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**Ramadan Kareem**

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## Gazans keep the faith in Ramadan

Truce efforts revived • Bibi OKs Rafah assault • Hamas, Houthis hold meeting



(Left) Palestinians mourn at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah victims pulled from the rubble of the Tabatibi family home on March 16, 2024, following overnight Zionist bombardment west of the Nuseirat refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip. (Right) Devotees offer first Friday prayers of the holy fasting month of Ramadan in front of the Dome of the Rock in the compound of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem on March 15, 2024. — AFP photos

### RAMADAN KAREEM

## Be mindful of Allah

By Hassan Twaha Bwambale

Being mindful of Allah involves observing His obligations, adhering to His injunctions and abstaining from his prohibitions with the realization that He is watching over you. If we are mindful of Almighty Allah, He will safeguard us and elevate our status like He did for the Muslims of the early days. The basis of mindfulness is the knowledge that Almighty is watching over us at every moment, seeing our deeds, knowing our feelings, and hearing our innermost thoughts.

Abu Huraira (Companion of Prophet Muhammad PBUH) narrated that archangel Gabriel approached Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and asked him about faith, Islam and Ihsan (excellence in worshipping Allah). The Prophet (PBUH) answered all his questions, and regarding the last one, he said, "Al-Ihsan" (ie, excellence in worship) is attained or manifested in worshipping Almighty Allah as though you see Him, and if you don't see Him, He definitely sees you." (Al-Bukhari # 50)

There is no place a person can hide from Almighty Allah. Allah says in the Noble Quran, translated as: "Allah knows what every female carries in her womb and what the wombs lose (prematurely) or exceed. And everything has its fixed measure with Him. He is the Sole Knower of the (realms of the) invisible and the visible, Infinitely Great, the Supremely Exalted. It is the same to Him whether any of you keeps secret his words or publicizes them, or whether one hides himself by night or walks around in the broad daylight." (Ar-Ra'd — the Thunder 13: 8-9)

You may hide yourself and evil acts from people, but you cannot hide them from Almighty Allah. The Majestic Allah tells us in the Noble Quran, translated as: "The treacherous people conceal (their evil) intentions and deeds from people, but they cannot conceal them from Allah, and He is with them (in His Knowledge) when they spend the night deliberating on an (evil) discourse with which He is not pleased."

Continued on Page 6

**GAZA:** Efforts towards a truce in the Zionist genocide appeared to rekindle on Saturday after a new proposal from Hamas, which also called for more aid into Gaza, where the first food shipment by sea reached shore. The Zionist entity said it would send a delegation to Qatar for another round of talks on a possible deal. It also advanced plans for a military operation in Rafah, where most of Gaza's population has sought refuge from more than five months of war and deprivation.

## Hotline to report citizenship fraud as 26 revoked

**KUWAIT:** The interior ministry has announced a dedicated hotline for citizens to report information about cases of dual citizenship and citizenship forgery. It urged citizens to report any information they have on 97287676, assuring that all calls will be handled in complete confidentiality.

The ministry clarified in a statement on Saturday that the decision to allocate the hotline is in line with the law that stipulates every person is required to report any crime they are aware of. The ministry is fully

## India to hold national election from April 19

**NEW DELHI:** India announced Saturday that national polls would begin on April 19, with Hindu-nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi strongly favored to win a third term in the world's biggest democracy. Nearly a billion people are eligible to cast ballots in what will be the largest exercise of the democratic franchise in human history, conducted over six weeks.

Many consider Modi's re-election a foregone conclusion, owing to both the premier's robust popularity a decade after taking office and a glaringly uneven playing field. His opponents have been hamstrung by infighting and what critics say are politically motivated legal investigations aimed at hobbling any challengers to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"We will take democracy to every corner of the country," chief election commissioner Rajiv Kumar said at a press conference in New Delhi announcing the voting dates. "It is our promise to deliver a national election in a manner that we... remain a beacon for democracy around the world." Voting will be staggered over seven stages between April

The US charity World Central Kitchen (WCK) on Saturday said its team had finished unloading almost 200 tons of food, the first shipment to arrive on a new maritime aid corridor from Cyprus. "All cargo was offloaded and is being readied for distribution in Gaza," WCK said in a statement. WCK's partner, the Open Arms vessel which towed the aid on a barge, had sailed from Larnaca port on Tuesday.

The United Nations has reported particular diffi-

cultured in accessing the besieged Gaza Strip's north for deliveries of food and other aid. Residents say they have resorted to eating wild plants and animal fodder, and some have stormed the few aid trucks that have made it through. "Doctors are reporting that they no longer see normal-sized babies," Dominic Allen, of the United Nations Population Fund, said after visiting Gaza's north.

Continued on Page 6

## Fitch affirms Kuwait rating, outlook stable

**KUWAIT:** The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said on Friday that Fitch Ratings affirmed Kuwait's outlook, which remains stable along with a rating of AA- which is "supported by its exceptionally strong fiscal and external balance sheets". A statement by the Central Bank said the "rating is constrained by Kuwait's heavy dependence on oil, its generous welfare system and large public sector that could be challenging to sustain in the long term, and a political context that hampers efforts to tackle consistent fiscal and economic rigidities and approve legislation to allow debt issuance and clarify government financing sources".

Kuwait's fiscal and external balance sheets remain among the strongest of Fitch-rated sovereigns. "We forecast Kuwait's sovereign net foreign asset position will average 529 percent of GDP in 2024-25, remaining one of the highest among Fitch-rated sovereigns and more than 10x the 'AA' median. The bulk of the assets are held in the Future Generations Fund managed by the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), which also manages the assets of the General Reserve Fund (GRF), the government's treasury account," the statement said. (See Page 8)



19 and June 1. Ballots from around the country will be counted all at once on June 4 and are usually announced on the same day.

Modi, 73, has already begun unofficial campaigning as he seeks a repeat of his landslide wins of 2014 and 2019, forged in part by his muscular appeals to India's majority faith. In January, Modi presided over the inauguration of a grand temple to the deity Ram in the once-sleepy town of Ayodhya, built on the grounds of a centuries-old mosque razed by Hindu zealots. Construction of the temple fulfilled a long-standing demand of Hindu activists and was widely celebrated across India with back-to-back television coverage and street parties. — AFP

**Ramadan Kareem**  
**Diwan Al-Naki**

The family Diwaniya  
Will be receiving guests  
Sunday, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2024  
Starting from 7 pm  
Mansouriya, Block 1,  
Jassim AlWazzan St,  
Across AlOthman Mosque



## Local

# Ramadan in the digital realm

## Technology revolutionizes the way people exchange greetings

By Ghadeer Ghloom

KUWAIT: The digitalization of Ramadan is set to shape the way people celebrate and connect during this holy month. Technology has revolutionized the way individuals exchange greetings and wishes during the month, by sending 'Ramadan Mubarak' texts or graphics, besides the traditional practices and events that once used to be celebrated in person, such as Graish, ghahgas and Girgian, which have now found a digital path. Television and online channels and platforms nowadays present these cultural celebrations through livestreams, virtual gatherings and interactive activities.

According to Reem Fares, technolo-

gy has given the holy month of Ramadan a modern look. "Many celebrations and events that are related to this month can now be enjoyed on TV, with some shows even broadcasting live late at night and enjoying suhoor with their guests. While some may feel that experiencing Ramadan events digitally is not as good and authentic as experiencing it physically and in person, I see that technology has actually enhanced my enjoyment of this month," she explained.

Fares also told Kuwait Times that in the past few years, she had been feeling uninspired during the month of Ramadan. "I simply used to fast, pray and accomplish the obligatory rituals that our religion specifies for this month. However, watch-

ing people celebrate this month, whether on TV or scrolling through social media, has refreshed my excitement for the month," she said.

"Technology has romanticized the holy month of Ramadan and taught me to enjoy and anticipate it. I also developed an interest in me to decorate and invite people to my house, buy new daraas and prayer rugs, decorate my house and change the whole atmosphere, inspired by what I see on TV. Another thing I really love are the ads and shows that make you feel the ambience of this time of the year. My kids, my husband and I gather after futoor to watch Ramadan TV shows, which have a different taste," Fares added.



## Al-Khaldiya Co-op now available only on Deliveroo app

KUWAIT: Deliveroo has announced an exclusive partnership with Al-Khaldiya Co-op, allowing customers to shop for their favorite grocery, food and consumer products from the co-op only on Deliveroo. "Al-Khaldiya Co-op team is thrilled to be partnering with Deliveroo," said Abdullah Al Jeeran, the Chairman at Al-Khaldiya Co-op. "Through this exclusive partnership, we aim to enhance our customers' shopping experience by providing swift and convenient home delivery of their preferred groceries and food and consumer essentials."

"We are excited to partner with Al-Khaldiya Co-op, a partnership that highlights our commitment to broadening our on-demand grocery offerings and to catering to evolving customer demands," said Hussain Al Kadi, the Head of Sales & Business Development at Deliveroo Kuwait. He highlighted the popularity of Al-Khaldiya Co-op for its diverse selection and emphasized Deliveroo's commitment to simplifying and enhancing digital grocery shopping experiences.

With a wide variety of grocery products available, Deliveroo is here to deliver the groceries customers need in a fraction of the time it would take to visit a grocery store. Since its launch, Deliveroo has set itself apart with its unbeatable customer service, a wide selection of global & local restaurants and groceries, and consistently reliable delivery. To shop at Al-Khaldiya Co-op through Deliveroo, customers can simply search for Al-Khaldiya Co-op under the "Grocery" tab in the app.



Chairman of the board of Directors of Khalidiya Association Abdullah Al Jeeran with Hussain Al Kadi, the Head of Sales & Business Development at Deliveroo Kuwait.

## Oil 'will remain' the main energy source for many decades

KUWAIT: Demand for crude oil will continue to rise, and crude will remain a main energy source for many decades, said the OAPEC chief. Oil demand will continue to increase and crude will maintain its status as a main energy resource for long decades; thus, cooperation and constructive dialogue are warranted among the stakeholders with respect to both demand and supply security, said Jamal Al-Loughani, Secretary General of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), in a statement to KUNA.

He underscored the need for research on clean energy, including renewable energy, the advanced and cleanest fossil fuel technology, and encouraging investment in the energy infrastructure and clean energy technology. Al-Loughani added, expressing his belief that such an approach would "lead us to attain global energy security in its two fields, demand and supply security." Al-Loughani added that the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to supply security, also noting that low emissions plans should be executed in tandem with the usage of various types of energy transformation technologies. — KUNA



Secretary General of (OAPEC) Jamal Al-Loughani



Kuwait Minister of Social Affairs, Family and Childhood Affairs Sheikh Feras Saud Al-Malik Al-Sabah with Vice President of the UAE's Gender Balance Council (GBC) Mona Al-Marri. — KUNA

## Kuwait, UAE, Saudi and Iran top officials discuss women empowerment

NEW YORK: Kuwait Minister of Social Affairs, Family, and Childhood Affairs Sheikh Feras Saud Al-Malik Al-Sabah said that Kuwait and the UAE are pioneers in women's empowerment on different levels. The remarks were made during the minister's meeting with Vice President of the UAE's Gender Balance Council (GBC) Mona Al-Marri in New York on the sidelines of the 68th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which kicked off last Monday and lasts until March 22. The minister hailed the strong Kuwaiti-Emirati relations, underscoring the need to enhance GCC cooperation in enabling and supporting women.

Also, Kuwait's Minister of Social Affairs engaged in discussions with Iran's Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, Ensiyeh Khaza-

li, regarding cooperation on family and women's affairs between the two countries. The Kuwaiti minister expressed his wishes to further enhance mutual cooperation aimed at benefiting women in Kuwait and Iran in the future. He emphasized the importance of ongoing efforts to empower women, noting Kuwaiti women's success across all sectors. Minister Khazali conveyed her vision to broaden cooperation towards institutional initiatives in the future.

### Boosting partnership

Kuwait Minister of Social Affairs also held talks with Secretary General of the Saudi Family Affairs Council Maimoonah Al-Khalil on ways to enhance bilateral cooperation to protect the family institution. This came during a meeting at the premises of Kuwait's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York. The officials engaged in discussions on mutual interests, particularly concerning women, such as achieving work and family balance for both genders and shoring up collaboration to improve the status of women in the Gulf region. — KUNA



Kuwait Minister of Social Affairs with Secretary General of the Saudi Family Affairs Council Maimoonah Al-Khalil.



Minister of Social Affairs, Family, and Childhood Affairs Sheikh Feras Al-Malik Al-Sabah with Iran's Vice-President for Women and Family Affairs Ensiyeh Khazali.

## Muslims welcome appointment of UN Islamophobia envoy

JEDDAH: The General Secretariat of the Muslim World League has applauded the adoption of a resolution to combat Islamophobia and the appointment of a special UN envoy concerned with the issue. The Secretary-General of the association, Dr. Mohammad Al-Eissa, said in a press statement that the world is witnessing a worrying escalation of hate speech, its slogans, and its methods, threatening world peace and the harmony of its national societies.

He called for a remedial response to this discourse through effective national and international legislation that criminalizes it and classifies it as a threat to national and international

stability. He affirmed that Islam is the religion of mercy, tolerance, justice, and peace, adding that Islam is not represented by those who deviate from its principles and values. Al-Eissa reiterated the support of the Muslim World League for combating extremist ideas and encouraging the values of peace, coexistence, and mutual respect between followers of religions and civilizations.

Meanwhile, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), United Nations Office in Geneva, and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights co-organized a conference on Friday to commemorate the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. In his message to the event, OIC Secretary-General Hissein Taha regretted that there are mounting racial attacks based on Islamophobia that are taking place right under the noses of many countries, citing the burning of copies of the Holy Quran and attacks on holy sites. However, the OIC chief commended the conference as a significant step towards fighting hatred against Islam and promoting peaceful co-

existence among religions, cultures, and peoples.

UN Human Rights Chief Volker Turk deplored systematic aggressions and indiscriminate arrests against Muslims and other minorities in many countries, saying that millions of people are still suffering from hate crimes. For her part, Chief of the United Nations Office in Geneva Tatiana Valovaya underlined that her organization commits itself to the principles of promoting tolerance and peace and respecting human rights and religions.

The commemoration came in the framework of the implementation of UNGA resolution 76/254 calling for strengthened international efforts to foster a global dialogue on the promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace based on respect for human rights and the diversity of religions and beliefs. The second edition of this International Day aims to encourage all stakeholders to pursue their efforts in combating religious intolerance, notably Islamophobia, by implementing the existing instruments. — KUNA

## Arab Parliament seeks end to Mideast conflict

CAIRO: Arab Parliament President Adel Al-Asoumi stressed on Saturday the necessity of ending conflicts and war in the Arab region, which claimed innocent lives and displaced others. This came in a statement issued by the Arab Parliament on the occasion of celebrating Arab Human Rights Day, which falls on March 16, which is also the day the Arab Charter on Human Rights came into force. What the Zionist occupation forces are committing in the Gaza Strip contradicts the most basic human rights rules advocated by the West, stated Al-Asoumi, describing the war in the Strip as "a genocidal war against a defenseless nation that history has never witnessed before."

He called for the necessity of preserving the rights of Arabs, which does not stop at political rights, commending Arab efforts made to develop and advance the human rights system by launching strategies and initiatives that contribute to strengthening the mechanisms of joint Arab action in the field of human rights. Al-Asoumi reiterated the Arab Par-

liament's support and solidarity with these human rights movements and its stand against any attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries under the pretext of human rights.

Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates has announced the arrival of the first ship carrying 200 tons of food and relief supplies to the Gaza Strip via the maritime corridor launched from Larnaca Port in Cyprus to Gaza in collaboration with World Central Kitchen (WCK) and the Republic of Cyprus. In a statement, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) underlined the UAE's endeavors to mobilize efforts within the "Amalthea" maritime corridor to successfully deliver relief aid to the northern Gaza Strip.

The Ministry commended the vital efforts of the leadership of Cyprus, the World Central Kitchen, and international partners to strengthen the humanitarian response to civilians in northern Gaza. Furthermore, the Ministry affirmed that the exacerbating humanitarian catastrophe in the Strip requires adopting a collective international approach to immediately mitigate harm to innocent civilians by ensuring urgent, safe, unhindered, and sustainable delivery of aid.

The Ministry reaffirmed that the maritime corridor is part of a sustained and dedicated effort to increase the flow of humanitarian aid and commercial commodities through all possible routes. As part of

its unwavering commitment to the brotherly Palestinian people and efforts to implement humanitarian initiatives aimed at providing relief, the UAE has delivered 21,000 tons of urgent supplies, including food, water, and medical items.

The country dispatched 213 flights, 8 airdrops, 946 trucks, and two ships. The UAE has also inaugurated a number of sustainable relief projects and provided medical care to civilians from Gaza by establishing a field hospital in the southern Gaza Strip, in addition to a floating hospital anchored in Egypt's Al-Arish Port.

Also, the US Central Command conducted the 11th airdrop of humanitarian assistance into Northern Gaza to provide essential relief to civilians affected by the ongoing conflict. A command statement aiding the joint operation included two C-130s and one C-17 Globemaster III US Air Force aircraft, and US Army soldiers specialized in the aerial delivery of humanitarian assistance supplies.

US C-17 and C-130s dropped over 35,700 ready-to-eat meals and 31,800 bottles of water into Northern Gaza, an area of great need, allowing for civilian access to critical aid, it noted. The DoD humanitarian airdrops contribute to ongoing US and partner-nation government efforts to alleviate human suffering. These airdrops are part of a sustained effort, and we continue to plan follow-on aerial deliveries, the statement concluded. — KUNA

# Surprising boost in work productivity for smokers

## Ramadan brings both challenges and opportunities for smokers

By Zainab Al-Mashoor

**KUWAIT:** As Ramadan, the month of peace and worship, unfolds, it brings both challenges and opportunities for smokers in the workplace. Traditionally, employees spend an average of 45 to 60 minutes or more per working day on smoking breaks, reducing productivity and hindering task completion. However, some smokers have found unexpected boosts in their productivity levels in Ramadan, sharing their insights with Kuwait Times.

Hassan, who has been smoking since his teenage years, initially anticipated a decrease in productivity during Ramadan due to the absence of smoking breaks. Surprisingly, he discovered that refraining from breaks actually enhanced his focus and productivity. Despite experiencing head-

aches during the fasting period in the first few days, Hassan remained committed to his tasks, recognizing Ramadan as an opportunity to consider quitting smoking altogether.

Conversely, Aymen admitted feeling drained during Ramadan and prefers minimizing interactions to avoid stress. He confessed that prolonged focus without smoking is challenging, illustrating the struggle some smokers face during fasting hours.

Amanullah shared a different perspective, acknowledging the initial difficulty of managing stress without cigarettes. However, he found that abstaining from smoking improved his patience and enabled him to handle workplace challenges more effectively. Amanullah added he can spend 4 straight hours of productivity but may experience occasional lapses in concentration after that.

Amanullah's commitment to stress management without smoking highlights the transformative potential of Ramadan.

Meanwhile, Mohammed chose to escape the chaos and opted to work from home during the month of Ramadan to manage his stress levels more efficiently. Recognizing his need for occasional cigarette breaks to de-stress, Mohammed prefers working at home, allowing him to focus on tasks without distractions. Lastly, Abdelrahman reflected on his decision to quit smoking months before Ramadan. Despite the initial challenges, he expressed gratitude for the significant improvements in his work performance since quitting. By eliminating the stress and headaches associated with smoking, Abdelrahman experienced a newfound sense of clarity and efficiency in his work.



## Increased salinity in Gulf waters 'a threat' to region

**KUWAIT:** The countries in the GCC region are situated in the most desert environments in the world, which makes resources and drinkable water crucial necessities. While there are 157 desalination plants in the region, including eight in Kuwait, the past two decades have seen an increase in salinity, which would pose a threat if levels exceeded 55 percent. The percentage posed a threat to countries in the region with the average drinkable water consumption exceeding 295 liters per person, which is a high global consumption rate, according to the GCC Statistical Center in one of its previous reports.

In addition, climate change is another factor that must push countries in the region to address the situation to safeguard this vital resource. In this regard, KUNA spoke to the vice dean for scientific, research, and higher education affairs at Kuwait University's (KU) college of life sciences, Dr. Badr Al-Enezi, who said that there were several factors leading to the increase in salinity in regional waters. The academic revealed that the traditional desalination process in and of itself caused the rise in salinity, noting that it was important to find alternatives to older technologies due to the current process producing more salt and pollutants.

He added that the water sanitation system was also a culprit, pointing out that byproducts of such stations on the coast increased the chances for algae and seaweed growth, which boosted oxygen levels in seawater. On the salinity level on the coastline of Kuwait, which stretched to around 200 kilometers, he said that it ranged around 45 to 50 percent but warned of approaching 60, which would be a hazardous percentage.

Al-Enezi indicated that he worked with several entities in Kuwait and abroad, including the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS), and through research he managed to produce three solution projects approved by the Environment Public Authority (EPA). The projects included two new desalination technologies aimed at decreasing salinity and protecting the environment at the same time. — KUNA

## Al-Zour's refining capacity reaches 530,000 bpd

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Integrated Petroleum Industries Company (KIPIC) announced the successful and safe completion of periodic maintenance operations for a group of manufacturing units at Al-Zour Refinery without any incident. The refining capacity of heavy oil has been raised to the maximum capacity to reach 530,000 barrels per day. This includes mixture of heavy oil and Kuwaiti export crude.

"This achievement came as a result of close cooperation between KIPIC and the global marketing sector in Kuwait Petroleum Corporation in consonance with the company's commitment to achieving the strategy of the KPC," KIPIC said in a release, noting that this is not just limited to reaching the maximum refining capacity but it demonstrates the refinery to overcome the challenges it faced in refining heavy oil. KIPIC praised the efforts of the team working in the company, which contributed significantly to this achievement, an accomplishment that is not limited to the company, its facilities and employees, but extends to the State of Kuwait as well.

"This strengthens its position in the oil industries at the global level and enhances the ability of Kuwait and the KPC to compete effectively in the global market and meet the growing demand for oil products around the world," KIPIC said. The company said it is within the framework of ensuring the continuation of the refinery's performance according to the highest operational standards and after continuing to operate at the maximum capacity of heavy oil. KIPIC will coordinate with the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation regarding the conversion of Kuwaiti export crude oil with the maximum refining capacity of this oil which is 615,000 barrels per day, starting from the beginning of next week.

## Officers promoted to Major General

**KUWAIT:** Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Acting Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah conferred on Saturday the rank of Major General upon several army officers under the direction of His Highness the Amir, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The investiture began with the reading of a relevant Amiri decree, followed by Sheikh Fahad bestowing new military ranks upon the officers, conveying the greetings and congratulations of His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, the Defense Ministry said in a press statement.

The statement conveyed Sheikh Fahad's congratulations, expressed in his speech to the military commanders, for earning the cherished Amiri trust and recognizing their sincere and diligent efforts in various assigned roles. Following the ceremony, Sheikh Fahad urged the promoted officers to consistently earn and uphold the trust of the political leadership, keeping in mind the fear of Allah Almighty, prioritizing the country's interests, and fulfilling their responsibilities with seriousness and determination.

He urged them to work diligently to enhance the Kuwait Army's capabilities, raise efficiency through training, support excellence, ensure fairness, hold the negligent accountable, maintain military discipline, and overcome obstacles for the development

## Kuwait backs efforts to counter narcotics

**VIENNA:** Kuwait has reiterated that international community efforts to combat drugs should be directed toward the implementation of all international drug policy commitments. This came in Kuwait's speech delivered Friday by Kuwait's Permanent Representative to international organizations in Vienna, Ambassador Talal Al-Fassam, before the high-level meetings of the 67th session of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs. He called for enhancing legislation and national strategies aimed at eradicating narcotics abuse. He affirmed Kuwait's support for the ministerial document and a plan of action approved in this meeting.

Al-Fassam stressed the need for full abidance by the gist of the three international agreements on combating drugs. He emphasized that Kuwait is committed to the political announcement, the 2009 plan, the 2014 ministerial statement, and the final document of the UN General Assembly extraordinary session in 2016. All these pacts constitute tools that ensure addressing the problem of narcotics and their negative impacts, he said. Kuwait pays much attention to the principles of the UN Charter and does not interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries, he said, taking into account the varied religious, social, legal, and judicial systems of member states as an addition to the principles of human rights.

In 2022, Kuwait formed a high committee for



**KUWAIT:** Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Acting Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah conferred the rank of Major General upon several army officers. — KUNA photos



of various military sectors within the armed forces.

The promoted officers expressed their sincere gratitude to His Highness the Amir for the trust placed in them, emphasizing their commitment to Kuwait's security, stability, and territorial integrity, and pledging allegiance and loyalty to their country,

leadership, and people. Chief of the General Staff of the Kuwait Army, Lieutenant General Pilot Bandar Al-Muzain, and Undersecretary of the Defense Ministry Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Meshal Al-Sabah, along with several senior army commanders, attended the ceremony. — KUNA

combating drugs and established facilities for treating and rehabilitating addicts, he stated. The committee aims to educate people about the risks of drugs and their impacts and combat them, he noted. Furthermore, Al-Fassam said his country is keen on offering healthcare to addicts and a comprehensive treatment plan to people who want to stop taking drugs and reintegrate into society. Kuwait believes in the importance of awareness and prevention from childhood through the family and school, as he made clear.

Based on this approach, Kuwait was keen to organize activities at schools and universities to raise awareness about the risks of narcotics, he revealed. Al-Fassam also highlighted the brutal Zionist aggression on the brotherly Palestinian people, which killed and wounded thousands of Palestinians. He referred to the fact that Zionist aggression has been destroying infrastructure, healthcare centers, and hospitals in Palestine.

He stressed that Palestinian people have been facing tough conditions due to the long-standing barbaric Zionist occupation. Palestinians have been suffering from a lack of medicines, food, and health equipment in flagrant violation of the UN Charter, human rights, and international humanitarian law, Al-Fassam said. He called on the international community to honor its pledges towards the brotherly Palestinian people, calling for a ceasefire and opening humanitarian corridors to ensure the delivery of food and medical equipment into the Gaza Strip. — KUNA



**Kuwait's Permanent Representative to international organizations in Vienna Ambassador Talal Al-Fassam.**

## Embassy supports students' initiatives



**'Save your sight' - an eye protection initiative launched by a group of Kuwaiti medical students at the Arabian Gulf University.**

**MANAMA:** Kuwaiti Ambassador to Bahrain Sheikh Thamer Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah said Friday that the Kuwaiti embassy is keen on backing Kuwaiti students' activities and initiatives in Bahrain as reflecting the country's civilized image. The ambassador made the remark to KUNA while commenting on an eye



**Kuwait Ambassador in Manama takes a group photo with a group of Kuwaiti medical students at the Arabian Gulf University in Bahrain. — KUNA photos**

protection initiative launched by a group of Kuwaiti medical students at the Arabian Gulf University in Bahrain, under the patronage of the Kuwaiti Cultural Office in Manama.

Sheikh Thamer said that the medical campaign reflects high-level thinking, human culture, and the

Kuwaiti people's benevolence and altruism. He also spoke highly of the Kuwaiti medical students' initiative and eagerness to invest their time in voluntary work, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, which, he said, would develop their skills and promote their values of dedication and earnest work. — KUNA

## Ramadan health tips



## Get adequate sleep

Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep per night to support overall health and well-being. Sleep is essential for rest and recovery, helping your body recharge and repair tissues, regulate hormones, and support cognitive function.

## Stay active

Engage in light physical activity like walking or stretching to promote circulation and boost energy levels. Gentle exercise helps improve mood, reduce stress, and prevent muscle stiffness during the fasting period.

## Limit salt intake

Reduce consumption of salty foods to prevent thirst and excessive fluid retention. High-sodium foods can lead to dehydration and bloating, especially when combined with limited fluid intake during fasting hours.

## Break your fast mindfully

Start with dates and water, followed by a balanced meal to replenish energy stores. Breaking your fast gradually with hydrating foods and nutrient-rich snacks helps prevent digestive discomfort and provides a steady source of energy.

## Choose whole foods

Prioritize whole, unprocessed foods over packaged or processed snacks for optimal nutrition. Whole foods are rich in essential nutrients and free from added sugars, unhealthy fats, and preservatives, supporting overall health and well-being.

## Consult a professional

If you have specific dietary concerns or health conditions, seek guidance from a healthcare provider or registered dietitian for personalized advice. Healthcare professionals can help you create a healthy eating plan tailored to your individual needs and ensure you're getting the nutrients your body needs during Ramadan.

## Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: Photo shows policemen in their traditional uniform on a street in Kuwait in the 1960s. – Photo from KOC archive, provided by Mahmoud Zakaria, heritage researcher at the Ministry of Information.

# Burgan Bank collaborates with Talabat in Ramadan

## Bank offers cardholders exclusive discounts

KUWAIT: In celebration of Ramadan, Burgan Bank announced its collaboration with Talabat during the holy month, whereby all customers shopping with a Burgan credit or pre-paid card can enjoy up to a 50 percent discount on all orders placed via the Talabat app. This collaboration comes as part of the Bank's unwavering efforts to add ease and convenience to its cardholders' banking experience, ensuring that every purchase is seamless and rewarding.

Commenting on the collaboration, Nasser Al-Qaisi, General Manager – Retail Banking at Burgan Bank, said: "Ramadan is a month of warmth, sharing, and gathering. From families and friends breaking fast together to gathering for prayer or sharing a hearty suhoor, food remains central to the unique Ramadan experience that we

all look forward to every year. That's why it was vital to offer our valued customers a seamless and rewarding shopping experience with every Talabat order, ensuring that their Burgan cards remain a top-of-wallet choice with every purchase."

The month-long campaign is available to all Burgan Bank customers using any of the Bank's credit or pre-paid cards on orders of a minimum value of KD 10, with a maximum discount value of KD 5. On its mission to be the bank of choice for varied customers across the market, Burgan Bank continues to elevate its banking experience through innovative solutions and yearlong collaborations with the best product and service providers in Kuwait, ensuring that Burgan customers' growing aspirations and diverse needs are efficiently met and exceeded.



## Talabat the 'main sponsor' of GCC Traffic Week 2024

KUWAIT: As part of its ongoing and strategic collaboration with the Kuwait Ministry of Interior (MOI), "Talabat", a trailblazer in technology and innovation, recently concluded its main sponsorship of the season's edition of GCC Traffic Week – Kuwait. Seamlessly aligning both public and private sector visions, this partnership aims to foster a safer and more sustainable environment for drivers in Kuwait and cultivate a more traffic-conscious society.

Held last week, the 2024 Gulf Traffic Week, was inaugurated to raise awareness about traffic and transport safety, with Talabat supporting as the main sponsor of the event. The tech and delivery pioneer continues to collaborate closely with the MOI's General Department of Traffic (GDT) to bring something new and innovative with each upcoming edition of Traffic Week in Kuwait.

Talabat's active participation in MOI's traffic awareness initiatives sets a commendable example of a private and public sector collaboration, significantly contributing to the State's overarching development plans outlined in the ambitious "New Kuwait 2035" vision. This is evident through Talabat's sponsorship of Traffic Week, supporting various activities aimed at enhancing traffic awareness and safety.

A standout feature of Talabat's latest community engagement in Traffic Week was the interactive booth launched in collaboration with MOI. The representative team embarked on an educational tour across the country, visiting one key site a day for the entire duration of the Traffic Week, with venues including the Avenues Mall, Al-Khairan Mall, Al-Razi Hospital, among others.

Inspired by the leading digital innovator and pioneer in facilitating customer reach, Talabat - the interactive booth drew significant attendance from visitors looking to expand their knowledge on traffic, transport, and road safety. With an innovative approach to edutainment, supported by attractive visual aids and interactive models, the booth succeeded in driving higher engagement rates throughout the day, and provided valuable and comprehensive information on traffic and road safety, making it a focal point of the Gulf Traffic Week 2024.

In his statement, Vice President, and Managing Director of Talabat Kuwait, Badder Alghanim, lauded the initiative, reaffirming Talabat's fruitful and long-lasting partnership with MOI, by saying: "With our main operations heavily reliant and widely observed on the local roads network, we as quality deliverers actively sought this partnership with MOI, adopting 'road safety' as one of the fundamental pillars of our multifaceted social responsibility program, with traffic awareness as a primary focus".

Within this vein, Alghanim reiterated Talabat's unwavering commitment to fostering a widespread culture of



safe driving and traffic morality within the local community, by leading and/or supporting awareness initiatives. "While, internally, we continue to reinforce our role in improving traffic efficiency, by making sure our delivery riders demonstrate the highest standards of road safety performance", he added.

To further explain, Alghanim pointed to Talabat's socially responsible and ethical approach to managing delivery operations, as it strives to optimize rider and road safety, alongside speed and quality delivery. The delivery giant remains steadfast in prioritizing commitments to customers and delivery partners, just as equally to its riders and community, observing best corporate sustainability practices in the process.

"In recognition of their integral role in driving operational success, as company representatives on the road and during customer interactions, Talabat remains keen on empowering its delivery riders, personally, physically and professionally", said Alghanim. Efforts to ensure a continued state of well-being in a safe work/on-road environment for drivers include Talabat's ongoing rider rest stops initiative - dedicating fully equipped and stocked stations along key roads and sites, for them to unwind, meet, entertain, and recharge between delivery trips, or keep safe during harsh weather conditions.

Improving their overall performance as safe and traffic-conscious drivers, however, mandates undergoing an intensive induction program by Talabat, involving a series of workshops, lectures, and field training - organized in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior's General Traffic Department. It's worth mentioning hereby that Talabat plans to coincide the launch of its next round of driver induction training with World Traffic Week.

Concluding his remarks, Alghanim expressed Talabat's appreciation for making this year's edition of Traffic Week a success, with special thanks dedicated to all MOI team for an exceptional performance. Underscoring its commitment to sustainable development and social responsibility, it serves to note how Talabat's leading role in Gulf Traffic Week contributes to the entire road and transportation system in Kuwait.



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Thousands in Syria's northwest mark 13 years since uprising

## Smuggled guns from the US behind Haiti violence

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JERUSALEM: A woman raises her hands in prayer on the first Friday of the holy month of Ramadan in front of the Dome of the Rock at the compound of the Al-Aqsa mosque on March 15, 2024. — AFP photos



BETHLEHEM: A member of the Zionist security forces checks the identity cards and permits of Palestinians trying to go through a checkpoint in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank to reach Jerusalem for the Friday prayers.

# 'Difficult' Friday prayers at Al-Aqsa

'They decide who they let in, who they don't let in, and you don't know why'

JERUSALEM: Under a heavy police presence, tens of thousands of Muslims attended the first Friday prayers of Ramadan in east Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound, a gathering weighed down by the war in Gaza.

Old men leaning on canes, veiled women and smartly dressed children flowed through the gates of the Zionist-annexed Old City for the midday prayer, which unfolded peacefully, though some younger men were turned away by police conducting security checks. "It's random. They decide who they let in, who they don't let in, and you don't know why," said Amjad Ghalib, a 44-year-old carpenter from the Mount of Olives who described relief at being granted access. "I have to be honest, we are afraid," he said, a prayer mat resting on his shoulder. "It's the first year I see so many forces (police) and their eyes, their look ... Two years ago I could argue with them, but now ... they're giving us no chance."

The Al-Aqsa mosque compound is Islam's third holiest site and Judaism's most sacred, known to Jews as the Temple Mount. The site has been a flashpoint for violence

during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan in past years, and thousands of police officers were deployed on Friday, some of them heavily armed.

"There are so many soldiers. Wherever you go, you find them. They make it difficult," said Ezzat Khouis, a 75-year-old tour guide, referring to the police. "Why do they do this? ... This is not good for us, not good for the future, for the peace and for the people to live together."

### 'Sad all day'

Since the Gaza war, violence in the occupied West Bank has flared to levels unseen in nearly two decades, according to the health ministry in Ramallah. Zionist troops and settlers have killed at least 430 Palestinians in the West Bank since the Gaza war began, the ministry says.

For security reasons, Palestinians trying to access Al-Aqsa from the West Bank were expected to face some restrictions this year, police said in a statement earlier this week. Only men aged 55 and over and women older than 50 would be allowed

to enter the mosque compound from the territory, government spokesperson Ofir Gendelman said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office has said that, despite the restrictions, worshippers would be allowed to enter the mosque "in similar numbers" to past years. But those assurances meant little to some young men who were denied entry to the Old City on Friday.

"It's unfair. When they refuse to let in young boys, it hurts me very, very much," says Fida Absiya, who stood at the entrance to the Old City collecting money for orphans and the less fortunate. "Since the first day of (the war) we knew that we would have very difficult days," a man who declined to give his name told AFP.

Other West Bank worshippers were unable to reach Jerusalem, including Umm al-Abd who attempted to cross at the Qalandia checkpoint to its north. "In the past, I used to go (to Al-Aqsa) every Friday and I never missed (the prayers)," the 50-year-old woman said. "Today they did not allow me to enter. I am sad. I will be sad all day." — AFP



JERUSALEM: Zionist forces detain a Palestinian man near the Damascus Gate as he attempts to enter the Old City to attend the first Friday prayers of Ramadan at the Al-Aqsa mosque.



RAFAH: A displaced Palestinian woman cuddling her baby sits on a stone in front of her tent at a camp in Rafah on March 11, 2024. — AFP

## No more 'normal sized babies' in Gaza: UN official

UNITED NATIONS: The humanitarian situation in Gaza is a "nightmare" for mothers and babies, with doctors reporting small and sickly newborns, stillbirths and women forced to undergo C-sections without adequate anesthesia, a UN official said Friday.

"I'm personally leaving Gaza this week terrified for the one million women and girls of Gaza ... and most especially for the 180 women who are giving birth every single day," Dominic Allen, UN Population Fund (UNFPA) representative for the state of Palestine, said in a video news conference from Jerusalem.

"Doctors are reporting that they no longer see normal-sized babies," Allen said after visiting hospitals still providing maternity services in the north of Gaza, where need is especially great. "What they do see though, tragically, is more stillborn births ... and more neonatal deaths, caused in part by malnutrition, dehydration and complications."

The numbers of complicated deliveries are roughly twice what they were before the war with

the Zionist entity began — with mothers stressed, fearful, underfed and exhausted — and caregivers often lacking necessary supplies.

"We have had reports of insufficient anesthetic being available" for Caesarean sections, "which again is unthinkable." "Those mothers should be wrapping their arms around their children," he said. "Those children should not be wrapped in a body bag."

The Zionist entity has defended its policies as it pursues its alleged goal of destroying Hamas, saying the UN should send more aid to the war-ravaged territory, pushing back on reports by the UN and NGOs that cumbersome Zionist inspections are blocking food and other essentials.

Allen said Zionist authorities had refused to allow in some UNFPA supply shipments, such as kits for midwives, or had removed supplies like flashlights and solar panels. "It's a nightmare which is much more than a humanitarian crisis," he said. "It is a crisis of humanity ... beyond catastrophic."

What he saw while driving through Gaza, he said, "really broke my heart." Everyone he passed or spoke to, Allen said, "was gaunt, emaciated, hungry" and exhausted from the daily struggle to survive.

At one military checkpoint, he said, he saw a boy who appeared to be about five years old walking with his hands held high, clearly frightened, as his slightly older sister followed behind, holding a white flag. — AFP

## Advocates denounce 'systemic abuse' in Zionist prisons

GENEVA: In the shadow of the war raging in Gaza, record numbers of Palestinian detainees are filling Zionist prisons, where they face "systemic abuse" and torture, rights advocates warn, calling for international action.

Members of several Zionist NGOs travelled to Geneva this week to raise concerns before the United Nations about a major "crisis" inside the country's prisons. "We are extremely, extremely concerned," said Tal Steiner. "What we're looking at is a crisis," she told AFP.

She said nine people had allegedly died behind bars since October 7, according to Zionist sources. And "there are almost 10,000 Palestinians in (Zionist) custody right now ... a 200-percent increase from any normal year". While the UN and others have long raised concerns about conditions for Palestinian detainees in Zionist prisons, Steiner said the situation had worsened dramatically since war erupted in Gaza.

The Zionist entity's assault on Gaza has killed more than 31,500 people, mainly women and children, according to the health ministry in the territory. The entity claims it's in response to an attack staged by Hamas on October 7, which resulted in about 1,160 deaths inside the entity, mostly civilians, according to an AFP count based on official figures. Hamas fighters also seized about 250 Zionist and foreign hostages. The Zionist entity believes about 130 of them remain in Gaza, including 32 believed to have died.

### 'Widespread and systemic'

"During the military onslaught on Gaza, there's been a crisis within (Zionist) detention facilities and prisons that has been really left ignored," said Miriam Azem of the Adalah legal center. The center is dedicated to protecting the rights of the Zionist entity's Palestinian citizens.

Her organization had managed to document "19 clear cases" of torture within the Zionist prison system just since October 7, including sexual violence, she told AFP. "We're seeing really widespread and systemic use of many, many tools in order to inflict torture and ill-treatment on Palestinians."

This crisis, she said, "requires the immediate intervention of the international community". Steiner agreed, warning that this was "an ongoing crisis. 'People are (suffering) in detention right now ... An urgent intervention is very much needed.'"

The Zionist Prison Service told AFP: "All prisoners are detained according to the law." The service was "not aware of the claims", against it, a spokesperson said, but stressed that any complaints filed by detainees "will be fully examined and addressed by official authorities". The NGOs also voiced alarm at reported conditions inside the military camps holding those detained inside Gaza. At least 27 Palestinians have reportedly died in such camps since October, Steiner said, adding that this was "unprecedented and extremely severe".

There was no access to the camps, nor had her organization, or foreign journalists, been permitted to enter Gaza to speak with those released, she said. But reports relying on testimony from former camp inmates suggest that detainees are often held "in open-air cages", where "they are handcuffed and blindfolded 24 hours a day". Prisoners reportedly had to sleep on the floor of the cages in the cold, were beaten, and deprived of medical care, she added.

### Unlawful combatants

The Zionist army said detainees are questioned in the facilities operating since the October 7 attack and those "found to be unrelated to terrorist activity are released back to the Gaza Strip".

Some of the detainees who died had injuries or complex medical conditions, it added, saying each death was investigated by the Military Advocate General's Corps. "At the end of the investigations, their findings will be forwarded to the Military Prosecution's Office," the army said.

While there are no official numbers, NGOs estimate that around 1,000 people are currently detained in the camps. Another 600 people from Gaza arrested on Zionist soil on October 7 are being held in the Zionist prison system.

Steiner pointed out that all those detained in Gaza, including children and reportedly even an 82-year-old woman, were being held under the Zionist entity's unlawful combatants law. That law denies protections typically granted to detainees and prisoners of war. "The law in its current form is unconstitutional," she said.

Steiner and Azem, both Zionist nationals, said defending Palestinians' rights in the Zionist entity had become increasingly difficult since October 7, and that they had faced threats and verbal abuse. "It's not an easy place to be," Steiner said.

The trauma caused by Hamas's attack and the frantic concern over the fate of the hostages is understandable, she said, but "that does not give you an excuse to torture". "This is not just the question of us versus them. This is us versus us," Steiner said. "If (the Zionist entity) can prove that it holds even the worst of its enemies in humane conditions, that will be a triumph." — AFP

## International

# Smuggled guns from the US behind Haiti violence

## Laws restricting legal ownership not enough in face of gangs, US smugglers

WASHINGTON: Weeks before the latest violence broke out in Haiti, the self-described "king" of a Haitian gang was in a US court pleading guilty to smuggling AK47s and a .50 caliber rifle to the Caribbean nation. "The Justice Department will aggressively pursue every tool at its disposal to hold accountable those who would smuggle US-origin weapons and other controlled goods for the benefit of malicious actors," prosecutors said at the time.

But as conflict rages between Haiti's gangs and police, the guilty plea of Joly Germaine, 31, in late January for smuggling some two dozen weapons has proved hardly enough to make a dent in the country's violence. Haiti has long been awash with guns smuggled in illegally from abroad, with the US likely a significant point of origin, according to experts. The total number is hard to pin down, though authorities have noted that only a fraction of the estimated hundreds of thousands of arms in the country are legally owned. "The principal source of firearms and munitions in Haiti is in the US, and in particular, Florida," according to a 2023 UN Office on Drugs and Crime report.

Weapons purchased legally in states with loose gun laws are often "hidden inside consumer products, electronic equipment, garment linings, frozen food items or even the hulls of freighters," it added. Haiti has no firearms or ammunition manufacturing capabilities and has laws restricting legal ownership.

Yet those laws, as well as UN restrictions on importing arms into Haiti, have proved insufficient in the face of US smugglers and Haitian gangs targeting the ports. "Would the gangs in Haiti acquire them from somewhere else if weapons in the US were not available? Probably," Matt Schroeder, of the research group Small Arms Survey, told AFP. "Would it be as easy? Probably not."

### Demand for rifles

Gang leader Jimmy "Barbecue" Cherizier, whose attacks have helped force Prime Minister Ariel Henry to promise to step down, has been seen alongside associates with weapons that appear to be Galil rifles and M16- or AR-pattern rifles, according to experts who viewed AFP photos of Cherizier.

It's unclear if Cherizier, a former police officer, got them from illegal or legal channels, though the UN report noted that "higher-powered rifles such as AK47s, AR15s and Galils are typically in higher demand from gangs." "Seizure rates indicate that the percentage of illicit weapons in circulation (in Haiti) that are rifles are much higher than in the rest of the Caribbean," Schroeder told AFP.

"And that is in part reflective of the demand and the desired capacity of the illicit end-users," he said, while cautioning that hard data — both on the number of guns and their countries of origin — remains hard to pin down because of the weapons' illegal nature.



PORT-AU-PRINCE: Haitian police officers deploy in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on March 9, 2024. — AFP

Germaine's shipment of weapons was actually one of the larger smuggling attempts — highlighting how difficult cracking down on smugglers is when they're often simply

individuals making a quick buck by slipping a single or a few guns being into otherwise normal cargo shipments, Schroeder said. As of Friday morning, residents in Port-au-

Prince had put up barricades in the streets — in part to protest the armed gangs that control 80 percent of the capital, but also for their own protection. — AFP

## Pence declines to endorse Trump for president

WASHINGTON: Former US vice president Mike Pence said Friday he would not be backing Donald Trump as his old boss runs for a second term in the White House. "It should come as no surprise that I will not be endorsing Donald Trump this year," Pence said in an interview with Fox News. US media called the announcement a "bombshell" and "startling," although in reality deep divisions have driven the two men apart since leaving office, and an endorsement would have been a surprise.

The pair became estranged after Trump tried to pressure Pence to help him overturn his 2020 election defeat to Joe Biden, repeatedly attacking him on social media when he wouldn't go along with the scheme.

After various attempts by Trump and his allies to subvert the election results failed, the then-president directed a mob of his supporters to march on the Capitol, where they ransacked the building as some chanted "Hang Mike Pence!"

Pence told Fox News that Trump was "pursuing and articulating an agenda that is at odds with the conservative agenda that we governed on during our four years." The 64-year-old's comments come days after Trump secured enough delegates to clinch the Republican nomination to challenge Biden in November.

Pence was one of Trump's early rivals in the primary



WASHINGTON: Former US Vice President Mike Pence listens as former US President Donald Trump speaks in this file photo. — AFP

contest ahead of the 2024 election, although he quit the race last October after failing to poll in double figures.

Pence did not offer an alternative endorsement — there are several third-party candidates running — and said he would never vote for Biden, who secured the Democratic nomination this week.

Pence gave Trump years of unwaveringly loyal service before the insurrection in Washington. But he called the president's actions on January 6, 2021, "reckless" and said they "endangered me and my family."

Trump had demanded Pence, a former governor of Indiana, to derail the congressional certification of Biden's electoral victory. Pence refused, gaining the enmity of Trump's diehard followers and becoming persona non grata within the hard right "Make America Great Again" movement. — AFP

## New York judge delays Trump's hush money trial

NEW YORK: The New York judge presiding over Donald Trump's trial for allegedly covering up hush money payments linked to extramarital affairs ordered a delay Friday in proceedings that had been scheduled to get underway on March 25. "Trial on this matter is adjourned for 30 days from the date of this letter on consent of the People," Judge Juan Merchan said in a court filing that will push the trial to at least mid-April.

The exact date will be determined at a hearing on March 25 which will also address complaints by the defense team about the disclosure of evidence ahead of trial, the letter said. Prosecutors preparing to try Trump, the first former US president to face criminal prosecution, said Thursday they would accept a delay of up to 30 days after both sides received a deluge of case documents.

Trump, seeking a comeback as the Republican candidate in this year's election, is accused of covering up hush money payments related to his successful 2016 bid for the White House.

"An immediate adjournment is appropriate," Trump's legal team wrote on Thursday in a letter to the judge. But it argued "30 days is not sufficient

given the volume of recently produced materials and the nature of the ongoing disputes."

Prosecutors say Trump illegally covered up reimbursements to his longtime aide Michael Cohen to reimburse him for payments made to bury stories revealing Trump's alleged extramarital sexual relations with porn star Stormy Daniels and a Playboy model. He denies the charges.

A New York grand jury indicted Trump in March 2023 over the payments made to Daniels, whose real name is Stephanie Clifford. A Trump campaign statement said the former president and his attorneys "have been consistent and steadfast that this case has no basis in law or fact, and should be dismissed." "We will continue to fight to end this hoax," it said.

In a historic first, Trump is facing four criminal cases as he campaigns to retake the White House, with his legal teams working to delay any trial starts until after the November 5 vote. In one of them, in which Trump faces trial in Georgia for allegedly trying to overturn the 2020 election results, the judge ruled Friday against his legal team's efforts to disqualify the top prosecutor over claims of an improper relationship.

Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee said District Attorney Fani Willis could remain on the high-profile case, as long as her lead prosecutor, Nathan Wade, stepped aside. Trump, who has seized on his legal woes to portray himself to his right-wing supporters as persecuted by the Democrats, has claimed the charges are "just a way of hurting me in the election." — AFP

## Gazans keep the faith in Ramadan...

### Continued from Page 1

With the situation increasingly dire, donors have turned to the air and sea. Multiple nations have begun daily aid airdrops over Gaza. Germany's air force said on Saturday it successfully made its first delivery over north Gaza. The new maritime corridor is to be complemented by a temporary pier which United States troops are on their way to build.

But air and sea missions are no alternative to land deliveries, UN officials and aid groups say. Humanitarians have cited Zionist restrictions as among the obstacles they face. The health ministry in Gaza said at least 63 people had been killed over the previous 24 hours.

Earlier Saturday, ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qudra reported 36 deaths from a strike on a house sheltering displaced people in Nuseirat, central Gaza. AFPTV images showed a building blown apart. Yusef Tabatibi, lifting concrete blocks among the rubble, said residents were trying to recover the dead with only their bare hands. "What should we do? God help us," he said. Witnesses reported air strikes and fighting in the southern Gaza Strip's main city Khan Yunis as well as areas of the north.

Senior figures from Hamas and Yemen's Houthi rebels held a rare meeting to discuss coordinating their actions against the Zionist entity, Palestinian factional sources told AFP on Friday. According to sources from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, leaders from the two Palestinian Islamist groups, as well as the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, held an "important meeting" with Houthi representatives last week. The groups discussed "mechanisms to coordinate their actions of resistance" for the "next stage" of the war in Gaza, the sources said without identifying where the meeting took place.

In negotiations aimed at securing a truce and hostage deal, Hamas has put forward a new proposal for a six-week ceasefire and the exchange of about 42 Zionist captives for Palestinian prisoners held by the Zionist entity, an official from the Islamist group told AFP. The Zionist entity has carried out relentless bombardment and a ground invasion that has killed at least 31,553 people in Gaza, most of them women and children,

according to the health ministry. Until Friday Hamas had insisted no further captives would be exchanged without a permanent ceasefire and Zionist withdrawal from Gaza. Now the fighters are saying that, during a six-week truce, Zionist forces would need to pull out of "all cities and populated areas" in Gaza, according to the Hamas official. The Hamas proposal also calls for ramped up humanitarian aid, the official added.

The Zionist entity has so far rejected withdrawing troops from Gaza, saying such a move would amount to victory for Hamas. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said the Zionist entity would send a delegation to Qatar for another round of talks on securing the captives' release. The Zionist entity did not attend earlier negotiations in Cairo which failed to secure a truce for the fasting month of Ramadan which began last Monday.

Washington's Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday acknowledged "a counterproposal" from Hamas and said, "we're working intensively with (the Zionist entity), with Qatar, with Egypt, to bridge the remaining gaps and to try to reach an agreement." The United States, which provides the Zionist entity with billions of dollars in military assistance, has grown increasingly critical of Netanyahu over his handling of the war but has not supported an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, who favors such a measure, said after meeting US President Joe Biden in Washington that "none of us like to see American weapons being used in the way they are" which, he said, "is not self-defense". Biden praised unusually critical comments by US Senate leader Chuck Schumer, who had described Netanyahu as one of several "major obstacles" to peace. "I think he expressed serious concern shared not only by him, but by many Americans," Biden said.

Netanyahu's office said on Friday he had approved the military's plan for an operation against Hamas in Rafah, where around 1.5 million people are sheltered, many in rough tents near the Egyptian border. There were no details or a timeline for the long-threatened operation which Washington says it could not support without a "credible, achievable, executable plan" to shelter the civilians there.

World Central Kitchen founder Jose Andres said the first seaborne aid to reach Gaza is the equivalent of 12 trucks but "we could bring thousands of tons a week". Prior to the war a daily average of around 500 trucks entered Gaza, the UN has said, but the current number is far below that. — AFP

## Be mindful of Allah...

### Continued from Page 1

And ever is Allah All-Encompassing of what they do." (An-Nisa'a — Women 4: 108)

A believer who is mindful of Almighty Allah will always feel shy to let any of his body parts commit a sin whether in private or public because he knows Allah is watching over him. Abdullah bin Masoud (ra) narrated that Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said, "Be sincerely shy to disobey Allah!" We (the narrator relates) said, "We are always ashamed to disobey Allah — and all praises are due to Allah." He said, "Not that, but being bashful from Allah is to protect the head and what it contains from sins, and to protect the stomach and the internal organs from sins. Moreover, you should remember death and decaying in the grave. And whoever focuses on the Hereafter, abandons the ornaments of this world." (Al-Albani rated it as authentic in Sahih At-Tirmidhi # 2, 458)

A young milkmaid was married to the son of Umar bin Al-Khattab's (RA) because she was mindful of Almighty Allah. During Umar's caliphate, he used to patrol the streets of Madinah during the night. It was in fact his routine to do so in order to make sure that everyone was safe. Zaid bin Aslam narrated from his father, who narrated from his grandfather that on one such night, he was patrolling the streets with his servant. Becoming tired after a while, both of them stopped to rest at a house, leaning against its wall. They could clearly hear the voice of an old woman from inside the house as she was ordering her daughter to adulterate milk with water so that they earn more profits. The daughter refused to obey her. Instead, she said, "Indeed, the Leader of the Believers has sent someone to announce that it is forbidden to mix milk with water."

The mother tried to reason with her daughter, saying, "Where is Umar now? Verily, he does not see us." Her believing and trustworthy daughter answered, "If Umar does not see us, then indeed, the Lord of Umar sees us." The Leader of the Believers was very impressed by what he heard from that young woman. On the following morning, he asked about her and found out that she was unmarried. He then married her to his son Aasim (may Allah be pleased with him). Allah blessed their marriage: for one of their grandchildren turned out to be a just and pious Caliph — Umar bin Abdul-Aziz. (Refer to Si-fat al-Safwah by Ibn Al-Jawzei and Tareekh Dimashq,

by Ibn Asakir 70/253)

A shepherd gained his freedom because of being mindful of Almighty Allah. Abdullah bin Dinar narrated, "I traveled with Umar bin Al-Khattab (RA) from Madinah to Makkah. After covering a considerable distance, we decided to alight and rest. As we were resting, a young shepherd descended upon us with his flock of sheep. Umar bin Al-Khattab (RA), testing him, asked him to sell him one sheep. The young man refused saying that the flock of sheep did not belong to him and that they were entrusted to him by his master.

Umar (RA) told the young man that if his master asked about the missing sheep, he would tell him that it was snatched by a wolf, and thus, he wouldn't retrieve it because he was unarmed. Upon hearing that, the young shepherd exclaimed, "And where is Allah?" Umar bin Al-Khattab (RA) was intrigued and fascinated by the young man's piety, mindfulness of Allah, honesty and trustworthiness — among others. He eventually decided to pay money to buy his freedom with no strings attached. (Refer to Sayar 'Alam An-Nubala', page # 310)

If you are always mindful of Almighty Allah, He will surely protect you in various aspects: Abdullah bin Abbas RA (cousin Prophet Muhammad PBUH) related, "Once, I was riding a riding animal behind the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him), when he said, 'O young man, I will teach you some words (of great significance). Be mindful of Allah, and He will take care of you. Be mindful of Him, and you will find Him at your side (guiding and protecting you). If you should ask (for anything), ask of (Almighty) Allah. If you need help, seek it from Allah. And know that if the whole world were to gather together to help you, they would not be able to help you except if Allah had preordained it. And if the whole world were to gather together to harm you, they would not harm you except if Allah had preordained it. The pens have been lifted, and the pages are dry.'" (Rated as authentic in Sahih At-Tirmidhi # 2, 516)

There is tremendous freedom from the hindrances of fear and loneliness when we rely only on Almighty Allah. Great acts of courage, patience and independence become possible, because the individual senses the company of the Majestic Allah by his or her side. When Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) was about to be burned alive after he destroyed the idols of his people, the angel Jibreel came to him and asked him, "Do you need help?" Ibrahim (PBUH) replied, "From you, no, but from Allah, then yes!" — Courtesy of Kuwaiti Society for Cultural Dialogue

## International

# Putin vows revenge for Kyiv's 'disruptive' strikes

## Voting in Russia's presidential polls marred by vandalism, uptick in Ukrainian attacks

**MOSCOW:** Ukrainian bombardments killed two people and set an oil facility ablaze in Russia on Saturday, officials said, on the second day of elections guaranteed to cement President Vladimir Putin's hardline rule.

Presidential polls opened this week but voting has been marred by an uptick in fatal Ukrainian aerial attacks and a series of incursions into Russian territory by pro-Ukrainian sabotage groups. Fresh bombardments prompted authorities to close schools and shopping centers in the Belgorod region bordering Ukraine, undermining the Kremlin's efforts to isolate Russians from its conflict in its neighbor — particularly during the highly touted elections.



**NOVO-OGARYOVO:** President Vladimir Putin votes online in the presidential election on March 15, 2024 in this pool photograph distributed by Russia's state agency Sputnik. — AFP photos

Putin, who cast his vote online, vowed a harsh response to the assaults and accused Kyiv of trying to "disrupt" his bid for another six-year mandate. The governor of the Belgorod region said air defense systems had downed eight Ukrainian missiles but that two residents were killed and others injured.

"A man was driving a lorry when a shell hit him, after which the vehicle crashed into a passenger bus.

The people on it were not injured," Vyacheslav Gladkov wrote on social media. "Another woman was killed in a parking lot where she and her son came to feed the dogs. Medics are fighting for her son's life," he added.

In a separate post, Gladkov announced that schools and shopping centers in the city of Belgorod and some surrounding districts would close temporarily over the coming days, the second time this month. Russia's defense ministry earlier said it had downed rockets, missiles and drones in the border regions of Belgorod and Kursk that have suffered an uptick in fatal attacks in recent weeks.

### Putin vows revenge

The ministry later said it had fought off more "attempts to infiltrate into the territory of the Russian Federation by Ukrainian militant sabotage and reconnaissance groups". The border attacks were a concern for voters hundreds of kilometers away in the town of Sergiev Posad outside Moscow, famous for its ornate Orthodox monastery with golden onion domes.

Casting her ballot from home with the help of election officials going door-to-door to collect votes from the elderly, 87-year-old Inessa Rozhkova said she hoped the polls would bring about an end to the conflict with Ukraine. "Can you imagine how many people died? And now our border villages are suffering. We worry for them," she said.

In a nearby polling station set up in the vocational school, 68-year-old Elena Kirsanova came with her husband to vote for Putin. "They try to scare us, but this is not a nation that can be intimidated," Kirsanova told AFP. Putin said this week in televised comments that the spate of aerial and ground assaults by Kyiv's forces "will not go unpunished". The 71-year-old has been in power in Russia since the last day of 1999 and is set to extend his grip over the country until 2030.

If Putin completes another Kremlin term, he would stay in power longer than any Russian leader since Catherine the Great in the 18th century. He is running unchallenged, having barred two candidates who opposed the conflict in Ukraine, and around one month after his main opponent, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic prison in unexplained circumstances.



**BELGOROD:** A view shows aftermath of fresh aerial attacks on Belgorod on March 16, 2024.

The Kremlin has cast the election as an opportunity for Russians to show they are behind Moscow's full-scale military campaign in Ukraine, where voting is also being held in occupied territory. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Saturday hailed Moscow's annexation of the Crimean peninsula — where voting is also taking place — 10 years ago from Ukraine. "The peninsula is an integral part of the Russian Federation," Lavrov said in a statement on the ministry's website.

### Oil facility ablaze

The first day of voting on Friday was however marred by acts of vandalism in polling stations, with a spate of arrests of Russians accused of pouring dye into ballot boxes or arson attacks.

And the ruling United Russia party that staunch-

ly backs Putin announced Saturday it was suffering a large-scale hacking attack on its website. The FSB security service also announced a spate of arrests, as polls opened, of Russians it said were aiding Ukrainian forces or planning to carry out sabotage at military and transport facilities. On Saturday, they said they had detained a Russian man who was plotting with Kyiv's help to set explosive devices on a railway line in the country's central Urals region. Ukrainian attacks on Russia have extended well beyond border regions too with Kyiv's forces targeting oil facilities deep inside Russian territory over recent weeks. The governor of the Samara region that lies around 800 kilometers (500 miles) from the front lines said Saturday that Ukrainian drones had targeted two oil refineries, igniting a blaze at one of them. — AFP



**IDLIB:** Syrians attend a gathering to mark 13 years since pro-democracy protests swept the country in the rebel-held city of Idlib on March 15, 2024. — AFP

## Thousands in Syria's northwest mark 13 years since uprising

**IDLIB:** Thousands took to the streets of Syria's rebel-held northwest on Friday to mark 13 years since pro-democracy protests swept the country, chanting against President Bashar Al-Assad and the region's jihadist rulers.

The government's brutal suppression of the 2011 uprising triggered a civil war that has killed more than half a million people, drawn in foreign armies and jihadists, and divided the country.

Former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) now controls a significant swathe of the northwest, where hundreds have taken to the streets in recent weeks against HTS leader Abu Mohamed al-Jolani, with anger simmering over the death of a man in the group's custody.

Hundreds of protesters paraded the rebel flag through the city of Idlib, with many brandishing placards that read "Down with Jolani ... Assad". Protester Mohammed Harnoush, 35, said the anniversary was a reminder that "our revolution is against everyone... whether it is Bashar al-Assad or Jolani". "This people shall not be ruled by iron and fire," he said, speaking in the city's main square.

The rebel-held region around Idlib hosts about three million people, many of whom fled other parts of the country held or recaptured by Assad's Russian and Iranian-backed government.

Khalidia Agha, 72, was among hundreds in Idlib city chanting against Jolani and Assad. She said government forces killed one of her sons, while two others disappeared into HTS prisons six years ago. She has not heard from them since. "I am protesting today because my children are jailed ... All I ask for is to see them and know where they are," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

### 'Grim downwards trends'

In the southern, government-held city of Sweida, hundreds took to the streets to mark the anniversary, footage from the Suwayda24 media outlet showed.

It followed around seven months of anti-government demonstrations in the wider Sweida region, the heartland of Syria's Druze minority, which has largely been spared from the war.

Since 2020, protests against deteriorating economic conditions have erupted sporadically in Sweida, with the latest wave starting after the government cut fuel subsidies in August.

In a joint statement to mark the anniversary, Britain, France, Germany and the United States said the Sweida protests "show that the demands for peace, freedom and dignity that led to protests 13 years ago endure". "The war in Syria is not over," the quartet said, pointing to government bombardments of rebel-held areas and Islamic State group attacks.

They rejected any normalization of relations with the Assad regime, which was readmitted to the Arab League last year, until "there is authentic, meaningful and enduring progress towards a political solution".

On Friday, the UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, warned that after 13 years of war, the country was "without a political solution in sight". "We must prioritize peace. If we do not do so, the grim downward trends across nearly all indicators in Syria will only continue in the year ahead," Pedersen said.

Some 7.2 million people have sought refuge from the fighting inside Syria while millions more have fled the country. The United Nations has said that this year 16.7 million people in Syria will require some type of humanitarian assistance or protection — the largest number since the conflict erupted in 2011.

About 90 percent of Syrians live in poverty, according to UN figures. Almost 7.5 million children in Syria will need humanitarian assistance in 2024, more than at any other time during the conflict, according to the UN child welfare agency UNICEF. — AFP

## Cancer patients in the Philippines fall for alternative 'cures'

**MANILA:** Filipino single mother Mary Ann Eduarte delayed chemotherapy for her breast cancer for several years and instead took food supplements falsely promoted on social media as cures for the deadly disease.

They didn't work and the cancer spread to her lungs and bones. Eduarte is one of many Filipinos duped by medical misinformation flooding the social media platforms where they rank among the world's heaviest users. A shortage of doctors, the difficulty of reaching a hospital in the archipelago, poor health literacy, and fear of incurring huge medical bills have led many people suffering from chronic conditions to seek alternative treatments online.

In recent years, AFP digital investigation journalists have seen an explosion in the volume of posts and paid advertisements promoting unproven treatments for diseases such as cancer. The trend was fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, when healthcare systems were overwhelmed and many were too scared to visit a hospital. Eduarte, 47, who makes a living selling beauty products online, found a lump in her right breast during a self-check in 2014. She was advised to have a biopsy to find out if it was cancer, but she was scared and delayed having the procedure for two years.

Instead, she spent about 50,000 pesos (\$900) a month on food supplements, including drinks made from tropical fruit and barley grass that she had seen advertised as cancer cures on Facebook and YouTube.

Eduarte finally agreed to have the biopsy in 2016, which confirmed the tumor was malignant. But she refused chemotherapy, fearing it would make her sick and lose her hair, and continued taking the supplements for another three years. "I really believed they would destroy my cancer cells because that's what I was being told by their marketing," Eduarte told AFP at her home near Manila. "They were posting testimonials that said people were being cured." After her cancer metastasized, Eduarte agreed to chemotherapy. "I made the wrong decision," she admitted. "Those food supplements actually cost me more than if I had immediately sought standard medical treatment."

### 'Our powers are limited'

Madonna Realuyo, an oncologist at the Bicol Regional Hospital and Medical Center in the central Philippines, said online misinformation about cancer treatment was a "serious problem". "Five out of 10 patients I see ask me about something they have seen or read on the internet — 90 percent of the time the information is incorrect," Realuyo said. "Telling them the correct in-

formation does not guarantee that they will listen to us or believe us." The cost of cancer treatment, which can reach millions of pesos, made patients vulnerable to deceptive marketing of unproven products that are supposedly cheaper. "Once you're diagnosed with cancer, the reality is that there's a lot of out-of-pocket expenses," said Aileen Antolin of the Philippine Foundation for Breast Cancer.

AFP has a global team of journalists who debunk misinformation as part of the third-party fact-checking program of Meta, the parent company of Facebook. Fact-checkers from around 90 organizations, including media outlets, check posts on Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram.



**MONTALBAN:** Mary Ann Eduarte shows food supplements promoted on social media as cures for the deadly disease, at her home.

AFP has repeatedly debunked posts on Facebook that have falsely promoted products as natural cures for cancer, including "Doc Atoie's Finest Guyabano Wine", which was one of the products used by Eduarte.

The drink was featured in hundreds of posts that were shared on Facebook pages with tens, even hundreds, of thousands of followers.

The Philippines' Food and Drug Administration (FDA) told AFP it was not able to go after companies or individuals falsely promoting products online because it still doesn't have guidelines for implementing this section of the 2009 law that established the agency. Instead, it issues warnings on its website and social media pages. "Our powers are limited," FDA lawyer Pamela Sevilla told AFP. Facebook owner Meta's ad policy prohibits any "promises or suggestions of unrealistic outcomes" for "health, weight loss or economic opportunity". It says ads for over-the-counter medicines should comply with licenses and approvals required by local laws. These ads can be removed from the platform once flagged, while posts that do not directly violate Meta's community standards but are rated as false by third-party fact-checkers like AFP are labelled as misinformation and demoted so they are less likely to appear in newsfeeds. But when AFP checked Meta's ad library it found ads for "Doc Atoie's Finest Guyabano Wine" and some other products debunked by AFP still there. — AFP



**QUEZON CITY:** Dr Katherine Hernandez (left) dances with her patients during a Christmas party for cancer patients at a hospital. — AFP photos

## Business

SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2024

## Fitch affirms Kuwait at 'AA-'; outlook stable

**'AA-' rating supported by Kuwait's exceptionally strong fiscal and external balance sheets**

**KUWAIT:** Fitch Ratings has affirmed Kuwait's Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'AA-' with a stable outlook.

**Key rating drivers**

Fundamental rating strengths and weaknesses:

Kuwait's 'AA-' rating is supported by its exceptionally strong fiscal and external balance sheets. The rating is constrained by Kuwait's heavy dependence on oil, its generous welfare system and large public sector that could be challenging to sustain in the long term, and a political context that hampers efforts to tackle consistent fiscal and economic rigidities and approve legislation to allow debt issuance and clarify government financing sources.

**Exceptionally strong external assets**

Kuwait's fiscal and external balance sheets remain among the strongest of Fitch-rated sovereigns. We forecast Kuwait's sovereign net foreign asset position will average 529 percent of GDP in 2024-25, remaining one of the highest among Fitch-rated sovereigns and more than 10x the 'AA' median. The bulk of the assets are held in the Future Generations Fund managed by the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), which also manages the assets of the General Reserve Fund (GRF), the government's treasury account.

**Political divisions hinder reform**

Conflicts between the elected parliament 16/03/2024, 00:07 and the 15-member cabinet, are a recurring feature of Kuwaiti politics, resulting in frequent resignations of ministers and dissolutions of parliament, with the most recent dissolution in February leading to elections scheduled for April 4. We assume that elections will result in a parliament composition similar to previous ones (following elections in Sept 2022 and June 2023), where politicians critical of government policies held the majority of the 50 electable seats. We assume that political divisions will continue to constrain political policy-making in Kuwait.

**Familiar reform challenges**

The incumbent government appointed in January 2024 before the dissolution of parliament by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, included a new prime minister and a largely technocratic cabinet. The government's published four-year program (2024-2027) focused on initiatives to enhance non-oil revenue, restructure subsidies and encourage private sector participation to create jobs for Kuwaitis and reduce the fiscal burden. The plan also included passing a new liquidity law that would allow the government to relaunch debt issuance following expiry of the previous authorization in 2017. However, these plans are similar to objectives of previous governments that failed to be implemented due to gridlock with parliament and we remain skeptical that this will change.

**Liquidity Law assumed but uncertain**

After the election, the government will aim to pass a liquidity law (as previous governments have), but parliamentary approval remains highly uncertain. However, our forecasts, notably for government debt, are based on the assumption that a liquidity law is passed in the fiscal year ending March 2026 (FY25). The assumption illustrates that Fitch considers the rating to be resilient to a moderate rise in government debt.

In the absence of a liquidity law, Fitch believes the government would still be able to meet its limited debt service obligations in the coming years, given the assets at its disposal.

**Low debt likely to rise**

Gross government debt/GDP remains low, estimated at 3.1 percent of GDP in FY23. Assuming the passage of a liquidity law in FY25, limited fiscal consolidation and lower oil prices, we forecast government debt will rise to 11 percent of GDP in FY25 and further in subsequent years. Nonetheless, during the forecast period, we expect debt levels to remain well below the projected 2025 'AA' median of 48.4 percent of GDP.

**Budget balance to deteriorate**

Under the government's reporting convention, which does not include KIA's investment interest in-



**KUWAIT:** Fitch Ratings has affirmed Kuwait's Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'AA-' with a Stable Outlook.

come in revenue (and reflects the financing needs of the government). Fitch estimates that the government balance returned to a deficit in FY23 (5.0 percent of GDP), after recording its first surplus (about 12 percent of GDP) in nearly a decade in FY22. Our estimated deficit is smaller than the government's original FY23 budget deficit projection of 13.2 percent of GDP, due to a higher-than-budgeted oil price and lower than-budgeted spending. Significant one-off expenditures on arrears on subsidies and unused vacation allowances were offset by underspending in areas such as capex. Under the government's convention, we forecast deficits of 6.5 percent of GDP and close to 10 percent of GDP in FY24 and FY25, respectively, as oil prices fall, spending pressures persist, and progress with fiscal reforms remains limited.

Our overall fiscal balance numbers include our estimate for investment income, which is not officially disclosed. On this basis, we forecast the budget to post surpluses of 5.2 percent in FY24 (from an estimate of 5.7 percent in FY23) and 0.7 percent of GDP in FY25.

**Oil assumptions and dependence**

Our forecasts assume an average oil price of \$79.8/bbl for FY24, down 5 percent from FY23, while oil output is likely to be broadly unchanged at 2.55mmbbl/d given OPEC+ constraints. In FY25, we assume Kuwait's average oil price will fall to \$71/bbl and that its crude output will rise to 2.66mmbbl/d, assuming that OPEC+ loosens production constraints somewhat. Kuwait Petroleum Corporation aims to boost capacity to 3.2mmbbl/d by FY27, with increases both onshore and in the neutral zone. Budget outcomes are highly sensitive to changes in oil price and production. A \$10/bbl change in our oil price assumption for 2024 would affect the budget by close to 4 percent of GDP, all other things equal. A change of 100,000bbl/d of production affects the budget by 1.4 percent of GDP. The fiscal break-even oil price (excluding investment income) will remain high (averaging \$93/bbl in FY24- FY25)

and the non-oil primary deficit/non-oil GDP is weak at 81 percent, significantly worse than regional peers.

**ESG - governance**

Kuwait has an ESG Relevance Score (RS) of '5[+]' for both Political Stability and Rights and for the Rule of Law, Institutional and Regulatory Quality and Control of Corruption. These scores reflect the high weight that the World Bank Governance Indicators (WBI) have in our proprietary Sovereign Rating Model. Kuwait has a medium WBI ranking at 53, reflecting low scores for voice and accountability, and middling scores across other governance indicators.

**Rating sensitivities**

Signs of sustained pressure on GRF liquidity, for example, due to the continued absence of a new liquidity law and of alternative measures will ensure that the government can continue to make good on its payment obligations, including but not limited to debt service.

**Public and external finance**

Significant deterioration in fiscal and external positions, for example, due to a sustained period of low oil prices or an inability to address structural drains on public finances. Strong evidence that Kuwait's institutions and political system are able to tackle long-term fiscal challenges, for example, through actions to implement a clear deficit reduction plan that is resilient to lower oil prices, as well as adopt a transparent and sustainable government funding strategy.

**Sovereign rating model and qualitative overlay**

Fitch's proprietary SRM assigns Kuwait a score equivalent to a rating of 'AA+' on the Long-Term Foreign-Currency (LT FC) IDR scale. Fitch's sovereign rating committee adjusted the output from the SRM to arrive at the final LT FC IDR by applying its QO, relative to SRM data and output, as

follows: - Structural features

1 notch, to reflect the frequency of political stand-offs and constraints on enacting key economic and fiscal reforms, and the lack of meaningful progress on addressing structural public finance challenges stemming from heavy oil dependence, a generous welfare state and a large public sector.

**Public finances**

We have introduced a -1 notch on public finances after the SRM output improved to 'AA+' from 'AA' at the time of the previous review, to reflect our expectation of large budget deficits and rising debt over the medium to long term, due to persistent difficulties of reining in a generous public employment and welfare system that could pose challenges if oil revenues decline for a sustained period of time, even as the large government assets provide an important buffer.

Fitch's SRM is the agency's proprietary multiple regression rating model that employs 18 variables based on three-year centered averages, including one year of forecasts, to produce a score equivalent to a LT FC IDR. Fitch's QO is a forward-looking qualitative framework designed to allow for adjustment to the SRM output to assign the final rating, reflecting factors within our criteria that are not fully quantifiable and/or not fully reflected in the SRM.

**Country ceiling**

The Country Ceiling for Kuwait is 'AA+', two notches above the LT FC IDR. This reflects strong constraints and incentives, relative to the IDR, against capital or exchange controls being imposed that would prevent or significantly impede the private sector from converting LC into FC and transferring the proceeds to non-resident creditors to service debt payments. Fitch's Country Ceiling Model produced a starting point uplift of two notches above the IDR. Fitch's rating committee did not apply a qualitative adjustment to the model result. — Fitch Ratings

## US tech fest offers reality check on AI

**AUSTIN:** Artificial intelligence aficionados are betting that the technology will help solve humanity's biggest problems, from wars to global warming, but in practice, these may be unrealistic ambitions for now.

"It's not about asking AI 'Hey, this is a sticky problem. What would you do?' and AI is like, 'well, you need to completely restructure this part of the economy'," said Michael Littman, a Brown University professor of computer science.

Littman was at the South By Southwest (or SXSW) arts and technology festival in Austin, Texas, where he had just spoken on one of the many panels on the potential benefits of AI.

"It's a pipe dream. It's a little bit science fiction. Most-

ly what people are doing is they're trying to bring AI to bear on specific problems that they're already solving, but just want to be more efficient." "It's not just a matter of pushing this button and everything's fixed," he said.

With their promising titles ("How to Make AGI Beneficial and Avoid a Robot Apocalypse"), and the ever presence of tech giants, the panels attract big crowds, but they often hold more pragmatic objectives, like promoting a product. At one meeting called "Inside the AI Revolution: How AI is Empowering the World to Achieve More," Simi Olabisi, a Microsoft executive, praised the tech's benefits on Azure, the company's cloud service. When using Azure's AI language feature in call centers, "maybe when a customer called in, they were angry, and when they ended the call, they were really appreciative. Azure AI Language can really capture that sentiment, and tell a business how their customers are feeling," she explained.

The notion of artificial intelligence, with its algorithms capable of automating tasks and analyzing mountains of data, has been around for decades. But it

took on a whole new dimension last year with the success of ChatGPT, the generative AI interface launched by OpenAI, the now iconic AI start-up mainly funded by Microsoft. OpenAI claims to want to build artificial "general" intelligence or AGI, which will be "smarter than humans in general" and will "elevate humanity," according to CEO Sam Altman. That ethos was very present at SXSW, with talk about "when" AGI will become a reality, rather than "if." Ben Goertzel, a scientist who heads the SingularityNET Foundation and the AGI Society, predicted the advent of general AI by 2029.

"Once you have a machine that can think as well as a smart human, you're at most a few years from a machine that can think a thousand or a million times better than a smart human, because this AI can modify its own source code," said Goertzel. Wearing a leopard-print faux-fur cowboy hat, he advocated the development of AGI endowed with "compassion and empathy," and integrated into robots "that look like us," to ensure that these "super AIs" get on well with humanity. — AFP



**AUSTIN:** Desdemona, a humanoid robot designed by Hanson Robotics and endowed with expressiveness and interactivity to teach AI to understand and care about people, is displayed at a SXSW conference titled "How to make AGI beneficial and avoid a robot apocalypse" in Austin, Texas. — AFP



Business



Salma Al-Hajjaj speaks at KWEEN conference.

- The number of Kuwaiti women in leadership positions does not align with the university graduates rate, which stands at 3:1 between women and men.
- The bank continues its efforts to support and empower women and enhance diversity and inclusion policies in the workplace.
- Bridging the gender gap contributes to increasing the productivity of institutions and boosting the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).



Dalal Al-Dosari moderates one of the sessions of 'Lead The Way' conference.

# Gulf Bank's female leadership percentage increases from 10% to 30% over 10 years

## Bank recognizes achievements, advocates equality and inspires change globally

KUWAIT: Salma Al-Hajjaj, the General Manager of Human Resources at Gulf Bank, stated that the number of Kuwaiti female leaders in institutions still does not correspond to the proportion of women in education. She highlighted that the ratio of university graduates is 3 to 1 between women and men, whereas the proportion of female leaders compared to men is significantly lower. This highlights the necessity of ongoing endeavors to empower women and bridge the gender gap, as it enhances institutional productivity, supports the national economy, and boosts the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

a community where ambition meets real opportunities. She added, "We at Gulf Bank take pride in being a founding partner of the Kuwait Women's Economic Empowerment Platform. We firmly believe that concerted efforts will create a thriving work environment that ensures women's empowerment and enhances diversity and inclusion policies in the workplace."

She stated that the Kuwait Women's Economic Empowerment Platform (KWEEN) acts as a channel for all working women to offer support, guidance, and foster a community where ambition aligns with tangible opportunities. She added, "At Gulf Bank, we take great pride in being a founding partner of the Kuwait Women's Economic Empowerment Platform. We strongly believe that collaborative endeavors will cultivate a flourishing work environment that promotes women's empowerment and enhances diversity and inclusion policies within the workplace."



Najla Al-Eisa poses for a group photo during Bayan School's International Women's Day celebration.



Hajla Aleisa is declared the President of the International Advertising Organization in Kuwait.

In light of International Women's Day, celebrated globally on March 8th each year, Al-Hajjaj outlined Gulf Bank's significant achievements in supporting and empowering women. She emphasized their active involvement in various events and conferences aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Al-Hajjaj highlighted that in the last decade, Gulf Bank has effectively raised the percentage of female leaders from 10 percent to 30 percent, with women constituting approximately 42 percent of the bank's total workforce.

She reaffirmed the bank's commitment to supporting and empowering women, as well as enhancing diversity and inclusion policies in the workplace. Al-Hajjaj stressed the importance of developing a well-planned strategy to achieve desired outcomes in supporting women as part of Kuwait Vision 2035. She also advocated for conducting yearly assessments to evaluate progress and promoting a workplace culture centered on gender equality and diversity in employment, based on transparent competency criteria. Below are some of the contributions and initiatives by Gulf Bank in supporting and empowering women:

### Participation in KWEEN conference

Gulf Bank participated in the Kuwait Women's Economic Empowerment Platform (KWEEN) conference, held last week at the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre with the involvement of 45 private sector companies. Salma Al-Hajjaj introduced the platform and emphasized the available resources to support women in the workforce and enhance their professional development. The conference witnessed the launch of the platform's official website, [kween.org](http://kween.org), which will serve as a primary resource to increase awareness of the platform's objectives and the impact of its initiatives, centralizing all data.

Al-Hajjaj highlighted that the widespread participation in the conference itself marks a significant and groundbreaking initiative in Kuwait and the region. She emphasized the importance of the private sector and its notable contribution to women's economic empowerment.

She stated that the Kuwait Women's Economic Empowerment Platform (KWEEN) serves as a gateway for every working woman to provide support, guidance, and create

### A podcast titled 'Own your Career'

As part of its continuous efforts towards women's empowerment and promoting diversity and inclusion policies, Gulf Bank organized a podcast as part of the "Lead the Way" program titled "Own Your Career" for female executives at the Bank. The podcast guest speaker was Hedwig Nuyens, Head of the International Banking Federation and Chair of the European Women on Boards, a non-profit organization that supports women's empowerment and gender diversity in corporate boards.

The podcast was moderated by May Al-Owaish, Chief Data and Innovation Officer at Gulf Bank, and hosted by Dalal Al-Dosari, Deputy General Manager of Investor Relations at Gulf Bank. Anne Karien, the Ambassador of the European Union Delegation to Kuwait, also participated in the event, appreciating Gulf Bank's role in supporting and empowering women in leadership.

### 'Lead the Way' conference

Gulf Bank organized the "Lead The Way" conference, gathering a diverse array of individuals and representatives from banks, the private sector, diplomatic and governmental entities, as well as non-profit organizations. The conference addressed significant challenges in supporting and empowering women, highlighting their positive economic impact. This was facilitated through interactive workshops, inspirational speeches, and engaging panel discussions held throughout the conference.

### Women of Wisdom discussion sessions

In its continuous commitment to uphold sustainability principles, Gulf Bank hosted discussion sessions for women through the Women of Wisdom (WOW) platform. These sessions serve as a reliable space for communication, sharing experiences and ideas, and addressing proposals and solutions to the challenges encountered by women.

### Gulf Bank receives excellence award for diversity and inclusion

Gulf Bank was honored with the "Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion" award at the 2023 Middle East and North Africa Human Resources Management Summit held in Bahrain. The summit saw the involvement of top experts and professionals in the human resources field, representing notable companies and financial institutions across the region. Salma Al-Hajjaj accepted the award on behalf of Gulf Bank, also receiving the prestigious "Best Training and Development" award.

### Bayan School celebrates International Women's Day

Najla Al-Eisa, Deputy General Manager of Consumer Banking at Gulf Bank's Marketing Department, served as a keynote speaker at Bayan School's International Women's Day celebration with the theme "Empowering High School Girls." During her presentation, she highlighted Gulf Bank's distinctive initiatives in women's empowerment.

Three women leaders from Gulf Bank took part in the Corporate Directors Training Program organized by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group, in collaboration with the Tamayaz Foundation and Soroptimist International. Gulf Bank's involvement in this program reflects its commitment to advancing sustainability principles in society and supporting women's empowerment programs and initiatives.

### ProudCast: Celebrating women's achievements

Salma Al-Hajjaj took part in the "ProudCast" event, hosted by KPMG Kuwait, which celebrated the numerous achievements and successes of women across various sectors. The event was attended by numerous representatives of leading companies in Kuwait, who share a keen interest in women's empowerment.

### AmCham Kuwait seminar

Gulf Bank took part in a seminar hosted by the American Business Council AmCham Kuwait, focusing on "Diversity, Inclusion, and Sustainable Practices." The seminar drew active participation from various representatives from both the public and private sectors. Gulf Bank's remarkable efforts in advancing sustainability principles, especially in women's empowerment, were thoroughly discussed during the event.

### Gulf Bank launches annual women's health campaign

Gulf Bank initiated its yearly campaign in recognition of Breast Cancer Awareness Month and mental health, aiming to promote women's health and safety throughout October. The campaign includes offering complimentary screenings for female employees and hosting a workshop focused on women's empowerment.

### Najla Al-Eisa becomes first female president of IAA Kuwait

Najla Al-Eisa, Deputy General Manager of Consumer Banking at Gulf Bank's Marketing Department, has been appointed as the President of the International Advertising Association (IAA) in Kuwait, marking her as the first woman in Kuwait to hold this position. This historic decision was made during the organization's recent annual meeting in Malaysia.

The International Advertising Association is globally recognized as the sole organization that comprehensively addresses all facets of the advertising and marketing sectors, encompassing client relationships and advertising agency affairs. Additionally, it stands out as the sole entity with a clear vision aimed at advancing the advertising system.



A group photo of Gulf Bank leaders and employees with the Chair of the European Women on Boards and the Ambassador of the European Union delegation to Kuwait.

## Eyes on BoJ as unions announce big wage hikes

TOKYO: Japan's largest trade union said Friday it had secured the highest wage hikes since 1991 in preliminary data that stokes speculation the central bank will finally shift away from its outlier ultra-loose monetary policy. The Rengo union said that in spring wage talks so far, its members had secured pay rises of nearly 5.3 percent on average, compared with 3.8 percent at this point last year.

Wage growth has been sluggish in Japan for decades, and the government partly blames this for the economy's woes. But hopes had been high for Rengo's bargaining after major firms including Toyota and Panasonic ceded fully to their workers' demands. The announcement will be closely watched by economists looking for signs that the Bank of Japan could soon scale back its long-standing monetary easing policies. Bank governor Kazuo Ueda called the spring negotiations an "important point" in deliberations over when and how to make the hotly anticipated shift.

Central banks worldwide have raised interest rates

in recent years to tackle soaring inflation, but the BoJ has kept in place its negative interest rate and other measures designed to boost the stagnant economy. Its decision to stick with these policies has sharply weakened the yen against the dollar.

Even so, the bank has stressed that it needs to see a "virtuous cycle" of rising wages and sustained, demand-driven inflation of two percent before changing its ways. The bank will announce its policy decision on Tuesday. "Rengo's first tally of responses... should greatly encourage the Bank of Japan to revise its poli-



People pass through Shinjuku station in Tokyo on March 15, 2024. — AFP

onomist Ryutaro Kono. Rengo said around half of the workers at its member unions had secured an average raise of 5.28 percent, or 16,469 yen (\$110) per month. That was lower than members' demands of an average hike of 5.85 percent, but Rengo chief Tomoko Yoshino said "the negotiators have been very aggressive in their demands". Yoshino declined to comment on next week's Bank of Japan decision but said factors such as rising prices and labor shortages had fuelled the push for higher wages.

These are on top of long-standing issues such as chronically low salaries and the gender pay gap, she added. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has urged business leaders to raise wages faster than inflation.

"I'm encouraged to see a strong trend of wage increases, even greater than last year," he told a meeting of business and union leaders on Wednesday. Nissan and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries are also among the Japanese companies that have given unions everything they asked for this year. Nippon Steel and Suzuki have even reportedly offered more than their unions had demanded. Japan's "chronic labour shortage supports the trend", Nobuko Kobayashi, Asia-Pacific strategy execution leader for consulting firm EY, told AFP before the announcement. "Steady and sustained wage growth in tandem with inflation around two percent year-on-year will signal Japan's exit from decades-long deflation," she said. — AFP

## Crisis-hit Sri Lankan economy rebounds as tourists return

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's economy rebounded strongly in the fourth quarter of 2023 from the island nation's unprecedented financial crisis as tourism arrivals rose, the government said Saturday. Agriculture, industries and services boosted the expansion to 4.5 percent in the December quarter compared to a 12.4 percent contraction a year earlier, the census and statistics department said. It added however that the economy shrank by 2.4 percent overall during 2023 compared to a contraction of 7.8 percent in 2022, when the country defaulted on its \$46 billion foreign debt.

"Sri Lanka's economy experienced some kind of duality in 2023," the department said in a statement, noting that the first half of the year recorded negative growth while the economy bounced back in the second. "The long-awaited boom in tourism came towards the end of the year," the department said, adding that worker remittances too had improved. The number of tourists visiting the South Asian nation jumped to 210,000 in December, more than double the 91,900 a year earlier. — AFP

# The Gen Z students are at the heart of Vietnam's chip plans

## Vietnam now eyeing a rapid climb up the global supply chain

HANOI: Nguyen Phuong Linh is among a crop of young electronics students crucial to Vietnam's ambitions to become a chips hub. She's driven, smart and already has her sights set on a professorship — wanting to train a new generation that could help woo foreign investors eager to diversify semiconductor production away from China and Taiwan.

Long viewed as a low-cost destination to make clothes, shoes and furniture, Vietnam is now eyeing a rapid climb up the global supply chain and has put computer chips at the heart of its development plans. It is a goal that suits nations such as the United States — increasingly worried about economic tensions with Beijing — but there are huge hurdles to overcome, chiefly a shortage of highly skilled engineers.

"Chips are attracting so much attention... among both the government and the public," Linh told AFP from a tiny windowless lab at Hanoi's University of Science and Technology, crowded with computers.

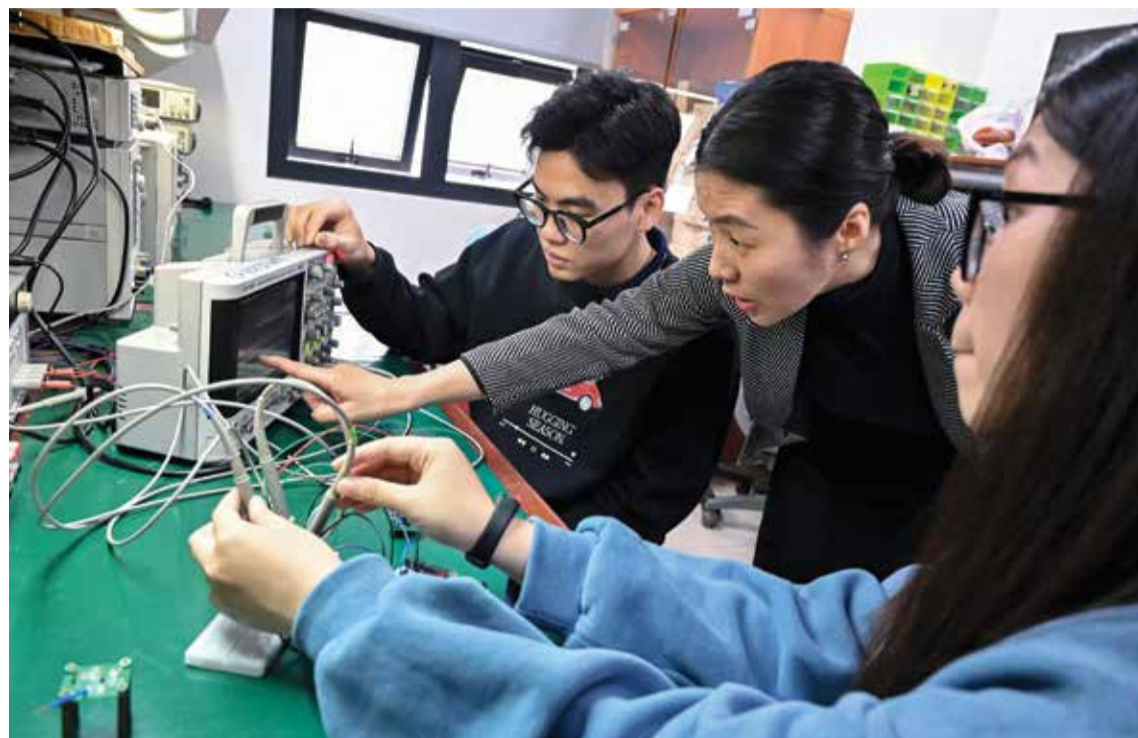
"I used to dream of working as a chip designer but now I want to be a professor. I think our country needs more teachers to create a better workforce," the 21-year-old said. Vietnam's market for semiconductors, which are used in everything from smartphones to satellites and to power AI technology, is expected to grow at 6.5 percent a year, reaching \$7 billion by 2028, according to Technavio, a market research firm. During a visit to the capital last year, US President Joe Biden announced deals to support Vietnam's chips industry, and shortly after, Nvidia — an American giant in the sector — said it wanted to set up a base in the country.

South Korea's Amkor and Hana Micron both opened packaging factories last year in Vietnam, which is already home to US firm Intel's largest factory for assembling, packaging and testing chips. As the hype around Vietnam's emerging chips industry ramps up, its communist government has said the

country's current pool of around 5,000 semiconductor engineers must jump to 20,000 in the next five years — and to 50,000 over the next decade. Earlier this month, Deputy Prime Minister Tran Luu Quang made an official request to the CEO of South Korea's Samsung, asking the electronics giant to help. Vietnam is currently producing just 500 qualified engineers per year, according to Nguyen Duc Minh, a professor of integrated circuit (IC) design who teaches Linh. "We need to do much more to reach the target," he told AFP. "I think this is a very challenging figure."

Many electronics students already know what role they want to play in the semiconductor field, with Linh's classmate Dao Xuan Son eyeing a job at Intel. But the pathway Vietnam's leaders want to take is less easy to understand, according to Nguyen Khac Giang, visiting fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. "Do they want to achieve a national champion Samsung-like Vietnamese company in semiconductors, which requires a lot of capital and investment?" he asked. "Or do they simply want to attract more investment in the semiconductor business in Vietnam?"

Experts also seem unclear about how the government arrived at the 50,000 engineer figure, and whether they are needed for chip design or factory work. "We talk of a very huge number but it seems we have not looked to see whether the industry really needs that big number of graduates," IC design professor Pham Nguyen Thanh Loan said. Intel told AFP that their focus in Vietnam would remain on assembly and testing, the lowest-value part of the semiconductor supply chain. "We face a challenge in expanding our talent pool beyond these areas," said Kim Huat Ooi, vice president in manufacturing, supply chain and operations, and general manager of Intel Vietnam. Several universities launched additional programs this academic year that focus on semiconductor and chip design.



HANOI: This photo taken on March 1, 2024 shows Pham Nguyen Thanh Loan, lecturer at Hanoi University of Science and Technology, teaching students in the school's lab in Hanoi. — AFP

But more importantly, professors say, Vietnam needs to invest in quality training that allows students to gain practical skills demanded by the world's top firms. Although courses are often good on theory, "we need more investment in infrastructure and equipment for students to practice", professor Minh told AFP. Among those top graduates who do come through, there is "real risk" of brain drain to the world's top chip-making nations, said analyst Giang. "Let's be honest, the salary in Vietnam is quite

low, even for those with very high skills," he said. "They might get the feeling... it's probably better to just move to Taiwan."

Linh says she is keen to study abroad to gain better connections to industry, but she is set on returning home. Final year student Son, however, dreaming of a design position with Intel, would be happy to study — and then stay overseas for a few years. "I can learn more — and have more opportunities — outside Vietnam," Son said. — AFP

## Apple in \$490m settlement over China comments

NEW YORK: Apple has reached an out-of-court settlement to pay \$490 million to shareholders who accused the iPhone titan of making misleading statements about its business in China in 2018.

Shareholders criticized Apple executives, in particular CEO Tim Cook, for stating in November 2018 that the company's business remained buoyant in China, even though it was slowing down.

The settlement, which was filed on Friday nearly five years after the case began, needs to be approved by a federal judge in Oakland. At the time, Apple was suffering from the deceleration of the Chinese economy, but also from tensions between China and the United States.

Questioned on the subject during an earnings conference call, Cook said that Turkey, India, Brazil and Russia were the only emerging economies where pressure on sales was being felt.

"I wouldn't put China in that category," he said. However, the next quarter Apple posted earnings that missed targets for the first time since Cook took over in 2011. In addition to Apple, shareholders — led by Norfolk County Council in the east of Britain — had also brought their class action against Cook and CFO Luca Maestri. The hearing to validate the agreement has been set for April 30. — AFP

## ExxonMobil makes new oil discovery off Guyana

GEORGETOWN, Guyana: US energy giant Exxon-Mobil on Friday announced a new offshore oil and gas discovery in waters off Guyana that are also claimed by neighboring Venezuela. The oil and gas strike, the first of 2024, was in the Stabroek block, the company said.

The so-called Bluefin well is in the southeast portion of the block and at a depth of 4,244 feet (1,294 meters). Some 30 discoveries made in Stabroek since 2015 have turned Guyana into an energy powerhouse with proven reserves of 11 billion barrels.

Drillers "encountered approximately 197 feet (60 meters) of hydrocarbon-bearing sandstone," Exxon said Friday. "Our exploration program continues to improve our understanding of the block's potential to drive viable oil-and-gas development," Alistair Routledge, president of ExxonMobil Guyana, said in the release.

Guyana's rise as an oil and gas producer has intensified a century-old territorial dispute with Venezuela over a region known as Essequibo. Tensions escalated in late 2023 to a point that triggered alarms of a possible armed conflict. Both governments eventually pledged not to use force.

Venezuela claims Essequibo — which makes up two-thirds of present-day Guyana — has historically been considered part of its territory since 1777, when it was part of the Spanish empire.

Guyana, on the other hand, says the dispute should be resolved by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which is currently handling the case on Essequibo based on a treaty signed in 1899, by which the current borders were fixed. — AFP

## Nissan and Honda seek partnership in electric vehicles

TOKYO: Japanese arch-rivals Nissan and Honda said Friday they were exploring a strategic partnership in electric vehicles to face up to a "once-in-a-century" upheaval in the car industry.

Analysts said the move was aimed at catching up with Chinese competitors who have stolen a march in EVs while Japanese firms have lost ground by focusing more on hybrid vehicles. "We are not competing only with the traditional car makers, but also with new players... with innovative products and new business models" as well as "overwhelming price competitiveness and amazing speed," said Nissan CEO Makoto Uchida.

"We cannot win the competition as long as we stick to conventional wisdom and traditional approach," he told a joint news conference announcing a feasibility study of the partnership. The scope includes automotive software platforms, core components related to EVs, and complementary products, the companies said.

Media reports said the partnership could include joint development of a common EV powertrain — a so-called e-axle — and joint procurement of batteries. Honda CEO Toshihiro Mibe said that there was a "once-in-a-century transformation in the automotive industry". "Our study criteria will be whether the synergy of the technologies and knowledge that our companies have cultivated will enable us to become industry leaders by creating new value for the automotive industry," he said. Hybrids that combine battery power and internal combustion engines have proved enduringly popular in Japan, accounting for 40 percent of sales in 2022. But Japanese firms' focus on hybrids has left them in the slow lane in meeting the



TOKYO: Makoto Uchida, president and CEO of Nissan (left) and Toshihiro Mibe, Honda director, president and representative executive officer attend a joint press conference in Tokyo on March 15, 2024. — AFP

growing appetite for purely electric vehicles.

Just 1.7 percent of cars sold in Japan in 2022 were electric — compared to 15 percent in western Europe and 5.3 percent in the United States. EVs accounted for as much as 20 percent of new cars sold in China in 2022, and the strength of Chinese auto firms helped the country overtake Japan as the world's biggest auto exporter last year. Honda and Nissan are even considering cutting production capacity in China as sales decline, according to media reports.

"Both of the companies are not at a high-enough scale to create enough profit margins... so they are actually under pressure to find a partnership," said Chris Redl, an auto analyst in Japan.

"Even though they were very fierce rivals histor-

ically, it makes more sense for Nissan to get together with a Japanese company like Honda, rather than having these cultural wars with an alliance partner like Renault" of France, he said. Nissan and Renault were in a major alliance but after years of tensions — including Japan's arrest of Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn in 2018 — the two companies are now "rebalancing" their ties. When asked about Friday's announcement, a Renault spokesperson said simply that under the terms of the current agreement with Nissan, both partners are "free to make their own strategic choices". Honda in October scrapped a tie-up aimed at making "affordable" EVs with US giant General Motors although the two firms are aiming to deploy self-driving taxis in Tokyo from 2026. — AFP

## Vodafone sells Italian unit to Swisscom

ZURICH: British telecoms giant Vodafone said Friday it has agreed to sell its Italian unit to Swisscom for eight billion euros (\$8.7 billion) in a cash deal that was slammed by Switzerland's main political party. Shares in the two companies jumped following the announcement but the hard-right Swiss People's Party (UDC) said that investing abroad again was "irresponsible in the highest degree" following heavy Swisscom losses in Germany, Hungary and Malaysia.

The UDC said the strategy of the federal government, as Swisscom's main shareholder, should be to "ban foreign adventures". The government, however, gave its green light for the operation on Friday.

Vodafone, which previously rejected offers from French billionaire Xavier Niel's Iliad group for the unit, has been on a cost-cutting campaign that has included layoffs and the offloading of divisions abroad.

The UK group said it intends to return four billion euros to shareholders following the sales of its Italian and Spanish businesses, which together total 12 billion euros.

Swisscom also said it would reward

investors, raising dividends to 26 Swiss francs (\$29) payable in 2026, compared to 22 francs in 2023. Vodafone chief executive Margherita Della Valle said the deal with Swisscom marked the "third and final step in the reshaping of our European operations".

"Going forward, our businesses will be operating in growing telecom (telephone company) markets — where we hold strong positions — enabling us to deliver predictable, stronger growth in Europe," she said in a statement. Swisscom said in a separate statement that it would merge Vodafone Italia with its own Italian subsidiary, Fastweb, which it bought in 2007.

"Swisscom's purchase of Vodafone Italy and to merge it with its Italian subsidiary, Fastweb, creates a strong contender in the most challenging telecom market in Europe," said Mark Diethelm, an analyst at Vontobel. The transaction — which is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2025 — will be paid in cash and financed by debt. "The industrial logic of this merger is very strong," Swisscom CEO Christoph Aeschli-mann said. "Fastweb and Vodafone Italia are an ideal fit to create high



ZURICH: This combination of file photographs shows the logo of Swisscom (top) the logo of Vodafone. — AFP

added value for all stakeholders."

Shares in Vodafone surged more than six percent in London while Swisscom jumped around five percent on the Swiss stock exchange in late afternoon deals.

"Vodafone's Italian business has been struggling, so shedding this weight should help the group refocus," said Sophie Lund-Yates, an analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown. "Attention will now turn to how effectively Vodafone uses its resources to fix wider challenges, including

high debts, costs and some increasing competition," she added. Vodafone and Swisscom had announced last month that they were in advanced talks for the transaction. Earlier this year, Vodafone rejected a proposal from Iliad to merge their Italian businesses in a deal valuing Vodafone Italy at 10.45 billion euros.

The British mobile phone operator had already rebuffed an 11.25-billion-euro approach by Iliad and private equity group Apax Partners in February 2022. — AFP

SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2024

## Kyoto seeks to guard geishas from tourist 'paparazzi'



Women take selfies in front of a plum tree at Kiyomizu-dera Temple in Kyoto. — AFP photos



People take pictures at the Torii path of Fushimi Inari-taisha shrine in Kyoto.



Tourists visit Fushimi Inari-taisha shrine in Kyoto.

Kyoto is cracking down after locals complained that Instagram-obsessed tourist "paparazzi" are harassing the Japanese city's famous, immaculately dressed geisha. Real-life geisha, or "geiko" ("women of art") as they are known locally, work for a living — as they have for centuries — in teahouses in Kyoto's picturesque Gion district where they perform traditional Japanese dance, music and games. However, like other major tourist attractions around the world such as Bruges in Belgium, Venice in Italy, or Rio de Janeiro's Sugarloaf Mountain, locals are fuming.

Residents are fed up with visitors sometimes rudely demanding selfies with or otherwise bothering the geiko, who wear smart kimonos and white make-up, with their hair styled in an elaborate bun. Signs will go up in the coming weeks asking tourists to refrain from entering privately run alleyways in Gion, although the area's main public streets will remain open.

"We don't want to do this, but we're desperate," Isokazu Ota, an executive member of a residents' council, said last week, comparing tourists who crowd around geisha emerging from the narrow alleys to "paparazzi". Jane Stafford from Australia told AFP in Gion at the weekend that she and her travel companions had been advised by a family member not to take photos there.

But she also questioned restricting movement in the bustling district lined with old-style wooden buildings. "To me, this is a unique heritage area that people want to enjoy, and we'd like to photograph the architecture," she said. "It's a shame that people can't enjoy it in smaller groups," she said, suggesting that big tours be broken up.

### 'Not a theme park'

Tourism to Japan has been booming since pandemic-era border restrictions were lifted and other attractions are also taking steps against overcrowding. This summer, hikers using the most popular route to climb Mount Fuji will be charged \$13 each, with numbers capped to ease congestion and improve safety. The mayor of the western metropolis Osaka has also said he is considering charging a new fee to foreign tourists, separate to an existing tax on hotel stays.

The residents' council in Gion — the setting of the hit Netflix show "The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House" — urged Kyoto City in December to tackle the issue, saying their neighborhood "is not a theme park".

They have put up signs since 2019 banning photography in the private alleys, warning of fines of up to 10,000 yen (\$68). One council member also told Japanese media about an instance of the kimono of a geisha's apprentice being torn and another who had a cigarette butt put in her collar.

## UK charities urge makeover for misunderstood molluscs

Gardeners in the UK should learn to "live harmoniously" with slugs, snails and other molluscs rather than viewing them as their "greatest foe", two leading horticultural organizations urged on Thursday. The Wildlife Trusts and the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) said they were joining forces to challenge the negative perception surrounding the role of slugs and snails in British gardens. The conservation charities have launched a "making friends with molluscs" campaign to highlight the importance to garden ecosystems of the often-maligned creatures.

"While a small number of slugs and snails can cause damage to certain plants, overall they bring many benefits to the garden and contribute to a balanced ecosystem," RHS senior wildlife specialist Helen Bostock said. "We hope that by highlighting the crucial work that molluscs do

in our gardens we can help give them a well-deserved reputation makeover."

There are around 150 species of slugs and snails in the UK, and only a fraction of these pose problems for gardeners, according to the organizations. They noted that although slugs and snails may not be as valued as earthworms for soil restoration, they provide several important services in green spaces. That includes feeding on rotting plants, fungi and other organic matter to recycle nitrogen and other nutrients and minerals back into the soil.

They are also a key food source for animals like hedgehogs, while territorial species such as leopard slugs can help ward off other types of slug and therefore protect at-risk plants.

The 220-year-old RHS and the Wildlife Trusts, founded in 1912 and now an umbrella organization for 46 local groups,



A woman in Kimono poses for photographs on a street in Kyoto.



People walk through the Torii path at Fushimi Inari-taisha shrine in Kyoto.



Women in Kimono pose for photographs at Kiyomizu-dera Temple in Kyoto.

### 'Don't be that guy'

Dutch tourists Anna and Mark Van Diggelen said they were in favour of the policy. "You have to respect the women" and their privacy, Anna said. But Mark said the new restrictions would be difficult to police. "You can make rules, but you can't keep them," he said. Resident Tetsuo Nishizawa, who owns a bar and event space, said he thought the new rules were "a good thing".

"It is important to clarify what is allowed and what is not," he told AFP. Dressing up in brightly colored kimonos

is popular among tourists excited to get the perfect Kyoto shot. But one user on a Facebook group called "Japan Travel Tips & Planning" pleaded with visitors to Gion not to behave badly. "I've been going to Japan for more than half a century and as the rest of the world increasingly discovers its charms, those charms are forced to become less accessible," wrote the user, Doug Burckhard. "Please don't be that guy," he said. — AFP

## London 'everywoman' sculpture to grace Trafalgar Square

A sculpture depicting modern women in the British capital will stand on the Fourth Plinth of London's Trafalgar Square from 2026, organizers said.

"Lady in Blue", a bronze patinated with Lapis Lazuli blue by the New York artist Tschabalala Self, depicts "a young metropolitan woman of colour" in a long dress and high heels striding forward.

Self, who credits the city with supporting her artistic development over the years, said her figure would be one that Londoners could relate to.

"She is not an idol to venerate or a historic figurehead to commemorate," she said in a statement. "She is a woman striding forward into our collective future with ambition and purpose. She is a Londoner, who represents the city's spirit."

Self is best known for her depictions of female figures that use paint, fabric and discarded pieces of previous her works.

The sculpture is the latest in a rolling programme overseen by the mayor of London that began in 1998 to showcase contemporary art on the "fourth plinth", which marks one corner of Trafalgar Square and has become one of the most coveted art commissions in the world.

Previous installations have included a giant ship in a bottle and a swirl of replica whipped cream, topped with a sculpted cherry, fly and drone. The plinth currently features Samson Kambalu's sculpture "Antelope", the 14th to occupy the spot, which the artist has said was designed to shed light on Britain's colonial legacy in southern Africa.

The bronze resin sculpture features Baptist preacher and educator John Chilembwe, who led an uprising in 1915 against British colonial rule in Nyasaland, which is now Malawi.

Fourth Plinth organisers also announced the winning work that will follow "Lady in Blue" in 2028.

"Untitled" by Romanian-born Andra Ursuta is a hollow, life-size person on a horse covered in a shroud and cast in a lime-green resin, according to the Fourth Plinth commissioning group. — AFP



A picture shows an edible snail in a garden near the village of Zella-Mehlis, Germany. — AFP

have drawn up five tips for gardeners as part of their campaign.

They include creating habitats for slugs and snails — by leaving log piles, mulch and natural debris in garden areas — and bedding in plants less attractive to them. Lavender, rosemary, astrantia, hardy geraniums, hellebores and hydrangeas are among such species. Other recommendations are to build barriers to help protect vulnerable plants, and to relocate slugs and snails found to compost heaps or other

less sensitive areas. Finally the charities advocate creating havens for their natural predators — such as ground beetles, song thrushes, frogs and toads — by providing suitable habitats like long grass, log piles and wildlife-friendly ponds.

"The Wildlife Trusts want everyone to avoid using pesticides, which can indiscriminately harm other creatures too," Kathryn Brown, its director of climate change and evidence, said. — AFP

# Giant redwoods thriving in the UK: Experts

**E**ndangered giant redwood trees are thriving in the UK but could also be significantly contributing to capturing carbon emissions, according to research published. The towering giant sequoias, which can soar as high as 90 meters (295 feet) and live for up to 3,000 years, were first planted in the UK in the mid-19th century.

There are now some 500,000 across the country — more than the 80,000 or so in their native California. Research by University College London (UCL) and published in the Royal Society Open Science journal, found that “the most massive species” of redwood can potentially pull an average of 85 kilograms of carbon from the atmosphere per year. It is the first time the growth rate and resilience of the trees have been analyzed in the UK.

“Giant sequoias are some of the most massive organisms on Earth and in their native range make up some of the most carbon-dense forests in the world due to their great age,” said Ross Holland, the lead author of the research. “We found that UK redwoods are well adapted to the UK and able to capture a large amount of carbon dioxide.”

Sequoias, which have wide trunks and can survive blazes that would wipe out forests



Senior Research Leader and spatial analysis at Kew Royal Botanic Garden Justin Moat stands by a giant redwood tree.

of other tree species, were first imported to the UK as seeds and seedlings in 1853. The trees, which were rare at the time, became a symbol of wealth and power in Victorian-era Britain. Many were planted at the entrance to large houses and estates.

To assess the adaptability of giant sequoias to the UK's milder climates and varied



Giant redwood trees at the Wakehurst site of the Kew Gardens, in Haywards Heath, southern England. — AFP photos



A sign placed on the trunk of a giant redwood tree.



Senior Research Leader and spatial analysis at Kew Royal Botanic Garden Justin Moat stands by a giant redwood tree.

rainfall patterns, the researchers compiled a map, pinpointing the locations of nearly 5,000 individual trees across the country. They analyzed 97 individual trees at Benmore Botanic Gardens in central Scotland, at Kew Garden's Wakehurst Place in the south of England and at a mixed woodland in Havering Country Park east of London.

Terrestrial laser scanners were used to map the

trees in 3D, enabling researchers to accurately measure the heights and volumes of the trees without having to cut them down. The tallest was approximately 54.87m tall — towering over most native UK species but modest in comparison to its far older American relatives.

Researchers calculated average growth rates of the trees at the three sites, which they said would be

important for the analysis of climate changes in the future. “Currently, these trees are probably more important for their aesthetic and historical interest than they are for solving the climate crisis,” said senior author Mat Disney. “But as more are planted we need to know how they will grow.” — AFP

## Glastonbury rocks gender norms with 2024 line up

**D**ua Lipa, SZA and Coldplay will headline the 2024 Glastonbury music festival, organizers said, marking the first time that women acts take two of the top three slots. Famed as much for its mud as its music, the wildly popular event has become a fixture in British life since 1970 and is one of the musical highlights of the year. Tickets for this year's festival, due to take place at Worthy Farm in southwest England on June 26-30, were snapped up within an hour of going on sale last November. A standard ticket for the event was priced at £355 (\$442).

British-Albanian pop sensation Dua Lipa, who played at the event once before in 2017, will make her headline debut on the main Pyramid stage on



Dua Lipa



SZA



Coldplay

the night of Friday June 28. “I have dreamt of this moment all my life,” she wrote on her Instagram page. “Something that lived only in my wildest dreams and highest manifestations!!!”

“I am so excited to see you all in my favorite place on earth and make it a night to remember!!!” Grammy and Brit winner SZA, who's real name Solana Imani Rowe, will headline the show on the Sunday night of the festival. It will be the first time that the R&B singer, who is known for the songs “Snooze” and “Ghost In The Machine”, will perform at the festival.

Coldplay will make their first Pyramid stage ap-

pearance since 2016 on the Saturday night, becoming the first act to headline Glastonbury five times. Canadian singer-songwriter Shania Twain, known for hits including “Man! I Feel Like A Woman!”, “You're Still The One” and “That Don't Impress Me Much”, will perform in the Sunday afternoon legends slot.

“There's like a stamp that comes with this slot and I feel like I'm there, I've arrived at this slot,” the five-time Grammy award-winner who has sold more than 100 million records, told the BBC. US rock band LCD Soundsystem, British rapper Little Simz, Nigeria's Burna Boy, 1980s star Cyndi Lauper and British soul singer

Olivia Dean, will also perform on the Pyramid stage.

Dairy farmer Michael Eavis first organized the festival in 1970, the day after Jimi Hendrix died, and fans who came paid £1 each for entry and received free milk from the farm. The festival was held intermittently in the 1970s but it wasn't until the 1990s that it began to acquire its current cult status. Last year's headliner was Elton John, playing his last concert in the UK. In 2022, Paul McCartney brought the festival back with a bang after Covid interruptions in 2020 and 2021. — AFP

## US actor Olivia Munn reveals breast cancer diagnosis

**A**ctor Olivia Munn revealed that she had undergone a double mastectomy after being diagnosed with breast cancer. The “X-Men: Apocalypse” and “The Newsroom” performer took to Instagram to tell followers her news, just days after she attended the Oscars ceremony with her partner, comedian John Mulaney. The 43-year-old said the cancer had been discovered almost a year ago after her doctor noted she was at elevated risk for the disease and suggested she undergo an additional scan, 12 months before a routine screening.

“I wouldn't have found my cancer for another year — at my next scheduled mammogram,” she told followers. After initial tests, a biopsy was ordered. “The biopsy showed I had Luminal B cancer in both breasts. Luminal B is an aggressive, fast moving cancer,” she wrote, adding that the double mastectomy was performed 30 days later.

“I went from feeling completely fine one day, to waking up in a hospital bed after a 10-hour surgery the next,” she wrote in a post, with photos taken apparently during her treatment. “I'm lucky. We caught it with enough time that I had options. I want the same for any woman who might have to face this one day.” — AFP



Olivia Munn

## Oliver Stone: Charges against Trump are 'ridiculous'

**M**averick American director Oliver Stone told AFP that the legal proceedings against Donald Trump are “all political” and that the ex-president was a victim of “lawfare”—when prosecutions are used to silence political figures. “Almost 100 indictments against the guy... it's ridiculous,” said Stone. “This is all political. They want to put him behind bars, but they're not going to be able to,” he added. However, the 77-year-old director of “JFK”, “Platoon” and “Snowden” said that he would not vote for Trump in this November's US presidential election.

“Everyone's corrupt. Russia runs on corruption, so does Turkey. So does the United States. Corruption is a way of life, but they make it into a political issue now,” Stone insisted. But he said he would not be voting for incumbent President Joe Biden either. “Never for Biden, because Biden is a warmonger,” said the Vietnam veteran.

Stone spoke to AFP Tuesday during a trip to Paris to promote his documentary about nuclear energy, “Nuclear

Now”. He said he has been thinking a lot about “lawfare” as he has recently completed a film about Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

### ‘Freethinker’

Lula, as he is widely known, was imprisoned in 2018 on corruption and money-laundering charges after several years in power. The charges were overturned after an investigation found the judge was biased, and Lula was re-elected president last year. “The concept of lawfare is all over the world, and it's been used for political reasons, weaponized,” said Stone.

“And so that's what they did with Lula. They put him in jail and he got out and he won the election. It was a hell of a story... but people don't know it, except in Brazil.” Stone has often focused on Latin American leftist leaders, with no less than three documentaries about the late Cuban leader Fidel Castro, and one about his friend the Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, who died in 2013. Lula, Castro and Chavez were all “humanists”, he said.



US director Oliver Stone attends the red carpet event for his movie ‘Nuclear Now’ in Rome. - AFP

“They're all great. They're all original, doing the best they can for their country. I think Chavez was motivated by love of country. So it was Castro.” There is not yet a release date for his Lula film, though he has launched previous films at the Cannes Film Festival, which takes place in May.

Stone has often been denounced as a conspiracy theorist for his views on US foreign policy and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, laid out in “JFK” and a follow-up documentary. He has a simple response for his detractors. “I'm a freethinker.” — AFP

Lifestyle

# Collective siesta in Mexico City aims to promote the right to sleep



People enjoy a nap while attending the World Sleep Day event at the Monumento a la Revolucion in Mexico City, Mexico. — AFP photos



People enjoy a nap while attending the World Sleep Day event at the Monumento a la Revolucion in Mexico City, Mexico.

In one of Mexico City's busiest neighborhoods on Friday, about 200 people took a collective nap in the middle of the street to celebrate World Sleep Day.

Lying in the heat on synthetic mats, their necks resting on pillows and their eyes covered by masks, participants tuned out the chaos of Mexico's capital as part of what organizers described as "a peaceful demonstration for the right to sleep."

"The idea is that sleeping well, or having this event attract attention, can help launch new public policies" to promote rest, said Guadalupe Teran, a doctor with the Center for Sleep and Neuroscience, which organized the event with the Mexican government.

"We have long working days, but there are no spaces at workplaces to guarantee the time for a siesta," she said.

Thanks to a guided meditation session, some nap participants sank into a deep sleep while others at least managed to relax for a moment.

"Sleeping and resting well is very good for mindfulness. I need to do it more, but I think this dynamic is very cool, it encourages rest," said Alexia Gonzalez, a 24-year-old psychotherapist from the central state of Morelos, who was visiting the capital.

Another napper, retiree Victor Sanchez from southern Mexico City, said he was interested in professional advice on how to get a good night's sleep.

"It's a bit far, but I had to come because it's important to me," the 64-year-old said. — AFP



People enjoy a nap while attending the World Sleep Day event at the Monumento a la Revolucion in Mexico City, Mexico.

## Eric Nam: The outsider who became a K-Pop star

Eric Nam barely spoke any Korean when he moved to South Korea to build a music career, but he somehow became one of the country's biggest K-Pop stars.

Nam grew up in Atlanta in the US, and travelled on a whim to South Korea in 2011 to take part in "Star Audition: Birth of a Great Star", a talent show similar to shows like "X Factor" and "The Voice".

Though he only came in fifth, he landed a record deal and chose to jack in his job as Deloitte management consultant to become a popstar.

"To be very blunt, when I started I couldn't really speak Korean, so I didn't really know much of what I was singing," Nam told AFP

in Paris ahead of a pair of shows in the French capital. It didn't stop him scoring a string of hit singles, hosting TV shows and being named a GQ Korea Man of the Year.

That forced him to learn Korean fast - but his unlikely route to fame meant he missed out on the famously exacting training process for K-Pop idols. "There was a steep learning curve. I felt very under-prepared when I debuted because I couldn't dance like everybody else, and I couldn't perform," he said.

"So it was a challenge - how do I create something that is unique to me?" he added.

### 'More open and honest'

His answer was to play up his outsider status and start producing songs in English with a view to conquering international audiences.

His plan seems to have worked, with Nam now on his third world tour - with around 80 dates, almost all sold out. The polished, wholesome image of Korean pop has been rocked in recent years by scandals, including a 2018 date-rape scandal at Gangnam's Burn-

ing Sun nightclub, run by boy-band member Seungri. Nam has deliberately avoided the polished image in favour of the more relatable and confessional approach of modern Western popstars.

"I wanted to tell my own stories... and I think I've been challenged to be more open and transparent and honest with my lyrics as time has gone on," he said.

Nam says his latest album, "House on a Hill", released last September, combines poppy beats with some searching questions about his life choices. "It was written during very much of an existential crisis of sorts," he said. "You have all these metrics of success, and I realized that I hit a lot of those metrics very early on. And it's like this never-ending rat race."

### 'Maturity and beauty'

But a more frank and personal approach to music has been catching on in Korea in recent years, Nam said.

"There are a lot more artists who are being very forward and open and honest with their life experience, which is a good thing."

But Nam added: "There's also a world in which you don't have to be 100 percent open and honest about every aspect of your life. We have to keep things for ourselves because otherwise we're living for everybody else."

Now 35, Nam sometimes gets teased by fans that he is too old for the pop game, despite his incredibly youthful appearance. "It's kind of an ongoing joke that I am forever 19," he said with a smile. "There was this fear for a long time that once you hit a certain age you're not able to perform or be relevant. But I think times are changing and there is a great level of growth and maturity and beauty that comes with ageing." — AFP



Eric Nam

## Cara Delevingne's Los Angeles home destroyed in fire

Cara Delevingne's Los Angeles home was gutted in a huge fire Friday, in a blaze that left the multimillion-dollar house a smoldering ruin.

The actress-model was not at the sprawling pad in the plush Studio City area, but there were two people - and Delevingne's cats - at home at the time.

All escaped without serious injury. "My heart is broken today. I cannot believe it. Life can change in a blink of an eye, so cherish what you have," the 31-year-old posted on Instagram.

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the firefighters and people that have showed up to help." Delevingne bought the 8,000-square-foot (750-square-meter) four-bedroom home in 2019 for \$7 million.

Photos show it to have been largely destroyed in the blaze, with the roof collapsed. The model, who also has screen credits in the TV series "Only Murders in the Building" and the film "Anna Karenina", posted a picture of her two flat-faced white Persian cats with the caption "They are alive! Thank you to the firefighters."

Nearly 100 firefighters attended the blaze, which was reported before dawn, a spokesman for the Los Angeles



Cara Delevingne

Fire Department said. "Crews confirmed all occupants were out of the home, and then pulled back into defensive mode due to the long duration of heavy fire," he said. "The house subsequently sustained a roof collapse, as firefighters continued to apply hose streams from the exterior." — AFP

## 'Squid Game' star found guilty of sexual misconduct

South Korea's "Squid Game" actor O Yeong-su has been found guilty of sexual misconduct, a local court said Friday, after he was charged with assaulting a woman in 2017.

The 79-year-old in 2022 became the first South Korean to win a Golden Globe Award for best supporting actor in a series for his performance as a seemingly vulnerable old man in the mega-hit Netflix dystopian thriller.

The actor was sentenced to eight months in prison, suspended for two years, the Seongnam Branch of the Suwon District Court told AFP.

He has been also ordered to complete 40 hours of class-

es on sexual violence, the court added. The victim's own records of the assault and her claims are "consistent ... and appear to be statements that cannot be made without actually experiencing them," judge Jeong Yeon-ju said, according to the court.

O was indicted in 2022 without detention on charges of sexually assaulting a woman, who has not been identified, on two occasions.

The incidents took place when O was staying in a rural area for a theatre performance in 2017, on a walking path and in front of the victim's residence, respectively, according to the Suwon District Court.

"Squid Game", a series that depicts a dark world where marginalized individuals are forced to compete in deadly versions of traditional children's games, quickly gained immense popularity on Netflix. — AFP



Actor O Yeong-su

## Sports

# Nissanka ton helps S Lanka level Bangladesh series

## Pair put on 185 in their fourth-wicket partnership to guide the tourists to 287-7

CHITTAGONG: Opener Pathum Nissanka struck 114 off 113 balls to steer Sri Lanka to a three-wicket victory over Bangladesh and level their three-match ODI series in Chittagong on Friday. Sri Lanka were teetering on 43-3 before Nissanka finally found a worthy partner in Charith Asalanka, who scored 91.

The pair put on 185 in their fourth-wicket partnership to guide the tourists to 287-7 in the 48th over, after Wanindu Hasaranga's 4-45 helped restrict Bangladesh. Their stand was broken soon after Nissanka hit his sixth ODI century, when Mehidy Hasan forced him to hoist a catch to Liton Das at deep-midwicket. Asalanka departed the next over when he nicked through to the keeper from Taskin Ahmed. Dunith Wellalage and Hasaranga kept their composure to put on 34 runs for the seventh wicket and edge Sri Lanka closer.

Wellalage hit Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto to cover for a double to complete the win with 3.5 overs to spare. All-rounder Hasaranga menaced Bangladesh's middle order after Sri Lanka opted to field first, with the hosts held to 286-7 despite a charging unbeaten 96 from number four Towhid Hridoy.

Hridoy narrowly missed a century but finished

on a flourish with successive sixes off the final two balls. "He played very well. That's what we want from him. Really happy for him," Najmul said afterwards. Hridoy, who was dropped on six by Kusal Mendis, made three fours and five sixes in his knock.

Bangladeshi opener Liton was sent back in the first over for his second straight duck of the series, but Soumya Sarkar scored 68 and skipper Najmul with 40 steadied the innings with a 75-run partnership. Najmul, who hit an unbeaten century in Bangladesh's opening match victory, survived despite nicking Pramod Madushan behind the stumps when Sri Lanka failed to appeal.

He was sent back by Dilshan Madushanka while Sarkar fell to Hasaranga after botching a reverse sweep. "On a wicket like this, me and Soumya should have batted longer," Najmul said. "We will be looking forward to the next match and hope we do something special."

Hasaranga bowled Mahmudullah Riyad for a duck two balls later and then trapped heavy-hitter Mushfiqur Rahim leg before for 25 and bowled Mehidy Hasan Miraz for 12. The series decider will be played in Chittagong on Monday before a two-Test series starting in Sylhet on March 22. — AFP



CHITTAGONG: Sri Lanka's Pathum Nissanka (L) plays a shot as Bangladesh's wicketkeeper Mushfiqur Rahim watches during the second one-day international (ODI) cricket match between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong. — AFP

## Ireland win T20I against Afghanistan

PARIS: Ireland claimed victory in the first T20I of their three-match series against Afghanistan in Sharjah on Friday, winning by 38 runs. Ben White and Josh Little starred with the ball for the tourists, while Harry Tector hit an undefeated half-century as Ireland took a 1-0 series lead against hosts Afghanistan. "Really happy. It was a fantastic team performance," said Ireland captain Paul Stirling, according to Cricinfo. "We have a big two months ahead. So we've got to put this behind. We have to perform at our best to win games," he added, looking ahead to the T20 World Cup starting in June.

Needing 150 to win, Afghanistan got off to a nightmare start when Mark Adair claimed the wicket of Rahmanullah Gurbaz with the very first ball of the innings. Gurbaz's opening partner, Sediqullah Atal, soon joined him in the stands when Little had him caught off Tector for one.

The Irish left-earmer then bowled Azmatullah Omarzai first ball to set up a hat-trick opportunity in just the second over of the innings. White then took over the attack and dismissed top-scorer Mohammad Ishaq for 32, Mohammad Nabi, Ijaz Ahmad Ahmadzai and Nangeyalia Kharote to finish with figures of 4-20.

The tail were left with too much to do and despite resistance from Naveen-ul-Haq, who scored a knock of 13 off 15 balls, Afghanistan were all out for 111 after 18.4 overs. Returning Afghanistan skipper Rashid Khan earlier won the toss and sent Ireland in to bat. Harry Tector struck an unbeaten 56 off 34 balls, including seven fours and two sixes, to guide Ireland to 149-6.

Stirling and Andy Balbirnie started well for the tourists and put on a first-wicket stand of 38, before Balbirnie fell to Azmatullah Omarzai on 22. Khan, in his comeback after an injury lay-off, was the pick of the bowlers with figures of 3-19 and he claimed his first in Ireland opener Stirling for 25 in the 11th over.

The leg spinner then immediately got the dangerous Curtis Campher for a golden duck and later broke Gareth Delany's blossoming partnership with Tector in the 17th over. Tector battled gamely in the middle but was unable to strike up a partnership of merit with those around him until the arrival of Delany and then Adair to the crease.

The right-hander put on stands of 35 with Delany and an undefeated 42 with Adair to set Afghanistan a target of 150, which eventually eluded the hosts. Already a successful tour thanks to Ireland's very first Test match win on March 1, the tourists can sew up the T20I series by winning the second match on Sunday in Sharjah. — AFP



INCHEON: Los Angeles Dodgers Shohei Ohtani arrives with his wife Mamiko Tanaka and his team's players at Incheon International Airport in Incheon on March 15, 2024, ahead of the 2024 MLB Seoul Series baseball games between Los Angeles Dodgers and San Diego Padres. — AFP

## Ohtani focused ahead of MLB season opener

SEOUL: Shohei Ohtani said Saturday he was focused on baseball despite being the subject of sky-high global interest as he prepares to make his Los Angeles Dodgers regular-season debut in South Korea. The Dodgers will play the San Diego Padres in two games in Seoul to open the Major League Baseball season next week, with new signing Ohtani the undoubted main attraction.

The Japanese superstar joined the Dodgers on a 10-year deal worth \$700 million in December and further ramped up already massive attention when he announced last month that he had got married. Ohtani said he was "grateful for the attention" but he stressed that playing baseball came first.

"I try to only concentrate on what I have to do," the 29-year-old told reporters in Seoul. "Whatever is in front of me, that's what I focus on." Ohtani had kept his wife's identity firmly under wraps but he posted a first picture of them together on social media on Friday as they prepared to board the flight to South Korea.

She was identified as former basketball player Mamiko Tanaka, following weeks of intense

speculation. Hundreds of fans greeted them at South Korea's Incheon airport on Friday, with some screaming Ohtani's name and holding up shirts with his name on them.

Ohtani, nicknamed "Sho-Time", said he was excited to be in South Korea and looking forward to getting the new season started. "Japan and South Korea have played each other in lots of really exciting games and I used to watch them when I was a kid," he said.

"I always thought South Korea were a really great team. I'm really happy to play here and it was nice to see so many people welcoming us at the airport." Ohtani won his second American League Most Valuable Player award in six seasons with the Los Angeles Angels last year but departed for free agency after failing to enjoy even a winning season, much less reach the MLB playoffs.

Known for his skills as a pitcher as well as swinging the bat, he will not take the mound in 2024 after undergoing right elbow surgery last September. Team-mate Freddie Freeman said the attention that Ohtani brings to the Dodgers "means something exciting happened in the off-season".

"I think we're starting to get used to it a little bit, but I don't know if anyone can get used to this," said Freeman. "This is exciting, it's fun for us, and it's fun to be playing in front of a lot more new fans this year." The Dodgers also signed Japanese pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto, who won the World Baseball Classic alongside Ohtani last year. — AFP

## McKenzie inspires Chiefs' Super Rugby victory

HAMILTON: The Waikato Chiefs rediscovered their attacking verve to outclass the Fijian Drua 46-29 on Saturday and move to third in the standings, while the ACT Brumbies snapped an 11-year drought in Dunedin. Inspired by All Blacks fly-half Damian McKenzie, the Chiefs scored six tries to four at home in Hamilton, pulling away in the second half after leading 24-17 at the interval.

It was a disappointing result for the Drua, who were coming off an upset of the Canterbury Crusaders in Lautoka and were competitive early on, crossing twice through midfield back Iosefo Masi in the first 22 minutes.

Their intensity fell away against the Chiefs, whose sole loss in four rounds this season came last week, when they were stifled by the second-placed Queensland Reds. Chiefs captain Luke Jacobson was pleased his game-breaking backline could deliver a reminder of what they are capable of.

"There were probably a few stages there where we got a bit too loose with ball in hand but it's awesome when we can get some of those plays to come off — it's pretty nice to watch," he said. Flanker Kaylum Boshier crossed twice while McKenzie's speed and awareness was at the heart of many attacking moments, complementing his 16 points with the boot.

Earlier, the Brumbies fought back from a half-time deficit to beat the Otago Highlanders 27-21 and end their long drought in Dunedin. Corey Toole and Lachlan Loneragan scored tries in the second half for the Brumbies while fly-half Noah Lolesio landed 12 points from kicks.

Coach Stephen Larkham sensed his team and the Reds — both boasting three wins from four after the Queensland side beat the Melbourne Rebels on Friday — could mount credible campaigns this year. "The Reds have been impressive and I think the Australian teams are starting to get on a bit of a roll," former Wallabies great Larkham said.

"You're four rounds in now, you'd be expecting that your combinations are starting to work. "We're looking at the bigger picture and making sure we're getting growth every week." In Sydney, the Auckland Blues survived a late scare to hold on for a 12-10 win over the NSW Waratahs.

The Blues dominated territory in a physical contest with tries from prop Ofa Tu'ungafasi and fly-half Zarn Sullivan earning them a 12-3 lead midway through the second half. But a converted try from Waratahs debutant Jay Fonokalafi late on set up a grandstand finish.

"We knew it would be a grudge game, it could have gone either way. There will be some banged up bodies after this," said Blues skipper Dalton Papali'i. Victory moved them into fourth place, four points behind the unbeaten table-topping Wellington Hurricanes. — AFP



MACAU: This handout photo taken and released by the Asian Tour on March 16, 2024 shows John Catlin of the USA playing a shot during round three at the International Series Macau at the Macau Golf and Country Club. — AFP

## Catlin shoots Asian Tour's first 59 to lead in Macau

MACAU: John Catlin carded the first sub-60 round in Asian Tour history on Saturday, his 11-under-par 59 catapulting him into the lead at the International Series Macau. The American rolled home a curling, left-to-right 15-foot putt on the final green for an eagle three as he moved to 18 under par after three rounds.

"I never, never, never thought I'd shoot 59," said a delighted, but slightly stunned, Catlin. He has a two-shot cushion over LIV Golf's Jason Kokrak, who carded an eight-under-par 62, at the top of the leaderboard at the \$2 million event with one round to play.

Catlin, who was the Asian Tour player of the year in 2018, got off to a blistering start in his third round, draining six birdies for a front nine of 28 on the par-70 coastal layout at Macau Golf and Country Club.

He sank three more on the 11th, 13th and 17th before his beautifully judged eagle on the 564-yard, par-five 18th capped a historic round of golf. "I didn't realize I shot 28 on the front nine so the magic number wasn't really in my head until the 17th," said Catlin. "It's a 239-yard par three, downhill 41 yards, so you're not really trying to make a birdie. "It actually got a

little closer than I was trying," he smiled. "I was able to bury that one and I figured, well, three down the last. And just hit two beautiful shots in there. "The putt was a big, left-to-right swinger and I just happened to get the pace and the line right." Sub-60 rounds are extremely rare in golf.

There have only been 12 on the US PGA Tour, one on the LPGA Tour, one on the European Tour, two in LIV Golf and until Saturday, none on the Asian Tour. It was a remarkable return to form for Catlin, who has been in a slump since the end of 2022 and lost his DP World Tour card in 2023.

"After all I've been through in the last two years, it hasn't totally sunk in yet," said Catlin. "You sacrifice a lot and you put in a lot. I definitely want to thank my coach, Noah Montgomery, he's been with me now for 10 years and he really helped me through it," said Catlin.

"I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have him in my corner," added Catlin, who was awarded a special invitation by the Asian Tour to play in Macau. "We just kept pushing. And yeah, it's pretty, pretty special." Kokrak's bogey-free 62 contained six birdies and an eagle. "I didn't drive it quite as good as I did yesterday, but the putter cooperated," said Kokrak. Overnight co-leader Jbe Kruger had a four-under 66 to lie three behind Catlin on 15 under, the same mark as Australia's Lucas Herbert who also had a 62. But Spain's David Puig, who started the day joint top of the leaderboard, fell back with a scrappy 68 containing four bogeys, and now lies in a share of eighth place on 13 under par. — AFP

Sports

# RB Leipzig into top four as Simons, Openda slay Cologne

## Dortmund two points behind Leipzig, can retake their lead with a win

COLOGNE: A goal and an assist from Xavi Simons and a Lois Openda brace helped RB Leipzig thump Cologne 5-1 away on Friday to leapfrog Borussia Dortmund into the top four. Simons produced yet another masterclass as Leipzig's attacking fulcrum in midfield while showcasing his understanding with fellow summer arrival Openda, who lifted his league goal tally to 19 this season.

Simons, who laid on two goals in a 6-0 procession when these teams met earlier in the season, now has 11 assists and seven goals in 25 games this season. Simons joined Leipzig on a season-long loan in summer from parent club Paris Saint-Germain.

Leipzig have been increasingly reliant on the Dutchman this season, with coach Marco Rose saying this week he was "very optimistic" the 20-year-old would stay beyond the season. Leipzig defender David Raum, who was named in Julian Nagelsmann's Germany squad on Thursday, told DAZN: "Of course it was fun in the end, but it was hard work."

"We didn't take our chances in the first half but in the second half we did — and you can see what potential we have when we do." The three points could prove crucial as Leipzig duke it out with Dortmund for the final Champions League spot. Dortmund, now two points behind Leipzig, can

retake their lead with a win when they host sixth-placed Eintracht Frankfurt on Sunday.

"A very good away performance. We scored some nice goals, some very nice goals," said Rose. Fresh from winning two in a row for the first time this season, Leipzig brought the energy early and hit the lead after 15 minutes through Simons.

Simons finished off a sublime short passing move, with Dani Olmo laying the ball onto Benjamin Sesko who found the goalscorer. Cologne hit back just three minutes later when Sargis Adamyan turned in a corner at the far post. Openda's 26th-minute strike was ruled out for offside but the Belgian broke through midway through the second half, tapping in a perfect Simons pass. Openda scored again just four minutes later, heading in a floating Raum chip for his 19th league goal of the season.

"At training sometimes he bangs them over the fence and into the forest but today he put it in perfectly," Raum said after the match. Amadou Haidara blasted in a low shot to add a fourth with 20 minutes remaining before Yussuf Poulsen, subbed on for Openda, added a fifth. Cologne's loss, their 14th in 26 games this season, leaves them in the relegation play-off spot and seven points from safety with eight games remaining. — AFP



COLOGNE: Leipzig's Slovenian forward #30 Benjamin Sesko (C) gets up to head the ball before Cologne's German defender #24 Jeff Chabot (L) during the German first division Bundesliga football match FC Cologne v RB Leipzig in Cologne, western Germany. — AFP

## Liverpool targeting trophy clean-sweep of silverware this season

LONDON: Virgil van Dijk says the intensity of Liverpool's bitter rivalry with Manchester United will make Sunday's FA Cup quarter-final a major test for his quadruple chasers. Liverpool head to Old Trafford looking to move a step closer to the second trophy of manager Jurgen Klopp's farewell season.

Having beaten Chelsea in the League Cup final, Klopp's side are embroiled in a gripping Premier League title race with Arsenal and Manchester City, and also face Atalanta in the Europa League quarter-finals. With Liverpool targeting a trophy clean-sweep and United hoping to preserve their last chance of silverware this season, the stage is set for the latest chapter in English football's most historic feud.

Separated by just 30 miles, the cities of Liverpool and Manchester have been united in mutual loathing since the Industrial Revolution, competing for bragging rights in football, music, fashion and numerous other domestic squabbles. On the pitch, Liverpool and United have produced countless classic encounters. But the

rivalry turned ugly in the 1970s and '80s when bloody battles between hooligan gangs made the fixture one of the most vicious on the domestic calendar.

While violence in the stands is less prevalent these days, police will be on red alert on Sunday when 9,000 Liverpool fans descend on Old Trafford. United have a record 20 English titles, but Liverpool, who have six European Cups to their rivals' three, hope to equal that feat this season.

In recent years, Manchester City have emerged as Liverpool's closest challengers in a series of heavy-weight fights for Premier League supremacy. But despite that change in the balance of power, Liverpool captain Van Dijk believes meetings with United still require a unique level of commitment. Asked to describe the experience of facing United, the Dutch centre-back said: "Intense. Not only the actual game but the whole build-up is a game on its own. I like to be involved in these type of games."

### Extra expectation

Van Dijk added: "We always have a difficult game against them and I expect a difficult one on Sunday as well. "They are finding ways to win but I focus on what we have to do against them. It's always difficult, it's always intense."

"The history of the games with the two biggest clubs

in England brings extra expectation and pressure. But why not just go out there and enjoy it, play our game and hopefully go to the next round."

Liverpool have held the upper hand of late, powering to a 5-0 victory at Old Trafford in 2021 and winning 7-0 at Anfield last year. United, winners only three times in their previous 18 games against Liverpool, are desperate to avoid the indignity of their enemies effectively ending their season. Erik ten Hag's team sit sixth in the Premier League and face a tough task to qualify for the Champions League via a top-four finish. Closely scrutinised by new co-owner Jim Ratcliffe, Ten Hag has been under fire in a disappointing second season, but victory over Liverpool would buy the Dutch manager some breathing space.

"Actually, we never got to turn around so far," Ten Hag said. "We had our opportunities, but we missed them. "Sunday we have another good opportunity to get the momentum. The team showed lately we are in a very good series of games with a lot of wins."

United will be boosted by the expected return from injury of Denmark striker Rasmus Hojlund and defenders Harry Maguire and Aaron Wan-Bissaka. "They have to believe they can do it. Now we have to take the momentum," Ten Hag said. "That is what I feel when I train with them, that they have belief. A good spirit is there. Go and get the turnaround." — AFP

## Galopin Des Champs wins back-to-back Cheltenham Gold Cups

CHELTHENHAM: Galopin Des Champs was described as a "superstar" by his trainer Willie Mullins after joining an elite club of horses to claim back-to-back Cheltenham Gold Cups on Friday. The odds-on favourite, trained by Mullins and ridden immaculately by Paul Townend, followed up his 2023 success in jump racing's blue riband in emphatic fashion.

In second came the well backed Gerri Colombe with Grand National winner Corach Rambler in third. Galopin Des Champs put up a performance fitting of the 100th anniversary of National Hunt's premier prize to join Best Mate and Al Boum Photo as the only horses to win the Gold Cup in successive years this century.

Winning owner Audrey Turley described watching her pride and joy repeat his heroics of last year as "terrifying". "It does not get any easier, I will enjoy the race later on. "I still cannot believe it. He is so special to us, he is so kind so loving."

For Mullins this was the crowning glory of a remarkable week in which the Irish master trainer notched up his 100th Festival winner on Wednesday. It took him a long time to finally get his hands on a Gold Cup, but now he has won four of the last six editions of the great race.

"All we were worried about was the loose horse over the last two fences. "He made one mistake early on but that was it, phew! "To win the 100th one, the week has been so good, it's like a perfect storm," said an emotional Mullins, who also won Tuesday's Champion Hurdle with State Man.



CHELTHENHAM: Jockey Paul Townend celebrates as he arrives in the winner's enclosure after riding Galopin Des Champs to victory in the Cheltenham Gold Cup Steeplechase race on the final day of the Cheltenham Festival at Cheltenham Racecourse, in Cheltenham. — AFP

"The third one would be the plan next year," Mullins added of Galopin Des Champs, confirming his champion will return to try to make it three in a row. Only Best Mate (2002-2004), Arkle (1964-1966), Cottage Rake (1948-1950) and five-time winner Golden Miller (1932-1936) have succeeded in conquering jump racing's Everest more than two years running.

"He's doing everything right, and achieving more than I thought he might," added Mullins. "You dream of those sort of things!" Townend had Galopin Des Champs perfectly placed in third behind early leader The Real Whacker. L'Homme Presse was prominent as one of the main dangers Fastorslow fell, the horse

continuing to race riderless, posing a potential problem to Galopin Des Champs.

But Townend kept his cool, jumping to the front and surging up the famous Cheltenham hill to the line to beat Gerri Colombe by three and a half lengths, with a further nine and a half lengths back to Corach Rambler. Townend commented: "He was brave the whole way around and the loose one was interfering with us a bit and it was messy. "What he found up the straight from the back of the last — you see so many horses get to the last and don't get up the hill. He got up the hill last year but it was a different type of ride when we conserved everything. We did it the hard way this year." — AFP

Today's Matches		
<b>ENGLAND FA CUP</b>		
Chelsea v Leicester City		15:45
beIN Sports HD 1		
Manchester United v Liverpool		18:30
beIN Sports HD 1		
<b>ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE</b>		
FC Everton v Liverpool		17:00
beIN Sports		
West Ham United v Aston Villa		17:00
beIN Sports HD 2		
Brighton & Hove Albion v Manchester City		19:30
beIN Sports		
<b>SPANISH LEAGUE PRIMERA</b>		
Sevilla FC v Celta de Vigo		16:00
beIN Sports HD 3		
Las Palmas v UD Almeria		18:15
beIN Sports HD 6		
Villarreal CF v Valencia C.F		18:15
beIN Sports HD 3		
Rayo Vallecano v Real Betis		20:30
beIN Sports HD 3		
Atletico de Madrid v FC Barcelona		23:00
beIN Sports HD 1		
<b>ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE SERIE A</b>		
Juventus FC v Genoa CFC		14:30
beIN Sports		
Hellas Verona FC v AC Milan		17:00
beIN Sports 2		
Atalanta BC v ACF Fiorentina		20:00
beIN Sports		
AS Roma v US Sassuolo Calcio		20:00
beIN Sports		
Inter Milan v SSC Napoli		22:45
beIN Sports		
<b>GERMAN BUNDESLIGA</b>		
SC Freiburg v Bayer 04 Leverkusen		17:30
beIN Sports		
Borussia Dortmund v Eintracht Frankfurt		19:30
beIN Sports		
<b>FRENCH LEAGUE</b>		
Stade brestois 29 v LOSC Lille		15:00
beIN Sports		
Stade de Reims v FC Metz		17:00
beIN Sports		
Clermont Foot 63 v Le Havre AC		17:00
beIN Sports		
AS Monaco v FC Lorient		17:00
beIN Sports		
Stade Rennais FC v Olympique de Marseille		19:05
beIN Sports		
HSC Montpellier v Paris Saint-Germain		22:45
beIN Sports		

# Classifieds

### Hospitals & Clinics

#### 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

#### Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300

### Change of Name

I, **Bayanaboyina** Sumalatha, W/o. Bayanaboyina Lakshmi Narasaiah, D.No.2/65, Upparapalli, Asramam, Kadappa, A.P-516247 have changed my name from Binaboena Sumalatha (old name) to Bayanaboyina Sumalatha (new name), Passport No. S7633005. (#5185) 17/03/2024

I, **Nazneen Shakeel** Ahmeed Khan of Indian Passport No. U0744172 having permanent address: B 20 403 Vaishali Nagar, S V Road Jogeshwari,

Mumbai, Pin: 400102, Maharashtra, India residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under (Given name) nazneen shakeel ahmed and (surname) Khan (#5184) 15/03/2024

I **Arif Inayathulla** holder of Indian Passport No. T8759963 having permanent address 50/249, Ravindra Nagar, Kadapa, YSR Dist., Andhra Pradesh, India - 516003 residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare

that henceforth my name will be read as (Given name) Arif Inayathulla and (Surname) Shaik. (#5182) 14/03/2024

I, **Mohammad** holder of Indian Passport No. M7063789, having permanent address Lal Ghati, Ratan Garh, Neemuch, Madhya Pradesh, Pin code: 458226 residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as (Given name) Mohammad and (Surname) Jaat Wala. (#5183) 14/03/2024



NYON: Former Nigerian footballer John Obi Mikel poses next to the trophy after performing the 2023-2024 UEFA Champions League football tournament quarter-finals and semi-finals draw at the House of European Football in Nyon. — AFP

## Man City to face Real Madrid in Champions League quarters

### Arsenal will face Bayern Munich, while PSG meet Barcelona

PARIS: Holders Manchester City will come up against record 14-time winners Real Madrid in the Champions League quarter-finals after being paired together in Friday's draw, meaning the sides will meet in a third consecutive season in the competition.

Arsenal will face Harry Kane's Bayern Munich, while Paris Saint-Germain meet Barcelona and Atletico Madrid will take on Borussia Dortmund in the other ties. Pep Guardiola's City will travel to the Spanish capital for the first leg on April 9, with the return in Manchester on April 17.

City beat Madrid in the semi-finals last season on the way to winning the Champions League for the first time, following a 1-1 draw at the Santiago Bernabeu with a stunning 4-0 victory at home in the second leg.

Real came out on top when the teams met in the last four a year earlier, before going on to defeat Liverpool in the final. The Spanish giants also won a semi-final clash between the teams in 2016, just before Guardiola took over at City, while the English club emerged

victorious in the last 16 in 2020.

"It looks like a little bit of tradition — three years in a row playing the king of the competition, who have won 14 Champions Leagues, but it is what it is," Guardiola said at a press conference ahead of Saturday's FA Cup quarter-final against Newcastle United.

"Hopefully we can arrive in a good moment. It's still a few weeks before the first game in Madrid and we will see." "They are the champions and we know each other perfectly, so I don't need to explain the virtues of City," Emilio Butragueno, the former Real player who is now the club's director of institutional relations, told Spanish broadcaster Movistar+.

"Two tremendous games await us." The draw threw up a set of mouthwatering ties with Arsenal being rewarded with a clash against German champions Bayern after beating Porto on penalties to qualify for the quarter-finals for the first time since 2010.

The Gunners will host the first leg at the Emirates Stadium on April 9, which

will see former Tottenham Hotspur talisman Kane — who has so far scored 36 goals in his first season at Bayern — return to London. The sides will meet again in Bavaria eight days later.

#### All-English semi-final?

There is the prospect of an all-English semi-final, with the winners of the tie between Arsenal and Bayern facing either City or Real in the last four. PSG's meeting with Barcelona will be the latest instalment in the rivalry between those sides, as the French club aim to win the Champions League for the first time in their final season before Kylian Mbappe departs when his contract expires in June.

Five-time champions Barcelona knocked PSG out in the quarter-finals in 2013 and 2015, before their spectacular victory in the last 16 in 2017, when they recovered from losing 4-0 away in the first leg with a 6-1 win in the return at the Camp Nou.

The Barcelona coach then was Luis Enrique, now in charge of Paris. PSG avenged that defeat in the last 16 in

2021, when Mbappe scored a hat-trick in the away leg to help his side triumph 5-2 on aggregate.

"It is going to be a great tie. PSG have a very young side and a coach who we know very well, but we also have a great team and they will help us to go through," Rafael Yuste, the Barcelona vice-president, told Movistar+. The sides will meet in the French capital on April 10, before the return six days later at Montjuic in Barcelona.

Atletico will host Dortmund in the first leg of their quarter-final, with the winners of that taking on PSG or Barcelona in the last four. "We're looking forward to a trip to Madrid," said Dortmund coach Edin Terzic at a press conference on Friday.

"Our clear goal is to take on a tough opponent who are a bit of a monster in knockout games and to defeat them ahead of the home game where we want to experience a magical evening in Dortmund." This season's Champions League final will take place at Wembley in London on June 1. — AFP

### Jokic's Nuggets beat Wemby's Spurs while Zion sparks Pelicans

WASHINGTON: Nikola Jokic dominated rookie Victor Wembanyama in a big-man battle as NBA champion Denver defeated San Antonio on Friday while Zion Williamson powered New Orleans over the Los Angeles Clippers.

Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Jokic scored 31 points on 13-of-19 shooting while Jamal Murray added 15 points and 10 rebounds in Denver's 117-106 victory over the Spurs at Austin, Texas. The Nuggets stretched their win streak to five games and seized sole possession of the Western Conference lead at 47-20, a half-game ahead of Oklahoma City with the second-best record in the NBA behind Boston (52-14).

"Holding onto first place is a big deal for us," said reserve Christian Braun, who replaced Jokic in the final minutes. "We've been on a roll. Our starters have been doing a really good job, playing really well since the All-Star break. That's what we've got to do. I'm here to give Jokic and Jamal a rest."

French 20-year-old rookie Wembanyama had 17 points on 4-of-12 shooting from the floor, going 1-of-5 from 3-point range, and added nine rebounds, two assists, two steals and three blocks for the Spurs, the West doormat at 14-53.

At New Orleans, Williamson scored 34 points to lead the Pelicans over the Clippers 112-104. The 23-year-old US power forward hit 14-of-21 shots from the floor and added seven rebounds, four assists, three steals and a blocked shot for the Pelicans, who improved to 40-26 while the Clippers, without James Harden due to a shoulder injury, slid to 42-24.

New Orleans pulled within two games of Los Angeles for fourth in the West and clinched a season tie-break over the Clippers, but Williamson wouldn't call it a statement triumph. "I want to win," Williamson said. "Simple as that. They can take it how they want. I just wanted to win."

"Every game matters. If you want to be in a good spot in the standings you've got to win every game. That's the mindset." Williamson was especially pleased with the defensive work against Clippers stars Paul George and Kawhi Leonard.

"They're both elite shotmakers. They're going to hit some shots," he said. "Just being physical and communicating. That was the game plan." George scored 26 points on 10-of-21 shooting, 3-of-9 from 3-point range, while Leonard was 8-of-15 from the floor and 1-of-3 from beyond the arc for 23 points to lead the Clippers. — AFP

### Sakkari holds off Gauff to book Indian Wells final

INDIAN WELLS: Maria Sakkari needed three sets and four match points to get past US Open champion Coco Gauff on Friday, setting up a title clash with world number one Iga Swiatek at the ATP-WTA Indian Wells Masters.

In a match halted twice by rain, Greece's ninth-ranked Sakkari squandered three match points in the second set but pulled away in the third to win 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-2. For the second time in three years, she'll take on Swiatek for the title after falling to the Polish star in 2022.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek needed just 69 minutes to clinch her return to the championship match, beating 32nd-ranked Ukrainian Marta Kostyuk 6-2, 6-1. There would be no easy victory for Sakkari, who trailed 4-3 in the opening set when light rain stopped play for 20 minutes.

Sakkari returned and held serve before gaining the only break of the opening set, converting her fifth break point. The second set had barely begun when heavier rain halted play for two hours. When it re-

sumed, Sakkari struck first, breaking an error-prone Gauff for 2-1 and again for a 5-2 lead.

But the world number three, playing in the Indian Wells semi-finals for the first time, responded. Gauff broke Sakkari handily to claw back to 5-3. Two games later, Sakkari battled back from 15-40 down but couldn't convert her three match points, sailing a forehand long on the first before Gauff saved two more with winners on the way to a service break that knotted the set at 5-5.

The tiebreaker was all Gauff as the American roared to a 6-2 lead, finally leveling the match with a service winner on her fourth set point. They exchanged service breaks to start the third set, but Sakkari won the next three games to take control and broke Gauff a final time to seal the win after two hours and 41 minutes.

"I don't want to disrespect Coco but it would've been amazing if this match was over an hour ago," Sakkari told the hardy fans who braved the cold night air and rain. "I'm going to take this win, even though it was in three sets," she added. "That was an amazing win. Coco is such an amazing opponent. She's incredible. She fights every point. I'm just so happy I'm in the final once again here."

Sakkari said sheer determination was key. "I didn't give up," she said. "You can easily lose your head when you lose that second set from being match point up. Things go wrong and I was down a break. Things didn't look right, but



INDIAN WELLS: Greece's Maria Sakkari hits a forehand return to USA's Coco Gauff during their ATP-WTA Indian Wells Masters women's semi-final tennis match at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells. — AFP

I just kept believing and kept fighting." Swiatek, meanwhile, was in complete control throughout against Kostyuk. "I think it was the cleanest match I played here," said Swiatek, who hit 14 winners with just six unforced errors and didn't face a break point. "I didn't really have any moment today in the match where I didn't feel confident. I have all the positive vibes." Although she reached the final without dropping a set, Swiatek had insisted after prior victories that she had a few things in her game to sort out. It looked as if she had done just that as she put Kostyuk on the run early, piling on the pressure with her precision and power. — AFP