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Iran Guards seize vessel linked to Zionists in Gulf

Tensions soar in the region as Mideast crisis escalates



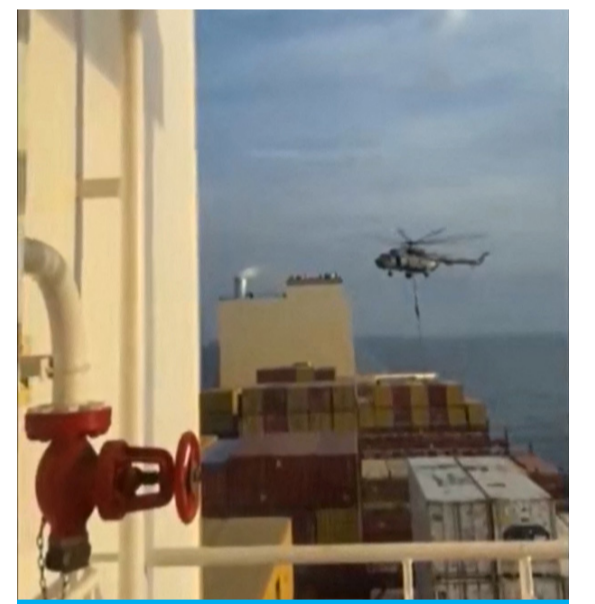
KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister, Defense Minister, and Acting Interior Minister Sheikh Fahad Yusef Saud Al-Sabah visited a number of Kuwait Air Force and army bases. He commended the Kuwait Air Force's overhaul and modernization process. — KUNA (See Page 3)

GAZA: Zionists warned on Saturday that Iran would suffer the "consequences for choosing to escalate the situation any further" as fears grew of wider conflict more than six months into Zionist war against Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip. The strong warning came after Iran seized a container ship linked to Zionists in the Gulf, and the United States announced it was sending more troops to the troubled region.

The White House has repeatedly warned Tehran against carrying out a potentially imminent attack on Zionist entity in response to an air strike on an Iranian diplomatic building in Damascus earlier this month. Tehran has vowed to avenge the April 1 strike - which killed 16 people, including two Iranian generals, and has been widely blamed on Zionist - but has not specified how. Iran's Revolutionary Guards seized a container ship "related" to Zionists in the Strait of Hormuz on Saturday, which was now heading towards Iranian waters, state media reported.

The ship's operator, the Italian-Swiss group MSC, said it was working with the relevant authorities to ensure the wellbeing of the 25 crew onboard. Not long after the seizure was announced, Zionist military spokesman Daniel Hagari said that "Iran will bear the consequences for choosing to escalate the situation any further".

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This image grab taken from a UGC video posted shows Iran's Revolutionary Guards rappelling down onto a container ship named, MSC Aries, near the Strait of Hormuz. — AFP

NEWS IN BRIEF

Sri Lanka frees prisoners

COLOMBO: Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe granted amnesty to nearly 800 convicts to mark the traditional Sinhala and Tamil New Year on Saturday, his office said. The amnesty of 779 inmates followed the release of 1,000 prisoners to mark Christmas. A prisons official told AFP that a recent spate of amnesties had eased congestion in the island country's still-overcrowded jails. As of Friday, there were just under 30,000 inmates in Sri Lankan prisons, which were designed to hold around 11,000 people. Sri Lanka has declared a long holiday for the New Year and banned the sale of alcohol until Tuesday. This year's celebrations were marred by conflicting timetables announced by an official panel of astrologers assigned to decide on a schedule for traditional ceremonies. — AFP

India arrests 2 suspects

KOLKATA: Police in India arrested two men accused of a popular cafe in the southern tech hub Bengaluru last month, wounding nine people. The National Investigation Agency said in a statement it had located the two suspects outside the eastern city of Kolkata, where they were hiding under false identities. The men are accused of orchestrating the March attack on the Rameshwaram Cafe during its busy lunch hour using a small homemade bomb. Bengaluru, known as "India's Silicon Valley", is home to many of the country's top information technology companies and the capital of Karnataka state. Karnataka is ruled by the opposition Congress party, which is often accused of being soft on extremism by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. — AFP

Knife-wielding attacker kills 6 in Sydney

SYDNEY: Six people were killed and several others injured - including a nine-month-old baby - when a knife-wielding attacker rampaged through a busy Sydney shopping centre on Saturday. Australian police said multiple people were stabbed by the unidentified assailant, who was tracked down and shot dead by a policewoman who is being hailed as a national hero. The incident occurred at the sprawling Westfield Bondi Junction mall complex, which was packed with thousands of Saturday afternoon shoppers.

New South Wales police commissioner Karen Webb said five women and one man had died. A baby was undergoing emergency surgery. Police said the attacker is believed to be a 40-year-old

man who was known to law enforcement, but he has not yet been formally identified. Webb played down suggestions that the attack could have been an act of terrorism and said it is believed the attacker acted alone. "If it is in fact the person we believe it is, then... it's not a terrorism incident," she said.

A New South Wales Ambulance spokesperson told AFP that eight patients were taken to various hospitals across Sydney, including the baby who was taken to the city's Children's Hospital. "They all have traumatic injuries," the official said. Security camera footage showed a man wearing an Australian rugby league jersey running around the shopping centre with a large knife.

Injured people lay lifeless on the floor, or surrounded by pools of blood. Eyewitnesses described a scene of panic, with shoppers scrambling to safety and police trying to secure the area. Many people took shelter in shops, trying to protect themselves, their families and frightened strangers.

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SYDNEY: Paramedics push stretchers into the Westfield Bondi Junction shopping mall to retrieve the injured after a stabbing incident in Sydney on April 13, 2024. — AFP

US troops head to the region; Airlines avoid Iran airspace

GAZA: Troop reinforcements from Zionist ally the United States headed to the region on Saturday, with fears of wider war growing more than six months into Zionist battle against Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip. After pulling forces from the southern Gaza city of Khan Yunis one week ago, Zionist military said Saturday it was continuing to operate against militants in central Gaza. In central Gaza's main city of Deir Al-Balah, fire burned in the rubble of a destroyed mosque.

Zionist military "demanded that the whole area be evacuated" before it was "wiped out in minutes", said Abdullah Baraka, a witness. The military said it had struck more than 30 militant targets across the Palestinian territory over the previous day. Airlines said they are avoiding Iranian airspace, nearly two weeks after a strike, which Iran blamed on its

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A handout picture provided by the US Air Force (USAF) shows A-10 Thunderbolt IIs from the 75th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron and F-16 Fighting Falcons from the 555th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron flying in formation during air refueling operations above the Strait of Hormuz. — AFP



Local

PM, senior officials pray at Grand Mosque



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, the Head of the Supreme Judicial Council, the Head of the Court of Cassation, Counselor Dr Adel Majid Bouresli and other top officials performed Eid Al-Fitr prayers at the Grand Mosque. — KUNA photos

Interior frees policemen

KUWAIT: The Interior Undersecretary General Sheikh Salem Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah has ordered the release of policemen held behind bars for disciplinary cases. The duration they had spent behind bars was considered a sufficient penalty, and their release would be effective as of the end of the last day of Ramadan, the undersecretary ordered, noting that the gesture was made on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr.

The public relations and information directorate general of the Ministry of Interior said in a press release that the decision was made upon instructions by the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Acting Minister of Interior, Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defense declared that, upon instructions by Minister Sheikh Fahad Yousef, the army Chief of Staff, Air Marshal Bandar Al-Mazyan, ordered the release of military personnel held for disciplinary cases. In a statement, it was said that the gracious gesture by the minister came out of his faith in participating with the military personnel and their families on this happy Eid occasion.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received congratulatory cables on Eid Al-Fitr from His Highness KNG Chief, Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah, and His Highness Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah. His Highness the Amir also received cables from His Highness Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah, His Highness Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah, and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah. They expressed their best wishes and prayers on the blessed occasion, wishing many returns. In turn, His Highness the Amir thanked them for their kind words and sentiments. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Cancer Aware Nation representatives and volunteers visit kids at the NBK Children Hospital (Sabah Health Zone).



CAN, volunteers visit NBK Children Hospital

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Chairman of the board of the Cancer Aware Nation (CAN) campaign, Dr. Khalid Ahmad Al-Saleh, described volunteers' visit at the NBK Children Hospital (Sabah Health Zone) as part of the efforts to instill the value of good deeds in our children and the feeling of being an example for charity work and helping others.

Dr. Al-Saleh said CAN, since its establishment 18 years ago, has several goals within its renewable strategy, the most important of which is to promote societal awareness about cancer diseases and healthy lifestyles, as well as promote the culture of giving, particularly in children. "We dedicate a large number of our activities to teaching children good behavior, and we will continue to make them think in several ways to extend their support with or without our participation through their



personal motivation, and we feel that we have succeeded in creating charitable hearts."

He urged people to focus on the most important signs that could possibly indicate early signs of cancer, including weight loss, fever, headache attacks, pain or swelling in bones or joints, and sometimes the appearance of bruises, bleeding, or skin rashes. Dr. Al-Saleh appreciated the role of partners and thanked the NBK hospital's director, Dr. Ali Al-Mulla, for facilitating the visit, as well as volunteers and the media. Dr. Al-Saleh called upon establishments and individuals to participate in CAN's initiatives.



Impact of teachers on students' lives

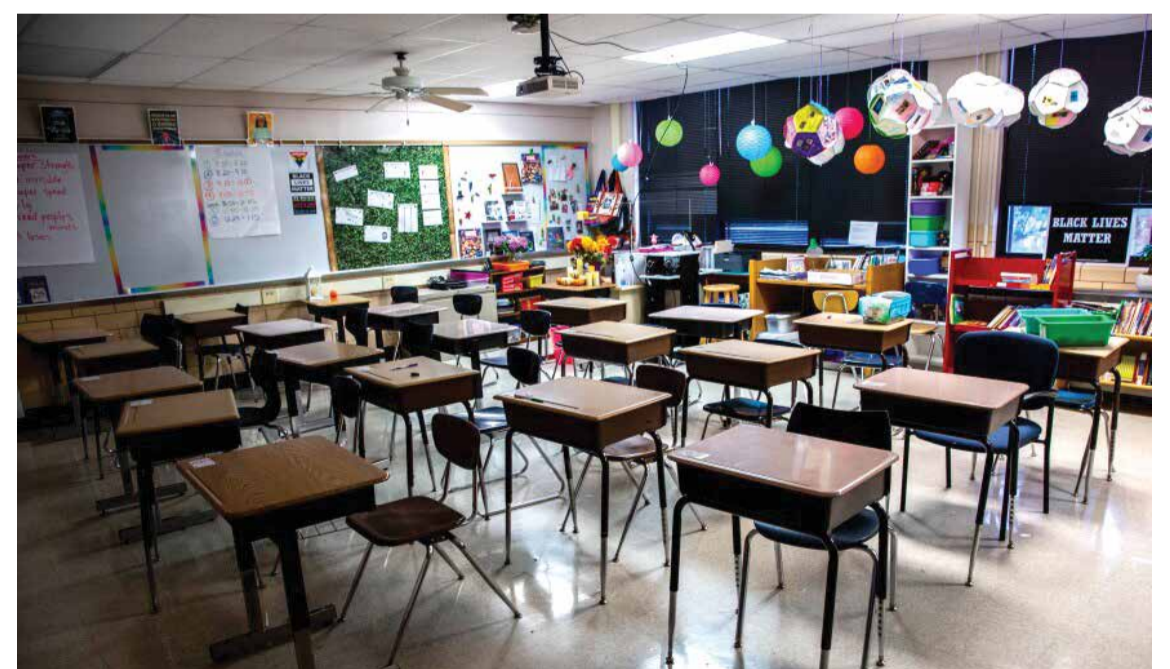
By Zainab Al-Mashoor

KUWAIT: Beyond imparting knowledge, teachers possess remarkable abilities to shape, mold, or transform their students' journeys, whether through encouragement or discouragement, recognition or neglect. They may be the heroes or the villains of their story. Individuals share with Kuwait Times their stories on how their teachers played a big role in their present lives.

Sumayya discovered her learning disability; Danah's dream was shattered; Basma became a journalist; Aymen became anti-religious; numbers became Zahra's weakness; Tarek overcame the fear of public speaking; Hussam learned the language; and Salma followed the right path. Sumayya recalls her transformative journey abroad. Despite living alone, her teacher provided unwavering support, akin to that of a caring mother. Recognizing Sumayya's struggles, the teacher identified dyslexia, which was not discovered by anyone — a revelation that empowered Sumayya to embrace her imperfections and strive for improvement. The teacher's encouragement motivated Sumayya to pursue her passion, and now she's a successful interior designer.

Danah's dream was to be a journalist. "My teacher changed my fate; she disliked me with no motives and failed me in her subject while I did really well in it. She discouraged me, telling me that I am bad at writing and that I will never succeed. This made me feel upset," she explained. "Heading to my advisor, I filed a grievance but was still denied the opportunity to step into journalism, which made me choose another career," she added.

On the other hand, Basma became a journalist thanks to her teacher, who discovered her talent for writing. "It was in 5th grade when my teacher was reading a poem that I got inspired to write my own poem. He caught me not being attentive in class and read my writing; instead of punishing me, he looked at me proudly and told me that I needed to continue writing as I had a bright future," Basma told the Ku-



wait Times. Since then, he has always encouraged me to participate in school activities and competitions, which boosted my confidence to share my writings with my friends and family and helped me choose my college major. The kindness and encouragement of Basma's teacher helped her become a journalist today.

55-year-old Aymen became anti-religious because of his teacher. He was in an environment where his teacher used to verbally and physically abuse him for practicing his religion. Witnessing hypocrisy and injustice instead of finding solace and guidance in his faith, he was led to disbelief and anti-religiousness. Ultimately, Aymen's journey reflects the sad truth about how a teacher's actions may cause a huge transformation and build hatred for their beliefs.

Being an excellent student, numbers became the weakness of Zahra. She was asked to solve a math problem in sixth grade. While she answered, the teacher kept confusing her by asking her if she was sure about the answer, which made her change her answer from (+) to (-).

She then asked another student to solve the problem, and all the student did was change it from (-) to (+). The teacher then clapped and said, "Now this is how smart people solve their math questions; always be like him and never make stupid decisions like Zahra." It became a joke, and everyone laughed it over. Zahra could not forget that moment, and everything about math and numbers became a hindrance for her till date.

Tarek has overcome the fear barriers of speaking publicly. His teacher always encouraged him to read out loud in front of the students and helped him overcome his fear and anxiety, which led him to be successful and confident. Hussam's teacher was the main reason for his fluency in the English language. As he was never interested in the subject, the teacher mentored him and understood his weakness. She gave him tips on how to learn it in an easier way, which helped him today. Salma's teacher always advised her to follow the right path and do the right things by sharing stories and situations and how they could be dealt with. Her words were capable of influencing Salma's decisions during her life journey.



Medics attend to a patient.

Cat Lab 'the first of its kind in the Gulf'

KUWAIT: Senior specialist in Cardiology and Arterial Catheterization, Dr. Yahya Al-Ansari, said the Arterial Catheterization Laboratory (Cat Lab) at Sabah Al-Ahmad Heart Center (Amiri Hospital) renders many services for patients, adding that the arterial and blood vessels unit was able to help 250 patients in the outpatient clinics. They also carried out around 90 catheterizations for peripheral arteries to treat resistance to hypertension medications. The Cat Lab is considered the first of its kind in the Gulf.

"We have clinics for patients who suffer from arterial problems. The majority of these people have foot injuries. We receive diabetic patients with wounds because of ischemia and our role is to open up arteries, he said, adding that artery problems result from irregular pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol levels, smoking, a lack of physical activity, and non-compliance with medications. Al-Ansari advised patients to comply with the doctor's instructions and medications, adding that symptoms of ischemic arteries include pain in the foot or leg.



Dr. Yahya Al-Ansari

Defense Minister hails Kuwait Air Force modernization efforts

New aircraft to transform the Air Force's capabilities



Deputy Prime Minister, Defense Minister and Acting Interior Minister Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah poses for a group photo with Air Force officers during his inspection tour. — KUNA photos



Deputy Prime Minister, Defense Minister and Acting Interior Minister Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah meets security personnel.

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister, Defense Minister, and Acting Interior Minister Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah has commended the Kuwait Air Force overhaul and modernization process, especially after the delivery of Eurofighter Typhoons and Caracal Helicopters. The defense minister made this remark during an inspection tour of a number of Kuwait Air Force and army bases. The new aircraft will bring about a significant transformation in the Air Force's capabilities with their state-of-the-art technologies

and features, he affirmed. "It will also help strengthen and raise the level of the armed forces preparedness," he said. During the tour, Sheikh Fahad Yousef conveyed the political leadership's greetings to the army personnel on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr and the leadership's appreciation for the efforts and sacrifices they are making "for defending and protecting the sanctity of our dear homeland." He called on the commanders of military sites to

work relentlessly to bring the capabilities of army personnel to the desired levels of efficiency and effectiveness. The defense minister listened to briefings from commanders of the military sites about the tasks and duties of their units and the degree of preparedness enjoyed by their members, as well as the level of military cooperation and coordination between the Ministry of Defense and other military sectors in the country. In another development, the Deputy Prime Minister,

Minister of Defense, and Acting Minister of Interior Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah visited the operations room (I12), the Khiran Coastal Center, the Um Al-Maradim Island Center, and the Qaruh Island Center. He was accompanied by a number of security leaders. The minister began his tour by visiting the operations room (I12), where he listened to an explanation on how to deal with the incoming reports, the response mechanism, follow-up, and how to distribute them and coordinate with the concerned sectors. — KUNA



Kuwait Interior Minister visits key installations. — KUNA photos



Apply law on all, minister urges

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Acting Minister of Interior, Sheikh Fahad Yousef Saud Al-Sabah, called on Friday to apply law and order to everyone. The General Administration of Security Relations and Media at the Ministry of Interior said in a press statement that Sheikh Fahad Yousef undertook a field tour that included the Operations Room (I12). He

also visited the Al-Khiran Coastal Center, Um Al-Maradim Island Center, and Qaruh Island Center, accompanied by several security leaders, to monitor the progress of security procedures during the blessed Eid Al-Fitr holiday. The minister congratulated the police officers on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr and pledged to persevere for the country, its security, stability, and territorial integrity under the leadership of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA

KPC intensifying integration efforts

KUWAIT: Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC), Sheikh Nawaf Saud Al-Sabah, stressed the seriousness of achieving integration between the corporation and its subsidiaries, mainly the Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) and the Kuwait Integrated Petroleum Industries Company (KIPIC). In a KPC statement sent to KUNA after a visit paid to the two companies, Sheikh Nawaf

affirmed that the corporation would focus on this goal in the coming period. Sheikh Nawaf also visited Mina Al-Ahmad and Mina Abdullah refineries, and Al Zour refinery, affiliated with the KNPC and the KIPIC, respectively. Congratulating workers on Eid Al-Fitr during his visit, Sheikh Nawaf was received by the CEO of KNPC and the acting CEO of KIPIC, Wadha Al-Khateeb, who affirmed that the oil sector's senior officials believe in the significance of integration among its companies. She expressed optimism about the success of the integration efforts, as the companies have carried out several successful joint projects. — KUNA



Kuwait Petroleum Corporation CEO Sheikh Nawaf Saud Al-Sabah visits Kuwait National Petroleum Company. — KUNA

Local

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P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
Website: www.kuwaittimes.comKuwait oil price
down 42 cents

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went down 42 cents to \$90.98 per barrel as opposed to \$91.40 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) on Saturday. The price of Brent crude and the West Texas Intermediate, respectively, went up by 71 and 64 cents, settling at \$90.45 pb and \$85.66 pb, respectively.

Meanwhile, the global oil demand growth forecast for 2024 remains broadly unchanged from last month's assessment of 2.2 mb/d (million barrels per day), according to OPEC's Monthly Oil Market Report. The MOMR for April 2024, released on Thursday, noted that slight adjustments were made to the IQ-24 data, with a slight upward revision in OECD Europe and some non-OECD data, reflecting better-than-expected performance in oil demand data.

"This increase was offset by a downward revision to Africa in IQ-24 and the Middle East in the first three quarters," it reads. Accordingly, the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) is projected to expand by around 0.3 mb/d and the non-OECD by about 2.0 mb/d. In 2025, global oil demand is expected to see robust growth of 1.8 mb/d, year-on-year. The OECD is expected to grow by 0.1 mb/d, y-o-y, while demand in the non-OECD is forecast to increase by 1.7 mb/d.

The world economic growth forecasts for 2024 and 2025 remain unchanged at 2.8 percent and 2.9 percent, respectively, as the report pointed out. In the United States, economic growth for 2024 is revised up slightly to 2.1 percent, as the healthy momentum from 2H-23 is expected to carry into 2024, while the forecast for 2025 remains at 1.7 percent. The economic growth forecast for the Eurozone remains at 0.5 percent for 2024 and 1.2 percent for 2025.

Japan's economic growth forecast is also unchanged at 0.8 percent in 2024 and one percent in 2025. Meanwhile, China's economic growth forecast remains at 4.8 percent in 2024 and 4.6 percent in 2025. India's economic growth forecast is unchanged at 6.6 percent for 2024 and 6.3 percent for 2025. Brazil's economic growth forecast remains at 1.6 percent for 2024 and 1.9 percent for 2025. The ongoing robust performance of Russia's economy leads to upward revisions for both the 2024 and 2025 growth forecasts, now standing at two percent and 1.4 percent, respectively.

Regarding crude oil price movements, the report said the OPEC Reference Basket (ORB) value increased by \$2.99, or 3.7 percent, in March, m-o-m, to average \$84.22/b. Oil futures prices averaged higher, with the ICE Brent front-month contract rising by \$2.95, or 3.6 percent, m-o-m, to \$84.67/b, and the NYMEX WTI front-month contract up by \$3.80, or 5.0 percent, m-o-m, to average \$80.41/b. — KUNA

KRCS and David Nott Foundation organize
specialized course for Gaza-bound doctors

Society's continuous efforts to improve humanitarian work



KRCS and David Nott Foundation host a specialized training course for Gaza-bound doctors. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) Chairman Dr. Hilal Al-Sayer affirmed on Saturday the society's continuous efforts to improve humanitarian work, especially by training and equipping doctors to operate effectively in hostile and hazardous environments. Dr. Al-Sayer spoke during the launch of a specialized training course for over 30 doctors and anesthesiologists, in collaboration with the David Nott Foundation, aiming to prepare them to support the Gaza Strip's collapsed medical sector for five days.

This collaboration signifies a crucial aspect of their dedication to consistent humanitarian efforts, he said, clarifying its goal to equip and train a group of doctors who have volunteered their time to acquire the necessary skills and experience to respond to medical emergencies in conflict zones. This inaugural course in the Middle East shows the collective dedication to maintaining high medical care standards in challenging conditions while also honoring the noble call to serve humanity through knowledge sharing, with the presence of Dr. David Nott, co-founder of the David Nott Foundation, symbolizing this dedication to ethical cooperation in their shared humanitarian mission.

On his side, Dr. Nott emphasized from his experience as a surgeon in disaster-stricken areas the importance of training and sharing information for

handling medical cases during humanitarian crises, stating that this course aims to prepare participants for active involvement in wartime medical cases and various surgical procedures. Dr. Nott witnessed the severe challenges during his time as a medical surgeon in Rafah city, southern Gaza, between January and February of this year, describing the dire humanitarian situation residents faced, including untreated medical cases, severe injuries, malnutrition, weakened immunity, and the influx of new patients needing immediate medical intervention.

The British training team brings extensive experience in field medical humanitarian work in disaster-stricken areas, with the mission to share expertise and experiences worldwide, including documentation of surgical procedures and optimal techniques for treating war injuries, he pointed out. Dr. Nott advised participating doctors that their field experience would be crucial at this stage in their lives, urging them to strive for excellence for



Dr Hilal Al-Sayer



Dr David Nott

Charge d'Affaires
Sunny Ahmad

themselves, their team, and those they care for in that setting.

Meanwhile, Charge d'Affaires Sunny Ahmad commended the ongoing partnership between the UK and Kuwait in delivering medical aid to devastated areas, especially noting Kuwait's devotion to global humanitarian efforts by sending over 45 aid-laden aircraft to Gaza, which has faced a humanitarian crisis due to Zionist attacks since October 7. The David Nott Foundation, a British charity established in 2015, focuses on training doctors and medical teams to operate in areas facing shortages of medical supplies and equipment in regions affected by humanitarian conflicts or natural disasters. — KUNA

KRCS delivers aid to
southern Lebanon

BEIRUT: The Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) delivered on Saturday relief aid to residents of areas in southern Lebanon who had been affected by military confrontations caused by Zionist aggressors since October 2023. Youssef Boutros, Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) aid coordinator, told KUNA the KRCS, which was continuing to deliver aid despite the ongoing military confrontations in the south, revealed that aid consisted of foodstuffs and necessities for around 2,500 families. Boutros added that residents of southern areas depended on farming for their livelihood, indicating that the Zionist military aggression had heavily damaged farmlands. — KUNA

Kuwait's charity
distributes meat
to Palestinians

GAZA: The Kuwait Relief Society distributed meat to war-afflicted families in Gaza after the fasting month of Ramadan. Omar Al-Thuwaini, the society's deputy director general, said in remarks to KUNA on Friday that the society, in coordination with the charities "Wafa" and "Rahma," distributed during the three-day Eid Al-Fitr 52 tons of meat to the poor, displaced families, and those affected by the Zionist aggression on South Gaza.

The relief activity was supported by the Kuwait Al-Awqaf General Secretariat. Meanwhile, "Wafa" director general Muhaisen Al-Atawneh said 10,000 relocated families in the enclave received donated meat during Eid. His peer at "Rahma," Mohammad Qaddous, said Kuwait, since the start of the aggression in early October, has doubled the aid sent to



GAZA: Kuwait Relief Society distributes meat to war-afflicted families in Gaza. — KUNA photos

Gaza via air and land and sent in medical teams to treat the injured. Much of the aid supplies that had been sent to Gaza or dropped from the air were cereals. The meat had been scarce on the shell-devastated and beleaguered strip. — KUNA

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Ukraine's eastern front 'deteriorated', Kyiv says

Zionist strikes kill more than 60 from one family

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GADAREF: A displaced woman and her children sit in the shade of a straw hut at a camp in southern Gadaref state for people who fled Khartoum and Jazira states in war-torn Sudan in this picture taken on March 20, 2024. — AFP

Sudan silently suffers, a year into generals' war

War 'is brutal, devastating and shows no signs of coming to an end': Expert

PORT SUDAN: Millions displaced and on the brink of famine. Sexual and ethnic violence. Infrastructure destroyed. Aid workers say a year of war between rival generals in Sudan has led to catastrophe, but the world has turned away.

The northeast African country is experiencing "one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent memory" and "the largest internal displacement crisis in the world", the United Nations says. It is also on track to become "the world's worst hunger crisis".

Aid workers have called it the "forgotten war" affecting a country of 48 million — more than half of whom they say need humanitarian assistance. "People have been killed and raped and assaulted and detained and beaten and taken away for months at a time. We're used to it," said Mahmud Mokhtar, who helped provide volunteer social services in the Khartoum area during the war before finally fleeing to Cairo.

Experts see no end in sight to the fighting, which began on April 15 last year between army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, who commands the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Since then thousands of people have been killed, including up to 15,000 in one West Darfur town alone, according to UN experts. More than 8.5 million have had to flee their homes to seek safety elsewhere in Sudan or across borders in neighboring countries.

The war "is brutal, devastating and shows no signs of coming to an end", said veteran Sudan expert Alex de Waal. But even if the violence stops now, "the state

has collapsed, and the path to rebuilding it is long and fraught", de Waal said. Before the bombing and pillaging began, Sudan was already one of the world's poorest countries. Yet the UN says that by January, its humanitarian response scheme had only been 3.1 percent funded and can barely reach one of every 10 people in need.

'Milestone of shame'

"Before the start of the war, there were dozens of international organizations responding across the country," according to Christos Christou, international president of medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF). "Now, there are almost none."

The health system has all but collapsed, and most agricultural land — the leading employer and once touted as a model for African development — is out of commission, researchers have said. Gibril Ibrahim, finance minister in the army-aligned government, said in early March that Sudan had lost "80 percent of its income".

Days later, the situation became even more precarious when the energy minister declared force majeure over a "major rupture" on an oil pipeline. Oil exports account for tens of millions of dollars in earnings each month. For desperate civilians, virtually all that remains is mutual aid: volunteers organizing soup kitchens, evacuation plans and emergency health care. "The world continues to look the other way," said Will Carter, Sudan country director for the Norwegian Refugee Council, which alongside MSF is one of the few humanitarian organizations still operating there.

The war's anniversary is "a milestone of shame", he said, charging that the international community "has allowed this catastrophe to worsen".

On the ground, the RSF now controls most of the capital and the western Darfur region. The paramilitaries descended from the feared Janjaweed militia, unleashed by former strongman Omar al-Bashir's government to quash an ethnic rebellion.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) charged Bashir with genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes dating from 2003, but Sudanese authorities never handed him over following his overthrow in 2019 after mass protests.

'Pure evil'

During the current war, government forces have used their air power to bomb targets on the ground, but failed to gain back much territory and have been blamed for striking civilians. "A final victory is out of the question," said a former army officer, requesting anonymity to speak freely.

Sudanese analyst Mohammed Latif agreed, telling AFP a win "is impossible" at this point for either side. "That's why I'm voting for this guy," said Brandon Rios, 28, who works in the financial sector. "Anybody could get up there and do a better job than Donald Trump or Biden at this point. That's my take." Vincent James, 68, retired, was more downbeat, saying "I appreciate what he's doing but I don't think it's going to be very effective."

In Texas, it takes more than 113,000 signatures from voters who have not taken part in party primaries to add a candidate to the presidential ballot. If he doesn't make the cut in Texas or elsewhere, it won't be for lack of trying. And there is a Plan B. Many US states let voters write the name of the person they want to elect onto the paper ballot. Then, conceivably, it is on to victory, the inauguration, and life in the White House. — AFP

pro-democracy lawyers' committee, after similar seizures by the RSF earlier in the fighting. The lawyers' committee, like other volunteer groups across Sudan, has spent the past year painstakingly documenting violations including summary killings, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and the forced conscription of children. The ICC, currently investigating ethnic-based killings primarily by the RSF in Darfur, says it has "grounds to believe" both sides are committing atrocities. International mediation efforts yielded only truce announcements that were quickly violated.

A UN Security Council call last month for a ceasefire also failed to end the war, as did Western sanctions. The war is "a vortex of transnational conflicts and global rivalries that threaten to set a wider region aflame", said de Waal. Both sides have sought regional support, experts say, and the United Arab Emirates has been painted as the RSF's main foreign backer, though its leaders deny it.

Washington has signaled talks could restart around April 18, but army-aligned prosecutors have since moved against civilian leaders the international community had looked to as potential partners. Still, according to de Waal, "it should not be difficult to reach a consensus across Africa and the Middle East that state collapse is in no one's interest". Against those complex realities, Amer Sohael, a displaced man taking shelter in Darfur's Abu Shouk camp, has a simple hope, "that God will help us achieve peace this year". — AFP

For some, 'Literally Anybody Else' wins over Trump, Biden

DALLAS: "Literally, nice to meet you," says the one presidential hopeful who many voters might feel sums up their feelings about American politics this election year. "My name is 'Literally Anybody Else', and I'm running for president of the United States," explains the 35-year-old teacher from Texas.

The wannabe politician formerly known as Dustin Ebey has legally changed his name to express his frustration over the 2024 White House rematch between elderly foes Joe Biden and Donald Trump. It is an eye-catching stunt that presents a lot of bureaucratic challenges, but he does have serious issues to raise — explaining that he and his wife can't afford to buy a home on their teacher's salaries.

"As it stands right now, my generation and younger, we struggle with finding housing. We struggle with these basic things that 20, 30 years ago weren't really a concern," he told AFP while on the campaign trail. "When I looked at American politics, I didn't feel like it was an accurate representation of not just me as an individual, but as America as a whole. "You cannot tell me that those two are the best that we can do."

'I'm voting for this guy'

Ebey, a middle-school math teacher, has policies on education, crime, health care and tax, but says he was really looking for a way to show the need "to hit reset on American politics." So he legally changed his name in court, and is collecting signatures in a longshot bid to get himself on the ballot.

Last weekend, he arrived at a park in downtown Dallas, set up his table and diligently arranged pens and paper to gather signatures. Wearing a T-shirt promoting his campaign, he brandished his driver's license to prove his name change is for real.

Some people eye him with curiosity, others laugh and take photos. He tries to address them, though he's not always lucky. Once in a while, he converts an instant fan. "He's just a voice to say 'Yeah! We want anyone else besides these two.' That's why I'm voting for this guy," said Brandon Rios, 28, who works in the financial sector. "Anybody could get up there and do a better job than Donald Trump or Biden at this point. That's my take." Vincent James, 68, retired, was more downbeat, saying "I appreciate what he's doing but I don't think it's going to be very effective."

In Texas, it takes more than 113,000 signatures from voters who have not taken part in party primaries to add a candidate to the presidential ballot. If he doesn't make the cut in Texas or elsewhere, it won't be for lack of trying. And there is a Plan B. Many US states let voters write the name of the person they want to elect onto the paper ballot. Then, conceivably, it is on to victory, the inauguration, and life in the White House. — AFP



DALLAS: 'Literally Anybody Else' arrives at Samuel-Grand Park to set up his table in Dallas, Texas, on April, 6, 2024. — AFP

International

Ukraine's eastern front 'deteriorated', Kyiv says

Russia claims capture of village in the Donetsk region

KYIV: Ukraine's commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky said Saturday the situation on the eastern front had worsened significantly and Russia claimed the capture of a village near the occupied industrial town of Avdiivka. "The situation on the eastern front has deteriorated significantly in recent days," said Syrsky, who took over as commander-in-chief in February after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky fired his popular predecessor, Valery Zaluzhny.

Russia's defense ministry announced its troops had "liberated" the village of Pervomaiske in the Donetsk region, about 11 km (7 miles) west of the largely destroyed town of Avdiivka, captured by Russia in the middle of February. Ukraine has not confirmed this. Its army said Friday that it had repelled attacks on the village. Syrsky spoke of "a significant intensification of the enemy's offensive after the presidential elections in Russia" last month.

The commander-in-chief added decisions were being taken "to strengthen the most problematic defense areas with electronic warfare and air defense". In the southern Zaporizhzhia region, Russia accused Ukraine on Saturday of killing 10 by shelling the occupied town of Tokmak. The town fell to Russia at the start of the invasion. Ukrainian authorities in Zaporizhzhia said Russia had struck the region more than 400 times over the last day, including from planes. Ukraine has also said the situation around the eastern frontline city of Chasiv Yar is "difficult and tense" with the area under "constant fire". Chasiv Yar lies 20 kilometers (12 miles) west of the town of Bakhmut,

which was flattened by months of artillery fire before it was captured by Moscow last May.

Russia is now securing fresh territorial gains and trying to press onwards against Ukrainian units hobbled by delays in the supply of vital Western military aid. "The enemy is actively attacking our positions in the Lyman and Bakhmut sectors ... In the Pokrovsk sector, they are trying to break through our defense using dozens of tanks and armored personnel carriers," Syrsky said. "The issue of achieving technical superiority over the enemy in high-tech weapons has again arisen. Only this will enable us to defeat a larger enemy," Syrsky said.

Training push

"The second serious problem is to improve the quality of training of military personnel, especially infantry units, so that they can make the most of all the capabilities of military equipment and Western weapons," Syrsky added. European allies of Ukraine are engaged in a training push for its forces.

France's defense minister Sebastien Lecornu on Friday said future Ukrainian fighter pilots likely to fly American F-16 aircraft were receiving their initial training in the south of France. Other countries including the Netherlands, Denmark and Romania are seeking to help Ukraine train pilots. Some Ukrainians, after receiving initial training in Britain, are now undergoing "advanced training" in an undisclosed location to learn how to fly fighter jets, according to a military source. — AFP



KOSTYANTYNIVKA: Children play in front of houses in the town of Kostyantynivka, Donetsk region, on April 11, 2024, amid the Russian invasion in Ukraine. — AFP

Explosive device blows up car in Damascus

DAMASCUS: An explosive device went off in a car in an upscale neighborhood of Damascus Saturday, Syrian state media said, quoting a police source and adding that there were no victims. Security incidents, including blasts targeting military or civilian vehicles, occur intermittently in the capital.

It was not immediately clear who was responsible for the blast or who was the target. But it came with tensions high in the city after Iran vowed retaliation for an air strike it blamed on the Zionist entity. The April 1 strike destroyed the Iranian consulate in Damascus, killing seven Revolutionary Guards, including two generals.

Syria's official SANA news agency, quoting a Damascus police command source, said an explosion "in the Mazzeh area resulted from an explosive device detonating in a car in al-Huda square". It added that there were no casualties. The city's Mazzeh district is where Iran's embassy and other foreign missions are located.

Britain-based war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said without elaborating that the driver of the car was "a Lebanese national who has yet to be identified". The Observatory, which has a wide network of sources inside Syria, said the authorities had cordoned off the scene of the explosion, and that the vehicle had been "slightly damaged". — AFP

N Korea's Kim, Chinese official hail 'new chapter' of ties

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and China's top legislator hailed a "new chapter" of Beijing-Pyongyang relations on Saturday, in one of the most high-level meetings between the allies in years. Beijing's third highest-ranking official Zhao Leji — a member of the powerful Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo — made a goodwill visit to the nuclear-armed North this week as the two countries mark 75 years of diplomatic ties.

China is North Korea's most important economic benefactor and diplomatic ally, obstructing US-led efforts at the UN Security Council alongside Russia to impose stricter sanctions on Kim Jong Un's government in response to its increased weapons tests.

Zhao met Kim on Saturday, after attending an opening ceremony on Friday for the "year of China-Democratic People's Republic of Korea Friendship" in Pyongyang on Friday, according to Beijing's state news agency Xinhua. Zhao told Kim that China is "willing to strengthen development linkage and deepen bilateral cooperation with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," according to Xinhua, using the North's official name.

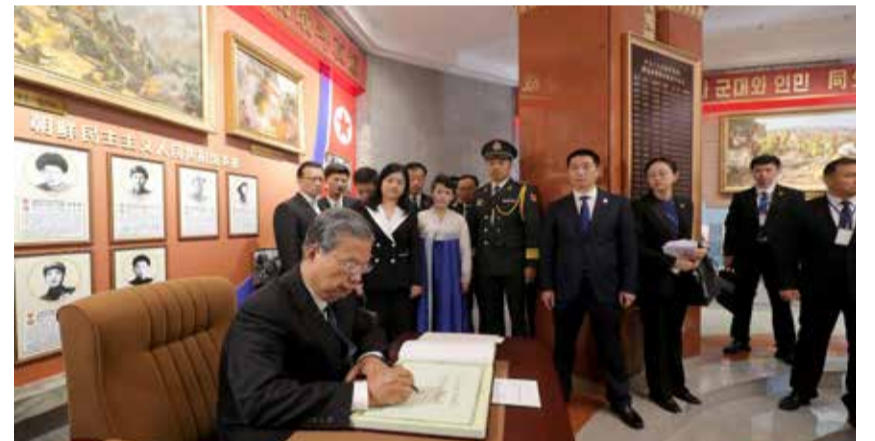
Zhao told Kim that China is willing to

"promote bilateral practical and mutually beneficial cooperation to achieve new results, to continue to give strong mutual support and to safeguard the common interests of both sides". Kim in turn told Zhao the North was keen to "deepen the traditional friendship and write a new chapter in Democratic People's Republic of Korea-China relations," according to Xinhua. A photo published by Xinhua showed Zhao and Kim smiling and shaking hands. Zhao is China's third highest-ranking official, behind President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang.

'Eternal friendship'

Zhao earlier emphasized the need to "open up a new chapter of China-DPRK friendship along with the times", in a speech at the opening ceremony on Friday, which he attended alongside North Korean counterpart Choe Ryong Hae, according to North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency.

North Korea's Choe said on Friday that the two countries' relationship "has greeted a new heyday under the wise leadership" of their leaders, KCNA said. Choe and Zhao were seen sitting next to each other watching performances by what KCNA said were "prestigious art troupes" of the



PYONGYANG: This picture released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency shows China's top lawmaker Zhao Leji (left) signing the guest book during a visit to the Friendship Tower in Pyongyang on April 12, 2024. — AFP

two nations at the East Pyongyang Grand Theatre, AFP footage showed.

Some performers wore colorful traditional Korean and Chinese garments, and what appeared to be the final moment of the event highlighted a massive image of the countries' flags, accompanied by the phrase "eternal friendship".

South Korean local media reports said this week that Zhao's trip could include planning for Kim's next potential state visit to Beijing. Kim last met President Xi in 2019 before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, making the Pyongyang meeting between Zhao and Choe one of the most high-level meetings in years. The Chinese delegation was seen off by senior North

Korean officials as they boarded their plane departing Pyongyang on Saturday, Xinhua said.

North Korea's rhetoric towards the South has been in stark contrast to the friendly relations with Beijing. This year, Kim has declared Seoul his country's "principal enemy", jettisoned agencies dedicated to reunification and outreach, and threatened war over "even 0.001 mm" of territorial infringement.

China's state-run news agency Xinhua said Friday that Zhao and Choe discussed the "situation on the Korean peninsula", and Zhao expressed Beijing's willingness to "intensify legislative exchanges and cooperation". — AFP

Iran Guards seize vessel...

Continued from Page 1

An adviser to Iran's supreme leader said that Zionist entity was in "complete panic" over Tehran's looming response. "They don't know what Iran wants to do, so they and their supporters are terrified," senior adviser Yahya Rahim said. Zionists' offensive has killed at least 33,686 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry. The toll rose by 52 over the last 24 hours, the ministry said. Zionist military said it had struck more than 30 Hamas targets across Gaza over the previous day. In the main central city of Deir Al-Balah, fire burned in the rubble of a destroyed mosque.

The military "demanded that the whole area be evacuated" before it was "wiped out in minutes", said Abdullah Baraka, a witness. In nearby Nuseirat refugee camp, Abd Thabet said residents had been warned to evacuate on Friday evening ahead of a large explosion that caused "massive destruction". "All of the houses were demolished, including my home," the 35-year-old told AFP. "There are children, women and the elderly, and we left without anything with us from our homes."

Tensions have also flared in the occupied West Bank, where a missing teenager was found dead on Saturday. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the death of

14-year-old Benjamin Achmeir a "heinous murder". After the boy went missing near the city of Ramallah on Friday, hundreds of settlers backed by Zionist forces raided nearby Palestinian villages, torching cars and homes, leaving at least one villager dead and dozens injured. After the body of the teenager was found, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant warned against citizens taking "revenge" for his death.

Following Iran's retaliation threats, Zionist entity said it was strengthening air defenses and paused leave for combat units. A US defense official in Washington said that "we are moving additional assets to the region to bolster regional deterrence efforts and increase force protection for US forces". The Netherlands said that its embassy in Tehran and consulate in Arbil, Iraq, would remain closed on Sunday "in connection with the rising tensions between Iran and Zionist entity". France earlier warned its nationals against travelling to the region, while the US embassy in Zionist entity said it was restricting the movements of its diplomats over security fears. German airline Lufthansa said its planes would no longer use Iranian airspace, while its subsidiary Austrian Airlines made a similar move. Australian airline Qantas said its long-haul Perth-London flights would also avoid Iranian airspace.

Gaza truce talks which started on Sunday in Cairo have brought no breakthrough on a plan presented by US, Qatari and Egyptian mediators, which Hamas has said it was studying. Washington has also ramped up pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to increase aid flows to Gaza where the United Nations warns of imminent famine. — AFP

"She is certainly a hero. There is no doubt that she saved lives through her action," Albanese said.

Pranjul Bokaria had just finished up work and was doing some shopping when the stabbing occurred. She ended up running to a nearby shop and taking shelter in a break room. "It was scary, there are some people who were emotionally vulnerable and crying," she told AFP. She escaped using an emergency exit with other shoppers and staff, which took them to a back street.

She described a scene of "chaos", with people running, and police swarming the area. "I am alive and grateful," she said. As night fell, dozens of heavily armed police and ambulances were still outside the shopping complex, with stretchers ready to take people to nearby hospitals. The sound of police sirens and helicopters filled the air. The mall has been locked down and police have urged people to avoid the area. Such attacks are virtually unheard of in Australia, which has relatively low rates of violent crime. — AFP

US troops head to the region...

Continued from Page 1

arch foe (Zionists), destroyed Tehran's consular annex at its embassy in Damascus, Syria. Violence involving Iran-backed groups around the Middle East, including in Lebanon, Yemen and Syria, has increased since Zionist forces began their retaliation against Hamas militants in Gaza.

Ways to retaliate

After meeting Kurilla on Friday, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Zionist entity and the United States stood "shoulder to shoulder", despite differences over the conduct of the Gaza war. "Our enemies think that they can pull apart Zionist entity and the United States, but the opposite is true - they are bringing us together and strengthening our ties," Gallant said.

After calls with his Australian, British and German counterparts, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said: "Iran does not seek to expand the scope of the war." But he said it had no choice but to respond to the attack on its diplomatic mission. There are a number of ways Iran could retaliate, and not all pose the same risk of escalation, experts said. "What is certain is that Tehran does not want a direct war with Zionists, at least at the current stage," said Eva Koulourioti, an independent Middle East analyst.

On Saturday, the Dutch foreign ministry said its embassy in Tehran and consulate in Arbil, Iraq, would remain closed on Sunday "in connection with the rising tensions between Iran and Zionist entity". Citing similar reasons, Germany reiterated a warning against travel to Iran. France earlier warned its nationals against travelling to the region, after the US embassy in Zionist entity announced it was restricting the movements of its diplomats over security fears.

German airline Lufthansa said its planes would no longer use Iranian airspace, and extended a sus-

pension of flights to and from Tehran. Its subsidiary Austrian Airlines made a similar move. Australian airline Qantas said its long-haul Perth-London flights would avoid Iranian airspace. A potential widening of the Gaza conflict helped send Wall Street stocks lower on Friday. Oil and gold shot up.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who leads a coalition including religious and ultra-nationalist parties, is under pressure from anti-government protesters and relatives of the hostages demanding that the government get them home. On Friday, supporters of the captives again rallied in Tel Aviv. "Hostage deal now," said one of their signs. The European Union on Friday imposed sanctions on the armed wings of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, another militant group, for "widespread" sexual violence during the October 7 attack.

Sirens in Sderot

Sirens had sounded in Sderot, just outside Gaza's northern tip, before Zionist air defenses intercepted rockets fired from the territory on Friday, the military said. It added that an air strike killed several armed militants in northern Gaza's Beit Hanoun. Washington has ramped up pressure on Netanyahu to increase aid flows to Gaza where the United Nations warns of imminent famine. Zionist military said an undisclosed number of aid trucks had been allowed to enter Gaza Thursday through a newly opened border crossing. Despite repeated AFP requests for comment, Zionist authorities did not disclose the exact location of the new crossing.

Gallant had announced the new crossing on Wednesday, promising to "flood Gaza with aid", but on Thursday the UN Security Council said "more should be done". In the West Bank, where more than 460 Palestinians have been killed by Zionist troops or settlers since October 7, gunshots rang out and black smoke poured skywards from burning vehicles and buildings in the Palestinian village of Al-Mughayyir. Violence erupted on Friday afternoon when Jewish settlers who were part of a manhunt for missing 14-year-old Benjamin Achmeir raided Al-Mughayyir, an AFP reporter said. — AFP

Knife-wielding attacker kills...

Continued from Page 1

Ayush Singh was working at a cafe inside the centre when the incident occurred. "I saw the whole thing in front of me," he told AFP. "I saw a lot of people running around, I saw the guy running with the knife and people running away." Singh helped two old ladies who were having a coffee to hide inside his cafe. He heard three gunshots ring out, then saw the man lying on the ground. "It was really scary," he said. "I've felt really safe (in Australia), I've been here for six years. I didn't feel unsafe but now I feel scared." Prime Minister Anthony Albanese praised the bravery of strangers who helped each other and the woman police inspector who rushed headlong toward danger.

International

Zionist strikes kill more than 60 from one family

'We were asleep. We don't know why they targeted the house, it's a massacre, annihilation.'

GAZA: Gaza's Tabatibi family is in mourning for the second time in less than a month, after separate Zionist bombardments on buildings they were sheltering in killed more than 60 of their kin. The latest strike occurred in the early hours of Friday in Gaza City's densely populated Daraj neighborhood, killing at least 25 members of the family, a relative told AFP.

In a narrow street, the six-story building where the Tabatibi family had been staying was still standing on Friday, balconies barely hanging to its facade, the ground floor charred and its inside strewn with rubble. "We didn't hear a missile come down or anything, we were all asleep", Khaled Al-Tabatibi, a surviving member of the family, told AFP.

"Our house, my sisters, their children, their daughters, all of them are martyred, all of them are in pieces," he said through tears. "When the occupation aircraft bombed the house, we were asleep. We don't know why they targeted the house, it's a massacre, annihilation."

Ziyad Dardas, a neighbor whose brother was injured in the strike, was at a loss for words. "This is madness, this is the peak of crime from our leaders and (Zionist) leaders", he told AFP. "To the (Palestinian) Authority, to Hamas leaders, I say why is this not enough?" The dead and injured were reportedly taken to Gaza City's Al-Shifa hospital,

which was mostly destroyed in a recent Zionist military operation.

'While we were in it'

The Tabatibi family, which has been displaced by Zionist bombardments on several occasions, had already been in mourning. On March 15, the family had gathered in central Gaza to eat together during the first Friday night of Ramadan, a reunion that soon turned into a bloodbath.

An air strike hit the building where they were staying as women prepared the pre-fasting meal, killing 36 members of the family, witnesses told AFP at the time. The health ministry in Gaza, which provided the same death toll, blamed the Zionist entity for the strike in the city's Nuseirat area, as did survivors.

Asked about that strike, the Zionist forces said it targeted two "terror operatives" in Nuseirat "throughout the night," without elaborating. "They bombed the house while we were in it. My mother and my aunt were preparing the suhoor food. They were all martyred," Mohammed Al-Tabatibi said at the time at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, before the bodies of his relatives were stacked on a truck to be driven to a cemetery. The Zionist war on Gaza has killed at least 33,634 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry. — AFP



GAZA: Palestinians inspect the damage to the home of the Tabatibi family after Zionist bombardment in the Daraj neighborhood of Gaza on April 12, 2024. — AFP

Raid by suspected separatist militants kills 11 in Pakistan

QUETTA: Gunmen killed 11 people in southwest Pakistan, officials said Saturday, with police searching for suspected separatist militants after migrant laborers were singled out for execution. Police said six gunmen stopped a bus near the city of Naushki in Balochistan province around 8:00 pm (1500 GMT) on Friday and checked ID cards, abducting nine workers from the eastern region of Punjab. Their bodies were later found two kilometers (1.2 miles) from the highway having been "fired upon at point blank range", senior local police officer Allah Bakhsh told AFP.

The same attackers later fired at a car belonging to a provincial parliamentarian, Bakhsh said. The lawmaker was not in the vehicle, but two people were killed when the car careened into a ditch. Bakhsh said a manhunt was underway and gunmen "clearly used the modus operandi of Baloch separatists", who have waged a decades-long insurgency targeting security forces and outside influence in the region.

Witness Tahir Hussain — who was travelling with the larger group of victims — told AFP "a group of gunmen blockaded the highway, forcing the bus to stop". "They asked which one of us were Punjabi," the 50-year-old said. "Those who were accompanying families were spared." "They took the others

with them at gunpoint," he added. "After a while, we heard gunshots from a distance."

Senior Naushki district administration official Habibullah Musakhail told AFP that "police and paramilitary forces started combing the area for the arrest of the attackers". "But the attackers have managed to flee the area this time," he said, also confirming the death toll.

Balochistan is Pakistan's largest but poorest province, despite an abundance of natural resources. Militants have in the past targeted ethnic Punjabis and Sindhis from elsewhere in Pakistan, as well as foreign energy firms they believe are exploiting the region without sharing its riches.

Punjabis are the largest ethnic group in Pakistan, and are perceived to dominate the ranks of the military locked in a battle to quash Balochistan's armed factions. Witness Zahid Imran, 46, told AFP that when gunmen boarded the bus they berated the abducted travelers, saying: "You Punjabis kill our children, get up and come with us."

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif described Friday night's attack as an "incident of terrorism" in a statement and said "facilitators will be punished". In October last year, gunmen killed six Punjabi laborers who were constructing a private residence. Late last month, eight Baloch militants were killed as they attempted to storm the offices of a port considered a cornerstone of China's investment in the region. Two Pakistani soldiers were killed repelling the assault, the military's public relations wing said. Baloch civil leaders claim their communities are subject to a state-sanctioned regime of extrajudicial killings and disappearances, punishing them for political dissent. — AFP

Iranian police toughen hijab controls

TEHRAN: Police in Iran announced a new crackdown Saturday on women who ignore the country's strict Islamic dress code that makes it compulsory for them to wear headscarves in public. "From today the police in Tehran, as in other provinces, will implement their measures against this sort of violation of the law regarding hijab," the capital's police chief AbbasAli Mohammadian said on live television.

Local media reported that police in the city had launched a campaign codenamed "Noor", the Persian word for light, in their efforts to double down on those who break the hijab dress code.

The authorities made it mandatory for women to obey the Islamic dress code shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled Iran's shah. The dress code, known as hijab, makes it mandatory for women to cover their hair and bodies in public places.

"People who did not pay attention to previous police warnings will be specially warned in the city from today and legal action will be taken against them," Mohammadian said on Saturday.

The crackdown comes just days after supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a speech reiterated that women in the Islamic republic must obey the dress code, regardless of their beliefs. "The hijab issue, which has now become an imposed challenge, did not exist before," he said, and blamed "the intervention of foreigners".

Iran's morality police had kept a low profile since protests erupted following the September 2022 death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a young Kurd who died three days after they arrested her for allegedly violating the dress code in Tehran.

The morality police were never formally abolished by the authorities. Amini's death triggered months-long demonstrations which the authorities labelled as "riots" fomented by foreign governments.

On Saturday, Iranian media including Ham Mihan daily posted "images of the presence of patrol vans" from the morality police in central Tehran's Valiasr Square. There have been reports in the media over recent months that police have seized vehicles transporting women without veils and punished their owners.

In an effort to tackle those breaking hijab laws, the authorities have also shut cafes and restaurants where the wearing of the hijab was not respected. After Amini's death, more and more women across the country began appearing in public without adhering to the dress code. — AFP



ZINDAH JAN: Afghan school boys attend class at a makeshift school set in a tent at Kashkak village of Zindah Jan district in Herat Province on April 3, 2024.

Afghan kids learn in makeshift schools 6 months after quake

ZINDAH JAN: Children sit shoulder to shoulder crammed in rows on the floor of a shipping container with lesson books in their laps, the remains of their school unrepaired in the six months since a major earthquake devastated their village in western Afghanistan. Hundreds of schools are still damaged since a series of strong quakes jolted Afghanistan's Herat province in October, with many students returning to lessons in tents and containers in March, according to the Herat education department.

Girls and boys in the village of Nayeb Rafi in Zindah Jan district studied in a packed container tucked between tents and small, blue homes newly built on a barren stretch of land. "I really want to study, to have a school, and become a teacher to teach my friends," said 11-year-old Siyah Gul.

She wants to make the most of her lessons in the makeshift classroom before she is soon excluded under Taliban government rules which bar girls and women from secondary education and universities.

The October quake killed more than 1,500 people and damaged or destroyed more than 63,000 homes, according to an assessment published in February by the United Nations, the European Union and the Asian Development Bank. Many people are still living in tents and temporary shelters, the World Health Organization said in February. Education is the second-most affected sector, the report said, with nearly 300 public schools and other learning centers damaged and 180,000 students facing learning disruptions.

'Completely destroyed'

In the village of Chahak, deep cracks scar the walls and ceilings of its pale blue schoolhouse. Broken windows still hang from their hinges and piles of dust fill the corners of classrooms. "Chahak village was completely destroyed by the earthquake and we still haven't been provided with permanent shelters," said teacher Mohammad Naseem Nasrat.

"Our school too, which was wrecked by the earthquake, has not been restored so far. I don't know if there are plans to or not," said the 25-year-old, adding that the village's children "face an uncertain future" without proper schools.

Decades of conflict have devastated Afghanistan's education system, with an estimated 3.7 million children out of school, 60 percent of them girls, according to the UN children's agency UNICEF. Poverty and access to schools in remote areas are major hurdles, while cultural norms often prevent girls from attending school.

One in five children aged between five and 17 are engaged in child labor, according to the United Nations, in a country facing deep economic, humanitarian and climate crises. Eleven-year-old Sefatullah's school in Kashkak village was destroyed by the recent quakes. "We don't have books and notebooks to study and write in," he said.

Four children were killed when the school collapsed, said teacher Mohammad Dawood, who now gives lessons in a framed tent with a large UNICEF logo on the outside. The makeshift school serves two villages, six classes and has only one teacher — Dawood. "On days when it is windy or raining, we are in big trouble, we can't carry on with this situation for much longer," he said. — AFP



QUETTA: Paramedics carry slain migrant laborers' coffins at a hospital in Quetta on April 13, 2024, after they were killed by gunmen in a suspected separatist raid. — AFP

Castaways saved thanks to 'HELP' palm fronds

LOS ANGELES: Sometimes all you have to do is ask for "HELP": That's what three men stranded on a deserted Pacific island learned earlier this week, writing the message in palm fronds which were spotted by US rescuers. The trio, all experienced mariners in their 40s, became stranded on

a lonely island after setting off from Micronesia's Polowat Atoll on March 31 in their motor-powered skiff which subsequently experienced damage. They were reported missing last Saturday by a woman who told the US Coast Guard her three uncles never returned from Pikelot Atoll, a tiny island in the remote Western Pacific.

"In a remarkable testament to their will to be found, the mariners spelled out 'HELP' on the beach using palm leaves, a crucial factor in their discovery," said search and rescue mission coordinator Lieutenant Chelsea Garcia.

She reported that the trio was discovered Sunday on Pikelot Atoll by a US Navy aircraft. "This act of

ingenuity was pivotal in guiding rescue efforts directly to their location," she said.

The aircraft crew dropped survival packages, and rescuers one day later dropped a radio which the mariners used to communicate that they were in good health, had access to food and water, and that the motor on their 20-foot (six-meter) skiff was no longer working.

On Tuesday morning a ship rescued the trio and their equipment, returning them to Polowat Atoll, the Coast Guard said. In August 2020, three Micronesian sailors also stranded on Pikelot were rescued after Australian and US warplanes spotted a giant "SOS" they had scrawled on the beach. — AFP



POLOWAT, Micronesia: This image obtained from the US Coast Guard on April 11, 2024 shows a "Help" sign on the beach made with palm leaves by three stranded mariners. — AFP

Business

SUNDAY, APRIL 14, 2024

Solid profits at banks as execs debate US economic risks

Bankers still point to a healthy American employment market



NEW YORK: Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in New York City. As new inflation data released showed a continued rise, stocks fell across the board with the Dow falling over 400 points. — AFP

NEW YORK: Large American banks reported solid earnings Friday behind still-high interest rates while offering varying views on the likelihood the United States can avoid a near-term recession. JPMorgan Chase reported higher profits, citing increased asset management and investment banking fees as well as the lift from lofty interest rates, while Citigroup and Wells Fargo reported dipping profits on higher costs.

Compared with a year ago, the banks have seen some uptick in write-offs for bad loans, reflecting the weaker profile of low-income consumers. However, bankers still point to a healthy American employment market and a lingering boost from pandemic-era government spending.

Officials such as Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell have pointed to the chance the US economy can achieve a "soft landing"—shifting relatively painlessly from a period of high growth and elevated inflation to one of slower growth, while avoiding a recession.

While allowing that "many economic indicators continue to be favorable," JPMorgan Chief Executive Jamie Dimon highlighted risks to the outlook, including geopolitical instability and the possible persistence of inflation. "The market is probably too happy," Dimon said on a conference call with reporters. "I think the chance of bad outcomes is higher than other people think."

Dimon's comments echoed his tone in a shareholder letter this week in which he warned interest rates could go even higher. He emphasized that he is not predicting this but merely pointing it out as a possibility.

On Friday, Citigroup Chief Financial Officer Mark Mason offered a somewhat more optimistic appraisal. While noting that "there's a lot of risk out there," Mason characterized the global economy as generally "resilient," with consumers mostly healthy and inflation "moving in the direction that central banks want."

Mason sees a "soft landing" in the United States

as "increasingly likely" and says Europe appears poised for modest growth after a period of stagnation. The chief concern, along with geopolitical risk, "is still around inflation" and the question of when, and by how much, rates will fall, Mason said in a conference call with reporters.

Job cuts

At JPMorgan, profits came in at \$13.4 billion, up six percent from the year-ago period, boosted by higher net interest income (NII) -- the benefit from charging more for loans minus the higher interest paid to depositors.

Revenues rose nine percent to \$41.9 billion. Markets were a weak spot, with trading revenue dropping for fixed income and staying flat for equities. While JPMorgan increased its estimate for full year NII by \$1 billion, to \$89 billion, the bank said it expects the boost from higher interest rates on profits to erode or "normalize" over time.

At Citi, profits were \$3.4 billion, down 27 per-

cent from the year-ago period, in part due to a two percent drop in revenues to \$21.1 billion. While the results were boosted by higher NII, that was offset by the impact of higher credit losses.

Another drag came from \$110 million in severance costs. Through the end of the quarter, Citi has cut 7,000 of the 20,000 jobs targeted in a global reorganization, Mason said. Wells Fargo reported profits of \$4.6 billion, down seven percent from the year-ago period. Revenues rose one percent to \$20.9 billion.

Unlike the other two banks, Wells Fargo had an eight percent drop in NII, which it attributed to a shift in consumers to higher interest products. But the bank cited higher investment banking fees as a strong point and said it reduced provisions for commercial real estate and auto loans—two areas that have seen an erosion in credit quality in recent quarters. Shares of JPMorgan slumped 4.5 percent, while Citi rose 0.1 percent and Wells Fargo climbed 0.3 percent. — AFP

Middle East tensions weigh on markets

NEW YORK: Wall Street stocks tumbled on Friday despite solid bank earnings as oil and gold prices shot up amid worries about a potential widening of conflict in the Middle East. After spending the entire session in the red, the Dow Jones Industrial Average finished down 1.2 percent, or 475 points, at 37,983.24.

"Heightened geopolitical uncertainty in front of a weekend contributed to today's sell-off," said Briefing.com. Market watchers cited worries about an imminent attack on the Zionist entity by Iran to retaliate for a strike in Damascus—a possibility also raised by President Joe Biden, who urged Iran against the move.

Oil prices surged more than two percent at session peaks before easing somewhat. Gold also benefitted from its status as a haven investment, breaking the \$2,400 per ounce level. Investor attention was set to focus on the start Friday of the corporate earnings season after economic data released earlier this week largely killed off the possibility that the US Federal Reserve could begin cutting interest rates in June.

Equity markets took the recalibration of expectations of interest rate cuts in their stride as the data showing the US economy in strong health raised hopes that companies will report strong earnings. At the start of the year markets had priced in six interest cuts by the Fed in 2024, but now expect only two.

JPMorgan Chase, Wells Fargo and Citigroup all reported better-than-expected earnings results for the first quarter. But shares in JPMorgan Chase, which have risen strongly this year, sank 6.5 percent, while the other two banks retreated by less. While Paris and Frankfurt edged lower, London stocks firmed higher on data showing the UK economy grew for a second straight month in February, further fueling recovery hopes after sliding into a shallow recession in the second half of last year. — AFP

IMF confirms Kristalina for second term

WASHINGTON: The IMF executive board confirmed Friday that it had reappointed Kristalina Georgieva to serve for a second five-year term at the helm of the international financial institution. It means that Georgieva, who was the sole candidate in the running to lead the International Monetary Fund, will continue in office when her current term ends on September 30, 2024.

The decision was taken by consensus, the IMF said in a statement confirming the board's decision. "I am deeply grateful for the trust and support of the Fund's Executive Board, representing our 190 members, and honored to continue to lead the IMF as Managing Director," Georgieva said in a statement.

"I look forward to continue serving our membership, together with the highly professional and committed staff of the IMF," she added. Georgieva, a 70-year-old Bulgarian, has run the IMF since 2019, and told AFP last month that she was making herself "available to serve, if people want me to serve."

During her tenure, the IMF has helped countries

Bank of England to reform economic forecasting

LONDON: The Bank of England (BoE) said Friday it would implement a "substantial upgrade programme" to improve its economic forecasting, after a probe found it had "deteriorated significantly" in recent years. The central bank's poor performance in this area has been the source of frequent criticism, and led it to call in former US Federal Reserve chief Ben Bernanke to investigate. "We should learn the lessons from the difficulties that we faced," BoE boss Andrew Bailey said Friday as Bernanke, who ran the Fed between 2006 to 2014, published his findings.

In response to the conclusions, the BoE said it would reconsider its current practice of issuing central projections for the economy, and would in-



WASHINGTON: (FILES) International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director, Kristalina Georgieva, speaks at a press briefing on the global policy agenda in Washington, DC, during the IMF and World Bank Spring Meetings, on April 13, 2023. — AFP

stead publish more alternative scenarios. It hopes this will allow it to take a broader account of economic risks and "to articulate better differences of view among committee members".

The central bank said it also needs "substantial investment" to develop its data, modelling, forecasting and evaluation infrastructures, and in hiring "expert staff" to support them. The BoE received particularly strong criticism for underestimating the persistence of UK inflation in the wake of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and for possibly taking too long to raise interest rates.

After climbing to over 11 percent at the end of 2022, inflation was slower to fall in the UK than in many other comparable countries. On an annualised rate, inflation fell to 3.4 percent in February, but still remains above the bank's 2 percent target. To combat rising prices, the BoE tightened its monetary policy 14 times before holding interest rates at a 16-year high of 5.25 percent in recent months. The bank is not alone in being the target of growing criticism about economists' inability to make accurate forecasts in the face of repeated crises. — AFP

Singapore economic growth misses forecasts in Q1

SINGAPORE: Singapore's economy grew slower than expected in the first quarter, early data showed Friday, as a struggling manufacturing sector weighed on tourism spending from events including Taylor Swift's concerts.

The city-state's economic performance is often seen as a barometer of the global environment because of its reliance on international trade. Gross domestic product expanded 2.7 percent on-year, the Trade Ministry said, faster than the previous three months but weaker than the 3.0 percent projected in a Bloomberg poll of economists.

It grew just 0.1 percent on-quarter. The advance estimates are computed largely from data in January and February and are subject to revision when March figures come in. Manufacturing, a pillar of the trade-reliant economy, rose 0.8 percent on-year and contracted 2.9 percent from October-December.

The services sector, which includes accommodation and food, grew 2.9 percent. "In all likelihood, the slew of concerts which attracted many international visitors to Singapore's shores, did have a temporal boost to the consumer-facing industries, namely the hospitality and entertainment-related activities," said Selena Ling, chief economist at banking group OCBC.

Swift performed only in Singapore in March for the Southeast Asian leg of her Eras Tour, while Coldplay played in January and the Singapore Airshow, the biggest in Asia, was held in February. Veteran economist Song Seng Wun said he expected an "upward adjustment" to the overall first quarter growth when the effects of Swift's concerts are fully counted.

There could also be "spillover effects" into March of spending from the Singapore Airshow, added Song, at financial services firm CGS International Singapore. "The bottom line is that the economy is still recovering post-pandemic," he told AFP.

In a separate announcement, the central bank Monetary Authority of Singapore kept its monetary policy unchanged for a fourth straight time, saying it needed to keep inflation in check. As the city-state imports most of its needs, it deals with imported inflation by allowing for a stronger Singapore dollar. — AFP

Business

NBK wealth thought leadership

Strategies to navigate market volatility

KUWAIT: Nobel Prize winner Harry Markowitz famously said, "Diversification is the only free lunch in finance." Diversification is indeed crucial for investors to navigate market volatility and to maximize their risk adjusted returns. Hedge funds can offer valuable diversification opportunities when implemented correctly.

The hedge fund industry has evolved from obscurity to over \$4 trillion in Assets Under Management (AUM). Originating in 1949, hedge funds were initially favored by high-net-worth individuals (HNWI). By the 1980s, they attracted a broader investor base, including pension funds and sovereign wealth funds. The 1990s witnessed accelerated growth as hedge funds attracted top talent leading to the emergence and refinement of additional trading strategies to cater to varying risk appetites and market conditions. The 2000s saw advancements in computing power, enabling sophisticated algorithmic trading programs



that enhanced performance. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 prompted regulatory reforms and stricter reporting standards to ensure transparency and stability in the industry.

Hedge funds are private, unconstrained investment vehicles that take long and short positions and use leverage. A long position involves buying an asset with the expectation of price appreciation, while a short position benefits from price decline. The hedge fund industry comprises various strate-

gies that can broadly be categorized as Return Enhancers or Diversifiers.

Return Enhancers are typically net long stocks seeking to outperform through both long and short positions. These strategies aim to enhance portfolio returns while providing a moderate level of diversification. An example is the long-short equity strategy, which involves buying undervalued stocks (long positions) and selling overvalued stocks (short positions) based on fundamental analysis.

Diversifiers are strategies expected to provide greater diversification benefits to investors. These strategies also take long and short positions but without a structural long bias. Global Macro is an example of a diversifying strategy where investment decisions are based on top-down analysis of global macroeconomic trends and events and their impact on various asset classes. Investors focusing on uncorrelated hedge fund strategies can achieve sub-

stantial diversification benefits to enhance the risk-adjusted performance of their portfolios.

Given the significant dispersion among hedge fund managers, the importance of manager selection and a rigorous due diligence process cannot be overlooked. The due diligence process includes Investment Due Diligence (IDD) and Operational Due Diligence (ODD) to assess the manager's investment and risk management processes.

In conclusion, hedge funds provide valuable exposure for navigating market volatility, and investors should consider the diverse nature of hedge fund strategies when constructing their portfolios. Conducting thorough due diligence, including IDD and ODD, is essential to ensure the effective implementation of strategy allocation with top-tier hedge fund managers. Investors lacking expertise in hedge fund investing should seek guidance from trusted advisors to achieve their desired outcomes.

Trump stock tumbles after buoyant debut

NEW YORK: After a winning debut on Wall Street last month, Donald Trump's media group has suffered a bruising retreat, denting the Republican candidate's wealth as he faces legal challenges. Since entering public markets on March 26, Trump Media and Technology Group has seen its market value plummet from around \$11 billion to under \$4.5 billion.

That's an unhappy reversal for the former White House inhabitant and current presidential candidate, who faces around a half billion dollars in civil court judgments if his appeals are unsuccessful. Trump holds 57.3 percent of the company, which was successfully merged into a shell company known as Digital World Acquisition last month; equity investors in such transactions are typically required to hold the stock for six months before cashing out.

TMTG's ticker is "DJT," Trump's initials. The company's principal asset is "Truth Social," the social media platform launched for the ex-president after he was kicked off Twitter and Facebook in 2021 in the wake of the January 6 attack on the US Capitol.

Market watchers aren't quite sure what to make of the stock's trajectory. "Nothing would surprise me about this stock's trading," said Matthew Kennedy, senior IPO Market strategist at Renaissance Capital. "It could jump to \$100 or drop to \$1 and I would be unfazed."

Though far below its peak valuation, TMTG's stock price is an anomaly in the sense that the company generated just \$4 million in revenues in 2023 and lost \$58 million, according to a securities filing. "I can't think of any companies that currently have such a wide gap between revenue and market cap," Kennedy said.

To justify such a valuation, a company would normally be expected to produce significant growth and profitability in the near-future — scenarios that are considered highly unlikely, if not impossible. "It's very hard to tell any story that could justify a valuation, at today's price," said Jay Ritter, a finance professor at the University of Florida.

"There's just no plausible story where that's going to be happening," Ritter said. "The media business has been on the decline. And with this company being so closely aligned with Donald Trump, he's not going to live forever."

True believers

Even so, TMTG maintains a valuation above a group of established companies that includes Goodyear and Shake Shack, a phenomenon market watchers struggle to explain. "I'd say this is a meme stock," said Kennedy, alluding to GameStop and a handful of other equities that caught fire in early 2021 after being embraced by users of the Reddit platform. "It's a combination of some short-term speculators, but ... there's also a committed number of retail investors who wanted to believe in the company, believe in the stock and weren't paying attention to valuations," Ritter said of the meme stock group, which also included movie theater chain AMC.

With speculators, the play is to benefit from a short-term positive move before selling and cashing out the gains. Expecting "lots of volatility," one anonymous investor who bought low said on Reddit he "took those profits and rolled them into put options, because of how overvalued the stock was."

Some investors likely sold out after TMTG's securities filing revealed the paltry revenues. Others may fear a sudden sale by Trump of a huge number of shares to raise money. But some holders are "buying with an ideological motivation where they wanted to show support," Ritter said.

Bet on 2nd term?

Most of the commentators on Reddit have come out swinging against TMTG. "My dad says he wanted to buy into this for the long-term stability of his grandchildren, and I just had to laugh," said one person on Reddit.

Kennedy calls TMTG a "unique stock" and sees one scenario where the investment could take off. "While voters may have concerns over conflicts of interest, shareholders of DJT would no doubt benefit from a second Trump term, especially if he continues to use it as his official platform," Kennedy said. "In fact, in a recent client note we called this stock a multi-billion dollar bet on a second Trump term." — AFP



AUSTIN: This handout picture released by the Argentinian Presidency shows Argentina's President Javier Milei (R) and Tesla CEO Elon Musk (L) posing for a picture during Milei's visit to the Tesla factory in Austin, United States on April 12, 2024. — AFP

Argentina's Milei meets with Elon Musk in Texas

SAN FRANCISCO: Elon Musk met with Argentine President Javier Milei on Friday at a Tesla plant in Austin, Texas, posting a picture of the pair happily giving thumbs-up signs. Under the photo was written "Libertad", which is Spanish for "Freedom."

Milei shared on X, formerly Twitter, a picture of him and Musk shaking hands in a conference room, with a message saying long live freedom. Milei and Musk "agreed on the need to free markets and defend the ideas of freedom" as well as the importance of eliminating bureaucratic obstacles to business, a spokeswoman for the presidency said in a statement.

The libertarian Argentine leader also offered to be an ally to Musk in his legal battle in Brazil, the spokeswoman added. X owner Musk is under investigation in Brazil after he accused a Supreme Court judge of censoring social networks, calling him a "dictator" and vowing to disobey rulings blocking users found to be spreading disinformation.

Musk agreed to take part in an event in Argentina in the near future to promote ideas of freedom, according to Milei's spokeswoman. Milei, a political outsider who won the presidency in November, is facing pushback on the streets and from some of his own conservative allies.

His government has rekindled debate over Argentina's military dictatorship by questioning the number of its victims, while also seeking a greater role for the armed forces in tackling ongoing security issues. Argentina is home to deposits of lithium used for rechargeable batteries like those that power Tesla electric cars. — AFP

Biden rule hikes fees for oil projects on public lands

NEW YORK: Oil companies drilling on public lands must post larger bonds and pay higher royalties under a rule finalized Friday by the Biden administration. The bonding requirements for development increased to \$150,000 from \$10,000, a level set in 1960 that no longer covers potential cleanup costs, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) said in a press release.

In another shift, the Department of the Interior lifted royalty rates for leases to 16.67 percent from the previous level of 12.5 percent. The changes were described by Interior Secretary Deb Haaland as the most significant reform to the leasing program "in decades" but were criticized by petroleum interests.

They come as President Biden emphasizes the environment in his reelection campaign against former president Donald Trump, who has mocked climate change as an issue. Friday's action finalizes the department's preliminary step taken in July 2023 that the Biden administration described as part of a "transition to a clean energy economy."

"Our public lands are owned by all Americans, and the Bureau of Land Management remains committed to managing them in a balanced, responsible way," said BLM Director Tracy Stone-Manning.

"This rule will help protect critical wildlife habitat, cultural resources, and recreational values, and it will ensure a fair return for American taxpayers." Petroleum industry officials are reviewing the rule "to ensure the Biden administration is upholding its responsibilities to the American taxpayers and promoting fair and consistent access to federal resources," said Holly Hopkins, vice president of upstream policy at the American Petroleum Institute. API, which had raised objections to the proposal during a public comment period, released figures on the economic contribution of petroleum development on federal lands, citing some 170,000 jobs in five states. "As energy demand continues to grow, oil and natural gas development on federal lands will be foundational for maintaining energy security, powering our economy and supporting state and local conservation efforts," Hopkins said.

"Overly burdensome land management regulations will put this critical energy supply at risk," Hopkins added. The environmental group Evergreen Action characterized the change as a "long overdue" step to boost biodiversity and the climate. "Let's be real: We need to get these oil companies off our public lands," said Evergreen Action's Mattea Mirkusic. "But for now, we're glad they won't get to stiff the public while they keep using public resources." — AFP

Google yanks news sites over proposed law

SAN FRANCISCO: Google on Friday said it is testing removing links to California news sites for some users in the western US state as legislators mull making the online search giant pay for connecting people to news. The Silicon Valley tech firm is preparing for the possible passage of the California Journalism Preservation Act (CJPA) that would create a "link tax" for connecting users in the state to news articles. Google Global News Partnerships vice president Jaffer Zaidi said in a blog post.

The CJPA was passed by the California Assembly in June of last year, and is currently being considered by the state's senate. "As we've shared when other countries have considered similar proposals, the uncapped financial exposure created by CJPA would be unworkable," Zaidi contended.

"If enacted, CJPA in its current form would create a level of business uncertainty that no company could accept." Google and Facebook-owner Meta have pushed back against efforts in other jurisdictions to require them to compensate news outlets for stories that make it onto their platforms.

Facebook briefly blocked news articles on its site in Australia in 2021 after the passage of a similar law, before the company and Google agreed to make deals to remunerate news publishers. In France, an agreement was reached in 2022 between Google, publishers and press agencies to allow news content displayed on its platform.

And in November, after months of negotiations, Canada and Google signed an agreement under which the world's number one online advertising company would pay Canadian media companies \$100 million a year in compensation for lost advertising revenues. Supporters of such laws argue that tech titans attract users with news stories and devour online advertising dollars that would otherwise go to struggling newsrooms. Google's trial involves removing links to news websites that might be covered by the proposed law to measure the effect on the platform, according to Zaidi. — AFP



BERLIN: In this file photo the KaDeWe Kaufhaus des Westens (Department Store of the West) department store is pictured in Berlin, Germany on February 9, 2024. Thailand's Central Group became the owner of the iconic Berlin department store Kadewe on April 12, 2024, following its purchase from Austrian real estate giant Signa, which resoundingly filed for bankruptcy last year. — AFP

Thai group buys iconic Berlin department store

BERLIN: Thailand's Central Group said Friday it has bought the iconic KaDeWe department store in Berlin from insolvent Austrian real-estate giant Signa. The 650,000-square-foot (60,000-square-metre) store is located on one the German capital's main shopping streets, and has long been a major draw for tourists.

The Thai group, a multinational conglomerate with a sprawling retail and property portfolio, did not confirm the purchase price, but German daily Handelsblatt put the figure at around one billion euros (\$1.1 billion). The news came several months after the company that operates the store, KaDeWe group, filed for bankruptcy, reportedly blaming the turmoil engulfing Signa.

"We are pleased to add KaDeWe Berlin to Central Group's historic flagship luxury store real estate portfolio," said Central Group's chief executive, Tos Chirathivat. Vittorio Radice, a board member of Central Group Europe, said the purchase was "the

first important milestone for us in the attempt to restore and restructure the KaDeWe Group operating company towards a sustainable, financially viable business". Central Group is already a majority shareholder in the KaDeWe Group, with a 50.1 percent stake. Handelsblatt reported the Thai conglomerate was in advanced talks to take over the entire group, which also operates the department stores Alsterhaus in Hamburg and Oberpollinger in Munich.

KaDeWe, short for "Kaufhaus des Westens" or the "Department Store of the West", first opened its doors in 1907, and is one of Europe's biggest department stores. When Berlin was divided during the Cold War, its well-stocked shelves symbolized the capitalism and consumerism of the West, a stark contrast to life in the communist East.

As well as problems caused by the crisis in Signa, it has suffered like other department stores as customers increasingly choose to shop online. Signa — which owns the Chrysler building in New York — initiated insolvency proceedings in November, marking the spectacular downfall of its founder, self-made Austrian tycoon Rene Benko. Central Group has been a long-standing business partner of Signa.

Late last year, it also ended another partnership with the Austrian group, becoming the majority shareholder in the group that runs historic British department store Selfridges. — AFP

Business

Japan seeks to reclaim tech edge with overseas help

US pumping billions of dollars into AI, cybersecurity and chip production in Japan

TOKYO: Massive overseas and domestic investments offer Japan a chance to reclaim its tech crown, but to become a convincing alternative to China the country must embrace rapid innovation, experts say. US tech giants are pumping billions of dollars into artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and chip production in Japan, which dominated the hardware industry in the 1980s.

Google launched a regional cyber defence hub in the country last month, and Amazon Web Services is spending \$14 billion to expand Japanese cloud infrastructure. And in the latest move, this week saw Microsoft, a partner of ChatGPT-maker OpenAI, pledge \$2.9 billion to boost the nation's AI prowess. "Geopolitical tensions have made Japan a more attractive and stable partner compared to China," said Khos-Erdene Baatarkhuu, CEO of fintech company AND Global.

"Japan's tech sector, once a leader, lost ground due to a slower response to digital and mobile trends" compared with neighbours such as South Korea, he told AFP. But "now, with supportive government policies, resilient start-ups, and a potentially shifting global tech scene, Japan has an opportunity to regain its tech edge".

It's not there yet, however. Japan was ranked a lowly 32nd in the latest global classification of digital competitiveness by Swiss management school IMD. And only seven Japanese firms appear among more than 1,200 tech "unicorns" — start-ups worth

more than \$1 billion — listed by CB Insights.

A "perfection-seeking approach" and preference for "stability and gradual improvement" among businesses is partly to blame, Khos-Erdene said. "The traditional corporate culture in Japan tends to be risk-averse and hierarchical, which can stifle the rapid innovation typically seen in the software industry."

Microchip 'revival'

Masayoshi Son, CEO of Japanese tech investment vehicle SoftBank Group, has warned the country could be left a gaping "goldfish" if it ignores AI. "Wake up Japan!" he said at a corporate event in October. "I want to be on the side of evolution." Son and tech titans including Apple boss Tim Cook and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos joined Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and US President Joe Biden at a Washington dinner on Wednesday.

At a summit that day, Kishida and Biden had vowed to strengthen "our shared role as global leaders in the development and protection of next-generation critical and emerging technologies". They also agreed to work with "like-minded countries to strengthen global semiconductor supply chains" in a joint statement.

Semiconductors, which power everything from mobile phones to cars, have become a key battleground in recent years. The United States and some European countries have blocked exports of high-tech chip technology to China over fears of military use. Meanwhile, Taiwanese chip behemoth TSMC is facing pressure to diversify its production from customers and governments worried about the possibility of China invading Taiwan. TSMC opened a new \$8.6 billion chip factory in southern Japan in February, and is planning a second, \$20-billion facility for more advanced chips.

On a visit to the TSMC plant this month, Kishida said he "felt first-hand the revival of our country's semiconductor industry". Japan has spent 3.9 trillion yen (\$25 billion) in the past three years on chip-related subsidies — a larger portion of gross domestic product than the United States or Germany.

Japanese firms including Sony and Toyota are also collaborating with US giant IBM on a semiconductor project called Rapidus, aiming to mass-produce two-nanometre logic chips in Japan from 2027.

'Crossroads'

"This is a great time to invest in Japan" with the yen's value at a 34-year low, said Hideaki Yokota, vice president of the specialist IT think-tank MM Research Institute. Tech firms hope the country can become their "best partner in Asia" while its workforce boasts many highly educated engineers ready to be snapped up, he told AFP.

Established Japanese businesses, especially in the auto and household appliance sectors, provide real-world opportunities to make AI profitable, he said. But Khos-



LIBERTY: Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida with North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper tours the new Toyota battery factory in Liberty, North Carolina. — AFP

Erdene warned that Japan should not rely on its legacy as a manufacturer, given its low labour productivity and shrinking workforce.

"As CEO of a tech company, I see Japan at a crossroads," he said, with the question not if but how quickly the country can become a "producer, not just a consumer, of these transformative technologies". Microsoft plans to offer AI training to three million of Japan's population of 125 million.

Japanese and American universi-

ties are also teaming up on new technology research programmes funded by global companies such as Nvidia and Arm. "Overall, Japan's commitment to AI holds tremendous potential for economic revitalization," Khos-Erdene said.

"By fostering collaboration, retaining top talent, and learning from successful models like the US and China, Japan can bridge the AI gap and re-establish itself as a major force in the global tech landscape." — AFP

NEWS IN BRIEF

Colombia seek new IMF debt repayment

BOGOTA: Colombia said Friday it would ask the International Monetary Fund to renegotiate repayments on the remainder of a \$6 billion loan it was granted during the COVID-19 pandemic, but which is now "asphyxiating" the country's finances. Finance Minister Ricardo Bonilla said he had been asked by President Gustavo Petro to meet IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva "to look at alternatives" for repayment. A formal request will be made next week at an IMF meeting in Washington. Bogota has already settled \$650 million of the original loan, the finance ministry told AFP. Payments scheduled for 2024 and 2025 would "reduce the possibilities for investment," Bonilla said at a public event in Cartagena. "The debate is this: Do we pay the debt or do we invest? Or how do we balance the two? It is the most important macroeconomic discussion we have for 2024," said Bonilla. Petro, Colombia's first-ever leftist president and an economist by training, on Thursday accused his conservative predecessor Ivan Duque of being the "father of debt in Colombia" due to the loan taken in 2020 to deal with the economic fallout of the pandemic. — AFP

EU lender to expand defence financing

BRUSSELS: The EU's financing body said Friday it would open up lending to more technologies that can be used by militaries as Europe pushes to rearm in the face of Russia's war on Ukraine. The European Union has been clamouring to produce more weapons in a bid to continue the flow of arms and ammunition to Kyiv and keep Europe's own stocks in good health. At a summit last month the EU's 27 leaders asked the European Investment Bank (EIB) to increase its scope to finance goods that can be used for defence out of a 6-billion-euro (\$6.4 billion) fund. According to long-established policies, the Luxembourg-based bank cannot directly fund the production of arms and ammunition, and the dual-use goods it finances must have a primarily civilian purpose. "We will step up and accelerate our support for Europe's security and defence industry while safeguarding our financing capacity and highest environmental, social and governance standards," EIB chief Nadia Calvino said. — AFP

JPMorgan Chase reports profits

NEW YORK: JPMorgan Chase reported higher profits Friday on the lift from elevated interest rates and service fees as the bank's chief executive cautioned about geopolitical uncertainty and the risk of persistent inflation. Profits were \$13.4 billion, up six percent from the year-ago period, boosted by higher net interest income — the benefit from charging more for loans, subtracting the hit from paying higher interest to depositors. JPMorgan, which also cited increased asset management and investment banking fees as positive drivers, reported revenues of \$41.9 billion, up nine percent. Markets were a weak spot, with trading revenue dropping for fixed income and flat for equities. Chief Executive Jamie Dimon touted "strong results" in the period, but flagged a number of concerns even though "many economic indicators continue to be favorable," he said in a press release. — AFP

India's IT giant TCS profits up on AI, cloud contracts

NEW DELHI: Indian IT giant Tata Consultancy Services saw March quarter profits above analyst expectations, with growth in cloud computing and artificial intelligence projects, the company reported Friday.

Clouds gather over Japan's ambitious Osaka World Expo

OSAKA: One of the largest wooden structures ever built is taking shape in Osaka, but hopes that Expo 2025 will unite the world are being dogged by cost blowouts and a lack of public enthusiasm. The imposing circular centrepiece will be crowned by a 20-metre-high (65-foot) sloping canopy, designed by top architect Sou Fujimoto, known as the "Grand Roof".

It has a circumference of a staggering two kilometres and 161 countries and territories will show off their trade opportunities and cultural attractions at pavilions within the vast latticed ring. A crane hoisted a block of beams into place this week as organizers said construction was largely on schedule, one year before visitors will be welcomed.

Expo 2025 global PR director Sachiko Yoshimura maintained that global participants would be "united" by the event even though there are conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza and elsewhere. Russia will not be among the participants at Expo 2025, which will run from April 13 to October 13.

"Of course there are so many crises around the world, but we want everybody to actually get together and think about the future and sustainability," Yoshimura said. It has also met a lukewarm response in Japan, where promotion is ramping up and the red-and-blue Expo 2025 mascot "Myaku-Myaku" — billed by the official website as "a mysterious creature born from the unification of cells and water" — is ever-present. A recent Kyodo News survey found that 82 percent of Japanese companies, sponsors and others involved said "fostering domestic momentum" would be a challenge.

Ballooning budget

The construction budget has ballooned 27 percent from 2020 estimates to 235 billion yen (\$1.5 billion) due to inflation and Japan's chronic worker shortage. Some say the costs are also hard to justify when 6,300 people are still in evacuation centres and hotels after an earthquake on New Year's Day devastated parts of central Japan.

Fujimoto's "Grand Roof" alone has a price tag of 35 billion yen and has been slammed by opposition leader Kenta Izumi as "the world's most expensive parasol". The "Grand Roof" and other structures are temporary,

US Steel shareholders approve Nippon buyout

NEW YORK: The major American steel manufacturer US Steel said Friday its shareholders had "overwhelmingly" voted to approve a \$14 billion acquisition proposal by Japan's Nippon Steel, a move President Joe Biden opposes. A US Steel press release said that more than 98 percent of the shares voted in favor of Nippon Steel's buyout bid, a figure which represented 71 percent of all outstanding stock.

"The overwhelming support from our stockholders is a clear endorsement that they recognize the compelling rationale for our transaction" with Nippon, US Steel CEO David Burritt said in a statement after the vote. "This is an important milestone as we progress

The Mumbai-headquartered firm earns more than 80 percent of its revenue from Western markets.

Net income rose to \$1.5 billion in the fourth quarter, an increase of more than eight percent on-year that defied market expectations of a slowdown in the sector. TCS chief executive K. Krithivasan said the company had ended the Indian financial year to March 31 "with the highest ever order book and a 26 percent operating margin". The results were "validating the robustness of our business model and execution excellence", he said in a statement. Consolidated revenue in the March quarter rose by 2.3 percent to

\$7.36 billion. "Clients are prioritizing initiatives that reduce cost, increase business agility, improve security posture and resilience," the company said.

"AI, cloud, enterprise solutions... and cyber security led the growth this quarter," it said. Chief operating officer N. Ganapathy attributed the results to "broad based deal wins across industries and geographies", particularly "the mega deal win at Aviva" — the UK insurer and existing TCS client which announced a 15-year expansion of their partnership. The group's Indian rivals Infosys and Wipro are scheduled to report their results next week. — AFP



OSAKA: File photo shows woman walking past a countdown board for the 2025 Expo at a station in Osaka. Organizers say construction is largely on schedule in the western Japanese city of Osaka, with one year to go before visitors are welcomed under the imposing "Grand Roof" — one of the largest wooden structures ever built. — AFP

with no clear plan for them other than organizers saying they will be reused or recycled.

The site on an artificial island in Osaka Bay will be cleared after the Expo, with plans to build a resort there containing Japan's first casino. Jun Takashina, deputy secretary general of the Japan Association for Osaka 2025, acknowledged budget and regulatory "struggles" among foreign participants but said organizers would help make sure the displays are ready in time.

Among the most hotly anticipated attractions are flying electric cars, which take off vertically, showcasing the event's technological and environmental aspirations. But the vehicles — subject to reams of regulations — will be a "kind of experiment", Yoshimura said.

More than 1.2 million tickets have already been sold and organizers hope to attract 28.2 million visitors, including 3.5 million from abroad. That would be four million more than the last World Fair in Dubai but pales in comparison to the 64 million people who attended the 1970 Expo in Osaka, a record until it was overtaken by Shanghai in 2010.

toward completing the transaction," he said.

The merger deal, coming in a presidential election year, has become pulled into political debate over foreign ownership of American companies and struggles in the US manufacturing industry. Democrat Biden, who won the backing last month of the US steelworkers union, is competing against Republican opponent Donald Trump for support among working-class voters — especially in key swing states such as Pennsylvania, where US Steel is headquartered.

Last month Biden came out against the deal, saying it was vital for US Steel "to remain an American steel company that is domestically owned and operated." He did not however say he would block the deal, which has been under a federal review of how it affects national security interests since it was announced in December. Trump meanwhile said in February that he would halt the "horrible" deal if he wins a second White House term. Clearly aware of the

'Future like science fiction'

The first world fair to celebrate culture and industrial progress was held in London in 1851, with the Eiffel Tower built for the 1889 Paris World Fair. Osaka academic Shinya Hashizume, a specialist in architecture history and town planning, said he was amazed as a 10-year-old when he saw a "future that looked like science fiction" at the 1970 Expo.

The first film in IMAX format was shown at that event and visitors could admire rocks brought back from the Moon. "Those six months were extraordinary for Osaka. Simply put, the whole town was having a party," he said.

The advent of mass tourism and hyper-connected societies may have since lessened the attraction but some Osaka residents still think it's a good idea. Kosuke Ito, a 36-year-old doctor, said it would "strengthen the economy". However, Yuka Nakamura, 26, said she might be put off by adult entry fees ranging from 4,000 to 7,500 yen (\$25 to \$50) a day. — AFP

political backdrop, Burritt reiterated Friday that the transaction would "maintain the US Steel name and Pittsburgh headquarters, with even more capital to invest in Pennsylvania."

Trump narrowly won Pennsylvania in the 2016 US presidential election, but Biden was able to retake it in 2020, also by a small margin. US media outlet Politico reported Wednesday that the Justice Department had launched a formal antitrust investigation into the deal, citing two people with direct knowledge of the matter.

When asked about the report, Nippon Steel said Friday that its acquisition was "subject to certain regulatory approvals such as those regarding merger control and foreign investments in relevant countries."

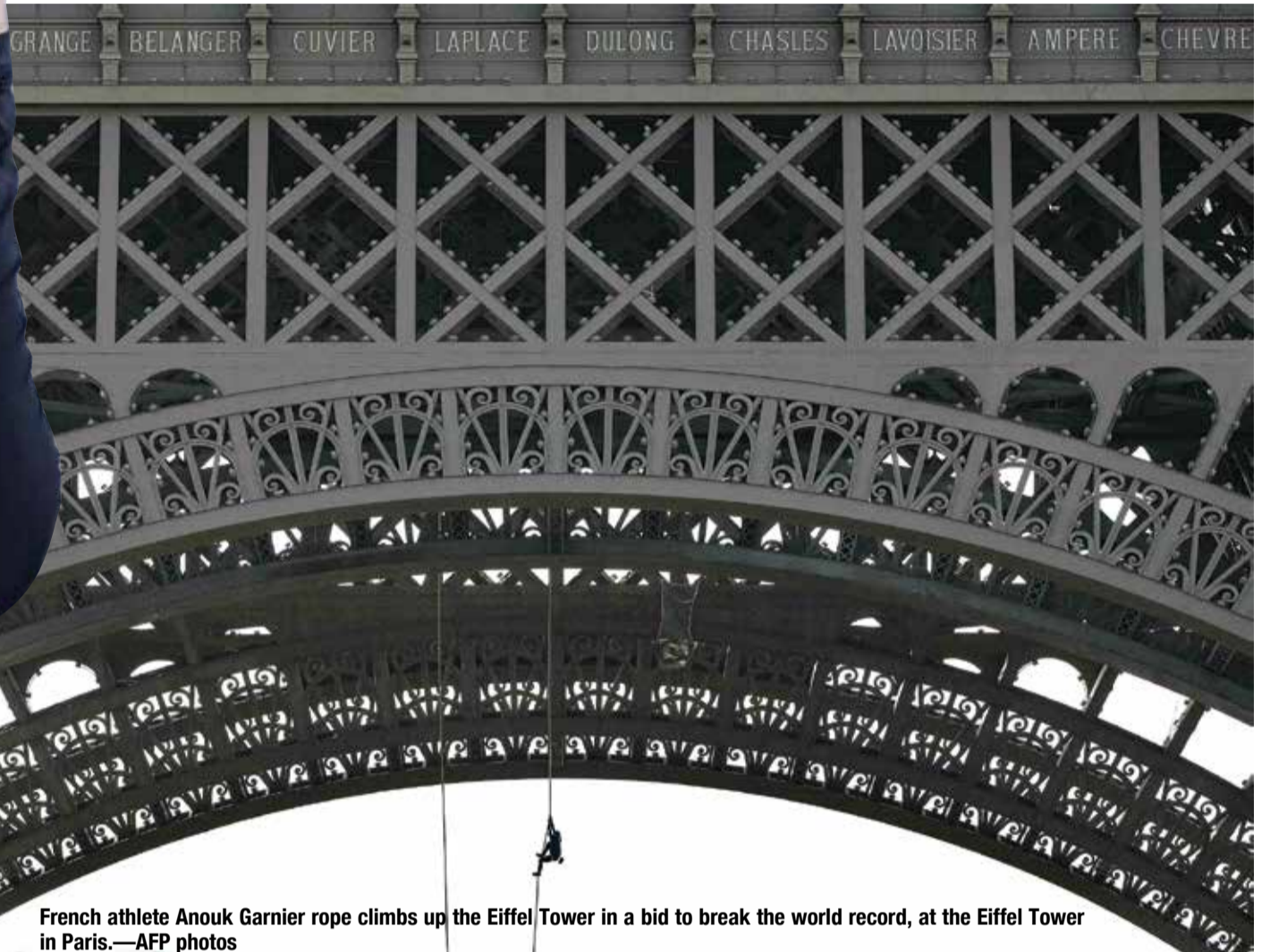
"While we are progressing through the merger control review process in the US as well, we will not comment on specific details about the status of the review process," it said. US Steel shares closed Friday down 2.1 percent. — AFP

SUNDAY, APRIL 14, 2024

French athlete breaks world record after climbing Eiffel Tower



French athlete Anouk Garnier poses for photographs as she celebrates breaking the rope climbing world record.



French athlete Anouk Garnier rope climbs up the Eiffel Tower in a bid to break the world record, at the Eiffel Tower in Paris.—AFP photos



French athlete Anouk Garnier rope climbs up the Eiffel Tower in a bid to break the world record at the Eiffel Tower.



French athlete Anouk Garnier rope climbs up the Eiffel Tower in a bid to break the world record.



French athlete Anouk Garnier celebrates breaking the rope climbing world record.



French athlete Anouk Garnier celebrates breaking the rope climbing world record.

French athlete Anouk Garnier broke the rope climbing world record on Wednesday morning after she ascended 100 metres (330 feet) to the second floor of the Eiffel Tower. "I really did it?" the 34-year-old asked through tears while throwing herself into the arms of her family, including her "very proud" mother.

Equipped with a security cord, the two-time obstacle course world champion set off just moments earlier in front of dozens of people to climb one of Paris' most iconic landmarks. The objective: Beat previous marks held by South African Thomas Van Tonder who climbed 90 metres (300 feet) for the men's record and Dane Ida Mathilde Steensgaard who peaked at 26 metres (85 feet) for the women's record.

After just 18 minutes of climbing, compared to the 20 minutes initially estimated, she finally hit 100 metres. "It is a dream come true. It was magical. If there was one thing that I never doubted, it was that I was going to do it," Garnier told AFP.

'What monument?'

It all began in 2022 when she landed the title of dou-

ble world champion for obstacle courses in her age category. Looking for a new challenge, Garnier discovered Steensgaard, a world champion in the same sport, who established a rope climbing world record for scaling the Copenhagen Opera House.

Garnier said: "I told myself '26 metres is not very long. And me, what monument could I climb?'"

She set her sights on the Eiffel Tower, a symbol of France around the world. "I never gave up because there were ups and downs," Garnier said. Convincing sponsors was particularly complicated, she added.

When Garnier finally arrived at the Eiffel Tower on Wednesday morning, she cried.

"It is a year of preparation, it is not just an 18-minute climb. There is all the pressure when you aim for big things like this. When it is really done, the emotion is crazy," she said.

As Garnier descended from her climb, she said it was beautiful to see her family so proud.

"They are the ones who instilled in me this discipline of sport, of always doing the best, always seeking excellence. It is thanks to them that I can do extraordinary

things like today," she said.

'Another 10 years'

She also took up this challenge for her mother, who has cancer, to raise money for League Against Cancer, an organisation that works to prevent cancer and support patients.

"I saw her struggling so much that I wanted to do my part," Garnier said. Garnier now wants to take a break, but it will be a short one because her schedule is already fully booked. Other than obstacle courses, which she plans to take up again after abandoning them a few months ago, she will be carrying the Olympic flame in Marseille on May 9 before becoming an ambassador for the volunteer program of this summer's Paris Olympics.

Garnier is already thinking about future challenges. "I'm 34 but my body is 20," she said. "I am in great shape and I hope to go on like this for another ten years." — AFP

'World of Warcraft', other top games to return to China

"World of Warcraft" is returning to China this summer, its developer and local partner said Wednesday, more than a year after dismayed devotees saw the hugely popular video game and other titles pulled from the market in a contract dispute. US-based game-maker Blizzard and China's NetEase said a new deal would see the sequential return of "World of Warcraft" (WoW) alongside first-person shooter "Overwatch" and spin-offs such as WoW card game "Hearthstone".

WoW's Chinese servers went offline in January 2023, prompting a wave of mourning and anger from millions of fans who poured years of their lives into building up their in-game points.

"I'm super excited, super happy about this return! I hope that the two companies will continue to cooperate, that they will win back old players and attract new ones," 25-year-old gamer Zhao Xuejia told AFP in Beijing. Another young man, Fu Tianze, said: "We were all waiting to find out who Blizzard was going to work with to be able to return to China. The fact that it's NetEase again is good, it's going to make things easier." "I'm excited about getting my account back soon." Chinese social media users were equally delighted, with "Blizzard announces return" and "NetEase and Blizzard remarry" the top trending searches on the Weibo platform.

"Today, our long-lost old friend returns, our most beloved game returns," gaming blogger "Scarlet Bunny" wrote in a Weibo post. "Come back to life, my beloved!" another fan wrote.

'Thrilled to align'

Massively popular worldwide, particularly in the 2000s, WoW is an online multiplayer role-playing game set in a fantasy medieval world where good battles evil. It is known for its immersive and addictive gameplay and players can rack up hundreds of hours of game time. Blizzard's games launched in China - the world's largest gaming market - in 2008 through collaboration with Internet giant NetEase. Under local law, foreign de-



File photo shows people playing computer games at an internet cafe in Beijing.



People play video games at an Internet cafe in Beijing.



File photo shows people looking at console games at a store in Beijing. — AFP photos

velopers are required to partner with Chinese firms to enter the market. After 14 years and acquiring millions of players in China, the two firms announced in November 2022 that contract renewal talks had failed to lead to an agreement. The companies said in their statement on Wednesday that, after continuing discussions over the past year, they were "thrilled to align on a path forward" and had struck "a renewed publishing deal".

Zeng Xiaofeng, China manager of gaming research firm Niko Partners, said that, while it was hard to "know the real story", it was likely that Microsoft's acquisition of Blizzard, which concluded last October, prompted a shift in strategy at the game publisher.

Louise Wooldridge, research manager at Ampere Analysis, said: "Microsoft is of course actively seeking growth for its games business, and China is an obvious - and lucrative - target."

"I imagine some concessions were made on the Microsoft/Blizzard side in order to appease NetEase and reinstate this valuable partnership," she told AFP.

However, Wooldridge noted that it was a "mutually beneficial arrangement" in that it would also allow NetEase to expand its international business.

'Players not playthings'

Some long-time WoW players remained bitter about the title's extended absence from China.

"The Chinese market is not Blizzard's living room where you come and leave as you want. Players are not playthings in Blizzard's hands that you take or abandon at will," one gamer wrote on Weibo, calling for a boycott.

Zeng told AFP he believed Chinese fans "would still have a lot of demand" for WoW despite the lengthy hiatus, pointing out that some had still managed to play the game on different Asian servers even while it was unavailable in China. The news will be a welcome boost for NetEase which, like many of the country's tech giants, has had a rough few years after a government crackdown on the industry.

Since 2021, children under 18 years old have only been allowed to play online between 8:00 pm and 9:00 pm on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays during the school term. — AFP



US director, producer and writer Todd Phillips poses during a Warner Bros Pictures photo opp as he arrives to promote "Joker: Folie a Deux" during CinemaCon 2024. — AFP photos



Bong Joon-ho and Robert Pattinson attend the Warner Bros. Pictures Presentation during CinemaCon 2024.



(From left) George Miller, Anya Taylor-Joy and Chris Hemsworth speak onstage.

'JOKER' pairs up with Gaga as sequel hype hits CinemaCon

Warner Bros. offered a glimpse of its eagerly anticipated "Joker" sequel at CinemaCon on Tuesday, as the Hollywood studio set out plans to build on the success of last year's blockbuster "Barbie." Warner's presentation at the Las Vegas movie summit also featured footage from a long-awaited follow-up to 1980s classic "Beetlejuice," plus Robert Pattinson promoting a new sci-fi from "Parasite" director Bong Joon-ho.

But the focus was on "Joker: Folie A Deux," Todd Phillips' sequel to a controversial original that won an Oscar for its star Joaquin Phoenix, and reinvented what is possible for superhero adaptations.

The 2019 "Joker" offered a dark, R-rated origin story for Batman's future nemesis Arthur Fleck, and polarized audiences by presenting its murderous villain as a hero, even prompting fears it could inspire mass shootings. Rumors have swirled around the sequel - out in October - which adds Lady Gaga, one of the world's biggest pop music stars, to its cast, and has been described as a musical.

Introducing a new trailer for the film, Phillips called his latest work "a movie where music is an essential element," adding that it "doesn't really veer too far from the first film" in that sense.

"Arthur is weird and aloof and distant, all these things, but he has music in him, he has a grace to him," explained Phillips.

"That informed a lot of the dancing in the first film... so it didn't seem like that big of a step, what we did here. It's different but I think it'll make sense once you see it."

The trailer showed Phoenix's Joker meeting Lady Gaga's Harley Quinn in an asylum, before the two seemingly plot their escape. Other dreamlike sequences featured the pair dancing romantically on a moonlit Gotham rooftop, and putting on an elaborate stage show. "I'll tell you what's changed. I'm not alone any more," says the Joker, in one scene. Phillips also thanked movie theater owners for standing by his first "Joker" film through controversy in 2019. It went on to gross more than \$1 billion.

'No-brainer'

The annual CinemaCon movie industry summit is an opportunity for Hollywood studios to present their upcoming films to theater owners from around the world. This year, it is being held as industry forecasts predict the annual global box office haul will shrink, in part due to the impact of recent industry-wide strikes.

Actors and writers shut down hundreds of Hollywood movie and TV productions last year, leaving gaping holes in current release calendars. The blow is just the latest in a difficult five-year period for the industry, which has yet to fully recover from the pandemic, and the rise of streaming.

As a studio, Warner enjoyed significant success with "Barbie," the top grossing film of last year, which earned \$1.45 billion. But parent company Warner Bros. Discovery, created by a 2022 merger, has seen its stock price plummet, even as mass layoffs ensued.

So the stakes were high for the studio's upcoming slate, which also included George Miller's "Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga," M. Night Shyamalan horror "Trap," and Kevin Costner's new multi-movie Western saga "Horizon." Costner promised his project, which involves back-to-back films hitting theaters in June and August, will take an unflinching look at the "tough" and "mean" 19th-century settlers who fought tooth and nail to grab their share of the



M. Night Shyamalan speaks about his film "Trap" onstage.



Australian director George Miller (center) speaks about his new movie "Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga" next to actors Anya Taylor-Joy (second right) and Chris Hemsworth (right) during Warner Bros Pictures "The Big Picture" special presentation.

US West. "That promise meant that we stepped on a whole group of people who had been here for thousands of years," said Costner. "But that's what happened... I don't pass judgment because I don't want to look down on people's resourcefulness to create what they created here in America."

Returning cast members Michael Keaton and Catherine O'Hara previewed "Beetlejuice Beetlejuice," a sequel that director Tim Burton called "a weird family reunion." And Korean director Bong made his CinemaCon debut to promote comedic sci-fi "Mickey 17" - his first film since "Parasite" became the only

non-English-language movie to win best picture at the Oscars. "With Bong doing it, it was a no-brainer," said Pattinson, who plays multiple characters in the movie, out in January. — AFP



US actor and director Kevin Costner (left) speaks about his film "Horizon: An American Saga" onstage.



English actor Robert Pattinson (right) speaks onstage during Warner Bros Pictures "The Big Picture" special presentation featuring footage from its upcoming slate.



(From left) US actor Willem Dafoe, US-Canadian actress Catherine O'Hara, US actor Justin Theroux, US actor Michael Keaton, Italian actress Monica Bellucci and US director Tim Burton pose during a Warner Bros Pictures photo opp as they arrive to promote "Beetlejuice Beetlejuice" during CinemaCon 2024 at Caesars Palace.

Paramount shows 'Gladiator 2' as Disney goes R-rated

Paramount Pictures unveiled gory first-look footage from "Gladiator 2" as Disney put on an unusually R-rated presentation for movie theater bosses at the final day of CinemaCon in Las Vegas on Thursday. In an extended trailer for the long-awaited "Gladiator" sequel, star Paul Mescal does battle in a Colosseum filled with rhinos, bloodthirsty baboons and even floating Roman warships, egged on by Denzel Washington's shadowy advisor. "It is possibly more extraordinary than the first," said director Ridley Scott, speaking via video link.

The footage was met with an enthusiastic thumbs up at CinemaCon, an annual gathering at which Hollywood studios showcase their upcoming titles for movie theater owners and managers from around the world.

Ridley Scott's sequel will hit theaters in November, nearly 25 years after the release of the original, Oscar best picture-winning historical epic "Gladiator."

All this week, promotional marble statues for "Gladiator 2" have adorned the casino floors of Caesars Palace, the Ancient Rome-themed casino and hotel in Las Vegas where CinemaCon is held.

As the previous film's main characters, played by Russell Crowe and Joaquin Phoenix, were killed off, a new crop of actors step in.

Mescal portrays gladiator Lucius, the nephew of Phoenix's villainous emperor, who was seen briefly as a child in the original film. Pedro Pascal plays a military general, while Denzel Washington's mysterious character is seen in the extended footage plotting to topple the Roman Empire.

"Rome must fall. I need only to give it a push," he says in one scene. The lavish presentation raised cheers even as both Paramount and the wider big-screen industry face uncertain times.

The parent company of Paramount - one of Holly-



Chris Aronson, President of Domestic Distribution, Paramount Pictures arrives onstage dressed as a Gladiator during Paramount Pictures presentation. — AFP photos

wood's oldest studios - is currently locked in merger talks with Skydance, a media company founded by the billionaire Ellison family. Meanwhile overall Hollywood box office receipts are expected to fall in 2024, largely due to last year's actors and writer strikes, which shuttered and delayed film productions.

On Thursday, Paramount executives also showcased titles such as "A Quiet Place: Day One," "Smile 2," "Transformers One" and "IF" - a new comedy from John Krasinski and starring Ryan Reynolds. Paramount film chief Brian Robbins even joked about the merger talks, suggesting one of his executives had launched a crowd-funded Kickstarter campaign to buy the studio.

R-rated Disney

Later on Thursday, Disney rounded off CinemaCon with its own star-studded presentation - which took an unexpectedly adult turn.

The showcase included appearances from Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson - promoting this November's "Mo-

na 2" release - and Amy Poehler, who returns in "Inside Out 2" this June. Oscar-winning "Moonlight" director Barry Jenkins previewed his animated prequel "Mufasa: The Lion King," which hits theaters in December.

Disney unveiled footage of Harrison Ford making his Marvel superhero film debut in next year's "Captain America: Brave New World."

But the family-friendly studio's presentation departed from the usual script with a glimpse of "Deadpool & Wolverine," Disney's first R-rated superhero movie.

The film sees Reynolds' potty-mouthed antihero team up with Hugh Jackman's beloved "X-Men" star. Both characters were previously owned by 20th Century Fox. But Disney bought that rival studio and its properties in 2019, and is now weaving them into its hugely popular Marvel film series.

That has resulted in a Disney superhero movie that features adult language, explicit sexual references, and several meta jokes about the studios themselves. — AFP



Dwayne Johnson and dancers perform onstage for 'Moana 2.'



Distribution, Paramount Pictures arrives onstage dressed as a Gladiator.

Italian designer Roberto Cavalli dies at 83



Italian fashion designer Roberto Cavalli attends his fashion show on late evening on June 10, 2013, in the Montenegrin coastal town of Budva. — AFP photos



Italian designer Roberto Cavalli acknowledges applause on the catwalk at the end of his Autumn/Winter 2004-2005 women's collection at Milan's fashion week 27 February 2004.



Italian designer Roberto Cavalli (right) walks down the catwalk at the end of his presentation of his creations during the second day of the Cali Exposhow fashion show.

Italian fashion designer Roberto Cavalli, known for his animal-print designs loved by showbusiness stars, has died at the age of 83, his company said. Cavalli, who founded his label in the early 1970s, had been ill for some time. He is survived by his six children and his partner Sandra Bergman Nilsson.

"The Roberto Cavalli company shares condolences with Mr. Cavalli's family, his legacy remains a constant source of inspiration," Sergio Azzolari, chief executive of Roberto Cavalli, said in a post on Instagram. The designer died on Friday at his home in Florence, Italian news agency ANSA reported.

Cavalli, who used bright colours and patchwork effects in his often revealing creations, was an extroverted art lover who wore tinted glasses and smoked a cigar. He expanded into real estate and often spent evenings in his popular "Just Cavalli Cafe," a nightclub in central Milan.

Giorgio Armani said he always had "enormous respect" for Cavalli even though his vision of fashion could not have been more different.

"Roberto was a true artist, wild and wonderful in his use of prints, capable of transforming fantasy into seductive clothes," he posted on social media platform X.

A popular image of US model Cindy Crawford in July 2000 shows her descending Rome's Spanish steps in a Cavalli-designed long slip dress depicting a tiger face. "You will be missed and you are loved by so many that your name will continue on, a beacon of inspiration for others, and especially for me," said Roberto Cavalli's creative director Fausto Puglisi.



Italian designers Roberto Cavalli and wife Eva Düringer acknowledge the applause of the audience after their show.

The Florence-based fashion group is owned by Auriel Investment SA, controlled by Dubai's Hussain Sajwani who rescued it in 2019.

Cavalli's funeral will be held in Florence on Monday, Italian media reported. — Agencies



Italian designer Roberto Cavalli poses with his dog prior to the Just Cavalli Fall-winter 2012-2013 collection on February 24, 2012.

Lana, Tyler, Doja headline Coachella where Swift rumored to appear

Hordes of music fans were arriving in California's Coachella Valley for the premier arts festival that began Friday and features headliners Lana Del Rey, Doja Cat and Tyler, the Creator. No Doubt - the group fronted by Gwen Stefani, which reached peak fame in the 1990s - will also reunite onstage for the first time since 2015. And rumors are flying that none other than Taylor Swift, the megastar currently on break from her blockbuster, billion-dollar Eras tour, could make a surprise appearance on the festival grounds dramatically flanked by the San Jacinto Mountains.

Swift is not on the lineup but speculation is a buzz that she could appear on stage with friend Lana Del Rey or with rock band Bleachers - which is fronted by Jack Antonoff, her longtime producer. It would also be the perfect moment to promo her forthcoming album, "The Tortured Poets Department," which drops April 19.

But hopeful fan gossip aside, it's far from Coachella's buzziest year. Ticket sales were sluggish compared to seasons past, although prices have remained in the \$500 range for general admission and over \$1,000 for VIP passes.

A decade ago, Coachella entries were snapped up within an hour. This year, week-end one took a month to sell out, while the second round - for which the lineup essentially remains the same - still has tickets up for grabs.

The 2024 edition follows a hard act. Last year, Bad Bunny helmed a historic year in which none of the major acts were white for the first time and where the reggaeton titan was the first Spanish-language and Latin American act ever to headline.

And another group with an insatiable fan base, K-pop group Blackpink of South Korea, was in 2023 the first top-billed Asian act. Meanwhile, reclusive R&B artist Frank Ocean notoriously dropped out of the second weekend after his initial set was inordinately delayed over a leg injury, angering many fans.

Virtual star, Latin revolution

Despite the slump in sales, Coachella 2024 features an eclectic line-up including many international acts, a consistent trend at the festival originally centered on alternative rock. Japan's famed virtual singer Hatsune Miku - a Vocaloid software voice-bank whose personification is a teen girl with turquoise hair - will make a Coachella debut after originally being booked for 2020.

The "artist" - who is not real - began as a virtual instrument in 2007, and has grown into a cultural icon, touring since 2014.

The stage production will include visuals and a live band.



Cuban singer-songwriter Cimafunk performs onstage in the Gobi Tent during the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California. — AFP photos



Colombian singer Shakira performs with Argentine record producer and songwriter Bizarrap on the Sahara Stage.

"We have no idea what to expect from the crowd...and the crowd doesn't know what to expect," said Riki Tsuji, who is on the business team of Crypton Future Media, the company behind Hatsune Miku.

"I'm sure we're going to have a ton of people who... have probably never heard of Hatsune Miku before," Tsuji told AFP.

The Grammy-nominated Cimafunk will become the first Cuban-born artist to ever play Coachella, bringing his brand of Afro-Cubano funk inflected with disco and horns to the desert.

He is among the plethora of Latin acts that also include Puerto Rico's fast-rising star Young Miko along with Peso Pluma, the Mexican superstar who broke into the global mainstream with a string of hits over the past year. Both are among the artists who have collaborated with Argentina's Bizarrap, one of the most streamed Latin American artists in the world whose recording partnerships have also included Shakira and Residente.

Saint Levant, the Jerusalem-born artist of Palestinian, Algerian, French and Serbian origins - who spent much of his childhood in Gaza - will take the stage after finding fame across social media, including for his 2023 hit "From Gaza With Love." — AFP



Mexican singer Peso Pluma performs on the Coachella Stage.

Coppola's 'Megalopolis' among entries for Cannes Film Festival



Festival General Delegate Thierry Fremaux holds a press conference to announce the official selection of the 77th edition of the Cannes Film Festival, at the UGC Normandie cinema in Paris. — AFP

Legendary director Francis Ford Coppola will return to the Cannes Film Festival with his long-awaited epic "Megalopolis", 45 years after winning a Palme d'Or for "Apocalypse Now", organizers said, announcing a line-up that includes major names of world cinema.

The 77th edition of the festival on the French Cote d'Azur, considered the most prestigious in the film industry, runs from May 14 to 25. This year's competition for the Palme d'Or, the festival's top prize, includes another team-up between Emma Stone and Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos - "Kinds of Kindness" - just weeks after Stone's Oscar win for their Frankenstein-style satire "Poor Things".

"The Apprentice", a biopic about the early years of Donald Trump by Iran-born director Ali Abbasi, is also expected to draw attention. But all eyes are likely to be on Coppola's "Megalopolis", marking the return of "The Godfather" director to Cannes at the age of 85. He has twice won the Palme d'Or - for "The Conversation" (1974) and, controversially, for "Apocalypse Now" (1979), which was not even finished when it premiered at the festival. He has self-funded "Megalopolis", said to be a Roman political drama transplanted to modern-day New York, starring Adam Driver, Forest Whitaker and other stars. "We are overjoyed that he has done us the honour of coming to present this film," festival director Thierry Fremaux told reporters.

Gerwig's choice

This year's jury is led by "Barbie" director Greta Gerwig, who "embodies perfectly the soul of the festival", said Cannes president Iris Knobloch.

Only 19 entries of the main competition were announced Thursday - there are usually around 22 - though more may be added.

Among the more intriguing entries is "Emilia Perez", a musical comedy about a Mexican cartel boss undergoing a sex-change operation, with popstar-actor Selena Gomez in a supporting role. It is the latest unlikely creation from Palme-winning French director Jacques Audiard.

Writer-director Paul Schrader reunites with his "American Gigolo" star Richard Gere for "Oh Canada", and Oscar-winner Paolo Sorrentino pens another love letter to his native Naples with "Parthenope", starring Gary Oldman.

Canadian horror maestro David Cronenberg returns with what is billed as his most personal film yet, "The Shrouds", with Vincent Cassel.

Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov is to tell the true story of a radical Soviet poet "who became a bum in New York, a sensation in France, and a political antihero in Russia" in "Liminov: The Ballad of Eddie". — AFP



Argentine record producer and songwriter Bizarrap performs on the Sahara Stage.



US singer Sabrina Carpenter performs on the Coachella Stage.



Colombian singer Shakira performs with Argentine record producer and songwriter Bizarrap on the Sahara Stage.

Sports

Osaka not needed as Japan reach BJK Cup finals for the first time

Emerging teen powers Australia past Mexico into BJK Cup finals

TOKYO: Naomi Osaka was not required to play after team-mate Nao Hibino sent Japan to their first Billie Jean King Cup finals Saturday in a 3-1 qualifying win over Kazakhstan. Former world number one and four-time Grand Slam winner Osaka was appearing at the competition for the first time since 2020 and won her opening singles game on Friday.

But she did not need to play a second time after Hibino clinched Japan's spot in November's finals in Seville with a hard-fought 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (9/7) win over world number 50 Yulia Putintseva. "I didn't play today but it's been an absolute pleasure to be a part of this team," Osaka said in an on-court interview.

"Nao, you saved us"

Osaka, who returned to tennis late last year after giving birth, was appearing in Japan for the first time since playing at the Pan Pacific Open in September 2022. She beat Putintseva 6-2, 7-6 (7/5) on Friday, hitting 15 aces and no double faults to stake Japan to a 2-0 lead.

Hibino said Osaka had brought presents for her Japan teammates and had been an important presence in the dressing room. But it was Hibino who took centre stage on the second day's play, fending off four straight match points for Putintseva before coming back to win the third-set tiebreaker.

"I started wondering if it was OK for me to win my match — there were a lot of fans looking forward to watching Osaka," laughed world number 79 Hibino. "It was mixed emotions but I really wanted to clinch the win." It was Hibino's second singles victory of the tie after dispatching Anna Danilina 6-1, 6-0 in under an hour on the opening day.

"I was playing against someone who I have strug-

gled against so I wasn't sure if I could win," said Hibino. "But the crowd really raised the voltage towards the end of the final set and I wanted to experience what it would be like to win in that atmosphere."

Kazakhstan salvaged a consolation point from the doubles dead rubber when Danilina and Zhibek Kulanbayeva beat Shuko Aoyama and Ena Shibahara 7-6 (9/7), 3-6, 11-9. Kazakhstan were without world number four Elena Rybakina, who lost in the final of the Miami Open last month.

Meanwhile, Australia surged into the Billie Jean King Cup finals Saturday with a 4-0 victory over Mexico, handing Grand Slam champion Samantha Stosur a winning start to her reign as captain. The seven-time champions took a commanding 2-0 lead into day two at Brisbane's Pat Rafter Arena, allowing Stosur to rest Arina Rodionova and hand a debut to 18-year-old Taylah Preston.

She seized the opportunity with both hands, sweeping past the experienced Marcela Zacarias, 12 years her senior, 6-1, 6-1 to put the tie beyond Mexico's reach. Daria Saville and Ellen Perez rubbed salt in the wounds by beating Mexican duo Jessica Hinojosa Gomez and Maria Fernanda Navarro 6-3, 6-1 in the dead rubber doubles. "I'm just trying not to cry at the moment, to be honest," said Preston.

"It's a very, very amazing feeling and so grateful for the opportunity from Sam and the rest of the team to be able to play and close out the tie." Zacarias was bidding to bank her 22nd Billie Jean King Cup match win and claim sole ownership of the record by a Mexican player. But she was no match for the emerging teenager, who made her WTA Tour main-draw debut at the 2022 Rosmalen Grass Court Championships as a qualifier before an injury derailed her progress. An



TOKYO: Japan's Nao Hibino hits a return to Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva during their women's singles match of the Billie Jean Cup tennis qualifying tie between Japan and Kazakhstan in Tokyo on April 13, 2024. — AFP

aggressive Preston powered through the first set in 37 minutes and kept the momentum going with a break for 2-1 in the second set.

Zacarias rolled her ankle midway through the first set and there was no way back as she struggled with the injury, in tears after being beaten. Stosur, who was pivotal as a player to Australia reaching the tournament decider in 2019 and 2022, said she

always had faith in Preston. "What a performance today, incredible for a debut," she said. "Obviously very happy to get the win here. 'I just said to Tay, 'we're all behind you, we all believe in you, enjoy the moment and play the way we know you can play.'" While Australia booked their place at November's finals in Seville, Mexico must now contest the play-offs in the same month. — AFP

Jake shines on IPL debut as Delhi thrash Lucknow

LUCKNOW: Jake Fraser-McGurk smashed a half-century on his Indian Premier League debut as Delhi Capitals thrashed Lucknow Super Giants by six wickets on Friday to reignite their hopes in the money-spinning T20 competition.

Fraser-McGurk, who had celebrated his 22nd birthday on Thursday, shared a 77-run partnership for the third wicket with captain Rishabh Pant (41) to help Delhi overhaul Lucknow's 167-7 with 11 balls to spare. Delhi moved to ninth in the 10-team contest after registering only their second victory from six outings. Lucknow, who came into the match with three wins out of four, are now placed fourth. "Spent five-six games on the sidelines itching to get out there," said Fraser-McGurk.

"I'm so happy to be here, different world in terms of cricket. Never seen anything like it, to be able to savour eight weeks, hopefully more, is amazing." Delhi lost opener David Warner early with the Australian dragging a ball from Yash Thakur on to his stumps soon after



LUCKNOW: Lucknow Super Giants' wicketkeeper and captain KL Rahul (L) stumps out his Delhi Capitals' counterpart Rishabh Pant during the Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 cricket match between Lucknow Super Giants and Delhi Capitals at the Ekana Cricket Stadium in Lucknow. — AFP

he was attended to by the physio for a blow he took on his knuckles. Prithvi Shaw (32) was caught brilliantly by Nicholas Pooran at deep midwicket off Ravi Bishnoi but Pant and Fraser-McGurk steadied the innings with their stand. Fraser-McGurk, who went unsold in the IPL

auction but came in as a replacement for Lungi Ngidi, hit Krunal Pandya for three huge sixes in a row in one over to underline his power-hitting prowess.

The Australian's 55-run knock, studded with five sixes and two fours, came to an end when he holed out to Arshad Khan, but by then Delhi needed just 28 runs off 32 balls. Pant went past 3,000 IPL runs before being stumped off Bishnoi for 41 off 24 balls including two sixes and four boundaries.

"We were about 15-20 runs short, we should've capitalized to get to 180," said Lucknow skipper K.L. Rahul. "McGurk was very unknown. We've watched a lot of videos of him but he hit the ball really well, credit to him."

Earlier, Lucknow were off to a fine start after electing to bat but they stumbled after the powerplay, losing two wickets in two balls to left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav (3-20). Yadav, 29, had missed Delhi's last two matches due to an injury. The slow bowler struck to send back Rahul (39 off 22 balls).

Rahul tried to slash the ball which was turning away and a Delhi review confirmed a nick. Lucknow were tottering at 94-7 in the 13th over but Ayush Badoni top-scored with an unbeaten 35-ball 55 and shared 73 runs for the eighth wicket with Arshad Khan (20 not out) to ensure a fighting total on the board. It was the first half-century this IPL season for Badoni, who hit one six and five fours. — AFP

Olympic triple jump champion Rojas out of Paris Games

CARACAS: Reigning Olympic women's triple jump champion Yulimar Rojas said on Friday she had injured her Achilles tendon and will miss the Paris Games. The 28-year-old Venezuelan said she had torn her Achilles during a training jump in Spain and had undergone surgery in Madrid on Thursday.

"My heart is broken and I want to say sorry that I will not be able to take part in Paris 2024," said Rojas in a statement on her social media accounts. In the statement, accompanied by a picture of her in a hospital bed, Rojas said that as she landed from the training jump, "I felt an intense pain, which has been diagnosed as an injury to the left Achilles tendon".

Rojas won the silver medal at the 2016 Rio Olympics and then took the Olympic title at the Covid-delayed Tokyo Games in 2021. She dramatically won the fourth of her outdoor world titles in Budapest last year with her last-round leap, moving from eighth place to gold medal position with a winning jump of 15.08m. Rojas is also the world record holder in the event with a jump of 15.74m in 2022.

She was voted the World Athlete of the Year for women's field events last year and would have been a hot favourite to retain her Olympic title in Paris. "Today I feel very emotionally affected about not being able to defend my Olympic title... but I must stop, take that in, recover and return with a lot of strength to continue to fly together," Rojas said in a message to her fans.

The Paris Olympics take place from July 26 to August 11. In Venezuela, Rojas is a national heroine. Her face appears on huge frescoes, photos adorn many walls and commercials featuring the star athlete on television are a common feature.

She is the only woman and the only track and field athlete to win Olympic gold for Venezuela, which has three male champions in other sports. Among them, Ruben Limardo, a fencing gold medallist in London in 2012, said Rojas remains an inspiration to the country ahead of the Paris Olympics.

"Yuli, every step we take, we will do so in thinking that you are with us in body, soul and heart. Warrior, you can rise and fly again," he said. Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro added: "All my love, my solidarity, my support. We love you and we know your commitment and your discipline. You are a warrior of life, an example for young people." — AFP



MADRID: This handout picture posted on Venezuela's Olympic champion Yulimar Rojas X social media account on April 12, 2024 shows Rojas recovering after surgery in a hospital bed in Madrid, Spain. Olympic track and field champion Yulimar Rojas announced on April 12, 2024 that she will miss the Paris 2024 Olympic Games after suffering an injury to her "left Achilles tendon". — AFP



WELLINGTON: Hurricanes' Peter Lakai (2nd L) runs with the ball during the Super Rugby match between the Hurricanes and Chiefs at Sky Stadium in Wellington on April 13, 2024. — AFP

Perenara equals rugby record as Hurricanes win

WELLINGTON: Scrum-half TJ Perenara moved level as the most prolific try-scorer in Super Rugby history as his competition-leading Wellington Hurricanes beat the Waikato Chiefs 36-23 on Saturday. The Hurricanes maintained their perfect seven-from-seven start to the season, out-scoring the visitors five tries to two in Wellington, including a brace to veteran All Black Perenara. The 32-year-old crossed once in each half to take his Super Rugby career tally to 62 tries. It is the same figure as his former Hurricanes team-mate Julian Savea, who scored a try on Friday for the victorious Moana Pasifika against the Queensland Reds.

A bonus point win pushed the Hurricanes five points clear of the second-placed Auckland Blues and ACT Brumbies as they continued the high-speed style that has created 38 tries. Wet conditions didn't slow them, going 10-0 up in the first quarter after Perenara bagged his opening try. Impressive loose forward Brayden Iose crossed to put his team 17-7 ahead but the Chiefs dominated the middle section of the game, scoring 16

unanswered tries. With his team trailing by six, Perenara's second try sparked a storming Hurricanes finish, including five-pointers to winger Kini Naholo and powerhouse hooker Asafo Aumua.

Hurricanes captain Brad Shields said his team's depth swung the contest their way over the closing stages. "It's not often you can roll a bench on that changes a game like that," he said. "Each week now, our impact players are taking our game to another level."

Backs Cortez Ratima and Emoni Narawa crossed for the Chiefs while fly-half Damian McKenzie landed 13 points with the boot. Last year's beaten finalists suffered their third loss from eight games and skipper Luke Jacobson said they gave the competition leaders too many opportunities.

"The Hurricanes played some really good footy and put a lot of pressure on us," he said. "There were a few errors in our own half that they ended up scoring from. In the end, that really hurt us."

In Melbourne, the Rebels banked only their second win against New Zealand opposition in 17 matches, and their first in two years, when they beat the Otago Highlanders 47-31. Young winger Darby Lancaster starred with a hat-trick.

Kevin Foote's side went to the break with a 26-10 advantage and kept their composure in the second half to secure a bonus point victory that propelled them up to fourth on the ladder behind the Brumbies. — AFP

Adoring Augusta cheers Tiger into another Masters

AUGUSTA: Tiger Woods battled his way to a record 24th straight cut at the Masters on Friday with a dastardly wind conspiring against him but an adoring crowd cheering him through a marathon 23 holes.

For five-time Masters champion Woods, now 48, the milestone of surpassing Gary Player and Fred Couples' streak of 23 straight cuts made was no doubt a matter of some pride. But despite his age, and more significantly the many injuries and surgeries that have taken their toll on his body, Woods remains the supreme competitor and his thoughts quickly turned to his goals for the weekend.

"It means I have a chance going into the weekend. I'm here, I have a chance to win the golf tournament," he said, when asked of the significance of his achievement. Woods is on one-over 145 after two rounds, six strokes off the lead and with plenty to do if he truly is to get into contention for Sunday.

For the most, Tiger was solid rather than spectacular but at times in his second round, with an excited crowd backing him, the atmosphere of his heyday was back.

Crowds swarmed around him on the tee, rushed down the sides of the fairways to grab a look at his approach shots and the galleries around the greens were packed on every hole he played.

It certainly could have been a final round on Sunday around Amen Corner, holes 11 through 13, where spectators peeked over shoulders for a glance of his putts amid the whiff of freshly lit cigars.

Augusta loves Tiger and the feeling is mutual. "I've always loved playing here. I've been able to play here since I was 19 years old. It's one of the honors I don't take lightly, being able to compete," he said.

"The years I have missed, I wish I was able to play because there's such an aura and mystique about playing this golf course that I don't think that — unless you have played and competed here — you probably don't really appreciate."

He parred all three holes at Amen Corner which in many ways summed up his round — rock solid and resilient with some superb short iron shots.

He made bogey on the 14th after going over the back of the green and missing a nine-foot putt for par but he bounced back on the par-5 15th with birdie and saw out the rest of his round with pars.

It was a calm end to a long day after he made three bogeys and three birdies on his front nine. He hit 25 of 28 fairways over his first two rounds, his best accuracy from the tee at Augusta since 1996. — AFP

Sports

Wemby magic as Spurs shock Nuggets

Embiid scores 32 points as Sixers keep their bid alive

LOS ANGELES: Victor Wembanyama scored 34 points as the San Antonio Spurs stunned the Denver Nuggets 121-120 on Friday to upend the race for the No. 1 seeding in the NBA Western Conference. French rookie Wembanyama, who has produced a dazzling debut season in the NBA despite playing on a struggling Spurs team, was superb once again as San Antonio pulled off a remarkable victory over the reigning NBA champions. The 20-year-old from Paris led an injury-hit Spurs line-up to finish with 34 points, 12 rebounds, five assists and two blocks, underscoring his reputation as the most exciting talent to land in NBA since LeBron James.

The result delighted San Antonio's veteran coach Gregg Popovich, who saw his team recover from a 23-point deficit early in the third quarter to snatch victory. "Really proud of them, they played a great second half but they've done that all year — they don't give in," Popovich said of his team. "Obviously with a lot of guys not there, we had a lot of people step up. Victor's Victor — he did a lot of good things. But it couldn't have happened without everybody else."

"Everybody contributed, they deserved it. They should all go get a beer, or a Coke, or whatever they do." Denver meanwhile were left wondering where it all went wrong after 35 points from Jamal Murray and 22 points from Nikola Jokic.

Denver went into the game in Texas knowing that wins in their final two games would guarantee them top seeding from the West. However the loss against the

team that is bottom of the conference with a 21-60 record leaves everything hanging in the balance heading into Sunday's final regular season fixtures.

The Nuggets (56-25) are now third behind Oklahoma City, who pummeled the Milwaukee Bucks 125-107, and Minnesota, 109-106 winners over Atlanta.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 23 points while Chet Holmgren added 22 for the Thunder, who face a tricky final home game of the season against the Dallas Mavericks on Sunday. Friday's results mean that leaders Oklahoma City, Minnesota and Denver are all level on 56-25, ensuring the race for top spot and home advantage will go down to the wire.

Elsewhere on Friday, Joel Embiid scored 32 points as the Philadelphia 76ers kept their bid for an automatic playoff berth alive in the Eastern Conference with a 125-113 victory over the Orlando Magic.

Orlando could have clinched a postseason berth with a win, but instead now face a nervous finale to the season on Sunday. The Sixers have now won seven games straight in a late season run that has coincided with Embiid's return from a two-month injury layoff.

The reigning NBA Most Valuable Player finished with 32 points, 13 rebounds and seven assists to shepherd Philadelphia to victory at the Wells Fargo Center.

Tyrese Maxey added 28 points while Kelly Oubre Jr finished with 21. Franz Wagner led the Magic scoring with 24 points. In Cleveland meanwhile, the Cavaliers punched their postseason ticket with a 129-120 defeat of the Indiana Pacers. A 70-point first-half perfor-



SAN ANTONIO: Devonte Graham #4 of the San Antonio Spurs winning shot gave the Spurs a 121-120 victory over the Denver Nuggets in the second half at Frost Bank Center in San Antonio, Texas. — AFP

mance set the Cavs on the way to victory, with Donovan Mitchell scoring 33 points and Jarrett Allen 24 from 11-of-12 shooting from the field.

Cleveland improved to 48-33 with the win to assure themselves of a postseason ticket. Indiana meanwhile are locked in a three-way scrap with Philadelphia and

Orlando heading into Sunday's final round of regular season fixtures. All three teams have identical 46-35 records as they chase the final two automatic playoff places. In Boston, the top-seeded Celtics got back to winning ways with a 131-98 defeat of the Charlotte Hornets. — AFP



LOS ANGELES: Attorney Michael G. Freedman (L) talks to an unidentified man outside the Roybal Federal Building where he will appear with his client Ipppei Mizuhara (not pictured), the former translator of baseball star Shohei Ohtani, on charges of bank fraud in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

Ohtani interpreter released after first court hearing

LOS ANGELES: Shohei Ohtani's former interpreter was released on bond and ordered to undergo treatment for gambling addiction on Friday, after his first court appearance since being accused of stealing \$16 million from the Japanese baseball star to cover illegal betting losses.

Ipppei Mizuhara was led into the dock in the federal court building in Los Angeles with shackles around his ankles for a brief hearing before US Magistrate Maria Audero. The 39-year-old's court appearance came a day after he was charged with bank fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison. Federal prosecutors say Mizuhara pilfered millions from the bank account of Los Angeles Dodgers ace Ohtani to fund an "insatiable appetite" for gambling. Mizuhara barely spoke during Friday's hearing, only saying "Yes" when asked if he understood the charges against him before nodding to agree to the terms of his release.

Audero said Mizuhara could be released on a \$25,000 bond and set a formal arraignment hearing for May 9. The judge ordered Mizuhara not to travel outside the region or have any contact with Ohtani. Mizuhara had already surrendered his passport, defense attorney Michael Freedman said.

He was also ordered not to engage in any form of gambling, and was instructed to begin treatment for gambling addiction — something Freedman said his client "fully intends to do." The New York Times reported this week that Mizuhara was in negotiations with federal prosecutors over a possible plea deal in connection with the case. Following Friday's hearing, Freedman issued a statement on Mizuhara's behalf in which he apologized and indicated a desire to reach a swift resolution to the case. "He wishes to apologize to Mr. Ohtani, the Dodgers, Major League Baseball, and his family," Freedman said in the statement issued on Mizuhara's behalf. — AFP

Kuwait ready for ice hockey championship

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The Ice Hockey World Championship Kuwait, Division IV will start Tuesday with the participation of Mongolia, Indonesia, Malaysia and host country Kuwait, as matches will be held at the Winter Sports Club Hall in Bayan area.

Chairman of the organizing committee, Club Chairman Fuhaid Al-Ajmi said the Championship enjoys total supervision by International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) technically, officially and organizationally as it has a significant importance because it promotes the winner to level III of this international championship. Al-Ajmi said IIHF officials, referees and participating teams will start arriving Sunday



Fuhaid Al-Ajmi

(today) and Monday, as matches will start Tuesday with a match between Mongolia and Indonesia followed by a match between the Blues of Kuwait and Malaysia.

Al-Ajmi said Kuwait's team is ready and well prepared for the championship following intense training and a camp in Dubai, UAE during which there were several friendly matches. He urged fans to support Kuwait national team, as he appreciated the support of the Public Authority for Sport.



AINTREE: Jockey Paul Townend on I Am Maximus clear The Chair to go on and win the Grand National Steeple Chase on the final day of the Grand National Festival horse race meeting at Aintree Racecourse in Liverpool, north-west England, on April 13, 2024. — AFP

I Am Maximus gives Townsend maiden Grand National win

AINTREE: I Am Maximus added the Grand National to his Irish National win last year to give trainer Willie Mullins his second victory in the world's greatest steeplechase at Aintree on Saturday. Paul Townend termed himself "a lucky boy" after he steered the co-favourite to an ultimately easy win in an Irish 1-2-3 with Delta World second and Minella Indo third. Whilst Mullins won with Hedgehunter in 2005 it was

Townend's first taste of victory in the historic race. "What an unbelievable race and an unbelievable horse," said Townend. "It is a bit surreal, to be honest. I ended up being first to the first and got to the Melting Road and he backed back."

"He got careful on the second circuit but I was trying to conserve energy. I didn't get the clearest run between the second-last and last." He added: "I had the ones in front of me in my sights and he responded like I thought he would." Townend and Mullins add the Grand National to their Cheltenham Gold Cup success with Galopin des Champs in March but for the jockey this was vastly different. "Gold Cups and Grade Ones are special but Grand Nationals are different. You need so much luck. I am a lucky boy." — AFP

Today's Matches		
ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE		
Liverpool v Crystal Palace	16:00	beIN Sports HD 1 beIN Sports HD 1 English
West Ham United v Fulham	16:00	beIN Sports HD 2
Arsenal v Aston Villa	18:30	beIN Sports HD 1 beIN Sports HD 1 English
SPANISH LEAGUE		
Las Palmas v Sevilla	15:00	beIN Sports HD 3 beIN Sports Fr 4 HD max
Granada v Deportivo Alaves	17:15	beIN Sports HD 3
Athletic de Bilbao v Villarreal	19:30	Premier Sports 1 HD beIN Sports HD 3 beIN Sports Fr 6 HD max
Real Sociedad v Almeria	22:00	beIN Sports HD 3 beIN Sports HD 1 English beIN Sports 2 FR
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE		
Napoli v Frosinone Calcio	13:30	AD SPORT'S Premium 1 beIN Sports 2 FR
US Sassuolo v AC Milan	16:00	AD SPORT'S Premium 1 beIN Sports 2 FR
Udinese v Roma	19:00	AD SPORT'S Premium 1 beIN Sports Fr 5 HD max
Inter Milan v Cagliari	21:45	AD SPORT'S Premium 1 beIN Sports 2 FR
GERMAN BUNDESLIGA		
SV Darmstadt 98 V Freiburg	16:30	beIN Sports HD 6 beIN Sports Fr 6 HD max beIN Sports HD 4 TR
Bayer 04 v Werder Bremen	18:30	beIN Sports HD 5 beIN Sports FR HD 2 beIN Sports HD 4 TR
FRENCH LEAGUE 1ST DIV		
Le Havre v Nantes	14:00	beIN Sports HD 4 beIN Sports Max 1 HD
Clermont v Montpellier	16:00	beIN Sports HD Xtra 1
Lyon v Stade Brestois	21:45	beIN Sports HD 4 beIN Sports HD 4 TR

Classifieds

Clinics & Hospitals

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khalidiya	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, the undersigned **John De Cruz**, holder of Indian Passport number S2393254, having permanent address house No. 0863/T, ward No.VIII, Santemol, Raia, Salcete, South Goa-403720, India, residing in Kuwait at present hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as John Da Cruz. Hereafter, in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by the name John Da Cruz

(#5193) 09/04/2024

I, the undersigned **Maura Jude De Sa**, holder of Indian Passport number W7982808, having permanent address house No. 0863/T, ward No.VIII, Santemol, Raia, Salcete, South Goa-403720, India, has changed my name from Maura Jude De Sa Da Cruz to Maura Jude De Sa. Hereafter, in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by the name Maura Jude De Sa.

(#5193) 09/04/2024

Automated enquiry about the Civil ID card is 1889988

Automated enquiry about the Civil ID card is 1889988

Man City go top of Premier League

Newcastle hit Tottenham for four to enliven Champions League race



MANCHESTER: Luton Town's Dutch midfielder #14 Tahith Chong (L) is fouled by Manchester City's English defender #82 Rico Lewis (R) during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Luton Town at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester. — AFP

MANCHESTER: Manchester City moved to the top of the Premier League as lowly Luton were eased aside 5-1 at the Etihad, while Newcastle thrashed Tottenham 4-0 on Saturday. Amid a gruelling schedule, Pep Guardiola could hardly have wished for a kinder fixture in between the two legs of his side's Champions League quarter-final against Real Madrid.

Guardiola made six changes from a thrilling 3-3 draw in the Spanish capital on Tuesday and City seemed set for a stress-free afternoon from the moment they opened the scoring after just two minutes. Erling Haaland's shot deflected off the unfortunate Daiki Hashioka into his own net.

Yet the floodgates refused to open as the English champions had to wait until after the hour mark before making the points safe when Mateo Kovacic smashed

in Julian Alvarez's cross at the edge of the box.

Haaland scored five then the sides met in the FA Cup in February. The Norwegian had to settle for just one time this time when scored from the penalty spot for his 20th Premier League goal of the season.

Ross Barkley netted a late consolation for Luton but they have just five games left to save their top-flight status. Jeremy Doku fired into the far corner after jinking through the Luton defence before Josko Gvardiol scored his second goal in a week after opening his City account in Madrid.

Victory takes City two points clear of Arsenal and Liverpool, who both have a game in hand, and are in action on Sunday. Liverpool host Crystal Palace at Anfield looking to bounce back from their shock Europa League defeat to Atalanta. Arsenal entertain

Aston Villa, who moved back into the top four without kicking a ball on Saturday thanks to Tottenham's trouncing at St. James' Park.

Isak double

Alexander Isak scored twice, while Anthony Gordon and Fabian Schar were also on target as the Magpies moved up to sixth and kept their slim chances of Champions League football next season alive. Newcastle are 10 points adrift of Tottenham and Villa with six games remaining but have the far easier run-in.

"We've just got to keep doing our bit which is trying to win every game," said Newcastle boss Eddie Howe. "We're hopefully returning to somewhere near our best and we've got to keep head-

ing in that direction." Manchester United can move back above Newcastle into sixth with victory away to Bournemouth later on Saturday. At the bottom of the table, Nottingham Forest edged one point clear of the bottom three after a thrilling 2-2 draw against Wolves.

Matheus Cunha struck twice for the visitors at the City Ground to deny Forest a vital three points after goals from Morgan Gibbs White and Danilo had put them 2-1 in front. Brentford's first win in 10 games pulled the Bees seven points clear of the drop zone as Ollie Arblaster's own goal and Frank Onyeka earned a 2-0 victory over Sheffield United.

Burnley's chances of survival are fading fast after a 1-1 draw at home to Brighton left them still second bottom, six points adrift of safety. — AFP



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's English forward #09 Harry Kane and Cologne's Danish midfielder #22 Jacob Christensen vie for the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match between FC Bayern Munich and 1 FC Cologne in Munich. — AFP

Bayern beat Cologne to delay Leverkusen title party

MUNICH: Bayern Munich defender Raphael Guerreiro struck a brilliant second-half goal and Thomas Mueller scored late to beat Cologne 2-0 on Saturday, delaying Bayer Leverkusen's Bundesliga title party to Sunday at the earliest.

Bayern's win means Xabi Alonso's Leverkusen, who are 13 points clear of the Bavarians, need to beat Werder Bremen at home on Sunday to lift the Bundesliga trophy for the first time. Bayern coach Thomas Tuchel made seven changes to his side ahead of Wednesday's quarter-final second leg against Arsenal, with Harry Kane and Mathys Tel hitting the woodwork in the first half.

Former Borussia Dortmund player Guerreiro, start-

ing at left-back ahead of Alphonso Davies, unleashed a curling shot from outside the box which broke the deadlock after 65 minutes. Mueller added a second to seal the result in the third minute of stoppage time. Dortmund and RB Leipzig continued their battle for fourth place — the final guaranteed Champions League spot — with both winning to stay level on points ahead of their clash in Saxony in late April.

Dortmund were reduced to 10 men and made to hold on to a 2-1 win at Borussia Moenchengladbach after Karim Adeyemi was sent off after picking up a second yellow with 35 minutes remaining. Dortmund were in control after a first-half brace from Marcel Sabitzer, the second from the penalty spot, gave them a two-goal lead after 28 minutes.

Gladbach pulled one back late in the first half when Maximilian Woeber took advantage of some sleepy Dortmund defending from a corner. Adeyemi, who won a penalty on 48 minutes but had it overturned by VAR, was dismissed seven minutes later after tripping Stefan Lainer. — AFP

Griezmann strikes twice as Atletico sink Girona

MADRID: Atletico Madrid on Saturday completed a good four days as they followed their Champions League quarter-final first-leg victory over Borussia Dortmund with a 3-1 Spanish La Liga victory over third-placed Girona.

Antoine Griezmann scored twice as Diego Simeone's men moved to within four points of their opponents and pulled five clear of fifth-placed Athletic Bilbao in the race for Champions League qualification. The Basques play Villarreal on Sunday.

Atletico won the home leg of their European tie

2-1 on Wednesday and visit Dortmund for the second leg on Tuesday. Girona took the lead in Madrid with a fourth-minute goal from close range by Artem Dovbyk that took him on to a league-leading 17 goals. Griezmann responded by converting a 34th-minute penalty. Angel Correa then gave the home side the lead six minutes into added time at the end of the first half. Griezmann extended his lead five minutes into the second half, taking advantage of a defensive error to fire home his 13th league goal of the season.

With an eye on the game in Germany, the France attacker was then replaced shortly after the hour mark by Marcos Llorente. Girona's fifth defeat away from home, gives Barcelona, buoyed by their midweek 3-2 Champions League win at Paris Saint-Germain, the chance to tighten their grip on second when they visit struggling Cadiz in the last game of the day. Real Madrid, eight points clear at the top, play at Mallorca later on Saturday. — AFP



MADRID: Atletico Madrid's Spanish forward #19 Alvaro Morata is challenged by Girona's Dutch defender #17 Daley Blind (L) during the Spanish league football match between Club Atletico de Madrid and Girona FC at the Metropolitano stadium in Madrid. — AFP