

## Prince Andrew back in headlines over alleged Chinese spy

LONDON: (news desk) Britain's Prince Andrew was facing intense media scrutiny on Saturday after revelations that a close Chinese business associate of the scandal-hit younger brother of King Charles was thought by the British government to be a Chinese spy.

In a court ruling on Thursday, it was disclosed that the businessman, known only as H6, had been banned from Britain on national security grounds because the authorities suspected he was working clandestinely for Beijing to forge close contacts with prominent British figures. Late on Friday, Andrew, the Duke of York, issued a statement to the BBC and other media in which he said he had "ceased all contact" with the individual, described in the court documents as a "close confidant", once concerns were raised. "The UK met the individual through official channels, with nothing of a sensitive nature ever discussed," the statement said.

However, questions about the case have continued to dominate British front pages and news broadcasts. The Daily Telegraph newspaper reported that the British intelligence agency MI5 was investigating Chinese money given to Andrew, while the Times said the prince had invited the businessman to the royal properties Buckingham Palace, St James's Palace and Windsor Castle. The Mirror reported that King Charles had been briefed by MI5 and was "truly exasperated" by the situation.

## Two detained after bomb kills three at Thai festival

BANGKOK: (news desk) Authorities in Thailand have arrested two men following a bomb blast at a festival near the border with Myanmar that killed three people and wounded several, police said on Saturday.

An improvised explosive device went off on a dance floor at a festival in Umphang district in Thailand's northern Tak province on Friday night, according to local police. Two people were killed instantly and another died later in hospital, police said. The explosion also injured 48 people among approximately 8,000-9,000 attending the event. Thai police said they had arrested a Thai youth and a man they said was a member of the Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic minority rebel group that has fought the Myanmar military for decades for autonomy in neighbouring Myanmar's Karen state. Tak police chief Major-General Samrit Ekamol said the Myanmar suspect had thrown the bomb after encountering a "rival gangster" he had previously fought with. A senior KNU official contacted by the agency, denied any involvement and said the group did not have any members in the area. The KNU expressed condolences to the families of those killed and wounded in the blast in a separate statement on their Facebook page.

## Anti-West hardliner elected as Georgia's president

TBILISI: (news desk) Georgia's ruling party on Saturday voted for a far-right former footballer to become president in a controversial election process, amid a deepening constitutional crisis and weeks of mass pro-EU protests.

The Black Sea nation has been in turmoil since the governing Georgian Dream party claimed victory in contested October parliamentary elections and then announced it would delay European Union membership talks for four years. An electoral college, controlled by the ruling Georgian Dream party and boycotted by the opposition, elected Mikheil Kavelashvili with a comfortable majority of 224 votes as the country's next figurehead leader for a five-year term, the central election commission said. Kavelashvili is a 53-year-old former forward for English Premier League champions Manchester City. An MP since 2016, he is known for airing far-right views in obscenity-laced statements. "Over the years, certain forces — particularly external ones — have exploited the presidential institution to divide society," Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, told journalists. "Under Mikheil Kavelashvili's presidency, it will regain its constitutional mission and dignity." The opposition denounced Saturday's election as "illegitimate" and said the sitting president, Salome Zurbishvili, remains the country's sole legitimate leader. Pro-Western Zurbishvili — at loggerheads with Georgian Dream — has refused to step down and is demanding new parliamentary elections, paving the way for a constitutional showdown. A former diplomat, Zurbishvili — a hugely popular figure among protesters, who view her as a beacon of Georgia's European aspirations — said Saturday's vote made "a mockery of democracy".



RESCUERS scour the rubble of a municipality building at Deir el-Balah for casualties following an Israeli strike in the central Gaza Strip, on Saturday.—

## 22 killed in Israeli strikes on Gaza

CAIRO: (News desk) At least 22 Palestinians were killed in Israeli air strikes in Gaza on Saturday, medics said, while the Israeli military claimed it targeted gunmen operating from shelters and aid storages. At least 10 people were killed in an air strike near the municipality building in Deir Al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip where people gathered to receive aid, medics said.

Casualties were being carried by foot, on rickshaws and private cars from the site of the attack to the hospital, medics said. The strike killed the head of the Hamas-run administrative committee in central Gaza, Diab Ali al-Jaru, a Hamas source said. The Israeli military said al-Jaru, who was also the mayor of Deir Al-Balah, was the target of the strike and that he had assisted

Hamas fighters. Four more people were killed in a separate strike in the area. Earlier, Israeli aircraft struck fighters and weapon caches near an aid warehouse, the military said, after gunmen had fired rockets into Israel from there on Friday. Another rocket was fired from Gaza into Israel on Saturday, the military said. A separate strike in Gaza City on a former shelter housing displaced people

targeted Hamas fighters, the military said. At least seven people were killed in that attack, Palestinian medics said, including a woman and her baby. A local journalist, Mohammed Baalousha who worked for Dubai Al Mashhad television was killed in a separate airstrike in Gaza City, health officials said. The military was looking into the report, a spokesperson said.

## Five migrants drown, 40 missing as boat sinks off Greece

ATHENS: (news desk) Five migrants drowned and 40 were missing after their wooden boat capsized off Greece's southern island of Gavdos late on Friday night. Thirty-nine men — most of them from Pakistan — were rescued by cargo vessels sailing in the area. They were transferred to the island of Crete, the Greek coastguard said. Coastguard

vessels, merchant vessels, an Italian frigate and naval aircraft were searching the area since Greek authorities were alerted about the incident. In separate incidents on Saturday, a Malta-flagged cargo vessel rescued 47 migrants from a boat sailing about 40 nautical miles off Gavdos, while a tanker rescued another 88 migrants 28 nautical miles off the tiny island in Greece's south. According to initial

information, coastguard officials believe the boats had left together from Libya. Greece was a favoured gateway to the European Union for migrants and refugees from the Middle East, Africa and Asia in 2015-2016, when nearly one million people landed on its islands, mostly via inflatable dinghies. Incidents with migrant boats and shipwrecks off Crete and its tiny neighbour Ga-

vdos, which are relatively isolated in the central Mediterranean, have increased over the past year. Eighty-two migrants were confirmed dead in June last year when an overcrowded vessel carrying over 700 people capsized and sank in international waters off the south-western Greek coastal town of Pylos. But Greek authorities estimate that over 500 people had drowned since



SOUTH Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol bows while giving a public address from his official residence in Seoul, on Saturday. Yoon said he would 'step aside' after parliament voted to remove him from office

## US has made 'direct contact' with Syria's rebels: Blinken

AQABA: (news desk) The United States has made "direct contact" with Syria's victorious Hayat Tahrir al-Sham rebels despite designating the group as terrorists, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Saturday, as he sought international unity on a peaceful transition. "We've been in contact with HTS and with other

parties," Blinken told reporters after talks on Syria in the Jordanian Red Sea resort of Aqaba. He did not give details on how the contact took place but when asked if the United States reached out directly, he said: "Direct contact — yes." Blinken said that the contact was partly related to the search for Austin Tice,

the US journalist kidnapped in 2012 near the start of the brutal civil war. "We have pressed upon everyone we've been in contact with the importance of helping find Austin Tice and bringing him home," Blinken said. He said that in the dialogue with HTS the United States also "shared the principles" on Syria that he has public-

ly laid out. Blinken indicated the United States was open eventually to easing sanctions on Syria but not yet. Referring to HTS statements since their victory, Blinken said: "We appreciate some of the positive words we heard in recent days, but what matters is action — and sustained action."

## Founder of clothing chain Mango dies in hiking accident

MADRID: (news desk) Isak Andic, the founder of Spanish clothing retailer Mango, one of Europe's largest fashion groups, with nearly 2,800 stores worldwide, died in an accident on Saturday.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez was among the first to pay tribute to the businessman's "entrepreneurial vision". The 71-year-old died after falling down a ravine while hiking in the mountains near Barcelona with several family members.

"It is with deep regret that we announce the unexpected death of Isak Andic, our non-executive chairman and founder of Mango," the Barcelona-based company's CEO, Toni Ruiz said in a statement. "Isak has been an example for all of us. He dedicated his life to Mango, leaving an indelible mark thanks to his strategic vision, his inspiring leadership and his unwavering commitment to values that he himself imbued in our company," he added. Colour and style

he media-shy entrepreneur was one of Spain's richest men. Forbes estimates he and his family have a net worth of \$4.5 billion.

Under his watch, to help boost sales the company hired big stars such as British model Kate Moss, Spanish actor Penelope Cruz, and French footballer Antoine Griezmann for its marketing campaigns.

## Japan space firm postpones second attempt at orbit

TOKYO: (News desk) A company aiming to become Japan's first private firm to put a satellite into orbit postponed its rocket launch on Saturday, after its first try ended in a mid-air explosion.

Tokyo-based Space One's Kairos rocket was to make its second blast-off from the company's launch pad in the rural western region of Wakayama at 11am, but called it off in a move announced about 20 minutes before the scheduled launch. "During the final decision-making process for the launch, we analysed the weather conditions and determined that the wind speeds above an altitude of 10 kilometres (6.2 miles) were so strong that it was not suitable for launch," Space One executive Kozo Abe told reporters. Abe said the company plans to make another attempt today on Sunday at 11am. "We will do our utmost to prepare for tomorrow's launch," he said.

Private firms are offering cheaper and more frequent space exploration opportunities than governments, and Space One hopes to emulate Elon Musk's SpaceX, which has contracts with NASA and the Pentagon. But first, it needs to get off the ground.

The solid-fuel Kairos, carrying a small government test satellite, lifted off for the first time in March from the Space One launch pad, dubbed Spaceport Kii.

## Iran allows IAEA to increase number of nuclear inspections

TEHRAN: (News desk) Iran confirmed on Saturday that it has allowed watchdog the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to increase the number of inspections it carries out into Tehran's nuclear programme, state media reported. "We have increased capacity — it is natural that the number of inspections should also increase," the official IRNA news agency quoted the country's nuclear chief Mohammad Eslami as saying. "When we carry out nuclear activities, and where we deal with nuclear materials, changing the scale will naturally change the monitoring level," he added. According to a report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) earlier this week, Iran has agreed to tougher monitoring by the agency at its Fordow site after it greatly accelerated uranium enrichment to close to weapons grade there. Eslami's comments came after an IAEA report, seen by the agency on Friday, that Iran had agreed to increased monitoring. "Iran agreed to the agency's request to increase the frequency and intensity of the implementation of safeguards measures at Fordo enrichment plant" south of Tehran, the IAEA report said.

## Cyclone batters French Indian Ocean island of Mayotte

SAINT REUNION: (news desk) Cyclone Chido inflicted "catastrophic" damage on the French Indian Ocean territory of Mayotte on Saturday, a senior local official said, battering the archipelago with winds of up to 220 kilometres per hour.

"We don't know if anyone has been killed but, given the damage, it's likely," said Madi Madi Souf, head of the Mayotte mayors' association, who was himself in mainland France. "It's a catastrophic situation," he added.

"There already seems to be very significant damage," French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau posted on X. He added that 140 fresh troops and firefighters would be sent to the scene on Sunday to help with recovery, more than doubling the deployment sent earlier in the week.

Mayotte had been placed on violet alert — the highest — ahead of the passage of Chido, whose eye swept across the north of the archipelago from east to west on its way towards Mozambique on the African mainland. Weather authority Meteo France recorded winds of at least 226 kilometres per hour at Pamandzi airport. But conditions were expected to calm later on Saturday as the cyclone moved away. On the ground, more than 15,000 homes were without electricity, Environment Minister Agnes-Pannier-Runacher posted on X. "Even emergency responders are locked down. There's no mobile phone service and we can't reach people on the island," the head of Mayotte's firefighters' union, Abdoul Karim Ahmed Allaoui, told the BFM news channel.

## South Korean president impeached over martial law bid

SEOUL: (news desk) South Korean lawmakers on Saturday impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol over his failed martial law bid, with the opposition declaring a "victory of the people". The vote capped more than a week of intense political drama in the democratic South following Yoon's failed attempt to impose martial law on December 3. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of the capital Seoul in rival rallies for and against

Yoon on Saturday. In a televised address following the parliamentary vote, the impeached Yoon said he would "step aside" but did not apologise for his botched bid to impose martial law. Out of 300 lawmakers, 204 voted to impeach the president on allegations of insurrection while 85 voted against. Three abstained, with eight votes nullified. With the impeachment, Yoon has been suspended from office while South Korea's Constitutional

Court deliberates on the vote. The court has 180 days to rule on Yoon's future and Chief Justice Moon Hyung-bae vowed to hold "a swift and fair trial". If the court backs his removal, Yoon will become the second president in South Korean history to be successfully impeached. Two hundred votes were needed for the impeachment to pass, and opposition lawmakers needed to convince at least eight parliamentarians from

Yoon's conservative People Power Party (PPP) to switch sides. "Today's impeachment is the great victory of the people," opposition Democratic Party floor leader Park Chan-dae said following the vote. PPP lawmaker Kim Sang-wook told broadcaster JTBC that Yoon had "completely betrayed the values of conservatism". "That is why we, as ruling party lawmakers, have decided to remove him ourselves," he said. Prime Minister Han

Duck-soo — now the nation's interim leader — said in an address to the nation that he "deeply acknowledges the heavy responsibility for the current situation" and "sincerely apologises to the people". "What is most important right now is that there must not be even the slightest gap in the administration of state affairs," said Han, who convened a National Security Council late Saturday evening. A Seoul police official told AFP at least 200,000 people had massed outside

parliament in support of removing the president. Choi Jung-ha, 52, danced in the street after the vote. "Isn't it amazing that we, the people, have pulled this off together?" she told AFP. "I am 100 percent certain the Constitutional Court will side with the impeachment." On the other side of Seoul near Gwanghwamun square, police estimated 30,000 had rallied in support of Yoon, blasting patriotic songs and waving South Korean and American flags.