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Roads, schools empty after Eid

Absent students, flexible working hours ease traffic • Real test next week



KUWAIT: Traffic on the roads was smooth as schools reopened after the Eid break and people returned to work on April 26, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: With the return of employees to work and school students to class after the Eid Al-Fitr holiday, the country's roads witnessed normal traffic without recording any bottlenecks or congestion on main or secondary roads. Security sources at the traffic department said all roads were passable at the beginning of the workday and no traffic jams were recorded.

They attributed this to the absence of a majority of school students, in addition to flexible working hours at all ministries, which contributed to the decrease in the number of vehicles traversing the roads, unlike previously when some highways witnessed complete paralysis and traffic grounded to a halt.

Sources said that the real test begins next week with the return of school students and some public bodies setting working hours for their employees that coincide with

school timings, which may lead to blocked roads and traffic jams.

Primary, middle and secondary school students extended the Eid Al-Fitr holiday, as is their custom before and after major events and holidays. Schools in most regions and governorates witnessed mass abstentions, while some of them were completely empty of students. The low turnout of students led school administrations to cancel the morning assembly, while the education ministry activated the grade deduction system for students who are absent without a medical excuse.

An educational source confirmed that all lessons will be repeated again in order to preserve the interests of the students, so that their absence does not affect their academic achievements and grades in the end-of-year exams, despite the high cost of absence to the study schedule and the mechanism for completing the curriculum.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Cub roams the streets

KUWAIT: Interior ministry personnel controlled a lion cub moving between streets and houses in Sabah Al-Ahmad, causing fear among residents of the area. Charges will be brought against its owner. (See Page 4)

Girl jumps from causeway

KUWAIT: Marine firemen rescued a girl who threw herself off Jaber Causeway Wednesday morning. The girl was found in good condition and handed to medical emergency personnel. (See Page 2)

Powerful Iranian cleric killed

TEHRAN: A powerful Iranian cleric has been killed in an armed attack, officials said Wednesday. "Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani was killed this morning in an armed attack... the assailant was also arrested and is now being investigated," IRNA news agency reported. The attack took place in a bank in the city of Babolsar. — AFP (See Page 5)



Ayatollah Abbas Ali

COVID deaths down 95%

GENEVA: The WHO said Wednesday that COVID-19 deaths had dropped by 95 percent since the start of the year — but warned the virus was still on the move. The World Health Organization said COVID-19 was here to stay and countries would have to learn how to manage its ongoing non-emergency effects, including post-COVID-19 condition, or Long COVID. —AFP

Wasmî demands recounting of votes in 2022 elections

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Former MP Obaid Al-Wasmî on Wednesday reiterated allegations that the Sept 2022 parliamentary elections had been marred with irregularities and demanded a recounting of the votes. Although the entire 2022 election process was annulled by the constitutional court in a ruling on March 19, Wasmî submitted a request to the National Assembly office to oversee the recounting of votes at the Assembly building to establish claims that the polls had been rigged.

He called on the Assembly office to invite all those concerned with the issue, in addition to foreign ambassadors and local and international media, to attend the proposed recounting of votes. During the scrapped polls, the opposition scored a landslide victory and unanimously voted veteran opposition figure Ahmad Al-Saadoun to be the speaker of the house. Wasmî himself won a seat from the fourth constituency.

Wasmî reiterated claims that wide-scale irregularities were committed during the elections and during the counting of votes, alleging that some opposition MPs secured a huge number of votes that is



Obaid Al-Wasmî

impossible to secure. He also claimed that during the polls, thousands of ineligible citizens were allowed to cast their votes, including some servicemen who are barred from voting by the election law, and some naturalized citizens who have not completed the required period of their citizenship to be able to vote.

The constitutional court on March 19 annulled the Sept 2022 elections on the grounds that the Amiri decree that dissolved the previous Assembly, known as the 2020 Assembly, was not in line with the constitution. The court also reinstated the dissolved 2020 Assembly. The government accepted the ruling, but HH the Amir decided last week to dissolve the 2020 house and call for fresh polls. The time and date of the new elections have not yet been set.

Wasmî urged HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah to answer his parliamentary questions about the number of voters who cast their votes during the 2022 elections. The Assembly office is expected to discuss Wasmî's request on Thursday.

Japan firm fails in historic Moon landing attempt

TOKYO: Japanese start-up ispace conceded Wednesday its ambitious attempt to become the first private company to land on the Moon had failed but pledged to move ahead with new missions. The unmanned Hakuto-R Mission 1 lander had been scheduled to arrive on the Moon's surface overnight but communications were lost during its descent and had still not been reestablished 25 minutes after the scheduled landing. "It has been determined that there is a high probability that the lander

eventually made a hard landing on the Moon's surface," ispace said in a statement. The company said its engineers were working to establish why the landing had failed. "Although we do not expect to complete the lunar landing at this time, we believe that we have fully accomplished the significance of this mission, having acquired a great deal of data and experience," ispace CEO and founder Takeshi Hakamada said. "What is important is to feed this knowledge and learning back to Mission 2 and beyond," he said.

Hakamada said the firm is developing two further attempts to land on the lunar surface and the setback would not change that. Still, the apparent crash marks a frustrating end to a mission that began with the

Continued on Page 6



TOKYO: Ispace CTO Ryo Ujiie speaks next to CEO Takeshi Hakamada during a press conference on April 26, 2023. — AFP

Astronomers reveal what ignites quasars

PARIS: Astronomers said Wednesday that for the first time they have confirmed what ignites quasars, the brightest and most powerful objects in the universe, which put galaxies in their "death throes". These celestial behemoths form when two galaxies smash into each other, the astronomers

said, warning that this could be the Milky Way's fate in a few billion years. Quasars are one of the most extreme objects in the universe, some shining with the brightness of a trillion stars despite being packed into the space of our Solar System.

They sit in the heart of galaxies, powered by supermassive black holes, requiring a huge amount of gas to be so staggeringly bright. But exactly what creates quasars has been a matter of debate since their discovery in the 1950s. In a new study, an international team of researchers said

Continued on Page 6



This handout photo shows an artist's impression of how the distant quasar P172+18 and its radio jets may have looked. — AFP



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Local

Kuwaiti retirees call for 'full' rights as cost of living soars

Reevaluating benefits, providing interest free loans among retiree demands

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Under the hashtag "Retirees_want_their_rights_in_full", thousands of retirees are demanding their rights on social media platforms, calling on the government to reevaluate their needs due to the high cost of living in the country. Adel Al-Dhubaeb tweeted that one of the most important rights claimed by retirees is to drop the benefits of salary replacements from insurance retroactively from the date of replacement. "Also, the share of the annual insurance profits should not be less than 10 percent. In addition, give retirees repetitive interest-free loans, on the condition of fully paying the previous loan," he said.

Om Bader was emotional about the retirees' situation. "Retirees are human beings — they're still alive. Why would you bury them? They have a family, children, house expenses, electricity and water bills and bank installments. Do you know retirees run away from children during Eid to avoid giving them Eid money? Hid-

ing with a broken and sad heart because he does not have enough money to give children Eidiya to make them happy. This is unfair," she said.

As for Ahmad, he called on the minister of finance to respond to the demands of retired men and women, noting they are going through financial hardship and need government assistance, especially since they had a rough Eid and Ramadan due to high expenses. "Our age has reached the fifties, and there is still no decent life. We are mentally tired, so hear our demands. We have started to buy stuff on installments and sell them in cash. Rent is expensive, while salaries are the same, with no increase, no grants, or anything else," Ahmed Al-Rashidi said.

"A rich country with poor people. Where are our increases? The country has a lot of blessings. How come there is no grant and no raise for Eid, or due to the increase in the cost of living? People want their rights — for how long will this silence be?" Zahra wondered on Twitter.

Dhafer Al-Ajmi said retirees have

rights and their files must be reviewed to improve their standard of living, asking the government when will they implement the fourth chapter of the laws of retirees. Abu Abdul Aziz said "Local pensioners are not like foreign ones. For pensioners outside Kuwait, life begins after retirement, but here, they remain committed to the expenses of their family, helping their children in all stages of their lives, even after marriage. Therefore, psychological problems may increase for the retired, and the entire family is affected."

Fayez El-Enzi mentioned people on social media platforms always give hope to pensioners regarding their salary issue. "I hate it when rumors spread about increasing the salaries of retirees. These people have hypertension, diabetes and heart problems. Do not give them hope. We know and understand there is nothing wrong with hope, but do not play with people's nerves," he pleaded.

Meanwhile, Adnan Al-Muhanna stressed the hashtag does not represent him as a pensioner. "I am a retired man



since 2008, and my pension is enough for me. My lifestyle depends on the amount of my pension. I am satisfied with what God has been giving me and I am appreciative of the government, headed by its prime minister and other ministers. We have a Kuwaiti proverb 'Stretch your legs according to the size of the blanket', which means that people must spend according to their budget, not over it," he

pointed out.

Kuwaiti citizens are eligible to retire at the age of 60 after at least 15 years of service in the public sector. However, if a Kuwaiti citizen has a disability or a chronic illness, they may be eligible to retire earlier with a reduced pension. Retirement eligibility and benefits may be subject to change based on government policies and regulations.

Youth left with few options for entertainment

By Ghadeer Ghloum

KUWAIT: Lack of fun and entertainment activities for people and especially youngsters has been a long-standing issue in Kuwait. However, practicing some hobbies, going on trips to the desert or visiting shopping malls are ways youngsters entertain themselves in Kuwait. Kuwait Times interviewed three youths to find out how they enjoy their free time in Kuwait.

Abdullah, a student at Kuwait University, said activities in Kuwait are usually indoors. Hence, he does not go out much, although he would love to because he loves nature. During winter, Abdullah goes to Shaheed Park to walk around the beautifully designed gardens and enjoy some coffee. But during summer, Abdullah said it is hard to enjoy going out unless you are going to the beach, where the water balances the heat. Thus, he sees the best way to be entertained in Kuwait is to find a hobby and enjoy doing it during one's free time.

"I personally love shooting, so I go to the shooting range in Kuwait. I spend most of my free time there, where I escape from my daily routine and the pressure of studying at college. The shooting range is an exceptional experience in Kuwait unlike the shopping malls or coffeeshops where people usually go to enjoy their free time," Abdullah said. For Abdullah, the shooting range is where he empties all the negative energy and any pressure he may be dealing with. This fixes his mood and prepares him to go back to his studies and responsibilities with more concentration and energy.

Lama, also a student at Kuwait University, told Kuwait Times that she spends her free time at coffeeshops, where she usually goes to meet her friends.



"My friends and I meet at coffeeshops to enjoy chatting together. In Kuwait, coffeeshops are fantastic and are easily found everywhere. The coffee also is very good, so to me going to a coffeeshop is very rewarding, especially after having a busy week at college," she said.

Being a student at college, Lama not only visits coffeeshops for entertainment, but also for studying. "I go to the coffeeshop both for entertainment and finishing my work at the same time. Some coffeeshops in Kuwait are in shopping malls, where it is hard to focus and finish work. However, there are many coffeeshops that have their own premises. This is where I prefer to finish my college work," she added.

The atmosphere at independent coffeeshops enhances Lama's concentration and productivity. "At coffeeshops, I focus more on my studies than working at home or at college, because seeing other people working on their laptops encourages me to do my own work," she said. Lama pointed out she does not

like shopping very much, so she prefers visiting coffeeshops in residential areas.

Like Lama, Mohammad, a high school student, does not like going to shopping malls. To have fun, Mohammad leaves the city and spends his weekends at his family's farm. "I usually spend my free time by leaving the city and going to the desert. I either go camping or to the chalet or to the farm that my family owns, where we have horses, goats and other animals," he said. Mohammad prefers avoiding the hustle and bustle of the city and sees that there is not much to do at shopping malls. Therefore, the farm is where he finds entertainment. However, Mohammad finds it hard to visit the farm on weekdays due to school. "I struggle because I have to go to school, which is not close to the farm. But it is worth because shopping malls are boring. Summer in Kuwait is another major issue for me, because I cannot be outside for long. In such cases, I go to shopping malls with my friends and relatives to enjoy some good food at restaurants," he added.

With AI, tech, are university degrees still important?

By Majd Othman

KUWAIT: With the advent of artificial intelligence, many reports expect several careers to be affected by this new technology. As online search engines link with AI bots to provide smart results, reports showed that not only the publishing, media and photo/video-ography sectors will be affected by AI, but the medical field may also be affected with smart diagnoses.

As a result of these new developments, and with the presence of social media as an income source, Kuwait Times asked people about their opinion whether university degrees are still as important as in the past to forge a good career path and secure a good income. Business owner Hamad, a citizen, said he has a university degree in interior design, but after his graduation, the saturated market affected him negatively amid fierce competition between degree holders.

"I spent years exerting efforts at the university to graduate from a field that I always dreamt to make a career out of, but due to a lack of good opportu-

nities, I wish I hadn't wasted my time and money at university. I should have taken specialized courses that teach me the basic information, and I would gain experience through practicing," he said.

Salam Husni, an expat, disagreed that university degrees are not important. "Despite the world having progressed in a lot of fields, whether technologies, Internet or AI, there are still too many places in the world struggling to have a good Internet connection or developed technologies, and they need human experts. The university degree is still the only source for students to practice in many different fields, such as engineering and medicine," she stressed. Husni added this is an opportunity to benefit and combine between latest developments and knowledge gained at universities.

Matoog Hamed, an expat, said he did not complete his studies, and regrets this, because he struggled in the beginning of his career to find jobs that paid well. "In most countries, they still evaluate employees for having a degree more than experience. When they start to evaluate the employee based on experience, then the importance of having a degree will lessen," he pointed out.

Sanaa Jamil, a citizen, said the new generation is not as interested in having a university degree. "The world has changed its ways in identifying the job — some careers need a specific personality more than experience, such as in sales and marketing, so a university degree is not mandatory for these jobs," she said.



"Currently, social media and blogging have mostly attracted the new generation. Some don't have a degree, while others have dropped out as social media brings more income for them. The new generation thinks social media will last forever as a source of income, so they ignore the university degree," she said. "A good example of the importance of a university degree can be seen when a famous blogger took advantage of her medical degree and opened a clinic that generates more money than what she is earning through social media. The degree is a safety net," Jamil added.

MoH issues decision on hiring children of Kuwaiti women

KUWAIT: Kuwait Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi issued a decision to directly employ doctors who are children of Kuwaiti women. The first article of the decision stipulated that for a resident doctor who is the son of a Kuwaiti woman should be employed. He or she must have a BSc in Medicine and Surgery and will be promoted to assistant registrar after one successful year in the job.

The second article said that the non-Kuwaiti resident dentist must have a BSc in Dentistry and he or she will be promoted to assistant registrar after one successful year in the job. The third article of the decision is about the financial incentives for the above-mentioned doctors, which include the basic salary, work nature allowance, out of our duty allowance, financial reward, residence allowance, expensive living allowance, and a special increase as explained in the decision.

Girl rescued after suicide attempt

KUWAIT: Fire and Marine Rescue Department boats rescued a girl who attempted suicide by throwing herself off the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Causeway. The public relations and media department clarified: "A report was received by the Central Operations Department Wednesday morning — stating that a girl had thrown herself off the bridge. As a result, the boats headed to Shuwaikh Marine Center and Shuwaikh Industrial Center and the girl was found in good condition and handed over to the medical emergency.



Minister holds talks with bank officials

KUWAIT: Housing Affairs and Electricity Minister Mutlaq Al-Otaibi was received by Kuwait Credit Bank's general director Zainab Al-Jeeran and members of the bank's administration. During an extended meeting with the credit bank's leaders, the minister listened to a full and detailed explanation of the bank's work, its strategy, and future plans, as well as the goals they seek to achieve.

Al-Otaibi urged the bank to provide the best services to the citizens in order to protect the bonds of

the Kuwaiti family, provide adequate housing, and facilitate all procedures for obtaining bank services in the easiest way possible. Habari Al-Khashti, the official spokesperson for the bank, announced the bank's readiness to finance the sectors to be distributed by the Public Authority for Housing Welfare. A study of the bank's liquidity and its financing capacity was also explained during the meeting.

On the other hand, Al-Khashti announced the bank's performance during the first quarter of 2023, saying: "The number of electronic services provided by the bank online exceeded 300,000. This came as a result of automating the bank's services and making them available electronically online every day of the week." Al-Khashti also stated that the bank's services are now provided with easy access online.



KUWAIT: Housing Affairs and Electricity Minister Mutlaq Al-Otaibi was received by Kuwait Credit Bank's general director Zainab Al-Jeeran and the bank officials.



KUWAIT: Eaman Al-Roudhan with Zain's team during the Iftar program.

Zain Alshuhoor campaign brings joy in Ramadan, Eid

Company's annual program sees plethora of social contributions



Waleed Al-Khashti with MOI officials during the Iftar banquet at Nuwaiseeb Port.



Hamad Al-Musaibeh with Grand Mosque officials during last 10 days of Ramadan.



Zain Alshuhoor campaign logo.

KUWAIT: Zain, Kuwait's leading digital service provider, successfully concluded its annual social campaign for the Holy Month of Ramadan, Zain Alshuhoor. The month-long program saw the company join the Kuwaiti community in sharing the blessings of the Holy Month with a plethora of social and humanitarian contributions.

Zain Alshuhoor is Zain's biggest social campaign of the year and comes in collaboration with public and private sector institutions to reflect the spirit of giving and shared responsibility. This year, the program featured contributions in the most vibrant sectors within the community, including charitable and humanitarian efforts, social, religious, and entertainment programs, as well as sports and health activities. Zain worked hand in hand with its strategic partners under its Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability strategies.

The campaign kicked-off by delivering "Ramadan Machla" (food supplies) to underprivileged families in collaboration with three of Zain's non-profit strategic partners: the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor's Social Care Centers, and Zakat House. In addition, Zain's volunteers team directly distributed supplies at Taimaa, Jahra in partnership with KRCS.

Zain's Iftar Program came back for its



Zain's drive-thru Girgian celebration, the first of its kind.

16th year and is considered one of the main pillars of the company's Ramadan campaign every year. Zain provided daily meals at the Iftar hall in Ardiya throughout the holy month, while also distributing meals across Kuwait via trucks in partnership with the Kuwait Food Bank. The trucks visit the most populated areas to secure the daily Iftar meal of workers, underprivileged individuals and families, and others who are in most need during Ramadan. The program saw nearly 40,000 meals distributed throughout Ramadan.

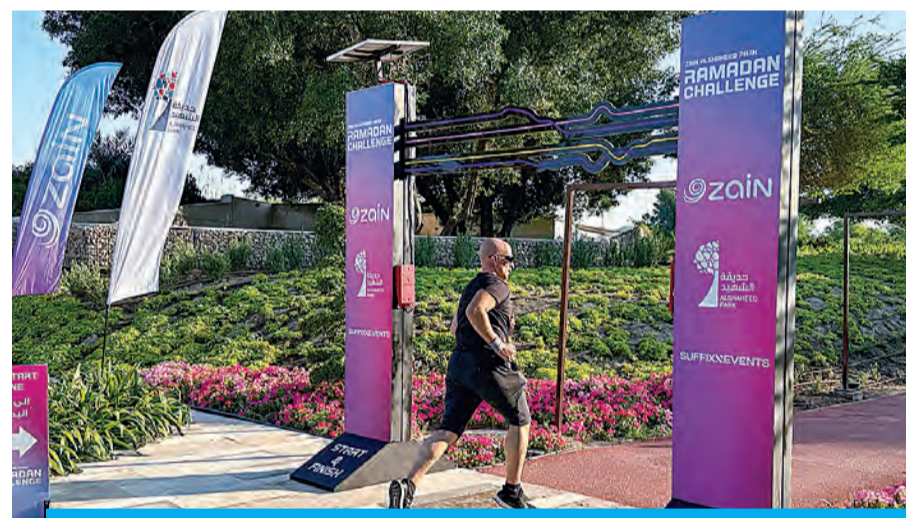
In one of the company's most notable social programs in Ramadan, Zain hosted a special event to celebrate the Kuwaiti tradition of Girgian (candy distribution) at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor's Social Care Centers. The event came in partnership with the Public Authority for Disability Affairs to share the joys and blessings of the holy month with foster care children, people with special needs, and the elderly.

To recognize the tremendous efforts

of frontliners during the holy month, Zain hosted a special Ramadan Iftar banquet for personnel operating at Nuwaiseeb Border Port. The step came as a gesture of gratitude and appreciation to the staff of the Ministry of Interior and Customs who dedicate their time and effort to Kuwait's safety.

In support of health and sports programs and to encourage an active and healthy lifestyle, Zain continued to partner with suffix Sports Management to present the Zain Ramadan Challenge at Al-Shaheed Park, which featured walkathons and marathons throughout the holy month, with advanced tech tools used to monitor the participants. The challenge targeted both males and females from all ages to encourage them to keep fit and adopt a healthy and active lifestyle, not only during the Holy Month, but throughout the year.

This year, Zain organized the first-of-its-kind drive-thru Girgian celebration at its main headquarters in Shu-



Zain's Ramadan Challenge at Shaheed Park promotes active lifestyle.

waikh. The event came in collaboration with the creative minds at Wainkoum and witnessed a great turnout of children and families who were eager to celebrate with Zain, celebrating without leaving their cars.

To promote a spirit of teamwork and enrich out-of-office bonding, Zain hosted its third padel tournament for staff at PADEL IN Courts in Yarmouk Sports Club, Mishref. The competition ran for two consecutive days, where 20 two-player teams competed for the title.

Every Ramadan, Zain diversifies the content of its campaign to include cultural and recreational programs, and so this year it sponsored Mukhalat radio show in partnership with 360 FM, offering daily prizes to listeners and winners all through the Holy Month. Zain also sponsored the new season of Qudwa, a program hosted by Sheikh Fahad Al-Kandari that presented beautiful Islamic values, in addition to sponsoring a wide range of TV programs of the biggest local channels.

Towards the end of the Holy Month, Zain partnered with the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs to present hospitality services and facilitate the transportation of worshippers at the Grand Mosque of Kuwait during Qiyam prayers throughout the last 10 days of Ramadan. The company also shared the blessings of Eid prayers with worshippers during the first day of Eid.

Delivering on its annual promise to bring the most spectacular of theatrical performances to its loyal fans, Zain presented its all-new play "Nothing is Ever Like Zain" with daily mesmerizing shows throughout Eid holiday at the Arena Kuwait. Mixing stunning theatrical performances with the latest technologies, the company presented a show like no other, reflecting positive values and hosting top local and regional stars. The play was directed by Sameer Aboud and written by Hiba Hamada, with music composed by Ehab Abdulwahed and distribution by Ahmed Tareq Yahya.



Nothing is Ever Like Zain... a spectacle like no other.

Higher allowance to be paid to KIMS trainers

KUWAIT: Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi issued a decision Wednesday to cash the new monthly allowance announced last year for trainers at the Kuwait Institute for Medical Specializations (KIMS).

According to the decision, allowances will be valued at KD 300 to 500 based on the trainer's job title. Trainers at the "consultant" level will get KD 500, those at the "principal specialist, specialist, or technical equivalent" level will get KD 400 and trainers at the "senior registrar or technical equivalent" level will get KD 300.

President of the Kuwait Medical Association (KMA) Dr Ibrahim Al-Tawalah had thanked the minister last month for backing the raise in the compensation received by doctor trainers. Tawalah had told media last year that requests for a raise had been refused by previous ministers prior to Awadhi's approval. The need for a larger compensation was the reason why some specialized physicians were reluctant to participate in training programs, which reflected poorly on the number of doctors enrolling in these programs.

The board of trustees at KIMS headed by the health minister had approved the request for higher allowances in line with a three-fold increase in admission quotas decided last year for all disciplines in in board programs recognized by KIMS. The changes are meant to ensure the needs of the medical centers and staff are met.



Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: People cast their fishing rods from a pier at sunset in Kuwait City on April 26, 2023. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Lion cub roams Sabah Al-Ahmad streets

Interior ministry to charge owner as possession of exotic animals is illegal

KUWAIT: A lion cub which has been reportedly roaming the streets of Sabah Al-Ahmad has been caught, according to the interior ministry.

The ministry's operation room received a report describing the cub as agitated, most likely due to being unfamiliar with its surroundings. Public security and traffic patrols went to the site, only to be surprised by the presence of the cub, which was in a moment of rampage as it moved between streets and houses, causing panic among people in the area.

The interior ministry tried to handle the cub, but to no avail, until specialists arrived and managed to control it. It was then transferred to the appropriate location for further handling. The interior ministry said it is currently looking for the cub's owner, as it is illegal to own predatory and exotic animals, given the danger that this may pose to others. The owner will be criminally charged as not caring for animals causes danger to both animals and people around them.

This is not the first time that wild animals have been found roaming the streets of Kuwait. Many incidents have been reported over the years of stray animals across the country.

Fatemah Al-Bader, Associate Professor of International Law at Kuwait International Law School, criticized Kuwait's animal welfare laws as incapable

of protecting animals. In a 2021 research paper she wrote for the Michigan State University Animal and Natural Resource Law Review, Bader said the "only" enforced protection of animals stems from Article 253 of Kuwait's criminal code.

The law states that "any person who kills an animal owned by another, or gives it a poisonous or harmful substance, or injures it, or renders it useless or reduces its usefulness, deliberately and unjustifiably, shall be punished with a fine and/or imprisonment for a period not exceeding two years. The previous penalties shall be imposed on anyone who intentionally causes the transmission of an infectious disease to an animal owned by another."

"The law, then, treats the animal like property belonging to an individual, and the pet owner becomes the victim of the crime, not the pet," wrote Bader.

In her paper titled "Animal Welfare Laws in Kuwait: All Bark, No Bite", Bader touched on ownership of exotic animals, in addition to forms of abuse, including selling them in arbitrary markets and dumping them.

"Monkeys, cheetahs, lions, and tigers are often sought out by Kuwaitis as a status symbol," she wrote. "While there are laws in Kuwait prohibiting exotic animals, like other animal laws, the law is not enforced in practice. Thus, Kuwaitis are able to own



exotic animals without fear of repercussions." Bader said the laws prohibiting the trade of exotic animals should be enforced so as to prevent further exacerbating the problem of animal welfare in Kuwait.



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Time to prioritize social justice

By Gilbert F Hougbo
Director-General of the International Labour Organization

May 1st is widely known as Labor Day, a day when we celebrate the contribution of workers worldwide. It is a moment for pride, celebration and hope.

After three years of the COVID-19 crisis, followed by inflation, conflict and food and fuel supply shocks, we badly need this. But the promises of renewal made during the pandemic, of "building back better", have so far not been delivered for the great majority of workers worldwide.

Globally, real wages have fallen, poverty is rising, inequality seems more entrenched than ever. Enterprises have been hard hit. Many could not cope with the cumulative effects of recent unexpected events. Small and micro-enterprises were particularly affected, and many have ceased operations.

People feel that the sacrifices they made to get through COVID-19 have not been recognized, let alone rewarded. Their voices are not being heard clearly enough. This, combined with a perceived lack of opportunities, has created a disturbing level of mistrust. It doesn't have to be like this. We are still the masters of our fate. But if we are to shape a new, more stable, and equitable world, we must choose a different path — one that prioritizes social justice.

I believe this is not only doable, but essential for a sustainable and stable future. So, how do we get there? First and foremost, our policies and actions must be human-centered, to allow people to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, economic security and equal opportunity. This approach is not new, it was set out and agreed on in the aftermath of World War II, when the ILO's international membership signed the 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia.

This visionary document set out guiding principles for our economic and social systems, that they should not be turned exclu-

sively to hitting specific growth rates or other statistical targets, but to address human needs and aspirations. This means focusing on inequality, poverty alleviation and core social protection. The most effective way to do this is by providing quality jobs so that people can support themselves and build their own futures — "Decent Work for All", as Sustainable Development Goal 8 terms it.

It means realistically addressing the long-term structural transformations of our time, ensuring that new technology creates and supports employment, pro-actively facing the challenges of climate change and ensuring we offer the jobs, skills training and transition support necessary for workers and businesses to benefit from the new low-carbon era, treating demographic changes as a "dividend" rather than a problem, with supporting action on skills, migration and social protection, to create more cohesive and resilient societies.

We also need to reassess and refashion the architecture of our social and economic systems, so that they support this change of course towards social justice, rather than continuing to channel us into a policy "doom loop" of inequality and instability. We must reinvigorate labor institutions and organizations so that social dialogue is effective and vigorous. We must review laws and regulations affecting the world of work, so that they are relevant and up-to-date and able to protect workers and support sustainable businesses.

To make all this happen, we need to recommit to international cooperation and solidarity. We must enhance our efforts and create greater policy coherence, particularly within the multilateral system, as the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres calls it.

This is why we need a Global Coalition for Social Justice. This coalition will create a platform to bring together a broad range of international bodies and stakeholders. It will position social justice as the keystone of the global recovery, so that it is prioritized in national, regional and global policies and actions. In sum, it will ensure that our future is human-centered.

We have the chance to reshape the world we live in — economically, socially and environmentally. Let us take this opportunity and move forward to build the equitable and resilient societies that can underpin lasting peace and social justice.



Singapore hangs prisoner over one kilogram of cannabis

Kenya cult toll climbs to 95 as families await news of missing

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US, Philippine troops fire rockets at ship in largest-ever drills

'No Hollywood effects this morning, this is old-fashioned training'



SAN ANTONIO: A US soldier loads an Avenger surface-to-air missile system during the US-Philippines Balikatan joint military exercise at San Antonio in Zambales, north of Manila. — AFP

SAN ANTONIO: US and Philippine troops fired a salvo of rockets at a warship representing an enemy vessel in the disputed South China Sea on Wednesday, in the final exercise of the allies' largest-ever military drills. It was the first time the countries had conducted a joint live-fire exercise in the hotly contested waters, which China claims almost entirely.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, who has sought stronger defence ties with the United States, sat in an observation tower with US and Philippine officials watching the event north of Manila. "No Hollywood effects this morning, this is old-fashioned training," said Lieutenant Colonel Nick Mannweiler, a US Marine Corps public affairs officer.

The live-fire drill kicked off with the US HIMARS precision rocket system launching a series of rounds at a decommissioned Philippine Navy corvette anchored about 22 kilometres (14 miles) off the coast. The ship, which represented an enemy vessel approaching the

Philippine shore, was sunk by guided bombs dropped by US Marines F-35B Lightning II fighter aircraft, a US military spokesman said in an email.

Artillery units also lined up along a grassy field to fire rockets at floating drums 10 kilometres offshore. F-16 Fighting Falcons, AH-64 Apache attack helicopters and Philippine Air Force FA-50 fighter jets also took part. The drill was briefly interrupted when a small private aircraft entered the exercise area, Mannweiler told AFP.

'Ironclad alliance'

The drills aim to boost Manila's military capability while serving as a US show of support for its Asian ally as China's assertiveness in the region grows stronger. Nearly 18,000 troops have taken part in the annual exercises dubbed Balikatan, or "shoulder to shoulder", in Tagalog.

Wednesday's event "demonstrated new potential

and revitalized the strength of our militaries while we continuously forge an ironclad alliance", the Balikatan director for the Philippine military, Major General Marvin Licudine, said in a statement.

The drills, which began on April 11, have involved helicopters landing on a Philippine island off the northern tip of the main island of Luzon, nearly 300 kilometres from Taiwan. The US military also showed off its Patriot missiles, considered one of the best air defence systems in the world.

This year's Balikatan follows a deal announced earlier this month for US forces to use an increased number of bases in the Philippines, including one near Taiwan. China considers self-ruled Taiwan a part of its territory.

The exercises and growing US access to Philippine bases have angered China, which has accused the United States of endangering regional peace and trying to drive a wedge between Manila and Beijing.

Philippine drills spokesman Colonel Michael Logico said it was the Southeast Asian country's "inviolable right to exercise within our territory".

Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands, ignoring an international ruling that the assertion has no legal basis. China's foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said Wednesday that "defence and security cooperation between countries... should not escalate tensions... and should not target any third party."

It is the first Balikatan to be held under Marcos, who has gravitated towards the United States since taking office last June. Relations had weakened under his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte, who had favoured China over his country's former colonial master. Marcos is scheduled to meet with US President Joe Biden at the White House next week to discuss among other things the growing tension over the South China Sea and Taiwan. — AFP

Former Sudan regime members escape prison

KHARTOUM: A wanted Sudanese war crimes suspect has confirmed that he and other members of the Islamist regime ousted in 2019 have escaped from prison during recent fighting, raising new fears for a fragile ceasefire that has enabled foreigners to flee.

The 72-hour ceasefire brokered by the United States was already struggling to hold after the regular army launched renewed air strikes against rival paramilitary forces in the capital late on Tuesday. Anti-aircraft guns fired at fighter jets in the skies over Khartoum's sister city of Omdurman on Wednesday, witnesses told AFP.

Armed clashes meanwhile continued in Soba on the outskirts of Khartoum, witnesses said. The escape of leading figures from the ousted regime of Omar al-Bashir, at least one of whom is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur, has raised fears the conflict may take a turn for the worse.

Ahmed Harun, a top Bashir aide who led the regime's infamous counter-insurgency operations in Darfur in the mid-2000s, said late Tuesday that he and other regime members had escaped from Kober prison. The ousted dictator had himself been held in the same prison but the army confirmed Wednesday that the 79-year-old had already been transferred to hospital before the current fighting erupted on April 15.



JEDDAH: A Saudi Navy sailor carries a child while disembarking off a ferry passenger ship after arrival at King Faisal navy base in Jeddah on April 26, 2023 following a rescue operation amid a US-brokered ceasefire between the country's warring generals. — AFP

Members of Bashir's regime, including the strongman himself, had been moved to a military hospital "due to their health conditions... and remain in the hospital under the guard of the judicial police", the army said in a statement, without specifying when they had been moved. It was the third reported jail break to have taken advantage of the fighting be-

tween forces loyal to army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and those backing his deputy turned rival, RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo. "We remained in our detention at Kober, under the crossfire of this current battle, for nine days," even after the jail was emptied of both guards and prisoners, Harun said in a recorded address to Sudanese television. — AFP

Trump destroyed ex-columnist, US civil trial hears

NEW YORK: Donald Trump raped a prominent former American columnist then "ridiculed" her with defamatory comments, a US civil trial hearing a lawsuit against the ex-president was told Tuesday. A lawyer for Trump, who denies the allegations, said the plaintiff E. Jean Carroll was motivated by money and fame as opening arguments kicked off the much-anticipated proceedings.

Carroll, 79, says Trump sexually assaulted her in a changing room at the luxury Bergdorf Goodman

department store on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan in the mid-1990s. She says the attack came after Trump playfully asked her for advice on buying a women's lingerie gift. The moment they were inside (the dressing room) everything changed. Suddenly nothing was fun. Trump was almost twice her size," Carroll's lawyer Shawn Crowley told the Manhattan court. The trial, which is not criminal in nature, is part of a barrage of legal woes that threaten to derail Trump's 2024 run for a second presidential term.

It comes just weeks after Trump's historic arraignment on criminal charges related to a hush-money payment made to a porn star. Carroll, who was in court Tuesday, first made the allegation in an excerpt from her book published by New York Magazine in 2019. Trump responded then by saying he has never met her, that she was "not my type" and that she was "totally lying." Carroll initially sued Trump for def-

amation in 2019 but was unable to include the rape claim because the statute of limitations for the alleged offense had expired.

But a new law took effect in November last year in New York that gave victims of sexual assault a one-year window to sue their alleged abusers decades after attacks may have occurred. Lawyers for Carroll filed a new suit that accused Trump of battery, "when he forcibly raped and groped" her.

It also included defamation for a post that Trump made on his Truth Social platform in October where he denied the alleged rape and referred to Carroll as a "complete con job." "He went on the attack. He ridiculed her. He destroyed her," Crowley said.

Joe Tacopina, representing Trump, said there was no evidence of the assault and that Carroll was "abusing the system for money, for political reasons, and for status." — AFP

Powerful Iranian cleric killed in attack at bank

TEHRAN: A powerful Iranian cleric, a member of the Assembly of Experts that selects the country's supreme leader, has been killed in an armed attack, officials said Wednesday. The attack is believed to be the most significant in years against a cleric in Iran.

"Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani was killed this morning in an armed attack... the assailant was also arrested and is now being investigated," IRNA news agency reported, citing a security official for the northern province of Mazandaran where the killing occurred.

The attack took place inside a bank in Babolsar city, the official said. "The motive of the assailant is not yet clear and will be announced after it is clarified," the official added. The governor of Mazandaran, Mahmoud Hosseini, said the attacker was a local security officer of the bank.

"So far, our information and documents indicate that this was not a security or terrorist act," Hosseini told state television, adding that "the assailant did not know the ayatollah." CCTV camera footage released by Tasnim news agency showed the security guard, wearing a blue and white jacket, shooting the cleric from behind as he was sitting in a chair at the bank.

Following the killing, Iranian Prosecutor General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri ordered provincial authorities to "investigate the issue from different angles, do the necessary follow-ups and report the results." Soleimani, 75, was previously a representative of the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He had also been the imam who led the weekly Friday prayers in the cities of Kashan, in Isfahan province, and Zahedan in the southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan.

Under the constitution, the 88-strong Assembly of Experts is mandated with supervising, dismissing and electing the Supreme Leader. The all-powerful deliberative body is now headed by ultra-conservative 96-year-old cleric Ahmad Jannati.

Its members are chosen in popular elections for eight year-terms from a pool of candidates vetted by the country's Guardian Council. In April 2022, a suspected jihadist knife attack in the northeastern shrine city of Mashhad in Razavi Khorasan Province led to death of two clerics and injury of another. — AFP

International

Kenya cult toll climbs to 95 as families await news of missing

Discovery of dozens of bodies buried in Shakahola forest shocked Kenyans

MALINDI: The number of victims linked to a suspected starvation cult in Kenya climbed to 95 on Wednesday, a government official said, with weeping relatives anxiously awaiting news of loved ones after investigators unearthed mass graves last week.

The discovery of dozens of bodies buried in Shakahola forest near the coastal town of Malindi shocked Kenyans, with cult leader Paul Mackenzie Nthenge accused of driving his followers to death by preaching that starvation was the only path to God.

The gruesome saga, which has been dubbed the "Shakahola Forest Massacre", has prompted calls for a crackdown on fringe religious outfits in the largely Christian country. "We had five exhumations which brings the total number of those who lost their lives to 95," Rhoda Onyancha, Coast Regional Commissioner, told reporters.

At the state-run Malindi Sub-County Hospital, whose morgue is already stretched well beyond capacity with dozens of bodies, families were desperate to know if their loved ones had been found.

Teenager Issa Ali was taken to Shakahola in 2020 by his mother and told AFP he was beaten by Nthenge when he tried to leave, until his father rescued him.

"The last time I saw my mum was in February," the soft-spoken 16-year-old said. "She was so weak the last time I saw her." Onyancha said Wednesday that 39 people had been found alive so far in the 325-hectare (800-acre) bush around Shakahola, while 22 people have been arrested.

Hassan Musa, a Kenya Red Cross official, told AFP that 311 people, including 150 minors, had been reported missing to its support staff in Malindi. "We are talking about people mostly from Kenya, but also from Tanzania and Nigeria. Some have been missing for years."

More deaths feared

"We don't know how many more graves, how many more bodies, we are likely to discover," Interior Minister Kithure Kindiki told reporters during a visit to the site on Tuesday, adding the crimes were serious enough to warrant terrorism charges against Nthenge. The majority of the dead

were children, according to three sources close to the investigation, highlighting the macabre nature of the cult's alleged practices which included urging parents to starve their offspring.

Hussein Khalid, executive director of the rights group Haki Africa that tipped off the police about Nthenge's activities, told AFP the pastor's Good News International Church appeared to require children to starve first, followed by women, and finally men. He said 50 to 60 percent of the victims were children, whose bodies were found wrapped in cotton shrouds inside shallow pits. Kenya's President William Ruto has vowed to take action against rogue pastors like Nthenge "who want to use religion to advance weird, unacceptable ideology".

As the investigation unfolds, questions have emerged about how the cult was able to operate undetected despite Nthenge attracting police attention six years ago. The televangelist had been arrested in 2017 on charges of "radicalisation" after urging families not to send their children to school, saying education was not recognised by the Bible.



MALINDI: Bethy Kahindi (C), 37, looks for bodies of her 45-year-old sister and her six children at the morgue of Malindi Sub-County Hospital in Malindi. — AFP

Nthenge was arrested again last month, according to local media, after two children starved to death in the custody of their parents. He was released on bail

of 100,000 Kenyan shillings (\$700) before surrendering to police following the Shakahola raid. Nthenge is due to appear in court on May 2. — AFP



ANKARA: Handout photo shows Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (2-L) and the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and presidential candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu (R) attending a ceremony. — AFP

Erdogan cancels appearances after stomach bug

ISTANBUL: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday cancelled his planned appearances due to a stomach bug less than three weeks before Turkey's crunch election. The 69-year-old leader's announcement came in the heat of a hard-fought campaign in what is widely viewed as Turkey's most important election of its post-Ottoman era.

Erdogan had three appearances in the central Anatolian provinces planned for Wednesday. But he said Vice President Fuat Oktay would take his place instead. "Today I will rest at home under the advice of our doctors," Erdogan said on his official Twitter account. "With God's permission, we will continue our program from tomorrow," he said. "On this occasion, I wish all my citizens health, peace and enjoyment." Erdogan has been campaigning tirelessly

to reverse a dip in polls and extend his two-decade election winning streak.

He is running neck-and-neck with secular opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu and must contend with the dual blows of a raging economic crisis and the impact of a massive February earthquake that claimed more than 50,000 lives. But he cut short a live television interview late on Tuesday after getting sick on air.

His television appearance on Tuesday began more than 90 minutes behind schedule and then went to a commercial break in the middle of a question 10 minutes into the show. The camera shook and the reporter asking the question stood up from his chair when the broadcast cut off.

"Oh wow," an unidentified voice could be heard saying off camera. Erdogan returned about 15 minutes later to apologise for getting sick. "Yesterday and today were hard work. That's why I got a stomach flu," Erdogan said.

"At one point, I wondered if it would be misunderstood if we cancelled the programme. But we promised. I ask for your and our audience's forgiveness." The Turkish leader looked ashen and ended the programme a few minutes later. —AFP

Japan firm fails in historic Moon...

Continued from Page 1

lander's launch last December aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket. The vessel was carrying payloads from several countries, including a lunar rover from the United Arab Emirates. Chief technology officer Ryo Ujiie became emotional as he addressed reporters, describing the attempt as a "very precious experience".

Standing just over two meters tall and weighing 340 kg, the lander entered lunar orbit last month. Its descent and landing were fully automated and the craft was supposed to reestablish communication as soon as it touched down. So far, only the United States, Russia and China have managed to put a spacecraft on the lunar surface, all through government-sponsored programs. In April 2019, Zionist organization SpaceIL, watched its lander crash into the Moon's surface. India's attempt to land a spacecraft on the moon in 2016 also ended in a crash.

Two US companies, Astrobotics and Intuitive Machines, are scheduled to attempt Moon landings later this year. "We congratulate the ispace inc team on ac-

complishing a significant number of milestones on their way to today's landing attempt," Astrobotics said in a tweet. "We hope everyone recognizes — today is not the day to shy away from pursuing the lunar frontier, but a chance to learn from adversity and push forward."

Ispace, which listed its shares on the Tokyo Stock Exchange Growth Market this month, was already planning its next mission before the failure of Hakuto-R. The spacecraft, whose name refers to the Moon-dwelling white rabbit of Japanese folklore, was launched from Cape Canaveral, Florida, on Dec 11. The lander carried several lunar rovers, including a round, baseball-sized robot jointly developed by Japan's space agency and toy manufacturer Takara Tomy, the creator of the Transformer toys.

It also had the 10-kg chair-sized Rashid rover developed by the United Arab Emirates and an experimental imaging system from Canadensys Aerospace. The UAE's space center praised ispace for working "tirelessly" on the mission and said its team was "inspired and believes that greater accomplishments are yet to come in our pursuit of space exploration". With just 200 employees, ispace has said it "aims to extend the sphere of human life into space and create a sustainable world by providing high-frequency, low-cost transportation services to the Moon". — AFP

have had collisions with other galaxies, the study said. While the theory that such collisions ignited quasars has been around for decades, it was difficult to prove.

Tadhunter said this was because observations had often been carried out with telescopes that were optimized to look at objects in the center of galaxies, but were less effective at spotting the distorted features at their edges that indicate past collisions. For example, these diffuse structures "get washed out" when observed by the Hubble Space Telescope, he said. So the team used land-based observatories, such as the Isaac Newton Telescope on the Spanish island of La Palma.

The new study, published in the Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society, also reviewed previous research to show how it may have missed the tell-tale signs of collisions. Tadhunter said that quasars "act like beacons to the distant universe" because of their incredible brightness. The James Webb Space Telescope, which has a much bigger aperture than Hubble, could help reveal more about quasars in this distant universe, when the universe was in its infancy, he said. — AFP

Astronomers reveal what...

Continued from Page 1

they have "clear evidence" that quasars are triggered by two galaxies colliding, which releases the vast amounts of energy needed.

Clive Tadhunter, an astrophysicist at the University of Sheffield in the UK and one of the study's authors, told AFP that this could be the fate of the Milky Way one day. The nearby Andromeda Galaxy is "coming directly towards us at about 200 kilometers a second," he said. It will collide with the Milky Way in roughly five billion years, and "we could get a quasar" as a result, he said. Quasars push out all the gas from a galaxy, preventing any new stars from forming, he added.

The researchers compared observations of 48 galaxies with quasars at their center to 100 without them. Galaxies hosting quasars were three times as likely to

Indian actor Mamukkoya passes away

CALICUT, India: Veteran Indian actor Mamukkoya, who was admitted to a private hospital in Kozhikode after he suffered a brain hemorrhage besides cardiac arrest, passed away on Wednesday. He was 76. Mamukkoya was admitted to the hospital after he collapsed at the venue of a football tournament at Wandoor in Malappuram on Monday.

After his stint in theatre, Mamukkoya made his silver screen debut with 1979 film Anyarude Bhoomi. He went on to act in over 400 films, including Gandhinagar 2nd Street, Sandesham, Nadodikattu, Vada-kkunokkiyantram, Chakoram, Ramji Rao Speaking,

Innathe Chintha Visheyam and Perumazhakkalam among others, proving he can play both comedic and character roles with ease. He won a Kerala state award in 2004 and 2008. Mamukkoya was last seen in Sulaikha Manzil, which hit screens on April 21. Born to Chalikandiyil Muhammed and Imbachi Ayyisha on July 5, 1946, in Kozhikode district's Kallayi, Mamukkoya worked as a laborer in a timber yard during his early days, but he was also involved in the local theatre scene.

Mamukkoya's connection with the drama community helped him land his first film role in 1979, Anyarude Bhoomi directed by Nilambur Balan, a well-known supporting actor and one of the founders of the Kalithara drama troupe. However, it took Mamukkoya another four years and a word of recommendation by renowned writer Vaikom Muhammad Basheer to secure another character in a film — S Konnanatt's Surumayitta Kannukal (1983). Unfortunately, both the film and his character went unnoticed. — Agencies

Iran upholds German dual national's death sentence

TEHRAN: Iran's top court has confirmed a death sentence for a German-Iranian national whose trial over a deadly mosque bombing in 2008 has strained relations with Berlin, the judiciary said Wednesday. "Jamshid Sharmahd's sentence has been upheld by the Supreme Court," judiciary spokesman Massoud Setayeshi told reporters in Tehran, saying "measures" ahead of the 68-year-old's execution "will be taken later".

Berlin was "dismayed" by the reported Iranian decision, a spokesman for the German foreign ministry told a press conference on Wednesday. "If this is the case, then the situation is in fact extremely serious."

The Tehran Revolutionary Court in February sentenced Sharmahd to death after he was convicted of involvement in the April 2008 attack in the southern city of Shiraz that killed 14 people.

Germany has condemned the sentence as "unacceptable" and declared two staff members at Iran's embassy in Berlin personae non gratae, ordering them to leave the country. Tehran, in turn, expelled two German diplomats last month. Prosecutors had also accused Sharmahd, a US resident, of having established contact with "FBI and CIA officers" and of having "attempted to contact Israeli Mossad agents".

Iranian authorities announced in August 2020 Sharmahd had been apprehended in what they described as a "complex operation", providing no specific details of the arrest.

His family says he was kidnapped by the Iranian security services while in transit in Dubai and then brought to Iran. At least 16 Western passport-holders, including six French, are being held in Iran on various charges. Most hold dual nationality, which Iran does not recognise. Three dual nationals including Sharmahd have been sentenced to death or executed over security-related charges since the start of the year, according to the judiciary. The execution in January of Alireza Akbari, a former Iranian official with British citizenship convicted of espionage, has provoked international outcry. — AFP

Dominant US dollar faces challenge from emerging currencies

PARIS: As the top global currency, the US dollar has enjoyed decades as the cash of choice for investors — but it is now facing a growing challenge to that status. The greenback has been used for almost everything in terms of international trade and global finance, from ordering planes, buying oil, or issuing debt. But a number of developing economies, particularly China, have been leading a drive against over-reliance on the US currency.

"In many developing countries there is desire to be less dependent on the dollar, particularly on the trade side," said Paola Subacchi, professor of International Economics at the Global Policy Institute at Queen Mary University of London. On a visit to China in April, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva asked why "all countries are forced to trade based on the dollar", before signing an agreement with Beijing to provide commercial contracts denominated in yuan and reals.

And Bangladesh announced recently it paid Russia for a nuclear power plant in Chinese yuan, as well as using its own currency for a delivery of liquefied natural gas from France's TotalEnergies. The widely-used dollar gives the United States a big competitive advantage. Emerging and developing countries are dependent on the movements of the US currency, which influences the price of their imports and their exports.

US-set interest rates also influence the cost of dollar-denominated debt. But the dollar's dominance has come under the spotlight since the war in Ukraine, which saw Washington and western countries impose sweeping sanctions on Moscow after it invaded Ukraine last year. "The US uses its dollar hegemony to sanction Russia," said Larry Yang, chief economist at Shenzhen-based First Seafont Fund Management.

"Other countries feel concerned that they might be sanctioned by the US as well, and hence they have decided to opt for more currencies for payment and settlement," he added. "This change is good for the stability of international trade and it is definitely a

long term trend." China, the world's second-largest economy and Washington's great political rival, has been internationalizing its currency for several years.

But its currency is still largely restricted and regulated by the Chinese authorities. Yang said the internationalization of the Chinese yuan, also known as RMB, will mean more countries choose the currency for international deals in the future. "With China's trade volume on a long term rapid ascending trajectory ... the level of RMB internationalization will increase and there will be more trading partners opt for RMB payment and settlement," he told AFP.

But others warn any significant move away from the dollar would require a number of key factors to be in place, including a transparent government framework, independent central bank, and investor security. "Clearly, we're entering a very delicate moment for the world economy, with lots of geopolitical tension and the world splitting into two large poles," said Alessandra Ribeiro, an economist at the Tendencias Consultoria consultancy in Sao Paulo. But she said proposals against the dollar are often "more political than economic".

Ribeiro also noted that China doesn't have a full market economy. "Depending on the government's interests, it could artificially devalue the yuan. And if I'm getting paid in yuan, that creates problems for me." Political or not, the level of foreign exchange reserves held in dollars in central banks has been gradually decreasing.

Reserves of the greenback fell from 71 percent of the total in 1999 to 59 percent in 2021, according to a report from the International Monetary Fund last year. This was partly down to an increase to 10 percent of reserves in "smaller" currencies, outside of the euro, the yen or the pound. But the dollar was still the currency used in 42 percent of international trade in April, followed by 33 percent which used the euro, according to international payment system Swift.

The Chinese yuan was used in just two percent of transactions, showing that there is still a long way to go for it to rival the dollar. "Can we move toward an alternative currency? Yes," said Ribeiro. "But the entire structure the United States offers in terms of security and institutional stability would have to be offered somewhere else." — AFP

International

Yoon, Biden kick off visit cementing US-S Korean ties

Biden, Yoon have had four 'engagements' since Yoon took office

WASHINGTON: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and US President Joe Biden visited the Korean War Memorial in Washington on Tuesday ahead of formal White House meetings set to deepen the vital US-South Korean alliance.

Yoon, on a six-day tour of the United States, inspected NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center just outside Washington earlier in the day, along with US Vice President Kamala Harris. He also laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery before joining Biden at the war memorial, which depicts life-sized steel statues of US soldiers marching during the 1950-53 conflict to against the communist North Korean forces.

On Wednesday, Yoon and his wife Kim Keon Hee will arrive at the White House for what is only the second full-fledged state visit of the Biden era, following that of France's Emmanuel Macron. This will feature lavish ceremonial events and a gala White House dinner. On Tuesday, the White House said Biden had presented Yoon with a handmade mahogany table and vintage baseball memorabilia. First Lady Jill Biden presented her counterpart with a "pendant necklace with a trio of blue sapphires designed by a Korean American designer."

Beyond the pomp and circumstance, Biden and Yoon are eager to discuss their countries' deepening partnership in an increasingly volatile Pacific, where North Korea is ramping up nuclear-capable missile production and China is saber-rattling around Taiwan.

White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters that Biden and Yoon have had four "engagements" since Yoon took office less than

a year ago, and "have developed a rapport." Washington and Seoul are also highlighting their strong cultural links, a connection underscored by streaming giant Netflix's announcement of a \$2.5 billion investment in South Korean content. Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos met with Yoon in Washington on Monday.

US defense of South Korea

A priority for Biden will be reassuring his guest over the US commitment to "extended deterrence"—the US nuclear and military umbrella South Korea falls under. "President Biden will reinforce and enhance our extended deterrence commitments to South Korea with respect to the threat" from North Korea, Sullivan said.

Sullivan said to expect "major deliverables on extended deterrence, on cyber cooperation and climate mitigation, foreign assistance, on investment, and on strengthening our people-to-people ties."

But the two leaders have some "uncomfortable" topics to discuss, noted Katharine Moon, professor emerita of political science at Wellesley College. The South Korean president has seen his domestic approval ratings dive over his handling of a recent US intelligence leak that appeared to reveal Washington was spying on Seoul.

However, he told NBC News in an interview that the spat would not have lasting impacts. "I believe that this matter is no reason to shake the ironclad trust that supports the US-South Korea alliance, because it is based on shared values like freedom," Yoon told NBC News. "When you have that trust, you don't get shaken."



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden, First Lady Jill Biden (hidden), South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol and First Lady Kim Keon Hee, visit the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington. — AFP

Yoon is meanwhile likely to come under pressure from the White House to do more to help the US support Ukraine, as Washington looks to South Korea—the world's ninth-largest arms exporter—to help secure ammunition and weapons for Kyiv.

South Korea has sent humanitarian assistance to

Ukraine, and has sold tanks and howitzers to Poland, but Seoul has a longstanding policy of not providing weapons to active conflict zones. Seoul is also mired in a diplomatic spat with China after Yoon blamed recent heightened tensions over Taiwan on "attempts to change the status quo by force." —AFP

Joy, fear as India's population becomes world's biggest

DEHRA: Exhausted, elated and cradling her newborn daughter in a rundown government hospital, young mother Manu Bala had just helped make India the world's most populous nation. Tears of joy and relief streamed down Bala's cheeks as her as-yet-unnamed child—one of more than 67,000 born across India on Monday—rested on her chest.

It was also the day the UN announced that India, already home to more than one in every six humans on the planet, would this week eclipse China with more people than any other country. "I am very happy that my child was born on the day India left behind China—it feels special to become a mother on this day," the 22-year-old housewife told AFP from her bed.

"I want my baby to study hard and become whatever she wants to become. I want to give her a good life." Bala had writhed in agony on her gurney inside the crowded and somewhat decrepit maternity ward of her Himalayan town's public hospital.

Flanked by nurses in green and white overalls, her face turned pale as she lay on a bare bed with her feet mounted in stirrups. "Push harder," the doctor urged the first-time mother in the labour room, while her husband and mother-in-law waited anxiously outside.

Sweat trickling down her forehead, Bala winced in pain and clasped the sides of the bed before the final push, met with a round of cheers from the staff. Holding the baby to her chest with relief writ large on her face, she mustered up one final reservoir of energy to thank the doctor and nurses.

'One baby is enough'

Bala's husband Rohit, a state government employee, was relieved that the birth was without complications and ecstatic about becoming a father. He already has his mind turned to the weeks ahead: the family will have a naming ceremony 11 days after the birth, with the assistance of a Hindu priest consulting astrological charts for an auspicious moniker.

But beyond that, Rohit was fretting over the future awaiting his daughter. "There are many problems we have to face because of the growing population," the 30-year-old told AFP. "Even for seeing the doctor here we had to queue up for so long."

India faces huge challenges in providing electricity, food and housing for its growing popula-

director Phil Robertson said the evidence "was far from clear cut — since he never actually touched the marijuana in question, was questioned by police without a lawyer, and denied access to a Tamil interpreter when he asked for one."

He added the hanging "raises serious concerns that Singapore is launching a renewed spree to empty its death row in a misguided effort of deterrence." Amnesty International Deputy Regional Director Ming Yu Hah said there were "many flaws" in the case and that the hanging showed "the staggering failure of Singapore's stubborn embrace of the death penalty."

'Not anywhere near' drugs

Singapore authorities have maintained that Tangaraju was given due process and that his guilt had been proven beyond a reasonable doubt. The Ministry of Home Affairs said "the evidence clearly showed that he was the person coordinating the delivery of drugs, for the purpose of trafficking."

Branson, a member of the Geneva-based Global Commission on Drug Policy, wrote Monday on his blog that Tangaraju was "not anywhere near" the drugs at the time of his arrest and that Singapore may be about to put an innocent man to death.

On Tuesday, the ministry slammed Branson, saying that the billionaire showed "disrespect for Singapore's judges and our criminal justice system with such allegations." In some parts of the world—including neighbouring Thailand—cannabis has been decriminalised, with authorities abandoning prison sentences.

congestion and overcrowding are already perennial sources of frustration for their inhabitants.

"The roads are choked with vehicles, so you spend hours in traffic jams," Satish Manchanda, a mobile phone shop owner in the capital New Delhi, told AFP before embarking on his evening commute. Manchanda and millions of others spend hours each day travelling to and from homes on the outskirts of cities already struggling with water shortages, pollution and packed slums.

About 70 percent of the billions of litres of sewage produced in urban centres every day goes untreated, a government report said in 2021. New Delhi, home to 20 million people, is cloaked in toxic air pollution every winter that caused almost 17,500 premature deaths in 2019, according to a study in the Lancet medical journal.

Indian cities also face huge challenges in providing electricity, housing, services and jobs for their growing populations. Banker Sonam Vardan bemoaned the "cut-throat competition" in her career and the seemingly endless fights that accompany her daily life in New Delhi. —AFP

Singapore hangs prisoner over one kilogram of cannabis

SINGAPORE: Singapore hanged a prisoner on Wednesday after he was convicted of conspiracy to smuggle one kilogram of cannabis, despite rights groups decrying "many flaws" in the case. Tangaraju Suppiah was hanged in defiance of a plea by the United Nations Human Rights Office for Singapore to "urgently reconsider" and calls by British tycoon Richard Branson to halt it.

The Asian financial hub has some of the world's toughest anti-narcotics laws and insists the death penalty remains an effective deterrent against trafficking. "Singaporean Tangaraju Suppiah, 46, had his capital sentence carried out today at Changi Prison Complex," a spokesman for the Singapore Prison Service told AFP.

Tangaraju was convicted in 2017 of "abetting by engaging in a conspiracy to traffic" 1,017.9 grams (35.9 ounces) of cannabis, twice the minimum volume required for a death sentence in Singapore, the spokesman said.

He was sentenced to death in 2018 with the Court of Appeal later upholding the decision, but rights groups have claimed there were several problems with the case. Human Rights Watch deputy Asia

Competition fuels misery in India's crowded cities

NEW DELHI: Every morning and evening—and for several hours in between—tens of millions of Indians sit idle on gridlocked highways and hang from the sides of packed passenger trains in what is becoming the world's most populous nation.

For those living cheek-by-jowl in the country's sprawling megacities, the thought of cohabiting with even more people is no cause for cheer. The United Nations said Monday that India—already boasting 1.43 billion people—would this week overtake China to earn the distinction of being home to more humans than any other country on the planet.

India is projected to see an explosion in its urban population in the coming decades, with over 270 million more people forecast to live in its cities by 2040. But

Ten Indian police killed in Maoist rebel attack

RAIPUR: Ten police and their driver were killed in India's central Chhattisgarh state Wednesday when their vehicle hit an improvised explosive device, an attack police blamed on Maoist rebels. India's long-running Maoist insurgency began in the 1960s and has cost thousands of lives in the decades since, although violence has waned considerably in recent years.

Wednesday's deaths were the worst casualties for security forces in more than two years and claimed the lives of police reservists returning from a mission to investigate rebel movements in remote Dantewada district. "They were returning from an operation when the explosion took place targeting their vehicle," senior Chhattisgarh police official Vivekanand,

who uses only one name, told AFP.

Footage aired on broadcaster NDTV showed a crater that stretched several feet into the earth, and security forces inspecting mangled vehicle parts strewn about by the blast. "I pay my tributes to the brave personnel we lost in the attack," Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote on Twitter. "Their sacrifice will always be remembered."

Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel told reporters the attack was "very saddening" and pledged to redouble efforts to combat the state's Naxalites, as India's Maoist insurgents are known. "This battle is in the last leg and we will not spare any Naxalites, and we will make a proper plan to wipe out Naxalism." No rebel group has claimed responsibility for the attack so far.

India has deployed tens of thousands of forces to battle the rebels across the insurgent-dominated region known as the "Red Corridor", which stretches across several central, southern and eastern states. —AFP



DEHRA: Photograph shows Manu Bala holding her newborn daughter inside a maternity ward of a civil hospital in Dehra, in Kangra district of India's Himachal Pradesh state. — AFP

tion. Many of its cities struggle with water shortages, air and water pollution, and packed slums. Millions of young people are entering the workforce each year and struggling to find opportunities in an economy that does not have the capacity to provide them all with jobs.

"Already there is so much unemployment in the country. It will become all the more difficult to get a job," Rohit said. "I think one baby is enough in today's times." —AFP



SINGAPORE: Leelavathy Suppiah (L), sister of a convicted drug trafficker Tangaraju Suppiah, reacts during a press conference in Singapore. —AFP

Rights groups have been heaping pressure on Singapore to abolish capital punishment, and the United Nations has said the practice has not proven to be an effective deterrent globally and is incompatible with international human rights law.

Singapore resumed executions in March 2022 after a hiatus of more than two years. Wednesday's hanging was the city-state's first in six months and 12th since last year. Among those hanged was Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam, whose execution sparked a global outcry, including from the United Nations and Branson, because he was deemed to have a mental disability. —AFP

UK warns China of any conflict over Taiwan

LONDON: Britain on Tuesday warned China against any attack on Taiwan, telling Beijing it risked triggering domestic and global turmoil if it failed to uphold its international obligations. In a set-piece foreign policy speech, Foreign Secretary James Cleverly restated that London wants to see a "peaceful settlement" to sovereignty claims.

China claims self-ruled Taiwan as its territory and has vowed to seize it one day, by force if necessary. Earlier this month, Chinese forces held military exercises simulating targeted strikes and a blockade of the island.

But Cleverly said conflict in the Taiwan Strait would have a catastrophic impact on world supply chains, particularly of advanced semi-conductors. "A war across the Strait would not only be a human tragedy, it would destroy world trade worth \$2.6 trillion, according to the Nikkei Asia," he added.

"No country could shield itself from the repercussions," he told an audience at the Mansion House in the City of London financial district. "Distance would offer no protection from this catastrophic blow to the global economy—and to China most of all."

"I shudder to contemplate the human and financial ruin that would follow. So it's essential that no party takes unilateral action to change the status quo." Cleverly's speech comes as Britain seeks to reset its foreign policy priorities after its departure from the European Union, with a "tilt" towards the Indo-Pacific region.

He recently returned from a swing through the region to cement political, trade and military links, in response to Chinese expansion. Tensions between London and Beijing have been strained in recent years, notably over China's squeeze on civil rights in the former British colony of Hong Kong.

Tempers have risen also over the treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority and a block on tech firm Huawei's involvement in the roll-out of Britain's 5G telecoms network. 'Profound disagreements' -

Hawkish elements in Britain's ruling Conservative party have urged the government to take a tougher stance on China. But Cleverly instead urged a pragmatic, constructive and united Western approach to China's rising power, acknowledging the need to work in partnership with the Asian power.

"It would be clear and easy—and perhaps even satisfying—for me to declare a new Cold War and say that our goal is to isolate China," he said. "Clear, easy, satisfying—and wrong, because it would be a betrayal of our national interest and a willful misunderstanding of the modern world."

"Instead, this government will advance British interests directly with China, alongside our allies, while steadfastly defending our national security and our values." Cleverly said "profound disagreements" could be expected when dealing with the Chinese leadership, not least over a clash of values.

But he said Western powers owed it to future generations to speak their mind and to engage, given China's increasing importance to issues such as fighting climate change, global health, tech and finance.

He urged China to uphold its international obligations, including the Joint Declaration it signed with Britain to preserve Hong Kong's freedoms, and the UN Charter. "If China breaks them, we are entitled to say so and to act—and we will," he added, urging Beijing not to see that as interference in domestic affairs.

"Peaceful co-existence has to begin with respecting fundamental laws and institutions, including the UN Charter, which protects every country against invasion," he said. "And that means every country." Cleverly also urged Beijing to abandon its neutral stance on Russian aggression in Ukraine. —AFP

Business

THURSDAY, APRIL 27, 2023

US lawmakers lock horns over debt limit as default looms

Default firestorm could engulf global markets

WASHINGTON: US representatives were set to vote on Republican proposals combining steep spending cuts with a hike in the country's borrowing limit to head off a potentially catastrophic credit default. The government is expecting to hit the debt ceiling within weeks, raising the possibility of the world's largest economy defaulting on its repayments and igniting a firestorm that could engulf international markets.

The Limit, Save, Grow Act — opposed by the Democrats — has no chance of becoming law but Republicans are trying to muscle it through the House of Representatives as an opening salvo in negotiations with President Joe Biden. The high-stakes standoff is the first major test for America's divided government after Republicans and Democrats assumed joint control of Congress this year.

Crucially, it is being touted as a measure of Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy's leadership after he secured the gavel in January by pledging to his party's hard-right that he would rein in federal spending. "I know President Biden might be focused on his own political future today, but he should be focused on the future of America," McCarthy said Tuesday after the Democratic leader announced he was running for re-election.

"Biden should have announced he will finally come to the table and negotiate a responsible debt limit increase to avoid the first default in our history."

Charm offensive

The United States is almost \$32 trillion in debt — a figure that has been accumulated under both parties over decades. Congress has voted to allow greater debt limits more than 150 times in the past century or so and in most cases the process has been routine.

IEA: Global sales of electric cars to surge in 2023

PARIS: The global auto industry is undergoing a sea change, with implications for the energy sector, as electrification is set to avoid the need for 5 million barrels of oil a day by 2030. Global sales of electric cars are set to surge to yet another record this year, expanding their share of the overall car market to close to one-fifth and leading a major transformation of the auto industry that has implications for the energy sector, especially oil.

The new edition of the IEA's annual Global Electric Vehicle Outlook shows that more than 10 million electric cars were sold worldwide in 2022 and that sales are expected to grow by another 35 percent this year to reach 14 million. This explosive growth means electric cars' share of the overall car market has risen from around 4 percent in 2020 to 14 percent in 2022 and is set to increase further to 18 percent this year, based on the latest IEA projections.

"Electric vehicles are one of the driving forces in the new global energy economy that is rapidly emerging — and they are bringing about a historic transformation of the car manufacturing industry worldwide," said IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol. "The trends we are witnessing have significant implications for global oil demand. The internal combustion engine has gone unrivalled for over a century, but electric vehicles are changing the status quo. By 2030, they will avoid the need for at least 5 million barrels a day of oil. Cars are just the first wave: elec-

The 320-page Republican bill would raise the ceiling through March 2024 — or until the debt grows to \$32.9 trillion — but it demands drastic belt-tightening in federal programs that the Congressional Budget Office estimates would save \$4.8 trillion over a decade. The stakes are extraordinarily high for McCarthy, who has been able to meet just once with Biden as the president has steadfastly refused to entertain any debt limit increase involving concessions and has vowed to veto the bill.

If the vote fails, the House could be forced to move a no-strings-attached hike — exactly what Biden wants but a potential disaster for the speaker, who would risk losing support among his party's right flank. The outcome is on a knife edge, with McCarthy only able to lose four Republicans and as many as 10 still said to be unconvinced.

He has signaled his intention to press ahead on Wednesday but acknowledges that the vote may need to be delayed if his bid to win over the holdouts does not bear fruit in time.

McCarthy's charm offensive hit a roadblock Monday though as ratings agency Moody's Analytics estimated that his plan could stunt 2024 growth by 0.6 percentage points and kill 780,000 jobs.

'Good stewards'

Konrad Petraitis, an Americas analyst for strategic risk consultancy Sibylline, predicted however that McCarthy would prevail, putting Biden under pressure to come to the negotiating table. "Biden has focused on a message stressing that the Democrats are good stewards of the economy and that his government has been able to right the ship against severe external pressures," he told AFP.

"His message is undercut, however, if the debt

ceiling negotiations lead to a default."

US Treasury debt is considered the world's benchmark safe asset and its interest rates are the basis for the pricing of financial products and transactions across the planet. Economists argue that failure to honor repayment obligations could panic investors, supercharge borrowing costs and torch millions of jobs.



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden speaks about the creation of new manufacturing jobs at the Washington Hilton in Washington, DC, April 25, 2023. — AFP

The Treasury has been using "extraordinary mea-

asures" — essentially moving money around and drawing on certain accounting tools — for months to keep paying creditors who own government bonds. It is likely to be able to continue doing this until late July, although there is a small chance that the government's wiggle room could run out by mid-June.

Experts expect the markets to start getting jittery by late May if no deal emerges between Congress and the White House. — AFP

Experts expect the markets to start getting jittery by late May if no deal emerges between Congress and the White House. — AFP

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Reduction Act was passed, and March 2023, major EV and battery makers announced investments totaling at least \$52 billion in EV supply chains in North America. Despite a concentration of electric car sales and manufacturing in only a few big markets, there are promising signs in other regions. Electric car sales more than tripled in India and Indonesia last year, albeit from a low base, and they more than doubled in Thailand. The share of electric cars in total sales rose to 3 percent in Thailand, and to 1.5 percent in India and Indonesia. A combination of effective policies and private sector investment is likely to increase these shares in the future. In India, the government's \$3.2 billion incentive program, which has attracted investments worth \$8.3 billion, is expected to increase battery manufacturing and EV rollout substantially in the coming years.

In emerging and developing economies, the most dynamic area of electric mobility is two- or three-wheel vehicles, which outnumber cars. For example, over half of India's three-wheeler registrations in 2022 were electric, demonstrating their growing popularity. In many developing economies, two- or three-wheelers offer an affordable way to get access to mobility, meaning their electrification is important to support sustainable development.



ted to this acquisition and will appeal. The decision "rejects a pragmatic path to address competition concerns and discourages technology innovation and investment in the United Kingdom", he added.

Activision also slammed the regulator's verdict, arguing it showed Britain was "closed for business" for its industry, despite the UK government's insistence that it was a global hub for technology.

"We will work aggressively with Microsoft to reverse this on appeal," it said. "The report's conclusions are a disservice to UK citizens, who face increasingly dire economic prospects." Wednesday's announcement comes despite the CMA having recently narrowed the scope of its probe to cloud gaming, after concluding that Microsoft's deal would not damage competition in relation to console gaming, citing fresh evidence. — AFP

UK blocks Microsoft's \$69bn takeover of US giant Activision

LONDON: Britain on Wednesday blocked Microsoft's \$69-billion takeover of US video game giant Activision Blizzard, arguing it would harm competition in cloud gaming. The ruling will be appealed but could potentially spell 'Game Over' for the blockbuster deal. Xbox-owner Microsoft in 2022 launched its bid to create the world's third biggest gaming company by revenue with the takeover of Activision, owner of hit games "Candy Crush" and "Call Of Duty", triggering antitrust concerns worldwide.

Following its lengthy probe, the UK's Competition and Markets Authority prevented the deal "over concerns... (it) would alter the future of the fast-growing cloud gaming market, leading to reduced innovation and less choice for UK gamers over the years to come". Both firms said they would appeal the final verdict and expressed deep disappointment over Britain's decision regarding the gigantic takeover, which has yet to win regulatory nods in Europe or the United States.

Activision threatened to reassess its growth prospects for Britain amid chances that the deal would be blocked elsewhere following Wednesday's ruling.

Market forces

The CMA on Wednesday said Microsoft's proposed remedies over cloud gaming — which allows to play over a range of devices like mobile phones and tablets — contained "significant shortcomings" and would require further regulatory oversight instead of allowing the market to decide and the industry to shape its own future. "Preventing the merger would effectively allow market forces to continue to operate and shape the development of cloud gaming without this regulatory intervention," it added in the statement.

Martin Coleman, chair of the independent panel of experts conducting the CMA probe, said the landmark transaction would hand Microsoft even more power over rivals. "Microsoft already enjoys a powerful position and head start over other competitors in cloud gaming and this deal would strengthen that advantage, giving it the ability to undermine new and innovative competitors," Coleman said. While "Microsoft engaged constructively... their proposals were not effective to remedy our concerns and would have replaced competition with ineffective regulation in a new and dynamic market", he added.

The video games market needs competition in cloud gaming to continue to thrive, the CMA argued. "Cloud gaming needs a free, competitive market to drive innovation and choice," added Coleman.

"That is best achieved by allowing the current competitive dynamics in cloud gaming to continue to do their job." In response, Microsoft's vice chair and president Brad Smith said it remained "fully commit-

'Infernal': Fuel crisis driving Cubans round the bend

HAVANA: The streets of Havana are quieter than usual — many of the rattling old cars the city is known for stand idle amid Cuba's worst fuel shortage in years.

"This is infernal!" exclaimed 59-year-old Lazaro Diaz, a private delivery driver, after queuing an entire day for gasoline. Without luck.

Queues snake for kilometers (miles) around fuel stations in the capital of the communist island suffering its worst economic crisis in three decades worsened by biting US sanctions and a tourism slump caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The dearth of fuel, which started end-March, is felt in all sectors and economic classes. Everything from concerts to baseball games have been postponed or canceled — including, authorities said Tuesday, the upcoming May Day rally in Havana's Plaza de la Revolution.

The event usually draws thousands — largely traveling by bus — to the square from all over the city. Instead, smaller events are being organized among Havana's various neighborhoods. A university in the capital and four in other provinces have had to cancel in-person lectures this week with students and professors unable to get to class. Thousands of other workers have taken to working from home. But many do not have the option. Diaz, for example, depends on his motorbike to support his wife, children and grandchildren.

"I don't have fuel, I can't work," he told AFP, smoking as he leaned against a wall in the intense afternoon sun. "I cannot make a living standing in a queue," he added.

'Most critical'

In a country that is no stranger to shortages of basic commodities, many Cubans say this is the worst they have experienced. Used to long queues for food and medicine, Cubans also have to deal with frequent power interruptions.

For now, many of Cuba's 600,000-odd cars — for a population of 11.1 million people — are not going anywhere. "It has been the most critical" shortage yet, said Edgar Sanchez, a 43-year-old volleyball coach who cannot make it to work because his Soviet-era Lada has run out of gasoline.

"We are not fuel producers, we depend on the world," he told AFP after seven hours in another fruitless queue. Like many others, he blames US sanctions in place for more than 60 years for Cuba's economic ills.

In mid-April, President Miguel Diaz-Canel admitted it was not "clear" how the country would "get out of this situation." Countries that supply Cuba with fuel have had to cut back due to a "complex energy situation" globally, he said. The president did not name the countries, but Cuba relies heavily on fuel from ally Venezuela. Diaz-Canel said Cuba could count on less than 400 tons of fuel per day, compared to the 500-600 tons it needs. According to Energy Minister Vicente de la O Levy, available fuel was being rationed to avoid a situation of "zero supply." — AFP

Business

Gulf Bank records KD 17.3 million in net profit for first quarter of 2023

Net profit increases by 15% compared to first quarter of 2022

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank KSCP announced its financial results for the first three months ending 31 March 2023. The bank reported a net profit of KD 17.3 million, an increase of KD 2.3 million or 15 percent compared to 2022 first three months net profit of KD 15 million.

Subsequently, the bank's return on assets improved from 0.9 percent in the first quarter of 2022 to 1.0 percent for the first quarter of 2023 and return on equity grew from 9.2 percent to 9.9 percent.

Gulf Bank recorded an operating income of KD 46.4 million for the first three months of 2023, and an operating profit before provisions of KD 25 million for the same period. The increase in the net profit was mainly driven by a 12 percent or KD 4.9 million increase in operating income supported by a noticeable enhancement in net interest income of 8 percent or KD 2.6 million and non-interest income of 24 percent or KD 2.3 million compared to first quarter 2022. Moreover, operating profit has increased by KD 3.2 million or 15 percent for the first quarter of 2023 compared to the same period of last year.

As for asset quality, the non-performing loans (NPL) ratio stood at 0.8 percent as of 31 March 2023, compared to the prior year level of 1.0 percent. Additionally, the Bank continues to have significant non-performing loans coverage ratio of 692 percent including total provisions and collaterals.

Total credit provisions as of 31 March 2023 reached KD 303.5 million whereas IFRS9 accounting requirements (i.e., ECL or expected credit losses) were KD 164.2 million. As a result, the bank has very healthy excess provision level of KD 139.2 million, above and beyond what is required by the IFRS9 accounting requirements. This excess provision is the highest ever since the start of the implementation of IFRS9.

Compared to 31 March 2022, total assets increased by 5 percent to KD 6.8 billion, loans and advances to customers increased by 6 percent to KD 4.8 billion, while customer deposits reached KD 4.2 billion. Shareholders' equity reached KD 705 million, an increase of 6 percent.

The bank's regulatory Tier 1 ratio of 13.9 percent was 1.9 percent above the regulatory minimum of 12% and the Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) of 16.1 percent was 2.1 percent above the regulatory minimum of 14 percent.

On March 18, 2023, Gulf Bank held its Annual General Assembly Meeting, where shareholders approved the distribution of a cash dividend of 10 fils per share for the year 2022, representing a 51 percent cash payout



Jassim Mustafa Boodai

- I am pleased to announce that we have achieved an excellent performance in the first quarter of 2023 with a 15 percent growth in our net profit, an encouraging start for the remainder of the year.
- We remain focused on creating value for all stakeholders amid fluctuating operating environments.
- We proceed to make excellent progress on our digital transformation initiatives focusing on enhancing our customer experience.
- We have achieved major milestones within our 5-year strategy, and we are anticipating further significant accomplishments towards the end of 2025.

ratio, in addition to a 5 percent bonus shares.

Strong financial performance

Commenting on Gulf Bank's first quarter 2023 financial results, Jassim Mustafa Boodai, Gulf Bank's Chairman said: "Despite the challenging start of the year 2023 with the world economic uncertainty, political tensions and tight monetary policies, the Kuwaiti economic environment remained resilient and stable. Having said that, I am pleased to announce that Gulf Bank achieved an excellent performance for first quarter of 2023 with a 15 percent growth in our net profit, an encouraging start for the remainder of the year."

"We remain focused on creating value for all stakeholders amid fluctuating operating environments," Boodai added.

Customer-centric

Gulf Bank continues its efforts to enrich customer experience by offering a comprehensive list of products and accommodating services that meet customer needs. The Bank's brand-new smartphone application provides unique features operating in a fast, secure, and simple customer interface. Moreover, the recent adoption of the latest version of IVR system at the Bank's Call Center addresses customers growing demand for digital services. On the ground, Gulf Bank owns one of the largest local branch networks, with over 50 branches covering vital locations across Kuwait. This prominent presence assisted the Bank in reducing the average transaction time for the in-branch customers, which ultimately leads to enhancing customer satisfaction to a greater extent.

Commenting on the recent consumer-centric business development at Gulf Bank, Boodai said:

observers and company insiders, according to media reports. "We'll continue to incorporate generative AI advances to make search better in a thoughtful and deliberate way," Google chief Sundar Pichai said during an earnings call.

"And we will test and iterate as we go because we know that billions of people trust Google to provide the right information." An arms race over AI is expected to play out for several years and could prove to be expensive for the tech giants.

To get itself battle ready for the AI wars ahead, Google has reorganized its AI division, putting the independently run Deep Mind subsidiary inside the company in a division called Google Brain.

'Serious challenges'

The threat from an AI-augmented Bing sent Pichai on a rare US media tour recently to reassure that the company remained an industry leader on everything from search to maps to AI pioneering. Despite headwinds, Pichai received a total compensation package worth more than \$225 million in 2022, according to a regulatory filing posted last week. Google-owned YouTube's advertising revenue dropped for the third quarter in a row. However, there was "strong watch-time growth" at a YouTube Shorts section added to counter TikTok. During the quarter, YouTube chief Susan Wojcicki stepped down after nine years, replaced by longtime executive Neal Mohan.

"Google exceeded both revenue and earnings expectations this quarter, but reasons for investor optimism are modest," said Insider Intelligence senior analyst Max Willens.

"Google's core business is facing the most serious challenges it has encountered in quite some time."

Despite challenges, Alphabet's share price has recovered well from lows seen before January's lay-

the ACP water manager, told AFP. That affects the canal's business with the largest vessels, which pay the highest fees, prevented from passing through, added Cordoba. In the 2022 fiscal year more than 14,000 ships carrying 518 million tons of cargo passed through the canal, contributing \$2.5 billion to the Panamanian treasury.

'Vital to find new water sources'

Alarm bells were already set off in 2019 when the fresh water supplies dropped to just three billion cubic meters, some way short of the 5.25 billion needed to operate the canal. Authorities fear that this operational uncertainty could lead some shipping companies to favor other routes, thus heightening the need to find solutions to guarantee the canal's operations over the long term. Canal administrator Ricaurte Vasquez recently acknowledged to Panamanian website SNIP Noticias that water shortage was the main threat to shipping in the canal. "Without a new reservoir that brings new volumes of water, this situation will remove the Canal's capacity to grow," former administrator Jorge Quijano told AFP. "It is vital to find new water sources, especially faced with the climate change we are seeing, not just in our country but all over the world." The Panama Canal basin also supplies water to more than half of the country's 4.3 million population.

The shortages have caused water supply problems in several parts of the country, provoking numerous protests. Experts warn that water conflicts could arise between the canal and local populations given the disorderly urban sprawl developing around Panama City.

"We proceed to make excellent progress in our digital transformation initiatives focusing on enhancing our customer experience. So far, we have achieved major milestones of our 5-year strategy, and we anticipate further significant accomplishments towards the end of 2025."

Wealth management

As part of Gulf Bank's 2025 strategy of expanding the bank's offering to cater for the high-net worth individuals, the Wealth Management division provides private and distinctive products to meet the wealth customers aspirations. These offerings include the WISE investment services - the Bank's flagship digital advisory and portfolio management platform - in addition to several alternative investments. With the completion of the establishment of an independent investment subsidiary, the Bank will be able to offer a full suite of investment products and services.

During the first quarter of 2023, Gulf Bank had co-joined KAMCO Invest, as a lead manager, in the issuance of United Real Estate Company KD 80 million bonds. This issuance was the largest Kuwaiti Dinar denominated bond issuance within the real estate sector.

Women empowerment

Gulf Bank has concluded its first "Lead the Way" conference in March 2023, shedding the light on the most prominent challenges and opportunities facing women empowerment in Kuwait. The Conference, along with the interactive workshops, inspiring speeches, and insightful panel discussions, were part of the Bank's commitment to the UNDP sustainability development goals and principles related to women empowerment and equality. On this occasion,

Boodai stated: "We are a firm believer in women empowerment and career development. Currently, we are proud to say that women represent more than 43 percent of the Gulf Bank's workforce and 28 percent of its leadership. We persist with our journey of embracing diversity at the workplace stemming from our belief in equal job benefits based on qualifications and competency rather than gender."

Credit ratings

Gulf Bank remains well recognized internationally in terms of its creditworthiness and financial strength. During the first quarter of 2023, Fitch Ratings affirmed the Long-Term Issuer Default Rating of Gulf Bank at 'A' with a 'Stable' Outlook. This affirmation reflects the potential support from the Kuwaiti authorities, if needed, as reflected in its Government Support Rating of 'a'. In addition, the 2022 Viability Rating upgrade of "bbb-" indicates Gulf Bank's good domestic franchise, cautious risk approach and healthy asset quality.

Furthermore, Moody's Investor Services maintained Gulf Bank Long-Term Deposits rating of 'A3' with a 'Stable' Outlook. In addition, Gulf Bank has a Long-term Foreign Currency rating at "A+" with a "Stable" Outlook from Capital Intelligence. At the same time, the bank's KD 50 million Basel III-compliant Tier 2 Subordinated Bonds are rated at "BBB+" with a "Stable" Outlook by Capital Intelligence.

Appreciation

Boodai concluded his remarks by stating: "On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to thank our shareholders for their ongoing trust, and our employees for their commitment and dedication. I would also like to thank the Central Bank of Kuwait for their continuous support. Finally, I want to thank our clients for their loyalty, and reiterate our commitment to offering them the best banking experience."

Key positive indicators

- First quarter 2023 net profit of KD 17.3 million, an increase of 15 percent compared to the same period of 2022.
- Loans and advances to customers grew by 6 percent to reach KD 4.8 billion.
- Non-performing loan ratio for the First Quarter 2023 was 0.8 percent, with a strong non-performance loan coverage ratio of 692 percent.
- Capital ratios as of the First Quarter 2023, Tier 1 ratio was 13.9 percent and Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) was 16.1 percent.

Google, Microsoft top expectations as AI rivalry heats up

SAN FRANCISCO: Google parent company Alphabet beat market expectations in the first quarter of 2023 with a net profit of \$15 billion, the company said on Tuesday, in a sign that the search engine behemoth is regaining its footing.

The tech titan has found itself under pressure due to a general slowdown in advertising spending, over-hiring during a COVID-era boom and a major challenge by Microsoft on artificial intelligence.

Its quarterly revenue came in at nearly \$70 billion, a billion better than expected by analysts, and in the same three-month period that the company said it would lay off 12,000 staff, or six percent of its workforce. Microsoft's results for the first three months of the year also pleased investors on Tuesday, lifted by its industry-leading business cloud products.

The company founded by Bill Gates reported profit of \$18.3 billion on revenue of \$52.9 billion as Cloud and AI more than offset drops in revenue from licensing Windows software to computer makers, as sales suffer in that market. Most market attention was on Google, which became a focus of worry when Microsoft-backed ChatGPT was released and quickly went viral late last year. The Windows maker has added the technology to its Bing search engine and office software.

The search giant has since rushed out Bard, its own version of the language-based AI, but the release was seen as clumsy and has so far disappointed

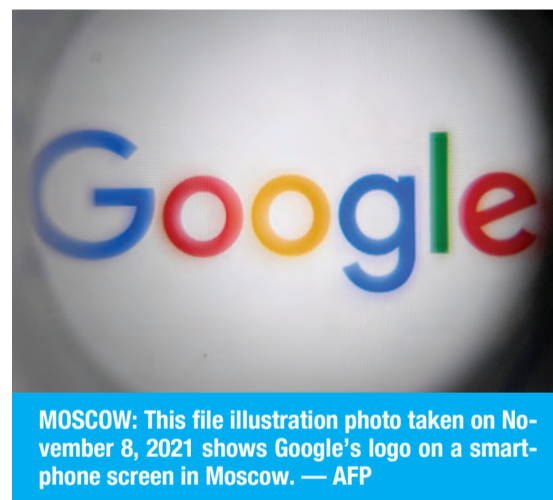
Drought threatens Panama Canal shipping traffic

PANAMA CITY: Drought has forced Panama's authorities to reduce shipping traffic in the canal that links the Atlantic and Pacific as a water supply crisis threatens the future of this crucial waterway. Two artificial lakes that feed the canal in the province of Colon have been depleted by lack of rain. "This Lake Alhajuela has less water every day," Leidin Guevara, 43, who fishes in the lake, told AFP.

The Panamanian Canal Authority (ACP) has limited the largest ships passing through the canal for the fifth time during this drought season. Some six percent of global maritime shipping passes through the canal, mostly from the United States, China and Japan.

Rain water is the energy source used in the Panama Canal to move ships through locks, up to as much as 26 meters above sea level. The passage of each boat involves 200 million liters of fresh water flowing into the sea, which makes the Alhajuela and Gatun lakes vital.

According to the ACP, between March 21 and April 21, the Alhajuela level fell by seven meters — more than 10 percent. "The lack of rains impacts in various ways, firstly in the reduction in our water reserves," Erick Cordoba,

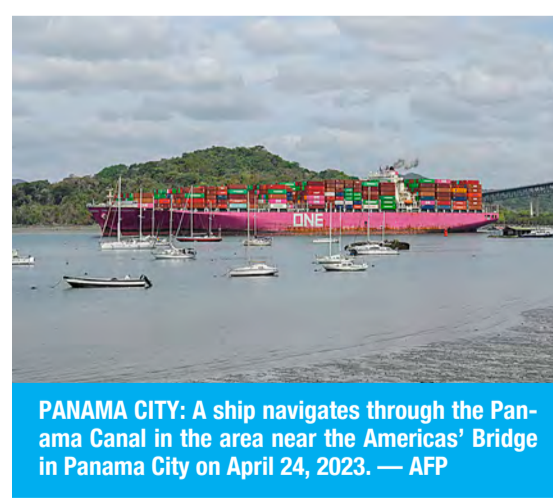


MOSCOW: This file illustration photo taken on November 8, 2021 shows Google's logo on a smartphone screen in Moscow. — AFP

off announcements and on Tuesday shot up by more than 4 percent in after-hours trading to \$108.4.

This was still well shy of the near \$150 seen in 2021, when ad revenue was pouring in. Microsoft has been steadily pressing on with its AI revolution, recently announcing that it would apply the powers behind ChatGPT to its iconic Excel, Word and Outlook programs. The Redmond, Washington giant has been swiftly adopting language-based AI, showing less caution than its rivals despite early problems such as chatbots giving disturbing responses or blatantly inaccurate information.

"We see that when people use the new AI features, their engagement with Bing and Edge goes up," Microsoft chief Satya Nadella said during an earnings call. "We look forward to continuing this journey in what is a generational shift in the largest software category - search." — AFP



PANAMA CITY: A ship navigates through the Panama Canal in the area near the Americas' Bridge in Panama City on April 24, 2023. — AFP

"We don't want to engage in a philosophical conflict over water for Panamanians or water for international commerce," said Vasquez. The canal has suffered from "a lack of rain as we have had in the whole country, but within the parameters of what is a normal dry period," Luz de Calzadilla, general manager at Panama's meteorology and hydrology institute, told AFP.

However, the El Nino climate phenomenon will likely reduce rainfall in the second half of the year, added De Calzadilla. "The truth is that the Canal administration is working magic to maintain business and fulfill a social responsibility such as drinking water for human consumption." — AFP

Germany wary of heat pump business sale to US group

BERLIN: Germany's economy minister said Wednesday Europe's largest economy must not lose out from the sale of a heat pump maker to a US rival, as competition in the sector increases. US group Carrier Global said Tuesday it had agreed to purchase German group Viessmann's core climate business for \$12 billion (10.9 billion euros).

The purchase of the German business was a "game-changing opportunity" to expand in Europe as governments look to decarbonize the housing sector, Carrier CEO David Gitlin said in a statement.

But the sale raised concerns that Germany could lose out in the race to develop and make the technologies needed for the green transition.

The Viessmann deal showed that Germany remained attractive to investors, Economy Minister Robert Habeck said in a statement. But he stressed that "what is important is that the advantages of our energy policy and the profits that are generated continue to benefit Germany".

The government is in talks with both parties in the deal "so that the project serves our economy", the Green party minister said. Demand for heat pumps is expected to rise as governments promote them as a greener alternative to fossil fuel-powered boilers.

Habeck's ministry has pushed proposals to progressively ban the installation of new oil and gas heating from 2024. The transition plans have caused ructions in Germany's three-way coalition government, dividing Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats, the pro-business FDP and the Greens.

The agreed sale showed how a "hasty and complicated" energy transition could have "a negative impact on the German economy", FDP general secretary Bijan Djir-Sarai told financial daily Handelsblatt. It was a "shame" to see a family-owned business from Germany's Mittelstand such as Viessmann end up in US hands, the economic spokeswoman from the opposition conservatives (CDU/CSU) Julia Klöckner told the Funke media group.

The planned boiler ban made takeovers of German companies more attractive to outside investors, Klöckner said, adding that strong partnerships were needed for the domestic industry to remain competitive. — AFP

Business

EU unveils reforms for cheaper drugs and to avoid shortages

Revamped spending rules to boost growth in Europe

BRUSSELS: The EU on Wednesday unveiled a long-awaited proposed reform of legislation governing pharmaceutical drugs to make them cheaper, prevent shortages and boost new antibiotic production.

"Over the last decade, reports of medicines shortages, including of antibiotics, have skyrocketed to the tens of thousands," EU health commissioner Stella Kyriakides told a news conference presenting the recommendations. The biggest reform of its kind in two decades was in part informed by Brussels' concerted action during the COVID pandemic that underscored the benefits of less-burdensome procedures, greater transparency and joint measures.

Kyriakides said that, under the proposal, "companies will have to notify potential shortages earlier and have shortage prevention plans for their medicines". By the end of this year, Brussels plans to draw up a list of critical medicines that will need to be stocked up by manufacturers. The pharmaceutical industry intensively lobbied ahead of the presentation of the proposals, which had been pushed back several times.

A leak in February of a draft version of them sparked criticism from companies worried that the exclusive period they had over selling new drugs could be shortened from 10 years to eight.

The European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations warned against steps that could constrain innovation. While the European Commission aims to bring down the cost of medicines, notably by having more generic drugs on the market, it doesn't have the power to set prices in the European Union. That is the prerogative of national governments who negotiate with pharmaceutical groups.

Drug voucher proposal

Commission vice president Margaritis Schinas said that, currently, the bigger EU member states had the clout to get certain drugs faster than smaller ones. "We want our citizens all over the

European Union to have the same level of access to drugs," he said.

He also said the EU carried out "the biggest ever vaccination program in the history of mankind" to combat COVID, which showed the benefit of Brussels having more say over broad health issues in the 27-nation bloc. However, a senior commission official admitted that the proposals would not by themselves entirely address the problem of drug shortages, which result from multiple factors, including that essential ingredients are sourced from China and India. A parallel policy push by Brussels to secure its own raw materials and to bring in more industrial production to Europe is meant to tackle that last issue.

Antibiotic resistance

Another key challenge is increasing microbial resistance to existing antibiotics, which each year leads to 35,000 deaths in the EU. Because antibiotics are meant to be taken in moderate, defined doses they are less lucrative to pharmaceutical companies than blockbuster drugs.

The EU also unveiled an overhaul of its fiscal rules on Wednesday, a long-awaited reform that has bitterly divided member states over how to encourage investment while strengthening scrutiny of government spending.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, presented the proposal to simplify the complex rules, known as the Stability and Growth Pact, which limit how much the bloc's 27 member states can borrow. Critics say the rules have failed to prevent debts from rising among the 27 member states and they must be reformed to fit with the reality of the bloc's diverse economies.

But the commission also pointed to boosted defense spending as Brussels comes to terms with what the reality of war raging on the bloc's doorstep, in Ukraine, means for EU countries.

The commission has set an ambitious target of



BRUSSELS: European Commission vice-president in charge of the Euro, Social Dialogue, Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union, Valdis Dombrovskis, and EU commissioner for Economy, Paolo Gentiloni speak during a press conference at the EU headquarters, in Brussels on April 26, 2023. — AFP

concluding the negotiations by the end of this year but that appears unlikely at this stage. Germany, a staunch defender of fiscal discipline, fears the reform will overly relax the European Union's budgetary straitjacket and undermine fairness within the bloc. Italy and others argue the rules constrain their ability to invest.

The pact currently stipulates that states' public deficits should not go above three percent of gross domestic product, and debt should stay below 60 percent of GDP.

Wednesday's proposals do not deviate far from what the commission first announced as plans for

reform in November 2022. The three-percent deficit and 60-percent debt targets will stay, but there will be more flexibility through individual plans for debt reduction tailor-made for each country.

"We simultaneously ensure both equal treatment and consideration of country-specific situations," the EU's economy commissioner, Paolo Gentiloni, told a news conference. The EU also wants to give wiggle room for countries to invest in digital and green transitions as Brussels tackles the challenge from the United States and China, where energy costs are cheaper and lavish subsidies risk luring businesses away from Europe. —AFP

News in Brief

Boeing reports another loss in Q1

NEW YORK: Boeing reported a bigger-than-expected quarterly loss Wednesday due to quality control problems that have limited commercial plane deliveries and lifted costs in its defense program. The company reported a loss of \$425 million, compared with \$1.2 billion in the year-ago period. But Boeing affirmed its full-year outlook for operating cash flow, a key metric, and for 737 plane deliveries in 2023. The company's revenues came in at \$17.9 billion, up 28 percent from the year-ago period and topping analyst expectations, but under the level of the pre-pandemic 2019 first quarter. Shares rose on the report. —AFP

EU to boost greener aviation fuel

BRUSSELS: EU lawmakers and member state governments have reached agreement on boosting "green" aviation fuels at airports to cut carbon emissions, officials said Wednesday. The preliminary deal would see a minimum two percent of sustainable aviation fuel—synthetic, biofuel, or recycled from waste gases and plastic—mixed into currently used kerosene starting from 2025, rising gradually to 70 percent by 2050. The agreement is part of the European Union's transition to a net carbon-neutral future, and follows a sweeping reform of the bloc's carbon market that is expanded to include sea and air transport. —AFP

GSK profit slides on Haleon split

LONDON: British drugs giant GlaxoSmith-Kline on Wednesday said net profit dropped 17 percent in the first quarter after the demerger of its health care unit Haleon and lower COVID treatment sales. Profit after tax fell to £1.5 billion (\$1.9 billion) compared with the first three months of 2022. GSK said in a statement. Revenue dropped more than three percent to £7 billion. Sales of its COVID antibody treatment Xevudy slumped 98 percent to £31 million, offset by strong growth in other areas, including shingles and meningitis. —AFP

S Africa slams EU citrus rule

PRETORIA: President Cyril Ramaphosa condemned the EU Tuesday for restrictions on citrus exports from South Africa to prevent the importation of non-indigenous moths which stranded tons of fruit at sea when introduced last year. Ramaphosa said he was "disappointed at the (EU's) acts of... protectionism against" the country's agricultural products, "most recently against our citrus". The rules, which seek to combat the spread of a pest called the false codling moth, require South African farmers to apply extreme cold treatment to all Europe-bound oranges. —AFP

First Republic shares sink 49%

NEW YORK: Shares of First Republic plunged 49 percent Tuesday after the bank reported a steep drop in deposits that exacerbated worries about regional banks. The beaten-down California lender said Monday that it lost more than \$100 billion in deposits in the first quarter—intensifying concerns about its long-term prospects after the failures of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and two other mid-sized banks. While First Republic had reported quarterly profits of \$269 million, that data point was overshadowed by its deposit level of \$104.5 billion at end-March. —AFP

German govt lifts growth forecast as outlook brightens

FRANKFURT: The German government Wednesday lifted its growth forecast for this year as rebounding industrial production and slowing inflation helped Europe's top economy weather an energy crisis. The manufacturing powerhouse is forecast to grow 0.4 percent in 2023, the economy ministry said in its latest projections.

The prediction highlighted a steady improvement in Germany's fortunes since Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year triggered the energy crisis and sparked fears of recession.

The government's last forecast in January was 0.2 percent expansion, and back in October they had predicted a contraction of 0.4 percent in 2023. Economy Minister Robert Habeck said the improved forecast was "truly remarkable", given the difficult backdrop.

"The German economy has proven to be adaptable and resilient," he told a press conference, add-

'Impossible to keep track': Spain's gamble on green hydrogen

PUERTOLLANO, Spain: Major green energy projects are sprouting up across Spain as it seeks to position itself as a future green energy leader—but experts have urged caution over costs and demand uncertainty. Spanish firms are ramping up production of emissions-free fuel and ploughing investment into green energy projects, despite fears over the high price of production.

"Everything is going very fast," said Miguel Angel Fernandez, technical director at the Spanish National Hydrogen Centre, a public research centre based in central Spain. "There are so many projects, it is impossible to keep track of them all." Most hydrogen is currently produced using polluting fossil fuels but so-called "green hydrogen" is made entirely using renewable energy such as wind, solar and hydropower. While fossil fuels emit harmful greenhouse gases when they burn, hydrogen only emits water vapor.

Madrid launched a 1.5-billion-euro (\$1.7-billion) plan in 2021 to support green hydrogen projects, using a European Union COVID recovery fund.

Spain is now home to 20 percent of the world's

Sweden hikes rate to 3.5% to beat inflation

STOCKHOLM: Sweden's Riksbank on Wednesday hiked its guiding interest rate by a half-point to 3.5 percent as the central bank tries to rein in double digit inflation.

The bank has progressively raised its key rate from zero over the past year, putting the squeeze on the country's many highly-indebted households with variable mortgage rates. The Riksbank said it would "probably" raise the rate by another quarter-point in June or September. Sweden's inflation rate, which came in at 10.6 percent in March, "is still far too high

and underlying inflation has been much higher than expected during the first months of the year," the bank said in a statement. It noted there was "considerable uncertainty regarding inflation developments".

Speaking at a press conference, central bank governor Erik Thedeén warned the next rate hike could be higher than a quarter-point if deemed necessary by incoming data.

"Should it surprise us negatively, that is to say indicate higher inflation, then the Riksbank will raise the rate higher," Thedeén said. Economists and homeowners have expressed concern about the impact of higher rates on Sweden's households, among the most indebted in Europe and who have seen interest rates on their mortgages soar.

The central bank noted that "monetary policy has a tightening effect on the economy", but said it expected to be able to adjust policy in smaller steps going forward. Inflation in Sweden peaked in De-

green hydrogen projects—second only to the United States. Last year Spanish energy giant Iberdrola started operating what it says is the largest green hydrogen plant for industrial use in Europe, in the former mining town of Puertollano.

The plant uses 100 megawatts of solar panels to produce green hydrogen, which is stored in huge white storage tanks.

The initial goal is for it to provide 10 percent of the energy needed by a neighboring factory belonging to fertilizer maker Fertiberia. This will prevent the release of 48,000 tons of planet-warming carbon dioxide per year according to Iberdrola. If the pilot project works, Iberdrola will launch a "much more important second phase" to meet 100 percent of the fertilizer plant's energy needs, said Javier Plaza, head of Iberdrola's green hydrogen division.

Rival Spanish energy firms such as Cepsa and Repsol have in recent months launched similar projects. In Spain's sunny southern Andalusia region, three billion euros is being invested to create a "green hydrogen valley" where two large factories will produce 300,000 tons of green hydrogen per year from 2027. In the northern region of Asturias 15 solar power parks will be built by 2030 to enable the annual production of 330,000 tons of green hydrogen.

Rafael Cossent, research associate professor in energy economics at Madrid's Comillas Pontifical University, said there was an "effervescence" in



BERLIN: German Minister of Economics and Climate Protection Robert Habeck presents a graph to show the development of the industrial production in Germany during a press conference on the government's growth forecast, in Berlin on April 26, 2023. — AFP

in the year, it said. On Friday, preliminary first quarter growth data will be released, which is expected to show the economy eked out weak growth and dodged a recession.

The economy suffered a shock 0.4 percent contraction in the final three months of last year as the fallout from the Ukraine war hit home. —AFP



PUERTOLLANO, Spain: This picture taken on April 18, 2023 shows the Green Hydrogen Plant built by Spanish company Iberdrola in Puertollano. — AFP

the sector putting Spain in a leading role in green hydrogen production. This is partly due to Spain's abundant sun and wind power capabilities, he added. The Spanish Hydrogen Association estimates there are currently 50 green hydrogen projects under development in the country. Spain could potentially produce enough green hydrogen to cover its own needs and export to northern Europe, the association argues. —AFP

It slowed slightly in January to 11.7 percent before unexpectedly spiking back to 12 percent in February. The Riksbank noted that the fall in inflation in March was mostly a result of lower energy prices.

"Disregarding energy prices, inflation has been much higher than expected during the first months of the year," the bank said. Sweden's inflation adjusted for fixed interest rates (CPIIF) -- the figure used by the Riksbank to guide monetary policy—was 8.0 percent in March, down from 9.4 in February.

Sweden's krona has also depreciated greatly against other main currencies over the past year, but while the Riksbank said it had contributed to higher inflation it "has not been a decisive factor behind the substantial rise." For 2023 as a whole, the central bank said it now expects the Swedish economy to contract 0.7 percent, and forecasted unadjusted inflation of 8.9 percent and rising unemployment. —AFP

Lifestyle



Mario Prushi holds in his hand one of the smallest Qurans (Islam's holy book), of a postage-stamp size with a cover crafted from gold embroidered velvet, in Tirana, Albania. — AFP photos



Mario Prushi and his wife Blerina look at one of the smallest Qurans, of a postage-stamp size with a cover crafted from gold embroidered velvet, at his home in Tirana, Albania.



Mario Prushi holds in his hand one of the smallest Qurans, of a postage-stamp size with a cover crafted from gold embroidered velvet, in Tirana, Albania.

The big history of Albania's tiny Quran

The ritual is always the same. Mario Prushi carefully washes his hands and face before kissing and pressing one of the world's smallest Qurans to his forehead. For generations, the postage stamp-sized book has been passed down in his family -- surviving wars and one of the world's most fanatical "godless regimes".

Scholars say it is one of the smallest Qurans on record, with the minuscule holy book held inside a silver case blackened with age.

"We have kept it from generation to generation with absolute dedication," Prushi, 45, told AFP at his home in Tirana.

Just two centimetres (0.7 inches) wide and one centimetre thick, the book almost disappears in the palm of Prushi's hand, and it can only be read with a small magnifying glass embedded in its case.

The Quran is difficult to date in the absence of scientific analysis, but according to Elton Karaj -- a researcher in Quranic studies at Beder University in Tirana -- the 900-page copy has been around since at least the 19th century.

"This Quran was printed in a very small format, one of the smallest in the world. From its appearance, its publication dates back to the end of the 19th century. It is an extraordinary work, very valuable. It is fortunate that this copy is in Albania," said Karaj.

Miraculously preserved

But its size is not the only remarkable thing about the Quran. It is also responsible for converting the Prushi family from Catholicism to Islam.

"My great-great-grandparents were digging the ground for a new house in the

Djakovica region of Kosovo when they found the perfectly preserved body of a man buried there," said Prushi. "The Quran was found intact laying over his heart."

The family took the discovery as a divine sign and embraced Islam.

His grandfather, an officer in the army of Albania's King Zog in the 1930s, knew Arabic and would invite friends to his home every night to read verses from it.

Years later, under the communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha -- who completely banned all forms of religion and sent all practicing believers to prison -- the book survived in part because it could be so easily hidden.

"Someone had notified the secret police that we had a Quran in our house, but it was so small that my father managed to hide it. The agents moved heaven and earth without finding it," said Prushi.

'Blessings'

Following the incident, Prushi's father Skender decided to entrust it to friends in neighboring Kosovo after smuggling it across the border hidden in a lorry full of coal. He only recovered it only after the war in Kosovo in 1999, where it was buried during to save it from the fighting.

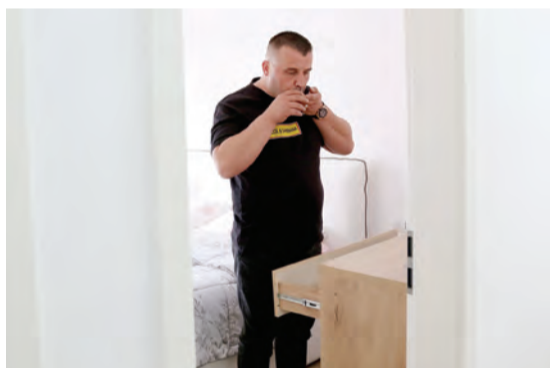
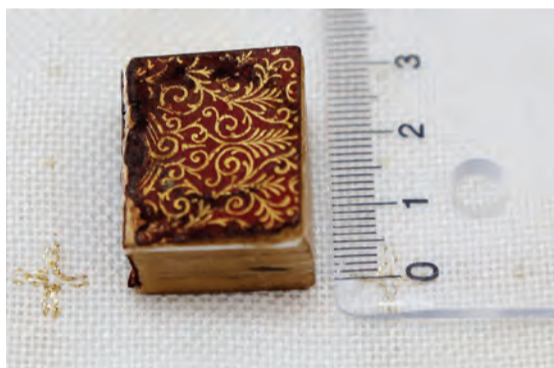
Prushi then inherited the Quran shortly before his father's death in 2012. "This little book carries so many stories, blessings and miracles. It is very dear to me," said Prushi.

"Every time I touch it, I am moved," his wife Blerina told AFP. "When something goes wrong or when our daughter is sick, we feel reassured, we know that the Quran will protect us, it is a real talisman," she added.

The family has received numerous offers to buy it, including from museums. "I never think of selling it," said Prushi. "This Quran belongs to our family and it will always stay with us." — AFP



These pictures show one of the smallest Qurans, of a postage-stamp size with a cover crafted from gold embroidered velvet, at Mario Prushi's home.



Mario Prushi kisses one of the smallest Qurans, of a postage-stamp size with a cover crafted from gold embroidered velvet.



Mario Prushi uses a magnifying glass to read one of the smallest Qurans, of a postage-stamp size with a cover crafted from gold embroidered velvet.

Mattel unveils Barbie doll with Down syndrome

US toy manufacturer Mattel unveiled a new Barbie doll Tuesday representing a person with Down syndrome, as it seeks to allow more children to see themselves in the popular figure. The toy was brought to market through work with the National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS), to ensure it accurately represents someone with the condition, the company said. "Barbie plays an important role in a child's early experiences, and we are dedicated to doing our part to counter social stigma through play," said Lisa McKnight, executive vice president and global head of Barbie and dolls at Mattel.

"Our goal is to enable all children to see themselves in Barbie, while also encouraging children to play with dolls who do not look like themselves," she added in a statement. The new doll has a face and body sculpt aimed at being "more illustrative of women with Down syndrome, including a shorter frame and a longer torso," said Mattel. For example, the face sculpt has a rounder shape, smaller ears and flat nasal bridge. The eyes are slightly slanted as well in an almond shape.

Meanwhile, the doll's dress pattern includes butterflies along with yellow and blue colors -- symbols associated with Down syndrome awareness. "This Barbie serves as a reminder that we should never underestimate the power of representation," said NDSS president Kandi Pickard. "It is a huge step forward for inclusion and a moment that we are celebrating." Down syndrome is a condition in which a person has an extra chromosome, which changes how their body and brain develop.

Previously, Mattel rolled out a series of Barbie dolls dedicated to feminist or other inspirational icons. Barbie has 175 looks, according to Mattel. The latest doll's release comes as a live-action film about Barbie is expected to hit the screens in July, starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling. — AFP



This undated image courtesy of Mattel, shows the company's newest Barbie doll. — AFP

Warner brings 'Barbie,' Oprah and DC superheroes to CinemaCon



(From left) Director Denis Villeneuve, actors Zendaya and Timothee Chalamet speak on stage during the studio presentation from Warner Bros Pictures during CinemaCon.

Celebrating its 100th year, Warner Bros unveiled a packed lineup of new big-screen films at CinemaCon on Tuesday, from a live-action "Barbie" comedy to Oprah Winfrey and Steven Spielberg's remake of "The Color Purple."

The historic Hollywood studio also used its presentation at the annual Las Vegas gathering to tease a "10-year plan" to relaunch its DC superhero films, which include beloved characters such as Batman and Superman.

David Zaslav, who spearheaded last year's corporate merger of Warner and Discovery, took to the stage personally to court an audience predominantly made up of theater owners.

"We don't want to do direct-to-streaming movies," said Zaslav, whose predecessor was slammed for releasing Warner films directly onto its streaming platform HBO Max -- recently rebranded as Max.

"We're in no rush to bring the movies to Max." Across a two-and-a-half-hour presentation, Zaslav and fellow Warner bosses brought out A-list stars including Margot Robbie, Ryan Gosling, Timothee Chalamet and Zendaya.

Robbie and Gosling co-star in "Barbie," out July 21, which finds the ubiquitous blonde doll living in a dreamlike, pink-hued world, before one day starting to question her too-perfect reality and travelling to real-life Los Angeles.

"Everyone knows Barbie, and she's never been on the big screen before," said director Greta Gerwig, who drew inspiration from "The Wizard of Oz" as well as disco music culture.



(From left to right) Director Greta Gerwig, actors America Ferrera, Ryan Gosling and Margot Robbie speak on stage during the studio presentation from Warner Bros Pictures during CinemaCon, the official convention of the National Association of Theatre Owners, at The Colosseum at Caesars Palace. — AFP photos



(From left to right) Director Blitz Bazawule, actresses Fantasia Barrino, Danielle Brooks, Taraji P Henson and producer/host Oprah Winfrey speak on stage during the studio presentation from Warner Bros Pictures during CinemaCon.

"They made life-size Barbie houses... everything was extraordinary," she said.

Gosling said making the film was "like a fever dream," explaining: "I was living my life, and then one day I was bleaching my hair, shaving my legs and wearing bespoke neon outfits and rollerblading down Venice Beach." Oprah Winfrey took to the stage to introduce her and Steven Spielberg's new version of "The Color Purple," out Christmas Day. The movie is based on the Broadway musical adaptation of Alice Walker's novel about Black women enduring trauma, sexual

abuse and racism in the rural Deep South in the early 20th century.

"The reason why it's not your mama's 'Color Purple' -- but your mama's gonna really like it -- is because the musical factor is so dynamic, and the magical realism is so perfected here," said Winfrey.

Winfrey starred in the previous 1985 film, earning an Oscar nomination for best supporting actress, and is a producer on the new version. Chalamet introduced footage from two new films in which he stars. — AFP

Lifestyle

Harry Belafonte: Legendary singer who lived out activism



In this file photo taken on December 06, 2014, US singer and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte holds his Golden Heart award for his social commitment during the charity gala "Ein Herz fuer Kinder" (A Heart for Children) in Berlin. — AFP photos

Even at the height of his fame as a groundbreaking musician, Harry Belafonte was only interested in the money or the celebrity insofar as it could fuel his campaigns for social justice. As the US civil rights movement gained momentum, Belafonte took on a role that went far beyond moral support. He became a confidant of Martin Luther King Jr. and personally opened his wallet to fund the cause.

"I could have made \$2 billion or \$3 billion -- and ended up with some very cruel addiction -- but I chose to be a civil rights warrior instead," the trail-blazing singer and actor said in a 2007 interview.

Belafonte, who died of congestive heart failure on Tuesday at the age of 96, soared to the highest heights of showbiz -- the African American artist won an array of awards for his performances, introducing Caribbean flair to mainstream US music.

But he is also remembered for his deep personal investment in civil rights -- from the American struggle for racial equality to famine in Ethiopia to South Africa's battle against apartheid.

"When people think of activism, they always think some sacrifice is involved, but I've always considered it a privilege and an opportunity," he said in a 2004 speech at Emory University.

Life of struggle

Born in Harlem on March 1, 1927 to a Jamaican mother and a father from the French territory of Martinique, Belafonte spent part of his childhood in Jamaica before returning to New York, a binational upbringing that shaped his musical and political outlooks.

Despite his vocal gifts and striking good looks, Belafonte did not grow up believing he would enjoy a promising career.

He suffered dyslexia and dropped out of high school to serve as a US Navy munitions loader in World War II. When he returned, he had few employable skills and worked as a janitor.

But he showed gusto at the job and, as a tip, was given two tickets to a performance at the American Negro Theater, where he was mesmerized by the magnetic pull of the stage.

He took acting classes and, at the theater in



In this file photo taken on September 24, 1988, US singer and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte performs in Paris.

Harlem, made a lifelong friend who became another groundbreaking African American actor: Sidney Poitier, who was born just eight days before Belafonte to parents from The Bahamas.

Belafonte said that his own Jamaican roots shaped "almost everything" in his life.

His mother came from Jamaica "to find the generosity of the American dream and discovered that that was not available to her," he told public television.

Early fame... and controversy

Belafonte's calypso, the genre of Caribbean music that drew from West African and French influences, offered a dash of exoticism for a United States in the midst of post-World War II prosperity and suburbanization.

His third album, entitled simply "Calypso" and released in 1956, became the first LP to sell more than one million copies in the United States.

The album featured what became Belafonte's signature song, "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)." Based on a Jamaican folk tune, Belafonte sings with a Caribbean accent, "Stack banana 'til de morning come / Daylight come and we wan go home."

Belafonte scoffed at suggestions that the song



In this file photo taken on February 13, 2011, US singer and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte receives the Berlinale Camera at a screening of the film "Sing your Song" in Berlin.

was simply feel-good dance music, calling the track a rebellious take on workers who were demanding fair wages.

Even in his early career, Belafonte did not shy away from controversy.

He starred in the 1957 film "Island in the Sun" as an upwardly mobile Black politician on a fictional island who becomes involved with a woman from the white elite, in one of Hollywood's earliest depictions of inter-racial romance.

Key role in US civil rights movement

Belafonte broke racial barriers in entertainment and worked for racial justice in politics.

In 1954, he became the first African American man to win a Tony Award, for his role in the Broadway musical "John Murray Anderson's Almanac."

Six years later, he became the first African American to win an Emmy Award for "Tonight with Belafonte," his musical television program. He also won three Grammys.

Always wary of politicians, Belafonte met for three hours in 1960 with then-presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, who hoped to gain support from a prominent African American. — AFP

Second cheetah brought from Africa dies in India

A cheetah brought from South Africa to India has died, wildlife officials said, the second such death within a month in a country where the big spotted cat was declared extinct seven decades ago. So far, 12 cheetahs from South Africa and eight from Namibia have been brought to India after its top court ruled in 2020 that the species should be reintroduced. The male cheetah, named Uday, was found unwell in an enclosure in central India's Kuno National Park and tranquilized for treatment, but died later in the day, forest official J. S. Chauhan said in a statement issued Sunday.

Tests are being conducted to determine the cause of death, Amit Mallick of India's national tiger conservation program told AFP. In March, a Namibian cheetah named Sasha died of a kidney ailment. Authorities said they were not informed of the ailment before the Namibian group was flown to India six months earlier. The reintroduction of cheetahs is a major prestige project for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who presided over the release of the animals into an enclosure after their arrival.

The program aims to bring in about 100 cheetahs over

the next decade. The last Asiatic cheetah to roam the sub-continent was believed to have been hunted down in 1947 by an Indian prince, and was declared officially extinct in the country in 1952. The spotted feline's reintroduction in India is the first intercontinental relocation of the planet's fastest land animal. Also in March, another Namibian cheetah gave birth to four cubs at the Kuno park, the first since the globally listed "vulnerable" big cat's extinction in India.

Critics have warned the creatures may struggle to adapt to the Indian habitat due to competition for prey from a significant number of leopards. Researchers and scientists from the Cheetah Research Project of Leibniz-IZW in Namibia have recently said the relocation program ignored "spatial ecology" and the size of Kuno National Park was much less than the big cats usually need to thrive. Cheetahs are one of the oldest big cat species, with ancestors dating back about 8.5 million years, and they once roamed widely throughout Asia and Africa in great numbers. But today, after their extinction from many countries across the Middle East and Asia, only around 7,000 remain, primarily in the African savannahs. — AFP



In this file handout photograph shows a wild cheetah being released at Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh state. — AFP

Shakespeare's First Folio goes on display in London



Copies of the First Folio edition were sold for between 15 shillings and one pound in 1623.

A copy of the first collected edition of William Shakespeare's plays went on display in London on Monday, to mark the 400th anniversary of its publication. The public was given the chance to see the First Folio held at London's Guildhall Library — for one day only. The edition, published on November 8, 1623, seven years after the playwright's death on April 23, 1616, is one of the best preserved copies in the world. Others will go on display around the world to mark the anniversary of the publication between now and the end of the year.

The Guildhall Library stands where the folio's editors, Shakespeare's friends Henry Condell and John Heminges, once lived, and opposite the churchyard where they were buried. The First Folio contains 36 plays, including 18 that had not been printed before, such as "Twelfth Night", "Measure for Measure", "Macbeth", "Julius Caesar" and "The Tempest". Condell and Heminges divided the plays into comedies, histories and tragedies, shaping the way Shakespeare was performed and understood.

None of the dramatist's original manuscripts survive from the time

they were written. "Without the First Folio, we might have lost most of Shakespeare's heritage," Guildhall Library principal librarian Peter Ross told AFP. "The copy we have here is regarded as one of the finest in the world. It's absolutely complete. Nothing's been made up from another copy. "Nothing's in facsimile. We have one tiny bit of the corner of a page missing which has been repaired, but apart from that it's a fantastic copy."

About 750 First Folios were printed, of which 233 survive, and queues formed at the library to catch a glimpse. "Shakespeare is so much part of our culture, and when you see something like that, and you think it's amazing that it survives, but how wonderful that it has survived," said psychologist Robert Richards, 81. "And it's awe-inspiring really." One First Folio sold for nearly \$10 million at auction in New York in October 2020, setting a record for a work of literature. — AFP

Norway's black metal earns a place in halls of culture



This handout photo shows Thomas Alkarr (left), curator for the exhibition "Bad vibes - Sonic emotions in Norwegian black metal", and Marte-Kine Sandengen, head of exhibitions at the National library of Norway. Norway's black metal music first gained notoriety with murders and church burnings, but has nonetheless earned its spot in the halls of culture with a new exhibit at Oslo's National Library. — AFP photos

Norway's black metal music first gained notoriety with murders and church burnings but has now earned its spot in the halls of culture with a new exhibit at Oslo's National Library. "Bad Vibes" showcases a dark world of music that has a contemplative, almost intellectual side beneath its destructive exterior. It features video clips full of naked bodies and crosses in flames, a provocative CD cover illustrated with a charred church and sold with a lighter, and news clippings chronicling the genre's legal woes. "Everything here tends to be about feelings," explains exhibit curator Thomas Alkarr above the din of raspy shriekings from the background music.

"Black metal's raison d'être is not to sleep with girls, it's to look into the abyss." Black metal — a subgenre of heavy metal — first appeared in conformist and tranquil Norway in the mid-1980s, styling itself as a rejection of the country's straight-laced society and a return to its roots. Crammed with Norse mythology, Viking history, popular legends and Satanism, the lyrics are set to brutal and abrasive music deliberately made to sound raw and primitive. "The main message of black metal is that darkness is something good," says Dan Eggen, a former professional footballer turned philosopher.

'Baby eaters'

Over the past four decades, a slew of bands has sprouted up in small towns across the country — outsiders decked out in ammo belts and spiked bracelets, with

their faces daubed in corpse paint. Peaceful Norway has become home to heavyweights like Mayhem, Darkthrone, Burzum, Satyricon, Immortal, Emperor and Dimmu Borgir. Their fame grew beyond Norway's borders, partly due to troubles with the law.

In 1993, at a time when the black metal scene was engulfed by violent infighting, black metal bassist Varg Vikernes stabbed Mayhem's singer-guitarist Oystein Aarseth to death. The following year, Vikernes was convicted of the murder as well as several church arson. The latter were copycatted by other black metal band members, which led to several centuries-old buildings being reduced to ash.

"One main reason why Norwegian black metal became so big, at least abroad, is because of what happened during these years," said Alkarr. "That's why Norwegian black metal is seen as more diabolical than others." Yet the genre's reputation abroad, where the bands are sometimes perceived as ruthless "baby eaters", is actually the result of just a few radical individuals, Alkarr said.

"The truth is that most of them are just normal people who like to watch skiing in a comfy armchair," the curator said. "They're professional musicians and family men who just happen to be passionate about a very particular kind of music."

'Paradox'

But given its contrarian nature, does black metal — which is anti-establishment to its core — really belong in Norway's ven-



This handout photo shows exhibits of the show "Bad vibes - Sonic emotions in Norwegian black metal".

erable National Library? "It's a kind of paradox", admitted Marte-Kine Sandengen, in charge of the library's exhibits. "But we can't ignore the fact that Norwegian black metal is an important part of our national cultural heritage."

"One aspect of our mandate is to share this heritage with the public — not just mainstream culture like Ibsen, Hamsun and the other big authors, but also the discordant voices from underground cultures," she said. The black metal scene also no longer has the same run-ins with the law and has today become more mainstream. In Norway these days, Dimmu Borgir can be heard performing with the national radio's symphony orchestra, while Satyricon has accompanied a Munch Museum exhibit.

Black metal also has its own well-known festival, dubbed Inferno, its own category in Norway's version of the Grammys, and budding stars in youth music competitions. The existence of an international fanbase even prompted the foreign ministry to brief its diplomats on the subject. But further afield, the bands do not always enjoy the same acceptance. In March, Brazilian authorities cancelled a Mayhem concert, mistakenly believing the group to be neo-Nazi. — AFP

Lifestyle

A REAL GEM: In Bahrain, only natural pearls will do



This picture shows a view of a choker of baroque natural pearls, emerald drops, and diamond baguettes on display at the House of Pearls shop in Manama. - AFP photos



In this picture laboratory technician Fatema Almahmood gives an interview at the gemmological laboratory of the Bahrain Institute for Pearls and Gemstones (DANAT) in Manama.



In this picture gemmologists man their terminals at the laboratory of the Bahrain Institute for Pearls and Gemstones (DANAT) in Manama.

Customers at a Bahrain jewelry store study displays of pearls that are, unusually, 100 percent natural – the result of attempts to preserve a centuries-old industry. While rare elsewhere, natural pearls prized from seabed oysters by divers are the only variety produced in the Gulf kingdom, which is fiercely proud of its pearling tradition. Bahrain, a tiny island state neighboring Qatar, is the sole country worldwide to have banned the cultivation of artificial pearls, which have flooded the market since the 1920s.

"We can't mass-produce," said Faten Mattar, who works at the family-run jewelry shop. It can take up to five years to complete one strand of a necklace by sourcing pearls directly from divers, she said, admitting it is "a challenge". And larger pieces, which can go for up to \$25,000, might take more than a decade to complete. But with no two natural pearls identical, Mattar said that was part of the appeal.

"Each person... who owns or gets a piece of jewelry that contains natural pearls knows no one else has the same." Mattar is one of the first women to work in a family business which was established more than two centuries ago, making it one of the oldest in Bahrain. Pearls adorn bracelets, necklaces, cufflinks and other items in the small store. "One of our goals... is to make pearls more attainable for everyone, so we

created different lines instead of having just big pieces," she explained, mentioning designs for men and "daily jewelry for a younger crowd".

Cultured 'shock'

Like other Arab Gulf states, Bahrain's economy before the discovery of oil had relied on pearl harvesting. Bahraini free-divers would spend months aboard traditional dhows, the wooden sailboats that have plied Gulf waters for centuries, to capture pearls prized by the region's royal families as well as European fashion houses. But the natural pearl trade crashed after the Great Depression of the 1930s and the development in Japan of cultured pearls, artificially propagated in freshwater mussels, which are cheaper and easier to produce.

Muharraq, in Bahrain's north, is home to "the last remaining complete example of the cultural tradition of pearling", according to UNESCO, with a heritage site featuring oyster beds and a fortress where dhows used to set off. Today, young gemmologists at the Bahrain Institute for Pearls and Gemstones (DANAT) -- nestled among the capital Manama's skyscrapers -- scrutinize pearls using modern machinery or the naked eye.

One researcher passes a pearl through an X-ray machine under the watch of Fatima Almahmood, a graduate in physics and gemology. The



This picture shows a view of a cameo made of 46 natural pearls on display at the House of Pearls shop in Manama.



This picture shows a view of an ant-shaped brooch made of natural pearls and 18k yellow gold on display at the House of Pearls shop in Manama.



In this picture Faten Mattar of Mattar Jewelers displays an ant-shaped brooch made of natural pearls and 18k yellow gold at the House of Pearls shop in Manama.



In this picture a jeweler displays natural pearl earrings at the House of Pearls shop in Manama.



In this picture Faten Mattar of Mattar Jewelers presents a natural pearl necklace at the House of Pearls shop in Manama.



In this picture Faten Mattar of Mattar Jewelers displays a natural pearl bracelet at the House of Pearls shop in Manama.



In this picture laboratory technician Fatema Almahmood examines pearls by micro-computed tomography (Micro-CT) at the gemmological laboratory of the Bahrain Institute for Pearls and Gemstones (DANAT) in Manama.



In this picture a technician examines a gemstone at the laboratory of the Bahrain Institute for Pearls and Gemstones (DANAT) in Manama.

X-ray detects "growth lines" that distinguish natural pearls from cultured ones, she explained, pointing to an image of the scan projected onto a screen. Created in 2017, DANAT appraises pearls at the request of merchants and individuals.

"You'd be surprised by how many clients come to DANAT that have inherited pieces and are then shocked to know... (they) contain cultured pearls," says Noora Jamsheer, who heads the research centre. Apart from appraisal, DANAT also monitors conditions in the water where natural pearls are harvested. Jamsheer said climate change is a cause for concern. "We have a research team that is continuously going to the field, researching and collecting data -- the water temperature, water quality, salinity -- to determine and study the impact of these factors." — AFP



In this picture a technician prepares a pearl to be X-rayed at the laboratory of the Bahrain Institute for Pearls and Gemstones (DANAT) in Manama.



This picture shows a view of the logo of the Bahrain Institute for Pearls and Gemstones (DANAT) on display at the entrance of its gemmological laboratory in Manama.

Sports

Karunaratne, Madushka hit tons; Sri Lanka pile on runs

Captain Karunaratne reaches 16th century of his test career

GALLE: Dimuth Karunaratne and Nishan Madushka both hit centuries as they amassed a record Sri Lankan opening stand in Galle of 228 in the second Test against Ireland on Wednesday. The hosts were 357 for one at the close, still 135 runs behind but with nine wickets in hand. Madushka was unbeaten on 149 at stumps, alongside Kusal Mendis, approaching a century of his own on 83, after Karunaratne departed for 115 - the only wicket to fall on the third day of the match. The first Test ended inside three days with Sri Lanka's spinners dominating, but the pitch in the second encounter has offered the spinners little assistance and the batsmen dominated proceedings.

Captain Karunaratne reached the 16th century of his test career, and his second consecutive ton, in just 116 balls. But the left-hander mistimed a pull shot off Curtis Campher and was caught at deep fine leg in the last over before lunch, two balls after he was hit on the helmet. Madushka had already brought up his maiden Test century, pulling a Harry Tector full toss for six. Their 228 was a record Sri Lankan opening partnership at the ground, eclipsing the 193 between Marvan Atapattu and Sanath Jayasuriya against South Africa in 2000.

Mendis and Madushka continued the run-fest, with the number three racing to his 83 off 96 balls with seven fours and five sixes, including three in a row off debutant left-arm spinner Matthew Humphreys, who was rapidly taken out of the attack. Bad light interrupted play before tea, before the rains came down and it was called off for the day. The prospect of a draw loomed large but Sri Lanka batting coach Naveed Nawaz insisted his side could still win



GALLE: Sri Lanka's Dimuth Karunaratne (left) plays a shot as Ireland's Lorcan Tucker watches during third day of the second and final cricket Test match between Sri Lanka and Ireland at the Galle International Cricket Stadium in Galle on April 26, 2023. — AFP

the game "although rain has played havoc".

"There's a total of 180 overs left in the game now," he told reporters. "If we bat for another 90 overs, we'll be able to take a decent lead as our deficit is now only 135. "We have wickets in hand and this is still a good batting pitch." Play will resume 15 min-

utes early on the final two days to make up for lost time. Sri Lanka lead the two-match series 1-0. Ireland fast bowling coach Ryan Eagleson conceded his team's bowlers "are still learning and are less experienced in Test cricket". "So you have got to give them time and be patient," he said. — AFP

Blundell, recently included in the five best cricketers of the year by Wisden, and middle-order batter Henry Nicholls further bolster the squad. "It's a new format and we have to adapt quickly for this challenging series," said Latham, whose team are second behind Australia in the ODI rankings. Pakistan, who are fifth, will again pin their hopes on skipper Babar Azam, the world's top-ranked ODI batter for the last two years. "These five matches are crucial for our World Cup preparation," said Azam. "We have eight ODIs plus the Asia Cup (to get ready) and we will be utilizing them to be well prepared."

Pakistan have won five of the seven ODI series that Azam has captained. His two losses came against England in 2021 and New Zealand in January this year. But New Zealand boast recent dominance over Pakistan. Of the last six ODI series between them, New Zealand have won five and drawn one. Their last series defeat against Pakistan was at home in 2011. The other matches of the current series are in Rawalpindi on Saturday followed by Karachi on May 3, 5 and 7.

Teams (from):

Pakistan: Babar Azam (captain), Shadab Khan, Abdullah Shafique, Fakhar Zaman, Mohammad Harris, Harris Rauf, Harris Sohail, Ihsanullah, Imam-ul-

chase against a stunned Gujarat Titans. The never-seen-before blitz, which conjured memories of the four sixes by West Indies batsman Carlos Brathwaite in the 2016 T20 World Cup final off Ben Stokes, is the highlight of this IPL. A son of a hawker, left-hander Rinku has risen from humble beginnings to IPL fame after being picked by two-time champions Kolkata for \$97,000 in the 2018 auction. Teammate Venkatesh Iyer called him "Lord Rinku" after the match-winning unbeaten 21-ball 48 and the 25-year-old followed up his performance with two half-centuries in the next four matches.

Big buys sizzle

Punjab made history by picking Sam Curran as the most expensive IPL player for \$2.23 million and the all-rounder has more than delivered with some stellar performances including a match-winning 55 on Saturday. England's white-ball wizard has also led Punjab in three matches - two wins and a loss - in the absence of injured skipper Shikhar Dhawan. Australia's Cameron Green overcame some ordinary scores to hit 64 off 40 balls and took a wicket with his pace bowling for Mumbai Indians last week to live up to his \$2.11 million price tag. Exciting England batsman Harry Brook lit up the IPL with the first century of the season to set up a big win for Hyderabad, who bought the gifted 24-year-old for \$1.6 million.

Warner's Delhi flop

Delhi Capitals have now registered two successive victories but after five losses Ricky Ponting's men remain bottom of the 10-team pile without injured talisman Rishabh Pant. Skipper David Warner has been among the runs but admitted his struggles with a relatively poor strike rate of 120, well behind the likes of Du Plessis on 165. After a scrappy first

from a young age and to do it at this level it feels special, it feels like a dream." With their task cut out, Gujarat bowlers kept down five-time champions Mumbai to 152-9 as Afghanistan wrist spinners Rashid Khan and Noor Ahmad shared five wickets between them.

Gujarat, who had a fairytale debut season last year when they won the IPL, moved second in the table behind toppers and four-time winners Chennai Super Kings at the midway stage of the T20 tournament. At the conclusion of the league stage, the top four teams will qualify for the playoffs. The final is on May 28 in Ahmedabad. The evening belonged to the Gujarat batters after opener Shubman Gill set the tone for his team's domination with his 56 off 34 balls at the world's biggest cricket stadium.

Rohit 'take a break'

Gill departed after his third fifty of the season and Miller and Manohar soon took over to tear into the opposition attack with a flurry of fours and sixes. Both the batsmen were denied fifties but it was raining sixes by the end of the innings and the left-handed Tewatia

Pakistan, NZ enter WCup mode with ODI series

LAHORE: Pakistan and New Zealand (NZ) contest a five-match one-day series starting on Thursday in Rawalpindi which serves as crucial build-up to the World Cup. The series offers both sides the opportunity to feel out each other's strengths and weaknesses ahead of the World Cup in India in October-November. The Black Caps shocked the home side by squaring a preceding five-match Twenty20 series 2-2 despite missing eight players - including skipper Kane Williamson - due to the ongoing Indian Premier League or injury.

Under stand-in skipper Tom Latham, New Zealand adapted to the conditions skillfully, roaring back from 2-0 down to win the third and fifth matches, with the fourth abandoned after rain. Middle-order batter Mark Chapman has been added to the ODI squad after blazing 290 for just one dismissal in the T20 series - the most runs by a batter in a five-match T20I series. Wicketkeeper-batter Tom

Fantastic Faf and Lord Rinku: Story of the IPL so far

NEW DELHI: The Indian Premier League has reached its midway stage with Faf du Plessis firing on all cylinders, Rinku Singh achieving a miracle and MS Dhoni's Chennai Super Kings top of the table. AFP Sport pinpoints five highlights so far of the current edition of the lucrative Twenty20 tournament, which reaches its climax on May 28.

Faf thwacks it

Six-machine Faf du Plessis has lit up the competition for Royal Challengers Bangalore with a barrage of boundaries including one 115-metre (380-foot) missile into the stands. The South African veteran tops the batting chart with 405 runs in seven matches, including five half-centuries, and has gelled with fellow opener Virat Kohli with two century stands. Australia's Glenn Maxwell, also at Bangalore, has similarly been no slouch in the powerhitting stakes with 23 sixes behind Du Plessis' 25 - the only two to go above 20. For Chennai, India's normally more sedate Ajinkya Rahane has been a revelation with a strike rate of over 199 in five matches, including an atomic 71 not out off just 29 balls. The top-order batsman has earned a recall to India's Test squad.

Rinku phenomenon

Batsman Rinku Singh became an overnight sensation with an incredible five sixes in the last five balls of Kolkata Knight Riders' against-the-odds

Miller, Manohar blitz helps Gujarat thrash Mumbai in IPL

AHMEDABAD: A batting assault by David Miller and Abhinav Manohar powered defending champions Gujarat Titans to a 55-run demolition of Mumbai Indians in the Indian Premier League on Tuesday. The left-handed Miller (46 off 22 balls) and rising Indian talent Manohar (21-ball 42) put together 71 runs to steer Gujarat to a mammoth 207-6 in their home Ahmedabad. The Miller-Manohar show, which included seven sixes, and an unbeaten five-ball 20 by Rahul Tewatia helped Gujarat get 94 runs from the final six overs of mayhem.

Man of the match Manohar said, "I think I have been gifted to time the ball well and I've been doing it

News in Brief

Burnley seal Championship title

LONDON: Burnley clinched the Championship title at the home of local rivals Blackburn as Manuel Benson's strike secured a 1-0 win at Ewood Park on Tuesday. Vincent Kompany's men were far from their best in a keenly contested Lancashire derby but did enough to not only lift the title, but also dent Rovers' chance of climbing into the playoff places. Benson curled home his 12th goal of the season with Burnley's only shot on target to open up a 13-point lead over second-placed Sheffield United, who have four games remaining. Blackburn remain outside the playoff places on goal difference after their winless run stretched to eight matches. — AFP

Sundowns stretch unbeaten run

JOHANNESBURG: Thapelo Morena scored as Mamelodi Sundowns extended an unbeaten South African Premiership run to 21 matches with a labored 1-0 home win over Riohards Bay in Pretoria on Tuesday. The defender-cum-midfielder slammed the ball past Ugandan goalkeeper Salim Magoola from close range on 25 minutes after pouncing on a deflection. Morena was one of only four starters retained from the side that built a 4-1 CAF Champions League quarter-final first-leg lead over Chabab Belouizdad in Algeria last Saturday. "I am not a big fan of rotation," said Rhulani Mokwena, the 36-year-old coach of Sundowns who never played top-class football. "Making a lot of changes means you can lose cohesion and rhythm. However, after arriving home from Algeria only yesterday after a 20-hour journey, I had no option. "This was a very, very tough match and we are grateful to goalkeeper Ronwen (Williams), who made many brilliant saves. He has to be a strong candidate for the Premiership player of the season." — AFP

Raducanu hit by another injury

MADRID: Emma Raducanu is set to drop out of the top 100 less than two years since her shock win in the US Open after pulling out of the Madrid Open on Wednesday with a hand injury hours before her first match. The 20-year-old Briton, currently world number 85, was poised to face Bulgaria's Viktoriya Tomova in the Spanish capital, ahead of a potential clash with world number one Iga Swiatek in the second round. The Briton was replaced by Austrian lucky loser Julia Grabher. Raducanu has been beset by health problems this year, suffering from a wrist injury during her first round defeat by Bianca Andreescu in the Miami Open in March. "I'm able to play in the short-term, but the current solutions aren't very viable long-term," said Raducanu after defeat in Miami. Raducanu, who has also suffered from tonsillitis, has only played 10 matches this season and won five. — AFP

Golf rankings 'almost obsolete'

SINGAPORE: Bryson DeChambeau took renewed aim at golf's world rankings on Wednesday, describing them as "almost obsolete", after the LIV rebel slumped to a new low of 178. The breakaway LIV circuit is yet to receive the green light for its tournaments to earn world-ranking points, adding to a slew of issues tearing golf apart. Bankrolled by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, LIV split the sport last year by luring away top stars from the US PGA Tour and DP World Tour (formerly the European Tour) with lucrative contracts. Speaking in Singapore, the latest stop in the LIV season, the American DeChambeau pointed out that Talor Gooch, who won the LIV tournament in Adelaide last week, dropped down two places in the rankings. "They are going to run out of business pretty soon as you should realize that the OWGR (golf rankings) is not accurate," said the 2020 US Open champion. — AFP

Tigres down Leon in semi

MONTERREY: Mexico's Tigres UANL roared back to defeat fellow Liga-MX side Leon 2-1 at home in their CONCACAF Champions League semi-final first leg on Tuesday. Chile international Victor Davila put Leon ahead after just six minutes, unleashing a ferocious strike from the edge of the area that flew in off the woodwork. But Tigres, winners of the competition in 2020, struck back in the final moments of the first half. Sebastian Cordova fired Tigres level in the 45th minute, bundling home a looping cross from the right to make it 1-1. Luis Quinones then swept in a low shot in the third minute of time added on at the end of the first half to give Tigres a 2-1 lead. The second leg of the semi-final takes place on May 3. The winner of the all-Mexico semi-final will face either Los Angeles FC or Philadelphia Union of Major League Soccer in the final. — AFP



New Zealand's Mark Chapman

Haq, Mohammad Nawaz, Mohammad Rizwan, Mohammad Wasim, Naseem Shah, Agha Salman, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shan Masood, Usama Mir

New Zealand: Tom Latham (captain), Tom Blundell, Chad Bowes, Mark Chapman, Matt Henry, Ben Lister, Cole McConchie, Adam Milne, Daryl Mitchell, Jimmy Neesham, Henry Nicholls, Rachin Ravindra, Henry Shipley, Ish Sodhi, Blair Tickner, Will Young. — AFP



Faf du Plessis

win, Delhi edged Sunrisers Hyderabad in their latest triumph and Warner remains hopeful of making it three in a row in his team's bid for a first IPL title. Another disappointment has been Chennai Super Kings' England import Stokes, who scored seven and eight in the opening two games before being forced out with a toe injury.

SKY falls in

Dubbed "SKY" or "Mr 360" for his all-round hitting prowess including the audacious scoop shot, Suryakumar Yadav smashed his first fifty of the season this weekend but has struggled to meet big expectations. Suryakumar, previously a T20 sensation, started the IPL with scores of 15, one and a first-ball duck, before scoring a match-winning 25-ball 43 to bring some smiles to his fans. He also came into the tournament on the back of three successive golden zeroes in the ODI series against Australia last month. Was nevertheless named Wisden cricketer of the year for a superb 2022. — AFP

joined in the charge in his team's highest IPL total.

Mumbai's Arjun Tendulkar, son of legendary Sachin Tendulkar, had some redemption from his previous match when he was hit for 31 runs in one over as the left-arm quick gave away nine in his two overs and took a wicket. Mumbai were never in the chase after skipper Rohit Sharma fell caught and bowled, for two, to his opposite number Hardik Pandya and wickets kept tumbling.

Former India captain Sunil Gavaskar suggested Rohit should take a break in the IPL to get fresh ahead of the World Test Championship final against Australia in June. "I think he should take a break and return for the final three or four matches (for Mumbai this season)," Gavaskar said on Star Sports. "I don't really know what's on his mind." Rashid struck twice with his leg spin in one over and was soon joined in by fellow Afghan Noor, an 18-year-old who returned figures of 3-37. Mumbai's expensive Australian import Cameron Green made 33 before falling to Noor's left-arm wrist spin that soon got Tim David for a duck. — AFP

Sports

Girona humble Madrid 4-2 as Barca edge closer to trophy

Castellanos hits four against Real; Real Sociedad hold off Betis

BARCELONA: Girona striker Taty Castellanos hit an incredible four goals as his side thrashed champions Real Madrid 4-2 in La Liga on Tuesday, helping leaders Barcelona edge closer to the trophy. Carlo Ancelotti's Madrid are 11 points behind Barcelona having played one extra match, with this defeat virtually killing any hope they had remaining of defending the title.

Fourth-place Real Sociedad earned a hard-fought 0-0 draw at Real Betis to frustrate the Andalusians, fifth, ensuring a six-point gap remains between them. Girona's Castellanos was left in tears after missing a big chance against Barcelona earlier in April in a goalless draw, but made amends in spectacular fashion at Montilivi against Madrid.

The Argentine striker, on loan at Girona from New York City FC — owned by the City group — exposed gaps in Madrid's defense ahead of their Champions League semi-final tie against Manchester City in May. Castellanos shut down his social media accounts after his bad night in front of goal at Camp Nou, but thanked those close to him for their support. "It was a dream night, we had a great game against one of the best teams in the world, it was a dream night," Castellanos said.

"I never imagined this, (I'm) enjoying it with our fans, with the people who have sent me support — my family, people in Argentina, they are always supporting me and that's fundamental." In April 2022 Castellanos hit four goals for New York City against Real Salt Lake and repeated the trick a little over a year later. "Obviously they are different days, it was a dream to score against Madrid and to score four — you can't even imag-

ine it," he added. "I'm very happy for everything, for the fans, for the lads."

Castellanos now has 11 goals in La Liga this season in 29 appearances. Ancelotti had said his team needed to stay in a positive winning dynamic in the league to stay at the top of their game in Europe, but badly took their eye off the ball in Girona. "A tough night, yes, when you lose a game like that it's a tough night," said the Italian. "On a defensive level it was a bad game, and that was the key to the match... the individual level was lower than normal too. "Everybody's was, not just some people. The level was very low, because the defensive aspect, which was very good in recent games, today, we have forgotten."

Absentees

Ancelotti was hampered by striker Karim Benzema taking a knock in the win over Celta Vigo at the weekend, while goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois did not travel because of a stomach problem among other absentees. Former Madrid defender Miguel Gutierrez set up the opening goal with a cross for Castellanos, which he headed home from six yards out after 12 minutes. Castellanos doubled Girona's lead after 24 minutes when he got in behind Eder Militao and blasted through Andriy Lunin's legs.

Vinicius Junior pulled one back for Real Madrid with a header from Marco Asensio's fine inswinging cross, giving them hope of a second half comeback. However Castellanos netted his third just 36 seconds after the interval after a fine run and cross from Yan Couto. The striker pounced again after 62 minutes, again capitalizing on a Militao mistake to net his and Girona's fourth. Lucas Vazquez pulled another back



GIRONA: Girona's Argentinean forward Taty Castellanos (left) scores the opening goal during the Spanish League football match between Girona FC and Real Madrid CF at the Montilivi stadium in Girona on April 25, 2023. — AFP

for Madrid late on after more good work by Vinicius, but it was too little, too late.

Sociedad hold firm

Real Sociedad dug deep to clinch a goalless draw with Real Betis, to tighten their grip on Champions League qualification for next season. It was a game of few clear chances, but Sergio Canales could have fired Betis in front after 74 minutes, firing inches over

after good work by Juan Miranda. Rui Silva saved well from Real Sociedad midfielder Mikel Merino's drive deep into stoppage time at the other end. Betis had the better of the second half but could not find the winner their fans craved and next travel to champions-in-waiting Barcelona on Saturday. Osasuna beat Cadiz 1-0 thanks to Ruben Garcia's long-range goal, although they had winger Ez Abde sent off late on, minutes after coming off the bench. — AFP



BARCELONA: Barcelona's Spanish coach Jonatan Giraldez talks to Barcelona's Spanish midfielder Aitana Bonmati during the UEFA Women's Champions League quarter-final second leg football match between FC Barcelona and AS Roma at the Camp Nou stadium. — AFP

Barcelona confident of ousting Chelsea

BARCELONA: Barcelona are confident of achieving their goal of reaching a third consecutive women's Champions League final when they host Chelsea on Thursday, boasting a 1-0 advantage from the semi-final first leg. The Catalans, who lifted the trophy as part of a treble in 2021 with a 4-0 romp over the Blues, have reached three finals in the last four seasons. With Olympique Lyon eliminated by Chelsea - the French side beat Barcelona in the other two finals - Jonatan Giraldez's team are favorites to lift the trophy again.

Caroline Graham Hansen struck early at Stamford Bridge last weekend to give her side the lead in the tie and although Chelsea clung on to give themselves a lifeline, Barcelona will relish their chances playing at Camp Nou. Giraldez's side have scored 23 goals in just four games at home in the Champions League this season, conceding just once, when they crushed Roma 5-1 in the quarter-finals. "I think we had control, we got the goal and could have scored a couple more, but, in the end, it was a really good game," Graham Hansen told reporters Tuesday.

"If you see our statistics in recent years, we have lost away from home (in Europe). We have still gone

through, but the away games have been tough. "Now we have a great chance to reach another final here at home in front of our fans." The Norwegian forward says that triumphing in Europe is the club's main goal once again - they are poised to lift Liga F on Sunday, a competition in which they have 60 consecutive victories. "Our big objective this season is to win the Champions League and if we get to the final we are one step closer to that," added the winger. "I promise I will do everything in my power to achieve it."

Emma Hayes' Chelsea side worked hard in the first leg and stopped Barcelona racking up a bigger scoreline despite dominating the game. However Barcelona midfielder Ingrid Engen thinks that the advantage is good enough to give her side a solid platform for the second leg. "I think it's a strong result for us - it's not like we need to have a 3-0 lead to feel good," said the Norwegian on Tuesday. "Now we know we are playing at Camp Nou with our fans, which gives us an incredible feeling, so for us it's a good result for the second leg."

Barcelona set two world record attendances for women's football last season in the Champions League, with over 90,000 attending their quarter-final against Real Madrid and semi-final against Wolfsburg, 5-2 and 5-1 wins respectively. Chelsea coach Hayes was happy her team did not crumble after Barcelona's early strike in the first leg, as they did in the 2021 final in Gothenburg, conceding four within the first 36 minutes. — AFP

Villa move to 5th as Leicester hold Leeds

LONDON: Aston Villa moved up to fifth in the Premier League (EPL) with a 1-0 win over Fulham on Tuesday, as Leeds and Leicester played out a 1-1 draw in the battle to beat the drop. Villa are now unbeaten in 10 games as they make a late push for Europe thanks to a remarkable turnaround since Unai Emery took charge. Tyrone Mings scored the only goal at Villa Park as the England international headed in John McGinn's corner after 21 minutes.

Emery's men did not reach the heights they have in recent weeks, but did enough to edge above Tottenham and to climb within five points of the top four, albeit having played more games than Newcastle and Manchester United in the battle for a place in next season's Champions League. "We are in the Europa (League) position. It is still difficult to achieve but after this win we are just ahead of trying to keep being with the option to get there," said Emery, who has won the Europa League four times as coach of Sevilla and Villarreal. "There's still Liverpool and Tottenham and Brighton (to come) and we are going to fight with them but with each match we are winning, it is giving us confidence and chance to get there."

Leeds and Leicester remain perilously poised just above the relegation zone after the points were shared in an entertaining encounter at Elland Road. The Foxes had won for the first time since February against Wolves on Saturday in Dean Smith's first home game in charge and looked to have made the perfect start when Youri Tielemans' strike found the top corner, but the goal was ruled out for offside against Boubakary Soumare. Leeds swiftly went up the other end to go in front when Luis Sinisterra headed in Jack Harrison's brilliant cross.

Jamie Vardy had not scored in the Premier League for six months, but picked the perfect time to net a huge goal 10 minutes from time when he latched onto James Maddison's pass. "I probably can't say what I want to say on TV because I'll get done but it's been a weird season for me," Vardy told BT Sport. "Hopefully the goals keep coming." Vardy then had the ball in the net again only to be denied by the offside flag. But Leeds will feel they should have snatched a vital win at the death as Patrick Bamford fluffed a great chance after Daniel Iversen saved from Marc Roca and Brenden Aaronson. — AFP



Aston Villa's English defender Tyrone Mings

Today's Matches

Coppa Italia		
Fiorentina v Cremonese		22:00
Premier Sports 1 HD AD SPORTS Premium 1		
English Premier League		
Everton v Newcastle United		21:45
beIN Sports 2 HD Premium beIN Sports Connect		
Southampton v Bournemouth		21:45
beIN Sports 3 HD Premium beIN Sports Connect		
Tottenham v Man United		22:15
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium beIN Sports Connect		
Spanish League		
Valencia v Real Valladolid		20:30
beIN Sports HD 2 beIN Sports Fr 5 HD max beIN Sports Connect		
Villarreal v RCD Espanyol		20:30
beIN Sports HD 1 beIN Sports Fr 6 HD max beIN Sports Connect		
Athletic de Bilbao v Sevilla		23:00
beIN Sports HD 1 beIN Sports 1 FR Premier Sports 2 HD beIN Sports Connect		

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Hospitals

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

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265

Change of Name

I, BURHUNUDDIN, holder of Indian Passport No. S2350336, having permanent address 1st floor, room 11, Lehri Manzil, 26/42, S.V.P road, Null Bazar, Mumbai, Maharashtra 400003, residing in Kuwait at present hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as given name **BURHANUDDIN and surname BADRI**. (#3511) 27/04/2023

that henceforth my name will be read as given name **MOHAMMED and surname BADRI**. (#3511) 27/04/2023

I, MOHAMMED, holder of Indian Passport No. M8399055, having permanent address 1st floor, room 11, Lehri Manzil, 26/42, S.V.P road, Null Bazar, Mumbai, Maharashtra 400003, residing in Kuwait at present hereby declare

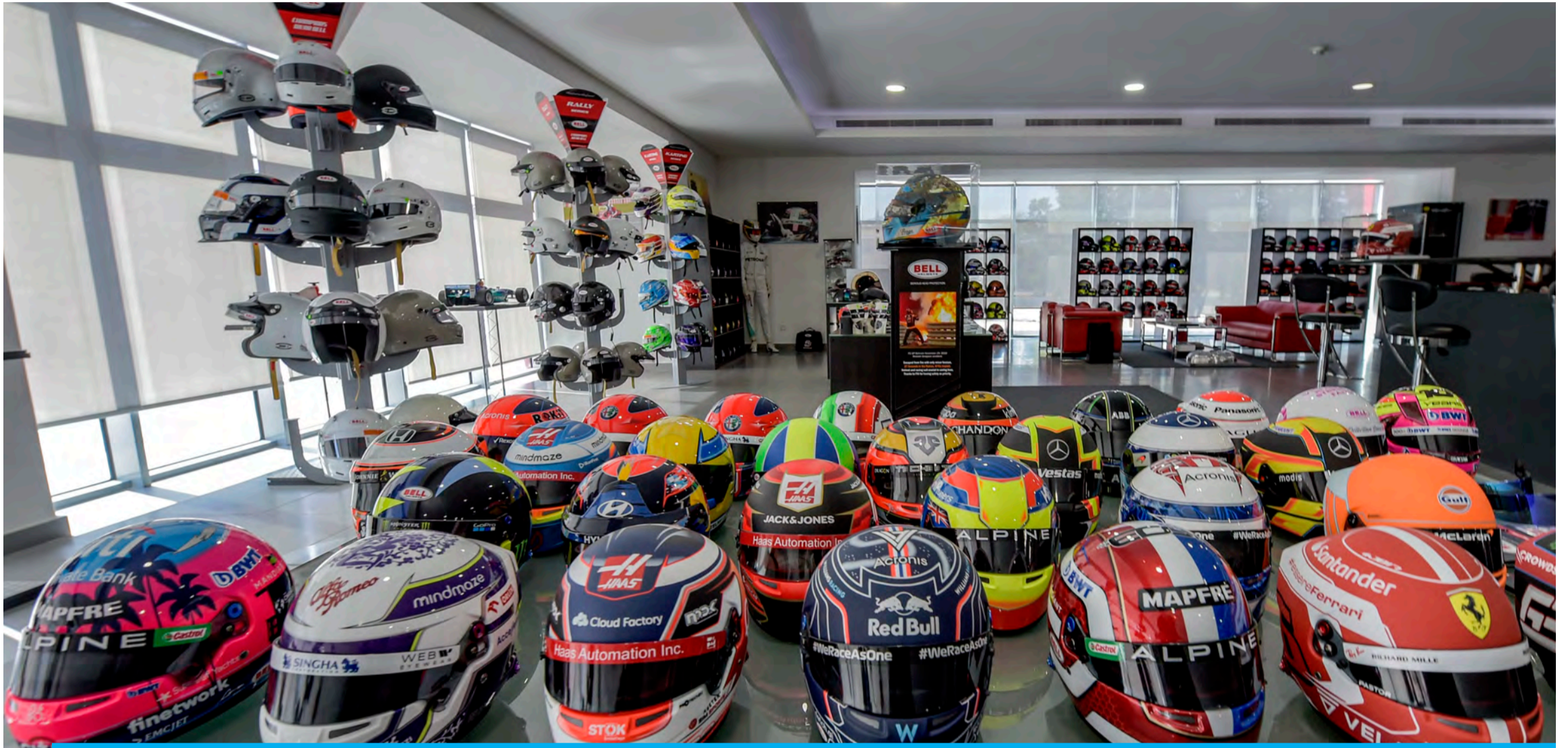
I, AAMEER, S/o IQBAL SARODAWALA (current name in passport), holder of Indian Passport No. M4838796, having permanent address WARD NO. 21, JUMATKHANA MOHALLAH, NA-JAMPURA SAGWARA, RAJASTHAN, INDIAN, PINCODE NO. 314025 residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under: Given name: **AAMIR and Surname: SARODA**. (#3510) 27/04/2023

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After F1 Grand Prix, Bahrain turns to helmet production

Bahrain cementing its racing footprint



SAKHIR: Replicas of F1 racing drivers' helmets are displayed at a showroom at the headquarters of Racing Force Group and its helmet factory on the outskirts of Bahrain International Circuit (BIC) in Sakhir in southern Bahrain. — AFP

SAKHIR: Host of a Formula One Grand Prix, Bahrain is cementing its racing footprint by locally manufacturing top-notch racing helmets for drivers as the Gulf kingdom clinches a manufacturing spot in the sport. At a production facility in Sakhir – a southern desert region that has hosted the Bahrain Grand Prix since 2004 – the renowned Bell Racing Helmets are displayed inside plastic cases.

More than 45,000 helmets were produced there last year, said Aref Yazbeck, the Bahrain managing director for the Racing Force group which owns the Bell Racing brand. "This year we are planning another increase in manufacturing," he told AFP from the Bell Racing headquarters in Bahrain. The production facility is owned by Racing Force SPA, a multinational that specializes in motor sport safety equipment.

It manages several brands including Bell Racing — which started in the US in 1954 and is the

leading supplier of helmets for Formula One. During the 2023 Formula One season in Bahrain, 14 out of 20 drivers used Bell Racing Helmets produced at the Sakhir facility, Yazbeck said. The sprawling complex was set up in 2015 as part of an effort by Racing Force SPA to centralize production efforts in one global hub.

The facility will expand from seven thousand to twelve thousand square metres by the end of the year, according to Yazbeck. The Bell Racing Helmets have been sported by racing champions such as Lewis Hamilton, Charles Leclerc, Spaniard Carlos Sainz, as well as other members of the Ferrari, McLaren and Alfa Romeo teams. In 2004, Bahrain became the first Arab country to host a Formula One race before the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar followed suit.

Investing heavily in sports, Gulf states trying to wean their economies away from oil are often accused of trying to 'sport wash' their reputation

which is regularly undermined by accusations of human rights violations. But a competitive tax system and exemptions on custom fees for certain imports makes Bahrain "the best choice," for helmet production, said Yazbeck. Home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, the tiny kingdom's ties to Washington also boost its appeal.

"One of the main reasons of moving to Bahrain is the Free Trade Agreement between the US and Bahrain," which entered into force in 2006, said Yazbeck. "This is very important for us because more than 55 percent of our manufacturing is shipped to the US." Inside the factory, workers in grey t-shirts test the helmets for safety. Others polish or paint their exterior before packing them in cardboard boxes for export to more than 80 countries worldwide. "It takes 14 days from the day we start till the day we finish to manufacture one helmet," Yazbeck said. "It's a manual job... it's a handmade product, it's craftsmanship." — AFP



Spurs' shambolic season puts Levy in the firing line

LONDON: Tottenham face Manchester United on Thursday in the caretaker charge of their third manager of the season, with open revolt among the fan-base and a risk of losing the club's greatest ever goalscorer. A season to forget hit a new low on Sunday as Newcastle scored five times in the first 21 minutes of a 6-1 win that cost interim head coach Cristian Stellini his job. Tottenham sit sixth in the Premier League, but have lost 10 of their last 22 games after a bright start to sink hopes of a return to the Champions League next season.

Stellini had only been in charge for four matches and his appointment was symptomatic of a club lacking in leadership on and off the field. The Italian had been a long-serving assistant under Antonio Conte and was a baffling choice to step up once the former Chelsea boss' time in charge became untenable after publicly berating his players for throwing away a 3-1 lead to draw 3-3 at bottom-of-the-table Southampton last month.

The Spurs squad have offered to reimburse the match tickets of travelling fans to St. James' Park after a performance that chairman Daniel Levy branded "wholly unacceptable". But it is Levy who is now receiving the bulk of the backlash from supporters for years of poor decision-making in the four years since the club reached its first Champions League final.

Levy can point to successes off the field in the club's state-of-the-art new stadium and training ground. But he has overseen a 15-year trophy drought and every game at the glistening 63,000 capacity Tottenham Hotspur Stadium is now greeted with chants of "Daniel Levy, get out of our club!" Former midfielder Ryan Mason has been ushered in to act as a temporary fig-

urehead for the final six games of the season, just as he was two years ago when Tottenham sacked Jose Mourinho without having a replacement lined up.

Mourinho replaced the beloved Mauricio Pochettino, who was dismissed just months after reaching the Champions League final and years of overachievement given the budget afforded to the Argentine as money poured into building the £1.2 billion stadium (\$1.5 billion). To rub salt into Spurs fans' wounds, Pochettino now looks set to take over at rivals Chelsea just Levy embarks on another new manager search.

He will do so without a sporting director after Fabio Paratici resigned earlier this week when his appeal against a 30-month global ban, handed down by the Italian football federation for his role in a false accounting scandal at former club Juventus, failed. But the most painful blow of all could be to come should Harry Kane, who turns 30 in July, decide he cannot afford to waste his few remaining prime years at his boyhood club.

Kane's goal to beat Manchester City in February and pass the legendary Jimmy Greaves as Spurs' all-time leading scorer in the process has been the highlight of a disappointing campaign. Even surrounded by mediocrity, the England captain has scored 26 goals this season. Kane previously tried to force an exit to Manchester City two years ago. Levy stood in his way back then, but the striker has more bargaining power now with only one year left on his contract amid interest from Manchester United and Bayern Munich. Sunday's shellacking painted a bleak future for Spurs even without losing their star striker.

Newcastle look set to secure a top-four finish in their first full season under the ownership of the Saudi sovereign wealth fund. More investment is expected to flood in to make the Magpies regular challengers for trophies, pushing Tottenham further down the food chain in the process. Spurs cannot afford to lose Kane if they are to bounce back under a new manager next season. But Levy, the businessman, may not be able to stomach the prospect of his biggest asset leaving for free in 12 months' time. — AFP

Hawks overpower Celtics as Nuggets and Suns advance

LOS ANGELES: Trae Young nailed a last-gasp three-pointer as the Atlanta Hawks stunned the Boston Celtics 119-117 to keep their Eastern Conference post-season campaign alive on Tuesday, while Denver and Phoenix booked their places in the next round with series-clinching victories. A nerve-jangling game in Boston was settled when Young drained a 29-footer with 1.8 seconds remaining to silence the Celtics' TD Garden crowd and set up a game six in Atlanta on Thursday. Young, who finished with 38 points, 13 assists and four rebounds, said the Hawks had been determined to extend the series following the suspension of key guard Dejounte Murray.

Murray was suspended for one game after a clash with a referee after game four on Sunday. "We were missing a big piece of ours and we want him to play game six, so we want to go back home and have him with us," Young said of Murray. "I didn't feel there was any pressure on me. Obviously we were without (Murray) but we all had to step our game up another level — not just me, we all did tonight. Total team win."

Hawks coach Quin Snyder praised his team's refusal to buckle in a game that the Celtics had controlled for long periods. "We were tough-minded," Snyder said. "It's tough to be down through the whole game. We were hanging in there and hanging in there. We just didn't capitulate." The Celtics, leading the series 3-1, had looked to be cruising to victory after dominating for most of the second half to lead by 13 points midway through the fourth quarter.

But with Boston poised to wrap up a 4-1 series victory, Young and the Hawks took over with a startling late rally in the closing minutes that whittled away the Celtics lead. Young nailed back-to-back three-pointers to level the scores at 111-111 with 2:42 remaining and then hit three free throws to help Atlanta take a 114-113 lead. Robert Williams handed Boston a one-point

advantage to make it 115-114 to the Celtics with 25.6 seconds left on the clock.

But a rash foul by Boston's Marcus Smart presented Young with two more free throws to edge the Hawks into a 116-115 lead. Young then had a nervous moment after conceding a foul on Derrick White, who shot two free throws to put the Celtics 117-116 ahead with 7.3 seconds left on the clock. Young however responded superbly, calmly bringing the ball up court before launching a pullup three-pointer to give Atlanta a 119-117 lead before Boston's final desperate last attack fizzled.

While Boston were left ruing a wasted opportunity to wrap up their series, there were no such concerns in the Western Conference for the top-seeded Denver Nuggets and fourth seeds Phoenix. The Nuggets squeezed home 112-109 against the Minnesota Timberwolves to complete a 4-1 series win while the Suns wrapped up their series with the Los Angeles Clippers by the same margin with a 136-130 victory in Arizona. The Nuggets, who will face Phoenix in the conference semi-finals, were made to work hard for their win by a Timberwolves team who jumped out to an early 15-point lead in the first quarter before gradually being reeled in. Jamal Murray led the Nuggets scorers with 35 points while reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic bagged his second triple-double of the series with 28 points, 17 rebounds and 12 assists.

Minnesota's Anthony Edwards missed a three-point attempt on the buzzer that would have forced overtime as the Timberwolves' season came to an end. Edwards finished with 29 points while Karl-Anthony Towns added 26. In Phoenix, Devin Booker erupted for 47 points while Kevin Durant poured in 31 points to spark the Suns to victory over the short-handed Clippers. The Clippers, missing the injured Paul George and Kawhi Leonard, fought bravely to lead by 10 early in the second half. But when Booker took over with 25 of 50 Phoenix points in a lopsided third quarter, the Clippers were left chasing the game. Los Angeles somehow managed to close to within two points with just under two minutes remaining before Durant settled Phoenix with a layup and two free throws to make the game safe. "Those guys don't stop fighting," Booker said of the Clippers afterwards. — AFP