weather events, whether flooding in Pakistan, or the cyclone in Malawi, leaving lots of stagnant water around the place.

"And we saw a very sharp uptick in infections and deaths from malaria in both places," he said ahead of World Malaria Day on April 25. Sands said World Malaria Day was usually an opportunity to "celebrate the progress we have made".

But this year it was an occasion to "sound the alarm". The dramatic increase in cases caused by the climate-change-driven weather disasters illustrated the need to "get ahead of this" now, he said. "If malaria is going to be made worse by climate change, we need to act now to push it back and where we can eliminate it," he said. In both countries, pools of water left behind as waters receded created ideal breeding grounds for malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

Sands said there had been some progress made in the fight against malaria but stressed that a child still dies of the disease every minute. In 2021, the WHO said there were an estimated 247 million cases worldwide and 619,000 deaths attributed to malaria.

Scientific breakthroughs saw more than a million children in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi last year given the RTS vaccine manufactured by British pharmaceutical giant GSK. Another vaccine, R21/Matrix-M, developed by Britain's Oxford University, received clearance to be used in Ghana earlier this month. But Sands, the fund's executive director, cautioned that the vaccines should not be seen as a "silver bullet". — AFP

West steps up sanctions on Iran's IRGC

LONDON: The United States, UK and European Union toughened sanctions against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Monday, as part of new restrictions on Tehran over alleged human rights violations. These add to measures already taken over Tehran's hardline response to protests that rocked the Islamic republic since the September death of Mahsa Amini — a 22-year-old who died in custody after being arrested for allegedly breaching the country's dress code for women.

Western sanctions have targeted what officials called a brutal crackdown against protests and demon-

International

China says it respects sovereignty of ex-Soviet states after EU uproar

Comments by Chinese ambassador to France threaten Beijing's neutrality

BEIJING: China insisted it respects the sovereignty of all ex-Soviet countries on Monday, after comments by its ambassador to France drew ire in Europe and threw into question Beijing's efforts to position itself as a neutral mediator of the Ukraine war. Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, the European Union's three Baltic countries, summoned China's envoys on Monday to account for Ambassador Lu Shaye questioning the sovereignty of former Soviet states.

In comments to French broadcaster LCI on Friday, Lu said countries that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union "don't have effective status under international law because there is not an international agreement confirming their status as sovereign nations".

The ambassador appeared to be referring not just to Ukraine, which Russia invaded in February 2022, but also to all former Soviet republics which emerged as independent nations after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Beijing on Monday distanced itself from Lu's remarks — while also defending its claimed neutral stance on Russia's war in Ukraine.

President Xi Jinping has sought to act as peacemaker in the conflict as he seeks a greater role for China on the global stage — even as Western leaders have accused Beijing of providing diplomatic cover to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"China respects the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries and upholds the purposes and principles of the UN Charter," foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning told reporters on Monday.

"After the collapse of the Soviet Union, China was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with relevant countries." She accused "some media" of misinterpreting China's position on Ukraine and "sowing discord in relations between China and relevant countries". "We will be vigilant about this," she added.

Wave of outrage

Lu's comments last week sparked a wave of outrage across Europe, including in the EU's three Baltic countries. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius

Landsbergis wrote on Twitter that "if anyone is still wondering why the Baltic States don't trust China to 'broker peace in Ukraine', here's a Chinese ambassador arguing that Crimea is Russian and our countries' borders have no legal basis".

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell branded the ambassador's remarks "unacceptable", adding in a tweet that the EU "can only suppose these declarations do not represent China's official policy". France's foreign ministry said a scheduled meeting with Lu in Paris on Monday would be "an opportunity for a stern rebuke". Lu has previously acknowledged being part of the so-called "Wolf Warrior" class of Chinese diplomats, a nickname given to those who respond vehemently to critics they perceive as hostile to China.

In January 2019, as ambassador to Canada, he accused the North American country of "white supremacy" for calling for the release of two Canadians detained in China, days after Meng Wanzhou, a Chinese national and Huawei executive, was arrested in Canada at the request of the United States. And last



EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell says the ambassador's remarks are "unacceptable". He is pictured during a debate on the need for a coherent strategy for EU-China relations in France, on April 18, 2023. —AFP

August he sparked outrage by suggesting Taiwanese people would need to be "re-educated" following a Chinese takeover of the self-ruled island. —AFP



LIMA: A handout picture released by the Peruvian Judiciary shows former Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo (left) during an identity control hearing prior to being transferred to a prison on April 23, 2023. —AFP

Peru ex-president extradited from US, taken to prison

LIMA, Peru: Peru's former president Alejandro Toledo was jailed on Sunday, hours after arriving back in his homeland following extradition from the United States to face charges of money laundering and corruption during his mandate. The 77-year-old, who served as Peru's president from 2001 to 2006, was flown in the evening by helicopter to the Barbadillo prison, journalists witnessed. Toledo is wanted by Peruvian prosecutors investigating a sprawling scandal involving Brazilian construction conglomerate Odebrecht.

He is accused of having received millions of dollars from Odebrecht in return for public works contracts, and prosecutors are asking that he be sentenced to more than 20 years in jail. Toledo arrived in Lima from Los Angeles in the custody of Interpol officers, who handed him over to local law enforcement, television images showed.

The former president, wearing a red sweater, appeared before a judge and gave his name, age and national identity number, the judiciary tweeted along with a series of photos. Toledo had been living in the United States for several years before surrendering Friday at a federal court building in San Jose, California, where he was handed over to the US Marshals Service. —AFP

Azerbaijan sets up checkpoint on route to Armenia

MOSCOW: Azerbaijan on Sunday set up a checkpoint on the only land link between Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, sparking an angry response from its archrival Yerevan.

The move fuels tensions between the ex-Soviet Caucasus nations that fought two wars over Azerbaijan's Armenian-majority region of Nagorno-Karabakh. "The units of the Azerbaijani Border Service established a border checkpoint on the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan, at the entrance of the Lachin-Khankendi road," the state border service said.

Baku and Yerevan went to war in 2020 and in the 1990s over Nagorno-Karabakh. Under the Russia-brokered ceasefire that ended the 2020 conflict, Azerbaijan is required to guarantee safe passage on the Lachin corridor, which is patrolled by Russian peacekeepers.

Azerbaijan, however, said it set up the checkpoint at 12:00 pm (0800 GMT) on Sunday "to prevent the illegal transportation of manpower, weapons, mines." It added the checkpoint "shall be implemented in interaction with the Russian peacekeeping force."

Washington said it was "deeply concerned that Azerbaijan's establishment of a checkpoint on the Lachin corridor undermines efforts to establish confidence in the peace process." "We reiterate that there should be free and open movement of people and commerce on the Lachin corridor and call on the parties to resume peace talks and refrain from provocations and hostile actions along the border," the State Department said in a statement.

A French foreign ministry statement also said it "deplores" the development as a violation of the ceasefire agreements that would hamper the negotiations process. Since last year tensions have risen over the Lachin corridor, with Russia focused on its offensive in Ukraine.



YEREVAN: A man sets fire to a Turkish national flag (right) and an Azerbaijan national flag on April 23, 2023, as Armenians mark the 108th anniversary of World War I-era mass killings. —AFP

In December, Azerbaijani activists blocked the Lachin corridor to protest what they claim was illegal mining. Yerevan accused Baku of staging the demonstrations and creating a humanitarian crisis in the mountainous enclave.

'Gross violation'

In a new escalation on Sunday, Azerbaijan said it built the checkpoint following "threats and provocations" from Armenia, which denied the claims. Baku accused Yerevan of using the corridor for the rotation of army staff, "the transfer of weapons and ammunition, entrance of terrorists, as well as illicit trafficking of natural resources and cultural property."

It said it recorded military convoys entering Azerbaijan's territory and "the construction of military infrastructure ... at the point closest to the territory of Azerbaijan." The Armenian foreign minis-

try said the claims were a "far-fetched and baseless pretext". It said setting up the checkpoint was "a gross violation" of the 2020 ceasefire agreement, part of Baku's "policy of ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh." Separatist authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh called on "the Russian Federation to immediately begin discussions" including on "preventing the establishment" of the checkpoint.

Distracted by its offensive in Ukraine and the confrontation with the West, Russia has been visibly losing influence in the region, which it sees as its traditional sphere of influence. Yerevan, which relies on Russia as a security guarantor, has grown frustrated over the Kremlin's failure to fulfil its peacekeeping role. Several servicemen from both sides have been killed in clashes in recent months. And on Sunday, Armenia reported Azerbaijan's forces killed one of its servicemen. Azerbaijan said it was responding to enemy fire. —AFP

Mass exodus of foreigners...

Continued from Page 1

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said more than 1,000 of the bloc's citizens had been taken out during a "long and intense weekend" involving missions by France, Germany and other member nations. With Khartoum international airport disabled after battles that left charred airplanes on the runways, many foreigners were airlifted out from smaller airstrips and taken to safety in countries including Djibouti and Jordan.

China said Monday it had "safely evacuated" a first group of citizens and would "try every means to protect the lives, properties and safety of 1,500 plus Chinese compatriots in Sudan". Long convoys of UN cars and buses have made their way from the capital, where gunfire and explosions have echoed through the streets, to Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast, an arduous 850 km road trip away.

"The war fell upon us all without warning," a Lebanese evacuee told AFP-TV upon his arrival by bus to Port Sudan. "The situation in Khartoum is very sad ... It's destroyed. I left with this T-shirt and these pyjamas, all that I have with me after 17 years." Those Sudanese who can afford to are also fleeing Khartoum on crowded buses on the more than 900 km drive north to Egypt. Among the 800,000 South Sudanese refugees who previously fled civil war in their own country, some are choosing to return, with women and children crossing the border, UN refugee agency official Marie-Helene Verney said.

The fighting started on April 15 in the poverty-stricken African nation with a history of military coups, sparking fears of a deeper descent into bloodshed and a wider humanitarian crisis. Across the capital city of five million, roaming army and paramilitary troops have fought ferocious street battles, with the sky often blackened by smoke from bombed buildings and torched shops. Life in war-torn Khartoum is "burdened with anxiety and exhaustion," said resident Ta-

greed Abdin, an architect. "There was a rocket strike in our neighborhood a few doors down from us ... It is like nowhere is safe."

The city has endured "more than a week of unspeakable destruction", said Norway's ambassador Endre Stiansen who was evacuated with his colleagues. "It fills me with immense sadness that I had to leave so many Sudanese colleagues and friends behind," he said on Twitter. "I fear for their future, because at present weapons and narrow interests carry more weight than values and words." Looking ahead at what fate awaits Sudan, already one of the world's poorest nations, he said that "most scenarios appear bad".

The fighting broke out on April 15 between forces loyal to army chief Abdel Fattah el-Burhan and his deputy turned rival Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, who commands the powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The military toppled Bashir in April 2019 following mass citizen protests. The two generals seized power in a 2021 coup, but later fell out in a bitter power struggle, most recently centered on the planned integration of the RSF into the regular army.

As foreigners who can get out flee the country, the growing impact of the violence on Sudan's already dire humanitarian situation worsens. Five aid workers have been killed, said the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the UN World Food Program (WFP) has been forced to suspend operations. The healthcare system is close to collapse, with the World Health Organization (WHO) verifying 11 attacks on hospitals and clinics, some of which have been overrun by the rival forces and used as military bases. In Nyala, in South Darfur, a compound of aid agency Doctors Without Borders was stormed, its medical warehouse raided and vehicles stolen, the UN said.

"Warehouses in Nyala, South Darfur have been overrun and looted, with the loss of up to 4,000 metric tons of food," said OCHA. The WHO said it had readied additional emergency medical supplies "such as blood bags, trauma and emergency health kits to meet the urgent health needs" as other supplies have been "rapidly consumed due to the heavy trauma load." — Agencies

Syrians protest Arab detente...

Continued from Page 1

Assad in Damascus on the first trip by a Saudi official since the conflict began, less than a week after Syria's top diplomat Faisal Mekdad visited the kingdom. Also this month, diplomats from nine Arab countries met in Saudi Arabia to discuss ending Syria's long spell in the diplomatic wilderness, while Mekdad visited Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt in a diplomatic push.

"We will never ever reconcile. What Saudi Arabia and the other countries are doing in terms of normal-

ization is nothing but an affront," said university student Hanifa Al-Hammoud, 22. "It's not their business, it's ours. This revolution is ours, it's not theirs."

Rebel-held Idlib is home to about three million people, around half of them displaced by the war. The enclave is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the former Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda, and other rebel groups. Some demonstrators held signs, including one that read: "Whoever forgives and reconciles (with Assad) is a criminal traitor... and is like him."

Syria's civil war broke out after Assad's repression of peaceful anti-government demonstrations escalated into a deadly conflict that pulled in foreign powers and global jihadists. More than half a million people have been killed and around half of the country's pre-war population has been forced from their homes. — AFP

India arrests Sikh separatist...

Continued from Page 1

look more like his hero. Singh and his supporters, armed with swords, knives and guns, raided a police station in February after one of the preacher's aides was arrested for assault and attempted kidnapping.

Authorities then tried to arrest Singh in mid-March, but he dramatically escaped, reportedly on a motorbike after changing clothes at a gurdwara. Deploying thousands of officers in the manhunt, authorities cut off mobile Internet for days in Sikh-majority Punjab, home to 30 million people, in their search. They arrested more than 100 of his followers, transferring them to jails hundreds of miles away, and banned gatherings of more

than four people in some areas.

After reported sightings in New Delhi and elsewhere, Singh released a video in late March in which he taunted the authorities and called the police operation an "attack on the Sikh community". "I was neither afraid of arrest earlier, nor am I now. I am in high spirits. Nobody could harm me. It is the grace of God," he said.

The operation sparked protests by Sikhs outside Indian consulates in Britain, Canada and the United States. Demonstrators smashed windows in San Francisco, took down an Indian flag at the Indian High Commission in London and reportedly vandalized a Gandhi statue in Ontario. India summoned top US, British and Canadian diplomats to complain and press for improved security at Indian missions in their countries.

Singh's video was posted on Twitter accounts based in Britain and Canada, which the social media company took down in India following government requests, reports said. — AFP

Twitter reinstates blue ticks for...

Continued from Page 1

The broadcasters were among those to protest the "state-affiliated" and "government-funded" labels Twitter attached to them, which were previously reserved for non-independent media funded by autocratic governments. Twitter removed these labels

on Friday, including those applied to China's official news agency Xinhua and Russia's RT.

Many who unwillingly gained blue ticks made it clear that they had not subscribed, as the badge became a symbol of support for Musk. "No means no, boys," tech journalist Kara Swisher tweeted on Saturday, saying that she had gained the blue tick without her consent. "Inquiring minds need to know: Does Elon love me for me or for my 1.49 million followers?" she added, two hours after saying she would not pay "\$8/month for blue check and meh features." — AFP

International

Stench of death engulfs hospitals in Sudan, but leaving is mortal danger

'I just want all of this to stop so I can take my son to be treated.'

KHARTOUM: Ibrahim Mohamed turned in his hospital bed to find the patient next to him had died, but fighting that had erupted in Sudan's capital hours earlier meant the body could not be moved.

Battles since April 15 between the forces of two rival generals have turned Khartoum into a war zone, shuttering hospitals and preventing health professionals from providing care.

By the time Mohamed, a 25-year-old leukemia patient, was finally evacuated from the Khartoum Teaching Hospital on Tuesday, the body was still there. "Because of the intense fighting, the person could not be moved and buried," Mohamed's father, Mohamed Ibrahim, 62, told AFP.

Atiya Abdullah, general secretary of the Sudanese doctors' union, said the same was happening in other hospitals. "Decomposing dead bodies are kept in wards" for lack of anywhere else to put them, he told AFP.

With explosions, heavy gunfire and air strikes that have killed hundreds in the capital and in other parts of the country, "morgues are packed and the streets are littered with bodies", Abdullah said.

According to him, urban warfare between forces loyal to Sudan's army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his deputy-turned-rival, Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, the commander of the powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), has triggered a "complete and total collapse of the healthcare system".

As Ibrahim waited with his son in the hospital ward under ceaseless blasts, "the stench filled the room", the father said, made worse by power outages in the baking heat. "We could either stay in the pungent room, or go outside and be met with gunfire."

Hospitals under fire

At around 1:00 pm on Tuesday, after three days with no food, water or electricity, the father and son

finally left, but not to safety. "The hospital was being shelled," Ibrahim recounted.

According to the doctors' union, 13 hospitals nationwide have been shelled and 19 others evacuated since fighting began. At least eight people have died in attacks on health facilities, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

"The RSF and the army were fighting right outside the hospital," Ibrahim said, adding that some of those evacuating were hit by gunfire themselves. When the bombs start falling near hospital premises, doctors face a grim choice.

"We find ourselves forced to let patients leave," Abdullah said. "If they stay, they would be killed." Ibrahim managed to shield his sick son from the crossfire, but "had to go on foot" through the streets, dashing from one safe point to another. It took them five hours to get home "safely, but my son's health has deteriorated since", the father said.

With nearly three quarters of hospitals shuttered and "operational hospitals only providing emergency services", according to Abdullah, there was nowhere else Mohamed could go. "I just want all of this to stop so I can take my son to be treated," his father said.

Medics 'extremely exhausted'

According to Abdullah, even hospitals that have remained open, receiving mostly gunshot wounds, "are at risk of closure at any time". "They don't have enough surgical equipment, not enough fuel to run generators, not enough ambulances or blood."

The WHO said 413 people had been killed and 3,551 wounded in the fighting across Sudan, but the actual death toll is thought to be far higher, with doctors and humanitarian staff unable to reach those in need. "Some hospitals have had the same team working" for eight days straight, Abdullah told AFP.



KHARTOUM: A closed medical clinic and pharmacy are pictured in the south of Khartoum on April 24, 2023 as battles rage in the Sudanese capital between the army and paramilitaries. —AFP

"Some have only one surgeon. All are extremely exhausted." Medics have made daily appeals for a ceasefire to allow humanitarian access to move through, transport the wounded and bury the dead. But brief lulls in the fighting in Khartoum have repeatedly given way to the crackle of gunfire, cutting through the momentary silence, and no truce has taken hold.

As civilians rallied on social media to find any sources of medication for chronically ill relatives, UNICEF has warned power cuts and fuel shortages were putting at risk the cold storage of more than \$40 million worth of vaccines and insulin. On Friday, as a third ceasefire collapsed, the doctors' union shared advice on Facebook on how to handle, shroud and bury decomposing bodies. —AFP

UK citizens in Sudan say they feel abandoned

LONDON: The UK on Monday said it was working "round the clock" to evacuate its citizens from conflict-hit Sudan, but some of those trapped complained they felt abandoned.

Britain carried out an operation on Sunday to withdraw diplomats as deadly battles rage in Khartoum, but has not announced a broader plan for its citizens in Sudan. British citizens in Sudan and their families have complained of feeling abandoned by the government, which came in for similar criticism after the Taliban took control in Kabul in 2021.

Foreign office minister Andrew Mitchell defended that operation to extract embassy staff and their families, saying there had been a "very specific threat to the diplomatic community". Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's spokesman confirmed that all but one of the embassy staff and dependents had been taken out of Sudan, with the other evacuated out of Khartoum.

The government is working "round the clock" to evacuate UK citizens more generally, he said, adding: "We are urgently exploring all routes for British nationals to leave Sudan should they wish to do so."

But lawmaker Tobias Ellwood, chairman of a parliamentary defense committee, called for a "clear-cut plan" to get British passport-holders out. "If that plan does not emerge today, then individuals will then lose faith and then start making their own way back," he told the television channel GB News, saying that could lead to "some very difficult situations".

Abdelsalaam Abdelmoneim, 80, from the eastern English city of Cambridge, was stuck in Khartoum after visiting for the winter and to mark Ramadan, his son Javid Abdelmoneim told AFP. Javid, a doctor currently working in Malawi, said that after contact with the UK authorities in which they asked if his father was ready to be evacuated, he turned down two opportunities to leave in convoys with other family members.

"My dad could have been with them. He was waiting for the British because of the phone calls that



This handout photograph taken on April 23, 2023 and released by the Etat Major des Armees (French defence staff) shows French and other nationalities people as they disembark at French military air base in Djibouti on April 23, during the "Sagittaire" evacuation of around 100 people from Sudan on the first French flight out of the war-hit country after a "complicated" rescue operation. —AFP

we've had from the embassy. "It's shocking. At least the Americans said forget it, you're on your own. Good, thank you, we will make our own plans," he said.

'Shameful'

Another British citizen told the BBC he had been forced to make his own evacuation arrangements even as other countries got their citizens out of the country.

The man who gave his name as William said he left Khartoum on a bus arranged by his Sudanese employer because "we've had absolutely nothing but nonsense from the Government". Another, Iman Abugarga, who is in Khartoum, said she felt "absolutely" abandoned by the UK government.

"It is shameful how they have mismanaged this situation," she told the Daily Telegraph newspaper. Around 2,000 British passport-holders had contact-

ed the UK authorities to register their presence in Sudan, Mitchell added.

"The situation is absolutely desperate and a ceasefire is what is required," Mitchell said, adding that the "only advice that Britain can give to people is to stay indoors because that is the safe option". Sunak on Sunday said UK armed forces had "completed a complex and rapid evacuation of British diplomats and their families from Sudan, amid a significant escalation in violence and threats to embassy staff".

He added that the government was "continuing to pursue every avenue to end the bloodshed in Sudan and ensure the safety of British nationals remaining in the country". UK forces undertook the military operation alongside "the US, France and other allies", according to Defense Secretary Ben Wallace. —AFP

are (800-acre) area of woodland has been declared a crime scene as teams clad in overalls search for more burial sites and possible cult survivors.

Ruto, speaking in Kiambu county neighboring Nairobi, said there was "no difference" between rogue pastors like Nthenge — who has been arrested and is awaiting trial — and terrorists.

"Terrorists use religion to advance their heinous acts. People like Mr Mackenzie are using religion to do exactly the same thing." "I have instructed the agencies responsible to take up the matter and to get to the root cause and to the bottom of the activities of ... people who want to use religion to advance weird, unacceptable ideology."

'Unfolding horror'

As authorities try to uncover the true scale of what is being dubbed the "Shakahola Forest Massacre", questions have emerged about how the cult was able to operate undetected despite Nthenge attracting police attention six years earlier. "The unfolding horror that is the Shakahola cult deaths should and must be a wakeup call to the nation, more particularly the National Intelligence Service (NIS) and our community policing program," Amason Jeffah Kingi, the speaker of the senate, said in a statement.

"How did such a heinous crime, organized and executed over a considerable period of time, escape the radar of our intelligence system?" Nthenge was arrested in 2017 on charges of "radicalization" after urging families not to send their children to school, saying education was not recognized by the Bible.

He was arrested again last month, according to local media, after two children starved to death in the custo-



MALINDI: Security personnel carry a rescued young person from the forest in Shakahola, outside the coastal town of Malindi, on April 23, 2023. — AFP

dy of their parents. He was released on bail of 100,000 Kenyan shillings (\$700) before surrendering to police following the Shakahola raid. Another 14 people are also in custody over the Shakahola deaths, according to Koome. The case is due to be heard on May 2.

Fears for followers

There are fears some members could be hiding from authorities in the surrounding bushland and at risk of death if not quickly found. A number of people have already been rescued and taken to hospital in Malindi, on Kenya's Indian Ocean coast.

Hussein Khalid, a member of the rights group Haki Africa that tipped off the police to the actions of the church, said one of those rescued had refused to eat despite being in clear physical distress. —AFP

60 killed by men in army uniform in Burkina Faso

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso: About 60 civilians were killed in a village in northern Burkina Faso by men wearing military uniforms, the local prosecutor said late Sunday, announcing an investigation into the latest bloodshed in the insurgency-hit country.

Landlocked and in the heart of West Africa's Sahel, the country is one of the world's most volatile and impoverished. Attacks blamed on suspected jihadists are on the rise in Burkina Faso, which is battling an insurgency that spilled over from neighboring Mali.

"About 60 people were killed by people wearing the uniforms of our national armed forces" on Thursday in the village of Karma, in northern Yatenga province, Ouahigouya High Court prosecutor Lamine Kabore told AFP in a statement, citing the gendarmerie.

"The wounded have been evacuated and are currently being taken care of within our health facilities," he said, adding that the perpetrators had "taken various goods". The village of Karma is near the Malian border and attracts many illegal gold miners.

According to residents contacted by AFP, survivors said more than 100 people on motorbikes and pick-up trucks raided the village. Dozens of men and young people were killed by the men, dressed in military uniforms, they said. Survivors gave a toll of "around 80 dead".

'General mobilization'

The latest bloodshed occurred a week after 34 defense volunteers and six soldiers were killed in an attack by suspected jihadists near the village of Aorema, about 15 kilometers (10 miles) from provincial capital Ouahigouya and 40 kilometers from Karma.

Following that attack, Burkina Faso's military junta declared a "general mobilization" to give the state "all necessary means" to combat a string of bloody attacks blamed on jihadists affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group.

The decree states that anyone over 18 years old and physically fit who is not in the armed forces will be "called to enlist according to the needs expressed by the competent authorities". The government had already announced a plan to recruit 5,000 more soldiers to battle the insurgency that has gripped the country since 2015.

Captain Ibrahim Traore, Burkina's transitional president, has declared a goal of recapturing the 40 percent of the country's territory which is controlled by jihadists. The violence has left more than 10,000 people dead, according to non-governmental aid groups, and displaced two million people from their homes.

Anger within the military at the mounting toll sparked two coups in 2022, the most recent of which was in September, when Traore seized power. He is standing by a pledge made by the preceding junta to stage elections for a civilian government by 2024. —AFP

Kenya's Ruto vows action as cult deaths spike

MALINDI, Kenya: Kenyan President William Ruto on Monday vowed to crack down on "unacceptable" religious movements as police discovered more fatalities in a Christian cult that practiced starvation, bringing the toll to 58.

A major search is under way in a forest near the coastal town of Malindi where dozens of corpses were exhumed over the weekend, with authorities fearing more grisly discoveries could be made. A full-scale investigation has been launched into the Good News International Church and its leader, named in court documents as Paul Mackenzie Nthenge, who preached that death by starvation delivered followers to God.

Police had previously named the suspect as Mackenzie Nthenge. It is believed some of his devotees could still be hiding in the bush around Shakahola, which was raided by police earlier this month after a tip-off from a local non-profit.

Since then, a number of people have been rescued and dozens of bodies unearthed in mass graves dug in shallow pits. "58 people (have been) confirmed dead and this is out of bodies exhumed and those who died on the way to the hospital," said police chief Japhet Koome who visited the site on Monday.

The toll had stood earlier Monday at 51. A 325-hect-

Business

TUESDAY, APRIL 25, 2023

\$68bn withdrawn from Credit Suisse ahead of UBS takeover

Report points to towering challenges ahead for UBS acquisition

ZURICH: Tens of billions were withdrawn from Credit Suisse in the first three months of 2023, the bank's earnings report showed Monday, providing clues to the towering challenges ahead as UBS prepares an emergency takeover. Switzerland's long-time second largest bank saw 61.2 billion Swiss francs (\$68.6 billion) withdrawn in the first quarter alone, it said Monday in what is likely its final quarterly report before it is swallowed by its larger domestic rival, UBS.

The bank also reported deceptively bloated net profits for the quarter, after its high-risk debts were wiped out in the mega-merger deal, but warned of "substantial" losses to come.

Investors had been eagerly awaiting the results as they seek clues to the magnitude of the challenges facing UBS, Switzerland's largest bank, after it was strongarmed last month by Swiss authorities into the shotgun marriage. The results seemed to be greeted with some optimism. In early afternoon trading, Credit Suisse's shares rose nearly two percent to 0.81 Swiss francs a piece and UBS's were up 1.6 percent at 18.35 francs a share, as the Swiss stock exchange's main SMI index rose 0.14 percent.

'Bad shape'

But Vontobel analyst Andreas Venditti warned in a research note that Credit Suisse's report "reveals the bad shape the firm is in". "UBS undoubtedly faces a major (and urgent) task in deeply restructuring its former competitor."

Credit Suisse said the "significant net asset outflows" were particularly heavy in the second half of March, as it was engulfed by panic in the days surrounding the hastily arranged takeover.

"These outflows have moderated but have not yet reversed as of April 24, 2023," the bank said in its earnings statement. Analysts with the Zurich Cantonal Bank (ZKB) stressed that Credit Suisse's out-

flows for the quarter were "less than feared". But they come after the bank already saw 110.5 billion francs in outflows in the fourth quarter of 2022.

Venditti pointed out that over the past six months, Credit Suisse's wealth management division alone had seen 140 billion francs in net new money outflows. The bank meanwhile said it saw its net profit swell in the first quarter to 12.4 billion francs, up from a significant loss a year earlier.

But that was largely attributed to holders of high-risk Credit Suisse debt being wiped out in the emergency takeover deal.

Swiss authorities required that close to 16 billion Swiss francs (\$17.9 billion) in so-called additional tier 1 (AT1) bonds be rendered worthless before Switzerland's two biggest banks united. The order by the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority (FINMA) infuriated bondholders, and a number of them have begun launching legal action against the regulator. Credit Suisse said its quarterly results were also boosted by the 700-million-Swiss-franc sale of a significant part of its Securitized Products Group to Apollo Global Management.

But despite this, on an adjusted basis, the bank said it nonetheless suffered a pre-tax loss for the quarter of 1.3 billion Swiss francs. The bank, which last October launched a vast restructuring plan including carving out its investment arm, said that unit had suffered an adjusted pre-tax loss of 337 million in the first quarter.

'Substantial' losses

And it warned that "in light of the merger announcement, the adverse revenue impact from the previously disclosed exit from non-core businesses and exposures, restructuring charges and funding costs", it expected to see a "substantial" pre-tax losses in its investment bank unit and overall in the second quarter and full year of 2023.



ZURICH: The sign and logo of Credit Suisse bank is seen at their headquarters in Zurich. —FP

Credit Suisse also said Monday that it had scrapped a deal to acquire the investment advisory business of M. Klein & Company and fold it into the First Boston brand, which it had planned to resurrect as part of its investment bank overhaul. The bank said the sides had "mutually agreed to terminate" the \$175-million acquisition "considering Credit Suisse's recently announced merger with UBS."

Credit Suisse suffered a string of scandals over the past several years, and after the collapse of three US regional banks unleashed market panic, it was left looking like the weakest link in the chain.

Over the course of a nerve-racking weekend, Swiss authorities organized an emergency rescue, pressuring UBS to agree to a \$3.25-billion mega merger on the evening of March 19. Justifying the move to parliament earlier this month, Swiss President Alain Berset said that "without intervention, Credit Suisse would have found itself, in all likelihood, in default on March 20 or 21".

In 2022, Credit Suisse suffered a 7.3-billion-franc loss, in stark contrast to the \$7.6 billion profit raked in by UBS last year. UBS is due to publish its first quarter results on Tuesday. —AFP

China's EV dominance hastens end of petrol engine era

SHANGHAI: This year's Shanghai Auto Show signalled the end of the petrol engine era in China, as domestic electric vehicle brands drive change across the sector and leave foreign companies in the dust, analysts and industry insiders said. Government support for EVs and growing interest from a vast consumer base has assured Chinese companies' dominance of their home market, the world's largest—and they are now beginning to set their sights overseas.

Shanghai has shown Chinese brands "can compete with all of the legacy automakers in every way—performance, quality, comfort, there's nothing they can't do", said EV specialist Elliot Richards, joking he had seen "a lot of worried-looking German men wandering around".

"I think this show marks the end of the internal combustion engine and the beginning of the EV era," he added. EV companies are well aware they are closing in on their fossil-fuelled predecessors.

"We regard high-end petrol vehicles such as BMW, Mercedes Benz and Audi as our main competitors," William Li, CEO of the "Chinese Tesla" Nio, told AFP. According to the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers, electric vehicles made up a quarter of car sales in the country in 2022, a year-on-year increase of 94 percent. Despite a downturn across the global auto sector, Li said he thought EVs' market share in China could increase to over 40 percent this year.

In Shanghai, dozens of new models were on dis-



SHANGHAI: People visit a booth during the 20th Shanghai International Automobile Industry Exhibition in Shanghai on April 22, 2023. —AFP

play from new and legacy carmakers alike. "The future is very much here now," Mike Johnstone, a top executive at British luxury brand Lotus, told AFP. "There's a lot of proliferation of electrified products (in China), and it's changing the entire market."

China has dedicated huge resources to the industry. "They skipped developing petrol engines because they can't compete with the rest of the world," said Richards. "So they thought: '(With EVs) we can get a head start in front of everyone else.'" The country began investing heavily in asso-

ciated technology from the early 2000s.

"It's ingrained in the nature of the country's economic system: the Chinese government is very good at focusing resources on the industries it wants to grow," Zeyi Yang wrote in MIT Technology Review.

Central and local authorities poured billions of dollars into subsidies and tax breaks, and allocated public transport contracts to EV companies. The supporting infrastructure was built too—the government says there are now more than 5.8 million charging piles in China. —AFP

Brazil may surpass US as world's No 1 corn exporter

RIO DE JANEIRO: On his farm in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil's grain basket, Ilson Jose Redivo finished planting his corn crop a few weeks ago, acting quickly once he'd harvested the soybeans that he'd grown on the same fields. In this region of west-central Brazil, the fields stretch as far as the eye can see and the schedule is well established: The farmer plants the two crops, soybean and corn, on "almost 100 percent" of his over 1,550 hectares (3,800 acres). The corn will be harvested in June.

The corn is a second crop, or "small crop," which Brazilians call a "safrinha." Over the past decade, the second crop has turned into Brazil's main corn crop and taken an increasing share of world corn production. This year's expected production should hit a record, making Brazil the world's leading corn exporter ahead of the United States, a position it has only reached once before, in 2013.

Production is expected to hit 124.9 million tons

(up 10.4 percent compared to last year), of which 76.3 percent is second crop, according to the latest report from the National Supply Company (Conab), published this week.

This is despite a "delay in the soybean harvest" due to a "surplus of rain" in Mato Grosso, the country's main producer of soybeans and corn, where the mild winter and the distribution of rainfall allow a second annual harvest.

Powered by GMOs

The increase in the price of the cereal grain, driven by the opening of corn ethanol plants from 2017, has encouraged producers to invest more in "safrinha," says Redivo, who spoke by phone to AFP.

"Corn as a second crop has become more attractive, so we have acquired more fertilizers, genetically improved seeds and farm machinery that allows for faster and more accurate planting," he stresses.

"We have been able to increase the area" devoted to corn cultivation, "improve our productivity and thus increase our production significantly." Genetically modified varieties now occupy almost all of Brazil's cornfields. With such production forecasts, "the country should increase its exportable surplus," which will enable it to sell more abroad, points out Joao Pedro Lopes, of the



SALTO DO JACUI, Brazil: A worker scatters cropped soybeans in a truck in a field at Salto do Jacui, in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. —AFP

commodity market analysis firm StoneX.

Geopolitical events and climate have put Brazilian corn in high demand, especially with problem harvests in the traditional corn powerhouses of the United States, Argentina and—because of the war—Ukraine, another grain basket nation. Demand has also risen with the opening of the Chinese market following the signing of an agreement between Brasilia and Beijing in early 2022, Lopes says. —AFP

London seeks to keep Europe fintech crown despite Brexit

LONDON: From digital bank Revolut to money-transfer group Wise and payments company Checkout, London is Europe's fintech champion and intends on keeping its crown despite Brexit fallout and declining investments.

"Before Brexit, the UK was a great place" for the sector developing financial technology, Revolut's global head of government affairs, Adam Gagen, told UK Fintech Week which ended on Friday.

He put this down to "fantastic regulation... great talent" and 300-400 million customers that could be directly accessed throughout Europe.

"That's not the case anymore." Britain's exit from the European Union without an EU-London deal on financial services has complicated access to the gigantic market and talent.

Also addressing the Fintech Week, junior UK Treasury minister Andrew Griffith insisted the sector was "vital for the economy". Revolut, which made its first annual profit in 2021, has an EU banking licence and is seeking the same for the UK, which would allow it to operate on a similar level as on the continent.

"The UK is still probably one of the best places to start and grow a fintech anywhere in the world," said Gagen. "I think one thing that we probably need to double down on in the UK is really finding a way to get better regulatory access" abroad through post-Brexit bilateral deals, he added.

Falling investments

The fintech sector has been rocked more recently by the failure of Silicon Valley Bank in the United States and wider global economic turmoil, which has dried up investments and eaten into company valuations. The UK last year saw injections of funds into its fintechs slump by 56 percent to just over \$17 billion. This was sharper than a drop globally of 31 percent to around \$164 billion, according to a study by accountants KPMG.

"Despite the fall in the total number of UK deals, the country remains the centre of European fintech investment," the report noted. In terms of venture capital, or financing of young companies, the UK sector attracted \$11 billion last year, behind only the United States with \$33 billion and ahead of India's \$6.3 billion, according to Dealroom.

"While other European markets might have growing fintech sectors, it is hard to compete with London for the top spot given its established financial ecosystem and history of innovation and technological progress," EY fintech expert Anita Kimber told AFP. The UK has 2,500 fintech companies, two-thirds of which are in London.

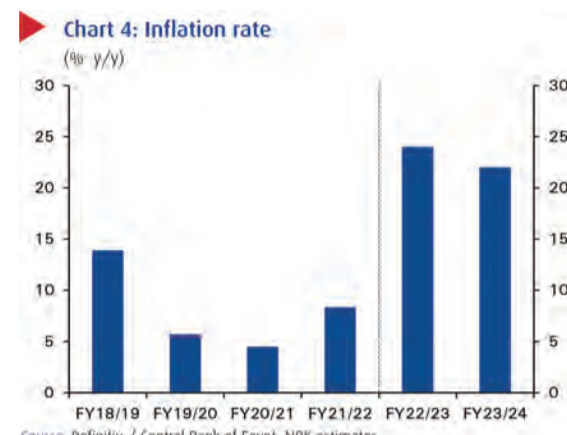
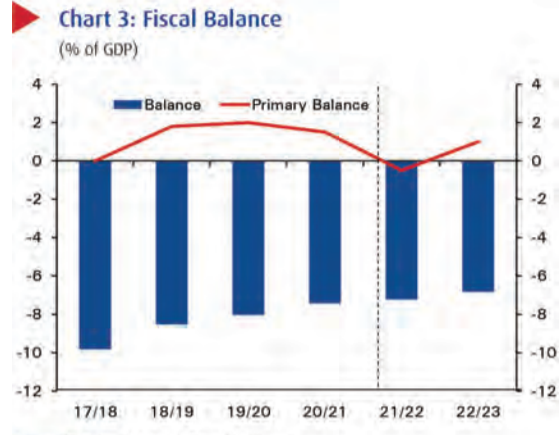
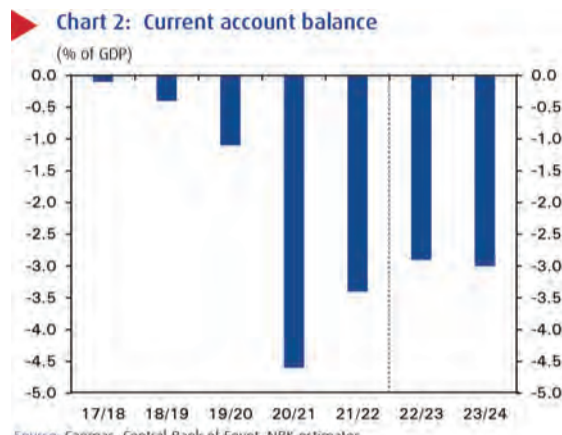
"From about 2012-2014 onwards, you see this explosive growth in fintech, but you also see at the same time, political support for the regulators to support innovation and greater competition as well," said Peter Cunnane at Innovate Finance. —AFP

Business

NBK ECONOMIC REPORT

Rough start for Egypt economy in 2023 with FX shortages, inflation

Slow privatization progress poses risks to external outlook



KUWAIT: Egypt's economy experienced a rough start to 2023 with the return of FX shortages and surging inflation. Progress on key reforms under the IMF deal agreed last December – especially the move to a flexible exchange rate and the privatization program – remains critical to restoring investor confidence and covering the external funding gap.

We expect growth to slow to 3.7 percent this year as these pressures play out and the pound weakens further. The cheaper currency, falling inflation and interest rate cuts will provide a platform for improved growth of 4.5 percent next year, conditional on the authorities showing stronger reform commitment. Once the current reforms are implemented, we see strong growth potential in tourism, manufacturing and real estate.

Since the IMF approved a \$3 billion loan agreement in December, the economic situation in Egypt has turned out tougher than initially expected and the major pillars of the program are not materializing smoothly – a key risk that we flagged earlier. This includes weak commitment to a flexible exchange rate with the pound still hovering at EGP31/\$1 (mid-April). Additionally, implementation of the crucial privatization program has been very slow with no deals executed so far, despite the clear importance of stake sales especially to GCC investors to help cover a gross external financing requirement of \$90bn over the coming 3-4 years.

GDP growth slipped to 3.9 percent y/y in Q2/22/23

(Oct-Dec) versus 4.4 percent in Q1 and we expect growth to range 3.0-3.5 percent for Q3 and Q4 of the same year, with FY22/23 full-year growth at 3.7 percent. We note that the Ministry of Planning has revised its growth projections downwards to 4.2 percent from 5.0 percent previously and the IMF to 3.7 percent from 4.3 percent last October. The evident slowdown comes as inflation rates have spiraled, interest rates rise, and the FX shortage takes its toll across the economy.

We see a gradual improvement in FY2023/24 with growth recovering to 4.5 percent, but highly conditioned on faster progress on reforms, a stronger commitment to a flexible exchange rate and materialization of the privatization program. The IMF restated the importance of both conditionalities along the sidelines of the Spring 2023 meetings, which may also be needed to successfully conclude the (currently delayed) first review of its loan program.

Privatization

Progress on privatization is facing major obstacles both related to debates on asset pricing mechanisms and an obvious reluctance by the authorities to commit to the program. Due to limited current alternatives to GCC investments, Egypt's external sector, which faces a gross financing need of \$27bn over the coming 12 months, is highly exposed to the success of the privatization program.

The main upside on the external front is a narrow-

ing current account deficit (and possible surplus), evident by the latest estimates for Q2FY22/23 which saw a surplus of \$1.4bn on the back of strong tourism revenues. In an event where the coming two quarters also post strong numbers, the gross financing gap could narrow by 25 percent to \$20bn. Another key upside would be a possible external debt negotiation and/or multilaterals re-financing maturing loans. Egypt in April signed a five-year \$7bn loan with the World Bank, which boosts the bank's lending to Egypt by 56 percent and allows for higher FX proceeds.

Despite these upside risks, current external pressures are high reflected in both market projections for a further decline in the pound and a continued fall in banks' net foreign assets, which dropped by \$3 billion over the period January-February 2023. But there is potential support in 2H23/24 from possible rate cuts by the US Fed, a recovery in foreign portfolio investments, and a return to the international bond market. This could assist in covering the large financing gap and limiting pressure on the EGP.

Fiscal austerity measures

We expect a widening in the budget deficit this year that is mostly attributed to a rise in treasury yields averaging 19 percent (July 2022-January 2023) versus the 13 percent budgeted by the Ministry of Finance. We expect interest expenses to rise to EGP913bn for the full year FY22/23 versus the EGP690bn initially estimated, pushing the fiscal deficit to 8.6 percent

of GDP, well above the government's newly-revised target of 6.1 percent. As we expect yields to remain elevated and policy rates to rise further, we look for a similar overshoot in FY23/24 to 8.1 percent of GDP compared to the projected 5.1 percent in the latest budget presented to parliament. This would also be mostly attributed to higher treasury yields (18-20 percent) versus the budget (12.5 percent). Key measures on the revenue side could include further cuts in electricity and petrol subsidies, which could yield a combined 2.4 percent of GDP in receipts. On a positive note, the primary balance recorded a surplus of 0.4 percent of GDP during 1H FY22/23 and we expect a full-year surplus of 1 percent of GDP.

CB to raise rates

Inflation accelerated to a six-year high of 32.7 percent y/y in March amid surging food prices and pass-through from the January currency devaluation. We see inflation peaking at 38-40 percent by August 2023 driven by a fresh round of currency depreciation and newly-introduced fiscal consolidation measures. Although the central bank's policy discount rate has risen 1000 bps since February 2022 to 18.75 percent, further monetary tightening could be needed to anchor both the currency and inflation expectations. The first window to cut rates could come as soon as 3Q-4Q23/24 as inflation starts falling below 25 percent and heads towards the CBE target of 7 percent (+/-2 percent) by 4QCY24.

Signs of hope for China property market, but no boom

BEIJING: Pummelled by a housing crisis that caused a record-breaking slump last year, some Chinese property developers are starting to see light at the end of the tunnel, but analysts warn the sector is still on course to slow down in the long term.

The real estate industry grew at lightning speed after restrictions were eased in 1998 across China, a country where buying a home is a common prerequisite for marriage, as well as an investment.

For two decades, developers have been able to build at breakneck speed thanks to easy bank loans, but their debts swelled so much that authorities put a stop to that access to cash from 2020.

Since then, availability of credit has been slashed and demand for property has fallen as a result of the economic downturn and a crisis of confidence. That was exacerbated by the near bankruptcy of the former industry leader Evergrande and has spread to other developers, who are in turn shunned by potential buyers for fear of similar setbacks.

Once China's largest real estate company, Evergrande this month said it had entered into a restructuring agreement with a group of international creditors, in what could be a breakthrough deal towards easing the developer's massive debt. The firm said its plan was "a substantial positive milestone" which would "facilitate the company's efforts to resume operations and resolve issues onshore".

'Strong signal'

In China, the majority of new properties are paid for even before construction begins. The property market experienced its "worst-ever slump" last year, with sales down 24 percent, said Rosalea Yao of Gavekal-Dragonomics, a

China approves coal power surge despite emissions pledge

BEIJING: China has approved a major surge in coal power so far this year, prioritizing energy supply over its pledge to reduce emissions from fossil fuels, Greenpeace said Monday.

The world's second-largest economy is also its biggest emitter of the greenhouse gases driving climate change, such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), and China's emissions pledges are seen as essential to keeping global temperature rise well below two degrees Celsius. The jump in approvals for coal-fired power plants, however, has fuelled concerns that China will backtrack on its goals to peak emissions between 2026 and 2030 and become carbon-neutral by 2060. Local governments in energy-hungry Chinese provinces approved at least 20.45 gigawatts (GW) of coal-fired power in the first three months of 2023, Greenpeace said.

That is more than double the 8.63 GW Greenpeace reported for the same period last year, and

greater than the 18.55 GW that got the green light for the whole of 2021.

China relied on coal for nearly 60 percent of its electricity last year. The push for more coal plants "risks climate disasters... and locking us into a high-carbon pathway," Greenpeace campaigner Xie Wenwen said. "The 2022 coal boom has clearly continued into this year." A study released in February by Global Energy Monitor (GEM) said China last year approved the largest expansion of coal-fired power plants since 2015.

Most of the new coal projects approved in the January-March period this year were in provinces that have suffered punishing power shortages due to record heatwaves in the last two years, Greenpeace said. Several others were in southwest China, where a record drought last year slashed hydropower output and forced factories to shut down.

It was unclear how many of the coal power plants approved this year will begin construction. Greenpeace analysts warned that investing in more fossil-fuel plants to prepare for the spike in air conditioning will create a vicious cycle: increased greenhouse gas emissions from the coal plants will accelerate climate change, resulting in more frequent

'Not for speculation'

In addition, "we don't have the speculative demand coming back", Lam added, with the government pushing the idea that housing is for living in, and "not for speculation". Real estate will experience "cyclical bounces" but the days of rapid growth are "likely behind us", Qazi said. The property sector, which along with construction accounts for about a quarter of China's GDP, is a key pillar of the country's growth.

It is also a major source of revenue for local authorities, whose finances are in a state of flux after three years of huge spending to tackle COVID-19.

To revive a struggling sector, the government has

adopted a more conciliatory approach since November, with targeted support measures for the most financially sound developers—with mixed results. In March, the number of new-builds starting construction dropped by 29 percent year-on-year after a fall of 9.4 percent in January-February, according to the latest NBS figures. This is despite the low base of comparison with 2022 when China's property market was in turmoil.

"Developers remain cautious and they are prioritizing completing the existing projects over starting new ones," said economist Larry Hu from investment bank Macquarie. The sector is "on the mend, but not out of the woods yet", he warned. And the recovery is mainly benefiting the big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, which have regained their 2019 momentum, according to Yao, while the property market in smaller cities still shows "no improvement at all". Less attractive, these cities may risk "suffering a population outflow" in the future, Lam warned. — AFP



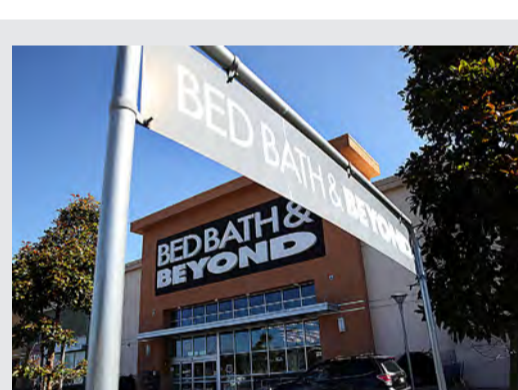
BEIJING: This file photo taken on September 17, 2021 shows residential buildings in Beijing. Pummelled by a housing crisis that caused a record-breaking slump in 2022, some Chinese property developers are starting to see light at the end of the tunnel, but analysts warn the sector is still on course to slow down in the long term. — AFP

extreme weather such as heat waves.

"China's power sector can still peak emissions by 2025," Greenpeace's Xie said, but added that emissions released today will linger in the atmosphere for decades. China is also the world's largest and fastest-growing producer of renewable energy. Wind, solar, hydro and nuclear sources are expected to supply a third of its electricity demand by 2025, up from 28.8 per cent in 2020, according to estimates by the National Energy Administration. — AFP



China is also the world's largest and fastest-growing producer of renewable energy.



DALY CITY, US: In this file photo taken on October 3, 2019 a Bed Bath & Beyond store is seen in Daly City, California. — AFP

US retailer Bed Bath & Beyond files for bankruptcy

NEW YORK: Bed Bath & Beyond filed for bankruptcy Sunday, cementing a years-long decline that saw losses surpass a billion dollars annually as the US retailer struggled to adapt to an uncertain economy and the dominance of on-line shopping. The home goods chain filed voluntary petitions for relief under Chapter 11 at the United States Bankruptcy Court for the District of New Jersey, a court filing showed. The New Jersey-based retailer, seller of everything from shower curtains and soaps to vacuum cleaners and duvet covers, for years was a fixture on the Fortune 500 list of biggest American companies.

It said in a statement it had sought bankruptcy protection "to implement an orderly wind down of its businesses while conducting a limited marketing process to solicit interest in one or more sales of some or all of its assets." Bed Bath & Beyond shares dove in January as it warned of "substantial doubt about the Company's ability to continue as a going concern," a sign that was widely interpreted to mean it could file for bankruptcy. The company said at the time that it expected a loss of \$386 million in the just-finished quarter.

Despite several efforts to restructure — including the closure in 2022 of 150 of its underperforming stores — Bed Bath & Beyond was unable to turn its slumping finances around. It says it has secured a commitment of \$240 million in debtor-in-possession financing from a lender to support its operations during bankruptcy. The company has listed both its estimated assets and estimated liabilities at between \$1 billion and \$10 billion, according to a court filing. Closing sales at the stores will start on Wednesday. "Thank you to all of our loyal customers," a banner on the company's website read Sunday.

"We have made the difficult decision to begin winding down our operations," Chief Executive Officer Sue Gove said the company "will continue working diligently to maximize value for the benefit of all stakeholders." "Millions of customers have trusted us through the most important milestones in their lives—from going to college to getting married, settling into a new home to having a baby," she said in the company statement. — AFP

Business

Sunak seeks to boost UK business links amid crisis

Push comes after high-profile firms pull out of CBI

LONDON: British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak sought to repair the government's tarnished economic record Monday, reaching out to the business community rocked by a scandal engulfing the Confederation of British Industry.

Sunak's Conservatives and the main opposition Labour party are jockeying for position ahead of a general election expected next year. The Tories, traditionally regarded as the party of business, have lost ground in a cost-of-living crisis as inflation stays high—and after former premier Liz Truss sparked markets chaos with unfunded tax cuts last year.

"We are going to keep engaging to make (Britain) the most pro-business, pro-growth country in the world," Sunak said in an address that was broadcast on social networking site LinkedIn.

Sunak, who was UK finance minister before leading the country, said his "Business Connect" platform would enable companies to engage directly with his administration. The news comes as a small number of high-profile firms withdrew from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) on Friday after the nation's business lobby was shaken by fresh rape allegations.

Current finance minister Jeremy Hunt, addressing Monday's gathering of chief executives and other business heads, said the government was "very concerned about the allegations of what's happened at the CBI.

"They are very, very serious." He added: "It is not for us to decide who business wants to engage with but we are not going to wait for a reincarnation of the CBI or whoever, we want to engage the whole time, every week, every day, with business."

'Economic boost'

Business Connect will look to boost economic growth, Sunak insisted Monday before an audience of more than 200 high-profile business figures. The UK remains plagued by double-digit inflation, prompting calls from many employers for the government to do more to stimulate economic output.

Hospitality, retail and tourism chiefs are calling for Sunak to reinstate tax-free shopping for tourists, a perk ended by Brexit. Monday's event focused partly on growth sectors including advanced manufacturing, life sciences and technology.

"Business Connect provides the next fantastic opportunity to demonstrate how we are growing the economy," insisted Sunak. However, Labour slammed the announcement and accused the government of mismanaging the economy.

"After 13 years, the pattern of Tory economic failure is grinding on," said finance spokesman Pat McCadden. "Families in Britain are being harder hit by price rises than many comparable economies."

The Conservatives have been in power since 2010, including an initial five years in coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

They won power following the global financial crisis and quickly introduced austerity measures aimed at stabilizing the UK economy. But the Tories massively loosened the purse strings a decade later as COVID struck, spending vast sums on saving businesses and jobs during economically-painful lockdowns. Monday's initiative comes as the business community reels from recent events at the CBI, which earlier this month sacked its director-general



LONDON: A handout photograph released by the UK Parliament shows (from second left) Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Britain's Home Secretary Suella Braverman and Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt during the weekly session of Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) at the House of Commons, in London. —AFP

Tony Danker after allegations of misconduct.

Danker is not linked, however, to reports of two allegations of rape said to have involved staff at

the lobby group. The CBI on Friday decided to suspend all activity until an extraordinary general meeting in June. —AFP



Investors are holding their breath ahead of key earnings results from tech giants including Amazon, Microsoft and Google parent Alphabet. —AFP

Global stocks seek direction before tech earnings results

LONDON: European and Wall Street stock markets were largely flat Monday after some losses in Asia, as investors awaited earnings from US tech behemoths this week. Bourses in New York, London, Frankfurt and Paris dipped in and out of negative territory throughout the day. All eyes will be on results from the likes of Amazon, Facebook owner Meta, Google-parent Alphabet and Microsoft. The companies' health and outlook reports could give clues regarding the Federal Reserve's next move regarding interest rates. "The first quarter earnings reporting period will go into hyperdrive this week, which is partly why things are starting today at a slow pace," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare.

There is uncertainty on when the Fed will end its campaign of raising rates, let alone when it could begin to cut borrowing costs. Inflation remains elevated, but there is an expectation the US and other economies could avoid falling into recession this year.

A survey Monday revealed that business confidence in Germany, Europe's biggest economy, edged up in April. At the same time, analysts warned that optimism about falling energy prices and China's reopening was being offset by worries about higher interest rates. Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management noted that China's rebound following the end of its growth-sapping zero-COVID policies was likely to cool, relying now on higher income growth and improved consumer sentiment. "So the easy part is done; now, the consumer will need to do the bulk of the heavy lifting," he said.

Earlier advances in markets slowed during the day as anxious investors waited for news. "With such an action-packed week investors are best described as 'skittish', fretting that data will prompt a reversal in markets but at the same time hoping for just enough good news to give stocks a reason to move out of their recent narrow range," said Chris Beauchamp, chief market analyst at online trading platform IG. One of the first to report this week was drinks giant Coca-Cola, which recorded higher quarterly profits but activity still below pre-pandemic levels. "There's plenty of uncertainty out there in terms of the direction of inflation, both of the consumers reaction to it, and the input side," said Chief Executive James Quincey.

Also this week, investors will be watching important economic data from South Korea, Australia and the eurozone, as well as Bank of Japan chief Kazuo Ueda's approach as he chairs his first key policy meeting. In parliament on Monday, Ueda suggested the bank would stay the course in terms of monetary stimulus, adding that inflation was expected to cool below two percent in the second half of the fiscal year ending next March.

Elsewhere on the corporate front, Credit Suisse revealed that more than \$68 billion was withdrawn in the first three months of 2023, in what are likely its final quarterly results before it is swallowed by rival UBS. The bank saw its net profit swell to \$13.9 billion—up from a significant loss a year earlier—after holders of high-risk Credit Suisse debt were wiped out in the emergency takeover deal. The problems at Credit Suisse will continue to prompt fallout across the banking sector, said Michael Hewson, chief market analyst at CMC Markets UK. —AFP

S&P revises Egypt's outlook to negative on currency crisis

CAIRO: S&P Global Ratings has revised Egypt's outlook to negative on prospects of further currency depreciation, a continued rise in inflation and the possibility of the country's external financing needs outgrowing its funding sources. The rating agency affirmed its long and short-term foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings of Egypt at "B/B", seven notches above default level and at par with countries such as Uganda.

The Arab world's third-largest economy's negative outlook underpins risks that the policy measures

implemented by authorities may be "insufficient to stabilize the exchange rate" and attract foreign currency inflows, essential for meeting its external financing needs. "The outlook revision reflects our view that Egypt's funding sources may not cover its high external financing requirements of about \$17 billion in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2023, and \$20 billion in fiscal year 2024," S&P analysts led by Trevor Cullinan said in a statement.

"Delays to currency and structural reforms put pressure on the Egyptian pound, increasing the risk for the government and the broader economy of further sharp currency devaluations, higher inflation and rising interest rates." Egypt, the most populous Arab country and one of the biggest wheat importers globally, has faced stiff economic headwinds since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

In March, Egypt's annual urban inflation rose to 32.7 percent, its highest level in six years, largely

driven by soaring food prices, according to government data.

The latest annual inflation is narrowly below the all-time high of 32.95 percent in July 2017, less than a year after Egypt devalued its currency by half as part of a \$12 billion support package offered by the International Monetary Fund. The Egyptian currency is also under severe pressure and has been devalued three times since March last year.

The Egyptian pound has lost about 50 percent of its value against the US dollar and is among the worst-performing currencies globally this year. "Notwithstanding the longer-term benefit of a more flexible exchange rate on the economy, its decline is currently adding to already-high inflation," S&P analysts said. The weaker currency is increasing import costs, and inflation in Egypt is expected to average 23 percent in the 2023 fiscal year, moderating to 18 percent in the 2024 fiscal year, they added. —Agencies

Manufacturers hope for AI boost in factories

HANOVER: Manufacturers are hoping for the artificial intelligence revolution to reach their factories, envisaging robots being used to repair complex machinery. There has been an explosion of interest in uses of AI across many sectors since the launch last year of chatbot ChatGPT from US startup OpenAI.

And at last week's Hanover Fair on industrial technology in Germany, the potential for artificial intelligence in the manufacturing sector was firmly in focus. Via the tablet in his hands, a young employee of American IT services provider HPE chatted with an AI-equipped virtual assistant, asking it to operate the arm of a robot. In order to solve a technical problem, "factory workers no longer need to get a qualified expert on site: the artificial intelligence takes charge" of guiding the repairs, said Thomas Meier, a data analyst from HPE who was presenting the prototype.

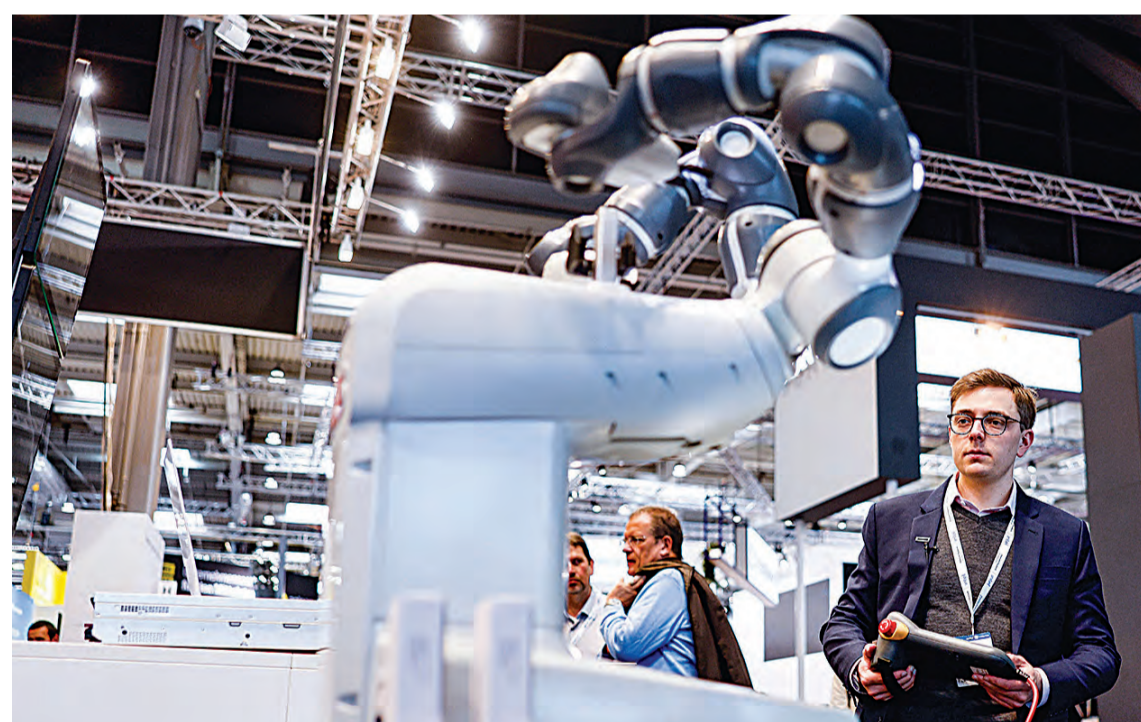
The US firm, which has some 60,000 employees, has been working for the past year with Aleph Alpha, a German startup with some 50 staff, seen as one of OpenAI's leading European rivals.

The innovation communicates with factory workers who can, for example, send a photo of a machine for the program to detect any problems or check that it is correctly installed.

Aleph Alpha's resources are modest compared to those available to OpenAI, which has received major financing from Microsoft. But the German startup believes it has at least one major advantage—it will keep customer data in Europe.

'Increasing efficiency'

But Aleph Alpha CEO Jonas Andrusis told AFP that Europe's contribution to the AI revolution must go "beyond regulation". At another stand at the Ha-



HANOVER: In this file photo, Philip Singer, business architect for data and AI at Hewlett-Packard Enterprises (HPE), operates a robot at the HANNOVER MESSE 2023, the Hanover technology fair, in Hanover. —AFP

nover fair, Siemens was also exhibiting an application aimed at improving factory performance.

In partnership with Microsoft, the German industrial conglomerate is this year planning to bring out a new version of the Teams messaging platform. It will feature ChatGPT and be specifically designed to help workers and spot defaults in products. Microsoft and Siemens, who say they are working with a number of clients in the automotive and aerospace industries, rejected accusation that AI will lead to job losses. Anthony Hemmelgarn, CEO of Siemens Digital Industries Software, said that 70 percent of issues were not being recorded and that AI was "not replacing anybody", as certain tasks were not getting done.

"With this historic project, we're not just bringing back manufacturing, we're bringing back a strong thriving economy for this community, and we're delivering a national anchor for Canada's electric vehicle supply chain," Trudeau told a news conference on Friday. He called the funding "a generational investment" in a new plant that is expected to generate about Can\$200 billion in value. Volkswagen, which announced in March plans to build the plant in St. Thomas, is investing Can\$7 billion in the 370-acre facility—about the size of nearly 400 football fields—which, according to a statement from Trudeau's office is "the largest electric vehicle-related investment in Canadian history." Construction of what is to be also the biggest manufacturing facility in Canada is set to start next year, while battery production for up to one million electric vehicles annually will begin in 2027. Volkswagen is also setting up a series of battery plants in Europe, the first of which opens this year in Sweden. This will be followed by another in Salzgitter, Germany, in 2025. —AFP

"It's all about increasing efficiency," he added. Another advantage that AI could bring is "alleviating the shortage of skilled workers", particularly in Germany, said Jochen Koeckler, head of the Hanover fair organizers. In Europe's biggest economy, almost 58 percent of manufacturers complain of workforce shortages, according to a study by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training published in December.

For Andrusis, AI will undoubtedly lead to huge upheavals in the world of work. But he also sought to offer assurances. "It's not like AI will take your job. But the company who will use AI will take the market share of the company who doesn't." —AFP

Canada pledges \$9.8bn subsidies for VW battery plant

OTTAWA: Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced Friday up to 13.2 billion Canadian dollars (\$9.8 billion) in subsidies over 10 years for Volkswagen's first overseas battery plant, to be built in St. Thomas, Ontario. The production support matches incentives by US President Joe Biden's administration, as Washington's trading partners work to keep up with subsidies under the ambitious Inflation Reduction Act amid anxieties surrounding it.

Already, European leaders fear EU-based companies could move to the US due to benefits from the act—which funnels some \$370 billion into subsidies for the United States' energy transition.

British retail sales dip as consumers shun high street

LONDON: British retail sales sank heavily in March, official data showed Friday, as consumers shunned the high street in the face of poor weather and a cost-of-living crisis. Sales by volume decreased 0.9 percent last month, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement. That was worse than expectations of a 0.5-percent decline, and followed a gain of 1.1 percent in February on strong buying at discount stores. Food sales were hit particularly hard by rampant inflation last month. "Retailers have been quick to point out that this (sales drop in March) was driven by poor weather conditions which discouraged spending in physical locations, but the broader issue runs much deeper than that," said Hargreaves Lansdown analyst Sophie Lund-Yates. —AFP

Lifestyle

World's 'oldest' tree able to reveal planet's secrets

In a forest in southern Chile, a giant tree has survived for thousands of years and is in the process of being recognized as the oldest in the world. Known as the "Great Grandfather," the trunk of this tree measuring four meters (13 feet) in diameter and 28 meters tall is also believed to contain scientific information that could shed light on how the planet has adapted to climatic changes.

Believed to be more than 5,000 years old, it is on the brink of replacing Methuselah, a 4,850-year-old Great Basin bristlecone pine found in California in the United States, as the oldest tree on the planet. "It's a survivor, there are no others that have had the opportunity to live so long," said Antonio Lara, a researcher at Austral University and Chile's center for climate science and resilience, who is part of the team measuring the tree's age.

The Great Grandfather lies on the edge of a ravine in a forest in the southern Los Rios region, 800 kilometers (500 miles) to the south of the capital Santiago.

It is a *Fitzroya cupressoides*, a type of cypress tree that is endemic to the south of the continent.

In recent years, tourists have walked an hour through the forest to the spot to be photographed beside the new "oldest tree in the world."

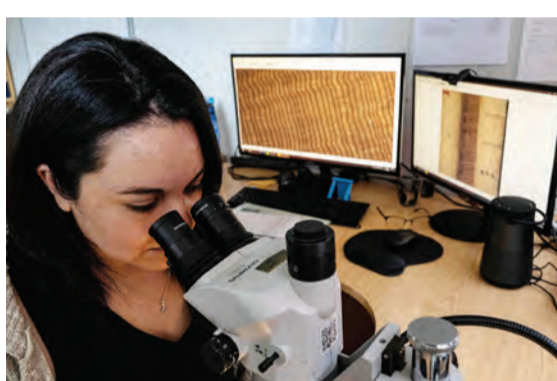
Due to its growing fame, the national forestry body has had to increase the number of park



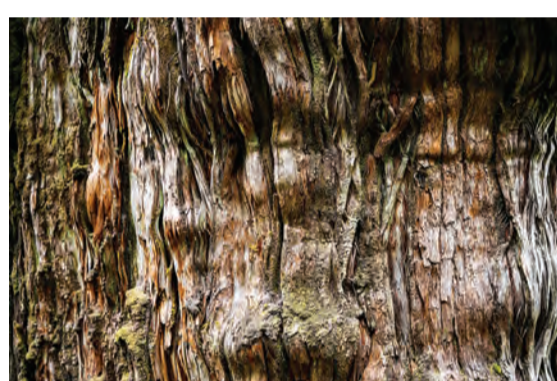
Antonio Lara, a researcher from the laboratory of the Faculty of Science and Climate of the Austral University, looks at larch trees at the Alerce Costero National Park in Valdivia, Chile. — AFP photos



Nancy Henriquez shows a wooden plaque where she is named the caretaker of the "Alerce Milenario" at her home in the Raulintal sector next to the Alerce Costero National Park in Valdivia, Chile.



Carmen Rodriguez looks at the rings of the "Alerce Milenario" with a microscope at the Dendrochronology laboratory of the Austral University in Valdivia, Chile.



Detail of the "Alerce Milenario" at the Alerce Costero National Park in Valdivia, Chile.



Germany's Pia Maier, an undergraduate student from the Austral University, investigates several cuts of a cypress tree (*Austrocedrus chilensis*) at the Dendrochronology laboratory of the Austral University in Valdivia, Chile.

rangers and restrict access to protect the Great Grandfather. By contrast, the exact location of Methuselah is kept a secret.

Also known as the Patagonian cypress, it is the largest tree species in South America. It lives alongside other tree species, such as coigue, plum pine and tepa, Darwin's frogs, lizards, and birds such as the chucaco tapaculo and Chilean hawk. For centuries its thick trunk has been chopped down to build houses and ships, and it was heavily logged during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Excitement in scientific community

Park warden Anibal Henriquez discovered the tree while patrolling the forest in 1972. He died of a heart attack 16 years later while patrolling the same forest on horseback. "He didn't want people and tourists to know (where it was) because he knew it was very valuable," said his daughter Nancy Henriquez, herself a park warden.

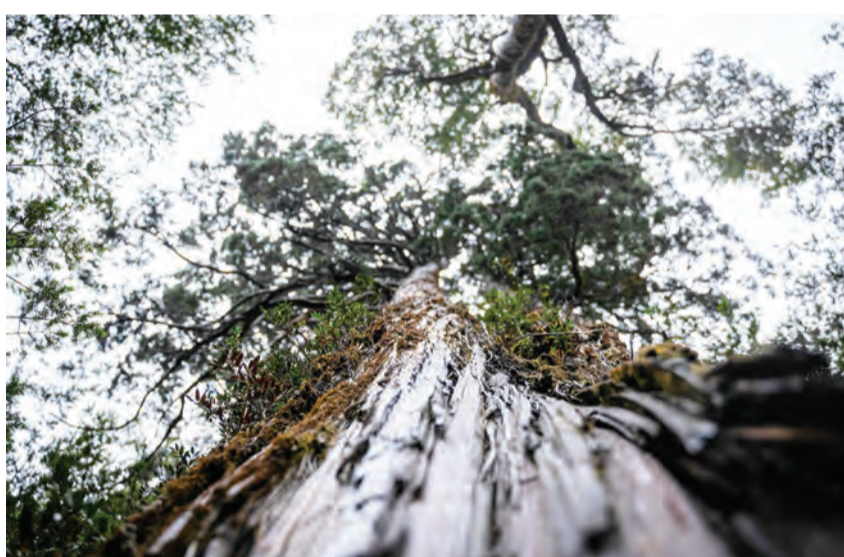
Henriquez's nephew, Jonathan Barichivich, grew up playing amongst the *Fitzroya* and is now one of the scientists studying the species. In 2020, Barichivich and Lara managed to extract a sample from the Great Grandfather using the longest manual drill that exists, but they did not reach the center.

They estimated that their sample was 2,400 years old and used a predictive model to calculate the full age of the tree. Barichivich said that "80 percent of the possible trajectories show the tree would be 5,000 years old."

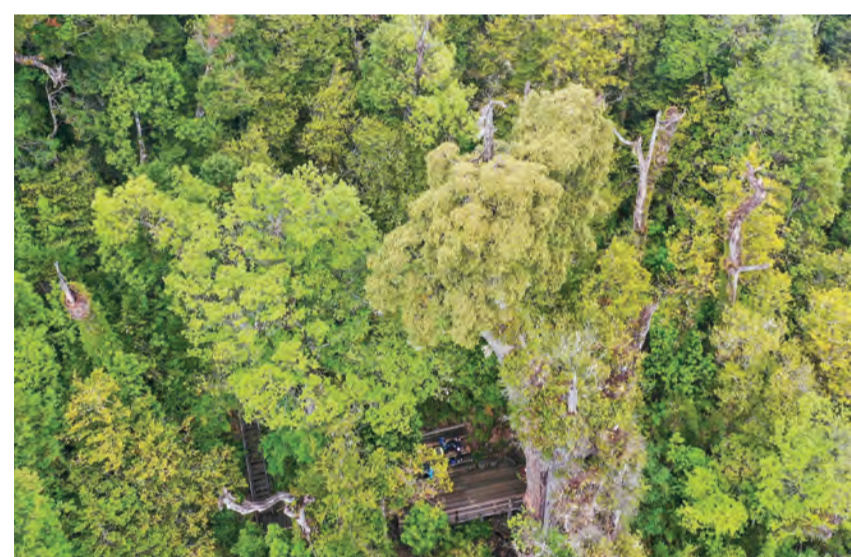
He hopes to soon publish the results. The study has created excitement within the scientific community given that dendrochronology -- the method of dating tree rings to when they were formed -- is less accurate when it comes to older trees as many have a rotten core.

'Symbols of resistance'

This is about more than just a competition to enter the record books though, as the Great Grandfather is a font of valuable information. "There are many other reasons that give value and sense to this tree and the need to protect it," said Lara. There are very few thousands-years-old trees on the planet. "The ancient trees have



View of the "Alerce Milenario" at the Alerce Costero National Park in Valdivia, Chile.



Antonio Lara, a researcher from the laboratory of the Faculty of Science and Climate of the Austral University, observes the "Alerce Milenario" at the Alerce Costero National Park in Valdivia, Chile.



View of the roots of several larch trees at the Alerce Costero National Park in Valdivia, Chile.



View of the "Alerce Milenario" at the Alerce Costero National Park in Valdivia, Chile.

genes and a very special history because they are symbols of resistance and adaptation. They are nature's best athletes," said Barichivich.

"They are like an open book and we are like the readers who read every one of their rings," said Carmen Gloria Rodriguez, an assistant researcher at the dendrochronology and global

change laboratory at Austral University. Those pages show dry and rainy years, depending on the width of the rings.

Fires and earthquakes are also recorded in those rings, such as the most powerful tremor in history that hit this area in 1960. The Great Grandfather is also considered a time capsule that can

offer a window into the past. "If these trees disappear, so too will disappear an important key about how life adapts to changes on the planet," said Barichivich. — AFP

Air pollution kills 1,200 children a year

Air pollution still causes more than 1,200 premature deaths a year in under 18s across Europe and increases the risk of chronic disease later in life, the EU environmental agency said Monday.

Despite recent improvements, "the level of key air pollutants in many European countries remain stubbornly above World Health Organization" (WHO) guidelines, particularly in central-eastern Europe and Italy, said the EEA after a study in over 30 countries, including the 27 members of the European Union.

The report did not cover the major industrial nations of Russia, Ukraine and the United Kingdom, suggesting the overall death tolls for the continent could be higher.

The EEA announced last November that 238,000 people died prematurely because of air pollution in 2020 in the EU, plus Iceland,

Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey.

"Air pollution causes over 1,200 premature deaths per year in people under the age of 18 in Europe and significantly increases the risk of disease later in life," the agency said. The study was the agency's first to focus specifically on children.

"Although the number of premature deaths in this age group is low relative to the total for the European population estimated by EEA each year, deaths early in life represent a loss of future potential and come with a significant burden of chronic illness, both in childhood and later in life," the agency said.

It urged authorities to focus on improving air quality around schools and nurseries as well as sports facilities and mass transport hubs.

"After birth, ambient air pollution increases the risk of several health problems, including asthma, reduced lung function, respiratory infections and allergies," the report noted.

Seven million dead annually

Poor air quality can also "aggravate chronic conditions like asthma, which affects nine percent of children and ad-

olescents in Europe, as well as increasing the risk of some chronic diseases later in adulthood".

Ninety-seven percent of the urban population were in 2021 exposed to air that did not meet WHO recommendations, according to figures released Monday.

The EEA had last year underlined that the EU was on track to meet its target of reducing premature deaths by 50 percent by 2030 compared with 2005.

In the early 1990s, fine particulates caused nearly a million premature deaths a year in the 27 EU nations. That fell to 431,000 in 2005.

The situation in Europe looks better than for much of the planet, says the WHO, which blames air pollution for seven million deaths globally each year, almost as many as for cigarette smoking or bad diets.

Several hundred thousand of the deaths concern children under 15.

It took until September 2021 to reach agreement to tighten limits set for major pollutants back in 2005.

In Thailand alone, where toxic smog chokes parts of the country, health officials said last week that 2.4 million people had sought hospital treatment for medical prob-



In this file photo huge clouds of steam come out of the chimneys of coal power plant in Niederaussem, western Germany. — AFP

lems linked to air pollution since the start of the year.

Fine particulate matter, primarily from cars and trucks and which can

penetrate deeply into the lungs, is considered the worst air pollutant, followed by nitrogen dioxide and ozone. — AFP

Lifestyle

Climate activists heap up 650,000 cigarette butts in Portugal



German environmental activist, Andreas Noe, 34 years old, poses with a pile of cigarette butts, collected in one week, at Comercio square in Lisbon.

Climate activists gathered 650,000 cigarette butts and piled them up in the heart of Portugal's capital Lisbon on Sunday to raise awareness about the often-overlooked form of pollution.

They collected enough stubs to fill 40 plastic buckets, then heaped them into a mound for the



German environmental activist, Andreas Noe, 34 years old, poses with a pile of cigarette butts, collected in one week, at Comercio square in Lisbon.

German climate campaigner behind the stunt to climb on. Andreas Noe wore a breathing apparatus to protect him from the toxins in the non-biodegradable butts. "We asked everyone in Portugal to take part in this community project to raise awareness about plastic pollution, because plastic is hidden in cigarette butts and many people don't know it," the 34-year-old



A child dumps cigarette butts on a pile of them, collected in one week, at Comercio square in Lisbon.

said. He said the simple cigarette butt was a "beautiful example of how someone can start to take action" against littering, ocean pollution and ultimately the climate crisis.

Two years ago, the activist and surfing enthusiast collected about a million cigarette butts in two months. "We want to put an end to this problem by encouraging people to throw their butts in the bin or pocket ashtrays -- anywhere but on the ground," said David Figueira, who took part in the project. — AFP



German environmental activist, Andreas Noe, 34 years old, throws cigarette butts at Comercio square in Lisbon. — AFP photos



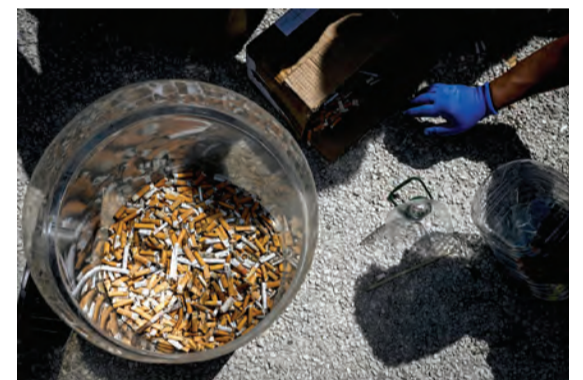
A child looks at a pile of cigarette butts at Comercio square in Lisbon.



Containers, full of cigarette butts collected in one week, are displayed at Comercio square in Lisbon.



Containers, full of cigarette butts collected in one week, are displayed at Comercio square in Lisbon.



Environmental activists collect cigarette butts from people at Comercio square in Lisbon.



A man reads a sticker reading "Cigarette butts on the ground, no!" on a container full of butts collected in a week, at Comercio square in Lisbon.



People look at a pile of cigarette butts, collected in one week, at Comercio square in Lisbon.

France frog fair faces criticism

A traditional frog fair held in France on Saturday has come under fire from activists for undermining biodiversity and causing suffering to the amphibians. The annual weekend gathering in Vittel sees visitors consume several tonnes of frogs legs, largely imported from Asia, where campaigners say frog populations are dwindling.

Frogs legs are a traditional delicacy in France and are typically fried in butter and garlic. "For this event alone, up to 350,000 frogs are caught, especially in Indonesia and Turkey, where frog populations are already in alarming decline," said Charlotte Nithart of French NGO Robin des Bois (Robin Hood).

Sandra Altherr of the German Pro Wildlife organization highlighted animal welfare issues, saying "frogs (legs) are amputated (while they're) alive on the other side of the world".

"It's absurd. The frogs that occur in the wild here in Europe are protected under EU law," the two associations said in a joint statement calling for a ban on imports to the European Union.

"But the EU still tolerates the collection of millions of animals in other countries."

Daniel Gillet, president of Taste-Cuisses de Grenouilles in Vittel, told AFP the event was "unique in France" and attracted thousands of visitors.

"This fair is almost 50 years old. It's not the first time that we've eaten frogs that aren't French, because there are very few farms and they don't have substantial output." — AFP

Great-granny's cannabis butter cooks up high school trouble

An Australian great-grandmother said she is "extremely remorseful" after letting a teenager use her cannabis butter to cook a batch of muffins to share with friends at school.

Pam Annette Bickerton, 73, faced a pre-sen-

tencing hearing at Adelaide Magistrates Court last week, after admitting to a count of supplying or administering a controlled drug to a child, court documents showed. She had prepared the drug-laced butter to help deal with a sleeping disorder, the April 19 court hearing heard, according to a report in the Adelaide Advertiser.

The teenager, who has not been identified, woke up the great-grandmother to ask to use the cannabis butter for some muffins, the court was reportedly told. "Still in a state of tiredness and unfortunately ... she said 'go for it - just make sure that you clean up afterwards'," her lawyer

was quoted as saying.

Bickerton was "extremely remorseful", the court heard. Magistrate Justin Wickens said it was "somewhat concerning" that the elderly defendant knew the teen would share the muffins with friends.

"As it turns out, it went to school, which is unfortunate but that is not something that was in your client's mind at the time," he was quoted as saying. Bickerton is due back in court for sentencing on May 4. — AFP

Baldwin manslaughter charges formally dropped

Manslaughter charges against Alec Baldwin over a fatal shooting on a movie set were formally dropped by prosecutors Friday. A New Mexico court filing said the case against Baldwin "is dismissed without prejudice," but investigations remain "active and on-going" into the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins during the filming of the Western "Rust" in New Mexico in 2021.

Baldwin was holding a Colt .45 handgun during rehearsals when it discharged, killing Hutchins and wounding director Joel Souza.

He has always insisted he was told the gun was safe and that he did not pull the trigger, and had pleaded not guilty to the charges.

The court filing said "new facts were revealed that demand further investigation and forensic analysis which cannot be completed" in time for a preliminary hearing that had been scheduled for May.

The Los Angeles Times reported that prosecutors had received information that the gun had been modified in a manner increasing the odds it might have misfired, citing three

anonymous sources.

The criminal case against Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, the young armorer who had been responsible for weapons on the set of the film, remains ongoing.

At a court status conference Friday, all parties agreed to postpone a preliminary hearing for those proceedings until August.

Filming of "Rust" resumed at a new location in Montana this week, producers said Friday, with Baldwin and Souza among those returning to complete the film.

Principal photography is scheduled to be completed by the end of May. The criminal case against Baldwin had hit multiple legal potholes in the past few months.

Baldwin and Gutierrez-Reed were each initially charged with two alternative counts of voluntary manslaughter.

But a so-called "firearm enhancement" which would have increased the jail term if they were convicted, was dropped soon afterwards, due to an alleged technical error by prosecutors. Santa Fe District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies and the



This file photo taken courtesy of Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office shows actor Alec Baldwin being processed after the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins at the Bonanza Creek Ranch in Santa Fe, New Mexico. — AFP

case's previous special prosecutor Andrea Reeb both stepped aside from overseeing the case against Baldwin and Gutierrez-Reed.

In a statement Thursday, the new special prosecutors noted that the

decision to drop charges "does not absolve Mr Baldwin of criminal culpability and charges may be refiled." — AFP

Lifestyle

Here's the story: Jordan initiative shapes young minds

At a school in Amman, a Jordanian volunteer opened a book and asked: "Who's excited to hear a story?" -- part of an initiative to get children to find joy in reading. The "We Love Reading" initiative, which is present in 65 countries worldwide, was founded by Rana Dajani, an associate professor of biology and biotechnology at the Hashemite University in Jordan.

She spent five years living in the United States, where she enjoyed reading to her children.

But when she returned, Dajani noticed schoolchildren in her home country were rarely reading for pleasure. She decided to change all that, and in 2006 "We Love Reading" was born.

"In the beginning, I noticed that children only read for their school lessons, so I did research and found that the best way is for an adult to read stories to them aloud," Dajani told AFP.

Dajani began with small weekly sessions in a mosque near her house in Amman's Tabarbour neighborhood. "On the first day, only 25 children came," she recalled.

Undaunted, she carried on and the initiative gradually expanded, training volunteers nationwide. "We Love Reading" is now present across Jordan, with 4,000 trained volunteers ranging in age from 18 to 100. "Our programme educates leaders, and it is strong and based on scientific research," Dajani said.

According to her, the initiative has so far helped about half a million children in Jordan, including tens of thousands of refugees who had fled the conflict in Syria.



In this picture Jordanian teacher Huda Abu Al-Khair (right) reads stories to children in a classroom in Amman. — AFP photos



In this picture Rana Dajani, Jordanian molecular biologist and tenured professor of biology and biotechnology at Hashemite University and founder and director of the "We love Reading" (WLR) programme, holds books as she poses for photos at a library in Amman.



In this picture Rana Dajani poses for a photo at a library in Amman.

'Real paper books'

Each "safir" -- ambassador in Arabic -- reads stories to children anywhere they choose, be it a mosque, church, school or nursery. Dajani said it was important not to read stories on electronic devices, "which we want to keep them away from, because it would be a losing battle. We want real paper books." Illiteracy rates in Jordan have plummeted from 88 percent in 1952 to 5.1 percent in 2020, according to official figures, and the programme seeks to ignite a passion for reading among children.

"Through reading, thinking patterns change

and the child's brain and psychological health develop," Dajani said. So far, "We Love Reading" has produced 33 titles for children on topics ranging from the environment, refugees and bullying to gender, social communication and science.

The initiative has also expanded to other countries, with 8,000 trained volunteers internationally, and has won plaudits from across the globe including a UNESCO award in 2017.

Huda Abu Al-Khair has been a reading volunteer in Jordan for four years. "I loved the idea of the programme, as it develops children's language, ideas and concepts," Khair told AFP.

"That's why I read to children in kindergarten, during school trips, in public parks and at family gatherings -- whenever I get the chance," she added. Back at the school in the capital Amman,



In this picture Jordanian teacher Huda Abu Al-Khair reads stories to children in a classroom in Amman.

she gathered round her a group of some 20 children aged four and five, and began to read. "I am Dina, and this is my brother Hani. We are twins. I came to life minutes before him, but we're alike, and we both love birds, swallows

and hummingbirds." Her narration is accompanied by chirping from a tape recorder, the only nod to modern technology. "Education at a young age is like engraving in stone," said Khair. It lasts a lifetime. — AFP

Syrians gripped by grim Ramadan TV series alluding to Assad dynasty

A Ramadan television series featuring sinister plotlines inspired by President Bashar Al-Assad's family has had Syrians glued to their screens, from those hunkered in the war-torn country to those abroad.

The series, "Smile, General", is set in an imaginary Arab country. But references to the Assad dynasty, in power in Syria for more than half a century, are clear through various characters and aspects of the plot. Television viewership in the Middle East traditionally peaks during Ramadan, when the faithful enjoy programming after breaking their daily fast at sunset. The series has been screening on a TV channel broadcasting to Syria's rebel-held areas and on a Qatar-owned broadcaster.

It is also streamed on YouTube, where Syrians living in government-controlled areas can clandestinely watch online.

"It's the first time in the Arab world that a series alludes to the Syrian regime," said Fidaa Saleh, a 35-year-old activist living in Jindayris, in Syria's rebel-held northwest.

"The Syrian people by now know perfectly well that what's evoked in this series is but a drop in the ocean of the regime's crimes," he added.

Director Orwa Mohamad said the series is "fiction, not a documentary" and aims to "dismantle the mechanics of dictatorships and of taking power by force". "But it's clear the series refers to current and past Syrian regimes, mixing together the periods" of Assad and his father Hafez, who took power in a 1970 coup, he added.

Filmed mostly in Turkey, each episode starts with a quote from Machiavelli.

'Shines a light'

The show revolves around a power struggle between the president and his volatile younger brother, who controls the military.

Mohamad said it was inspired both by the rivalry between Hafez Al-Assad and his younger brother Rifaat, who mounted a failed 1984 coup, as well as that between Bashar and his younger brother Maher, who commands an elite army division.

The show also features a rebellious sister, an allusion to Bushra Al-Assad, who moved to Dubai after her husband, a senior security official, was killed in a 2012 suicide attack.

The series includes arrests, killings, corruption, Islamists, foreign powers, and a neighboring country resembling Lebanon, which Syria occupied from 1976 to 2005. In the show, a retired military officer

reveals ghastly skeletons in the regime's closet.

"It's a great series that shines a light on the suffering of the Syrian people and refers to the hereditary transfer of power," said shopkeeper Rida Saidi, 52.

He said he followed the show every night from a tent along with others in the Deir Ballut displacement camp in Syria's northwest.

Syria's civil war broke out in 2011 after Assad's repression of peaceful anti-government demonstrations escalated into a deadly conflict that pulled in foreign powers and global jihadists.

More than half a million people have been killed and around half of Syria's pre-war population forced from their homes. The most prominent actors in "Smile, General" are exiled Syrians known for opposing the government, including Maxim Khalil, who plays the sharp, moustachioed president.

Abdel Hakeem Qutaifan, who plays a powerful intelligence chief, lives abroad after being imprisoned for nine years under Hafez al-Assad.

'Reality is worse'

Hussam Hazber, 32, fled Syria four years ago and said the presence of actors "who stood beside the Syrian people during the revolution" was one of the reasons he was watching the show.

The series "crosses all red lines the regime placed on dramas in Syria", said the student and activist living in the Turkish city of Gaziantep.

Other characters include a first lady who, like Asma al-Assad, extends her influence into the economic sphere. A ruthless businessman appears to be inspired by Assad's tycoon cousin Rami Makhlof. Sami al-Doraid, 53, who was arrested in Damascus for taking part in protests early in the uprising, said the series "re-opens wounds".

"It clearly shows the crimes of this dictatorship. When it shows the prisons, it reminded me of when I was arrested -- but the reality is even worse," said the teacher, now living in the rebel-held northwest.

In Damascus, people refer to the show as "the other series", to avoid problems.

"Though it didn't meet our expectations, I watch it because it touches on the situation in Syria," said Ibrahim, a teacher in his 30s who declined to provide his surname due to security concerns.

"I get together with friends and we try to guess which scene corresponds to what in real life." — AFP



These handout pictures provided by Metafora Production company shows Syrian actor Maxim Khalil during shooting of the TV series "Ayuha al-General" in Istanbul. — AFP photos



These handout pictures provided by Metafora Production company shows a scene from the TV series "Ayuha al-General" during shooting in Istanbul.



A handout picture provided by Metafora Production company shows a scene from the TV series "Ayuha al-General" during shooting in Istanbul.

Sports

Swiatek beats Sabalenka to win second straight Stuttgart title

Red-hot favourite for another title at Roland Garros

BERLIN: World number one Iga Swiatek defeated Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka in straight sets to win her second consecutive Stuttgart title on Sunday. Swiatek eased past her second-ranked Belarusian opponent 6-3, 6-4 on the clay in one hour and 50 minutes.

A first tournament triumph since February will give Swiatek a confidence boost ahead of her French Open title defence in May. "I wanted to win really, really hard, but I knew that I can't really focus on that and just I have to keep doing my job as I did in previous matches," she said.

"I'm pretty happy that I could kind of have a good mentality and just focus on what I want to do tennis-wise." Sunday's match was a repeat of last year's final in Stuttgart, which Swiatek also won in dominant fashion, 6-2, 6-2.

She has now sat atop the WTA rankings for more than a year and is a red-hot favourite for another title at Roland Garros. The US Open champion broke serve late in the first set, taking advantage of an uncharacteristic miss from Sabalenka.

Swiatek broke again in the opening game of the second, after which notable frustration began to creep into the world number two's game. Sabalenka made a number of unforced errors, allowing Swiatek to gain control of the match.

Swiatek converted her first match point with a smooth backhand to chalk up another impressive victory. The 21-year-old came into the match fresh after playing just 18 minutes of Saturday's semi-final before her opponent Ons Jabeur retired hurt.

Sabalenka beat Anastasia Potapova 6-1, 6-2 on Saturday. Swiatek is the first player to win back-to-back Stuttgart titles since Angelique Kerber in 2015 and 2016. Swiatek now holds a 5-2 record against Sabalenka and has won all eight of her matches on the Stuttgart clay. It was the first time a world number one had faced the world number two on clay since the 2013 French Open final, when Serena Williams beat Maria Sharapova. Sabalenka has lost her past three Stuttgart finals, two of which have been played against Swiatek. The Belarusian lost the 2021 final to Australia's Ashleigh Barty. — AFP



STUTTGART: Poland's Iga Swiatek celebrates with the trophy after the Women's Tennis Grand Prix WTA tournament final match against Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka (2nd right) in Stuttgart, south-western Germany. — AFP

'I'm not Nadal's replacement,' says Alcaraz

BARCELONA: Carlos Alcaraz insisted Sunday that he is not Rafael Nadal's "replacement" as the teenager comfortably defended his Barcelona title, bolstering his bid to succeed his compatriot as French Open champion.

The 19-year-old brushed aside Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 6-4 to add the Barcelona trophy to wins in Buenos Aires and Indian Wells in 2023. He now has nine career titles. With 14-time French Open champion Nadal sidelined since January with a hip injury and world number one and two-time Roland Garros winner Novak Djokovic struggling with an elbow problem, Alcaraz reinforced his credentials as a major contender to add the clay-court Grand Slam title to the US Open he captured last year.

However, he was quick to dampen speculation that he is the French Open champion-in-waiting, just five weeks out from the second major of the year in Paris. "I don't want to be anyone's replacement," said world number two Alcaraz when confronted with his status as heir apparent to Nadal who turns 37 in June. Nadal hasn't played since his second round exit at the Australian Open and has missed Masters events at Indian Wells, Miami and Monte Carlo as well as sitting out Barcelona for a second successive year. "In the two years that Rafa hasn't been here, I've been lucky or, let's say, I've won the title," said Alcaraz who defended his Barcelona title without dropping a set. His win on Sunday was his fourth in four meetings against fifth-ranked Tsitsipas.

'Build our history'

"I've always wanted to play against the best, it's a shame that we haven't been able to enjoy Rafa these last two years," added Alcaraz. "Let's hope he continues to play for a long time and that we can enjoy his tennis, but obviously we are not here to take over from anyone, but to build our own history." Alcaraz's caution is justified. Despite Nadal's continuing injury woes, he boasts a stunning win-loss record at the French Open of 112 wins against just three losses since his title-winning 2005 debut.

Two of those defeats came against Djokovic who shares the men's record of 22 majors with Nadal. Djokovic reached that mark with a 10th Australian Open victory in January. Despite concerns over his elbow, he knows that traditionally he improves as the clay season progresses — his record shows two Monte Carlo titles, three at Madrid and six in Rome, the last significant event before Roland Garros.

Djokovic has successfully bounced back from elbow worries in the past — in February 2018, he needed surgery on the injury but still won Wimbledon and the US Open later that year. Both Nadal and Djokovic are sitting out the Madrid Masters where Alcaraz is the defending champion.

"Roland Garros is a clear short-term objective," added Alcaraz. "It's a tournament I really want to win, but now we are focused on Madrid and then Rome. Winning the tournament here in Barcelona gives me extra confidence for what's to come." Holger Rune, like Alcaraz also just 19, defended his Munich title on Sunday but unlike the Spaniard, had to battle back from the brink of defeat. Plagued by a shoulder injury, which needed a medical time-out, the Dane came back from 5-2 down in the third set and saved four match points to see off Botic van de Zandschulp 6-4, 1-6, 7-6 (7/3) in a rematch of last year's final.

"It is the last match and the last push, so you try to find a way," said Rune who heads to Madrid having never previously played in the tournament. Also heading to Madrid with confidence is women's world number one Iga Swiatek, the reigning US and French Open champion.

On Sunday, she defeated Australian Open champion and second-ranked Aryna Sabalenka 6-3, 6-4 to claim a second successive Stuttgart title. "I wanted to win really, really hard, but I knew that I can't really focus on that and just I have to keep doing my job as I did in previous matches," said the Pole. "I'm pretty happy that I could kind of have a good mentality and just focus on what I want to do tennis-wise." — AFP

World Handball Championship

KUWAIT: Kuwait Handball National Team left for Greece for a training camp in preparation for the World Handball Championship to be held (Germany-Greece) from June 20th until July 3rd. The training camp will continue until May 1st.

Kuwait team ended in the third group after the draw along with Portugal, Costa Rica and Brazil. The delegation is headed by Handball Federation President Shibeeb Al-Hajiri accompanied by Board Member Mishal Al-Qabandi.

Team Manager Abdelaziz Al-Zaabi said the handball federation received an invitation from its Greek counterpart to have a training camp for both teams in preparation for the World Cup.



Equestrian team to hold ten-day training camp

KUWAIT: Kuwait Special Olympics Equestrian team will hold a ten-day training camp in Cairo in preparation for the Special Olympics World Games 2023 to be held in Berlin from 12th to 26th June.

Riders Nawaf Abdelaziz Al-Qassar and Basma Bassam Al-Busaili will be under the supervision of trainers Mohammad Al-Kandari and Sarah Buhandi. The delegation is headed by Tomooh Sports Club for Mental Disability Board Member Fahad Al-Sahli and Deputy Chairwoman of the club Huda Al-Khalidi. Al-Sahli said Kuwait Mental Disability Equestrian team succeeded in its first participation in winning 3 gold and 3 silver medals in the National Competition of the Special Olympics in Egypt.

He said Kuwait Special Olympics is keen on



providing the suitable environment and support to ensure the development of sports activities for the mentally disabled and support their inclusion

in the society through sports programs. Kuwait will participate in 10 singles and teams games in the world games.

Kuwait wins gold, silver in triathlon

KUWAIT: The Triathlon Club and Federation players won two gold and a silver medal during their participation in Ibiza Triathlon of Senses in Spain as they prepare for Spain's multi distance championship.

Abdallah Al-Shimmari won the gold medal of the super sprint, while Hamad Al-Khalidi won the gold of the ages categories sprint, while the silver medal was won by Rabeea Al-Hajiri in the super sprint. Federation President Rashid Al-Kandari congratulated the winners and wished them success in their upcoming events as they represent Kuwait as best as possible.



Indian wrestlers demand arrest of ex-federation chief

NEW DELHI: Top Indian wrestlers, including Olympians and Commonwealth Games champions, were on the streets of New Delhi on Monday to demand the arrest of the sport's former federation chief over allegations of sexual harassment and intimidation.

The wrestlers, both men and women, mounted protests in January demanding an investigation into then Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. The Indian Olympic Association formed a panel to investigate, but the athletes say there has been insufficient action since then.

"Some people manipulated our minds and damaged our protest," Olympic bronze medallist Sakshi Malik told reporters at the protest on Monday. "Now we will not repeat that. Now we appeal to all the sportspersons, political parties and elders of the wrestling world join us."

The athletes, including an underage wrestler, filed a complaint with police on Friday demanding a case of sexual assault be registered against Singh

and their allegations properly investigated. Police have not registered a case against Singh so far.

"If it goes on like this it obviously breaks the athletes' spirit," Tokyo Olympics bronze medallist Bajrang Punia, who is male, told AFP at the protest. Both Malik and Punia said the protest would continue until Singh, an MP for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, was arrested.

He has denied the allegations, saying they were a conspiracy to replace him in the legislature. Singh "is a powerful parliamentarian of the ruling party", said Punia. "The athletes are fearful for their lives but despite that they have shown courage and still no action is being taken. This is very saddening."

Broadcaster NDTV reported that the government was to disband the WFI and hand its affairs to a new panel to hold board elections, where Singh would not be allowed to stand. Last year India's national cycling team coach was sacked following sexual harassment charges.

India is a deeply hierarchical society, and some wrestlers say they were earlier intimidated into not coming forward because of their humble origins. India's #MeToo movement gathered momentum in 2018 after a Bollywood actress accused a senior actor of sexual harassment.

Soon after, other women came forward with multiple allegations, including against a former government minister, but activists say there has been little fundamental change. — AFP

IBAK conducts Ramadan Cup

KUWAIT: Ramadan Cup was introduced by Indian Badminton Association Kuwait (IBAK) in the interest of badminton lovers in Kuwait. It was held on the 20th and 21st of April, 2023. As everything has to end, the event concluded with the best players holding up the Winner's trophy crushing all other endowed teams.

It was indeed a battle of nerves between players of various categories with results as follows:

- Singles (Open)
 - o Winner - Shrihari G
 - o Runner-up - Amirsyazwan Al Razi
 - Flight 1 (Professional Doubles)
 - o Winner - Dhruva Bharadwaj, Amirsyazwan Al Razi
 - o Runner-up - Arshad NV, Roshan Sojan
 - Flight 2 (Advance Doubles)
 - o Winner - Isaac Abheek, Binu Sebastian
 - o Runner-up - Gowri Shanker, Subin Varghese
 - Flight 3 (Intermediate Doubles)
 - o Winner - Justin Manuel Jacob, Prathab Kumar
 - o Runner-up - Roland Allen, Edwin Bobby
 - Flight 4 (Lower Intermediate Doubles)
 - o Winner - Shruti Vagvala, Harsh Wankhade
 - o Runner-up - Alban D Souza, Suresh Pitta

The Ramadan Cup 2023 was inaugurated by ER. Mohamed Ismail, General Manager - Alowais International Company.

Sports

Timberwolves hold off Nuggets to stay alive, Warriors edge Kings

No NBA team has come back from 3-0 down to win a best-of-seven series

SAN FRANCISCO: Anthony Edwards scored 34 points, including a three-point dagger with 11.5 seconds left, as the Minnesota Timberwolves beat the Denver Nuggets 114-108 in overtime Sunday to stay alive in the NBA playoffs.

Western Conference top seeds Denver, led by 43 points from reigning two-time Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic, closed regulation on a 12-0 run to force overtime. But they were out-scored 18-12 in the extra session at the Target Center in Minneapolis as the Timberwolves pulled within 3-1 in the series.

Minnesota still face a daunting task — no NBA team has come back from 3-0 down to win a best-of-seven series. “See you in Denver, we’re going back,” said Edwards, whose 16 third-quarter points keyed a Timberwolves charge that carried them to a 12-point lead midway through the fourth.

Mike Conley added 19 points for Minnesota. Karl-Anthony Towns scored 17 points with 11 rebounds and Rudy Gobert added 14 points and 15 rebounds as the Timberwolves withstood another big night from Jokic.

The Serbian star matched his playoff scoring high and added 11 rebounds and six assists. The teams swapped the lead four times in overtime, but Nuggets coach Michael Malone said too many defensive lapses in the extra session doomed his team.

“You hold them to 16 points in the fourth quarter, then (they have) 18 in five minutes,” Malone said. “That’s the hardest thing to stomach about this game is that when the game was on the line, we were unwilling and unable to get the necessary stops.”

‘Sloppy’ Curry

It was the second Western Conference thriller of the day, after the Golden State Warriors held off a ferocious fourth-quarter fightback from the Sacramento Kings to secure a 126-125 victory that leveled their series at two games apiece.

Harrison Barnes almost snatched victory for Sacramento at the buzzer, but his long-range effort bounced off the rim to leave the NBA champions celebrating. Stephen Curry led the Warriors with 32 points — and breathed a sigh of relief after two uncharacteristic blunders in a frenetic finale at the Chase Center. Curry missed a wide-open three-pointer with his team leading 126-121 with less than a minute remaining. He then erroneously called a timeout when the Warriors had none left, earning a technical foul and allowing Sacramento’s Malik Monk to make it a four-point game with a free throw.

De’Aaron Fox’s three-pointer pulled Sacramento within 126-125 and Curry missed another floater to give the Kings a final chance. “It was kind of sloppy not knowing how many timeouts we had left, and a couple of dagger shots didn’t go in — but we did what we needed to do defensively in those last 10 seconds,” a relieved Curry said.

Klay Thompson added 26 points and Jordan Poole had 22. Draymond Green, back from suspension, scored 12 points with 10 rebounds and seven assists off the bench to help the Warriors withstand a 38-point performance from Fox.

Knicks, Celtics close in

In the Eastern Conference, the New York Knicks and Boston Celtics moved within a victory of advancing, the Knicks beating the Cleveland Cavaliers 102-93 and the Celtics downing Atlanta 129-121 to each take 3-1 series leads.

Jalen Brunson drained five three-pointers on the way to 29 points for the Knicks, who again electrified Madison Square Garden. With just one win from three more games the Knicks can advance past the first round for the first time since 2013.

Darius Garland led Cleveland with 23 points but Donovan Mitchell scored just 11 — only two in the second half. The Cavs will try to extend the series



MINNEAPOLIS: Rudy Gobert #27 of the Minnesota Timberwolves dunks the ball during Round 1 Game 4 of the 2023 NBA Playoffs against the Denver Nuggets on April 23, 2023 at Target Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. — AFP

when they host game five on Wednesday. The Celtics can wrap up their series at home on Tuesday after bouncing back from a disappointing game-three defeat with a convincing victory in Atlanta.

Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown scored 31 points apiece for the Celtics, each delivering a dunk in the final minute as the Celtics thwarted the Hawks’ final rally bid. Hawks star Trae Young finished with a game-high 35 points and handed out 14 assists.

But Boston stepped up their defensive intensity and had an answer for every Atlanta run, never trailing after the first quarter. Brown got off to a slow start, making just one of his first seven shots. Then he got rid of the protective mask he’s worn since suffering a facial fracture in February and made 11 of 15. “Maybe it was all in my head,” Brown said. “I took it off and started to turn things around a little bit.” — AFP

Man Utd will fight to derail Man City’s treble bid: Ten Hag

LONDON: Erik ten Hag vowed Manchester United would “give everything” to prevent Manchester City from matching his club’s treasured treble after they beat Brighton to set up an FA Cup final against their fierce rivals.

United won 7-6 on penalties at Wembley on Sunday after the game finished goalless, with defender Victor Lindelof scoring the decisive spot-kick. It went some way to banishing the agony of their shocking Europa League performance in midweek, when they lost 3-0 to Sevilla in the quarter-finals to lose 5-2 on aggregate.

But they will have to find more of a cutting edge in the FA Cup final on June 3 if they are to beat Pep Guardiola’s City, who are targeting the treble of Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup. City are favourites to win all three of the trophies this season after moving up through the gears in recent weeks. United were on course for three trophies of their own before Thursday’s blowout in Spain, but

they are still chasing a domestic double after winning the League Cup in February to end a six-year silverware drought.

United boss Ten Hag, speaking after the nail-biting Wembley shootout, praised his team’s ability to bounce back. “First we are physical, strong, we are mentally strong, so we showed the character and personality necessary... we were determined to win this game,” he said. But the Dutch boss said his men must learn to change the script during tough matches — they have suffered a number of punishing defeats this season, including a 6-3 defeat at City and a 7-0 reverse at Liverpool.

“What we have proved is that we can deal with setbacks, we can bounce back between games,” he said. “But now what we have to improve is to bounce back in a game in difficult situations or occasions, away stadiums — it doesn’t matter what, we have to show personality.”

United remain the only English club to have won the treble, completing the feat under former manager Alex Ferguson in 1999. They stopped Liverpool from winning all three trophies in 1977, winning the FA Cup final that year.

Ten Hag joked that he would not reveal the “key” to beating City, who lost 2-1 at Old Trafford in January. “I won’t tell you,” he said. “I’ll keep that for myself.” Ten Hag said he understood Unit-



LONDON: Manchester United’s Portuguese defender Diogo Dalot (R) challenges Brighton’s Japanese midfielder Kaoru Mitoma (C) during the English FA Cup semi-final football match between Manchester United and Brighton and Hove Albion at Wembley Stadium. — AFP

ed fans’ feelings about their unique achievement, issuing a defiant rallying call. “We will do everything to give them it, to give them the second trophy, everything that I have, everything that the team have, the staff have,” he said. “We will give everything to get that done.” — AFP

Marseille reclaim second after late Lyon own goal

PARIS: Marseille climbed back into second place in Ligue 1 on Sunday after a 2-1 win at Lyon following a farcical own goal by Malo Gusto with the final kick of the game. Cengiz Under put Marseille in front on the stroke of half-time before Alexandre Lacazette brought Lyon level midway through the second half with his 20th league goal of the season.

Lyon were punished for their failure to deal with a cross deep into added time as Sinaly Diomande hit Chelsea loanee Gusto with his attempted clearance and the ball ricocheted into the net. Marseille’s first league win in Lyon since 2007 sent them a point clear of third-placed Lens again and snapped their opponents’ seven-game unbeaten streak.

“I hope it’s a turning point but there’s still a lot of points to play for between now and the end of the season,” said Marseille coach Igor Tudor. “It’s a really valuable win but we’re still far from our objec-

tive. This goal in the final second is why people love football.”

Only the top two in Ligue 1 qualify automatically for the Champions League, with the team finishing third entering in the third qualifying round. However, third place will gain direct entry to the group stage if the winner of this season’s Europa League also qualifies for the continent’s elite club competition via their domestic championship.

Lyon had clawed to within five points of the European places following a run of just one defeat in 12 outings, but they were undone by their defensive frailties against Marseille. Under gave the visitors the lead when he slid in the rebound after Alexis Sanchez raced clear only to be denied by an inspired Anthony Lopes.

Lacazette continued his fine goalscoring form by turning in a cross from Corentin Tolisso on 68 minutes for his sixth goal in as many games. Lopes then pulled off a brilliant save to tip Jonathan Clauss’ strike onto the bar but could only watch on in horror after the late mix-up in his area.

Habib Diallo scored twice in a 2-0 win away to Reims to haul Strasbourg out of the relegation zone, while French Cup finalists Toulouse won 1-0 at Lorient. Montpellier overcame a red card for captain Teji



DECINES-CHARPIEU: Lyon’s French forward Bradley Barcola (R) fights for the ball with Marseille’s Burkina Faso defender Issa Kabore during the French L1 football match between Olympique Lyonnais (OL) and Olympique Marseille (OM) at Groupama Stadium in Decines-Charpieu, central-eastern France. — AFP

Savanier to beat Rennes 1-0 courtesy of a late Stephy Mavididi header. Nice are without a win in seven after losing 2-1 at home to Clermont, while Nantes grabbed an injury-time equalizer to draw 2-2 with Troyes and stay out of the bottom four on goal difference. — AFP

Rahane helps CSK steamroll Kolkata in IPL

KOLKATA: An electric 71 not out off just 29 balls by Ajinkya Rahane helped Chennai Super Kings rack up this season’s highest total of 234-5 as they blew away Kolkata Knight Riders and moved top of the IPL table on Sunday.

Despite a blistering 61 off 26 by Jason Roy and a valiant half-century by Rinku Singh, Kolkata fell 49 runs short in front of 60,000 fans at a noisy Eden Gardens stadium to suffer their fourth straight defeat. Put in to bat, opener Devon Conway hit his fourth consecutive half-century before Rahane and Shivam Dube launched into the Kolkata attack with a barrage of 10 sixes and eight fours to put on 85 off just 32 balls. Once Kulwant Khejroliya dismissed Dube in the 18th over Rahane moved up a gear, smashing 21 runs off the final five balls he faced to give Chennai their third-highest total in IPL history.

“I came into the season with a clear mind and trying to enjoy my batting,” Rahane said. “Playing with (Chennai captain) MS Dhoni, he makes you feel that you can achieve anything.” Kolkata got off to a disastrous start, with Sunil Narine falling for a duck to Akash Singh and Narayan Jagadeesan back in the hutch for one to leave the hosts flailing on 1-2.

Venkatesh Iyer struck a useful 20 before falling leg-before to Moeen Ali and Nitish Rana made 27 as Roy raced to his 50 accompanied by the dangerous Rinku. But the English bruiser was out-foxed by Maheesh Theekshana and Rinku — who made 53 not out — lost partners, with Andre Russell, David Wiese, Umesh Yadav and Varun Chakravarthy all out cheaply. Theekshana ended with 2 for 32 and Tushar Deshpande figures of 2 for 43.

In the first game of the day Faf du Plessis and Glenn Maxwell smashed another big partnership and Harshal Patel held his nerve as Royal Challengers Bangalore beat Rajasthan Royals by seven runs. Trent Boult trapped Virat Kohli leg-before first ball for his 100th wicket and the Kiwi quick had Bangalore reeling on 12-2 with the scalp of Shabbaz Ahmed at Bangalore’s M. Chinnaswamy Stadium. But Du Plessis — the top-scorer of the current Indian Premier League edition — and Maxwell soon got Bangalore out of trouble and ended up hammering 127 runs off only 66 balls. Du Plessis belted eight fours and two sixes before being run out for 62 off 39 deliveries. — AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000
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Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300

Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9
Clinics	
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Ferran Torres earns Barca narrow win over Atletico, Sevilla stun Villarreal

Takes a big step towards clinching their first title since 2019



BARCELONA: Atletico Madrid's Argentine defender Nahuel Molina (L) vies with Barcelona's Spanish defender Marcos Alonso during the Spanish league football match between FC Barcelona and Club Atletico de Madrid at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. — AFP

BARCELONA: Ferran Torres' strike helped Barcelona emerge from a recent slump to earn a 1-0 win over Atletico Madrid on Sunday in La Liga, taking a big step towards clinching their first title since 2019.

Sevilla, fresh from thrashing Manchester United in the Europa League, snatched a late winner to beat high-flying Villarreal 2-1, with Youssef En-Nesyri heading home in stoppage time.

After two consecutive goalless draws for Barca, second-place Real Madrid cut into their lead by beating Celta Vigo on Saturday, but Torres' low first-half finish restored their advantage to 11 points with eight games remaining.

Diego Simeone's Atletico, third, arrived as Spain's most in-form side but Torres stroked home from the edge of the box in the 44th minute to secure victory for Xavi Hernandez's side. Both sides had clear chances to score in the second half but Barcelona held on to their lead to inflict Atletico's first defeat since these sides met in January at the Metropolitan.

The hosts recorded a 23rd clean sheet of the season in La Liga, with Marc-Andre ter Stegen making

a fine save to deny Antoine Griezmann an equalizer. "I've always said Marc is among the top three goalkeepers in the world, and for our game, I think he's the best," Xavi told reporters.

"He's a guarantee, our defence too — defensive work is fundamental and Marc has been decisive at various moments," Xavi brought Frenkie de Jong back into the starting line-up after injury, but Pedri had to make do with a seat on the bench after his two-month absence.

Griezmann almost struck immediately against his former side, rattling the crossbar with a fine effort from distance within the first minute. Barcelona broke the deadlock just before the interval, with Raphinha controlling a long ball and crossing to Torres on the edge of the box, who swept the ball home past Jan Oblak. It was Barcelona's first goal since Torres' strike against Elche on April 1, ending a painful run of three games without finding the net.

Barcelona brought on Pedri to roars from the Camp Nou in the second half. Gavi and Raphinha both mishit efforts from point-blank range in the

space of a few seconds that should have put the game out of reach, before Ter Stegen palmed away Griezmann's cunning flick.

"It's a fact that being decisive makes you champions — if you're strong in both boxes, you have a much bigger chance of being champions," said Simeone. Barcelona had another golden opportunity to score a second but Robert Lewandowski selfishly shot wide from distance as he and Raphinha ran through on goal.

A simple pass would have left the Brazilian with an open goal, but desperate to improve his poor goalscoring form in 2023 — he only has four league goals since the turn of the year — Lewandowski went alone and scuffed his effort wide.

"Ferran is the happiest man in the world; Raphinha and Lewandowski are a bit sad," Xavi added. "Happy because the team has won, but sad because they have not scored. Lewandowski is the top scorer with 17 goals — imagine how all the others feel." The Polish striker was not punished for his profligacy as Barcelona survived a late handball appeal against

Sergio Busquets to triumph. After knocking Premier League giants Man United out of the Europa League in midweek, Sevilla produced another impressive victory against Villarreal, sixth. Since coach Jose Luis Mendilibar arrived the Andalusians are unbeaten in six games and far more solid than under his predecessor Jorge Sampaoli, climbing to 12th, eight points above the bottom three.

Rafa Mir slammed Mendilibar's revived side ahead in the first half but Villarreal defender Pau Torres pegged them back from close range. Jesus Navas came close to a winner for Sevilla with a low drive which whistled past the post, before En-Nesyri, who netted twice against United, sent the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan into raptures again in the 94th minute.

Valencia earned a comfortable 2-0 win on the road against bottom-of-the-table Elche, but remain in the relegation zone, 18th, as they have a worse head-to-head record with Almeria in 17th. Getafe's 3-1 defeat by Mallorca leaves the Madrid side 16th, just a point above Almeria and Valencia. — AFP

Raspadori fires Napoli past Juve and to the brink of title glory

MILAN: Giacomo Raspadori fired Napoli to the brink of their first Serie A title in over three decades on Sunday with his stoppage-time winner in a 1-0 triumph at Juventus which was packed with late drama. Italy international Raspadori was left completely unmarked to lash home a volley from Eljif Elmas' cross in the 93rd minute of a pulsating encounter in Turin, pushing Napoli 17 points ahead of second-placed Lazio, who lost at home to Torino on Saturday.

Raspadori's late winner means that Napoli, who were knocked out of the Champions League by AC Milan on Tuesday, can win Serie A for the first time since 1990 next weekend if they beat Salernitana and Lazio fail to win at Inter Milan.

"It was a very important goal, but we still have matches to win. Today gave us a great hand as we came from disappointment in the Champions League," said Raspadori. "We only have one thing on our minds, get three points against Salernitana."

Juve stay third, where they rose to on Thursday following the decision to revoke their 15-point penalty for illicit transfer activity, after their third straight league defeat. However they await a new ruling from the Italian Football Federation's (FIGC) appeals court to see if they will be handed a new points penalty, a decision which will have a big impact in Serie A's race for the Champions League. "We played well but we conceded a really idiotic goal," said Juve coach Massimiliano Allegri. "It's the 93rd minute you have to have bodies into the box to defend."

Juve thought they had snatched the points for them-



TURIN: Napoli's Italian defender Giovanni Di Lorenzo (L) fights for the ball with Juventus' Serbian midfielder Filip Kostic (C) during the Italian Serie A football match between Juventus and Napoli. — AFP

selves when substitute Angel Di Maria netted a brilliant solo effort with eight minutes remaining, only for referee Michael Fabbri to then rule it out for a foul on Stanislav Lobotka which Juve were convinced was a good tackle.

By that point Victor Osimhen should have already put Napoli ahead through one of the three golden chances he missed midway through the second half. First he clipped the outside of the post in the 70th minute following great work from Elmas and then headed a great opportunity straight at Wojciech Szczesny from the subsequent corner.

The away fans then had their heads in their hands three minutes later when Osimhen was brilliantly fed by Giovanni Di Lorenzo but could only smash his close-range finish over the bar. However after Di Maria had another goal chalked off for the ball going out of play, and Osimhen mis-controlled when clean through on goal, Raspadori popped up to take Napoli to potentially one match from fulfilling the dream of a generation of fans. — AFP

Newcastle hit Spurs for six to shatter their top four bid

LONDON: Tottenham's bid to qualify for the Champions League suffered a hammer blow as they conceded five times in the first 21 minutes of a humiliating 6-1 defeat at top-four rivals Newcastle on Sunday.

Cristian Stellini's side were buried by an avalanche of goals from Jacob Murphy and Alexander Isak, who both netted twice, and strikes from Joellinton and Callum Wilson. Harry Kane's reply was no consolation for woeful Tottenham, who look certain to miss out on a place in the Premier League's top four after a second successive loss.

The north Londoners are six points behind third-placed Newcastle and fourth-placed Manchester United, having played two more games than United and one more than Newcastle. Fifth-placed Tottenham host United on Thursday and a defeat against Erik ten Hag's team would surely end their faint hopes of salvaging their troubled campaign.

"It was my responsibility to decide how we play. We decided to do it differently because of the injuries, but it was wrong," interim boss Stellini said of switching to a back four. "It's very difficult to understand why the first 25 minutes were so bad. We were not prepared to play this type of tough game. To suffer, control the space and win duels."

There is a bleak future ahead for Tottenham, who have no permanent manager lined up for next season and no director of football after Fabio Paratici's resignation on Friday. Paratici stepped down after



NEWCASTLE: Newcastle United's English midfielder Joe Willock (R) vies with Tottenham Hotspur's Danish midfielder Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg during the English Premier League football match. — AFP

failing in his appeal against a 30-month worldwide FIFA ban for his involvement in allegations of false accounting at his former club Juventus.

Tottenham's heaviest defeat of the season was a new low for a club already in turmoil after Antonio Conte's departure by "mutual consent" in March after just 16 months in charge. Conte had exposed the rifts behind the scenes at Tottenham when he called the players "selfish" and criticized the club's culture in an explosive rant after their draw at lowly Southampton.

Tottenham haven't won a major trophy since 2008 and their latest setback could increase the chances of England striker Harry Kane asking to leave in the close season. Fans are also unhappy with chairman Daniel Levy, who has gone through a host of unsuccessful managers since sacking the popular Mauricio Pochettino in 2019. — AFP