

**3** Gulf news agencies give preliminary nod to joint app



**6** Mob burns churches, vandalizes cemetery over 'blasphemy' in Pak



**13** Movies vilifying Muslims spark fear ahead of polls in India



**16** Ruthless England beat Australia to reach final



## US beefs up Gulf deployment over Iranian oil tanker threat

Fifth Fleet says buildup affords Washington 'more robust forces where needed'



US Air Force A-10s fly over the USS McFaul during operations in the Gulf on Aug 15, 2023. — AFP



MANAMA: US 5th Fleet spokesperson Commander Tim Hawkins speaks during an interview at the US Navy 5th Fleet headquarters on Aug 13, 2023. — AFP

MANAMA: As Iranian seizures threaten oil tankers plying the Gulf, the United States is raising its military presence — a move long demanded by Gulf Arab states who accused Washington of retreating from the region. Three thousand additional US personnel on troop-landing warships have already passed through the Red Sea, and US-led maritime forces are warning ships against approaching Iranian waters.

The moves follow a spate of capture and attempted capture of ships in and around the Strait of Hormuz, the U-shaped gateway to the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea that carries a fifth of world oil output. "There is a heightened threat, a heightened risk to regional mariners in terms of seizures" by Iran in the strait, said Commander Tim Hawkins, spokesman for the US Navy's Fifth Fleet. "Right now, our focus is on... increasing our presence in and near the Strait of Hormuz to ensure security and stability in a very critical waterway," Hawkins told AFP at the US Naval base in Bahrain.

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### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### Syria doubles pay, lifts subsidies

DAMASCUS: Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has decreed a 100-percent pay rise for civil servants and pensioners while fuel subsidies were lifted in a country ravaged by 12 years of war. In two decrees issued late Tuesday, Assad doubled the salaries and pensions of those currently and formerly employed in the civil service and military, as well as contract workers. In a separate statement late Tuesday, the commerce ministry announced the total lifting of subsidies on petrol and a partial lifting of subsidies on fuel oil. — AFP

#### Jordan downs TNT-laden drone

AMMAN: Jordan's army said it shot down a drone Wednesday loaded with TNT explosives trying to enter its airspace from Syria, in the latest incident of trafficking of arms or drugs. "Border guards... detected a drone trying to cross the border illegally" from Syria, it said in a statement, adding that the aircraft was "shot down over Jordanian territory". The army said the drone was carrying "TNT-type explosive material". On Sunday, the army said it shot down a drone flying from Syria that was loaded with crystal meth, the second such case in less than three weeks. — AFP

#### Pig kidney functioning in human

WASHINGTON: A genetically-modified pig kidney is continuing to function well a record-breaking 32 days after it was transplanted into a brain dead patient, a medical center said Wednesday. "This work demonstrates a pig kidney — with only one genetic modification and without experimental medications or devices — can replace the function of a human kidney for at least 32 days without being rejected," said surgeon Robert Montgomery, director of the NYU Langone Transplant Institute. — AFP

### MP queries delay in operating Dhaman hospitals for expats

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MP Osama Al-Shaheen on Wednesday asked the ministers of health, commerce and finance about the "deliberate" delay in operating the Dhaman

health insurance scheme for expats, although the company has been ready for a long time. Shaheen said the agreement to establish and operate a separate health system to deal only with expatriates in the private sector was signed in 2014, and although the hospitals and clinics are ready, the system has not been put in operation.

The lawmaker said the Health Assurance Hospitals Company (Dhaman) established its latest hospital near Ahmadi recently with a capacity of 332 beds, 21 Intensive care units and 14 operation rooms. Other hospitals and clinics have been ready for a long time. He said as many as 1.8 million expats will receive healthcare through Dhaman, in which government

### Gas drilling rig arrives off Lebanon

BEIRUT: French firm TotalEnergies said Wednesday that a drilling rig had reached Lebanese waters ahead of exploration for offshore gas reserves, months after a landmark accord demarcating the Lebanon-Zionist entity maritime border. "TotalEnergies, the operator of Block 9, announces the arrival of the drilling rig, Transocean Barents, on the block, at around 120 kilometers off the coast of Beirut," a statement said, adding that a transport helicopter

had also reached Beirut airport.

Beirut divided its exclusive economic zone at sea into 10 blocks, and Block 9 was part of an area disputed with the Zionist entity. "The arrival of the equipment marks an important step in the preparation of the drilling of the exploration well in Block 9, which will begin towards the end of August," TotalEnergies added. In October last year, a US-mediated maritime border agreement between Lebanon and the Zionist entity opened up potentially lucrative offshore gas fields for the eastern Mediterranean neighbors.

Block 9 contains the so-called Qana field or Sidon reservoir, parts of which fall in the Zionist entity's territorial waters. Under the deal, Lebanon gained

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Handout picture provided by TotalEnergies on Aug 16, 2023 shows the drilling rig Transocean Barents reported to have arrived in Lebanese territorial waters. — AFP

### Truce holding in Libya after clashes kill 55

TRIPOLI: Tripoli's worst armed clashes in a year have killed 55 people and wounded 146, Libyan media reported Wednesday, after a truce took hold in the capital and air traffic was restored. Fighting erupted on Monday night and raged through Tuesday between the influential 444 Brigade and the Al-Radaa, or Special Deterrence Force, two of the myriad of militias that have vied for power since the 2011 overthrow of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

In August last year, 32 people were killed and 159 wounded in Tripoli during battles between divided Libya's two rival administrations. Libya's Al-Ahrar TV updated the death toll to 55, citing Malek Mersit, spokesman for the Emergency Medical Centre which handles

emergency response in the country's west. Libya has seen more than a decade of stop-start conflict since the NATO-backed revolt that toppled Gaddafi.

A period of relative stability had led the United Nations to express hope for delayed elections to take place this year, and the latest fighting triggered international calls for calm. The clashes with rocket launchers and machine-guns followed the detention of the 444 Brigade head, Colonel Mahmud Hamza, by the rival Al-Radaa Force on Monday, an interior ministry official said.

Late Tuesday, the social council in the south-eastern suburb of Soug el-Joumaa, a stronghold of Al-Radaa, announced that an agreement had been reached with Prime Minister Abdelhamid Dbeibah, head of the UN-recognized government in Tripoli, for Hamza to be handed over to a "neutral party". In a televised announcement, the council said a ceasefire would follow the transfer of the force's commander, and late on Tuesday the fighting abated. Both armed groups are aligned with Dbeibah's government.

A total of 234 families were evacuated from front-



TRIPOLI: Forces affiliated with the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity deploy following two days of deadly clashes between two rival groups on Aug 16, 2023. — AFP

line areas in the capital's southern suburbs, along with dozens of doctors and paramedics trapped by the fighting while caring for the wounded, the Emergency Medical Centre said. Overnight Tuesday-Wednesday, Dbeibah visited the southeastern

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# Navigating relationship, love with mental illness

## 'You should know your partner's health disorder'

By Ahmed Sabeeh

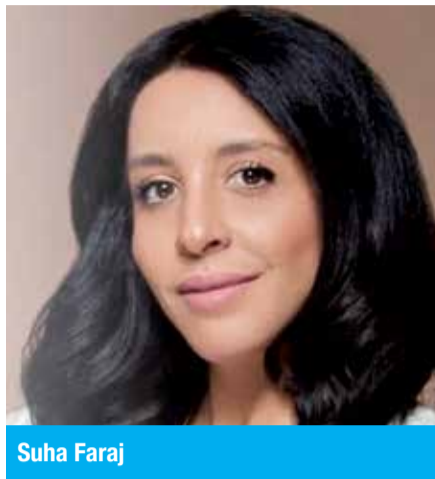
**KUWAIT:** Psychologist Suha Faraj spoke about issues that arise when people with mental health go into a relationship. "The love hormone plays an important factor in any healthy relationship. When in a relationship, the presence of this hormone can lead to heightened focus on specific aspects to enable partners to better understand each other's viewpoints and encourages them to identify the sources of any issues that arise," she told Kuwait Times.

Faraj added the pursuit of love takes on a unique shade when intertwined with individuals grappling with mental illnesses. "Within this realm, the intricate journey of building and nurturing relationships assumes a distinct complexion, fraught with challenges that arise from the complex interplay of emotions and mental health. These endeavors revolve around communication, trust and emotional intimacy — a tapestry of interwoven

threads forming the human connection's essence. However, the presence of mental health struggles casts intricate shadows, magnifying the intricacies within this fabric," she said.

Being romantically involved with a person with mental illness may sometimes take a toll on our own mental health by trying to understand our partners, when they may have serious mental health issues such as bipolar personality disorder. Sometimes we just have to deal with it and try not to walk on eggshells every time. The best way to understand your partner's mental health is by educating yourself on their mental illness.

When a person enters a serious relationship, they must always be on their guard by seeing any red flags. "The most important thing in a relationship is to be balanced. Secondly, if your partner always makes toxic comments, is love bombing you, does not have boundaries or dislikes you, then it will not work out," Faraj said.



Suha Faraj

She added there is a need for a guiding compass for those dealing with mental illnesses, so they can also experience love. "Support backed by valuable insights and tailored advice is required to support this community in navigating romantic relationships. Through real-life stories and



expert wisdom, it can help individuals with self-awareness and a candid perspective as they embark on matters of the heart," she pointed out.

"If you want your relationship to work, you should know your partner's mental health disorder. There is a big difference

between anxiety disorders and psychotic disorders. They involve different symptoms and have different triggers. The more you know, the better understanding you will have of your partner and how to help them in their time of need," Alyssa from Banyan Treatment Center affirmed.

## Committee formed to study tenders

**KUWAIT:** Ahmed Al-Saleh, spokesman for the Ministry of Public Works, said that the committee that was formed to study the tenders for the maintenance works at the governorates, highways, and Sheikh Jaber Bridge is studying all tenders thoroughly in preparation for presenting its recommendation so as to award the contracts to the best tenders.

Saleh expected in a statement to the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) on Tuesday that the committee will finish its work by the end of this month or early next month, stressing that all tenders are subject to careful technical study by committee members to come up with appropriate recommendations. He pointed to their commitment to working with the budget allocated by the Ministry of Finance in accordance. As soon as the committee's work is completed, the ministry will immediately complete the rest of its procedures.

He said that the Minister of Public Works, Dr. Amani Bugammaz, and her accompanying team had previously discussed with officials the ministry's contract plan with international companies and the reasons why it was limited to offering these limited contracts to companies nominated by the embassies of their countries. He pointed out that the results of the study are based on the principles of transparency and neutrality, explaining that the ministry will contract with the companies directly away from the local agent.

The ministry is keen to follow up on the progress of the committee's work and the rate of its completion, believing that it is necessary to complete road maintenance works as soon as possible to end the suffering of road users in Kuwait. He reiterated the ministry's continued implementation of its plan to carry out radical maintenance of Kuwait's roads and streets in various governorates according to schedule once the committee finishes its work. — KUNA

## The next big market: Emissions trading

By Zaid Aboobacker

**KUWAIT:** Step into the world of carbon credits. Picture this: A permit granting countries and organizations a set carbon emission limit. But here's where it gets intriguing — if they don't use up their allowance, they can trade it. Imagine a company selling its unused emissions to another that's gone overboard their emission limits. In simple words, carbon credits grant organizations the right to emit a certain amount of CO2 annually, acting as a regulatory framework which allows countries to stay within their emission control goals.

### Emission trading systems

Carbon markets mainly fall into two types: Compliance and voluntary. Compliance markets emerge due to the presence of national, regional and/or global policies or regulatory obligations. These are obligatory responsibilities that businesses must meet. Voluntary carbon markets, both at the national and international levels, refer to the voluntary trading, purchasing and selling of carbon credits.

The current supply of voluntary carbon credits comes mostly from private organizations that develop carbon projects, or governments with certified programs that reduce emissions and/or removals. Demand is generated by businesses with sustainability goals, private individuals looking to offset their carbon footprints and other parties looking to profit by trading credits.

One of the first tradable emission offset mechanisms is the 1997 US Clean Air Act. This act enabled a permitted facility to increase emissions if it compensated by paying another company to cut emissions by an equal or greater amount. This act laid the groundwork for a mesmerizing dance of emission trading that echoes across subnational, national, and international stages. In 2023, under India's Carbon Credit Trading Scheme, entities exceeding emission limits now face a choice: Pay a penalty or embrace responsible practices.

Programs like California's Cap Trade Program cover about 85 percent of statewide GHG emissions. One of the biggest emission trading systems is the European Union Emission Trading System (EU ETS), which witnessed emission allowances from €12.4 per ton by the end of 2010 to a jaw-dropping €100.3 per metric ton of CO2 by 2023.

### Carbon offset schemes for carbon credit

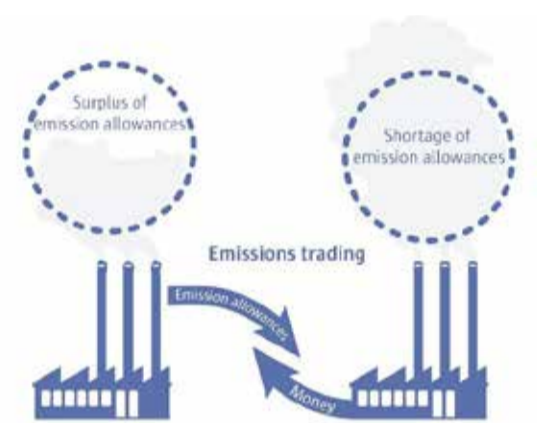
Let's talk about carbon offset schemes — these schemes are programs which produce credits in exchange for funding programs that offset carbon emissions. Carbon credits and offsets are produced from diverse projects like fuel switching, energy efficiency, reforestation and renewable energy. In practice, a developed country can fund a greenhouse gas reduction project in a developing country. As a result, the developed country receives credit for achieving its carbon reduction goals, while the developing country receives funding for projects, technologies or a favorable change in land use. This falls under the Clean Development Mechanism, a UN-administered carbon offset initiative.

CORSIA, the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation, represents a global initiative aimed at limiting international aviation emissions, which also establishes a framework for generating credits and offsets on a global scale. The REDD+ program is another international program that aims to monetize landowners to refrain from deforestation or degradation. In doing so, the program fosters a collaborative balance between conservation and compensation.

Dr Nadine Mustafa, a PhD researcher specializing in carbon capture technologies, said: "Should Kuwait embark on implementing such a scheme, it must brace itself for an ongoing and vigilant monitoring process. Embracing an emissions trading scheme becomes especially pivotal if Kuwait intends to embrace industrial innovation, championing technologies like carbon capture and storage." Some carbon markets are implementing blockchain technology for processes like tracking carbon credit transactions or monitoring, reporting and verification. This can improve the auditability of emission-reduction project data, streamlining verification processes, thus reducing transaction costs and enhancing trust among market participants, according to the World Bank.

### Value of Credits

How are the carbon credits valued? How can we ensure the quality of a carbon credit? How do we determine the value of a carbon credit produced by a carbon offset program? We will all answer it here. A number of factors can affect the prices of the value



of the credits produced in an offset program. Project development costs and certification from a respected organization, projects that absorb CO2 and projects with added social and environmental advantages can all command a higher price. Carbon credits with older vintages tend to be valued lower on the market. The vintage is the year in which the carbon emissions reduction project generates the carbon offset credit. Certification programs are a key component of this community. In 2022, voluntary carbon market prices ranged from \$8 to \$30 per ton of CO2 for the most common types of offset projects.

### Risks of the current market

Dr Mustafa also informed Kuwait Times about potential drawbacks and uncertainties such as carbon leakage, overallocation of credits, lack of additionality and inaccurate emission accounting. She added it is important to note that these risks can be managed and mitigated through proper design and transparency.

### Carbon credit for Kuwait

Kuwait has huge potential to implement this into their system in the future, according to Shariq Ahmed, who works as an HSE Specialist in a Kuwait petroleum company. "Several factors could influence the implementation and success of carbon credits or an emission trading system, as Kuwait's economy profoundly depend on oil exports, and the oil industry is a major supplier to its carbon emissions. The availability of technologies for monitoring and reporting emissions is important for an effective ETS or carbon credit system. Precise measurement is necessary to ensure the integrity of emission reductions," he said. Kuwait Finance House supported the first carbon offset platform in 2021. Its aim was to mitigate carbon emissions by increasing tree plantings and starting new environmental projects. But Kuwait has still not established a proper emissions trading system.



**KUWAIT:** Bangladesh Embassy in Kuwait observed the National Mourning Day, the 48th martyrdom anniversary of the architect of Independent Bangladesh on Tuesday, 15 August, 2023.

## Bangladesh Embassy observes 'National Mourning Day'

**KUWAIT:** Bangladesh Embassy in Kuwait observed the National Mourning Day, the 48th martyrdom anniversary of the architect of Independent Bangladesh, the Greatest Bangalee of all time, the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on Tuesday, 15 August, 2023 at the Chancery with due solemnity. Presided over by Major General Md Ashikuzzaman, NDC, AFWC, PSC, G, Ambassador of Bangladesh to Kuwait, Embassy officials, members of the Bangladesh community and representatives of the print and electronic media were present at the program.

On this day, in the early morning, Major General Md Ashikuzzaman, NDC, AFWC, PSC, G, Ambassador of Bangladesh to Kuwait hoisted the National Flag at half-

mast ceremoniously in the presence of the Embassy officials and members of Bangladesh community in Kuwait. In the afternoon, the ambassador along with Bangladesh Community & Embassy officials presented floral wreath at the portrait of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Bangabandhu corner of the embassy, and stood in solemn silence for one minute to commemorate all the martyrs of 15 August, 1975.

At that time, special prayers were offered seeking divine blessings for the souls of all martyrs along with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and prosperity for the country and nation. After that, the members of various social organizations of Bangladesh Community in Kuwait paid tribute to all the martyrs including Bangabandhu by placing wreaths of flower at the portrait of Bangabandhu. Later on, a discussion program was held of the occasion of the National Mourning Day. The discussion program began with recitation from the Holy Quran. The messages given by the President, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and State Minister for Foreign Affairs were read out by Officers of the Embassy.

After the speech, a video documentary titled "Dark



Night of the Bangalis" were screened. The discussion session took place in a very lively atmosphere. Members of Bangladesh community in Kuwait including various professionals, freedom fighters, leaders of cultural organizations voluntarily took part in the discussion. They recall the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with deepest respect in their speeches.

In his speech, Major General Md Ashikuzzaman, NDC, AFWC, PSC, G, Ambassador of Bangladesh to Kuwait recalled with deep respect, the father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and all martyrs of 15 August, 1975 who were brutally assassinated with the direct and indirect connivance of anti-liberation forces. During his speech, he highlighted the struggling life of Bangabandhu, friendly foreign policy and his sincere efforts to establish world peace and harmony. The Ambassador said, Bangabandhu is a symbol of independence and ambassador of freedom for oppressed and exploited people in the world.

Bangabandhu's principles and ideals will remain an eternal source of inspiration for freedom-seeking people worldwide and against exploitation and



oppression. He also urged all to follow the ideals of Bangabandhu sincerely and work jointly under the prudent leadership of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to establish happy and prosperous Bangladesh as dreamt by Bangabandhu. He thanked all the people who were present at the discussion session and requested to all Bangladeshi nationals in Kuwait to abide by the rules and regulations of Kuwait.

# Gulf news agencies eye joint application project

## Heads of Gulf news agencies hold Zoom meeting

**KUWAIT:** The heads of news agencies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries agreed on Wednesday in principle to establish a joint application project for Gulf news agencies, which allows GCC citizens to access official news directly from GCC news agencies. At their 22nd meeting, which was held via video communication technology (Zoom), the presidents tasked the relevant committees to work on the creation of this application, which also allows GCC citizens to watch live broadcasts of various Gulf radio and television channels, view the archive of photos and videos of each news agency, and follow up on the social media networks of each agency.

The meeting agreed that the formation of a technical media committee would enhance cooperation and coordination between news agencies to facilitate the implementation of all recommendations for the establishment of this application. The application provides the service of pulling data from various sources for news agencies in the GCC countries and importing it into the database so that each country can access the information. In this regard, the director general of the Kuwait's news agency (KUNA), Dr. Fatima Al-Salem, welcomed the joint application project proposed by Qatar.

Dr. Al-Salem called for the need to appoint a liaison officer to be a liaison between the agencies. Gulf news facilitates the task of the heads of agencies and provides them with data and information to develop the mechanism of joint work. She also expressed KUNA's readiness to host experts and analysts to shed light on the most important issues affecting the GCC countries and to

organize awareness seminars and workshops through video communication technology on the dangers of drugs and psychotropic substances and their effects on society.

Salem also expressed the agency's readiness to host a number of employees working in Gulf news agencies to benefit from artificial intelligence and exchange experiences in this aspect. In this regard, she stressed the need for an exchange of visits between editors and correspondents, provided each reporter or editor has a journalistic project that he is working on at the host agency. She also praised the idea of discussing common topics via video communication technology (Zoom) in order to facilitate urgent issues.

Regarding the item contained in the proposal of Oman on a timetable that includes a news file in various fields, Dr. Al-Salem stressed the need to unify journalistic standards and journalistic ethics. During the meeting, the heads of the Gulf news agencies discussed a study on the current situation of news platforms that spread misleading and erroneous news about the GCC countries.

Other news agencies expressed their great appreciation for the initiative of KUNA to prepare this study, stressing that "the agency is always ahead of such matters that are in the interest of GCC countries and citizens". They also discussed a proposal submitted by the United Arab Emirates on introducing the World Media Congress 2023, praising the achievement achieved by the UAE in the first edition of this Congress and calling at the same time the need to continue to organize it annually. The



The heads of news agencies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries hold their 22nd meeting via zoom. — KUNA

heads of agencies also discussed the agenda of the meeting, including the proposals of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and nominating a liaison officer in each news agency who will be responsible for communication and coordination between the agencies.

They also reviewed a proposal submitted by the Sultanate of Oman, which includes six items, including the establishment of a joint database, activating a unified account for the GCC countries on Twitter, making a schedule that includes a news file in various fields, as well as the implementation of a unified mobile application for news agencies. They also discussed the proposals of Kuwait, which include the establishment of joint workshops and training courses between countries.

The proposals of Kuwait include the establishment of joint digital platforms for the dissemination of news and reports, knowledge exchange, and providing a space for interaction between journalists and correspondents, as well as the development of joint media projects such as journalistic investigations and special reports dealing with common issues in the region, in addition to intensifying cooperation by covering important events such as the Gulf summits.

Among these proposals are the standardization of journalistic standards and the use of modern technologies such as artificial intelligence and data analysis to improve the quality of journalism, as well as enhancing cooperation between Gulf news agencies. The presidents also reviewed the Secretariat General's propos-

als on broadcasting periodic reports to promote Gulf citizenship, training courses in Gulf news agencies, exchanging visits between editors, photographers, and technicians, and agreeing to hold their next meeting in Qatar next year.

In addition to Dr. Fatima Al-Salem, the meeting was attended by the director general of the Bahrain News Agency, Abdullah Buhaji, the director general and editor-in-chief of Oman News Agency, Ibrahim Al-Azri, Dr. Fahad Al-Aqran, the acting head of the Saudi Press Agency, Ali Al-Saad, the deputy director general, the director of the communication and international relations office at the Emirates News Agency, Nasser Al-Awadi, as well as the director of the marketing and public relations department at KUNA, Essam Al-Ruwaih. — KUNA

## Weekend to witness high humidity: Meteorologist

By Majd Othman

**KUWAIT:** Meteorologist Essa Ramadan forecast the weekend will witness high humidity that could reach 70 to 80 percent, while northerly-southerly winds will continue. Ramadan warned humidity coupled with high temperature may cause fatigue and physical stress in people. He said despite the temperature probably not exceeding 50 degrees Celsius,



Essa Ramadan

people will feel the temperature is higher than it actually is. Regarding his forecast for dust storms this year, Ramadan said this year will not witness heavy dust like what occurred last year, because the previous winter witnessed heavy rains that helped the plants to grow strong roots, which helps improve soil cohesion. "This means the soil is more stable and will not easily blow with the wind," he explained. Finally, Ramadan spoke about the so-called "season creep", which means the next season could be late or early by two to three weeks. The current summer is expected to extend until the end of September, when the heat usually starts reducing.



KUWAIT: Motorists drive on the highway during a heatwave in Kuwait City. Meteorologist said the weekend will witness high humidity that could reach 70 to 80 percent, while northerly-southerly winds will continue. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## Kuwait chairs Greater Arab Free Trade Area facilitation meeting

**CAIRO:** Trade facilitation committee for the Greater Arab Free Trade Area on Wednesday held its 14th meeting chaired by Kuwaiti Finance Ministry Acting Undersecretary Talal Al-Nemash. Chief of economic integration directorate at the League of Arab States, Bahjat Abu Al-Nasser, affirmed in his inaugural speech the league's continual support to efforts developing the free trade area.

Last September, the league's economic and social council issued a decision approving several complimentary appendices to the executive program, clarified Abu Al-Nasser, adding that trade facilitation is part of these appendices. The meeting is set to handle, over two days, observing commitments of Arab members of the World Trade Organization, providing technical support to non-members, and examining state models in implementing the trade facilitation agreement presented by Oman, Qatar and Egypt. The congregation is set to file a report with outcomes and recommendation to the forthcoming economic social council meeting. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti youths sail aboard traditional dhows on a pearl diving expedition. Pearl-diving trips are held annually in summer under the patronage of Kuwait's Amir, in order to keep alive an ancestral heritage that was crucial for the country's economy prior to the discovery of oil. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## 32nd pearl diving to conclude with Qaffal ceremony

**KUWAIT:** In the presence of the Minister of Commerce and Industry and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Mohammed Al-Aiban, representing HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the curtain will fall on Thursday on the coast of Kuwaiti Sea Sports Club on the 32nd pearl diving trip, organized by the maritime heritage committee

of the club under the patronage of HH the Amir from Aug 12 to Aug 17.

Sixty Kuwaiti youth are participating in the event on two diving dhows donated by late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The trip will conclude with the Qaffal ceremony, which will be broadcast live on television. The two ships will reach the shore, when everyone will disembark carrying their equipment and their haul of oysters, with friends and family receiving them on the beach.

The Ben Hussein Folklore Band and a group of the club's youth will present marine folk art performances, accompanied by a navy group opening the oysters. This will be followed by going to the representative of HH the Amir to

display the pearl harvest. The Qaffal ceremony will conclude with the lowering of the Kuwaiti flag, marking the end of the diving season.

The diving trip began Saturday morning with the Dasha ceremony, in which the dhows left the coast of the club in Salmiya and headed to Khairan, where the young divers engaged in pearl diving over a period of five days in the same style and old traditional way practiced by the olden generation amid difficult weather conditions and high temperature and humidity.

Qaffal means the return of diving ships at the end of the diving season. It is an old and well-known term in Kuwait and GCC countries. People often held popular celebrations on the beach when the dhows returned after a long ab-

sence of more than three or four months, which could extend for longer periods.

Secretary General of KSSC Khaled Al-Fouderi expressed the club's pride and appreciation of the care by HH the Amir. "Despite the exceptional situation experienced due to a lack of time and circumstances of preparations, we took into account this is the first trip held by the club under the sponsorship of HH the Amir, as well as the great official and popular attention it received," Fouderi said. The club invited the public and people to attend the Qaffal ceremonies and participate in the reception and accompanying events, including the performance by the folk band. He also called on everyone to wear traditional clothes.

Kuwait Times  
Established 1961THE LEADING INDEPENDENT  
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF  
ESTABLISHED 1961

Founder and Publisher

YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

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ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432  
ADVERTISING : 24833199 Extn. 301  
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 220  
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## Kuwait leaders condole India

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent on Wednesday a cable of condolences to the President of India Droupadi Murmu, expressing grief over recent floods that caused several casualties and injuries. In the cable, His Highness the Amir wished for the swift recovery of those injured in the floods and hoped for the safety and welfare of the leadership and people of India. Also, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a similar cable of condolences to the President of India. His Highness the Crown Prince wished for quick recovery.

Meanwhile, rescuers searched Tuesday for people feared missing in floods and landslides that have killed at least 65 in India, including 11 who died in the collapse of a popular temple. Days of torrential downpours have washed away vehicles, demolished buildings and destroyed bridges in the Himalayas. Flooding and landslides are common and cause widespread devastation during India's treacherous monsoon season, but experts say climate change is increasing their frequency and severity.

At least 52 people have been killed in Himachal Pradesh since Sunday, with thousands more stranded after disruptions to roads, power lines and communication networks. "The suffering of those affected cannot be relieved with money, but the government will provide all possible help to them in this hour of distress," state chief minister Sukhinder Singh Sukhu said in a statement on Tuesday. Sukhu said earlier that up to 20 others were feared trapped under rubble after landslides, and appealed to residents to stay indoors and avoid going near rivers. — Agencies

### Photo of the day



KUWAIT: A young boy plays in a fountain to cool off during a heatwave, at the Mubarakiya Market in Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## NBK, LOYAC conclude 'KON' social entrepreneurship training program



KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) and LOYAC concluded the "KON" social entrepreneurship training program. The program is held with NBK's Platinum Sponsorship, as part of its strategic partnership with LOYAC for the 8th year in a row,

in collaboration with Babson College for Entrepreneurship Education to enhance students' leadership and innovation skills for introducing projects that drive community development.

The program ran for 5 weeks with the participation of 53 male and female students between the age of 12 and 16, and included training sessions, discussions, lectures and workshops, which aim to introduce and promote pioneering social programs in Kuwait. The program was delivered by leaders from NBK as well as experts from the participating companies and institutions who transfer their knowledge and expertise and give the necessary advice to the participants to help them develop their projects.

Speaking on this, Joanne Al Abdul Jaleel, Manager, Public Relations Officer at National Bank of Kuwait, said, "At NBK, we are proud of our sponsorship of the "KON" program, which embodies our keen endeavors to deliver on our social responsibilities, especially with regard to qualifying national talent from "today's youth, tomorrow's leaders", and empowering them with knowledge and training to perform their crucial role towards a better future for our country, Kuwait."

"Our strategic partnership with LOYAC, and consistent sponsorship of its meaningful cultural and youth activities emanate from our firm belief in its impactful contributions in supporting the endeavors



Joanne Al Abdul Jaleel

of the government and private sector's endeavors towards achieving sustainable development," she added. Al Abdul Jaleel expressed her pleasure with the program's outputs and the noticeable tremendous development in the performance and knowledge of the participating students, who emphasized they have greatly benefited from the entire program's content, which reflects highly careful preparation based on prudent scientific study.

NBK continues its annual humanitarian initiatives and support for social welfare programs in line with its unwavering commitment to deliver on its social responsibilities and firm belief in the powerful impact of these programs in serving the society and people, as well as in reflecting its leading role in this field over long decades. LOYAC is a nonprofit organization that runs several programs for the youth to develop their professional skills, enhance their personal growth and help them find their sense of purpose by extending themselves to others.



## Firemen rescue 2 workers stranded on the 27th floor

KUWAIT: Fire crews rescued two workers who were stuck on the 27th floor of a building in the Mirqab area. The Public Relations and Media Department of the General Fire Force said it received a report from the Central Operations Department on Wednesday about a scaffold that broke down in one of the commercial buildings in the Mirqab area with two stranded people on board. The central operation directed the fire brigades and search and rescue team to the site. Upon arrival, it was found that the two people were stuck on the scaffold on the 27th floor of a building that consists of 38 floors. The two stranded people were rescued.



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Syria to Libya to the EU: How people smugglers operate

Mob burns churches, vandalizes cemetery over alleged blasphemy in Pakistan

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# Hawaii wildfire death toll tops 100

## Governor warns against 'outsider' developers taking advantage of tragedy



LAHAINA: The charred frame of a house is seen among the ashes of a burnt neighborhood in the aftermath of a wildfire, in Lahaina, western Maui, Hawaii on August 14, 2023. — AFP

KAHULUI: President Joe Biden will head to fire-ravaged Hawaii next week to meet with survivors and first responders still hunting for victims, the White House said Wednesday, as the death toll from the devastating blazes surpassed 100. The fire, which levelled the historic town of Lahaina on Maui, is the deadliest in the United States for more than a century, and state Governor Josh Green has repeatedly warned the death toll could yet grow significantly.

Maui County officials updated that toll to 106 on Tuesday, with Green saying earlier that just over a quarter of the disaster zone had been searched by dogs trained to sniff for bodies. Refrigerated containers were being pressed into use as makeshift morgues at the Maui police department's forensic facility, an AFP journalist observed, as the largely rural island struggled to cope with the sheer number of dead.

Biden and First Lady Jill Biden on Monday will "meet with first responders, survivors, as well as federal, state, and local officials" on Maui, the White House said in a statement. The president then tweeted:

"I remain committed to delivering everything the people of Hawaii need as they recover from this disaster." Biden had quickly declared a "major disaster" in Hawaii after last week's inferno, allowing the deployment of emergency assistance from the federal government, and has talked several times with Green.

But he has been criticized by the Republican opposition for what they characterized as a timid response to the fires. Though he has addressed the disaster in speeches, he did not speak publicly when the death toll soared over the weekend. The White House said Biden had been in close contact with leaders in the Pacific archipelago and federal emergency officials, who had advised that "search and recovery efforts are expected to be at a stage early next week to allow for a presidential visit."

The announcement came as the difficult process of identifying the dead inched forward, with officials saying Tuesday that they had collected DNA samples from 41 people whose relatives were missing. Only five of the dead have been identified

so far. The island's police chief has said that many of the bodies are so badly charred that they are unrecognizable.

Stories of horrifying escapes continued to emerge, as did more testimony about the lack of official warning of the fast-moving blaze. Annelise Cochran told AFP she had been reassured when officials said a small blaze in the hills had been contained last Tuesday morning. But then it suddenly, and dramatically, flared. "It was very, very fast; shocking to see," the 30-year-old said, adding no evacuation order had been issued. After trying to flee by car only to find her way blocked by vehicles abandoned by their terrified drivers, some of which had begun exploding in the heat, she realized the ocean was her only escape option. It was hours before she was plucked from the water.

### Toxic chemicals

Green has warned against any attempt at a land grab in the devastated remains of Lahaina, as locals fret that deep-pocketed developers might take ad-

vantage of people's desperation and try to buy up plots that can be turned into luxury housing or more lucrative short-term rentals. "Our goal is to have a local commitment — forever — to this community, as we rebuild," he said.

"So, we will be making sure that we do all that we can to prevent that land from falling into the hands of people from the outside." Meanwhile, residents desperate to get back to check on the homes they fled have expressed frustration at bans that have prevented people from getting into Lahaina. Officials warned of the dangers of unstable buildings and potential airborne toxic chemicals in the area.

Questions are being asked about authorities' preparedness and response to the catastrophe. Some fire hydrants ran dry in the early stages of the wildfire, and multiple warning systems either failed or were not activated. A class-action lawsuit has been filed against Hawaiian Electric, the state's biggest power firm, claiming the company should have shut off its power lines to lower the risk of fire. — AFP

## Cargo ship exits Ukraine despite threat from Russia

KYIV: Kyiv said a civilian cargo vessel had exited its southern port of Odesa on Wednesday despite warnings from Russia that its navy could target ships using Ukraine's Black Sea export hubs. The announcement, which raises the specter of a standoff with Russian warships, came hours after Ukraine said it had liberated a village as part of a grinding push against Moscow's forces along the southern front.

Russia issued its maritime threat after thwarting a key deal last month brokered by the UN and Turkey, which guaranteed safe passage for grain shipments from three Ukrainian ports. Ukraine's Infrastructure Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov said the Hong Kong-flagged Joseph Schulte left Wednesday morning from the port of Odesa — one of three that participated in the now-scrapped grain export deal.

"The first vessel is moving along the temporary corridors established for civilian vessels to and from Black Sea ports," he said. The Joseph Schulte was en route to Turkey, a maritime tracking website showed as of 5:20 pm local time (14:20 GMT). Since Russia's exit from the accord in July, it has stepped up attacks on Ukraine's Black Sea port infrastructure and facilities Kyiv uses to export grain through the Danube river.

The governor of the Odesa region said Wednesday that Russian attack drones had damaged grain facilities at a river port near the Romanian border. The air force meanwhile said it had downed 13 Russian drones over Odesa and the neighboring Mykolaiv region.



ODESA: The first cargo ship using new Black Sea shipping lanes is seen leaving the southern port of Odesa on August 16, 2023. — AFP

The incident sparked outcry in EU-member Romania — now a key hub for Ukrainian grain exports abroad since the collapse of the exports deal. "I strongly condemn the continued (Russian) attacks on innocent people, civilian infrastructure, including grain silos in the ports of Reni and Izmail," Foreign Minister Luminita Odobescu said. The possibility of a Russian attack on cargo ships in the Black Sea increased after Moscow said it fired warning shots from a warship at a cargo vessel heading towards Izmail last week.

The Joseph Schulte left Odesa hours after Kyiv announced the capture of Urozhaine, a small village in the industrial east. "Our defenders are entrenched at the outskirts. The offensive continues," Deputy Defense Minister Ganna Malyar said on social media. Kyiv launched its long-anticipated counteroffensive in June but has acknowledged tough battles as it struggles to break through heavily fortified

Russian positions. Malyar's announcement comes a day after Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu said Ukraine's military resources were "almost exhausted", despite receiving Western arms deliveries. Moscow, which often downplays Kyiv's offensive capabilities, did not confirm the takeover and said its forces were continuing to engage Ukraine's forces around the village.

The Donetsk region — which has faced the brunt of fighting in recent months — is one of four Ukrainian regions the Kremlin claimed to have annexed last year. Its governor Pavlo Kyrylenko said Wednesday that Russian attacks in the last 24 hours killed four people and wounded seven. Urozhaine, with an estimated pre-war population of around 1,000 people, is among a cluster of villages that Ukrainian forces have been attempting to wrest control of in recent weeks. — AFP

## Racism drove US soldier to defect: North Korea

SEOUL: Travis King defected to North Korea to escape "mistreatment and racial discrimination in the US Army", state media said Wednesday, Pyongyang's first official confirmation they were holding the American soldier. A private second class with a checkered disciplinary record, King was due to fly back to America in July but instead slipped out of South Korea's main airport, joined a tourist trip to the DMZ and ran across the border into the North.

The United States has previously said that King crossed the border at the Joint Security Area in the Demilitarized Zone separating the North and the South "willfully and without authorization". Following a North Korean investigation, King "admitted that he illegally intruded", Pyongyang's Korean Cen-

tral News Agency reported. "Travis King confessed that he had decided to come over to the DPRK as he harbored ill feeling against inhuman maltreatment and racial discrimination within the US Army," KCNA said, referring to the North by its official name.

King "came to be kept under control by soldiers of the Korean People's Army" after he crossed the border, KCNA said. "He also expressed his willingness to seek refuge in the DPRK or a third country, saying that he was disillusioned at the unequal American society," KCNA said, adding that a government investigation was still ongoing. The United Nations Command, which oversees the armistice that ended fighting in the Korean War, confirmed last month it had begun a conversation with the North over King.

But US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said at the time that while contact had been made with the North Koreans, Washington still had no idea where King was or in what condition. KCNA did not provide any details about King's health or location, or about what they planned to do with him. The United States said Wednesday it was committed to freeing King and declined to comment on remarks attribut-



SEOUL: A man walks past a television showing a news broadcast featuring a photo of US soldier Travis King (center) who ran across the border into North Korea on July 18. —AFP

ed to him by Pyongyang. North Korea's first official comment on King was pure propaganda, said Soo Kim, policy practice area lead at LMI Consulting and a former CIA analyst. — AFP

## 'Drunk' California judge shot wife with one of his 47 guns

LOS ANGELES: A California judge charged with drunkenly killing his wife with a gun he kept in an ankle holster allegedly texted a colleague after the shooting to say "I won't be in tomorrow. I will be in custody," a court heard Tuesday.

Judge Jeffrey Ferguson had dozens of guns and 26,000 rounds of ammunition at his house when officers arrived to find his wife dead from a gunshot wound to the chest, the court was told. Prosecutors said Ferguson, 72, who sits on Orange County Superior Court, smelled strongly of alcohol when he was arrested and told police, "Well, I guess I'm done for a while."

A court in Los Angeles heard that Ferguson and his wife, Sheryl, began arguing over dinner at a restaurant near their home in an affluent Anaheim suburb. During the August 3 dispute, the judge had "pointed his finger at his wife in a manner mimicking a firearm," Orange County Deputy District Attorney Christopher Alex told the court. The argument continued at home, where Sheryl Ferguson, 65, said "words to the effect of: 'Why don't you point a real gun at me?'" Alex said.

It was at this point Ferguson "retrieved his pistol from his ankle holster and shot" her in the chest at close range, Ferguson called 911 and asked for a paramedic, saying his wife had been shot. When a dispatcher asked if he had fired the weapon, he told them he did not want to discuss the issue at the time, Alex told the court. After getting off the phone, Ferguson texted his court clerk and bailiff to say: "I just lost it. I just shot my wife. I won't be in tomorrow. I will be in custody. I'm so sorry," Alex said.

A search of the house found 47 firearms, all legally held. Ferguson, who has been a judge since 2015, denied having committed murder when he appeared in court Tuesday. Lawyer Paul Meyer told reporters outside court: "We want to be clear this was an unintentional, accidental shooting and not a crime." Ferguson was released on bail and ordered not to drink. He is expected to appear in court again on October 30. — AFP

## International

# Mob burns churches, vandalizes cemetery over alleged blasphemy in Pakistan

## Blasphemy laws weaponized to target religious minorities: Rights commission

**FAISALABAD:** Hundreds of Muslim men set fire to churches and vandalized Christian homes during a rampage in eastern Pakistan on Wednesday, officials said, after Christians were accused of blasphemy. The mob made its way through a predominantly Christian area on the outskirts of the industrial city of Faisalabad after allegations spread that the Quran had been desecrated.

"The crowd inflicted heavy damage on the area including to homes of Christians, and many churches," Ahad Noor, a district government official, told AFP. Police and rescue officials said at least four churches had been set on fire, while residents said as many as a dozen buildings with church status had been damaged.

Several thousand police have been sent to secure the area and dozens of people detained. Amir Mir, the information minister for Punjab province, said in a statement that also condemned the alleged blasphemy. Yasir Bhatti, a 31-year-old Christian, fled his home in a narrow alley next to one of the churches that was ransacked by the mob. "They broke the windows, doors and took out fridges, sofas, chairs and other household items to pile them up in front of the Church to be burnt. They also burnt and desecrated Bibles, they were ruthless," he told AFP by phone.

Blasphemy is a sensitive issue in Muslim-majority Pakistan, where anyone deemed to have insulted Islam or Islamic figures can face the death penalty. Pakistani bishop Azad Marshall, in the neighboring city of Lahore, said the Christian community was "deeply pained and distressed" by the events. "We cry out for justice and action from law enforcement and those who dispense justice

and the safety of all citizens to intervene immediately and assure us that our lives are valuable in our own homeland," he posted on the social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

### 'Failure to protect minorities'

Images on social media showed crowds of people armed with sticks and rocks storming through the streets, with smoke rising from church buildings. In one video, crowds cheer and demand punishment for the accused blasphemers as a cross is torn from the top of a church. The boundary walls of a Christian cemetery were vandalized, as well as the local government office, as crowds demanded action from the authorities, police said.

Local Muslim leaders used mosque loudspeakers to urge their followers to demonstrate, according to videos posted on social media. "Christians have desecrated the Holy Quran. All the clerics, all the Muslims should unite and gather in front of the mosque. Better to die if you don't care about Islam," one cleric is heard saying. A police report said charges would be filed against two Christian men who have fled the area.

Christians, who make up around two percent of the population, occupy one of the lowest rungs in Pakistani society and are frequently targeted with spurious and unfounded blasphemy allegations that can be used to settle personal vendettas. Islamist right-wing leaders and political parties across Pakistan frequently rally around the issue, while politicians have been assassinated, European countries threatened with nuclear annihilation and students lynched over accusations of blasphemy.

"The frequency and scale of such attacks —

that the "safest way out is on a plane."

"The highway was engulfed in flames and smoked out," the 28-year-old said, describing his panicked bolt to safety over land as "the scariest moment of my life." "The forest fire crossed the highway, I couldn't see anything in front of me," he said. "Flames were jumping over my truck" and he said he worried its tires would melt in the heat. "The asphalt was on fire." All along the route there were many abandoned and charred vehicles.

"There was no cell service, so I had no way of knowing where I was," said Evoy. Eventually he made his way back to Hay River and caught a military flight to Fort McMurray, Alberta. "My heart breaks for the people of the Northwest Territories, who are dealing with devastating wildfires," Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter. Several towns and Indigenous communities were under evacuation orders — displacing 15 percent of the territory's population or about 6,000 people — while firefighters in some areas were forced to pull back as strong winds stoked the flames.

The tiny hamlet of Enterprise at the junction of two major highways has been almost completely destroyed. Images shared on social media and on Canadian television showed an orange smoky haze over the region, large swaths of blackened forests, and melted headlights and peeled paint from the heat on those cars and trucks that made it through to safety before roads became completely undrivable.

The Northwest Territories fire department said Yellowknife, with a population of 20,000, was not facing an imminent threat despite fast-moving fires coming within 20 kilometers (12 miles) of the

Gulf as an added layer of defense, a US official told AFP in early August.

Hawkins said that although no formal announcement has been made about manning tankers, "we have sailors, we have Marines that are trained here in the region to carry out whatever mission they are tasked with". But at the same time, the United States military buildup coincides with the first deal between President Joe Biden's administration and Iran's clerical leadership. The delicate agreement would see Iran free five American prisoners in exchange for the unblocking of Iranian funds frozen in South Korea under US sanctions.

It followed exhaustive diplomacy between the Biden administration and longtime US adversaries Iran. Experts and diplomats said the deal could bring further, quiet efforts to address concerns — but tensions persist. The spokesman for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Ramazan Sharif, last week said his country "can reciprocate any vicious act by the US, such as seizing ships", according to state news agency IRNA.

Washington's Gulf allies — reliant on the shipping lane to deliver their oil to global markets — have long demanded stronger US security commitments, especially after an uptick in seizures by Iran since 2019. With Biden's increased emphasis on Asia adding to their frustrations, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have boosted engagement with American rivals China and Iran.

Dina Arakji, an associate analyst at Control Risks consultancy, called the increased US presence a "shift in posture". "The move by the US likely aims to reassure Gulf Arab states that Washington remains committed to the region's security," Arakji said. "Increased Iranian hostility and Chinese engagement with the region has caught Washington's attention," she added, noting the US "now aims to bolster its alliances". — AFP

begin," Energy Minister Walid Fayad said. The results will be known in two to three months, he added. Since late 2019, Lebanon has been caught in an economic collapse that has plunged most of its population into poverty and been described by the World Bank as one of the worst in modern history. The country is plagued by chronic power cuts and has at times seen fuel shortages.

Many Lebanese politicians have expressed hope that gas exploration can offer a way out of the economic crisis, as officials fail to implement reforms demanded by international creditors in return for bailout funds. But analysts have warned Beirut cannot count on gas alone to ease its economic woes, and that it will take several years to begin exploiting the Qana field, should a commercially viable discovery be made. — AFP



**FAISALABAD:** View of a burnt church on the outskirts of Faisalabad on August 16, 2023, following an attack by Muslim men after a Christian family was accused of blasphemy. — AFP

which are systematic, violent and often uncontrollable — appear to have increased in recent years," The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said on Wednesday. "Not only has the state failed to protect its religious minorities, but it has also allowed the far right to permeate and fester within society and politics." Christian woman Asia Bibi was at the center of a decade-long blasphemy row in Pakistan, which eventually saw her death sentence overturned and

she was later allowed to leave the country.

Her case sparked violent demonstrations and high-profile assassinations while spotlighting religious extremism across wide sections of Pakistani society. Pakistan's newly appointed caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar said on X that he was "gutted" by what was happening: "Stern action would be taken against those who violate law and target minorities." — AFP

## Airlifts only safe escape from fires in Canada's north

**MONTREAL:** Jordan Evoy's escape from wildfires raging in Canada's far north was the "scariest moment" of his life as flare-ups closed roads, forcing him to backtrack to catch a military flight as part of the Northwest Territories' largest ever evacuation. Hundreds of people were airlifted to safety from remote villages overnight into Tuesday, after Yellowknife, the largest city in the region, declared an emergency.

For many in smaller communities, it was the second time in recent months that residents were forced to leave their homes. With several roads to the south closed after being engulfed by flames, a ride aboard military aircrafts — deployed along with 120 soldiers to beat back the blazes — was the only means of escape.

On Tuesday evening Northwest Territories authorities declared a state of emergency, citing a rapidly changing situation and shifting needs on the ground. "We find ourselves in a crisis situation and our government is using every tool available to assist," said Shane Thompson, territorial environment minister. Evoy, a resident of Fort Smith, told AFP he had tried to drive south to Alberta province, but had to turn back and heed officials' pleas to immediately go to the airport, warning



**FORT SMITH:** This handout photo shows the town of Fort Smith, Canada during the wildfires, on August 13, 2023. — AFP

regional capital. Wildfire official Mike Westwick told a news conference that fighting fires in the near Arctic is "especially challenging" due to the vast size of the region and its sparse population, with few access roads. "It's difficult to get crews and equipment in," he explained.

This season, megafires have spread across Canada with remarkable intensity, forcing 168,000 to flee their homes and scorching 13.5 million hectares (33.4 million acres) — almost twice the area of the last record of 7.3 million hectares, according to the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre. Four people have died so far in this year's wildfires. As of Tuesday, there were nearly 1,100 fires still burning, including more than 230 in the Northwest Territories. — AFP

## 17 troops killed in Niger attack

**NIAMEY:** Seventeen troops died in a jihadist ambush in Niger, the government said, in a reminder of the nation's deep security crisis as its military rulers face off against neighbours determined to reverse last month's coup. An army detachment was "the victim of a terrorist ambush near the town of Koutougou" in the Tillaberi region near Burkina Faso on Tuesday, said a defence ministry statement published later that day. It added that another 20 soldiers had been wounded, six seriously, with all the casualties evacuated to the capital Niamey.

More than 100 assailants, who were travelling on motorbikes, were "neutralized" during their retreat, the army said. A jihadist insurgency has plagued Africa's Sahel region for more than a decade, breaking out in northern Mali in 2012 before spreading to neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso in 2015. The so-called "three borders" area between the three countries is regularly the scene of attacks by rebels affiliated with the Islamic State group and Al-Qaeda.

The unrest across the region has killed thousands of troops, police officers and civilians and forced millions to flee their homes. Anger at the bloodshed has fueled military coups in all three countries since 2020, with Niger the latest to fall when its elected president, Mohamed Bazoum, was ousted on July 26. — AFP

## US beefs up Gulf deployment...

**Continued from Page 1**

The attacks on tankers came at a time of troubled relations between Washington and its wealthy Gulf allies, who have long relied on US protection for their oil assets and chafed at a perceived military drawdown. The US military says Iran has either seized or attempted to take nearly 20 internationally flagged ships in the region in the past two years. Most recently, Washington said its forces blocked two attempts by Iran to seize commercial tankers in international waters off Oman on July 5. In April and early May, Iran seized two tankers within a week in regional waters.

On Saturday, a US-led naval coalition issued an advisory for commercial ships to "transit as far away" from Iran's waters as possible in what Hawkins called a "prudent step" in light of recent seizures. Less than a week earlier, 3,000 US Marines and sailors arrived in the Red Sea on board the USS Bataan and USS Carter Hall warships, which can ferry troops ashore by aircraft and landing craft. Washington had already promised fighter jets and said it deployed A-10 Warthog warplanes.

The buildup, according to Hawkins, affords Washington "more robust forces where needed". They are in addition to the more than 30,000 US troops already in the Middle East. Although Washington has previously sent troop reinforcements to the Gulf, including in 2019 as a response to Iran tensions, the US is now considering unprecedented measures. It is preparing to put Marines and Navy personnel aboard commercial tankers transiting the

## Gas drilling rig arrives...

**Continued from Page 1**

full rights to operate and explore Qana, but the Zionist entity will receive compensation from the firm operating the reservoir. There are still no proven gas deposits there, but a 2012 seismic study by the British firm Spectrum estimated Lebanon's recoverable gas reserves at 719.2 billion cubic meters. Lebanese officials have announced higher estimates.

"A new page has been written today. When the logistical team is ready in a few days, drilling will



**TRIPOLI:** Forces affiliated with the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity deploy following two days of deadly clashes between two rival groups on Aug 16, 2023. — AFP

## Truce holding in Libya after...

**Continued from Page 1**

suburb of Ain Zara, which saw some of the heaviest fighting on Tuesday, accompanied by Interior Minister Imed Trabelsi.

Dbeibah "saw for himself the severity of the damage" as he toured the densely populated neighborhood's unlit streets, his government's press office said on its Facebook page. He gave instructions for a survey of the damage to be carried out so that residents could be compensated, it added. The interior ministry put in place a security plan to deploy officers to battleground districts to oversee the truce announced between the two sides.

The Libyan capital's only civilian airport, Mitiga, in an area under Al-Radaa's control, reopened to commercial flights on Wednesday, officials said. Flights had been diverted to Misrata about 180 km to the east. In May, the same armed groups had clashed for hours in Tripoli, also after the arrest of a 444 Brigade member, but only minor injuries resulted.

Human Rights Watch Libya researcher Hanan Saleh expressed outrage that the capital's armed groups continued to settle their differences with heavy weaponry in residential areas without being held accountable. "Surely, Libyans at risk of such violent incidents deserve more? Nothing will change unless there are consequences," she said.

Libya specialist Jalel Harchaoui saw the latest fighting as a struggle over territory. He said it highlighted the failure of the international community to address the problem of the militias and shows that "the past three years have been wasted" by diplomats, peace-building specialists, and others. "Tripoli is a territory even more dominated by the militias than before," Harchaoui said.

The 444 Brigade is affiliated with Libya's defense ministry and is reputed to be the North African country's most disciplined armed group. It controls the southern suburbs of Tripoli and other areas. The Al-Radaa force is a powerful ultra-conservative militia that acts as the capital's police force and controls central and eastern Tripoli. Mitiga air base, the civilian airport and a prison. Libya is split between Dbeibah's UN-backed government in the west and another in the east backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar. — AFP

International

# Syria to Libya to the EU: How people-smugglers operate

## 'Paying off security officials can solve everything'

BEIRUT: For desperate Syrians, a WhatsApp message saying "I want to go to Europe" can be all they need to start a treacherous journey to Libya and then across the Mediterranean. Twelve years after conflict broke out when President Bashar Al-Assad repressed peaceful pro-democracy protests, Syrians are still trying to escape a war that has killed more than 500,000 people, displaced millions and pulled in foreign powers and global jihadists. At least 141 Syrians were among up to 750 migrants thought to have been on a trawler that set off from Libya and sank off Greece in June, relatives and activists told AFP. Most of the passengers are feared drowned. AFP interviewed Syrian smugglers and migrants about the journey to migrant hub Libya, notorious for rights abuses, and then across the central Mediterranean—the world's deadliest migrant route. Almost everyone requested anonymity, fearing reprisals.

### 'A batch every month'

"We finalize everything by phone," said a smuggler in Syria's southern Daraa province. "We ask for a copy of their passport and tell them where to deposit the money. We don't have to see anyone in person," he told AFP over WhatsApp. Daraa, the cradle of Syria's uprising, returned to regime control in 2018. It has since been plagued by killings, clashes and dire living conditions, all of which are fueling an exodus, activists say. "The first year we started, we only sent one group. Today, we send a batch every month" to Libya, the smuggler said. "People are selling their homes and leaving."

Libya descended into chaos after a NATO-backed uprising toppled and killed dictator Moamer Kadhafi in 2011, the same year Syria's war began. The North African country is split between a UN-recognized government in the west and another in the east backed by military strongman Khalifa

Haftar, who has ties to Damascus. Syrians deposit the money — more than \$6,000 per person — with a third party, often an exchange office which takes a commission. The smuggler declined to disclose his cut, but said he was paid once the migrants reached Italy. His partner in eastern Libya organizes the actual boat trip.

### 'Humiliated, beaten'

One travel agent in Daraa told an AFP correspondent posing as a migrant that a package deal cost \$6,500. This included a plane ticket, eastern Libya entry document, airport pickup, transport, accommodation, the boat journey to Italy and a life jacket, a WhatsApp message said. Migrants stay "in a hotel or a furnished apartment", it added, but Syrians said such promises were seldom kept.

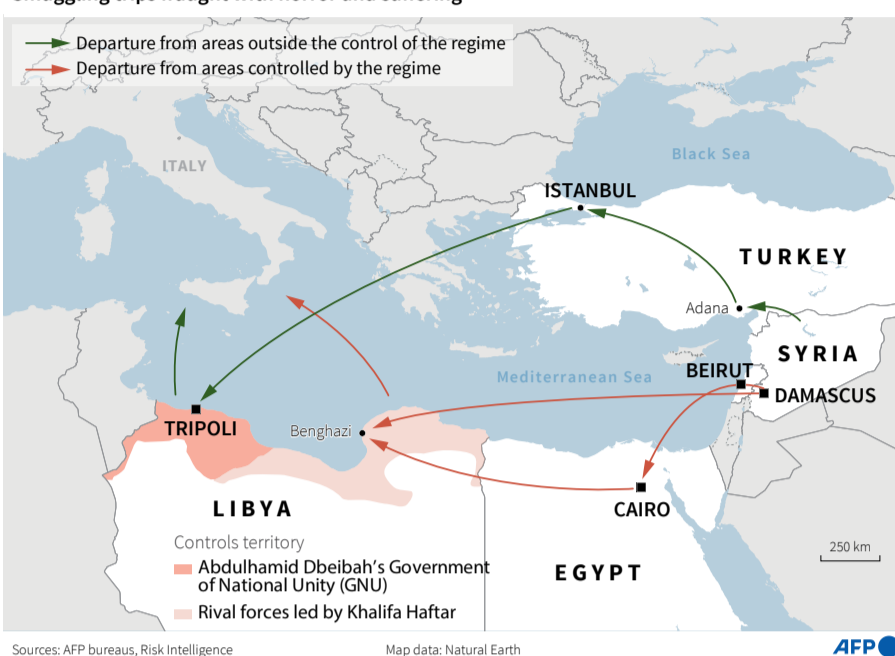
They told AFP of overcrowded and disease-ridden warehouses, where armed guards subjected migrants to violence and extortion. Omar, 23, from Daraa province, borrowed \$8,000 to be smuggled to Libya and then Italy this year, saying he was desperate to leave "a country with no future".

Now in Germany, he said he spent two weeks locked in a hangar near the coast in eastern Libya with around 200 other people. "We were abused, yelled at, humiliated and beaten," added Omar, who said guards gave them only meagre servings of rice, bread and cheese to eat. On departure day, "around 20 armed men forced us to run" the distance from the hangar to the sea, "hitting us with the back of their rifles", he said. "When we finally reached the shores, I was exhausted. I couldn't believe I'd made it."

### Among mercenaries

In part of northern Syria controlled by Ankara-backed rebel groups, a recruiter of fighters said he also smuggled migrants to Libya by listing them among pro-Tur-

**Syria to Libya to the EU: how people-smugglers operate**  
Smuggling trips fraught with horror and suffering



key mercenaries. Turkey supports the Tripoli administration in Libya's west. Ankara has largely shut down a once well-trodden route to Europe via Turkey. "Every six months, we use the fighters' rotation to send people with them," the recruiter told AFP.

Syrians from the impoverished, opposition-held northern Idlib and Aleppo provinces, "particularly those living in displacement camps, contact us", the recruiter said. Listed as "fighters", the Syrian migrants are entitled to a Turkish-paid "salary" of around \$2,500, the recruiter said. The armed group pockets \$1,300, the recruiter takes the rest and the migrants get a free flight to Libya, he said.

Syrians first go to border camps for

pro-Ankara fighters before crossing into Turkey and flying to the Libyan capital Tripoli. They spend two weeks in Syrian militia camps in western Libya before being introduced to smugglers, who ask around \$2,000 for the boat trip to Italy, he added.

### 'To hide our tracks'

For those in regime-held Syria, getting to Libya can involve crisscrossing the Middle East on a variety of airlines and sometimes overland — "to hide our tracks", the smuggler in Daraa said. AFP saw a group ticket for around 20 Syrian migrants who travelled to neighboring Lebanon and then flew from Beirut to a Gulf state, then to Egypt, before finally landing in Benghazi

in eastern Libya. Direct flights are also available from Damascus to Benghazi with private Syrian carrier Cham Wings. The European Union blacklisted Cham Wings in 2021 for its alleged role in irregular migration to Europe via Belarus, lifting the measures in July last year. Several Syrians told AFP that on their flights to Benghazi, direct or not, were many migrants bound for Europe.

Spokesperson Osama Satea said Cham Wings carried only travelers with valid Libyan entry documents, noting the presence of a considerable Syrian diaspora there. He told AFP the airline is not responsible for determining whether passengers are travelling for work or for other reasons, but "it certainly doesn't fly to Libya to contribute to smuggling or migration attempts".

### 'There was terror'

Syrians arriving in Benghazi need a security authorization from the eastern authorities to enter. But the Daraa smuggler told AFP this was not a problem. "In Libya, like in Syria, paying off security officials can solve everything." "We have a guy in the security apparatus who gets the authorizations just with a click," he said.

Migrants told AFP a smuggler's associate — sometimes a security officer — escorted them out of Benghazi's Benina airport. One security authorization seen by AFP bore the logo of Haftar's forces and listed the names and passport numbers of more than 80 Syrians bound for Europe. Once in Libya, the Syrians may wait weeks or months for the journey's most perilous part. More than 1,800 migrants of various nationalities have died crossing the central Mediterranean towards Europe this year, according to International Organization for Migration figures. Around 90,000 others have arrived in Italy, according to the UN refugee agency, most having embarked from Libya or Tunisia. — AFP



In this file photo Syria's President Bashar al-Assad speaks during a press conference with Iraq's Prime Minister in Damascus on July 16, 2023. — AFP

## International warrant issued for Assad uncle over 1980s war crimes

GENEVA: A Swiss court last year ordered an international arrest warrant for the uncle of Syria President Bashar al-Assad for war crimes allegedly committed in the 1980s, according to the ruling only published Wednesday. The decision was published a year after Switzerland's Federal Criminal Court ordered the Federal Department of Justice and Police (FDJP) to issue the warrant.

The office of the Swiss attorney general had asked that the ruling be kept secret for fear that Rifaat Al-Assad might take measures to dodge arrest, the Keystone-ATS news agency reported. The attorney-general's office had already in 2021 requested the issuance of an international arrest warrant for the 85-year-old, but the justice ministry had balked, arguing Switzerland did not have jurisdiction to pursue him.

At the time, it pointed out that he was neither a Swiss citizen, nor residing in the country, and that no Swiss citizens were among the victims of the 1982 massacre in the Syrian city of Hama, which the accusations center around. But the court did not share that interpretation, highlighting that Rifaat al-Assad had been staying at a Geneva hotel when Swiss prosecutors first launched their investigation into him in 2013.

### 'Executions, enforced disappearances, rape'

That presence was enough, according to the court, to give Switzerland jurisdiction to pursue him over alleged war crimes, including the issuance of an international arrest warrant. The warrant is meanwhile likely to go unheeded: The younger brother of former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad returned to Syria in 2021, after 37 years in exile.

Rifaat Al-Assad, who is separately implicated in French and Spanish corruption cases, was forced into exile in 1984 after a failed attempt to overthrow his brother. The complaint against Rifaat al-Assad was first filed a decade ago by TRIAL International, a rights group that works with victims and pushes Switzerland to prosecute alleged international criminals.

TRIAL said that much of the evidence it had compiled against him relates to his role in suppressing the 1982 Hama rebellion, where thousands of people were estimated to have been killed. He was at the time in command of the Syrian Defense Forces, which is accused of "executions, enforced disappearances, rape and torture on an unimaginable scale", according to TRIAL, citing estimates that as many as 40,000 people were killed in the span of three weeks. — AFP

## Violent Indonesia muggings spark 'shoot-to-kill' calls

MEDAN: A spate of violent muggings by machete-wielding thieves in Indonesia has drawn coded calls from prominent politicians for them to be killed-on-sight by police, in comments condemned by rights groups as condoning extrajudicial murders. Last month, police in the northern Sumatran city of Medan shot dead a "begal" — a term used to describe a type of street thief known for their brutality — as part of what the force said was a bid to "eradicate" them.

Bobby Nasution, Medan mayor and President Joko Widodo's son-in-law, lauded the officers involved, saying such criminals should be shot dead on the spot. "I appreciate this because begal and criminals have no place in Medan," he wrote in an Instagram post on July 9, sharing footage of the suspect's dead body. President Widodo has not commented on Nasution's statements. Other leaders, including the governor of North Sumatra province, have supported the comments.

Rights groups want an investigation into the killing and have condemned the rhetoric as giving officers and citizens the right to take the law into their own hands. "It is inappropriate for public officials to declare support for such extrajudicial actions," Amnesty International Indonesia director Usman Hamid told AFP. "The shooting not only violates human rights principles — such as the right to life, the right to a fair trial — but also the regulations." Indonesian police rules state that firearms should only be used as an officer's last resort.

Indonesia's Institute for Criminal Justice Reform called Nasution's words "irresponsible". Some public sentiment, however, is on the mayor's side. Under viral videos of the begal attacks, social media users call for the thieves to be shot dead or to face the death penalty. And in a village east of Jakarta, local

leaders have issued a 10 million rupiah (\$662) bounty for the capture of begals.

### 'Begal' terror

Begals have savagely attacked their victims with sickles, air guns and rocks, terrorizing Indonesians in the capital Jakarta, Medan and other urban centers. They approach their victims on scooters, usually in carefully chosen areas that have few security cameras, so that they can rapidly escape after the robbery. "They have to do it quickly and cruelly to make the victim surrender," said Adrianus Meliala, a criminologist at the University of Indonesia. "Begal run away using the city labyrinth they have mastered."

Medan, Indonesia's fifth-largest city, has been hit by 45 begal attacks since January, police say, and one brutal case two months ago caused an uproar. Student Insanul Anshori Hasibuan was riding a scooter home when a man hacked him in the head with a machete, stealing his wallet. Hasibuan, 22, died in hospital after the attacker and several accomplices escaped with the contents of the wallet: just 70,000 rupiah (\$4.60). Four suspects were later arrested and face up to 15 years in jail if convicted.

Such brutal attacks have been splashed across Indonesian media, raising public fear and allowing Nasution to cast himself as a champion for law and order. According to official data, the rate of robberies has risen in 2023, but experts say Indonesian criminal data is often incomplete due to underreporting. Indonesia's national police force did not respond to an AFP request for comment. The issue is a complex culmination of factors, including rising poverty in one of the world's most unequal countries, the difficulty of countering such quick and violent attacks, weak rule of law and crumbling public trust in the police. "The begal phenomenon cannot be separated from the social economic order of society," said Ida Ruwaida of the University of Indonesia. Rights groups say they are concerned that calls by prominent politicians such as Nasution to kill suspects on sight could lead to chaos on the country's streets. "We are concerned that the statement by the mayor of Medan can serve as legitimacy for more extrajudicial killings," said Hamid. "This is very dangerous." — AFP

## Giuliani threatened by anti-Mafia law he spearheaded

NEW YORK: Forty years ago, Rudy Giuliani was the fearless Mafia-busting prosecutor whose aggressive use of racketeering laws brought down New York's Five Families. On Tuesday, he was fighting for his own freedom after being ensnared by the very legal strategy he had pioneered. The man once feted as "America's Mayor" for steering the US financial hub through the horror of the September 11, 2001 attacks has experienced a stunning fall from grace. Charged with 13 felonies over the help he is alleged to have given his client and long-time friend Donald Trump in trying to subvert the 2020 presidential election, the attorney is threatened with years behind bars as his 80th birthday approaches. "It's just the next chapter in a book of lies with the purpose of framing President Donald Trump and anyone willing to take on the ruling regime," Giuliani said on X, formerly known as Twitter, after he was charged Monday. It was a typically bombastic response from the 107th mayor of New York City, who played a starring role in Trump's post-election push to cling to power through an allegedly criminal campaign of lies about voter fraud. Giuliani was charged Monday under Georgia's Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Practices (RICO) statute, the plaudits he once earned squandered in a series of increasingly bizarre media appearances around the 2020 election. He is one of 18 co-defendants charged alongside Trump.

### 'Person of the Year'

They included an unwitting cameo in a Sacha Baron Cohen movie in which Giuliani was filmed lying on a hotel bed with his hands down his pants. At a press event, Giuliani and his allies claimed mass voter fraud without a shred of evidence as hair dye streamed in dark rivulets down the attorney's cheeks. Born in an Italian American enclave of Brooklyn on May 28, 1944, Rudolph William Louis Giuliani made his name in his 40s as a pioneering US attorney for Manhattan, using RICO to bring down the high command of the New York mob.

Giuliani captured the New York mayoralship in 1993 and gained national prominence in the wake of the 9/11 attacks by helping save the shocked city's soul, earning Time Magazine's prestigious "Person of the Year" honor. "We've undergone tremendous losses, and we're going to grieve for them horribly, but New York is going to be here tomorrow morning, and it's going to be here forever," he declared. The Republican suffered his first big setback in 2008 with a disastrous bid for the White House, and appeared adrift until Trump eventually brought him back into the fold.

### Gaffes and walk-backs

After Trump was elected, he appointed Giuliani to fight a federal probe into the campaign's extensive ties to Russia and the lawyer became a constant TV presence. But gaffes and walk-backs were as much a feature of Giuliani's lawyering as his spirited talk show diatribes — and he led Trump into trouble as often as steering him away. Never the most reliable spokesman, Giuliani proved susceptible to seemingly unforced admissions — contradicting Trump's denials over hush money payments to a porn star and his pursuit of a business deal in Moscow before the 2016 election. But the effort to reverse Trump's clear election loss in 2020 appears in the end to have sealed Giuliani's downfall. One by one, his post-election court challenges were withdrawn or dismissed as groundless. — AFP



SEMARANG: This picture taken on July 24, 2023 shows Baghastian Wahyu Kisara (L), accused in the robbery and murder of a motorist amid a spate of violent crimes, as police present evidence to members of the media during a press conference in Semarang, Central Java. — AFP

## Business

THURSDAY, AUGUST 17, 2023

## Global household wealth drops for first time since 2008 crisis

‘Global Wealth Report 2023’ explores the fall in global household wealth

**ZURICH:** For the first time since 2008, global household wealth in US dollar terms decreased on aggregate as well as on a per adult basis, both in nominal and real terms. Wealth per adult also recorded the second-largest reduction since 2000, according to the Global Wealth Report issued jointly by Credit Suisse and UBS.

The 3.4 percent household wealth growth in 2022 was the lowest rate recorded in any year this century apart from 2008. It was also the only year this century, other than 2008, in which the total value of household financial assets declined even when exchange rate changes are discounted. The key contributors to this situation were the reduced value of financial assets, a stronger US dollar and elevated inflation.

During the COVID-19 era, household wealth proved resilient and grew at a record pace during 2021, reinforced as macroeconomic activity recovered in a low-interest environment. This produced advantageous conditions for wealth growth, resulting in the most rapid rise recorded, the report said.

The financial support given to households by central governments in many advanced countries, coupled with lower interest rates and limitations on consumption opportunities, raised household savings and led to widespread increases in share and house prices. But inflation, rising interest rates and currency depreciation caused a reversal in 2022.

## Inflation effect

Fiscal and monetary policies undertaken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the Russia-Ukraine war and other factors, have resulted in a rise in global inflation. This persistent inflation has consequences for both global gross domestic product (GDP) and global wealth. In fact, in 2022 inflation reduced wealth growth by 6.0 percent, turning a nominal wealth gain of 3.4 percent into a real wealth loss of 2.6 percent.

Also, inflation reduced debt growth to roughly zero and increased the (negative) contribution of

the reduced value of financial assets to -4.6 percent in 2022. And, while 2022 is expected to be the peak year for inflation, predicted future levels have been subject to a sequence of upward revisions.

## Exchange rates

Measured in current nominal US dollars, total net private wealth fell 2.4 percent to \$454.4 trillion, while wealth per adult dropped 3.6 percent to \$84,718 at end-2022. Much of the 2022 decline in wealth came from the appreciation of the US dollar against many other currencies, which caused global wealth to decline by 5.8 percent. But this was offset by inflation, which raised nominal USD values by a similar amount.

If exchange rates are held constant at 2021 rates, then total wealth increased by 3.4 percent and wealth per adult by 2.2 percent during 2022. Nevertheless, the 3.4 percent growth in 2022 is the lowest rate recorded in any year this century except 2008. Apart from exchange rate effects, financial assets were the main contributors to wealth declines in 2022. On the other hand, non-financial assets (mostly real estate) stayed resilient, despite rapidly rising interest rates. However, this may change in 2023 as generally higher interest rates take their toll on house prices.

Wealth increases among countries were more common overall than wealth losses, but the gains were generally small in magnitude. Rare exceptions included Russia, Mexico, India and Brazil, which all saw higher aggregate private wealth in 2022. On a per adult basis, Norway, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates stood out with higher increases of average private wealth.

Interestingly, the countries that lost substantial wealth in 2022 were often those that made sizeable gains the year before. The number of US dollar millionaires worldwide fell by 3.5 million during 2022 to total 59.4 million at year-end. This number includes 4.4 million “inflation millionaires” who would no longer qualify if the millionaire threshold were adjusted for inflation during 2022.

The ultra-high-net-worth (UHNW) group with

definition that the Netherlands is in recession,” said Peter Hein van Mulligen, chief economist for the CBS, in an online presentation Wednesday.

The figures also suggest the Dutch economy has stagnated for the fourth consecutive quarter, he added. The lack of growth has not yet translated into a decline in the labour market, van Mulligen said.

Compared to the rest of Europe, after the decline linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dutch economy “recovered more quickly and strongly”, but for the past year, it’s turned the other way, he noted. The contraction of 0.3 percent in the Netherlands contrasts with mild growth seen in France and Belgium at 0.5 and 0.2 percent respectively in the second quarter.

Hungary’s gross GDP fell 0.3 percent between April and June compared to the previous quarter, continuing the negative trend since mid-2022, national statistics institute KSH said. The central European nation of 9.7 million people has for months been suffering from record inflation, in excess of 20 percent, although it eased in July to 17.6 percent. — AFP

While improvements are expected, it won’t be enough to pull the country out of the red, according to Erste Bank analyst Janos Nagy, who said a full-year recession is “inevitable”. Meanwhile in neighbouring Romania, a country of 19 million people, GDP grew by 0.9 percent.

The disappointing results had ING change its growth forecast for the rest of the year to 1.5 per-



For the first time since 2008, global household wealth in US dollar terms decreased on aggregate as well as on a per adult basis, both in nominal and real terms.

cent from 2.5 percent initially. Bulgaria also saw mild growth of 0.4 percent, in line with the first quarter, on a backdrop of lower exports, partly due to the ban on sales of petroleum products made from Russian crude, with the exception to Ukraine.

Slovenia fared better with GDP growth at 1.4 percent in the second quarter compared with 0.8 percent in the first, a result of strong foreign trade data. But the Alpine country is suffering from devastating floods affecting two-thirds of its territory since the beginning of August.

Prime Minister Robert Golob has called it the “worst natural disaster” to hit the country since its independence in 1991, likely to cost it “several billion euros”. — AFP



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## Netherlands slips into ‘mild recession,’ Hungary contracts

**THE HAGUE:** The Dutch economy contracted for the second consecutive quarter, according to an initial estimate by the national statistics bureau on Wednesday, signaling a “mild recession” for the Netherlands. Meanwhile, Hungary remained in recession with its economy contracting for the fourth consecutive quarter, amid soaring prices, while Romania and Bulgaria posted modest growth, according to estimates released on Wednesday.

The fall recorded over the second quarter was 0.3 percent, after the first three months of 2023 showed a contraction of 0.4 percent, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) said in a statement. A decline in household consumption was a major contributor to the contraction in the last quarter, as the Dutch “mostly bought less furniture and clothing”, even though spending was up in the culture and leisure sectors, the CBS said.

Foreign trade was another significant factor in the slowdown with an increase in imports and decrease in exports, particularly from the Dutch chemical industry. “This means according to the most common

## Markets mixed as US industrial production up

**LONDON:** Wall Street opened higher Wednesday on strong industrial production data while Europe remained mixed following concerns about the Chinese economy and a further Fed rate hike.

Overall US industrial production rose by 1.0 percent in July, lifted by a 5.2 percent rise in the production of motor vehicles and parts, the Fed announced in a statement. This was well above the median expectation of economists surveyed by MarketWatch, who expected a 0.3 percent increase.

“We think last month’s increase will be reversed quickly as the industrial sector is poised to face multiple, intense challenges,” Oxford Economics’ lead US economist Oren Klachkin wrote in a note to clients. European markets remained mixed following the release of UK inflation data showing it had dipped to a 15-month low.

The British pound strengthened on the inflation data—although the UK still has the highest rate of inflation among G7 nations, and the drop might not be enough to prevent another rate hike next month. “The result will likely elicit only a slight sense of relief in the government and at the Bank of England,” said Richard Flax, Moneyfarm chief investment officer.



BEIJING: People leave a food court at a mall in Beijing on August 15, 2023. Global stocks fell on August 15, after disappointing data from China deepened concerns over the state of the world’s second-largest economy. — AFP

The eurozone’s industrial production data, with 0.5 percent growth month-on-month in June, was also “surprisingly strong”, according to Fawad Razaqada Market Analyst, market analyst for City Index and FOREX.com. Another focus Wednesday will be the release of minutes from the US Federal Reserve’s July policy meeting, which investors will be scouring for insight on the bank’s interest rate outlook.

Comments by Minneapolis Fed president Neel Kashkari on Tuesday also added to concerns that the US central bank is not yet done with rate hikes in its battle to tame inflation. While inflation may be moving in the right direction, it is still higher than the Federal Reserve would like and it is too early to declare victory, said Kashkari, a member of the Fed’s interest-rate-setting committee. — AFP

## Norway fund boss says climate change leading to inflation

**OSLO:** The head of Norway’s mammoth sovereign wealth fund said Wednesday it would be “quite difficult” to bring down global inflation due to persistent upward pressure brought on by climate change and global market trends. But a positive development in the world is artificial intelligence, which will enable us to concentrate on the “most fun” tasks, Nicolai Tangen, the chief executive of Norges Bank Investment Management which manages the fund, said as he addressed current economic trends while presenting the fund’s half-yearly report.

Central banks around the world have struggled to rein in inflation despite numerous interest rate hikes since the end of the COVID pandemic. “We think it could be quite difficult to bring down global inflation,” Tangen said. Manufacturing costs have been rising amid a global push for “nearshoring”, where goods are produced closer to their consumers, Tangen said.

In addition to that trend, “the new thing here is the climate effects, that is to say, the link between the climate and inflation,” he said, pointing to rising food costs. “More expensive olive oil, potatoes, beef, all these things and that fuels inflation,” he said. “What’s new is that (the climate) is also affecting productivity.” Tangen cited a summer “in Europe this year so hot that you can’t work in the middle of the day”, as well as increasingly extreme weather events that dissuade tourists.

“And then there’s nothing going on in the stores... We shut down parts of society during certain periods due to the climate,” he said. July 2023, marked by heatwaves and fires around the world, was the hottest month ever registered on Earth, according to the EU’s climate observatory Copernicus.

Tangen was presenting half-year results for the Government Pension Fund Global, the world’s largest and valued at 15.3 trillion kroner (\$1.46 trillion) at the end of June. The fund, paradoxically fuelled by the Norwegian state’s oil and gas revenues, has made climate change one of its main priorities, making demands on the companies in which it invests. The fund invests primarily in stocks but also in bonds and real estate around the world.

With shares in more than 9,000 companies, the fund controls around 1.5 percent of the world’s market capitalization. It earned 1.5 billion kroner (\$143 billion) in the first half of the year, boosted by the strong financial market, in particular tech stocks with investors buoyed by developments in artificial intelligence. — AFP



Nicolai Tangen



# China: Economic recovery 'will be a bumpy and tortuous process'

## 'Western critics will be proven wrong eventually'

BEIJING: China said on Wednesday its economic recovery "will be a bumpy and tortuous process", but insisted Western critics "will for sure be proven wrong".

The comments follow a raft of recent figures that have stoked concerns over China's stuttering post-COVID recovery, and after US President Joe Biden said the country's mounting economic problems made it a "ticking time bomb". "After the smooth transition of the epidemic prevention and control, China's economic recovery is a wavelike development and a tortuous process, which will inevitably face difficulties and problems," foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said at a regular news conference.

"A number of Western politicians and media have hyped up the periodic problems in China's post-epidemic economic recovery process. But eventually, they will for sure be proven wrong," he added. Retail sales, a key gauge of consumption, grew 2.5 percent year-on-year in July, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said on Tuesday, down from 3.1 percent in June and falling short of analyst expectations. The NBS also said it would no longer release age-specific unemployment data, citing the need to "further improve and optimize labor force survey statistics".

The decision sparked a social media backlash on Tuesday, with Internet users accusing the authorities of attempting to hide the extent of rising youth joblessness. Unemployment among 16- to 24-year-olds hit a record 21.3 percent in June. Overall unemployment rose to 5.3 percent in July

compared with 5.2 percent in June, while industrial production grew 3.7 percent in July from a year ago, down from 4.4 percent in June.

Chinese leaders have sought to boost domestic consumption in recent weeks, with the State Council releasing a 20-point plan last month to encourage citizens to spend more in sectors including vehicles, tourism and home appliances. The country's top brass has warned that the economy faces "new difficulties and challenges" as well as "hidden dangers in key areas".

"But we never shy away from problems, we have taken proactive measures to solve problems, and the results have been or are being seen," the foreign ministry's Wang said.

### 'Time bomb'

Recent data suggests China may struggle to achieve the five percent growth target it set for the year, with the economy growing just 0.8 percent between the first and second quarters of 2023, according to official figures. Speaking at a fundraising event last week, Biden had pointed to the country's high unemployment and ageing workforce, saying "China is in trouble". The world's second-largest economy slipped into deflation for the first time in more than two years in July, due to waning consumption and flagging exports. While cheaper goods may appear beneficial for purchasing power, falling prices can actually lead to decreased demand, fuelling a vicious cycle that drags down the wider economy. — AFP



HAIAN, China: A worker is pictured in a textile factory in Haian city in China's eastern Jiangsu Province on August 16, 2023. — AFP

## British annual inflation drops to 15-month low

LONDON: Britain's annual inflation rate dropped sharply in July to a 15-month low, official data revealed Wednesday, off the back of lower energy prices and in line with economists' expectations.

The Consumer Prices Index (CPI) rose by an annual rate of 6.8 percent, down from 7.9 percent in June, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said, easing the country's cost-of-living crisis. July's price growth met the predictions of analysts, including the Bank of England, which had forecast the 6.8-percent rate.

It follows a bigger-than-expected drop in June, when the CPI fell 0.8 percent. However, UK inflation has for months been the highest among G7 nations, despite the Bank of England hiking its key interest rate more than a dozen times in succession to try to tame it.

Although there was a fall in gas and electricity prices in July, food prices continued to rise, but less quickly than in the same month a year earlier. "Inflation slowed markedly for the

second consecutive month, driven by falls in the price of gas and electricity," ONS deputy director of prices Matthew Corder said.

"Although remaining high, food price inflation has also eased again, particularly for milk, bread and cereal. "Core inflation was unchanged in July, with the falling cost of goods offset by higher service prices," he added.

### 'Get it done'

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has set a target of halving inflation through this year to around five percent by 2024. Despite the Bank of England projecting inflation could actually rise again next month, due to the impact of public sector pay rises, Sunak insisted Wednesday's figures showed "the plan is working".

"If we stick to the plan I've set out, we'll get it done," Sunak added. However, the Institute for Fiscal Studies economic think-tank was skeptical. "The stubbornly high rate of price inflation for goods and services other than food and energy has put the target in jeopardy," said IFS research economist Heidi Karjalainen. Finance minister Jeremy Hunt welcomed the latest CPI data but cautioned "we're not at the finish line" and that hitting the Bank of England's two-percent inflation target "as soon as possible" re-



LONDON: Britain's annual inflation rate dropped sharply in July to a 15-month low, official data revealed Wednesday.

mained the overarching goal. Data published Tuesday showed that UK unemployment increased in the three months to the end of June while wages grew at a record annual pace.

Martin McTague, national chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), said the latest CPI statistics would renew fears of a "wage-price spiral". "The worry now is that rising wages ignite a fresh wave of inflation in September, which will threaten the

momentum from June's GDP growth," he added. Interest rate rises since late 2021 have sparked widespread financial pain, with mortgage turmoil in particular as commercial lenders lift their own rates on home loans.

Wednesday's CPI figures may not prevent a further rate rise in late September, when the Bank of England's monetary policy committee next meets to decide whether to hike its current base rate of 5.25 percent. — AFP

## Turkish bank shares rally on Moody's outlook revision

ISTANBUL: Moody's Investors Service revised the outlook for Turkey's banking sector to stable, but operating conditions are still "volatile", weighed down by an anticipated slowdown in the country's economy and high inflation. The operating environment for banks in Turkey remains challenging but recent government steps to move away from unconventional policymaking could ease headwinds for lenders in the country, the rating agency said in a report on Tuesday.

"Following the elections in May 2023, the government's initial steps towards orthodoxy are supportive of operating conditions and we expect the orthodox measures introduced in the period building up to the elections will be gradually unwound during our outlook horizon," Moody's analysts said.

"Although banks should benefit from a return to orthodox policy, we believe the potential for sequencing missteps in the process of unwinding macroprudential measures presents risks to baseline expectations for the operating environment, par-

ticularly GDP [gross domestic product] growth and exchange rate depreciation." The outlook revision by Moody's boosted shares of the nation's lenders to all-time highs.

The Borsa Istanbul Banking Sector Index, a gauge that tracks shares of Turkey's listed banks, reversed losses and rose as much as 4.1 percent to the highest level ever on a closing basis on Tuesday.

Investors Service raised the Turkish banking system's outlook to stable from negative, boosting the nation's lenders to all-time highs. The Borsa Istanbul Banking Sector Index, a gauge that tracks shares of Turkey's listed lenders, reversed losses and rose as much as 4.1 percent to the highest level ever on a closing basis. It was trading 0.8 percent higher as of 4.42 pm in Istanbul. Despite headwinds, the country's B3 stable rating and Turkey's strong exports and tourism sectors will continue to support growth despite the moderate slowdown in the first half of 2023, the rating agency said.

Moody's expects Turkey's economic growth to slow down, with real GDP expanding at 4.2 percent in 2023, down from 5.6 percent growth in 2022. It expects inflation to stay high at 51 percent in 2023, although down from 72 percent recorded in 2022. In July, Turkey's new central bank governor Hafize Gaye Erkan pledged to stick with a "gradual" cycle of monetary tightening despite more than doubling the forecast for consumer price inflation to 58 percent.

ties aims to limit the impact of international restrictions on its financial system. Moscow has sought to de-dollarize its transactions and develop alternative payments systems, after many Russian banks were excluded from the widely used SWIFT system following the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict last year. Like cryptocurrencies, the digital ruble uses blockchain technology, which facilitates direct transactions through a decentralized database.

The main difference lies in its status as a "central bank digital currency", which is tightly controlled. The digital rubles are issued by the Russian central bank and stocked in electronic wallets, with the FSB national security service monitoring the system. The authorities say digital rubles will make payments safer, but some observers see an attempt by the government to further control its citizens.

According to researchers at the Atlantic Council, Russia has become the 21st country to enter the test phase for a digital currency. Moscow hopes the new currency will be extended to all Russians who want it "by 2025 to 2027", the central bank said. Meanwhile,



ISTANBUL: Moody's Investors Service revised the outlook for Turkey's banking sector to stable.

Her remit is to restore the credibility of the central bank in the eyes of the markets after years of unconventional measures championed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Last month, Turkey increased its policy rate by 250 basis points to 17.5 per cent, continuing to reverse Erdogan's low-rates policy as it promised more tightening. For the banking sector, however, asset quality risks will remain elevated, driven by lower consumer spending and weakened repayment capacity of borrowers amid high inflation, Moody's said. — Agencies



MOSCOW: A Russian ruble coin lies with US dollar bills and a one dollar coin in Moscow, on March 15, 2022. — AFP

the Russian ruble traded steady against the dollar on Wednesday, recovering from the day before, when the central bank hiked its key rate to 12 percent following an emergency meeting. — AFP

## Bahrain inks deals to set up 72 MW solar park project

MANAMA: Bahrain has signed agreements to set up a solar park project with a capacity of 72 megawatts as the kingdom looks to achieve net-zero emissions by 2060. The project is part of Bahrain's renewable energy plan, which aims to increase the share of clean energy in the country's electricity mix to 5 per cent by 2025, and 20 per cent by 2035, the Bahrain News Agency reported on Tuesday.

The solar PV project, located in Bahrain's southern region of Sakhir, will include rooftop and ground-mounted solar power systems and electric vehicle charging stations at the Bahrain International Circuit, the University of Bahrain, Exhibition World Bahrain, and the Al-Dana Amphitheatre. The solar park will help achieve sustainable economic development for Bahrain and its citizens and is within the kingdom's international commitments, Yasser Humaidan, Minister of Electricity and Water Affairs, said. Expanding the use of solar energy will help preserve the environment and ensure the sustainability of resources, he added.

Bahrain, the Arabian Gulf's smallest oil producer, is making "progress" in several areas as it aims to achieve the net-zero target, Humaidan said during an event in May. "We have engaged with several of the large industrial emitters, and we have implemented a system of continuous emissions monitoring where we can monitor their emissions remotely, continuously and in real-time," he said. — Agencies

## Senior Fed official says 'not ready' to end rate hikes

WASHINGTON: US inflation may finally be moving in the right direction, but the Federal Reserve shouldn't declare victory just yet, a member of the Fed's interest rate-setting committee said Tuesday. "I'm not ready to say that we're done, but I'm seeing positive signs," Minneapolis Fed President Neel Kashkari told a conference in the city.

The Fed has raised interest rates 11 times since last year to tame high inflation, which surged above the US central bank's long-term target of two percent. But while inflation has come down sharply in recent months, it remains stuck above the Fed's target — especially when stripping out volatile food and energy prices. With inflation heading in the right direction, the Fed could now afford to "take a little bit more time to get some more data in before we decide whether we need to do more," Kashkari said Tuesday.

Futures traders currently assign a probability of close to 90 percent that the Fed will vote to hold interest rates steady at its next rate-setting meeting next month, according to data from CME Group.

"I want to see convincing evidence that inflation is well on its way back down to two percent, and then it needs some time to run," Kashkari said in response to a question about when the Fed would begin to cut rates. He added that the Fed could begin cutting its headline or "nominal" interest rate next year if price increases continue to slow, which would in effect hold the "real" inflation-adjusted interest rate steady.

"There will come a point in time where one could reasonably argue, 'hey, maybe we ought to back off the nominal rate just to keep monetary policy at a stable point,'" he said. "Could that happen sometime next year? It's certainly possible — or the year after that — but we need to see how the data comes in," he added. — AFP

## Business

# Vietnam electric carmaker VinFast debuts on Nasdaq

## Listing could unlock automaker's access to global capital markets

**NEW YORK:** Vietnamese electric vehicle (EV) maker VinFast made its debut on the Nasdaq Tuesday after being merged into a publicly traded investment vehicle.

Shares of VinFast, trading under the ticker "VFS," jumped more than 31 percent to \$28.90 shortly after midday, after entering the market at \$22 a share.

Prior to its debut, VinFast had priced the shares at \$11.50 apiece, according to a securities filing Monday night. The company estimates total valuation at \$23 billion. "Today's successful listing not only supports VinFast's commitment to sustainable mobility at a global scale but also unlocks access to the capital markets and important avenues for future development," said Chief Executive Le Thi Thu Thuy in a statement.

VinFast, which is part of conglomerate Vingroup, owned by Vietnam's richest man Pham Nhat Vuong, broke ground last month on a new EV manufacturing facility in the state of North Carolina, the company said in a press release. The Nasdaq debut came after VinFast completed its merger with Black Spade Acquisition on Monday. Black Spade is a "blank check" company, or a special purpose acquisition company (SPAC) introduced to public markets with the sole purpose of merging with an operating company.

There have been fewer transactions with SPAC entities following big market

drops by some companies that went this route, include other EV startups. They told CNBC VinFast opted for a SPAC due to challenges in the traditional initial public offering market, saying "it's just a way for us to get listed in the US."

VinFast is Vietnam's first homegrown car manufacturer. It has launched two EV models in North America, becoming the first-ever Vietnamese car sold in the US market. It hopes to compete with giants such as Tesla and began building a factory in the US state of North Carolina last month.

The carmaker is a subsidiary of Vietnam's largest private conglomerate, Vingroup, which is owned by the country's richest man, Pham Nhat Vuong.

Vuong started out selling dried noodles in the former Soviet Union before amassing a \$5 billion fortune from enterprises in a range of sectors including real estate, tourism and education. Once his focus shifted to cars with the launch of VinFast in 2017, he transformed a muddy patch of swampland near northern Vietnam's port city of Haiphong into a state-of-the-art factory within two years.

The factory was kitted out with 1,200 robots, German, Japanese and Swedish machinery, and a global team from auto giants including BMW and General Motors.

However, in 2022 VinFast posted a

loss of \$2.1 billion. What happened on its Nasdaq debut?

Shares of VinFast—trading under the ticker "VFS"—entered the market Tuesday at \$22 and rose sharply, closing at more than \$37. That gave it a market value of around \$85 billion after the day's trade, much higher than Ford's \$48 billion valuation and General Motors's \$46 billion.

Vuong's wealth jumped by \$39 billion, according to Bloomberg. He owns about 99 percent of the company's shares, meaning only a small number are being actively traded. This makes them prone to big price swings. As a way to get the company listed in the United States, VinFast completed a merger with casino mogul Lawrence Ho's Black Spade Acquisition.

Black Spade is a "blank cheque" company, or a special purpose acquisition company (SPAC) introduced to public markets with the sole purpose of merging with an operating company. Some companies using SPACs—including other EV startups—have suffered big market drops.

### What's next for VinFast?

VinFast launched its EVs last year across Vietnam, where they are slowly gaining in popularity. It also introduced a taxi service in major cities in April using the EVs. In North America, more than



**HAIPHONG, Vietnam:** This photo taken on August 26, 2022 shows vehicles being constructed on an automated production line at the VinFast electric automobile plant in Haiphong. Vietnam's electric vehicle (EV) maker VinFast made its debut on the Nasdaq on August 15, 2023. — AFP

10,000 orders for two models—the VF8 and the VF9 -- had been placed by customers, VinFast told AFP Wednesday.

But only 350 cars—all of them VF8s—are currently on the road. Elliot Richards, a presenter for the EV-focused YouTube channel Fully Charged, told AFP that VinFast had succeeded in the US market where other bigger names in the electric space, such as China's BYD, had failed.

"It shows a lot of confidence," he said. The listing on the Nasdaq gives VinFast a second chance, he added, after "the first car was pretty much a flop" due to "fixtures and fittings that weren't up to expectations, as well as the drive". VinFast hopes the factory in North Carolina will begin production in 2025, and has also opened showrooms in Canada and Europe. — AFP

## Kenya's debt rises to historic high: Treasury

**NAIROBI:** Kenya's debt level has reached record highs despite President William Ruto's vow to tame the country's appetite for loans, treasury figures show.

Total public debt rose by a record 1.56 trillion shillings (\$10.8 billion) in the financial year ended June 30 to 10.1 trillion shillings (\$70.75 billion), breaching a debt ceiling of 10 trillion shillings, according to the data released Tuesday. "The increase in the public debt is attributed to external loan disbursements, exchange rate fluctuations and the uptake of domestic and external debt," the treasury said.

Loan repayment costs, mainly to China, have shot up as the local currency trades at record lows of around 144 shillings to the dollar. The cost of debt servicing in the year ended June was 391 billion shillings (\$2.7 billion), of which the highest payment -- 107 billion shillings (\$743 million) -- went to China. The debt load has prompted warnings from global credit ratings agencies including Fitch Ratings which last month downgraded Kenya's ability to repay international lenders from "stable to negative", citing tax hikes and social unrest.

Kenyan lawmakers voted in June to change the debt ceiling from a fixed shilling amount to a proportion of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). The senate is yet to pass the amendment.

Ruto came to power last year on a promise to revive the economy in the country of about 53 million people. Economic growth slowed to 4.8 percent in 2022 from 7.6 percent the previous year and is forecast to expand by more than five percent this year, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Outlining his plan for a "bottom-up" economic transformation, Ruto promised to slash government debt and introduce policies putting money in the pockets of impoverished Kenyans.

But his first act after taking office in September last year was to cut food and fuel subsidies introduced by his predecessor Uhuru Kenyatta, saying he preferred subsidizing production instead of consumption.

### 'Test government's commitment'

In June, Ruto introduced new taxes that increased prices for basic goods such as fuel and food and mobile money transfers, as well as a controversial levy on all taxpayers to fund a housing scheme.

But in a U-turn on Monday, his administration reinstated a fraction of the fuel subsidy following several rounds of deadly anti-government protests and public anger over the high cost of living. The subsidy "to cushion consumers from the spike in pump prices" will last for a month, the country's energy regulator said.

"Expectations of higher international oil prices and the possibility of further shilling weakness will test the government's commitment to contain fuel prices in the coming months," think tank Oxford Economics Africa said Tuesday, adding that the subsidy was against the wishes of the IMF.

Kenya is one of the most dynamic economies in East Africa but about a third of the population lives in poverty. Inflation in Kenya has remained stubbornly high, at an annual rate of 7.3 percent last month.

Ruto has insisted the tax hikes are needed to create jobs and fill government coffers and ease over-reliance on borrowing. — AFP

## HK exchange posts 31% rise in H1 profit

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong's stock exchange operator reported a "strong" first-half net profit of HK\$6.31 billion (\$807 million) on Wednesday, up 31 percent from the same period last year despite IPO activity being impacted by "global market fragility". It was a "good half year for HKEX, despite continued global macro uncertainty", bourse chief executive Nicolas Aguzin said in the earnings report.

First-half revenue rose 18 percent year on year to \$1.4 billion. The bourse attributed the strong revenue result—its "second best ever"—to a \$345 million net investment income buoyed by high interest rates, and the strong performance of its external portfolio.

"In the first half of 2023, Hong Kong Cash Market trading volume and IPO activity continued to be impacted by global market fragility," HKEX said in its announcement. "The global IPO market was weak, though Hong Kong performed relatively well." Still, new listings in the first six months raised just \$2.3 billion, down nine percent from the year before. The figures were also a sharp contrast to peak levels in 2020, when IPOs raised \$51 billion.

## Country Garden says 'major uncertainties' over bond payments

**BEIJING:** China's troubled property giant Country Garden said Wednesday there were "major uncertainties" over payments on its bonds, with fears swirling about the health of the country's heavily indebted real estate sector.

Country Garden—listed among the world's 500 biggest companies by Forbes—has warned of losses worth billions of dollars and is staring at the possibility of a default. Like its troubled competitor Evergrande, any collapse of Country Garden would have catastrophic repercussions for the Chinese financial system and economy.

"There are currently major uncertainties in the redemption of corporate bonds," the company said in a filing to the Shanghai stock exchange on Wednesday. The privately owned firm was long deemed financially stable but it failed to make two bond payments last week. After a 30-day grace period, it risks defaulting in September.

Country Garden estimated its debt

at some 1.15 trillion yuan (\$159 billion) at the end of 2022, and said at the weekend it would suspend trading of onshore bonds from Monday.

Additional liabilities mean other estimates of its overall debt are as high as 1.4 trillion yuan (\$193 billion), according to Bloomberg. Adding to the pressure, 31 billion yuan (\$4.27 billion) in the firm's bonds are set to mature in 2024, according to rating agency Moody's, which downgraded its rating for the group last Thursday to "Caa2", indicating "very high credit risk".

Housing reform in China during the late 1990s unleashed a boom in the real estate sector, spurred by social norms that consider owning a property a prerequisite for marriage. But the massive debt accrued by the industry's biggest players has been perceived by Beijing in recent years as an unacceptable risk for China's financial system and overall economic health. To reduce the sector's indebtedness, authorities have gradually tightened

### COVID crackdowns

Hong Kong's bourse has only recently emerged from the shadow of the city's strict zero-COVID policy, which spooked international investors and tanked the wider economy. New listings from China's mega-companies also dried up in recent years following Beijing's regulatory crackdown on the property and technology sectors. The bourse last month axed a rule that required mainland Chinese firms to discuss "material differences between the laws and regulations" in China and Hong Kong in their listing documents.

At a Wednesday press conference, Aguzin said the move was to standardize disclosure practices for companies regardless of where they incorporate. "We have not softened at all our disclosure requirements," he said. "Any company that lists in our markets, they need to disclose in detail jurisdictional risks, material risks that they may have."

### 'Committed' to LME

Aguzin also said HKEX remained "committed" to the London Metal Exchange (LME) and had seen "continued confidence and trust" despite the fallout from recent nickel trading scandals. "We think it's a great institution and look forward to... progress in all the initiatives that they have in making the market more resilient," he added. The bourse this year signed cooperation agreements



with stock exchanges in Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and Beijing, with cross-listing being mullied in some cases, Aguzin said.

He added that HKEX was looking to continue diversifying its product lineup, including with derivatives, so it was not "dependent on just the cash market". In its Wednesday results announcement, HKEX said the IPO market showed "signs of good momentum" in the second quarter and that it had 104 active applications for new listings as of June. "We are pleased to see encouraging signs of a revival in our IPO market, matched by a very healthy pipeline," Aguzin said.

Average daily turnover of equity products in the first half fell by 14 percent year-on-year. The bourse's stock price has declined by around 13 percent since the start of the year. — AFP



**ZHENJIANG:** This aerial photo taken on October 31, 2021 shows a logo of Chinese property developer Country Garden on top of a building in China's eastern Jiangsu province. — AFP

conditions for developers' access to credit since 2020, drying up sources of financing for firms already in debt.

A wave of defaults followed—notably that of Evergrande—which undermined the confidence of potential buyers and reverberated through the industry. The downturn in the once-thriving sector has occurred

against a backdrop of a general economic slowdown in China.

Country Garden is particularly susceptible to weak demand because it focuses on the lower end of the property market, launching ambitious projects in secondary cities where local buyers wield less purchasing power. — AFP

## China's Tencent reports jump in Q2 income

**BEIJING:** Chinese internet giant Tencent announced on Wednesday a 41 percent year-on-year jump in second-quarter net income, but missed analyst forecasts for revenue. Following a long period of meteoric growth, Chinese tech firms have faced a stringent crackdown by authorities in recent years, which weighed heavily on their profitability. Tencent's annual increase in net income to 26.17 billion yuan (\$3.6 billion) was the fastest recorded since 2021 by the Shenzhen-based internet giant. It also announced an 11 percent increase in revenue during the second quarter reaching 149.21 billion yuan (\$20.46 billion).

However, that revenue total fell short of analysts' expectations of around 152 billion yuan, according to Bloomberg. And on a quarter-to-quarter basis, Tencent's latest quarterly net income figure represents an increase of just 1 percent.

In the second quarter of last year, a large-scale lock-

down of China's economic powerhouse Shanghai and continued regulatory pressure on the tech sector greatly harmed Tencent's performance.

In 2020, Beijing started tightening the screws on what it saw as out-of-control ballooning of the tech industry, slashing the market capitalization of major players by billions of dollars. While rival Alibaba was one of the crackdown's main targets, Tencent was not spared from increased oversight, with its WeChat mega-app receiving a nearly 3 billion yuan fine last month.

Tencent said Wednesday that the combined monthly active users of WeChat during the second quarter surpassed 1.3 billion. The firm last year announced its first decline in quarterly sales since its listing on the Hong Kong stock exchange in 2004. But China's tech crackdown now appears to be waning as officials voice renewed support for the digital economy, an important source of growth and potential jobs at a time when the broader economy is under pressure. The country slipped into deflation in July for the first time since 2021, amid a slew of indicators reflecting an economic slowdown. Tencent is the world's largest video game company in terms of revenue, dominating the Asian market in particular.

Beijing moved against the gaming sector in 2021 as part of the sprawling crackdown on big tech, including a strict cap on the amount of time children could spend



**SHENZHEN:** A man walks past the Tencent headquarters in Shenzhen in China's southern Guangdong province on July 10, 2022. — AFP

playing online. After a hiatus of more than a year, Tencent last year began regularly receiving video game licenses in China—a prerequisite for marketing titles in the world's largest gaming market. In recent years, it has looked to expand operations in overseas markets, especially in Europe. The firm owns Riot Games, maker of the battle royale hit "League of Legends". —AFP

## Lifestyle



Women walk past a banner of Bollywood movie 'The Kashmir Files' installed outside a cinema hall in the old quarters of Delhi. - AFP photos



A moviegoer walks past a poster of the film - The Kerala Story - at a movie theatre in Mumbai.

## Iran sentences film-maker over Cannes-selected movie

A court in Iran has sentenced prominent movie director Saeed Roustaei to six months' prison for the screening of his film "Leila's Brothers" at the Cannes Film Festival last year, local media reported Tuesday. "Leila's Brothers", a rich and complex tale of a family struggling with economic hardship in Tehran, has been banned in Iran since its release last year.

The movie was in competition for the Palme d'Or at last year's Cannes festival. It missed the top prize but won the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI) award. On Tuesday, the reformist daily Etemad said that Roustaei, along with the movie's producer Javad Noruzbegi, "were sentenced to six months in prison for screening the movie at Cannes Film festival". Roustaei and Noruzbegi were found guilty of "contributing to propaganda of the opposition against the Islamic system."



Iranian film director Saeed Roustaei poses during a portrait session on the sidelines of the 75th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France. - AFP

"Leila's Brothers" was banned after it "broke the rules by being entered at international film festivals without authorization," and the director refused to "correct" it as requested by the culture ministry, official media said at the time.

The film-makers will only serve one-twentieth of their sentence, about nine days, while the remainder "will be suspended over five years," according to Etemad, which added the verdict can be appealed. During the suspension period, the defendants will be required to take a film-making course while "preserving national and ethical interests" and refrain from associating with other cinema professionals, the newspaper said.

Roustaei, 34, has gained international renown since the 2019 release of his film "Just 6.5", an uncompromising look at Iran's drug problem and the brutal, and fruitless, police response. — AFP

# Indian movies vilifying Muslims spark fear ahead of polls

With free tickets and false claims, "The Kerala Story" is one of a slew of polarizing films sparking concern Bollywood is churning out cultural propaganda to bolster support for India's ruling party ahead of elections. The trailer for the anti-Muslim box office hit claims to depict "innocent girls trapped, transformed and trafficked for terror", while declaring it was "inspired by many true stories".

A fictitious tale of a Hindu woman who converts to Islam and then is radicalized, the movie is the second-highest-grossing Hindi film of 2023 so far. Critics have accused it and other recent releases of peddling lies and stoking divisions, including by vilifying the Muslim minority, ahead of next year's national elections. "I would suggest all political parties to take advantage of my film... Use it for your political gain," director Sudipto Sen said, in response to an AFP question about its political leanings.

The world's largest democracy has a long history of film censorship, but detractors say the industry is increasingly pushing out films that share the ideology of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist government.

The mass appeal of cinema in India makes the medium an unrivalled means of reaching the public, said journalist and author Nilanjana Mukhopadhyay. During Modi's tenure, movies have increasingly been used to spread divisive messages reinforcing prejudices shared by political leaders, he told AFP. "The same thing is being done by these films, to take hatred to the people... to create prejudice against the religious minorities," he added.



A worker cleans a display with the poster of the Bollywood movie 'The Kashmir Files', outside a cinema hall in New Delhi.

### 'Medium of communication'

The release of "The Kerala Story" in May coincided with elections in the southern state of Karnataka. The polls, hotly contested by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), triggered stone-throwing clashes in neighboring Maharashtra state in which one person died. Modi endorsed the film during an election rally, while accusing the opposition Congress party of "supporting terrorism

tendencies". Critics said the low-budget movie taps into so-called "love-jihad" conspiracies, where predatory Muslim men seduce Hindu women.

The filmmakers have since retracted the false claim that 32,000 Hindu and Christian women from mixed-faith Kerala had been recruited by the Islamic State jihadist group. BJP members organized free screenings of the movie, which party spokesperson Gopal Krishna Agarwal said were part of "a medium of communication" but not official policy. "How do you communicate your ideology? How do you communicate the life and story of your leader and their work? This is the way we do it... People from the party do it on an individual basis," Agarwal told AFP.

In a bid to encourage viewers, two BJP-led state governments slashed the tax on tickets. The director said his film had "touched a chord" in India, which has one of the biggest Muslim populations worldwide — about 14 percent of its 1.4 billion people. "I believe in the power of truth, the truth which we said in the film, and this is what people want to see," he told AFP.

Sen's film is one of many shifting from Bollywood's usual song-and-dance routines. A string of recent military-themed movies have been nationalistic, all-guns-blazing stories of heroics by soldiers and police — usually Hindus — against enemies outside and within India. "Cinema has always been used as propaganda — doesn't Hollywood?" said veteran director Sudhir Mishra, citing Sylvester Stallone's Rambo series. "I definitely think that Bollywood is being attacked and singled out."

### 'Strongly ideological'

Ahead of the last national election in 2019, Modi glad-handed Bollywood stars, who posted selfies on social media generating thousands of views. Media reports said they discussed "nation-building". "The Accidental Prime Minister", a biopic critical of Modi's predecessor and rival Manmohan Singh, was also released just a few months before the vote, although the hagiographic "PM Narendra Modi" had its release delayed by the Election Commission until after polls.

Those movies "seem relatively tame now", documentary filmmaker Sanjay Kak said. "The new crop of films is strongly ideological and shares the worldview of the ruling dispensation — which is rightwing, Hindu-nationalist and Islamophobic."

More recent hits include the 2022 blockbuster "The Kashmir Files", depicting in harrowing detail how several hundred thousand Hindus fled Muslim militants in Indian-administered Kashmir in 1989-90. Meanwhile, the upcoming film "Godhra" examines the 2002 train fire that killed 59 Hindu pilgrims and triggered deadly sectarian riots in Gujarat, with its trailer darkly suggesting the violence was a premeditated "conspiracy".

At the same time, the government has clamped down on critics, including banning a BBC documentary about Modi's role in the Gujarat violence. It called the BBC reporting "hostile propaganda and anti-India garbage". — AFP

## The Killers apologize after inviting Russian fan on stage in Georgia

US rock band The Killers apologized on Wednesday after they invited a Russian fan on stage during a concert in the ex-Soviet republic of Georgia, drawing boos from the crowd. Since Russia invaded Ukraine last year, Georgia has hosted thousands of Russians fleeing mobilization and a crackdown on dissent back home, leading to some tension in the small Caucasus country.

Moscow and Tbilisi went to war in 2008 and a fifth of Georgian territory has been occupied by Russian-backed separatists since. In a video posted on social media, The Killers frontman Brandon Flowers can be seen inviting a fan on stage during a concert at an arena on Georgia's Black Sea coast. "This guy is a Russian. Are you okay with a Russian coming up here?," Flowers asks, prompting crowd members to respond with boos. "You can't recognize if someone's your brother?" he then asks.

Local media said some audience members left during the concert, which

took place on Tuesday. "Good people of Georgia, it was never our intention to offend anyone!," The Killers said in a post on social media Wednesday. "We recognize that a comment, meant to suggest that all of The Killers' audience and fans are 'brothers and sisters', could be misconstrued. We did not mean to upset anyone and we apologize," the band said. Organizers at the Black Sea Arena, where the concert was held, also apologized.

"We understand the emotions of our guests," it said in comments after the show. "The act of the artist on the stage is not the position of Black Sea Arena," it added. The Georgian rock band LOUD-speakers, which played at the same concert as a warm-up act, said it was "disappointed" after the incident. "Russia is an enemy and an occupier!," the band said in a post on social media. The Killers, active for more than 20 years, shot to fame with the synth-rock hit "Mr Brightside", first released in 2003. — AFP



## Cyprus dig reveals key trading hub in antiquity



A Swedish-led excavation on Cyprus has unearthed a wealth of artefacts suggesting an ancient port city in Larnaca on the south coast was the region's key Bronze Age trading post, an official said Wednesday. "The city's wealth seems to have been based on the production of copper and trade with near and distant cultures," said Giorgos Georgiou, acting director of Cyprus' Antiquities Department. "Judging by the rich burial gifts, the tombs belonged to families of the city's ruling class, which must have been involved in the export of copper and intercultural trade," he added in a written response to AFP. He said the excavation site at Dromolaxia-Vyzakia was a Late Bronze Age harbor settlement, estimated by some authorities to be at least 25 hectares (60 acres) in size.

The settlement, which flourished from 1600 to 1100 BC, lies along the shores of the Larnaca salt lake at Hala Sultan Tekke. Last month, the University of Gothenburg said it recently discovered tombs outside the Bronze Age trading metropolis. It said they rank among the richest ever found in the Mediterranean region, and the precious tomb artefacts indicate their occupants ruled the city, which was a centre for the copper trade in 1500-1300 BC. "Considering the richness of the grave goods, it is a reasonable assumption that these were royal tombs," said Peter Fischer, an archaeology professor and leader of the expedition.

The tombs consist of underground

chambers accessed via a narrow passage from the surface. The chambers vary in size, measuring up to 4 x 5 meters (yards). The Swedish expedition, excavating around Hala Sultan Tekke since 2010, has previously found chamber tombs. "We found more than 500 complete artefacts distributed among two tombs," it said. "Many of the artefacts consist of precious metals, gems, ivory and high-quality ceramics," said Fischer.



er on the university's website. He said about half of the artefacts were imported from neighboring cultures. Gold and ivory came from Egypt. Precious stones, such as blue lapis lazuli, dark red carnelian and blue-green turquoise, were imported from Afghanistan, India, and the Sinai, respectively. The tombs also contain amber objects from the Baltic region.

### 'From cultures east and north'

The tombs were discovered using magnetometers, an instrument that can detect objects and structures up to two meters beneath the surface. Georgiou said three chamber tombs, preliminarily dated to the 14th century BC, were exposed during the most recent excavation season. "One had been looted, most likely in the 19th century AD. "Two nearby tombs were found undisturbed."

The tombs contained locally produced pottery and ornaments, "as well as numerous items of jewelry and other imported objects from the Aegean, Anatolia, Egypt, the Levant and cultures further east and north". He said other metal objects included jewelry of precious metals, diadems, daggers, knives, spearheads, and a mirror of bronze. — AFP

A handout picture shows an archaeological expedition team from the University of Gothenburg working at a site in Cyprus, on the shore of the Larnaca salt lake at Hala Sultan Tekke.



Lifestyle



A saleswoman dresses a plus size mannequin at a store in Sao Paulo, Brazil.



Women look clothes displayed at a plus size clothing thrift store in Sao Paulo, Brazil.— AFP photos

# Plus-size movement reshapes fashion in Brazil

Defying the fashion world's narrow stereotype of beauty, Brazilian plus-size designer Amanda Momente poses confidently for the camera, wearing the clothing label she founded after failing to find other options that fit. More than half of all adults in Brazil are overweight, but Momente is part of a growing movement of entrepreneurs, activists and models who are fed up with a fashion industry they say fails to fit their needs and shames them for their bodies.

"Society judged me based on one thing, so I took that thing and used it... to launch my business," says Momente, 34, dressed in a sheer black bodysuit created by Wondersize, the company she founded in 2017.

The former real-estate agent, who sports a pink mohawk and multiple tattoos, got the idea after feeling uncomfortable at the gym in clothes she says were too tight, turned transparent when stretched or bunched up around her thighs. She decided to find a seamstress to help her make her own workout outfit.

It turned out so well she quit her day job and plunged headfirst into the fashion world, she says. The rise of colorful, stylish clothes for Brazilians with large bodies is part of a broader international trend rejecting unrealistic standards of beauty, especially for women. "The fashion industry needs



A woman looks clothes displayed at a plus size clothing thrift store in Sao Paulo, Brazil.



Women look clothes displayed at a plus size clothing thrift store in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

to fit our bodies, not the other way around," says Momente.

### 'Identity and dignity'

Major brands tend to dedicate at most a small portion of their lines to clothing in larger sizes, leaving "repressed" demand, says Marcela Liz, head of the Brazil Plus Size Association. The plus-size sector grew in Brazil more than 75 percent in the decade through 2021, reaching sales of 9.6 billion reais (about \$1.9 billion) that year, according to the association.

It projects sales will hit 15 billion reais by 2027 in Latin America's biggest econ-

omy. "Supply has improved, but we're still not meeting demand," says Liz. The nascent industry sashayed through Sao Paulo this month at the Pop Plus fair, where indie designers showed off sparkling skirts, racy tops, T-shirts stamped with bold statements and other clothes in sizes ranging up to 70.

"The market saw fat people as people who didn't like fashion, who just wanted to hide their bodies," says Flavia Durante, the activist who founded the fair in 2012. "We had clothes, not fashion," she told AFP. "Fashion isn't just about consumption. It's about identity and dignity."

### More work to do

TV presenter and plus-size model Leticia Munniz has strutted the runway at glitzy Sao Paulo fashion week, made the cover of glossy magazines and been the face of numerous ad campaigns. But she says real inclusion remains a long way off for the overweight and obese in Brazil -- 57 percent and 23 percent of the adult population, respectively, in the country of 203 million people.

"Things have improved, but our work is still seen as just checking a quota box. We're not seen as real equals," she says. The activist and

influencer, who usually wears custom-made clothes, says she is glad to see more plus sizes on runways -- but adds that doesn't necessarily mean they are actually available in stores.

She encourages her more than one million followers on social media to love themselves as they are. "When you find something made to exalt your body instead of hide it, it changes everything," she says in one post. — AFP

## Push to free chained elephants at Hanoi zoo



Legs in iron chains and unable to roam freely, the treatment of two elderly elephants at the Hanoi public zoo has drawn outrage in Vietnam, with animal rights groups demanding the pair be relocated. The groups are calling for the two female elephants—Thai and Banang—to be released to a national park, and close to 70,000 people have signed an online petition in support.

State media has also covered the story widely in recent weeks. On Wednesday morning, the pair's legs were in chains as zookeepers fed them

grass and sugarcane, AFP journalists observed. "The elephants are quite fierce. With a broken electric fence, we had to chain them," a zoo staff member told AFP on the condition of anonymity. Staff said the two elephants were brought to the zoo from the country's south and central highlands in 2010 and 2014.

"They were not in the same herd. We had to do our best to help prevent fighting between them and ensure safety for carers," the zoo employee said, adding the animals were well cared for and given three meals a day.

But Animals Asia sent a letter to city authorities earlier this month urging the creatures be returned to the jungle at the Yok Don National Park in the country's central highlands.

"Elephants at the Hanoi zoo have been chained for a very long period," the group said in the letter. "The health of the two elephants will deteriorate if they remain as they are." Vietnam Animal Eyes, a group of local animal advocates, started a petition to remove the pair from the zoo at the beginning of August.

Zoo director Le Si Dung, howev-



An employee shackles an elephant at the Hanoi Zoo in Hanoi.

er, has characterized the push to free the animals as "illogical", according to state media. "The two elephants, aged 60-70 years old, have been at our zoo for more than 10 years... They will die if they are put back to nature as they do not know how to seek food or protect themselves," Dung was quoted as saying by the Dan Tri news site.

David Neale, animal welfare director at Animals Asia, told AFP the elephants were likely frustrated they couldn't carry out their natural behaviors. "Yok Don National Park... has all of the elements which an elephant needs to be able to

live well and live happily," he said.

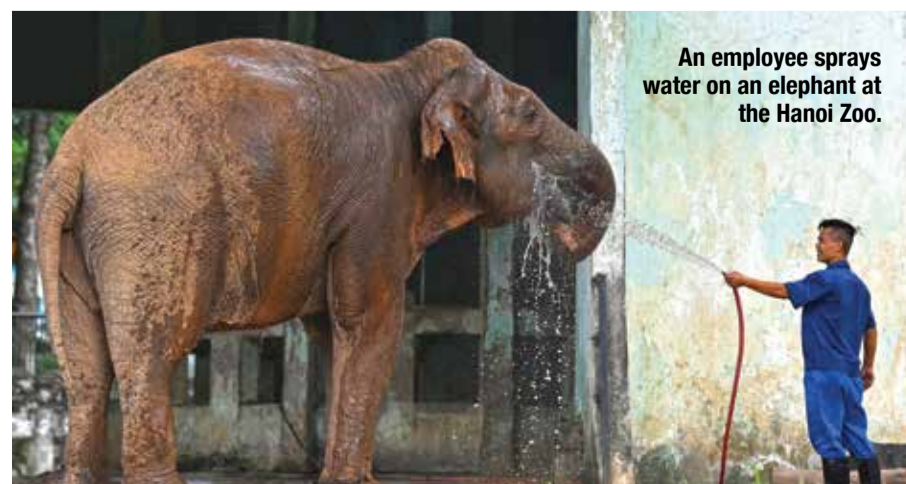
Other animal lovers believe the zoo is not serving the elephants' best interests. "This (Hanoi) zoo is like a jail," social media user Thanh Nguyen said. "I was furious after my first visit there last year... I would never go back." According to environmental groups, Vietnam's wild elephant population has fallen from around 2,000 in 1980 to about 100 in 2022. The number of domesticated elephants has also declined significantly from about 600 in 1980 to 165 today. — AFP



An elephant with a shackled leg is pictured at the Hanoi Zoo.



Children watch elephants with their legs shackled at the Hanoi Zoo in Hanoi.



An employee sprays water on an elephant at the Hanoi Zoo.

## Sports

# Alcaraz battles through rain, holder Garcia out

## Exits began with withdrawal of Murray due to abdominal injury

**CINCINNATI:** Carlos Alcaraz battled through a rain interruption to claim his 50th win of the season, defeating Jordan Thompson 7-5, 4-6, 6-3 on Wednesday at the Cincinnati Open. The top-seeded Spaniard is bidding for his seventh trophy of 2023 as he prepares for a US Open title defense in less than a fortnight.

His victory took three hours, with the world number one breaking open the third set as he delivered two love games and moved through on a second match point. "I had never played him and the start/stop was not easy," Alcaraz said. "It was not easy to wait for the rain."

"He played aggressive, I'm glad to get through. It was a long day waiting to play and then find rain in the first set. "I had to play my best level at the end; I'm hoping for better conditions in the next round." Alcaraz was tested by number 55 Thompson who now stands 2-16 against Top-10 opponents.

The Spaniard had 32 winners and 41 unforced errors in the marathon. Including a 15-minute pause for rain and subsequent warmup, the first set took nearly 90 minutes, with Thompson saving 10 of a dozen break points only to lose on the first Alcaraz set point.

Alcaraz came back from a break down in the second set and ran away

with the third as Thompson complained to the chair umpire about an incorrectly strung racquet which he only discovered at a late stage in the epic.

### British exodus

In other games, an inspired Gael Monfils applied the finishing touches to a British exodus with a 3-6, 6-4, 6-3 defeat of 13th seed Cameron Norrie. The veteran French showman got his left knee wrapped in the opening set of the first-round match and took confidence from encouraging words from the physio to secure the win which left Britain 0-3 on the day here. The rush to the exits began with the withdrawal of Andy Murray due to an existing abdominal injury dating to last week in Toronto.

Meanwhile on court, Lorenzo Musetti defeated Dan Evans 6-4, 6-3 before Monfils staged his comeback victory against British number one Norrie. In other matches, Alexander Zverev defeated fellow former tournament champion Grigor Dimitrov 6-2, 6-2. Germany's Zverev, the 16th seed, claimed the title at his last participation in 2021 while Dimitrov lifted the trophy in 2017.

Zverev was joined in the second round by former semi-finalist Stan Wawrinka, who polished off a win after

rain called a halt to his match the night before. Switzerland's three-time Grand Slam champion defeated American Brandon Nakashima 6-3, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, requiring just two concluding games to reach the second round after the overnight pause. Borna Coric concluded unfinished business with Petra Korda, winning 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 while Ugo Humbert defeated fellow Frenchman Arthur Fils 6-4, 3-6, 6-2.

### Garcia out

In the WTA draw, the continuing career comeback of former number one Carolina Wozniacki failed to ignite as the Dane went down to French lucky loser Varvara Gracheva 6-4, 6-4 in 96 minutes. Wozniacki, 33, won her first comeback match a week ago in Montreal before losing in the second round to Wimbledon winner Marketa Vondrousova.

Three-time Grand Slam runner-up Ons Jabeur, playing for the first time since losing last month's Wimbledon final, survived a struggle with Anhelina Kalinina of Ukraine to reach the third round 6-3, 6-7 (2/7), 7-6 (7/2).

Unseeded American Sloane Stephens, making her 12th tournament appearance, defeated holder Caroline Garcia 4-6,



**MASON:** Carlos Alcaraz of Spain returns a shot to Jordan Thompson of Australia during their third round match at the Western & Southern Open at Lindner Family Tennis Center in Mason, Ohio. — AFP

6-4, 6-4 to reach the last 16 alongside Jabeur. The sixth-seeded Frenchwoman had won the title here a year ago from a qualifying start, defeating three Top 10 opponents along the way.

All England Club titlewinner Marketa Vondrousova beat Katerina Siniakova

7-5, 6-4. Two-time Cincinnati winner Victoria Azarenka rallied from 1-4 down in the second set to overhaul Barbora Krejcikova 6-3, 7-5. Azarenka's fellow double Grand Slam champion Petra Kvitova took down Anna Blinkova 7-6 (7/2), 6-0. — AFP



**Khaled Al-Mudhaf**

## Kuwait's Al-Mudhaf qualifies for World championship final

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Shooting Sport Club (KSSC) announced Wednesday that Kuwaiti shooter Khaled Al-Mudhaf has qualified to the World Championship Final in Men's Trap competition which will be organized by The International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF).

The qualification comes as Al-Mudhaf is ranked 7th in the world in his category in addition to his achievements in continental and international events, Mudhaf said in a statement on Wednesday. He added that he is preparing for this championship which will be held next November expressing his honor to represent Kuwait and be among the world best 12 shooters.

Mudhaf pointed that the upcoming international and continental competition will be significant since it qualifies for the Olympic Games Paris 2024 affirming that he will put great effort to achieve best result in the World Championship.

The shooter praised the ongoing support by his peers in Kuwait international shooting team (KSSC) president Duaij Al-Otaibi and thanked his Italian coach in lifting up his performance. — KUNA

## Stokes ends ODI retirement ahead of Cricket WCup

**LONDON:** Ben Stokes has reversed his decision to retire from one-day internationals ahead of England's defence of their 50-over men's World Cup title in India. Test captain Stokes quit the ODI format 13 months ago due to a demanding workload as a multi-format player and amid concerns about a chronic left knee injury.

That fitness issue meant the all-rounder did not bowl at all during the last three Tests of the recently concluded drawn Ashes series at home to Australia. But Stokes, one of the stars of England's 2019 World Cup final win over New Zealand at Lord's, could now feature as a specialist batsman when England look to retain their title in India starting in October.

England are at home to New Zealand in four warm-up ODIs next month, with Stokes, 32, included Wednesday in a 15-man squad that could well resemble the touring party selected for the World Cup. England men's national selector Luke Wright said: "Any series against New Zealand is closely fought and will provide us with an ideal opportunity to test ourselves against one of the best teams in the world."

"The return of Ben Stokes only adds to that quality with his match-winning ability and leadership. I am certain that every fan will enjoy seeing him back in an England ODI shirt again." David Malan, who made ODI hundreds in Australia, South Africa and Bangladesh during the 2022/23 English winter—has retained his place ahead of Harry Brook, with the Yorkshire batsman appearing to be the player left out to accommodate Stokes's return. — AFP

## UEFA chief: Football must eliminate cancer of hooliganism

**ATHENS:** UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin on Wednesday urged European football to "eliminate the cancer" of hooliganism. Ceferin was speaking in Athens in the wake of last week's fatal stabbing of a fan ahead of a Champions League qualifier.

"The problem of violence and hooliganism is not just Greek, it is European," he told a joint press conference with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. "I call on everyone at a European level to eliminate this cancer", he added.

AEK Athens fan Michalis Katsouris, 29, died after being stabbed during violent clashes on the eve of Croatian club Dinamo Zagreb's qualifier at AEK near the Greek club's stadium in Nea Filadelfia, a western suburb of Athens. Last Tuesday's match was then postponed by UEFA until 19 August.

"We will do everything in our power to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again," said Ceferin. On Sunday, the Greek courts charged 105 people with involvement in the incidents and remanded them in custody. The accused include 102 Croatians, suspected of being linked to the Bad Blue Boys, a Dinamo Zagreb ultra group.

"The guilty parties will be found and punished for this murder," said the Greek prime minister, who



**ATHENS:** UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin (first-L), Evangelos Marinakis, owner of the soccer club Olympiacos (third-L), Giannis Alafouzos, president of the soccer club Panathinaikos (fourth-L) and Dimitris Melissanidis, owner of the soccer club AEK (fifth-L) meet with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (C) at the Maximos Mansion, in Athens, on August 16, 2023. Ceferin is in Greece following the death of Greek football fan Michalis Katsouris, 29, stabbed in a mass brawl which erupted on the streets of the Greek capital. — AFP

also called for a "European mechanism to tackle violence in stadiums and punish it effectively." Mitsotakis also emphasised that he had agreed with the four chairmen of the main Greek clubs that "the

police should operate in the stadiums and be able to control entry". "But violence is not just in the stadiums, it is also on the streets, and we need to fight it collectively", he added. — AFP

## Red Bull Hattrick arrives in Kuwait for the first time

**KUWAIT:** The 3v3 FIFA tournament, Red Bull Hattrick, debuted in Kuwait on August 8, 2023 and now all eyes are on the national final, set to take place on Thursday, August 17, at 5pm at Al Assima Mall. The event kicked off with 16 teams competing against each other in qualifiers that took place over the span of two days, on August 8 and 9, in House of X.

Now, the remaining top 8 teams of 3 players are gearing up for the national final and the team that comes out victorious will qualify to compete at the world finals, happening in Egypt later this year. Red Bull Hattrick is FIFA for the pros, where matches are played on PlayStation 5 and FIFA 2023. The tournament

is played in teams and singles, not multi. The premise of the game is that it is a best-of-3 winning condition: each player from every respective team plays against the player from a different team, for a total of three matches per game and six halftimes.

Each team only has one wild card, to switch one of his players for only 1 halftime. The teams playing against each other are chosen randomly on the day of the event. After the first round of games, the top four players will make it to the semi-final. The last stage will be the final game between two teams. Qualification from one stage to the other is based on the sum of the scores of the three players in the team.



**Participants of Red Bull Hattrick Final in Amman, Jordan.**

## Former NFL 'Blind Side' star sues over 'adoption'

**LOS ANGELES:** Former NFL star Michael Oher, whose inspirational life story became the subject of the Oscar-winning 2009 movie "The Blind Side", is suing the Tennessee couple who took him in as a teenager. Oher, 37, who won a Super Bowl with the Baltimore Ravens during eight seasons in the NFL, alleged in a legal petition filed on Monday that Leigh Anne Tuohy and her husband Sean Tuohy tricked him into signing away control of his financial affairs.

Oher alleges in the filing that instead of being legally adopted by the Tuohys, as he was told, the Tuohys instead established a conservatorship which allowed them to profit from his name. The lawsuit, which seeks to dissolve the conservatorship, adds that the Tuohys used their control of Oher's affairs to rake in millions of dollars from the success of "The Blind Side". The film earned more than \$300 million at the box office and earned a best actress Oscar for Sandra Bullock,

who played Leigh Anne Tuohy. The movie, based on the journalist Michael Lewis's 2006 book of the same name, charts the story of how Oher, who spent much of his youth in foster homes, is taken in by the Tuohys before going on to forge a successful NFL career.

However Oher's lawsuit says the premise of the film—his adoption by the Tuohys—is false. "The lie of Michael's adoption is one upon which Co-Conservators Leigh Anne Tuohy and Sean Tuohy have enriched themselves at the expense of their Ward, the undersigned Michael Oher," the legal filing says.

"Michael Oher discovered this lie to his chagrin and embarrassment in February of 2023, when he learned that the Conservatorship to which he consented on the basis that doing so would make him a member of the Tuohy family, in fact provided him no familial relationship with the Tuohys."

"Since at least August of 2004, Conservators have allowed Michael, specifically, and the public, generally, to believe that Conservators adopted Michael and have used that untruth to gain financial advantages for themselves and the foundations which they own or which they exercise control," the petition adds.

### 'It's upsetting'

The filing seeks to dissolve the Tuohys' conser-

vatorship and to bar them from using his name and likeness. Oher is also seeking to receive a share of profits he claims not to have been paid in addition to financial and compensatory damages.

Speaking in response to the lawsuit, Sean Tuohy said his family was "devastated" by the claims. "It's upsetting to think we would make money off any of our children," Tuohy told the Daily Memphian newspaper in Tennessee.

"But we're going to love Michael at 37 just like we loved him at 16." Tuohy however admitted the conservatorship over Oher's affairs, but said the agreement was only made in good faith after legal advice. Oher's biological mother had attended the court hearing to formalise the conservatorship, he added.

"We contacted lawyers who had told us that we couldn't adopt over the age of 18; the only thing we could do was to have a conservatorship," Tuohy said. "We were so concerned it was on the up-and-up that we made sure the biological mother came to court." Tuohy also maintained that the family had made little money from the success of the movie about Oher's life. "We didn't make any money off the movie," Tuohy said. "Well, (author) Michael Lewis gave us half of his share. Everybody in the family got an equal share, including Michael. It was about \$14,000 each." — AFP

Sports

# Neymar ends turbulent PSG stay, six years after record fee

## Neymar is reported to earn 100 million euros per season with Al Hilal

PARIS: Neymar brought an end to a topsy-turvy spell at Paris Saint-Germain on Tuesday by leaving for Saudi club Al Hilal, six years after great fanfare greeted his arrival in the French capital. The Brazilian was afforded a rock star's welcome in Paris when he signed from Barcelona for a world-record fee of 222 million euros (\$242 million), but left just months after PSG fans protested outside his house, demanding his exit from the club.

PSG hoped Neymar would help deliver a coveted maiden Champions League title when he joined in 2017, but the closest he came was a 2020 final defeat by Bayern Munich. Several injuries plagued his time in Paris, with PSG seemingly happy to cut their losses by allowing him to leave for a reported 100 million euros.

The 31-year-old lifted five Ligue 1 titles and three French Cups with PSG, scoring 118 goals in 173 appearances. But Neymar only lived up to expectations intermittently, as even his combination with Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe failed to deliver Europe's biggest prize to PSG's Qatari owners.

French media reported Mbappe made Neymar's departure one of the necessary

conditions for him to sign a new contract in 2022. The France captain was also tipped with a move away from the Parc des Princes this summer but now appears set to stay for at least another campaign.

Neymar has instead settled for following in the footsteps of Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Sadio Mane in accepting the Saudi riches on offer. He is reported to be set to earn 100 million euros per season with Al Hilal, according to a source close to the negotiations. The deal brings an end to an indifferent relationship with PSG, a club he wanted to leave to return to Barcelona in 2019 before signing a contract extension until 2027.

Paris were open to Neymar leaving last season, but his estimated salary of 30 million euros a year put off any potential buyers. He started the season strongly but was hit by the latest in a series of ankle injuries at the World Cup in Qatar.

### Injury woes

Neymar won a domestic treble in his maiden season in France, although he did not play in the latter stages of the campaign after fracturing a metatarsal. The following season saw Neymar insult

officials on Instagram after PSG were dumped out of the Champions League by Manchester United, before he appeared to punch a spectator after a French Cup final defeat by Rennes. He was then disciplined after missing pre-season training in 2019 but decided to stay at the club after not securing a transfer back to Barca. A third straight Ligue 1 title followed in a COVID-hit season, but PSG suffered heartbreak in the Champions League showpiece, losing 1-0 to Bayern.

He suffered ankle and adductor injuries in the 2020-21 season as PSG contrived to lose the French title race to Lille. More injuries followed under coach Mauricio Pochettino, although he did play in their next Champions League exit at the hands of Real Madrid. Last season, the front three of Neymar, Messi and Mbappe were in fine form before the World Cup.

But Neymar needed surgery on his injured ankle in March and missed the second leg of the Champions League last-16 loss to Bayern. The season ended in turmoil for PSG, although they stumbled across the line to win another league title, with supporters protesting outside the club's headquarters and Neymar's home.



PARIS: Picture released by the Saudi Al-Hilal football club on August 15, 2023, Brazilian forward Neymar (L) poses for a picture with Hilal President Fahad bin Nafel in Paris. Brazil forward Neymar has signed for Saudi Arabia's Al-Hilal from Paris Saint-Germain. — AFP

Neymar's exit helps PSG balance the books as they bid to adhere to financial fair-play restrictions, with midfielder Marco Verratti also expected to leave before the end of the month after 11 years

with the team. PSG are now hoping for the start of a new era at the Parc des Princes, evidenced by the recent signings of Marco Asensio, Ousmane Dembele and Goncalo Ramos. — AFP

## Bayern pin hopes on 'messiah' Kane as Bundesliga returns

BERLIN: Bayern Munich are pinning their hopes on England captain Harry Kane to return a stuttering team fresh off their worst season in a decade to the European elite. Bayern's 11th straight Bundesliga title failed to paper over the cracks of a side which is yet to click since the arrival of coach Thomas Tuchel in March.

Last week's signing of Kane for 100 million euros (\$109 million) from Premier League side Tottenham broke the German club's transfer record. The deal also broke a long-standing promise from former boss Uli Hoeness that the club "wouldn't buy a player for 100 million even if I had the money". But whether the 30-year-old Kane, who arrives after a successful but trophyless career in north London, can truly be Bayern's saviour remains to be seen.

### 'A bad start'

Bayern limped to the title in 2022-23, winning on goal difference after Borussia Dortmund's last-day collapse to draw at home with mid-table Mainz. Bayern's points total of 71 was their lowest since 2010-11, when the side finished third under caretaker coach Andries Jonker.

The shock firing of Julian Nagelsmann for Tuchel in March failed to have the desired effect, with Bayern knocked out of the German Cup and the Champions

League soon afterwards. Former Bayern sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic repeatedly dismissed criticisms of the team under Tuchel, saying the side needed time to get used to the Champions League-winning coach's methods.

In late May, just days before he himself was sacked, Salihamidzic told Sky: "Thomas Tuchel just needs the pre-season with the team, then everything will be better." Early evidence however suggests Bayern have not solved their problems from last season.

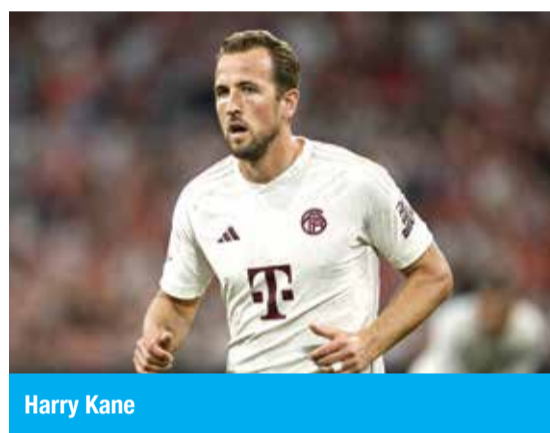
On Saturday, Bayern were beaten 3-0 at home by RB Leipzig in the German Super Cup with Kane making little impact, making his debut as a late substitute. Just like last season, Bayern lacked fluency and coherence, with a "sorry" Tuchel saying Kane "probably thinks we haven't been training here for weeks".

Tuchel blamed his side's "bad start" to the match and said he saw a "huge discrepancy" between what his team produced at training and what they showed on the pitch. Tuchel said he was "frightened", telling reporters he has "no solution" to the side's problems. Tuchel has publicly called for a new defensive midfielder, while the ongoing saga surrounding injured captain and goalkeeper Manuel Neuer was made worse by the sale of replacement Yann Sommer to Inter Milan.

### 'Walking on water'

Even for the richest club in Germany, the outlay on Kane was lavish and the Bayern brass will want an immediate return. Tuchel said as much after Saturday's result, saying Kane would "soon help the team and lift us up to a new level". "We have to get to know him but he will play every game."

Kane embraced the expectations on him at his



Harry Kane

unveiling on Sunday, saying: "I'm here to win the Champions League with this team." The sky-high expectations on Kane come after the failed signing of Sadio Mane.

Mane, another arrival from the Premier League unveiled to great fanfare, lasted just one disappointing year in Munich, having failed to step into the shoes of the departed Robert Lewandowski. Lewandowski scored 344 goals in 375 Bayern appearances during his eight years at the club, making the Pole an almost impossible act to follow.

As a true centre-forward, Kane is more likely than the Senegalese to match Lewandowski's output, but whether he alone can return Bayern to the European elite is a task questioned by the club's rivals. Leipzig sporting director Max Eberl said after his side's dominant performance on Saturday that the hype around Kane made the England captain seem "like the messiah, walking on water". — AFP

## Kuwait Basketball League scraps two-division system

KUWAIT: Kuwait Basketball Association announced a new format for the next basketball season, canceling the two-division system and merging both divisions into a single league. Nine teams will compete in the regular season, and the top four will advance to the playoffs to crown the 2023/2024 Kuwait Basketball League champions, the KBA said in a statement Wednesday.

The change from the two-division format that was followed in the past couple of seasons came after several teams withdrew from the league. KBA Deputy Chairman Mohsen Al-Sahmi said. "The number of clubs participating in the league has dropped to nine, which makes it impossible to continue with the two-division system," he explained.

The new season's start date will be announced as soon as the schedule for the West Asia Super League is released, Sahmi noted, adding that the KBA is waiting to see Kuwait SC's and Kazma SC's schedule in the Asian tournament before finalizing the local league's schedule to avoid conflict in dates. Furthermore, Sahmi revealed that the KBA agreed to increase the number of professional players each team can register for the next season from two to three, while allowing each time to have two professional players simultaneously on court in accordance with the FIBA Asia regulations. — KUNA

## Panathinaikos beat Marseille on penalties

PARIS: Panathinaikos stunned Marseille on penalties to reach the Champions League play-off round on Tuesday, while Rangers teed up a clash with PSV Eindhoven. Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang wiped out Panathinaikos' 1-0 first-leg lead in the third qualifying round with his first Marseille goal inside two minutes at the Stade Velodrome.

The former Arsenal and Barcelona striker completed the turnaround in first-half added time by turning home his second goal from Jonathan Clauss' low cross. But there was a late twist, as just seconds after Matteo Guendouzi had seen a strong penalty appeal waved away, the Marseille midfielder was penalised for handball by VAR and Fotis Ioannidis dispatched the resulting 99th-minute spot-kick to force extra time.

Vitinha had a goal ruled out by VAR for an offside against Ismaila Sarr in the build-up as the Greeks held on for penalties. Filip Mladenovic stroked home the winning penalty as Panathinaikos won the shoot-out 5-3, with goalkeeper Alberto Brignoli's earlier save



MARSEILLE: Panathinaikos' Italian goalkeeper #91 Alberto Brignoli (up) makes a save in front of Marseille's French-Gabonese forward #10 Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (C) during the UEFA Champions League second leg of the third qualifying round football match between Olympique Marseille (OM) and Panathinaikos. — AFP

from Guendouzi proving crucial.

Panathinaikos will next face Braga, with the winners to secure their first group-stage appearance in over a decade. James Tavernier's second-half header helped Rangers edge past Swiss side Servette with a 1-1 second-leg draw and 3-2 aggregate win. The Scottish giants, who conceded 22 goals in six

defeats on their return to the group stage last season, saw their 2-1 first-leg lead cancelled out by Servette midfielder Dereck Kutesa. But Tavernier struck to set up a play-off round rematch for Rangers against PSV Eindhoven, after their success against the Dutch team at the same stage last year. The first leg will be played next week in Glasgow. — AFP

## Garcia the key as Napoli begin title defence

MILAN: Napoli head into their first title defence in over three decades with questions as to whether new management will be up to replicating last season's stunning charge to glory. Rudi Garcia will make his official debut on Saturday as Napoli kick off the 2023/24 campaign at promoted Frosinone with a similar line-up to the one which cruised to the Scudetto and became Italy's fourth different champions in as many years.

The Frenchman replacing title-winning coach Luciano Spalletti is the key factor in doubts over Napoli's credentials this season. Garcia has bucked a trend by leaving Saudi Arabia, sacked by Al Nassr in April not long after they signed Cristiano Ronaldo and before the country's clubs began a mega-money feeding frenzy in Europe.

The 59-year-old is familiar with Italian football thanks to his time with Roma, whom he guided to Champions League football in 2014 and 2015 and like Spalletti

has plenty of charisma. But his only trophies as a manager came 12 years ago when he won the league and cup double with Lille, the Europa League final with Marseille in 2018 and a French League Cup final with Lyon two years later the closest he has come to glory since then.

Playing in his favour is Napoli keeping hold of star striker Victor Osimhen, who is likely to sign a contract extension until 2026 in the coming weeks and will again lead the way after scoring 31 goals last season.

Osimhen's attacking partner in attacking crime Khvicha Kvaratskhelia was never likely to leave but it's a sign of how healthy Napoli are structurally that last term's top scorer and breakout star are more than happy to stay put.

And bar Kim Min-jae, who has left for Bayern Munich, Napoli have kept hold of everyone involved in the Scudetto triumph while none of their rivals have had a blockbuster summer in the transfer market. Both of the Milan clubs need to sign a striker, with Inter losing both Edin Dzeko and Romelu Lukaku and so far only replacing them with Marcus Thuram—whose tally of 16 with Borussia Moenchengladbach last season was his personal best—and likely veteran Marko Arnautovic. — AFP

# 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
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

### Change of Name

I, **Yusuf** son of Shakir Husain holder of Passport No. M3185221, issued at Kuwait on 08/11/2014, permanent resident of Musalman Mohalla Dahi Dist. Dhar, M.P. 454331 - India and presently residing at Qibla, Block 9, Shohada Street Building 12, 1st Floor, Flat No. 4, Kuwait, do hereby change my name from **Yusuf** to **Yusuf Bohra** with immediate effect. **(3847) 17/8/2023**

327001, Rajasthan, India residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as: **Zainab Murtaza** (given name) and **Tatiwala** (surname). **(3846) 16/8/2023**

I, **Zainab Saifuddin** holder of Indian Passport No T3173369 having permanent address Mohalla Saifeepura Nai Abadi Banswara, Banswara, Pin:

residing in Kuwait at present hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as given name: **Khuzema Ali Husain**. **16/8/2023**

## England shatter Australian dreams

### Set up Women's World Cup final against Spain



SYDNEY: England's players react after winning the Australia and New Zealand 2023 Women's World Cup semi-final football match between Australia and England at Stadium Australia in Sydney. — AFP

SYDNEY: Lauren Hemp and Alessia Russo did the damage late on in Sydney as England shattered Australian dreams Wednesday with a clinical 3-1 win to set up a Women's World Cup final against Spain. The Lionesses had stumbled at the same stage twice before but the European champions made no mistake this time to silence most of the 75,000 crowd and reach the final for the first time.

They took the lead nine minutes before the break with Manchester United's Ella Toone unleashing a rocket just inside the box with the outside of her boot. A fit-again Sam Kerr, starting for the first time this tournament, hit back for the home side just after the hour with a world-class goal that set the game on fire, picking up the ball and letting fly from 30 yards after a weaving run.

It sparked ecstatic scenes but the crowd were silenced just eight minutes later when Hemp muscled her way into the box and stabbed into the corner, before Russo put the icing on the cake with four minutes left of normal time.

"We achieved the final and it's unbelievable. It

feels like we won it but we didn't win it (the World Cup), we just won this game," said England coach Sarina Wiegman. "We played a hard game, but again we found a way to win. We have been talking about ruthlessness and this team has ruthlessness, whether it is up front or in defence."

#### Dream come true

England now face a final on Sunday, also at Stadium Australia, against a dangerous Spanish side that beat Sweden 2-1 in the last four, with a new name to be engraved on the trophy. "Every game in this tournament has been of the highest level so we have to be ready," said Russo.

"But we've been dreaming since we were little girls. We're excited, we'll recover and be ready." England had been in this position before, in 2015 and 2019, losing 2-1 on both occasions, with a third-place finish their best World Cup before now.

But Wiegman led them to the European title last year on home soil and captain Millie Bright said before the semi-final they were now better-placed to

handle big-pressure games. They demonstrated their resilience at a pumping and partisan Stadium Australia, successfully blanking out the noise to silence an expectant home nation.

Despite losing Australia have enjoyed their best World Cup ever, with a third-placed playoff against Sweden on Saturday still to play. "I feel for so many tonight, the players all left it out there," said Australia coach Tony Gustavsson. "But it was one of those nights. England were clinical. "Our defending in the first half was solid, but we were not brave enough on the ball. In the second half we started playing the type of game we can play."

#### Heavy challenges

With striker and skipper Kerr fit again, Gustavsson moved Emily van Egmond to the bench in one of two changes with defender Clare Polkinghorne in for an ill Alanna Kennedy. England stuck to the same XI that beat Colombia 2-1 with striker Lauren James serving the second of a two-match ban—she will be eligible to play on Sunday.

England were the better side for much of the first half. Goalkeeper Mackenzie Arnold rescued Australia, deflecting Georgia Stanway's strike with her legs. Kerr was in the thick of the early action and England ruthlessly looked to close her down with some heavy challenges, one of them earning Alex Greenwood a yellow card.

But as England grew in confidence they began controlling the midfield battle. The breakthrough came in the 36th minute with Toone, in the side for James, arrowing her shot into the top right corner after Hemp pulled the ball back from the touchline.

With 45 minutes to save their tournament, Australia frantically pressed forward and it paid dividends when Kerr's wonder strike drew them level. But England were unmoved and when Ellie Carpenter misjudged a long ball into the box, Hemp hustled her way through to score from close range.

As the hosts pushed forward for the equaliser the home fans so desperately wanted, Russo found herself alone in the box and finished calmly with her right foot to seal a deserved win for England. — AFP

## Miami rout Union to reach Leagues Cup final

CHESTER: Lionel Messi extended his remarkable goal-scoring streak as Inter Miami powered into the final of the Leagues Cup with an emphatic 4-1 victory over Philadelphia Union on Tuesday. The Argentine superstar took his tally to nine goals in six appearances for Miami in an entertaining semi-final at Philadelphia's Subaru Park.

Venezuelan international Josef Martinez, Messi's former Barcelona team-mate Jordi Alba, and substitute David Ruiz scored Miami's other goals, with Alejandro Bedoya the lone scorer for outgunned Philadelphia. The result leaves Messi preparing for the 42nd final of his career with Miami facing Nashville SC in Saturday's final of the World Cup-style tournament for teams from Mexico and Major League Soccer.

Nashville booked their place in the final later Tuesday with a 2-0 win over Mexican side Monterrey and will host the final this weekend. Miami meanwhile were left basking in a victory which also sees them qualify for the CONCACAF Champions Cup regional tournament next season—potentially opening up a route into FIFA's expanded Club World Cup in 2025. "Our goal was to qualify for international competition next season and we've done that tonight," said Miami head coach Gerardo "Tata" Martino. "This most important thing was achieving qualification for Concacaf Champions Cup, and now we have to prepare to win this tournament, which has us feeling very motivated and confident."

Miami's semi-final in Philadelphia was in theory supposed to be the toughest assignment yet faced by Messi since he made his debut for Miami on July 21 after joining from Paris Saint-Germain. Philadelphia are one of the strongest teams in MLS, and are third in the Eastern Conference standings while Miami are bottom of the table.

#### Early strike

The Union have also been practically invincible at home, losing only once in their previous 38 games at



CHESTER: Inter Miami's Argentine forward #10 Lionel Messi fails to score in front of Philadelphia's English defender #03 Jack Elliott during the CONCACAF Leagues Cup semifinal football match between Inter Miami and Philadelphia Union at Subaru Park Stadium in Chester. — AFP

Subaru Park. But the home side were left in disarray just three minutes after kick-off as Miami took the lead. A long ball forward from Ukrainian defender Sergii Kryvtsov sowed panic in the Union back line, and Martinez latched onto the pass before rifling a shot past diving Philadelphia goalkeeper Andre Blake.

Philadelphia should have equalised five minutes later when Hungary international Daniel Gazdag went through on goal only to shoot straight at Miami goalkeeper Drake Callender. Gazdag had another good chance after 19 minutes, but saw his curling shot from the edge of the area fly just wide.

If that chance encouraged Philadelphia, the optimism was short-lived as Messi struck once again to punish slack Union defending. Damion Lowe was caught napping and Martinez spun away from the defender to rejoin Messi, who was given far too much

time and space to direct a fierce low strike from outside the area into the bottom corner past Blake.

Philadelphia responded with sustained pressure, and Gazdag tested Callender from long range once more with a rasping shot on 29 minutes. Although Union enjoyed plenty of territory and possession, it was Miami who struck the decisive blow on half-time.

Finland international Robert Taylor held the ball up well in midfield and took his time before picking out the overlapping Jordi Alba. The former Barcelona star controlled and buried a clinical finish to leave Miami 3-0 up at the break.

Philadelphia coach Jim Curtin threw caution to the wind in the second half, tweaking his formation to add an extra attacker. But Union squandered two good openings when Chris Donovan rounded Callender on 55 minutes but then shot over the bar. — AFP

## England's Lucy Bronze elated at reaching WCup final

SYDNEY: England defender Lucy Bronze was elated after achieving a long-held ambition as the side reached their first Women's World Cup final with a 3-1 defeat of tournament co-hosts Australia.

"The one thing I've always wanted to do is get to a World Cup final," Bronze told the BBC after Wednesday's semi-final win in Sydney. "After two times of such disappointment, I can't believe it," added Bronze, twice a losing semi-finalist.

"We played how we wanted to, we were determined, resilient. We knew the crowd would be crazy and we talked about silencing them and at the end we did that. "We all dreamed of being in the final, all our family and friends have booked to stay here until then because they all believed in us. It's been amazing to play against Australia, in Australia, what a fantastic tournament they had but we're in the final."

European champions England took the lead through Ella Toone's 36th-minute strike into the top right corner before Australia heroine Sam Kerr, making her first start of the tournament, equalised with a long-range shot in the 63rd minute. Lauren Hemp, however, restored England's advantage in the 71st minute after firing into the bottom far corner from Millie Bright's long ball upfield.

Alessia Russo then put the result beyond doubt when she made it 3-1 four minutes before full-time, beating Australia goalkeeper Mackenzie Arnold with a well-struck low shot. It was the first time England had reached a major football World Cup final since the men's team beat the then West Germany 4-2 at Wembley back in 1966.

They will now face fellow first-time Women's World Cup finalists Spain in Sydney on Sunday. "Spain have been very good, they did have that defeat against Japan," said Bronze, who plays her club football with Spanish side Barcelona. "Me and Keira (Walsh) know 90 percent of the squad very well so we'll be getting questions in the analysis I'm sure." — AFP