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| Fajr            | : 04:51 |
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| Asr             | : 15:20 |
| Maghrib         | : 17:50 |
| Isha            | : 19:06 |

## Arab leaders discuss Gaza plan

Zionists demand Gaza demilitarization, expand West Bank offensive



CAIRO: Representative of HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, arrives in the Egyptian capital to head Kuwait's delegation at the Arab League summit on Gaza on March 4, 2025. (Right) Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas meets Syria's interim President Ahmed Al-Sharaa on the sidelines of the summit. — KUNA/AFP

CAIRO: Arab leaders were gathering in Cairo Tuesday to discuss an alternative to US President Donald Trump's widely condemned plan to assume control of war-battered Gaza and displace its Palestinian population. Representative of HH the Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, arrived in Cairo on Tuesday along with an accompanying delegation to participate in the extraordinary Arab summit.

Hours before the summit opened, the Zionist entity demanded Gaza's "full demilitarization", which Hamas promptly rejected, calling disarmament a "red line". "We look forward to an effective Arab role that ends the humanitarian tragedy created by the occupation in the Gaza Strip... and thwarts the (Zionist) occupation's plans to displace (Palestinians)," a statement by Hamas said. The Zionist military said Tuesday it had expanded its offensive in the occupied West Bank currently in its 43rd day to new parts of the northern city of Jenin, adding it killed two Palestinians including a local Hamas leader during the overnight raid.

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### RAMADAN KAREEM

## Ramadan: The month of character-building

By Nisar Ahmad

Belief in Almighty Allah is the foundation of virtuous character. Allah, the Exalted, is the best guide, and His guidance is the true guidance. He created humankind with the ability to distinguish between righteousness and wickedness, good and bad, virtue and sin, and truth and falsehood. He also guides us through His revealed books. As Allah, the Exalted, says in the Holy Quran: "And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it, and inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness. He has succeeded who purifies it. And he has failed who instills it [with corruption]." (Al-Shams 91:7-10)

Almighty Allah revealed divine scriptures and sent prophets and messengers to guide mankind throughout the ages, so that we may follow the righteous path. One who does not connect with His message — the Holy Quran — neither understands His will nor follows His guidance. Such a person remains in darkness, unaware of the true purpose of life and the difference between right and wrong.

The excellence of the month of Ramadan lies in the revelation of the Noble Quran during this time. Ramadan provides an annual opportunity for character-building, which will benefit us for the rest of the year. The Quran commands us to uphold the best moral values, and this month is a chance to improve and refine our behaviors. Here are some noble characteristics to focus on during Ramadan:

#### Truthfulness

The Quran commands believers to fear Allah and speak the truth. Allah says: "O you who have believed, fear Allah and speak words of appropriate justice." (Quran 33:70) True faith requires us to be truthful in both word and deed. The fasting person must commit to speaking the truth and refraining from lying in order to receive the full rewards of fasting. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is reported to have said: "Whoever does not give up false speech and acting upon it, Allah has no need of him giving up his food and drink."

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## Saudi mulls lifting Lebanon curbs as Aoun meets MBS

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia is to review "obstacles" to resuming Lebanese imports and ending a ban on its nationals visiting Lebanon, the two governments said on Tuesday as relations improve. The joint statement came a day after Lebanese President Joseph Aoun met Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh on his first trip abroad since taking office in January.

Saudi Arabia has recently renewed its interest in Lebanese politics after a long period when it kept

its distance over the influence of Hezbollah — now weakened after last year's war with the Zionist entity. "The two sides agreed to start studying the obstacles facing the resumption of exports from the Lebanese Republic to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the measures necessary to allow Saudi citizens to travel to" Lebanon, the statement published by the official Saudi Press Agency said.

In April 2021, the kingdom suspended fruit and vegetable imports from Lebanon, charging that shipments were being used for drug-smuggling and accusing Beirut of inaction. Saudi Arabia was the top destination for Lebanese agricultural exports in 2019, taking 22.1 percent, a Lebanese government report found in 2020. Since 2021, Saudis have also had to obtain their government's permission before traveling to Lebanon because of strained relations.

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RIYADH: Lebanese President Joseph Aoun meets Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on March 3, 2025. — AFP

## Trump halts aid to Ukraine after Zelensky clash

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump has suspended military aid to Ukraine, heaping pressure on Kyiv to agree to peace negotiations with Russia and prompting Europe to unveil an €800-billion plan to shore up its defense. The move comes just days after a stunning public clash between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Trump, who is seeking a rapid end to the war.

"Ukraine is absolutely determined to continue cooperation with the US," Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmygal told reporters, adding: "The US is an important partner and we need to preserve this." US and Western security guarantees were "existentially

important" for Ukraine and for Europe, he said, adding Kyiv was ready "at any time" to sign a strategic minerals extraction deal demanded by Trump.

Russia said the suspension of US-Ukraine aid was the "best contribution" to peace, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, adding that it was a "solution which could really push the Kyiv regime to a peace process". Any disruption in the flow of US arms to the front line would rapidly weaken Ukraine's chance of beating back Russia's invasion.

Trump had earlier on Monday declined to rule out a pause when quizzed by reporters, but a White House official told AFP on condition of anonymity that aid would be paused. "The President has been clear that he is focused on peace. We need our partners to be committed to that goal as well," the White House official said late Monday. "We are pausing and reviewing our aid to ensure that it is contributing to a solution," the official added.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen hours later presented a five-part plan to mobilize

some €800 billion for Europe's defense — and help provide "immediate" military support for Ukraine. "This is a moment for Europe, and we are ready to step up," von der Leyen announced in Brussels on Tuesday morning. Britain also committed its support to Ukraine after the suspension, with Prime Minister Keir Starmer "laser-focused" on securing peace in Ukraine, his deputy Angela Rayner said.

In Washington, Congressional Democrats immediately condemned the pause as dangerous and illegal. "My Republican colleagues who have called Putin a war criminal and promised their continued support to Ukraine must join me in demanding President Trump immediately lift this disastrous and unlawful freeze," said Gregory Meeks, top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Ukrainians reacted in shock on Tuesday following a decision by US President Donald Trump to suspend military aid to Kyiv, saying the move played into the Kremlin's hands. Denys Kazansky, a Ukrainian

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## Marking Ramadan at Canada's 'Little Mosque on Tundra'

INUVIK, Canada: Muslims who gathered at the Midnight Sun Mosque in the Canadian Arctic to break the Ramadan fast this week enjoyed home-cooked Sudanese food in a tranquil setting with breathtaking surroundings. But it wasn't for everyone. "I'm stuck. Every year I go, 'This is my last year in Inuvik,'" said Abadallah El-Bekai, a Lebanese-born Palestinian, who chuckled as he reflected on his efforts to leave the community in Canada's Northwest Territories, where he has lived for 25 years. "God didn't agree for me to go. Maybe I made bad in my life, God sent me here!" the 75-year-old said.



INUVIK, Canada: The sun hangs low in the sky over the Midnight Sun Mosque, as Muslim devotees prepare to break their Ramadan fast on March 2, 2025. — AFP photos



The Midnight Sun Mosque, widely referred to as the "Little Mosque on the Tundra", opened its doors in Aug 2010 to serve a growing number of Muslim Canadians who were migrating north for work. The structure

was built in Winnipeg, in the province of Manitoba, and driven 4,000 km north on a truck. It is now the northernmost mosque in the Western Hemisphere.

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## Local

# Zain Alshuhoor Ramadan campaign kicks off with food supplies initiative

Food supplies delivered to underprivileged families through 'Social Affairs' and 'Food Bank'



The Zain Alshuhoor volunteer team.



Dr Jassim Al-Kandari and Zain's team during delivery of the supplies.



Zain's volunteers prepare the boxes.

**KUWAIT:** Zain kicked off its annual Ramadan social campaign, Zain Alshuhoor, with the food supplies (Machla) initiative, providing essential supplies to underprivileged families and individuals through its strategic partners — the Social Care Centers of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Kuwait Food Bank. The food baskets were delivered with the attendance of Dr Jassim Al-Kandari, Acting Assistant Undersec-

retary for the Social Care Sector at the Ministry of Social Affairs, Kuwait Food Bank officials and members of Zain's team.

In a demonstration of Zain's deep commitment to active community engagement, members of the Zain Alshuhoor volunteer team — comprising employees from various departments — gathered at Zain's headquarters in Shuwaikh to prepare the food

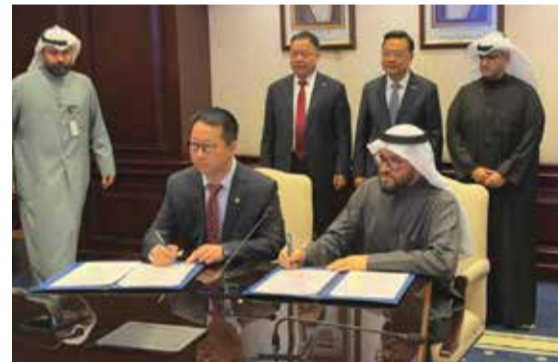
baskets. The volunteers sorted and packed various essential food items into boxes before dispatching them to charitable organizations. The baskets were delivered to the Social Care Centers of the Ministry of Social Affairs, benefiting residents from care homes, the elderly, and people with special needs. Additionally, baskets were provided to the Kuwait Food Bank for distribution to underprivileged fam-

ilies across various areas in Kuwait.

Each year, Zain Alshuhoor continues to evolve and expand its programs and initiatives, fostering collaboration with different organizations across the country. The campaign reflects the spirit of giving that defines the Holy Month of Ramadan and embodies the deep-rooted values of generosity, compassion, and solidarity that characterize the people of Kuwait.



The Public Institution for Housing Welfare signs all infrastructure contracts in the presence of the Minister of State for Municipal Affairs and Minister of State for Housing Affairs Abdullah Al-Meshari and the institution's leaders, along with the Ambassador of China to Kuwait, Zhang Jianwei. — KUNA photos



## PAHW signs South Saad Al-Abdullah City project deal

**KUWAIT:** The Public Authority for Housing Welfare (PAHW) announced the signing of all contracts for the construction and maintenance of roads, infrastructure networks for residential suburbs, irrigation tanks, and substations in the South Saad Al-Abdullah City project, in the presence of Minister of State for Municipal Affairs and Minister of State for Housing Affairs Abdullah Al-Meshari and the Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait, Zhang Jianwei.

Acting Director General of the Authority, Rashid Al-Enezi, stated in a press statement on Monday that three contracts were signed with a local company and an international company to implement road and infrastructure works for the entire city's suburbs at a value of KD 261.7 million (about \$863 million), with the implementation period set at 1,095 days for each contract.

Al-Enezi added that the project includes identifying the corners of 23,551 residential plots and implementing the first and second asphalt layers for all roads in the city's residential suburbs, as well as rainwater drainage, sewage, irrigation, treated water, fresh water, telephone networks, road lighting, traffic networks, and electrical cable culverts. He explained that the contracts include the implementation of 52 irrigation tanks of different sizes, in addition to 649 sub-electricity stations, stressing the commitment of

the engineering teams under the supervision and follow-up of the Minister of Housing to accelerate the implementation of the South Saad Al-Abdullah project, which is witnessing progress in actual achievements beyond the monthly contractual percentage.

He pointed out that the Housing Authority has indeed begun implementing the contracts that were signed earlier, achieving progress in completing the infrastructure of the main roads by 26 percent, which is 17 percent ahead of the schedule that includes the rainwater drainage network and tunneling for sewage. He noted that work has commenced on road lighting, retaining walls, the sewage network, rainwater tanks, and treated water in some suburbs according to the prepared timetable, adding that the actual implementation also encompassed bridges, tunnels, and networks for fresh and brackish water. — KUNA

## KUNA launches 21st issue of its quarterly magazine for kids

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) issued on Monday the 21st edition of its quarterly magazine for children 'Little KUNA', which includes interesting and useful topics along with entertaining stories that enhance children's culture and develop their writing skills in an attractive, entertaining and informative journalistic style. In her opening remarks, KUNA Director General Dr Fatima Al-Salem expressed her happiness at the release of the new issue of 'Little KUNA' magazine at a special moment that combines learning and creativity.

Dr Al-Salem stated that the magazine serves as a bright window to the world of knowledge and discovery through its efforts to develop children's minds and open new horizons for them with purposeful and entertaining content. "We believe that children are the future and that building an educated generation begins with providing resources that encourage them to think creatively and feed their curiosity with science and the arts," she added.

She noted that the magazine's supervising team

was dedicated to providing a variety of stories and activities that meet children's interests and open new doors to knowledge. Dr Al-Salem expressed hope that the new issue will foster great interaction among children and contribute to enhancing their love for reading and learning, leading to the development of a generation that appreciates culture and realizes its importance in shaping a bright future.

The new issue presents a variety of stories, including 'The Adventures of Dalal and Hamad', 'Spring Break', 'Rationalizing Electricity Consumption', 'Sarah and the Red Crescent' and 'My Grandmother's Kitchen', alongside 'Little KUNA' celebrating the joy of children in the activities of the Arabian Gulf Cup Football Championship (Gulf Zain 26) in Kuwait.

The issue also incorporates various educational, social, media and cultural topics, including the experiences and hobbies of a group of children in the fields of media, sports, tourism, art and photography. It additionally features religious information and sections on Arabic language skills, poetry, and health. Schools and anyone wishing to obtain free copies of the magazine can contact KUNA directly at (22271800) or visit the agency's building in Shuwaikh. All previous issues of the magazine can also be viewed electronically via the agency's website, on Instagram @kids\_kunanews, or through the KUNA news application. — KUNA



## Leading philanthropists praise Kuwait's global humanitarian role

**RIYADH:** Philanthropic officials and leading figures in the humanitarian sector have praised Kuwait's relief efforts worldwide, assisting people in need during times of catastrophe. Abdullah Al-Muhaidli, Secretary General of the Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Organization (ARCO), speaking to KUNA during the Fourth Riyadh International Humanitarian Forum, affirmed that Kuwaiti public and private organizations have consistently provided aid to refugees and the displaced in countries affected by natural and man-made disasters. The organization is closely following, with admiration, these humanitarian and relief efforts, particularly those carried out by the Kuwait Red Crescent Society, an active member of the organization.

Mohammad Baharethah, the Executive Manager of the Yemeni relief organization "Istijaba," highlighted in his address Kuwait's diverse relief projects in his country, including the construction of villages, hospitals, water networks, roads, and orphanages, in addition to implementing programs for empowering youth. Baharethah took the opportunity to congratulate Kuwait on its 64th National Day and 34th Liberation Day, affirming that the Yemeni people share in the joy of the Kuwaitis. — KUNA

## Meteorological dept predicts rain, thunderstorms

**KUWAIT:** The Meteorological Department forecasted that Kuwait will be affected by rain from Tuesday until Saturday at intermittent intervals, peaking on Thursday and Friday, with varying intensity ranging from light to medium and potentially heavy in some areas, accompanied by thunderstorms at times. The Director of the Department, Dharar Al-Ali, told KUNA that the rain will be accompanied by easterly to southeasterly winds, light to moderate in speed, and becoming active from the early hours of Wednesday morning, causing dust and reducing horizontal visibility in some areas, particularly exposed regions.

Al-Ali expects that the chances of rain and cloud cover will gradually decrease from Saturday afternoon, with the possibility of heavy fog forming in some areas on Saturday evening and Sunday morning. He urged citizens and residents to follow the weather bulletin through the department's website and its official application for smartphones, especially during weather fluctuations, to stay informed about the latest weather developments and review any issued weather warnings. — KUNA

Local

# Kuwaiti official promotes water conservation and sustainability

## Arab countries facing serious water challenges

KUWAIT: Undersecretary of the Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy Dr Adel Al-Zamel has stressed the importance of spreading the culture of water conservation to ensure its sustainability, especially since most Arab countries are experiencing a harsh reality filled with serious water challenges due to the growing effects of climate change on water resources.

Al-Zamel added in a speech carried by a press release issued by the ministry on the occasion of Arab Water Day, under the slogan "Sustainable Water Towards a Better Water Future," which falls on March 3 of each year, that water is a fundamental pillar of sustainable development and requires raising awareness among various groups in Arab society, including youth and children, about the importance of preserving water resources, halting depletion, and ensuring sustainable water use.

He explained that the slogan of this year's Arab Water Day highlights the necessity of managing wa-

ter resources sustainably, to avoid exhaustion, in order to achieve sustainable development and reduce water poverty. He noted that this requires concerted Arab efforts to raise awareness about water issues in the Arab world, emphasizing the rationalization of water consumption. He stressed the need to develop water resources through technical studies and discoveries, in addition to monitoring the water situation, searching for new water sources, and rationalizing water usage.

He emphasized the importance of instilling water awareness among all members of the Arab community to reduce waste and depletion, take action to protect water resources from pollution, depletion, and drought, and cultivate a national sense in the Arab world to ensure the sustainability of water for future generations. He stated that Kuwait's participation in Arab Water Day confirms its pioneering efforts to secure its local water needs using modern and innovative methods since 1951, when the Shuwaikh

station was established as the world's first seawater desalination station.

He pointed out that the ministry, since its establishment, has been working diligently to achieve its goals in line with Kuwait's vision, contributing to the growth and development of the state's population and service projects, expecting the demand for water to rise by 2035 to 800 million imperial gallons per day. Al-Zamel explained that the ministry has developed a future plan to meet the state's needs, as its water production will reach approximately one billion imperial gallons per day by 2035.

He added that the ministry has taken serious and effective steps toward improving water management and conservation through modern technologies and high performance in the manufacture, treatment, transport, and storage of water. He expressed his gratitude and appreciation to all employees of the ministry for their dedication and commitment to performing their work under challenging circumstances



Undersecretary of the Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy Dr Adel Al-Zamil

and at the highest level of professionalism to deliver water services in the best possible way to all categories of beneficiaries. — KUNA

## Maintenance work continues on Abdullah Al-Mubarak area roads

KUWAIT: Minister of Public Works Dr Noura Al-Mashaan announced the continuation of radical maintenance works on roads in the Abdullah Al-Mubarak area as part of the new maintenance contracts for highways and internal roads, which include 18 major road maintenance practices in various areas of the country across the six governorates. Al-Mashaan stated in a press statement on Tuesday that road maintenance works will start in the most affected areas and then proceed to the least affected, with supervision and follow-up on the maintenance works. She noted that work teams from the ministry will monitor the implementation of the maintenance tasks, as a committee has been formed to select supervising engineers and conduct tests for them to ensure effective management. She emphasized the continuation of road maintenance projects in all areas, committing to quality and achieving international specifications. She explained that investing in infrastructure enhances economic growth, improves quality of life, and supports



Workers continue the radical maintenance work on the roads of Abdullah Al-Mubarak area within the new contracts. — KUNA

sustainable development.

For his part, Engineer Mohammed Al-Moussawi from the Supervision Department of the 'Farwaniya Governorate Project, Scope 2,' said in a similar statement that the ministry's teams are present between plots 2 and 4 in the Abdullah Al-Mubarak area to follow up on the latest developments in the new contracts for radical maintenance of road works. He indicated that the works consist of spreading an asphalt layer with a thickness of 5 centimeters. Al-Moussawi urged citizens and residents to check with the General Traffic Department to stay informed about upcoming closures to avoid traffic jams. — KUNA

## Kuwait, Turkey discuss military cooperation

KUWAIT: Undersecretary of the Ministry of Defense Sheikh Dr Abdullah Mishal Al-Sabah discussed with the Turkish Ambassador to Kuwait, Tuba Nur Sonmez, bilateral relations in the field of military defense and ways to enhance cooperation between the two friendly countries. The Ministry of Defense stated in a press release that the meeting was attended by Assistant Undersecretary for External Equipment Dr Shamail Al-Sabah, Acting



Assistant Undersecretary for Local Equipment and Financial Affairs Dr Wael Al-Sabah and Director of Military Cooperation Brigadier General Saud Al-Hasawi. — KUNA



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## Local

In my view

May Allah  
bless KuwaitBy Dr Khalid Al-Saleh  
local@kuwaittimes.com

After the end of the brutal Iraqi invasion, a few Kuwaiti property owners sold their properties in Kuwait and traveled abroad. These individuals believed that Kuwait would not withstand the shock of the post-invasion and occupation. They sold their houses at the first opportunity and bought property in the US because, in their opinion, it was safer. As the years passed, the US was shaken by the mortgage crisis and the value of their properties decreased while the prices of the properties they sold in Kuwait increased exponentially. It is Kuwait. Our country is blessed.

The government sold its stakes in private companies as it tried to make strong decisions. Many people were troubled and frustrated at that time. Some skeptics claim that Kuwait is unique in a way. Kuwait is more than three hundred years old. It is older than many countries. Kuwait will remain as long as the sun rises from the east of the earth. It is our country and we love its soil and resources. My homeland, Kuwait, is moving from glory to glory. Oh! Our youth! Believe in our homeland! It is everything to you. Do not lose your confidence in Kuwait, no matter what. Kuwait will endure and will rise; just as those who sold their properties after the invasion lost the bet, everyone who doubted it will lose, while those who believed in it will prosper. My country will remain the pearl, the most beautiful country and my heart will continue to tremble with love. This is Kuwait, my eternal homeland, above every dispute, higher than every obsession and greater than every conflict.

## Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: A section of the old port where goods arriving in Kuwait were collected in 1938. (Source: Mohammad Al-Habib, Kuwait Through the Dickson Family's Lens, published in Kuwait, 2019.) — Compiled by Mahmoud Zakaria, researcher in heritage.

# Kuwait condemns halting of aid entry into Gaza Strip

## Gaza reconstruction plan ready for endorsement by Arab leaders

KUWAIT: Kuwait strongly condemned and denounced the Zionist occupation authorities' decision to block the entry of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. In a statement, Kuwait's Ministry of Foreign Affairs dismissed the Zionist occupation's decision as a blatant violation of international law and the principles of international humanitarian law. It also disregards the catastrophic impacts of the brutal war on the densely populated Strip, the Ministry stated. It added that the State of Kuwait renews its call to stop all decisions and policies that do not adhere to humanitarian principles, deny the Palestinian people their basic rights, and use starvation as a weapon to pressure Palestinians in the holy fasting month of Ramadan.

Additionally, the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jassem Al-Budaiwi, expressed his strong condemnation and denunciation of the occupation forces' halt of humanitarian and relief aid to the besieged Gaza Strip. This is a blatant violation of all international charters and laws, primarily international humanitarian law, which guarantees the provision of basic needs to innocents in disputed areas, Al-Budaiwi said in a statement. These illegal measures worsen the humanitarian crisis facing the Palestinian people in Gaza and aggravate their ongoing suffering caused by these dangerous steps taken by the occupation forces,

he added. The GCC chief called on the international community to urgently intervene and press the Zionists to lift the unfair restrictions imposed on assistance and to ensure the entry of urgent relief aid to meet the basic needs of the Palestinian people, especially in the holy month of Ramadan, according to the statement. Al-Budaiwi renewed the GCC states' unwavering position to support the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, notably the establishment of their independent state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative and the relevant international resolutions, it stated.

### Reconstruction Plan

In another development, Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr Badr Abdelatty announced a blueprint for the post-war reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, which will be presented at the emergency Arab Summit, taking place in Cairo on Tuesday. The plan will be detailed to international stakeholders only when approved by the Arab leaders, he stated at a joint press conference with Vice President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Suica, on Sunday.

Regarding the Gaza ceasefire-hostage release deal, the minister said that Egypt is pursuing in-



CAIRO: Trucks carrying humanitarian aid line up on the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing with the Gaza Strip on March 2, 2025, after the Zionist entity suspended the entry of supplies into the Palestinian enclave. — AFP

tensive efforts with other mediators to initiate the second stage of the deal, despite the stubbornness of the Zionist authorities. Dr Abdelatty condemned the occupation authorities for using humanitarian aid as a weapon of collective punishment and starvation against the residents of the Gaza Strip, which is "totally unacceptable." He was commenting on a decision made by Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu to block the entry of relief aid into Gaza. For her part, the EU senior official renewed support for the Palestinian National Authority and Egypt in their efforts to rebuild Gaza. "Egypt is the cornerstone of stability and security in the Middle East," said Suica, noting that the European Commission and Egypt have agreed on a high-level political partnership. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Workers arrange and clean the tables at the Mubarakiya market in Kuwait City on the second day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## Ramadan health tips

By Khaled Al-Abdulhadi

### Don't skip suhoor (pre-dawn meal)

In Kuwait, most people don't like to miss their Suhoor. For many people, it is the vital before the fasting begins. Although skipping Suhoor for uninterrupted sleep may seem appealing, that last meal is crucial as it determines how one feels during the next fast, breaking at dusk. Some individuals postpone sleep until after Suhoor just to ensure they get enough nutrition in their eating window. Due to the long hours of fasting, one is more likely to feel dehydrated and tired during the day.

### Drink as much water as possible

Kuwaitis ensure they drink plenty of water between Iftar (fast-breaking) and Suhoor (pre-dawn meal) to reduce thirst the next day. Some who rely on caffeine consume it with their Suhoor and follow it up with water to prevent feeling dehydrated the following day.

### Reduce eating fried, salty foods, high-sugar foods

It is common for some fasting Kuwaitis to reward themselves with rich, greasy and fried foods, accompanied by a sugary treat such as Luqaymat or Mahalbiya and tea. While these foods provide temporary pleasure, they can make fasting the next day more challenging, so it's best to keep them to a minimum. Consuming fiber-rich foods like lentils or bananas during the latter part of the eating window is ideal, as it helps in avoiding hunger the next day. Additionally, try to incorporate foods from all the major food groups, including fruits and vegetables, rice and alternatives, as well as meat and alternatives.

### Overeating during iftar

Some people, especially younger fasters, make the mistake of overeating during iftar, which can lead to bloating and lethargy after a large, tasty meal. Iftar should be a well-balanced, nutritious meal and not a feast! Many in Kuwait specifically break their fast lightly with dates and a small snack before rushing to the mosque to pray. They have a larger meal afterward, once their stomachs have settled. Overeating and excessive high-fat food consumption can lead to indigestion and weight gain.

## 'Al-Mikshat 3' project attracts more than 250,000 visitors

KUWAIT: Acting Undersecretary of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Dr Khaled Al-Ajmi has affirmed the success of the "Al-Mikshat 3" project in attracting more than 250,000 visitors from citizens and residents of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries within four months since its launch in November 2024. This reflects the project's distinction as a leading entertainment and tourist destination.

Al-Ajmi told the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) that the project was fully funded by the National Cooperative Projects Committee without imposing financial burdens on the state treasury and with exceptional support from the Union of Cooperative Societies. This represented a fruitful partnership between the public and private sectors based on an integrated strategy rooted in effective planning, seamless implementation, innovative media promotion, and continuous follow-up to enhance performance and the visitor experience.

He explained that "Al-Mikshat 3" will cease receiving visitors during the holy month of Ramadan to carry out maintenance and development work in preparation for the next stage, noting that it will reopen its doors on the first day of Eid Al-Fitr with a new look and added features that enhance the visitor experience. He pointed out that the project contributed significantly to strengthening the national economy by stimulating local spending and activating sectors related to tourism and entertainment, leading to an increase in sales of restaurants, cafes and shops, and creating many direct and indirect job opportunities for Kuwaiti youth, entrepreneurs, and owners of small and medium enterprises.

He explained that the third version of the project witnessed an expansion in infrastructure, as the number of restaurants and cafes increased to more than 30. Additionally, the popular cafe was expanded to enhance the heritage experience along with the allocation of 60 family rest areas to ensure visitor comfort. Furthermore, the organization of additional events during official holidays contributed to attracting more visitors.

He pointed out that the project relies on the latest

technologies in event management and has developed an electronic reservation system through the official website and the (EVENTA) application to facilitate entry and organization. Moreover, advanced technologies are employed to monitor performance, measure visitor satisfaction, and analyze data, which helped improve planning for future events.



He stressed that the project is a model to be emulated in transforming ambitious ideas into economic successes, noting that its substantial financial revenues during its operational period confirm its economic importance and open broad horizons for its future development to enhance Kuwait's position as a prominent regional entertainment and tourism destination.

Al-Ajmi expressed his appreciation for the close cooperation with government agencies, represented by the Ministries of Interior, Information, Health, and the Public Fire Force, and the distinguished services they provided to ensure visitors' comfort and safety, which contributed to the project's success. He emphasized the ministry's commitment to continue supporting national projects with sustainable returns that align with the vision of (New Kuwait 2035) and contribute to transforming Kuwait into a distinguished tourist and entertainment center. — KUNA



DR Congo's Muslims endure Ramadan in a 'climate of war'

## Ukrainians waiting for peace before having children

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GAZA: A pickle vendor serves an order of olives for a customer from his stall at the old Zawiya market of Gaza City on March 1, 2025. — AFP photos



BUREIJ: Palestinians queue to buy sweets ahead of the iftar fast-breaking meal in the Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip on March 1, 2025.

# Gazans fear shortages, price hikes after Zionists block aid

## Entity continued blocking entry of generators, mobile homes during first phase despite deal: Officials

GAZA: Palestinians living in war-ravaged Gaza say they fear food shortages and price hikes after the Zionist entity halted the entry of aid into the territory to pressure Hamas to agree to its terms for a ceasefire extension. The effect of the Zionist entity's announcement on Sunday was immediate, and sent ripples through markets across the Gaza Strip. Prices for basic goods soared despite attempts by the authorities to keep them stable, shoppers and aid workers told AFP. "There is a lot of fear, today there are a lot of people buying food supplies and prices have risen a lot," Belal Al-Helou told AFP at a crowded street market in Gaza City.

As long as Gaza's crossings are closed, "the prices will rise and increase even more", Al-Helou told AFP on Sunday. "Today a kilo of sugar costs 10 shekels or 12 shekels," he said — roughly \$3, and more than twice the price before the war. "Prices are rising and people are panicking about food supplies."

Another shopper, Adly Al-Ghandour, said prices had risen "80 percent so far, and if the crossing remains closed, prices will rise 200 percent". Around them, stalls were still well-stocked from the first phase of the ceasefire, which began on January 19 and enabled the entry of vital food, shelter and medical assistance after more than 15 months of war. Shopkeepers also sold decorations such as small lanterns and signs reading "happy Ramadan", while bakers made hundreds of pancakes to be used in qatayef, a pastry filled with cream and nuts typically eaten during the Muslim holy month that started on Saturday in Gaza.

### 'No panacea'

Caroline Seguin, emergency coordinator for Doctors Without Borders in Gaza, said trucks that were supposed to arrive on Sunday were turned back full. "We were able to get a few trucks in during the six

weeks of ceasefire, but it's no panacea" for the humanitarian situation, Seguin told AFP Monday. Although the organization's stocks of medical equipment were somewhat replenished during the first phase, other items such as generators and supplies for water desalination were blocked because the entity labels them "dual use" items that could be used by militants to make weapons.

Seguin added that humanitarian aid "shouldn't be a part of ceasefire negotiations while Gaza's population needs assistance". In the northern city of Jabalia, displaced Palestinians who returned after the start of the ceasefire live in tents erected by charity organizations on a patch of cleared land, surrounded by bombed-out buildings, AFP journalists saw.

Senior Hamas official Osama Hamadan said on Monday that only 15 of the 65,000 mobile homes that were due to enter Gaza during the ceasefire had actually made it in. The Zionist entity's agency

in charge of regulating the aid flow in Gaza did not respond to AFP when asked about the figure.

### 'Completely demoralized'

Seguin said she had noted an instant price increase in Gaza markets, including for eggs, whose price went up 150 percent. But above all, Seguin said the aid suspension was a hard blow to Gazans' morale. "They're completely demoralized," she said of her Gazan colleagues who had held on through 15 months of fighting. "They're afraid of a return to the November-December situation ... when you couldn't find bread and there wasn't any meat in town." Negotiations between the entity and Hamas for the continuation of the truce have hit an impasse in recent days. The entity is pressing to extend the ceasefire's first phase, while Hamas favors moving on to phase two of the deal, which envisions a Zionist entity withdrawal from Gaza and a more permanent end to the war. — AFP

## Tunisia opposition figures go on trial on state security charges

TUNIS: The trial of several prominent Tunisian opposition figures accused of national security offences opened on Tuesday, with rights groups denouncing the case as politically motivated. The around 40 high-profile defendants include former diplomats, politicians, lawyers and media figures, some of whom have been vocal critics of President Kais Saied. Those already in detention were not allowed to attend the trial in person and followed it remotely, an AFP journalist reported. Their lawyers and rights groups argued this was unjust and demanded their right to appear before a judge.

In the courtroom, relatives of the accused chanted "Freedom" and accused the judiciary of acting on government orders. Some defendants have been detained since February 2023, after Saied labelled them "terrorists". Saied, elected in 2019 after Tunisia emerged as the only democracy from the Arab Spring, staged a sweeping power grab in 2021. Rights groups have since raised concerns over a rollback on freedoms.

The charges in the case include "plotting against the state security" and "belonging to a terrorist group", which could entail hefty sentences and even capital punishment, according to lawyers. The case has named politician and law expert Jawhar Ben Mbarek, Ennahdha leader Abdelhamid Jelassi, and Issam Chebbi, founder of the opposition National Salvation Front coalition.



TUNIS: Relatives of detainees accused of involvement in a conspiracy case against state security, gesture on the day of a first hearing in front of the court in Tunis on March 4, 2025. — AFP

### 'Unjust'

Activists Khayam Turki and Chaima Issa, businessman Kamel Eltaief, and Bochra Belhaj Hmida, a former member of parliament and human rights activist now living in France, have also been charged in the case. While some remained free pending trial, others have fled abroad, according to the defense committee.

Several of the defendants are also suspected of getting in contact with foreign parties and diplomats amid the alleged conspiracy. In a letter from his cell, Ben Mbarek called the trial a form of "judicial harassment" aimed at "the methodical elimination of critical voices", claiming the accusations were baseless.

Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, head of the FSN and himself named in the case, called the trial "unjust". He said the defendants were "figures in Tunisia known for their pacifism and respect for the law". Contrary to his brother Issam, he remains free while awaiting the trial's verdict. Lawyer Samir Dilou said the real conspiracy in the high-profile case was that of "the government against the opposition". French lawyer Christian Charriere-Bournazel, who is defending some of the accused, described the case as "surprising". "There is no evidence that justifies a plot against state security," he told AFP. The defense committee had also told AFP the charges were "based on false testimony". — AFP

## EU chief unveils 800-bn-euro plan to 'rearm' Europe

BRUSSELS: EU chief Ursula von der Leyen Tuesday presented a five-part plan to mobilize some 800 billion euros for Europe's defense - and help provide "immediate" military support for Ukraine after Washington suspended aid. The move came hours after US President Donald Trump announced the aid freeze, intensifying Washington's push for a peace deal with Russia and confirming its pivot away from its European allies and partners in backing Kyiv's war effort.

"A new era is upon us," the European Commission president said in a letter presenting the plan to EU leaders, two days before a summit aimed at cementing joint action on support for Ukraine and boosting Europe's defenses. "ReArm Europe" could mobilize

close to 800 billion euros of defense expenditures for a safe and resilient Europe," von der Leyen told reporters as she outlined the plan, which includes a 150-billion-euro loan facility along with steps to free up large-scale defense investments.

It was not immediately clear how fast funds could be made available under the proposals -- which need approval by member states -- nor how quickly this could translate into battlefield support for Kyiv. "It can help finance or accelerate certain purchases," Camille Grand of the European Council on Foreign Relations told AFP. "The results will be visible more likely in weeks or months rather than 'immediately' but it makes a difference, since that is when the American restrictions will start to bite."

The plan includes five points: It proposes that the EU ease strict budget rules - which oblige states to keep public deficits below three percent of gross domestic product - to allow them to ramp up spending on defense. Von der Leyen suggested this measure could free up 650 billion euros over four years. - Secondly, the plan calls for a new "instrument" to provide 150 billion euros of loans to member

states for defense investment. "We are talking about pan-European capability domains -- for example: air and missile defense, artillery systems, missiles and ammunition drones and anti-drone systems," said von der Leyen. "With this equipment, member states can massively step up their support to Ukraine. So, immediate military equipment for Ukraine," she said.

The third component would involve using the existing EU budget "to direct more funds towards defence-related investments." That would include letting member states repurpose so-called "cohesion" funds intended for the development of poorer European countries - to use them for defense. - The last two areas of action would involve the bloc's lending arm the European Investment Bank. EU states want it to drop limits on lending to defense firms and a savings and investments union to help companies access capital.

In a separate letter to EU leaders Tuesday, seen by AFP, the EIB's president Nadia Calvino said she would call for the scope of eligible investments to be "further widened" to align with the EU's "new policy priorities". — AFP

## Security sweeps in Syria as Assad backers accused of attacks

DAMASCUS/AMMAN: Syrian authorities launched a security sweep in the city of Latakia on Tuesday, residents said, after two members of their forces were killed in an attack blamed by state media on remnants of Bashar Al-Assad's ousted government. Bursts of gunfire were heard through the night as government security forces deployed in the Datur district of Latakia, part of the coastal region where Assad had drawn support from the Alawite community to which his family belongs.

The coastal region has emerged as one of the main security challenges for interim President Ahmed Al-Sharaa's new administration, which has deployed many of its forces into the area since Assad was deposed in December. A senior security official in the area told Reuters there had been an increase in hit-and-run attacks on security patrols and checkpoints in several towns in Latakia province over the last two weeks, blamed on former army personnel in hiding.

The Syrian state news agency SANA, citing a security source, reported that the two members of the defense ministry had been killed in Al-Datur by "groups of Assad militia remnants", and that security forces had mounted a campaign to arrest them. One Datur resident told Reuters there had been heavy gunfire in the early hours and that security forces in numerous of vehicles had surrounded the neighborhood, before the situation calmed down in the morning. The senior security source blamed attacks in the Latakia region on a proliferation of arms in the hands of former security and army personnel who had refused to enter into reconciliation agreements with the new authorities.

The source said that Alawite elders have in some cases cooperated with security forces to hand over former personnel suspected of committing crimes during the Assad era, keen to stave off crack downs and potential civil unrest. Last week, a police station was attacked during confrontations in Assad's ancestral town of Qardaha, located in the mountains some 25 km (16 miles) to the east of Latakia.

Qardaha residents and activists said that the incident began when members of security forces tried to enter a house without permission, sparking opposition from residents. One person was killed by gunfire, with locals accusing the security forces of the shooting, two residents and Alawite activists said.

A statement issued at the time by the Latakia security chief made no mention of the shooting. It accused groups whom it said opposed the imposition of security of trying to prevent security forces from setting up a check point and attacking the police station. Community sheikhs and notables from Qardaha issued a videoed statement after the incident accusing "strangers" of trying to "exploit gaps between the people of Qardaha and the authorities with the aim of disrupting" security. They declared support for any step taken by the authorities with their agreement to preserve security and lives. — Reuters

## International

# Ukraine says military can hold out on front after US aid pause

## Trump suggests minerals deal with Ukraine still possible

**KYIV:** Ukraine said on Tuesday its forces could hold the situation together on the battlefield as they fight Russian troops despite a pause in US military aid, and that it hoped to continue working with Washington pragmatically. The remarks by Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal were the first official comment from Kyiv after US President Donald Trump stunned Ukrainians by pausing the supply of US military aid that has been critical for Kyiv since Russia's 2022 invasion. "Our military and the government have the capabilities, the tools, let's say, to maintain the situation on the front line. They are obviously not subject to disclosure," he said.

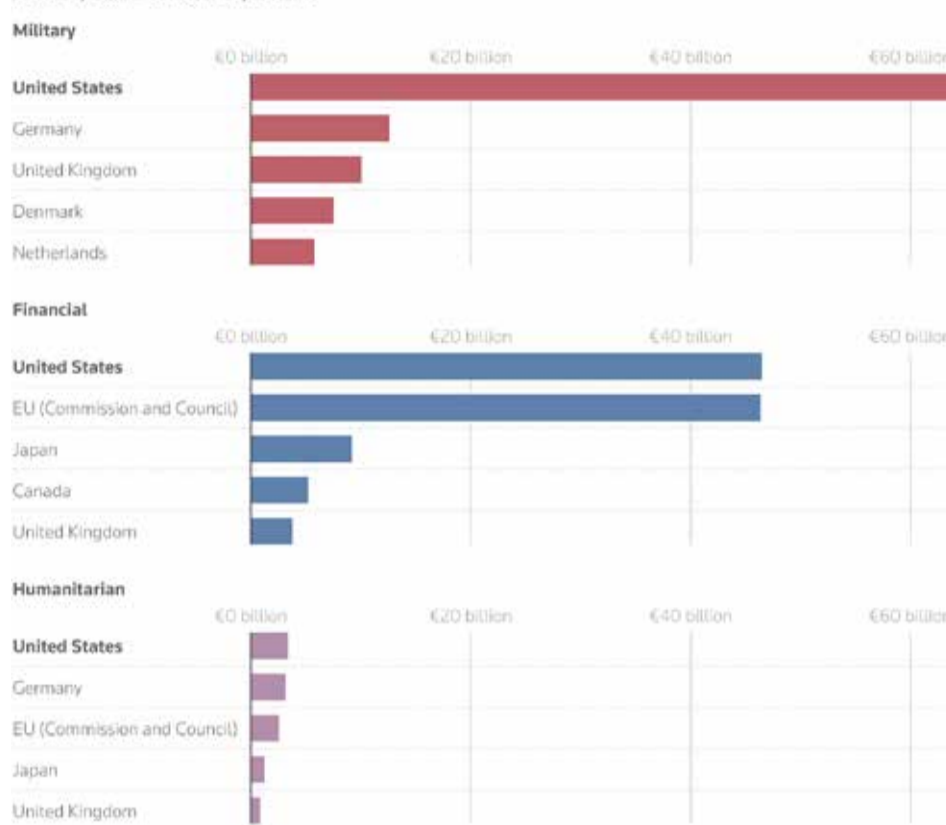
The remarks, in which Shmyhal thanked the US and emphasized Kyiv wanted mutually-beneficial cooperation, appeared aimed at keeping up a semblance of normality as Kyiv's once key ally continues to upend its wartime policies, engaging directly with Russia. "We will continue to work with the US through all available channels in a calm manner," Shmyhal told a news conference.

Russian forces, which already control around a fifth of Ukraine, have been pressing in the east for more than a year and conduct regular missile and drone strikes. He acknowledged, however, that US military assistance was critical for Ukraine and that it had helped save thousands of lives.

He said there was a risk for the repair, maintenance, and general supplies for US Patriot air defenses that he described as the only system capable of repelling Russian ballistic missile strikes. He added that Ukraine was ready to sign a minerals deal with the United States that was cast into doubt after US President Donald Trump's meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky last Friday descended into acrimony. Trump hinted on Monday that a deal to open up Ukraine's minerals to US investment could still be agreed despite his frustration with Kyiv.

Ukraine said on Tuesday it would do all it can to maintain its ties with the United States. "We will continue to work with the

**The United States has provided the bulk of military aid to Ukraine**  
Five donors that have allocated the most bilateral aid to Ukraine across sectors between Jan. 24, 2022 to Dec. 31, 2024.



Note: Allocations are defined as aid which has been delivered or specified for delivery.

US through all available channels in a calm manner," Shmyhal told a press conference. "We only have one plan - to win and to survive. Either we win, or the plan B will be written by someone else." The Kremlin said cutting off military aid to Ukraine was the best possible step towards peace, although it was still waiting to confirm Trump's move.

Military experts say it could take time for the impact of missing US aid to be felt on the battlefield. When US assistance was held up for several months last year by Republicans in Congress, the most notable initial impact was shortages of air defenses to shoot down incoming Russian missiles

and drones. Later, Ukrainian forces in the east complained of shortages of ammunition, including for artillery.

The pause puts more pressure on European allies, led by Britain and France, whose leaders both visited the White House last week and have publicly embraced Zelensky since the Oval Office blow-up. Europeans are racing to boost their own military spending and provide alternative support for Kyiv, including a plan to put troops on the ground to support any ceasefire, though they say they still need some form of US support.

Since Russia's invasion three years ago,



**ODESA, Ukraine:** A woman walks past burnt cars in the courtyard of a building damaged as a result of a drone attack in Odesa on March 4, 2025. — AFP

the US Congress has approved \$175 billion in total assistance for Ukraine, according to the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. The Trump administration inherited \$3.85 billion worth of Congressionally approved authority to dip into US arms stocks for Ukraine. Monday's move also appeared to halt deliveries of military equipment approved by former President Joe Biden, including munitions, missiles and other systems.

Trump's abrupt pivot towards Russia may be the most dramatic US geopolitical shift in generations. Defending Europe from a hostile Kremlin has been the lodestar of US foreign policy under both parties since the 1940s. Trump's moves have appalled Democrats and some Republicans, although there has been little pushback from Republican leaders in Congress, including those who were once strong backers of Ukraine. "By freezing military aid to Ukraine, President Trump has kicked the door wide open for Putin to escalate his violent aggression against inno-

cent Ukrainians," said Senator Jeanne Shaheen, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Trump suggested on Monday that a deal to open up Ukraine's minerals to US investment could still be agreed, and Shmyhal said Ukraine could still sign it. The deal was meant to be signed in Washington on Friday before Zelensky departed after the Oval Office bust-up.

In an interview on Fox News, Vice President JD Vance called on Zelensky to accept it. "If you want real security guarantees, if you want to actually ensure that Vladimir Putin does not invade Ukraine again, the very best security guarantee is to give Americans economic upside in the future of Ukraine," Vance said. Zelensky has made clear that a ceasefire must carry explicit security guarantees from the West to ensure that Russia, which holds about 20 percent of Ukraine's land, does not attack again. Trump has so far refused to give any such guarantees. — Reuters

## Ukrainians waiting for peace before having children

**UNDISCLOSED, Ukraine:** Oleksandr, a Ukrainian soldier, dreams of being a father to a girl and a boy. But, as fighting against Russian invaders rages on, he is putting off having children. Instead, he said, he will freeze his sperm — a hedge against the daily risks he confronts on the frontline, where he has been since the start of Russia's full-scale offensive in 2022. Though his wife Kateryna lives in the Czech Republic as a refugee, Oleksandr was adamant about the family life he envisages: "I also want to raise my child, not just leave them with my partner." The ideal setting would be all of them living together, in the mountains, surrounded by "lots of cats".

But wartime reality makes that dream a distant prospect. "I can't just do what I want," acknowledged the 36-year-old, who spoke to AFP on condition his last name not be used. The logical option, then, is to do as many of his fellow soldiers have done, and freeze his sperm.

New legislation means that, from this year, Ukrainian soldiers can do so for free, and many clinics are already offering the service. "Who knows what could happen?" Oleksandr said, pointing to the risks of reduced fertility due to combat stress — or that he might be killed. If he dies, Oleksandr said he wants his wife to use his sperm to become pregnant.

It is an "insurance policy" Oleksandr finds reassuring, even if struggles to imagine his wife having their child without him, and prefers not to discuss "sad things". The most important thing for him is that Kateryna, 33, can have that "choice". "I know she loves me a lot. I love her a lot too," said Oleksandr, adding: "Everything will go well".

Ukraine was already in a demographic crisis before the war, but the Russian invasion has made it much

worse. The UN estimated in October last year that the country's population of 43 million in 2022 has dropped by nearly 19 percent. According to the UN, the birth rate is less than one child per woman — one of the lowest levels in the world. The government is worried, but hoping an end of the war will usher in a "baby boom".

Many civilians are also freezing their eggs and sperm in anticipation of a better time to have children in the future, although the exact number is not known as there are no official statistics. The Feskov clinic in Kharkiv in northeastern Ukraine said many more civilians were freezing sperm and eggs — procedures that were rare before the war. Vladyslav Feskov said the demand comes "in waves". Demand rises every time the war takes a worse turn. The clinic has remained open despite unrelenting Russian strikes on Kharkiv, a city located close to the border with Russia. It now has an underground laboratory and all the genetic material is stored in a secret location as far as possible from any Russian drone strikes, Feskov said.

Daria Chernyshova, a 23-year-old student, recently

had her eggs frozen. She said the prospect of becoming a mother in wartime is "very frightening". At one point she delayed her decision to freeze, hoping that Russian bombardment of her country would ease. But she eventually came to see the procedure as "necessary" because "we do not know what will happen tomorrow".

Chernyshova now lives in Kharkiv but comes from Lyman, a town in eastern Ukraine that she was forced to flee in 2022 as Russian troops advanced. She is left with traumatic memories of women rushing to evacuate, clutching small children in their arms. Currently single and dating, Chernyshova said she also wants to build her career and find a partner before having a baby. Her dating prospects have thinned because of the war — and not only because of the undisclosed numbers of combat deaths and men who have left Ukraine. Recruiters patrol the streets looking for young men to put in uniform, making real-life dating difficult. "Where can we go to meet or do we just talk on Skype?" Chernyshova said. In the end, she said she may have to move abroad and "find a boyfriend there". — AFP

## Arab leaders discuss Gaza plan...

Continued from Page 1

The Arab League summit on reconstruction follows renewed backing of Trump's plan from Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who labelled it "visionary and innovative". Palestinians, Arab states and many US and Zionist partners have rejected Trump's proposal, opposing any efforts to expel Gazans. The United Nations estimates Gaza's reconstruction will cost more than \$53 billion.

Egypt was expected to present a reconstruction plan for Gaza to Arab leaders in Cairo on Tuesday that would cost \$53 billion over five years and avoid resettling Palestinians. A draft final communique mentioned what it called support for a Palestinian decision to

form an administrative committee for Gaza affairs, and did not tackle the explosive issue of what Hamas' role would be after the war ended.

Arab leaders were also expected to call for elections in the West Bank and Gaza in one year, according to the draft final communique. Egypt's reconstruction plan did not specify who would fund the reconstruction of an enclave that has been reduced to rubble. Any proposal would require heavy buy-in from oil-rich Gulf Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who have the billions of dollars needed.

Egypt's Reconstruction Plan for Gaza is a 112-page document that includes maps of how its land would be re-developed and dozens of colorful AI-generated images of housing developments, gardens and community centers. The plan includes a commercial harbor, a technology hub, beach hotels and an airport. The reconstruction plan projects that rebuilding the enclave would take five years and the first two-year phase would cost \$20 billion and involve building 200,000 housing units. — Agencies

Lebanese army and the importance of supporting it", the statement said.

In 2016, Riyadh halted \$3 billion in military aid to the Lebanese army, citing the political influence of Hezbollah. On Friday, Aoun told Saudi-owned newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat that he would "seek, if possible, to reactivate military aid" during his Riyadh visit. The joint statement also "emphasized the importance of implementing the commitments made in the presidential oath".

Aoun had pledged upon taking office to usher in a new era in which the state would have a "monopoly on weapons", in a country where Hezbollah was the only faction to retain its arms after the 1975-1990 civil war. — AFP

ensky "won't be around very long" without a ceasefire deal with Moscow.

The pause has gone into effect immediately and impacts hundreds of millions of dollars of weaponry in the process of being sent to Ukraine. The New York Times reported. Zelensky for his part said Monday he was seeking for the war to end "as soon as possible". The comment came after Zelensky accused Russia — which invaded Ukraine in 2014 and greatly expanded the conflict in 2022 — of not being serious about peace. He insisted tough security guarantees were the only way to end the war. — AFP

## Ramadan: The month of character-building...

Continued from Page 1

(Al-Bukhari) If we consciously practice truthfulness in all situations and avoid false speech, it will profoundly transform our character.

### Honesty and trustworthiness

The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: "There is no faith for one who cannot be trusted. There is no religion for one who cannot uphold a covenant." (Musnad Ahmad) Honesty is a fundamental requirement of Islamic faith. Ramadan gives us an opportunity to train ourselves in honesty and trustworthiness. A fasting person remains honest, even when alone or unseen, resisting the urge to break the fast despite severe hunger and thirst. By recognizing that we are always under the watchful eye of Allah, we find the motivation to be honest and trustworthy.

### Taciturnity (avoiding idle talk)

The Prophet (PBUH) said: "He who believes in Allah and the Last Day must either speak good or remain silent." (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim) A fasting person should engage in the remembrance of Allah and avoid idle talk, unnecessary arguments, and gossip. The Prophet (PBUH) also said: "When one of you wakes up

for fasting, he should avoid using obscene language or behaving foolishly. If anyone abuses him or picks a fight with him, he should say: 'Indeed, I am fasting.'" (Sahih Muslim) Fasting trains us to avoid vain and foolish talk. One of the beautiful characteristics of successful believers is mentioned in the Quran: "Who avoid vain talk." (Quran 23:3)

### Patience

Patience is crucial for building good character, and fasting plays a vital role in cultivating it. No one can complete the fast without patience. One must exercise patience in enduring hunger, resisting evil temptations, and controlling desires, including those related to one's spouse. The Prophet (PBUH) said: "Fasting is half of patience." (Sunan al-Tirmidhi)

### Sympathy and Empathy

The experience of fasting enables a person to truly feel the pangs of hunger and thirst, which, in turn, cultivates sympathy for the poor and needy. During Ramadan, believers are strongly encouraged to feed the poor. Immense rewards are promised for acts of generosity during this blessed month. Being kind to others and showing mercy to the poor is an integral part of Islamic faith. Sympathizing with the pain and suffering of others inspires one to be more righteous.

## Marking Ramadan at Canada's 'Little...

Continued from Page 1

The imam, Saleh Hasabelnabi, has lived in Inuvik for 16 years. He told AFP the congregation is no longer growing, but has remained stable at roughly 100 to 120 members. Muslims who live around the Arctic Circle face challenges adhering to their faith, notably when trying to follow a prayer schedule linked to the position of the sun. Inuvik gets 24 hours of sunlight more than 50 days a year and sees polar nights — or no direct sunlight — about 30 days each year.

"The first time was like a shock. I can't believe. The first time in my life I pray five times, the sun is still up," Hasabelnabi said, recalling his first summer in Inuvik. The community has implemented a rule that it adheres to the local time in Makkah, Islam's holiest city. Mohamed Asad Beharwar, who works in accounting and recently moved to Inuvik, said ad-

justing to the white nights wasn't difficult because he had previously lived in Edmonton, the capital of Alberta, which also has long summer days. "But it's still hard to adjust to this environment. It's kind of harsh," the 36-year-old told AFP.

Braving frigid weather, members gathered at the Midnight Sun on Sunday to break the fast on the third day of Ramadan. They brought multiple chicken dishes, rice and other fare packed in containers and sat together, including El-Bekai, who despite his eagerness to live elsewhere, happily chatted as he ate.

Inuvik's population is about 3,400 people and the Midnight Sun's congregation includes those who came to Canada as refugees, ultimately moving north seeking higher incomes. Several work as taxi drivers in the community just south of the tree line. Abdul Wahab Saleem, a 37-year-old Islamic scholar visiting from Edmonton, described the Muslims in Inuvik as a "visible minority". "You walk around outside you will see Muslims all the time, every time you get a cab, more than likely it's going to be a Muslim," he said. — AFP

## Trump halts aid to Ukraine after...

Continued from Page 1

media commentator said that while Washington had paused military aid to Kyiv "North Korea and Iran did not stop military aid to Russia". Trump has also warned he would "not put up" much longer with Zelensky's defiance, and said Ukraine's leader should be "more appreciative" of US support.

Speaking at the White House, Trump said Zel-

## International



BUKAVU, DR Congo: Muslims pray in the Nyawera mosque during Ramadan, in Bukavu, South Kivu province, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, on March 3, 2025. — AFP photos



This photo shows the Nyawera mosque during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan.

# DR Congo's Muslims endure Ramadan in a 'climate of war'

## Poor security forces people to stay home for tarawih, forgo communal iftars

BUKAVU, DR Congo: Prayers at home and smaller gatherings to break the fast — Muslims in a city recently captured by Rwanda-backed fighters in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo face a more subdued holy month of Ramadan this year. The M23 captured Bukavu in South Kivu province in mid-February in a lightning offensive after resurfacing in late 2021 in a region battered by decades of conflict.

Around 15,000 families are Muslim in the city of some one million people and make up about five

percent of the province's population, according to Sheikh Saleh Radjabu, a representative of South Kivu's Muslim community. "It's the first Ramadan living in Bukavu in a situation of distress and a climate of war," said Sheikh Musa Awam, imam of Nyawera mosque in a central neighborhood.

At the mosque, worshippers "arrive torn between joy (of celebrating the holy month) and pain", said Awam. "We still pray at noon and at 3:00 pm, and then we go home," he said. For security reasons,

mosques in Bukavu have told those not living close-by to stay at home for prayers after sunset, especially the tarawih, or the nighttime prayers carried out during Ramadan. "This situation of war has disrupted our entire prayer schedule," the imam said.

Poor security has also forced people to break their fast with the iftar meal in smaller groups than normal. Walking around the city at the time of fast breaking is "tricky", said Junior Saleh, the executive secretary at the Nyawera mosque. Radjabu now only

shares the iftar meal with his family, rather than in a larger group. For many, their meal is also more modest than usual.

Banks have been closed since the M23 took over the city and residents no longer have access to cash, making it difficult to buy supplies. Before the city was captured "some (people) had time to stock up on provisions at home ... but others are suffering because they did not have time to stock up on food", Radjabu said. — AFP

## Infants as young as one raped in Sudan: UNICEF

GENEVA/CAIRO: Children under five, including babies, are among victims of sexual violence in the war between Sudan's army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), according to findings shared on Tuesday by UN children's agency UNICEF. The UN agency cited a database compiled by Sudan-based groups helping survivors of sexual violence which showed that of 221 cases involving children registered since last year, 16 were under five years old, including four one-year-olds. About one-third of victims were male, it said.

The database includes cases from across the

country, but aid workers and rights groups think it represents just a fraction of the cases because stigma, fear of reprisals and lack of access to medical facilities limit reporting. Some of the survivors cited by UNICEF say they fell pregnant as a result of the assaults, resulting in rejection by relatives and additional hardships.

One woman who was held in captivity with other women and girls was quoted saying, "After nine at night, someone opens the door, carrying a whip, selects one of the girls, and takes her to another room. I could hear the little girl crying and screaming." "They only release these girls at dawn, and they return almost unconscious."

UNICEF did not say who was responsible for the child rapes, calling on both sides to respect international law. Neither the RSF nor the army immediately responded to requests for comment. "Children as young as one being raped by armed men should shock anyone to their core

and compel immediate action," UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell said in a statement sent to journalists.

War erupted in April 2023 from a power struggle between the army and the RSF ahead of a planned transition to civilian rule, triggering huge displacement and hunger crises. A UN fact-finding mission has described levels of sexual abuse as "staggering". The majority of known cases were perpetrated by the RSF and its allies, the mission said, noting it was more difficult to report in army-controlled territories.

Reuters has reported on women who said they were gang raped in ethnically targeted attacks by the RSF and allied Arab militiamen. UN human rights chief Volker Turk said last week that over half of reported rape cases in Sudan were gang rape, "an indication that sexual violence is being used as a weapon of war". The RSF has previously said it would investigate allegations and bring perpetrators to justice. — Reuters

## Man whose blood protected 2.4 million babies dies

SYDNEY: An Australian known as the "Man with the Golden Arm" for protecting 2.4 million babies with his rare, antibody-rich blood plasma, has died at 88, health officials say. James Harrison rolled up his sleeve and donated blood 1,173 times over 64 years, Australian Red Cross organization Lifeblood said in a statement. His plasma contained a rare antibody, known as Anti-D, used to make a medication for mothers whose blood was at risk of attacking their unborn babies — known as rhesus D hemolytic disease of the fetus and newborn (HDFN).

While it is impossible to know how many babies would have died without Anti-D protection, HDFN affected as many as 1 in 100 women until 1966, government data shows. Following the success of a 1966 Anti-D trial in Australia, Lifeblood looked for people who had the antibody to scale up the project. Harrison fit the bill.

He had started donating a few years earlier and never missed a single appointment until his retirement in 2018, Lifeblood said. His blood was used to make 2.4 million doses. Of Harrison's 1,173 donations, 1,163 were from his right arm and 10 from his left, the Sydney Morning Herald reported. "It didn't hurt in the right arm," he told the publication, although he never watched the needle go in. Harrison died in his sleep at a nursing home on the New South Wales Central Coast on February 17.

### 'Incredible legacy'

Among his blood recipients was daughter Tracey Mellowship, who said Harrison would be greatly missed. "James was a humanitarian at heart, but also very funny," she said. "As an Anti-D recipient myself, he has left behind a family that may not have existed without his precious donations. He was also very proud to have saved so many lives, without any cost or pain. It made him happy to hear about the many families like ours, who existed because of his kindness."

Lifeblood chief executive Stephen Cornelissen said Harrison left behind "an incredible legacy". "It was his hope that one day, someone in Australia would beat his donation record." About 17 percent of pregnant women require Anti-D, but finding donors for the program remains difficult, the government said. Scientists hope to use blood from Harrison and other donors to recreate Anti-D antibodies in the lab, helping to prevent HDFN worldwide. — AFP



James Harrison, who was known as the 'Man with the Golden Arm' due to his rare antibody-rich plasma that helped protect over 2.4 million babies, is seen in this handout photo taken on May 11, 2018 and released by the Australian Red Cross. — AFP



MENDOZA: Azul Vieiro (center), 44, daughter of the late legendary mountaineer Guillermo Vieiro, poses for a picture with climbers Juan Schiappa (left) and Gabriela Cavallaro in Mendoza, Argentina, on February 28, 2025. — AFP photos



Undated handout picture of the late legendary mountaineer Guillermo Vieiro (left) and his apprentice Leonardo Rabal.

## Daughters scale peak to retrieve dead dad's photos

MENDOZA: Two daughters of an Argentine mountaineer who died on an icy peak 40 years ago, have retrieved his backpack from the spot — finding camera film inside that allowed them a glimpse of some of his final experiences. Guillermo Vieiro was 44 when he died in 1985 while descending Argentina's Tupungato lava dome, one of the highest peaks in the Americas. Then last year, his backpack was spotted on a slope by mountaineer Gabriela Cavallaro, who examined it and contacted Vieiro's daughters Guadalupe, 40, and Azul, 44.

In February this year, the three set out with four other guides and two filmmakers on an 11-day jour-

ney to recover the bag from an altitude of about 6,100 meters (20,000 feet) — close to the summit of the 6,600-meter volcanic peak.

"In my family, the word 'mountain' was always forbidden. My mother wants nothing to do with the discovery of this backpack. It's a family that has been broken by grief, by the void," Azul, who was just four years old when her father died, told AFP. "It all seemed crazy to me, and I didn't want to go back to the volcano where he had died. But as the months went by... I started to loosen up, and began thinking: 'Why not?'" Inside the backpack, the women found a jacket, a sleeping bag, a water bottle, aspirin, Vitamin C tablets, a set of knives and two rolls of film that had belonged to their father. "Spiritually, it felt like a greeting, like: 'I'm still here, I exist. You're not alone,'" Azul recounted.

### Mountaineering history

The experience also allowed her to learn more about a man she never got a chance to know. "My

Vatican press office. His condition, it said, is stable, although doctors have kept his prognosis as "guarded", meaning the pope is not out of danger. Francis has been in Rome's Gemelli hospital since February 14, when he was admitted for a severe respiratory infection that triggered other complications. A full medical update on the pope's condition was expected on Tuesday evening.

Francis has not been seen in public since entering hospital, his longest absence from view since his papacy started in March 2013. His doctors have not said how long his treatment might last. Monday's setback came following several days of relatively upbeat statements about his condition. The Vatican said the two respiratory episodes on Monday were caused by "a significant accumulation of endobronchial mucus".

The pope, it said, had suffered a bronchospasm,

mother never really told us who he was. We knew he had died in the mountains and that he was a mountaineer, but not much more than that. So, it was like rediscovering his story, like saying, wait ... we have a father who had a life, a history. So it was like discovering him all over again."

Photos taken from other film found inside the same backpack by Cavallaro a year earlier, showed that Vieiro and his partner Leonardo Rabal, 20, had been the first climbers to reach the top of Tupungato from its eastern side — the most challenging route. "That slope has never been scaled again," Cavallaro, who lives at the foot of Tupungato in the city by the same name, told AFP. "What they (Vieiro and Rabal) accomplished has real historical value in Argentine and international mountaineering," she added. The bodies of Vieiro and Rabal were recovered shortly after they died. Azul and her sister said they would donate their father's belongings in an attempt to share a "piece of Argentine mountaineering history" with others. — AFP

akin to an asthma attack, and had required two bronchoscopies, or procedures to inspect his air passages. The Vatican would not say on Tuesday whether the pope had received sedation during the procedures.

A Vatican official, who did not wish to be named because he was not authorized to discuss the pope's health, said on Monday evening that the pontiff's blood tests that day had remained stable. The pope's doctors believe the respiratory episode was part of his body's normal response in fighting infection, the official added.

Francis has experienced several bouts of ill health over the last two years and is prone to lung infections because he had pleurisy as a young adult and had part of one lung removed. Double pneumonia is a serious infection in both lungs that can inflame and scar them, making it difficult to breathe. — Reuters

## Pope no longer needs ventilation after respiratory crisis

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis, who suffered two respiratory crises on Monday as he battles double pneumonia, has stabilized and no longer needs to use mechanical ventilation for help breathing, the Vatican said on Tuesday. Francis, 88, had been put on non-invasive ventilation on Monday after suffering what was described as two episodes of "acute respiratory insufficiency" that day.

The pope has now returned to receiving oxygen via a small nasal hose under his nose, said the

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 5, 2025

# Economic woes cast shadow over Iran's holiday season

## Plummeting currency and double-digit inflation deter holiday shoppers

TEHRAN: Shops and markets in central Tehran, usually teeming with customers ahead of the Persian New Year, now barely see any buyers, a somber reflection of the dire state of the Iranian economy.

The plummeting currency and double-digit inflation, which have reduced the number of holiday shoppers to a trickle, were behind a parliament vote on Sunday to remove finance minister Abdolnaser Hemmati. At Tehran's Grand Bazaar, underwear vendor Mohsen said that "business is going very badly. I cannot describe how catastrophic it is."

Another vendor, who like others interviewed by AFP declined to be named, said he was barely "selling anything as people have lost their purchasing power". The Iranian rial was trading at more than 920,000 to the US dollar on the parallel market, compared to under 600,000 in mid-2024.

Hemmati, the impeached minister, was appointed by President Masoud Pezeshkian with the promise to tackle a deepening economic crisis worsened by prolonged international sanctions.

Many Iranians, already struggling under the weight of sanctions, fear further hardship with US President Donald Trump back in the White House. Since he began a second term in January, Trump has reinstated his "maximum pressure" policy on Iran that was a hallmark of his first term in office, sending ripple effects through the Iranian capital's famed market. "Everyone is complaining," shopkeepers and shoppers alike, said Mohsen. He pointed to a shop next door that had shut down just weeks ahead of Nowruz, the new year's celebrations beginning late March, when the traffic of shoppers was meant to be peaking.

Iranians usually buy gifts and shop for new clothes and other items ahead of Nowruz, a two-week holiday spent with family or travelling, which this year will coincide with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan already underway. Majid, a shopkeeper at the



TEHRAN: People walk past shops in the Grand Bazaar in Tehran on March 3, 2025. — AFP

Grand Bazaar, blamed inflation for the slump in sales at the toy store he has been working at for 40 years.

One plastic toy sold last year for 200,000 rials, the equivalent of about 30 cents, now goes for more than double that price, said Majid. The skyrocketing currency rates mean that importing toys from China, for example, now costs him much more.

"I feel ashamed to sell goods at such high prices," he said. Iran's statistics bureau says the annual

inflation rate was at 32 percent in early February. According to the World Bank, inflation hit 44 percent in 2023, compared to around 30 percent in 2019. According to official news agency IRNA, the minimum wage—which changes yearly—stood at 111 million rials (about \$120) for the Persian calendar year that ends March 21. Akram, a 60-year-old woman who was at the Grand Bazaar to shop for nuts and chocolates, left empty-handed. "I saw the prices and I

couldn't buy anything. Nothing," she said exiting the market normally known for its affordable rates.

Reza Esmailian, 58, said he "could only buy a packet of dates"—a staple food during Ramadan, the dawn-to-dusk Muslim fast which began in Iran on Sunday. Vendor Ali, who also works as a driver to make ends meet, said: "I have three children and I struggle to provide for them". "No one shops for Nowruz anymore." — AFP

## The Family Office introduces bespoke investment opportunities to Kuwait

KUWAIT: Tapping into Kuwait's widely favorable and inviting investment climate, the regionally renowned investment and wealth management powerhouse, The Family Office, recently landed in Kuwait, introducing a competitive suite of investment and wealth management solutions, tailored to Kuwait's most aspiring high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs), ultra-high-net-worth individuals (UHNWIs), and affluent investors. Committed to redefining successful investment and wealth management in Kuwait, The Family Office merges tech-driven solutions with over two decades of experience and the resources of a global network of leading asset management partners.

"For decades, private markets investment opportunities were largely reserved for institutions and ultra-high-net-worth individuals. However, fintech has reshaped access to investment opportunities, enabling many aspiring individuals to secure a better, more stable future through inclusive, democratized, and tech-driven investment solutions," said Abdulaziz Al-Humaidhi, Deputy CEO of The Family Office Investment Advisory Company (Kuwait). "Despite how accessible investment tools are today, institutional-grade opportunities in private equity, private credit, and real estate remain exclusive. We bridge this gap through global partnerships with

world-renowned asset management market leaders, including BlackRock, KKR, Carlyle, and Apollo."

Al-Humaidhi elaborated that modern technology paired with expertise-led acumen and solid global connections are at the heart of The Family Office's efforts to diminish investment gatekeeping and offer clients a wider range of portfolio types and investment opportunities that respond to their varying investment aspirations, risk preferences, and time horizons.

"Regardless of portfolio preferences, our independent investment team conducts rigorous due diligence in sourcing and selecting high-quality investment opportunities. In fact, only 4 percent of the investment deals we evaluate pass our thorough screening process to be considered viable opportunities. By prioritizing quality over quantity, we continue to earn our clients' trust in the critical endeavor of growing their wealth," Al-Humaidhi added.

In addition to the one-on-one advisory that The Family Office's financial advisors offer to clients, the company also fortifies its services with advanced digital tools designed to enhance our clients' investment experience and foster utmost transparency. This includes portfolio simulation, which allows clients to visualize and simulate a decade's worth of portfolio performance, giving them an overview of



Abdulaziz Al-Humaidhi

their current choices and future outcomes. Such insights enable clients to make investment choices that are aligned with their strategies and long-term goals.

Other digital tools that The Family Office offers include The Marketplace, where clients can trade shares in private market investments, and All In One Plus, presenting investors with consolidated financial insights and enabling them to monitor all their assets and liabilities for a holistic view of their financial position. For more than 20 years, The Family Office has gained the trust of over 800 clients globally, managing over \$2.1 billion in assets. Licensed and regulated in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Switzerland, the United States, and Hong Kong, the company's expansion to Kuwait follows its acquisition of the necessary licenses from the Capital Markets Authority (CMA) – Kuwait.

## Saudi Aramco profits drop 12% on lower prices and volumes

RIYADH: Oil giant Saudi Aramco posted a drop in annual profits on Tuesday as prices dropped and volumes fell. The world's biggest crude exporter said profits were down more than 12 percent to \$106.25 billion in 2024, the second annual drop following a surge in oil prices in 2022. Expected dividends for 2025 also fell heavily to \$85.4 billion, down from \$124.3 billion announced for last year by the mainly state-owned company.

Aramco is the chief source of revenue for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform agenda, which aims to remodel the Gulf kingdom's crude-reliant economy. Revenues were slightly down "primarily attributable to lower prices and volumes sold of crude oil, as well as lower refined and chemical product prices", a company statement said.

The overall profits decrease was "driven by lower revenue and other income related to sales, higher operating costs, as well as lower finance and other income," it added. Soaring energy prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine allowed Aramco to post record profits in 2022, before they dipped by 25 percent in 2023. In an attempt to prop up prices, Aramco slashed production by 500,000 barrels per day in April 2023 as part of a joint move with the OPEC+ oil producers' alliance.

Aramco followed up with a further cut of one million bpd in June 2023, agreeing last December with other OPEC+ countries to extend the supply cut until March. Aramco is not the only energy major with lower profits. Britain's Shell saw a 17 percent drop last year and France's TotalEnergies posted a 26 percent decline. A global surplus, spare production capacity and uncertain demand, coupled with unpredictable policy signals from US President Donald Trump are all weighing on prices, analysts said.

"Prices have remained lower than what Gulf governments like Saudi Arabia would like to see," said Robert Mogielnicki, senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute and an adjunct assistant professor at Georgetown University. "Energy market fundamentals are still manageable, but the Saudis aren't necessarily rolling in more petrodollars than they know what to do with."

Saudi Arabia, eyeing a post-oil future, is in the midst of a lavish spending plan aimed at attracting tourists and investment to the Middle East's biggest economy. Chief among a welter of flashy projects are NEOM, a \$500 billion futuristic new city in the desert, the 2034 football World Cup and a major new airport for Riyadh. Amena Bakr, head of Middle East Insights at trade intelligence company Kpler, said although market sentiment was holding back prices, Saudi could adjust its spending as it needs to.

"Overall the OPEC+ policy has managed to tighten markets in terms of fundamentals, but what's weighing on prices is negative market sentiment," she told AFP. "Saudi Arabia is known to adjust its budget depending on market conditions, and the kingdom does not target a certain oil price... projects and plans can be adjusted along the way." — AFP

## Beijing hits US agriculture, says won't be bullied

BEIJING: China on Tuesday swiftly retaliated against fresh US tariffs, announcing hikes to import levies covering \$21 billion worth of American agricultural and food products, moving the world's top two economies a step closer towards an all-out trade war.

Beijing also placed twenty five US firms under export and investment restrictions on national security grounds, but refrained from punishing any household names, as it did when it retaliated against the Trump administration's February 4 tariffs. In a press conference, China's foreign ministry said the country has never succumbed to bullying or coercion, and that "trying to exert extreme pressure on China is a miscalculation and a mistake."

China's latest retaliatory measures came as the extra 10 percent duty U.S. President Donald Trump threatened the world's second-largest economy with last week entered into force at 0501 GMT on March 4, resulting in a cumulative 20 percent tariff in response to what the White House considers Chinese inaction over drug flows.

China has accused the White House of "blackmail" over its tariff hike, saying it has some of the world's toughest anti-drug policies. Analysts say Beijing still hopes to negotiate a truce with the Trump administration, deliberately setting its tariff hikes below 20 percent to leave Chinese negotiators room to hash out a deal, but each escalation reduces the chance of a rapprochement.

"China's government is signaling that they do not want to escalate," said Even Pay, agriculture analyst at Trivium China. "It's fair to say we're in the early



QINGDAO, China: An aerial view shows rows of containers at Qingdao port, in China's eastern Shandong province. — AFP

days of Trade War 2.0." Pay added, noting that there is still time to avoid a protracted trade war if Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping are able to strike a deal. The new US tariffs represent an additional hike to pre-existing levies on thousands of Chinese goods.

Some of these products bore the brunt of sharply higher US tariffs under former president Joe Biden last year, including a doubling of duties on Chinese semiconductors to 50 percent and a quadrupling of tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles to over 100 percent. The 20 percent tariff will apply to several major US consumer electronics imports from China that were previously untouched, including smartphones, laptops, videogame consoles, smartwatches and speakers and Bluetooth devices. China responded immediately after the deadline, announcing it will impose an addi-

tional 15 percent tariff on US chicken, wheat, corn and cotton and an extra 10 percent levy on US soybeans, sorghum, pork, beef, aquatic products, fruits and vegetables and dairy imports from March 10.

The additional levies will hit about 15 percent of US exports to China or \$21 billion worth of trade, according to Reuters calculations based on US census data for 2024. Beijing also added 15 US companies to its Export Control List, which prohibits Chinese firms supplying American companies with dual-use technologies, and 10 American companies to its Unreliable Entity List for selling arms to Taiwan, which China claims as its own territory. "We're still on track to 60 percent (tariffs)," said Cameron Johnson, supply chain expert at Tidalwave Solutions, referring to Trump's campaign trail threat. — Reuters



## Business

# NBK hosts a panel discussion on 'Let's Be Aware' campaign at PIC

## Bank continues to strengthen its collaboration with oil sector

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) held a panel discussion at Petrochemical Industries Company (PIC) headquarters to promote banking awareness, enhance financial literacy among employees, and highlight the latest fraud tactics. The session focused on preventive measures and essential steps to safeguard against financial fraud, reinforcing NBK's commitment to fostering a more informed and secure banking environment.

This initiative reflects NBK's commitment to strengthening collaboration with oil sector institutions and working collectively to combat fraud and cybercrime. It also underscores the bank's support for the Central Bank of Kuwait's "Let's Be Aware" campaign — launched in partnership with Kuwaiti banks and Kuwait Banking Association — which stands as the largest financial awareness initiative of its kind in the region.

These visits exemplify NBK's ongoing commitment to promoting financial literacy across society. The "Let's Be Aware" campaign extends beyond fraud awareness, encompassing crucial topics such as maximizing the benefits of banking services and products, fostering a culture of savings and investment, and addressing other key financial issues.

Leveraging its long-standing and distinguished relationships with oil sector institutions, National Bank of Kuwait remains committed to fostering financial awareness and security. As part of this effort, the bank actively organizes visits, awareness sessions, and discussions designed to equip employees with a deeper understanding of fraud risks and the evolving tactics used by fraudsters to execute their schemes. As digital advancements and AI-powered banking services become more prevalent, the majority of transactions are now conducted via smartphones. This makes financial awareness more critical than ever, enabling individuals

to make informed and secure financial decisions in an increasingly digital landscape.

NBK firmly believes that awareness is the strongest defense against fraud and remains committed to amplifying its educational content across social media platforms to safeguard customers' interests, strengthen their trust, and ensure a secure banking environment. With the rapid advancements in technology and artificial intelligence, financial fraud tactics have

- NBK firmly believes that awareness is the first line of defense against fraud
- The bank is committed to supporting strategic initiatives that drive economic and social development

become more sophisticated, making proactive awareness and vigilance more essential than ever.

NBK emphasized the importance of staying vigilant against evolving fraud tactics to stay ahead of emerging threats. The bank urged customers to remain vigilant and leverage the advice and guidance it provides across all its digital platforms to safeguard their financial security. It was further explained that fraudsters are increasingly leveraging advanced artificial intelligence technologies to ensnare unsuspecting victims. In response, the bank remains committed to



As part of 'Let's Be Aware' campaign, NBK actively organized visits, awareness sessions, and discussions at PIC premises.

monitoring these sophisticated and deceptive methods, issuing timely public alerts, and outlining clear, actionable steps to minimize the risk of falling prey to fraudulent activities.

NBK remains steadfast in its commitment to supporting pivotal and strategic initiatives that serve the national economy and society. At the core of its strategy lies a strong emphasis on combating fraud and empowering customers through financial education, reinforcing trust and security in the banking sector. NBK leverages its extensive capabilities, including its industry-leading digital platforms with the largest fol-

lowing among Kuwaiti banks, to maximize the reach and impact of the "Let's Be Aware" banking awareness campaign, ensuring its objectives resonate with the widest possible audience.

As a leading financial institution in the region, NBK actively organizes a wide range of events to educate the community on key banking sector issues. The bank also conducts specialized training programs to enhance its employees' expertise in combating fraud and financial crimes while leveraging its digital channels and social media platforms to raise awareness about cybercrime risks and fraud prevention.

## NBK ECONOMIC REPORT

## Saudi economic transformation gains momentum

KUWAIT: Saudi Arabia's non-oil economic growth averaged an impressive 4.8 percent in 2021-24, driven by unprecedented government-led investment in key strategic sectors as part of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 development plan. In parallel, the government has, since 2016, embarked on a series of economic and fiscal reforms that have led to notable improvements in employment, productivity and the regulatory and business environment, facilitating the growth and diversification effort. Sustaining strong momentum in non-oil growth will depend on continued reform and domestic investment progress. Amid lower oil prices/production and elevated spending, we view the ongoing fiscal shortfalls and higher public debt as manageable for now, helped by a recalibration of project spending priorities and a larger role for the PIF in the domestic economy.

With the traditionally dominant oil sector constrained by Saudi Arabia's outsized OPEC+ production cut obligations in recent years, the non-oil economy has taken up the mantle and logged impressive growth rates. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, broader socio-economic gains have also been forthcoming. After a spell of strong growth, the non-oil sector's share of GDP reached a record high of 51 percent in 2024 according to official preliminary estimates.

Non-oil growth was a solid 4.6 percent in Q4 2024, slightly higher than in the previous quarter (+4.3 percent y/y), pushing up growth for the full year 2024 to an estimated 4.3 percent. Monthly indicators, from private sector credit growth at a very robust 13 percent y/y in December 2024 to the purchasing managers' index (PMI) of private sector activity hitting a ten-year high in January 2025 (60.5), paint a positive picture of current conditions in the non-oil economy.

More noteworthy, however, is the breadth of progress being made, with output gains evident across a more diverse sectoral spread than before, including the wholesale and retail trade, construction, and the manufacturing and transport sectors.

The progress has been facilitated by a significant increase in domestic investment, a testament to the authorities' efforts to grow and diversify the non-oil economy through implementation of the National Investment Strategy (NIS) since 2021 under the auspices of the broader Saudi Vision 2030. The NIS seeks to invest SR12.4 trillion (\$1.3 trillion) via a combination of channels all with specific targets. These include the central government, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), the "Shareek" program for large corporates, and through foreign investors (FDI). Sectors from entertainment and tourism to transport/logistics and manufacturing have been assigned specific development targets. The results

have seen real gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) rise by 12 percent y/y on average in 2021-2023. In 2023, its share of GDP rose to 25.2 percent, the highest in the available series.

### Tourism receipts increase

Visitor numbers witnessed impressive growth since 2020, rising from under 50 million to well above 100 million in 2023. Tourism spending increased to over SR250 billion in 2023 (\$67bn), equivalent to 14 percent of non-oil GDP, from 7.4 percent in 2021, mostly from inbound tourists on the back of a concerted effort by the authorities to overhaul the sector. This includes through the establishment of a tourism development fund, improvements to the visa application process, investment in human capital, expanded air travel routes, marketing campaigns, and the hosting of sports and entertainment events, such as the Formula 1 race and international concerts. The development of natural and heritage sites, such as the Red Sea coastline, the Diriyah Gate and Al-Ula, has helped boost both domestic and inbound tourism, while continued development and modernization of the Holy sites and transport links supported further growth in religious pilgrimage, a large part of inbound tourism.

Rising tourism should continue to support growth and job creation within the wholesale and retail trade sectors. These grew by an impressive 8.3 percent y/y on average between 2021-2023 to become the largest contributor to non-oil GDP in 2023 at 15.3 percent.

### Manufacturing

Saudi manufacturing (excluding petroleum refining) accounts for about 13 percent of non-oil GDP after putting in a strong performance in 2022-2023 (+7 percent y/y on average). The sector did contract in 2023 (-0.7 percent) on a combination of base effects and weaker petrochemicals demand in China, the kingdom's largest trading partner, but activity in 2024 looks to have rebounded, with output growing by an average of 2.6 percent during the first three quarters of 2024. The outlook is positive, as the sector is expected to expand its scope beyond downstream processes such as refining and petrochemicals to industrial and military equipment manufacturing, in line with NIS objectives. Renewable energy and metals and minerals mining also hold good potential.

### FDI improves

FDI inflows amounted to SAR96 billion (\$25.5bn) in 2023, exceeding the NIS target of SAR83 billion (\$22bn) and achieving the NIS target of 2.4 percent of GDP. There had been a surge in FDI inflows in 2021 and 2022 due to the exceptional Aramco pipeline deals worth \$12.4 billion and \$15.6 billion, respectively. Inflows in 2023 were 50 percent higher than in 2022 after excluding the one-off inflows from the previous year. Over the past three years, FDI inflows have nearly tripled, reaching SAR112 billion (\$30bn) between 2021-2023 following the launch of the NIS. This compares to an average of SAR43 billion (\$11.5bn) during the

preceding three-year period (2018-2020). The government is looking to secure \$100 billion (6 percent of GDP) in FDI per year by 2030. At the sectoral level, manufacturing has tended to be the largest FDI recipient followed by the retail/hospitality, financial services, and transportation/storage sectors. FDI has also positively responded to the various government reforms and policies, including the requirement to establish a regional headquarters in the Kingdom to capitalize on government contracts and tax relief.

### Investment gains

While the latest budget (2025) from the Saudi Ministry of Finance is only mildly expansionary compared to previous ones, off-budget spending is expected to rise, mainly via the PIF, which plans to increase the level of investment nearly two-fold from \$40 billion to \$70 billion per year as early as 2025, according to the PIF governor. In parallel, ongoing reforms aimed at enhancing the effective execution of laws, streamlining procedures and fees, raising the participation of women in the labor force, facilitating access to land and finance, and improving governance should further promote private sector expansion, draw in more FDI and support overall productivity growth. Continued investment in human capital and digitization will also be important for unlocking the potential for further productivity gains.

### Outlook positive

The overall growth outlook is positive, underpinned by a strong investment drive, reform progress, rising FDI and employment, and promising momentum in strategic sectors such as tourism, manufacturing, and transport/logistics. The government remains committed to maintaining a strong pace of investment spending, especially in the run-up to the 2027 Asian Cup, and other landmark events further out including the Expo 2030 and the FIFA World Cup in 2034. Against this background, we expect non-oil economic growth to remain robust at above 4 percent in 2025 from an estimated 4.3 percent in 2024.

In terms of downside risks, the threat of lower oil prices is the predominant one, and this would most likely reflect economic weakness in developing economies, especially China's given its importance as the engine for global oil demand growth. Lower oil revenues would stretch the government's fiscal position (it projects a deficit of SAR101 billion or \$27 billion for 2025), potentially leading to a scaling back of key projects and the pace of investment. This said, a sharp spending slowdown seems unlikely given alternate funding channels and still good financial space due to the involvement of a well-capitalized sovereign wealth fund, adequate reserves and relatively low debt-to-GDP. Another risk is a slower than expected pace of US interest rate cuts limiting rate cuts in Saudi as well, given the currency peg system, hitting potential growth in private spending, credit, the mortgage market and homebuilding. Finally, restrictive US tariff policies — the extent of which is still uncertain — could lead to higher imported inflation, weighing down on real growth.

assembled in Windsor, where the border can be almost forgotten and the economy is deeply integrated with Detroit's. Anxiety and anger were palpable among Stellantis workers clocking off on Monday afternoon. Trump's decision is "not even logical, it makes absolutely no sense," said John D'Agnoles, president of a union in Windsor representing 2,000 workers at Ford.

"I can't imagine how that would work," he added, predicting layoffs could be seen in a few weeks after the tariffs go into effect, and that vehicles would become more expensive in the long term.

More than two million jobs are at stake in Canada, with 500,000 alone in Ontario, the country's most populous province. Ford employee Christina Grossi was in shock. "They're our jobs. We've been doing this for 100 years," she said. "It's terrifying," added the woman in her fifties, feeling betrayed by a country she has always considered a strong ally, and where her son is studying. On Monday, Ontario Premier Doug Ford pledged to fight back. — AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: US President Donald Trump shakes the hand of CC Wei as he announced an investment of a \$100 billion into American Chip manufacturing by Taiwan's TSMC on March 3, 2025. — AFP

## TSMC unveils \$100bn investment in new US chip plants

WASHINGTON: Taiwanese chip-making giant TSMC will invest at least \$100 billion in the United States to build "cutting edge" manufacturing facilities, President Donald Trump said on Monday, announcing the latest blockbuster financial pledge by a private company since his return to office.

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co's new investment will come on top of their existing commitments and will go into "building five cutting edge fabrication facilities," Trump said during a White House event, flanked by TSMC chief executive CC Wei.

He added that much of the funding would be invested in the US state of Arizona, where TSMC — the world's largest chipmaker — has already invested heavily, and would create "many thousands" of high-paying jobs. TSMC has long faced demands to move more of its production away from Taiwan, amid fears that supplies of the critical technology could be disrupted in any conflict with Beijing.

The company pledged during former president Joe Biden's administration to invest more than \$65 billion in three factories in Arizona, one of which began production in late 2024. Trump recently ratcheted up the pressure on TSMC and other chip manufacturers by publicly mulling the introduction of 25 percent tariffs on all semiconductor chips made outside the United States. Taiwan will review the investment "in accordance with the law" and ensure that the "most advanced manufacturing processes will remain in Taiwan," President Lai Ching-te's office said.

Taiwan Premier Cho Jung-tai said the island looked forward to "continuing to cooperate with friendly countries for mutual benefits." However, he said it was important that Taiwan maintain its "key position" in the global chip supply chain and "ensure that we are leading in key technologies." Monday's announcement brings the total amount committed by TSMC to around \$165 billion, Wei said. "We are going to produce many chips to support AI progress, and to support smartphones' progress," he said. The new investment will help expand the firm's US footprint to include "three new fabrication plants, two advanced packaging facilities and a major R&D (research and development) team center," while supporting 40,000 construction jobs over the next four years, TSMC said in a statement. The concentration of chip manufacturing in Taiwan has been described as a "silicon shield" against a possible invasion or blockade by China, which claims the island as part of its territory and has threatened to use force to bring it under its control. There are concerns Taiwan could lose that protection if its companies build too many factories overseas. — AFP

## Canadian auto workers dismayed at US tariffs

WINDSOR, Canada: Residents of the Canadian border city of Windsor had held out hope US President Donald Trump's threats of tariffs on imports from Canada would prove hollow, but that faith was dashed Monday, sparking fear for their futures.

Trump had unveiled — and then paused — blanket tariffs of up to 25 percent on imports from major trading partners Canada and Mexico in February, accusing the US neighbors of failing to stop illegal immigration and drug trafficking.

Canadian leaders had been pushing for a deal ahead of the expiration of the halt this week, but Trump said

Automotive parts can cross between the United States and Canada up to six times before a vehicle is

## Business

# Gulf Bank distributes iftar meals at Souq Mubarakiya as part of Ramadan program

Najla Aleisa: We are committed to leveraging all our resources to serve the community



Gulf Bank distributes Iftar meals at Souq Mubarakiya.



Najla Aleisa poses for a group photo with Gulf Bank officials and Gulf Bank's volunteer team.

**KUWAIT:** As part of its Ramadan Program, "Our Traditions Bring Us Together," Gulf Bank distributed Iftar meals at Souq Al-Mubarakiya to those in need. The Bank will be distributing Iftar meals across various areas in Kuwait over a period of 20 days. This effort was made possible through a strategic partnership with the Kuwait Food Bank and the dedicated participation of Gulf Bank's volunteer team, Sawa'ed Al-Khaleej.

On this occasion, Najla Aleisa, Chief Marketing Officer at Gulf Bank, stated: "At Gulf Bank, we are proud to be an active part of our community, celebrating meaningful moments and supporting those in need, especially during the holy month of Ramadan. This initiative reflects our deep commitment to fos-

tering social sustainability, both within the Bank and throughout the wider community."

Aleisa expressed her appreciation for the Kuwait Food Bank's ongoing efforts in providing and distributing meals to those in need. She also praised the longstanding partnership between Gulf Bank and the Kuwait Food Bank, now in its eighth consecutive year, highlighting its vital role in promoting sustainability within the community. "We look forward to continuing our collaboration on impactful charitable initiatives that promote social sustainability," she added.

She further emphasized that for 64 years, Gulf Bank has played an essential role in Kuwait's economic and social development, continuously leveraging its resources to support those in need. Aleisa

stated, "We understand the significant impact these initiatives have, especially during Ramadan."

Aleisa reaffirmed Gulf Bank's strong commitment to sustainability, particularly social sustainability, through carefully curated initiatives that benefit both the Bank and the wider community. These efforts align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Kuwait Vision 2035.

She concluded: "As a financial institution, Gulf Bank remains committed to supporting key civil society organizations, particularly the Kuwait Food Bank, for its outstanding humanitarian and social contributions. We strongly believe that the private sector has a vital role in raising awareness and driving meaningful change in these important areas."

Gulf Bank aims to be Kuwait's leading bank, fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace to deliver exceptional customer service while contributing sustainably to the community. Through its extensive branch network and innovative digital services, the Bank empowers customers to conduct banking transactions conveniently and efficiently, ensuring a seamless experience. In alignment with Kuwait Vision 2035, "New Kuwait," and its commitment to fostering collaborative partnerships, Gulf Bank is dedicated to driving robust sustainability initiatives across environmental, social, and governance (ESG) dimensions. The Bank is committed to implementing strategically selected and diverse sustainability programs both internally and externally.

## News in Brief

## Qatar Airways boosts Berlin flights

**BERLIN:** Qatar Airways is expanding in Berlin but will wait at least another year before adding further German destinations due to sluggish plane deliveries, the company's chief commercial officer said on Tuesday. "A couple of destinations are on our radar," CCO Thierry Antinori said in Berlin on the sidelines of the ITB travel fair, one of the industry's biggest gatherings, when asked about the airline's future plans in Germany. "But we won't have movement this year and probably not next year either," Antinori said, adding that this was down to aircraft deliveries. "We already have plans for all the deliveries we will receive over the next two years," the executive said. — Reuters

## Tesla's China-made EV sales fall 49.2%

**BEIJING:** US automaker Tesla sold 30,688 China-made electric vehicles in February, down 49.2 percent from a year earlier, data from the China Passenger Car Association (CPCA) showed on Tuesday. Deliveries of China-made Model 3 and Model Y vehicles fell 51.5 percent from the previous month. Chinese rival BYD, with its Dynasty and Ocean series of EVs and plug-in hybrids, recorded a 161.4 percent increase in passenger vehicle sales to 318,233 units last month. — Reuters

## S Korea, US discuss Alaska LNG project

**SEOUL:** South Korea and the United States have agreed to establish a working-level group to discuss a gas pipeline project in Alaska, energy, shipbuilding, tariffs and non-tariff barriers, South Korea's Industry Minister Ahn Duk-geun said on Tuesday. The United States has asked South Korea and other countries if they are interested in participating in an Alaskan LNG project, Ahn told reporters in Sejong. He added that the two sides will discuss potential cooperation in energy. "South Korea has a high dependence on the Middle East for energy suppliers, making diversifying import sources a key part of energy security," he said. — Reuters

## Japan trade minister Muto to visit US

**TOKYO:** Japan's Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Yoji Muto is expected to visit the United States as early as March 10 to meet US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, the Asahi newspaper reported on Tuesday citing multiple sources. Muto plans to request exemptions from the additional tariffs on Japanese products such as automobiles and steel proposed by US President Donald Trump, the report said. — Reuters

## US manufacturing expansion cools

**WASHINGTON:** A nascent expansion in US manufacturing activity cooled in February, according to survey data published Monday, as weaker demand led to a slowdown in new orders, while tariff threats fueled prices. The Institute for Supply Management's (ISM) manufacturing index hit 50.3 percent last month, a 0.6 percentage-point fall from January. This was below the market consensus estimate of 50.7, according to Briefing.com, but was still just above the 50-point mark separating expansion from contraction. — AFP

## Minister says Pakistan well-positioned for IMF bailout review

**ISLAMABAD:** Pakistan was "well positioned" for the first review of its \$7 billion International Monetary Fund bailout program, the finance minister told Reuters, as talks with the global lender began on Tuesday. Islamabad secured the \$7 billion Extended Fund Facility last summer to help

## Second stock exchange opens in South Korea, ending 70-yr monopoly

**SEOUL:** A second stock exchange opened in South Korea Tuesday, where consumers will eventually be able to trade top tech stocks like Samsung and SK hynix, ending a long-standing monopoly.

The Korea Exchange, founded in 1956, has been South Korea's sole securities exchange for nearly seven decades, until the new secondary stock trading platform named Nextrade opened Tuesday at 10 am (0100 GMT). The move "is expected to enhance market accessibility and improve liquidity, contributing to the expansion of the stock market," said Kim Byeong-hwan, chairperson of the financial services commission.

The new exchange will be open for longer -- 12 hours per day, compared to the Korea Exchange's 6.5 — and will charge lower fees when compared with the main bourse. Nextrade's CEO Kim Hak-soo said the company had "conducted extensive testing to verify the system's reliability and have implemented institutional safeguards to ensure market stability."

For the next two weeks trading will be available for ten listed stocks, all from the benchmark Kospi and the small-cap Kosdaq.

The number of listings will gradually expand, and from March 31 onwards, 800 stocks will be available including major companies such as chipmakers Samsung and SK hynix.

The country's financial watchdog said the new exchange could help "improve trading

## IMF warns Sri Lanka trade unions against strike over pay demand

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka's fragile economic recovery could be hampered by threatened trade union strikes over reduced benefits for government employees in this year's budget, the International Monetary Fund warned on Tuesday.

Leftist President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's maiden budget raised public sector salaries but also made deep cuts to longstanding perks in a continuing effort to repair the island nation's tattered finances. Sri Lanka's main doctors' union is considering a strike from Wednesday to protest

claw its way out of an economic crisis.

The program has played a key role in stabilizing Pakistan's economy and the government has said the country is on course for a long-term recovery. "They are here. We will have two rounds of talks, first technical and then policy level," Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb said.

"I think we are well positioned" for the review, he said. The English-language Dawn newspaper said the Fund was concerned about Pakistan failing to meet its tax collection targets, but may let the shortfall slide over positive macroeconomic indicators, including a high-

er-than-anticipated budget surplus.

"The ongoing review will be critical in determining how the economy moves forward," the paper said.

Pakistan was running an estimated 600 billion rupees (\$2.15 billion) shortfall to meet a 1.3 trillion rupees tax revenue collection target set in its June 2024 budget, said a finance ministry official who asked not to be identified. The IMF team usually spends around two weeks reviewing fiscal reforms and policy.

A separate IMF team was in Pakistan last week to discuss around \$1 billion in climate financing on top of the EFF. — Reuters



SEOUL: Nextrade's CEO Kim Hak-soo (fifth right) and South Korean financial officials celebrate during an opening ceremony of "Nextrade", South Korea's secondary stock trading platform, at the Korea Financial Investment Center in Seoul on March 4, 2025. — AFP

convenience for investors," it said in a statement. Kim Dae-jong, a business professor at Sejong University, told AFP that South Korea was simply playing catch-up with other advanced economies.

"Multiple stock exchange platforms are already in place in many advanced countries worldwide, and South Korea is now

following suit," said Kim. "Having multiple exchanges instead of a single monopoly increases competition, lowers transaction costs, and extends trading hours into the late evening," he said. "This increased competition benefits consumers, as it drives down transaction fees and improves overall market conditions." — AFP

against cuts to their allowances, while teachers are also considering stoppages.

IMF team leader Peter Breuer said the budget was the "last big push" for Sri Lanka's austerity program and said everyone who can "should make a sacrifice".

"Sticking with the reforms is really the best way out for Sri Lanka to assure its sustainability," Breuer told reporters. "I think it's important for everyone in Sri Lanka to recognize that," he said. "This is the last budget where there is still a bit of an increase in revenues needed."

Sri Lanka suffered an unprecedented economic crisis in 2022 that caused widespread shortages of food, fuel and other essentials. The island nation secured a \$2.9 billion bailout loan from the IMF in 2023, almost a year after defaulting on its \$46 billion foreign debt.

Successive governments have since raised taxes and cut public spending to raise state revenue. Breuer said the next year would be less painful, but the country must remain committed to economic reforms. "This is the last big push," he said. "Thereafter, it will be much easier going forward."

The IMF released last week its fourth tranche of \$334 million in its rescue package for Sri Lanka, commending the country for adhering to its economic reform pledges. "Reforms in Sri Lanka are bearing fruit and the economic recovery has been remarkable," IMF Deputy Managing Director Kenji Okamura said in a statement at the time. "Inflation remains low, revenue collection is improving, and reserves continue to accumulate," he said. "The recovery is expected to continue in 2025." — AFP

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 5, 2025



Employees of The Viking Boat Co work to put the finishing touches to a replica 30-foot Viking longboat in their workshop.

## UK MILITARY VETS REBUILD LIVES CARVING VIKING LONGBOAT



Colin Laycock, a Director of The Viking Boat Co, works to put the finishing touches to a replica 30-foot Viking longboat in their workshop in Darlington, north east England.



A sign at the entrance to the workshop of The Viking Boat Co.

Made from solid oak using authentic Scandinavian plans, a Viking longship built by military veterans battling mental health issues is finally ready after a long labor of love. "It is not about a boat, it's not about wood. We're making boats, but we're actually rebuilding people," Bob Marshall told AFP at the project's workshop in Darlington, northeastern England. A former soldier who served in both the Falkland Islands and Northern Ireland, he has kept the project running through every setback since it was launched in 2019 to support veterans' mental health recovery.

Now like a phoenix, a longboat christened "Stormbird" measuring 30 feet (nine meters) went on view for the first time at a Viking festival in northern England last week. The project was originally run by the Help for Heroes charity from a rehabilitation center at the army's Catterick Garrison in northeastern England. It began using wood donated from an oak tree chopped down in 2018. But when the Covid pandemic hit and funding was cut in 2020, it looked as if its future was doomed.

Faced with walking away or somehow finding new premises and working on an unpaid basis, Marshall opted to "get on with it", pouring his own funds into the project to keep it afloat. "Stormbird", which is seaworthy though so far untested, is one of the star attractions at the JORVIK Viking Festival in York. Visitors can marvel at its historical accuracy and expertly crafted woodwork, including decorative features such as carved roses and a mythical dragon-like creature.

More than 60 veterans have worked on the boat, some of whom suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "Every time I come down here I just crack on and I just forget," said Angie Reid, 58. The former army medic, who has added decorative work to the boat's gunnels, said issues of mental health and even suicide were very real for ex-service personnel, though she declined to elaborate on her own experiences.

**Destructive thinking**  
Marshall said difficult "mega" projects like the longboat helped crowd out



Bob Marshall (center), the CEO of The Viking Boat Co, works to put the finishing touches to a replica 30-foot Viking longboat in their workshop.

the destructive thinking that plagues PTSD sufferers. "If you get PTSD... it's a big powerful thing. It needs knocking out, it's got to be moved aside, so the only way you can move it is taking a bigger target," he said. "It's such an engaging project that they think about it at night and if you're thinking about woodwork at night it's putting bad thoughts to one side."

Veteran Kevan Blackburn recounted how his wife always says he's in a "better place" after being in the workshop. "It's just getting out and mental health-wise it's just helped so much... you feel in a happier place than you were before," he told AFP. Marshall said the project also offered the camaraderie many veterans missed from their time in the forces.

One, the sole survivor of a helicop-

ter crash, had been "transformed" by the project, said Marshall, recalling how he gradually opened up after refusing to engage with people around him. Others had successfully seen their confidence restored, opening the door to lasting new job opportunities. But he remains on tenterhooks if participants stop coming. "You think you haven't heard from them for a week, you don't know if they are in a ditch somewhere. 'We've got three that we brought back from there this year and they're doing ok, as far as ok can be.'" His sense of humor has been crucial to the project's success. "You just can't let them down -- because every time veterans get a promise, that gets broken. Once the cordite leaves the battlefield, soldiers are soon forgotten," Marshall said.



A detailed view of the interior of a replica 30-foot Viking longboat.



Viking-themed gifts are created in the workshop of The Viking Boat Co.

**'How we get on from there'**  
After a 26-year army career, Marshall instinctively knows how to connect with ex-service personnel. It's a style of straight talking -- combined with "rude language" and "dark humor". "They want to be told it as it is. And we say 'we can't fix it, but we can fix the next 20 minutes and see how we get on from there.'" Signs on the workshop wall sum up the no-nonsense approach. "If something here offends you, please let us know -- we can all use a good laugh," reads one. Although the boat is finished, the project is far from over. After the York festival it will be used for a planned fundraising blitz so that another heritage boat can be built. --AFP



Bob Marshall, CEO of The Viking Boat Co and Colin Laycock (right), a Director of The Viking Boat Co, work to put the finishing touches to a replica 30-foot Viking longboat in their workshop.



Employees of The Viking Boat Co work to put the finishing touches to a replica 30-foot Viking longboat in their workshop.



Bob Marshall (center), CEO of The Viking Boat Co and Colin Laycock (right), a Director of The Viking Boat Co, work to put the finishing touches to a replica 30-foot Viking longboat in their workshop.



# PARIS FASHION WEEK KICKS OFF WITH BIG DESIGNER DEBUTS EXPECTED

Paris Women's Fashion Week kicked off on Monday with young new labels dominating the catwalks before a trio of hotly awaited designer debuts at Givenchy, Dries Van Noten and Tom Ford in the coming days. The opening of the world's biggest fashion week also saw demonstrations from the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) charity and the Brigitte Bardot Foundation to demand the industry stop using animal hides.

Dressed in fake prehistoric fur outfits, five PETA activists held up placards reading "Leave The Stone Age" in front of the French Fashion Institute, while the Brigitte Bardot Foundation sent billboards on trucks denouncing the use of animals for fashion around the City of Light. Fur and sheepskin jackets are back in fashion, with experts like Simon Longland, director of fashion buying at Harrods in London, saying the shearing coat is "set to be the ultimate wardrobe investment" for Fall-Winter 2025.

"We're here to demand that Paris joins London, Copenhagen and Amsterdam too in banning the use of fur on their catwalks," PETA spokeswoman Natasha Garner said. On the runways, France's Victor Weinsanto, Japanese label CFCL and New York's Vaquera held their shows Monday before the bigger corporate luxury juggernauts unveil their Fall-Winter collections later this week.

Japanese designer Yusuke Takahashi, who founded CFCL (Clothing For Contemporary Life) just under five years ago, sent out models in knitwear outfits in primary colors, inspired partly by furniture from the 1980s. There was no fur or animal hide in sight, with Takahashi making elaborate use of his favorite material, recycled polyester, which was used for 90 percent of the collection.

"We really focused on knit technology and making new products," he told reporters afterwards. Victor Weinsanto, an up-and-coming designer from eastern France, stressed that he only used fake leather and fur in his collection in mostly neutral wintery colors of white, beige and black, with a splash of 1980s-style shade of purple.

### Debuts

Over the next eight days, more than 100 fashion houses will unveil their Fall-Winter 2025-2026 collections, hoping to rally sales in what is an in-

Burton is one of a number of recent changes at major brands, with Belgian veteran Dries Van Noten stepping down from his eponymous label last year and handing the reins to fellow countryman Julian Klausner, 33. Klausner's first collection on Wednesday will be closely scrutinized.

The French Haute Couture and Fashion Federation has also pulled off a coup by luring Tom Ford, a mainstay of New York Fashion Week, to Paris for the first time. Chief designer Haider Ackermann, in the top job at Tom Ford since September and also tasked with

person, who is currently at the helm of Spanish label Loewe, is tipped as her potential replacement.

The luxury industry as a whole has seen profits fall and sales slow. Paris-based LVMH, Europe's largest company by market value, reported a 17 percent fall in annual net profits which it attributed to the end of the luxury-buying "euphoria" following the COVID 19 pandemic. Analysts see weakness in the key luxury market of China, reduced appetite for high-priced goods, and widespread economic uncertainty as other reasons for the decline.



Models acknowledge the applause at the end of the presentation of creations by CFCL Clothing For Contemporary Life for the Womenswear Ready-to-wear Fall-Winter 2025/2026 collection as part of the Paris Fashion Week in Paris on March 3, 2025. - AFP photos

creasingly difficult global luxury market. Among the most anticipated will be Sarah Burton's debut at Givenchy on Friday, with the French label given a boost by Hollywood star Timothee Chalamet, who wore a yellow Givenchy suit at the Oscars ceremony at the weekend.

Burton, a 51-year-old Briton who made her name as creative director at Alexander McQueen, was appointed to Givenchy in September. "Givenchy has a very beautiful history," she told Vogue in a profile last month. "It appeals to me because it's a small house, and it's in Paris."

leading a brand defined by its founder, will also be making his catwalk debut on Wednesday.

### Downturn

French luxury heavyweights Louis Vuitton, Dior, Saint Laurent and Chanel will produce the biggest budget shows this week, with their front row seats fought over by celebrities and influencers. Dior's show on Tuesday could be the last from head designer Maria Grazia Chiuri, with persistent rumors and press reports that she is on the way out. Northern Irish stylist Jonathan An-

Fellow French luxury giant Kering reported a 62 percent drop in profits last year, largely due to struggles at its flagship Gucci brand. Elsewhere on Monday, the Financial Times reported that Prada had emerged as the frontrunner to buy fellow Italian label Versace from Capri Holdings for about 1.5 billion euros (\$1.6 billion). The takeover would combine two of Italy's best-known luxury fashion brands. — AFP



Lifestyle



Pupils attend a Mandarin language lesson at a school in Riyadh. - AFP photos



Chinese teacher Shuaib Ma gives a Mandarin language lesson at a school in Riyadh.



Pupils attend a Mandarin language lesson at a school in Riyadh.

# Chinese lessons in Saudi schools show growing ties

With a map of China on the wall behind him, 14-year-old Yasser al-Shaalan studied the names of professions in a Chinese textbook, one of thousands of Saudi children now learning the language at school. Mandarin's entry into public schools is the latest sign of growing ties between Saudi Arabia and China, as the oil-rich Gulf kingdom pushes to diversify its economy and strategic alliances.

"The pupils at the other schools are proficient in English. I know Arabic, English and Chinese, which is a great asset for my future," Shaalan told AFP. In August, Saudi Arabia introduced China's official language as a compulsory second foreign language after English in six of its 13 administrative regions' schools.

Shaalan and his classmates have three Mandarin lessons a week, taught by their teacher Ma Shuaib, a Chinese national and Muslim who is fluent in Arabic. In their classroom in northern Riyadh, close to the Saudi headquarters of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba, Shaalan and his classmates learn Chinese characters shown on an electronic whiteboard. "At first it was difficult, but now it has become easy and fun," the teenager told AFP. Mandarin is one of the world's most widely spoken languages, and the overwhelming majority of its speakers live in China.

**'Language of the future'**

After a visit to China in 2019, Saudi crown prince and ruler Mohammed bin Salman announced a plan to intro-



Chinese teacher Shuaib Ma (right) gives a Mandarin language lesson at a school in Riyadh.

duce Chinese throughout the education system. Since then, several Saudi universities have opened programs in Chinese. In 2023, Prince Sultan University in Riyadh inaugurated the kingdom's first branch of the Confucius Institute. Following China's emergence as a major economic power, Mandarin teaching has become increasingly popular around the world, including in Europe.

However, in 2022 Germany warned the Confucius Institute language centers were being "used by the Communist Party for political ends". Dozens have closed in the United States, Sweden, France, Australia and Canada in recent years, following similar accusations. In Saudi Arabia, no such fears have been expressed. In Riyadh, Ma said that while "Chinese is one of the most difficult languages", he uses "modern methods" to make it

easier. "I use a digital board, gestures and interactive games to motivate the students," he explained.

While learning Chinese is compulsory, marks for the course do not count towards the students' overall grades. "At the beginning, we focus on listening, speaking and reading, then we move on to writing," added Ma, who teaches five classes a week at the Yazeed bin Abi Othman School.

Sattam Al-Otaibi, the school's director, said: "Chinese is the language of the future for economic communication. The world depends on China for many industries." Thousands of Chinese people work in Saudi Arabia, particularly in Riyadh, where the airport now displays trilingual signs in Arabic, English and Chinese.

**'Changing global order'**

Saudi Arabia is a long-standing



partner of the United States but has also strengthened its relations with China and Russia. The Middle East's largest economy is the world's leading exporter of crude oil, with China taking about a quarter of its shipments. That has helped China become Saudi Arabia's leading trade partner, with two-way trade exceeding \$100 billion in 2023, according to official figures.

Ties with Beijing have flourished during Prince Mohammed's "Vision 2030" project to diversify his country's oil-dominated economy and improve its image abroad.

A geopolitical rival to the United States, China has worked to strengthen its influence in the Middle East. In 2023, it brokered a stunning rapprochement between heavyweight rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran after years of no ties between them. "For Saudi Arabia, the relationship with China has

become one of the most important," said Umer Karim, an expert on Saudi foreign policy at the University of Birmingham.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has twice visited Riyadh, participating in Gulf-China and Arab-China summits attended by regional leaders. Riyadh also hosted a Sino-Arab Investment Forum in 2023, where more than \$10 billion of investment agreements were signed with Chinese companies.

As economic exchanges step up, hundreds of Chinese teachers have already arrived in Saudi Arabia, and Riyadh plans to send Saudi teachers to learn Mandarin in China. "The move to teach kids Chinese is again in line with the changing global order dynamics where China has emerged as the global economic powerhouse," Karim said. — AFP



US singer-songwriter Dolly Parton speaks on stage during the Academy of Country Music (ACM) Awards at Ford Center at the Star in Frisco, Texas, on May 11, 2023. — AFP

## Dolly Parton's longtime husband dies aged 82

The husband of Dolly Parton, Carl Dean, died Monday aged 82, the country music superstar said, after nearly 60 years of marriage kept out of the spotlight despite the singer's chart-topping fame. "Carl and I spent many wonderful years together. Words can't do justice to the love we shared for over 60 years," Parton wrote in a post on X. The singer-songwriter and actor met Dean in 1964 outside the Wishy Washy Laundromat in Nashville, Tennessee on the day she moved to the country music capital. She was 18 and he was 21.

"I was surprised and delighted that while he talked to me, he looked at my face (a rare thing for me)," said the "Jolene" singer, known for her glamour and gravity-defying hairdos, according to a post on her website. "He seemed to be genuinely interested in finding out who I was and what I was about," she added. The pair married two years later in May 1966 in a simple ceremony attended only by Parton's mother, the preacher and his wife. The low-key wedding was a fitting start for the couple's 58-year marriage, with Dean managing to stay away from the cameras.

The Nashville native worked as an asphalt paver as his wife's music career rocketed to earn her the title of the "queen of country music". The pair enjoyed a simple private life far from the spotlight. "We like to get out in our little RV and just be simple," Parton told People magazine in 2015. "I love to read, I love to cook, I love to be with my husband." The couple never had children. — AFP

## Adrien Brody breaks longest Oscars speech record as ratings dip

Best actor winner Adrien Brody broke the record for the longest-ever Oscar acceptance speech Sunday, as a lengthy gala suffered a small ratings dip, reaching some 18 million people on US network ABC and streamer Hulu. Despite promising to be "brief" on multiple occasions during his marathon monologue, "The Brutalist" star Brody clocked a whopping five minutes and 40 seconds on stage, surpassing an eight-decade-old record. The ceremony itself, in which low-budget indie "Anora" took five Oscars including best picture, overran to nearly four hours.

British star Greer Garson, who won best actress for "Mrs Miniver" in 1943, had held the record with a five-minute-and-30-second speech, according to the Guinness World Records website. The Academy introduced time limits and the practice of "playing off" winners with music following Garson's speech. But Brody on Sunday ordered the orchestra to stop.

"Please, turn the music off. I've done this before," said Brody, who won best actor in 2003 for "The Pianist." "It's not my first rodeo, but I will be brief. I will not be egregious, I promise," said Brody, before continuing for another 90 seconds.

The preliminary 18.1 million US audience figure, shared by ABC on Monday, includes Hulu. The Oscars went live on streaming for the first time, with technical glitches meaning some online viewers missed the final prizes. It means a recent three-year streak of improved Oscars ratings has ended.

Last year's comparable early ratings figure was 19.5 million, for a gala that saw Christopher Nolan's blockbuster "Oppenheimer" dominate prizes, and featured live musical performances from smash hit "Barbie." During the COVID-19 pandemic, Oscars ratings sank as low as 10.4 million. The Academy Awards telecast regularly topped 40 million just a decade ago.

**'Acid and affection'**

Sunday night's show received generally positive reviews. Variety called the 97th Academy Awards "successful in more ways than not," and said Conan O'Brien "absolutely rocked his debut at host, walking the perfect line between



US actor Adrien Brody poses in the press room with the Oscar for Best Actor in a Leading Role for "The Brutalist" during the 97th Annual Academy Awards at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California on March 2, 2025. - AFP

acid and affection." The Los Angeles Times declared the show "generally navigable in spite of a pointless excursion into a dancing-singing salute to James Bond films." Indiewire called it "one of the best Oscars telecasts in years," but The Hollywood Reporter found the evening "unstable" and "uneven."

Brody's extended speech was perhaps appropriate for "The Brutalist," a three-and-a-half hour drama that features an intermission. Brody plays a brilliant architect, haunted by the Holocaust, who moves to the post-World War II United States to begin a new life.

The actor used his speech to thank more than a dozen people by name, including his mother and father, "Brutalist" director Brady Corbet, co-stars Guy Pearce and Felicity Jones and his girlfriend Georgina Chapman. In a bizarre moment on his way to the stage, Brody paused and removed chewing gum from his mouth, tossing it to Chapman, who caught it. "I forgot I was chewing gum... I've got to get rid of this somehow!" Brody later explained, in a post-victory interview Monday on "Live with Kelly and Mark." Brody concluded his speech with a more serious note. "If the past can teach us anything, it's a reminder to not let hate go unchecked," he said. - AFP

## 60% of adults will be overweight or obese by 2050

Nearly 60 percent of all adults and a third of all children in the world will be overweight or obese by 2050 unless governments take action, a large new study said Tuesday. The research published in the Lancet medical journal used data from 204 countries to paint a grim picture of what it described as one of the great health challenges of the century. "The unprecedented global epidemic of overweight and obesity is a profound tragedy and a monumental societal failure," lead author Emmanuela Gakidou, from the US-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), said in a statement.

The number of overweight or obese people worldwide rose from 929 million in 1990 to 2.6 billion in 2021, the study found. Without a serious change, the researchers estimate that 3.8 billion adults will be overweight or obese in 15 years - or around 60 percent of the global adult population in 2050. The world's health systems will come under crippling pressure, the researchers warned, with around a quarter of the world's obese expected to be aged over 65 by that time.

They also predicted a 121-percent increase in obesity among children and adolescents around the world. A third of all obese young people will be living in two regions - North Africa and the Middle East, and Latin America and the Caribbean - by 2050, the researchers warned. But it is not too late to act, said study co-author Jessica Kerr from Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Australia.

"Much stronger political commitment is needed to transform diets within sustainable global food systems," she said. That commitment was also needed for strategies "that improve people's nutrition, physical activity and living environments, whether it's too much processed food or not enough parks," Kerr said. More than half the world's overweight or obese adults already live in just eight coun-

tries - China, India, the United States, Brazil, Russia, Mexico, Indonesia and Egypt, the study said.

While poor diet and sedentary lifestyles are clearly drivers of the obesity epidemic, "there remains doubt" about the underlying causes for this,



A patient who was infected with COVID-19 and went into intensive care sits with a tensiometer at the ORA ORA follow-up care and rehabilitation centre (Soins de Suite et Readaptation - SSR) for patients with overweight issues or obesity, in Pirae, Tahiti, French Polynesia, on September 10, 2021. - AFP

said Thorkild Sorensen, a researcher at the University of Copenhagen not involved in the study. For example, socially deprived groups have a "consistent and unexplained tendency" towards obesity, he said in a linked comment in The Lancet. The research is based on figures from the Global Burden of Disease study from the IHME, which brings together thousands of researchers across the world and is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. — AFP

## Sports

# Panthers halt Lightning's 8-game winning streak

## Panthers played their fifth straight game without star forward Matthew Tkachuk

FLORIDA: Aleksander Barkov scored two goals and Sergei Bobrovsky made 28 saves as the host Florida Panthers snapped the Tampa Bay Lightning's eight-game winning streak 2-1 on Monday night in Sunrise. Tampa Bay had held the NHL's longest active win streak, but it ended in large part due to Barkov's first multi-goal game of the season.

Florida's penalty-killing unit also delivered, going 7-for-7 as the Panthers won their fourth straight game. The Panthers played their fifth straight game without star forward Matthew Tkachuk, who was placed on the long-term injury list on Monday. The team confirmed he will miss the rest of the regular season with a groin injury.

For Tampa Bay, goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 27 shots in his 11th straight start. He is 9-1-1 in that span. Brayden Point scored the Lightning's goal, his team-leading 32nd of the season. Five-time All-Star defenseman Seth Jones made his Panthers debut, providing three shots, two blocks and one hit in 22:56.

Jones was acquired in a trade with the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday. The Panthers dealt backup goalie Spencer Knight to Chicago, then called up Chris Driedger to serve as Bobrovsky's backup. After a scoreless first period, the Panthers made it 1-0 on Barkov's initial goal 10:58 left in the second.

Tampa Bay's J.J. Moser turned it over in his own end. Barkov got the puck, spun away from Point, used Victor Hedman as a screen and beat Vasilevskiy — who never saw the shot — from just beyond the left circle. Six minutes later, Barkov scored a power-play goal. The sequence started when Moser made another mistake, tripping A.J. Greer.

Six seconds later, it was 2-0 as Barkov beat Luke Glendening on a faceoff before drifting to the slot, taking a pass from Mackie Samoskevich and then turning and firing a shot past Vasilevskiy's glove. With 3:56 left in the second, Florida's Eetu Luostarinen was hit with a double-minor penalty after his high stick drew blood to the face of Jake Guentzel.

However, Tampa Bay was not able to convert on its four-minute power play. Tampa Bay finally got on the board with 17:53 left in the third. Point scooped up his own rebound and backhanded a shot under Bobrovsky's right armpit.

A few minutes later, Tampa Bay nearly tied the score. Anthony Cirelli and Nikita hit the crossbar on successive shots before Florida swept the puck out of danger. Then with 2:54 left, Bobrovsky stopped Ryan McDonagh on a short-handed breakaway.

With nine seconds left, Florida was hit with a tripping penalty. But Hedman's subsequent shot to tie the score went off the right post. — Reuters



SUNRISE: (FILES) Aleksander Barkov (16) of the Florida Panthers faces off against Morgan Frost (16) of the Calgary Flames during the third period at Amerant Bank Arena. — AFP

## NZ raring to go for semi after 'tough travel'

LAHORE: Skipper Mitchell Santner said New Zealand have endured some "tough travel" but insisted they are raring to go for their Champions Trophy semi-final against South Africa on Wednesday in Lahore. New Zealand convincingly won their first two games of the ODI tournament in Pakistan, then lost to India in Dubai on Sunday, and have now flown back to Pakistan again for the encounter at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium.

"It was actually more of a daytime sleep," Santner said on Tuesday on the eve of the semi-final. "I think it was a tough travel but it's nice to get it done, get here and kind of a reset and get ready for today (training) and tomorrow's game."

The Champions Trophy is played on a hybrid model after India refused to travel to Pakistan over political tensions, instead playing all their matches and their semi-final in Dubai. All the other teams in Group A — Pakistan, New Zealand and Bangladesh — had to travel to Dubai to play India, who promptly won all three matches.

India faced Australia in the other semi-final in Dubai on Tuesday. Critics have condemned the tournament's unusual arrangement as giving India an unfair advantage. South Africa also travelled to Dubai not knowing who they would face in the semi-finals, but instead returned to Pakistan less than 24 hours later without playing a game.

Santner said scheduling in international cricket "is an issue just all around". "I think when you do have time to rest and recover it's very important," said the skipper, whose side beat hosts Pakistan and then Bangladesh in the group phase. New Zealand were well beaten by India by 44 runs but had already reached the semi-finals by then. "One-day cricket can be very exhausting on the body, so for us it's making sure that the bowlers are ready," Santner said.

"I think what we can change is to have rest and a good reset," Santner added. "The boys have recovered well after the travel and we are good to go." South Africa reached the semi-finals with big victories in the group phase over England and Champions Trophy debutants Afghanistan.

"I think like us they have all aspects covered," said Santner. "They have four good seamers and Lahore would probably not be spinning as much as Dubai. "We have seen (spinner Keshav) Maharaj for a long time, they have (spinner Tabraiz) Shamsi and (all-rounder Aiden) Markram can be tidy with the ball. So I think they are a well balanced side." — AFP

## San Diego vow to tackle homophobic chanting

LOS ANGELES: Major League Soccer's newest club, San Diego FC, say they will take action to stop homophobic chanting after a taunt used in Mexican football blighted their first ever home game. San Diego drew 0-0 at home to St. Louis City FC at their Snapdragon Stadium on Saturday but the one-word chant was heard several times throughout the match.

Mexico's national team has been fined several times by FIFA over the same chant which has also been an issue in Mexican club games. The club posted messages during the game warning supporters that the chants were "offensive" and adding that "discrimination has no place in our sport and in our stadiums and will not be tolerated."

On Monday the club issued a statement saying they would be taking action to deal with the prob-

## 'FIFA owed me this money', says Platini in court

MUTTENZ: Michel Platini, the former head of UEFA, told a Swiss appeals court on Monday, where his acquittal on fraud charges is being examined, that FIFA "owed" him the two million Swiss francs (\$2.2 million) at the heart of the case.

"I still don't understand why the public prosecutor's office is picking on me," the French three-time Ballon d'Or winner said at the start of his hearing. The special appeals court, sitting in Muttenz near Basel, is hearing a request by the country's Attorney General's office (OAG) to reopen proceedings against the 69-year-old Platini as well as former FIFA president Sepp Blatter, who turns 89 on March 10.

The long-running legal saga began in 2015, when Blatter quit as head of FIFA in a corruption crisis. It stems from the delayed payment of two million Swiss



Michel Platini

francs FIFA paid Platini, who was president of UEFA from 2007 to 2015, in 2011 for consultancy services.

The pair were acquitted by the Swiss Federal Court in June 2022 of charges that included "disloyal management", "breach of trust" and "forgery of securities". The Federal Court concluded that fraud was "not established with a likelihood bordering on certainty" and gave them the benefit of the doubt.

Back in court on Monday, Platini said he had been

"surprised" when Blatter first asked him his salary expectations when he came on board as an advisor to help him win the presidency election in 1998. "As I didn't know this world, the world of FIFA, I randomly said 'one million'," said Platini. "He asked me 'one million of what?'. I wanted to joke a bit and said 'one million of whatever you want: roubles, pesetas, lire'. And Mr Blatter said 'one million Swiss francs'."

In 1999, Blatter allegedly told Platini, who had been advising without a written contract, that he could not pay him the million so the two men agreed a written deal for 300,000 Swiss francs. "He told me: 'I'll give you the balance later, when we have money at FIFA,'" said Platini.

His invoice, which he presented in 2011, was duly described by the public prosecutor as a "false invoice" designed to defraud the organization. Platini insisted he would have taken legal action if FIFA had not paid the invoice. "A contract is a contract, a word is a word," he said. "FIFA owed me that money and I would have done anything to get it back." Blatter said on Monday that he had struck "a gentleman's agreement" with Platini but that the agreement had been purely oral, was made without witnesses and did not appear in FIFA's accounts. — AFP

## Ronaldo absent, Duran fails to grab chances in Iran

PARIS: Without Cristiano Ronaldo, his Saudi club Al Nassr had to settle for a goalless draw at Esteghlal in Tehran on Monday in an AFC Champions League Elite last-16, first-leg tie. Ronaldo, the Al Nassr captain, was reportedly rested for the opening knockout match of the rebranded competition.

Now 40, the Portuguese forward played in his team's shock domestic defeat to Al Orobah last Friday and was left in Riyadh for the resumption of the continental competition. In Ronaldo's absence, winter signing Jhon Duran had a night to forget at the Azadi Stadium.

A high-profile recruit in January from Premier League club Aston Villa, the Colombian could not add to the two goals he scored on his tournament debut last month. Duran went close twice midway through the first half. On 20 minutes, he ran in behind the Esteghlal defence but shot straight at goalkeeper Hossein Hosseini. Ayman Yahya latched onto the rebound but his effort was blocked on the goal line. Duran should have opened the scoring six minutes later after he was teed up by former Chelsea winger Angelo Gabriel, but his tame effort was saved by Hosseini.

Al Nassr, who dominated possession in the first half, looked set to break the deadlock just before the hour. Former Inter Milan midfielder Marcelo Brozovic released Duran with a ball over the hosts' backline, only for the forward to fail to get enough purchase on his attempted lob to beat Hosseini.

In the 69th minute and with Hosseini stranded, Duran struck the base of the Esteghlal post from a tight angle. Minutes later, he shot high and wide



TEHRAN: Nassr's Colombian Forward #9 Jhon Duran is marked by Esteghlal's Iranian midfielder #88 Arash Rezaevand and defender #04 Rouzbeh Cheshmi during the first leg of the AFC Champions League round of 16 football match between Iran's Esteghlal and Saudi's Al-Nassr at the Azadi Stadium in Tehran. — AFP

from the left-hand side of the area. Al Nassr will host Esteghlal, whom they beat in the group stages, in the second leg in Riyadh in seven days' time.

The Saudi side's manager Stefano Pioli will hope to welcome back Ronaldo to his starting lineup. Ronaldo has six goals in five Champions League Elite appearances this season. In the night's other last-16 match, UAE champions Al Wasl were held 1-1 at home in the first leg of their tie with two-time

Asian champions Al Sadd of Qatar.

Al Wasl made the perfect start at Zabeel Stadium on three minutes, when captain Ali Saleh put his side ahead with a brilliant cut-back and finish. Al Sadd levelled with 22 minutes remaining. Akram Afif, the reigning Asian Player of the Year, whipped in a cross from the left for Abdullah Al Yazidi to head home. The second leg takes place in Al Rayyan next Monday. — AFP

## Agha named Pakistan T20 captain, Rizwan to lead ODI side

LAHORE: Pakistan all-rounder Salman Agha was named skipper of their Twenty20 International team while Mohammad Rizwan will continue to lead the one-day international side, the country's cricket board said on Tuesday.

Shadab Khan will be Agha's deputy, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) added, as it named squads for five T20s and three ODIs against New Zealand starting on March 16. There was no place for senior batsman Babar Azam in the T20 side while Rizwan was also left out of a young squad as Pakistan look ahead to the T20 Asia Cup in September and next year's T20 World Cup.

Rizwan had only been named skipper of the white-ball teams in October. Aqib Javed will stay

on as interim head coach for the tour, extending his assignment beyond Pakistan's ill-fated Champions Trophy campaign on home soil, while the hunt for his successor begins. Mohammad Yousuf will join the squad as batting coach. Hosts Pakistan ended their group campaign in the ongoing Champions Trophy without a victory and failed to reach the semi-finals.

### Pakistan squads:

T20: Salman Ali Agha (captain), Shadab Khan, Abdul Samad, Abrar Ahmed, Haris Rauf, Hasan Nawaz, Jahandad Khan, Khushdil Shah, Mohammad Abbas Afridi, Mohammad Ali, Mohammad Haris, Muhammad Irfan Khan, Omair Bin Yousaf, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Sufyan Moqim and Usman Khan.

ODI: Mohammad Rizwan (captain), Salman Ali Agha, Abdullah Shafique, Abrar Ahmed, Akif Javed, Babar Azam, Faheem Ashraf, Imam-ul-Haq, Khushdil Shah, Mohammad Ali, Mohammad Wasim Jnr, Muhammad Irfan Khan, Naseem Shah, Sufyan Moqim and Tayyab Tahir. — Reuters

Sports

# Real Madrid need flawless game against Atletico: Vinicius Junior

Ancelotti praises his opposite number and highlighted Atletico coach Simeone's strengths

MADRID: Real Madrid star Vinicius Junior said his team face early elimination from the Champions League if they make any mistakes against Atletico Madrid in their last-16 tie. Los Blancos host their city rivals on Tuesday in the first leg before visiting Atletico next week at the Metropolitano stadium. Madrid lost 2-1 against Real Betis on Saturday in La Liga and Vinicius said their weak performance cannot be repeated in Europe.

"I think in the last game we lacked a bit of everything... we made too many mistakes, we defended badly and did everything badly," the winger told a news conference Monday. "It's better it happened in the last game as tomorrow we can make no mistakes, because these are knock-out games where you make a mistake and you're going home, and we don't want to go home so early.

"We're here to keep improving our game and to put in a good performance tomorrow." Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said he hoped the slip-up against Betis was a one-time issue before the derby. "We lacked attitude in the game against Betis, I hope it was an isolated incident," Ancelotti told reporters.

"I think it is a very even tie and it will be decided in the second leg. It's a tight game, (it will be) hard-fought." Ancelotti praised his opposite number and highlighted Atletico coach Diego Simeone's strengths.

"What I like is the way he reads games, how he sets up his team, his strategy, the defensive grit his players have, I like all of that," said Ancelotti. Madrid will be without the suspended Jude Bellingham for the first leg.

Vinicius has not been at his best in recent weeks but last season came to the fore in the final months of the campaign as Madrid won La

Liga and the Champions League. "With so many games you can't be 100 percent in all of them," added Vinicius. "It's normal that people want and demand more from me.

"The decisive moment of the season is arriving and at Madrid we play best in this moment of the season." The 24-year-old also said he hoped to renew his Madrid deal, which expires in 2027, "as soon as possible" despite speculation he could be lured by a big-money offer from Saudi Arabian football. Real Madrid's all-time top goalscorer Cristiano Ronaldo currently plays for Al Nassr, in the Saudi Pro League.

**'Big opportunity'**

Earlier Monday, Simeone admitted Real Madrid have the more illustrious history but backed his own team to deliver against the record 15-time European champions. Real Madrid beat Simeone's Atletico in the 2014 and 2016 Champions League finals as well as the 2017 semi-finals, 2015 quarters and on the only other occasion they have met in the competition, in the 1959 semis.

Atletico have never won the Champions League, finishing as runners-up on three occasions, while Madrid are considered the 'kings of Europe' and Catalan giants Barcelona have lifted the trophy five times.

"I always put Barcelona and Real Madrid where they are because of their history, so nothing has changed," Simeone said. "They both have a tremendous history and we are pure growth, which is very nice." The coach said his team had a chance to write a new story at the Bernabeu.

"As we always relate situations to history, and history exists, Real Madrid's history in the Champions League is extraordinary, and tomorrow we have a big opportunity," continued Sime-



MADRID: Real Madrid's French forward #09 Kylian Mbappe (CL) and teammates attend a training session on the eve of the UEFA Champions League Round of 16 first leg football match between Real Madrid CF and Club Atletico de Madrid at Real Madrid Sports City in Valdebebas, on the outskirts of Madrid. — AFP

one. Atletico are battling with Spain's big two for the domestic title and are currently second, one point behind Barca and two ahead of Madrid.

Simeone believes the intense La Liga battle will have no bearing on their European tie. "I see a game with a lot of respect against a great opponent and I think they respect us in the same

way," said the coach.

"I think all the previous games will have no impact at all, this is the Champions League. "If we played against a team that wasn't in our league, we would not get into that... I think for the city, for Madrid, it's spectacular that Atletico and Real Madrid are facing off." — AFP

## Juventus see off Verona to stay in Serie A top four

TURIN: Juventus moved back into Serie A's Champions League places on Monday by beating Verona 2-0 on Monday to dampen rumbling fan discontent.

Khephren Thuram's fine first-time finish in the 72nd minute and a late strike from Teun Koopmeiners saw off struggling Verona. Juventus climbed two points above Lazio who briefly moved into the top four by winning at AC Milan on Sunday night, and next week host third-placed Atalanta with only three points separating the two teams.

France midfielder Thuram opened the scoring just as fans at the Allianz Stadium in Turin were turning on the Juve players, loudly booed off at half-time by supporters already outraged at the midweek exit from the Italian Cup at the hands of lowly Empoli. "We played well and we deserved to win... it was an important three points," said under-fire Juve coach Thiago Motta. "I'm pleased with the players I have, with the effort and commitment they show... We know that the attitude was wrong last time (against Empoli)."

The match was played in a flat atmosphere as fans protested their team's underwhelming season after bringing in Motta to replace Massimiliano Allegri and spending significant sums to renew the squad and mount both a challenge for the Scudetto and a deep run in the Champions League.

Instead, Juve were dumped out of Europe's top club competition in the play-offs by PSV Eind-



TURIN: Juventus' Turkish midfielder #10 Kenan Yildiz (L) reacts as he lies on the ground during the Italian Serie A football match between Juventus and Hellas Verona at the Allianz Stadium in Turin. — AFP

hoven and trail league-leaders Inter by six points. Demanding supporters staged a protest outside the team hotel on Sunday night and launched foul-mouthed chants at Motta ahead of Monday's win, Juve's fifth in a row in Serie A.

On Monday, Juve would have been behind to a rocket of a shot from Toma Suslov at the break had Davide Faraoni not strayed offside in the build-up.

stage—and with this season's final in Munich—Alonso's big match experience could prove crucial for Leverkusen. On Saturday, Bayer Leverkusen thumped Eintracht Frankfurt 4-1 to stay eight points behind Bayern and keep their slim hopes alive of defending their Bundesliga title.

Speaking after the match, Alonso said domestic dominance meant little when the Champions League anthem soars through the stadium speakers. "It doesn't matter. The next game is always the most important. It will be brutally difficult for us and it'll be a big challenge.

"We're in form. We want to show again we can bring the fight to Bayern. But we also know the Champions League and Bundesliga are totally different. "The Champions League is a bit more emotional. Emotional control is most important. "Five bad minutes, and you're gone."

**'Deal with the bad moments'**

Leverkusen's best has been very good this season, but a failure to keep their emotions in check has already cost Alonso's side. Away against Atletico Madrid, Leverkusen were the better side but lost after falling prey to Diego Simeone's wily team.

That ruling set the stage for Juve to win a match which they dominated from the first whistle and could have won more comprehensively had it not been for Verona goalkeeper Lorenzo Montipio. Koopmeiners, who has underperformed since arriving from Atalanta as a potential star of a reworked team, netted just his third goal of the season give the match a more respectable scoreline. — AFP

A goal up at half-time and playing against 10 men, Leverkusen let their emotions get the better of them, finishing a man down themselves and conceding a Julian Alvarez winner in the 90th minute. Leverkusen midfielder Granit Xhaka, revitalised after leaving Arsenal two years ago for a return to Germany, said stability would be the key.

"I think we're stable enough to upset Bayern," said Xhaka. "In the league, let's see where things are after 34 matchdays. But there's definitely a lot to be gained in the Champions League." While Bayern are six-time European champions, Leverkusen's best performance in the competition came when they finished runners-up to Real Madrid in 2002.

But they hope to compensate for a relative lack of European pedigree by drawing on the confidence gleaned from past encounters with Bayern during Alonso's tenure. "We know each other very well and we've played recently," said Alonso.

"We need to try and deal with the bad moments we might have, because that's the Champions League, to go through difficult moments and not make many mistakes. "We're playing at the Allianz, then we play at home. It's Bayern, they're the best team in Germany. "Not always the best team wins, but we will see." — AFP

## Arteta hopes CL 'urgency' kicks Arsenal in top gear

EINDHOVEN: Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta believes his injury-ravaged side can still challenge for Champions League glory ahead of Tuesday's last 16, first leg trip to PSV Eindhoven.

The Gunners' hopes of a first Premier League title for 21 years look to have disappeared after losing 1-0 at home to West Ham and being held 0-0 at Nottingham Forest in their last two matches to fall 13 points behind leaders Liverpool.

Arsenal's lack of firepower is understandable with all of Kai Havertz, Gabriel Jesus, Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Martinelli sidelined by injury. Midfielder Mikel Merino has had to deputize as a makeshift striker in recent weeks, but Arteta insists there is still better to come from his side.

"We still have gears with the players that we have to take the game to a different level," Arteta said at his pre-match press conference in the Netherlands on Monday. "Every individual has to be at their best. When we do that, and we have that connection, we are a really strong team."

Without the luxury of a free-flowing attack, Arsenal can at least lean on the Premier League's meaneast defense and one of the best in the Champions League so far this season. Only Inter Milan conceded fewer than Arsenal's three goals as they finished third in the eight-game league phase.

"Focusing on what we have done in the Champions League this season is our biggest reassurance because that doesn't happen at that level of consistency for that many months for a random reason. It's because we have it in us," added Arteta.

"We're going to have to adapt. That's obviously unquestionable, but we can still be very efficient and a top team. "When you get to this stage of the Champions League, there is something else. You feel it in the atmosphere and the energy of the place. "It's something else because it's a competition you don't play weekly. You play, and you are in or you are out. And that gives you urgency." Arsenal managed just one shot on target against Forest and two in the shock defeat to lowly West Ham.

But Jurrien Timber believes they do have the firepower to see off the Dutch champions. "We change the narrative by winning games, it's as easy as that. We have to score tomorrow, we have to win games," said former Ajax defender Timber on his return to the Netherlands.

"We have so much quality in our group. We have a lot of injuries, especially up front. We know that. But I think it is a beautiful challenge for us as a team to put our front players, or anyone, in the best position to score goals." — AFP

## Alonso wants to keep it cool in Bayern, Leverkusen showdown

BERLIN: Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso said keeping a cool head would be the secret to making his side's recent dominance of Bayern Munich count in the Champions League last 16. Managing in the top flight for just a second full season, Alonso may be inexperienced in coaching terms, but the Spaniard knows a thing or two about Champions League success from his playing days.

Alonso won the Champions League with both Liverpool and Real Madrid. During a career in which he also spent three seasons at Bayern, he reached the final three times and the semi-finals on a further six occasions. On top of his club honours, Alonso also won two European Championships with Spain and the 2010 World Cup. Under Alonso, who took over in October 2022, Leverkusen have never lost to Bayern, winning three games and drawing the other three.

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I, Adrians Ferns, holder of Indian passport no. M9149345 having permanent address, 11 Beatrice villa, Amboli, Andheri West, Mumbai 400058, Maharashtra, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as (given name) Adrian and (surname) Ferns.

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## Gilgeous-Alexander scores 51 points, Thunder win 50th game

### Hawks edge Grizzlies on Caris LaVert's buzzer-beater



CHARLOTTE: Stephen Curry #30 of the Golden State Warriors defends a shot by Nick Smith Jr. #8 of the Charlotte Hornets during the second half of a basketball game at Spectrum Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. — AFP

**OKLAHOMA CITY:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 51 points to lead the Oklahoma City Thunder to a 137-128 home win over the Houston Rockets on Monday. It was Gilgeous-Alexander's fourth game with 50 or more points this season and ninth game with 40 or more points — both tops in the NBA. He had never produced a 50-point game in his career before January.

Gilgeous-Alexander shot 18 of 30 from the floor and 5 of 9 on 3-point attempts while adding seven assists and five rebounds. Oklahoma City has won four consecutive games and 13 of its past 15. The Thunder registered their 50th win of the season before any other team in the conference hit 40 wins. Oklahoma City is the first team to accomplish that feat since the 2004-05 Miami Heat.

#### Warriors 119, Hornets 101

Buddy Hield racked up 22 points and Stephen Curry scored 21 points in his hometown as Golden State defeated host Charlotte. Brandin Podziemski added 19 points and 11 rebounds, Draymond Green finished with 16 points, 12 rebounds and seven rebounds and Jimmy Butler III had 13 points as seven different Golden State players made at least one 3-point shot. Hield connected five times from

beyond the arc. Charlotte's losing streak reached seven games despite 35 points from Miles Bridges and 25 points from LaMelo Ball. Mark Williams provided 12 points and 13 rebounds for the Hornets, who committed 17 turnovers. Tidjane Salaun had 10 points off the bench.

#### Hawks 132, Grizzlies 130

Caris LeVert's reverse layup at the buzzer lifted visiting Atlanta to a victory over Memphis, spoiling the first career triple-double by Desmond Bane. LeVert scored 21 of his 25 points in the second half. Zacharie Risacher led the Hawks with 27 points, Onyeka Okongwu added 16 points and 12 rebounds, Daniels contributed 14 points and Trae Young finished with 12 points and 15 assists. Bane scored a season-high 35 points — including 18 in the third quarter — and added 10 points and 10 assists. Luke Kennard had 17 points and seven assists. The Grizzlies lost their third game in a row and have dropped six of their last eight. Jaren Jackson Jr. injured his left ankle 1:39 into the game and did not return.

#### Trail Blazers 119, 76ers 102

Anfernee Simons scored 34 points and Shae-

don Sharpe and Donovan Clingan each posted a double-double as Portland continued its strong road trip with a victory over Philadelphia. Sharpe registered 20 points, 11 rebounds and five assists, while Clingan totaled 13 points, 13 boards and three blocks. The Trail Blazers improved to 4-1 on their seven-game road trip, which continues this week with challenging contests in Boston and Oklahoma City. Philadelphia, which has lost 10 of its past 11, continued to play without Joel Embiid (knee), who is out for the season. Paul George (groin) and Kelly Oubre Jr. (illness) also sat out, while Tyrese Maxey left with a back contusion after taking a hard fall in the third quarter. Andre Drummond posted a season-high 25 points and 18 rebounds.

#### Pistons 134, Jazz 106

Cade Cunningham scored 29 points and Detroit cruised to its 10th win in 11 games by beating Utah in Salt Lake City. Cunningham, who also contributed nine assists and four steals, put up 17 points in the first half as Detroit built a 23-point lead. Jalen Duren contributed 16 points, 12 rebounds and four blocks. Kyle Filipowski compiled 25 points and eight boards for the Jazz, who concluded their homestand with a 3-6 record. Collin Sexton scored 16 points.

#### Heat 106, Wizards 90

Bam Adebayo posted 19 points and 15 rebounds and Miami used a fourth-quarter run to pull away from visiting Washington. Duncan Robinson added 17 points for the Heat, who have won three of their past four games. Pelle Larsson scored half of the Heat's points during a decisive 12-0 stretch in the fourth quarter. The Wizards shot a dismal 3 of 23 in the second quarter, finishing 31 of 84 (36.9 percent) for the night. Khris Middleton led Washington with 16 points.

#### Kings 122, Mavericks 98

Zach LaVine and DeMar DeRozan combined for 42 points and Sacramento took advantage of a knee injury sustained by Kyrie Irving to run away from host Dallas. Irving left the game for good with 2:35 remaining in the first quarter after it appeared he hyperextended his left knee on a drive to the basket. LaVine led all scorers in the game with 22 points, making eight of his 12 shots and four of his five 3-point attempts. Dallas' top six scorers were all reserves. Kai Jones led the way with 21 points, while Naji Marshall added 18, and Spencer Dinwiddie and Max Christie had 10 apiece. Jones pulled down nine boards, while Marshall and Dinwiddie had six assists each. — Reuters

## F1 ready for new season but eyes on the prize for 2026

**LONDON:** Williams could be the most improved team when the Formula One season starts in Melbourne next week but 2026 is still the focus for faded former champions determined to get back on top. Next year will be the dawn of a new engine era, coupled with significant chassis regulation changes, in a major shake-up that could send tremors through the paddock pecking order.

All teams, from top to bottom, have to decide at what point this season they cease to upgrade their cars and focus fully on 2026. For teams like Williams, ninth out of 10 in 2024, that means switching far sooner than title-chasing rivals to give themselves the best chance of a big leap.

"I've been very clear from the beginning that 2026 is the year I want to make sure we put focus onto and that will have an effect on 2025," said Williams principal James Vowles at last month's car launch. "My head is clear. It's about the future of this organization. The bias is very much towards 2026. The second of January, which was the first legal date, our 2026 car was in the wind tunnel."

Williams were fastest in last week's Bahrain



Carlos Sainz

testing, with new arrival Carlos Sainz, and their overall package had rivals suggesting they could be top five contenders. Vowles played that down, having already warned Sainz and teammate Alex Albon to expect a tough year with the rewards to be reaped in seasons to come.

Midfield rivals will also be looking to bank points early in the season before turning off development. "There are areas of our business that are already 100% focused on 2026, so concept engineering groups are just focused on 2026 because 2025's done from their perspective," said Aston Martin boss Andy Cowell.

"As we go through the year, every single department will do that transition from partially on 2025 to fully on to 2026," added the Briton,

who had top designer Adrian Newey starting on Monday. Alpine's Oliver Oakes said it would be a balancing act for the Renault-owned team but "I think we're going to see that, especially after the first few races, it's pretty evident where your attention needs to be."

Those at the front and chasing championships will take a different approach. Andrea Stella, boss of champions McLaren whose car already looks the one to beat and whose drivers Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri will be chasing both titles, said his team would be introducing upgrades early in the season at least. Ferrari's Fred Vasseur, now with seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton on board, said the situation would be assessed after the first four or five races.

"Even if you have a plan, even if you decide now that we do like this, like this, like this, let's see after a couple of races into the championship where you are," he told reporters. "If you are one second behind, it makes no sense to continue to develop. If you are one second in front, you can be focused a little bit on 2026, but I think these two scenarios are not realistic at all."

"I think it will be the continuity of last year with four teams able to win races, able to win the championship, and it will be a good fight." Mercedes driver George Russell agreed. "I think why it is going to be so interesting is whoever continues to develop will probably win the championship but you'll pay the price in 2026," he said. — Reuters

## Rams respect QB Matthew Stafford's year-to-year status

**LOS ANGELES:** Matthew Stafford required only three weeks to accomplish what the 37-year-old quarterback and the Los Angeles Rams needed seven months to accomplish last offseason: agreeing to a new contract. The Rams modified Stafford's contract for the 2025 season, added guarantees for the 2026 league year and respected his sense of urgency to shorten the offseason drama head coach Sean McVay said brought on too many sleepless nights last spring.

"Maybe it'll (take) about two, three days next year if we have to do this," McVay said of the second February in a row investing time into the contract status of his quarterback. "We've taken it a year at a time, and he's earned the right I believe," McVay said. "To be able to say he can play for a few more years if that's what he wanted. But we've always had great dialogue, and I really think it's been a year-to-year thing. He's obviously under contract for two more years with us, but as long as he wants to play, I know we're feeling really good about that."

Stafford and McVay agreed the "end goal" both sides had in mind was a contract for a fifth season together - 2025 - to get a firm grasp of the franchise's bottom line as they began reshaping the team in free agency. — Reuters