

## Business

# Defiant French unions dig in after Macron defends pension reform

## Kerosene supply to capital, airports 'critical' • Macron's approval rating drops

**PARIS:** French unions on Thursday staged a new day of disruption against President Emmanuel Macron's pension reform after he defiantly vowed to implement the change, with refineries at a standstill and mass transport cancellations. Interrupted supply from refineries has raised concern over fuel shortages for planes at Paris airports, adding to a growing list of headaches in the crisis that include growing piles of rubbish in Paris and questions over the looming state visit of King Charles III. Macron on Wednesday said he was prepared to accept unpopularity because the bill raising the minimum retirement age from 62 to 64 was "necessary" and "in the general interest of the country". Protests were planned across the country on Thursday, in the latest day of nationwide stoppages that began in mid-January against the pension changes.

Some 12,000 police, including 5,000 in Paris, were to be deployed during the day, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin has said. In an early action Thursday, protesters blocked road access to Terminal 1 at the capital's Charles de Gaulle airport, French television pictures showed. Half of all high-speed trains were cancelled, national railway operator SNCF said, after union sources reported around a third of staff would be striking. At least half the trains into Paris from the suburbs were not running. In the suburb of Nanterre, Paul Kantola, a 57-year-old carpenter, said he had to wake up at 5:00 am to be able to get to work, but said he agreed with the protesters. "It's scary to grow old in these conditions. Already when you have a pension it's not enough to live off," he said.

Paris municipal garbage collectors have pledged to uphold a rolling strike until Monday, as thousands of tons of rubbish linger in the streets. Acting on Macron's instructions, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne invoked an article in the constitution a week ago to adopt the reform without a parliamentary vote.

The government on Monday narrowly survived a

no-confidence motion, but the outrage has spawned the biggest domestic crisis of Macron's second term.

### Airport fuel 'under pressure'

A survey on Sunday showed Macron's personal approval rating at just 28 percent, its lowest level since the height of the anti-government "Yellow Vest" protest movement in 2018-2019. Blockades at oil refineries were also to continue, with only one such TotalEnergies site in four working in the country.

The ministry of energy transition on Thursday warned that kerosene supply to the capital and its airports was becoming "critical". The Directorate General of Civil Aviation has warned that its fuel stocks at the two main Paris airports are "under pressure", and urged planes to fill up at foreign stopovers. Spontaneous protests have broken out on a daily basis in recent days, leading to hundreds of arrests and accusations of heavy-handed tactics by police. Amnesty International has expressed alarm "about the widespread use of excessive force and arbitrary arrests reported in several media outlets". Paris police chief Laurent Nunez on Thursday denied this, saying the security forces only detained people from "gatherings towards committing violence". On Wednesday evening, hundreds again took to the streets in Paris, the southeastern city of Lyon and the northern city of Lille, the authorities said.

### 'Disdain'

While France's Constitutional Court still needs to give the final word on the reform, Macron told the TFI and France 2 channels in a televised interview on Wednesday that the changes needed to "come into force by the end of the year". Backtracking on earlier comments that the crowds demonstrating had "no legitimacy", he said organized protests were "legitimate", but violence should be condemned and blockades should not impede normal activity. He appeared to draw a comparison with insurrections by supporters of the ex-US and Brazilian presidents



**MARSEILLE, France:** Protestors walk during a demonstration, a week after the government pushed a pensions reform through parliament without a vote, using the article 49.3 of the constitution, in Marseille, southeastern France, on March 23, 2023. —AFP

Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro after election defeats, adding: "We cannot accept rebels or factions." His comments during the lunchtime interview, when most people would have been at work, have incensed union workers.

Philippe Martinez, head of the hard-line CGT union, said that the remarks showed "disdain for the thousands of people who have been protesting". The tensions have also raised questions over whether France can host the UK's

King Charles III when he arrives Sunday for his first foreign state visit as monarch. The government has said the reform is necessary to keep the system from slipping into deficit and to bring France in line with its European neighbors, where the legal retirement age is typically higher. Critics however say the changes are unfair for people who start working at a young age in physically challenging jobs, and for women who interrupt their careers to raise children. —AFP

## Warba announces its working hours during Ramadan

**KUWAIT:** During the holy month of Ramadan, Warba Bank continues to provide its banking services to its valued clients by receiving clients from 10 am to 1.30 pm from Sunday to Thursday. The bank will also welcome clients in the Avenues and Egailla branches on Saturdays from 10 am to 1.30 pm, while the airport branch will continue to receive clients from 3am till 4pm and from 9pm to 2am on a daily basis. In addition, EBM devices in the Avenues, Airport and Keifan branches will continue to operate to facilitate the provision of services.

The telephone service through the call center 1825555 and the bank's platforms on social networking sites or via the Internet will also continue during Ramadan.

Abdullah Nasser Al-Shuail, senior director of branches and private banking services stated that Warba Bank is ready to serve its clients by providing all its banking services during this holy month, including EBM services. These devices offer a variety of banking solutions through the best secure technologies, including cash and check deposit services. It also allows Warba Bank clients to include check funds in their accounts as soon as they are deposited. EBM devices play an important role in providing several electronic services, including cash withdrawals and deposits, balance inquiries, password changes, and other services. Warba clients have qualitative advantages, as they can perform some of the basic banking operations via smart phones through the unique Warba Bank application.

Warba Bank succeeded, after a short period of its foundation, in positioning itself in the banking sector, and occupied a leading position in the field of Islamic digital banking services for individuals, as it is considered the local bank with the highest number of shareholder base from members of society, which makes it the closest bank to them by providing the best banking services. It became up to the aspirations of the Kuwaiti society and deservedly earned their trust in a short period.

## IMF warns South Africa economy risks stagnation

**JOHANNESBURG:** South Africa's growth is set decelerate sharply this year due to power cuts and the economy risks stagnation, the International Monetary Fund warned Wednesday. The near-term growth outlook for Africa's most industrialized economy has deteriorated, an IMF team said after a visit to the country. "South Africa's economic and social challenges are mounting, risking stagnation amid an unprecedented energy crisis, increasingly binding infrastructure and logistics bottlenecks..." said in a statement. "Real GDP growth is projected to decelerate sharply to 0.1 percent in 2023 mainly due to a significant increase in the intensity of power cuts, as well as the weaker commodity prices and external environment," it added. In January, South Africa's central bank said it expected the economy to grow by 0.3 percent in 2023, down from 2.0 percent in 2022. —AFP

## Earbuds and watch come into one: Huawei Watch Buds

**KUWAIT:** What if you could have a smartwatch and a pair of earbuds in one device? Sounds too good to be true, does it? Well, it's not. The recently launched Huawei Watch Buds does just that. It's a sleek and smart watch that hides a pair of earbuds inside its body. Whenever you feel like jamming to some tunes, chatting with your mates, or talking to the virtual assistant, just pop up the cover, take the earbuds out and pop them in your ears. And the best part is that the Huawei Watch Buds is a full-blown smartwatch with all the health and fitness features you would want. Here is a lowdown on this premium 2-in-1 smartwatch-earbuds combo. The Huawei Watch Buds will be available in Kuwait on the 30th of March, 2023, on Huawei's official website and select retailers.

### Innovative 2-in-1 design

The trickiest part of combining earbuds and a smartwatch in a single device is actually finding enough space for the earbuds inside a smartwatch. You would think that such a device would end up being heavy and bulky. But using an innovative 2-in-1 design, the Huawei Watch Buds manages to stay sleek and compact while hiding two earbuds under the watch dial, which also doubles as a pop-up cover that reveals the earbuds when opened.

## Brazil's Lula irks foreign oil firms with new tax

**BRASILIA:** Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has not even been in power for 100 days but has already provoked the wrath of foreign oil companies with the creation of a new tax on crude exports. Multinationals Repsol, TotalEnergies, Shell, Equinor and Galp have petitioned a federal court to suspend the 9.2 percent tax due to run from March to July and announced by the government last month. That announcement came on the same day that Finance Minister Fernando Haddad partially restored a tax on fuel that had been suspended by Lula's predecessor Jair Bolsonaro during last year's election campaign.

Mining and Energy Minister Alexandre Silveira said the new crude tax would be an "opportunity to attract (investors) interested in the internal refining" of crude to sell to the domestic market rather than to export. Brazil is the world's ninth largest producer of crude with more than three million barrels a day, mostly drilled from offshore platforms.

Lula, who began his third mandate on January 1, wants to boost the public purse to fund social programs. During his first two terms as president from 2003-10, his social programs lifted millions out of poverty. However, unlike the first decade of the century when there was a boom in primary materials, Brazil's economic situation in 2023 is a lot less prosperous.

The latest projection from Brazil's central bank is for growth to be less than one percent this year.

Due to a lack of resources, the government "looked for the easiest solution, which puts it in conflict with fewer people," said economics professor Juliana Inhasz, from the IUPERJ institute. It is a decision that is "more political than economic" and allows the government to avoid hiking up fuel

The cover opens with the push of a button, and you can take out the earbuds to immerse yourself in high quality audio.

When you think of a smartwatch, you might wonder about its style, health & fitness tracking, and other smart features. But did you ever imagine asking yourself: how does it sound? Well, here we are. So, talking about sound quality, Huawei Watch Buds sounds surprisingly good for calls. And it all starts with dual microphones and a bone conduction sensor. The dual microphones pick up your voice and the sounds around you, and the bone conduction sensor detects how your voice vibrates through your bones. Then using a Deep Neural Network (DNN) call noise reduction algorithm, it can separate your voice from the noise and enhance the vocals for crystal clear calls. No more shouting or repeating yourself.

### All-round health management

Despite making design accommodations to fit in a pair of earbuds, the Huawei Watch Buds doesn't make any compromise when it comes to any of the smart features. That means you get impeccable health management features on the Huawei Watch Buds. It can monitor your SpO2 levels and heart rate with Huawei's TruSeen 5.0+ technology.

### Fits your ears perfectly

The earbuds are designed to fit your ears snugly and securely without any ear handles or wires. They are lightweight and compact, weighing only 4g each. The sleek octagonal cylindrical design makes them easy to wear and store back inside the watch. Since the earbuds sit closer to the ear canal, they are stable



when worn and won't be accidentally knocked off.

The Huawei Watch Buds earbuds also have a unique feature called Wide-Area Auricle Touch Controls that makes the touch controls a delight to use. This feature makes it possible to access the earbuds' functions just by tapping your ears, anywhere from the earbuds to the auricle to the area in front of your ears. You can access multiple functions such as play/pause tracks, answer calls and more.

### Bluetooth calling

But you know what makes the Huawei Watch Buds even more amazing? It's that you can answer calls just by slipping on an earbud without having to fiddle around on the screen. You can also synchronise text messages from your smartphone and quickly reply with text messages and emojis. That's not all. You can also access a wide variety of apps via Watch AppGallery.



**SERRA DO MEL, Brazil:** In this file photo taken on June 30, 2016 an oil drilling platform is seen next to wind turbines at Vamcruz Windfarm in Serra do Mel, Rio Grande do Norte state, Brazil. —AFP

prices too much, which would anger a far larger number of Brazilians, Inhasz told AFP.

### 'It stinks of Robin Hood'

The new crude export tax will create "better fiscal balance," according to the government, and will help make up for the 6.6 billion reais (\$1.25 billion) missed out on by only partially restoring the fuel tax. But the oil sector, which employs 450,000 people and is responsible for 15 percent of industry's contribution to GDP, is up in arms.

In a statement sent to AFP, Shell said it was "worried" about a measure announced "without significant dialogue" that created "uncertainty about new decisions regarding investments." The crude exporters feel unfairly prejudiced by the tax and consider it a "breach of contract" given that it

did not exist when they invested in oil exploration in Brazil. "During the next oil auction, it is possible that the bidders will take into account the risk that the rules will change" at a later date, said Livio Ribeiro, a researcher at the Brazilian Economic Institute at the Getulio Vargas Foundation.

He said this tax sets a "precedent" that creates legal uncertainty and could discourage not just major oil companies but other investors from putting their money in Brazil.

It has attracted scorn not just from foreign oil companies, with newspaper O Globo calling it "a very bad idea" in a recent editorial. Such measures "stink of Robin Hood, who redistributes money from the rich to the poor. But invariably it turns out to be counterproductive," said the newspaper. —AFP