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Statement from the Royal Hashemite Court

AMMAN (JNews) — His Majesty King Abdullah on Tuesday underwent a successful surgery to treat a thoracic herniated disc, a Royal Court statement said.

At the professional advice of physicians, the surgery, which took place at a specialized hospital in Frankfurt, will be followed by a period of rest before King Abdullah returns to Jordan.

The Royal Hashemite Court wishes His Majesty continued good health and wellbeing.

Public debt down by JD244m in January

AMMAN (JNews) — Jordan's public debt dropped by JD244 million in January 2022, standing at JD28.519 billion, or 88.3 percent of the gross domestic product, according to Ministry of Finance figures, carried by the Jordan News Agency Petra.

The ministry said in a press release on Tuesday that the decrease, excluding debt owed to the Social Security Investment Fund at the end of 2021, was due to securing treasury bonds worth JD311 million against JD175 million of new issuances, which led to a JD136 million decrease in domestic debt.

The payment of National Electricity Power Company dues and a decrease in bank facilities for the company and the Water Authority also led the debt to drop.

Furthermore, external debt went down by JD68 million due to the government paying some dues as well as a decline in the exchange rates against the US dollar.

Regent visits PSD's Criminal Investigation Department



HRH Crown Prince Hussein, the Regent, visits the PSD's Criminal Investigation Department; notes the need to strengthen cross-sector partnerships to raise awareness of crime prevention and the need to keep up with technological development. (Photo: Royal Court)

AMMAN (JNews) — HRH Crown Prince Hussein, the Regent, on Tuesday visited the Public Security Directorate's (PSD) Criminal Investigation Department, according to a Royal Court statement.

Crown Prince Hussein was briefed on the department's main duties and the latest technologies that were introduced to combat and prevent crime.

The Regent highlighted the importance of enhancing cross-sector partnerships to raise awareness of crime prevention and the need to keep up with technological development.

The Crown Prince also stressed the need to further advance the department by enhancing international cooperation and investing in human resources.

HRH congratulated PSD personnel on the directorate's 64th anniversary.

For his part, PSD Director Maj. Gen. Hussein Hawatmeh said the PSD provides all needed operational and logistical support for the Criminal Investigation Department to facilitate its mission.

Kingdom loses 46% of water due to leakage, illegal use

AMMAN (JNews) — Nearly half of Jordan's water supply is lost due to water leakage and illegal water use, Al-Ghad News reported on Tuesday.

The Kingdom's administrative and physical water loss amounts to 46 percent, according to Ministry of Water and Irrigation figures. Administrative water loss refers to meter errors that affect usage.

An informed ministry source told Al-Ghad that "water leakage and illegal water use are the most important challenges that affect water supply in the Kingdom."

The source added that the ministry has been working on a campaign to control water sources since 2013, and has increased penalties to protect this national resource that belongs to Jordanians.

There have been 59,630 attempts to breach water pipelines and 24,615 attempts to breach the King Abdullah Canal from 2013 to April 2021, according to ministry's statistics. The ministry has also shut down 1,213 illegal wells and stopped 2,445 instances of illegal use of Treasury lands in the Jordan Valley.

Under the National Water Strategy, the government seeks to reduce water losses by three to six percent every year, with the goal of reducing losses to 25 percent by 2025.

The ministry is continuing to implement projects to increase water supply efficiency through Farah projects, which are funded through USAID grants.



(Photo: Envato Elements)

JRPSC receives only 8.3% of promised funding in Q1

AMMAN (JNews) — The volume of funding for the Jordan Response Platform for the Syria Crisis (JRPSC) for the first quarter of this year amounted to \$189 million, only 8.3 percent of the \$2.28 billion pledged according to the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, as reported by Al-Mamlaka TV.

According to the ministry's data, the plan's funding for the first quarter of this year was allocated as follows: \$62.457 million to fund the requirements of refugee support, and \$39.307 million for supporting host communities.

\$1.240 million went to support projects related to responding to the pandemic, and \$86 million was allocated to supporting infrastructure projects and institutional capacity development.

According to the same data "no funding has been provided to date to support the state budget".

China, Jordan bilateral trade exceeded \$4.4 billion last year— envoy

AMMAN (JNews) — Chinese Ambassador to Jordan Chen Chuandong said Tuesday that China is Jordan's second largest trading partner in terms of goods, and bilateral trade exceeded \$4.4 billion last year, Al-Mamlaka TV reported.

On April 7, 1977, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the People's Republic of China formally established diplomatic relations, which opened a new page in the millennia of friendly exchanges between the two peoples.

"We meet online to review the history of friendship between China and Jordan, look ahead to the future of bilateral relations, and draw the outlines of our cooperation" the Chinese ambassador said during a virtual reception held by the embassy on the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Jordan and China.

The ambassador added that China is currently the largest country offering human resource training opportunities in Jordan, with more than 1,000 Jordanians from various fields studying in China or participating in training courses over the past three years.

He added that Jordan is one of the first Arab countries that the Chinese have come to travel to, and the number of Chinese tourists to Jordan has increased significantly in recent years. The Chinese Culture Center in Amman entered the trial operation phase, which will build a new bridge of communication between the two peoples.



Impacted by pandemic, women's economic participation is decreasing

By Nesreen Ghassan

AMMAN — Participation in the labor market is one of the most significant challenges Jordanian women face when trying to make a difference in their communities. Despite official efforts to empower women and increase their role in the economy, the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated an already dire situation.

Recent data shows that the pandemic resulted in a significant drop in the percentage of women workers in a wide range of industries, reflected in higher unemployment rates.

According to official UN data, women's unemployment rate remains high, reaching 30.8 percent in the third quarter of 2021, compared to unemployed men at 21.2 percent.

In the same period, the revised economic participation rate for women fell to 14.5 percent from 14.9 percent in 2020, indicating that many women who had left the labor market during the pandemic did not return.

According to Jordan Labor Watch, the rate of economic activity for Jordanian women is among the lowest in the world, at around 47.9 percent, and among the lowest in the region, at around 31 percent.

In the words of Linda Kalash, executive director of Tamkeen for Legal Aid and Human Rights, the coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on women's employment.

"We witnessed an exodus of women from the Jordanian labor market as a result of online education, as well as the dismissal of a large number of male and female employees, not to mention the closure of several institutions during the pandemic," she said.

The existence of an informal labor market whose size and composition are unknown makes it hard to get accurate estimates of the number of women who work in the entire labor market.

Kalash said that "the responsible authorities must first improve the work environment and support flexible work, in addition to ensuring equal pay for men and women, because the wage disparity results in women withdrawing from the labor market".

She added that the Ministry of Labor is in charge of this issue, and that one of the most significant challenges the ministry faces is lack of inspectors.

Women's participation in the labor force is significantly lower than that of men's, and the pandemic has resulted in many people losing their jobs, Rasha Badareen, leader of the Workforce Development component at the Jordan River Foundation, told *Jordan News*.

"During the pandemic, we noticed that there was a significant number of women who wanted to work from home because there are no nurseries at their place of employment, and because of logistical issues," Badareen added.



(Photo: Flickr)

BRIEFS

JTB, eDreams sign deal to promote tourism in Jordan

AMMAN (JNews) — The Jordan Tourism Board (JTB) on Tuesday signed a joint marketing agreement with eDreams, one of the world's leading online travel brands, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported.

Signed on the sidelines of the 2022 Milan International Tourism Fair, the deal seeks to promote Jordan as a must-visit destination for Italian tourists, according to a JTB statement.

JTB participated in the Milan fair, held April 10-12, along with 22 Jordanian tourism offices and hotels, Royal Jordanian airline and the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority.

JFDA inspects 1,415 facilities during Ramadan

AMMAN (JNews) — The Jordan Food and Drug Administration's (JFDA) monitoring and inspection teams carried out 1,415 inspections in various areas across the Kingdom during the first week of Ramadan, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported.

In a statement on Tuesday, the General Director of the JFDA Nizar Muhaladat said that the administration shut down eight alimentation facilities, suspended 46, and gave a warning to 746 others for violating the JFDA's health requirements and standards. It also destroyed more than 10 tonnes of sweets and 3,000 liters of liquids.

The JFDA called on citizens to contact them if they have any observation, inquiry, or complaint via the toll-free complaints line 117114, via e-mail at info@jfda.jo, and through WhatsApp on the number 0795632000 available around the clock.

Armed forces to cultivate land to ensure food security

AMMAN (JNews) — Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maj. Gen Yousef Huneiti said the Jordan Armed Forces-Arab Army (JAF) will start cultivating land, contributing to boosting the national economy, according to the Jordan News Agency, Petra.

Speaking during an iftar banquet with the Royal 84th Field Air Defense Battalion, Huneiti stressed JAF's commitment to achieving food security and lessening the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Kingdom.

Labor minister, Turkish ambassador discuss ties

AMMAN (JNews) — Minister of Labor Nayef Steitieh met with Turkish Ambassador Ismail Aramaz on Tuesday to discuss bilateral ties and the exchange of expertise in various fields, according to the Jordan News Agency.

Steitieh commended the strong relations between the two countries, particularly cooperation in employment and vocational and technical training fields.

The envoy highlighted the "strong and friendly" Jordanian-Turkish ties and the close relationship between HM King Abdullah and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Observers expect violence to escalate in occupied territories at weekend

By Sarah Abu-Saad

AMMAN — Diplomatic efforts to ensure a calm Ramadan this year in the occupied Palestinian territories failed to prevent a new cycle of violence from breaking out.

Following a series of attacks by Palestinians, carried out inside Israel in the past few weeks by lone attackers with no clear affiliation to militant groups, Israel launched a wide-ranging "security" operation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem earlier this week. So far, the Israeli operation has resulted in the killing of at least four Palestinians, including two women, and the arrest of more than 100 Palestinians. Israel is also threatening to storm the Jenin refugee camp at any moment, but the most serious escalation could take place late Thursday and early Friday as radical Jewish settlers and politicians have called for storming Al-Aqsa Mosque to mark the Jewish Passover.

This would be a recipe for carnage, observers say.

Professor of international relations and conflict resolution Hasan Al-Momani told Jordan News that there is a fertile ground for escalations that would lead to a military confrontation, but it is difficult to predict whether a confrontation will be triggered by another "lone wolf" Palestinian attacker or if the Israeli response will spark a violent Palestinian reaction.

"There have always been Israeli provocations, either by govern-



Palestinians run for cover from Israeli forces at the northern entrance of Ramallah, near the Israeli settlement of Beit El, in the occupied West Bank, on April 11, 2022. (Photo: AFP)

ment forces or by Jewish extremist groups, at Al Aqsa Mosque, which always create tension. As we saw last year, there was a military confrontation between Hamas and Israel due to the events at Al-Aqsa mosque," Momani said.

He added that Jerusalem is always at the center of tensions as both Israelis and Palestinians see the city and holy places as a test for legitimacy.

Momani added that Israeli extremist groups are interested in increasing tensions and creating a new reality in Jerusalem and at Al-Aqsa Mosque.

The current Israeli government, he said, might not be able to control these extremist groups since far-right Prime Minister Naftali Bennett wants to save his coalition and the only way to do that is by appeasing these groups.

According to Momani, the Israe-

li-Palestinian conflict is being marginalized, especially now that the West is busy with the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Political analyst Amer Al-Sabaileh told Jordan News that there is a real danger of war breaking out "due to escalations and violations". He noted that some Jewish groups want to use religious festivities to create political and religious crises, "which could result in a confrontation".

"All previous diplomatic efforts were good, but not enough to affect the ambiguous scene in Palestine and Israel," Sabaileh said.

He added that the international community is currently occupied with the Ukrainian conflict, "therefore the Palestinian-Israeli issue might not be at the center of attention. However, there could be attempts by the international community to calm the situation down".

Safadi updates senators on Kingdom's foreign policy

AMMAN (JNews) — Deputy Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Ayman Safadi on Tuesday briefed senators on Jordan's position toward regional and international developments, foremost of which is the Palestinian issue, the Jordan News Agency, Petra reported.

He noted efforts led by HM King Abdullah II to promote regional peace and stability during a meeting of the Senate's Committee on Arab, International, and Expatriates Affairs and the Palestine Committee.

Senate President Faisal Fayez said at the meeting that Jordan maintained a balanced diplomacy as it built regional and global alliances during its first centennial which have helped to preserve its security, stability, and interests.



(Photo: Petra)

He said the repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine crisis had cast a shadow over the Arab world.

The senators commended Jor-

dan's foreign policy guidelines and the Foreign Ministry's efforts to forge policies that are in line with the national interests.

Labor Ministry team inspects factory after boiler incident

AMMAN (JNews) — A team of representatives from the Directorate of Occupational Safety and Health Services, the Irbid Labor Directorate, and the Public Health, and Safety Committee of the Koura District, on Monday inspected a clothing factory in Der Abi Saeed where a boiler had exploded injuring 16 workers, according to Al-Mamlaka TV.

Head of the Public Health and Safety Committee of the Koura District Bakr Al-Kaabneh said that "the inspection comes to ensure the

provision of a healthy and safe work environment for male and female workers in the factory, with the aim of preventing accidents, work injuries, and health problems caused by occupational hazards", adding that "the Public Health and Safety Committee carries out periodic inspections of all production facilities in the Koura District".

The injured factory workers were taken to Princess Raya Hospital in Irbid 15 were discharged, and one is still being treated.

Ramadan charity parcels double this year — Chamber of Commerce

AMMAN (JNews) — Amman Chamber of Commerce Chairman Khalil Al-Haj Tawfiq estimated that the quantity of charity parcels this year has increased by 100 percent compared to last year, according to Al-Rai.

Tawfiq said in a statement to Al-Rai that food merchants have seen an increase in demand for food parcels leading up to and during Ramadan.

Economic analyst Ahmad Aud attributed the increase in charity packages to a decline in people's standards of living.

The parcels do not go to people living in "difficult economic conditions, but to poor people in the most dire poverty," he explained. "If they are not given these parcels, they will starve."

Aud blamed economic policies, a significant rise in unemployment rates, and low wages. He said that the increase in poverty "calls for a review of economic and social policies aimed at stopping the expansion in the poorest class."

Ziyad Al-Rubaei, a writer specializing in demographic issues, also pointed to "the presence of Syrian refugees and migrant workers who need work but cannot find it, in addition to the decrease in Jordanian citizens' own purchasing power."

However, Rubaei said that the increase in charity parcels points to an increase in donors' financial capacity. He believes that charity is not limited to the rich, as "poor people feel more than rich people and share what they have."

Ministry launches youth gov't, parliament projects registration

AMMAN (JNews) — Registration for the youth government and youth parliament projects run by the Ministry of Youth's Political Institute program has begun and will remain open until Saturday, April 30, according to Al-Mamlaka TV.

According to a ministry statement, the two projects include training on a variety of political action tools. The Youth Government Project focuses on the executive aspect of governance, while the Youth Parliament Project focuses on the legislative aspect. Both projects deal with public policies and youth issues, and help students acquire technical and specialized

knowledge through periodic meetings with experts and specialists.

In addition to field visits to ministries for training and discussing the outcomes of work directly with relevant decision-makers, students will participate in a simulation between the youth parliament and the youth government.

The Ministry called on young people to register after reviewing the general conditions, the stages of application for participation, and the criteria for each stage by submitting an application for participation at the following link:

<https://www.shababgovjo.org/SiteContent.aspx?id>

417,000 tonnes of wheat bought so far — ministry

AMMAN (JNews) — According to the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Supply, the quantities contracted so far to boost Jordan's wheat stock stood at 417,000 tonnes, Al-Mamlaka TV reported on Tuesday.

The ministry's spokesperson

Yanal Barmawi said that the ministry continues to offer tenders for additional quantities of wheat. He indicated that Jordan's wheat stock is enough for 13 months, and the amounts of wheat available in warehouses stands at 753,000 tonnes.



A vendor makes juice at a store during the holy month of Ramadan in Amman, Jordan, on April 20, 2021. (Photo: Xinhua)

19,400 liters of juice disposed of since beginning of Ramadan

AMMAN (JNews) — Director of the Health Control Department of the Greater Amman Municipality Khalid Al-Hawadi said that 19,400 liters of fresh juices have been disposed of since the beginning of the Ramadan, including 3,100 on Monday, according to Al-Mamlaka TV.

Hawadi said that the juices were disposed of by inspection teams visiting random stands and street vendors' stalls.

He explained that the teams dispose of juices because they are exposed to sunlight and do not have an expiration date, product ingredients, or methods of preparation and storage.

The inspection teams are divided into two different sections. The first works on economic establishments and carries out 34 daily tours, and the second section focuses on random stands and street vendors and carries out 25 daily tours.

No reason to close Al-Aqsa Mosque, says minister



Palestinian Muslim worshippers attend Ramadan Friday prayers near the Dome of the Rock mosque in Al-Aqsa mosque compound in the Old City of Jerusalem on April 8, 2022. (Photo: AFP)

AMMAN (JNews) — The Lower House's Palestine Committee discussed Monday the Israeli incursions and violations of Al-Aqsa Mosque, according to local media outlets.

Minister of Awqaf Mohammed Khalayleh, who attended the discussions, said that since 1967, the last 10 days of Ramadan are spent by the faithful in spirituality, reading the Quran, so there is no political reason for Al-Aqsa Mosque to be closed and deprive those who wish to remain steadfast in its defence of this right.

"His Majesty has led a sustained diplomatic effort to prevent any harassment that denies worshippers access to Al-Aqsa Mosque, however, on Jewish holidays and occasions, incidents of harassment usually increase," Khalayleh said.

Jerusalem Department of Awqaf officials encouraged worshippers to remain steadfast at Al-Aqsa Mosque, to face extremists who will use any pretext to violate its sanctity.

Strategic crops encouraged to improve country's food security

By Dana Al-Zyadat

AMMAN — Minister of Agriculture Khaled Hneifat announced on Sunday that the ministry is adopting a four-tier plan to encourage the cultivation of wheat and barley.

Ministry spokesperson Lawrence Al-Majali told *Jordan News* that the plan will focus on allocating interest-free loan packages, through the Agricultural Credit Corporation, for the production requirements of field crops.

He added that the seeds needed to cultivate wheat and barley will be given by taking into consideration the geographical areas targeted and the climatic conditions.

In addition, the ministry will continue to buy locally farmed wheat and barley at subsidized prices, which are higher than the international price of these crops. Majali said that this should lead to increasing the production of these strategic crops, despite Jordan's water challenges which are compounded by climate change and low rainfall rates.

Majali said that Jordan's annual need is estimated at 1 million tonnes of wheat, and that the Kingdom's local production does not exceed 30,000 tonnes.

Taking part on Sunday in a Scientific Research Society discussion of strategies to expand wheat and barley cultivation as strategic crops, which constitute the cornerstone of the food security pyramid, Hneifat talked about the role of his ministry in supporting farmers, overcoming challenges, and setting plans to achieve the largest possible return and to increase agricultural areas.

Head of the Farmers Union Mahmoud Al-Oran told *Jordan News* that the package of measures suggested by the ministry is satisfactory and will contribute to encouraging farmers to plant wheat and barley, but pointed to the need to coordinate with the Meteorological Department during each agricultural season to gauge the expected rainfall rates and the areas that are most likely to give the largest yields.



(Photo: Freepik)

Oran reiterated that the endemic water shortages and climate change are the farmers' biggest challenges, and called for finding solutions to water shortages, including by drilling new artesian wells to irrigate the crops.

Farmer Mishaal Al-Arameen told *Jordan News* that he grew wheat in large quantities for many years, but the many challenges Jordanian farmers face pushed many of them away from such crops.

According to Arameen, farms in the southern regions, such as Wadi

Al-Hasa, were full of grain crops, but today most of them are barren.

Head of the Agricultural Materials Traders and Procedures Association Mohammad Baibars told *Jordan News* that the Kingdom would not reach self-sufficiency in the two strategic grains for several reasons, most notably fluctuations in annual rainfall rates, urban expansion at the expense of agricultural lands, and high costs that most farmers cannot afford.

He highlighted the role of the Ministry of Agriculture in expanding

farming in western regions, such as Al Hammad Basin and Al Mudawra, which, in his opinion, will lead to a guaranteed production of wheat.

If this works out according to plan, and if buying locally farmed wheat at double world price continues, there will be a trend among farmers to grow wheat, he said.

"Once this happens, the private sector could respond by investing in bigger wheat and barley cultivation projects," Baibars said, stressing that it is necessary to find a good supply of seeds and provide farmers with harvesting machines, "which are costly".

Baibars said that currently, local production of wheat covers only 2 percent of the Kingdom's needs, and if the ministry's plan is activated successfully, it could rise to meet 10 percent of Jordan's needs.

"In order to achieve this goal, we need to cultivate 350,000 to 400,000 dunums," he stressed.

Reducing customs duties has not helped revive the economy

By Razan Abdelhadi

AMMAN — The government's decision to reduce customs duties for several sectors has yet to prove any positive and tangible impact on the economy a few months after implementation, sectors representatives say.

It neither lowered prices for consumers nor revived commercial activity, despite the advent of the holy month of Ramadan, which traders used to rely on in the past years to move the wheel of the economy.

Representatives of several sectors stress that the impact of the decision is still not clear due to the rise in prices, and the higher cost of production inputs globally, following the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, and urge the government to take immediate and drastic solutions to help revive the economy.

The head of the Restaurant and Sweets shop Owners, Omar Awwad, told *Jordan News* that reducing customs duties had no effect on consumers, "due to the global rise in prices".

"The restaurant sector did not feel the effect of reduced customs duties either," he said, adding that "prices even increased". For example, he said, the price of a ton of chickpeas rose from JD400 to JD500, and a gallon of oil that was sold for JD22 now sells for JD32 "despite the fact that the Ministry of Industry and Trade has set the price cap at JD29".

Awwad added that "there is a tacit agreement among merchants to sell at the highest price, and the problem here is that the role of the Ministry of Industry and Trade authorities responsible for monitoring merchants' activity is totally hidden".

That, he stressed, makes it incumbent on the ministry to play a strong role in controlling the mo-

nopoly of some traders.

The head of the Freight Forwarders and Logistics Association, Nabil Al-Khatib, told *Jordan News* that traders and consumers might feel the effect of reduced customs duties several months later, reiterating that "the impact is still not reflected due to the global rise in prices".

He added that "there was an increase in the prices of goods more recently imported due to the unprecedented rise in the prices of production inputs and freight charges around the world".

Head of the Syndicate of Merchants of Cosmetics and Accessories Mahmoud Al-Jalis told *Jordan News* that "there is no real and clear impact of the government decision to reduce customs duties so far" for the same reasons: the rise in freight charges, and in the prices of commodities and raw materials.

Jalis said that even though citizens have started to prepare for Eid Al-Fitr, "the commercial movement is still very weak", and urged the government "to take more serious decisions to protect merchants and increase liquidity for citizens".

Amman Chamber of Commerce clothing sector representative Asaad Qawasmi confirmed that demand for clothes is still very weak, because citizens' priorities seem to have changed; "they are more interested in buying food and drinks at these times than buying clothes".

Qawasmi, however, told *Jordan News* that "we expect the turnout to increase in the second half of Ramadan and the approaching Eid Al-Fitr".

"I can say that we are currently going through a stage of recovery after the difficult conditions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, including lack of liquidity and weak purchasing power," he added.

According to Qawasmi, "prices are stable despite the rise in freight charges and raw materials prices", and the reason is "the government's decision to reduce customs tariffs, the presence of many offers that encourage citizens to buy, and the high competition among traders".



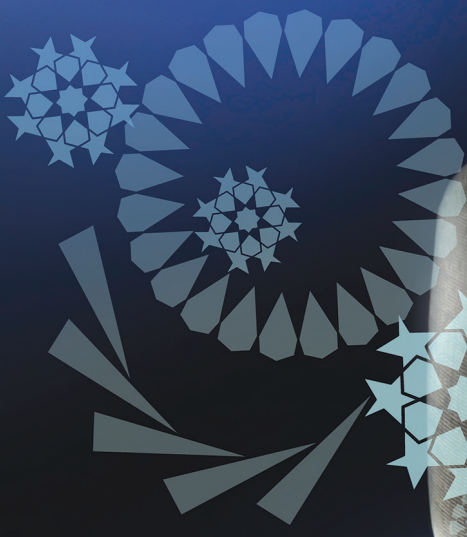
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Italy PM signs Algeria gas deals to reduce Russia reliance

ALGIERS (AFP) — Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi announced a deal on Monday to boost gas deliveries from energy heavyweight Algeria, as he steps up efforts to reduce Rome's heavy reliance on Russian imports.

Addressing journalists after meeting President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Draghi told journalists the two governments had signed a preliminary deal on energy cooperation.

"There is also a deal between ENI and Sonatrach to boost gas exports to Italy," he said, referring to the Italian energy giant and Algeria's state hydrocarbons firm.

The firms agreed to boost gas exports through the Transmed undersea pipeline starting this autumn, gradually "increasing volumes of gas ... up to 9 billion cubic meters per year in 2023-24", ENI said in a statement.

The Ukraine war has sparked a

Western push for sanctions against Moscow, including moves to drastically cut purchases of Russian gas.

Italy buys the vast majority of its natural gas from overseas, and is one of the most Russia-reliant gas importers in Europe, with over 40 percent of its imports coming from the country.

But Italy also imports significant amounts from Algeria, including some 6.4 billion cubic meters of Algerian gas during the first quarter of 2021, a 109 percent uptick from the previous year.

The war in Ukraine and the subsequent campaign of Western sanctions have prompted Rome to step up the search for alternative sources, with gas giant Algeria an obvious option.

"Immediately after the invasion of Ukraine I announced that Italy would organize quickly to reduce its dependence on Russian gas,"

Draghi said.

"The deals today are a significant response to reach this strategic goal, and others will follow."

Spare capacity

Draghi arrived in Algeria weeks after Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio made the same trip, during which he confirmed that Italy was "committed to increasing energy supplies, notably in gas", including from Algeria, which he said had "always been a reliable supplier".

Algeria's Sonatrach said at the time that it was prepared to increase deliveries, notably via the Transmed pipeline linking Algeria to Italy.

Its CEO Toufik Hakkar said Europe is the "natural market of choice" for Algerian gas, which accounts for about 11 percent of Europe's gas imports.

But he said any boost to exports would depend on first satisfying

Algeria's ever-growing domestic needs.

Sonatrach and Italy's ENI jointly operate the Transmed pipeline, which has a capacity of some 32 billion cubic meters per year.

Aydin Calik, an energy analyst at the Middle East Economic Survey, said Monday's deal implied additional exports that would push the limits of the Transmed pipeline.

"That's assuming Algeria actually has the capacity to supply more, given its other commitments," he told AFP. "There are lots of questions."

Former Algerian energy minister Abdelmajid Attar previously told AFP that "Algeria exports a maximum of 22 billion cubic meters (per year) via the Transmed pipeline", leaving some 10 billion in spare capacity.

Attar, also a former CEO of Sonatrach, said that Algeria's liquefaction facilities, which allow gas to be exported by ship, are "only being used at 50-60 percent of capacity".

He noted that in the short term, Algeria could boost its gas exports to the EU by at most three billion cubic meters per year, meaning "it can't make up for a fall in Russian gas supplies on its own".

However, "within four or five years, Algeria could send bigger quantities" to Italy, he added.

Algeria expects to invest some \$40 billion on gas and oil exploration, production, and refining between 2022 and 2026.

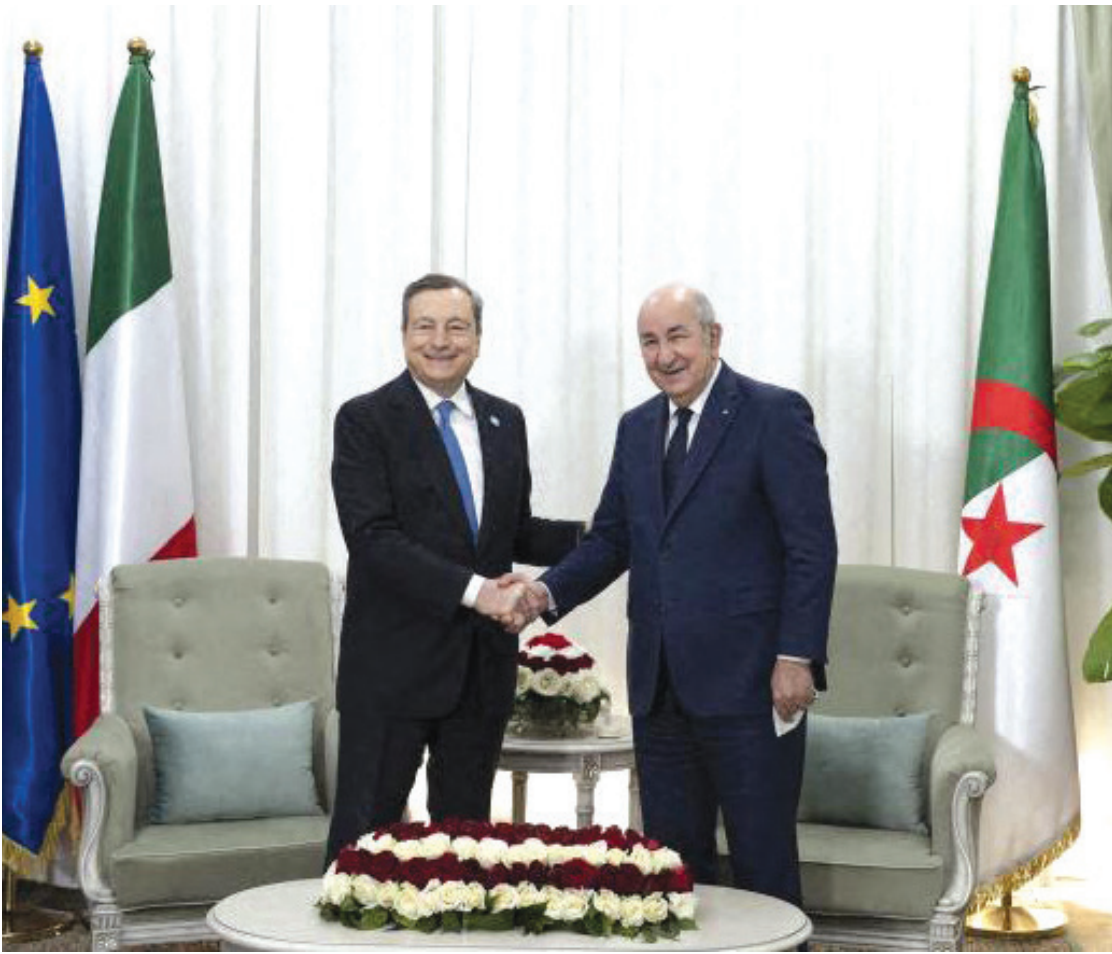
Draghi did not say how much exports were to be boosted under Monday's deal.

The two countries have a contract for gas deliveries up until 2027.

Draghi said last week that Italy would "follow the decisions of the European Union" on new sanctions against Russia, including a possible gas embargo.

His visit also follows a spike in tensions between Algeria and Spain, another major gas importer, after Madrid dropped a decades-long policy of neutrality over Western Sahara and backed an autonomy plan put forward by Algeria's arch-rival Morocco.

Sonatrach warned earlier this month it could increase the price of its gas sales to Spain, which make up more than 40 percent of the country's imports.



Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi (left) shakes hands with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune (right) during their meeting in the capital Algiers on April 11, 2022. (Photo: Palazzo Chigi Press Office/AFP)

Egypt's jailed dissident Abdel Fattah obtains British citizenship

CAIRO (AFP) — Egyptian activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, a key figure in the country's 2011 revolution, has obtained British citizenship from inside prison, his family said Monday.

The family has appealed to British authorities to seek consular access to visit him in jail.

Abdel Fattah, along with his sisters Mona and Sanaa, gained UK citizenship through their mother, math professor Laila Soueif, who was born in London in 1965.

As a British citizen, Abdel Fattah also requests he be allowed to communicate with the family's law-

yers in the UK "so that they can take all possible legal measures regarding not only the violations he has been subjected to, but all the crimes against humanity he has witnessed during his imprisonment," according to a statement released by Abdel Fattah's sisters.

The news comes 10 days into a hunger strike which Abdel Fattah began on April 2, the first day of Ramadan, in protest at his prison conditions, according to his sister Mona Seif.

"For two and a half years, he has been kept in a cell without sunlight, with no books, no exercise. His vis-

itations have been cut to one family member, for 20 minutes a month, through glass, with not a moment of privacy or contact," the statement said.

Egypt has released several political prisoners who hold a second nationality in recent years.

Abdel Fattah was sentenced in



December to five years in prison after he was convicted along with two others of "broadcasting false news".

He had already been in pre-trial detention in Cairo's Tora prison since September 2019.

Abdel Fattah has spent much of the past decade behind bars, having also been arrested under former presidents Hosni Mubarak, who was toppled in the revolution, and Mohammed Morsi.

Rights groups say Egypt is holding a total of some 60,000 political prisoners, many facing brutal conditions and overcrowded cells.



A Palestinian child stands in front of burning tires in the refugee camp of Jenin in the occupied West Bank after an Israeli military raid on April 12, 2022. (Photo: AFP)

Palestinian death toll rises as Israel continues operation for fourth day

JENIN, Palestinian Territories (AFP) — Israeli forces in the Mediterranean port city of Ashkelon shot dead a Palestinian man in his 40s after he allegedly "pulled out a knife and attacked" an Israeli officer. In the northern West Bank city of Jenin, violence between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians continued as Israel carried out military operations for a fourth day.

According to Israeli forces, the man killed in Ashkelon was from Hebron — a powder keg city in the Palestinian West Bank where around 1,000 Jewish settlers live under heavy military protection among more than 200,000 Palestinians.

Al-Jazeera News' Nida Ibrahim reported that "The Palestinians are saying that the man did not pose any threat and that the Israeli police were acting in a very violent way."

Israeli police stated that the policeman "fired and neutralized the suspect, whose death was declared on-site", adding that the officer was hospitalized with light wounds from a kitchen knife.

Military operations are being carried out around Jenin after an assailant from the area last week shot and killed three people in a Tel Aviv bar in the latest attacks on Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett — who warned in response that there would "not be limits for this war" — vowed during a visit to the Tel Aviv shooting scene overnight: "We will not let our enemy stop our lives. ... We will fight where they are located, in their bases, at their source..."

In Tuesday's battles, Israeli forces "fired live bullets, stun grenades and tear gas," the official Palestinian news agency Wafa said.

Palestinian youth also clashed elsewhere with Israeli forces, including in Ramallah, where they threw

rocks and were met with tear gas. Israeli forces have stepped up operations over the past three weeks in which four shooting, stabbing and car-ramming attacks by Palestinians have left 14 Israelis dead.

Over the same period, Israeli forces have killed 15 Palestinians, including assailants, according to an AFP tally.

Palestinian presidency spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh charged that Israel's actions "will lead to a dangerous and uncontrollable escalation" and cause a new "cycle of violence".

Militant group Islamic Jihad, meanwhile, hailed the Palestinian response to Israel's military incursions in Jenin and other cities.

"We salute our people who stand like an unyielding barricade in the face of the Zionist enemy's terrorism," it said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres followed "with deep concern the escalating violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel," said his spokesman Stephane Dujarric.

"He is appalled by the increasingly high number of casualties, including women and children," Dujarric added.

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz visited an area Tuesday where a barrier that runs along the West Bank border is to be extended by 40km in coming months under a plan approved Sunday. More Israeli military presence will also be reinforced, said the Israeli army.

Israel started building the more than 500km barrier, which is part concrete wall and part fence, 20 years ago. Palestinians say the barrier's construction effectively confiscated nearly 10 percent of West Bank territory, and the International Court of Justice has ruled it illegal.

Maritime traffic between Morocco and Spain resumes

RABAT (AFP) — Maritime traffic between Spain and Morocco is set to resume Tuesday following the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Rabat's transport ministry said.

Embroided in a dispute with Spain over the territory of Western Sahara, Morocco upheld the blockade between some of the largest ports on the Mediterranean for over two years.

The busy, but short, 14km route across the Strait of Gibraltar had originally been shut in March 2020 when Morocco severed transport links with Europe over the COVID-19 pandemic.

The maritime borders reopened last summer — but connections between Tangiers and Spain's Algeciras and Tarifa ports have remained cut.

"Shipping companies will gradually resume their passenger services between the Moroccan ports of Tangier Med and Tangeri-City and the Spanish ports of Algeciras and Tarifa," the transport ministry said in a statement.

While passenger and shipping traffic is scheduled to resume on Tuesday, motorists will have to wait until April 18.

In March, Spain and Morocco began repairing diplomatic ties after Madrid ended a decades-long stance of neutrality over the disputed territory of Western Sahara and agreed to publicly support Rabat's autonomy plan for the region.

After Spanish colonial forces withdrew in 1975, Morocco fought a bitter war with the Polisario independence movement in western Sahara before reaching a ceasefire in 1991, on the promise of a referendum on self-determination.

But in November 2020, the Polisario declared the ceasefire null and void after Morocco sent in troops to forcibly reopen a highway running through Western Sahara to neighboring Mauritania.

Spain's decision to recognize Morocco's claims to the territory infuriated regional rival Algeria, which has long backed the Polisario and also supplies large quantities of natural gas to Spain.

Afghans protest against Iranian 'cruelties' in Taliban-approved demo

KABUL (AFP) — Dozens of Afghans protested Tuesday against Iranian "cruelties" after videos appearing to show refugees being beaten circulated widely over the weekend.

Tehran announced the closure until further notice of its Afghan missions "in order to obtain necessary assurances guaranteeing total security", its foreign ministry said.

Iran has hosted millions of Afghan refugees for decades, but fresh waves have flooded the country since the Taliban returned to power in August, testing the patience of authorities and ordinary people.

On Tuesday around 200 Afghans gathered at a square in central Kabul, carrying posters reading "Iran should stop its cruelties" and "We want justice".

Public demonstrations have been banned by the Taliban, but they allowed it to proceed with armed guards watching.

"The Iranian security forces and even common people there have been treating us badly these days," said protester Manzoor Ahmad Farooqi, recently returned from Iran.

"When their police see us they pin us to the ground and beat us."

Tuesday's protest came after videos circulated at the weekend pur-



Afghan protestors shout slogans during a demonstration against the alleged published reports of harassment of Afghan refugees in Iran, outside of the Iranian consulate in Herat on April 11, 2022. (Photo: AFP)

ported to show Iranian border guards and civilians beating Afghans, although it was unclear when and where the images were filmed.

Iranian officials have dismissed the videos as "baseless and invalid".

Protests first erupted Monday in Herat, the western city that serves as a launchpad for Afghans wanting to cross to Iran — officially and illegally.

Protesters set fire to an Iranian flag outside Tehran's consulate in the city and smashed CCTV cameras.

A statement on Iran's foreign ministry website said the embassy in Kabul had also been targeted.

The statement, issued Tuesday, said the ministry summoned Afghanistan's charge d'affaires in Tehran "to vigorously protest the attacks on the Iranian embassy in Kabul and the consulate general in Herat".

Human trafficking is big business along their shared 900km border.

The two nations also have the Persian language in common — known as Farsi in Iran and Dari in Afghanistan — but a majority of Afghans are Sunni Muslims compared to their mostly Shiite neighbors.

Iran has long had testy relations with the Taliban, who raided Tehran's consulate in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 and murdered 10 diplomats and a journalist.

The Taliban said the raid was carried out by a renegade force acting against orders.

Russia closes in on Mariupol as part of eastern Ukraine offensive

KRAMATORSK, Ukraine (AFP) — Russian troops aimed to take control of the city of Mariupol on Tuesday, part of an anticipated massive onslaught across eastern Ukraine, as defending forces tried desperately to hold them back.

Russia is believed to be trying to connect occupied Crimea with Moscow-backed separatist territories Donetsk and Lugansk in Donbas, and has laid siege to the strategically located city, once home to more than 400,000 people.

"It is likely that in the future the enemy will try to take control of the city of Mariupol, capture Popasna, and launch an offensive in the direction of Kurakhove in order to reach the administrative borders of Donetsk region," the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine said on Facebook.

The Russian defense ministry said its army had thwarted an attempt to break the siege with "air-strikes and artillery fire" at a factory in a northern district of the city.

But the Ukrainian army insisted that "the defense of Mariupol continues".

In his nightly address, President Volodymyr Zelensky made another plea to his allies for more weapons to boost the defense of the city.

"We are not getting as much as we need to end this war sooner. To completely destroy the enemy on our land ... in particular, to unblock Mariupol," he said.

He made a similar appeal for military assistance to South Korea's National Assembly earlier in the day, telling lawmakers Russia had "completely destroyed Mariupol and burned it to ashes" killing "at least tens of thousands of people".

Late Monday, Britain said it was trying to verify reports that Russia had also used chemical weapons in the city.

Western officials have previously expressed concerns that as the conflict drags into its seventh week, Russia could resort to such extreme measures.

Ukrainian lawmaker Ivarna Klymush said Russia had used an "unknown substance" and that people



Two men look at their relatives about to leave by train at Slovyansk central station, in the Donbas region on April 12, 2022, amid Russian invasion of Ukraine. (Photo: AFP)

were suffering from respiratory failure.

But deputy defense minister Hanna Maliar said the purported chemical attack was more likely phosphorous munitions.

"Officials' conclusions will be made later," she told Ukrainian television.

Eduard Basurin, a senior official in the separatist area of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, has spoken of the possibility of such arms being used in Mariupol but insisted on Tuesday that "no chemical weapons have been used" in the city.

Elsewhere in the east, heavy bombardment continued as civilians were urged to flee ahead of an expected Russian troop surge in the region.

Russian forces are reinforcing

around the Donbas region, notably near the town of Izium, but have not yet launched a full offensive, Pentagon officials said Monday.

They reported a Russian convoy had been observed heading for Izium, an hour's drive north of Kramatorsk, saying it appeared to be a mix of personnel carriers, armored vehicles, and possible artillery.

President Vladimir Putin insisted that Russia's own security was at stake in Donbas, after talks at the Russian spaceport in Vostochny by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

"What we are doing is helping people — rescuing them on the one hand and on the other taking measures to assure Russia's security," he said, according to Russian news agencies.

Ukraine's defense ministry said it believed a major assault would happen soon.

"We don't know precisely when, but the preparation is almost over," spokesman Oleksandr Motuzanyuk told a briefing on Monday.

Such signs of a build-up in Donbas suggest hopes of an imminent diplomatic solution remain slim.

Meanwhile, the toll on towns previously occupied by Russian forces during their month-long offensive to take Kyiv was still coming to light. AFP saw the bodies of three men in civilian clothes exhumed from gardens in Andriivka, 33 kilometers west of the capital as relatives gathered to learn the fate of their kin.

UN Security Council (UNSC) officials on Monday called for an investigation into violence against wom-

Ukraine says over 870,000 who fled war have returned

KYIV (AFP) — Ukraine's border force said Tuesday that more than 870,000 people who fled abroad since the start of the war have returned to the country, including a growing number of women and children.

Spokesman Andriy Demchenko said that currently 25,000 to 30,000 Ukrainians are returning each day.

He said more women, children, and elderly were among those coming back than in the early days of the conflict when those arriving had been almost exclusively men returning to fight the Russian invasion.

"They say they see that the situation is safer, especially in the western regions, and they can no longer stay abroad," Demchenko told journalists.

"They are ready to return to the country and stay here."

The shift comes after Russia's battered forces retreated late last month from near the capital Kyiv in preparation for ramping up their offensive in the east of the country.

Ukraine's interior ministry said on April 3 that 537,000 people had returned to the country.

The UN says that overall more than 4.6 million Ukrainians have fled abroad since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the attack on February 24, in Europe's fastest-growing refugees crisis since World War II.

The vast majority of those who left crossed into neighboring EU states Poland, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and non-EU member Moldova.

Refugee agency UNHCR said Tuesday that 4,615,830 Ukrainians had fled since Russia invaded on February 24 — a figure up 68,095 from Monday.

"Even though the numbers of people crossing the borders has declined significantly, those who have been crossing we've noticed have been in a more vulnerable state, have had lesser means, and have also had less of a plan as to where they might go," UNHCR spokesman Matt Saltmarsh said in Geneva.

Women and children account for 90 percent of those who have left Ukraine, with men aged 18 to 60 eligible for military call-up and not allowed to leave.

en during the conflict.

"This war must stop. Now," Sima Bahous, director of the UN women's agency, told the Council.

"We are increasingly hearing of rape and sexual violence. These allegations must be independently investigated to ensure justice and accountability."

The UNSC will hold another meeting next week on the humani-

tarian situation there, in a bid to keep pressure on Russia despite its veto power over the body, diplomats said.

More than 4.5 million Ukrainian refugees have now fled their country, the UN refugee agency said — 90 percent of them women and children.

The war has displaced more than 10 million people overall.

Ukraine crisis pushes US inflation to new four-decade high

WASHINGTON DC (AFP) — Americans paid more for gasoline, food, and other essentials last month amid an ongoing wave of record inflation that Russia's invasion of Ukraine made worse, according to government data released Tuesday.

The Labor Department's consumer price index (CPI) climbed 8.5 percent over the 12 months to March, a rate — not seen since December 1981 — that added pressure to President Joe Biden's administration even as it looks for ways to punish Moscow for the attack on its neighbor.

Prices have surged across the world's largest economy as it tries to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, dragging Biden's approval ratings lower, though the March data contained signs that the spike was rounding off.

"The Russia-Ukraine war has added further fuel to the blazing rate of inflation via higher energy, food, and commodity prices that are turbocharged by a worsening in supply chain problems," Kathy Bostjancic of Oxford Economics said.

Compared to February, prices rose 1.2 percent, within analysts' forecasts, but if there was good news to

be found in the data, it was in "core" prices, which exclude the volatile food and energy sectors. These increased 0.3 percent last month, less than economists anticipated.

The data nonetheless underscored the potency of the price jumps and bolstered the case that the Federal Reserve will take aggressive action at its policy meeting next month, likely raising rates by half a percentage point as opposed to the quarter-point increase agreed to last month.

"With labor shortages pressuring firms to raise wages, we are in the midst of a wage-price inflation cycle that will require extreme action on the part of the Fed to rid the economy of the spreading inflation threat," economist Joel Naroff said.

While the US economy has bounced back strongly from the mass layoffs that marked the pandemic's start, inflation began bedeviling the recovery last year, as businesses struggled to find enough workers and supplies, the Fed kept interest rates low, and Congress approved stimulus measures that drove up demand among American consumers.

Biden's public support has dropped as prices have increased, leaving the White House scrambling to offer relief, including by releasing strategic oil supplies to lower prices at the pump and, before the data's release on Tuesday, waiving a prohibition on selling a lower-price gasoline blend during the summer months.

But the most potent actor in Washington against inflation is the Fed, and their rate increases are indeed expected to lower prices in the months to come, though economists warn the tightening could also cause a recession.

Until then, the Labor Department data showed Americans are facing real financial pain when they go to purchase things they cannot avoid.

Gasoline prices rose 18.3 percent last month, accounting for half the overall increase in CPI. Prices for shelter, the category including rents, rose 0.5 percent.

Food prices rose one percent overall, while prices for groceries were up 1.5 percent in the month, and 10 percent over the past year — the largest such increase since March 1981, according to the data.



Members of the New York Police Department and emergency vehicles crowd the streets after at least 13 injured in Brooklyn subway shooting. (Photo: AFP)

At least 13 injured in Brooklyn subway shooting

BROOKLYN, United States (AFP) — At least 13 people were injured during a rush-hour shooting at a subway station in the New York borough of Brooklyn Tuesday, where authorities said "several undetonated devices" were recovered amid chaotic scenes.

Ambulances lined the street outside the 36th Street subway station, where a New York police spokeswoman told AFP officers responded to a 911 call of a person shot at 8:27am (1227 GMT).

Unverified video footage posted on Instagram appeared to show passengers tending to bloodied victims lying on a smoke-filled station platform.

The images showed subway staff shepherding panicked passengers, some still clutching their morning coffee cups, off the platform and into the carriages of a stationary train. A sign saying 36th Street can be seen in the background.

An unidentified person can be heard saying that a fire had been set in the train car, and that he saw "at least eight people" shot.

According to NBC, citing NYPD and senior law enforcement officials, a man in a gas mask and orange construction vest may have tossed a smoke canister on the platform to distract the rush hour crowd.

The suspect was still at large, according to Manhattan borough president Mark Levine.

The city's fire department gave a toll of "13 injuries at this time," while ABC News quoted police sources as saying at least five people were shot in the incident.

The police department tweeted that there were "NO active explosive devices at this time."

"Please stay clear of the area" the NYPD tweeted, urging witnesses to contact a police tip line with any information.

The White House said President Joe Biden had been briefed on the incident and was in communication with New York officials.

New York governor Kathy Hochul tweeted that first responders were on the scene and promised regular updates as the investigation

unfolds.

Mass casualty shootings happen with relative frequency in the US, where firearms are involved in approximately 40,000 deaths a year, including suicides, according to the Gun Violence Archive website.

Shootings in New York City have risen this year, and the uptick in violent gun crime has been a central focus for Mayor Eric Adams since he took office in January. Through April 3, shooting incidents rose to 296 from 260 during the same period last year, according to police statistics.

The incident came just a day after US President Joe Biden announced new gun control measures, increasing restrictions on so-called "ghost guns", the difficult-to-trace weapons that can be assembled at home.

Lax gun laws and a constitutionally guaranteed right to bear arms have repeatedly stymied attempts to clamp down on the number of weapons in circulation, despite greater controls being favored by the majority of Americans.

Quarter billion face extreme poverty in 2022 — Oxfam

LONDON (AFP) — Fallout from the Ukraine conflict, growing inequality and COVID-19 could force more than a quarter of a billion people into extreme poverty this year, Oxfam forecast Tuesday.

The British-based charity issued the warning in a report published before next week's annual meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

"New Oxfam estimates show that 263 million more people could be pushed into extreme poverty in 2022, due to the combined impact of COVID-19, inequality and food and energy price inflation — accelerated by the war in Ukraine," Oxfam said.

"Poorer countries face looming debt crises and the purchasing power of wages is depressed, while

corporate profits soar and billionaire wealth reaches unprecedented levels."

The World Bank had previously estimated that 198 million people faced extreme poverty — defined as living on less than \$1.90 per day — due to the COVID pandemic.

Another 65 million people are at risk due to fallout from Russia's Ukraine invasion — including soaring energy and food prices.

The total number of people in extreme poverty worldwide could reach 860 million.

Oxfam called for an immediate global economic rescue plan to tackle the vast problem.

"G20 leaders, the IMF and World Bank, together with all leaders, must act," it declared.

"They must protect people from

the crisis' harsh impacts."

The organization urged debt cancellation and more aid for the world's poorest nations, while calling for higher taxation on the wealthy.

"It's clear that a herculean response is needed to tackle the catastrophe facing humanity," said Katy Chakraborty, the charity's head of policy.

"Multiple global crises are causing misery for millions of people and just moving aid around to each crisis is not enough.

"Low-income countries need debt cancellation to be able to invest in social safety nets and progressive taxation on the wealthiest is needed now more than ever to provide huge funds for protecting the most vulnerable."

Ramadan
and the gift of
looking within



RUBA SAQR

MUSLIMS belief that it is difficult to carry on as usual during Ramadan is largely due to the holy month's spiritual attributes. While it is a time for abstinence from food and drink, it is also a time to observe the symbolism of fasting from sin, moral depravity, and self-centeredness.

The Prophet Mohammad mentioned Ramadan's special qualities in several holy hadiths, where he described it as the month for celestial mercy, forgiveness, and Allah's acceptance of sincere repentance.

One hadith in particular speaks about the unseen and the intangible, two notions that test our ability to open our hearts to a power greater than ourselves, which some believe is a first step toward yielding to faith. Surrender to Allah is what the word "Islam", in essence, means. But to submit to God, one needs self-restraint and self-discipline to harness one's vanity and ego.

The Prophet once said: "When the month of Ramadan begins, the gates of Heaven are opened, the gates of Hell-fire are closed, and the devils are chained."

In Islam, the devils are a force of distraction, among other things. Whereas people who are self-absorbed, calculating, and self-serving are perceived as a diabolical breed, demons of all kinds and shapes (both actual and metaphorical) are humanity's worst enemy, born to lead humankind astray.

The devils' main job is to lure humanity toward the path of carnal pleasure and egocentricity - through the trappings of power and status, among other maneuvers in their playbook.

However, when the "devils are chained", the shimmer and glimmer of carnal life (also referred to as "dunya" in the Holy Quran) is reduced to a bare minimum, allowing those who fast the opportunity to look at life from a different perspective. In the absence of distraction, those who fast are able to confront hard truths that no one likes to deal with during easy times. As such, hard times, lack of luxury, and strict rules that prohibit carnal indulgence and decadence become the true test of faith.

During times of play and plenty, it is convenient to forget our limitations as humans. In the presence of unbridled extravagance, humans tend to lose themselves in habits that corrupt the soul, giving way to ailments of the ego narcissism, cruelty, self-righteousness, and unfairness, to name a few.

But then again, when we fast, we are reminded of our frailty as humans. Abstaining from food and drink (and the daily dose of cigarettes for those who smoke) can prove to be the trigger that sends us into fits of anger, oftentimes spiralling into tension headaches and impatience.

From dawn to dusk, we fight with ourselves to keep our cool while being denied easy access to water, food and the daily pleasures of life that we so often take for granted. To top it all, with our dry mouths and tired brains that have been denied their morning cup of coffee, we are also supposed to be kind and charitable toward each other as we strive to rise above the trivialities of life.

If we are habitual gossipers, Ramadan will be the time to "tie our tongues" into knots of silence to avoid tarnishing the holy ritual. And if we are cheaters who lie to people about the products we sell, or the services we offer, Ramadan is a time to observe honesty and integrity.

Achieving this level of self-awareness is no easy feat. Once a year, we are required to reset our inner compass to better align with God's highest forms of ethics and morality. Easier

said than done; having spent the previous months in a care-free mode, Ramadan will prove to be a difficult journey toward self-correction.

This of course applies to those who dare look within and be honest with themselves about their shortcomings. To look in the mirror and be transparent with oneself about one's blemishes is no easy task. It requires a healthy dose of humility, self-knowledge and courage to remove the veil of illusion and self-deception in order to see the truth.

Several verses from the Quran urge us to correct ourselves in this life (of "dunya"), rather than wait to face ourselves in the afterlife. That is because Judgment Day is when all truths will be revealed, as one's own tongue and skin shall bear witness to one's true history of deeds, unembellished, raw, and precise.

That is why Ramadan for Muslims is a precious occasion to hone self-governance. A time to grow a conscience and cultivate a sense of true responsibility toward oneself and others, with a heightened sense of inner clarity and transparency whenever is possible.

Many around the world accuse Islam of all sorts of things, encouraging ugly forms of Islamophobia to conceal the truth about this nuanced faith. But in Ramadan, we drown out the noise and concentrate on the rare gift of having the time to look within as we search for a better and more evolved version of ourselves and, hopefully, of the world around us.

Ruba Saqr has reported on the environment, worked in the public sector as a communications officer, and served as managing editor of a business magazine, spokesperson for a humanitarian INGO, and as head of a PR agency.

Israel's killing spree will not
stifle Palestinian resistance



OSAMA AL SHARIF

ISRAEL IS on edge following a series of Palestinian attacks inside the so-called Green Line, which killed at least 11 Israelis, all carried out by lone attackers. The fact that individual Palestinian youths were able to cross unnoticed into Israel from the occupied West Bank and spread terror and confusion among ordinary Israelis is a watershed in the decades-old conflict. Fortress Israel appeared increasingly vulnerable in the past few weeks, and not because the iron-clad arm of the occupation forces has become lax.

Naftali Bennett's coalition government, which had just lost its thin majority in the Knesset, is feeling the heat. To save face, the far right premier has given his security forces permission to use all necessary force to subdue the Palestinians, especially in Jenin, where at least two lone attackers had come from. Between Sunday and Monday, the Israeli occupation forces killed at least four Palestinians, including two women, one clearly in cold blood.

Furthermore, Israel is threatening to storm the Jenin refugee camp, home to about 14,000 souls and a symbol of defiance and resistance, in a repeat of what happened 20 years ago when its forces besieged the camp for days before launching a large military operation that ended in the killing of at least 52 Palestinians and the extensive destruction of the camp.

To believe that this is merely a reaction to what happened in the past few weeks is shallow and insulting. Millions of Palestinians have been living under colonial occupation for decades and successive Israeli governments have been unleashing waves of wholesale land expropriation, settlement expan-

sions, inviting more illegal settlers to take Palestinian lands, cutting off villages and towns, arresting thousands, including children and women, and carrying out summary execution of hundreds of young men and women who dared to protest against their occupiers.

In recent months, radical Jewish settlers have been allowed, under army protection, to attack peaceful villages, torch cars and houses, and uproot olive trees. While the West is quick to condemn Palestinian terror, it shamefully falls silent when Israel commits war crimes.

To this day Gazans remain under an illegal siege and are still waiting for UN investigators to arrive and serve justice to those who lost loved ones in recent wars.

The new lone attacker phenomenon is spurred by increasing desperation; it is a sign that tens of thousands of young Palestinians are losing hope. Israel's iron fist reaction has not worked before and will certainly fail this time. The killing spree Israeli soldiers are engaging in will not bring the peace and quiet the Israeli politicians wish for.

For decades since the collapse of the peace process, Israel had only one answer to Palestinian resistance: to double down using extreme force and new forms of collective punishment. Such policies never succeeded in controlling the Palestinians, and while it may have provided Israel with short spells of quiet, the reality is that the two sides are reaching a critical juncture, one that promises to lead to new cycles of violence.

There are at least four factors here that contribute to the building up of Palestinian anger and despair. One is the Palestinian Authority's total loss of credi-

But while Western governments continue to ignore Israel's occupation and its daily atrocities against the Palestinians, there is a glimmer of hope in the fact that world public opinion is becoming more aware of Israel's crimes, as an occupation force and as an apartheid state, thanks to social media platforms that offer a different narrative from that of the mainstream media.

Can Europe and Turkey crowd Russia
out of the Caucasus?

NIKOLA MIKOVIC



(Photo: Shutterstock)

OVER THE past 30 years, Russia has been one of the biggest foreign powers operating in the turbulent south Caucasus region. But the invasion of Ukraine means that two regional archenemies - Armenia and Azerbaijan - are now attempting to distance themselves from Moscow.

Other global and regional actors, namely the European Union and Turkey, are aiming to replace Russia as the major arbiter in the decades-old dispute between the two countries.

Turkey had previously backed Azerbaijan against Armenia, which Russia has treated as a nominal ally. Now that the Kremlin is preoccupied with its war in Ukraine, Turkey is seeking to change the dynamic and normalize ties with Armenia, despite a bitter history between Ankara and Yerevan. The EU, meanwhile, is attempting to increase its influence in the south Caucasus.

On April 6, Charles Michel, the European Council president, initiated a meeting between Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The two leaders met in Brussels and discussed the implementation of a ceasefire agreement signed in Moscow in 2020. The deal effectively ended a 44-day war that the two countries fought over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, although sporadic clashes continue to this day.

As a result of the meeting, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to establish a joint border commission that will delimit the border between the two countries and "ensure a stable security situation along, and in the vicinity of, the borderline". In other words, Pashinyan de facto accepted Baku's five-point plan to normalize relations with its energy-rich neighbor.

Azerbaijan's document calls on each side to recognize the other's territorial integrity, abstain from threats, demarcate the border and open transportation links.

It is, however, rather questionable if the two countries will reach a lasting peace deal any time soon. Armenian opposition parties strongly oppose any agreement that defines Artsakh (the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh) as part of Azerbaijan. More importantly, even though Russia's position in the global arena is not nearly as strong as it was before Moscow launched its war in Ukraine, the Kremlin still has significant leverage over Yerevan.

As a result of the 2020 Moscow-brokered ceasefire deal, some 2,000 Russian troops were deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh to protect ethnic Armenians who are still living in the region. It is not surprising, therefore, that Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan traveled to Moscow on April 8 to meet with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. In the coming days, Pashinyan is expected to meet with President Vladimir Putin, as the Kremlin will undoubtedly

attempt to preserve its role as a mediator in the south Caucasus.

Aliyev, on the other hand, was quick to make a phone call to his ally, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Following the second Karabakh war, Turkey has managed to increase its presence in the south Caucasus. At the same time, Moscow and Ankara have established a joint Russo-Turkish observation center to monitor the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

However, given a new geopolitical reality, Russia will have a hard time preserving the status quo in the region. Although Armenia is the Kremlin's ally in both the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Union, no Armenian representative took part in the UN vote to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council. Armenia is also actively working on normalizing relations with Turkey, even though more than two thirds of the Armenian population strongly opposes establishing diplomatic ties with Ankara.

Armenian political analyst Areg Kochinyan, however, warned that "Armenia's statehood will be under threat in the medium term if the country does not normalize relations with Ankara and Baku". Indeed, under the current circumstances, Armenia cannot count on Russia's serious support, which is why the land-locked nation of around three million people is expected to make painful unilateral concessions to Azerbaijan, the clear winner in the 44-day war.

Baku is now looking to exploit Russia's primary

bility as a representative of the Palestinian people. It has failed to deliver on all fronts and is now on the verge of financial collapse as well as political bankruptcy. All that remains of Oslo is the security coordination that Palestinians see as a liability tainting their presumptive leadership.

Second is the awareness that Israel's end game is to colonize as much Palestinian land as possible, denying Palestinians a path toward liberation and self-determination. Third is the growing frustration among millions of Palestinian youth, which drives them further toward radicalism and the belief that only force can alter Israel's current trajectory. And fourth is the conviction that the world will never hold Israel accountable for its crimes and its violation of international law. The Palestinians believe they are on their own and must force change, no matter the sacrifice.

But while Western governments continue to ignore Israel's occupation and its daily atrocities against the Palestinians, there is a glimmer of hope in the fact that world public opinion is becoming more aware of Israel's crimes, as an occupation force and as an apartheid state, thanks to social media platforms that offer a different narrative from that of the mainstream media.

The cold-blooded, chilling murder of partially blind and widowed mother of six Ghada Sabateen, on Sunday, at an Israeli checkpoint near Bethlehem was captured on video and was trending on social media with thousands of retweets.

Israeli leaders believe that force alone can stifle Palestinian resistance and intimidate the struggle for liberation. This is where they have been proven wrong time and time again. The killing fields of Jenin will not bury the just cause of the Palestinians. The world is changing and the unipolar reality is declining, and soon Israel will find itself facing a new global structure.

The West's application of double standards when it comes to reacting to Israel's occupation of the Palestinians is being exposed and is becoming more and more difficult to defend or justify.

The writer is a journalist and political commentator based in Amman.



The writer is a political analyst in Serbia. His work focuses mostly on the foreign policies of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, with special attention on energy and "pipeline politics." @Syndication Bureau, www.syndicationbureau.com



Father Gerry Masangya blesses the communion wine during Sunday mass at the Annunciation Church, Jabal Luweibdeh, Amman on April 10, 2022. (Photos: Matthew Petti/JNews)

Filipinos lay down roots in Jordan through the Catholic religion

By Matthew Petti

GUITARS ARE not a typical part of services in Arab Catholic churches, but every Sunday, guitar music rings through the halls of the Annunciation Church in Jabal Luweibdeh where El Shaddai Choir performs for a largely foreign Catholic audience.

The choir was founded by members of Amman's growing Filipino immigrant community. Filipino workers in Jordan can spend years or even decades away from home. They have started to lay down roots through local Catholic institutions, bringing a piece of the Philippines to the Kingdom and creating a small home away from home.

"When you arrive in this country, even if you are professionals, people (think) that you are just house maids," said Melissa Elemia, an immigrant from Mindanao who leads the choir.

"Some in our community may live in difficult circumstances, but we help each other, we are really one," she added.

The Latin Catholic Patriarch of Jerusalem recently recognized the growing presence of Filipino Catholics in Jordan, setting up a special chaplaincy for Filipino immigrants in 2017. Father Gerry Masangya, a Filipino priest, currently serves as chaplain.

The choir is a branch of El Shaddai Fellowship, a Catholic charismatic group that claims 8 million members in the Philippines (and several in Amman).

Charismatic Catholicism is a movement that emphasizes personal relationships with Jesus Christ, connection to the Holy Spirit, and emotional experiences. Founded in the US in the 1960s, the movement soon spread around the world, particularly in non-European countries.

Elemia said she joined El Shaddai Fellowship three decades ago; "we are trying to help people hear the



A Lenten Cross with the Arabic world for "prayer," "fasting," and "charity" at the Annunciation Church, Jabal Luweibdeh, Amman.

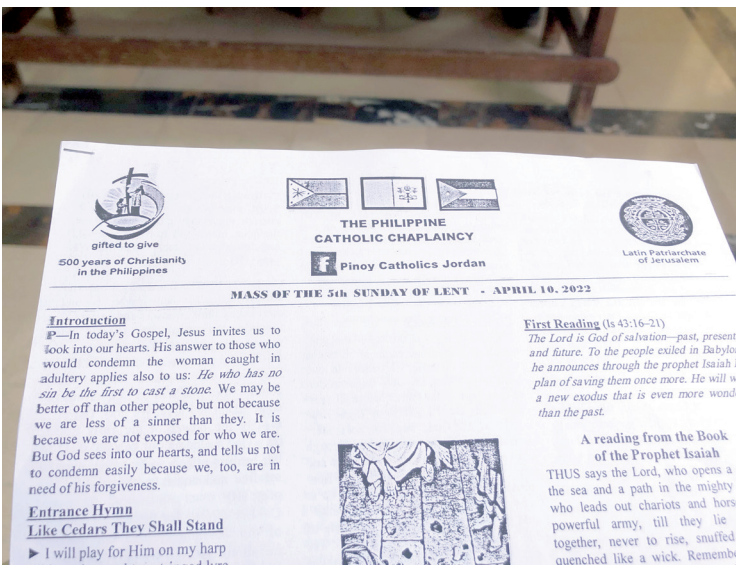
word of God".

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, Elemia and her teenage daughter Jamcee took responsibility for music at church services attended by Filipinos. (The previous musicians passed away or left Jordan during the pandemic, she explained.) And so El Shaddai Choir was born.

On the second Sunday of Lent, I attended mass at the Annunciation Church. The priest and the altar boy walked up to the pulpit to the sound of Jamcee's guitar and the singing

of the congregation. Sweet-sounding chords accompanied many parts of the service. The congregation lined up for communion to the song Amazing Grace, then cleared out of the church to another hymn.

Masangya gave a sermon about the "complicated situations" that migrant workers often find themselves in. He read a passage from the Book of John — "let him who is without sin cast the first stone" — and explained that people in the community should not spread judgmental rumors about each other's conduct.



The program for Philippine Catholic services at the Annunciation Church, Jabal Luweibdeh, Amman on April 10, 2022.

The service was in English rather than Tagalog, the Philippines national language. That is because many immigrants from other communities come to services at the church, according to Masangya.

The Filipino presence in Jordan has grown dramatically over the past few decades. In 1990, the Philippines restricted Jordanian employers from recruiting Filipino workers, due to reports of worker abuse. But after the restrictions were lifted in 2005, the Filipino diaspora in Jordan grew dramatically.

The Jordanian government went from issuing 5,000 work permits for Filipino citizens in 2004 to 15,000 in 2009, according to a 2011 study by the Migration Policy Institute.

The Philippines Embassy's records show that there now are 26,000 to 28,000 Filipinos in Jordan, but Masangya says that official statistics may not include the full picture, because many Filipinos work illegally. In a speech last year, Philippines Ambassador Akmad Sakam estimated that there are over 38,000 Filipinos in the Kingdom.

Overall, the Filipino diaspora is

one of the largest in the world. The Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs estimated that there were 79 million Filipinos abroad in 2015, nearly ten percent of the total Philippines population.

"Filipinos are spread around the world... not only in Asia, but not only in America, but in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa as well," Masangya said.

"You name it, there's a Philippine community!"

Masangya's predecessor, Father Gerald Metal, left Jordan to minister to Filipino workers on Diego Garcia, a tiny Indian Ocean island that serves as a British air base. Masangya came to Jordan in 2021, after a brief stay in South Korea.

Many Filipinos in Jordan work as domestic help under the kafala sponsorship system, which has been criticized for enabling exploitative and even abusive working conditions. Even under a good employer, doing manual labor thousands of miles away from home for years takes a toll on workers.

To help meet the needs of the community, Filipino diaspora lead-

ers meet every Friday at the Pontifical Mission for Palestine, the local branch of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association in Jabal Hussein.

The mission is not just a place for Filipinos to organize for their own interests, but also a way for the Filipino community to give back to society.

Elisa Estrada, a Filipina lay member of the Teresian Sisters, helps run the mission's library, which serves as a community center for immigrant and refugee communities from around the world. The Filipino community meetings usually conclude with a meal open to members of the general public. Unfortunately, the meals have been suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic, according to Estrada.

The library now offers plates of onions and salt as protection against the virus.

"Do not be surprised at the onions, it's the natural way," Estrada said.

"Thank God, in three years we haven't been infected."

Outside of religious services, the Filipino diaspora also organizes weekend trips, volleyball matches, and disco nights. When *Jordan News* first spoke to Elemia, she was preparing for an El Shaddai outing to Aqaba.

There is probably no better sign of how Filipinos made Jordan a second home than Elemia's daughter.

Jamcee speaks English and Arabic better than Tagalog. She has visited the Philippines three times in her life — and had fun every time — but feels that "Jordan, definitely Jordan" is more of a home.

"I just think about it as if I have two families," Jamcee said.



Father Gerry Masangya with Filipina choir leader Melissa Elemia and church guitarist Jamcee Elemia at the Annunciation Church, Jabal Luweibdeh, Amman.



Father Gerry Masangya walks towards the pulpit at the beginning of Sunday mass at the Annunciation Church, Jabal Luweibdeh, Amman on April 10, 2022.

FITNESS

Working out during Ramadan

By Rifaat Al-Nasser

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims abstain from food and water throughout the day. Although difficult, it is possible to still maintain your fast and continue to exercise. In fact, there are many benefits associated with fasting and exercise in combination. Nevertheless, there are potential risks, so it is important to understand what to do to be safe.

What happens to the body without food?

Our body needs energy on a constant basis in order to function properly. Normally, three square meals provide the sustenance we need. From the meals we obtain sugar in the form of glucose; this is the body's main source of fuel.

After a meal, the body releases a hormone known as insulin. Insulin is responsible for regulating the amount of sugar circulating in the blood stream. Excess glucose is converted by insulin into glycogen which is subsequently stored in the liver and skeletal muscles. Glycogen is a source of fuel that is more or less readily available, but once at capacity, insulin converts glycogen further into fatty acids, which are stored as body fat, called adipose tissue. Adipose tissue is difficult to burn, but contains a high amount of energy.

During fasting, the amount of free circulating glucose begins to lower and as a result, a hormone known as glucagon is released; it converts glycogen back into glucose. Depending on the level of nourishment, glycogen stores can provide the body with energy for 24 hours. Past this point, the body has to rely on adipose tissue to provide energy.

Fat cells are broken down into glucose and ketone bodies, which are an amazing source of energy for the heart, brain, and muscles, and are more efficient at providing energy than glucose. During this time, there will be a huge reduction in body weight as the body continues to utilize the stored body fat. Once the reserve of body fat is gone, the



(Photo: unsplash)

body will turn to amino acids as a source of fuel. Amino acids are the building block of proteins, which make up nearly all parts of the body.

Benefits of fasting and exercise

One of the biggest benefits of exercising and fasting is the amount of weight loss. Weight loss generally depends on creating a calorie deficit. This can be achieved by limiting calorie intake (restricting eating) or increasing calorie expenditure (exercising). By combining fasting with exercising, one creates even more of a deficit.

Furthermore, due to fasting, changes in how the body metabolizes fuel sources could potentially allow for significant weight loss over a short period of time. Additionally, fasting releases several hormones that aid in weight loss and metabo-

lism, such as noradrenaline and human growth hormone (HGH).

In type 2 diabetics, fasting can help maintain glucose levels and even improve insulin sensitivity. Fasting is also good for those who suffer from chronic pain brought on by inflammation, especially in conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis. Fasting can reduce the levels of inflammatory markers in as quickly as one month.

Fasting also has benefits for the heart. Decreased levels of inflammatory markers may reduce the risk of developing heart diseases. Additionally, burning fat can help reduce the amount of triglycerides, total cholesterol, and LDL (bad) cholesterol.

Research into fasting is still going on, but there is promise that it prevents and manages certain conditions.

Although limited to animal testing, neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's may be prevented or slowed with the reduction in inflammation, and potentially due to the formation and utilization of ketone bodies. However, more research is still needed.

Animal testing has found that fasting can help block tumor formation and can also increase the effectiveness of chemotherapy. Fasting may also delay aging and help with longevity, but long-term research in humans is still needed.

Exercising has many benefits that overlap with those of fasting. This includes weight loss, diabetes management, and reduction in inflammation.

It has greater benefit for the heart and can dramatically lower and control blood pressure while also preventing many heart conditions.

Concerns about fasting and exercise

Although exercise and fasting have benefits, the two in combination can come at a risk if one is not cautious. One of the main concerns is dehydration. During Ramadan, abstaining from drinking water puts you at risk of dehydration, especially in hot weather. Fasting and exercising may contribute to significant water loss, which may cause cramps or heatstroke and in severe cases, seizures due to electrolyte imbalance or hypovolemic shock (low blood volume).

Another concern with exercising while fasting is hypoglycemia, which occurs when there is not enough free circulating glucose in the blood stream. Despite the body having reserves of glucose in the form of glycogen, there may not be

enough, or the body may not be able to keep up with the increased demand. Hypoglycemia may present as irregular or fast heart rate, shaking, anxiety, sweating, tingling or numbness in the lips or fingers, and in severe cases visual disturbances, seizures, or loss of consciousness.

Lastly, muscle loss might be a concern for those who are trying to gain muscle. During the transition from glycogen to adipose utilization, there is a brief period where bulky muscle is used as a fuel source.

How to exercise safely

If done correctly and safely, there should be no concern about exercising during Ramadan. One of the most important things to consider is timing. Exercising in the morning should generally be avoided, since it will leave you exhausted throughout the day and potentially dehydrated.

For those who prefer to workout on an empty stomach, working out shortly before the time you break your fast is an option, but that may depend on local gym hours.

Ideally, working out during the time when eating and drinking is allowed is the safest option, but that will mean adjusting your schedule to exercise at night.

Replenishing vital nutrients is important when exercising. Primarily, this includes carbohydrates to replenish the stores of glycogen, protein (especially for those who are looking to gain muscle), water, and electrolytes. Good sources of carbohydrates are breads and pasta, while good sources of protein are nuts, shakes, or lean meat, like chicken. For electrolytes, sports drinks contain high amounts of sugar which can help manage glucose levels while fasting, but may interfere with weight loss goals. For those looking for a good alternative to sports drinks, coconut water is a suggestion.

Finally, it is important to listen to your body. If you decide to work out while fasting and you begin to experience any symptoms of hypoglycemia or dehydration, it is important to assess whether to lower your intensity or stop the exercise altogether.

GS4

European Standards

QA

القدرة العربية
Al-Qudra Alarabia

Mecca street - Building No. 214

06 5504488

STYLE

Brazil’s first indigenous fashion show ‘a form of resistance’

MANAUS, Brazil (AFP) — Proudly donning majestic feathered head-dresses, models sing an ode to the rain while a makeup artist draws geometric patterns on their faces, arms, and thighs in preparation for Brazil’s first-ever indigenous fashion show.

“It is a feeling of happiness and pride,” 19-year-old model Moan Munduruku told AFP ahead of his turn on the catwalk in Manaus in the Brazilian Amazon.

“We are very eager to show our talent, in sewing, in crafts. To show the world that indigenous people can also succeed” in fashion, he said.

Moan is one of 37 models — women and men — representing 15 indigenous groups of Brazil to take part in the month-long Inter-cultural Exhibition of Indigenous Fashion in the Brazilian Amazon’s largest city.

For the entire month of April, the catwalk is to host the creations of 29 indigenous designers.

“It’s a form of resistance, a way to overcome stereotypes,” event organizer Reby Ferreira, 27, told AFP.

“Here in Manaus, unfortunately, many people are ashamed or even afraid to recognize that they have indigenous blood. Our goal is for everyone to feel included and to show our culture to everyone through these clothes.”

The designers use natural elements in their creations, including the spear-like teeth of the peccary — an Amazonian boar — the red guarana fruit, acai seeds, and coconut shells.

The same geometric patterns sported by the models are repeated in the fabrics that envelop them.

Our goal is for everyone to feel included and to show our culture to everyone through these clothes.



Indigenous models Ira Maragua (left), of the Tikuna tribe, and Kim Puremanã, of the Sateré-Mawé tribe pose during a fashion event in Manaus, Amazon on April 9, 2022.



Indigenous woman Cleiane Costa, from the Sateré-Mawé tribe, poses for a photo during a fashion event in Manaus, Amazon.



Indigenous model Iaro Arupy, of the Sateré-Mawé tribe, poses during a fashion event in Manaus, Amazon on April 9, 2022.

“My outfit evokes the (coming-of-age) ritual of the Ticuna girl,” said Kimpuramana, a 17-year-old model sporting a white dress adorned with black diagonal stripes.

On the runway, a presenter announces the ethnicity of each model and explains the symbolism behind the clothes and accessories they wear.

Saturday’s show was hosted at the Rio Negro Palace, an early 20th century building that now serves as a cultural center.

“I feel privileged to have been able to attend such an event in this place. We are generally excluded from such sites. Today I can see my people telling their story through fashion,” said participant Bianca Mura, 24.

As the models walked down the catwalk to appreciative applause, thousands of indigenous Brazilians gathered in the capital Brasilia some 3,500km away, for an annual mass camping event called Terra Livre (Free Land).

The gathering is both a rally for indigenous rights and a protest against the government of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who is in favor of opening indigenous reserves — already hard hit by deforestation — to mining and farming companies.



Indigenous woman Luana Melgueiro da Silva, of the Baré tribe, poses for a photo during a fashion event in Manaus, Amazonas state, Brazil, on April 9, 2022. (Photos: AFP)



An indigenous model presents a creation during a fashion event in Manaus, Amazonas state, Brazil, on April 9, 2022.

The evolution of search: Huawei’s Petal Platform

By Andrey Demiyarov

Huawei presented Petal Search, a revolutionary search platform that provides an all-in-one experience for internet users worldwide, during the Mobile World Congress (MWC) 2022 in Barcelona at the end of February.

Petal Search is a user-friendly platform that employs cutting-edge technology and multimodal capabilities to provide a smooth search experience. The search tool now supports more than 20 vertical domains, including news, applications, commerce, travel, local services, pan-entertainment, and others. It is also among the top five mobile search engines in more than 25 countries as of the writing of this article.

While there are multiple reasons behind Petal’s success, below, we outline the three key differentiators that have enabled it to stand out from the crowd and grow as rapidly as it has.

AR technologies to support multi-modal search

In recent years, it has become evident that augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) will characterize the 2020s and 2030s.

The rise of AR has been most noticeable in two important areas: gaming and retail.

According to a Deloitte study for 2021, more than 100 million of the 1.5 billion worldwide AR users utilize it for shopping. This figure is expected to rise as e-commerce companies integrate AR into their online buying experience.

ences.

Some of the most recognizable examples of AR in a laymen’s world would include AR lenses on platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram, as well as web apps that enable camera functionality to showcase

the product before making a purchase, more commonly known as the “Try before you buy” model.

The pandemic and its consequences on consumption directly contributed to the growing interest in AR shopping. As individuals worldwide found themselves imprisoned indoors, they increasingly turned to AR shopping to get them out of their funk.

Petal Search was created to capitalize on the rising interest in such AR technologies. The search engine will enable consumers to get information about their favorite items in ways other than text inputs, opening the door for a new type of e-commerce engagement. Users will be able to use AR glasses to scan their favorite goods and obtain information in real-time.

Huawei collaborated with an industry partner to demonstrate the potential of AR search at the MWC.

In practice it would look like this: you really want a scarf, so you scan it with AR glasses and quickly obtain information on where you may find it with Petal Search. The platform will leverage Visual Search and Real-Time Translations to deliver high-

many sectors – including Trivago and AliExpress – to ensure you have access to high-quality, diverse, and dependable results.

Petal Search is currently available in 170 countries and 70 languages, and the database is expected to continue its growth.

A unified search environment across devices

Huawei recognizes that today’s consumers have several devices they use to launch a search – smartphones, watches, tablets, computers, and more – which is why they launched a 1+8+N strategy powered by Petal Search. This aims to provide a unified search experience across platforms and devices.

Petal Search will immediately simplify your search request across all of your devices, allowing you to locate everything you need on the device of your choosing.

The platform will also automatically classify and arrange the search results, making locating files, documents, and other assets a breeze.

Tuned with breakthrough AI capabilities, Petal will continue to become more efficient and accurate based on user habits, making searches simpler and more convenient over time.

Restricted to Huawei phones

Currently, and for the foreseeable future, this feature will only be available for Huawei users.

While this relatively new, integrated search engine may only dream of gaining mass popularity across the world as Google once did, provided that Petal proves itself as a more useful, holistic search engine, users of more traditional phones such as Apple or Samsung may indeed find themselves intrigued enough to purchase a Huawei phone as their next upgrade.

Petal is now available via Huawei’s app store for trial.



(Photo: PR NewsWire)

Petal Search is a user-friendly platform that employs cutting-edge technology and multimodal capabilities to provide a smooth search experience.

Ultimate all-in-one solution for all your search needs

Petal Search aspires to be a one-stop-shop for all your search needs, whether you are looking for media content, news, shopping, or anything else. The platform aggregates information from 20 verticals, including entertainment, local services, travel, commerce, applications, news, and more, eliminating the need for several platforms for distinct search experiences. It consolidates all of your search engine and internet activities into a single user-friendly interface.

Furthermore, Petal Search collaborates with over 3,000 partners from

ly relevant search results and information. Furthermore, the AR glasses will provide users with comprehensive knowledge in the language of their choosing.

GAMES & HOROSCOPES

13/04/2022
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HOROSCOPES

BY MAGI HELENA



ARIES

You can stand up for yourself without upsetting anyone’s agenda. Nevertheless, a loved one could sulk or try to hide disappointment. You may struggle to find the best words and actions to avoid causing problems.

CANCER

Your empathy can be your superpower. Win gold stars by being gentle when touching on other people’s sensitive spots. Rather than mixing business with pleasure, get straight to the point at the workplace.

LIBRA

You may need to walk a razor’s edge tightrope in your neighborhood or workplace. People may hide their opinions or camouflage their feelings. It may be difficult to achieve harmony with someone who seems easily triggered.

CAPRICORN

What you see is what you should get. You are realistic about your income and resources and are willing to work closely with others to obtain your business and career objectives. Don’t debate opinions.

TAURUS

Take care of little misunderstandings before they evolve into big ones. You may feel gregarious, but someone may believe you are not telling the whole story. Hang onto good ideas that should be reconsidered later.

LEO

View every meeting and get-together as an opportunity to display your intelligence and ability. You may need to say “no” if someone tries to demand too much of your time and energy, which could delay completion of a key task.

SCORPIO

Asking for help does not necessarily demonstrate weakness. Hold off on making changes or important decisions that involve your bank account. You could spend money on something that does not hold up over time.

AQUARIUS

There is always room to grow and learn. Participating in an informal think tank might put you on the road to prosperity. Take notes and wait for better timing to make a major purchase or a new investment.

GEMINI

Present a polished veneer and maintain a businesslike demeanor if you hope to impress friends in high places. Trust is built on experience, so give people a taste of your dependability and you can earn their confidence.

VIRGO

A loved one’s lack of enthusiasm might not be caused by anything that you have said or done. Try for balance if you feel preoccupied by serious subjects when someone craves sympathy or dramatizes their feelings.

SAGITTARIUS

Shield yourself from negativity. Watch for an inadvertent slip of the tongue that could somehow turn you into the villain. Process your feelings by yourself — others may not be sympathetic.

PISCES

Beware of overthinking or of catastrophizing – things may not be so dire. You may not be at your best in social settings if you don’t feel accepted for being yourself, or feel uncomfortable sharing your personal beliefs.

GOREN BRIDGE

BY BOB JONES



USING WHAT YOU KNOW

Neither vulnerable, South deals

NORTH		EAST	
♠	9 6 5 2	♠	K
♥	K Q 2	♥	10 8 6 4 3
♦	K 8 5	♦	Q 6 4
♣	A 9 4	♣	J 10 7 2
WEST		SOUTH	
♠	J 10 8 7	♠	A Q 4 3
♥	J 9 7	♥	A 5
♦	9 7 3 2	♦	A J 10
♣	5 3	♣	K Q 8 6

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
2NT	Pass	6NT	All pass

Opening lead: Seven of ♠

North was a recent graduate of the “Smile and Blast” school of bidding. South only had 10 top tricks, even after the favorable diamond lead, but there were chances for more. He would need at least two spade tricks, and perhaps three un-

less the clubs split 3-3.

South won the opening diamond lead in hand with the jack when East played low. The technically correct play in the spade suit is to cash the ace first, then cross to dummy and lead a spade toward the queen. South led the ace of spades, and the surprise fall of the king meant that a 3-3 club split was all he needed. He cashed three top clubs and was disappointed to see West discard a heart on the third club.

The good news was that South knew the exact position of the spade suit, and that West could not afford to discard one or South could just duck a spade. South cashed his three top hearts, forcing a diamond discard from West. Two diamonds ending in his hand reduced dummy, South, and West to three spades each. A low spade toward dummy’s nine did the trick. West won with his 10 but had to lead a spade away from his jack to give declarer his twelfth trick. Very nicely played!

CROSSWORD

BY JOYCE NICHOLS LEWIS AND RICH NORRIS

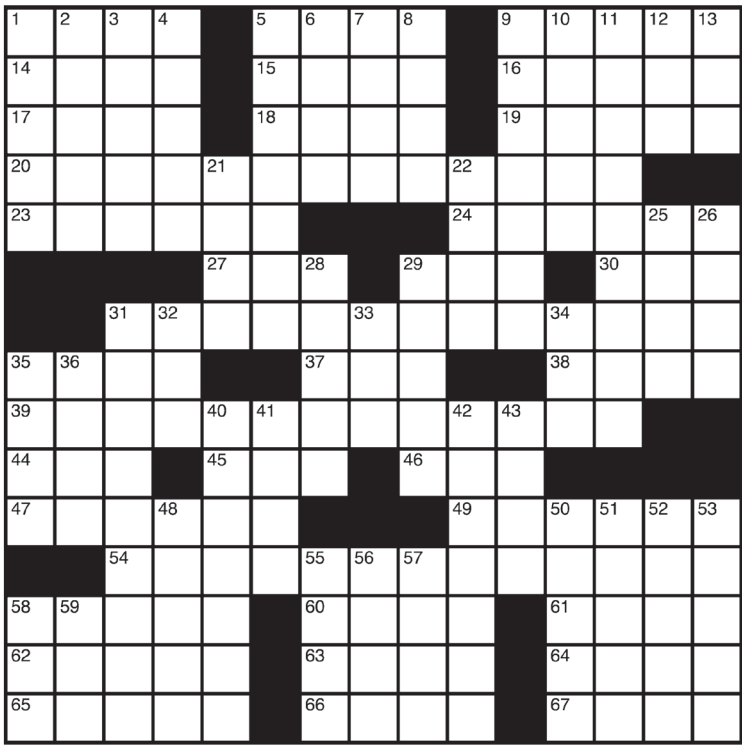
Across

- Pierre’s st.
- Retro ski area sight
- Sounding amazed
- Dance at Jewish weddings
- Slippery
- Not exactly a company person
- Like a GI doing dishes
- It starts the pot
- Former Portuguese territory in China
- Train vigorously
- Obscure
- Worldwide cultural org.
- Part of a play
- Like wee bairns
- Street-paving goop
- Show eager anticipation
- Citrus drinks
- Brazil ___
- Cookies-and-cream ingredient
- Search everywhere
- Timeworn
- Paddle relative
- Honor society starter
- Subject of the Book of Proverbs
- Neither early nor late
- Work really hard for victory ... and a hint to the start of 20-, 31- and 39-Across
- Classic mother-and-son statue
- Pub projectile
- Yellowish green
- Primp
- Geometry product

- Techie, say
- Cline of country
- Sail support
- “Get lost!”

Down

- Exhibited, as a home for sale
- Hawaiian singing legend
- Alan of “Argo”
- Honor society ender
- Town where the New Jersey (now Brooklyn) Nets played home games for their first year
- Twisted
- The “A” in SATB
- Bar shelf lineup
- Annual fact book
- Act bonkers
- Family tree members
- North ___
- Play-for-pay
- Apple desktop
- Sings without lyrics
- Common superhero garb
- Estimate qualifier
- Printer supply
- Prep
- Bare bones musical notation
- Loyal end?
- Heart
- Garden tool
- Take ___: acknowledge applause
- Business with a slicer
- More than needed
- Soccer great Mia
- Call to from a distance



- Clue
- Sources of high school jitters
- Anklebone
- “If only”
- Old copy machine
- Four before mayo
- Dutch cheese
- ___ avis
- Mining targets
- Very softly, in music
- Sr.’s nest egg

Yesterday’s Solution

O	P	R	A	H	V	E	G	A	N	S	O	B
A	D	A	G	E	E	L	A	T	E	T	H	E
F	A	S	H	I	O	N	S	H	O	W	A	N
A	G	R	E	E	E	F	R	O	N	A		
U	S	A	H	E	E	C	R	A	B			
N	A	P	H	O	R	S	E	R	A	C	I	N
I	T	P	R	O	S	I	V	Y	I	L	E	R
T	O	R	O	L	E	E	A	L	S	O		
E	R	O	S	J	I	V	E	S	P	L	I	T
S	I	X	T	H	A	V	E	N	U	E	N	E
I	R	O	N	O	D	E	G	R	E			
H	E	M	A	N	C	L	A	R	K			
E	V	A	C	O	M	M	O	N	S	E	N	S
L	E	T	H	E	A	D	S	A	N	G	E	L
D	R	E	O	D	O	R	S	T	T	O	P	S

SUDOKU

LEVEL 1 2 3 4

Complete the grid so each row, column and 3-by-3 box (in bold borders) contains every digit, 1 to 9. For strategies on how to solve Sudoku, please visit sudoku.org.uk

Yesterday’s Solution

3	8	6	7	9	2	4	1	5
9	7	1	3	4	5	8	2	6
4	5	2	8	1	6	7	9	3
5	6	4	2	8	9	1	3	7
7	2	9	6	3	1	5	8	4
8	1	3	5	7	4	2	6	9
2	9	5	4	6	8	3	7	1
6	4	7	1	2	3	9	5	8
1	3	8	9	5	7	6	4	2

	7			6				
			2					
	6					4	9	
7	4							3
			2	4		9	1	7
8					7		5	4
	9	1				5		
	8				3			
				8			1	

Vogel fired by Lakers after season flop

LOS ANGELES, United States (AFP) — The Los Angeles Lakers sacked head coach Frank Vogel on Monday, saying a change of leadership was needed after the club's failure to reach the playoffs.

Lakers general manager Rob Pelinka confirmed Vogel's dismissal in a statement, a day after the club's miserable campaign drew to a close.

"This is an incredibly difficult decision to make, but one we feel is necessary at this point," Pelinka said.

Speculation over Vogel's future intensified after the Lakers' final regular-season game on Sunday, with ESPN reporting that the coach — who led the franchise to a 17th NBA championship in 2020 — would be fired.

Talking to reporters later Monday, Pelinka said the Lakers' season had been "disappointing at every level."

"When you have disappointment you need to take ownership of that and make adjustments to be better," Pelinka said.

"Today's not going to be a day of finger-pointing or unwinding all the specific reasons, we just felt organizationally, that it was time for a new voice."

The sacking came as Lakers players addressed the media in end-of-season interviews.

Lakers superstar LeBron James said before the dismissal was confirmed he had "nothing but respect" for Vogel.

"I respect Frank as a coach, as a man," James said earlier Monday.

"The partnership that we've had over the past few years has been nothing but just candid, great conversations."

"He's a guy who gives everything to the game. Prepared us every single night with his coaching staff."

"I don't know what's going to happen, but I've got nothing but respect for him."

Vogel bristled when asked about his reported dismissal immediately after the Lakers' 146-141 overtime win over the Denver Nuggets on Sunday.

"I haven't been told sh** and I'm going to enjoy tonight's game, celebrate what these young guys did in terms of scratching and clawing and getting back in this game and getting a W, and we'll deal with tomorrow, tomorrow," Vogel told reporters.

Dismal record

The Lakers finished the 2021-2022 campaign in 11th place in the Western Conference, missing out on the postseason with a dismal record of 33 wins and 49 losses.

It is only the fourth time in James'



(Photo: Frank Vogel's Wikipedia)

career that he has failed to reach the playoffs, and the second time it has happened since he joined the Lakers in 2018.

The team had been tipped as championship contenders before the season after acquiring nine-time NBA All-Star Russell Westbrook in a blockbuster trade.

But injuries meant that the Lakers were only able to field their big three of James, Westbrook, and Anthony Davis in 21 games during the 82-game season.

Australian rugby league star Maloney test positive for cocaine

TOULOUSE, France (AFP) — Former Australian rugby league international James Maloney has been stood down after testing positive for cocaine, his French club Lezignan confirmed Tuesday.

The 35-year-old tested positive in a test carried out after a match against Carcassonne in the Elite One Championship, France's highest domestic league competition, at the end of February.

Maloney, who notched up almost 250 games in the NRL, 14 State of Origin matches for New South Wales, and was capped three times by Australia, is under contract at Lezignan until the end of June, having joined the semi-professional club after leading the Catalans Dragons to last season's Super League final.

He is suspended pending a decision by the French anti-doping agency.

"It's up to him to provide some details," Lezignan president Alain Fabre told AFP.

"We all know cocaine is a scourge throughout society. No one is out of its reach."

"Unfortunately we can't be behind all the players to watch over what they're doing when they're not at the club."



(Photo: James Maloney's Wikipedia)



(Photo: Aurelio De Laurentiis' Twitter)

Italian FA ask for Juve, Napoli director bans as suspect transfers trial begins

MILAN, Italy (AFP) — Key figures at Juventus and Napoli, including chairmen Andrea Agnelli and Aurelio De Laurentiis, face possible lengthy bans as a trial over suspicious football transfers began on Monday, the Italian FA announced.

Prosecutors at the country's football federation (FIGC) have asked for Agnelli to be banned from the game for a year over his alleged role in suspected inflated transfer values designed to artificially boost clubs' balance sheets.

Agnelli is just one of 61 people before the FIGC's tribunal along with Juve's former sporting director Fabio Paratici, his replacement Federico Cherubini, CEO Maurizio Arrivabene, and vice-chairman and former player Pavel Nedved.

Now at Tottenham Hotspur, Paratici faces a potential ban of 16 months and 10 days, the longest requested by prosecutors for any individual.

Nedved and Arrivabene face eight months while Cherubini, along with six other Juve directors, is looking at nearly seven months.

Film mogul De Laurentiis has to defend himself against a potential 11-month suspension while his wife and two children Edoardo and Valentina, who all have roles at the club, could be banned for six months and 10 days.

Prosecutors have also asked for bans for

figures at three other Serie A clubs — Empoli, Genoa, and Sampdoria — and six lower league teams including former top-flight outfit Chievo who went bust last year.

Juve, Italy's most successful club, faces an 800,000 euro fine while Napoli could end up having to pay 392,000 euros. The rest of the clubs involved in the trial also face fines of varying severity.

The trial reportedly regards 62 transfers over three seasons between 2019 and 2021, with the majority involving Juve but the biggest being Victor Osimhen's 70 million euro move from Lille to Napoli.

That transfer stands out as it involved four players valued at just over 20 million euros moving to Lille as part of the deal. Three of them never played for the French club and are now in Italy's lower divisions.

Italian media report that the trial should be finished by Friday, with rulings to come next week. However, the appeals process is likely to be long-winded given the number of clubs and individuals being prosecuted by the FIGC.

In addition to the FIGC trial, Juve are also being investigated by prosecutors in Turin over alleged inflated capital gains made between 2019 and 2021.

The club is suspected of having presented false accounting information to investors and producing invoices for non-existent transactions over that period.

this year not to go out early."

Liverpool raced into an early 2-0 lead in Lisbon last week before Darwin Nunez pulled a goal back for Benfica.

And it was only when Luis Diaz scored three minutes from time that Liverpool restored their two-goal lead.

"Knowing more about the way they played, they try to isolate Darwin and Ibou (Konate) one-on-one a little bit," said Klopp.

"But they play football, and if you don't defend (Julian) Weigl then you have a problem as well because he connects the people. They have speed with Rafa (da Silva), things like this."

He added: "I don't know (how they will play) but I know what I would do. I would go for it, full

throttle. I would try to put us under pressure, score early, and if not try to score a bit later. That's what we expect."

"But now, bad news for Benfica, it's Anfield: they don't only play against us, they play against the whole crowd."

Klopp also suggested television broadcasters were almost as much a threat to Liverpool as their opponents in a renewed attack on the scheduling of the Merseysiders' matches.

If Liverpool defeat Benfica, they will face either Bayern Munich or Villarreal in the last four, with Klopp angry that after that potential midweek semifinal Liverpool would have to travel to Newcastle for a Saturday lunch-time kickoff.

BRIEFS



(Photo: AFP)

PSG's Sergio Ramos wants five more years at the top

PARIS (AFP) — Paris Saint-Germain's veteran Spanish defender Sergio Ramos would like to play four or five more years of top-level football before retiring, according to an interview he gave to Prime Video.

The 36-year-old Ramos joined PSG in July after winning the Champions League four times with Real Madrid, the 2010 World Cup and two European Championships with Spain.

"I'd like to play between four and five years at the top before

moving on to a new experience," Ramos told the Ligue 1 broadcaster.

"I've signed for two years here at Paris Saint-Germain and we are going to try and make that three years, one more, and then we'll see."

"As long as I can hold out physically, I believe I can remain focused," he said.

Since his arrival in Ligue 1 he has struggled with calf problems that saw him miss the first five months of the season.

Injured Nadal still unable to train with a racket, will miss Barcelona

MONTE CARLO (AFP) — Rafael Nadal has not yet been able to resume training with a racket, said one of his teammates said on Tuesday, adding that the world No. 4 will "logically" miss the Barcelona tournament next week.

"He is still suffering from his ribs and as expected when his injury was announced, he needs four to six weeks. We are at three, so logically he will not be able to play again in Barcelona," a person close to Nadal told AFP.

"He does the gym, but nothing that hurts him and therefore obviously not with the racket."

After Nadal suffered his first loss of the year to Taylor Fritz in the Indian Wells final, the 35-year-old Spaniard said he had suffered a stress fracture of a rib in the semifinal against 18-year-old compatriot Carlos Alcaraz.

He has already missed the Miami Masters on hard court and Monte Carlo, which opens the European clay court season.

The next Masters events are Madrid starting on May 1 and then Rome beginning on May 8. The French Open begins on May 22. Nadal has won the title at Roland Garros 13 times.



(Photo: Rafael Nadal's Facebook)

Simeone calls for more respect amid criticism of Atletico style against City

MADRID (AFP) — Diego Simeone has called for critics of Atletico Madrid's style of play to show more respect ahead of the second leg of their Champions League quarterfinal against Manchester City on Wednesday.

Atletico were widely lambasted for their ultra-defensive performance at the Etihad Stadium last week, when Simeone's team failed to muster a single shot as City claimed a deserved 1-0 victory.

"Since I started coaching in 2005, if I'm not mistaken I have never criticized a colleague of mine. Never," Simeone said in a press conference

on Tuesday.

"I believe there are different ways of playing to get what you want from each match but when somebody criticizes a colleague, I don't get involved."

City's dominance in the first leg failed to translate into a convincing lead, with only Kevin de Bruyne's late strike preventing Atletico from returning to Madrid with a clean sheet.

Atletico will be hoping to upset the odds in front of their own fans at the Wanda Metropolitano and reach their first Champions League semi since 2017.



(Photo: AFP)

Klopp says Liverpool's FA Cup semi-final has no bearing on Benfica lineup

LIVERPOOL, United Kingdom (AFP) — Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp has insisted a looming FA Cup semifinal against Manchester City will have no impact on his team selection for Wednesday's Champions League tie at home to Benfica.

Last weekend the Reds, still in the hunt for an unprecedented quadruple of trophies in one season, drew 2-2 with City to remain just a point behind the Premier League leaders.

They will face City again in the last four of the FA Cup at Wembley on Saturday but before then the six-time kings of Europe play Benfica in the second leg of a Champions League quarterfinal at Anfield.

Liverpool, who beat Chelsea in

a penalty shootout to win the English League Cup final at Wembley in February, have a healthy 3-1 lead following the first leg in Portugal, which has led to speculation Klopp could rest key players with an eye to the FA Cup tie.

But the German boss, speaking at a pre-match press conference on Tuesday, insisted: "The next game has no influence on the line-up for tomorrow but the last game has."

Klopp added: "There is nobody injured, as far as I know, but we have to be careful with who is fresh enough for this game and stuff like this."

As for Liverpool's ongoing bid for the quadruple, Klopp said: "We are part of four competitions, and thankfully we are good enough

Britney Spears, newly free, says she is pregnant

LOS ANGELES, United States (AFP) — Britney Spears on Monday announced she is pregnant with her third child, five months after a judge ended the controversial guardianship the pop icon said barred her from having more children.

"I got a pregnancy test... and uhhhhh well... I am having a baby," the 40-year-old said on Instagram.

A Los Angeles judge in November dissolved the conservatorship long overseen by Spears' father — an arrangement the singer said had prevented her from having a contraceptive IUD removed despite her desire for more kids.

Spears' representatives did not immediately respond to AFP request for comment.

"I thought 'Geez... what happened to my stomach???' Spears wrote, saying that her 28-year-old partner Sam Asghari, whom she has started referring to online as her "husband," speculated she was "food pregnant."

"It's growing !!! If 2 are in there... I might just lose it," added the singer, prompting online chatter that she may be expecting twins.

After a highly public 2007 breakdown, when Spears attacked a paparazzo's car at a gas station, the star was placed under a conservatorship headed by her father Jamie Spears, which ultimately lasted nearly 14 years.

Fans had long sounded alarm that the singer was unhappy with her father as guardian, and in June 2021 she asked a Los Angeles judge to end the legal arrangement that had left her "traumatized".

Her allegation that the conservatorship was preventing her from removing a contraceptive IUD — despite her wanting to have authority over her own birth control method in order to get pregnant — sparked outrage from reproductive rights groups



Supporters of the FreeBritney movement rally in support of musician Britney Spears at a conservatorship court hearing, on November 12, 2021. (File photo: AFP)

and her fans, many of whom were already involved in the fervent #FreeBritney movement.

"I would like to progressively move forward, and I want to have the real deal," Spears told the court in a bombshell hearing last summer.

"I want to be able to get married and have a baby. I have an (IUD) inside of myself so I don't get pregnant. They don't want me to have children — any more children," she said during the gripping 20-minute statement.

The formal end to the guardianship in

November 2021 came after the pop phenom's father Jamie Spears was removed from his position in charge of her finances and estate at a hearing in September.

Britney Spears said Monday that she "won't be going out as much" to avoid trailing paparazzi.

She is already mother to two teen sons, Sean and Jayden, with her ex-husband Kevin Federline.

In her post Monday Spears also opened up about struggles with perinatal depression during previous pregnancies, saying it was "absolutely horrible."

"Women didn't talk about it back then... some people considered it dangerous if a woman complained like that with a baby inside her... but now women talk about it everyday... thank Jesus we don't have to keep that pain a reserved proper secret," the pop star wrote.

During a highly publicized apparent mental breakdown that followed her 2006 divorce and custody battle, Spears was captured in gas stations barefoot and driving with one son in her lap.

Today she and other turn-of-the-millennium female pop stars have drawn sympathy, after documentaries that emphasized the role of the early-2000s celebrity journalism machine in triggering breakdowns and questionable behavior.

But at the time they were paparazzi punching bags, who were also mocked and belittled by national news outlets.

Matt Lauer — the now-disgraced former morning television personality — once pushed Spears to tears in a 2006 interview aired on national television, after needling the young artist over her maternal fitness while she was pregnant with her second child.

On Monday Spears did not provide a due date.

She met Asghari in 2016 when they co-starred in a music video for her single "Slumber Party."

Spears announced their engagement on social media in September 2021, but has yet to divulge a date for the nuptials.

Film industry guns for fresh start at Cannes

PARIS (AFP) — The Cannes Film Festival will hope to relaunch the industry's hopes with another star-packed line-up to be announced on Thursday.

After a slow return to cinema-going after the COVID-19 pandemic, the film business will be hoping for a boost on the French Riviera when the 75th edition of the world's leading film festival returns from May 17 to 28.

Tom Cruise is already confirmed for the festival promoting the world premiere of "Top Gun: Maverick", the sequel to his 1986 blockbuster. Also attending is Tom Hanks, who co-stars in "Elvis" as the rock'n'roll star's manager, Colonel Tom Parker.

The latter is the latest spectacle from Australian director Baz Luhrmann, who has previously lit up Cannes with "Moulin Rouge" and "Gatsby".

The rest of the line-up will be announced on Thursday, including the 20-odd films competing for the top prize Palme d'Or.

The selection committee, who have been working their way through more than 2,000 entries in recent weeks, have a tough act to follow after last year's vintage edition.

Coming after the festival was canceled by the pandemic in 2020, it launched several films that went on to global success, especially "Drive My Car".

After picking up three awards at Cannes, it went on to win this year's Oscar for best international feature film — and was the first Japanese film to be nominated in the best picture category.

Big-name speculation

Last year's jury — led by US director Spike Lee — gave the Palme d'Or to Julia Ducournau's body-horror "Titane" — ensuring the festival maintained its reputation for boosting bold and edgy filmmaking alongside starry entertainment.

The organizers have left it late to announce who will chair the jury this year, but Penelope Cruz and Marion Cotillard are among the favorites according to industry insiders.

Film experts have also been picking through the release schedules for ideas on who might be in competition.

Many are hoping to see the return of David Cronenberg, whose upcoming sci-fi/horror cross-over stars Viggo Mortensen, Kristen Stewart, and Lea Seydoux.

Also hotly tipped is Australian George Miller, the man behind "Mad Max", who takes a new direction with "Three Thousand Years of Longing" about a djinn (played by Idris Elba) offering three wishes to Tilda Swinton.

Another possibility is Terrence Malick, who won previously for "Tree of Life" starring Brad Pitt. His new film follows the life of Jesus Christ and stars Mark Rylance as Satan.

Though women have been getting more of a presence on the festival circuit, they remain poorly represented.

One possible contender in competition at Cannes might be US director Kelly Reichardt, with her new film, "Showing Up". Her lo-fi hit "First Cow" was on many critics' end-of-year lists in 2021.

Shadow of war

As with everything in the arts at the moment, the Russian invasion of Ukraine hangs over the selection.

Possible names include exiled Russian filmmaker Kantemir Balagov, 30, whose film "Beanpole" won the directing award of the Un Certain Regard section in 2019.

Or there may be the return of Kirill Serebrennikov, who was unable to attend Cannes last year for his Palme nominee "Petrov's Flu", after being banned from traveling due to a controversial court case.

One possible Ukrainian entry is a film about the Allied destruction of German cities at the end of World War II by director Sergei Loznitsa.

Meanwhile, festival director Thierry Fremaux has been pushing for a change to the rule that bars streaming platforms from competing at Cannes.

But French cinema distributors, who have a seat on the festival board, continue to block the move even as big-name directors such as Martin Scorsese and Jane Campion have turned to Netflix and other streamers for financial support.

In the short term, that means that the much-anticipated Marilyn Monroe biopic, "Blonde", starring Ana de Armas, a Netflix film, cannot compete for Palme, although fans are still hoping it will get a premiere on the Cote d'Azur.

Red Hot Chili Peppers top chart with 'Unlimited Love'

(NYT) — Everything aligned for Red Hot Chili Peppers' latest album, "Unlimited Love," which has opened at No. 1 on the Billboard chart, the band's second time at the top.

The Chili Peppers reunited with its former guitarist, John Frusciante, for the album. He has been in and out of the band since 1988 — with his most recent departure coming after the tour for "Stadium Arcadium" (2006), the group's last album to go to No. 1. "Unlimited Love" also put the band back in the studio with Rick Rubin, who has produced most of the Chili Peppers' albums since 1991, but not its most recent, "The Getaway" (2016, with Danger

Mouse).

And if there were an award for most unusual promotional appearances, it might go to a recent one by Flea, the band's inimitable bassist, who offered a lunging, psych-funk solo instrumental version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" before the Los Angeles Lakers-Denver Nuggets NBA game April 3. (Did it result in sales or streams of "Unlimited Love"? Who knows, but it's a must-see for any Chili Peppers fan.)

In its first week out, "Unlimited Love" had the equivalent of 97,500 sales in the United States, according to tracking service Luminate, formerly known as MRC Data. That

total includes 19 million streams — modest for a No. 1 album these days — as well as 82,500 copies sold as a complete package, among them a hefty 38,500 copies on vinyl. (On next week's chart, Jack White's "Fear of the Dawn" is also expected to arrive with a big vinyl number.)

Also this week, "7220," by Chicago rapper Lil Durk, is No. 2. The "Encanto" soundtrack is No. 3, Morgan Wallen's "Dangerous: The Double Album" holds at No. 4 in its 65th week on the chart — every week but one of that time in the Top 10 — and Olivia Rodrigo's "Sour" is No. 5.



(Photo: Twitter)

Where the ice is still abundant, these penguins are, too

(NYT) — Adélie penguins have had a rough time on the western side of the Antarctic Peninsula, where warming linked to climate change has occurred faster than almost anywhere else on the planet. That and other factors have led to sharp declines in Adélie populations in recent decades.

But on the east side, it's a different story.

"It's just a complete train wreck on the western side of the peninsula," said Heather Lynch, a statistical ecologist at Stony Brook University who studies penguin populations and how they are changing. "But on the eastern side, the populations are stable and quite healthy."

Lynch uses satellite imagery in much of her work, but she also organizes penguin-surveying expeditions to the peninsula, the northernmost part of the Antarctic continent. On the latest one, in January, three of her current and former doctoral students did the counting at islands on the eastern side of the peninsula in the Weddell Sea.

Their work showed that Adélie populations there have changed little since

previous counts taken over the past two decades. That suggests that as global warming continues and Adélie populations decline in other parts of the continent, the Weddell may remain a refuge for the birds.

"It's a nice confirmation that where the climate has not changed as dramatically, the populations have not changed dramatically," Lynch said.

The Weddell Sea is notoriously icy, a function of a rotating current, or gyre, that keeps much of the pack ice within the sea for years. The ice makes it difficult for most ships to navigate. (The Weddell is where explorer Ernest Shackleton's ship Endurance was crushed by ice a century ago. The wreck was found last month.)

Over the years, Lynch's students have done penguin surveys from cruise ships in return for giving lectures and otherwise helping out. On the Antarctic Peninsula, those ships usually stay on the western side, and regulations limit shore visits to a specific set of colonies.

The January trip was on a Greenpeace vessel that sailed around the tip of the peninsula into the northwestern

Weddell. "It's somewhere that we've wanted to get to," Lynch said.

The three researchers — Michael Wethington, Clare Flynn, and Alex Borowicz — used drones and hand-counting to determine the number of chicks at colonies on Joinville, Vortex, Devil, and other islands.

Hand-counting takes time, said Flynn, a doctoral student at Stony Brook. Counters identify a specific area within a colony — perhaps a grouping of nests, or an area delineated by the birds' walking paths — and count all the chicks within it three times to ensure accuracy. At Penguin Point, a sprawling colony on Seymour Island that is home to 21,500 chicks, the counting took two days. (Adélies normally produce two chicks per breeding pair each year.)

"It does get tedious, counting them three times over," Flynn said. "But it's just such an amazing place to be and such an amazing job to be doing."

Adélies are among the most numerous of the penguin species found in Antarctica, with an estimated 3.8 million breeding pairs at colonies all around the continent. They use their beaks to

gather stones to make nests on dry land. Chicks hatch around November, late in the Southern Hemisphere spring, and the parents forage for food that they regurgitate for their offspring. Antarctic Peninsula Adélies are choosy about their diet: They eat only krill, a small crustacean, although elsewhere, they also eat fish.

Krill and ice, or the lack of both, are at the root of the Adélies' problems on the western side of the peninsula, which has been warming in part as a result of atmospheric circulation patterns originating in the warming tropics. Krill flourish in cold, icy conditions, so as warming has caused sea ice to decline, krill have become less abundant as well.

That leaves Adélies without enough of the food they need. "The fact that they're such picky eaters on the peninsula is to their detriment, because they're very much tied to the health of the krill population," Lynch said.

Populations have declined by as much as 90% in parts of the western side, and Gentoo penguins, with their bright orange beaks, have largely taken over. "They'll eat anything, they'll breed anywhere," Lynch said of Gentoos. "I think of them like the urban pests of the peninsula."

As the world continues to warm, models suggest that the Weddell Sea and the Ross Sea in West Antarctica will be the last places to become unfavorable to Adélies.

The Weddell has also been proposed as a marine protected area under the Antarctic Treaty, which would further protect the penguins and other life there, from human activities such as krill fishing, especially as ice cover declines from warming and the area becomes more accessible. "As scientists, we want to map out where all the important biology is" for that effort, Lynch said.

The finding that populations are stable "doesn't mean that climate change isn't happening in the Weddell Sea," she said. "By virtue of the oceanography, it remains cold and icy and exactly the kind of place where these Adélies need to live."



The western side of the Antarctica Peninsula has seen sharp declines in Adélie penguin populations in recent decades, but on the eastern side, it is a different story. (Photos: NYTimes)