

**Thailand denies viral claim
Macron knelt before king**

AFP | Bangkok

Thailand's foreign ministry denied yesterday that French President Emmanuel Macron knelt before the country's king during his state visit to Paris this week, after an AI-generated picture circulated online.

King Maha Vajiralongkorn and Queen Suthida's trip was the first official visit by a Thai monarch to France since 1960, marking the 170th anniversary of formal diplomatic relations between the two nations.

During a state dinner at the presidential palace, Macron presented the 73-year-old king with the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour -- France's highest award -- and Queen Suthida with the Grand Cross of the National Order of Merit, according to Thai media.

Trial of potential Ebola treatments begins in DR Congo: WHO

AFP | Geneva

The trial of two potential treatments for the rare Bundibugyo species of Ebola behind the deadly outbreak in the DR Congo began in the country yesterday, the WHO said.

"Today, the clinical trial of two therapeutics began, with the enrolment of the first patient," with the trial evaluating the monoclonal antibody MBP134 and the antiviral drug remdesivir, alone and in combination, the World Health Organization's chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters.

Vatican excommunicates six ultraconservative bishops over ordination

AFP | Vatican City

The Vatican excommunicated six bishops from the ultraconservative Society of St. Pius X yesterday, while warning that any lay believers who "formally adhere" to the breakaway Catholic group would suffer the same fate.

The Vatican decree comes a day after the traditionalist group consecrated four new bishops, openly defying a plea from Pope Leo XIV to desist and exacerbating a rift dating from 1988 when the group earlier consecrated four bishops.

Russian strikes kill 21 in biggest ever attack on Kyiv, mayor says

Zelensky urges more air defences



A damaged residential building is seen following missile strikes on the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv

● 52,000 sheltered in metro

● EU proposes new sanctions on Moscow

AFP | Kyiv

Russia launched its largest ever barrage on Kyiv early yesterday, according to the city's mayor, tearing open apartment buildings in an hours-long drone and missile attack that killed at least 21 people.

In Moscow, the Kremlin vowed to further ramp up the "pressure" on Kyiv after the strike, sticking to its no-compromise rhetoric as rescuers in Kyiv scoured the rubble for survivors.

The European Union's top diplomat proposed new sanctions on Moscow, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky asked the United States for licences to manufacture Patriot air defence missiles.

Russia has routinely launched waves of missiles and drones at Ukrainian cities during its more than four-year invasion, which



has become Europe's deadliest conflict since World War II.

AFP journalists in central and eastern Kyiv heard more than a dozen explosions and saw residents -- some with children and pets -- rushing to shelter in metro stations.

In the morning, locals stood on the rubble of destroyed apartment blocks ripped apart by the barrage, as smoke poured over the Kyiv skyline.

At one spot, a mother cried as she embraced her son in front of the smouldering debris.

Blasts started echoing out late on Wednesday, lasting into the early hours of yesterday as Russian missiles and drones rained down on residential areas in the city centre.

Mayor Vitali Klitschko described it as the "enemy's most

massive attack on the capital", without elaborating.

The state emergency services said at least 21 people were killed and 85 were wounded, including two children.

Kyiv urged its allies to send more air defence.

"Air defence supplies for Ukraine are an absolute and critical priority," Zelensky said in a post on Facebook.

"We also very much count on a decision by the United States regarding licences for Patriots."

Ukraine is seeking to manufacture munitions for the US-made missile interceptor system, one of its only ways of defending against Russian ballistic missiles, although defence experts say it will take time to set up production domestically.

Struggling to sleep

Russia fired 496 drones and 74 missiles -- including hard-to-intercept ballistic projectiles -- Ukraine's air force said.

It said it shot down 48 of the missiles and 476 drones.

AFP reporters met several Kyiv residents outside an apartment building largely destroyed in the attack.

Next indirect US-Iran talks after Khamenei funeral: mediators



The sun sets behind the Doha skyline

● Indirect US-Iran talks held in Doha

● Progress made via Qatari-Pakistani mediators

● Discussions cover nuclear and assets issues

● Tensions persist despite diplomatic steps

AFP | Washington

The next indirect US-Iran talks will come after the late Iranian supreme leader's funeral, mediators said yesterday, as diplomacy inches ahead on ending the Middle East war.

Following the foes' indirect discussions in Doha on Wednesday, US President Donald Trump as well as mediators Qatar and Pakistan offered signs that diplomacy was holding, despite exchanges of fire this week.

An interim deal was agreed to reopen the vital Strait of Hormuz and end hostilities, but major questions still need to be tackled in talks, including Iran's nuclear programme.

"Qatari and Pakistani mediators concluded separate meetings with the US and Iranian negotiators in Doha (Wednesday), with positive progress made," Pakistan said yesterday.

Islamabad added the sides agreed to keep talking, "with the next meeting to be set at the earliest possible time following the funeral processions of the former Iranian Supreme Leader."

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed aged 86 at his compound in the centre of the Iranian cap-

ital on February 28, the first day of the war. Power was swiftly passed to his son Mojtaba.

Ali Khamenei's public funeral will begin on Saturday, with his body lying in state at the colossal complex in central Tehran that hosts major Friday prayers, official ceremonies and religious gatherings.

His burial will take place on July 9 at the shrine of Imam Reza in the northeastern city of Mashhad, his birthplace.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi, who led Tehran's delegation, said Wednesday talks had concluded with an agreement to establish a communications channel by yesterday to report and record alleged violations of the memorandum.

Iran had insisted there would be no direct negotiations with the United States in Doha.

Trump told reporters Wednesday before boarding Air Force One: "As far as things are going, the denuclearization of Iran is moving along well."

"We hit them very hard... but we're getting along very well," he added.

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Negotiators agreed to establish a communications channel to report and document alleged violations of the interim memorandum before the next round of talks

Space startup to launch India's first private orbital rocket

AFP | New Delhi

Indian startup Skyroot Aerospace said yesterday it would hold the maiden test flight of the country's first privately developed orbital-class rocket in the coming weeks.

The Vikram-1 rocket, designed to carry small satellites into low-Earth orbit, will lift off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota between July 12 and August 4, the company said.

"The countdown to history

has begun," Skyroot co-founder and chief executive Pawan Kumar Chandana said in a social media post.

"What once was a bold dream now stands tall on the launch pad. Vikram-1. India's first private orbital rocket."

The rocket, about as tall as a seven-story building, is capable of carrying payloads weighing up to 300 kilograms (661 pounds).

"Skyroot plans to commence full-scale commercial launch operations after one or two suc-

cessful orbital demonstration missions," the newspaper The Hindu reported.

The rocket is a significant step for India's space industry, which was opened to greater private-sector participation in 2020, with New Delhi seeking to capture a larger share of the rapidly growing global space economy.

India has built a reputation for delivering low-cost space missions and now hosts more than 400 space startups.

Its space economy is currently

valued at about \$8 billion and accounts for around two to three percent of the global market, according to government figures released last month.

The government estimates the sector could grow to \$40-50 billion over the next decade.

India's space ambitions have gathered pace in recent years. In August 2023, it became only the fourth country to successfully land an unmanned spacecraft on the Moon, after Russia, the United States and China.



Vikram-1 sits on a launch pad at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre