

PRIME MINISTER RISHI SUNAK

India revels, UK shrugs

AGENCIES

Rishi Sunak took charge yesterday as Britain's third premier this year with his Conservative Party floundering in the polls and daunting challenges ahead.

The 42-year-old was born and raised in Southampton, but his appointment as his country's first prime minister of colour has been cheered by Indians who still consider him a son of the soil.

"I am extremely happy," Krishna Kumar, an Indian IT worker, told AFP in the capital New Delhi.

"Great Britain is a country which ruled India for more than 300 years -- now a person of Indian origin is going to rule UK."

Sunak's parents were born into the Indian diaspora in east Africa, and trace their heritage back to pre-independence



Britain's King Charles III greets incoming PM Rishi Sunak during an audience at Buckingham Palace in London yesterday, where Sunak was invited to form a government.

PHOTO: AFP

daunting challenges in power, from an economic crisis to uniting his fractious party.

He is married to Indian-born Akshata Murty, whose father co-founded IT giant Infosys.

Sunak's father was a family doctor in Southampton on England's south coast, and his mother ran a local pharmacy. Sunak waited tables in a local Indian restaurant, before progressing to Oxford and then Stanford University in California.

He swears his oath of allegiance as an MP on the Hindu Bhagavad Gita.

Sunak's ascent has been the subject of wall-to-wall television coverage in India, animating discussion during the usually lethargic Diwali holiday season.

"Indian son rises over the Empire -- History comes full circle in Britain," read a news banner splashed on broadcaster NDTV.

Despite Indians hailing Sunak's appointment as a historic moment for both countries, the political and economic instability he inherits has muted expectations for his tenure.

But for many UK South Asians, as with the country at large, the arrival of Britain's

first prime minister of colour provoked as much debate about his economic credo as about the colour of his skin.

Anand Menon, politics professor at King's College London, said Sunak's ethnicity was "a really, really big deal".

But he added on BBC television: "What reassures me most, actually, is how little comment there has been about it, in a sense that we seem to have normalised this."

If it feels "normalised" now, a brown or black prime minister would have felt unimaginable in Britain only a few years ago.

When Sunak was born in 1980, there had been no Asian or black MPs since World War II.

A handful was then elected for the opposition Labour party. But the Conservatives still had none when Sunak graduated from the University of Oxford in 2001.

In the late 1960s, many were in thrall to the firebrand Tory Enoch Powell, who warned of racial civil war if mass immigration from the old Empire continued.

Polls at the time found a majority of white Britons agreed with Powell.

Today, according to Sunder Katwala, director of the demographics think tank British Future, "most people in Britain now rightly say the ethnicity and faith of the prime minister should not matter".

"They will judge Sunak on whether he can get a grip on the chaos in Westminster, sort out the public finances and restore integrity to politics," he said.



Punjab in northern British India.

At 42, Sunak also became the youngest prime minister of modern times once he is confirmed in office by King Charles III.

Fabulously rich from his previous career in finance, the former hedge fund investor, an observant Hindu, faces

Israeli raid on West Bank kills 6 Palestinians

AFP, Nablus

Six Palestinians were killed in sweeping Israeli raids yesterday in the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian Health Ministry said, in what the army described as an assault targeting the emerging "Lion's Den" armed group.

Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid said that Wadih Al Houh, a leader of a new coalition of Palestinian fighters dubbed The Lions' Den, had been among those killed in the northern West Bank city of Nablus.

The Palestinian health ministry initially reported three dead and 19 wounded shot "by Israeli fire in Nablus".

Later statements said that two more Palestinians had died in Nablus, while another Palestinian was also killed after being shot in the chest in overnight clashes at the village of Nabih Saleh, north of Ramallah.

World is in its 'first truly global energy crisis': IEA chief

REUTERS, Singapore

Tightening markets for liquefied natural gas (LNG) worldwide and major oil producers cutting supply have put the world in the middle of "the first truly global energy crisis", the head of the International Energy Agency (IEA) said yesterday.

Rising imports of LNG to Europe amid the Ukraine crisis and a potential rebound in Chinese appetite for the fuel will tighten the market as only 20 billion cubic meters of new LNG capacity will come to market next year, IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol said during the Singapore International Energy Week.

At the same time the recent decision by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies, known as OPEC+, to cut 2 million barrels

per day (bpd) of output is a "risky" decision as the IEA sees global oil demand growth of close to 2 million bpd this year, Birol said.

"(It is) especially risky as several economies around the world are on the brink of a recession, if that we are talking about the global recession...I found this decision really unfortunate," he said.

Soaring global prices across a number of energy sources, including oil, natural gas and coal, are hammering consumers at the same time they are already dealing with rising food and services inflation. The high prices and possibility of rationing are potentially hazardous to European consumers as they prepare to enter the Northern Hemisphere winter.

Europe may make it through this winter, though somewhat battered, if the weather remains mild, Birol said.

For oil, consumption is expected to

grow by 1.7 million bpd in 2023 so the world will still need Russian oil to meet demand, Birol said.

G7 nations have proposed a mechanism that would allow emerging nations to buy Russian oil but at lower prices to cap Moscow's revenues in the wake of the Ukraine war.

Birol said the scheme still has many details to iron out and will require the buy-in of major oil importing nations.

The energy crisis could be a turning point for accelerating clean sources and for forming a sustainable and secured energy system, Birol said.

"Energy security is the number one driver (of the energy transition)," said Birol, as countries see energy technologies and renewables as a solution.

The IEA has revised up the forecast of renewable power capacity growth in 2022 to a 20% year-on-year increase from 8% previously, with close to 400 gigawatts of renewable capacity being added this year.



A woman reacts as Israeli forces demolish a Palestinian-owned building in the West Bank village of Bani Naim, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US 'dragging feet' over nuclear deal Says Iran's Raisi

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi yesterday accused the United States of "dragging their feet" instead of making a decision to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran.

The 2015 agreement with major powers, known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), gave Iran sanctions relief in return for restricting its nuclear programme.

It has been on life support since then-president Donald Trump withdrew the US from it in 2018, but on-off talks have been held since April 2021 in an effort to revive it.

"Today, it is the Americans who have to make a decision, but they are delaying and dragging their feet", Raisi told reporters in Tehran.

Raisi's comments follow weeks of demonstrations in Iran sparked by the death of the 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on September 16, after her arrest for allegedly violating the country's strict dress code for women.

The US and other Western parties to the deal have imposed fresh sanctions on Iran over its reaction to the Amini protests.

On Saturday, Iranian FM Hossein Amir Abdollahian accused the US of "looking to exert political and psychological pressure on Iran to obtain concessions in the negotiations".

'World's dirtiest man' dies in Iran at 94

AFP, Tehran

An Iranian man nicknamed the "dirtiest man in the world" for not taking a shower for decades has died at the age of 94, state media reported yesterday. Amou Haji, who did not wash for more than half a century and was single, died on Sunday in the village of Dejgah in the southern province of Fars, IRNA reported. Haji had avoided showering over fears of "getting sick", the agency quoted a local official as saying. But "for the first time a few months ago, villagers had taken him to a bathroom to wash," it added. A short documentary film titled "The Strange Life of Amou Haji" was made about his life in 2013, according to Iranian media outlets.

Ex-US defense secy Ashton Carter dies

AFP, Washington

Ashton Carter, who served as US secretary of defense during Barack Obama's administration, has died at age 68, his family said. Carter held the top job at the Pentagon from 2015 to 2017 -- a period that covered the height of the war against the Islamic State group, which lost swathes of territory it seized in Iraq and Syria to local ground forces backed by a US-led international coalition. He also oversaw sweeping changes to the US military, including the opening of combat positions to women and the lifting of a ban on transgender personnel openly serving in the American armed forces. After leaving the Pentagon, Carter became the director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School. He is survived by his wife and two children.



Italy committed to Europe, Nato: PM

AFP, Rome

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni confirmed her government's support for the European Union, Nato and Ukraine yesterday in her first address to parliament, one month after her far-right party won a historic election victory. The 45-year-old, who was sworn in as Italy's first woman premier on Saturday, also rejected any links with her country's fascist past, saying she had "never felt sympathy or closeness to undemocratic regimes... including fascism".

"Italy is fully part of Europe and the Western world," Meloni told the lower house of parliament, adding that it would "continue to be a reliable partner of Nato in supporting Ukraine". Meloni said she would not give in to "Putin's blackmail on energy".



'UNFAIR' PAYMENT SYSTEM

India fines Google \$113m

AFP, New Delhi

India's antitrust watchdog yesterday fined Google \$113 million for "unfair" payment policies, a week after hitting the tech behemoth with an even bigger financial penalty for abusing its market dominance.

The California-based company's Android mobile operating system is by far the dominant player in India and runs on 95 percent of all the country's smartphones, according to research agency Counterpoint.

Independent developers distribute their own software on Android through the company's app store, Google Play, but must use Google's billing system to collect revenue from consumers.

This policy amounts to an "unfair condition on app developers", the Competition Commission of India (CCI) said in a statement announcing the fine.

Google's "one-sided and arbitrary" billing practices left developers "bereft

of the inherent choice to use (a) payment processor of their liking", it added.

The CCI ordered Google to allow app makers to use third-party billing systems and treat rival payment processing services on equal footing.

Yesterday marked the second financial penalty levied by the CCI against Google in a matter of days.

Last week, the watchdog fined the company \$162 million after ruling that it had configured Android to crowd out potential rivals to YouTube, Chrome and other popular Google apps.

It also ordered the company not to enter into any agreement with smartphone makers that would encourage them to only sell Android-based devices or exclusively use its software.

Google faced a similar anti-trust ruling in the European Union that found the company had imposed "unlawful restrictions" on smartphone makers to benefit its search engine.

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