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Ramadan KAREEM

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Cabinet resigns after election

New National Assembly to hold inaugural session on April 17



By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The government on Saturday submitted its resignation to HH the Amir as required by the constitution following parliamentary elections. After accepting the resignation, HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is expected to start customary consultations early next week with former prime ministers and Assembly speakers before naming a prime minister, who could be the present one or a new figure.

Under Kuwaiti law, the new Cabinet must be formed before the National Assembly holds its inaugural session within two weeks after the election results. During an extraordinary meeting on Saturday, the Cabinet expressed gratitude for all efforts by all bodies that participated in organizing the elections. It praised the citizens' national commitment demonstrated in this democratic event. The Cabinet con-

gratulated all the newly-elected MPs, wishing them success and further progress.

Before resigning, the Cabinet approved during an extraordinary meeting on Saturday an Amiri decree inviting the new parliament to hold its first meeting on April 17. During the meeting, HH the Amir will deliver a speech, followed by new MPs and ministers taking the oath, then the election of speaker, deputy speaker and parliamentary committees.

So far, MP Fahad Al-Azmi has announced his intention to contest the speaker's post. Outgoing speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun is also highly expected to run for re-election. Assembly speaker between 2013 and 2022 Marzouq Al-Ghanem said he will study the matter before deciding whether to run or not. Ahead of the official inaugural meeting, MPs will hold an informal meeting at the Assembly on Monday, according to MP Bader Al-Dahoum, who added invitations will be sent out to new lawmakers.

RAMADAN KAREEM

So, where are you going?

By Yeasmin Mohammed Ibrahim

Most scientists concur that the universe is expanding and destined for cessation, thereby culminating everything within it. The Creator, Allah, lives forever — never born or given birth to, unique, and unparalleled in comparison to His creation. Have you gazed into the mirror and pondered, "What's the purpose of this life?" Are we obedient or not to Allah? Answer, we were made to heed His Call and follow all His messengers. Every other living thing or His other Creations, like the Sun, moon, stars, trees, or animals, submit to Allah. The Sun never says, "Today I don't feel like rising." So obedient. "So, where are you going?" (Surah Takwir V 26).

We all have to die one day. Maybe we will live 20, 30, 40, 80, or perhaps 100 years, but still, the return is imminent. Death is uncertain, and not always is it a sick person dying. Its arrival is sudden, not solely reserved for the old or sick; the sick may endure, while the young may perish prematurely, who knows. Wherever we may be, in any corner, whichever part of the world, death is an inevitability - the only truth we don't think about much. Should our end come today, what have we prepared to present before Allah? Are we ready?

We are here in this world for one thing: To give our eligibility test to enter heaven. On the Day of Judgment, all our affairs, big or small, will be exposed, akin to a courtroom scene with a Judge, audience, and criminal in one place. And we will know where is our final destination there. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) advised us to keep death in frequent remembrance. Abu Huraira (RA) reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Remember often the destroyer of pleasures: Death." (Sunan Al-Tirmidhi 2307).

Maybe I'm walking to the mosque, but tomorrow I will be carried. Maybe today I'm showering, but I will be given my final bath. I'm dressing up today, but one day I will be worn a kafan (burial shroud). Which society are we trying to impress? For what or whom is all this struggle?

Continued on Page 6

Kuwaiti medics do 120 surgeries in 2 days in Gaza

GAZA: The Kuwait Society for Relief's medical team in Gaza announced Saturday the achievement of their continued implementation of a series of relief projects for displaced people in Gaza. Deputy Director General of Kuwait Society for Relief and head of the Kuwaiti medical relief team in Gaza Omar Al-Thuwaini said in a press statement to KUNA that 120 operations were done within two days on a number of patients at the European Hospital. He thanked the Kuwaiti

people for their contributions of providing material and moral support to the medical relief team.

The head of the relief and projects sector at Kuwait Society for Relief and administrative coordinator of the Kuwaiti relief team Mahmoud Al-Mesbah said in a similar statement to KUNA that administrative coordinators in the team have participated in implementing a number of food projects that benefited approximately 25,000 affected and displaced people in Gaza.

He confirmed that the team set up iftar tables for 790 Palestinian families and distributed about 540 vegetable baskets, in addition to distributing 1,250 iftar meals to displaced families, in addition to the team visiting meat warehouses inside the Gaza



GAZA: Kuwaiti medics operate on a patient. — KUNA

Strip. The Kuwaiti team arrived in Gaza on Monday through the Rafah crossing on a bold humanitarian mission involving 11 Kuwaiti doctors and administrators in the bombed-out enclave. — KUNA

Faithful throng Grand Mosque for qiyam prayers

By Shakir Reshamwala

KUWAIT: Hundreds of thousands of worshippers spent the night of the 27th of Ramadan in prayer and supplication at mosques around Kuwait early Saturday. Huge crowds were in attendance at the Grand Mosque, the hub of worship in Kuwait in Ramadan. Qiyam prayers started at midnight, with roads adjacent to the mosque cordoned off. Emergency services were at hand and scores of vol-

unteers directed the crowds. As the night wore on, worshippers — estimated at nearly 100,000 — spilled onto the sidewalks, streets and nearby embankments.

Eight rakaats of tahajjud prayers were performed, followed by three rakaats of witr prayers. The first four were led by Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nafees, and the remaining by Sheikh Meshary Al-Afasi. No sermon was scheduled after four rakaats as on other nights.

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



KUWAIT: Worshippers pray in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque in Kuwait City in the early hours of April 6, 2024 during the holy fasting month of Ramadan. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (See Page 3)

Zionists deploy AI to identify Gaza targets, permit killing civilians

UNITED NATIONS: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday expressed serious concern over reports that the Zionist entity was using artificial intelligence to identify targets in Gaza, resulting in many civilian deaths. According to a report in the independent magazine +972, the Zionist entity has used AI to identify targets in Gaza — in some cases with as little as 20 seconds of human oversight.

Guterres said that he was "deeply troubled by reports that the (Zionist) military's bombing campaign includes Artificial Intelligence as a tool in the identification of targets, particularly in densely populated residential areas, resulting in a high level of civilian casualties".

Continued on Page 6



GAZA: Injured Palestinian father Ashraf mourns over the bodies of his two daughters Aysal and Rashel after they were killed in an overnight Zionist air strike on April 4, 2024 at Al-Najjar Hospital in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP



Local

Expenses burden push many into financial survival mode

Financial expert recommends '10 percent rule', proffers solutions

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: The burden of expenses is making life difficult for many, pushing them into financial survival mode before each month's end. Even with salary raises, saving money still feels like a daydream for those people. Financial expert Mohammad Al-Rashed noticed that the problem isn't rooted in how much you earn, but in how wisely you manage your expenses each month. Rashed believes that this common struggle grew with the habit of spending without planning ahead, as he said, "It's a big mistake to start spending your salary as soon as you receive it, and only save what's left over."

Right after you get paid, he recommended dividing your expenses into three main categories: savings, emergencies, and essentials, using what he called the 10 percent rule. That means putting away 10 percent of the money for emergencies, like unexpected medical bills or car repairs, and another 10 percent for savings and investments.

After allocating these rates for emergencies and savings, the remaining funds should be dedicated to covering essential monthly expenses such as school fees, rent, or debt payments. To manage these expenses effectively, Rashed suggested using "The four Envelopes Method," dividing the remaining money into four weeks. For example, if you have 200 KD remaining, you will allocate 50 KD for each week, placed in separate four envelopes.



Mohammad Al-Rashed

To ensure the success of this strategy, Rashed emphasized the importance of living within your means, saying, "Don't live beyond your social level." He highlighted the need for individuals to be honest with themselves and acknowledge what they can and cannot afford. He advised against trying to impress others by copying their lifestyle choices. "If your financial situation only allows for an average-sized house, don't aim for a villa," he advised.

After all, it remains important to always dream big by having ambitions to seek additional sources of income, hereby investment plays a significant role. Rashed discussed various investment methods, including deposits, stocks, cryptocurrencies, real estate funds, or business ventures. He noted that the best method depends on your goals, whether you seek immediate returns or are willing to wait by seeking long term investment sources.

Regardless of the method, consistency remains the key in investing, according to Rashed. "Be a real in-



vestor, not a speculator," he urged, stressing the significance of patience in witnessing returns and goals attainment. Furthermore, he advised investors not to

be afraid of market fluctuations, regarding them as a natural aspect of any market. "The primary focus should be on long-term growth," he clarified.



The Iranian ambassador with Assistant Secretary of State for Asian Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Samih Hayat and officials during the event.

Iranian envoy organizes Ghabga, blasts Zionists

Faten Omar

KUWAIT: The Iranian Embassy in the State of Kuwait held a Ghabga on the occasion of Ramadan, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. During his speech, the Iranian Ambassador to Kuwait, Mohammad Totonji, conveyed prayers for divine acceptance of fasting and prayers, particularly as the holy month of Ramadan entered its final ten days, adding "The significance of Laylat al-Qadr and the blessings bestowed upon International Quds Day, declared by the late Imam Khomeini underscored the importance of this day as a moment to remember and advocate for the oppressed worldwide, especially emphasizing solidarity with the people of occupied Palestine."

He stressed that the Zionist entity's continuation of committing genocide against our brothers in Gaza and imposing famine and siege on women and children threatens a humanitarian tragedy that cannot be tolerated. Ambassador stated "What is happening today is a continuation of a bloody series that began seventy-six years ago. Every day we witness more killing and destruction of the people of Palestine, where it exceeded 31,000 Palestinian martyrs within five months, in addition to the destruction of many hospitals, religious sites, and schools, as well as displacing people while the



Iranian Ambassador to Kuwait, Mohammad Totonji

world watches and the international community remains silent."

He emphasized the significance of observing International Jerusalem Day as an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity with Gaza, underscoring the importance of condemning the crimes committed by the Zionists, and urged international forums to offer support to the oppressed Palestinian people. The Iranian ambassador highlighted the need for global unity in addressing the injustices faced in Palestine, advocating for their rights, and holding accountable those responsible for their suffering.

At the end of the event, the ambassador praised the efforts of the Kuwaiti government and its honorable positions to relieve the Palestinians through the air bridge sending tens of tons of food and medicine, based on the high directives of the political leadership.



Kuwaiti Ambassador to Brussels Nawaf Al-Enezi with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

has hosted the NATO Regional Center since 2017, which is the first regional center of its kind outside the NATO region, as it provides training and educational courses in the areas of partnership between the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative countries and NATO. NATO, which was founded on April 4, 1949, in Washington in response to the threatening policies pursued by the communist Soviet Union at the time, celebrated the 75th anniversary of its founding on Thursday in Brussels with the participation of the foreign ministers of member states. —KUNA

Kuwait joins in celebration of NATO's 75th anniversary

BRUSSELS: The Kuwait Embassy in Belgium and its missions to the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) participated in the ceremony held by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken on the 75th anniversary of the founding of NATO on the sidelines of the NATO Ministerial Meeting in Brussels.

During his speech, Blinken discussed the achievements achieved by NATO over the past decades, as well as efforts to strengthen partnerships with third countries, while looking forward to the Washington summit scheduled for July 2024. He also addressed emerging risks, including cybersecurity, and the efforts achieved in spending 2 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) on defense expenditures of all NATO members.

Kuwaiti Ambassador to Brussels Nawaf Al-Enezi told KUNA, "Kuwait enjoys a partnership relationship with NATO as the first country to join the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in 2004." In addition, Kuwait

Kuwaiti surgeon earns honorary US fellowship

WASHINGTON: The Kuwaiti surgeon at the College of Medicine—Kuwait University, Dr. Moussa Khorshid, has been granted an honorary fellowship from the American Surgical Association (ASA). Dr. Khorshid is the first doctor in the Gulf and the Middle East to be honored with this fellowship. In a statement to KUNA, he dedicated the certificate to His Highness the

Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the people of Kuwait.

Dr. Khorshid, a specialist in endoscopic surgery, said that this achievement adds to Kuwait's record of earning many high-esteem awards and contributes to placing it on the international map in the realm of endoscopy and the treatment of obesity and tumors. The ASA, founded in 1841, groups elite American surgeons. This certificate had been granted to 99 doctors of various specialties throughout the world. Dr. Khorshid had been given another certificate in 2021 from the American ACS (the American College of Surgeons). He was the first to earn it in the Gulf and the second at the Middle East level. — KUNA



Kuwaiti surgeon at the College of Medicine (Kuwait University) Dr. Moussa Khorshid has been granted the honorary fellowship from the American Surgical Association (ASA). — KUNA

Minister commends humanitarian efforts

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Minister of Social Affairs, Family, and Childhood Affairs Sheikh Feras Saud Al-Malik Al-Sabah has touted the distinguished humanitarian role of the Kuwaiti Charitable Societies Union (KCSU). Welcoming the union's representatives, the minister said the partnership between the ministry and civil society organizations is the key to the success of the recently launched humanitarian campaign aiming to help those in debt. The second edition of this annual humanitarian initiative is supervised by the ministries of social affairs, media, labor, and endowments, the Union of Consumer Cooperative So-

cieties, and the Kuwaiti Charitable Societies Union. It is chiefly meant to help Kuwaiti families who are locked in financial trouble.

Meanwhile, a medical team of the Kuwait Society for Relief has been conducting surgeries for wounded and ill patients and handing out relief aid to the displaced persons in the war-ravaged Gaza Strip for the third day in a row. Head of the Kuwait team and Deputy Director General of the Kuwait Society for Relief, Omar Al-Thuwaini, told KUNA that his team offered its healthcare services at European and Kuwaiti hospitals in Gaza. The medical team has performed more than 75 surgeries for Palestinian patients and wounded in the Gaza Strip so far, he said. He pointed out that the team also distributed vegetable packages to displaced families in the southern city of Rafah, which houses over 1.2 million displaced people. — KUNA



BRUSSELS: Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Hadja Lahbib (left) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, each hold a slice of cake as they and foreign ministers celebrate the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance's 75th anniversary at the NATO Headquarters. — AFP

Arab Parliament congratulates Kuwait

Egyptian press highlights Kuwait's parliamentary polls

CAIRO: Arab Parliament Speaker Adel Al-Asoumi congratulated the Kuwaiti political leadership on the success of the National Assembly elections on Friday. In remarks to KUNA, Al-Asoumi lauded His Highness the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's patronage and support of the Kuwaiti democratic process. He also praised the democratic process of the Kuwaiti parliamentary elections, stressing that it was a pioneering and distinguished experience for Kuwait. Al-Asoumi wished all of the newly elected MPs success and further progress.

In another development, the Egyptian daily press dedicated wide spaces in the editions published on Saturday to the 2024 parliamenta-

ry elections in Kuwait and the democratic atmosphere that marked the polling. The mass circulation "Al-Ahram" specialized wide spaces for the Kuwaiti elections, congratulated His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on the polls' success, and felicitated the winners of the 50 seats.

It wrote that the change in the new line-up is different by 22 percent as compared to that of the previous assembly, where eight nominees had been elected as members of the parliament; three who were former MPs came back to Abdullah Al-Salem Hall, also noting that the voting reached 62.1 percent, according to the Ministry of Information. "Al-Gomhuria" indicated that the change

in the new assembly reached 20 percent. Ten figures who were members of the 2023 Assembly joined the 2024 parliament.

It also wrote that seven were elected as members of the new parliament, and three former MPs rejoined the assembly. The former MP Jenan Boushehri was the sole Kuwaiti woman to bag a seat in the new assembly. "Al-Masri Al-Yom" newspaper also concurred that the change was estimated at 20 percent, noting that the voting had lasted for 12 hours, covering five constituencies. The polling was conducted on a single-vote basis.

Meanwhile, the Kuwait Cabinet expressed its gratitude on Saturday for all efforts made by all

of the bodies that participated in organizing the parliamentary election in 2024. This came during an extraordinary meeting held at Bayan Palace and presided over by His Highness Prime Minister Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah.

The Cabinet was briefed by the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Acting Minister of Interior, Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah, on the electoral process and the announcement of the election's final results. In this regard, the Cabinet praised the citizens' national commitment they demonstrated in this democratic event. The cabinet went on to congratulate all of the newly elected MPs, wishing them all success and further progress. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Muslims pray outside the Grand Mosque in Kuwait City in the early hours of April 6, 2024. Hundreds of thousands of worshippers spent the night of the 27th of Ramadan in prayer and supplication at mosques around Kuwait early Saturday. Huge crowds were in attendance at the Grand Mosque, the hub of worship in Kuwait in Ramadan. Qiyam prayers started at midnight, with roads adjacent to the mosque cordoned off. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Diplomat praises Saudi leaders for successful Umrah

JEDDAH: The Kuwait Consul General in Saudi Arabia city (Jeddah) and its permanent representative to the organization of Islamic Cooperation,

Mohammed Al-Mutairi, said on Saturday that the consulate has made all efforts and provided all facilities to serve Kuwaiti Umrah pilgrims in the holy month, especially on the last Friday of Ramadan, stressing that the success of the Umrah season in Ramadan "calls for pride."

Consul Al-Mutairi explained in a statement to the Kuwaiti news agency (KUNA) that the efforts to serve Kuwaiti Umrah pilgrims in the holy month of Ramadan came under the direct directives of

Foreign Minister Abdullah Al-Yahya and follow-up from Deputy Minister Ambassador Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah in coordination with the Kuwaiti Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, in line with the plans of the Saudi authorities for the last ten days of Ramadan.

He added that the Umrah season this year was exceptional in all matters, including the services provided and the plans implemented. He expressed his congratulations to the Saudi political

leadership on the success of the Umrah season this year and thanked them for their follow-up and their keenness to perform Umrah rituals easily and conveniently and to provide all possibilities for the comfort of the guests. Makkah witnessed the influx of millions of worshippers, Umrah worshippers, and visitors yesterday who came to perform the last Friday prayers of Ramadan amid an integrated system of religious services that enable worshippers to worship easily. — KUNA

Benefits of fasting

Helps in protecting from Alzheimer's disease

According to a study published in *Frontiers in Molecular Neuroscience*, fasting protects against Alzheimer's disease and relieves its symptoms. Fasting is a therapy option that is rapidly gaining traction outside of the domain of pharmaceuticals and treatments.

Helps in improvement of memory and intellect

Evidence shows that fasting improves brain functions and structures in mice. Because higher glucose levels result in poorer cognitive performance, especially among individuals with pre-diabetes levels.

Boosts the mood

As per the research conducted in the *Current Neuropharmacology*, fasting shows to boost moving and sleep quality. Additional findings suggest fasting markedly reduces negative emotions, including tension, and depressive feelings.

Spiritual benefits of fasting

Every religion observes fasting in their own ways as per the scripture. But Islam is the last and complete religion for all humanity and has made obligatory fasting for the whole month of Ramadan in its utmost format. As we have discussed the health and mental benefits of fasting, Muslims consider the spiritual benefits of fasting as compared to the other benefits.

Cleaning the soul

Fasting is one of the best ways to clean your soul. As fasting abstains you from eating and drinking, similarly it abstains you from evil deeds and minor and major sins. This is the right time to keep the objectives of fasting even when we are not fasting. This way we can clean our souls from all the evil dirt and get closer to the Almighty Allah.

A newly born feeling

At the end of fasting in the month of Ramadan, you will feel renewed, full of energy, and empowered with a new desire, praise, and sensitivity to Allah's commandment. You will find that worldly values are nothing in comparison to what you have gained in the past 30 days of fasting. It gives you a feeling as if you are newly born.

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: A group of children play around the swing in this file photo. — Photo from KOC archive, provided by Mahmoud Zakaria, heritage researcher at Ministry of Information.

NBK and LOYAC support children through 'Eid Clothing' campaign

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) and LOYAC organized "Eid Clothing" campaign to support children in low income families through purchasing new Eid clothing to celebrate Eid Al-Fitr by dressing up and wearing their new outfits. The campaign covered purchasing new Eid clothing to 30 children in Kuwait. Each dedicated volunteer was assigned to accompany a child to go shopping. The shopping trip included buying new clothes and shoes for Eid Al-Fitr, so that children would look their best and don't feel left out of the celebration mood due to the limited resources of their families.

"NBK is so proud of its cooperation with LOYAC. We highly appreciate its role in the community through organizing a wide range of volunteering, developmental, awareness and social initiatives", Joanne Al AbdulJaleel, NBK Public Relations Manager said. "The "Eid Clothing" campaign, launched to support children in low income families, is considered a unique initiative

across Kuwait. It extends a helping hand to families in need to bring them the joy of Eid through providing the necessary support to whomever in need, so no one is left out when celebrating Eid holidays" she added.

She highlighted that NBK is always committed to supporting humanitarian initiatives and is proud to lead this campaign with LOYAC. "We look forward to organizing this campaign to complement our community and philanthropic initiatives that share the same objectives of lend-

ing helping hands to those in need," she noted. Al AbdulJaleel stressed that NBK firmly believes that this social commitment is a fundamental cornerstone of NBK's objectives as a leading financial institution, expressing his hopes that this campaign had left a positive impact on children and brought them happiness, confirming that NBK's mission is to bring joy and hope for a better tomorrow.

The initiative is part of NBK's commitment to its social responsibility program in Ramadan and expanding its reach to cover more sustainable programs. NBK continues to reinforce its leading corporate citizen role committed to bringing positive values to the community through its CSR initiatives that adopt a wide range of objectives. NBK's participation in this initiative is part of its partnership with LOYAC through its participation in similar campaigns covering training, developmental, educational and social services programs.



Joanne Al AbdulJaleel



Kuwait reaffirms its efforts to enhance mental health

NEW YORK: Kuwait reaffirmed its commitment to enhancing mental health care for children and adolescents through comprehensive legislation and programs. This came in a speech by Kuwait's Minister Plenipotentiary and Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Faisal Al-Enezi at an event held at the organization's headquarters on the mental health of children and adolescents.

In the context of seeking to achieve better mental health for children and adolescents, Al-Enezi said that Kuwait issued a law in 2019 for mental health that was not limited to treatment only but included correction and rehabilitation. He added that this law authorizes the Ministry of Health to establish rehabilitation centers and grant licenses to private centers to support mental health patients. Kuwait also launched the Kuwait National Child Protection Program Initiative in 2016 to protect children and adolescents from abuse and neglect, providing a framework for social and therapeutic rehabilitation services and the necessary support, moral guidance, and social counseling to vulnerable children.

Al-Enezi added that Kuwait's government had established a hotline to protect anonymous children in line with Kuwaiti Child Rights Law No. 21/2015, which serves as a channel for investigating cases of child abuse and neglect in the six

governorates of Kuwait. Kuwait also launched the Child Protection Office of the Ministry of Health, which was opened under the auspices of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs to deal with complaints related to children at risk. Al-Enezi stated that the center also conducts comprehensive assessments of children's well-being and provides health and psychological treatment and rehabilitation services to affected family members.

Al-Enezi pointed out that Kuwait's continued efforts to strengthen family protection and men-



Kuwait's Minister Plenipotentiary and Deputy Permanent Representative to United Nations Faisal Al-Enezi.

tal health guidelines are an investment in the collective future of the world. Kuwait participated in organizing this event in cooperation with the permanent delegations of Qatar, Canada, Romania, Indonesia, and Mexico, and in coordination with the World Health Organization as well as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). — KUNA



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Earthquake rattles US northeast

Mexico cuts ties with Ecuador after police raid embassy

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Palestinians perform the last Friday noon prayer of Islam's holy fasting month of Ramadan at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem, on April 5, 2024.

Somber last Friday of Ramadan in Jerusalem

'We all feel what is going on in Gaza. We can't escape it for a minute.'

JERUSALEM: Palestinian Muslims marked a tense and somber last Friday of Ramadan in Jerusalem, with minor scuffles between worshippers and Zionist police controlling the entrance to the Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. Some 120,000 people descended on the shrine, which dominates the Old City, officials said, with grand mufti Muhammad Ahmad Hussein urging the faithful to brave the heavy police presence because of the war in Gaza.

Adli al-Agha, 53, from Jerusalem, told AFP that many people "had to flee dawn prayers" after Zionist police deployed a mini-drone spraying tear gas to disperse people chanting "Glory to God". "In our soul and our blood, we sacrifice for you Al-Aqsa," worshippers declared, according to Agha. Police said they arrested eight people for inciting terrorism.

Yasser Basha, from Tulkarem in the Zionist-occupied West Bank, said police were restricting entrance to the mosque to the old and the very young. Only men over 55 and women over 50 were being allowed inside, he said. "If it wasn't for the war, things would have been much easier," he added.

Friday also marks Laylat al-Qadr ("The Night of Destiny"), the spiritual climax of the Muslim holy month, which commemorates the moment the archangel Gabriel first appeared to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and began revealing the Koran.

It is the night when Muslims believe their prayers are most likely to be granted, a festive moment while children stay up late and shops stay open till the small hours. But many Palestinians are not in the mood to celebrate and are praying for an end to the war in Gaza after almost six months of bloodshed.

'Can't escape Gaza'

Sameeha Al Qadi, 55, who had come from near Bethlehem, said Jerusalem "is sad and has lost its light — we all feel what is going on in Gaza. We can't escape it for a minute." This year there are few Ramadan decorations or lights in the Holy City, with Palestinians instead having a bitter coffee and a date — traditionally to mark mourning — on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, when feasts are usually held.

"There is nothing sweet about the feast this year. People are not celebrating," said Sabah, 54, some of whose relatives have been killed in Gaza. "Everything is bitter in my mouth. It is so painful at this time which is all about family."

Easter was similarly subdued last weekend for Palestinian Christians. Adnan Jafar, 60, a sweet maker in the Old City, said usually in Ramadan his shop is at its busiest. "But I have never had a Ramadan like this. And we all know why. (Gaza) is not just affecting us, it is affecting the whole world."

ence to the position it presented on March 14 ... and we will not back down from this position," a statement said.

"The demands ... are complete ceasefire, withdrawal of the occupation forces from Gaza, the return of the displaced to their residential areas, freedom of movement of the people, offering them aid and shelter, and a serious hostage exchange deal," it said. Biden's Thursday call with Netanyahu included discussions on "empowering his negotiators" to reach a deal, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said.

Washington blames the lack of a deal on Hamas's refusal to release sick and other vulnerable hostages. Qatar has said Zionist objections to the return of displaced Gazans are the main holdup. Biden is under pressure over massive US military aid to the Zionist entity which, so far, Washington has not leveraged despite increasingly critical comments about its conduct of the war. UN agencies have accused the Zionist entity of blocking aid, but the entity blames shortages on aid groups' inability to distribute supplies once they get in.

The Zionist military announced it was firing two officers after finding a series of errors led to the drone strikes that killed the WCK workers. WCK said its Gaza operations remain suspended after the attack, while other global aid groups said relief work in the territory has become almost impossible.



RAFAH: A girl blows a balloon as behind her boys search through the rubble of a destroyed building in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on April 5, 2024. — AFP

Gaza truce talks on, after aid worker death outcry

GAZA: American, Zionist and Hamas negotiators are expected in Cairo over the weekend in a renewed push for a ceasefire and hostage release deal in a war that reaches the half-year mark on Sunday. Ahead of the talks Hamas confirmed its core demands — a complete ceasefire in Gaza and withdrawal of Zionist forces. The ceasefire attempt comes after the Zionist entity's military made a rare admission of wrongdoing and said it was firing two officers over the killing of seven aid workers in Gaza where humanitarians say famine is imminent. The admission did not quell calls for an independent probe, however. The deaths of the workers from US-based World Central Kitchen (WCK) on April 1 led to a tense call between US President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Biden urged an "immediate ceasefire" and for the first time hinted at conditioning US support for the Zionist entity on curbing the killing of civilians and improving humanitarian conditions.

Iran vows revenge

The UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths decried the Zionist attack and called for a "collective determination that there be a reckoning for this betrayal of humanity". Fears that the war could spread intensified after Iran vowed retaliation after seven Revolutionary Guards were killed in an air strike Monday on the consular annex of its embassy in Damascus. Ahead of the weekend talks, Biden wrote to the leaders of Egypt and Qatar urging them to secure commitments from Hamas to "agree to and abide by a deal", a senior administration official told AFP.

Stop-start talks have made no headway since a week-long truce in November saw some hostages exchanged for Palestinian prisoners detained by the Zionist entity. The White House confirmed negotiations would occur this weekend in Cairo, and Hamas said its delegation would head there on Sunday. But Hamas also restated its key demands. "Hamas confirms its adher-



JERUSALEM: A member of the Zionist security forces and Palestinians waiting near the Lion's Gate scuffle to enter the Al-Aqsa mosque compound to attend the last Friday noon prayer of Islam's holy fasting month of Ramadan, on April 5, 2024. — AFP

The Zionist military campaign, which enters its seventh month this week, has killed at least 33,091 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry.

The entity claims the assault is aimed at destroy-

ing Hamas after the group staged an attack on southern communities in the entity in October 2023 which resulted in the deaths of 1,170 Zionists and foreigners, most of them civilians, according to an AFP tally of Zionist official figures. — AFP

'Criminal'

The army said a commander "mistakenly assumed" Hamas had seized the aid vehicles, which were moving at night. Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong said Saturday Canberra had "not yet received sufficient information" from the Zionist entity about the death of Lalzawmi "Zomi" Frankcom and the other aid workers. "It cannot be brushed aside and it cannot be covered over," Wong said.

WCK said the Zionist entity "cannot credibly investigate its own failure in Gaza" and said its staff were attacked despite having "followed all proper communications procedures". Britain called for a "wholly independent review", while Poland sought a "criminal" probe. Hours after Biden and Netanyahu spoke, the Zionist entity announced it would allow "temporary" aid deliveries through the Ashdod port and the Erez border crossing. UN chief Antonio Guterres called for a "paradigm shift" rather than "scattered measures".

'Dying from hunger'

Mahmud Bassal, spokesman for Gaza's Civil Defense agency, told AFP Saturday aid reaching Gaza is "absolutely not sufficient" for its 2.4 million people, with basic necessities "extremely scarce" particularly in the north. "Children are dying from hunger" there, he said.

Around 1.5 million Gazans are sheltering in the territory's far south, in Rafah. "We are ordinary citizens and human beings," Siham Achur, 50, said in the tent that is now her family's home. "Why did they bomb our house?" They had lived in Khan Yunis for 30 years, Achur said, but those memories "have become dust".

On Saturday, The Zionist military said warplanes had killed Akram Salamah, a "senior" militant it said held several positions including Hamas's deputy chief for Khan Yunis. Troops also recovered from Khan Yunis the body of Elad Katzir, who was abducted on October 7 and "murdered in captivity" by Islamic Jihad, a group fighting alongside Hamas, the army said.

His sister Carmit Palty Katzir on Facebook blamed the Zionist authorities for Elad's death, saying he would have returned alive had the authorities agreed to a new truce. The Zionist military has paused leave for combat units and reinforced "defense systems" since the Iranian consulate strike. Iranian army chief Mohammad Bagheri on Saturday became the latest Iranian leader to vow retaliation. — AFP

Zionist fire 'most likely' killed woman hostage on Oct 7

JERUSALEM: A Zionist investigation found Friday that a Zionist woman who had been seized during the October 7 attack was "most likely" killed when a combat helicopter fired on her kidnappers' vehicle.

Efrat Katz and most of the militants in the vehicle were killed when the Zionist aircraft fired on them on October 7, the army investigation said. The helicopter "fired at a vehicle that had terrorists in it, and which, in retrospect, based on the testimonies, also had hostages in it," the army said in a statement.

"As a result of the fire, most of the terrorists manning the vehicle were killed, and most likely, Efrat Katz ... was killed as well." The "tragic and unfortunate" event occurred at a time of "fighting and conditions of uncertainty," Zionist Air Force chief Tomer Bar said in the statement. "The commander of the air force did not find fault in the operation by the helicopter crew, who operated in compliance with the orders in a complex reality of war."

The army statement said the mistake occurred because surveillance systems could not distinguish hostages from kidnappers once in a vehicle, and that "the shooting was defined as shooting at a vehicle with terrorists". Katz, 68 at the time of Hamas's unprecedented attack on the southern Zionist entity, was kidnapped from the Nir Oz kibbutz close to the Gaza border.

Her daughter Doron Katz-Asher and her two children were taken hostage during the attack but were later released on November 24. Katz's partner Gadi Moses and his ex-wife Margalit Moses were also taken hostage during the attack. She was later released but Gadi is believed to remain in captivity in Gaza and still alive. — AFP

International

Mexico cuts ties with Ecuador after police raid embassy

Former Ecuadorian president 'forced' out of embassy where he sought refuge in fear of arrest

QUITO: Ecuadorian authorities stormed the Mexican embassy in Quito on Friday to arrest former vice president Jorge Glas, who had been granted political asylum there, prompting Mexico to sever diplomatic ties after the "violation of international law".

Images taken by AFP showed police special forces massed outside the embassy and at least one of them scaling its walls, which were already surrounded by police and military. Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said authorities "forcibly entered" the building to arrest Glas. "This is a flagrant violation of international law and the sovereignty of Mexico," he said on social media platform X.

Foreign minister Alicia Barcena said the arrest was a "flagrant violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations" and Mexican personnel in the embassy had been injured during the incident. "Mexico announces the immediate breaking of diplomatic relations with Ecuador," she said on X. She added that Mexican diplomatic personnel will immediately leave the South American country and asked Quito to "offer the necessary guarantees" for their movement.

Mexico had complained earlier in the day of "harassment" due to an increased police presence outside its Quito embassy. The former Ecuadorian vice president — who served under leftist President Rafael Correa — sought refuge in the Mexican embassy last December after authorities issued a warrant for his arrest for alleged corruption.

But his asylum request was formally

granted on Friday, angering Quito and deepening the diplomatic dispute between the two Latin American nations. Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa's government called the move an "illicit act" but Mexico insisted it had granted political asylum to Glas "after a thorough analysis" of the situation.

Ecuador's presidential communications department said in a statement that Glas "has been arrested tonight and placed under the orders of the competent authorities." Former president Correa, who was sentenced in absentia to eight years in prison for corruption, wrote on X that "not even in the worst dictatorships has a country's embassy been violated."

Local media showed Roberto Canseco, head of the Mexican diplomatic mission, running behind vehicles believed to be transporting Glas from the site, shouting: "It's an outrage!" Agents prevented Canseco from approaching one of the cars and in the ensuing struggle he is seen falling to the ground.

Before the arrest, Ecuador said that according to international conventions, "it is not legal to grant asylum to people convicted or prosecuted for common crimes and by competent ordinary courts." Lopez Obrador had irked Quito a day before Mexico granted the asylum request with comments equating political violence in the two countries. On Wednesday he drew a comparison between 2023 election violence in Ecuador, in which a presidential candidate was murdered, and crime in Mexico ahead of the June 2 legislative and presidential elections.



QUITO: Ecuadorian police special forces enter the Mexican embassy in Quito to arrest Ecuador's former Vice President Jorge Glas, on April 5, 2024. — AFP

Lopez Obrador said violence and "manipulation" by some media caused a drop in the popularity of leftist candidate Luisa Gonzalez and the rise of Noboa. The Ecuadorian government criticized his comments as offensive

and said the country was still in "mourning" for the slain candidate, Fernando Villavicencio, a fierce opponent of corruption.

Glas was released from prison in November after serving time for corruption in a vast

scandal involving the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht. He faces another arrest warrant for allegedly diverting funds that were intended for reconstruction efforts after a devastating earthquake in 2016. — AFP

Desperate to dodge dengue, Argentines run out of repellent

BUENOS AIRES: Insect repellent has become a hot commodity in Argentina, which is besieged by dengue-carrying mosquitoes and facing shortages that have sparked supermarket brawls, rations and homemade concoctions. The country is one of the worst hit by an outbreak of dengue sweeping Latin America and the Caribbean, attributed to a muggy summer that has been intensified by the El Nino climate phenomenon. The outbreak in the middle of an economic crisis, in a country with strict importation controls, has led to a severe shortage of mosquito repellents.

Some businesses have opened dedicated WhatsApp channels to tell clients when they get some in. Others impose rations of three products per person. In one viral video, a man appears in a park surrounded by a cloud of mosquitoes, explaining how a mixture of water and low-cost local shampoo brand Plusbelle repels the flying pests.

"I did everything homemade," said Laura Di Costa, 56, who was unable to find repellent and ended up in the hospital with dengue, which causes joint



BUENOS AIRES: A sign reading "No Repellent Available" is displayed on the window of a store as Argentina is facing a significant and growing number of dengue fever cases. — AFP photos

and bone pain, earning it the nickname "breakbone fever." Dengue can provoke hemorrhagic fever in severe cases, and death. "I try not to go out much, I don't take my grandchildren to the park so as not to be in the grass," added Di Costa.

With 129 deaths so far this year, Argentina has seen a ten-fold increase compared to the same period last year, according to official figures. Brazil has seen an 81 percent increase in cases, the biggest in the region, according to the Pan American Health

Organization, which has recorded 3.5 million cases — triple what was seen in 2023. "Probably this will be the worst dengue season (in the region)," said Jarbas Barbosa, director of the Pan American Health Organization. — AFP



A worker sprays chemicals to combat mosquitoes that transmit dengue fever in a park.

Thousands of salmon escape truck crash into nearby river

LOS ANGELES: Tens of thousands of endangered salmon being transported by truck to a US river miraculously survived a road crash by escaping into a nearby creek, officials said. A large tanker vehicle transporting the young salmon — or smolts — was travelling in a mountainous area of the northwestern state of Oregon last week when it rolled on its side and skidded off the road.

The 53-foot-long truck ended up on its roof — fortuitously for its slippery passengers, right next to a small creek. "About 77,000 smolts made it into the creek when the tanker overturned," said the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in a statement. The truck driver suffered only minor injuries.

Sadly, some 25,000 smolts were not so lucky in the March 29 accident. They did not reach the river, and their carcasses had to be recovered either in the tanker or on the stream bank, the department said. Chinook salmon are threatened by the decades-long drought gripping the American

West, aggravated by climate change. The levels of many rivers have dropped, and their waters have grown warmer, while the construction of dams and canals have also imperiled salmon.

The tasty migratory fish are typically born in rivers, swim to the ocean where they reach maturity and can remain for several years, before returning to their native rivers to spawn and die. Because drought-hit rivers with too little flow or unusually warm water can fatally disrupt that cycle, wildlife officials truck millions of hatchery-raised juvenile salmon to the sea each year.

Road transportation of salmon dates back to the 1980s, but has been ramped up in recent years, as the decline in salmon numbers has steepened. Countless dams and canals constructed in the region's rivers, in order to support its cities and farms, have robbed salmon of 80 percent of the habitats in which they can spawn.

The smolts lost in last week's accident represent about 20 percent of the total that will be released into Oregon's Imnaha River this year, officials said. The 77,000 fish that were catapulted into the Lookingglass Creek will likely return there in 2026 and 2027 and produce approximately 350-700 additional adults. "This should not impact our ability to collect future brood stock or maintain full production goals in the future," said Andrew Gibbs, fish hatchery coordinator for Eastern Oregon. — AFP

Look at yourself in front of the mirror and ask, so, where am I going? Where did you want to go originally? For whom did you have to live actually? Whose purpose do we fulfill? Whose command do our bodies, organs, and heartbeats heed? Who holds dominion over them? The cosmos, in its entirety, belongs to Allah. Despite the passage of time, have we amassed anything for the hereafter? To the mothers among us, paradise lies under the mother's feet; yet, have we readied them to become Muslim leaders and make us proud in front of Allah? "So where are you going?"

So much of life is already gone, but did we accumulate anything for the hereafter? Ask yourself, how did your day go? How did your evening go? How did your night go? What did we do for Allah in these fleeting 24 hours? Let us declare an end to our defiance of Allah and resolve to earnestly strive for His pleasure. Thus, where do we intend to go? "So where are you going?"

Zionists deploy AI to identify Gaza...

Continued from Page 1

"No part of life and death decisions which impact entire families should be delegated to the cold calculation of algorithms," he said.

The +972 report said "the (Zionist) army has marked tens of thousands of Gazans as suspects for assassination, using an AI targeting system with little human oversight and a permissive policy for casualties." The report said that, according to "six (Zionist) intelligence officers", a system dubbed Lavender had "played a central role in the unprecedented bombing of Palestinians, especially during the early stages of the war".

"According to the sources, its influence on the military's operations was such that they essentially treated the outputs of the AI machine 'as if it were a human decision'," +972 reported. Two sources said "the army also decided during the first weeks of the war that, for every junior Hamas operative that Lavender marked, it was permissible to kill up to 15 or 20 civilians". If "the target was a senior Hamas official... the army on several occasions authorized the killing of more than 100 civilians," it added.

The Zionist entity's campaign in the Gaza Strip has killed at least 33,137 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the Palestinian

territory. The United Nations has warned of imminent famine in the besieged territory. The Zionist entity began hyping AI-powered targeting after an 11-day conflict in Gaza during May 2021, which commanders branded the world's "first AI war".

The military chief during the 2021 war, Aviv Kochavi, told Zionist news website Ynet last year the force had used AI systems to identify "100 new targets every day", instead of 50 a year previously. Weeks into the latest Gaza war, a blog entry on the Zionist military's website said its AI-enhanced "targeting directorate" had identified more than 12,000 targets in just 27 days.

An unnamed Zionist official was quoted as saying the AI system, called Gospel, produced targets "for precise attacks on infrastructure associated with Hamas, inflicting great damage on the enemy and minimal harm to those not involved". But an anonymous former Zionist intelligence officer, quoted in November by +972, described Gospel's work as creating a "mass assassination factory".

In a rare confession of wrongdoing, the Zionist entity on Friday admitted a series of errors and violations of its rules in the killing of seven aid workers in Gaza, saying it had mistakenly believed it was "targeting armed Hamas operatives". Alessandro Accorsi, a senior analyst at Crisis Group, said the +972 report was "very concerning". "It feels very apocalyptic. It's clear... the degree of human control is very low," he told AFP. "There are a thousand questions around this obviously — how moral it is to use it — but it is hardly surprising it is used," he said. — AFP



GAZA: A man pushes a bicycle along as he walks amid building rubble in the devastated area around Gaza's Al-Shifa Hospital on April 3, 2024. — AFP

So, where are you going?...

Continued from Page 1

We may hear that so-and-so person, friend, or relative passed away, but we don't always get to see them at their graves in person.

The Prophet (PBUH) said: "Visit the graves, for they remind you of the Hereafter." (Narrated by Muslim, 976). The Prophet (PBUH) used to visit graves, as did his Companions, may Allah be pleased with them. The more we visit graveyards, the more we will be inclined towards good deeds that please our Creator. Now, the question from Allah to every man, woman, living person: "So where are you going?" (Surah Takwir, V 26).

International

Earthquake rattles US northeast

Rare 4.8-magnitude quake becomes center of jokes on social media as no casualties reported

NEW YORK: UN Security Council diplomats were shaken in their chairs, planes got briefly grounded, and furniture rattled across New York Friday when an earthquake jolted the city that never sleeps. No one was hurt, though, and New York's iconic skyline remained intact. "I AM FINE," reported the Empire State Building on its X account.

The tremor had a 4.8 magnitude, according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS). Near the epicenter in Lebanon, New Jersey, Dominika Uniejewska, a 50-year-old retail worker, said "I'm still shaking" after being woken up by the quake.

"I've never experienced such a strong earthquake. I did experience some before, but it was nothing compared to that. The whole house was really shaking. The bed was shaking, the house was making rumbling noises," she said. "I ran to check on my dog. The dog was okay."

In Brooklyn, buildings shook, rattling cupboard doors and fixtures, an AFP correspondent reported. "I'm nervous, I'm shaking. Many people are scared right now," said Brooklyn resident Ana Villagran, 62. Shortly before 6:00 pm (2200 GMT) the region was shaken by an aftershock which the USGS said was 4.0 magnitude. "I AM STILL FINE," the Empire State building wrote on X.

At the United Nations, which has its headquarters in New York, a Security Council meeting on the situation in Gaza was temporarily paused after the initial tremor. "Is that an earthquake?" said Save

the Children representative Janti Soeripto who was speaking at the time. One diplomat joked: "One for the memoirs."

'Under control'

A short time later many diplomats' cell phones blared with the sound of the emergency alert system confirming the quake. "Residents are advised to remain indoors and to call 911 if injured," the emergency alert said.

Flight operations were halted at several airports in the region including New York's La Guardia, Newark in New Jersey and in Philadelphia. "Air traffic operations are resuming as quickly as possible," the Federal Aviation Administration said in a statement.

Social media users reported feeling the earthquake from Philadelphia up to New York and eastward along Long Island. Several users posted images of knocked over garden furniture captioned, "we will rebuild."

"Earthquakes are uncommon but not unheard of along the Atlantic Coast, a zone one study called a 'passive-aggressive margin' because there's no active plate boundary between the Atlantic and North American plates," the USGS wrote on X.

Moderately damaging earthquakes strike somewhere in the urban corridor roughly twice a century, and smaller earthquakes are felt roughly every two to three years, USGS said. US President Joe Biden was briefed on the situation, spokeswoman

Shot, beaten to death

The assassination of Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana on the night of April 6 when his plane was shot down over Kigali triggered the rampage by Hutu extremists and the "Interahamwe" militia. Their victims were shot, beaten or hacked to death in killings fueled by vicious anti-Tutsi propaganda broadcast on TV and radio. An estimated 100,000 to 250,000 women were raped, according to UN figures.

Hundreds of thousands of people, mainly ethnic Hutu fearing reprisal attacks, fled in the aftermath of the genocide to neighboring countries including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Mass graves are still being found in Rwanda to this day.

In 2002, Rwanda set up community tribunals where victims could hear "confessions" from those who had persecuted them. A staggering 1.2 million cases were heard over a 10-year period, although rights watchdogs said the system also resulted in miscarriages of justice, with some complainants using it to settle scores. Today, Rwandan ID cards make no mention of whether a person is Hutu or Tutsi. Secondary school students learn about the genocide as part of a tightly controlled curriculum.

'Scars of the past'

Around two-thirds of Rwanda's population was born after the genocide. Many are eager to help rewrite their nation's painful history and craft a new narrative. "Ever since I was little, Rwanda's story has been one of re-



KIGALI: A picture taken on April 5, 2024 shows documents, belongings and skulls of victims ahead of the commemorations of the 30th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide at the Kigali Genocide Memorial on April 5, 2024. — AFP

'Never again'

Sunday's events mark the start of a week of national mourning, with Rwanda effectively coming to a standstill and national flags flown at half-mast. During those days, music will not be allowed in public places or on the radio, while sports events and movies are banned from TV broadcasts, unless connected to the commemorations.

The United Nations and the African Union among others will also hold remembrance ceremonies. "This year, we remind ourselves of genocide's rancid root: hate," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a message marking the anniversary. "To those who would seek to divide us, we must deliver a clear, unequivocal and urgent message: never again." The international community was heavily criticised for failing to protect civilians, with the UN sharply reducing its peacekeeping force shortly after the outbreak of the violence.

Denmark clears Christiania's hippy cannabis paradise

COPENHAGEN: Copenhagen's libertarian Christiania neighborhood, an old hippie paradise tainted in recent years by drug trafficking violence, is clearing out its famous Pusher Street, where cannabis used to be sold freely.

In late August, the so-called Christianite residents decided to close the street, known for its hashish stalls, after the fourth murder in three years shattered the image of a free-spirited and peaceful community.

Pusher Street "has deteriorated into being a really not very nice place," Hulda Mader, spokeswoman for the Christianites, told AFP. "They fight each other, they fight people and they are violent," she added.

On Saturday, the locals will mark the official closure of the street. "We're going to clear the area. So we are removing all the shops and the small cannabis shops. That's our first task in the morning," Mader said.

While the shops have always reappeared after being destroyed several times by the police, this time the actual cobblestones will be torn up. "We'll take the cobblestones and give them to people who want some. That's just a sign that Pusher Street is changing from a pushers' street to something else," Mader explained.

For Mader, who is in her 70s and has lived in the area since 1994, it is important that most of the area's 1,000 or so residents support the action, which is being carried out in cooperation with the police and the City of Copenhagen.

Committed residents

"Their commitment is crucial," Copenhagen mayor Sophie Haestorp Andersen told AFP. "It is the first time ever that they united and agreed to take a stand against the rising crime and insecurity in their neighborhood. Digging up the street and making it a construction site will inevitably make it very difficult to

sell. But it's just the beginning," she said. In 1971, a group of hippies founded the "Free City of Christiania" in an abandoned barrack to create a municipality which, according to its statute, "belongs to everyone and to no one" and where every decision is taken collectively.

In the 84-acre waterside enclave, the sale and consumption of cannabis is illegal but tolerated, making it a hotspot for drug trafficking. "About five or 10 years ago, it was primarily locals. But right now we see that it's mostly gangs and biker gangs that drive this drug market," Copenhagen police officer Simon Hansen explained. Since Christiania, contrary to urban legend, is part of Denmark, police raids in the area have become more frequent. "For too long we have accepted that pushers were selling weed and drugs like strawberries and freshly picked peas in a market," Haestorp Andersen said.

'New chapter'

In August, the locals blocked access to the free city for non-residents for one day "in the hope of freeing Christiania from the tyranny of gangs". The neighborhood usually sees around half a million tourists a year. The police arrested some 900 people in connection with drug trafficking in the area in 2023. No figures were given for the quantities of drugs seized.

But with this "new chapter", the residents want to "clean (the street) up and make it nice," Mader said. "We'll paint the buildings and rebuild them and all sorts of things." "We want to be associated with what we were associated with before ... art, culture and plays," she continued, making it "a nice place for people to come and chill out".

Christiania is located on an island abundant with greenery, where you can hear birds chirping. Along with the wish to end drug trafficking, the community wants to capitalize on the neighborhood's postcard image and the artistic vitality.

It also aims to start the construction of housing for about 300 new residents. Though the details of the project have not yet been decided, residents hope it will attract families with children, as a quarter of the population is currently over 60. — AFP



NEW JERSEY: First responders arrive to inspect homes in Lebanon, New Jersey, the epicenter of a 4.8 magnitude earthquake, according to the Geological Survey (USGS) on April 5, 2024. — AFP

Karine Jean-Pierre said. Social media users jokingly questioned whether an earthquake coming days before the April 8 solar eclipse, which will be visible across swaths of the northeastern United States, heralded the end of the world.

building," project manager Roxanne Mudenge, 27, told AFP. "The scars of the past are still there, but there's a different energy now, a sense of possibility." According to the Rwandan authorities, hundreds of genocide suspects remain at large, including in neighboring nations such as the DRC and Uganda. So far, only 28 have been extradited to Rwanda globally.

France, one of the top destinations for Rwandans fleeing justice at home, has tried and convicted half a dozen people over their involvement in the killings. At the time, the French government had been a long-standing backer of Habyarimana's regime, leading to decades of tensions between the two countries.

In 2021 President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged France's role in the genocide and its refusal to heed warnings of looming massacres, prompting Kagame to applaud the French leader for taking "a big step". Although Macron stopped short of an apology and denied complicity in the bloodshed, Kagame said the rapprochement could pave the way for "a better" relationship between the two nations.

Ties between Kigali and Kinshasa have been characterized by even deeper acrimony, with the RPF accused of killing tens of thousands of civilians during its pursuit of genocide perpetrators in the Congo. Kagame's government has been accused of arming Tutsi-led M23 rebels in eastern DRC. Kigali has denied the allegations but says Tutsis in its larger neighbor are victims of persecution.—AFP

S Korean candidates embrace K-pop to attract votes

SEOUL: Thanks to quirks of South Korean election law and history, almost every candidate on the campaign trail has a theme song, a dance routine, and politically-tweaked lyrics to make their message hit home.

From K-pop chart toppers to "Baby Shark", still the world's most-watched song on YouTube, seemingly no music is safe from a South Korean political makeover. At a rally for Democratic Party lawmaker Nam In-soon, running for a fourth term in office in Seoul's Songpa district, campaign speeches were interspersed with ear-splitting blasts of music, as uniformed campaign staff performed choreographed moves.

"This kind of campaigning helps raise voters' interest," Nam told AFP before next week's parliamentary election. "I can convey my message and policy promises through the campaign songs," she said, adding that the tunes were carefully selected, and the lyrics thoughtfully re-worked, to help her engage with constituents.

This election cycle, Nam had chosen a hit K-pop song called "Jilpoonggado" — which means "Stormy Road" in English — for her campaign. The original lyrics, which speak of giving people courage against a storm, were tweaked to request "storming courage" for the candidate, and end with: "ballot number 1 Nam In-soon! The right person to lead Songpa".

But the campaign also used Baby Shark and a few "tro" hits — another genre of Korean music, popular with older South Korean listeners — to cover their bases. "We chose songs that can appeal to a wide range of age groups," Nam said.

'Really excited'

K-pop campaigning is not only grueling work for the candidates: campaign choreographer Kim Mi-ran performs an elaborate dance routine three times a day, every day for around two weeks before the vote, everywhere Nam goes.

"The party headquarters gave us some guidelines, but the candidate's staff have a lot of decision-making power," over song selection and dance routines, said Kim, who is not a full-time dancer but works as a civil activist outside election time. "I talked to her staff to decide on a set of songs that go well with the candidate and choreographed accordingly," she said.

One of the songs, by a K-pop girl duo called Davichi, which is called Yeoseong Shidae or "Women's Era", was chosen as a means of hammering home the fact Nam is a rare female candidate in a sea of male politicians.

Only 14 percent of candidates running for the April 10 vote are women, and just 19 percent of sitting MPs are female from 300 seats. "Politics can come across as boring and not interesting," Kim said. "I think this cultural approach to the election campaigning can be a positive thing for the voters. I can feel people are really excited when they see us — and they join in dancing!"

In many countries, for example France, the United Kingdom, or Pakistan, candidates are restricted to holding campaign events in designated spaces, such as sports centers, with proper approvals from authorities.

But under South Korean election law, all candidates are allowed to hold campaign events in the constituency's streets during a set two-week period before the vote, on the condition they don't violate a 127-decibel noise limit — a level similar to a rock concert.—AFP



SEOUL: South Korea's ruling People Power Party campaigners dance during a campaign ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections. — AFP

Indian academic gets bail after 6 years without trial

NEW DELHI: An Indian academic detained for almost six years without trial has been granted bail by the Supreme Court, highlighting the country's use of harsh anti-terror laws decried by rights activists. Shoma Sen, 66, a former professor of English at Nagpur University, was arrested in 2018. She was one of 16 activists and academics held for allegedly inciting violence between different Indian caste groups, among them a Jesuit priest, Stan Swamy, who died in pre-trial detention three years later at the age of 84.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA), the country's top anti-terror agency, also claimed that Sen and some of the other activists had links with far-left Maoist insurgents. New Delhi has been battling armed Maoist rebels, known locally as Naxals, for decades in dense, tribal-dominated forests of central and eastern India. "At present, the appellant has been in detention for almost six years, her age is over 66 years and charges have not yet been framed," the two-judge bench said on Friday. "If we examine the acts attributed to the appellant by the various witnesses or as inferred from the evidence ... we do not find prima facie commission or attempt to commit any terrorist act" by Sen, the court added.

Another sexagenarian activist detained in the same case, Sudha Bharadwaj, was released by the Mumbai High Court in 2021. Sen, like Bharadwaj and Swamy, was held under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), which allows indefinite detention without trial. Critics say the law — which makes it difficult for accused people to receive bail — has been used by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to silence dissent. According to Indian government statistics, more than 1,000 people are detained under the UAPA each year, while fewer than 100 are convicted. — AFP

SUNDAY, APRIL 7, 2024

Boursa Kuwait releases its third standalone Sustainability Report

Boursa Kuwait embraces a forward-thinking strategy

KUWAIT: Boursa Kuwait released its third standalone Sustainability Report, which shed light on the Kuwaiti stock exchange's corporate sustainability strategy and initiatives in 2023, as well as assessing the company's non-financial performance and progress for the period from January 1 to December 31, 2023.

The report also demonstrates Boursa Kuwait's commitment to adopting best-in-class practices in environmental, social and governance (ESG) metrics. To ensure transparency and adherence to internationally recognized standards, the report has been developed in alignment with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Standards: Core Option, the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) Security and Commodity Exchanges guidelines, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as Boursa Kuwait's ESG Reporting Guide.

Since its establishment, Boursa Kuwait has embraced a forward-thinking CS strategy that blends economic growth with a commitment to environmental and community responsibility, forming the foundation of its core values and integrating industry-leading practices in ESG reporting and implementation. In 2023, Boursa Kuwait intensified its efforts to weave these principles more deeply into its operations by advancing responsible business practices within its organization and endorsing social and environmental initiatives that benefit both the company and the State of Kuwait as well as reinforcing Boursa Kuwait's role as a catalyst for positive change.

As one of the marquee capital markets in the region, Boursa Kuwait committed to aligning its CS pillars with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the "New Kuwait" vision and the National Development



Mohammad Al-Osaimi

Plan for the State of Kuwait. As part of this commitment, the company has, over the past few years, urged listed companies to follow its lead as a model issuer in the "Premier" Market and adopt internationally accredited metrics and standards in its ESG reporting efforts.

Boursa Kuwait's Chief Executive Officer, Mr. Mohammad Saud Al-Osaimi, commented on the release, saying, "Sustainability sits at the heart of Boursa Kuwait's strategic vision and its blueprint for long-term success as the company understands that its various stakeholders, which include investors, employees, listed companies and the broader community, regard it as a beacon of social and environmental responsibility. The company plays a pivotal role in the development of the Kuwaiti capital market and its efforts have paved the way for its sustainable growth as well as that of its listed companies."

He added, "Over the past few years, we have made considerable inroads in our sustainability efforts, sponsoring key environmental initiatives and community programs as well as improving our business operations across the board. As we look ahead to the future, we will contin-

ue our journey of success, building on our momentum to deliver greater impact for our stakeholders as part of our goal for a more sustainable future and a brighter tomorrow."

Since becoming a partner and supporter of the Sustainable Stock Exchanges (SSE) initiative in 2017, Boursa Kuwait has committed to enhancing the understanding of corporate sustainability (CS) concepts and the essentials of effective environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting within the Kuwaiti capital market.

To this end, the company published a comprehensive disclosure guide for listed companies which included globally recognized reporting metrics and a framework for their application. Boursa Kuwait also played a key role in developing unified ESG disclosure metrics for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), presenting an optional set of 29 standards aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In addition to these contributions, Boursa Kuwait actively fosters learning and collaboration through the organization of workshops and seminars annually in partnership with globally acclaimed consultancies, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Chartered Financial Analysts (CFA) Society, among other notable organizations. Through these initiatives, Boursa Kuwait not only reinforces its commitment to sustainability but also supports the broader adoption of responsible business practices across the region.

In 2023, Boursa Kuwait was recognized by Global Finance and The European for its achievements in the sustainability field, and its iconic building received LEED Gold certification from the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) for its renovation efforts to align the



building with best-in-class standards and globally recognized metrics.

The company also elected Dalal Jafaar Behbehani as the first female member of its Board of Directors and improved its employee retention rate to 98 percent in 2023. Boursa Kuwait continued to be a responsible business citizen, adopting and supporting over 30 social programs and environmental initiatives in collaboration with local and international organizations to make a positive long-lasting impact in the community in which it operates.

Since its inception, Boursa Kuwait has worked diligently to create a thriving capital market that attracts local and foreign investors through a broad spectrum of new products and services, infrastructure upgrades, and market reform initiatives, as part of its multi-phase market development plans. The company was fully privatized in 2019, the first government entity in the country to successful-

ly undergo the process, bringing about greater levels of efficiency. Boursa Kuwait also self-listed in September 2020 and has made great strides in sustaining its operations and business continuity in the face of uncertainties and challenges.

The company has rolled out numerous market reforms and new initiatives as part of its comprehensive multi-phase market development (MID) plans and showcases some of the standout listed companies and the investment opportunities that reside in the Kuwaiti capital market through its series of Roadshows and Corporate Days, putting these companies in touch with some of the world's leading investment firms and financial institutions and highlighting their financial health and business strategies and outlooks, to help investors gain an in-depth understanding of the benefits and opportunities of investing in Kuwaiti companies.



HARARE: A vendor sells goods at Mbare Musika in Harare. — AFP

Zimbabwe launches gold-backed currency

HARARE: Zimbabwe's central bank launched a new "structured currency" backed by gold on Friday, as it seeks to tackle sky-high inflation and stabilize the country's long-floundering economy. The ZiG - short for Zimbabwe Gold - will replace the Zimbabwean dollar which has tumbled in value over the past year pushing inflation through the roof. Reserve Bank governor John Mushayavanhu said. "With effect from today... banks shall convert the current Zimbabwe dollar balances into the new currency," he said presenting a monetary policy statement.

The ZiG would be "fully anchored and fully backed" by a basket of reserves comprising foreign currency and precious metals - mainly gold, he added. The move aimed at fostering "simplicity, certainty, (and) predictability" in Zimbabwe's financial affairs, he added, presenting the new banknotes that will come in seven denominations ranging from 1 to 200 ZiG. The Zimbabwean dollar has lost almost 100 percent of its value against the US greenback over the past year.

On Friday it was officially trading at around 30,000 against its more coveted US counterpart - and at 40,000 on the black market, according to tracker Zim Price Check. Its poor performance contributed to the southern African country's high inflation rate, which after climbing well into the triple digits last year, was at 55 percent in March according to official data. This has piled pressure on its 16 million people who are already contending with widespread poverty, high unemployment and a severe drought induced by the El Nino weather pattern. — AFP

Apple lays off over 600 staff

WASHINGTON: Apple has laid off more than six hundred employees, according to data from a California state agency, the first known post-pandemic job cuts at the iPhone juggernaut. The California-based company was largely spared from last year's massive rounds of job cuts at Amazon, Meta, Google and other tech giants after a major hiring spree during the coronavirus pandemic. According to the California's Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, also known as WARN, Apple laid off 614 workers in several offices on March 27.

Apple did not immediately respond to a request for comment early Friday. According to Bloomberg, the job cuts were related to the company's scuppered plans to produce an electric car, ending a struggling decade-long project. The iPhone maker had dedicated nearly 2,000 employees to its secretive car development program, Bloomberg reported, but faced an increasingly competitive electric vehicle (EV) sector. The full scope of the layoffs could be wider as Apple is only legally required to notify of job cuts in California. — AFP

UK rail services hit as train drivers walk out

LONDON: Rail services were hit to large parts of the UK, including key tourist routes, as train drivers launched a new strike amid cost-of-living pressures and decades-high inflation. Members of the Aslef union representing train drivers are taking part in a three-day rolling strike which will also affect express services to London's Gatwick, Stansted and Heathrow airports. Union chief Mick Whelan blamed the industrial action on the "cost of living crisis created by the economic ineptitude of the Tories (Conservatives) that have been in power for 14 years".

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is expected to call a general election later this year with current opinion polls putting his government on course for a drubbing at the hands of Keir Starmer's main opposition Labor party. Workers across the economy from doctors and nurses to lawyers, teachers and dock workers have taken strike action for pay hikes. Five main train operating companies were due to be hit by the first day of the latest Aslef strike.

More train drivers at different companies would walk out on Saturday and again on Monday with overtime bans also being implemented. Last November members of the RMT rail union, which represents various types of rail workers, voted in favor of a pay deal that ended more than a year of walkouts. "Aslef is the only rail union continuing to



SHANGHAI: People gather at quad area outside a recently-opened Apple Store in Shanghai's Jingan district. — AFP



LONDON: Commuters walk at Waterloo Station in London. — AFP

strike, targeting passengers and preventing their own members from voting on the pay offer that remains on the table," a Department for Transport spokesperson said.

"Having resolved disputes with all other rail unions, the Transport Secretary and rail minister have ensured that a pay offer is on the table - taking train drivers' average salaries from £60,000 up

to £65,000 (\$75,800-\$82,100)," the spokesperson said. Aslef chief Whelan, speaking in front of striking drivers at London's Euston station, said that offer from last April would never be accepted by members, describing it as "ridiculous" and a "land grab for all the terms and conditions we have negotiated over the years". Aslef members had not had a pay rise since 2019, he added. — AFP

Business

Artificial Intelligence a 'game changer'

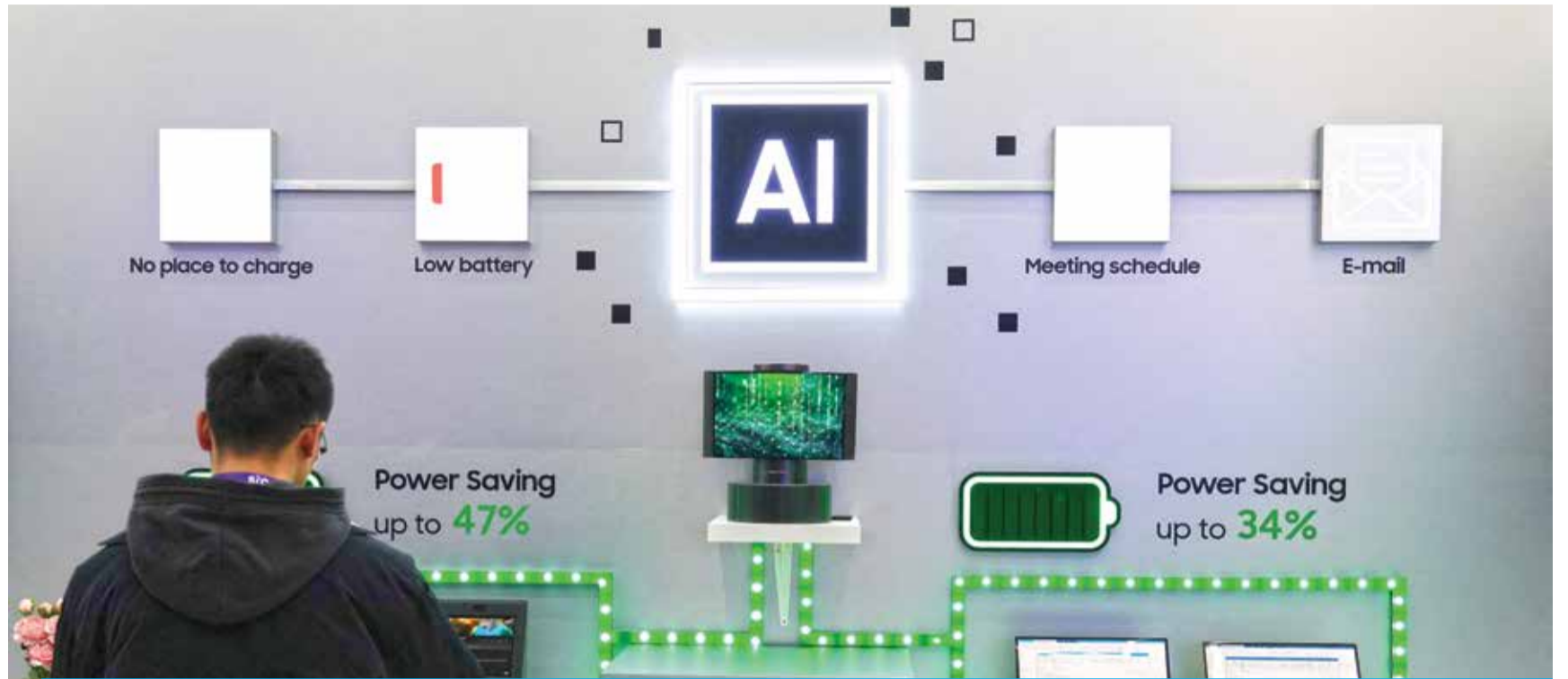
Company executives not ready: Survey

ZURICH: A majority of corporate executives across leading economies believe artificial intelligence will be a "game changer" for their industry but admit their leadership teams lack the knowledge to understand AI's risks and rewards, a study showed Friday. Adecco, the world's biggest temporary staffing agency, and Oxford Economics conducted a survey to see how companies are preparing for a technology that is growing fast but also raising concerns about what it means for jobs.

Around 2,000 CEOs, chief financial officers and other executives in companies across nine countries were surveyed between October and December. The poll found that 61 percent believe AI is a game changer for their industry, with the figure rising to 82 percent in the tech sector and 51 percent among automakers. But 57 percent "lack confidence in their leadership team's AI skills and knowledge", the report found. Adecco chief executive Denis Machuel said companies bosses must be ready for the AI transition.

"Almost all kind of jobs will be impacted, more or less, even leadership jobs," Machuel said in a telephone conference. "One thing that this survey helped us reflect upon is what leaders have to embark on. If us leaders are not AI ready, how can you make sure that your workforce is AI ready?" he said. The rise of generative AI is expected to transform an array of jobs, helping to simplify tasks, but it has also raised concerns that it could take away work done by humans. The survey showed that 41 percent of executives say they will employ fewer people within five years because of the technology.

At the same time, 66 percent said they will recruit AI specialists externally while 34 percent said they will train existing staff to fill the technological gap.



BARCELONA: A man stands next to an AI (artificial intelligence) logo at the Mobile World Congress (MWC), the telecom industry's biggest annual gathering, in Barcelona. - AFP

"The 'buy' mindset could exacerbate skills scarcity and create a two-speed workforce," the report warned. "Only half of leaders say they will redeploy employees affected by AI. Organisations must urgently rethink this approach, building relevant skills within the organisation to ensure continued employ-

ability of today's workforce," it said.

An IMF report has found that 40 percent of jobs globally will likely be impacted by AI technology. In advanced economies, the figure rises to 60 percent of the workforce. "Our research shows that many leaders don't have a clear understand-

ing of the disruption that lies ahead," Machuel said in Adecco's report. "Responsible, human-centric talent strategies will be paramount to manage growing pains and build the right workforce for success, all while creating opportunities for personal growth," he said. — AFP

China using AI to sow division in US, Microsoft says

SAN FRANCISCO: China is ramping up use of AI-generated content and fake social media accounts to inflame division in the United States and elsewhere, according to the latest report from Microsoft's threat center. Beijing has "doubled down" on targets and increased sophistication of its influence operations, Microsoft threat analysis center general manager Clint Watts said in a report released late Thursday.

"China is using fake social media accounts to poll voters on what divides them most to sow division and possibly influence the outcome of the US presidential election in its favor," Watts said in the report. "China has also increased its use of AI-generated content to further its goals around the world" as well as in the US.

Chinese influence operations continue to "opportunistically jump" on events such as a train derailment in Kentucky and wildfires in Maui to promote mistrust of the US government, according to the report.

The polling about controversial US domestic issues "indicates a deliberate effort to understand better which US voter demographic supports what issue or position and which topics are the most divisive, ahead of the main phase of the US presidential election," Watts wrote. The report concluded there is little evidence that the influence operations have succeeded in swaying opinions thus far.

The threat center reported late last year that social media accounts "affiliated" with the Chinese government had used social media accounts to im-



NEW YORK: People walk past a Microsoft Experience Center on Fifth Avenue in New York City. A Cyber Safety Review Board, created in 2021 by executive order and led by Homeland Security, released a report that detailed lapses by Microsoft that led to a targeted Chinese hack last year of top US government officials' email that included the email of Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo. - AFP

personate US voters to influence midterm elections in 2022. "This activity has continued and these accounts nearly exclusively post about divisive US domestic issues such as global warming, US border policies, drug use, immigration, and racial tensions," Watts wrote. "They use original videos, memes, and infographics as well as recycled content from other high-profile political accounts."

Microsoft saw a surge in the use of AI-generated content used to augment China-linked online

influence operations aimed at the presidential election in Taiwan in January, according to Watts. "With major elections taking place around the world this year, particularly in India, South Korea and the United States, we assess that China will, at a minimum, create and amplify AI-generated content to benefit its interests," Watts wrote. Microsoft's report also noted that North Korea has begun to use AI to steal cryptocurrency, attack supply chains, and gather military intelligence more effectively. — AFP

lian Trade's senior North America economist, Dan North, told AFP, referring to 303,000 new jobs that were created last month.

"Lots of job growth, participation rates back up fairly sharply, unemployment back down a tick. So for Jerome Powell and the Federal Reserve, what more can you ask for?" he said. "It's strong, but I wouldn't say it was out of whack," said Erica Groshen, a former commissioner of the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"This is certainly not sending a signal that the rates are too high," added Groshen, who is also a senior economics adviser at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. "This would probably support any inclination to just wait a little bit longer," she said. Inflation fell sharply last year, while the economy and jobs markets have remained resilient. But it has edged higher since the start of the year, causing some policymakers to delay their expectations for the start of cuts. "We think the Fed is more likely to start moving in July at

this point," North from Allianz Trade said, adding: "June seems to be too early."

The consistently strong jobs data is good news for Biden, who is campaigning on a platform that he has rebuilt the post-pandemic US economy. However, the Democrat still faces the challenge of persistent inflationary pressures for ordinary Americans spurred by the high interest rates. If inflation remains above target, stronger jobs and growth data will likely keep the Fed on pause for longer, pushing up the cost of borrowing for consumers and producers. This makes it harder for consumers looking to purchase a home, or to repay credit card debts, and makes it more expensive for companies to borrow to invest for the future. "There's never been a president that didn't want lower interest rates all the time," North from Allianz Trade said. "I think it's well recognized that even though most economic measures are pretty good, people are still concerned more about inflation," he added. — AFP

US hiring blows past expectation

WASHINGTON: US hiring rose much more than expected last month, according to government data published Friday, increasing the chances that the Federal Reserve will remain on pause for longer as it weighs when to start cutting interest rates. The world's largest economy added 303,000 jobs in March, up from a revised 270,000 new jobs created a month earlier, the Department of Labor announced.

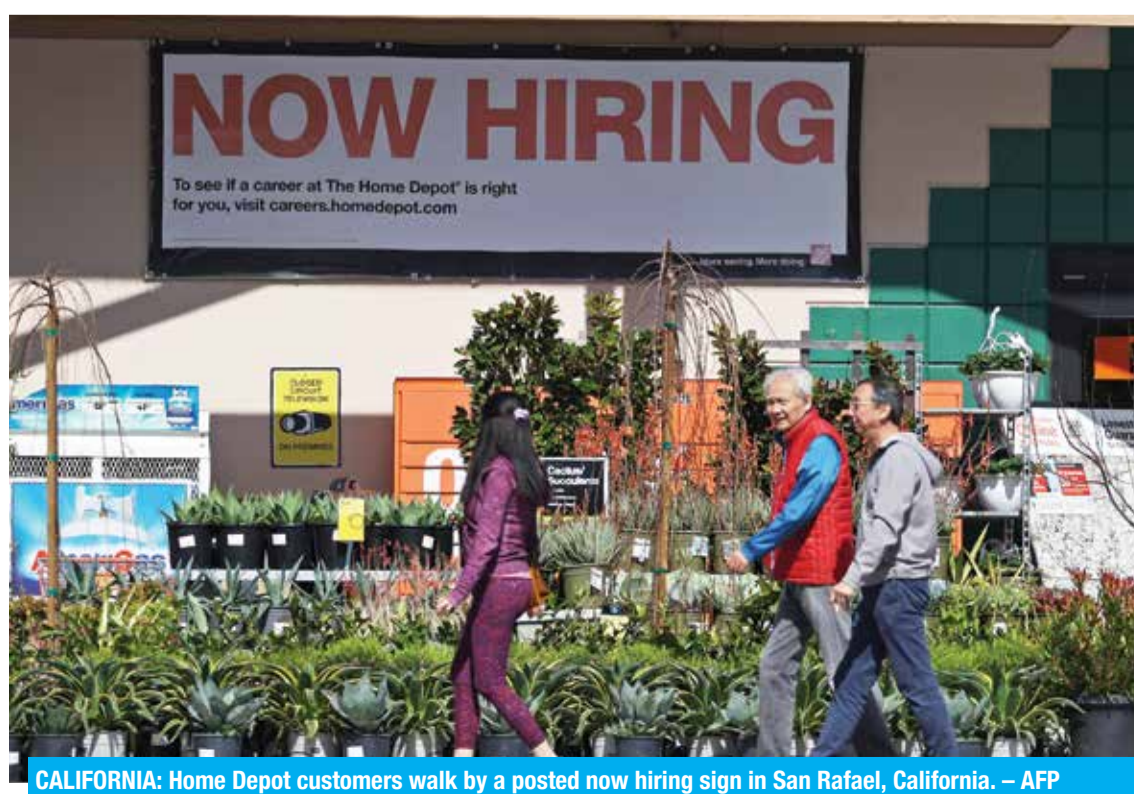
The surge, coming seven months before the November election pitting President Joe Biden against former Republican president Donald Trump, was far above market expectations of an increase of 200,000, according to Briefing.com. The unemployment rate ticked lower to 3.8 percent from 3.9 percent in February, in line with expectations - and maintaining the longest streak of below-four-percent joblessness in decades.

"Today's report marks a milestone in America's comeback," Biden said in a statement. "Three years ago, I inherited an economy on the brink. With today's report of 303,000 new jobs in March, we have passed the milestone of 15 million jobs created since I took office." Beyond the headline number, wage growth increased 0.3 percent on a monthly basis, while average hourly earnings were up 4.1 percent from a year earlier, Labor Department figures showed.

The labor force participation rate was little changed at 62.7 percent. Many of the new jobs were created in the health care and government sectors, while construction and leisure and hospitality also saw big gains. While the overall unemployment rate fell slightly, it rose for Black Americans, while declining for both Asians and Hispanics. Wall Street stocks closed higher on Friday, bouncing back after tumbling in the prior sessions on geopolitical concerns.

US Fed pause

Policymakers at the Fed, led by Chairman Jerome Powell, have been debating when will be the right time to begin lowering interest rates, as they look to return inflation firmly to their long-term target of two percent without damaging the buoyant US economy. "It's a big number, and you can't argue with it," Al-



CALIFORNIA: Home Depot customers walk by a posted now hiring sign in San Rafael, California. - AFP

Gulf Bank app offers exclusive services for account transfers

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank's new mobile application is swiftly advancing towards digital leadership, offering a comprehensive range of high-quality services. Among these, is the seamless transfer feature between the customer's personal accounts. Users can easily initiate transfers by simply dragging the icon from the source account to the destination account, enhancing the overall customer experience.

In this context, Bader Al-Ali, Gulf Bank's Deputy General Manager of Consumer Banking, said: "Gulf Bank's mobile application offers numerous features and services through a smart user interface, tailored to meet the unique needs of each customer and promptly address their expectations." Al-Ali highlighted the distinctive features of the bank's mobile app, positioning it as the most user-friendly and efficient choice in the banking industry - thereby bringing modern and advanced technology directly to users' fingertips.



Bader Al-Ali

He further mentioned that the application offers customers an even simpler option for transferring between their accounts. This involves dragging the icon of the source account to the destination account, inputting the desired transfer amount, reviewing the transaction, clicking "Review and Pay," and confirming the operation by dragging. Upon successful completion, a confirmation page will be displayed. Al-Ali concluded by emphasizing that the new version of Gulf Bank's mobile application represents a significant advancement in customer experience, impacting various banking services and transaction stages. It is accessible to everyone, regardless of location or time, via a simple, fast and secure interface.

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience.

Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining robust developments in sustainability at environmental, social and governance levels through diverse sustainability initiatives, strategically selected to benefit the bank both internally and externally. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with various parties to achieve it.

Shell expects lower natural gas sales

LONDON: British energy giant Shell said that it expects lower natural gas sales in the first quarter after a particularly strong performance in the final three months of 2023. Integrated gas sales "are expected to be strong, but significantly lower than an exceptional" fourth quarter, Shell said in a statement. The update was published ahead of the energy major's first-quarter results that are scheduled for May 2.

"In Q1 we saw solid (gas) supply against higher inventory levels, decreased prices and reduced volatility driving strong results, but lower than Q4 record performance," a Shell spokesperson said. "The exceptional Q4 performance was driven by seasonal demand for winter inventory—some buyers paying premium prices to replenish stocks for winter and reduce price exposure—and significant volatility at the beginning of Q4." Conversely, Shell added Friday that sales of chemicals products should be "significantly" higher in the first quarter. — AFP

Business

US and China agree to hold talks on 'balanced economic growth'

World's leading economies try to stabilize rocky ties

GUANGZHOU: The United States and China have agreed to hold "intensive exchanges on balanced growth", the US Treasury Department said in a statement...

solved in an afternoon or a month," she said, hailing the agreement for fresh talks for "(providing) a structured way in which we can continue to listen to one another and see if we can find a way forward that will avoid conflict".

Beijing-bound

Yellen now heads north to Beijing, where she will have a two-day visit involving more high-level discussions with Chinese leaders. This visit to China—her second in the past year—comes as Washington and Beijing feud over everything from access to advanced technology...

"Secretary Yellen emphasized that companies, including those in the PRC, must not provide material support for Russia's war against Ukraine, including support to the Russian defense industrial base, and the significant consequences if they do so," the US Treasury said in a statement...

'Shared challenges'

The US Treasury readout also said the two sides had made a "commitment to work together on shared challenges, including climate finance and debt issues in low-income and emerging economies".



GUANGZHOU: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen (center) and US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns (left) attend a dinner offered by China's Vice Premier He Lifeng in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou. — AFP

financial working group", with a first meeting to be held "in coming weeks", the statement said.

The exchange comes after repeated calls by Washington for Beijing to stem the flow of fentanyl and related precursor chemicals from plants in China...

Relations have stabilized somewhat since the two top leaders met in San Francisco for talks that both sides described as a qualified success. Yellen's July 2023 visit helped restart dialogue after a period of heightened tensions...

Burgan Bank announces winners of Kanz draw

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank has announced the names of the Kanz account monthly draw winners, who will each take home a KD 2,000 cash-prize.

Hanan Mohammed AlAjmi; Ghareeb Fahh AlRasheedi; Wissam Assad Faraj; Abdulsttar Amir Hossain; Amal Mohammad Alghanim; Thoufique Mohamed Tharayil; Ismael Yap Pineda; Sabah Jaballah AlRefaei; Nour Ibrahim Abed Ali; Mohammad Hasan AlBuloushi.

In addition to the monthly draw of Kanz account, Burgan Bank also offers a semi-annual KD 500,000 prize and a mega annual prize of KD 1,500,000.

Advertisement for Burgan Bank Kanz Account April Monthly Draw. Winner: 2,000 KD. Lists names of winners in Arabic and English.

tion on opening a Kanz account, the draws or any of the Bank's products and services, is available at any of

Burgan Bank branches, through the Call Center at 1804080 and Burgan Bank website www.burgan.com.

Italy deficit narrows in 4th quarter 2023

MILAN: Italy's budget deficit narrowed to 5.5 percent of gross domestic product in the fourth quarter last year, down from 6.7 percent in the same period of 2022, official data showed Friday.

Household purchasing power registered its first annual growth, climbing by 2.1 percent after seven quarters of decline, despite contracting compared to the third quarter. Istat announced in March that for 2023, the budget deficit came in at 7.2 percent of GDP...

The government intends to bring the deficit to below 4.5 percent of GDP this year, according to a source close to the matter. Economy Minister Giancarlo Giorgetti acknowledged Wednesday that Italy would again be subject to a European Union excessive deficit procedure (EDP) this year...

Armani unit targeted

In another development, an Italian court has placed under partial judicial administration a unit of luxury fashion group Armani for using subcontractors who violated labor laws, according to a ruling made public Friday.

But the court says one of its suppliers, Manifatture Lombarde, used subcontractors in the Milan area that employed undocumented migrants for the production of Armani bags, leather goods, and other accessories.

World food prices rise for first time in seven months

PARIS: Global food prices rose in March, the first increase since July, pulled higher by cooking oil prices despite the cost of grains continuing to ease, the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization said Friday.

Rising palm oil prices were driven by seasonal drops in output in leading producing nations that coincided with strong demand in Southeast Asia, while demand from the biofuel sector pulled up soy oil prices.

Meanwhile, cereals prices slid 2.6 percent on a monthly basis, while sugar prices fell 5.4 percent. Food prices reached a record high after Russia invaded agricultural power Ukraine in February 2022 but have dropped since then.

Agri-food trade surplus

In another development, the EU racked up a record agri-food trade surplus in 2023 - exporting far more farm goods than it imported - even as farmers



JAKARTA: A vendor waits for customers at a rice kiosk in Jakarta, amid rising prices and shortages of the staple in Indonesia. — AFP

feeling the squeeze on their livelihoods prepared to launch protests across the bloc. Agri-food exports from the bloc reached 228.6 billion euros last year, as imports fell to 158.6 billion - creating a record surplus of 70.1 billion euros, up 22 percent on the previous year, European Commission data showed.

The data further cements the EU's status as the world's leading agricultural power - though it may not feel that way to farmers complaining they cannot live on the prices paid for their produce by big industrial buyers, the main beneficiaries of the booming surplus.

the sixth month in a row due to a population boom and now stands at 61.4 percent. "The Canadian labor market is beginning to show more cracks," Desjardins Bank economist Royce Mendes said in a note.

annual report. Imports from Ukraine - another source of anger for farmers who see them as unfair competition - were down 10 percent since 2022, but still 71 percent higher than 2021 levels, before the bloc lifted trade restrictions in response to Russia's invasion.

Key drivers of EU exports included cereal preparations, dairy products, and wine - together accounting for around one third of the total. The United Kingdom was the top destination for EU agri-food exports, accounting for 22 percent in value, followed by the United States at 12 percent and China at six percent.

in exports of unwrought gold, with exports of metal and non-metallic mineral products rising 31.1 percent in February to a record \$9.4 billion. Statistics Canada also noted an increase in wheat exports to Asian countries as well as exports of other crops.

Canada's jobless rate climbs to 6.1%

OTTAWA: Canada's unemployment rate climbed in March to 6.1 percent, the statistics agency announced on Friday. Unemployment had hit an annual rate of 5.8 percent in February. Statistics Canada said in a statement that employment declined in the hospitality and food sectors, in wholesale and retail trade and in the professional, scientific and technical services sectors.



MILAN: People walk past giant letters reading 'milano' with skyscrapers of the CityLife district in the background in Milan. The CityLife district is a residential, commercial and business district, with three skyscrapers: Il Curvo (The Curved One) (left), Il Dritto (The Straight One) - Allianz Tower (center) and Lo Storto (The Twisted One) - Generali Tower. — AFP

SUNDAY, APRIL 7, 2024

Born to help: Syria bikers deliver Ramadan meals



Members of motorcycle club Hope Bikers Syria help prepare distribute "iftar".



Members of motorcycle club Hope Bikers Syria help prepare distribute "iftar".

Members of motorcycle club Hope Bikers Syria help prepare distribute "iftar". — AFP photos



Members of motorcycle club Hope Bikers Syria help distribute "iftar" fast breaking meals during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan, in Damascus.



Members of motorcycle club Hope Bikers Syria help distribute "iftar".

Every evening during Ramadan, members of a motorbike club zip down the streets of Damascus to deliver meals to those in need during the Muslim holy month. "We hit the most disadvantaged areas," said Tarek Obaid, head of Hope Bikers Syria, whose 50 volunteers make and distribute the food for various charities in the Syrian capital. The bikers -- some sporting beards or wearing large silver rings on their fingers -- head out as sunset approaches, racing to hand over the food so Muslims recipients can break their daytime fast. The volunteers don their club's signature blue vest, the front and back embroidered with their emblem: a flaming motorbike and

the Syrian flag. They help out for "humanitarian or moral" reasons, said Obaid, a swimming coach in his fifties who supervises the Ramadan rounds. But the act of charity also lessens the stigma around bikes and their "Born to be Wild" image. "Before, people avoided the motorbikes when they saw them, but now they are happy to see our blue (vests) or hear the noise of our bikes," Obaid told AFP. The group says it has no political affiliation and crosses faith boundaries, with Christian and Muslim members. The Muslims among them break their fast after the rounds are done. "People have gotten to know us, they smile

at us, they love us," said Obaid, directing the riders on sport, dirt and classic motorbikes. Syria has been ravaged by 13 years of war that has killed more than half a million people and battered the country's economy and infrastructure. Around 90 percent of the population is in poverty, according to the United Nations. The motorbike club began its volunteer work during the Covid-19 pandemic, transporting oxygen bottles for those in urgent need.

As the pandemic subsided, the bikers turned their attention elsewhere, including helping victims of an earthquake in February last year that ravaged parts of Syria, killing about 6,000 people there. They have also

been part of organizing, with non-government organizations, recreational activities for orphaned children. Earlier in the day, the volunteers gathered at a charity kitchen in Damascus to prepare vegetables, meat and rice, then packaged the meals for distribution.

They put on their silver, black or bright yellow helmets, ready to ride into the sunset: this time to a home for the elderly on the outskirts of Damascus. The bikers move nimbly through busy areas, evading heavy traffic to deliver the meals swiftly. They cover the cost of fuel themselves, a great help in a country blighted by petrol shortages that drive up prices, particularly after subsidies were lifted last year.

"Even though the motorbikes use less petrol, we struggle to get fuel" due to shortages and high costs, said George Hafteh, 37, a photographer and one of the bikers. Motorcycles have also earned a bad reputation over the years of Syria's economic crisis because thieves often use them to snatch bags or phones from people on the street. But Hafteh said the group was trying to return biking to "its place in society, taking on our responsibility towards the people". When they arrive at the centre for the elderly, he and his fellow bikers take the meals up to the rooms, distributing them to people in beds.

Fellow club member Amer Totanji, 31, who works at a private-sector company, says he takes pleasure in what he can do on motorbikes. They are "more than just a mode of transport" and have become "a means of helping people in need", he added. —AFP

The Crookie: The French pastry craze that took over TikTok

A bemused Paris bakery owner has been besieged by smartphone-wielding youngsters over the past year, keen to snap themselves with the latest pastry craze: the crookie. A croissant filled with cookie dough might sound like a fistful of heart attack, but everyone knows it's going to be tasty, even when all they've seen is a viral TikTok video. The crookie was invented by Parisian pastry chef Stephane Louvard in 2022. It was "just something for regulars", he said, until a video by Instagram account "The Ultimate Guide", which specializes in Paris restaurants, drove sales up to 150-200 per day. Then in early 2023, TikTok influencer Johan Papz filmed himself taking a satisfying bite into one of Louvard's crookies, and things went crazy.



This photograph shows "Crookies", a traditional French croissant mixed with a cookie dough, in the pastry shop of French pastry chef Stephane Louvard in Paris.

"We had hundreds of people coming, most of them young women between 18- and 25-years-old, smartphones in hand to take photos with them," Louvard told AFP in his kitchen as workers rushed to spread cookie dough into croissants. In the weeks that followed, the queue never seemed to diminish in front of the bakery. Production is now between 1,000 and 1,600 crookies per day and Louvard has had to hire two extra workers. He is pleased, but

somewhat bemused, over the craze. "I mean, it's a bit insane," he said. "At some point you have to stop. It's just some cookie in a croissant, it's not some revolutionary invention."

Thanks to TikTok, Maison Louvard now has imitators around the world, with crookies spotted in Brussels, New York, Tel Aviv and Singapore. Louvard has no interest in filing a patent, however. "What for? To find myself in court with half the planet?" he said. It is not the first pastry craze to tickle the world's taste buds. In 2013, New Yorkers slept on the pavement outside Dominique Ansel's bakery after he invented the cronut—half-croissant, half-donut. In 2022, the New York Roll, a mixture of croissant and bombolone (an Italian pastry) turned into a frenzy, with videos featuring the cake accumulating hundreds of millions of views on TikTok, driving a hunt for more baked crazes. —AFP



French pastry chef Stephane Louvard poses with his "Crookies", a traditional French croissant mixed with cookie dough, in his pastry shop in Paris.



This photograph shows a sign announcing "Crookies", a traditional French croissant mixed with a cookie dough, in the pastry shop of French pastry chef Stephane Louvard in Paris. — AFP photos



An employee removes "Crookies" from an oven, a traditional French croissant mixed with cookie dough, in the pastry shop of French pastry chef Stephane Louvard in Paris.



Employees cook "Crookies", a traditional French croissant mixed with cookie dough, in the pastry shop of French pastry chef Stephane Louvard in Paris.

Lifestyle

Fan outcry over K-pop star's date highlights 'harsh' industry rules

Accused of "betraying" fans, subject to relentless online and real-world public abuse, K-pop star Karina recently issued a groveling, handwritten apology. Her crime? Dating a South Korean actor. Her plight mirrors that of many K-pop stars before her, experts say, such as late singer Sulli, who have bemoaned strict behavioral controls and being held to impossibly high standards, as record companies seek to sell fans the perfect idol. Dating "ruined" her career, Karina's fans claimed, with one particularly enraged admirer sending a truck with an electronic billboard to her agency that read: "Do you not receive enough love from your fans?" and: "Apologise, or you'll see album sales decline and empty concert seats."

The attacks prompted Karina, a member of the group aespa, to post a handwritten note "to convey my sincere apologies to the fans." "An idol's persona is expected to be romantically available," said Stephanie Choi, a K-pop expert with the University at Buffalo's Asia Research Institute. For young K-pop idols, who often start in the business as teenagers, there is a lot of "promotional emphasis on innocence and chastity", and it is hard for them to move past this, Choi told AFP. Western stars such as Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus have also experienced blowback as they turn from girls to women in the public eye, but the business model of South Korean K-pop makes it particularly intense for local idols.

Dedicated super fans -- epitomized by boy-band BTS' so-called ARMY of global supporters -- do huge amounts of "crucial unpaid labor" promoting music and voting in competitions, Keung Yoon Bae, a Korean studies professor at Georgia Institute of Technology, told AFP.

But in return, they may expect their idols to be held to "grueling professional standards" which extend into their personal lives, with young female stars particularly vulnerable, Bae said. "Purity and 'girliness' have remained important images, and unfortunately this can really backfire on the idols when they are discovered to be dating, drinking and smoking," she said.

Business strategy

In the early 2000s, before K-pop swept to world recognition, dating was essentially banned for aspiring South Korean pop stars. Park Joon-hyung, a member of popular K-pop band god, famously gave a tearful press conference in 2001 when he was asked to leave



Karina (second right) and other members of South Korean girl group Aespa attend the red carpet at the Mnet Asian Music Awards (MAMA) in Seoul.— AFP

the group by his agency following reports he was in a relationship. "If I'm guilty of one thing, it's that I met someone I love," he said. "I am 32, okay? I, Park Joon-hyung, am 32 years old and I have a girlfriend," he added, tearing up.

Expectations have gradually relaxed, and many popular K-pop stars such as IU, SNSD's Sooyoung, Jiyeon and BoA have confirmed relationships to the press. But being open about one's relationship status is a privilege reserved for established stars, while newcomers in the competitive K-pop industry -- like Karina -- are discouraged from dating to avoid jeopardizing their popularity.

"The idea of dating or the potential to date a K-pop star is definitely used as a business and marketing strategy," Billboard's K-pop columnist Jeff Benjamin told AFP. Part of what makes new idols marketable and profitable is allowing fans to entertain the notion that "maybe, one of the fans may date the idol themselves -- as delusional of a thought as it may be," he added.

'You are a product'

Many K-pop idols start training as teenagers, when they are typically banned from dating, and recently major celebrities have spoken

about how lonely and repressive this method of minting stars can be. "It's really harsh," mega-star band BLACKPINK member Jennie said in a Netflix documentary. "We were not allowed to drink, or smoke or get a tattoo," she said of her training period, and had to endure "being told that I'm not good at stuff".

Late star Sulli, who took her own life in 2019 at age 25, also spent around four years as a K-pop trainee, before making a debut as a member of popular girl group f(x) at age 15. In a biographical documentary released posthumously last year, she revealed that when she turned 20, there were only two things she wanted to do: "to get counselling from a psychiatrist and to date."

Her relationship with Choiza, a rapper 14 years her senior, which became public when she was 20, along with other moves away from her erstwhile idol image -- like not wearing a bra in public -- triggered relentless online bullying. "When I started out in the entertainment business, there was one thing people wouldn't stop telling me," she said in the film. "You are a product. You need to exist as the finest, top-quality product to the public."—AFP

Full time for football comic 'Captain Tsubasa' in print

Japanese football comic "Captain Tsubasa" ended its 43-year print serialization on Thursday, but its creator said the stories that inspired Lionel Messi will continue online. Yoichi Takahashi started the comic about an 11-year-old football prodigy in 1981 and it became a smash hit whose fans included future superstars Messi and Andres Iniesta. On Thursday the final installment of Captain Tsubasa Magazine hit the shelves in Japan, tightly sealed at bookstores to protect against spoilers. "Burn the bravery of Tsubasa and the gang into your hearts!" the magazine said on its cover, beside an illustration of main character Tsubasa Ozora wearing a Japanese national team kit. "To new challenges!" another banner headline said.

Takahashi said earlier this year that the series would end in April, citing his worsening health and changing conditions in the manga industry. "Now I have finished draw-

ing the last episode of the series, I am relieved to have finished everything and feel liberated to finally lead a life without deadlines," the 63-year-old wrote on X, formerly Twitter, on Wednesday. The author said he would continue the story in sketches published online and would try new "forms of expression" unbound by the constraints of the publishing industry. Known as "Super Campeones" in Spanish-speaking Latin America and "Holly e Benji" in Italy, the story has also been adapted into cartoons and video games. Its books have sold more than 70 million copies in Japan, and more than 10 million overseas. "The story of Captain Tsubasa is not over yet! That is a fact," Takahashi said. "Please continue to support Captain Tsubasa just as you have in the past."—AFP



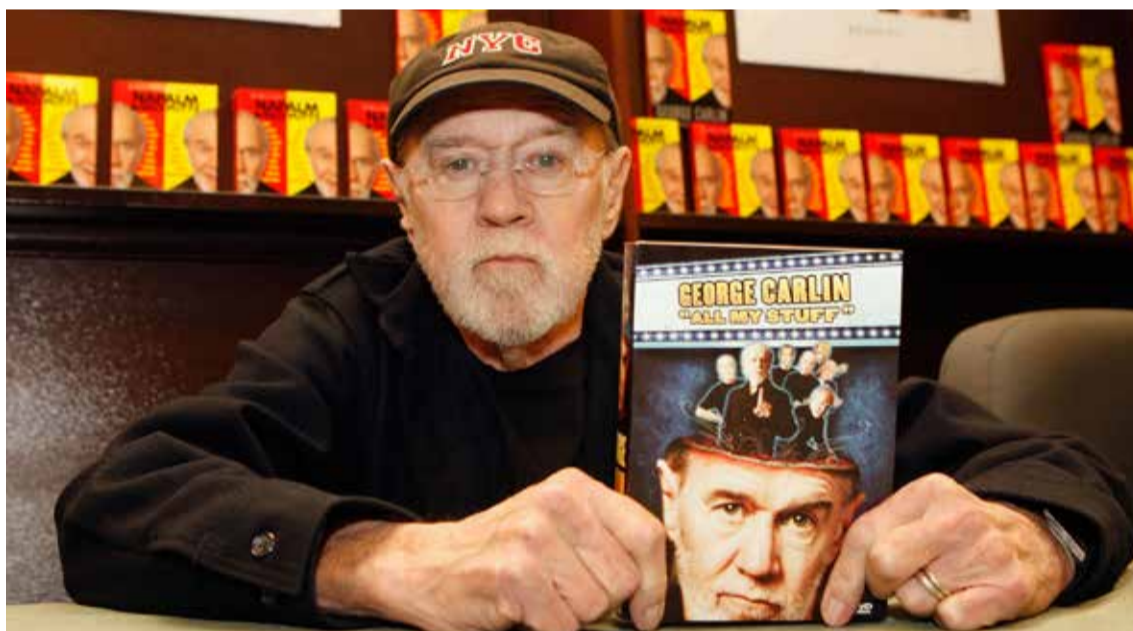
This photo shows Japanese cartoonist and manga artist Yoichi Takahashi, best known for his work "Captain Tsubasa", displaying his autograph with the painting of the main character following an interview with AFP at his workplace in Tokyo.— AFP

Podcast sued for 'AI George Carlin' settles with comic's estate

Podcasters who controversially used AI to emulate the late US comedian George Carlin in a recent comedy episode have reached a settlement with his estate after family members sued. The legal battle over the "Dudesy" podcast's one-hour special "George Carlin: I'm Glad I'm Dead" highlights the rapidly growing role of AI in entertainment, which is viewed as a threat by many creatives and was a key issue in last year's Hollywood strikes. The terms of the deal, which was confirmed Thursday by Carlin's estate, were not revealed.

But the episode in question has been removed from the "Dudesy" website and other platforms. "I am pleased that this matter was resolved quickly and amicably, and I am grateful that the defendants acted responsibly by swiftly removing the video they made," said Kelly Carlin, daughter of the influential counter-culture comic, referring to a video that accompanied the podcast episode. "While it is a shame that this happened at all, I hope this case serves as a warning about the dangers posed by AI technologies and the need for appropriate safeguards not just for artists and creatives, but every human on earth."

AI -- or artificial intelligence -- is increasingly being explored by the entertainment industry to generate content. Proponents say it can be used to create content at lower costs than would be paid to human artists, and point to potential innovative uses of the technology. But opponents say it simply draws upon the existing work of human performers, often without their consent



Author George Carlin poses as he promotes his new book "All My Stuff" at Barnes and Noble December 11, 2007 in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

or compensation, and point to moral dangers including its use to seemingly reanimate deceased artists in audio or even visual form.

Josh Schiller, a lawyer for Carlin's estate, said he hoped the settlement "will serve as a blueprint for resolving similar disputes going forward where an artist or public figure has their rights infringed by AI technology." In a statement, Schiller pointed to recent high-profile cases including a fake robocall received by New Hampshire residents impersonating US President Joe Biden, and AI-generated nude photographs of celebrities. "This is not a problem that will go away by itself," he said.

"It must be confronted with swift, forceful action in the courts, and the AI software companies whose technology is being weaponized must also bear some measure of accountability." "Dudesy" is an experimental comedy podcast in which human hosts interact with AI to shape the format and content of each episode. Its creators faced a similar controversy last year when they were threatened with legal action for an episode that imitated former American football star Tom Brady. Stand-up comedian Carlin, who became famous for his biting anti-establishment brand of humor, and regularly appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and "The Tonight Show," died in 2008 at the age of 71.—AFP

James Cameron -- childhood drawings and dreams inspired Hollywood blockbusters

James Cameron, the mastermind behind "The Terminator," "Aliens" and "Titanic," has an exhibition opening in Paris Thursday showcasing his lesser-known skills with pencil and paper. "The Art of James Cameron" is at the Cinematheque Francaise until January. The 69-year-old met AFP there to discuss the childhood origins of his films, his thoughts on artificial intelligence and a few teasers about the third "Avatar" film, due in 2025.

How important was drawing when you were a child?

Drawing was everything. It's how I processed the world. I was reading, watching films, taking in all the storytelling, and I just had to tell my own. I remember very distinctly (aged eight or nine), I went to see the film 'Mysterious Island'. And I was so amazed by the big creatures and the giant crab, but I didn't go back and draw 'Mysterious Island'. I drew my own version with different animals. I remember in high school being very serious about disciplining myself to draw in all kinds of different styles. I created my own comics. I thought maybe I'll write a novel and illustrate it. They didn't have graphic novels yet, but I was thinking in panels... so I was really thinking in shots. The transition into filmmaking was really pretty easy.

How did these early drawings inspire your films?

(My first 'Avatar' drawing) was done when I was 19 so that was 50 years ago. That drawing led me to think about a bioluminescent world and I wrote a story about that in the late 70s. In the early 90s, when I founded a visual effects company and we were trying to do computer-generated characters and creatures, I needed a script about another planet, and so I went back and found that artwork, and that became 'Avatar' -- in 1995. 'The Terminator' image came to me in a dream. I was



James Cameron

sick, I had a high fever, and in that fever dream, I saw a chrome skeleton emerging out of a raging fire. I drew it right away. And then I thought: 'How did he get in the fire? What did he look like before?' And I knew instinctively that he looked human before the fire.

I had dreams as a kid of going through watery tunnels at high speed, kind of like a circulatory system, that wound up in the abyss. I had a nightmare about being in a room where the walls were covered with horns that would kill me, and that became the scene in 'Aliens' where she runs into the egg chamber.

Are kids today losing these skills due to technology?

I don't think we can go back, but I think it's important for people to unplug from time to time. It's important to spend time in nature, to spend time with yourself, just quiet the mind. People are very creative but if you're constantly being bombarded by other people's creativity with movies, games, with the constant flood of media, it tends to stunt it. Drawing is becoming a lost art. Even the artists that work

with me now, they don't usually put pencil to paper. They think of me as the dinosaur because I come in and draw something. But I have to feel it in the lines and textures.

Are you worried about artificial intelligence?

The problem is there's multiple flavours of AI, some of which aren't here yet. Artificial general intelligence is a giant question mark. I think we should definitely pump the brakes on that. In terms of generative AI... that's really interesting because the data they scrape is all the imagery that human beings have ever created. We're putting our subconscious mind out into the world, and it's coming back to us through these images. That's why they're so compelling, because it's really us writ large. We're going to learn something about consciousness and about art.

But there's no original. There's no paint on a canvas. You can use gen-AI to create music, but you can't take it on the road. I think the human artist becomes more important. Music is going to have to be about the actual moment of performance.

Can you give us an update on 'Avatar 3'?

In movie three, we're in a transitional state between fighting for the survival of Earth and of Pandora. We're exploring other cultures on the planet, and solidifying the bad-guy story. There's a bunch of new things that happen to the Sully family... and we drop in one important new character who then becomes a major part of the story. You've got to remember this is a story arc that goes from one all the way to five, and we're right in the middle. But I can promise this: Whatever you think it's going to be, it isn't. — AFP

Ailing French star Alain Delon under legal guardianship



This combination of pictures shows French actor Alain Delon (Top) and (From left, Bottom) his three children, French actor Fabien Delon, French actress Anouchka Delon and French actor Anthony Delon. — AFP

A French judge placed screen legend Alain Delon under reinforced legal guardianship, a source close to the case and a judicial source said. Delon, who starred in classics such as "Swimming Pool", "The Leopard" and "Purple Noon", has been in poor health since he suffered a stroke in 2019. A guardian had since January been in charge of the 88-year-old's medical decisions, but Thursday's decision is a step further. "It implies he is no longer totally free to manage his assets or take decisions, which allows for the management of certain medical aspects concerning him," the source said. The particular level of guardianship that has been ordered usually means a guardian manages a person's bank account and expenses.

Delon is believed to be living on his estate in the village of Douchy, more than 130 kilometers (80 miles) south of Paris. A judge in the nearby town of Montargis on Thursday made the legal guardianship decision. A judicial source said prosecutors had asked for the opinion of a doctor, who then alerted the judge. Delon has recently been the centre of an escalating family feud between his sons Anthony and Alain-Fabien, and his daughter Anouchka. The quarrel went public after the oldest son Anthony Delon told the Paris Match magazine that his father was in a "weakened" state.

He has accused his half-sister Anouchka of wanting to take their father to Switzerland, a country of which the actor has been a citizen since 1999, against his will to avoid "huge tax" on inheritance. She has replied that she wanted to take him there for medical treatment. Police have seized 72 firearms from Delon's home because he did not have permits for them.

In the latest development, Anouchka is suing her brothers for infringing on her private life by publishing a conversation between her and her father. A trial date has been set for April next year, a court said last week. Delon is estimated to be worth millions. He sold some 80 works of art at auction in June for more than eight million euros (\$8.7 million).—AFP

Lifestyle



A traditional mask dancer dances during the Festimasq, the Festival des Masques in Pouni, Sangue province. — AFP photos



BURKINA FASO VILLAGERS USE MYSTIC MASKS TO SUMMON PEACE

To the rhythmic beat of drums and flutes, hundreds of villagers parade through a remote town in Burkina Faso wearing large, colorful masks that represent bush animals and local proverbs. In rural areas, sacred masks are frequently used in important ceremonies including births, marriages and funerals. But in a country plagued by jihadist violence, villagers are now using the creations to summon a return of peace. On a Saturday at the end of March, locals dressed as animal-like creatures danced around Pouni, a town located 130 kilometers (81 miles) west of the capital Ouagadougou, to celebrate Festimasq, the festival of masks.

Every design is different. Some represent an ani-



mal, like a crocodile, buffalo or monkey, while others are called "blade masks", topped by a large plank of wood. "The mask is a sacred element. Our ancestors who were strong managed to tame the bush animals. That's what the mask represents, a symbol of strength and power," Yaro Boubie, a festival-goer from Zawara, one of the 30 villages participating in the tradition, said. But this year's festival, the 17th year to be held in Pouni, has a political aspect. The theme, "peace and social cohesion in Burkina Faso", was chosen due to the current environment in the country, Ya Herve Gue, president of the Amis des Masques (Friends of Masks) association and organiser of the festival, told AFP.

"The mask is a symbol of peace and social cohesion that can be used to face the security challenges that our country is going through," Gue said. "Zoomorphic masks are inspired by the attitudes of some

animals to parody humans," he added. "The blade masks, however, present proverbs, allegories of sorts that play a moral and civil role."

Erosion of relations

The West African nation has been battered by a jihadist insurgency that swept in from neighboring Mali in 2015. Thousands of civilians, troops and police have been killed, two million people have fled their homes and anger within the military at the mounting toll sparked two coups in 2022. The sacred sculptures have "an important place in the imagination of our communities", Culture Minister Jean Emmanuel Ouedraogo said. Jihadist violence is causing "the erosion of fraternal relations and harmony that exist between communities," he said.

According to Ouedraogo, an event like the mask

festival can help bring communities closer together. Ko Belibie, who participated in a previous festival, recalls a "miracle" that occurred during a Festimasq. "When I was young, there was a big drought. The masks came out for a procession and asked for rain. At the end of the ceremony, the masks didn't have time to leave the place when it started raining," he said. —AFP



Venice vows light touch in new measure to cut down on day visitors

Venice's mayor on Thursday promised a light touch "without queues" when the city rolls out a new ticket policy in a few weeks, seeking to cut down on the hordes of visitors who descend on its canal streets every summer. The new strategy to lower the number of tourists visiting the UNESCO World Heritage site calls for day-trippers to pay a five-euro ticket to enter the historic city centre and is due to start on April 25. Although the new policy was announced in September, the city had not provided details on how it would be implemented, causing speculation that the city could install turnstiles or other drastic measures.

But at a press conference in Rome on Thursday, Mayor Luigi Brugnaro promised "very soft controls" and "without queues", saying that the city would carry out spot checks on tourists to make sure they are armed with a QR code. "This is an experiment, and the first time it's been done anywhere in the world," he said. "Our aim is to make Venice more liveable." At peak times, some 100,000 tourists spend the night in the city, with tens of thousands other people visit-

ing just for the day. This compares with a population of some 50,000 in the city centre, which is steadily shrinking. This year, only 29 peak tourist days will be affected by the new tax, which begins April 25 and continues nearly every weekend from May to July.

Venice Access Fee

The "Venice Access Fee" targets only daily tourists entering the old town between 08:30 and 16:00 local time. Exempt are those tourists staying in hotels, minors under 14, and the disabled, among other categories. For five euros, a QR code can be downloaded from the website, available in English, Spanish, French, German and, of course, Italian. Other languages will be added. Residents and their families do not have to pay the fee, while tourists staying in hotels will be provided a free QR code.

Controllers will be stationed in and around the city's main entrances, notably the Santa Lucia train station, performing spot checks on visitors. Tourists without their ticket will be invited to purchase one at the last moment on arrival, with the help of local operators. But they could also risk fines ranging from 50 to 300 euros. For the time being, there is no ceiling on the number of QR codes distributed each day: "We need to find the true number of visitors," Brugnaro said. The main aim of the project is to discourage day-trippers, who contribute to the overcrowding of the city, world-famous for its works of art, bridges and canals, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987. —AFP

Water returns to Rome's Baths of Caracalla in reflecting pool

The Baths of Caracalla, one of Rome's most spectacular sites, unveiled a special pool on Thursday that reflects the majestic ruins, in an interplay of the contemporary and ancient. The pool, called "Lo Specchio" ("The Mirror"), measures 42 meters by 32 meters (138 feet by 105 feet), creating a sparkling surface for the reflection of the remains of one of antiquity's largest bath complexes.

Cultural officials said they were not trying to recreate one of Caracalla's many baths, but rather to evoke the spirit of the site. "The return of water is not only a wonder for its own sake, a joy for the eyes and the spirit, but is meant to be a concrete symbol of reconnection with the ancient world," said Daniela Porro, special superintendent for cultural affairs in Rome.

The addition of the contemporary architecture "harmonises with the ancient one, to consolidate the role of the Baths of Caracalla as a centre promoting culture and art". Water jets and spotlights installed at the bottom of the pool create a play of water and light, suggesting the steam of the ancient baths. A stage can be placed over the water for theatre and dance performances or concerts, officials said. The installation opens to the general public on April 13 with a new ballet set to George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue". —AFP



Verstappen grabs pole in Japan for Red Bull one-two

Ferrari's Leclerc out of answers at Japanese Grand Prix

SUZUKA: Triple world champion Max Verstappen said his performance "wasn't ideal" but still good enough to grab pole position for Sunday's Japanese Grand Prix ahead of Red Bull team-mate Sergio Perez. Verstappen, who failed to finish the race in Australia a fortnight ago, clocked a fastest lap of 1min 28.197sec in qualifying at Suzuka—just 0.066sec ahead of the Mexican for a Red Bull one-two.

It was the fourth time the Dutchman has claimed pole in as many races this season. Verstappen said he was "not very happy with myself" after almost letting Perez snatch top spot in the dying moments.

"It wasn't ideal but it was still good enough," said the Dutchman. "Of course I always want it to be perfect but that's not possible. Luckily it was still good enough today." McLaren's Lando Norris was third, 0.292sec behind Verstappen.

Perez was in third place heading towards the end of a gripping qualifying session in dry conditions but he almost jumped into top spot with an inspired final effort. The Mexican said it was "quite difficult to get the perfect lap nailed".

"It was close today but I think the whole weekend has been good," said Perez, who finished runner-up behind Verstappen in the first two grands prix of the season. "We made some good progress and we managed to keep some consistency through qualifying. Let's see what we are able to do tomorrow," he added. Ferrari's Carlos Sainz, who won in Melbourne, was fourth. Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso was fifth ahead of McLaren's Oscar Piastri and Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton. Ferrari's Charles Leclerc finished eighth ahead of Mercedes' George Russell and RB's Yuki Tsunoda.

'Question mark'

Verstappen won the first two grands prix of the season but retired in Melbourne with a brake issue, marking the first time he had failed to finish a race in two years. He has looked back to his formidable

best so far at Suzuka, topping the time sheets in the first and third practice sessions while sitting out the second because of bad weather.

But he said after qualifying that he was not happy with his pace over long distances so far in Japan. The Dutchman said it was "a question mark" heading into the race and wondered aloud if Ferrari might be able to take advantage.

"Maybe they were not so quick over one lap today but they are definitely fast in the long run," said Verstappen. "So we'll have to wait and see how that will evolve in the race." Norris emerged from a crowded qualifying pack to claim third behind the two Red Bulls. The British driver went toe to toe with Verstappen at the first corner in last year's race before ultimately finishing as runner-up.

He admitted there was "a lot to do" to close the gap but vowed to keep pushing. "It's tricky, they're quick," said Norris. "They complained about their race pace but I don't think they've had a bad race in the last four, five years."

Mercedes failed to build on their promising practice sessions and the team were fined after an early incident where Russell was released into Piastri's path in the pit lane. Tsunoda made it to Q3 with a last-gasp charge, edging out RB team-mate Daniel Ricciardo as well as Nico Hulkenberg, Valtteri Bottas, Alex Albon and Esteban Ocon.

Alpine's Pierre Gasly was eliminated in Q1 for the fourth time this season. Lance Stroll, Kevin Magnussen, Logan Sargeant and Zhou Guanyu also fell at the first hurdle. Meanwhile, Ferrari's Charles Leclerc said he was out of answers after finishing a disappointing eighth in qualifying for the Japanese Grand Prix on Saturday. Leclerc came home 0.589sec behind triple world champion Max Verstappen, who made it four pole positions from four grands prix so far this season.

Leclerc also trailed teammate Carlos Sainz, who qualified in fourth, with the Monegasque driver



SUZUKA: Pole position qualifier Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen (L) poses with former French F1 driver Jean Alesi after the qualifying session for the Formula One Japanese Grand Prix race at the Suzuka circuit in Suzuka, Mie prefecture on April 6, 2024. —AFP

saying it was "definitely not a good feeling". "I tried many different things today and none of them worked," Leclerc told Sky Sports.

"For now, I don't have the answers but the positive thing, if we have to find one, is our race pace looks a bit stronger." But on a track like this, qualifying position is extremely important and today we didn't do a good job." Sainz led Leclerc to a one-two finish for Ferrari at the Australian Grand Prix a fortnight ago, with Verstappen retiring from the race with a brake issue. But while Sainz said he was happy with his qualifying performance in Suzuka, Leclerc cut a

frustrated figure. "I'm not happy with our qualifying today," he said. "The feeling in the car was quite good but the pace was just not there, so we will look at the data and assess what exactly this was down to." Verstappen qualified 0.066sec ahead of Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez, with McLaren's Lando Norris coming home in third.

Sainz said he thought his fourth-place finish left him "in a good position to fight tomorrow". "We've made good steps in terms of race pace and I hope we will be able to exploit it during the race and fight for a podium position," said the Spaniard. —AFP

Fiji flop again ahead of tilt at third Games gold

HONG KONG: Fiji's men are the reigning two-time Olympic rugby sevens champions and when they play, the Pacific island country comes to a standstill and crime there plummets. But just over three months before they defend their cherished Olympic crown in Paris, there is soul-searching after a painful barren run in the World Series. The latest disappointment came in a 19-12 loss to holders New Zealand in the quarter-finals on Saturday in Hong Kong, the most prestigious leg of the series and a tournament Fiji consider home. One month ago, Englishman Ben Gollings was sacked as head coach and replaced by former Fiji sevens captain Osea Kolinisau, who helped the country to Olympic gold as a player at the 2016 Rio Games.

"In the pursuit of Olympic glory in France, we have to have the best," rugby board boss Peter Mazey said in axing Gollings. Kolinisau took charge for the first time this week in a hot and wet Hong Kong, where Fiji have triumphed a record 19 times and are usually the hottest ticket in town. But coming to Hong Kong, they had not won a tournament in the five legs so far of the cur-

rent series. That poor run continued in defeat to New Zealand and skipper Vatemu Ravouvou told AFP: "We planned to come and win but it wasn't a good enough week and it wasn't our day today."

"The boys have to adapt to the change in coaching staff and we are getting there. But we need to improve in a lot of things, especially our defence." In a message to the large number of colourful Fiji fans at Hong Kong Stadium, many wearing blue wigs, Ravouvou said: "We will work hard to put Fiji back on the map."

'Air of hope'

Rugby sevens is the national sport of Fiji. They have long excelled at the abbreviated form of rugby with slick handling, speed, crunching tackles and a desire to run the ball from anywhere, often ending with outrageous tries. They won the Olympic title in 2016 by demolishing Great Britain 43-7 in the final, then again in Tokyo in 2021 by beating New Zealand 27-12 in the gold-medal match. Those are the only Olympic golds the country of just under one million people has ever won. A seven-dollar banknote was introduced in 2016 to celebrate gold in Rio, and was reissued in 2021 when they repeated the feat. Gollings took over in December that year but was axed with the team failing to replicate their golden touch under him. Satish Narain, a rugby commentator for Fiji's national broadcaster, told AFP in Hong Kong that there were wider issues at play beyond the coaching. —AFP



HONG KONG: Fiji's Jeremaia Matana (C) runs with the ball against New Zealand in their quarter-final match at the 2024 Rugby Sevens Hong Kong tournament at the Hong Kong stadium on April 6, 2024. —AFP

Tiger appears set for Masters start despite injuries

AUGUSTA: Tiger Woods appears set to make his 26th start at the Masters next week, but the 15-time major winner remains hampered by severe leg injuries from a 2021 car crash. Woods, whose plane was tracked to Augusta a week ago, is listed to speak with reporters at Augusta National on Tuesday and remains among those in the tournament field on the event website rather than among non-playing champions.

But the 48-year-old US superstar, whose 82 PGA Tour wins shares the all-time record with Sam Snead, is struggling with injuries, according to his long-time pal Notah Begay. "He's trying to formulate a strategy and approach that he can work with given the constraints

that he is presented with, and he has got some constraints," Begay told reporters on Wednesday.

"He has got zero mobility in that left ankle and really has low-back challenges now, which he knew he was going to have." Woods won the 2019 Masters for his first major title since 2008, but has struggled since making his comeback from the 2021 auto accident at the 2022 Masters, finishing 47th when he struggled just to walk all 72 holes at the hilly layout. Last year, Woods matched a Masters record by making a 23rd consecutive cut, pulling level with Gary Player and Fred Couples, but later withdrew due to plantar fasciitis and underwent ankle surgery last April. The five-time Masters champion reportedly played Augusta National last weekend with pal Justin Thomas and Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley. So far this season, the only PGA event Woods has played was at Riviera in February, when he withdrew after one round due to illness.

Can he walk 72 holes?

The main struggle for Woods is walking a full four rounds, Begay said. "He has been trying to find a way to

recover," Begay said. "He can play the golf. We always knew the question was going to be, 'Can he walk the 72?'" That's still up in the air.

"Can he recover from one round to the next? That's the biggest question. I really don't know and he's not going to know either until he gets out there and figures out whether the way he has prepared for this year's Masters is going to work for him."

Woods has delivered some of the most spectacular shotmaking ever seen at Augusta National, creating roars that reverberated through the pines along the famed course. He captured his first major title at the Masters in 1997, won again in 2001 to complete a "Tiger Slam" of four major wins in a row, then joined Jack Nicklaus and Nick Faldo as the only back-to-back Masters winners with a 2002 triumph before taking the 2005 title.

In 2019, Woods completed a fairytale comeback by taking the Masters, having recovered from four back operations that left him wondering if he could have a normal life due to nagging pain, much less play golf again. —AFP



HYDERABAD: Sunrisers Hyderabad's Aiden Markram plays a shot as Chennai Super Kings' MS Dhoni (L) watches during the Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 cricket match between Sunrisers Hyderabad and Chennai Super Kings at the Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium in Hyderabad. — AFP

Markram shines as Hyderabad pip Chennai

HYDERABAD: Aiden Markram struck a brisk half-century as Sunrisers Hyderabad overcame some late jitters to beat Chennai Super Kings by six wickets in the Indian Premier League on Friday. The South African batsman hit four fours and a six in his 50-run knock to help Hyderabad overhaul Chennai's below-par total of 165-5 with 11 balls to spare at the packed Rajiv Gandhi International stadium.

The victory lifted Hyderabad to fifth place in the 10-team competition with two wins from four games. Chennai, led by the charismatic Mahendra Singh Dhoni, suffered their second defeat in the Twenty20 tournament and are third.

"When we bowled, the first 10 overs or so, it (the ball) was coming on alright but it got tougher," said Markram. "So we took it on in the first 10 overs and were in a good position later." Chennai skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad said his batsmen failed to capitalise in the last five overs and put up a bigger total.

"It was a slow pitch. At the back end they bowled well," he said. "We were in a good situation halfway but they bowled well at the back." Hyderabad made a flying start with opener Abhishek Sharma hammering 27 runs including three sixes and two fours in the second over by Mukesh Choudhary.

But his heroics were cut short by Deepak Chahar who had Sharma caught by Ravindra Jadeja for 37. Markram then steadied the innings with his well-composed knock off 36 balls before being trapped leg before by England's Moeen Ali. Ali then struck again in his next over to remove Shabbaz Ahmed (18), stunning the home crowd into silence.

Heinrich Klaassen and Nitish Kumar Reddy however ensured there were no further setbacks and carried the team past the target. Chennai started slowly after being put in to bat, with openers Rachin Ravindra (12) and Gaikwad (26) cautious in their approach. Shivam Dube provided a fillip to the innings with a quickfire 45 off 24 balls studded with four sixes and two fours. He appeared set for a bigger knock but was caught at backward point off Australian fast bowling star Pat Cummins.

Ajinkya Rahane (35) and Ravindra Jadeja (31 not out) also made useful contributions but Hyderabad bowlers did well to keep the batsmen in check. A disciplined bowling performance meant CSK could only add 37 runs in the last five overs. — AFP

Sports

Lille beat Marseille 3-1 to boost Champions League hopes

Top three in Ligue 1 will qualify for next season's expanded Champions League

PARIS: Canadian star Jonathan David scored his 23rd goal of the season to set Lille on the way to a 3-1 win over Marseille on Friday that kept them firmly on course for next season's Champions League. David's penalty put Lille ahead early in the second half. Remy Cabella doubled their lead on 71 minutes by scoring against his former club.

Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang claimed a goal back for Marseille, but substitute Gabriel Gudmundsson made sure of the victory for Lille late on. The northern side, who face Aston Villa next week in their first ever European quarter-final in the Europa Conference League, move up to third in Ligue 1 ahead of the rest of the weekend's matches.

They are a point behind second-placed Brest and ahead of Monaco in fourth on goal difference, with the gap to Nice in fifth now six points. The top three in Ligue 1 will qualify automatically for next season's expanded Champions League, with the team in fourth entering Europe's elite club competition in the preliminary rounds.

Marseille are seventh, which may yet be enough to sneak into Europe next season depending on who wins the French Cup, but they are a huge 10 points adrift of the top four and only have six matches left to play.

OM, who face Benfica in Portugal in the first leg of their Europa League quarter-final next week, have lost four straight in all competitions. Prior to that, they had recorded five wins on the bounce following the appointment of Jean-Louis Gasset as their third coach this season.

Lille were seeking to extend an impressive home record which had seen them lose just one of their previous 37 matches at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy, going back to August 2022. They went ahead nine minutes after the break when David converted from the spot after he had been fouled in the box by Samuel Gigot.

Sixteen of his goals have come in Ligue 1, with only Kylian Mbappe, who has 24 for Paris Saint-Germain, scoring more. Cabella curled in a delightful shot to make it 2-0 for Paulo Fonseca's impressive team, before Aubameyang gave Marseille a glimmer of hope, appearing to get the last touch as Lille's defence made a mess of clearing their lines.

Shortly after that, in the 84th minute, Gudmundsson swept in Lille's third goal as they prepared in the best possible manner for next Thursday's trip to Villa Park. Brest host struggling Metz on Sunday, with Monaco entertaining Rennes and Nice going to Reims later the same day. — AFP



VILLENEUVE: Lille's French goalkeeper #30 Lucas Chevalier (C) eyes the ball during the French L1 football match between Lille LOSC and Olympique Marseille (OM) at Stade Pierre-Mauroy in Villeneuve-d'Ascq, northern France. — AFP



HAVELUY: Mathieu van der Poel (Alpecin-Deceuninck) rides on the paved sector during a reconnaissance ride for the 121st edition of the Paris-Roubaix upcoming cycling event near Haveluy. — AFP

Paris-Roubaix cobbled 'Hell' looms as cycling faces crash crisis

COMPIEGNE: Defending champion Mathieu van der Poel goes into Sunday's muddy, cobbled Paris-Roubaix bike race sceptical over new safety measures in a week when several of the sport's biggest stars were hospitalised. Miles of mud and millions of cobbles have lent the race the name of 'the Hell of the North' and a reputation of the most gruelling one-day race in cycling. In 2018, one competitor the Belgian Michael Goolaerts was found slumped dead by the roadside after heart failure, and the peloton will pass a memorial to him along the route.

First run in 1896, broken wheels and broken bones have been part of the history of the annual race due to the hefty hunks of cobble that surface around 57km of the 260km route. Organisers this week introduced a u-turn to slow the riders ahead of their entry into the legendary section outside the 650m deep Arenberg coal-mine. World champion and one day racing's hottest star van der Poel asked on X: "Is this a joke". But as cycling fans tune in Sunday, their thoughts will be with Tour de France champion Jonas Vingegaard, Remco Evenepoel and Primoz Roglic, who were among those hospitalised after crashing at the Tour of the Basque Country on Thursday.

Of road cycling's five huge one-day races known as the Monuments due to their epic length Paris-Roubaix, which now starts in Compiègne 80km from the French capital, is known as 'Queen of the classics' because it is the toughest. The 25 teams select seven of their sturdiest riders on the cobbles to cope with the repeated punctures and frequent falls.

Local delicacies

The 2021 winner Sonny Colbrelli fell to the ground at the finish line unrecognisable in a coating of mud. The following year, after a race ridden in drier conditions, champion Dylan van Baarle rode into the Roubaix velodrome cloaked in ghostly grey dust. Race folklore has it that the cobbles decide the winner, who receives one of the rough-hewn slabs in guise of a champion's trophy along with a cheque of 30,000 euros (32,500 dollars). The winner also has his name engraved on a plaque at the Roubaix velodrome's iconic outdoor cold showers.

He will also, as tradition requires be presented with a carton of local delicacies—french fries and a cold beverage. There are 29 cobbled sections along the 260km route, each of them given a star rating of one to five depending on their bone-rattling potential. Six are four-star and three of them five-star. The first of them is the Trouée d'Arenberg, where the safety chicane has been introduced.

These sections can be as narrow as three metres, are by no means flat, and are flanked with a daunting drainage ditch on one side. At last week's other great cobbled classic, the Tour of Flanders, which Van der Poel won with ease, there were no significant accidents.

"I'm lucky to have a team dedicated 110 percent around me," said the 29-year-old Dutch rider. Yet in the build up to the race one of cycling's top stars Wout van Aert was left moaning in agony after a high-speed fall sparked a safety debate. Belgian newspaper Het Nieuwsblad had identified the section where the fall eventually occurred as a risk. —AFP

Clark-led Iowa advances to US women's final

WASHINGTON: US women's college basketball sensation Caitlin Clark rallied the University of Iowa over the University of Connecticut 71-69 on Friday, giving her a chance to complete her historic career with a national title. Clark scored 21 points, grabbed nine rebounds and passed off seven assists to spark the Hawkeyes (34-4) into Sunday's March Madness women's championship game against unbeaten South Carolina, which routed North Carolina State 78-59.

"Our team's confidence is pretty good at the point in the season," Clark said. "Everybody is stepping up." "At this point, anybody can take it and you've got to go prep. You've got one day to take care of yourself so we'll be ready." Clark, the all-time leading scorer in major US college basketball for men or women, has become a iconic figure attracting unprecedented attention to women's basketball.

Resale prices for tickets to the sold-out Women's Final Four in Cleveland were higher than those for the men's games, a sign of the spotlight Clark's feats have brought to the women's game. Clark gave herself a chance to conclude her college career as a champion after Iowa lost to Louisiana State in last year's final. But

Clark scored only six points in the first half, shooting 3-of-11 from the floor and 0-for-6 from 3-point range, as the Huskies' Nika Muhl shut her down.

"That's what you're really going to see at this point. They are really going to sell out on me," Clark said. "I thought my teammates stepped up and did a really good job, made some really big baskets when we needed it. "I couldn't be more proud of them. It takes all five of us."

Connecticut led as much as 28-16 before Iowa pulled within 32-26 at half-time despite 12 turnovers.

"That wasn't a very good start for us at all," Iowa coach Lisa Bluder said. "They wouldn't let us get our running game going. But I thought we took better care of the ball in the second half. We really did a lot better job composure-wise in the second half."

Clark struck for seven points early in the fourth quarter as Iowa grabbed a 66-57 lead thanks to a 15-6 run to start the final quarter. Muhl sank a 3-pointer with 49 seconds remaining to cut Iowa's lead to 70-69 and the Huskies forced a turnover, but Connecticut's Aaliyah Edwards was called for an offensive foul, Clark added a final free throw and Connecticut never got the ball back for a final shot. "We started off the fourth quarter really good, came up with some big baskets," Clark said. "Our offense wasn't great tonight but played great defense. Sometimes that's what you need to win so I'm just proud of our girls to find a way to win." Iowa forward Hannah Stuelke had 23 points on 9-of-12 shooting, scoring when Clark was denied. "My teammates just did a great job of getting me the ball in there and I went to work," Stuelke said. —AFP

Top seed Pegula beats Azarenka

WASHINGTON: US top seed Jessica Pegula saved four match points to eliminate two-time Australian Open champion Victoria Azarenka on Friday and advance to the WTA Charleston Open semi-finals.

Pegula squandered four match points at the clay court event before denying Azarenka's four chances to advance and finally captured a 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (9/7) victory after two hours and 36 minutes when Azarenka hit a forehand service return long.

"That was an emotional roller coaster," Pegula said. "It was like that the entire match. I was playing really well and then I got frustrated I didn't break in the second and she kind of turned it up a gear. "I was able to get back in the third but it was really up and down, I feel like, from the end of the second, start of the third."

"At the end, it was really windy so a lot of awkward points. It's tough when it's windy, playing with your nerves as well. I'm just happy I got through." Pegula advanced to a Saturday semi-final against fourth seed Daria Kasatkina, who battled back to beat Romania's Jaqueline Cristian 6-7 (4/7), 6-2, 6-3 after two hours and 42 minutes.

Miami Open champion Danielle Collins, who won twice on Thursday to reach the quarter-finals, ousted Belgian 11th seed Elise Mertens 6-3, 6-4, stretching the American's win streak to 11 matches. Collins, who ousted 2023 champion Ons Jabeur and fellow American Sloane Stephens on Thursday, will face Greek third seed Maria Sakkari in the semi-finals after she eliminated ninth seed Veronika Kudermetova 6-2, 6-4.

Pegula equalized her rivalry with Azarenka at 3-3, but only after a tenacious third-set finish. "We were playing some good tennis there at the end," Pegula said. "I had match points, 40-love on her serve, and that's frustrating but I was just trying to stay focused to win and at the end, I don't know what happened—I have no idea."

After squandering her chances for the victory, then falling behind 6-3 in the tie-breaker, Pegula admitted she was less than confident. "At 6-3, I didn't have any trust," she said. "I was like, 'Oh, it's crap. Probably over. Try and hang in there. Win this second point.' Honestly, that's what I was thinking. I know that sounds awful but it does release a little of the stress because I think I did play the tie-breaker a little nervy."

Pegula, who has never won a WTA clay-court crown, reached two prior semi-finals this year in Adelaide and San Diego. Her most recent final was last November at the WTA Finals and her most recent of four career WTA titles was last October at Seoul. — AFP



CLEVELAND: Caitlin Clark #22 of the Iowa Hawkeyes fouls Aaliyah Edwards #3 of the UConn Huskies in the second half during the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament Final Four semifinal game at Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse in Cleveland, Ohio. — AFP

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Clinics

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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
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World champions Spain thump Belgium in Euro 2025 qualifiers

Olympic hosts France beat Republic of Ireland 1-0 in Metz



LEUVEN: Belgium's midfielder #23 Kassandra Missipo (C) fights for the ball with Spain's midfielder #03 Teresa Abelleira and Belgium's midfielder #10 Justine Vanhaevermaet during the Women's UEFA Euro 2025 League A Group 2 qualifying football match between Belgium and Spain at the Den Dreef stadium in Leuven. — AFP

PARIS: A Salma Paralluelo hat-trick inspired Spain to a 7-0 win in Belgium on Friday in the opening fixture of their Euro 2025 qualifying campaign, while Marie-Antoinette Katoto gave France a narrow home win over Ireland.

Paralluelo goals bookended a Jenni Hermoso strike in a clinical start by the Spanish, before the Barcelona attacker scored her third two minutes after the break and Esther Gonzalez and Sheila Garcia then completed the rout. "Salma had a great game. She's a player with goals who gives us a lot," said Spain coach Montse Tome.

The victory comes at a difficult moment for the Spanish football federation (RFEF) after disgraced ex-president Luis Rubiales, who was forced to step down last September after forcibly kissing Hermoso following Spain's triumph in the World Cup final in August, was briefly arrested on Wednesday in connection with an alleged graft scandal at the federation. The arrest came two weeks after investigators searched 11 locations, including the RFEF's Madrid

headquarters and Rubiales' house in the southern city of Granada, as part of a probe into alleged corruption and other crimes.

In Leuven in Belgium, Paralluelo broke the deadlock with a precise finish from a corner in the eighth minute and Hermoso doubled the lead eight minutes later. After 30 minutes, former Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas set Paralluelo up with a delightful backheel and the 20-year-old turned and finished assuredly inside the box.

The hat-trick came soon after the interval when Paralluelo swept home Ona Batlle's cross from inside the six-yard box. Gonzalez netted a fourth for Spain on 64 minutes, before Garcia and Gonzalez struck again in the last five minutes to complete an emphatic away win. Earlier in Group 2, Denmark won 3-1 in the Czech Republic 3-1 thanks to an early Amalie Vangsgaard strike and two goals in four second-half minutes from Stine Ballisager and Josefine Hasbo.

Olympic hosts France beat the Republic of Ireland 1-0 in Metz. Herve Renard's side dominated the vis-

itors but lacked incision in a combative encounter in Group 3. Paris Saint-Germain forward Katoto netted in the sixth minute to give the Euro 2022 semi-finalists a winning start to their campaign.

Katoto decisive for France

The 25-year-old was quickest to react to Maelle Lakrar's pass across goal and tapped the ball over the line from one yard out. France were unable to break down the stubborn Irish defence a second time but were never troubled.

"I'm very satisfied with this match in terms of the spirit, the desire to get forward, to press," said France coach Renard, adding that the Irish are "a very difficult team to destabilise". In the same group, England drew 1-1 with Sweden at Wembley. Alessia Russo's opener midway through the first half was cancelled out by a 64th-minute Fridolina Rolfo header.

The breakthrough came for the reigning European champions in the 24th minute from Russo's close-range stooping header after Lauren James

picked out the Arsenal forward. Soon after the hour, Rolfo levelled when she headed in Rosa Kafaji's cross at the back post.

Moments later, Stina Blackstenius raced clear but her left-footed finish rolled wide of Mary Earps' post. Elsewhere in League A, Norway beat Finland 4-0 at home in Group 1 while Italy beat Euro 2017 winners Netherlands 2-0 at the San Vito stadium in Cosenza. Roma forward Valentina Giacinti opened the scoring on four minutes with a clinical right-footed finish, before Agnese Bonfantini turned in Michela Cambiaghi's cross to secure the three points just before the hour.

Iceland won 3-0 at home against Poland and Germany came from two down to win 3-2 in Austria. In League B, Wales made a flying start to their campaign with a 4-0 home victory over Croatia and Scotland were held to a goalless draw in Serbia. Montenegro beat Andorra 6-1 in Podgorica and Luxembourg, 117th-ranked in the world, came from behind to win 2-1 at home to Albania in League C. — AFP



DOHA: Salem Al-Sarraf seen on the podium with other winners. — KUNA

Kuwait's Al-Sarraf ranks 2nd at Qatar Drift Championship

DOHA: Kuwaiti racer Salem Al-Sarraf came second in the fifth and final round of the 2023-2024 Season of Qatar Drift Championship on

Friday. Ahmad Al-Ameri, of Oman, led the race while the Jordanian Ali Jabsha came third in the general rankings of the championship which started in November. Al-Sarraf noted that he ranked second in the first round and first in the third round.

In statements to KUNA, he thanked the organizers of the championship, notably the Chairman of Qatar Racing Club Sheikh Jabr bin Khalid, for their hospitality and efforts to ensure the convenience of participants. — KUNA

Celtics hold off Fox, Kings extend NBA win streak

LOS ANGELES: The top-seeded Boston Celtics held off a 40-point display from De'Aaron Fox and a furious fourth-quarter rally to beat the Sacramento Kings 101-100 on Friday. Boston, already assured of entering the playoffs as the NBA's number one-ranked team, looked to be strolling to a comfortable victory after taking a 19-point lead midway through the fourth quarter.

But what looked like a formality for Boston came within a whisker of an implosion as Sacramento roared back to take a 100-99 lead after a Fox 3-pointer with 27 seconds remaining. However, Xavier Tillman's floating jump shot restored Boston's lead with seven seconds left and the Celtics held on to secure their 61st win of the season.

Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla praised the grit of his team's second unit in closing out the win, saying it augured well for the playoffs. "I thought, 'This is fun, this is awesome,'" Mazzulla said. "Couldn't have simulated a better environment of stress, pressure, chaos. It's the perfect environment to execute.

"When those guys are in, you hold them to the same standard as everyone else. I think they did a great job making plays." Payton Pritchard led Boston's scoring with 21 off the bench while Kristaps

Porzingis added 20 points with 11 rebounds and two assists. Despite Sacramento's defeat, the Kings are assured of at least a play-in place after the Houston Rockets were beaten 119-104 at home by the Miami Heat. In other games on Friday, Milwaukee slipped to a third straight defeat, losing 117-111 at home to the eliminated Toronto Raptors, who had been on a 15-game losing streak.

Milwaukee, missing the injured Giannis Antetokounmpo, started brightly to pull clear by 10 points in the second quarter, before a sustained rally hauled the Raptors back into contention. Gary Trent Jr. finished with 31 points for Toronto, with R.J. Barrett (26) and Immanuel Quickley (25) lending offensive support. Damian Lillard topped the Milwaukee scoring with 36 points, including 4-of-12 from three-point range. The Bucks (47-30) remain second in the Eastern Conference.

The defeat was another blow to Bucks coach Doc Rivers as his team gears up for a tilt at the playoffs. "I'm frustrated, we're all frustrated, and I guess that's a good thing," Rivers said. "But frustration gets you nowhere. We've got to work ourselves through this.

"I've got to figure out what we've got to do to play at a higher pace." The Bucks next face the New York Knicks, who slumped to a 108-100 loss to the Chicago Bulls in the Windy City on Friday despite a 35-point performance from Jalen Brunson.

Elsewhere, the Golden State Warriors were left still waiting to clinch at least a play-in spot after Klay Thompson's last-gasp attempted buzzer-beater missed in a 108-106 loss to the Dallas Mavericks. — AFP