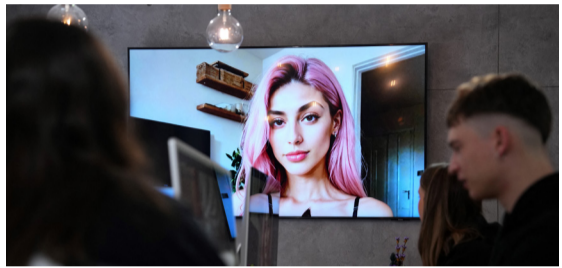


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**10** Ro'ya talent program a milestone for Burgan Bank leadership development



**11** AI vs humans: Influencers face competition from virtual models



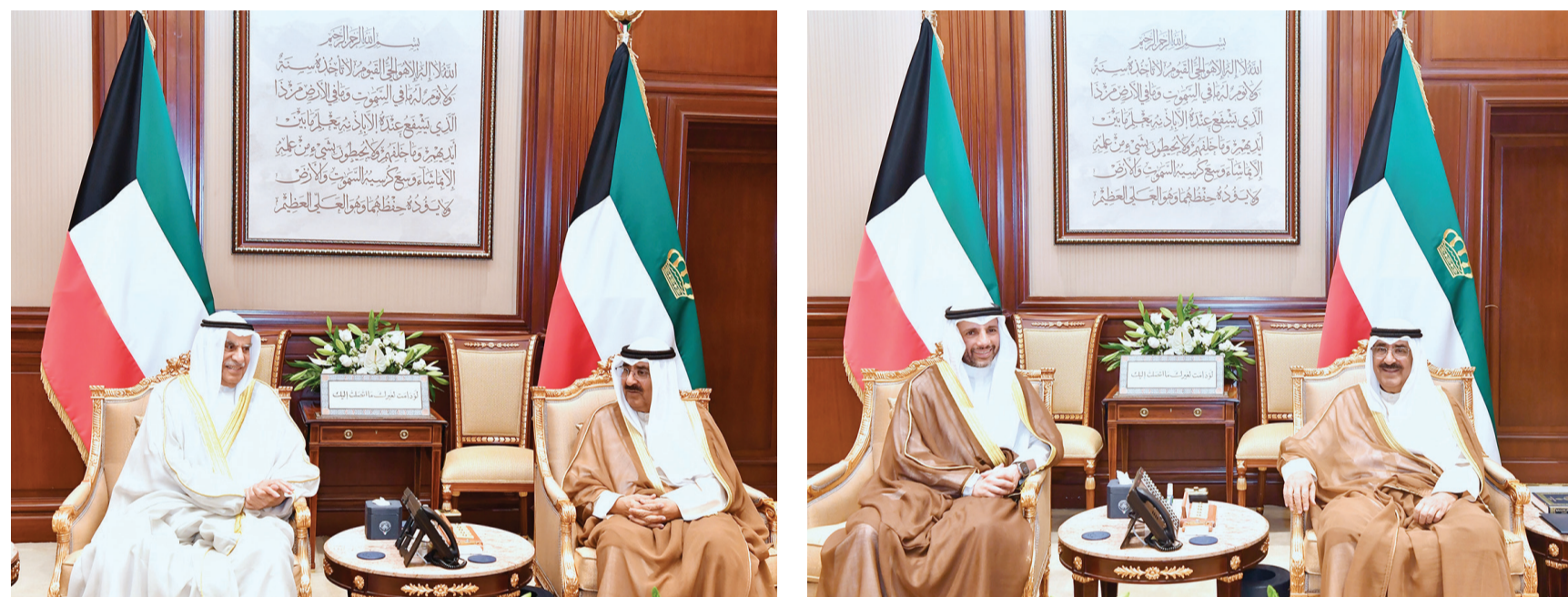
**16** Copa del Rey triumph rewards finest Athletic Bilbao in 40 yrs



Ramadan Kareem	
Fajr	: 04:09
Shrooq	: 05:30
Dhuhr	: 11:50
Asr	: 15:23
Maghrib	: 18:10
Isha	: 19:29

# Amir receives former speakers

### Sheikh Mishal accepts govt resignation, issues decree for Assembly to convene April 17



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives former National Assembly speakers Ahmad Al-Saadoun (left) and Marzouq Al-Ghanem (right) as part of consultations ahead of forming a new Cabinet on April 7, 2024. — KUNA photos

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Sunday former National Assembly speakers Ahmad Al-Saadoun and Marzouq Al-Ghanem as part of consultations ahead of forming a new Cabinet. HH the Amir earlier on Sunday accepted the resignation of the government, which quit in accordance with the law after the parliamentary elections.

An Amiri decree asked HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Dr Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah and other ministers to continue as a caretaker government until a new Cabinet is formed. Under Kuwaiti law, the government must resign after parliamentary polls.

HH the Amir can name a new prime minister or ask HH Sheikh Mohammad to form the new Cabinet. He will also meet all former prime ministers. There are two former speakers and five former premiers. HH the Amir also issued a decree announcing the new parliament will hold its inaugural session on April 17.

Former veteran speaker Saadoun and MP Fahad Al-Azmi have officially announced they are running for the post of speaker of the Assembly as a proposed informal meeting for new lawmakers

Continued on Page 6

## RAMADAN KAREEM

### Victories in Ramadan

By Sharafun-Nisa'a Mohammed Farooq

Ramadan is not a month of laziness, irresponsibility and non-accountability as many people think. I would like to prove in this article that such people not only have erred, but have also distorted the pure and noble meaning and spirit of Ramadan.

Reading about the victories that took place during the era of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the succeeding golden era of his rightly guided companions as well as our rightly guided ancestors, will give us an overview of the way Ramadan has to be treated, and the wide range of benefits that we can reap from it. The following are some of the victories that Muslims - during the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and throughout the era of his rightly guided companions and their followers - were able to achieve in Ramadan:

1. On the 17th of Ramadan of the second year of Hijra (Emigration of Prophet Muhammad PBUH to Madinah), the Quraishi polytheists of Makkah assembled with the aim of attacking Muslims in Madinah so as to uproot Islam. They numbered approximately 1,000 warriors (infantry and cavalrymen). Moreover, they were armed to the teeth. They possessed all the means of victory and were confident that they would easily vanquish the Muslim army.
- As for Muslims, they numbered only 313. However, a few of them had never been engaged in fighting before. The two sworn enemy armies confronted each other in the battle of Badr (the first decisive battle between Muslims and pagans). God Almighty bestowed victory upon Muslims as explained in the following verse: "God surely succored you (Muslims) at [the battle of] Bader when you were a contemptible little force; then fear Allah (God); thus you may show your gratitude." (Al Imran 3: 123)
2. On the 10th day of Ramadan of the eighth year of Hijra, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

Continued on Page 6

## Genocidal Zionist Gaza war enters seventh month

GAZA: Zionist pulled its ground forces out of the southern Gaza Strip Sunday, media reports said, in a partial withdrawal six months into the devastating war. But the military said a "significant force" will keep operating elsewhere in the besieged Palestinian territory. The war entered its seventh month on Sunday, with talks towards a truce and hostage release deal expected to resume in Cairo.

As the bloodiest-ever Gaza war passed the half-year mark, the Zionist entity's government has faced



GAZA: A man stands in the midst of devastation caused by months of Zionist bombardment in Khan Yunis on April 7, 2024, after the Zionist entity pulled its ground forces out of the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

## Largest Gaza hospital 'an empty shell with human graves': WHO

GENEVA: The World Health Organization said on Saturday that Gaza's largest hospital had been reduced to ashes by the Zionist entity's latest siege, leaving an "empty shell" with many bodies. WHO staff who gained access on Friday to the devastated facility described horrifying scenes of bodies only partially buried, with their limbs sticking out, and the stench of decomposing corpses.

Zionist forces pulled out of Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City on Monday after a two-week military operation, during which it said it had battled Palestinian "militants" inside what was once the Palestinian territory's most important medical complex. A WHO-led mission finally accessed the hospital on Friday, after multiple failed attempts since March 25, the United Nations health agency said.

It found massive destruction and heard reports that patients had been "held in abysmal conditions" during the siege and several had died. "WHO and partners managed to reach Al-Shifa — once the backbone of the health system in Gaza, which is now an empty shell with human graves after the latest siege," WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus wrote on X, formerly Twitter.

Continued on Page 6

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Zionist embassies 'no longer safe'

TEHRAN: An adviser to Iran's supreme leader warned Sunday that Zionist embassies are "no longer safe" after a Zionist strike on Damascus leveled the Iranian embassy's consular annex, killing seven Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps members including two generals. "The resistance front is ready; how it (the response) will be, we have to wait," said Yahya Rahim Safavi, senior adviser to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, noting that "confronting this brutal regime is a legal and legitimate right". He also noted that multiple Zionist embassies around the region "have been shuttered". — AFP

### Houthis target three ships

DUBAI: Two ships have been targeted off Yemen, British maritime security firm Ambrey said on Sunday, raising to three the number of incidents reported in under 24 hours. The attacks coincide with a campaign by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis against ships the rebels say are linked to the Zionist entity. Ambrey said "a vessel was targeted... southwest of Mukalla," a Yemeni port city. Earlier, it said a projectile fell near a ship southwest of the Yemeni port of Aden, hours after two missiles targeted a ship southwest of the Yemeni port city of Hodeida. — AFP

### Sunak stands by Zionist entity

LONDON: British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Saturday said the "terrible" war between the Zionist entity and Hamas "must end", six months on from the start of the conflict. "We continue to stand by (the Zionist entity's) right to defeat the threat from Hamas terrorists and defend their security. But the whole of the UK is shocked by the bloodshed," he said in a statement. "This terrible conflict must end. The hostages must be released. The aid — which we have been straining every sinew to deliver by land, air and sea — must be flooded in," he added. — AFP

### Attack on Sudan village kills 20

RED SEA STATE, Sudan: Sudanese paramilitary forces have killed at least 20 people in an attack on a village south of the capital Khartoum, a local activists' committee said on Sunday. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) "attacked the village of Um Adam" 150 km south of the city on Saturday, said a statement from the local resistance committee. Saturday's attack resulted in "over 200 wounded with both serious and minor injuries, and more than 20 martyrs, not all of whom we could tally", the statement said. — AFP



# Submitting to the will of God

## Converts share their journey towards Islam and changes in their lives

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: The first encounter with Islam has been a deeply transformative moment for three new converts, each originating from diverse backgrounds, who all bravely embarked on a shared journey towards faith. Their paths converged in Kuwait, a land where they met people who welcomed and embraced them at every turn, deepening their sense of connection to a religion and a place they had never been part of before.

### Finding God

German American Bettina Monroe had always been driven by an unseen force, searching for God throughout her life, until she unexpectedly stumbled upon Him. It was when she witnessed, for the first time, the prayer ritual of a Muslim, bowing down on their knees and touching their forehead to the ground. Even though Monroe said that she had always prayed to God, whether sitting, lying in bed or going to church, it was very odd for her to see someone go down to this level. This humble practice deeply touched her. "It did something different inside of me and made me feel so little," she said compassionately.

When she performed this practice herself last year during Ramadan, she recalled feeling as if she were held down by an invisible weight. "It took me a while to be able to get up again. But when I did, I felt safe, and I couldn't stop crying," she said. Through this incident, Monroe came to the realization that God invited her to find Him, in the same manner that God invited Randall Smith, a 51-year-old American, by resolving all the doubts he had. "Islam answered all my questions and filled all the gaps I once had," he remarked.

### Bonding with community

Smith remembered worrying about how he would be received in the religion as a black American. However, he was pleasantly surprised each time he was greeted by a Muslim. "As soon as people knew I was a Muslim, it was as if they had won a prize, showering me with smiles and hugs," he said. Reflecting on the sense of brotherhood and connection that he found within the Muslim community, he stated: "It's exactly what I was searching for."

It was also this strong sense of brotherhood that warmly welcomed fellow American Alexander Newcomb, 26, into the religion last year. To him, every encounter with a Muslim pushed him deeper into his faith. "If I hadn't met such welcoming people, it would have been more challenging for me to learn about Islam," he noted. He was astonished at how all the people he met always expressed a generous willingness to assist him beyond his requests. "I could text some of my friends at 2 am and immediately receive a response to any inquiry I had about Islam," he added.



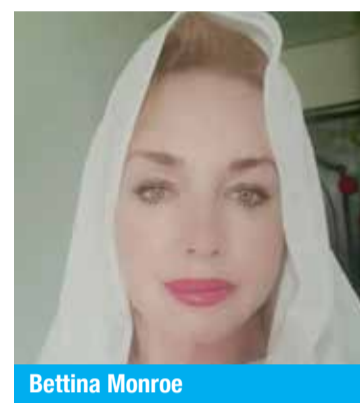
KUWAIT: People pray outside the Grand Mosque in Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Alexander Newcomb



Randall Smith



Bettina Monroe



Muslim brothers hugging each other.

### A leap of change

Islam provided Newcomb with a daily purpose, motivating him to strive towards self-improvement. "Every verse I read in the Quran resonated with what I believed a good man should strive to be," he said. Following Islamic guidelines made him realize that happiness could be found beyond his old habits, such as drinking alcohol or eating pork. Instead, he found fulfillment in positive rituals like giving to the poor through sadaqah and zakat and witnessing instant rewards for his good deeds. "I learned that giving money to the poor truly doesn't decrease your wealth. Since converting, I've received two job promotions and have also improved in my role," he shared.

While Newcomb acknowledged that Islam brought significant changes to his personality, Monroe felt it had relatively little impact on her. She said she had always strived to be a good person before embracing Islam. However, it did inspire her to adopt more positive habits, such as praying regularly and gradually embracing the hijab. "I don't see the hijab as oppressive to women. I've learned that it's for protection," she explained.

Monroe admired how wearing the hijab redirects people's focus on inner beauty and encourages equal treatment of all women, regardless of age or physical appearance. As for Smith, he shared that breaking his old habits wasn't easy, especially after 51 years of ingrained behaviors that he had to unlearn and replace with new ones.

### Grasping the purpose

Smith realized the necessity of the five obligatory prayers a day in his journey of transformation. "Every time I kneel on my prayer mat and perform salah, I'm reminded of everything I've done since the last prayer," he said. It particularly taught him to reflect on his interactions with people, by treating them more fairly and justly. "I use it as a chance to repent and reconsider my behavior, if I've given someone a harsh glance or told a lie."

Understanding the purpose of praying was as easy for Smith as understanding the purpose of fasting. Simply realizing he did it for the sake of God made it much easier. "Fasting taught me that there's something more important than food and drink. It's true that I have a relationship with food, but I also have a relationship with God," he said. He highlighted how this deprivation allowed him to worship God more profoundly, with an increased focus on prayers and reading the Holy Quran.

Smith, Newcomb and Monroe all agreed that fasting made them feel "clearer and more peaceful" from the inside. Even though they all had led different lives before Islam, they unanimously agreed that converting blessed them with the life they had always desired. Monroe believes that God gave us free will to seek Him, and upon finding Him, He desires for us to find who we are meant to be, not what others expect us to be.

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Local

# Opinions differ over 'modernized Eidiya'

## Act of giving evolves into creative meme cards, decorative bags

By Faten Omar

**KUWAIT:** "Eidiya," the tradition act of joy to children during Eid, holds a timeless memory in their minds. However, time has ushered in changes, modernizing its giving. Now, the act of giving Eidiya has evolved into a creative meme cards, decorative bags, and colorful boxes. Kuwait Times spoke with citizens and residents reacting to the "Modernized Eidiya". While shopping for Eidiya cards, Samira Al-Hajj said that the markets and online stores have opened the way for innovations that make Eidiya a distinctive idea that is distinct from its predecessors.

She remarked "The current generation is attuned to trends and values novelty. It's crucial to impress them with innovative Eidiya rather than adhering to the old, traditional method of simply giving money." She revealed that the prices of Eidiya cards and boxes vary according to the quality they are made of and the items' creativity, saying "Card prices range between KD 1 and KD 5 - depending on the size of

the card or the box.

These prices differ if the purchase is by piece or in wholesale, and in some stores, they mostly sell in dozens." In contrast to Al-Hajj's view, Muhammad Yahya refused to enhance the significance of Eidiya in the eyes of children through modern innovations. According to him, children are inherently innocent and require nothing beyond the primary essence of Eidiya. He added "The most crucial aspect for them is to receive Eidiya directly, as it represents their opportunity to exert autonomy and purchase what they desire without interference from adults."

For her part, Huda Azzam emphasizes that Eidiya isn't exclusively for children, noting that many adults also receive it from their husbands and parents. She pointed out "The act of giving Eidiya in a unique way brings joy and satisfaction. It adds a delightful touch to the tradition. It is not just about the monetary exchange; it is about infusing creativity and fun into the gesture."

Meanwhile, Khaled Al-Fadhli completely rejects



the new trend that has become associated with offering Eidiya, saying "Capitalism and trade make social customs lose their meaning and distort its spontaneity, which we have tasted and known as children.

Therefore, I think that I and everyone who is accustomed to the traditional form of Eidiya reject the use of these meaningless trendy ways." He added "I'm someone who doesn't advocate for embracing every new trend, preferring instead, traditional experiences for my children. I believe in crafting memories that are rooted in simplicity. These memories, steeped in tradition, remain enduringly linked to moments of joy and celebration, regardless of how much time passes or how old my children grow."

For her part, Um Abdullah welcomes the use of Eidiya's new ways spread in the markets, such as cards and boxes, and finds them cheerful, affirming that they will become a beautiful memory that her two children will keep for years. She indicated that the new trendy Eidiya is not widespread, explaining "Such trends add an extra financial burden. I think middle and upper classes are the ones who can afford the cost of cards and boxes that accompany the amount of the Eidiya, which is now - not less than KD 20."

## Collapse of health system in Gaza portends disaster

**CAIRO:** The League of Arab States said on Sunday that the collapse of the health system in the Gaza Strip portends a major disaster, the spread of diseases and epidemics, and a major famine that threatens the lives of thousands. This came in a statement by the Assistant Secretary-General of the Arab League and Head of the Social Affairs Sector, Ambassador Haifa Abu Ghazaleh, on World Health Day.

The statement condemned Zionist occupation forces for violating human rights, international humanitarian law, and the Fourth Geneva Convention for the Protection of Civilians and continuing to target and kill women, children, and the elderly, as well as the systematic bombing of hospitals and all health facilities. It also denounced the Zionist occupation's continued serious violation of preventing access to humanitarian aid, which increases the risk of health and humanitarian conditions, noting that this matter will have devastating effects on the health of mothers, children, and the elderly. The statement said,



**EL-ARISH:** A soldier patrols next to ambulances, donated by Kuwait, as humanitarian aid is unloaded at Egypt's Al-Arish Airport in this file photo. — AFP

"On the day of celebration of World Health Day under the slogan (My Health is My Right) 2024, the World Health Organization and everyone have the responsibility to continue to shed light on the unprecedented health and humanitarian catastrophe that the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip are suffering from.

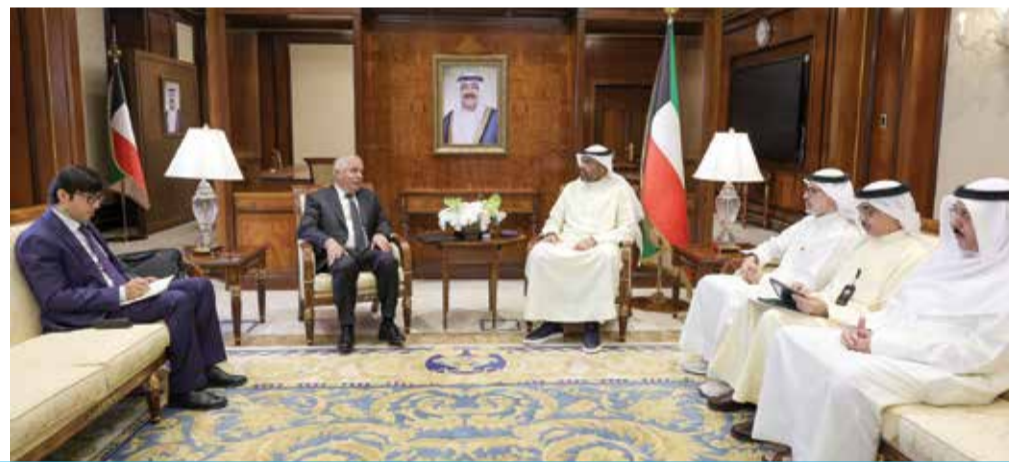
Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti medical team continued the implementation of a series of relief projects for

displaced people in Gaza. Deputy Director General of the Kuwaiti Relief Society and head of the Kuwaiti medical relief team present in Gaza, Omar Al-Thuwaini, said that 120 operations were done within two days for a number of patients at the European Hospital. He thanked the Kuwaiti people for their contributions to providing material and moral support to the medical relief team. — KUNA

## Ministry launches new Sahel service

**KUWAIT:** Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs, Minister of State for Youth Affairs, and Minister of State for Communications Affairs Dawood Maarafi announced the launch of a new service by the General Sports Authority through the unified government application for electronic services, Sahel. This will enhance users' queries of club membership data and will appear in the (Bayanat) tab. Minister Maarafi said on Sunday that this addition to the government application is important in displaying the user's membership data in the club, in addition to showing the status of the subscription. The individual can follow up with the information at any time via Sahel. The minister renewed the ministry's keenness to enhance reliance on digital technology. —KUNA

## FM receives letter from Tajikistan counterpart



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Al-Yahya received a letter from Tajikistan counterpart Sirojiddin Muhriddin. The letter touched on bilateral ties between the two friendly countries and ways of boosting cooperation in various fields. Tajikistan Ambassador to Kuwait Dr. Zubaidallah Zabidov handed the letter to Minister Al-Yahya. — KUNA photos

## Ministry warns artists

**KUWAIT:** The Assistant Undersecretary for Press and Publications commissioned by the Ministry of Information, Lafi Al-Subaie, said that everyone who participated in any work that offends Kuwaiti society has been suspended from participating in any artistic works filmed inside Kuwait or theatrical works shown in Kuwait.

Al-Subaie stressed in a statement to the Kuwaiti news agency (KUNA) on Sunday the keenness of the Ministry of Information to apply the laws and regulations to everyone without discrimination, pointing out that the role of the Ministry is to preserve the values and traditions of Kuwaiti society and highlight its true image in adherence to Kuwait's values and morals. Al-Subaie pointed out that "We will not allow those who participate in artistic works outside Kuwait that offend the Kuwaiti society to submit works of art inside Kuwait." Al-Subaie called on the creators of works of art, whether inside or outside Kuwait, to be careful in their works. — KUNA



**KUWAIT:** Male and female squacco herons (*Ardeola ralloides*) perch on the tree branch in Kuwait City. The squacco heron is a migrant bird and its breeding habitat is marshy wetlands in warm countries. The birds nest in small colonies, often with other wading birds, usually on platforms of sticks in trees or shrubs. Three to four eggs are laid. They feed on fish, frogs and insects. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



## Ramadan health tips

## Managing weight

Are you planning to lose weight? Well, Ramadan could be the right time to start:

- Avoid using too much oil when cooking. Replace cream soups with grain or vegetable soups.

- Use grilling or boiling cooking methods to prepare meals rather than frying for weight loss during Ramadan.

- Eat lean red meat or skinless grilled chicken and more grilled fish.

- Diet plan for weight loss in Ramadan, substitute sweets with fresh fruits within the allowed limits. Eating two servings of fruits per day is sufficient with three dates being the equivalent of one serving, delivering about 60 to 70 calories.

- Use low-fat or skimmed dairy products when preparing dishes and pastries during Ramadan and eat fat-free yogurt for weight loss.

- Observe moderation when eating raw and unsalted nuts.

- Substitute sweetened juices and concentrated drinks with fresh juices and limit intake to one cup per day.

- Increase fluid intake, especially water, between Iftar and Suhoor.

- Eat fresh vegetables and serve salads without high-fat and mayonnaise dressings. Instead, use a small quantity of olive oil and vinegar without adding salt.

- Reduce the amount of starch by mixing steamed rice with vegetables or legumes to add flavor, and incorporate fiber into your dish that increases the feeling of fullness. One cup of cooked rice or spaghetti is sufficient for a meal.

- Figure out your everyday meals in advance. Irregular dining hours, the tendency to overeat and the fried or starchy nature of many dishes are all contributing factors to an expanding waistline. Tackle this by planning your meals. By identifying the meals you want to prepare each day, you will reduce the amount you cook and introduce a healthy dish or a healthier cooking method.

- Continue exercising, for instance walking for 30 minutes a day, swimming, or working out in an air-conditioned gym.

## Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: A merchant and money exchanger transact business in a local market in the sixties. — Photo from KOC archive, provided by Mahmoud Zakaria, heritage researcher at Ministry of Information.

## NBK intensifies awareness campaign, warns customers of scams when donating online

Bank keeps customers updated with the newly emerging fraud trends and protection tips

KUWAIT: Underscoring its active participation in enhancing financial awareness and inclusion among all segments of society, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) continues to promote the "Let's Be Aware" campaign launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait, in collaboration with local banks and Kuwait Banking Association (KBA).

In this context, NBK intensifies awareness by publishing educational content including video clips and text communications, as well as awareness tips on all its social media platforms and other digital channels, in addition to reposting of CBK's related communications. This aims to increase awareness among all segments of society and familiarize them with different fraud schemes and the precautions to steer clear of these threats.

NBK urges customers to be cautious when making donations to any charities online, and to verify the identity of the recipient, to avoid falling victim to fraud, especially with the increasing fraud schemes and scams used by fraudsters to deceive victims. This comes within the bank's commitment to raise customers' awareness and keep them updated on the latest fraud trends and how to avoid them.

The bank also warned against donating to unfamiliar charities, whether through links or on websites, as fraudsters may use fake websites similar to the websites of well-known charities, or claim affiliation to real charities raising funds for war or disaster-stricken people, then send the links to the victims which transfers them to the fake website page and asks them to make payments.

Furthermore, the bank called customers to be aware of e-mails, text messages or phone calls asking for donations for well-known charities, warning them of responding to such fraudulent messages attempting to obtain their banking information in order to steal their money or information. NBK employs its strong customer communication capabilities as well as all its digital channels, which are the most popular among all Kuwaiti banks, to support the Central Bank's endeavors to protect customers and the national economy.

It is worth mentioning that NBK is a key promoter and participant in all CBK's campaigns and initiatives to increase financial and banking awareness among different segments of society. As the leading financial institution in Kuwait, the bank frequently organizes



various activities to raise awareness on all topics related to the banking sector, as well as many training courses for its employees to enhance their knowledge and expertise in the areas of combating fraud and financial crime.

The "Let's Be Aware" campaign is the largest across the GCC region focusing on raising banking and financial awareness among banks' customers. The campaign covers a variety of crucial topics including: anti-fraud tips, awareness on high-risk investments, ways to maximize benefit from banking services, promoting savings and investment culture, as well as other related topics.



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MANAMA: People sit by the beach in Manama. — AFP

## Manama 'capital of Gulf Tourism'

MANAMA: A promising future awaits the tourism sector in the Gulf region as it is witnessing radical leaps and rapid growth in tourism investments, the CEO of Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority said. In an interview with KUNA, Sara Buhiji stressed that the Kingdom of Bahrain supported integrated tourism efforts among GCC countries, with joint efforts currently being exerted between the GCC countries to promote the Arabian Gulf as a single tourism destination.

On the occasion of selecting Manama as the capital of Gulf tourism for the year 2024, Buhiji said that Bahrain was ready to launch various programs and festivals throughout 2024 to entertain tourists of all ages and backgrounds. The activities will include musical and cultural performances, seaside activities, and historical and sports tourism, adding that the authority is developing various activities and resorts to be launched in the summer.

Buhiji said that the authority will also launch several activities on the occasion of Eid, including exclusive hotel and travel special offers and art, cultural, and entertainment activations from April 9-14. On hosting the 33rd Arab League summit, Buhiji said that it would be a great opportunity to review Bah-



CEO of Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority Sara Buhiji

rain's tourism achievements and attract tourists all around the world.

She added that work is underway to establish more tourism projects, hotels, and partnerships with major travel and tourism agencies and airline companies in the market. It is worth noting that the number of Kuwaiti tourists in 2023 increased by 7 percent compared to 2022. Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority launched a calendar with all the activities for the year 2024 on their website. — KUNA





'Real threat': US long-shot RFK Jr alarms Dems



KIGALI: President of Rwanda Paul Kagame and his wife Jeannette Kagame light a remembrance flame surrounded by heads of state and other dignitaries as part of the commemorations of the 30th anniversary of the 1994 Rwandan genocide at the Kigali Genocide Memorial on April 7, 2024. — AFP

# Rwanda marks genocide anniversary

## Country starts week of national mourning, remembrance

### Iraq tightens grip on autonomous Kurdish region

**BAGHDAD:** Iraq is using a period of relative stability to assert more control over the oil-rich autonomous Kurdistan region that has long had fraught relations with federal authorities, analysts and politicians say. Long-simmering disputes between Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of the northern region, came to a head recently after several Supreme Court rulings seen by the Kurds as an attempt to weaken the region's autonomy.

Regional prime minister Masrour Barzani warned last week of "conspiracies aimed at undermining and dismantling the Kurdistan region" with "internal support within Kurdistan". The pressure is aimed at Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) which has been locked in a never-ending rivalry with the other main party the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Kurds in Iraq were persecuted under the regime of the late dictator Saddam Hussein but the 2005 constitution formalized their autonomy after the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam. But mending the volatile ties between the central government in Baghdad and Kurdistan has been a persistent challenge. Consecutive federal governments have long been preoccupied with "crises and complex challenges", said a senior official in Baghdad in reference to years of war, the fight against the Islamic State group and anti-government protests. "That is why they never looked into the mistakes made by Kurdistan... (such as) oil deals and exports, the region's financial system and several illegal decisions that have been taken", he added on condition of anonymity. But, he added: "Now is the time to fix these mistakes."

Despite facing the same problems as Baghdad, such as endemic corruption, fractious politics and entrenched ruling elites, the US-backed Kurdistan region has portrayed itself as a hub of stability and economic growth in contrast to the conflicts and crises that have besieged federal Iraq. Last year, civil servants and lawyers from the city of Sulaimaniyah, the PUK stronghold, had taken the regional and national authorities to court over unpaid salaries in Kurdistan, where officials have long accused Baghdad of not sending the necessary funds. In February, the Federal Supreme Court in Baghdad ordered the federal government to pay public sector salaries in Kurdistan directly instead of via the regional administration under a previous long-standing arrangement. It also demanded that Erbil hand over all "oil and non-oil revenues" to Baghdad. In a separate case, the court issued a ruling to reduce the number of seats in the Kurdish parliament from 111 to 100, effectively eliminating a quota reserved for Turkmen, Armenian and Christian minorities. — AFP

**KIGALI:** Rwanda's President Paul Kagame on Sunday said the international community "failed" his country during the 1994 genocide, as he paid tribute to victims 30 years after Hutu extremists tore apart the nation. "Rwanda was completely humbled by the magnitude of our loss. And the lessons we learned are engraved in blood," Kagame said in Kigali during a solemn ceremony to commemorate a 100-day massacre that claimed the lives of 800,000 people, largely Tutsis but also moderate Hutus.

"It was the international community which failed all of us, whether from contempt or cowardice," he said, addressing an audience that included several African heads of state and former US president Bill Clinton, who had called the genocide the biggest failure of his administration. In keeping with tradition, the ceremonies on April 7 — the day Hutu militias unleashed the carnage in 1994 — began with Kagame placing wreaths on mass graves and lighting a remembrance flame at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, where more than 250,000 victims are believed to be buried.

The tiny nation has since found its footing under the iron-fisted rule of Kagame, who led the rebel militia which ended the genocide, but the scars of the violence remain, leaving a trail of destruction across Africa's Great Lakes region. The international community's failure to intervene has been a cause of lingering shame, with French President Emmanuel Macron expected to release a message on Sunday saying France and its Western and African allies "could have stopped" the bloodshed but lacked the will to do so.

African Union chief Moussa Faki Mahamat said in Kigali that "no one, not even the African Union, can exonerate themselves from their inaction... Let us have the courage to recognize it, and take responsibility for it." Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, French Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne and Zionist President Isaac Herzog are among the visiting dignitaries. Rwandans will also stage a march and hold a candlelit vigil in the capital for those killed in the slaughter.

### Week of national mourning

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. 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 what has been dubbed "Kwibuka (Remembrance) 30".

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. At least 250,000 women were raped, according to UN figures. Each year new mass graves are uncovered around the country.

In 2002, Rwanda set up community tribunals where victims heard "confessions" from those who had per-

secuted them, although rights watchdogs said the system also resulted in miscarriages of justice. Today, Rwandan ID cards do not mention whether a person is Hutu or Tutsi. Secondary school students learn about the genocide as part of a tightly controlled curriculum. The country is home to more than 200 memorials to the genocide, four of which were added to UNESCO's World Heritage list last year.

### Fleeing justice

According to Rwanda, hundreds of genocide suspects remain at large, including in neighboring nations such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda. Only 28 have been extradited to Rwanda from around the world. 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.

The French government had been a long-standing backer of Habyarimana's regime, leading to decades of tensions between the two countries. In 2021, Macron acknowledged France's role in the genocide and its refusal to heed warnings of looming massacres, but stopped short of an official apology. Rwanda's much larger neighbor the DRC did not send a representative to Sunday's ceremonies.

Relations between the two countries have sharply worsened in recent years, with Kigali denying allegations that it is arming Tutsi-led M23 rebels in the eastern DRC, and accusing Kinshasa of hosting a Hutu-led militia hostile to Rwanda. — AFP

### Trump ambiguous on Zionist entity amid Gaza war

**WASHINGTON:** At the start of the Zionist entity's war with Hamas in October, Donald Trump loudly presented himself as the key US ally's ultimate champion. But six months and more than 33,000 deaths in Gaza later, the Republican White House hopeful has become increasingly vague on the intensity of that support. The former US president, not usually known for biting his tongue on any given topic, has only halfheartedly commented on the issue in two recent interviews.

"I'm not sure that I'm loving the way they're doing it," he told a conservative radio host Thursday about the Zionist entity's offensive. And in an exchange with Zionist media, Trump warned that videos "of bombs being dropped into buildings in Gaza" offer "a very bad picture for the world". "(The Zionist entity) is absolutely losing the PR war," the 77-year-old told radio host Hugh Hewitt.

### Historic ally

Despite allusions to his concerns, Trump has not explicitly mentioned the humanitarian crisis in Gaza — where experts warn a famine is looming — the Palestinian civilian death toll or the seven aid work-



PALM BEACH, Florida: Republican presidential candidate, former US President Donald Trump, arrives at the home of billionaire investor John Paulson with former first lady Melania Trump on April 6, 2024. — AFP

ers killed Monday by a Zionist drone strike. Still, any comment critical of the Zionist entity is a major departure for the Republican White House hopeful, and his remarks have garnered notice in the Zionist entity and in Washington.

Trump has long boasted of having done more for the Zionist entity than any other US president. In 2018, his administration reversed decades of US policy and snubbed a major tenet of an eventual two-state solution with the Palestinians by unilaterally recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of the Zionist entity and moving the US embassy there from Tel Aviv, sparking international backlash.

By the end of his term, the United States had bro-

kered the so-called Abraham Accords, which would allow the Zionist entity to annex a large area of the West Bank, leaving the Palestinians with a tiny portion of their previous territory and a capital in the outskirts of Jerusalem. The Trump administration's push for several Arab countries to recognize the Zionist entity successfully kicked any imperative to address the Palestinian issue even further down the road — at least temporarily.

### 'Punditry'

But it's not clear whether the billionaire's shift in tone since the war in Gaza, sparked by Hamas' unprecedented Oct 7 attack on the Zionist entity, would correlate to any real change in policy, if he were to be elected president again in November. "Nobody's entirely sure what Trump's views are on this," Danielle Pletka, a senior fellow at conservative think tank AEI, told AFP, adding that his recent rhetoric sounds more like it's coming from a "media consultant" than an Oval Office candidate. "That's not presidential, that's not policy — that's more punditry," she said.

For some observers, Trump's non-committal attitude is best explained by the conflict's high electoral stakes in the United States, as he battles President Joe Biden — who has faced increasing criticism over his handling of the crisis — for votes. The otherwise outspoken Trump is employing the same strategy of deliberate ambiguity on other flashpoint issues as well, including abortion, aware that staking out an extreme position on either side could cost him dearly at the polls. — AFP



## International

## Ecuador in diplomatic storm

## Raid at Mexican embassy prompts searing rebukes

## Ecuador raid a blow to Mexico's 'sacred' asylum tradition

**MEXICO CITY:** In the past century, Mexico has opened its doors to revolutionaries, Spanish exiles, and persecuted Latin American leaders — a tradition that has been dealt an unprecedented blow by a police invasion of its embassy in Ecuador. Quito has faced a barrage of criticism over its shock raid on Mexico's embassy in the capital to seize graft-accused former Ecuadorian vice president Jorge Glas, who just hours earlier had been granted political asylum.

Considered the sovereign territory of the nation they represent, embassies are supposed to be inviolable and a police raid of this nature is almost unheard of. "Not even in the worst coups d'etat in our region has a situation of this nature occurred," Mexican Foreign Minister Alicia Barcena told a local broadcaster. She defended the granting of asylum to Glas as part of a regional treaty dating back to 1954 which enshrines the right of states to "admit into their territory the people they deem appropriate."

"We consider this right to asylum to be sacred," said President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, just hours before granting it to Glas. The invasion prompted the leftist leader to break off diplomatic ties with Ecuador, something Mexico had only done previously with Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, Chilean strongman Augusto Pinochet, and Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.

## Trotsky, Castro and Guevara

The list of people to whom Mexico has given asylum is far longer. Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, who was expelled from the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin in 1929, also sought refuge in Mexico — which did not spare him from assassination in 1940. Spain's republican government in exile also settled in Mexico after a civil war resulted in Franco's victory in 1939, as well as more than 20,000 Spaniards, including intellectuals, artists and writers.

In 1955, brothers Fidel and Raul Castro sought exile in Mexico, which they used as a base to plan their revolution to overthrow the Cuban government. There they connected with other revolutionary figures seeking refuge in Mexico, such as Ernesto "Che" Guevara. A raft of coups and military dictatorships in the 1970s also spurred multiple asylum requests.

In more recent times, Bolivia's former president Evo Morales fled to Mexico in 2019 amid a political crisis. After his disastrous attempt to dissolve Congress and rule by decree, Peru's former leader Pedro Castillo asked for refuge in the Mexican embassy in Lima in December 2022, but was arrested before getting there.

Lopez Obrador said that most people persecuted and taken in by Mexico had been accused of something. "Weren't those fleeing the Spanish Civil War accused of being communists? Trotsky was a traitor to Stalin, supposedly, to the Russian Revolution, and he was given protection and refuge?"

## Recovering diplomatic territory

Mexico has said it will file a complaint about the Ecuadorian raid with the International Court of Justice, alleging an "irreparable violation" of the Vienna Convention, which establishes that embassy premises are "inviolable". The only similar event in the region was recorded in June 1976, when Uruguayan teacher and anarchist militant Elena Quinteros jumped over the wall of the Venezuelan embassy in Montevideo while escaping from the police.

Although diplomatic personnel tried to protect her, she was forcibly removed and taken to a detention center where she was allegedly tortured. — AFP

**QUITO:** Ecuador faced criticism from the UN and across Latin America on Saturday after its security forces stormed the Mexican embassy in Quito to arrest graft-accused former vice president Jorge Glas, who had been granted political asylum there. Special forces equipped with a battering ram surrounded the embassy, and at least one agent scaled the walls, in an almost unheard-of raid on diplomatic premises that are considered inviolable sovereign territory.

The incident Friday night prompted Mexico to quickly sever diplomatic ties with Ecuador. "This is a flagrant violation of international law and the sovereignty of Mexico," President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador wrote on X. Nicaragua followed suit, citing the "unusual and reprehensible action" of the embassy raid.

Searing rebukes poured in from regional governments across the political spectrum, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Peru and Venezuela. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was "alarmed" by the raid, and urged both sides to show moderation in resolving the dispute, his spokesman said. Lopez Obrador said authorities "forcibly entered" the building to arrest Glas, who is wanted on corruption charges and had been at the embassy since December before being granted asylum on Friday. He said he would file a complaint against Ecuador at the International Court of Justice.

President Daniel Noboa "broke all the behavioral blueprints of traditional diplomacy," Roberto Beltran Zambrano, a professor of conflict management at Ecuador's Private Technical University of Loja, told AFP. Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Gabriela Sommerfeld on Saturday accused Mexico of meddling in Quito's "internal affairs" by offering asylum and said the raid was justified because of the "real risk" that Glas would escape justice.

The Vienna Convention, a treaty governing international relations, states that a country cannot intrude upon an embassy on its territory. The United States said it condemned any violation of the Vienna Convention, but added both Mexico and Ecuador were "crucial partners" for Washington and urged them to "resolve their differences in accord with international norms."

## 'Real threat': US long-shot RFK Jr alarms Dems

**WASHINGTON:** Armed with the most storied surname in US politics, Robert F Kennedy's wildcard shot for the presidency holds a clear and present danger for Joe Biden's hopes of a second term in the White House. The environmental lawyer and conspiracy theorist is boasting double-digit support, and polling suggests that independent candidate "RFK Jr" is hurting the president more than Republican challenger Donald Trump.

Democrats have learned to fear long-shot outsiders after George W Bush and Donald Trump won tight elections in 2000 and 2016, buoyed by Green Party candidates leeching votes from Al Gore and Hillary Clinton. "Hyper-polarization is the reason that a third-party candidate with name recognition is such a threat at this time," said Donald Nieman, a professor and political analyst at New York state's Binghamton University.

"There are only six or seven truly competitive states, and some of those states will be decided by as few as 10-20,000 votes. So anything that siphons a group of usually reliable voters away could be a deciding factor." Kennedy's popularity — he is pulling around 10 percent in election polling averages — complicates the strategy for the Biden campaign, which is seeking to make November's vote a binary choice between the president and Trump.

Kennedy, a vaccine skeptic who has spread misinformation downplaying the 2021 insurrection at the

after the Eid holidays on April 14. Dahoum added the meeting will not discuss the issue of posts in the Assembly and the election of committees, but will focus on studying priority issues to be debated in the coming weeks.

Regarding the deputy speaker's post, a number of lawmakers have already announced they will contest the post. They include former deputy speaker Mohammad Al-Mutair, MP Mubarak Al-Tasha and the only female MP in the house Jenan Bushehri. Bushehri said she is running for the post with the intention to work to boost cooperation between the Assembly and authorities. If elected, she will be the first woman to occupy the post.

The public prosecution has said that it is investigating a case of vote-buying for a candidate in the third constituency. In a statement on the X platform, the prosecution said that it has detained one suspect and ordered the arrest of another. It said it seized cash, a laptop and a mobile containing the names of voters in the constituency.

restoring minimal functionality in the short term seems implausible."

WHO said the acting hospital director had described how patients were "held in abysmal conditions during the siege." "They endured severe lack of food, water, health care, hygiene and sanitation, and were forced to relocate between buildings at gunpoint," it said. At least 20 patients reportedly died, it said, "due to the lack of access to care and limited movement authorized for health personnel."

Tedros said efforts by WHO and other aid groups to revive basic services at Al-Shifa after the Zionist entity's first devastating raid on the hospital last year "are now lost." "People are once again deprived of access to life-saving health care services," he continued. Of Gaza's 36 main hospitals, only 10 remain even partially functional, according to the WHO.

For the past six months, the Zionist entity has relentlessly bombarded the besieged, densely populated Palestinian territory. Tedros said urgent action was needed in Gaza as "famine looms, disease outbreaks spread and trauma injuries increase" among the trapped Palestinian population. He called for the "protection of remaining health facilities in Gaza... unimpeded access of humanitarian aid into and across the Gaza Strip" and a "ceasefire". — AFP



**GUAYAQUIL:** This handout picture shows former Ecuadorian vice president Jorge Glas being escorted by members of the Special Penitentiary Action Group (GEAP) during his arrival at the maximum security prison La Roca on April 6, 2024. — AFP

## 'This is crazy'

On Saturday, the embassy remained surrounded by police and the Mexican flag had been taken down. Mexico's foreign ministry said late in the day that diplomatic personnel and their families would leave Ecuador on a commercial flight Sunday, adding that personnel from "friendly and allied countries" would accompany them to the airport.

In Mexico City, about 50 demonstrators rallied outside Ecuador's embassy, accusing Quito of being "fascist". Glas, 54, was vice president under leftist president Rafael Correa between 2013 and 2017. He was released from prison in November after serving time for receiving millions of dollars in kickbacks in a vast scandal involving

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.

Ecuador's government said Glas had been transferred to a maximum-security prison in the port city of Guayaquil, whose jails serve as de facto headquarters for the country's violent drug cartels. Former president Correa, who has been exiled in Belgium since 2017 and 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." He said Glas "was struggling to walk because he was beaten". — AFP



**LOS ANGELES:** Independent presidential candidate Robert F Kennedy Jr speaks at a Cesar Chavez Day event at Union Station on March 30, 2024. — AFP

US Capitol, has yet to secure ballot access in most of the country. But says he has enough support to compete in six states and is aiming to raise one million signatures to qualify in all 50.

"Kennedy represents a real threat to the Biden campaign in key swing states," said Charlie Kolean, the chief strategist at conservative political consultancy RED PAC. "He's polling exceptionally well with independents and the younger generation — groups that have traditionally voted for Biden". Progressive super PACs and the Democratic National Committee have ramped up anti-Kennedy attacks, sending mobile billboards out to his events and pursuing legal efforts to keep him off the ballot.

For all their fears, a conservative rather than a liberal — businessman Ross Perot — remains the most successful wildcard in modern history, snagging 19 percent in 1992 to deny George HW Bush victory over Bill Clinton. Kennedy's conspiratorial views and opposition to Ukraine aid once made him a darling of Trump's "Make America Great

Again" (MAGA) movement, but Trump has dismissed the notion that Kennedy could be another Perot. "He is Crooked Joe Biden's Political Opponent, not mine. I love that he is running!" Trump posted recently on his social media app.

## 'Gigantic error'

Kennedy, 70, started his White House bid as a Democrat, but exited the primary after complaining of bullying tactics by Biden allies seeking to keep him out of contention. Keith Nahigian, a Bush aide in the Perot-assisted 1992 defeat to Clinton, believes Biden made a "gigantic error" in alienating Kennedy, a candidate the Democrat could have swept out of the way in the primary contest. "I think they might lose the presidency because they didn't think through the strategy in the beginning of this race," he told AFP.

A veteran of six presidential campaigns, Nahigian cautions against viewing 2024 as another 1992 however, pointing out that billionaire Perot could buy access and publicity that Kennedy cannot afford. Kennedy moved some way to closing the funding gap — and further perturbing Democrats — by naming as his running mate Nicole Shanahan, a Californian former Democratic donor with deep pockets.

Nahigian described Shanahan, an attorney and philanthropist, as "very far left" and unlikely to peel off Trump supporters. But he warned Republicans and Democrats alike against complacency. "Independent candidates make a big impact on an election and it doesn't matter if you're a sitting president, if you're a former president — you have to take it seriously," Nahigian said. "You've seen the last couple of weeks both Trump and Biden really start attacking RFK because they now see him as a viable threat, especially to Biden in these key states where he is losing right now." — AFP

## Amir receives former speakers...

## Continued from Page 1

was postponed to April 14. Saadoun announced his candidacy on his account on X platform while Azmi made a brief statement expressing his determination to continue in the race.

The 16 Cabinet ministers are allowed to vote for the speaker like elected MPs and their vote could be crucial. Former speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem has not yet decided to enter the race. After winning a seat in the Assembly, Ghanem said he will study the situation before making his decision.

Meanwhile, new MP Bader Al-Dahoum, who called for the meeting to coordinate between MPs, said Saturday night that due to the unavailability of many lawmakers, the meeting will now take place

## Largest Gaza hospital 'an empty shell with...

## Continued from Page 1

In a statement, WHO said no patients remained in the hospital, where "numerous shallow graves" had been dug just outside the emergency department and the administrative and surgical buildings. "Many dead bodies were partially buried with their limbs visible," it said. During their visit, WHO staff witnessed "at least five bodies lying partially covered on the ground, exposed to the heat", it said. "The team reported a pungent smell of decomposing bodies engulfing the hospital compound. Safeguarding dignity, even in death, is an indispensable act of humanity," the WHO stressed.

The mission, which was conducted in cooperation with other UN agencies and the acting hospital director, found that "the scale of devastation has left the facility completely non-functional". "Most of the buildings in the hospital complex are extensively destroyed and the majority of assets damaged or reduced to ashes," Tedros said. "Even

## Victories in Ramadan...

## Continued from Page 1

completed the conquest of Makkah after a prolonged struggle in Madinah. He entered Makkah with his companions as a liberator after its inhabitants had driven him away. The sacred Kaaba was thereof cleansed of idols. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) while breaking the idols that hung around the Kaaba recited the following verse: "And say, 'truth has come, and falsehood has departed. Indeed falsehood [by nature], is bound to depart.'" (Al-Isra'a — the Night Journey 17: 81)

3. In the month of Ramadan on the ninth year of Hijra, the tribe of Thaqeef (then among the sworn opponents of Prophet Muhammad PBUH and his mission) who inhabited the city of Taif (about 90 km north of Makkah) embraced Islam in multitudes after being obstinate and strong opponents of Islam and sworn enemies of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

4. In the month of Ramadan, the 15th year of Hijra, Muslims vanquished the great army of Persia (Iran today), which was then one of the two main superpowers in the world — the other being the Roman Empire.

## Genocidal Zionist Gaza war enters...

## Continued from Page 1

The army said it withdrew its forces from southern Gaza after months of fighting there left in ruins the city of Khan Yunis, hometown of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. "The 98th commando division has concluded its mission in Khan Yunis," the army told AFP. "The division left the Gaza Strip in order to recuperate and prepare for future operations."

An army official told the Haaretz daily that the troops pulled out after they had "dismantled Hamas' Khan Yunis brigades and killed thousands of its members. "We did everything we could there." The news of the partial withdrawal came on the day talks towards a truce and hostage release deal were expected to resume in Cairo, including US, Qatari and Egyptian mediators.

CIA chief Bill Burns and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani will join Egyptian officials for indirect talks from

The Muslims' victory was epitomized in the battle of Qadisiya, under the commandship of Saad bin Abi Waqqas (one of the greatest companions of Prophet Muhammad PBUH). Eventually, the flag of Islam was proudly and confidently hoisted over the palace of Chosroes (Kisra).

5. Battle of Ain Jalut: A decisive battle between the Mamluk Muslims of Egypt and the strong Mongol Empire took place on September 3, 1260 or Ramadan 26, 658 Hijri near Ain Jalut, Jazreel Valley of Palestine. After a series of losses against the Mongolians, this battle was a turning point in the history of Islam. Saifuddin Qutb, the valiant Sultan of Egypt and Syria, led the Muslim army to victory, stopping the seemingly unstoppable Mongol army.

Fasting, a catalyst of victories: It is very clear that Almighty Allah accustomed Muslims since the duty of fasting was prescribed upon them, that if they behaved sincerely with devotion, He would grant them decisive victories beyond imagination. If a Muslim fights against his desires and strives to curb them in that he succeeds in defeating his instincts sincerely by the intention of pleasing God, it would be then logical that he would vanquish his enemy by the will of God.

Sunday between the Zionist and Hamas delegations, Egypt's Al-Qahera News said. Netanyahu had long threatened a ground offensive on far-southern Gaza's Rafah city, sparking global concern, including from the Zionist entity's top ally the United States.

Up to 1.5 million Palestinians are crowded into the area on the Egyptian border, many living in tents. Dozens left Rafah by foot, in cars and on donkey carts and returned to Khan Yunis on Sunday after the Zionist pullout, AFP images showed. On Thursday, US President Joe Biden — angered by a Zionist strike that killed seven aid workers of a US-based food charity — told Netanyahu he wants to see a ceasefire and hostage release deal and ramped-up aid deliveries.

Biden — whose government is the Zionist entity's top arms supplier and political backer — also hinted at making US support for the Zionist entity conditional on curtailing the killing of civilians and improving humanitarian conditions. Several aid trucks on Sunday entered southern Gaza through the Rafah crossing with Egypt, the drivers honking their horns as crowds ran after them, AFP TV footage showed. The Zionist entity has faced a storm of international outrage over the killing of the seven aid workers. — AFP



## International

# Fact-checkers battle threats harassment, financial perils

## Organizations battling rising tide of misinformation in major election year

WASHINGTON: From India and South Korea to Croatia and North Macedonia, fact-checking organizations battling an ever-rising tide of misinformation in a major election year are buffeted by legal threats, harassment and funding shortfalls. Fact-checkers, largely under-resourced and increasingly under attack, have their work cut out this year as dozens of countries hold elections, a period when falsehoods typically explode.

Debunking fake political claims and hoaxes that threaten election integrity, likened by some researchers as a seemingly endless game of whack-a-mole, comes with a litany of challenges that are piling pressure on fact-checkers in a crucial year. The most significant is raising funds to sustain operations, according to a new survey by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) of 137 organizations across 69 countries.

The Seoul National University (SNU) FactCheck Center, South Korea's only local debunking platform, faces possible shutdown after its biggest donor — the search engine company Naver — pulled financial support last year. Naver declined to comment on the reason, but the outfit's director Chong Eun-ryung believes "political pressure" from the ruling People

Power Party was the "biggest factor". SNU FactCheck Center has been accused of bias by ruling party lawmakers, a charge it rejects. The development follows the closure of another outfit, Fact-check Net, last year after the government cut off its funding.

### 'Information warfare'

"Fact-checkers are facing growing amounts of misinformation with limited resources for reporting and publishing," Angie Drobnic Holan, director of IFCN, told AFP. "There are also campaigns of on-line and legal harassment against fact-checkers from those who prefer more cutthroat information warfare, without checks based on evidence and logic." The IFCN survey said about 72 percent of organizations faced harassment, while many also reported physical and legal threats.

Croatian fact-checking website Faktograf.hr has been forced to invest in security measures after its staff received death threats and female reporters faced sexist insults, executive director Ana Brakus told AFP. A text message received by one staff member warned that his fingers would be "cut off". "We had to find ways to deal with that kind of stress" without affecting the fact-checking mission, Brakus

said, adding the organization offered mental health support to its staff. In India, home to the largest number of certified fact-checkers, Prime Minister Narendra Modi — tipped to win a third consecutive term in upcoming parliamentary elections — has been accused of stifling independent media. Mohammed Zubair, co-founder of Alt News and a frequent target of government rebuke, continues to face legal threats after being briefly jailed in 2022 over accusations that he insulted a Hindi god in a tweet four years earlier. During a fundraising drive on X, formerly Twitter, Zubair wrote Indian media organizations were being "forced to censor themselves" and in some cases, "becoming government mouthpieces."

With their shoestring budgets, many fact-checkers must turn to external funding support to defend themselves against the "existential threats" that lawsuits — often frivolous — present, the IFCN report said. In some cases, fact-checkers are themselves targeted by disinformation. Truthmeter, the fact-checking service of the North Macedonia-based Metamorphosis Foundation, faced a sweeping smear campaign earlier this year after its fact-checks of Facebook posts prompted accusations that it was censoring content.

The campaign, the group said in a note to readers, escalated into insults, slander and "badly disguised calls for violence" against its staff. "We are fully aware that such disinformation campaigns, full of attacks, manipulations, threats and hate speech will continue, especially in the pre-election period," it said, as North Macedonia gears up for the presidential race later this month.

Content moderation on social media has become a hot-button issue even in advanced economies such as the United States — which faces elections in November — with many users equating fact-checking with censorship. "Who fact-checks the fact-checkers?" is a common response to our work," said Eric Litke, who heads a US-based fact-checker, stressing the need for transparency to gain reader trust. Fact-checking organizations, including AFP — which debunks misinformation as part of Meta's third-party fact-checking program — routinely face online abuse from people who dispute their ratings, sometimes even when they peddle blatantly false information. "I've watched this movement label fact-checkers as part of a 'censorship industrial complex,'" said Holan. "Ironically, this deeply misleading argument itself is aimed at suppressing critique and debate." — AFP



SEOUL: This picture taken on March 18, 2024 shows South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol visiting a Hanaro Mart branch to check the price of green onions. - AFP photos



YONGIN: This picture taken on April 6, 2024 shows South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung hold a helmet decorated with green onions during a campaign event for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

## Green onion outcry: Humble vegetable roils S Korean vote

SEOUL: Foreign policy, the economy, or Kim Jong Un's nukes might be expected to top the agenda ahead of South Korea's crucial parliamentary election on Wednesday. Instead, it's green onions on the minds of voters and election officials, who have banned the humble allium from polling stations over fears of electoral interference. Used widely in South Korean cooking including for kimchi, green onions are dominating discussions ahead of the April 10 vote after an apparent gaff by the president sparked online outcry and turned the vegetable into an opposition rallying cry.

It all started March 18, when President Yoon Suk Yeol — whose party is trying to win back control of the 300-seat parliament — visited a grocery store in the capital Seoul, officially to check consumer prices, with food inflation a key concern ahead of the polls. Looking at a bunch of green onions, Yoon said: "I've been to many markets and 875 won (\$0.65) for this is a reasonable price."

But green onions typically sell for three or four times that sum, and local media have reported that the store had specially discounted the vegetable ahead of the president's visit. Yoon's comments sparked an avalanche of online memes, with the opposition quick to claim the episode showed the 63-year-old politician was out of touch, and opposition leaders soon brandishing green onions at campaign rallies.

After early voting started Friday, people also began posting photos of themselves holding green onions at polling stations after they cast their ballots, adding hashtags like #earlyvotedone #gree-



SEJONG: This picture taken on March 25, 2024 shows South Korean farmers holding up green onions with a sign reading "The president's monthly salary of 875 won is appropriate!" during a rally demanding the abolition of imported agricultural products outside the government complex.

nonions875won. Early voting turnout has been high, official figures show, with some 13.8 million people out of a total 44.2 million eligible voters having already cast their votes.

But soon after the trend emerged, South Korea's National Election Commission (NEC) banned

green onions from polling stations, citing concerns of "election interference". Green onions will not be allowed in the vicinity of voting booths because they could "interfere with the election", the NEC said in a statement Saturday. "While people's expression of political views should be respected to the maximum level, using a certain item as a means of expression other than for their original purpose has great potential to affect the election," it said.

### Online backlash

The NEC's move has been widely mocked online, with more onion memes going viral on Korean-language social media over the weekend. It has also set off a fresh rush to find green onion-themed memorabilia to bring to polling stations. "I wasn't initially thinking about the green onion issue, but after I heard about the ban, I bought a green onion hairband and I'm determined to wear it on election day," one 36-year-old voter named Hyun Jung told AFP.

She said the NEC's ban on green onions at polling stations was "too arbitrary to accept" and was "condescending" to voters like her. "Should they also ban red or blue clothes then?" she asked, referring to the colors that represent Yoon's People Power Party and the opposition Democratic Party, respectively. "Or what about a Dior bag?" she added, referencing a controversy over Yoon's wife, first lady Kim Keon Hee, apparently accepting an expensive luxury bag as a gift.

Adverts quickly began circulating on Korean-language sites offering hyper-realistic green onion headbands and keychains, giving interested voters a way to get around the ban. While green onions themselves are restricted, "it is up to election officials on site to determine" whether green onion-themed items are allowed, an NEC official told AFP. Political analyst Yum Seung-yul told AFP the NEC's decision seemed a little hasty. "The NEC's ban is part of its discretionary role in the electoral process, but it comes across as too easily made," Yum said. — AFP

## Russian flood situation 'critical' over burst dam

MOSCOW: A major flood in the city of Orsk that forced several thousand people to evacuate after a dam burst has created a "critical" situation, Emergency Situations Minister Alexander Kurenkov said on Sunday. "A critical situation has developed in the city of Orsk" in the southern Urals close to the border with Kazakhstan, he said from the city of 200,000 people. More than 4,500 homes have been flooded and more than 4,000 people evacuated from Orsk to temporary housing centers, Kurenkov said.

Images diffused on the Telegram social media channel showed the minister on a small boat surrounded by members of the emergency services. Torrential rain caused the dam in the Orenburg region to burst on Friday night. Authorities have opened a criminal case for "negligence and violation of construction safety rules" over the burst dam, which was built in 2014.

They have warned of a dangerous water level on the Ural river in the main city of Orenburg. It has been classed a "federal emergency" with reinforcements sent to the region and extra funds released to deal with the urgent situation. Melting ice at this time of year has exacerbated the situation. The dam was built to manage a 5.5-m water level in the Ural river but that has swelled to nine meters. — AFP



ORSK: This photo released on April 6, 2024 shows rescuers walking across a flooded street on their way to evacuate residents during a flood in this town in the Orenburg region. - AFP

## China conducts military drills in South China Sea

BEIJING: China conducted military "combat patrols" Sunday in the disputed South China Sea, its army said, the same day as joint drills by the Philippines, the United States, Japan and Australia. The announcement comes one day after defence chiefs from four countries including the Philippines — which has been engaged in several contentious maritime disputes with Beijing recently — said they would conduct joint drills Sunday in the area. Beijing's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Southern Theater Command said it was organizing "joint naval and air combat patrols in the South China Sea". "All military activities that mess up the situation in the South China Sea and create hotspots are under control," it said in a statement, in an apparent swipe at the other drills being held in the waters.

Further details about the Chinese military activities in the waterway Sunday were not announced. The exercises take place days before US President Joe Biden is due to hold the first trilateral summit with the leaders of the Philippines and Japan. Top US officials have repeatedly declared the United States' "ironclad" commitment to defending the Philippines against an armed attack in the South China Sea — to the consternation of Beijing.

China claims territorial sovereignty over nearly all of the South China Sea and has been increasingly assertive in the region in recent years. China's Coast Guard said Saturday it had "handled" a situation on Thursday at a disputed reef where several ships from the Philippines were engaged in "illegal" operations.

"Under the guise of 'protecting fishing', Philippine government ships have illegally violated and provoked, organized media to deliberately incite and mislead, continuing to undermine stability in the South China Sea," spokesman Gan Yu said. "We are telling the Philippines that any infringement tactics are in vain," Gan said, adding that China would "regularly enforce the law in waters under (its) jurisdiction". — AFP

## Hundreds rescued in Australia floods

SYDNEY: Widespread flooding in Australia left hundreds needing to be rescued after a natural disaster was declared in regions across New South Wales on Sunday. Intense rainfall at the start of the weekend saw around 300 homes evacuated in north-east Sydney, emergency services said. Floodwaters had caused widespread damage across the state in a very short amount of time, federal minister for emergency management Catherine King said.

"The New South Wales government is continuing to assess the damage and understand the impact of this disaster," King added. Emergency crews had performed about 200 flood rescues since Friday, said state minister for emergency services Jihad Dib, as some regions were left cut off by damaged or flooded roads. Around 5,000 volunteers had worked through the night helping those affected, he added. State emergency commissioner Carlene York said 60 community warnings remained in place for regions affected by the flooding. Disaster support had been triggered by officials in a dozen areas to help cover clean-up costs and pay for emergency accommodation. It was the region's seventh flood in 18 months. Researchers have repeatedly warned that climate change amplifies the risk of natural disasters such as floods, bushfires and cyclones. — AFP



WOLLONGONG: Residents walk past fallen rocks and debris along a road after a landslide cut off Lawrence Hargrave Drive at Coalcliff on April 6, 2024 after heavy rain. - AFP



## Business

MONDAY, APRIL 8, 2024

# 'Market of Fakes' in Naples, capital of counterfeits, Camorra

Counterfeits estimated to represent 2.5% of world trade



NAPLES: An officer of the Guardia di Finanza, the Italian police in charge of financial crime and smuggling, checks trucks transporting containers in the commercial area of the port of Naples. — AFP photos

NAPLES: As top brands like Gucci and Prada prepare to report billions in sales this month, luxury fakes on the streets of Naples are also yielding a jaw-dropping cash stream - for the mafia. The teeming southern metropolis is ground zero for Italy's estimated 6-7 billion euro (\$6.5-7.5 billion) counterfeit market, where fake handbags, sunglasses, clothing and shoes flourish, hawked in plain sight to buyers willing to score a knockoff bargain. "Which brand do you like? What color, what model?" asks a persistent seller at the "Market of Fakes" spread out over back alleys near the gritty city's central train station.

Men arrive hauling overstuffed blue plastic bags, from which emerge Gucci baseball hats, Fendi wallets, Hermes belts and bright orange Louis Vuitton shoeboxes, sold from rickety tables at a fraction of the price of their originals. Counterfeits are a global phenomenon, whether fake fashion, toys, electronics, food or pharmaceuticals, estimated by the OECD to represent 2.5 percent of world trade.

But Italy - home of the most luxury fashion brands - is the clear leader in counterfeit seizures within the European Union, accounting for 63 percent of detained items in 2022, according to a November EU report. And it's in Naples where counterfeits find a unique

breeding ground, giving it the dubious distinction of being the undisputed European capital of fakes. The city is home to every phase of the counterfeit fashion supply chain from manufacturing and warehousing to distribution and sales - all dominated by the region's homegrown Camorra mafia.

#### Easy money

While many consumers are unconcerned about counterfeits, the mafia's handprint has increasingly made them a law enforcement priority. "Counterfeiting is very important because it's a warning bell," signaling more dangerous crimes, said Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Evangelista, head of operations in Naples for the Guardia di Finanza, Italy's financial crimes police.

While less lucrative than selling drugs, counterfeiting generates cash, helps launder drug money and is relatively low-risk, with jail sentences far below those for more violent crimes. "They've already got the clientele... the tourists go by on the street, the bag is bought and it generates profits for the criminal organization," Evangelista told AFP. Police seizures are frequent and on the rise, including the discovery of a factory producing thousands of counterfeit Napoli banners, jerseys and caps in February.

Interior ministry data shows that



ROME: A seller carries counterfeit bags on a street in this file photo.

between 2018 and 2022, Naples police seized nearly 100 million items worth over 470 million euros - some 14 percent of the value of all counterfeit goods seized in Italy. "In Naples, counterfeiting represents a real parallel economic sector," run by local and foreign mafias, wrote a 2021 government report. It called the city a "centre of excellence" for fakes. An artisanal heritage in tailoring and leather, an international port, high unemployment and an influx of cheap foreign labor have all helped

counterfeiting flourish - as has the local population's longstanding tolerance of bending the rules.

Collaboration between the Camorra and Chinese criminal groups fuels the rigorously controlled system. While higher quality goods are produced locally, most imported goods come from China and Turkey. Counterfeiters choose busy EU ports, such as Rotterdam, or those with less stringent control like in Greece or Bulgaria, before reaching Italy by truck. — AFP

doesn't always use this type of watermarking adopted by AI's big players.

Meta said its rollout will occur in two phases with AI-generated content labeling beginning in May 2024, while the removal of manipulated media solely based on the old policy will cease in July. According to the new standard, content, even if manipulated with AI, will remain on the platform unless it violates other rules, such as those prohibiting hate speech or voter interference. Recent examples of convincing AI deepfakes have only heightened worries about the easily accessible technology.

The board's list of requests was part of its review of Meta's decision to leave a manipulated video of US President Joe Biden online last year. The video showed Biden voting with his adult granddaughter, but was manipulated to falsely appear that he inappropriately touched her chest. In a separate incident not linked to Meta, a robocall impersonation of Biden pushed out to tens of thousands of voters urged people to not cast ballots in the New Hampshire primary. In Pakistan, the party of former prime minister Imran Khan has used AI to generate speeches from their jailed leader. — AFP

## Meta to start labeling AI-generated content

WASHINGTON: Facebook and Instagram giant Meta said it will begin labeling AI-generated media beginning in May, as it tries to reassure users and governments over the risks of deepfakes. The social media juggernaut added that it will no longer remove manipulated images and audio that don't otherwise break its rules, relying instead on labeling and contextualization, so as to not infringe on freedom of speech. The changes come as a response to criticism from the tech giant's oversight board, which independently reviews Meta's content moderation decisions.

The board in February requested that Meta urgently overhaul its approach to manipulated media given the huge advances in AI and the ease of manipulating media into highly convincing deepfakes. The board's warning came amid fears of rampant misuse of artificial intelligence-powered applications for disinformation on platforms in a pivot-

al election year not only in the United States but worldwide. Meta's new "Made with AI" labels will identify content created or altered with AI, including video, audio, and images. Additionally, a more prominent label will be used for content deemed at high risk of misleading the public.

"We agree that providing transparency and additional context is now the better way to address this content," Monika Bickert, Meta's Vice President of Content Policy, said in a blog post. "The labels will cover a broader range of content in addition to the manipulated content that the Oversight Board recommended labeling," she added. These new labeling techniques are linked to an agreement made in February among major tech giants and AI players to cooperate on ways to crack down on manipulated content intended to deceive voters.

Meta, Google and OpenAI had already agreed to use a common watermarking standard that would invisibly tag images generated by their AI applications. Identifying AI content "is better than nothing, but there are bound to be holes," Nicolas Gaudemet, AI Director at Onepoint, told AFP. He took the example of some open source software, which

## Elon Musk: Tesla to unveil robotaxi

SAN FRANCISCO: Elon Musk revealed that Tesla will pull back the curtain on a robotaxi this summer, news that comes as adoption of self-driving vehicles hits speed bumps over safety concerns. The billionaire boss of the electric car maker did not provide details, saying only in his post on X that the "Tesla Robotaxi unveil" will come on August 8. Tesla shares rose more than three percent in after-market trades following the post, after finishing the day down.

Musk has long boasted of work Tesla is doing on its systems for electric cars to drive themselves. Tesla models with FSD (Full Self-Driving) "will be superhuman to such a degree that it will seem strange in the future that humans drove cars, even while exhausted and drunk!" he said in a post on X in March. Musk has also said that owners of Tesla vehicles with FSD will be able to have their cars serve as robotaxis, rather than remain idly parked. Despite its potential, rollout of self-driving vehicles in the United States has been tentative and rocky so far as both regulators and the public voice safety concerns. San Francisco has been a testing ground for the technology.

Robotaxis from Google's Waymo in the city have been targeted by vandals opposed to autonomous vehicles, while GM-owned Cruise indefinitely suspended its robotaxi service at the end of October after several accidents sparked a crackdown by California regulators. Tesla's "autopilot" feature has also come under scrutiny, facing accusations the marketing of the feature oversold its actual capabilities. Tesla's robotaxi reveal came on the heels of a Reuters report that the company had abandoned Musk's long-touted plan to manufacture an electric car model selling close to \$25,000 to drive adoption in the mass market.

Musk fired off a post denying the report. Tesla this week reported sharply lower first-quarter auto sales amid an underwhelming demand outlook for electric vehicles, while legacy players including Toyota rode improved US inventories to higher sales. Musk's auto giant reported global deliveries fell 8.5 percent in the quarter, reflecting in part a weak sales market in China, where it faces heavy competition from local electric vehicle makers. Wedbush analyst Dan Ives called the quarterly results "an unmitigated disaster." — AFP



Business

# Unexpected strawberry crop spins Burkina Faso's 'red gold'

## Lucrative strawberry farming supplanting traditional crops

**OUAGADOUGOU:** In the suburbs of Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou, lucrative strawberry farming is supplanting traditional crops like cabbage and lettuce and has become a top export to neighboring countries. Prized as "red gold" in the Sahel, strawberry crops brought in some 2.0 billion CFA francs (\$3.3 million) from 2019 to 2020, according to agricultural support program PAPEA.

In their January to April season, strawberries "take the place of other crops", Yiwendenda Tiemtore, a farmer in the working-class Boulmiougou district on the city outskirts, told AFP. Tiemtore has been busy harvesting the red fruit since dawn, before temperatures rise to 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit). He harvests about 25 to 30 kilograms (55-66 pounds) of Burkina's popular strawberry varieties, "selva" and "camarosa", every three days, watering his plots from wells.

Cultivating strawberries, which thrive on ample sunlight and water, might come as a surprise in this semi-arid West African country. But Burkina Faso leads the region's strawberry production, growing about 2,000 tons a year. Despite being prized by local customers, more than half is exported to neighboring countries. "We receive orders from abroad, particularly from Ivory Coast, Niger and Ghana," said market gardener Madi Compaore, who specializes in strawberries and trains local growers. "Demand is constantly rising and the prices are good."

In season, strawberries tend to be sold at a higher price than other fruit and vegetables, fetching 3,000 CFA francs (\$5.0) per kilogram. Production has re-

mained strong despite insecurity in the country, including from jihadist violence and the repercussions of two coups in 2022. As well as in Ouagadougou, strawberry production is prominent in Bobo-Dioulasso - Burkina's second city - even though "the sector's not very well organized" there, Compaore said.

### Since the 70s

"You might think it's an oddity to grow strawberries in a Sahelian country like Burkina Faso but it's been a fixture since the 1970s," Compaore added. The practice began when a French expatriate introduced a few plants to his garden in the country. Now more and more people are growing them. "It's our red gold. It's one of the most profitable crops for both growers and sellers," he explained.

Seller Jacqueline Taonsa has no hesitation in swapping from apples and bananas to strawberries in season. "With the heat, it's hard to keep strawberries fresh for long," said Taonsa, who cycles around Ouagadougou neighborhoods balancing a salad bowl on her head. "So we take quantities that can be sold quickly during the day," she explained. That usually amounts to about five of six kilograms. Adissa Tiemtore used to be a full-time fruit and vegetable seller.

She has mainly switched to selling woven loincloths now but takes up her strawberry business again in season because of the lucrative margins, as high as "200 to 300 percent". "I start strawberry selling again when they're in season to make a bit of



**OUAGADOUGOU:** Strawberries are displayed for sale on the stalls of the Gounghin market in Ouagadougou. In the suburbs of Ouagadougou, the round leaves of strawberries are replacing cabbage and salads. An "oddity" in the heart of the Sahel, Burkina strawberries invade the stalls of local markets, a "red gold" which is now also exported beyond the borders. — AFP

money and satisfy my former customers, who continue to ask for them," she said. "We go round the different growers depending on what day they're harvesting. That way we get enough to sell every day

during the three fruit-producing months," she said. The end of April spells the end of the bonanza. "We go back to our other activities and we wait for next season," Tiemtore said. — AFP

## Boeing CEO gets \$33m in pay, gives up bonus

**NEW YORK:** Boeing's CEO received \$33 million in compensation for 2023 but declined a potential \$2.8 million bonus following the near-catastrophic Alaska Airlines incident in January, the company said in a securities filing. David Calhoun, who is set to exit as chief executive at the end of 2024, received a base salary of \$1.4 million, plus more than \$30 million coming in stock awards. The announcement, which came in Boeing's annual proxy statement, comes as the company faces intense scrutiny over the January 5 incident, in which a

737 MAX 9 was forced to make an emergency landing after a fuselage panel blew out.

"Following the Alaska Airlines accident, Mr. Calhoun declined to be considered for an annual incentive payout, and the Board honored that request," Boeing said. On March 25, Boeing announced that Calhoun would step down as CEO at the end of the year as part of a leadership shakeup while it searches for a replacement. In describing Calhoun's compensation, Boeing recounted that his appointment as CEO started in January 2020 when the company was "facing one of the more serious challenges in its long history" from the grounding of the 737 MAX after two fatal crashes.

That was soon followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a deep downturn in aviation. "Throughout his tenure, as part of Mr. Calhoun's focus on safety and quality, he has demanded transparency within Boeing and with

our customers, our regulators and the flying public," Boeing said in the filing. "He has also made a number of decisions that, in the Board's judgment, were in the long-term interest of Boeing, even if they came at the expense of achieving near-term financial or operational goals."

"While the Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 accident shows that Boeing has much work yet to do, the Board believes that Mr. Calhoun has responded to this event in the right way by taking responsibility for the accident, engaging transparently and proactively with regulators and customers and taking important steps to strengthen Boeing's quality assurance." Besides the lack of a 2023 bonus for Calhoun, Boeing also adjusted its 2024 long-term long incentive program to account for the Alaska Airlines incident. The CEO's 2024 target award has been lowered by 38 percent to \$17 million, in parallel with the drop in Boeing stock and the grant date. — AFP



**ARLINGTON:** The exterior of the Boeing Company headquarters is seen in Arlington, Virginia. Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun announced he intends to leave the company by the end of the year in the wake of ongoing safety concerns with the company's jetliners. — AFP



شركة الصفاة للاستثمار  
AL SAFAT INVESTMENT COMPANY

# KUWAIT BOURSA WEEKLY REPORT

WEEK ENDED ON 3 APRIL 2024

(965) 22 675 140  
Al-Safat Tower, Hawalli, Beirut St.  
alsafatinvest.com  
research@alsafatinvest.com  
alsafatinvestment  
al-safat-investment-company

Market	M. Cap (KD ml)	Last Close	WTD %	MTD %	YTD %	Quantity Traded	Value Traded	No. of Trades	P/E	P/B	% of Total M. Cap
Premier Market	36,321	7,976.57	-1.3%	-0.7%	6.7%	348,731,597	141,778,085	30,358	17.8	1.3	82.3%
Main Market	7,794	5,937.83	-1.8%	-0.8%	6.6%	325,490,778	38,729,381	14,519	12.9	0.8	17.7%
All Share	44,115	7,271.82	-1.4%	-0.8%	6.7%	674,222,375	180,507,466	44,877	14.1	0.9	100%

Sector	M. Cap (KD ml)	Last Close	WTD %	MTD %	YTD %	Quantity Traded	Value Traded	No. of Trades	P/E	P/B	% of Total M. Cap
Banking	26,379	1,761.27	-1.2%	-0.6%	6.9%	102,842,368	54,403,640	10,493	16.9	1.4	59.80%
Basic Materials	444	786.93	0.2%	-0.4%	5.5%	3,376,047	2,103,600	869	9.6	2.2	1.01%
Consumer Discretionary	1,214	1,764.84	0.8%	0.8%	10.0%	21,362,473	6,800,697	2,429	12.8	1.2	2.75%
Consumer Staples	244	801.44	7.2%	3.7%	21.7%	2,540,843	1,753,951	341	105.1	1.4	0.55%
Energy	219	1,045.54	0.0%	0.2%	10.2%	500,821	37,249	111	10.3	0.7	0.50%
Financial Services	4,775	1,343.82	-1.1%	-0.7%	10.9%	188,978,701	26,422,794	8,349	15.3	0.9	10.82%
Health Care	151	314.87	-33.0%	-8.4%	-34.7%	2,525,110	858,938.645	704	10.1	1.1	0.34%
Industrials	3,465	1,015.48	-4.2%	-2.9%	11.8%	79,979,796	46,678,196	9,410	13.8	0.9	7.86%
Insurance	1,048	2,564.45	1.8%	-0.1%	11.8%	2,197,452	373,132	309	10.4	1.2	2.38%
Real Estate	2,767	1,300.90	0.3%	0.4%	7.3%	243,655,922	28,949,037	7,752	15.7	0.7	6.27%
Technology	26	1,906.05	0.0%	0.0%	229.6%	0	0.00	0	NM	2.2	0.06%
Telecommunications	3,205	1,048.71	-1.9%	-1.5%	-5.1%	22,544,996	11,511,164	3,748	9.7	1.3	7.26%
Utilities	178	426.32	-4.1%	-4.1%	-6.4%	3,717,846	615,069	362	14.1	1.5	0.40%

### Top Gainers

Stock	Last Close	Change %	Volume	Value	Trades
ALMANAR	68.7	9.92%	378,968	24,171	24
GFC	84.1	9.36%	136,900	12,063	20
KBT	71.9	8.94%	6,763,590	493,737	47
MEZZAN	708	7.60%	2,497,972	1,749,401	325
SHIP	833	6.25%	1,478,766	1,194,364	419

### Top Losers

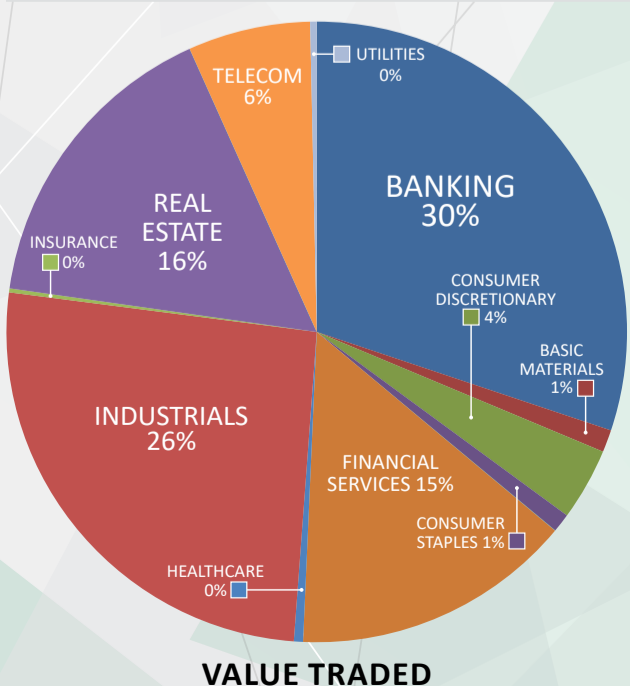
Stock	Last Close	Change %	Volume	Value	Trades
MIDAN	390	-50.94%	2,525,110	858,939	704
KGL	47.7	-11.99%	826,776	41,577	74
ALDEERA	349	-11.20%	63,095	22,114	98
FTI	176	-10.66%	88,280	15,349	81
KPPC	34.6	-10.13%	407,719	14,802	28

### Top Volume

Stock	Last	Change %	Volume	Value	Trades
NRE	101	4.12%	160,892,843	16,896,901	3,295
AGLTY	609	-8.56%	58,516,985	38,098,072	6,682
GFH	82	-7.24%	38,678,360	3,301,446	819
KFH	728	-0.75%	38,351,322	28,135,953	4,608
KPROJ	127	4.10%	24,551,870	3,107,727	559

### Top Value

Stock	Last	Change %	Volume	Value	Trades
AGLTY	609	-8.56%	58,516,985	38,098,072	6,682
KFH	728	-0.75%	38,351,322	28,135,953	4,608
NRE	101	4.12%	160,892,843	16,896,901	3,295
NBK	899	-1.67%	13,919,842	12,624,443	2,429
ZAIN	484	-1.43%	19,189,182	9,399,597	2,766



### Market Summary:

- Premier volume dropped 10% while value increased by 3%. Main market volume and value increased 36% and 24%, respectively.
- Premier and Main indexes both suffered from a significant fall due to increasing sell pressure.
- Technically, the All Share index closed at 7271, with support levels at 7248, 7214, and 7178, and resistance at 7286. The Premier index closed at 7976, with support levels at 7945, 7916, and 7899, and resistance at 7997. The Main index closed at 5937, with support levels at 5925, 5902, and 5881, and resistance at 5959.



## Business

# Ro'ya Talent Program ends, marking milestone for Burgan Bank's leadership development

## Bank cements its commitment to development of human capital

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank recently celebrated 37 of its high-potential, aspiring talents who graduated from the second round of the Bank's flagship talent development program, Ro'ya. The Bank's management attended the graduation ceremony in recognition of the graduates' impressive dedication and performance, which they exhibited along the learning tracks of the program.



Naqeeb Amin

Ro'ya, among several other educational and training programs, comes as part of Burgan's steadfast strategy for human capital development, which aims to enhance the personal and professional skills of its employees and Kuwaiti caliber in adherence to the Central Bank of Kuwait's (CBK) mandates.

"On behalf of the Bank's Executive Management and staff, I congratulate our 37 exceptional graduates on their outstanding performance during the full length of the Ro'ya 2 program," Naqeeb Amin, General Manager - Human Resources and Development Group at Burgan Bank, said. "In a market where new technologies are emerging every day and customers' needs and aspirations are evolving at a phenomenal speed, it is essential for our success that we continue to enhance our training and development programs at an equally fast pace.

Every new round of Ro'ya is developed in collaboration with some of the best national and international educational institutions to cater to the market's and the program attendees' modern needs." "Innovation is an essential tenet of our Burgan philosophy that influences the design and development of everything from products and services to talent development and the overall Burgan



culture," Bashar Al-Qattan, Senior Manager - Talent Empowerment at Burgan Bank, said.

"Today's graduation ceremony is an excellent example that showcases our dedication to merging innovation with education and development, guaranteeing that our top talents are qualified to respond with proficiency to the market's arising needs and to lead by example in their disciplines. Among the most prominent topics that dominate talent development and training in the banking industry is the impact of technology on the evolution of financial products and services, which we en-

sured our Ro'ya 2 graduates are all well-versed in and up to date on."

Similar to the first round of the program, Burgan Bank developed and delivered Ro'ya 2 in collaboration with a number of top-tier educational institutions including the American University of Kuwait (AUK), Harvard Business School (HBS), London Business School (LBS), and INSEAD, among others. The one-year program, which began in Q4 of 2022 and ended in Q4 of 2023, offered its participants a comprehensive and immersive educational experience that prepares them for bigger responsi-

bilities and leadership roles within Kuwait's banking industry.

Burgan Bank's learning and development strategy remains one of the most robust in the market, guaranteeing that every employee is guided along a tailored journey of development throughout their employment periods. In recognition of these efforts and others, Burgan Bank was the first in Kuwait's banking sector to receive the Great Place to Work certification. It was also listed as one of the Best Workplaces in Asia - a Great Place to Work Middle East recognition.

### NBK Weekly Report

## US labor market resilient as Fed reiterates calls for cuts

KUWAIT: The US manufacturing industry is showing signs of recovery after a year and a half of decline, with manufacturing PMI rising to 50.3 from 47.8 previously. Meanwhile, production and new orders components of the survey are also up. This is positive news for the overall economy, but there are some concerns. Employment in factories hasn't grown yet, and the cost of raw materials is rising.

This could lead to higher prices for manufactured goods in the future, potentially impacting the Federal Reserve's decisions on interest rates as inflationary pressures persist. Meanwhile, services PMI fell to 51.4 from 52.6, indicating easing in price pressures on the services front. The Federal Reserve have lamented about services inflation, which is a big contributor to the overall squeeze that is being felt by the American consumer.

#### Job openings

US job openings edged up in February despite labor market conditions gradually easing since the start of the year. Job openings, a measure of labor demand, edged up by 8,000 to 8.756 million on the last day of February, the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics said. Data for January was revised lower to show 8.748 million unfilled positions instead of the previously reported 8.863 million. There were 1.36 vacancies for every unemployed person in February, down from 1.43 in January. The decline in the ratio reflects a spike in unemployment at the start of the year, however most analysts argue the drop does not mark a material shift in the labor market.

#### Non-farm employment surges

In another sign of a resilient labor market, the US economy added 303,000 non-farm jobs, significantly greater than the forecasted figure of 214,000 jobs, and more than the 270,000 jobs added previously. Additionally, the unemployment rate ticked down to 3.8 percent while labor force participation increased to 62.7 percent. The largest job gains were in the healthcare sector at 72,000 and the government

### Rates - April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Currencies	Previous Week Levels				This Week's Expected Range		3-Month Forward
	Open	Low	High	Close	Minimum	Maximum	
EUR	1.0786	1.0723	1.0876	1.0835	1.0720	1.0940	1.0879
GBP	1.2629	1.2536	1.2683	1.2636	1.2525	1.2750	1.2647
JPY	151.31	150.80	151.95	151.61	150.30	152.00	149.55
CHF	0.9017	0.8996	0.9095	0.9014	0.8900	0.9110	0.8927

sector at 71,000 jobs. The data overall indicates that the labor market remains historically tight, particularly at a time where the Fed indicated that some easing would relieve inflationary pressures to bring inflation down to their 2 percent target.

#### Fed Chair insists on cuts

In remarks delivered prior to the release of non-farm payroll data, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell insisted that the recent elevated inflation readings don't "change the overall picture" in his eyes when it comes to delivering the central bank's projected three rate cuts by year-end. Powell added the story "continues to be one of solid growth, a strong but rebalancing labor market, and inflation moving down toward 2 percent on a sometimes bubbly path."

Powell reiterated that interest rates have likely peaked, and it will "be appropriate to begin lowering the policy rate at some point this year." Finally, he asserted that the Fed will keep their eye on the upcoming data. "Given the strength of the economy and progress on inflation so far, we have time to let the incoming data guide our decisions on policy." Following the recent release of non-farm data, the gap of a June rate cut narrowed, with markets now favoring a rate cut to occur in July. The greenback ended the week at 104.29.

#### Euro-zone PMI data mixed

Euro-zone manufacturing activity further contracted in March, with the PMI falling slightly to 46.1 from 46.5 in February. This decline continues a trend of over a year. While the overall picture in the manufacturing sector remains gloomy, some bright spots emerged. Composite PMI climbed to 50.3 from 49.2 in the previous month driven by a rise in services and

entering expansion territory. Services PMI increased to 51.5 from 50.2, beating expectations of a 51.1 rise and the highest level in nearly 9 months.

#### Euro-zone CPI declines

Euro-zone inflation eased in March, reaching 2.4 percent year-on-year. This is down from 2.6 percent in January but still above the European Central Bank's (ECB) target of 2 percent. Core inflation softened to 2.9 percent from 3.1 percent previously. Despite the positive overall readings, monthly figures painted a different picture. Headline inflation rose 0.8 percent versus a 0.6 percent rise previously, while monthly core inflation increased to 1.1 percent from 0.7 percent the previous month. The declining nature of inflation, combined with the recent weakness in retail sales has markets pricing in an overwhelming chance that the European Central Bank (ECB) will deliver their first rate cut in June.

#### Cautious optimism

PMI figures coming out of China show the fastest expansion of factory activity in 13 months, with the Caixin manufacturing PMI rising to 51.1 from 50.9 previously, while simultaneously beating market expectations of 51.0. The rise in manufacturing activity coincides with better than expected recent retail sales and export data, as the world's second largest economy attempts to recover from a variety of problems including weak demand, property sector slump, and deflation. Furthermore, the survey also showed services PMI edging up to 52.7 from 52.5 in February. At the annual meeting of the Chinese parliament, it was announced that the target growth rate for the year was around 5 percent. Oil prices are approaching a 5 month high, with Brent crude futures last trading \$91.17 per barrel.

## Parent company of UK's biggest water supplier defaults

LONDON: Thames Water's parent company has defaulted on a payment, deepening the crisis at the UK's largest water supplier, which is heavily indebted and under fire for failing to stop sewage discharges into the nation's waterways. The default comes after Thames Water on March 28 said it had failed to raise a major cash injection from shareholders, blaming industry regulations that made its rescue plan "uninvestable".

Kemble Water Finance said in a statement Friday that "as envisaged" payments on a debt of £400 million (\$505 million) due on April 2 had "not been paid". The firm said it had begun to approach creditors and bondholders to "request that they take no creditor action so as to provide a stable platform while all options are explored with all key stakeholders". The company expected to be in "a position to provide a further update in the coming weeks," it added. Spokespeople for Kemble and Thames Water contacted by AFP declined to elaborate further on the consequences for the beleaguered supplier.

Thames Water's problems have come to a head since its March 28 announcement. The cash injection it had been seeking represented most of a £750-million funding lifeline agreed with investors in July to stay afloat. The company said at the time it was in talks with industry regulator Ofwat over a plan that is "affordable for customers, deliverable and financeable for Thames Water, as well as investible for equity investors". Ofwat had reportedly refused to bow to Thames Water's demands for concessions, which it said included a 40-percent jump in water bills that would worsen the country's cost-of-living crisis.

Thames Water, which supplies more than 15 million homes and businesses in London and elsewhere in southern England, is saddled with debts of almost £15 billion that have placed it at risk of nationalization. It has faced fierce criticism over missing targets to reduce leaks and slash sewage discharges into rivers, despite major infrastructure investment. Environmentalists have increasingly voiced outrage at the rise in pollution on the UK's beaches and waterways, and have pointed the finger at privatized water companies.— AFP

## Yellen and Li express hope for US-China cooperation

BEIJING: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Chinese Premier Li Qiang sounded a hopeful tone on US-China cooperation on Sunday, though the American policymaker noted both sides cannot shy away from tough conversations. The US-China relationship can only move forward with direct and open communication, Yellen told Li, after arriving in the Chinese capital from the southern city of Guangzhou. "China sincerely hopes that the two countries will be partners, not adversaries," Li said in welcoming remarks to Yellen. He added that Chinese internet users have closely followed the details of her trip since her appearance in Guangzhou, showing "expectation and hope for the China-US relationship to continue to improve".

Yellen held a series of meetings in the southern port city, including hours of discussions with her counterpart, Vice Premier He Lifeng. Both countries have since agreed to hold talks on balanced growth under an

existing working group, allowing officials to discuss the key US concern of overcapacity. This refers to a situation where Chinese government support to industries fuels production capacity but risks a surge of exports at depressed prices to the global market, undercutting international competitors.

Washington is especially concerned about this phenomenon in new industries such as electric vehicles and solar energy. Yellen's trip marks her second visit to China in less than a year. "While we have more to do, I believe that, over the past year, we have put our bilateral relationship on more stable footing," she said in opening remarks to Premier Li as she began two days of high-level talks in Beijing. Rather than avoiding hard conversations, this has meant "understanding that we can only make progress if we directly and openly communicate with one another", the Treasury chief said.

Yellen also stressed, ahead of talks with Beijing mayor Yin Yong, the need to

engage with local officials to understand China's "economic future". "Local governments play a critical role, from boosting consumption to addressing overinvestment, and Beijing of course has particular importance," she said. A senior Treasury official told reporters Saturday that Washington believes household spending needs to be a bigger part of China's economy. Speaking to Peking University National School of Development professors, Yellen said she was keen to hear their perspectives on "the potential long-term impacts of today's policy decisions".

#### Tensions remain

Yellen told Li that the world's two biggest economies have a duty to "responsibly manage our complex relationship" and show leadership when it comes to working on global challenges. On Saturday, the Treasury also said US and Chinese officials would start talks under another existing working group for cooperation on tackling money laundering. The aim is to cut off financing for criminal organizations such as drug traffickers.

Despite the outcomes of meetings so



BEIJING: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen (left) meets with Chinese Premier Li Qiang at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on April 7, 2024. — AFP

far, China's state-run Xinhua news agency warned in a commentary of the "specter of protectionism" in the United States. It criticized existing US tariffs on Chinese imports, while accusing Washington of "suppressing" China's electric vehicle-related industries,

signaling at tensions that remain. Another state media outlet, the Global Times, pointed to "negative actions toward China" in an editorial, referring to US trade and tech curbs, and "an ever-growing list of sanctions against Chinese companies". — AFP



MONDAY, APRIL 8, 2024

## AI vs humans: Influencers face competition from virtual models



Spanish co-founder and creative director at The Clueless agency Diana Nunez, shows printed AI generated images of Maia Lima model, at the headquarters of The Clueless company in Barcelona.—AFP photos

Social media influencers have embraced artificial intelligence (AI) to spice up their content but they are also facing growing competition from AI-generated Instagramers, TikTokers and YouTubers. Sporting pink hair and posing in lingerie, swimsuits or gym outfits, Aitana Lopez has more than 300,000 followers on Instagram where she is described as a “gamer at heart” and “fitness lover”—except she’s not real. Aitana was created by The Clueless, a Barcelona-based company that describes itself as an “AI modeling agency” run by “visionaries on a mission to redefine the world of influencers.”

Sofia Novales, project manager at The Clueless, said the “rising costs associated with human influencers” was a reason behind the company’s creation. “Virtual models, being digital, present a more economical alternative,” Novales said. Another plus: total control over content. “The advantages lie in unparalleled creative control, allowing seamless decision-making on image, fashion, and aesthetics without the need for physical photoshoots,” Novales said. The rise of AI has fueled concerns about the proliferation of deepfake videos that could be used maliciously.

Meta, owner of Facebook and Instagram, said Friday it would start putting “Made with AI labels” on AI-generated content in May. AI presents a huge business opportunity for content creators: The influencer market is expected to grow rapidly, from \$16.5 billion in 2022 to nearly \$200 billion by 2032, according to Allied Market Research.

### Younger audience

Using virtual influencers is not new: Barbie already has millions of followers on Instagram. But they are now being used in advertisements where they can’t be told apart from a real person. Take Lil Miquela, a “19-year-old Robot living in LA” created by a California agency in 2016. With 2.6 million followers on Instagram and 3.5 million on TikTok, Lil Maqueta has promoted brands as big as BMW. The idea was to “create something never seen before,” the German premium carmaker said in a statement to AFP. “Attracting a younger, technology-savvy generation is for us

the icing on the cake,” it said.

Maud Lejeune, who heads up the Paris-based digital strategy agency AD Crew, said that it isn’t difficult for the public to accept AI influencers. “It’s like actors on TV: we



A graphic designer works on his computer on AI generated image of Aitana Lopez model.

know it isn’t real yet we follow them and we find it interesting, it’s like watching a mini-series.” AD Crew represents more than 30 influencers, but Lejeune created her own virtual influencer, Metagaya, two years ago.

“The current level of design didn’t exist then. It’s technical, you’ve got to dress them, take photos for the background, create a story,” said Lejeune, acknowledging that Metagaya didn’t turn out very well. The rapid technological progress brought by the likes of OpenAI’s Sora video generator could make it easier to create and operate realistic virtual influencers.

### Deepfakes

Human influencers are also seizing on AI technology to make better videos. France’s Charles Sterlings sees an opportunity to improve translations. He uses different tools on platforms like HeyGen and Rask.ai to automatically translate and lip-sync his video posts into English and Spanish. Sterlings also uses Deepshot, a platform that allows users to create deepfakes by changing the words and mouth movement of people in real videos.

He said it took him just a few minutes and a few dollars to manipulate a video of French President Emmanuel Macron. But Sterlings sees the technology as a compet-



Spanish co-founders and creative directors at The Clueless agency Diana Nunez (second right), Ruben Cruz (left) and other employers work on their computer as an AI generated image of Aitana Lopez model is displayed on a screen at the headquarters of The Clueless company in Barcelona.

itor as well as a useful tool. “Anyone with a phone can be an influencer. But eventually, it will be AI, available 24 hours a day, and much cheaper to develop,” he said. For Maud Lejeune, AI can help influencers produce more content. “It’s tough to put yourself in front of the camera for a long time and certain creators burn out... Maybe AI will provide a new way to create without exposing oneself,” she said. The Clueless has no qualms about its AI models taking away business from real influencers. “We don’t foresee real models becoming obsolete or replaced by AI-generated models like Aitana,” said Novales. “In our view, they can coexist as another competition of the industry.” — AFP

## ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’ copy on sale in New York for \$1.5m

A diamond-covered edition of Truman Capote’s seminal novel “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” is on sale for \$1.5 million to mark the centenary of the author’s birth. The one-of-a-kind volume, on display at the New York International Antiquarian Book Fair, is signed by the author and decorated with almost 30 carats of diamonds and a sapphire. “The streets of London are paved with gold... the streets in New York are paved with platinum and diamonds,” said British artist Kate Holland who is behind the special edition of the 1958 novella.

Three years in the making, British jewelers Bentley and Skinner collaborated with US luxury bookseller, Lux Mentis, and the work is on display until

Sunday at the book fair in the heart of Manhattan. The alignment of the more than 1,000 diamonds takes the form of the outline of Manhattan’s distinctive grid system. The sapphire is positioned at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, location of the legendary flagship of jeweler Tiffany, which reopened in April 2023 under the ownership of French global luxury giant LVMH.

Tiffany, a beacon of New York luxury since 1940, was immortalized by the film adapted from the book of the same name directed by Blake Edwards and starring Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard. The romantic comedy with a psychological edge, and the darker book about the character’s childhood traumas, tell the story of



A custom binding of a signed, first-edition of “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” by Truman Capote is displayed at the ABAA New York International Antiquarian Book Fair. — AFP photos

Holly Golightly, a whimsical young socialite who lives off her charms in New York and dreams of marrying a billionaire to shower her with jewels. Holland described the novel as a “love story to New York”, a global hub for the arts, luxury and finance.

And while the artist admits the \$1.5 million price tag “sits uncomfortably” — she believes the book can be displayed rather than sit “in a box on a shelf.” The work and life of Capote, as famous for his controversies as for his writing, have since his death in



A custom binding of a signed, first-edition of “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” by Truman Capote is displayed at the ABAA New York International Antiquarian Book Fair.

Los Angeles a month before his 60th birthday, been adapted for the screen. Most recently his exploits were dramatized in Gus Van Sant’s “Feud: The Betrayals of Truman Capote” starring Tom Hollander, Naomi Watts, Diane Lane and Demi Moore.—AFP

## First Indigenous member joins Brazilian Academy of Letters



Brazilian actress Fernanda Montenegro (left) greets Brazilian Indigenous leader, environmentalist and writer Ailton Krenak during his swearing-in ceremony as an “immortal” member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters (ABL). — AFP photos

Writer and activist Ailton Krenak on Friday became the first Indigenous person inducted into the Brazilian Academy of Letters, as dancers in feather headdresses shook up the staid proceedings of the country’s leading liter-

ary institution. Wearing an Indigenous bead bandana along with the traditional gold-embroidered suit of the Academy’s members, Krenak joked about his “distinguished new outfit” and feeling a bit out of place in the predominantly



Brazilian Indigenous leader, environmentalist and writer Ailton Krenak speaks during his swearing-in ceremony as an “immortal” member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters (ABL) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

white institution. Krenak, 70, is known for an acclaimed body of work criticizing the excesses of colonialism and capitalism, including the essay collection “Ideas to Postpone the End of the World” (2019), which has been translated into more than 10 languages.

He is the first member of Brazil’s more than 300 Indigenous peoples to be inducted into the Academy, the rough equivalent of France’s revered Academie Francaise or Spain’s Real Academia. Seen as a standard-bearer of Brazilian language and literature, the Rio de Janeiro-based institution has 40 members, known as the “immortals,” who hold their seats for life. Krenak, a writer, journalist, poet, philosopher,

activist and environmentalist, was elected in October with 23 of 39 votes to the seat left by deceased historian Jose Murilo de Carvalho.

The Academy, which has at times faced accusations of racism, has gradually begun reflecting Brazil’s diversity in recent years. In 2022, it inducted singer-songwriter and former culture minister Gilberto Gil. He and the writer and academic Domicio Proenca Filho, inducted in 2006, are the first Afro-Brazilians to join the academy since it was founded in 1897 by intellectuals including the iconic black writer Machado de Assis. Krenak has vowed to use his seat to help shine a light on Brazil’s nearly 200 Indigenous languages.



Brazilian Indigenous leader, environmentalist and writer Ailton Krenak shows his diploma during his swearing-in ceremony as an “immortal” member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters (ABL).

Retracing five centuries of Indigenous suffering in his speech, he questioned gestures such as the apology issued Tuesday by Brazil’s human-rights ministry—the first of its kind from the government—for the persecution of the country’s native peoples. “Saying sorry afterwards means very little in terms of reparation. What we need is real reparations for native peoples,” he said to applause. He also criticized the destruction of the environment by humankind—or “Predatory sapiens,” as he called the species—urging people to rethink our relationship with nature. —AFP



## Lifestyle



An employee of the Secretary of Citizen Security shows special sunglasses to observe the next solar eclipse.



In this photo illustration, eclipse glasses from Warby Parker are seen on a table in New York City.



Solar eclipse t-shirts are offered for sale at Audra's Footprint in Pinckneyville, Illinois.

## Why unprotected eclipse gazing will leave you seeing stars

Just a single, unguarded glance at a solar eclipse can result in a lifetime of vision loss, eye health experts warn. On Monday, tens of millions of spectators across Mexico, the United States and Canada will witness the Moon completely obscure the Sun's light, a rare celestial spectacle that won't be visible for most of North America again until 2044. Medical literature is teeming with examples of people who suffered damage to their retinas—the layer of light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye—and health professionals are offering advice on how to avoid becoming the next cautionary tale.

Aaron Zimmerman, a clinical professor of optometry at the Ohio State University, told AFP that the dangers of sun-gazing during eclipses were discussed by the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, but it wasn't until recently that science really caught up with how eye injury happened. When it comes to eclipses, he explained, the main damage comes from "photochemical toxicity," where short, high-energy wavelengths of light—blues, violets and non-visible ultraviolet—trigger chemical reactions that damage the rods and cones of the retina.

Cue visits to the emergency department by people with complaints of blurry vision, changes in color perception, and blind spots, with the outlook for recovery far from certain. Human beings inherently look away from the Sun because of the discomfort it causes, but during eclipses "you can psychologically override" that instinct, explained Zimmerman. A famous journal report about the 2017 US solar eclipse involved a woman in her twenties who presented to the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary after looking at the solar rim "several times for approximately 6 seconds without protective glasses" and

then later with eclipse glasses.

Hours later, objects started to look fuzzy and out of shape, colors became distorted, and she developed a central black spot in her left eye. An advanced imaging technique was able to show the damage at the cellular level which persisted on her follow up six weeks later.



A marquee announces a solar eclipse party as part of the town's celebration of the April 8 solar eclipse in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

### 'Permanent blank spot'

Young adults might be more susceptible, the authors of the paper said, because of larger pupils, clearer eye structure, or "poorer recognition of the dangers" of viewing eclipses with improper eyewear. "In some cases, it's just partially damaged and it may resolve so that you don't notice it anymore," Neil

Bressler, a professor of ophthalmology at Johns Hopkins University and editor-in-chief of JAMA Ophthalmology told AFP. If recovery happens, it's normally within the first six months.

"But in other cases, it can leave a permanent blank spot... and we don't have a treatment to reverse that. It's like brain tissue, once you lose it, it won't grow back," added Bressler. The best way to view the eclipse is with eclipse sunglasses, which block out 99.999 percent of light. Always go for genuine products. To test if your glasses are up to standard, "find the brightest light bulb in your home—and then look at that from up close and you should barely be able to see the light," said Zimmerman.

If it's too late to procure specialist eyewear, then there are indirect methods, such as punching a pinhole into a cardboard and letting the light shine onto another surface, or even using the humble kitchen colander to the same effect. NASA's webcast is another option. Those fortunate enough to be in the "path of totality," under which the Moon will fully block out the Sun, can look up without glasses and admire the Sun's outer atmosphere, or corona, glowing from behind the silhouette of the Moon.

But, said Bressler, the danger is not having protection before and after those precious moments, which can last anywhere from seconds to a few minutes, depending on your location. "You must know when it begins and use protection before that, and you may be enamored by looking at all this, but you must have some alarm to tell you it's about to end," he warned. —AFP

## What do scientists hope to learn from total solar eclipse in US?

When a rare total solar eclipse sweeps across North America on Monday, scientists will be able to gather invaluable data on everything from the Sun's atmosphere to strange animal behaviors—and even possible effects on humans. It comes with the Sun near the peak of its 11-year solar cycle, setting the stage for a breathtaking display: The corona will glow spectacularly from the Moon's silhouette along the path of totality, a corridor stretching from Mexico to Canada via the United States.

Total solar eclipses offer "incredible scientific opportunities," NASA Deputy Administrator Pam Melroy told a press conference this week about the celestial event. The US space agency is one of the institutions at the ready for the eclipse, with plans to launch so-called "sounding rockets" to study the effects on Earth's upper atmosphere. Here is a look at what researchers are hoping to learn from the upcoming eclipse:

### Sun's atmosphere

When the Moon passes directly in front of the Sun and blocks it, the elusive outermost edge of the Sun's atmosphere, or corona, will be visible "in a very special way," Melroy said. "Things are happening with the corona that we don't fully understand," she said. The heat within the corona intensifies with distance from the Sun's surface—a counterintuitive phenomenon that scientists struggle to fully comprehend or explain. Solar flares, a sudden explosion of energy that releases radiation into space, take place in the corona as do solar prominences, enormous plasma formations that loop out from the Sun's surface.

During an eclipse, the bottom most part of the corona—where a lot of this activity occurs—is more clearly visible than when using specialized instruments to block the central part of the Sun, offering a golden opportunity for study, said Shannon Schmoll, director of the Abrams Planetarium at Michigan State University. Researchers are particularly thrilled about the Sun being near the peak of its 11-year cycle. "The chance we're going to see something amazing is very high," Melroy said.

### Earth's atmosphere

The total eclipse also will afford scientists a chance to study changes in part of the Earth's upper atmosphere known as the ionosphere, important because it affects radio waves used for communication and navigation. "Disturbances in this layer can cause issues with GPS and communications," said Kelly Korreck, the eclipse program manager at NASA headquarters.

The ionosphere, which is where Earth's atmosphere meets space, is affected by the Sun, which electrically charges the particles there during the day. NASA's three sounding rockets will

be launched before, during and just after the eclipse from Virginia to measure these changes. The major decrease in sunlight provoked by the eclipse—more rapid and localized than a simple sunset—should allow researchers to learn more about how light affects the ionosphere so they can better predict potential problematic disruptions.

### Animal behaviors

Startling animal behavior has been noted during eclipses: Giraffes have been seen galloping, while roosters and crickets can start crowing and chirping. Beyond the drop in sunlight, temperatures and wind—conditions to which animals are sensitive—can also decrease significantly during an eclipse. Andrew Farnsworth, a researcher in ornithology at Cornell University in New York state, studies how eclipses affect birds, using weather surveillance radar to detect birds in flight. During the last total solar eclipse visible from the United States in August 2017, scientists observed a "decline in the number of animals flying around," Farnsworth told reporters.

The 2017 eclipse disrupted the daily activities of insects and birds, but did not trigger usual animal nocturnal behaviors such as birds migrating or bats emerging, the expert said. This time around, birds might be more apt to migrate during the eclipse, given that it's in April, he said. "These kinds of patterns—they're important for understanding the ways animals perceive their worlds," Farnsworth said.

### Human wonder

"Eclipses have a special power. They move people to feel a kind of reverence for the beauty of our universe," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson told reporters. Researchers studied this feeling of awe in 2017, using data from nearly three million users of Twitter, now called X. Those in the so-called "path of totality," under which the Moon will fully block out the Sun, tended to use the pronoun "we" (as opposed to "I") and express concern about other people, according to Paul Piff, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Irvine.

"What we're finding is that experiences that bring about awe... seem to attune people and connect us to one another, to connect us to entities that are larger than ourselves," Piff said. This year, he plans to study if the experience has any effect on political divisions in society.

### Citizen scientists

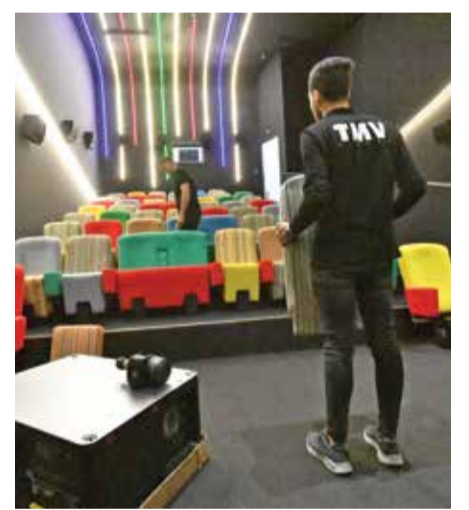
About 40 citizen science projects are planned around the eclipse, from using a phone app to register the temperature and cloud cover to recording ambient noise during the event. "We encourage you to help NASA observe the sights and sounds around you," Nelson said. —AFP



People buy snacks before entering one of the auditoriums of the Algerian TMV group's multiplex inside the Garden City mall in Algiers.



People gather in front of the Algerian TMV group's multiplex inside the Garden City mall in Algiers. — AFP photos



Employees prepare one of the auditoriums of the Algerian TMV group's multiplex inside the Garden City mall in Algiers.

## Algerian film industry vies for revival after decades of neglect

Algerian cinema is in search of a revival, decades after its 1970s heyday and steep decline, with authorities having blown hot and cold in their support. Today, the country counts only a few dozen theatres against a backdrop of legal, bureaucratic and financial restraints. "Algerian cinema is rich in its talents and poor in its means," said producer and film critic Ahmed Bedjaoui. "We need to give a little more freedom to filmmakers." During the 1960s and 70s, the north African country was home to more than 450 cinemas and film libraries.

Its production then yielded cinematic gems like "Inspector Tahar's Holiday" (1973), "Omar Gatlato" (1976), and the Palme d'Or-winning "Chronicle of the Years of Fire" (1975). In the 1980s, though, the industry fell into a tailspin. "The industry and its talents started disappearing little by little," said Bedjaoui, who is also known as Algeria's "Mister Cinema". The onset of dire economic and political crises then thrust the hydrocarbon-rich country into a long civil

war between the government and Islamist rebel groups. During the 1992-2002 conflict, which came to be known as the Black Decade, numerous artists and film professionals left the country. Cinemas and other entertainment spaces, viewed as places of depravity by Islamists, were shut down one after another. It was only in the diaspora, said Bedjaoui, that "filmmakers like Nadir Mokhneche or Rachid Bouchareb filled the void by producing works about Algeria."

### 'Political willingness'

In a cabinet meeting last December, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced the creation of a body to oversee cinematic production amid an "emergence of young talents in acting and directing". Bedjaoui said the announcement spoke to the president's "political willingness and determination to support cinema". But prospects of reviving the industry soon proved to be short-lived.

Earlier this month, the Algerian par-

liament passed a law criminalizing films that offend religion, morality, or the history of the 1954-1962 Independence War against France. In a Facebook post, director Sofia Djama called it "a law of shame". "Yesterday the press, today cinema, tomorrow literature, painting, and any form of creation and expression that does not suit them will be censored," she wrote. Several journalists and activists are imprisoned in Algeria, which ranks 136 out of 180 countries and territories in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index.

After taking office in December 2019, President Tebboune vowed to "place the film industry at the heart of his programme" by giving it its own state secretariat, said Bachir Derrais, a filmmaker and actor. But the secretariat was dissolved only a year after its creation, owing to conflicts within the culture ministry, he added. An example of these tensions is the ban, which lasted for almost six years, on Derrais' biopic of Larbi Ben M'hidi, the prominent Algerian

Independence War leader killed by the French army in 1957. The film was finally screened in Algeria for the first time on March 4, which marked the 67th anniversary of Ben M'hidi's killing.

### A new generation

Amir Bensaifi, 39, is part of a new generation of Algerian filmmakers who say they must go to great lengths to create their films. "I didn't have any funding, it's self-produced," said Bensaifi of a film he made in 2023, adding that he worked with self-starting "technicians who believed in the project and who are all producers". His 34-year-old colleague, Imene Ayadi, said she had resigned herself to seeking funding from France to "film in Algeria in Arabic with Algerian technicians and actors".

Fouad Trifi, director and founder of Algeria's first-ever casting agency, is among those who continue to believe that Algeria is "a country of cinema". "There is really an energy, a desire," Trifi told AFP. "There is an audience. We see

it in festivals." Yet his enthusiasm comes in the face of multiple challenges in production and distribution.

The country's silver screen is still "inchoate and confined to preview showings and extremely limited distribution", said Derrais, whose film was only screened once in a preview showing. He also blamed "a glaring shortage of screening rooms". Bedjaoui said a solution could be "investing in multiplexes" as well as "building new theatres". Last August, a 990-square-metre multiplex cinema with four screens was opened in a suburb of Algiers within Garden City, a new state-of-the-art shopping centre. The multiplex had a turnover of 90 million Algerian dinars (more than \$660,000) within six months of opening, said its manager, Riad Ait-Aoudia. "There were a lot of people at the opening," Rym Khaldi, the group's communications manager, told AFP. —AFP



Lifestyle



A genocide survivor belonging to the Kakira Imigongo Cooperative displays new pieces of traditional imigongo cow dung art at their small shop in Kirehe. - AFP photos



A worker displays pieces of traditional imigongo cow dung art while waiting for costumers at a shop selling traditional African art and handicraft in Kayonza.



A genocide survivor belonging to the Kakira Imigongo Cooperative paints a piece of traditional imigongo cow dung art in Kirehe.



Genocide survivors belonging to the Kakira Imigongo Cooperative paint pieces of traditional imigongo cow dung art in Kirehe.

# REVIVING A TRADITIONAL ART FORM IN RWANDA AFTER GENOCIDE



Genocide survivors belonging to the Kakira Imigongo Cooperative mix colors while painting pieces of traditional imigongo cow dung art in Kirehe.

A 200-year-old Tutsi art form made with cow dung, Rwanda's imigongo painting tradition has experienced a revival in the Great Lakes nation three decades after the 1994 genocide, becoming a symbol of culture and unity. Known for its raised black and white patterns, imigongo is widely believed to have been invented by a Tutsi prince in the 19th century. Prince Kakira mixed cow dung and ash to create a material which he used to paint three-dimensional patterns on the walls of his palace in eastern Rwanda's Gisaka kingdom.

The tradition was named after "umugongo", the Kinyarwanda word for "spine", owing to its curved lines, and became popular among rural households where women would use dung and natural pigments made with soil, clay and aloe sap to decorate their homes. Basirice Uwamariya, founder of the Kakira Imigongo Cooperative in eastern Kirehe district, told AFP she started making art when she was 15.

But the 1994 genocide targeting the Tutsi minority nearly wiped out the tradition, with almost all 15 members of Uwamariya's cooperative killed in a bloodbath that claimed around 800,000 lives across Rwanda, including moderate Hutus. She lost her husband and

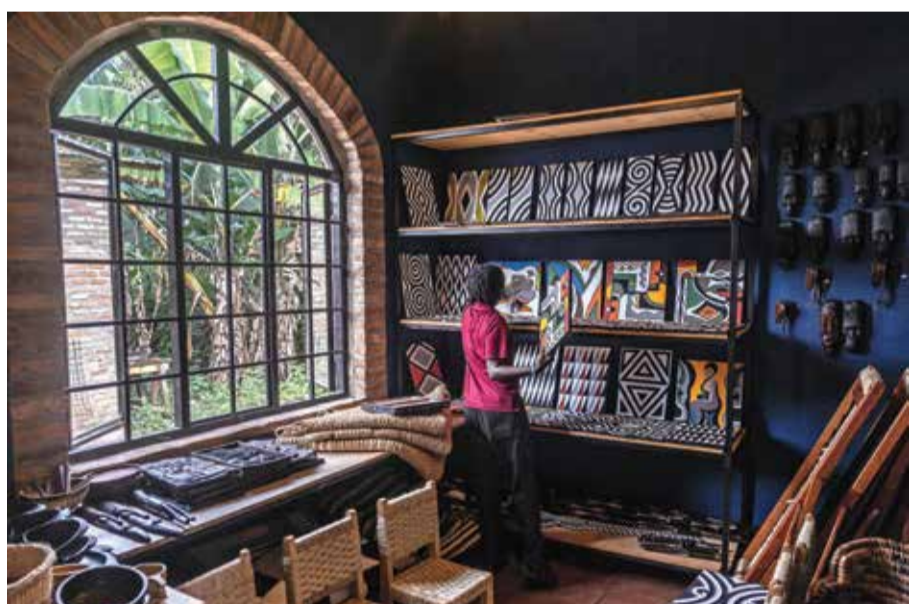


A man rides his bike in front of walls decorated with traditional imigongo cow dung art at the Kakira Imigongo Cooperative in Kirehe.

multiple relatives, leaving her to fend for herself and her two sons. "I lived in darkness, in silence," the 53-year-old said, recalling the loneliness that pushed her to revive the cooperative in 1996 and invite other genocide survivors to join her. Since then, imigongo

has evolved. Traditional patterns exist side by side with modern designs featuring various colors. Natural pigments have been replaced by commercial paints. Imigongo designs have made their way to upmarket studios and fashion boutiques, adorning garments and wooden artefacts alike, with a market that includes foreigners and Rwandans.

According to Theoneste Nizeyimana, manager of Azizi Life Studio in the capital Kigali, the tradition was once largely limited to eastern Rwanda. "But after the genocide destroyed everything... people started thinking about how they can bring back their culture. Today, imigongo is appreciated by all Rwandans, not just Tutsi," he told AFP. "Imigongo is something that brings people together," he said, pointing out that the Kigali boutique and studio holds painting classes for students whose ages range from four to 75 years old. It also makes business sense, he said, with its instantly recognizable patterns helping to market "made in Rwanda" designs around the world. — AFP



A worker displays pieces of traditional imigongo cow dung art while waiting for costumers at a shop selling traditional African art and handicraft in Kayonza.



A genocide survivor belonging to the Kakira Imigongo Cooperative paints a piece of traditional imigongo cow dung art in Kirehe.

## Chinese sci-fi fans divided over Netflix's '3 Body Problem'

Netflix's blockbuster "3 Body Problem", an adaptation of the crown jewel of Chinese sci-fi, has sparked passionate debate and divided opinions among fans in the country despite it not being available to watch there. The streaming service isn't officially operational in China, but that hasn't stopped devotees accessing the show, likely via VPN services or illegal streaming sites. Hashtags relating to the show have over two billion views on the X-like social media platform Weibo.

Among the tens of thousands of commentaries left on a reviewing platform, reactions ranged from disappointment at plot and character changes, to nationalistic outrage, to optimism the show's profile would boost representation of Chinese literature and film. The series is based on the three-part "Remembrance of Earth's Past" by Liu Cixin, a domestic superstar who readers sometimes jokingly call "God", and his trilogy "the bible of Chinese sci-fi".

"The original works have a huge influence. Many fans of the books know all the details of the characters in the books by heart, so they have a hard time accepting changes," Li Dongdong, founder of Chinese sci-fi film community Geek Movie, told AFP. Previous Chinese-produced adaptations have taken this obsessive attention to detail into account — Liu told a conference recently he had suggested making a small visual change to a recurring plot device, only to be told: "You can't change it beyond recognition!" For many, the Netflix adaptation has very much done that.



Chinese writer Liu Cixin gestures during an autographing session at the 2023 World Science Fiction Convention in Chengdu in China's southwest Sichuan province. - AFP

Spearheaded by the team behind megahit series Game of Thrones, it transfers most of the action to the United Kingdom and changes the nationalities and genders of some of the key characters. One Chinese reviewer likened the series to "a plate of General Tso's chicken", a Westernized Chinese dish that can be used as a metaphor for inauthenticity and cultural misunderstanding.

"Big miss?" Disagreement with the showrunners' creative choices is not confined to China. The series was the most watched on Netflix by its second week, but reviews have been mixed, with Rolling Stone calling it "one great big miss". Some of the Chinese criticism though is tinged by politics, against a backdrop of tense US-China relations. Many commenters questioned the motive behind the decision to keep the villain Chinese while the heroes are mostly played by Westerners.

"Other things aside, the casting once again shows that Americans are (political) ideologues," read one of the most popular reviews. Others have taken issue with the show's portrayal of Chinese history. The show starts in the 1960s, with an ugly scene from the Cultural Revolution in which a physicist is killed by a mob for refusing to disown key scientific theories. — AFP

## Swedish firm acquires rock legends KISS' catalogue

A Swedish entertainment group co-founded by ABBA's Bjorn Ulvaeus has acquired the music catalogue, name and likeness of KISS and plans to produce a movie about the legendary rock band, the company said. Formed in the 1970s by Paul Stanley, Gene Simmons, Ace Frehley and Peter Criss, KISS became glam metal icons through their iconic face paint, stage theatrics and hard rock riffs. Some of their breakout hits include songs like "Rock And Roll All Nite" (1975) and "I Was Made For Lovin' You" (1979). Ulvaeus' Pophouse said in a statement that the



Paul Stanley, member of the hard rock band "KISS", poses with a plectrum with the band's image and logo on his tongue as he performs during the Resurrection Fest music festival in Viveiro, northern Spain.

deal would enable them to "further develop and amplify the unique KISS legacy worldwide."

It said it had acquired KISS' "music catalogue, brand name and likeness — including the world-famous face paint designs — as well as trademarks of the iconic American rock band." The finan-

cial terms of the deal were not disclosed. "KISS is one of the most recognized and iconic bands in the history of music," said Johan Lagerlof, head of investment at Pophouse. "They redefined the concept of rock shows and have always taken their artistry to new uncharted territories." Pophouse said plans for a movie based on the band's story, an avatar show, and a KISS themed experience were "already in the works."

The rock group had already collaborated with Pophouse in the creation of digital avatars for stage performances, which Pophouse in December said marked "the withdrawal of the flesh and blood group." Pophouse were also among the developers of the "ABBA Voyage" show in London where digital avatars, or "ABBAtars", performed hits from the iconic Swedish pop group. In February, Pophouse announced it had acquired the rights to US singer Cyndi Lauper's music catalogue. — AFP



Members of the US rock music band Kiss (from left) Gene Simmons aka The Demon, Paul Stanley aka The Starchild, perform during the Hellfest Summer Open Air rock festival in Clisson, western France. - AFP photos



## Sports

# Buttler trumps Kohli in battle of IPL tons as Rajasthan win

## Rajasthan remain unbeaten with four wins, take top spot in 10-team table

JAIPUR: Jos Buttler hit an unbeaten 100 to trump Virat Kohli's first century of the IPL season as Rajasthan Royals beat Royal Challengers Bengaluru by six wickets on Saturday. England's Buttler reached his ton, from 58 balls, with a six in his 100th IPL match when Rajasthan needed one for victory in their chase of 184, with five balls to spare in Jaipur.

Buttler, who struck form after he scored 35 across the previous three matches, put on 148 runs for the second wicket with skipper Sanju Samson, who made 69. "Had a little bit of luck, did not time it well, just got over the rope, delighted with the win," Buttler said of his winning hit over the deep mid-wicket fence.

"However long you've played the game, you still have those anxieties and stresses. The mind is a powerful thing, just keep digging in, keep working hard and you need a little bit of luck along the way." Earlier Kohli reached his eighth IPL ton — the most by any batsman — in 67 balls and finished on an unbeaten 113 to take Bengaluru to 183-3.

But his effort was not enough as inaugural champions Rajasthan remained unbeaten in the season with four wins as they took top spot in the 10-team table, ahead of second-placed Kolkata Knight Riders who have three wins in as many matches.

Buttler, who now has six tons in the IPL along with Chris Gayle, started slowly before he hammered Mayank Agar for three fours and a six in a 20-run sixth over to set up the chase. Samson also took on the opposition attack after he joined Buttler following the loss of Yashasvi Jaiswal to the second ball of the

innings. Both Samson and Buttler brought the crowd alive at their home venue with delightful strokeplay and 16 fours and five sixes between the two.

### 'Experience and maturity'

Rajasthan suffered a bit of a stutter after Samson departed and they lost two more wickets but Buttler stood firm along with Shimron Hetmyer, who made 11 off six. Kohli, 35, hit the first hundred of the 17th edition of the IPL as he reached the three-figure mark with a single off Nandre Burger and took off his helmet and raised his bat to a cheering crowd.

"I don't want to be over-aggressive, want to keep the bowler guessing. They want me to go hard and get me out," Kohli said. "It's just experience and maturity. I play the conditions and have the game ready."

Kohli hit his third fifty-plus score of this season as he put on an opening stand of 125 with skipper Faf du Plessis, who hit 44, to lay the foundations for the total. Kohli reached his half-century off 39 balls with a six, hitting Riyan Parag down the ground.

Du Plessis fell to Yuzvendra Chahal as he gave a catch to long-on. Burger soon bowled Glenn Maxwell for one to check the surge. Kohli stood firm and hit back as he finished with 12 fours, including three in the final over, and four sixes in his 72-ball knock.

The former India captain consolidated his position at the top of this year's batting chart with 316 runs in five matches. Kohli is still awaiting his first IPL title with Bengaluru. — AFP



JAIPUR: Rajasthan Royals' Jos Buttler (L) and Shimron Hetmyer celebrate after their win against Royal Challengers Bengaluru at the Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 cricket match in Sawai Mansingh Stadium of Jaipur on April 6, 2024. — AFP

## HOLDERS La Rochelle reach Champions Cup quarters

PARIS: Holders La Rochelle will face Leinster in a repeat of the last two Champions Cup finals after edging the Stormers 22-21 in Cape Town to reach the last eight as Manie Libbok missed a late conversion for the South African side. The hosts had led 13-0 at the break before an impressive comeback from the French side, who had a 22-16 advantage before Libbok failed with his kick in windy conditions following Suleiman Hartzenberg's try. La Rochelle, bidding for a third successive Champions Cup title, had lost to the same opponents in December's pool stage meeting when a successful late Libbok conversion proved decisive.

"We knew the dangers of them scoring, we backed our defence but if by chance they scored the wind was horrible," La Rochelle lock Ultan Dillane told reporters. "It was a nightmare seeing it (Libbok's successful kick) around Christmas time but fate was on our side today."

La Rochelle will face four-time winners Leinster, who eased past Leicester 36-22, in Dublin at the same venue as last May's final. Scrum-half Jamison Gibson-Park scored a 29-minute hat-trick for the Irish province at Lansdowne Road.

La Rochelle also played Leinster in the 2022 final, when they claimed their first Champions Cup crown under former Ireland fly-half Ronan O'Gara. The Top 14 club were handed a pre-match boost on Saturday with giant Australia lock Will Skelton returning after two months out with injury for one of five repeat fixtures from the group stage in the last 16.

The Stormers had four Rugby World Cup winners

in their matchday squad, including fly-half Libbok. The hosts led 13-0 before the half-hour mark as Libbok slotted eight points and scrum-half Herschel Jantjies crossed for a try.

### 'Patient' Bordeaux-Begles

The Stormers stretched their lead to 16-0 with a third Libbok penalty, but then lost a third back-rower to injury as Hacivah Dayiman followed Deon Fourie and Ben-Jason Dixon off the field. Dayiman's departure sparked La Rochelle's comeback as prop Louis Penverne and No 8 Gregory Alldritt crossed either side of a penalty from fly-half Antoine Hastoy to put La Rochelle 17-16 up with 18 minutes to play.

La Rochelle extended their advantage with a 68th-minute touchdown from Argentina prop Joel Sclavi but Hastoy missed the conversion, setting up a tense finish with the Stormers within a converted try from a quarter-final spot.

Hartzenberg crossed with 35 seconds to play from a delicate Libbok cross-kick, setting the latter up for a match-winning conversion attempt with the clock in the red. Libbok stepped up, with Willemsse holding the ball on the tee due to gusty conditions, but his effort drifted wide as the reigning champions survived.

Elsewhere, Exeter downed English rivals Bath 21-15 and will meet either Toulouse or Racing 92 in the next round, with the French clubs meeting on Sunday. Bordeaux-Begles saw off Saracens 45-12, having thumped the three-time former champions 55-15 in the pool stage, thanks to doubles from France winger Louis Bielle-Biarrey, centre Nicolas Depoortere and fly-half Mateo Garcia. The French club will host Harlequins in the last eight after the English team beat Glasgow 28-24 on Friday. "We had to be patient and trust our systems and if we held the ball, build pressure, we were sure it would give at one point," Bordeaux-Begles prop Ben Tameifuna told TNT Sports. — AFP

## Bhatia leads by four at PGA Texas Open

HOUSTON: Akshay Bhatia will take a four-shot lead into the final round of the PGA Texas Open after overcoming an early wobble and a bout of nerves to card a four-under-par 68 on Saturday. Bhatia, who led by five strokes after Friday's second round, bounced back after two bogeys in his first seven holes to mount a charge on the back nine at TPC San Antonio.

The 22-year-old from California reached the turn at one under for the day after a birdie on the ninth, and then grabbed another birdie on the 14th. He rolled in a 12-foot birdie putt on the 17th to move to three under and then saw his birdie putt on the 18th curl around the cup before dropping in.

Bhatia admitted he had struggled with nerves throughout his round, revealing that he had consulted his sports psychologist on Friday for help in navigating the challenges of the weekend.

"I was never calm today and it was the hardest thing to deal with," Bhatia said. "It's just so hard, you feel so tense and all these things in your stomach, your mind can kind of go one way. I kept to my game plan." Bhatia said his psychologist had given him useful advice after Friday's second round.

"There's a couple of things he told me that really stuck and I just truly stuck to what I was trying to do this week," Bhatia said. "Whether I win tomorrow or not, it's closer to my goal of where I want to be in a couple of months."

Bhatia's four-under round left him on 15 under after 54 holes, four shots clear of Denny McCarthy, who carded a five-under-par 67 to finish the third round on 11 under. Brendon Todd is a shot behind McCarthy on eight under after a two-under-par 70, with Japan's Hideki Matsuyama and American Russell Henley on seven under.

Sweden's Ludvig Aberg meanwhile is a further shot back on six under, nine off the lead, after a five-under-par 67. Aberg's round included a bizarre incident on the 17th, when he drove the green despite the head flying off of his driver. Aberg two-putted for birdie and then played the remainder of the round with a backup driver.

Aberg said a loose screw connecting the head to the shaft had been responsible. "It's on me," he said. "I should have checked. It was bizarre, quite surreal. "But at the end of the day I feel like I put a pretty good swing on it and that's all that matters."

Four players are tied for seventh place on five under, including Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy, who scrambled his way around to make a level-par 72. McIlroy's round began with a double-bogey six on the par-four first, but he clawed those shots back with birdies on the second and sixth holes to reach the turn at level par. However bogeys on the 11th and 16th sent him sliding down the leaderboard before back-to-back birdies on 17 and 18 helped him back to par. — AFP



VRHNIKA: Slovenia's Janja Garnbret climbs during a training session in Verd, some 20 km southwest of Ljubljana, on March 27, 2024. The eight-time world champion is looking to win another gold medal at the Paris 2024 Olympics Games this summer, just like she did in Tokyo 2020 when the sport debuted at the Olympics. — AFP

## Slovenian spiderwoman Garnbret eyes more Olympic climbing gold

VRHNIKA: As a child she climbed doors, closets and trees — then she started to win climbing competition after climbing competition. At the Paris Olympics this summer, eight-times world champion Janja Garnbret is looking to win another gold medal, just like she did in Tokyo in 2021 when the sport made its debut in the Games. "Once you have an Olympic medal, you want another one," the 25-year-old Slovenian spiderwoman told AFP in an interview between training sessions in Japan and China. While in Slovenia, Garnbret spends most of her time in a tucked-away climbing gym near Vrhnika, some 20 kilometres (12 miles) south of Ljubljana.

Despite her success — an illustrated children's book about her life should be out later this year — Garnbret keeps her feet firmly on the ground. She believes she is blessed to be able to do what she has liked most since she was seven. "When I'm competing, I feel like nothing else matters," she said. "I don't hear the crowd... It's just me in my own world, my own bubble... My mind is clear. "I don't have any thoughts. I climb by intuition."

### 'Strong and light'

Garnbret's parents discovered her talent during one of their many attempts to keep their "hyper-active" daughter busy. During one excursion, they came upon a five- or six-metre-high promotion climbing wall, which made Janja stop and "stare at it, tempted". Once secured to ropes, "she just climbed to the top", her father, Vili Garnbret, proudly remembers. She then joined a local climbing club near their home and eventually stopped her other hobby of dance classes to focus on climbing.

"I personally wasn't so excited about her decision, but I accepted it," her mother, Darja Garnbret, recalls, adding they fully supported their daughter even though they initially "did not know about this sport".

Garnbret herself believes her first climbing steps happened much earlier, when she was "climbing doors, closets and trees as a little girl". "One of the first feelings I remember when climbing was how strong and light at the same time I felt on the wall... And this is still the feeling I'm looking forward (to) the most every time I go climbing," she said. She adds in climbing she "found that spark, that fire in me".

One of her first coaches, Rok Malek, said Garnbret only took three or four months to outperform colleagues who had been training for two years or more. "Her talent was exceptional. She moved intuitively," he told AFP. Her current coach Roman Krajnik also remembers being impressed when he first saw her at a national competition. "She's definitely made for this sport," Krajnik said, lauding her tough training regimen — with just one day off after three days of training — while deeming her already "ready" for the Paris Olympics. — AFP



CAPE TOWN: La Rochelle's number 8 Gregory Alldritt (R) 00 runs with the ball during their Champions Cup Round of 16 rugby match against the Stormers at Cape Town Stadium on 06 April, 2024, in Cape Town. — AFP

## McIlroy rings changes in quest for Masters win

AUGUSTA: Rory McIlroy is changing things up when it comes to the Masters, hoping some alterations in preparation can help produce the green jacket that has eluded him. The 34-year-old from Northern Ireland will make his 10th attempt to complete a career grand slam at next week's 88th Masters, needing a victory at Augusta National to claim at least one win at every major.

Four-time major winner McIlroy will join Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods, Ben Hogan, Gary Player and Gene Sarazen in achieving the feat if he can add a Masters victory to his collection and snap a major win drought dating to 2014.

"I feel like I've worked hard over the last couple of weeks and I've made some pretty big strides, especially

with some of the things I was struggling with," McIlroy said. World number two McIlroy has tweaked his plans for Masters week, setting up nine-hole practice rounds for late Tuesday and Wednesday, skipping the Par-3 Contest, to better rest and focus on the challenge presented by Augusta National.

McIlroy has learned his greatest weapon over the formidable layout might be his mind, not his iron skills or long hitting. "Discipline, not being tempted to do too much, sticking to your game plan," McIlroy said. "It's the biggest test of discipline and the biggest test of patience of the year for me. "If someone says I want you to go out and shoot 67 at Augusta, it's very easy to shoot 75 or 76 because you start to chase pins, start to miss it in the wrong spots, start to not be patient and play the disciplined golf you need to."

McIlroy went to Augusta National for a practice session before playing the week before the major at the Texas Open, learning about a second tee that was moved back and some renovated greens on early holes.

He also took time to visit swing coach Butch Harmon, spending time with the former coach of 15-time

major winner Woods for some different perspective on his game. "I met Butch when I was 14, so we've always had a good relationship. If there's one guy that I want to go and get a second opinion from, it's him," McIlroy said. "I just thought to myself I'm obviously missing something here."

"The one thing with Butch is you go spend time with him and you're always going to feel better about yourself at the end of it whether you're hitting it better or not. He's sort of half-golf coach, half-psychologist in a way. He said a couple of things to me that resonated."

"Nothing was resonating with me. He gave me a tiny little something that I went with and it has felt a little better." McIlroy also got a nice reminder from his daughter Poppy as he went to see Harmon — he didn't have to get a lesson, he knew how to play golf.

"As I was walking out the door on my way to the airport to go see Butch in Vegas, that were Poppy's words of wisdom," McIlroy said. "It sort of hit home with me, like yeah, you're probably right." Getting back to simple things has helped him pull together thoughts about his swing without overthinking. — AFP



Sports

# Arsenal return to Premier League summit as Manchester City cruise

## Gunners boss hails his team's maturity and cleverness

LONDON: Arsenal leapfrogged Liverpool at the top of the Premier League with a 3-0 win at Brighton on Saturday after Kevin De Bruyne scored twice in Manchester City's victory at Crystal Palace. Goals from Bukayo Saka, Kai Havertz and Leandro Trossard lifted the Gunners to 71 points—one clear of Jurgen Klopp's men, who are tied on 70 points with defending champions City.

Liverpool face a trip to mercurial Manchester United at Old Trafford on Sunday in the next chapter of a thrilling three-way title race. Mikel Arteta's Arsenal have now won 10 of their past 11 league games and have added steel to style after faltering badly in the home straight last season.

The Gunners boss hailed his team's maturity and cleverness against a side who had not lost at home since August. "In attack and defence we had big performances individually," he told the BBC. "We missed some big chances but the team looked really connected and had purpose. The last pass and shot to finish the situation could have been better, but it doesn't matter as we kept going." Arsenal, who have not been crowned league champions since 2004, dominated the first half at the Amex Stadium but needed a penalty to take the lead. The breakthrough came when Gabriel Jesus was brought down by Tariq Lamptey and the returning Saka sent Bart Verbruggen the wrong way for his 14th Premier League goal of the season in the 33rd minute. Arsenal doubled their lead shortly after the hour mark when Jorginho set up Havertz at the near post for a simple tap-in and Trossard made it three with a deft chipped finish.

### De Bruyne reaches 100 goals

In the early kick-off, De Bruyne netted twice and top scorer Erling Haaland hit his 19th league goal of the



LONDON: Manchester City's Norwegian striker #09 Erling Haaland (C) fights for the ball with Crystal Palace's Danish defender #16 Joachim Andersen (R) during the English Premier League football match between Crystal Palace and Manchester City at Selhurst Park in south London. – AFP

season in City's 4-2 win at Selhurst Par. Jean-Philippe Mateta gave the home side a shock early lead but De Bruyne levelled in the 13th minute with a curler into the top corner to quell any nerves from the visitors.

Palace carried an attacking threat but Rico Lewis put City ahead just after half-time and De Bruyne

and Haaland combined for the third. Midfielder De Bruyne added his second with a stinging shot in the 70th minute—his 100th goal for the club—to make the game safe, before substitute Odsonne Edouard scored a consolation.

City boss Pep Guardiola hailed the Belgium inter-

national, who missed five months of the season with a hamstring injury he sustained in the opening match at Burnley. "Sometimes it's Phil (Foden), Erling or Julian (Alvarez), today it was Kevin," he said.

"Without him we would not be able to win this. You talk about managers but players like Kevin make this game easy." Everton went into their match against second-from-bottom Burnley desperately searching for a spark after a run of 13 Premier League matches without a win.

They struggled to impose themselves but benefited from a huge slice of fortune when goalkeeper Arijanet Muric's clearance deflected in off Dominic Calvert-Lewin in first-half stoppage time. Everton, who last played outside the English top-flight in the 1953/54 season, are now four points above the relegation zone.

But the club need everything they can get as they wait nervously to find out if they will be handed a second points deduction this season for breaking Premier League financial rules. Fourth-placed Villa, who drew 3-3 against Brentford, will rue a second-half collapse that could prove costly in the race to qualify for next season's Champions League.

Unai Emery's men had led 2-0 before three goals in nine minutes from Mathias Jorgensen, Bryan Mbeumo and Yoane Wissa turned the match on its head. But Ollie Watkins levelled in the 80th minute, leaving Villa just three points above Tottenham, who have two games in hand.

Carlton Morris scored a 90th-minute goal in Luton's 2-1 win against Bournemouth—a result that leaves them in the relegation zone but now level on points with 17th-placed Nottingham Forest. Newcastle edged past Fulham 1-0 courtesy of a late goal from Bruno Guimaraes while West Ham came from behind to beat Wolves 2-1. – AFP



ATLANTA: USA's Lindsey Horan (R) kicks a shot on goal as Japan's Moeka Minami tries to block it during the SheBelieves Cup semifinal football match between USA and Japan at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, Georgia, April 6, 2024. – AFP

## Horan penalty gives USA comeback win

MIAMI: Lindsey Horan converted a second-half penalty to give the United States a 2-1 win over Japan on Saturday in the SheBelieves Cup. Japan had taken the lead after just 30 seconds but Jaedyn Shaw levelled in the 21st minute before Horan's spot kick in the 77th minute. The match, at Atlanta's Mercedes Benz Stadium drew a crowd of 50,644, the largest crowd ever for a USA women's team friendly and the biggest crowd for any of the team's games on home soil since the 1999 World Cup final. The Americans will now face regional rivals Canada in Tuesday's final. The Canadians defeated Brazil 4-2 on penalties to win Saturday's second semi-final after the score finished 1-1 after 90 minutes. USA interim head coach Twila Kilgore left Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Korbin Albert out of the starting line-up after a row over social media posts from the player.

The 20-year-old Albert apologised after sharing content, including a religious video about transgender and LGBTQ issues, which was heavily criticised by former player Megan Rapinoe. The retired former captain of the team, known for her activism, suggested that the content was contributing to 'hate' against the LGBTQ community. Albert came on as part of a triple change in the 78th minute with the Americans already in the lead. The huge crowd were quickly silenced when Japan

scored on their first attack. Momoko Tanikawa fed Kiko Seike down the right and her low shot flew in off the inside of the post. Striker Mallory Swanson, returning to the side after a year out with injury which cost her a place in the World Cup, went close with a left-foot shot which was cleared off the line by Japan defender Miyabi Moriya. But the Americans, who had been on top, got on level terms when Sam Coffey won the ball in midfield, burst forward and then slipped a pass inside to Shaw who fired home with a low drive into the corner. The goal was Shaw's fifth in her last five games for the national team.

Swanson went close again when Horan surged from midfield and threaded a pass through to the striker but Japan keeper Ayaka Yamashita was off her line quickly to smother the ball. After the break, Trinity Rodman forced Yamashita into action again with a fierce drive that the keeper did well to parry out. The Americans pushed hard for a winner with Swanson wasting a good opportunity, screwing a shot wide after good work from Sophia Smith to set her up.

It was Smith who won the penalty, dribbling into the box before she was brought down by Hina Sugita and Horan buried the spot kick into the bottom corner. Kilgore, who will hand over the reins of the team to English coach Emma Hayes in June, praised the response to the early Japan goal. "I just can't speak any more highly of this group. They continue to deal with anything which is in front of them," she said. "Japan is a world class team and to do what they did today, especially after almost starting the game a goal down essentially, it is a mark of who they are and what they are willing to do to get the job done," added Kilgore. —AFP

## Leverkusen on cusp of first Bundesliga title after Bayern loss

BERLIN: Bayer Leverkusen are just three points from a first Bundesliga title after a 1-0 win at Union Berlin on Saturday, with Bayern Munich letting a two-goal lead slip in a 3-2 loss at Heidenheim. Bayern were cruising at half-time thanks to strikes from Harry Kane and Serge Gnabry but conceded three times in the second half, losing their second match in a row. Florian Wirtz converted a penalty deep into first-half stoppage time as Leverkusen were made to work hard in the German capital against 10-man Union, extending their unbeaten run this season to 41 games. Xabi Alonso's side need just three points from their remaining six matches to clinch the club's first league title.

Bayern, on a streak of 11 straight Bundesliga titles, could relinquish their crown next week in between the first and second legs of their Champions League quarter-final against Arsenal. Union did their best to hold on despite Leverkusen's relentless pressure but gave way just before half-time, Germany defender Robin Gosens picking up a second yellow for a desperation tackle on Nathan Tella near the penalty box.

After some chaotic scenes from the ensuing free-kick the ball connected with the arm of Union captain Christopher Trimmel, giving Leverkusen a penalty after a long VAR review. Wirtz calmly dispatched the penalty, his third goal in his past two games.

Late in the second half word filtered through to the visiting fans that Bayern were trailing at Heidenheim, sending them into raptures. "Of course the situation is super but we don't want to celebrate yet," said Alon-

so. "We can maybe celebrate something next Sunday. Before that there's a Europa League game (at home against West Ham). "Nothing is settled yet and we need to wait a little."

### Bayern 'drastically punished'

Bayern looked in fine form early on, despite missing several injured first teamers including captain Manuel Neuer, Leroy Sane and Kingsley Coman, with coach Thomas Tuchel taking a cautious approach with Tuesday's Champions League trip to Arsenal in mind.

The ever-reliable Kane, yet to miss a league match this campaign, opened the scoring, scrambling in a Gnabry assist after 38 minutes. Gnabry seemingly had Bayern on track for a simple victory when he scored just before the break, but the hosts turned the match around early in the second half.

Kevin Sessa and Tim Kleindienst both scored inside the space of 90 seconds to level the scores and stun the visitors. Kleindienst struck again with 11 minutes remaining to snatch victory in their first home match against Bayern, a goal celebrated 460 kilometres away in Leverkusen.

"We were drastically punished for not keeping our energy," Tuchel said. "The manner in which we lost today was too easy. Congratulations to Heidenheim. They turned the game on its head."

In Saturday's late game, Stuttgart won 1-0 at Borussia Dortmund to draw level with second-placed Bayern on 60 points. Serhou Guirassy scored the only goal of the game, blasting in on the counter for his 24th league goal of the season.

Dortmund defender Nico Schlotterbeck had a golden chance to equalise late but somehow blazed over with the goal beckoning. Schlotterbeck told Sky the setback would not hurt Dortmund ahead of Wednesday's Champions League quarter-final first leg against Atletico Madrid. —AFP



BERLIN: Bayer Leverkusen's Spanish forward #09 Borja Iglesias (3R) and Union Berlin's German defender #02 Kevin Vogt (3L) vie for the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match between 1 FC Union Berlin and Bayer 04 Leverkusen in Berlin. – AFP

# Classifieds

## Clinics & Hospitals

### Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804

Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

### Hospitals

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

## Change of Name

I, **Muzaffar**, holder of Passport No. V3754266 do hereby change my name to Mufaddal (as given name) Karachiwala (as surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name Mufaddal Karachiwala and I also undertake to carry out this name changes in all my documents. **(#5192) 07/04/2024**

Emergency call 112



## Athletic beat Mallorca on penalties to win Copa del Rey

Berenguer strokes home the winning penalty to spark wild celebrations



SEVILLE: Athletic Bilbao's players celebrate victory with the Copa del Rey trophy at the end of the Spanish Copa del Rey (King's Cup) final football match between Athletic Club Bilbao and RCD Mallorca at La Cartuja stadium in Seville on April 6, 2024. — AFP

SEVILLE: Athletic Bilbao ended a 40-year wait to win the Copa del Rey by beating Real Mallorca 4-2 on penalties on Saturday following a 1-1 draw after extra time. The Basque side lifted the trophy for the 24th time, behind only 31-time winners Barcelona, as they edged underdogs Mallorca at La Cartuja stadium in Seville.

Dani Rodriguez sent Mallorca ahead in the first half but Oihan Sancet levelled soon after the break and the sides could not be separated until penalties. Athletic goalkeeper Julen Agirrezabala saved Manu Morlanes' penalty and Mallorca's Nemanja Radonjic lashed another spot kick over the bar, with Athletic converting all four of theirs to triumph.

Alex Berenguer stroked home the winning penalty to spark wild celebrations among the hordes of travelling Basque support. Ernesto Valverde's Athletic, defeated in their six previous appearances in the final, brought an era of almosts to a close with a

hard-fought win. Having beaten Barcelona and Atletico Madrid en route to the final, Los Leones were able to secure the club's first major trophy since a domestic league and cup double in 1984. "This is incredible, we've made history," man-of-the-match Nico Williams told TVE.

"The team worked hard, the fans are always with us and they deserve it, I've dreamed of this for a long time." Athletic, whose players celebrated on a boat known as the 'Gabarra' after they last won it, will now get the chance to launch the barge once again next week.

"I'm so excited (for that). I am so happy, this is the club of my life," added the Spanish winger, who taunted Mallorca with his dribbling all night. Mallorca, winners in 2003, had started the stronger and target man Vedat Muriqi's long-range effort was tipped over uncertainly by Agirrezabala.

In the final for the fourth time, the islanders took

the lead after 21 minutes through Rodriguez's perfectly placed finish. After Giovanni Gonzalez's shot was blocked and Jose Copete's effort was saved, Rodriguez carefully placed the ball into the top corner, past Athletic's Dani Vivian on the line.

### Nico's night

When Los Leones did create anything it came from the outstanding Nico Williams, and he slotted home after 39 minutes but was offside. Yuri Berchiche blocked well to deny Copete as Mallorca had a sight of goal for their second, before Nico Williams fired into the side netting after breaking into the area.

Agirrezabala thwarted Canada international Cyle Larin early in the second half before Athletic found the equaliser. Again Nico Williams was heavily involved, sliding a pass into the box for Sancet to gleefully stroke beyond Mallorca goalkeeper Dominik Greif to delight Athletic's raucous travelling support.

A brilliant dribble by Nico Williams almost helped the Basques take the lead but his cross flashed through his brother Inaki Williams' legs, with the Ghana international unable to react in time to finish. Greif beat away a Vivian piledriver late on and Gorka Guruzeta headed narrowly wide, but the teams could not be split before extra time.

Nico Williams had a shot from close range brilliantly deflected wide by the lunging Pablo Maffeo after 111 minutes. At the other end Agirrezabala was alert to shovel away Muriqi's header, with the Kosovo striker sporting a large bandage after a painful clash of heads with Unai Gomez. What followed in the shoot-out was more painful still for Muriqi, who converted his penalty but his team-mates could not follow suit. "I'm emotional because I'm proud of my team-mates and of the fans who came here," Rodriguez told TVE. "It was a dream to lift this cup and we tried until the end." — AFP

## Dominant Verstappen wins Japanese GP in Red Bull one-two

SUZUKA: Max Verstappen said Red Bull must capitalise on their early season dominance after romping to victory in Sunday's Japanese Grand Prix ahead of teammate Sergio Perez. The triple world champion claimed his third win in the four races so far this year and on this evidence the Dutchman and Red Bull will take some stopping once again.

Verstappen failed to finish in Australia a fortnight ago because of a brake issue but starting from pole he controlled the race at Suzuka from start to finish. "I know there will be tracks coming up that might not be so favourable for us," said Verstappen, who took the chequered flag 12.5sec ahead of the Mexican Perez.

"But then of course when we do get to the tracks where we can be quick, we have to really take advantage of it and score maximum points as a team." Ferrari's Carlos Sainz, who triumphed in Melbourne, was third in dry, sunny conditions at Suzuka.

Verstappen has taken an early stranglehold on the world championship on 77 points, with Perez on 64 and Sainz's Ferrari teammate Charles Leclerc on 59. Mercedes boss Toto Wolff told reporters after the race that "no one is going to catch Max this year".

"Basically the rest of the season now is the best of the rest, that's the fact," said Wolff. Verstappen said this week that Suzuka was one of his favourite circuits and he has now won the Japanese Grand Prix three times in a row. "Of course Melbourne felt like a bit of a hiccup," he said.

"But what we did today was what we want to do, and that's what we aim to do every single weekend." Perez was also coming off a weekend to forget after



SUZUKA: Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen celebrates on the podium after the end of the Formula One Japanese Grand Prix race at the Suzuka circuit in Suzuka, Mie prefecture on April 7, 2024. — AFP

finishing fifth in Australia. He did not complete the race last year at Suzuka but was comfortable in holding off Sainz for second.

"I think we have a good momentum," said Perez. "Last year here was probably my worst weekend, so I think if we are strong here, I think we can be strong anywhere else. "It's been a good weekend."

Leclerc, who started from eighth on the grid, came home in fourth. McLaren's Lando Norris, second in last year's race, was fifth ahead of Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso. Mercedes' George Russell edged out McLaren's Oscar Piastri for seventh, while Lewis Hamilton was ninth in the other Mercedes.

Japan's Yuki Tsunoda was 10th for RB, scoring points at his home grand prix for the first time. Verstappen was starting from pole for the fourth time in as many grands prix, but the race was almost immediately red-flagged after RB's Daniel Ricciardo and Williams' Alex Albon collided in a frenetic start. — AFP

## Embiid scores 30 as Sixers extend winning streak

LOS ANGELES: Joel Embiid scored 30 points to lead the resurgent Philadelphia 76ers to a fourth straight victory with a 116-96 defeat of the Memphis Grizzlies on Saturday. Reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Embiid returned from a two-month injury lay-off on Tuesday to help the Sixers upset the Oklahoma City Thunder.

The 30-year-old forward followed that up with a 29-point performance in Thursday's win at Miami, and then led Saturday's rout of Memphis on the road. Against Memphis, the Sixers were into their stride quickly, leading from early in the first quarter to complete a wire-to-wire victory. Embiid, who was rested for most of the fourth quarter with victory assured, finished with 30 points, 12 rebounds and two blocks. The win saw Philadelphia improve to 43-35 to remain eighth in the Eastern Conference.

Prior to Embiid's injury in January, the Sixers were safely embedded in the upper reaches of the standings, firmly on course for an automatic playoff spot. However, in Embiid's absence, the Sixers slid down the standings and are now in line to fight through the play-in tournament following the conclusion of regular season play on April 14.

### Lakers, Nuggets win

In other games on Saturday, the Los Angeles Lakers bagged a fourth straight win with an impressive 116-97 blowout against the Cleveland Cavaliers, who sit in third place in the East. Point guard D'Angelo Russell led the Lakers scorers with 28 points while

LeBron James posted 24 and Anthony Davis had 22 points with 13 rebounds.

The Lakers performance was yet further evidence that head coach Darvin Ham's team are rounding into form at the right time of the season. The Lakers have now won nine of their last 10 games, and are still in with a chance of forcing their way into the automatic playoff spots.

As things stand, the Lakers are eighth in the West with a 45-33 record, just behind seventh-placed New Orleans (45-32) and Phoenix, who occupy the sixth playoff spot with a 46-31 record. Lakers coach Ham said his team were preoccupied with the quality of their performance rather than dwelling on where they may fit into the postseason picture.

"We've been saying it to ourselves every day—whether it's a game day or a non-game day, just take care of ourselves, take care of us," Ham said. "Everything else will take care of itself and we'll fall in the spot where we are supposed to fall."

"But the key is for us to be playing at a high level on both sides of the ball. You saw that on the defensive end tonight; when we take care of the ball, we're a pretty tough team to beat." Meanwhile, the Denver Nuggets returned to the top of the Western Conference with a 142-110 rout of the Atlanta Hawks.

Nikola Jokic bagged his 25th triple double of the season with 19 points, 14 rebounds and 11 assists. Denver are locked in a nip-and-tuck battle at the top of the West for the conference's No.1 seeding. The Nuggets lead the standings at 54-24, just half a game ahead of Minnesota, who are second with 53-24. Oklahoma City are third with a 52-25 record.

Elsewhere Saturday, the Brooklyn Nets overturned a 19-point second quarter deficit to deny Detroit of what would have been only their 14th win of the season. Brooklyn completed a 113-103 win thanks to a fourth quarter blitz that saw them outscore the Pistons, 38-20. — AFP