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Assembly 'opener' on April 21

Govt again denies raising fuel prices after MP releases documents

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MP Saleh Ashour, the second oldest lawmaker in the National Assembly who will chair the house's opening session, invited lawmakers on Tuesday to attend the new Assembly's opener on Sunday, April 21. Ashour said the Assembly's secretariat contacted former speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun, who is the oldest member at 90 years old, to chair the opening session, but he apologized because he plans to run for the speaker's post.

As a result, Ashour officially became the lawmaker to chair the opening session, he said. Ashour said after HH the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah issued a decree postponing the opening session to May 14, the earlier decree which set the opener on April 17 became redun-

dant. The opening session is expected to be only ceremonial, since no government has been formed and no Assembly session can be held without the presence of at least one Cabinet minister.

The controversy started when an Amiri decree was issued inviting MPs for an April 17 opening session in accordance with article 87 of the constitution, which states that the inauguration of the new Assembly must take place within two weeks of announcing the election results. But HH the Amir later invoked his constitutional powers in accordance with article 106 of the constitution, which allows HH the Amir to postpone Assembly sessions for up to one month.

The postponement came after caretaker prime minister HH Sheikh Dr Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah declined an offer to form the new Cabinet. HH the Amir later named Sheikh Ahmad Al-Ab-

dullah Al-Sabah to form the new government.

Meanwhile, government spokesman Amer Al-Ajmi on Tuesday reiterated that the government has not taken any decision to raise fuel prices after MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri released documents showing that the government has indeed taken a decision to raise fuel prices by 25 percent. Ajmi reiterated that the entire issue was sent back to the ministerial committee responsible for studying subsidies and price hikes.

Muwaizri had said on Monday that a decision to raise petrol prices had been taken by the government. Ajmi immediately denied the report, insisting that the issue was still under study. Muwaizri then displayed documents, saying they were from the Cabinet and showing the decision had been taken, which was denied again by the government spokesman.

'Bad for business': Gulf states scramble to avert wider war



Zionist military spokesman Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari poses next to an Iranian ballistic missile which fell in the Zionist entity on the weekend during a media tour at the Julis military base near the southern city of Kiryat Malachi on April 16, 2024. — AFP

DUBAI: Gulf states are grappling with the widening Middle East conflict as hostilities between Iran and the Zionist entity threaten their security and ambitious plans to reshape their economies. Leaders of the resource-rich Gulf monarchies engaged in a rapid round of diplomacy after last weekend's Iranian drone and missile strikes on the Zionist entity raised the specter of a regional conflagration.

The desert countries lie across the Gulf from Iran, placing them on the doorstep of the latest crisis after months of tensions generated by the Zionist-Hamas war in Gaza. US military facilities are scattered around the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have both faced previous attacks on oil facilities by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

Meanwhile, the Starbucks Foundation and Alshaya Starbucks announced making a \$3 million donation to World Central Kitchen to help support aid efforts in Gaza. "We are deeply saddened by the mass tragedy that is unfolding in Gaza, and our hearts are with all the people affected. We are committed to supporting our local communities and our partners and, inshallah, through these donations we will provide aid and relief to the people of Gaza," Mohammed Alshaya, Executive Chairman, Alshaya Group, said.

"We are heartbroken for all the people impacted by the situation in Gaza, and the many people at risk of hunger," said Duncan Moir, president of Starbucks Europe, Middle East and Africa. "Starbucks has always been about more than coffee," the company said in a statement. "We're committed to contributing positively and supporting others who do so."

The Gulf countries share an "overall realization that conflict is bad for business and avoiding conflict comes now almost at any cost", said King's College London Middle East analyst Andreas Krieg. On Monday, Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani spoke to the Iranian president about the "need to reduce all forms of escalation and avoid the expansion of conflict in the region", the official Qatar News Agency reported.

And on Sunday, UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed spoke to Qatar's Amir and the kings of Jordan and Bahrain, state media said, while Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince

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Scramble for biometrics appointments

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: People in Kuwait are scrambling to find appointments to submit their biometric data as the May-end deadline to register looms. Two million citizens and expatriates have already submitted their biometrics, with 400,000 more to go. Mohammad Qanbar told Kuwait Times the process was smooth and organized,

expressing satisfaction with the efficiency of the staff when accompanying his maid for her biometrics to facilitate her visa renewal.

Due to the difficulty of getting appointments, some people show up without an appointment, with varying success. Ahmed Adel said he had to wait for an hour before his turn arrived at the personal identification department, but was surprised no one inquired about the appointment he had previously made through the Sahel app.

Amer Mina was also able to submit his biometrics without an appointment, but after standing for four hours at a biometrics center. Reem Al-Houli said she managed to register her biometrics at the airport. (See Page 3)



KUWAIT: People submit their biometric data at a center in Dajeej.

Heavy floods hit Dubai as Oman toll rises to 18

DUBAI: Dubai's major international airport began diverting all incoming flights on Tuesday as heavy rains lashed the city, causing widespread flooding. The world's busiest air hub for international passengers, which had been expecting more than 100 flights on Tuesday evening, earlier briefly halted its operations in the chaos caused by the storm.

Dubai, the Middle East's financial centre, has been paralysed by the torrential rain that caused floods around the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and left 18 dead in Oman on Sunday and Monday. "Due to the continued exceptional weather event currently being experienced in the UAE, Dubai International is temporarily diverting inbound flights due to arrive this evening... until the inclement situation improves," a Dubai Airports spokesperson said.

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DUBAI: Vehicles drive on a flooded road during a torrential rain on April 16, 2024. — AFP

Jordan no 'theatre of war' between Zionists and Iran

AMMAN: When Iran attacked the Zionist entity at the weekend, Jordan intercepted multiple missiles and drones, but King Abdullah II has stressed his country must not become "the theatre of a regional war". If the Gaza war raging since October 7 has created tough challenges for Jordan, it now faces the additional threat of being literally stuck in the middle of a widening Zionist-Iran conflict.

Jordan, about half of whose population is of Palestinian origin, is also a close US ally and signed a peace treaty with the Zionist entity 30 years ago. Amid the half-year-old Gaza war, Jordan's king has repeatedly voiced strong criticism

of the Zionist entity and directed his military to fly daily food airdrops to help besieged Palestinians. A strong supporter of the Palestinian cause, the monarch has described Jordan's relationship with the Zionist entity as a "cold peace".

Then, last weekend, Jordan was among a group of nations, also including the United States, Britain and France, that helped the Zionist entity shoot down missiles, rockets and attack drones launched by Iran and its allies at the Zionist entity. Jordan stressed its aim was to safeguard its own sovereignty rather than defend the Zionist entity. The government said its military "will confront anything that would expose the security and safety of the nation... to any danger or transgression by any party".

But this did not spare it from Iran's anger. Iran — which labelled its attack an act of self-defence after a deadly Zionist strike on its Syria consulate — warned Jordan it could be "the next target", a military source was reported as saying by

Continued on Page 6



AMMAN: An image grab shows Jordanian onlookers and security agents standing around the debris of an Iranian missile that Jordanian forces intercepted in the early hours of April 14, 2024. — AFP

Local

Silver is the new gold, but for the poor, expert says

Silver prices set for a dramatic rise

By Passant Hisham

KUWAIT: Silver prices are set for a dramatic rise, projected to double by 2025, as forecasted by Salah Al-Jemaz, a consumer behavior consultant specializing in the gold and precious metals sector. When gold prices go up due to global events, silver tends to follow, although usually at a lower value, according to Jemaz.

He suggested that the projected increase in silver's value could soon position it as "The Gold of the Poor." "It's the wisdom of God that there will be a commodity affordable for the rich and a commodity affordable for the poor," he said, noting how this brings a sense of justice to the world. Due to its greater abundance and lower prices, silver can often get overlooked in favor of gold. While gold remains a good investment, silver also holds great potential. However, unlike gold, which can yield instant returns, Jemaz pointed out that silver's value will become more apparent over time, at least three years from now.

He advised being patient when investing in silver, as the market is still adjusting to its dynamics. Just as it took gold years to change from being monopolized by associations to gradually becoming accessible to individuals, silver too needs time to find its place in the investment landscape. The ma-



Salah Al-Jemaz

nipulation of silver prices over the past 12 years is identified by Jemaz as the primary catalyst for its impending price surge. "With persistent high inflation rates and escalating prices across various sectors, central banks cannot indefinitely control silver prices," he explained. "Maintaining price stability in such times is simply unrealistic."

He also noted that the prices of silver will be influenced by high demand in certain industries, particularly the healthcare sector, where silver is essential for manufacturing medical technology equipment. Additionally, the transition of the world to renewable energy will increase the demand for silver, as it is a key component in electric car batteries.

The fact that silver is considered an industrial metal is the reason why many consumers are underestimating its value, but Jemaz countered this misconception. "It's a metal with a monetary value and it is considered an international currency."



In the past, gold and silver were used as money (means of exchange), and Jemaz believes they'll make a comeback as the value of paper money

declines. "This shift is particularly concerning for banks, as they profit from the interest on paper money, a benefit not offered by gold and silver."

Minister urges Iraq to resolve border issues

KUWAIT: The head of the Kuwaiti delegation at the second meeting of the Ministerial Council between the GCC and Central Asia countries, Foreign Minister Abdullah Al-Yahya, called on Iraq to enter into serious talks with Kuwait to complete the demarcation of maritime borders.

He stressed the importance of Iraq's commitment to Kuwait's sovereignty, territorial integrity, respect for international and bilateral agreements, and United Nations resolutions, especially the Security Council resolution on the demarcation of the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border. The minister urged Iraq to complete the demarcation of the Kuwaiti-Iraqi maritime borders beyond the 162 mark and to abide by the Convention and Regulation of Arab Navigation in Khor Abdullah signed on April 29, 2012.

Al-Yahya said, "We meet today to consolidate and strengthen the strategic partnership between us under the directives of the leaders of the GCC and Central Asian countries and to follow up on the outcomes of our first joint ministerial meeting." He praised the efforts made by the technical teams that held the first meetings, stressing the importance of continuous consultation in order to enhance stability, security, and prosperity. He underlined the importance of holding strategic dialogue between the GCC and Central Asian countries, which reflects a common interest in addressing threats and working to consolidate the pillars of security and stability in the region. — Agencies

News in Brief

Reckless driver arrested

KUWAIT: An Egyptian driver who appeared in a video clip deliberately colliding with another vehicle has been arrested and charged with endangering lives. The vehicle was also seized.

Expats jailed for fraud

KUWAIT: The appeals court sentenced an Egyptian to 10 years in jail and fined him KD 6 million for stealing money and forging invoices for 1,942 patients. The court also sentenced a manager at the Health Ministry for seven years with a fine of KD 30,000.

'Paperless justice' initiative

KUWAIT: The Secretary General of the Kuwait Bar Association, Khaled Al-Suwaifan, said that the "Paperless Justice" initiative launched by the association is a strategy aimed at enhancing the working process through electronic means. He said that digital transformation has become very necessary and not an option. This will preserve the rights of litigants, speed up the adjudication of cases, and reduce costs, effort, and time.

16,000 travel bans have been issued

KUWAIT: Recent data from the Ministry of Justice revealed that about 16,000 travel bans against citizens and expatriates were issued in January and February. 6,642 travel ban orders were issued in January, while 9,006 travel ban orders were issued in February. According to statistics, Ahmadi recorded the highest number with 4,321 travel ban orders, followed by Farwaniya (3,641), Hawally (2,452), Jahra (2,381), Kuwait City (1,757), and Mubarak Al-Kabeer (1,096).

Tourist spots in Kuwait



KUWAIT: Photo shows a view of the landmark Kuwait Towers in Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait Towers

Kuwait Towers is one of Kuwait's most famous landmarks. It is located on the Arabian Gulf Road in Sharq district. The Kuwait Towers are a group of three towers in Kuwait City, standing on a promontory into the Arabian Gulf.

Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre

The Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre showcases performing arts and creates a world-class theater quarter in a spacious parkland setting. The Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre is a cultural center in Kuwait, located on the Gulf Road in the capital, Kuwait City. It is the largest cultural center and opera house in the Middle East. The cultural center is part of the Kuwait National Cultural District.

Al Shaheed Park

Al Shaheed Park, located on the periphery of Kuwait City, narrates the story of a land, its history, and its culture. The park consists of 200,000 m² of greenery, featuring beautiful botanical gardens, two museums, a visitor center, a lake, walkways, and jogging tracks, making it the largest urban park in Kuwait. Al Shaheed Park is considered the most significant green infrastructure project in Kuwait and has one of the largest over-structure green roofs in the world. The park is part of the new Kuwait National Cultural District.

Boulevard Park

Boulevard is the largest touristic hub in the country, including more than 353,000 square meters of fabulous family fun in the area of Salmiya, a compo-

nent of the trade center that contains global shops, a hypermarket, and a lounge entertainment interior in addition to gardens, village restaurants, a health club, an outdoor theater, and multiple halls.

Sheikh Abdullah Al Salem Cultural Centre

Sheikh Abdullah Al Salem Cultural Centre is one of the world's largest cultural complexes housing a total of 22 galleries with over 1,100 exhibits. The complex offers a Natural History Museum, Science and Technology Museum, a Fine Arts Centre, Arabic Islamic Science Museum, Space Museum, and Theatre. The development of Sheikh Abdullah Al Salem Cultural Centre involved coordination between 96 sub-contractors from 13 countries around the world — a truly international collaboration. The Centre's facilities are gathered around a beautifully landscaped courtyard that plays host to festivals and community events and provides space for outdoor exhibits, as well as a variety of cafés and restaurants. The theatre and special exhibition spaces host an ongoing series of quality programs covering a variety of topics and themes related to the arts and sciences. The Fine Arts Centre will host an Artist-in-Residence (AiR) program which will support the development of local artistic talent, in turn, allowing their work to be accessible to an international audience.

Green Island

Green Island is a part of the Sea Front, constructed in February of 1988. It is the first artificial island.

Failaka Island

Failaka Island is one of the most famous historical

islands in Kuwait. Failaka is a Kuwaiti island, 20 km off the coast of Kuwait City in the Arabian Gulf. The island is becoming a tourist magnet in Kuwait. The overall impression of the island demonstrates that a commitment is being made to preserve the distinctive cultural, social, and environmental heritage of the island. Failaka is divided into various sections. Each section has its own uniqueness. There are tourist parks, family parks, heritage parks, sanatoriums, hotels, swimming pools, tents, and zoos, among others. There are also small resorts for tourists who choose to stay for a night or weekend. The island offers family-fun activities ranging from renting electric scooters, visiting the museum, kayaking, 4-wheeling, picnicking on the beach, and visiting the horse stables.

The Scientific Center

The Scientific Center has three main fascinating attractions, which are the aquarium, Discovery Place and IMAX Cinema.

Al-Khiran Resort

Khiran Resort is located in Khiran District, southeast of Kuwait City. Since opening its doors in February 1987, Khiran Resort has become one of Kuwait's most popular getaways. Located in the Khiran District (approximately 110 kilometers) from Kuwait City, it occupies a prime seaford stretching 1,800 meters, with an area exceeding 789,380 square meters, overlooking the Arabian Gulf. Lavish greenery, beautifully landscaped lawns, and sandy beaches surround the resort, perfectly contrasting against the sparkling blue water to create a real seaside haven.

1.06 million travelled through Kuwait airport

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) said on Tuesday that the total number of passengers during March reached 1,067,674. DGCA Acting Director General for Aviation Safety and Air Transport Affairs Abdullah Al-Rajhei said in a press release that Kuwait International Airport witnessed a decrease in passenger traffic by eight percent and a rise in flights by seven percent, whereas air cargo increased by 14 percent compared to the previous year. The number of flights operated from and to Kuwait International Airport during March reached 9,950, compared to 9,283 last year. The most popular destinations during March were Jeddah, Dubai, Cairo, Dhaka, and Doha. — KUNA

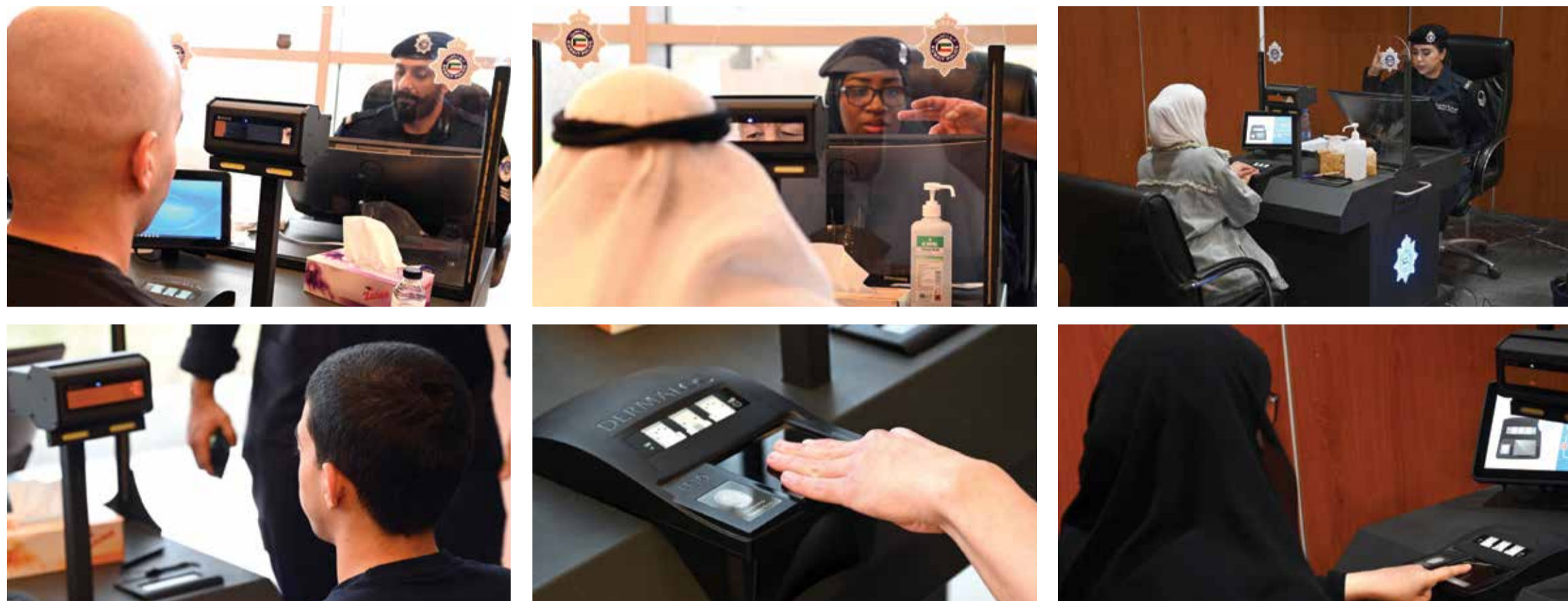


KUWAIT: Passengers queue at Kuwait International Airport before boarding in this file photo. — AFP

Local

Scramble for biometrics appointments

Residents share experiences and tips to get coveted slots as deadline nears



KUWAIT: Security officers process the data information as residents submit their biometrics.— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: People in Kuwait are scrambling to find appointments to submit their biometric data as the May-end deadline to register looms. Two million citizens and expatriates have already submitted their biometrics, with 400,000 more to go. Mohammad Qanbar told Kuwait Times the process was smooth and organized, expressing satisfaction with the efficiency of the staff when accompanying his maid for her biometrics to facilitate her visa renewal.

Hamdy Aboeldahab said he is illiterate and struggled to get an appointment, so he asked a resident of his building for help. "I felt embarrassed to ask a stranger to do it for me, but had to due to the difficulty of following up on appointments. The person who managed to make the appointment took more than a month to find one," he said.

Due to the difficulty of getting appointments, some people show up without an appointment, with varying

success. Ahmed Adel said he had to wait for an hour before his turn arrived at the personal identification department, but was surprised no one inquired about the appointment he had previously made through the Sahel app. Azzam Abdulrahim registered his biometrics through the proper process, but his wife entered the biometrics booth at Avenues Mall without an appointment.

Amer Mina was also able to submit his biometrics without an appointment, but after standing for four hours at a biometrics center. "I was tired of checking the (Meta) appointments website and the Sahel app, so I went last week to one of the biometrics centers, and after four hours, they agreed to let me in without an appointment. This is how I finished the task that was bothering me," he said.

Reem Al-Houli said she managed to register her biometrics at the airport. "One employee refused to tell me where to go and told me that there is no scanning at the airport. But I persisted

and asked another employee, who told me scanning is available in Hall 2. The queue was long, and I was late in collecting my luggage, but it was worth it," she told Kuwait Times.

As for Rima Lotfy, all the appointments she had booked for biometrics in early April were canceled due to the National Assembly election, so she had to find new appointments for her family members and herself. Regarding the tricks and appropriate times to find availability, Lotfy said she had been trying to get an appointment for months, but discovered in Ramadan that bookings opened just before iftar time, so she quickly rebooked her appointments.

Meanwhile, Abo Ali said he found an appointment for his father and himself a week ago. "I found it is possible to get appointments if you enter the Meta website after midnight," he revealed. Khaled Hassan pointed out people can get a slot five minutes before the clock strikes the hour. "For example, if you want to book an ap-



pointment at 6, visit the website at 5:55 and search for the appropriate time," he explained. "The secret is in being quick, because only one or two appointments are available, mostly in Umm Al-Haiman and Jahra."



Army launches blood donation campaign

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti army has launched a blood donation campaign under the slogan My Blood for Kuwait. The campaign was organized by the Ali Al-Sabah Military College

in coordination with the Directorate of Moral Guidance and Public Relations, the Medical Services Authority, and the Central Blood Bank at the Ministry of Health. Personnel and

employees from Ali Al-Sabah Military College, non-commissioned officers, and college students participated in the event to support the Central Blood Bank. — KUNA

Health guidelines to follow if you're going for hajj

KUWAIT: As the hajj season nears, people in Kuwait embarking on the sacred pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia are preparing for the taxing spiritual and physical journey. Here's a list of health protocols that those travelling for hajj and umrah must adhere to this year as outlined by both Saudi and Kuwait health authorities.

Vaccines

Pilgrims are required to be vaccinated against meningitis (ACW135Y) and COVID-19 with vaccines approved by the Saudi Ministry of Health. All vaccines used in Kuwait are recognized by Saudi authorities. The seasonal influenza vaccine is also mandatory, with a strong recommendation for high-risk groups such as the elderly, pregnant women, children under five, and those with chronic conditions. The pneumococcal vaccine (Pneumococcal 13 Valent) is required for those not previously vaccinated.

Hygiene and health protocols

Pilgrims must adhere to preventive guidelines issued by Saudi health authorities during the hajj to minimize health risks. These include maintaining hygiene, wearing masks in crowded areas and using sanitizers.

Medical exams

A comprehensive medical examination is required for each pilgrim, which will be recorded on a health certificate issued by preventive health



centers in Kuwait. This certificate must include detailed vaccination records and be stamped by authorized health officials.

Chronic diseases

Doctors must also advise individuals who suffer from chronic diseases that prevent them from per-

forming the hajj rituals, such as kidney failure, heart failure, chronic lung diseases, cirrhosis of the liver, dementia and other diseases hindering the performance of the rituals to postpone hajj due to the risk of them suffering from health problems while performing the rituals. It is also recommended not to take children below five years old due to the possibility of them being exposed to acute respiratory diseases that pose a threat to the child's health or other pediatric illnesses.

Food handlers in hajj caravans must undergo medical and laboratory exams to ensure they are free from infectious diseases. Workers, including food handlers in hajj caravans, must receive additional vaccinations such as the typhoid vaccine and tetanus shots according to specified intervals.

Preventive centers are tasked with submitting weekly updates to the Infectious Diseases Control Department, which include statistics on vaccinated individuals and stock levels of vaccines.

UN experts deplore the purported use of AI in Gaza

CAIRO: A group of UN experts have deplored the purported use of artificial intelligence (AI) and related military directives by the Zionists in Gaza, leading to an unprecedented toll on the civilian population housing vital services and infrastructure. They noted that more than 15,000 deaths — almost half of all civilian deaths so far — occurred during the first six weeks after October 7, when AI systems seemed to have been largely relied upon for target selection.

"We are especially concerned about the alleged use of AI to target 'family homes' of suspected Hamas operatives, typically at night when they sleep with unguided munitions known as 'dumb' bombs, with little regard for civilians who may be in or around that home," they said. They also expressed concern about the practice of bombing so-called "power targets," such as large high-rise residential and public buildings, especially in the first weeks of the war.

"Buildings that were not legitimate military targets were bombed simply with the intent to shock the population and increase civilian pressure on Hamas," the experts said. The experts underscored that between 60 and 70 percent of all homes in Gaza and up to 84 percent of homes in northern Gaza are either fully destroyed or partly damaged. The experts stated that the systematic and widespread destruction of housing services and civilian infrastructure represents a crime against humanity as well as numerous war crimes and acts of genocide.

Kuwait's Permanent Representative to the League of Arab States, Ambassador Talal Al-Mutairi has affirmed Kuwait's condemnation of the starvation and genocide crimes that the Zionist occupation forces continue to commit against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. The ambassador warned of the occupation forces continuing their grave violations of international humanitarian law against the Palestinian people, considering this a threat to international peace and security.

He stressed that the occupation authorities' disregard for the International Court of Justice's provisional measures, which demanded that humanitarian aid routes be opened without delay, "is considered a crime against humanity and an insult to the dignity of individuals, as they have the right to obtain food." — KUNA



GAZA: Palestinians arrange freshly baked flatbread at a bakery in Gaza City on April 14, 2024, amid the ongoing conflict between the Zionist entity and the militant group Hamas. — AFP

Arab Parliament calls for fact-finding committee

CAIRO: The Arab Parliament called on Tuesday to form an international fact-finding committee to visit occupation prisons and identify the serious and inhumane violations Palestinian prisoners and detainees are being exposed to. In honor of Palestinian Prisoners' Day, which is commemorated every year on April 17, the Parliament demanded that institutions like the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) put pressure on the Zionist entity to release innocent prisoners immediately.

The Parliament demanded that the occupation pay heed to and apply international law, as well as provide innocent captives with the necessary protection in accordance with the Fourth Geneva Convention. It held the Zionist entity responsible for the lives of the Palestinian prisoners, noting that the number of detainees in occupation prisons in the West Bank has reached more than 9,000 since October 7th.

The pan-Arab legislative body reaffirmed its full solidarity with the Palestinian prisoners, saluting them over their sacrifices, their perseverance in fighting for their freedoms, and the hope of one day rebuilding their home country with the city of Jerusalem as its capital. Prisoner's Day this year coincides with the dangerous escalation of brutal aggression, genocide, and ethnic cleansing against the Palestinian people by the Zionist occupation and the escalation of the extreme right-wing government against Palestinian prisoners. — KUNA



GAZA: A Palestinian youth prepares a meal while people look for salvageable items amid the rubble of buildings destroyed during Zionist bombardment in Khan Yunis, on the southern Gaza Strip on April 16, 2024. — AFP

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: The sun rises from behind the skyline of Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Burgan Bank adds birthday leaves to employee benefits

KUWAIT: In its latest bid to elevate its employees' work experience, Burgan Bank announced that all staff are now eligible for a one-day paid birthday leave. This comes as part of Burgan Bank's continuous efforts to reinforce its positive work environment by catering to its employees' personal and professional needs, reaffirming their indispensable value and central role in the Bank's consistent success.

"To many people, their birthday marks a celebration of how far they have come in life, a chance to set goals for yet another year, and an opportunity to appreciate all the people and blessings that adorn their lives" Naqeeb Amin, General Manager – Human Resources and Development for the Group at Burgan Bank, said.

"Even though it's just one calendar day from a work perspective, the personal value it holds for each individual goes far beyond just that. As a token of appreciation and a testament to our commitment to achieving a healthy work-life balance across our work environment, we decided to treat all employees to a one-day paid leave on their birthdays, separate from their annual reserve of paid leaves."

Naqeeb went on to emphasize that adequate

rest and personal quality time are directly related to the quality of work that employees deliver at work, adding that a workplace that prioritizes physical and mental health ultimately sees higher rates of creativity, ownership, and innovation. "That's why we spare no effort to recognize our employees' overall needs to better adjust our policies accordingly," he added. In early 2023, Burgan Bank announced the progressive increase of its paid paternity leave to five working days, marking the longest paternity leave in the domestic banking sector. These initiatives and more are the reason Burgan Bank is recognized as a certified Great Place to Work and listed among the Best Workplaces in Asia™ 2023, a Great Place to Work Middle East recognition.



Naqeeb Amin



Farah Al-Roumi



Hassan Kamal



Ismail Behbehani



Munira Al-Amir

Municipal Council members support new premier

KUWAIT: Members of the Municipal Council have expressed their support for Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah after being blessed with the confidence of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad, who appointed him to this important and sensitive position at a crucial moment in Kuwait. A member of the Municipal Council, Engineer Munira Al-Amir, said: "In obedience to HH the Amir and

standing with the interests of the country, we support the Prime Minister in his new duties, wishing him success in this great task. Kuwait needs its loyal men to achieve its ambition."

Council member Engineer Ismail Behbehani also congratulated Abdullah and said, "We ask Allah to help him carry this responsibility, and we hope for an atmosphere of cooperation." Council member Eng. Farah Al-Roumi also congratulated Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah, wishing him "success and God's guidance in his steps." Dr. Hassan Kamal, another member of the Council, said, "We look forward to the new government presenting a clear vision for development, achievement, and service to citizens within a realistic and implementable work program." — Agencies



Municipality launches intensive campaign

KUWAIT: Kuwait municipality has launched an intensive field campaign to remove any encroachment and buildings on state properties in all governorates. The field campaigns will be carried out by supervisory teams and will include industrial and

commercial investment zones, as well as land encroachments. Meanwhile, a team from the Department of Removing Violations in Mubarak Al-Kabeer Governorate removed six parking shades from the residential buildings after legal warnings.



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Settlers continue killing Palestinians in West Bank

Modi remains favorite as election marathon nears

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SAN FRANCISCO: The Golden Gate Bridge is pictured after Pro-Palestinian demonstrators blocked it for hours in San Francisco, California on April 15, 2024. — AFP

Pro-Palestine protesters paralyze roads across US

Demonstrators block traffic for hours in multi-city day of action against Zionist war in Gaza

LOS ANGELES: Pro-Palestine demonstrators blocked San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge on Monday, completely halting traffic for hours as part of a coordinated day of action against the Zionist entity's war in Gaza.

Aerial footage Monday morning showed stationary traffic in one direction on the iconic bridge, while lanes in the other direction were empty, with police present. Similar protests were held across the United States and around the world, after the group A15 Action called for coordinating a "multi-city blockade ... in solidarity with Palestine."

"In each city, we will identify and blockade major choke points in the economy, focusing on points of production and circulation with the aim of causing the most economic impact," the group said on its website.

Protesters blocked roads Monday in Philadelphia

and shut down highway traffic heading into Chicago's O'Hare International Airport — forcing some passengers to make their way by foot to catch their flights. Protests were also planned in Canada, Italy, South Korea, Colombia and Belgium, while the X account for A15 posted photos of demonstrations in Greece, Spain and Australia.

Demonstrators who were blocking traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge held a banner reading "Stop the world for Gaza." "We know that money is really what speaks to (elected leaders)," an organizer, who gave her name as Hayshawiya, told the San Francisco Chronicle from the bridge, adding they would stay until the police forced them out. The California Highway Patrol said on X that officers were making arrests before announcing that traffic had reopened in both directions just before 12:30 pm (1930 GMT).

Biden faces pressure

Monday's protests come as US President Joe Biden faces continued criticism from within his own party about Washington's continued support of the Zionist entity. The Zionist entity launched its punishing offensive in Gaza last October after an attack by Hamas militants resulted in the deaths of 1,170 people, mostly civilians, according to Zionist figures.

At least 33,797 people have since been killed in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory. The growing death toll has unnerved both voters and some elected officials, including Biden ally Senator Chris Coons, who called on conditioning US aid to the Zionist entity after a strike killed seven aid workers from an American charity operating in Gaza.

As the country heads toward elections in November, Biden will have to juggle the discontent among Dem-

ocrats with those in the party who support the Zionist entity, all while battling Republican nominee Donald Trump. In another protest, in Los Angeles, a few hundred people marched downtown behind a banner reading "End the siege on Gaza now, end US funding to (the Zionist entity)." The demonstrations came on the same day as the US tax deadline, protesters in Philadelphia noted. "We believe we should be funding things that support the people of Philadelphia ... things that will actually make our city safer," organizer Hannah Zellman told the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Other protests in the United States were held in Connecticut, where demonstrators blocked access to an aerospace manufacturer, and in Oregon, where a highway was shut down. In New York, protesters took to the Brooklyn Bridge and temporarily halted traffic before police stepped in to make arrests and clear the roadway. — AFP

Tightknit Assyrian community rocked after church stabbing

SYDNEY: The stabbing of a prominent bishop has rocked Australia's tightknit Assyrian community, conjuring terrors of past violence in the homelands many fled. During a livestreamed church service Monday, a 16-year-old suspect slashed wildly at Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel as he gave a sermon in Sydney, one of the safest cities on Earth.

The suspect was quickly subdued and no one was gravely hurt, but the incident incited riots that lasted hours and shattered a community's sense of peace. "For community members who escaped war-torn countries, witnessing something like that was triggering, and brought back memories they'd tried to bottle up and don't want to remember," said Ramsin Edward, a board member at the Assyrian National Council of Australia.

Since the attack, Edward has been speaking to congregants and the community, trying to understand and assuage a burning anger that left homes damaged, police cars wrecked and officers hospitalized. Many of the people who rushed to Christ The Good Shepherd Church were concerned about the safety of elderly parishioners inside — some of whom were relatives. "Communities shouldn't be afraid to go to church," he told AFP.

This sentiment runs deep for a community anchored by faith and language that have sustained it for centuries and set Assyrians apart from neighbors in their ancient homelands — modern-day Iraq and Syria.

Since Monday night's violence, religious leaders have met law enforcement and issued public calls for calm, trying to make sure nightfall on Tuesday does not bring more violence. Church parishioners on Tuesday helped clear the streets of hurled bottles and bricks, a declaration the community would overcome this



SYDNEY: Women react as they carry flowers outside the Christ the Good Shepherd Church in Sydney's western suburb of Wakeley on April 16, 2024. — AFP

spasm of hate. But Edward said some were too afraid to return. One resident, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP she was watching the livestream with her daughter when the stabbing occurred. "We don't know why this young guy is doing this. He came to God's house to kill him and he couldn't," she said.

The resident, who fled war in Iraq, said she was "scared" as helicopters had circled overhead on Monday night, people threw projectiles and smashed windows. She added the bishop was a "lovely man" and was "welcoming of all people".

"I don't come to church much because of the baby, but I see him teach people on Facebook and watch everything he says. I feel sorry about him," she said.

Online bishop

The church and its bishop have an online following of about 200,000 people — far more than Australia's Assyrian community. The bishop, born and raised in

Iraq, is a prominent conservative leader who was ordained a priest in 2009 and then a Bishop in 2011. But he is not without controversy.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, he gained support by arguing lockdowns were akin to "modern slavery" and "the death rates out of those who were vaccinated were more than the ones who died because of the Coronavirus".

He has taken stances that have been highly critical of Islam. Those comments and others like them have caused schisms within the local Assyrian community, some of whom avoid dealing with him or his congregants.

But the attack has brought unity, with the major Assyrian denominations stating their solidarity. "Our hearts and prayers are with the victims and we beseech the Lord to give them comfort and speedy recovery," said sister denomination, the Assyrian Church of the East. — AFP

Muslim student loses UK court bid over prayer ban

LONDON: A Muslim pupil lost a UK court challenge Tuesday against a top London school's ban on prayer rituals, in a case about freedom of religion in schools that captured national attention. The student, who cannot be named, took legal action against Michaela Community School in northwest London, claiming the policy was discriminatory and "uniquely" affected her faith due to its ritualized nature.

She argued the school's prohibition of on-site prayer unlawfully breached her right to religious freedom and was "the kind of discrimination which makes religious minorities feel alienated from society". The school — state-funded but independently run and renowned for its academic achievement record and strict rules — countered that the policy imposed last year was justified.

The High Court in London hearing the case was told the ban introduced last year stemmed from several dozen students beginning to pray in the school's yard, using blazers to kneel on, the BBC reported. It then imposed the new rules due to concerns about a "culture shift" towards "segregation between religious groups and intimidation within the group of Muslim pupils", the court reportedly heard.

In a written ruling, judge Thomas Linden dismissed the pupil's arguments, ruling that by enrolling at the school she had effectively accepted being subject to restrictions on manifesting her faith. He concluded that the prayer ritual policy was "proportionate" and that its aims and ability to achieve them "outweighs" any "adverse effects" on the rights of Muslim pupils at the school. Responding to the decision Katharine Birbalsingh, headteacher of Michaela Community School, said "a school should be free to do what is right for the pupils it serves". — AFP

International

Modi remains favorite as election marathon nears

Modi's prospects bolstered by criminal probes into rivals, sparking concerns about skewed vote

NEW DELHI: India begins voting Friday in a six-week election, with Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi's victory all but assured, raising concerns for the health of the world's largest democracy. Modi remains roundly popular after a decade in office that has seen India rise in diplomatic clout and economic power, as well as efforts by his government to bring the country's majority faith in ever closer alignment with its politics.

Analysts have long expected him to win against a fractious alliance of more than two dozen parties who have yet to name a candidate for prime minister. Modi's prospects have been further bolstered by several criminal probes into his opponents, sparking concerns from UN rights chief Volker Turk and human rights organizations that the vote will be skewed.

"I don't need the United Nations to tell me our elections should be free and fair," foreign minister S Jaishankar told reporters while campaigning this month. "The people of India will ensure that," he added. "So don't worry about it."

Modi, 73, has already led the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) through two landslide victories in 2014 and 2019, forged in part by his appeals to the Hindu faithful. This year in the town of Ayodhya, he presided over the inauguration of a grand temple to the deity Ram, built on the grounds of a centuries-old mosque razed by Hindu zealots.

Construction of the temple fulfilled a long-standing demand of Hindu activists and was widely celebrated across India with back-to-back television coverage and street parties. "The nation is creating the genesis of a new history," he told the thousands gathered for the ceremony, among them Bollywood celebrities and cricket stars.

'Our ability to fight'

The opposition Congress party, which ruled the country almost uninterrupted for decades after independence from Britain, is meanwhile a shadow of its former self and out of office in all but three of the country's 28 states. Its leaders have stitched together an alliance of more than two dozen regional parties to present a united front against the BJP's well-oiled and well-funded electoral juggernaut.

But the bloc has been plagued by disputes over seat-sharing deals and suffered the defection of a leading member to the government. It has also accused Modi's government of using law enforcement agencies to selectively target the bloc's leaders, several of whom are the subject of active criminal investigations.

Among them is Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, who was arrested last month and remains in custody on allegations his party received kickbacks while handing out liquor licenses to private companies. Rahul Gandhi is the most prominent Congress politician,

and his father, grandmother and great-grandfather all served as prime minister.

He was briefly disqualified from parliament last year after being convicted of criminal libel. His party's bank accounts have been frozen since February by India's income tax department after a dispute over returns that were filed five years ago. "We have no money to campaign, we cannot support our candidates," the 53-year-old told reporters last month. "Our ability to fight elections has been damaged."

'Contempt for all dissent'

Modi's tenure has seen India overtake former colonial ruler Britain as the world's fifth-biggest economy, with Western nations lining up to court a prospective ally against regional rival China's growing assertiveness.

In doing so, they have sidestepped concerns over the taming of India's once-vibrant press and restrictions on civil society that have seen rights groups like Amnesty severely curtail their local operations. Last year, the tax office raided the BBC's local offices weeks after the British broadcaster aired a documentary questioning Modi's role in 2002 religious riots that killed around 1,000 people, most of them Muslims.

Should Modi win again, his third term "will be even more characterized by contempt for all dissent", political scientist Suhash Palshikar told AFP. Gandhi has criticized the government for democratic backsliding



CHENNAI: India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, leader of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), holds the party symbol during a road show at an election campaign. — AFP

and its chest-thumping Hindu nationalism, which have left many among the country's 220-million-strong Muslim minority fearful for their futures.

But Gandhi has already led Congress to two defeats against Modi and his efforts to dent the premier's popularity have failed to register with voters. Published opinion polls are rare in India, but a Pew survey last year found Modi was viewed favorably by nearly 80 percent of the public.

A total of 968 million people are eligible to vote in the election — more than the entire population of the United States, European Union and Russia combined. Voting will be staggered over seven stages between April 19 and June 1, with more than a million polling stations across the country. Ballots from around the country will be counted all at once on June 4 and are usually announced on the same day. — AFP

Frustrated Trump vents on day two of historic trial

NEW YORK: A fuming Donald Trump began another day of jury selection in his historic criminal trial Tuesday, in stark contrast to his White House rival President Joe Biden who headed out to campaign in a key swing state. No other ex-president in US history has been hauled before a criminal court and the trial in an unglamorous Manhattan courthouse comes as scandal-plagued Trump is fighting to make a shock return to the White House in November.

Trump, 77, was angry as he arrived for the second day of proceedings in the trial, where he is accused of falsifying business records in a scheme to cover up reports on the eve of his 2016 election victory that he had an extramarital affair with a porn star.

Jury selection was expected to take as long as two weeks before lawyers even start to present their cases. "I should be right now in Pennsylvania and Florida — in many other states, North Carolina, Georgia — campaigning," Trump said as he entered court. He called the presiding judge, Juan Merchan, "Trump hating." Trump has repeatedly described the hush money case in New York as a sham — or part of some far-reaching conspiracy in which Democrats are trying to stop him from taking on Biden. But reality set in for the hard-right Republican at the trial's opening on Monday as Merchan issued the routine warning for criminal defendants that he will have to attend pro-

ceedings daily or face arrest. Meanwhile, Biden was due to tout his economic policies in a visit to his birthplace in Scranton, Pennsylvania on Tuesday — a key swing state Biden narrowly carried in the 2020 election.

Jury challenges

Merchan has also warned Trump against repeating his frequent past attempts to disrupt hearings with incendiary social media posts and courtroom outbursts. Illustrating the extraordinary nature of the proceedings, potential jurors have been told they will remain anonymous to the public throughout. Merchan said this is to protect them from possible bribery or physical harm.

But selecting 12 ordinary citizens to judge one of the most famous — and controversial — figures in the country is no easy matter. Of the first batch of 96 prospective panelists sworn in for screening on Monday, at least 50 were quickly excused after they said they could not be fair and impartial.

Nine others were allowed to leave after stating there were compelling reasons they could not serve, while remaining prospective jurors were grilled about their education, hobbies and news consumption.

Political risk

While the panel of prospective jurors filed in again Tuesday, Trump sat motionless, staring straight ahead. Trump faces three other criminal cases centered on his hoarding of top-secret documents after leaving office and his unprecedented attempts to overturn his 2020 election loss to Biden. Those trials are arguably weightier in content, but Trump has succeeded in forcing continued delays, meaning they may not start before the November 5 election.



NEW YORK: Former US President Donald Trump arrives back to Trump Tower after the first day of his trial in New York City on April 15, 2024. — AFP

In New York, the Republican is accused of falsifying business records while covering up an alleged extramarital sexual encounter with adult film actress Stormy Daniels to shield his first election campaign, in 2016, from last-minute upheaval. Although the case is on relatively minor charges, the legal and political peril is all too real. Merchan has indicated he will maintain strict discipline, preventing Trump from turning his appearances into impromptu campaign rallies.

The judge has already scheduled a hearing next week to consider whether Trump should be held in contempt for violating a partial gag order restricting him from attacking individuals connected to the case. If convicted in the hush money case, Trump would potentially face prison, but legal observers say fines would be more likely. The maximum sentence would be four years for each count. — AFP

Meta 'supreme court' takes on deepfake porn

SAN FRANCISCO: Meta's oversight board said Tuesday it is scrutinizing the social media titan's deepfake porn policies, through the lens of two cases. The move by what is referred to as a Meta "supreme court" for content moderation disputes comes just months after the widespread sharing of lewd AI-generated images of megastar Taylor Swift on X, formerly Twitter.

The Meta board picked its two cases, regarding images shared on Instagram and Facebook, to "assess whether Meta's policies and its enforcement practices are effective at addressing explicit AI-generated imagery," it said in the release. The board can make recommendations regarding the social media giant's deepfake porn policies but it is up to the tech firm to actually make any changes.

The first case taken up by the Meta Oversight Board involves an AI-generated image of a nude woman posted on Instagram. The woman pictured resembled a public figure in India, sparking complaints from users in that country. Meta left the image up, later saying it did so in error, the board said.

The second case involves a picture posted to a Facebook group devoted to AI creations. That image depicted a nude woman resembling "an American

public figure", the board said in a release. The board did not name the woman, who it said was identified in a caption on the synthetic image at issue.

Meta removed the image for violating its harassment policy, and the user who posted the content appealed the decision, according to the board. People were invited to submit comment, particularly on the gravity of harms posed by deepfake pornography and the harm it does to women who are public figures.

Deepfake porn images of celebrities are not new, but activists and regulators are worried that easy-to-use tools employing generative AI will create an uncontrollable flood of toxic or harmful content. The targeting of Swift, one of the world's top-streamed artists whose latest concert tour propelled her to the top of American fame, shined a spotlight on the phenomenon, with her legions of fans outraged at the development.

"It is alarming," said White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, when asked about the images at the time. "Sadly we know that lack of enforcement (by the tech platforms) disproportionately impacts women and they also impact girls who are the overwhelming targets of online harassment," Jean-Pierre added. — AFP



ISA TOWN, Bahrain: Civil defence rescue crews respond to an emergency call during a heavy rainstorm early on April 16, 2024. — AFP

Heavy floods hit Dubai as Oman...

Continued from Page 1

Departures will continue, said the spokesperson, who earlier warned that roads around the airport have suffered major flooding and urged passengers to use public transport. Airport operations were earlier suspended for 25 minutes before resuming. Unconfirmed images on social media showed planes taxiing across an apron flooded with standing water.

Similar scenes were repeated across Dubai and elsewhere in the UAE as the desert country, better known for its arid climate and intense summer heat, reeled from the storm. Flagship shopping centres Dubai Mall and Mall of the Emirates both suffered flooding and water was ankle-deep in at least one Dubai Metro station, according to images posted on social media. Roads and residential communities also suffered heavy flooding and many residents reported leaks from roofs, doors and windows.

Schools were shut across the UAE and were expected to remain closed on Wednesday, when further storms are forecast. Dubai's government also extended remote working for its employees into Wednesday. The Asian Champions League football semi-final

between the UAE's Al Ain and Saudi side Al Hilal, due to be hosted in Al Ain, was postponed for 24 hours because of the weather.

Some inland areas of the UAE recorded more than 80 mm of rain over 24 hours to 8:00 am, approaching the annual average of about 100 mm. The weather board "urged residents to take all the precautions... and to stay away from areas of flooding and water accumulation" in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

Both the Emirati and Omani governments have previously warned that climate change is likely to lead to more flooding. Individual weather events are often difficult to link to climate change, but scientists say that it increases both the likelihood and strength of extreme weather events. Bahrain was also hit by heavy rain and flooding after being pummeled by thunder and lightning overnight. "I like to play in the rain, but for the first time it scares me," said nine-year-old Ali Hassan, as he helped his mother clear water from outside their house in Bahrain's capital Manama.

The storms descended on the UAE, Bahrain and areas of Qatar after passing over Oman, where they caused deadly floods and left dozens stranded. A child's body was recovered on Tuesday, bringing the death toll to 18 with two people missing, emergency authorities told the official Oman News Agency. Nine schoolchildren and three adults died when their vehicles were swept away in flash floods, the news agency reported on Sunday. — AFP

Jordan no 'theatre of war' between...

Continued from Page 1

Iran's Fars news agency. Jordan's foreign ministry summoned the Iranian ambassador and demanded that Tehran stop "questioning" its positions. Ayman Safadi, head of Jordanian diplomacy, insisted that "if the danger had come from (the Zionist entity), Jordan would have taken the same measures".

King Abdullah, in a phone call with US President Joe Biden on Sunday, called for de-escalation and stressed that Jordan "will not be the theatre of a regional war". In anticipation of a possible Zionist response, Jordan's army said on Tuesday it was increasing air sorties "to prevent any airspace in-

fringement and defend the kingdom's skies".

Nimrod Goren, senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, said Jordan during the Iranian attack had "played a role that I think was larger than many expected it to play". "It definitely shows Jordan's positioning within the US-related camp in the region, which is something that is not new, but it became very clear."

Jordan signed a peace treaty with the Zionist entity in 1994, only the second Arab country to do so after Egypt, although several others have since also established diplomatic ties. Yet, as the Gaza war has raged, Jordan has also seen mass demonstrations in support of Palestinians since the Zionist-Hamas war broke out on Oct 7.

Located in a volatile region, Jordan has long established strict security policies. The kingdom borders Iraq and Syria, where the regional power Iran wields significant influence. — AFP

'Bad for business': Gulf states...

Continued from Page 1

Mohammed bin Salman talked with Iraq's prime minister. Saudi Arabia's foreign minister spoke with his counterpart in Iran, and the Saudi and Kuwaiti defense ministers held separate discussions with their US counterpart.

Much is at stake for the wealthy, US-friendly Gulf states, whose expensive economic diversification plans, aimed at securing their futures post-fossil fuels, rely on a peaceful environment for business and tourism. Top oil exporter Saudi Arabia has been the biggest spender, pledging hundreds of billions for new cities and leisure attractions as part of Prince Mohammed's flagship Vision 2030 economic transformation plan.

"Saudi's top priority is that the crisis does not escalate," Ali Shihabi, a Saudi analyst, told AFP, stressing the Gulf's vulnerability. If there is an attack on Iran, Tehran might "be tempted to retaliate against the GCC given its close proximity and wealth of tar-

gets (that are) difficult to protect". "Iran just learned how difficult it is to target (the Zionist entity) thousands of miles away but the GCC with its proximity and massive size compared to (the Zionist entity) is a different story," he added.

In Saudi Arabia's favor is its influence over the US — which is pushing it to follow the UAE and Bahrain by recognizing the Zionist entity — and renewed ties with Iran, which were resumed last year after a lengthy rupture. The deadliest ever war in Gaza had already dampened US efforts to broker a Saudi-Zionist normalisation. "Saudi will be definitely pushing for the US to pressure (the Zionist entity) for a ceasefire in Gaza and also to not respond to Iranian attacks," said Umer Karim, researcher of Saudi foreign policy and politics at Britain's University of Birmingham.

Meanwhile Oman, which is close to Iran, remains a vital conduit of mediation. And Qatar has leverage as the host of Al-Udeid, the region's biggest US military base, said Krieg. "When it comes to anything to do with the Strait of Hormuz or Bab Al-Mandeb, (the Omanis) have deeper networks and are probably the more effective mediator," he said, referring to strategic waterways in the Gulf and the Red Sea. — AFP

International



BAYTIN: Relatives mourn during the funeral of Omar Hamed, who was killed during clashes with Zionist settlers the day before, in the village of Baytin, near Ramallah in the Zionist-occupied West Bank, on April 14, 2024. — AFP



MUGHAYIR: A Palestinian inspects the damage to a home in the village of Mughayir near Ramallah after an attack by Zionist settlers on the village.

Settlers continue killing Palestinians in West Bank

UN calls on Zionist forces to 'immediately' stop supporting settler attacks

JERUSALEM/GENEVA: Zionist settlers killed two Palestinians in the occupied West Bank on Monday, Palestinian officials said. The Palestinian health ministry named the victims of the attack near Nablus as Abdulrahman Maher Bani Fadel, 30, and Mohammed Ashraf Bani Jame, 21, according to the official Palestinian news agency Wafa.

The mayor of Aqraba, Salah Bani Jaber, told AFP "dozens of settlers attacked" the nearby hamlet of Khirbet al-Tawil late on Monday. They "assaulted residents and fired at people in the town leading to the death of two citizens," the mayor said, adding that "the occupation army is still holding the bodies." The (Zionist) army told AFP "an initial inquiry suggests that the fatal shootings did not originate from the IDF."

In a statement, it said "earlier today, the IDF received a report regarding a Palestinian suspect who attacked a Zionist shepherd in the area of Gitit. "A violent exchange developed between (Zionist) civilians and Palestinians in the area. IDF soldiers were dispatched to the scene and operated to disperse the violent exchange. "During the incident, two Palestinians

were reportedly killed."

On Friday, 14-year-old Zionist shepherd Benjamin Achimeir went missing from the Malachi Hashalom outpost near Ramallah in the West Bank. Hundreds of settlers backed by Zionist forces then launched raids on nearby villages that left at least two Palestinians dead and dozens wounded. The attacks intensified after Achimeir was found dead nearby on Saturday and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu condemned what he called a "heinous murder".

Two new outposts

The UN voiced grave concern Tuesday over the escalating violence in the West Bank, demanding that Zionist security forces (ISF) "immediately" stop supporting settler attacks on Palestinians in the occupied territory.

With the Gaza war raging, the United Nations rights office decried that Palestinians in the West Bank had been "subjected to waves of attacks by hundreds of (Zionist) settlers, often accompanied or supported by (Zionist) security forces".

"The (Zionist) security forces must immediately end their active participation in and support for settler attacks on Palestinians," rights office spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani told reporters in Geneva. "(Zionist) authorities must instead prevent further attacks, including by bringing those responsible to account."

She stressed that "those reasonably suspected of criminal acts, including murder or other unlawful killings, must be brought to justice through a judicial process that complies with international human rights standards, following a prompt, impartial, independent, effective and transparent investigation".

Shamdasani pointed out that following the killing of the 14-year-old Zionist settler, "four Palestinians, including a child, were killed and Palestinian property was destroyed in revenge attacks". The UN rights office, she said, had received information that "armed settlers and (Zionist) forces" had entered a number of towns and villages. "Dozens of Palestinians were reportedly injured, including through the use of firearms, by settlers and ISF, and hundreds of homes and other buildings, as well as cars, were torched," she said.

"Three Zionist soldiers suffered injuries after they were hit with stones," she added.

The UN also highlighted reports that settlers had established at least two new outposts in recent days in the Jordan Valley and South Hebron Hills. The outposts, she said, were "near Palestinian communities which have been repeatedly attacked by settlers in the past months and are at imminent risk of being forcibly transferred from their homes and land".

"(The Zionist entity), as the occupying power, must take all measures in its power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety in the occupied West Bank," she said. "This obligation includes protecting Palestinians from settler attacks, and ending unlawful use of force against Palestinians by the ISF."

The West Bank, which the Zionist entity has occupied since 1967, has seen a surge in violence since early last year. At least 468 Palestinians have been killed by Zionist forces or settlers across the West Bank since October 7, according to official Palestinian sources. — AFP

Astronomers find largest black hole in Milky Way: Study

PARIS: Astronomers identified the largest stellar black hole yet discovered in the Milky Way, with a mass 33 times that of the Sun, according to a study published on Tuesday. The black hole, named Gaia BH3, was discovered "by chance" from data collected by the European Space Agency's Gaia mission, an astronomer from the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) at the Observatoire de Paris, Pasquale Panuzzo, told AFP.

Gaia, which is dedicated to mapping the Milky Way galaxy, located BH3 2,000 light years away from Earth in the Aquila constellation. As Gaia's telescope can give a precise position of stars in the sky, astronomers were able to characterize their orbits and measure the mass of the star's invisible companion — 33 times that of the Sun.

Further observations from on-the-ground telescopes confirmed that it was a black hole with a mass far greater than the stellar black holes already in the Milky Way. "No one was expecting to find a high-mass black hole lurking nearby, undetected so far. This is the kind of discovery you make once in your research life," Panuzzo said in a press release.

The stellar black hole was discovered when scientists spotted a "wobbling" motion on the companion star that was orbiting it. "We could see a star a little

smaller than the Sun (around 75 percent of its mass) and brighter, that revolved around an invisible companion," Panuzzo said. Stellar black holes are created from the collapse of massive stars at the end of their lives and are smaller than supermassive black holes whose creation is still unknown. Such giants have already been detected in distant galaxies via gravitational waves. But "never in ours", said Panuzzo.

BH3 is a "dormant" black hole and is too far away from its companion star to strip it of its matter and therefore emits no X-rays — making it difficult to detect. Gaia's telescope identified the first two inactive black holes (Gaia BH1 and Gaia BH2) in the Milky Way. Gaia has been operating 1.5 million kilometers from Earth for the past 10 years and in 2022 delivered a 3D map of the positions and motions of more than 1.8 billion stars. — AFP

Fire at Copenhagen landmark 'under control': Officials

COPENHAGEN: Danish rescue services said Tuesday that the fire that engulfed Copenhagen's 17th-century former stock exchange, ravaging the building and toppling its iconic spire, was "under control."

Amid flames and black smoke, the 54-metre (180-foot) spire crashed into the street below the Borsen building on Tuesday morning, which had been undergoing renovation. Shortly after 4:00 pm (1400 GMT), rescue services said the fire had been brought under control. "The fire is under control to the extent that we at this moment are dealing with what we call final extinguishing," director of emergency services Jakob Vedsted Andersen told a press conference, adding the work would continue for "many hours".

He said that half of the building was more or less burnt. Earlier in the day, witnesses watched in tears as more than 100 firefighters battled to save the building. "This is our Notre-Dame! This is a national treasure," local resident, 45-year-old Elisabeth Moltke, told AFP.

"It pains us all to see Borsen in the middle of Copenhagen in flames. It is our shared cultural heritage", Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen told public broadcaster DR. Frederiksen lamented the "hundreds of years of history going up in flames." Denmark's King Frederik X said in a statement that the country had woken up to "a sad sight." "An important part of our architectural heritage was and still is in flames," the regent said.

The fire started at around 7:30 am (0530 GMT) under the red-brick building's copper roof, emergency services told reporters. As flames and huge plumes of black smoke billowed from the rooftop, fire trucks surrounded the building, covered in scaffolding and canvas, which today houses the Danish Chamber of Commerce.

'Dreadful loss'

The landmark spire that fell was known for its distinctive design, being made up of the intertwined tails of four dragons — which were meant to protect the building from both enemies and ironically fire, according to the Danish Chamber of Commerce. The Borsen building, close to the Christiansborg parliament and seat of government, was commissioned by King Christian IV and built between 1619 and 1640. It is one of Copenhagen's oldest and best known landmarks.

Housing a vast art collection, it was being renovated to celebrate its 400th anniversary. The images recalled the disaster at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, which was gutted by a fire almost five years ago to the day. Its spire was also destroyed in the flames.

"I'm lost for words ... It's a 400-year-old building that has survived all the other fires that burned Copenhagen down to the ground," said Carsten Lundberg, an employee at the Danish Chamber of Commerce. "It's a dreadful loss," Lundberg said. Culture Minister Jakob Engel-Schmidt said in a post on X, that he had been moved to see employees, rescue workers and residents trying to "rescue art treasures and iconic paintings from the burning building." Images from the scene showed several people carrying works of art. Forces from the Danish military were also called to the scene, in particular to try to evacuate artworks. Vedsted Andersen, said that extensive parts of the building were damaged beyond repair and that for hours the focus had been on trying to save the building's facade. "A large part of the stock exchange has been severely damaged by the fire. But a large part of the valuables have been saved," he told reporters. — AFP

Fear grips city in Sudan's Darfur as peace collapses

PORT SUDAN: Clashes near El-Fasher, a relative haven in Darfur largely spared from the last 12 months of war in Sudan, have raised fears of a further expansion of the devastating conflict. Since fighting erupted last April 15 between Sudan's army and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, the already war-ravaged western region of Darfur has been the site of horrific violence, including reports of mass ethnic-based killings.

But North Darfur's El-Fasher, the last state capital not under RSF control in the vast Darfur region, had been a site of comparative stability and a key humanitarian refuge. "Clashes have taken hold of the countryside west of the city," a local human rights defender told AFP by phone, requesting anonymity for fear of reprisal. "Air strikes have pounded (the area) and everyone is terrified," she added.

The local resistance committee, one of many pro-democracy groups organizing aid across the country, said on Saturday an RSF-allied militia had set fire to six villages west of El-Fasher. At least 10 civilians were killed in the attacks, according to another activist committee.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was "deeply concerned" by reports indicating "an attack on El-Fasher may be imminent", his spokesperson said on Saturday. In a statement, he said "such an attack would be devastating for civilians in the city," which has functioned as "a humanitarian hub for the UN that ensures lifesaving assistance" across Darfur. The immense region, the size of France, is home to a quarter of Sudan's 48 million people and — like much of the country — is on the brink of famine.

The UN ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a post on X on Saturday that she was "gravely concerned by reports of escalating conflict" in El-Fasher that risked "humanitarian catastrophe in an already dire situation".

As violence rages through the countryside, residents in North Darfur have reported an influx of displaced people moving towards the city, in the hope that it might prove safer than their villages. But even within the city on Saturday, "we could hear the sound of clashes," local activist Adam told AFP, requesting to be identified only by his first name. The UN said last year that 80,000 people had already sought shelter in El-Fasher's "overcrowded school buildings, or were left out in the open". Peace in the key city was similarly threatened last year, before local armed groups successfully negotiated a makeshift truce — acting as peacekeepers in what the UN called "a fragile status quo". — AFP



KHARKIV: People gather outside a cafe during a blackout following Russian attacks on a city's energy infrastructure in Kharkiv, on April 8, 2024. — AFP

Kharkiv's Gen Z strive for 'normal life' to spite Russia

KHARKIV: Kristina Shapovalova stood in a crowd outside a cafe, its storefront shining a rare light amid a blackout in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. Wearing trendy black-framed glasses, Shapovalova spoke about the mounting Russian attacks on the city with fatalism and defiance. "You have to accept that if you stand in the street, you might die," the 25-year-old told AFP. "But we basically live as full a life as in London," she added, house music pumping in the background.

Russian forces, just 40 kilometers (25 miles) away, have bombarded the northeastern city almost daily for the past two years. But many young people told AFP they had chosen to stay in Kharkiv to keep it alive as a sign of resistance against Moscow. The struggle to maintain a semblance of normal life demonstrates the motivations and hardships facing Ukrainians living in the shadow of Russian weapons. Last month a Russian strike caused a complete power outage in the city and there have been more since.

'Like an alarm clock'

Shapovalova and her friend Polina Kaganovska took advantage of the cafe's power before the city's 11:00 pm curfew. "My friends and I try to get out of the house as much as possible because most of the time we have no light and no electricity," said 23-year-old Kaganovska.

She said places like the cafe, equipped with generators, were vital. "You can charge your phone and spend time with friends — in the light of day or the

light of lamps." No one in the young crowd flinched at any of the three air sirens that rang out in less than an hour. "It doesn't change anything. It's just like an alarm clock," said Shapovalova. Russia has escalated attacks on Kharkiv in recent weeks. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has urged allies to supply air defense systems for the city. It takes a rocket just 30 to 40 seconds to hit Kharkiv, the State Emergency Service told AFP. That means incoming projectiles can hit before the sirens ring out, giving residents little chance of reaching a shelter.

'Carry the culture'

More than two years into the war, many now ignore the warnings, despite official recommendations. "You have rockets flying by ... but cafes are full, we all have internet, we're all connected," said 34-year-old Oleg Khromov. Khromov co-founded the Protagonist bar, one of the first to reopen after the Russian invasion. On a weekday afternoon, the bar was packed with clients enjoying the sun shining through the floor-to-ceiling bay windows.

Many chatted, working on their laptops or taking internet calls in front of the cafe's concrete beams. Khromov regretted that much of the cultural elite in the city — known as an intellectual bastion because of its writers and universities — had left for Kyiv or Europe. "The small numbers who decided to stay had to carry the city's culture on their shoulders," he said. Russia partially blockaded the city after it invaded in February 2022, but Ukrainian forces had prevailed by May 2022.

The battle turned Kharkiv into a symbol of resistance. "Kharkiv is a city of heroes that nevertheless continues to showcase its culture," said theatre student Andriy Panchishko. The 24-year-old spoke from the basements of the Kharkiv State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre, where rehearsals and shows now take place. — AFP

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17, 2024

Boeing defends safety practices

Company refutes whistleblower's allegations



NEW YORK: A Boeing 777 passengers aircraft of American Airlines arrives from Miami at JFK International Airport in New York as the Manhattan skyline looms in the background. — AFP

Microsoft to invest \$1.5bn in AI firm in UAE, take board seat



NEW YORK: People walk past a Microsoft Experience Center on Fifth Avenue in New York City. — AFP

DUBAI: Microsoft is to invest \$1.5 billion in United Arab Emirates artificial intelligence firm G42, taking a minority stake and a seat on the board, the companies said on Tuesday. The deal, in which G42 will run its applications and services on Microsoft's Azure platform, comes days after the US giant said it would plough \$2.9 billion into Japanese AI. Microsoft has become a major player in the advancement of AI through its partnership with ChatGPT-maker OpenAI - propelling it past Apple as the world's biggest company by market capitalization.

According to the New York Times and Bloomberg, the strategic investment follows talks between the US and UAE governments where G42 agreed to drop Chinese partnerships in favor of American technology. "The commercial partnership is backed by assurances to the US and UAE governments through a first-of-its-kind binding agreement to apply world-class best practices to ensure the secure, trusted and responsible development and deployment of AI," Judson Althoff, Microsoft executive vice-president and chief commercial officer, said in a statement.

Microsoft president Brad Smith, who will join the board of G42, told Bloomberg that his company "got strong encouragement from the US government to move forward in this process". "That reflects a recognition by the US government of the importance of the relationship between the two countries and the importance of continuing to encourage responsible companies," he was quoted as saying.

The deal appears to mark the latest salvo in the battle between the US and China over technology, which includes Washington's sanctions on Huawei and centers on fears over intellectual property and data protection. Abu Dhabi-based G42 is part of the reported \$1.5 trillion business empire of National Security Advisor Tahnoon bin Zayed, brother of UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed. Under the new arrangement, G42 will offer AI services via Azure to public sector clients and large enterprises in various sectors, focusing on the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa. — AFP

NEW YORK: Boeing defended its safety practices Monday, touting aircraft testing protocols as it girds for a tough congressional hearing featuring critics of the embattled aviation giant. "Boeing is confident in the safety and durability of the 787 and 777," the company said in a PowerPoint presentation accompanying a media briefing with two senior engineers, who summarized exhaustive testing procedures to refute whistleblower allegations that some 1,400 Boeing planes suffer from significant safety issues.

Wednesday's Senate hearing is scheduled to include testimony from Boeing engineer Sam Salehpour, who went public last week with sweeping charges alleging Boeing's safety practices are deficient and that the company retaliated against him for speaking out. The hearing, titled Examining Boeing's Broken Safety Culture: Firsthand Accounts, comes as regulators and politicians escalate scrutiny of Boeing in the wake of a near-disastrous January 5 Alaska Airlines flight on a 737 MAX that made an emergency landing after a panel of the fuselage blew out in mid-flight.

Salehpour's charges include allegations that the 787 Dreamliner contains gaps between parts well above company standards, a dynamic that could "ultimately cause a premature fatigue failure with-

out any warning," creating unsafe conditions "with potentially catastrophic accidents," according to an official complaint to the Federal Aviation Administration released by Salehpour's attorneys.

Steve Chisholm, chief engineer for Boeing Mechanical and Structural Engineering, told reporters gathered at a Charleston, South Carolina factory and on a webcast, that "there was zero fatigue" found in testing. "We were not surprised by the lack of fatigue findings," said Chisholm, who noted that the composite materials behind the 787 were picked because they do not fatigue or corrode like traditional metals.

Testing regime

Described by his attorneys as a veteran quality engineer at Boeing, Salehpour slammed Boeing for a series of "shortcuts" that have "allowed potentially defective parts and installations in 787 fleets," according to the FAA complaint. To compensate for gaps between parts beyond the .005 inch standard set by Boeing, Salehpour said Boeing has employed force during assembly of 165 times the recommended level of 10 pounds.

After Salehpour's complaint last week, Boeing released a lengthy rebuttal insisting it is "fully confi-

dent" in the aircraft and noting that regulators with the FAA signed off on Boeing's processes when the company addressed the gap issue in 2022. Company engineers pointed to testing for plane fatigue undertaken between 2010 and 2015 involving 165,000 cycles, or simulations of 165,000 flights.

In this process, a 787 was placed in a test rig and subjected to pressurization meant for a time period more than three times as long as the aircraft's expected 787 lifespan of 44,000 cycles. Company employees raised concerns about gaps and other aspects of the 787 in the 2020-2022 time period. With 787 deliveries suspended during large stretches of this span, the company removed thousands of fasteners on some 120 planes in inventory and conducted rework on eight planes, company officials said.

While Boeing maintains that around 99 percent of the gaps conform to the .005 inch standard, a small percentage exceeds it. However, testing has shown no sign of fatigue, said Chisholm, who also described the elevated force during manufacturing as a non-issue. "We're talking about 150 pounds on structure that's meant to carry many thousands of pounds of load. This is not a large load," Chisholm said. "It's acceptable." — AFP

Lufthansa reports loss, cuts outlook after strikes

FRANKFURT: German airline giant Lufthansa reported a hefty first-quarter loss and downgraded its 2024 outlook due to recent strikes, while warning of risks from conflict in the Middle East. Adjusted operating losses came in at 849 million euros (\$902 million), according to preliminary results. While the start of the year is typically a quieter period for travel in Europe, the results were still far worse than a loss of 273 million euros in the same period last year. "The loss was higher than expected due to various strikes," said Lufthansa, one of Europe's biggest airline groups, adding that the walkouts had slashed earnings by hundreds of millions of euros.

Lufthansa - whose carriers include Lufthansa, Eurowings, Austrian, Swiss and Brussels Airlines - cut the forecast for its operating profit for the whole year to 2.2 billion euros. It had previously been expecting the figure to come in broadly the same as last year, at around 2.7 billion euros. After two years of hefty losses during the pandemic, Lufthansa had racked up healthy profits in 2022 and 2023 as travel demand roared back. But the German aviation sector faced walkouts in recent months as workers pushed for higher pay to combat inflation, with airport security staff as well as Lufthansa ground staff and cabin crew staging repeated strikes.

When the company unveiled its 2023 results in March, Lufthansa personnel chief Michael Niggemann

UK unemployment rises as wage growth eases

LONDON: British unemployment has risen as wage growth has eased, official data showed Tuesday, leaving the door open for an interest rate cut according to analysts. The UK unemployment rate rose to 4.2 percent in the three months to the end of February, up from 3.9 percent in the three months to



SCHONEFELD: Lufthansa airplanes stand on the ground at the Berlin Brandenburg Airport in Schoenefeld near Berlin. — AFP

had criticized the "uncompromising strikes," saying they were "damaging our guests, the company and ultimately our employees". But the group has in recent weeks struck deals with major staff unions, averting the immediate threat of more industrial action. Second-quarter profits are also likely to be impacted however, and are likely to come in lower than last year due to the impacts of wage disputes on short-term demand for bookings, Lufthansa said.

Results are expected to bounce back in the sec-

January, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement. "We are now seeing tentative signs that the jobs market is beginning to cool," said Liz McKeown, ONS director of economic statistics.

The ONS added that average regular pay growth, excluding bonuses, dipped to 6.0 percent from 6.1 percent. However, taking into account Britain's annual inflation rate during the period, real wages rose by only 2.1 percent. "Easing pressure in the labor market keeps the Bank of England on track for a summer rate cut," commented Yael Selfin, chief economist at KPMG UK.

ond half of the year. Lufthansa also warned that the "recent escalation of the Middle East conflict and further geopolitical uncertainties pose risks to the group's full year financial outlook". Lufthansa has since April 6 suspended flights to and from Tehran due to soaring regional tensions. At the weekend, it suspended flights to and from several more destinations in the Middle East following Iran's drone and missile attack on Zion entity. — AFP

"The slight easing in regular pay growth will bring some comfort for the BoE which has relied on the pay data as a key gauge of domestic inflationary pressure. "Moreover, the rise in unemployment rate paints a picture of a less tight labor market." The Bank of England in March held its key interest rate at a 16-year high of 5.25 percent, as overall UK inflation remains stubbornly above its 2.0-percent target. Inflation fell to a near two-and-a-half-year low of 3.4 percent in February, easing the nation's cost-of-living crisis. — AFP

Business

IMF lifts growth forecast

World economy expected to grow by 3.2 percent

WASHINGTON: The IMF has raised its outlook for the global economy this year, while maintaining a gloomy forecast over the medium term, according to fresh data published Tuesday. The International Monetary Fund now expects the world economy to grow by 3.2 percent this year, up 0.1 percentage point from its previous forecast in January, and by a further 3.2 percent in 2025, according to the latest World Economic Outlook (WEO) report.

Global headline inflation is expected to ease from 5.9 percent this year to 4.5 percent in 2025, supported by elevated interest rates in many countries around the world. "The global economy remains quite resilient, although there are differences in regions and countries," IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas told reporters in a call ahead of the WEO's publication on Tuesday.

"Our baseline scenario is one that is consistent with a global soft landing," he said, referring to attempts by many central bankers to bring inflation down to target without fueling high unemployment or killing economic growth. The WEO's publication comes as global financial leaders are gathering in Washington this week for a series of semi-annual meetings hosted by the IMF and World Bank at their headquarters in Washington. Assistance for the world's most indebted nations and climate change are at the top of the agenda for those meetings.

Divergence among advanced economies

The differences among the world's advanced economies are stark: The IMF now expects growth in the United States to hit 2.7 percent this year - up 0.6 percentage points from the January forecast - marking an acceleration from the 2.5 percent growth recorded in 2023. Growth in the world's largest economy is then expected to slow to 1.9 percent in

2025, slightly higher than previously expected. In contrast, the Euro Area is now expected to grow by just 0.8 percent in 2024 - down 0.1 percentage point from January and only slightly above last year's tepid 0.4 percent growth - before picking up to 1.5 percent in 2025. The outlook for the United Kingdom and Canada this year has also been revised lower, while Japan's 2024 growth forecast was unchanged.

China unchanged

The picture is also mixed for the world's emerging market and developing economies. China, the world's second-largest economy, is still expected to grow by 4.6 percent this year, and by 4.1 percent in 2025 - unchanged from January. The slowdown in growth is largely down to the easing of a "postpandemic boost to consumption and fiscal stimulus," and the ongoing weakness in the property sector, according to the WEO report.

One of the bright spots this year is India, which the IMF now expects to grow by 6.8 percent - up 0.3 percentage points from January's forecast - and by 6.5 percent in 2025. Although a full percentage point below India's growth figure for 2023, the robust growth expected this year reflects the South Asian economy's "continuing strength in domestic demand and a rising working-age population," the IMF said.

Russia outlook improved, again

Russia's growth prospects have been revised sharply higher once more, as it continues to defy expectations of a slump due to its costly ongoing war in Ukraine. The Russian economy is now expected to grow by 3.2 percent this year, and by 1.8 percent in 2025, sharply above January's forecast.

"Their oil export volumes have been holding very steady and in an environment in which oil prices have

United States economy over the last six months," Gourinchas said, pointing to robust US productivity growth, an immigration-driven boost in the labor supply, and "quite a bit of public spending." The rise in foreign-born workers in the US "increases the capacity of the economy to produce more and it also moderates the pressures on the labor market," he said. "We're still expecting inflation to come down in the course of 2024, and to leave the Federal Reserve in a position where it will be able to start cutting rates later in the year," he said.

In contrast to the resilient US economy, the IMF expects European growth to continue at a more lackluster pace in the short term, predicting 0.8 percent growth for the euro area this year, picking up slightly to 1.5 percent in 2025. "The consequences of the energy shock are still there to some extent, although this has moderated quite a bit," Gourinchas said. "But let's not forget that we have tight monetary policy, and that monetary policy is increasing the cost for borrowing and for households and businesses," he added.

Unlike the US, European consumers and businesses are also feeling much less confident in the health of the overall economy, according to Gourinchas. "That means less consumption, less aggregate demand, less investment," he said. "There is no sign of overheating." Because of the rapid pace of disinflation in Europe in recent months, the IMF sees the European Central Bank's projection of a June interest rate cut as a "reasonable forecast," Gourinchas said.



WASHINGTON: (Left to right) International Monetary Fund (IMF) Chief Economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas and IMF Research Department Deputy Director Petya Koeva Brooks hold a press briefing as the IMF publishes its global economic forecasts at the IMF-World Bank Group spring meetings in Washington, DC on April 16, 2024. — AFP

been quite strong," Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said, pointing to exports as a key driver of continued Russian economic strength. The forecast for Latin America this year is slightly higher at 2.0 percent, while the outlook for Sub-Saharan Africa is unchanged at 3.8 percent. The outlook for 2024 growth in the Middle East and Central Asia is slightly lower, at 2.8 percent, down 0.1 percentage point.

Despite the IMF's more optimistic overall outlook for this year, the WEO report still finds that

China operating 'below potential'

In Asia, the IMF expects China's growth rate to continue to ease over the next few years due to the easing of a "postpandemic boost to consumption and fiscal stimulus," and the ongoing weakness in the property sector, according to the WEO report. "China is another example where you see an economy that is operating below potential," Gourinchas told AFP. "Growth is lower than what the economy can sustain."

"This is an economy that would benefit from tackling some of its supply side problems - the property sector chiefly - but can also afford to have a little bit more expansionary policies - in particular monetary policy," he added. The IMF's WEO report also found that "the pace of convergence toward higher living standards for middle- and lower-income countries has slowed," adding that income inequality could persist if something was not done to remedy the worrying situation.

"If you're trying to catch up with advanced economies, and you start going a little bit slower, it's going to take you longer to get there," Gourinchas said. "Countries should think about ways they can boost medium term growth, either through changes in policies, attracting foreign capital and investment or educating the population," he continued. Higher growth would allow governments "to invest in the multiple challenges that these countries are facing, whether it's building safety nets, it's increasing education, capital, its financing the climate transition or adaptation for many of these countries," he added. — AFP

medium-term growth is expected to remain "historically weak," due largely to "persistent structural frictions preventing capital and labor from moving to productive firms." It expects growth to hit 3.1 percent in 2029, well below its pre-pandemic forecast. The IMF report also found that "the pace of convergence toward higher living standards for middle- and lower-income countries has slowed, implying a persistence in global economic disparities." — AFP

Mideast-related oil price spike threatens economic outlook

WASHINGTON: The recent oil price spike fueled by rising Middle East tensions has the potential to derail the IMF's "relatively good" outlook for the world economy, its chief economist told AFP. "We are projecting a global economy that is quite resilient for 2024," Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said in an interview ahead of the publication of the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook (WEO) report on Tuesday.

The IMF now expects the world economy to grow by 3.2 percent this year and next, and inflation to continue to ease from its post-pandemic high, hitting 5.9 percent this year, and 4.5 percent next year amid elevated interest rates in many countries. "The news is relatively good," Gourinchas said. "One of the things that could derail that path towards disinflation would be some disruption in oil prices or energy prices or commodity prices," he continued. "So far, we've seen some pressure in oil prices, but it's way too early to figure out whether that will be sustained," he added.

US driving growth

"A lot of the news have been very good on the

China economy beats growth expectations

BEIJING: China's economy expanded far more than expected in the first quarter of 2024, data showed Tuesday, but disappointing retail and industrial figures suggested leaders face severe headwinds to hit their annual growth target. Beijing has set a goal of around five percent for 2024, which officials have already admitted will "not be easy" and which analysts said was ambitious given the challenges the world's second-largest economy is confronting.

For the first three months of the year, gross domestic product rose 5.3 percent, compared with 5.2 in the previous quarter, the National Bureau of Statistics said. The figures well exceeded analysts' expectations, with those polled by Bloomberg having forecast 4.8 percent. "The national economy continued the good momentum of a rebound," the NBS said, calling it a "good start".

The GDP data remains a key insight into the health of the world's second-largest economy, despite being eminently political. Tuesday's figures "beat the market expectation by a wide margin", Dan Wang, chief economist at Hang Seng Bank China, told AFP. "Consumption and housing investment (were) the main drag, while manufacturing and infrastructure were the main engines," she said.

It reflects "the fundamental policy shift from a focus on (the) consumer market and service sector to... industrial growth". But woes in the property market remained a millstone for the economy as home prices continued to fall and top developers including Country Garden and Vanke sent out distress signals over their profits and challenges paying off debt. Reflecting those difficulties, last month also saw a fall in



WUHAN: Customers select eggs at a market in Wuhan, in central China's Hubei province on April 16, 2024. — AFP

property prices in China's major cities, data showed.

Fears about a return to deflation are also looming. Derek Scissors, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), warned that "the good news ends" with the real GDP figure, which is adjusted to take into account inflation. "Deflation is evident in GDP and in producer prices," he said, adding that "benchmark indicator retail sales were slower than last year at this time." "There are two reads on the full set of figures: China's surprising real GDP growth is unsustainable or China's surprising real GDP growth is fake."

Growth still sluggish

Some sectors are doing well, notably services, as customers return to restaurants, travel internally and

visit tourist spots. However, both retail sales - the main indicator of household spending - and industrial output slumped last month, officials said. Retail sales grew just 3.1 percent on-year, down from 5.5 percent in the first two months of 2024, while industrial production rose 4.5 percent, compared with seven percent in January-February.

The unemployment rate fell in March to 5.2 percent, from 5.3 in February. That figure, however, paints an incomplete picture as it only includes workers in cities, effectively excluding millions of migrant laborers from rural areas who are particularly vulnerable to the downturn and whose situation has been exacerbated by the housing crisis. The latest figures follow last week's report showing exports and imports sinking. — AFP

PwC rejects allegations on Evergrande audit

HONG KONG: Accounting firm PwC on Monday rejected an anonymous letter that criticized the company's involvement in auditing beleaguered Chinese real estate giant Evergrande, saying the letter contained "false allegations". Heavily indebted Evergrande has become a symbol of the years-long crisis in China's property market and last month its onshore

unit was accused of a \$78 billion revenue overstatement. Chinese authorities are examining the role of PwC in auditing Evergrande, though no decision regarding penalties has been made, Bloomberg News reported last month.

The firm said on Monday it was aware of a letter purportedly written by some PwC partners that was circulating on social media. "We believe the letter contains inaccurate statements and false allegations... (that) could tarnish PwC's reputation and infringe our legal rights," the company said. PwC said it had reported the matter to authorities and will fully investigate the incident with "high priority". The letter, written in Chinese and

titled "Who led PwC into the firepit that was Evergrande?", placed the blame on a senior figure within the firm and alleged problems with its corporate culture.

AFP is unable to verify who wrote the letter and its claims. PwC was the auditor for Evergrande for more than a decade before resigning last year amid disagreements on the audit of the firm's 2021 accounts. Chinese regulators said last month it would ban Evergrande chair Xu Jiayin from the securities market for life on grounds of financial fraud. Earlier this year, the real estate behemoth was handed a winding-up order by a Hong Kong court after struggling for years to repay creditors after its 2021 default. — AFP



BEIJING: A general view shows the entrance of the Evergrande Group residential complex called Evergrande Palace in Beijing. — AFP

Business

NBK gives customers opportunity to win exclusive packages for Summer Olympics

Bank seeks to enhance customer banking

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) always seeks to enhance customer banking experience by providing premium exclusive offers and rewards for a comprehensive and exceptional banking experience. In this context, the bank has announced the launch of "2024 Summer Olympics in Paris" campaign, giving customers the opportunity to win exclusive packages to attend the 33rd Summer Olympics in Paris scheduled from 26 July to 11 August 2024.

The campaign will run from 1 April to 31 May 2024, and a draw will be conducted on 6 June to announce nine winners who will attend the Summer Olympics in Paris. Packages will include business class tickets along with a companion, as well as luxurious hotel accommodation, city experience, and tickets to attend the activities including the opening and closing ceremonies.

To qualify for the campaign, customers need to register using the registration page on nbk.com and spend a minimum of KD 250 per month using the eligible NBK Visa Credit/Prepaid Cards. Each KD 1 spent locally gives customers 1 chance, each KD 1 spent internationally gives customers 2 chances, and if the card is issued during the campaign period, this gives customers 10 chances in the draw.

Eligible cards: (1) NBK Visa Platinum Credit Card (2) NBK Visa Signature Credit Card (3) NBK Visa Infinite Credit Card (4) NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card (5) NBK Visa Infinite Privilege Credit Card (6) NBK-KPC Visa Infinite Credit Card (7) NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Signature Credit Card (8) NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Infinite Credit Card (9) NBK-Kuwait Airways (Oasis Club) Visa Platinum Prepaid Card (10) NBK Avios Visa Signature Prepaid Card.

Commenting on this offer, Anwar Al Ballam Senior Products Manager, at Consumer Banking Group, at National Bank of Kuwait said: "We seek to be always closer to our customers by participating with

them in all events and occasions and providing premium offers and exceptional campaigns to meet their expectations and needs, giving them a comprehensive and exceptional banking experience that suits all segments and ages."

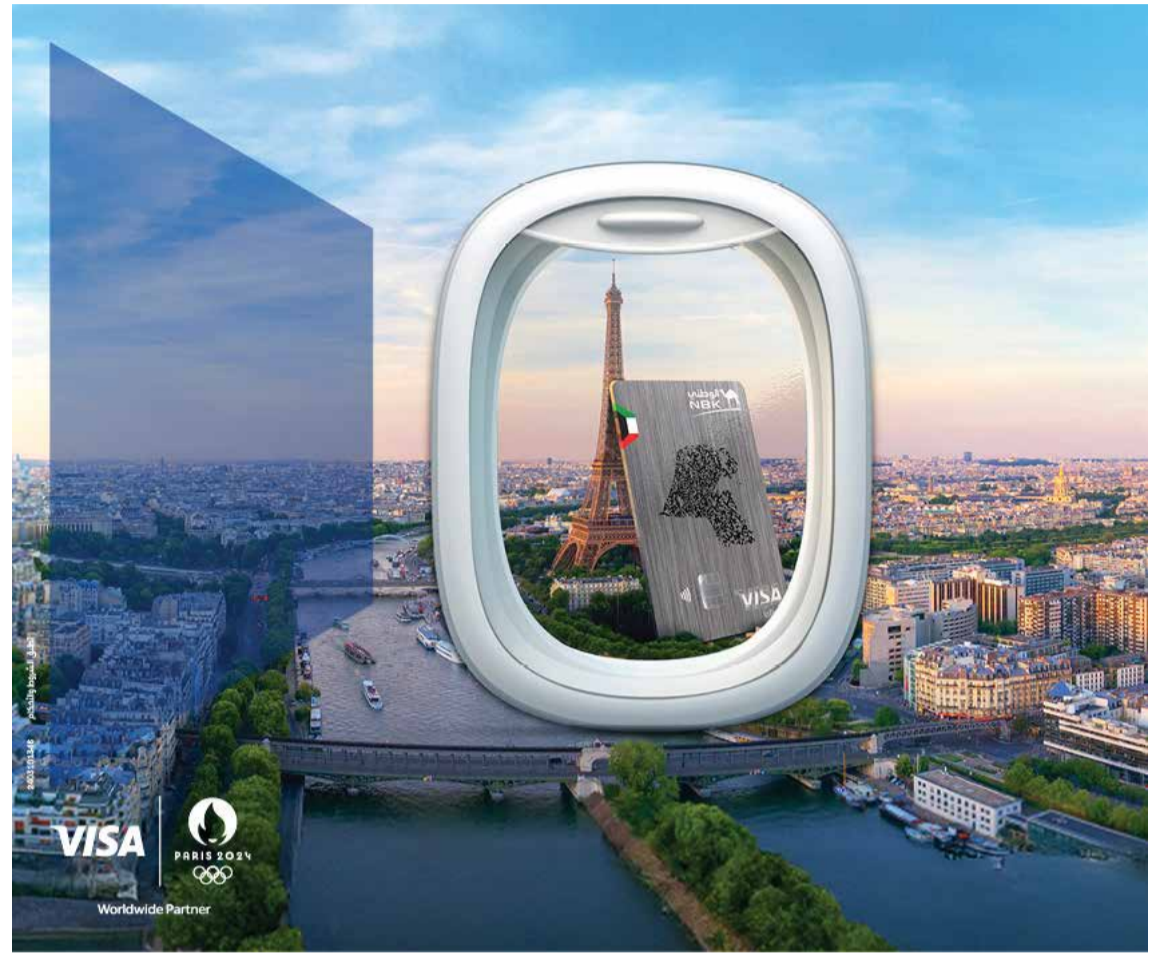
"The exclusive outstanding offers provided to our customers around the year reflect our endeavors to offer them an integrated banking experience integrated with our cutting-edge, innovative banking products, services and payment solutions," he added. "NBK Credit Cardholders get the chance to participate in the bank's campaigns all year round, in addition to enjoying a unique lifestyle through the various benefits offered by these cards," he emphasized.

"Our Olympics sponsorship enables Visa to co-create with our bank partners worldwide exclusive experiences for our cardholders. That's exactly what this partnership with NBK is about - helping make Visa cardholders' journey to 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris a memorable one. This promotion is also a great way to support the Kuwait government's ambitions to extend the benefits of digital payments to more local consumers and businesses. We are delighted to partner with NBK on this exciting promotion and look forward to bringing more of these exciting promotions to Visa cardholders in Kuwait," said Mohamed Reyad, Visa's Head of Financial Institutions for Kuwait.

NBK Visa Credit Cards offer the best payment method for the convenience and benefits they



Anwar Al Ballam



provide to customers, especially when using them in shopping including NBK Rewards Program, NBK Miles Program, as well as Purchase Protection and Extended Warranty. Additionally, NBK

Visa Credit Cards provide a unique lifestyle, and eligibility for exceptional campaigns throughout the year, which are always well-received and popular among customers.



GENEVA: A watchmaker shows the 'cyberloupe' a digitalized magnifying glass that can livestream, created by luxury Swiss watch manufacturer IWC, on the opening day of the Watches and Wonders Geneva show. — AFP

Swiss watch brands making time for India

GENEVA: Swiss watchmakers are increasingly turning their sights towards India thanks to a new free trade agreement that is due to gradually open the doors for luxury timepiece exports. While some brands are already in the starting blocks, others are waiting to see whether India will become a new land of plenty. "India represents enormous potential," Yves Bugmann, president of the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry, told AFP at Watches and Wonders, the Geneva watch fair that closed on Monday.

Despite its 1.4 billion population, India was in 22nd place for Swiss watch exports in 2023, just ahead of Switzerland's Alpine neighbor Austria. The value of Swiss watch exports to India was just 218.8 million Swiss francs (\$239.4 million) - way behind front-runners the United States (4.2 billion francs), mainland China (2.8 billion francs) and Hong Kong (2.4 billion francs). High taxes have long discouraged watch brands, particularly the most expensive labels. Although the calculation is complex, it includes customs duties of around 20 percent for watches, a goods and services tax of 18 percent, plus an additional surcharge.

'New El Dorado'?

But last month, after 16 years of negotiations, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) - Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein - signed a free trade agreement that will reduce customs duties "progressively over a period of seven years", Bugmann explained. "It's an extremely interesting market, but will this be the new El Dorado of the watch industry? We don't know yet," he admitted. In a study published in mid-October, the audit firm Deloitte estimated that Swiss watch exports to India could exceed 400 million francs by 2028. And it could climb into the top 10 export markets within a decade thanks to its ultra-high net worth individuals, as well as its growing middle class.

With the EFTA agreement, "we are feeling things beginning to move", Karine Szegedi, the report's author, told AFP at the Geneva salon. "Seven years is already tomorrow," said Edouard Meylan, the chief executive of H. Moser, a small brand undergoing an expansion, where the average watch price is around 40,000 francs. "We sense a tremendous appetite", and "you have to be the first to establish yourself", said Meylan. He has already teamed up with a local distributor and is hoping to open a store in New Delhi this year, "before Diwali" - the Hindu festival of lights, which will be celebrated this year from the end of October into early November. Thierry Stern, the president of Patek Philippe, said India would be increasingly on the radar, but would "especially interest brands that produce large quantities", he told AFP. Patek Philippe produces 72,000 watches per year - a small number for a big-name brand, which therefore has long waiting lists and sees its timepieces go for millions of dollars in auctions. — AFP

Germany's investor morale climbs again

FRANKFURT: German investor confidence rose more than expected in April, a key survey showed Tuesday, on growing optimism about the economic outlook at home and abroad. The ZEW institute's economic expectations index rose for the ninth consecutive time, climbing by 11.2 points month-on-month to reach 42.9 points.

Analysts surveyed by FactSet had predicted a smaller jump to 35 points. "A recovering global economy is boosting expectations for Germany, with half of the respondents anticipating the country's economy to pick up over the next six months," said ZEW president Achim Wambach. "Further contributing to the heightened optimism are the much improved assessments of the situation and economic expectations in Germany's export destinations," he added. Europe's largest economy shrank by 0.3 percent last year, battered by high interest rates, elevated inflation and an export slowdown.

With euro-zone inflation steadily slowing in recent months, the European Central Bank last week reiterated that it was eyeing a first rate cut in June. While the German economy likely had a weak first quarter, a modest recovery is expected to get under

Overtourism sparks backlash in Spain

MADRID: Anti-tourism movements are multiplying in Spain, the world's second most visited country, prompting authorities to try and reconcile the interests of locals and the lucrative sector. Rallying under the slogan "The Canaries have a limit", a collective of groups on the archipelago off northwest Africa are planning a slew of protests on Saturday.

The Canaries are known for volcanic landscapes and year-round sunshine and attracts millions of visitors from all over the world. Groups there want authorities to halt work on two new hotels on Tenerife, the largest and most developed of the archipelago's seven islands. They are also demanding that locals be given a greater say in the face of what they consider uncontrolled development which is harming the environment.

Several members of the collective "Canaries Sold Out" also began an "indefinite" hunger strike last week to put pressure on the authorities. "Our islands are a treasure that must be defended," the collective said. The Canaries received 16 million visitors last year, more than seven times its population of around 2.2 million people. This is an unsustainable level giv-



FRANKFURT: People wait at a bus stop close to the headquarters of the European Central Bank (ECB) in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany. — AFP

way this year as demand picks up on the back of easing inflation and the expected reduction in borrowing costs. The turnaround is expected to take

longer than initially thought however, prompting the government to recently slash its forecast for 2024 to just 0.2 percent growth. — AFP

en the archipelago's limited resources, Victor Martin, a spokesman for the collective told a recent press briefing, calling it a "suicidal growth model".

Similar anti-tourism movements have sprung up elsewhere in Spain and are active on social media. In the southern port of Malaga on the Costa del Sol, a centre of Spain's decades-old "soy y playa" or "sun and beach" tourism model, stickers with unfriendly slogans such as "This used to be my home" and "Go home" have appeared on the walls and doors of tourist accommodations. In Barcelona and the Balearic Islands, activists have put up fake signs at the entrances to some popular beaches warning in English of the risk of "falling rocks" or "dangerous jellyfish". Locals complain a rise in listings of accommodation on short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb have worsened a housing shortage and caused rents to soar, especially in town centers.

The influx of tourists also adds to noise and environmental pollution and taxes resources such as water, they add. In the northeastern region of Catalonia, which declared a drought emergency in February, anger is growing over the pressure exerted on depleted water reserves by hotels on the Costa Brava. "There are tourist destinations that are at the limits of their capacity," said Jose Luis Zoreda, the vice president of tourism association Exceltur. "It's a problem that appears occasionally in the high season and in certain parts of the country, but it's getting worse". — AFP



BARCELONA: Tourists walk up and down Las Ramblas alley in Barcelona. — AFP

US giant Int'l Paper offers £5.8 billion for UK peer

LONDON: US group International Paper said Tuesday it has agreed to buy UK peer DS Smith for £5.8 billion (\$7.2 billion) to create a global giant after topping a proposal from rival Mondi. "The boards of International Paper Company and DS Smith Plc are pleased to announce that they have reached agreement on the terms of a recommended all-share combination of International Paper with DS Smith," the pair said in a statement.

The deal for DS Smith is higher than a £5.1-billion informal bid made last month by fellow London-listed competitor Mondi. "The combination will bring together complementary businesses to create a truly global sustainable packaging solutions leader, with industry leading positions in two of the most attractive geographies of Europe and North America," the statement added. International Paper will own 66.3 percent of the new company, and DS Smith the remainder.

New York-listed International Paper said it would seek a secondary listing in London as the group pursues expansion. The transaction, which remains subject to regulatory and shareholder approval, is expected to complete in the fourth quarter. "Combining with DS Smith is a logical next step in International Paper's strategy to drive profitable growth by strengthening our global packaging business," said Mark S. Sutton, chairman and chief executive of the US firm.

"DS Smith is a leader in packaging solutions with an extensive reach across Europe, which complements International Paper's capabilities and will accelerate growth through innovation and sustainability," he said. Tuesday's news marks the latest consolidation in the paper and packaging sector, after Smurfit Kappa announced in September that it planned to merge with WestRock, also aiming for a stronger international presence. — AFP

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17, 2024

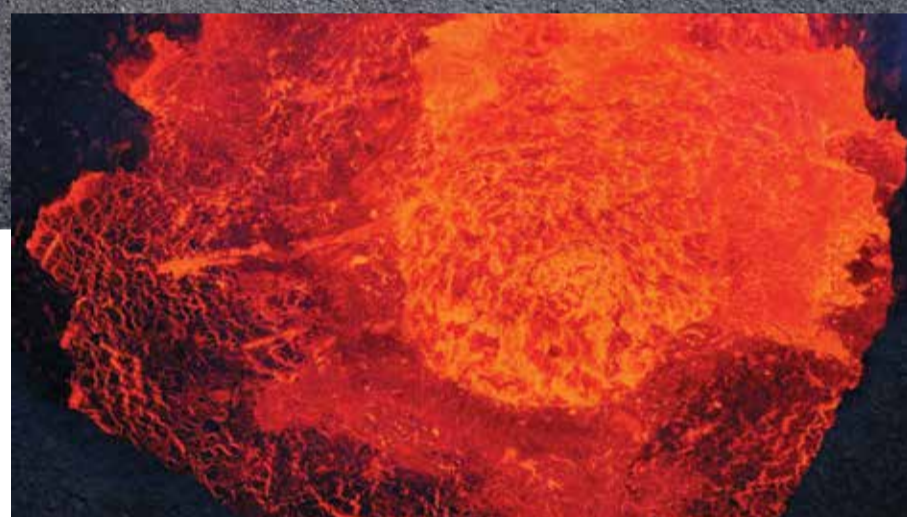
Pictures taken with a drone at Svartsengi near Grindavik, Iceland, show aerial views of a volcanic eruption at Sundhnukagigar in southwest Iceland, ongoing for a month. —AFP photos

Iceland volcano

still spewing lava, one month on

Orange lava bubbles and pops, occasionally spewing large fountains from a volcano that has been erupting for a month in Iceland, the second-longest eruption since the region's volcanic activity reawakened in March 2021. "It's continuing at a pretty stable rate at the moment and we don't see any real signs that it will end in the near future," Benedikt Ofeigsson, geophysicist at the Icelandic Meteorological Office (IMO), told AFP. On March 16, lava burst out of a crack in the ground at Sundhnukagigar, on the Reykjanes peninsula in southwestern Iceland, and has flowed ever since.

The volcano was pumping out some 3.6 cubic meters of lava per second in the most recent measurements taken on April 9, according to the IMO. Other eruptions in the same region in Decem-



ber, January and February -- preceded by the evacuation in November of 4,000 residents in the nearby town of Grindavik -- likely created favorable conditions for a lasting eruption. "Now there is an open channel to the surface," Ofeigsson said.

Magma is making its way through the Earth's upper crust from a depth of at least 10 kilometers (6.2 miles). This scenario is similar to the first eruption in

the region, near Mount Fagradalsfjall in March 2021, which lasted six months. By contrast, the other eruptions in the past few months have only lasted a few days. In addition, the ground has been observed rising -- so-called inflation -- in the nearby area of Svartsengi, home to a geothermal plant providing electricity and water to 30,000 people on the peninsula.

The inflation suggests that "all the magma coming from this depth doesn't have the capacity to go straight to the surface (and) is partly stored in this magma storage in Svartsengi," Ofeigsson said. Until March 2021, the Reykjanes peninsula had not experienced an eruption for eight centuries. Volcanologists now believe a new era of seismic activity has begun in the region.

Site off-limits

While the area's previous eruption sites have been open to the public, authorities have closed this one, wary of visitors flooding the evacuated town of Grindavik. "I wanted to see some of the lava fields, maybe some flowing lava, get up close to a volcano. It was part of the whole 'land of ice and fire' thing, right?" tourist David Cordova, a 46-year-old

engineer from Texas, told AFP. He still hoped to get "some cool visuals" flying his drone over the crater.

Many tourists park by the roadside near the Blue Lagoon geothermal spa to take in the plumes of smoke rising from the ground just past a section of road blanketed by flowing lava in February and March and subsequently rebuilt. The Blue Lagoon, Iceland's biggest tourist attraction, now resembles a fortress, protected by a hastily-built wall of earth towering a dozen meters high. The spa's turquoise waters reopened to the public on April 6 after a three-week closure. The spa has however had to close temporarily for two days since then due to air pollution linked to gas emissions and unfavorable winds. —AFP



Hannah Gutierrez-Reed (left), the former armorer at the movie Rust, attends her sentencing hearing at the First Judicial District Courthouse in Santa Fe, New Mexico. —AFP photos



Hannah Gutierrez-Reed (center), the former armorer at the movie Rust, attends her sentencing hearing with attorney Jason Bowles (left) and paralegal Carmella Sisneros (right) at the First Judicial District Courthouse in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

'Rust' armorer sentenced to 18 months over deadly on-set shooting

The armorer who loaded the gun that killed a cinematographer on the set of the Alec Baldwin movie "Rust" was sentenced to 18 months in prison by a US court on Monday. Hannah Gutierrez stood impassive as a judge in New Mexico told her she was not remorseful for the October 2021 death of Halyna Hutchins during filming of the budget Western. "You were the armorer, the one that stood between a safe weapon and a weapon that could kill someone. You alone turned a safe weapon into a lethal weapon," Judge Mary Marlowe Sommer said.

"But for you, Miss Hutchins would be alive. A husband would have his partner and a little boy would have his mother." Gutierrez's 10-day trial for involuntary manslaughter had heard how despite being the person charged with handling on-set firearms, the 26-year-old had repeatedly failed to follow basic safety rules, leaving guns unattended and allowing actors -- including Baldwin -- to wave weapons around. It also heard how she was responsible for the

presence of six live rounds -- a movie industry red line -- and how she had loaded one of them into the Colt .45 that Baldwin was using.

The weapon discharged as the actor was preparing a scene inside a wooden church, killing Hutchins and wounding director Joel Souza. "Halyna Hutchins died due to a cascade of safety violations that began with Miss Gutierrez introducing live rounds to the movie set, loading one into a prop gun telling the members of the crew that it was a cold gun," prosecutor Kari Morrissey told the sentencing hearing in Santa Fe. "That conduct absent responsibility or remorse is deserving of a sentence of 18 months."

'Not sorry'

Morrissey told the judge that since her conviction, Gutierrez had made around 200 calls from jail in which she complained that she was being unfairly victimized. "Rather than accept responsibility, she has chosen to place blame on the witnesses who testified

against her, me, you, the jurors, the set medic and the paramedics who tried to save Miss Hutchins' life," Morrissey said. "Her jail calls... tell us who Miss Gutierrez really is."

Gutierrez sobbed as she begged the court for probation, rather than jail time, but still insisted she was not wholly to blame. "Your Honor, when I took on 'Rust,' I was young and I was naive. But I took my job as seriously as I knew how to, despite not having proper time, resources and staffing. "The jury has found me in part at fault for this god-awful tragedy. But that doesn't make me a monster. That makes me human," she said. The judge dismissed the plea. "I did not hear you take accountability in your allocation," Sommers said.

"You said you were sorry... but not... for what you did. "It was your attorney that had to tell the court that you were remorseful. The word 'remorse': a deep regret coming from a sense of guilt for past wrongs; That's not you." The movie's star Baldwin, who was also a producer, faces his own involuntary

manslaughter trial in July. He denies the charge. If convicted, he too faces a possible 18 months in prison.

Dave Halls, the film's safety coordinator and assistant director, who handed Baldwin the loaded gun, agreed to a plea deal with prosecutors last year and was sentenced to six months' probation. The tragedy sent shock waves through Hollywood and led to calls for a complete ban on the use of weapons on movie sets. Industry insiders, however, insisted that rules were already in place to prevent such incidents, and that those working on "Rust" had not followed them. The filming of "Rust" was halted by Hutchins' death, but completed last year on location in Montana. The cinematographer's widower, Matthew Hutchins, who has already settled a wrongful death suit with "Rust" producers, served as an executive producer. No release date has been announced. —AFP

Hermès poised to overtake Vuitton as luxury leader

By Esraa Al-Shatti

Citigroup analysts have projected that Hermès, the esteemed luxury brand renowned for its iconic Birkin bag, stands on the brink of eclipsing Louis Vuitton as the foremost brand in the luxury industry by revenue. In a report dated April 12th, Thomas Chauvet highlighted that Hermès sales are forecasted to surpass the significant milestone of €20 billion (\$21.3 billion) by 2027, or potentially earlier—a benchmark Louis Vuitton achieved in 2022. Notably, Hermès recorded group revenue of €13.4 billion in 2023.

Chauvet emphasized the consistency of Hermès' growth trajectory, its robust margins, and its resilient cash flow, positioning the brand as a stalwart within the luxury sector. Furthermore, Chauvet underscored Hermès' strategic pricing approach, spanning from accessible to ultra-luxury segments, along with its adept control over distribution channels. Additionally, opportunities for expansion beyond leather goods into categories such as ready-to-wear apparel, watches, jewelry, and tableware were identified as avenues for further growth and diversification. This projection from Citigroup marks a potential turning point in the hierarchy of luxury brands, with Hermès poised to ascend to the helm as the preeminent leader in the global luxury landscape.



Lifestyle



A dish being prepared using the peels, leaves, and stems of vegetables and fruits in a restaurant laboratory.



A dish prepared by a group of women in charge of a soup kitchen using the peels, leaves, and stems of vegetables and fruits using culinary techniques to optimize food.



Melissa Castro, head chef at Ccori prepares a dish using the peels, leaves, and stems of vegetables and fruits in a restaurant laboratory where a team of chefs and nutritionists investigate culinary techniques to optimize food.



Waste not want not: Peruvian drive to feed more with less

Peruvian cook Isabel Santos prepares a salad with carrot peels and pea shells at a community kitchen in Lima; a disciple of a sustainable cuisine movement seeking to tackle hunger and food waste at the same time. With five other women, she works at making 150 tasty, vitamin-packed servings that include "the peels of potatoes, peas, carrots, leeks and ginger that we used to throw away," the 76-year-old told AFP.

Santos is a follower of the "Optimum Kitchen" concept of renowned Peruvian chef Palmiro Ocampo, who promotes the concept of nose-to-tail cooking - part of a more planet-friendly food drive increasingly finding a following world-wide. "There is no such thing as waste," Ocampo, 40, told AFP on a recent visit to Santos' Maria Parado de Bellido kitchen in a poor district of southern Lima.

"An ingredient has to be used in its entirety," he said, in a world where a



People eat at a soup kitchen run by a group of women that prepare food using the peels, leaves, and stems of vegetables and fruits using culinary techniques to optimize food.

third of food is wasted while 800 million people go hungry. Palmiro and his wife Anyell San Miguel train cooks from Peruvian soup and community kitchens and share recipes through their project Ccori, which means gold in the Indigenous Quechua language and was created 11 years ago to promote "culinary

recycling." As a result "more than a ton of ingredients that would normally end up in the garbage have been... turned into delicious food," said the chef.

Not only tasty but healthy too: "many of these (formerly discarded) food parts have more nutrients" - vital to combat anemia, which affects more

than two in five children in Peru. Banana peels, for example, "contain a lot of magnesium and zinc" and pea shells are rich in iron, according to the chef. At first, it was not easy to convince people, added Ocampo, who describes himself as a "professional recycler." People told him that "it is one thing not to have any money, but we're not going to eat garbage," he recounted.

'Delicious'

The concept seems to have taken root. The salad "seems delicious and nutritious to me," 75-year-old motorcycle taxi driver Demostenes Parinan told AFP at Santos' kitchen, where a main course, soup and drink is sold for the equivalent of about \$1.30. Also on offer that day was a puree prepared with broccoli stems, a side of pea shells and rice, and drinks made with lemon and celery peels.

Anita Clemente of the "La Amistad"

soup kitchen in another part of Lima said Ocampo's project "has taught us to... create healthy dishes" with ingredients once discarded. Clients also end up saving money because they learn to consume the entirety of every product they buy, she told AFP. According to the UN Environment Program, mankind wasted the equivalent of a billion meals every day in 2022.

Ocampo's concept relies on three main elements: food preservation through methods such as fermentation, "culinary recycling" to extract more from an ingredient already used, and cooking with parts previously considered inedible. Another beneficiary is planet Earth: the more nutrition can be extracted from a single plant or animal, the fewer need to be grown, while also reducing the greenhouse gases released from the decomposition of organic waste. — AFP



Anita Clemente prepares food using the peels, leaves, and stems of vegetables and fruits using culinary techniques to optimize food.



A group of women in charge of a soup kitchen prepare food using the peels, leaves, and stems of vegetables and fruits using culinary techniques to optimize food.



A woman prepares food using the peels, leaves and stems of vegetables and fruits.

Ballet performance in South Korea featuring dancers from Russia's Bolshoi Ballet was cancelled abruptly, the organizers confirmed to AFP Tuesday, amid growing tensions between Seoul and Moscow over Ukraine and North Korea. The Russian embassy in Seoul expressed its "deep regret" over the cancellation of the show - scheduled to open April 16 - which comes after another planned performance in Seoul featuring Russia's top ballet dancer Svetlana Zakharova was axed in March. Ukraine said the show had been cancelled after a vigorous lobbying campaign by its local embassy. "Russian 'cultural' propaganda should have no place on international platforms," it added on an official Telegram account.

But the South Korean organizer Choi Jun-seok, who studied at Russia's Bolshoi Ballet Academy, told AFP that while Kyiv's embassy had requested he cancel the show, the final decision was made by the venue, Seoul's Sejong Center for the Performing Arts. "The Ukraine embassy did ask to meet with me and ask me to cancel the show, as Russia started the war and Ukraine is in pain," he said, adding that his goal was to help young Korean ballet dancers see world-class performances. The performance had already undergone several changes in the run up to the opening, including a reduction in the number of Russian performers and alterations to its content, Choi said.

The venue had been under pressure from activists to cancel, with a rally staged outside Sunday. One of the banners they held read: "Purchasing tickets for Russian performances = Purchasing missiles that will kill civilians." Another read: "Caution! Russian culture sponsors



the war!" The relationship between Seoul and Moscow is at one of its lowest points in years, as Russia last month used its UN veto to effectively end UN monitoring of violations of the raft of sanctions on nuclear-armed North Korea.

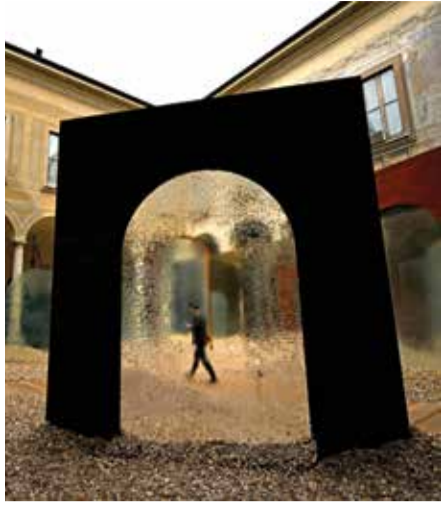
The Russian embassy in Seoul said Monday that it "can't help but notice that South Korea is now showing

a certain tendency in its approach to cooperation with Russia in the cultural field as well." "We will have no choice but to consider this," it added. Russia in February said increased tension on the Korean peninsula was "primarily due to the brazen policy" of Seoul and Washington not North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's nuclear weapons, prompting

South Korea to summon Russia's ambassador to protest.

Seoul has claimed that the North has sent 7,000 containers of arms to Russia to help support its war in Ukraine - which would violate rafts of UN sanctions on both Moscow and Pyongyang. Ukraine also protested when Zakharova's Seoul performance was announced, local

media said at the time. Zakharova, a Ukrainian-born Russian, is widely known as a supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the venue - the Seoul Arts Center - at the time cited "safety concerns" for the cancellation. — AFP



People visit the exhibition "Re/Creation" organized by Lasvit at Palazzo Isimbardi as part of the Fuorisalone 2024 event.



Visitors look at the couch "La Bocca" (The Mouth) presented by Gufram.



People stand next to a sign promoting the Salone del Mobile (furniture fair) on the eve of the Milan Design Week.



MILAN DESIGN FAIR OPENS WITH SUSTAINABILITY AND DAVID LYNCH

One of the world's leading design events, the Salone del Mobile, opened in Milan on Tuesday, marked by sustainability, craftsmanship and two "thinking rooms" from David Lynch. Immersive experiences, new editions of iconic furniture and pop colors from the 1970s are also set to define this year's fair, featuring around 1,950 exhibitors - including a

third from outside Italy. Sustainability, the environment and social responsibility are again a big theme, Maria Porro, head of the Salone, told AFP.

Shapes are "inspired by the organic world", colors are dominated by natural shades from dark brown to sage green and cobalt blue, she said. Leading materials include "natural fibers and recycled ones, materials that

meet high standards of sustainability as well as design and functionality". But Porro said the bright colors of the 1970s would also return, as part of a wider retro spirit as Italian brands bring furniture from that period up to date. Among the fair's main attractions are two identical "thinking rooms" designed by Lynch, conceived as symbolic doors through which a visitor

must pass to become immersed in the exposition.

The 78-year-old US filmmaker is best known for his movies, often unsettling portraits of American life, but has also been designing furniture for over two decades. Another immersive experience, "Under the Surface" by illustrator Emiliano Ponzi, takes the form of a sunken island, with

a message against wasting water. Constantly moving reflections of light on the sea represent data on global water consumption. Last year more than 300,000 visitors came from 181 countries - with Chinese buyers also returning following an absence caused by the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP



Visitors look at the artwork "Straordinaria", an immersive installation presented by the Italian company Elica as part of the Fuorisalone 2024 event, on the eve of the Milan Design Week, in Milan. - AFP photos



Visitors look at the artwork "Straordinaria", an immersive installation presented by the Italian company Elica.

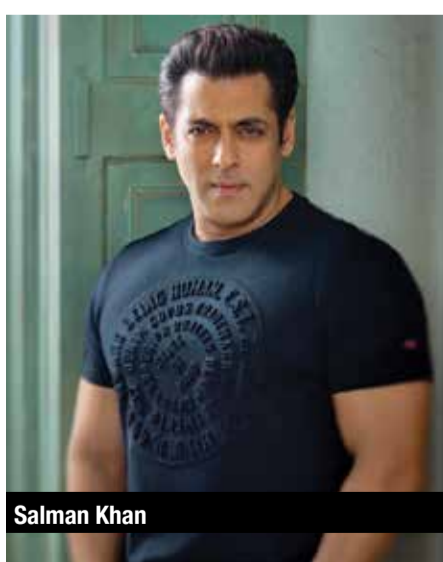


A security guard walks past an installation part of the exhibition "Making Sense of Color" at Garage 21 in Milan.

Two arrested for firing at Bollywood superstar's home

Two members of a notorious criminal gang were arrested by Indian police Tuesday for firing at the home of Bollywood actor Salman Khan in retaliation for the superstar's killing of two antelopes. The Bishnoi gang, accused of several murders and extortion rackets, hails from a wider desert-based religious sect that considers the species to be the reincarnation of their guru. Khan, 58, has been in the crosshairs of the group since 1998 for shooting two blackbucks on a recreational hunting trip.

The gang's jailed leader Lawrence Bishnoi has threatened Khan with assassination in the past. Two men on a motorbike shot at Khan's first-floor apartment during the early hours of Sunday in the upscale Mumbai neighborhood of Bandra, also firing several



Salman Khan

rounds in the air before fleeing.

Khan, who is always guarded by armed policemen owing to threats to his life, was home when the gunshots were fired. The two men aged 24 and 21 were arrested Tuesday in the western state of Gujarat, police told AFP. "We were able to locate the two accused near a temple," Kutch district police officer Mahendra Bagaria said.

"One of our teams reached the temple and nabbed the accused." Members of the Bishnoi community pursued a criminal case against Khan for the black-buck shooting for 20 years.

Khan was sentenced to five years in jail by a local court for violating the Wildlife Protection Act in 2018. But the penalty was suspended on appeal just days after Khan was sent to prison, prompting Lawrence Bishnoi to warn soon afterwards that his gang would take the law into their own hands. The gang leader has been accused of orchestrating several murders including the killing of popular Indian rapper Sidhu Moose Wala in 2022.

Khan has starred in nearly 150 films and television shows since his first hit in the 1980s, and remains one of Bollywood's most bankable figures. But his personal life has long been dogged by controversy. In 2002 he allegedly ran over five people sleeping on the sidewalk in an upmarket Mumbai neighborhood, killing one, in a late-night hit-and-run. He was cleared, but authorities challenged his acquittal in 2016 and the case is still ongoing. — AFP

Fortunato Ortombina named new La Scala director

The director of La Fenice Opera House in Venice, Fortunato Ortombina, will take the helm of Milan's storied La Scala, authorities announced Tuesday. The Italian director, 63, succeeds Frenchman Dominique Meyer, 68, who has been in the post since 2020, Milan's Mayor Giuseppe Sala announced after a meeting of La Scala's board of directors, where he serves as chairman. Last year, the hard-right government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni set an age limit of 70 on opera directors, effectively preventing Meyer from being reappointed. Ortombina has directed the Venice opera house, one of Italy's leading cultural centres, since 2017.

At La Scala, he served as an artistic director coordinator from 2003-2007. For nearly a year the two men will work side by side, with Ortombina taking up his post in September, and Meyer remaining in his until August 2025. "We have done everything for the good of La Scala, with dignity and fairness," the mayor said. La Scala's music director, Riccardo Chailly,



The artistic director of Le Fenice theatre, Fortunato Ortombina, poses prior to the performance of "Othello, the Moor of Venice" outside Palazzo Ducale on July 10, 2013 in Venice. — AFP

71, whose current mandate expires in February 2025, has had his duties extended until 2026. Succession plans at the head of La Scala had caused a stir with critics accusing Meloni's government of purging cultural voices at the head of Italian institutions who clashed with the government's views. — AFP

Sports

Records galore as Hyderabad beat Bengaluru after IPL best 287

Steep run chase made wickets tumble for Royal Challengers

BENGALURU: Sunrisers Hyderabad amassed 287-3 for the highest-ever Indian Premier League total and beat Royal Challengers Bengaluru by 25 runs on a Monday full of records and featuring a century by Travis Head. Hyderabad, who were invited to bat first by hosts Bengaluru, went past the previous mark of 277 they made last month after a 41-ball 102 by Head and Heinrich Klaasen's explosive 67. The new high was the second best in a T20 match after Nepal bludgeoned 314-3 against Mongolia in last year's Asian Games in Hangzhou.

The match produced the highest aggregate for a T20 game with a tally of 549 runs. Virat Kohli (42) and skipper Faf du Plessis (62) gave RCB a blazing start before Dinesh Karthik smashed 83 off 35 balls as Bengaluru ended on 262-7.

Skipper Pat Cummins and spinner Mayank Markande broke the back of the Bengaluru chase with five wickets between them. "Against Mumbai (Indians) a few weeks ago I thought it won't happen again, but it has happened again," Cummins said after his team's third straight victory and fourth of the season.

Batters ruled at the M.Chinnaswamy Stadium as Hyderabad smashed the most sixes in an IPL innings, with 22 hits flying over the fence. Head reached his ton in 39 balls for the fourth-fastest hundred in the competition as he set the tone for the assault and named man of the match. He put on a 108-run opening stand with Abhishek Sharma, who hit 34. Head, who was Australia's

match winner in the final of the ODI World Cup in India last year, struck nine fours and eight sixes.

Klaasen blitz

After his departure Klaasen took charge with his 31-ball blitz. The South African was nearly as punishing as Head as he smashed the ball to all parts of the ground before being dismissed by Lockie Ferguson.

Fellow South African Aiden Markram (32) and Indian hitter Abdul Samad (37) put together 59 off 19 balls for the final storm. Samad smashed England left-arm fast bowler Reece Topley for three fours and two sixes in a 25-run 19th over before he and Markram finished off with 21 runs from the final over. Hyderabad posted 277-3 against Mumbai Indians at their home ground on March 27 to go past the 263-5 by Bengaluru in 2013. Earlier this month, Kolkata Knight Riders posted 272-7 in a crushing 106-run victory over Delhi Capitals. In-form Kohli attempted to set up the chase with a powerful start as he struck six fours and two sixes in his 20-ball knock and Du Plessis kept up the charge till his departure. The steep run chase made wickets tumble but Karthik once again came up with a late assault to reduce the losing margin for bottom-placed Bengaluru, who slumped to their fifth straight loss. "One thing really important is to freshen your mind, it's such a mental game," said Du Plessis. "Sometimes it feels like your mind is going to explode. A little bit of (an) uphill task for us at the moment." — AFP



BENGALURU: Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Dinesh Karthik (R) plays a shot during the Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 cricket match between Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Sunrisers Hyderabad at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru. — AFP

IPL smashes scoring records

NEW DELHI: Better use of the Indian Premier League's impact substitute rule has been the big factor behind this season's run spree in the high-octane Twenty20 competition which has seen multiple scoring records smashed, say experts. Sunrisers Hyderabad broke their own IPL all-time record score by bludgeoning 287-3 on Monday against Royal Challengers Bengaluru, only three weeks after they set the previous benchmark with 277-3 against Mumbai Indians. Travis Head led Hyderabad's charge with a 39-ball century, the fourth-fastest in the tournament's 17-season history, before Heinrich Klaasen slogged seven sixes his 67 off 31 balls. "Impact player makes a big difference," Klaasen said after his team's 25-run victory in Bengaluru.

"It's nice to see our boys striking it nicely and our bowlers can at least defend 270, which is always a positive sign." The impact player rule was introduced last year and allows the replacement of a player named in the starting team at any

point after the toss. The rule is allowing teams batting first to play an extra big-hitting batsman down the order, who can then be replaced by a bowler when they field. Alternatively a bowler can be replaced if they bat second.

No fear

"The impact player rule has definitely worked," former India women's captain Mithali Raj said in a Star Sports press meet on Monday. Five substitutes can be named and the one used must be Indian, unless there are fewer than four overseas players in the starting XI. Teams have been using the rule to maximise the chance of quick runs in the final few overs. "We have seen how it has helped teams to post big totals and... especially it has helped teams in chasing," said Raj.

Hyderabad's total was the second highest men's score in Twenty20s after the 314-3 scored by Nepal against Mongolia at last year's Asian Games in Hangzhou, China. Bengaluru fell short by 20 runs after their impact substitute Anuj Rawat hit a 14-ball 25 to help his team finish on 262-7. The 549-run aggregate in Monday's encounter was the highest in any T20 match. "It's the intensity that these guys

are playing at now, it is the new way. These guys are not frightened," said former England batsman Kevin Pietersen during TV commentary.

Hyderabad amassed their previous record of 277-3 against Mumbai Indians on March 27, but days later Kolkata almost eclipsed it with 272-7 in their 106-run win over Delhi Capitals. Kolkata opener Sunil Narine led the way with a fearless 85 off 39 balls and Delhi coach Ricky Ponting believes substitutes give the top order extra freedom to play shots. "I feel the impact players had a bit of an influence on that (total)," Ponting said after the defeat. "The fact is that most teams have now got someone reasonably good that can bat at number nine, and sometimes even a specialist batsman at number eight. "That definitely helps, so it gives the batting team the extra freedom to go harder earlier." But former India pace bowler Irfan Pathan said there was a flipside to the impact player rule with the role of all-rounders diminishing as they were often replaced after their batting or bowling stint. "Impact player rule is benefiting (the) entertainment part of cricket, which is high-scoring games," Pathan told reporters. "But Indian cricket will have to think about it going forward as far as all-rounders are concerned." — AFP

Cummins leads Australia quintet of Wisden award

LONDON: Australia captain Pat Cummins was named the Leading Cricketer in the World by Wisden on Monday to coincide with the publication of the 161st edition of the sport's "bible". Cummins was recognized by Wisden for a stellar 2023 in which the fast bowler led Australia to a World Test Championship (WTC) final win over India.

His side retained the Ashes before he captained them to a 50-over World Cup final win against tournament hosts India in Ahmedabad. The 30-year-old paceman was the first Australian to win this award since Michael Clarke in 2012.

"After captaining Australia to success in the World Test Championship, Pat Cummins retained the Ashes — thanks in no small part to his late-order runs in the first Test at Edgbaston — then led Australia to victory in the World Cup final in India," said Wisden editor Lawrence Booth.

"In 2023, no other seamer in world cricket took more than his 42 Test wickets." Wisden Cricketers' Almanack has been published continually on an annual basis since its first edition in 1864. Wisden also names five Cricketers of the Year — an award that can only be won once in a career — and is generally based on performances in the previous English season.

Three of the latest recipients — Usman Khawaja, Mitchell Starc and Ashleigh Gardner — are all Australia internationals and played in the men's and women's Ashes last year. Opening batsman Khawaja was honored for an Ashes tally of 496 runs and fast bowler Starc for his 23 wickets in the series.

Gardner was recognized for taking 12 wickets in holders Australia's victory in the one-off Women's Ashes Test at Trent Bridge. The other two Cricketers of the Year were the England duo of Harry Brook and Mark Wood. There was more Australian success when it came to the Wisden Trophy for Test performance of the year, with Travis Head recognized for his decisive 163 in the WTC final against India at The Oval. England all-rounder Nat Sciver-Brunt was named the Leading Women's Cricketer in the World after three one-day international hundreds in five Ashes innings. West Indies' Hayley Matthews was named Leading T20 Cricketer of the Year. — AFP



LONDON: (FILES) Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (L) is introduced to Australian cricket captain Ricky Ponting (2R) by then MCC President Derek Underwood (2L) before the start of play against England. Derek Underwood, the most successful spin bowler in England's Test cricket history, has died at the age of 78. — AFP

England spin great Underwood dies at 78

LONDON: Derek Underwood, the most successful spin bowler in England Test cricket history, has died at the age of 78, his former county Kent announced on Monday. Underwood took 297 wickets in 86 Tests with his distinctive brand of brisk left-arm spin.

He was noted for being particularly effective on uncovered pitches, which were in use for much of a 24-year first-class career that ran from 1963 until 1987. He famously bowled England to a Test victory over arch-rivals Australia at The Oval in 1968 on such a surface, taking 7-50 when a draw had seemed inevitable.

Underwood made his England debut as a 21-year-old in 1966 and played his last Test in 1982. Together with outstanding wicketkeeper Alan Knott, he formed a celebrated combination for Kent and England. Both Underwood, affectionately nicknamed "Deadly", and Knott might have achieved even more success for England had they not been involved in Kerry Packer's breakaway World Series Cricket of the late 1970s and a rebel tour of South Africa in 1982. Even so, Underwood's tally of Test wickets is 42 more than the next highest by another England spinner, Graeme Swann.

'Near unplayable'

Former England captain Mike Atherton said Underwood would be "held to be England's best spinner" even though he faced different conditions from modern bowlers, who play on covered pitches and

have the benefit of the decision review system in international games.

"On pitches that were drying, from wet to dry, he was said to be near unplayable," Atherton told Sky Sports. "You think of spinners being quite slow and flighty, but because of the conditions that pertained at the time, particularly the uncovered pitches, he was somebody who had quite a long run-up and bowled in a kind of a cutter fashion."

"You speak to someone like Ian Chappell, who would have played against him in the Ashes as an Australian batter, and he would say Derek Underwood was amongst the most difficult bowlers that he played against."

Derek Pringle, a former England all-rounder who played against Underwood for Essex, said on X: "Very saddened to hear of Derek Underwood's passing — a superb spin and cut bowler and an unassuming England and Kent legend. I once faced him on a 'turner' at Folkestone and there was only one Deadly Derek and it wasn't me." After his playing career was over, Underwood served as president of Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), the owners of London's Lord's Cricket Ground, for an annual term in 2009, and was inducted into the International Cricket Council's Hall of Fame.

England and Wales Cricket Board chairman Richard Thompson said: "Derek Underwood will be remembered as one of the finest spin bowlers this country has ever produced and his remarkable record is testament to his enduring skill." Kent chairman Simon Philip said: "Derek was an outstanding contributor to both Kent and England, winning trophies for club and country and etching his name in the history books forevermore. "Watching Derek weave his unique magic on a wet wicket was a privilege for all who were able to witness it." — AFP

Babar returns as Pakistan captain

KARACHI: Babar Azam makes his return as Pakistan captain in a five-match Twenty20 series starting Thursday against an understrength New Zealand with the World Cup weeks away. Azam regained the captaincy last month in a shock U-turn that ended the short-lived reign of Shaheen Shah Afridi, raising fears of a rift between the players.

The hosts hope that spending time together at a fitness camp at an army base will have been good for bonding. Head coach Azhar Mahmood said on Tuesday that the T20 World Cup in June in the United States and West Indies is very much on their minds.

"I have full faith in the selected squad and the morale is very high in the team, so we will overcome all the shortcomings so that we can do our best in the World Cup," he told AFP. "You cannot take any team lightly in the T20 format and if New Zealand is missing their key players then there is an opportunity for their young players."

Pakistan suffered major upheaval following their first-round exit from the one-day World Cup last year. Azam stepped down as captain in all three formats and head coach Mickey Arthur left along with Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Zaka Ashraf.

Mohsin Naqvi, the country's interior minister, took up the board's top post and reorganized the selection committee, paving the way for batsman Azam's return. Fast bowler Mohammad Amir and spinning all-rounder Imad Wasim also return to international cricket in this series after coming out of retirement.

Youthful New Zealand

New Zealand arrived in the country at the weekend, having sent a security team last month. In 2021 the Black Caps pulled out of a tour of Pakistan at the 11th hour over security fears, but returned twice in 2023. New Zealand are missing nine top players including skipper Kane Williamson because of the Indian Premier League. Stand-in skipper Michael Bracewell says it is a chance for the younger players. "I think the group of young players have come through and have played a lot of T20 cricket growing up," said Bracewell, who has returned after a year-long injury lay-off. "They have fresh ideas on how the game should be played and as a group we will just try to play our game."

Ace pacer Tim Southee, the world's top wicket-taker in Twenty20 internationals with 157, is rested. The experienced duo of Adam Milne and Finn Allen suffered injuries a day before the team's departure. All-rounder Zac Foulkes, hard-hitting batsman Tim Robinson and seamer Will O'Rourke are uncapped in T20s. The first three games of the series are in Rawalpindi, with Lahore hosting the last two. — AFP



BENGALURU: Royal Challengers Bengaluru's captain Faf du Plessis and his Sunrisers Hyderabad's counterpart Pat Cummins (R) pose for photo during the toss before the start of the IPL Twenty20 cricket match. — AFP

Sports

Bayern boss Tuchel hoping to echo Chelsea run before Arsenal clash

Arsenal are in the midst of a tense Premier League title race

MUNICH: Bayern Munich manager Thomas Tuchel will seek to echo the spirit of 2021's Champions League-winning run with Chelsea in Wednesday's home quarter-final second leg against Arsenal. Bayern put aside their domestic struggles in the first leg, returning from London with a 2-2 draw, another Harry Kane goal against his old foes and the knowledge victory in Germany will see them through to the final four.

With Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen already in possession of the Bundesliga trophy, the Champions League is now the only focus for Tuchel's Bayern. Being able to concentrate only on Europe is a luxury few of the teams remaining in the Champions League have, particularly Arsenal who are in the midst of a tense Premier League title race.

Tuchel was free to make his focus on Europe obvious, making seven changes in Saturday's hard-fought 2-0 home win over struggling Cologne. Left out of the squad completely for the Cologne clash, captain Manuel Neuer and winger Leroy Sane were allowed to watch Saturday's win from the comfort of the grandstand.

Bayern will however face Arsenal missing several first teamers. Canada defender Alphonso Davies is suspended, while forwards Serge Gnabry and Kingsley Coman are injured. Tuchel would not be drawn on who would replace Davies on Wednesday, telling reporters after Saturday's win over Cologne he may "do something crazy".

Asked if one of Bayern's centre-backs could make the shift out to left-back, Tuchel said with a smile "no, we want to win." Bayern veteran Thomas Mueller, who has two Champions League titles, wrote on social media the focus was all on Europe. "Now, it's all about Europe. These nights, this pressure, this special atmosphere in the Allianz Arena: I'm looking forward to it."

Chelsea 2.0

While not quite at the level of self-described "overthinker" Pep Guardiola, Tuchel is known for his flexibility and a penchant for being tactically reactive, a perfect fit for knockout football. Despite winning leagues in France and Germany, Tuchel's teams have shone brightest in cup competitions.



Harry Kane

He announced himself as Dortmund coach by winning the 2017 German Cup, dispatching Bayern 3-2 in Munich in the semi-final on the way to the first major title of his career. His only Champions League season with Dortmund was impressive but failed due to circumstances beyond his control.

Tuchel's Dortmund were unbeaten in the group phase, finishing ahead of eventual cham-

pions Real Madrid. Their campaign came undone in a quarter final against Monaco with the club forced to play a day after a bomb blast shattered the windows of the team's bus.

Dortmund's decision to play led to a rift between Tuchel and Dortmund which never healed and he was fired just days after his side lifted the German Cup. At Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea he made the finals of both the major and minor domestic cup competitions.

In Europe, Tuchel took PSG to the Champions League final, where they lost 1-0 to Bayern. The next season as Chelsea boss, he took over a side in disarray in January after the firing of club legend Frank Lampard.

He steadied the ship and took Chelsea to the Champions League final, where they beat Guardiola's heavily favored Manchester City to win the title for the second time. While plenty stands in the way of another Champions League triumph, including one more potential meeting with Guardiola's City on the way, Tuchel could be just four games away from Wembley glory. — AFP



SHANGHAI: Formula 1 Kick Sauber's Chinese driver Zhou Guanyu (L) and Managing Director of Sauber Group and representative of the Alfa Romeo F1 Team, Alessandro Alunni (C) attend the world premier of the docu-film The First One, in Shanghai, on April 16, 2024. — AFP

Pride and hype as F1 roars back to China after COVID

SHANGHAI: Two years ago the Shanghai International Circuit hosted a COVID hospital, but this weekend it will stage Formula One once more as the sport returns to China for the first time since the pandemic. Adding to the excitement of fans, they will see Shanghai native Zhou Guanyu drive at his home track in Formula One for the first time. "I'm extremely excited, in these 5,000 years of (Chinese) history there has only been one Zhou Guanyu," said fan Wang Xiaotian. Shanghai last witnessed an F1 race in 2019, before COVID and China's travel restrictions put a halt to almost all major international sport in the country.

Tickets for the action-packed Formula One weekend — which begins with Friday morning practice, sees a sprint race on Saturday and ends with the grand prix on Sunday — sold out within minutes of going on sale in January. Ma Qinghua, the first Chinese to drive an F1 car when he took part in a 2012 practice session, said the sport's return will have a "very good impact", especially on younger fans who did not have the chance to see their heroes in the flesh during the pandemic. "This group of people are very much anticipating the chance to witness a race personally," Ma, a pioneer of China's motorsport industry, told AFP.

'Extremely proud'

It was almost exactly two years ago, at the height of the city's lockdown, that the Shanghai circuit became the site of a makeshift 13,000-bed COVID hospital. That was just a few weeks after Zhou had his first grand prix drive in Bahrain, finishing 10th to score a point, but the pandemic delayed 24-year-old Zhou's home F1 debut until this week.

Even though he is unlikely to challenge for the podium, Zhou is desperate to put on a Shanghai show.

"I can't wait to give it my all, share the passion with our entire team trackside and at home, and start a new chapter of Chinese motorsport together with the crowd," Zhou said Monday. "It's an opportunity to inspire and pave the path for future generations being interested in the sport."

"My country loves racing and has been waiting for this moment for years." His excitement is echoed by fans in the city. "As China's first F1 driver, we are extremely proud of him," Hu Yanqin, 29, said at a recent fan event screening the Japanese Grand Prix — complete with large banners bearing Zhou's photo.

Underlining the hype surrounding Zhou, who is in his third F1 season, fans greeted him at the airport when he arrived last week and a documentary about the racer, "The First One", will hit Chinese cinemas this weekend to coincide with the race.

Growing popularity

China is relatively new to motor racing, with cars a rare sight even in major cities as recently as the 1980s. Shanghai staged the country's first F1 grand prix in 2004 and, prior to the pandemic, the sport's decision-makers had talked about the possibility of a second grand prix each year in China. Ma, who was the first Chinese driver to take part in a Formula One practice session at the 2012 Italian Grand Prix, has witnessed the growth in motorsport first hand. "It is a lot more popular now," said Ma, adding that, when he started, "I didn't even know where I could do a test or that there was such a thing as a racing licence". Ma's F1 adventure did not go any further with the now-disbanded HRT team because of contract issues, he said, but he drove in other classes such as Formula E and the World Touring Car Championship. Now 36, he runs a go-kart venue in Shanghai where aspiring speed demons zoom down a looping two-storey track tucked into the basement of a mall. During Formula One's five-year absence, China continued to put resources into motor sport. — AFP

Caitlin Clark selected first in WNBA draft

NEW YORK: Caitlin Clark, who smashed records on and off the court in a dazzling US college career, was selected first in the WNBA draft on Monday amid expectations she will have a transformative effect on women's professional basketball.

The Indiana Fever made it official, taking the 22-year-old Iowa Hawkeyes star with the first pick in front of a rapt crowd at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. "I got a little anxious there before the pick," Clark said in an interview with broadcaster ESPN. "I've dreamed of this moment since I was in second grade and it's taken a lot of hard work, a lot of ups and downs. I told my mom before this, you know, I earned it, and that's why I'm so proud of it." The Fever won the 2012 WNBA crown but haven't been to the playoffs since 2016.

They had the second-lowest attendance in the league in 2023 with an average of 4,066 fans per game. But with Clark on board alongside last year's overall top pick Aliyah Boston, in Indiana all that seems set to change. In anticipation of her selection, the WNBA had already scheduled 36 of the Fever's 40 games next season for national television. Even before the draft the Fever had begun selling a limited amount of single-game tickets, betting that the basketball-mad Midwestern state of Indiana would be prime territory for "Clark-mania."

Seats for games against Connecticut and Los Angeles sold out within hours of going on sale. Everyone wants to see the two-time national player of the year, whose fame is built on a foundation of on-court excellence that saw her eclipse Pete Maravich's 54-year-old all-time college basketball scoring record.

Her remarkable long-range shooting prowess made for a stream of highlight-reel baskets. She averaged 31.6 points per game this season as she led Iowa to the NCAA championship game for a second straight year.

They were beaten both times, but thanks to Clark's impact the Hawkeyes set or broke attendance records in all but two of their games. This month's title game, in which South Carolina vanquished Clark's Iowa, drew an average audience of 18.7 million viewers. That made it the most watched women's basketball game in history and the most watched basketball game of any kind — men's or women's, college or professional — since 2019.

Pretty insane

Clark's face adorns cereal boxes and State Farm Insurance billboards, and just last week she appeared as herself on the late-night comedy show "Saturday Night Live." "Obviously the course of the last few weeks has been pretty insane in my life," Clark said. "I'm just very lucky to be in this moment, and all these opportunities and these things, they're once in a lifetime."

"This isn't something everybody gets to do." While Clark's trademark is explosive scoring, her coaches and teammates have touted her maturity and high basketball IQ and Clark said that will be key as she joins Boston and the rest of her new teammates in trying to revive the Fever's fortunes. — AFP



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Portuguese midfielder #20 Bernardo Silva attends a press conference at Manchester City's training ground in north-west England on April 16, 2024, on the eve of their UEFA Champions League Group quarter-final second-leg football match against Real Madrid. — AFP

Man City aim to repeat Real Madrid heroics

MANCHESTER: Manchester City are closing in on a second consecutive treble, yet Erling Haaland is still facing criticism as Real Madrid visit the Etihad on Wednesday aiming to exact revenge for their Champions League exit last season.

The 14-time European champions were humbled 4-0 on their visit to Manchester 11 months ago at the semi-final stage as City went on to win the Champions League for the first time, along with the Premier League and FA Cup.

Pep Guardiola's men are 12 games away from repeating that remarkable feat even without their prolific Norwegian hitting the form he did last season. Haaland's return of 31 goals in 38 games this season is still impressive, but he has not scored in City's three meetings with Madrid in the past year and failed to find the net in 13 of his last 20 matches for club and country.

The 23-year-old has also been in the firing line for not offering anything other than goals. Former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher labelled Haaland the "ultimate luxury player" who is yet to become "world-class".

Ex-Manchester United captain Roy Keane, famously sent-off in a Manchester derby for a pre-meditated lunge on Haaland's father Alf-Inge due to a long-running feud, went even further by claiming the City striker's hold-up play resembles that of a player in England's fourth-tier League Two.

The Spanish press have been just as harsh after Haaland failed to fire for a second consecutive year at the Santiago Bernabeu in a thrilling first leg that ended 3-3 last week. His performance was described by Madrid sports daily Marca as "impotent", while AS called him "clumsy and desperate" in his attempts to get the better of Antonio Rudiger. Madrid boss Carlo Ancelotti will not repeat the same mistake of dropping Rudiger for the second leg as he did last season after the German had kept Haaland quiet in the Bernabeu. — AFP

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

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Olympic flame lit for 2024 Paris Games

Olympic flame that we are lighting today symbolises hope for a better future: Bach



OLYMPIA: First torch bearer, rowing Olympic gold medalist on 2020, Stefanos Ntouskos (2L) receives the flame from Greek actress Mary Mina (C), playing the role of the High Priestess, during the flame lighting ceremony for the Paris 2024 Olympics Games at the Ancient Olympia archeological site, birthplace of the ancient Olympics in southern Greece, on April 16, 2024. — AFP

OLYMPIA: The torch relay for the Paris 2024 Olympics set off Tuesday from Olympia, the birthplace of the ancient Games, after the flame was lit in a ritual inspired by antiquity and marked by messages of hope amid global crises. "The Olympic flame that we are lighting today symbolises this hope for a better future," said International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach.

Owing to cloudy weather, Greek actresses in the role of ancient priestesses used a flame lit in a rehearsal Monday in the 2,600-year-old Temple of Hera, near the stadium where the Olympics were born in 776 BC.

Carrying the flame in a pot, Greek actress Mary Mina lit the torch for the first bearer, 2020 Olympic rowing champion Stefanos Ntouskos. Retired swimmer Laure Manaudou, who won a gold medal at the 2004 Athens Olympics, followed as France's first torchbearer in Olympia.

The torch harks back to the ancient Olympics when a sacred flame burned throughout the Games. The tradition was revived in 1936 for the Berlin Olympics. During the 11-day relay on Greek soil, some 600 torchbearers will carry the flame over a

distance of 5,000 kilometres (3,100 miles) through 41 municipalities.

"In ancient times, the Olympic Games brought together the Greek city states, even – and in particular – during times of war and conflict," Bach said. "Today, the Olympic Games are the only event that brings the entire world together in peaceful competition," he said. Then as now, the Olympic athletes are sending this powerful message: yes, it is possible to compete fiercely against each other and at the same time live peacefully together under one roof."

'Inclusive' Games

Officials on Tuesday stressed that the Paris Games will set new milestones, following the legacy of the other two prior Olympics held in the French capital. "The Olympic Flame will shine over the first Olympic Games inspired by our Olympic Agenda reforms from start to finish," Bach said.

"These Olympic Games will be younger, more inclusive, more urban, more sustainable. These will be the very first Olympic Games with full gender parity, because the IOC allocated exactly 50 percent of the places to female and male athletes," he said.

Paris Olympics chief organiser Tony Estanguet noted that women took part for the first time in the Paris 1900 Games, while the first Olympic Village was created for the 1924 Paris Games. For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic imposed toned-down events for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and 2022 Beijing Winter Games, the ceremony was back with full regalia and scores of spectators.

Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou, French sports minister Amelie Oudea-Castera and Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo were present at the ceremony. American mezzo soprano Joyce DiDonato delivered the Olympic anthem.

Security concerns

The Olympic flame will be handed over to Paris 2024 organisers in a ceremony at the all-marble Panathenaic Stadium, site of the first modern Olympic Games of 1896, on April 26. Nana Mouskouri, the 89-year-old Greek singer with a worldwide following, has been invited to perform at the ceremony.

On April 27, the flame will begin its journey to France on board the 19th-century three-masted barque Belem, which was launched just weeks after

the 1896 Athens Games. A French historical monument, the Belem carried out trade journeys to Brazil, Guyana and the Caribbean for nearly two decades.

France's last surviving three-mast steel-hulled boat, it is expected to arrive in Marseille on May 8. Ten thousand torchbearers will then carry the flame across 64 French territories. It will travel through 400 towns and dozens of tourist attractions during its 12,000-kilometre (7,500-mile) journey through mainland France and overseas French territories in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific.

On July 26 it will form the centrepiece of the Paris Olympics opening ceremony. The ceremony is planned to be held on the river Seine, with thousands of athletes sailing along a six-kilometre (four-mile) stretch of the river on barges—the first time it has not been held in the Games' main stadium.

However, French President Emmanuel Macron on Monday said it could be moved to the national stadium in the event of a security threat. Macron said instead of teams sailing down the Seine, the ceremony could be "limited to the Trocadero" building across the river from the Eiffel Tower or "even moved to the Stade de France". — AFP

IIHF World Championship Division IV kicks off

By Abdellatif Sharaa and KUNA

KUWAIT: The IIHF World Championship Division IV was launched yesterday with the opening ceremony under the patronage and presence of Minister of National Assembly Affairs, Youth Affairs and Communications Affairs Dawood Maarafi, President of Kuwait Olympic Committee Sheikh Fahad Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Chairman of Kuwait Winter Games Club Fuhaid Al-Ajmi, US Ambassador to Kuwait Karen Hideko Sasahara, US Deputy Chief of Mission James Holtsnider and diplomats of participating countries.

In his opening remarks Minister Dawood Maarafi welcomed delegations to its first international ice hockey event in Kuwait. He said that Kuwait Ice Hockey team already achieved good results in previous event for Kuwait and hope to win this championship title and move to Division III. Maarafi wished all participants success and urged fans to be in attendance to back their teams.

Meanwhile, Mongolia defeated Indonesia by the score of 9-3 earlier in the day, in a match that was dominated by the Mongolian team in most periods, particularly in the third when they scored seven unanswered goals. Kuwait play Malaysia in the second match of the day which was in progress when this re-



Dawood Maarafi (centre) during the kick off of the tournament. — Photos by Yasser Al Zayyat

port was prepared.

Earlier, Franz Reindl, a council member in the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), praised the preparedness of the Kuwait Winter Games Club, in all organizational and technical aspects. In a statement to KUNA, he lauded the club for providing facilities to the teams, referees and members of the International Federation, and by equipping the rink with the necessary internationally approved arrangements.

Reindl, who is also chairperson of the championships committee for the 2024 World Ice Hockey Champion-

ship Division IV, added that they aim to improve the game and in spreading it to a large number of countries.

Reindl revealed that the levels of the teams in Divisions III and IV have notably increased in the past few years, including Kuwait's team that has improved greatly. Reindl expressed his pleasure of being in Kuwait, and the gratefulness of the International Ice Hockey Federation to Kuwait and the Kuwaiti organizing committee on their cooperation and presenting a good job. The tournament, being held at the Kuwait Winter Games Club's ice skating rink in Bayan.

Palmer scores four as Chelsea hit Everton for six

LONDON: Cole Palmer scored four goals to put Chelsea within touching distance of the Premier League's top six after a 6-0 win over Everton on Monday. The England international has been a shining light in an otherwise disappointing campaign for the Blues and moved level with Manchester City striker Erling Haaland's 20 Premier League goals in the race for the Golden Boot.

Palmer killed the game as a contest as he completed his hat-trick inside 30 minutes before Nicolas Jackson also struck before half-time. However, the night was not without drama for Chelsea as Palmer had to fend off teammates Jackson and Noni Madueke to score his fourth from the penalty spot.

"We cannot behave in this way. I told them this is the last time I accept this type of behaviour," said Pochettino after his biggest win as Chelsea boss to date. Despite an eight-game unbeaten Premier League run, Chelsea remain in ninth but are now just three points adrift of sixth-placed Newcastle with a game in hand to come.

And they will head into Saturday's FA Cup semi-final against City confident they can end the holders' quest for a second consecutive treble. "The most important thing now is to build a team which is consistent," added Pochettino. "We were not consistent enough. We need to learn and learn quick."

A demoralising defeat leaves Everton still perilously placed just two points above the relegation zone. Nottingham Forest visit Goodison Park in a huge relegation six-pointer on Sunday and Sean Dyche's men will need to improve at both ends of the field to prolong their 70-year stay in the top flight.

"It's the most embarrassed I've felt as an individual and part of a team in my time in football," said Everton defender James Tarkowski. The visitors were dealt a blow before kick-off as Dominic Calvert-Lewin missed out due to a hamstring injury. His deputy Beto spurned a glorious chance to open the scoring when he somehow turned over Seamus Coleman's cross from point-blank range. — AFP



(From Left) Khalid Al-Mutairi, Fuhaid Al Ajmi and Dawood Maarafi.



Lara al-Barrak performs.



Junior ice skaters performs at the opening ceremony