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28 Fortune favors Liverpool in 7-goal thriller against Palace



Standard & Poor's forecasts stability for Kuwait economy

Agency affirms state's AA/A-1+ rating • Balance sheets to remain strong



BEIRUT: Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah is received by Lebanese Prime Minister designate Saad Al-Hariri yesterday after he arrived to attend the 4th Arab Development, Economic and Social Summit. — KUNA (See Page 2)

KUWAIT: The government of Kuwait will remain in a substantial net asset position over the medium term, which should provide a safety buffer against external shocks, according to Standard & Poor's Financial Services LLC (S&P). "We are affirming our 'AA/A-1+' long- and short-term foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings on Kuwait. The outlook is stable," it said in a freshly released report.

The report continues: "The stable outlook reflects our expectation that Kuwait's public and external balance sheets will remain strong over the next two years, primarily underpinned by sizable foreign assets accumulated in the country's sovereign wealth fund. This should partially mitigate risks related to Kuwait's undiversified oil-dependent economy, and rising geopolitical tensions in the region."

"We could raise the ratings if wide-ranging political and economic reforms enhanced institutional effectiveness and improved long-term economic diversification, although we think such a scenario is unlikely over the forecast horizon. We could lower the ratings on Kuwait if we observed a sustained decline in economic wealth levels, for example due to a

fall in oil prices beyond our current expectations or materially weaker rates of economic growth. We could also lower the ratings if Kuwait's domestic political stability deteriorated, or if regional geopolitical risks were to significantly escalate.

"The ratings on Kuwait remain supported by the country's high levels of accumulated fiscal and external buffers. The ratings are constrained by the concentrated nature of the

S&P Global

economy and comparatively weak institutional settings compared with those of non-regional peers in the same rating category. Kuwait derives around 55 percent of GDP, more than 90 percent of exports, and about 90 percent of fiscal receipts from hydrocarbon products. Given this high reliance on the oil sector, we view Kuwait's economy as undiversified. Kuwait's economy remains almost entirely dependent on oil, which accounts for an estimated 90 percent of exports and gov-

ernment revenues.

"Given the oil production cuts announced by OPEC (of which Kuwait is a member) in Dec 2018, we have lowered our 2019 GDP growth forecast for Kuwait to 1.0 percent (we forecast 3.2 percent previously). Despite the economic diversification and reform efforts announced by the government, we expect progress to be only gradual. This carries downside risks if oil prices turn out weaker than expected. The oil sector directly comprises over 50 percent of the country's GDP, although if other related activities are taken into account, that proportion is even higher."

"As of 2017, Kuwait was the world's ninth-largest crude oil producer, with the seventh-largest oil reserves. Assuming current production levels, Kuwait's total proven oil reserves are equivalent to about 100 years. Given this high concentration, Kuwait's economic performance will remain largely determined by oil industry trends. We assume oil prices (Brent) will average \$55 per barrel (/bbl) over 2019-2022, which is lower than our previous oil price projections for these years. This is also lower than the average 2018 Brent price of \$72/bbl.

Continued on Page 24

Real progress needed at new Trump-Kim meet

SEOUL: The planned second summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un needs to make tangible progress on Pyongyang's nuclear weapons if it is to avoid being dismissed as "reality TV", analysts say. Their summit in Singapore in June was undoubtedly historic, the first ever encounter between the leaders of two nations whose forces - backed by arrays of allies from each side of the Cold War - fought each other to a standstill decades ago.

The world's media were transfixed as the pair shook hands on the verandah of a historic hotel and strolled together in its grounds, before Trump held an hour-long press conference extraordinary even by his own unique standards. But the agreement they signed was long on rhetoric and short on details, with Kim pledging to work towards the "denuclearization of the Korean peninsula".

Progress has since stalled as Pyongyang and Washington disagree over what that means and how to achieve it, with each accusing the other of dragging their feet and acting in bad faith. Critics say North Korea has made no concrete commitments and is unlikely to surrender its atomic arsenal, while Washington's policy of maintaining pressure through isolation and sanctions has left Pyongyang seething.

Even so the White House said Friday Trump would meet the North Korean leader again "near the end of February". While no decision has been made on location, a Vietnamese government source told AFP that "logistical preparations" were under way to host the summit, most likely in the capital Hanoi or coastal city of Danang.

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SINGAPORE: In this file photo taken on June 12, 2018, US President Donald Trump meets North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un at the start of their US-North Korea summit at the Capella Hotel on Sentosa Island. — AFP

Mexico fuel pipeline blast kills at least 66

TLAHUELILPAN, Mexico: An explosion and fire in central Mexico killed at least 66 people after hundreds converged on the site of an illegal fuel-line tap to gather gasoline, officials said, during a government crackdown on fuel theft. "The toll that we have until a few minutes ago... is 66 dead, while 76 are injured," the Hidalgo state governor, Omar Fayad, said yesterday. Forensic specialists in white suits worked among

the charred, blackened corpses at the scene, which was guarded by soldiers as the pungent smell of fuel hung in the air.

Fuel traffickers had punctured the pipeline, leading hundreds of people including families to swarm the area, collecting the gasoline in jerrycans and buckets when the blast occurred Friday afternoon, witnesses said. Video taken in the aftermath showed screaming people fleeing the scene as an enormous fire lit up the night sky in Tlahuelilpan, Hidalgo state, north of Mexico City. "I went just to see what was happening, and then the explosion happened. I rushed to help people," Fernando Garcia, 47, told AFP. "I had to claw through pieces of people who had already been burned to bits."

Continued on Page 24



TLAHUELILPAN, Mexico: A fire rages behind the bodies of burned victims at the scene of a massive blaze triggered by a leaky pipeline early yesterday. — AFP

Women march in US cities for 3rd straight year

WASHINGTON: Women marched in hundreds of US cities and overseas yesterday to mark the second anniversary of demonstrations that drew millions of protesters to the streets the day after Republican President Donald Trump's inauguration in Jan 2017. Women's March, a national non-profit organization that evolved from the initial Washington march, again hosted its main event in Washington, with hundreds of "sister" marches in other cities. March

On, a separate grassroots coalition that also grew from the original march, coordinated hundreds of marches in cities such as Boston, Houston, Baltimore and Denver. Leaders of both groups said they would use this year's marches to push policy related to raising the minimum wage, access to reproductive and healthcare and voting rights, among other issues. They are aiming to mobilize women to vote ahead of the 2020 elections, when Trump is expected to be the Republican nominee for president.

"There is definitely huge, huge focus on the 2020 elections," said March On's Natalie Sanchez, an organizer of the 2017 Boston Women's March who is also with March Forward Massachusetts, which organized Saturday's march there.

Continued on Page 24



NEW YORK: Protesters march during the Women's Unity Rally at Foley Square yesterday. — AFP

Giant great white swims with divers

LOS ANGELES: Divers in Hawaii were watching a school of tiger sharks feast on a dead whale on Tuesday when a much bigger fish appeared out of the depths. A 20-foot-long great white shark, believed to be one of the largest in the world, swam right at the divers then began to check out their boats, said Ocean Ramsey, one of the marine biologists in the water at the time. The great white in question is named Deep Blue and has been videoed before. In fact, the 50-year-old female has made such a name for herself in the world

of marine biology she even has her own Twitter account.

"Deep Blue came up and brushed up against the boat, maybe she's pregnant, maybe she's itchy?" Ramsey wrote on Instagram. "We spent the entire day with her till the sun went down." Ramsey, a shark conservationist, posted pictures and video of the encounter to show great whites are not "mindless monsters". "We need sharks and yet, perhaps because of the negative and inaccurate way they are portrayed in mass media many people do not care that they are being killed at a rate of 70,000,000-100,000,000 every year!" she said, criticizing the mass slaughter of the creatures to make shark-fin soup.

The great white is uncommon in Hawaii's warm waters, but hunger could have driven Deep Blue out of her comfort zone, Ramsey said. — Reuters



OAHU, Hawaii: Diver Ocean Ramsey swims next to a female great white shark off the coast of Hawaii on Jan 15, 2019. — AFP (See Page 24)

Local

Arab Economic Summit's draft declaration warns of aggravating refugees' crises

Summit spotlights Arab potentials for serving citizens

BEIRUT: The draft declaration of the 4th Arab Economic and Social Development Summit in Beirut warned Arab countries from aggravating refugee crises. Beirut summit declaration, which Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) received, stressed the importance of joining all international donors and organizations to ease the suffering of all refugees. Arab leaders affirmed the significance of supporting the Palestinian people in their confrontation with the Israeli forces assuring their beliefs in their responsibility towards Jerusalem in order to preserve its Arab, Islamic and Christian identity. They also confirmed the importance of unifying all efforts by all concerned parties to provide the necessary funding to execute the plans in the developmental strategy of the occupied East Jerusalem 2018/2022.

The Arab Leaders showed importance of attracting more Arab and international investments to organize a secure immigration for the refugees. They have also spotlighted technology and its global effect on economy and the importance of keeping up with the rest of the world and to adopt new leading policies to create necessary skills to benefit from digital economy. The draft declaration announced the approval of the guiding charter to evolve small and medium businesses to guarantee Arab economic integration to create a competitive environment that will contribute to terminating unemployment. It also declared the approval of the Arab strategy for sustainable energy of 2030 to achieve sustainable development in its economic, social and environmental dimensions.

The Beirut summit declaration affirmed that investing in human is the fastest way to achieve the required economic growth, after approving the strategy of eliminating poverty with an aim to decrease poverty by 50 percent by 2030. The declaration indicated the agreement of Arab leaders on a regional initiative for women's health in the Arab region as a part of achieving sustainable development goals of 2030. The summit's declaration emphasized the importance of growing potentials and encouraging creativity in order to build a better and a more productive human that will contribute to building a society compatible with sustainable development.

Leaders also authorized a strategy to protect children seeking refuge in the region and stressed the importance of providing them with better lives away from fighting and terror. Arab Leader have decided to hold the Arab Economic and Social Summit for the 5th time after four years in 2023 in Mauritania to follow-up the decision made in this year's declaration.

Summit discusses essential social, economic issues

BEIRUT: The Arab Development, Economic and Social Summit will discuss crucial matters today as Arab leaders gather to come up with positive political and economic outcomes benefiting Arab citizens. This fourth summit continues on the road paved by previous summits to fulfill Arab dreams and also will contribute to the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030. On the economic sphere, Assistant Arab League Secretary for Economic Affairs Ambassador Kamal Ali said that one of the chief issues to be discussed during the summit was the Sudanese initiative to achieve Arab food security. Other paramount topics on the agenda will include food security emergency programs, Arab economic integration, improvement of Arab commercial exchange, and the development of agricultural and food products in the region, said the official. He added that updates on the grand Arab free-trade zone, digital economy, the Arab customs union, micro-Arab business ventures, small and medium Arab enterprises were also to be discussed by the summit.

Palestinian economy

Supporting Palestinian economy through UNRWA as well as other means in addition to the 2018-2020 strategy sectoral development plan for Jerusalem also one of the major topics of the event, said the Arab League official. He noted that the social and economic woes facing the Syrian refugees will be touched upon and hopefully new plans would be introduced to help the refugees. Meanwhile, Assistant Secretary-General, head of social affairs in the Arab League Haifa Abu Ghazaleh said that the summit would provide an important opportunity for the Arabic community to concentrate on the roots of social problems and current social standings. "The summit will debate a number of proposals that concern the social issues. It will focus on the importance of investing in the human resources to empower laborers to deal with the future as it affects economic growth directly by terminating poverty," Abu Ghazaleh added.

Abu Ghazaleh believed that the high profile attendance for this summit affirmed the significance of merging economic, social and environmental priorities to achieve sustainable development. "This summit is a journey that will reflect on many sectors in the Arab nation in the upcoming years," Abu Ghazaleh continued. Abu Ghazaleh also noted that this summit's agenda focuses on several cases that are worrying in many fields such as poverty, producing productive working hands and reinforcing social integration in different parts of the Arab world.

Lebanon's economic rise

The summit will focus on three main topics, the inter-mutual Arab market for electricity, land, aerial and maritime transportation as well as food security. Its business agenda includes 24 items, starting with a report by the Secretariat of the Arab League on Joint Arab economic, social and development works and a report on following up on last summit's decisions that, held in Riyadh in 2013. Significance of holding this summit in Beirut was a point of consensus among officials and Lebanese economic experts who thought it would reinforce Lebanon's place and its economy in the region, especially after dangerous phase the country went through.

Member of the parliamentary national economic, commerce and industry committee Elias Hankach said that holding the summit in Beirut would revive Lebanon's role among Arab nations, encourage return of foreign investments, restore faith in Lebanon's place among Arab countries in organizing such a major event and ensuring all security and logistic procedures". The summit is held in a delicate time where talks are spreading about rebuilding Syria, amid expectations Lebanon would have a major role at this level .. it would reflect directly on Lebanese traders, entrepreneurs and industrialists who are looking for markets to launch businesses," Hankach continued.

In the meantime, economic expert professor Jassem Ajaka said that the summit is a meeting among Arab leaders to distribute necessary resources for economic and social growth, and for Lebanon hosting such an event affirms its status regionally after the political and security events it has faced in the last five decades that have weakened its economy. Ajaka said Arab investments in Lebanon between 2006 and 2011 displayed opportunities provided by Lebanon, as an important international financial center, with a banking sector that could be equivalent to counterparts in the west. Ajaka also stressed on the importance of shedding the light on the economic feasibility of the CEDRE conference for international donors and investors to support Lebanon's economy that took place in Paris, France in 2018. It was attended by 40 countries that pledged to donate \$11 billion, a huge sum quite lucrative for aspiring entrepreneurs. — KUNA

Major event

The fourth Arab Development, Economic and Social Summit is a major event for discussing issues concerning Arab peoples, namely enhancing their living standards. Since its launch in Kuwait in 2009, Arabs' interest in the



Unifying efforts to fund East Jerusalem development

summit have increased, noticeably because it concerns the private sector, civil society, women, youth, education, food, water, energy security and development. Renovation and advancement in these sectors are a mutual interest for the Arabs, thus they ought to join hands for finding proper solutions to problems in these arenas.

Meetings among presidents and officials on sidelines of the summit contribute to activating plans to tackle mutual issues and reflect positively on political matters of common interest. The Lebanese aspire to see, during the summit, Arabs' collective will to cast aside thorny and divisive political issues and throw weight, anew, behind Lebanon after the freezing of Gulf countries' investments, widely considered a hard blow to the country's economy. Moreover, significance of this Arab Development, Economic and Social Summit lies in shedding light on economic capabilities of the participating Arab countries, which can attract huge investors from various countries worldwide.

Former Lebanese President Michel Suleiman says in a statement that value of this summit is discussing Arab development and social matters; away from complicated politics, focusing on development of Arab citizens' potentials and unifying the vision on handling current economic and development crises in the region. "Working on economic integration among Arab countries is one of the tasks of this summit through creating a productive center



DELHAMIEH, Lebanon: Refugees walk through flood water and mud covering the ground at an informal tent settlement housing Syrian refugees following winter storms in the area of Delhamiyeh, in the central Bekaa Valley on January 17, 2019. — AFP

point in each participating country for economy and development according to their strength spots," the expert Suleiman continues. "Lebanese authorities are counting on this summit to assure Lebanon's place among Arab nations, and to restore its trust amongst them after a tough phase," he added.

Delicate time

Meanwhile, Economy Minister Raed Khoury affirms the former president's opinion, saying that it is being held at a delicate time where conferees can hold extensive talks about finding solutions for ongoing common issues. Moreover, it is aspired to pave way for rebuilding the country and regional states. As for the economic expert, Ghazy Wazni, he says that the greatest benefit of this

summit is discussing ways of strengthening commercial ties, future economic relationships among Arab countries and evolving economic growth, excluding the oil sector.

Wazni considers this summit as a chance for two challenges: to enhance Arab economy to achieve the 2030's sustainable development goals and to rebuild Syria and Iraq. These two Arab countries have suffered widespread damage and destruction due to internal wars and infighting. Arab Development.

Economic and Social Summit was launched in 2009 in Kuwait for the first time, in line with a Kuwaiti-Egyptian initiative. During that summit, Arab leaders decided to hold the Economic Summit meetings regularly every two years. It was held in Kuwait 2009, Sharm El-Sheikh in 2011 and Riyadh in 2013. — KUNA

2009 Summit aspired to uplifting Arabs' living standards

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, along with former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, proposed the Arab Economic Summit as an event focusing on promotion of Arab states' economies. The first Arab Economic Summit began in Kuwait, January 2009. The initiative aimed to tackle issues of economic, developmental, social and cultural importance that affect life and dignity of Arab citizens and their right to lead a secure and decent life. On such basis, His Highness Sheikh the Amir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah dedicated unique interest and support to ensure success of this summit and its organization. The call by His Highness to hold an Arab economic development summit reflected his deep vision and far-reaching insight regarding necessity of integration and development for the peoples of the Arab world, his Arab and national sense, as well as his concern that the Arab summits and conferences achieve the ambitions of the Arab peoples.

Taking into consideration importance of economic, social and development aspects with regard to comprehensive Arab security, this summit is a historic turning point in the Arab joint work and the real and right offset in implementing the Arab economic project, which was born fragile half a century ago. The summit's agenda includes issues relating to unemployment, preparing and qualifying Arab labor, methods of developing education, water and food security, in addition to discussing the issues of technology and methods of enhancing the coordination mechanism between the concerned Arab organizations to confront climate changes, natural disasters and emergencies.

Kuwait Declaration of the Arab Economic Summit indicates that it has been launched on basis of a new Arab economic development ideology, committing to what has been stated in the Arab League Charter, agreements and charters signed within the framework of the League and adopted strategies. The Declaration commended the Kuwaiti-Egyptian initiative, which underlined the relation between security and Arab social peace of the economic and social development, which was activated through issuing two resolutions in Riyadh and Damascus Arab Summits of 2007 and 2008 respectively, after a special summit to push the development cycle in the Arab world. It explained that the necessary resolutions were adopted to guarantee uplifting the living level of the Arab citizen, giving priority to joint Arab investments, and giving way to private sector and civil societies to participate in the advancing process of the economic and social development.

The declaration affirmed supporting infrastructure projects, developing sectors of production, business, services and social projects, preserving environment, in addition to projects of electricity link, Arab land link scheme and water and food security programs in order to realize Arab economic integration. Arab leaders commended the pioneer development initiative declared by His Highness the Amir on launching the Economic, Social and Development Summit. They also hailed Kuwait's contribution that was worth \$500 million to the budget of this initiative. In addition, it was decided to hold the Economic Summit meetings regularly every two years.

Due to the impact of the global financial crisis, the disturbance in the world financial market, the danger of recession and economic deflation and its negative repercussion on development, many countries, economic blocks and international financial organizations hurried to find proper solutions and limit the buildup of damage. Many leaders agreed to amplify their efforts to attain Arab economic and social integrity, as it is a main objective that all Arab countries are seeking to achieve the joint Arab economic and social action.

Regarding the global financial crisis, the declaration pointed out the leaders' agreement on following monetary and financial policies that enhancing Arab countries' potentials to face the backlash of the global financial crisis, so it asserted the importance of encouraging intra-Arab investment, providing suitable atmosphere, necessary protection, facilitating Arab capital movement among Arab Nations, widening the scope and mechanism of implementing the unified agreement of investing Arab capitals in the Arab countries. The Declaration reiterated importance of enhancing role of funds and joint Arab financial organizations, developing its resources, facilitating conditions of loans, mechanisms and accesses to finance basic infrastructure projects to allow participation in financing Arab economic integration projects, in cooperation with the private sector and providing credit facilities to various ventures.

Concerning the private sector, the Declaration emphasized providing the economic fundamentals and proper legislation environment by lifting obstacles that limit achieving economic and social development in Arab countries. The Declaration focused strongly on the action to elevate human potentials of the Arab citizen, and widening the scope of women and youth empowerment, increasing job opportunity before them, advancing health, education and

increasing real incomes. Furthermore, it focused on health services, the importance of increasing basic health care projects in Arab countries, activating the role of joint Arab health organizations to promote the health service level and providing it in a proper way to the Arab citizen and uplifting pharmaceutical production. As for women, The Declaration highlighted importance of woman empowerment, promoting her economic, social and legal conditions, enhancing her role in public life to achieve equality principle and assure justice and equity principles in the society.

In the field of agriculture and food security, the Declaration called for taking action to increase agricultural productivity, improving its rates, encouraging investment in agricultural development by accelerating the implementation of agricultural development strategy adopted in Riyadh Summit 2007. The Summit called also for taking all the necessary procedures to clear obstacles that are still hindering in the communication and information technology sector, and encouraging private companies and organizations to attract investment.

Demands of preserving the environment and natural resources, using those resources optimally to achieve sustainable development were one of the main aims of the Declaration. It also emphasized Arab cooperation in the energy field; particularly improving its effectiveness and rationalizing its usage as a mean of sustainable development, strengthening the existing Arab electrical link networks, enhancing natural gas networks and increasing the participation of the private sector in its investments. Demands made in the Declaration, regarding transportation, seeking to achieve linking land, marine and air transportation networks among Arab countries as they are the main veins of trade, tourism, investment and labor movement inside the Arab region. — KUNA

Egypt's top lawmaker arrives in Kuwait



KUWAIT: Speaker of the Egyptian House of Representatives Ali Abdel-Aal and his accompanying delegation arrived in Kuwait yesterday on a five-day official visit. The top Egyptian lawmaker was welcomed by National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, head of the accompanying mission of honor MP Ali Al-Deqbas, Kuwaiti Ambassador in Cairo Mohammad Al-Thuwaikeh and Egyptian Ambassador in Kuwait Tareq Al-Qoni. — KUNA

Local

Kuwait Air Force holds show at Ali Al-Salem Air Base in Salmi

‘Great opportunity to encourage young men to join the army’



KUWAIT: Kuwait Army Chief of Staff Lt Gen Mohammed Al-Khudhur is seen in a group picture taken during the event. — Defense Ministry photos



A helicopter featured in an airshow held as part of the event.

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Air Force held a static show event at the Ali Al-Salem Air Base in Salmi yesterday. The show was held in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior, Kuwait Fire Service Department, Kuwait National Guard, Ministry of Health and some international armed forces. It was held under the patronage of First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. On display were various old and new vehicles of the Kuwait armed forces, including tanks, mobile operations rooms, special forces vehicle and others. Visitors also enjoyed getting onboard some aircraft and helicopters.

Kuwait Army Chief of Staff Lt Gen Mohammed Al-Khudhur said the open day of the Kuwait armed forces comes as part of the upcoming national celebrations, in which the armed forces always participate. “This is a great opportunity for the public to witness various equipment of the Kuwait armed forces to encourage young men to join the army. The participation of various authorities reflects the cooperation between them and the public,” he said.

The event included two air shows including F/A 18 slow pass, parachute jumping and an Apache show. This was followed by the K9 team (dog) show and the explosive detonation team show. The Kuwaiti Army military band also performed during the event. Children were able to enjoy entertainment activities at the event free of charge such as camel riding and slides. In addition, some competitions were held and visitors received souvenirs.



Kuwait Air Force aircraft displayed at the event.



The Kuwaiti Army military band performs during the event.

News in brief

Embassy monitors citizen's death

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Embassy in Jordan is closely following up on the recent death of a Kuwaiti national in Amman, Ambassador Azeed Al-Daihani said yesterday. “The embassy is in close contact with Jordanian security authorities,” the ambassador said in a statement, adding that the embassy was informed that a Kuwaiti national was found dead in an under-construction building in Amman. He quoted Jordanian Minister of Interior Samir Al-Mobaideen as confirming that the incident was under investigations. The Kuwaiti diplomat spoke highly of Jordanian security efforts to find the details of the incident, according to the statement. — KUNA

Online commercial licenses

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Commerce and Industry announced it will start today providing online licenses for new companies, stores and commercial projects. The process will allow small and medium enterprises to receive their licenses within a shorter time period and will also reduce the number of clients in the ministry's centers, said the ministry in a statement yesterday. It added that the online request form only requires the leasing contract and leasing receipt without any other documents. The new license is equipped with a barcode that provides the ministry's inspectors with the company's information and is connected directly to the ministry's database, the statement said. — KUNA

Early pregnancy unit

KUWAIT: Head of Adan Hospital's Obstetrics and Gynecology Department Dr Abeer Al-Thaydi said the hospital will soon launch an early pregnancy assessment unit to take care of possible illnesses during the early months of pregnancy, detect possible complications and their effect on patients and hospitalize patients before discharging them to help them resume their regular routines. Speaking in a press statement she made on the sidelines of a lecture at Adan Hospital delivered by pregnancy consultant Dr Janye Terry from St Mary Hospital in the UK, Thaydi said new clinics are being currently equipped with early pregnancy assessment units in outpatient departments to work in the morning and afternoon hours. Thaydi also announced that as part of MoH's visiting doctors program, Egyptian hysteroscopy professor Osama Shawki will visit Adan Hospital this week. — By Meshal Al-Enezi

‘Masked men’ video

KUWAIT: The Interior Ministry's Relations and Security Information Department said policemen identified the person responsible for a video clip that went viral online and showed several individuals wearing masks on a street. The man confessed to filming the clip and publishing it, saying it was an advertisement for a TV program to be broadcast on a local TV channel. The department said that an undertaking was taken from him not to film and broadcast without obtaining approval from security authorities. — By Hanan Al-Saadoun

Kuwait reaffirms support for UN envoy's Libya mission

NEW YORK: Kuwait reiterated yesterday its support for Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) Ghassan Salame to facilitate the Libyan political process through the UN Plan of Action. The position was expressed in a speech at a UN Security Council meeting about Libya, delivered by Kuwait's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi.

Otaibi urged all Libyan parties to take action for a peaceful political settlement by engaging in technical, legislative, political and security conditions for transparent and peaceful elections, eventually leading up to a united and stable Libya. Last year, the Libyan people faced a set of serious challenges that posed a threat to their country's security and stability; primarily hostilities and military clashes, he regretted. The so-called Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for bombings of several vital institutions such as Libyan High National Electoral Commission (HNEC), Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), he added.

The UN plan of action aims at establishing public order based on security forces and police to replace armed groups in addition to developing mechanisms linked to UNSMIL, he said. In this context, the Kuwaiti diplomat hoped all parties in Tripoli would reply positively to the plan in question. For the first time in seven years, the first police station in Tripoli capital was established to enhance Libyan security services under the supervision of the Libyan government, Otaibi said.

Otaibi hoped that a national Libyan conference due in the coming few weeks would lead to pushing the Libyan political process forward, ending inter-Libyan divisions and stalemate, and armed militias. He renewed his appeal to the House of Representatives and the Supreme Council of the State to finalize limited changes to a Libyan political agreement purposed to reform the executive authority, along with a constitutional referendum law.

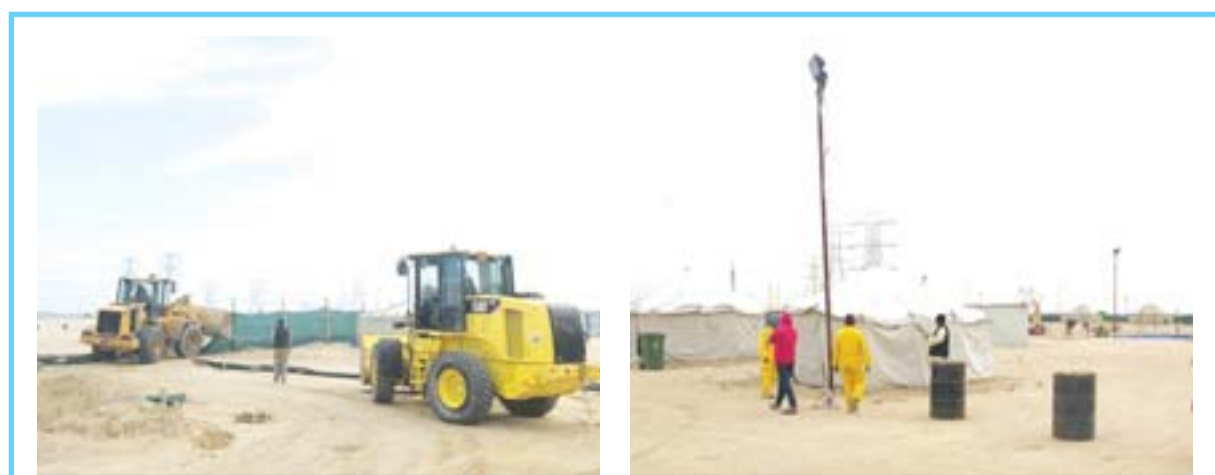


NEW YORK: Kuwait's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi speaks during a UN Security Council meeting on Libya. — KUNA

Peace in Darfur

Meanwhile, Kuwait renewed its support for Sudan to move towards peace and sustainability in the Darfur region. This came in the speech of Kuwait at the Security Council meeting on the 1591 Committee on Sudan delivered by Otaibi. Otaibi expressed his satisfaction at the continuous decline in the number of displaced persons in Darfur for years, hoping that Member States would do their utmost to support Sudan to provide conditions conducive to the return and stability of displaced people and the provision of basic services to them. “We are gathering for the progress achieved in stabilizing all areas of Darfur, except for hostilities in the vicinity of Marrah mountains and it is imperative that the Council review the sanctions regime pursuant to resolution 2400, which is gradually lifted in line with developments on the ground and strengthens the authority of the government to exercise its sovereignty throughout its territory,” Otaibi said.

Otaibi reiterated appreciation of Sudanese authority's efforts in collecting weapons and renewing the cease-fire, pointing out that the achievement of security in Darfur has pushed most armed factions out of Sudan. “The priority of a political solution remains our goal and despite the lack of significant political progress during the reporting period, the Government of the Sudan remains the only party involved in all negotiations on Darfur,” he said. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality announced issuing warning notices to 956 violating camps and removing 841 that had been pitched without licenses, in addition to 114 that were used for commercial purposes. — By Meshal Al-Enezi

local spotlight

Cybercrimes law



By Muna Al-Fuzal

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The 2016 cybercrime law includes severe penalties for those who violate its provisions or try to breach the privacy and confidentiality of its terms. The implementation of the law sparked a wave of rage from activists on social media, who saw it as narrowing the freedom of opinion, especially since we are witnessing a technological revolution in the world, which means that there is enough space to express opinions without restrictions or criminalization.

Since then, people have been divided in maintaining a consistent position towards this law, with differences between supporters and opponents according to their points of view and experience. Some said the law will preserve the privacy and security of Internet users, whether on social networks or websites that are heavily exposed to intrusions, especially websites of government agencies that have confidential files. It also targets those who insult others.

One of the provisions of the cyber law is that a person who threatens to kill a person, harm the dignity of a person or damage their honor can be punished by up to five years' imprisonment and a fine of KD 5,000 to KD 20,000 or either of the two penalties. Opponents of this law are mostly young people and activists who find social networking sites a means to express their personal views on issues of internal or external societies.

Statistics of the public prosecution published by Al-Qabas daily in June 2017 stated that despite the adoption of the Information Technology Act, the number of harassers has increased, as 90 percent of the complaints handled and investigated from the beginning of 2017 till the end of May were concerned with libel charges. The law considers cyberspace a “public place and therefore offensive speech is considered a crime”.

In Jan 2018, the government issued a field study conducted by the department of statistics and research at the ministry of justice, which noted an increase in cybercrime in the Kuwaiti society. It indicated that about 75 percent of citizens and residents use the Internet daily, but 32 percent of them are unaware of the penalties resulting from these crimes.

The study also revealed that cybercrime jumped from 20 percent to 170 percent during 2014 to 2016. The study stressed that crimes committed against children on the Internet call for the adoption of proactive measures of the child protection law by the state with competent authorities, and applying this law to educational and technical aspects that contribute to preventing this phenomenon. The findings indicate that the number of cybercrime cases increased year to year. As to the average number of cases recorded during the period 2016-2010, three cases were filed every three days. In 2014, 2015 and 2016, there were six cases per day. This is a big jump, I believe.

We are now in 2019. I trust that we have the right to see things more clearly. I personally have been against any law restricting the freedom of expression, but I do not agree with the slander and abuse of others. I think some of the clauses of the law need to be reviewed. For example, the study confirmed that the department of juvenile welfare recently dealt with 30 female students accused of posting an abusive poster on Twitter against their school principal. Another unusual case involved a man who took pictures of a married woman and posted them on Twitter.

Recently, everyone was surprised by the news of a Kuwaiti female professor who fled to the United States because she posted a sarcastic joke on her birthday on her Twitter account. She used a method that is used by foreigners and meant to ridicule the situation and not the Creator, but she was accused of insulting Allah and was referred to the public prosecution, so she left the country for good.

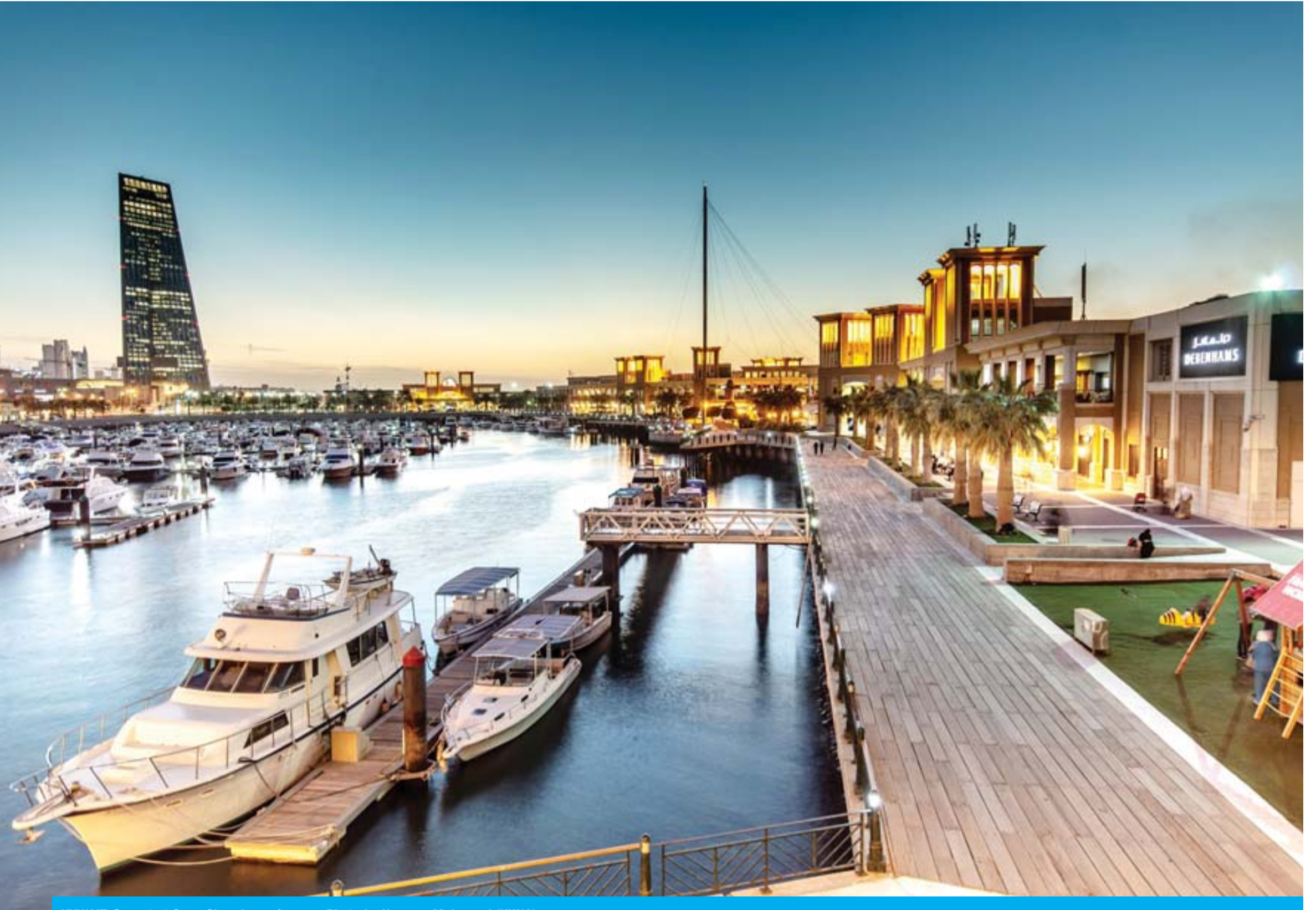
I think she found no way but to leave her country and live abroad. Many others have also fled or left the country due to verdicts that were issued because of this law. The question remains - why to keep a law if its negative outcomes are huge and reflect badly on the country's reputation more than its positives and which has turned into an oppressive nightmare for intellectuals and educated Kuwaitis?

Salih Ashour is a member of the National Assembly representing the first constituency. He recently said the cybercrime law is bad as its application had led to the exodus of Kuwaiti politicians, pilots, doctors, engineers and young people, and it is time to abolish this law because Kuwait is a country of freedom of expressing opinions and intellectual pluralism. This courageous statement by a strong and committed MP means that there is real harm not only to these figures, but on the reputation of the country. It is also repulsive to citizens because they may express personal convictions without experience or understanding, especially young people.

One of the results of the study was the demand of community awareness sessions on e-crimes. I think the issuance of fines for those who speak badly and use abusive words is acceptable, but the harsh prison sentences make me wonder about the future of a person who is imprisoned with murderers and drug dealers for many years for a word they wrote. I hope MP Ashour can convince more MPs of his position and that the media adopt this issue and demand a review of the law. It's about time.

Local

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Sunset at Souq Sharq's marina. — Photo by Hassam Mahmoud (KUNA)

Zakat House pride of Kuwait, its people: Awqaf Minister

KD 51,455 million total revenues in 10 months

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs and Minister of State for Municipal Affairs Fahd Al-Shula said yesterday that Kuwait's Zakat House is the pride of Kuwait and its people, thanks to its humanitarian and charity work. This came during the minister's chairmanship of Zakat House's board meeting during which he reviewed a report on performance indicators and progress of work in various sectors of Zakat House during the period from January 1 to September 30, 2018.

The Minister praised efforts exerted by the Board of Directors to promote the Zakat House till it reached this distinguished position in charitable and humanitarian work, calling for more work and effort to maintain the prestigious status of the Zakat House. The statement said that the total revenues of the Zakat House reached about KD 51,455 million (\$168 million), a growth of 14 percent over the same period of 2017. He noted that the House's Board thanked the benefactors and supporters for their donations and support to enable the house to continue its charitable and humanitarian work in society. He pointed out that the total domestic and external expenditure of the Zakat House reached about KD 39,780 million (about \$117 million), while the domestic expenditure amounted to KD 23 million (about \$70 million) and the external about KD



The Zakat House.

16,272 million (about \$48 million), indicating that they are conditional amounts of donors to set up projects abroad.

The number of families benefiting from Zakat House assistance within Kuwait reached 17,873 families, with assistance amounting to KD 7,186 mil-

lion (about \$21 million). He concluded by saying that some 7,788 families have benefited from foodstuffs and in-kind assistance per month, in addition to the financial support provided to some bodies and ministries through joint fund agreements between the Zakat House and those entities. — KUNA

KIB offers non-profit medical financing up to KD 15,000

KUWAIT: As part of its ongoing commitment to providing the best banking products and services to its customers, KIB is currently offering non-profit medical financing for up to KD 15,000, in cooperation with Smile Gallery Dental Center. With this offer, the bank provides customers with the best medical services through flexible financing solutions for a maximum of 36 months - all in line with Islamic sharia principles.

On this occasion, General Manager of the Retail Banking Department, Othman Tawfiqi, said: "This financing solution reaffirms KIB's dedication to providing the best and latest products and services to its customers, making the bank a true partner in all aspects of people's lives. As part of this solution, the bank provides the necessary financing to customers interested in medical treatment services, which includes access to various treatments across diverse medical areas at a reasonable price and without any interest."

Tawfiqi added that this financing solution will facilitate a healthier, more flexible lifestyle for KIB customers. The bank offers customers who are interested in medical treatment and services access to short-term, easy payment terms with utmost flexibility, reflecting its commitment as a leading Islamic banking institution.



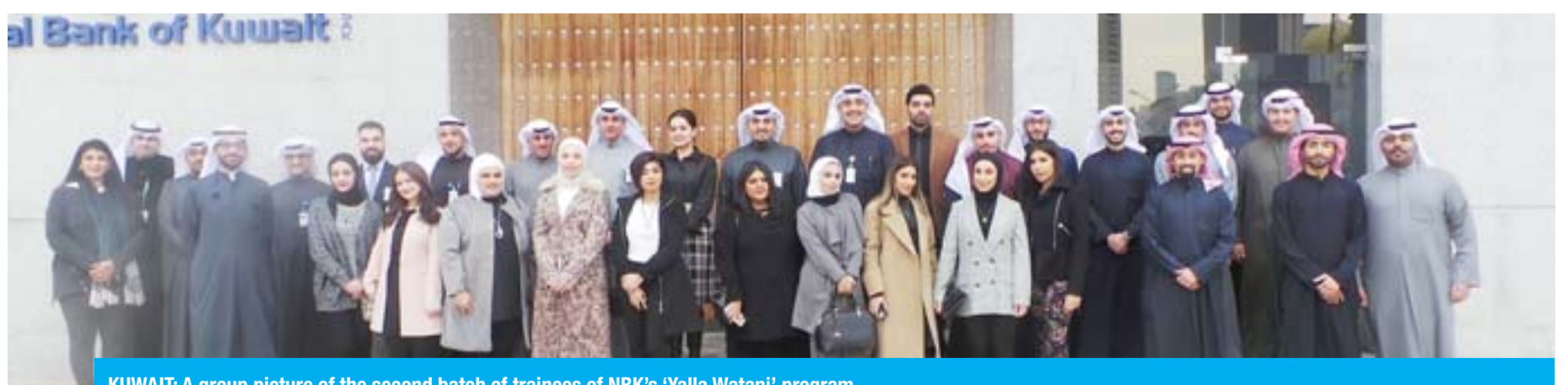
Othman Tawfiqi

NBK welcomes second batch of trainees for 2019

KUWAIT: The National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) launched the second batch of its 'Yalla Watani' program for the year 2019 for newly recruited employees to work in NBK branches. The trainees were welcomed by Emad Al-Ablani, General Manager of the Group Human Resources and Mohammed Al-Othman, General Manager of the Consumer Banking Group.

The concentrated and NBK-specific program focuses on training employees on the various aspects of banking. The program comprises of the main banking principles, credit cards, loans, accounts, insurance, fraud risks, money laundering, in addition to the core banking system.

Throughout the program, unique sets of skills will be enhanced in order to improve performance, increase self-confidence, adapt to change and promote innovation. The program also caters for soft



KUWAIT: A group picture of the second batch of trainees of NBK's 'Yalla Watani' program.

skills, work ethics, professional behavior and teamwork training.

'Yalla Watani' program is going to be conducted over a period of four weeks, with 22 participants, allowing them to cover in detail the branch operations processes and enhance their skills to comply with the current work environment.

Ablani said: "The Yalla Watani program is one of

the most important professional development programs that trains Kuwait graduates into the private sector in Kuwait. It aims to develop their skills and integrate them into the banking sector."

Moreover, he highlighted that NBK is the best institution for graduates and talent to learn and acquire knowledge and experience in an ideal work environment. This is enabled through the training

opportunities that are organized in cooperation with leading educational institutions.

Ablani explained that 'Yalla Watani' program offers practical and theoretical training and aims to help the newly recruited to achieve the objectives and meet the high standards set by the Bank; while also personally growing in their professional career and successfully integrate in the workplace.

Local

Kuwait sends much-needed aid to refugees afflicted by snowstorm

Relief supplies sent to thousands in Syria and Lebanon

KUWAIT: In shadow of the winter peak marked with biting cold, heavy snow and rains in the Levant, Kuwait has hurriedly sent convoys of relief supplies to thousands of relocated Syrians and refugees in Syria and Lebanon. A convoy of 20 large trucks packed with food, heating materials, mattresses and beddings has recently headed to Syria to deliver the supplies to more than 2,000 families, some 10,000 people, suffering from the heavy rains and floods; as well as to impoverished Syrians.

Walid Al-Suwailem, the head of Syria and Turkey bureau of Al-Rahma International Charity, said that the relief supplies were dispatched, with support by Kuwaiti charities, donors and 'diwaniyahs' and in cooperation with four Syrian relief and welfare associations. 'Warmness of the winter' was the motto of Al-Rahma's relief convoy for the needy to the Levant and Turkey, where many regions hosting thousands of Syrian refugees have been blanketed with snow, witnessed floods and damage related to the severe and stormy weather. Suwailem expressed gratitude to Kuwait's leader His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and various departments and associations that lent support for such ongoing humanitarian activities-named

by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Simultaneously, Al-Rahma organized its first relief operation in Lebanon as part of its winter campaign there, themed 'below zero.' Teams distributed food, heating fuel to 300 Syrian families in a number of shanty towns in the Bekaa valley, a lush plain in eastern Lebanon recently shrouded with heavy snow resulting from the notorious 'Norma' storm, as branded by the local media. Chairman of the International Islamic Charitable Organization (IICO) Dr Abdullah Al-Maatouq said in a statement that the IICO has mobilized all available resources and volunteers to relieve Syrian refugees who have taken brunt of the snow storm in Syria's neighboring countries, namely Lebanon, where snow has ravaged the tent camps and made warming for the refugees difficult to attain. The first relief trip to Lebanon aimed at delivering food parcels to 300 Syrian families and heating fuel, in addition to food supplies.

Some of the 1.5 million Syrians who have fled war in their country live in rag-tag tents in the Bekaa plain. The storm, he says, has ravaged some of the camps and has taken lives. Gale winds have uprooted tents leaving scores of refugees without a roof over their heads, amid swamping rain water that

Gale winds, snow ravage refugees' tents



BEIRUT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society members help distribute aid material to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. —KUNA

seeped into tents. Maatouq appealed to the international community to intervene to relieve the refugees in Lebanon, including the eastern region of Ersal, noting that the inflowing aid supplies have remained largely insufficient for the large number of refugees.

In Ersal, a town in the border region, the Kuwait Red Crescent Society distributed aid materials to

600 Syrian families, the society General Secretary Maha Al-Barjas said, noting that the hard weather had aggravated the refugees' hardships. In Ghana, a \$327,000, given by donors in Kuwait, was delivered to support low-income families and orphans. In Gaza, Kuwait gave a grant to establish a birth ward in Al-Shifaa Hospital. Kuwait has donated up to \$200 million to help rebuild Gaza. — KUNA

Kuwait delivers aid to Syrian refugees in East Lebanon

BEIRUT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), upon instructions of His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, delivered yesterday relief aid to some 600 Syrian refugee families residing in Bekaa, east of Lebanon. Secretary General of KRCS Maha Al-Barjas said that necessities and relief aid were delivered to the refugees in six camps in Saadnayel town. She added that the main goal of the campaign - in coordination with the Lebanese Red Cross and the



BEIRUT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) workers deliver relief aid to Syrian refugee families residing in Bekaa, east of Lebanon. — KUNA

Kuwaiti Embassy - was to lesser the suffering of the refugees facing the harsh winter conditions. Last Wednesday, KRCS Chairman of the Board Dr Hilal Al-Sayer announced that His

Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah ordered an urgent relief aid campaign worth \$1.5 million aimed at alleviating the suffering of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon. — KUNA

Kuwait spearheading Gaza desalination project

BRUSSELS: Kuwait is playing a dominant role to push for construction of a desalination plant in Gaza aimed at alleviating the water hardships being faced by two million Gazans. "We want to send a message to the people in Gaza that this project is not dead. It is alive and the actual construction has already started," said Dr Mohammed Sadeqi, engineering advisor in the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED).

Sadeqi made his statement after participating in the one-day Coordination Meeting on the Gaza Central Desalination Program hosted by the European Commission in Brussels which ended Friday evening. He noted that Kuwait's overall contribution to the reconstruction of Gaza is \$200 million as a grant administered by the KFAED. From this amount, \$60 million is designated for the Gaza desalination plant.

The project consists of building a desalination plant and water conveyors that take the produced water to northern and central Gaza. More than two million people will benefit from the project, he noted. The project is in the phase of completing the financial plan. Fifty percent of the total cost of the project valued at over 500 million euro (\$568 million) will come from Arab countries and the other fifty percent from international donors.

The Arab donors are managed by the Islamic Development Bank, while KFAED is managing its own contribution which is \$60 million. The Arab countries have already committed the fifty percent. "There is some deficiency on the part of international donors. So this meeting was aimed at coordinating our efforts so that we can attract other donors to participate in this important project," said the Kuwaiti representative.

The total commitment by the Arab side and the international

donors has reached to about 80 to 85 percent, he clarified. "We are here to attract new donors to fill the gap. It is always encouraging to have these kind of meetings to have new ideas to press ahead with the project. KFAED is taking the lead in starting the actual implementation of the project," said Sadeqi. "We started by building the conveyors that will take the water when it is produced by the desalination plant. We started in July 2018," he said. "We think the whole project will take another three-and-a-half years or so to complete, and by 2023 all the components of the project will be finished," he stated. Sadeqi described the situation in Gaza as "very dire and very difficult." "There is scarcity of water resources. The underground water is salty. There is sea water intrusion in the aquifer that they rely on to get their water supply," said the Kuwaiti engineer.

The desalination plant that currently exists in Gaza are very small and that is why they are looking forward to this big 150,000 cubic meters of desalination plant, he explained. The desalination project also consists of power generation so that it can supplement the current capacity of electricity they have. "If we do not have clean water this will lead to diseases, to anarchy and to so many bad things. We want stability in that region so that people can focus on development," said Sadeqi. "This is our message, to work together, cooperate together with international donors to try to eliminate the suffering of the people," he said.

Besides the EU, representative from the World bank, the Islamic Development bank, the European Investment bank, the KFAED as well as other international donors attended the Brussels meeting. The EU on 20 March 2018 had hosted a pledging conference on the Gaza Central Desalination Plant and Associated Works Project in Brussels. — KUNA



Dr Mohammed Sadeqi

Kuwait funds UN programs in Syria

NEW YORK: Kuwait's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi, handed over financial contributions from Kuwait to a number of UN specialized agencies to complement Kuwait's efforts to fund the UN programs in Syria. Ambassador Otaibi presented a donation of \$5 million from Kuwait to UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore and another \$4 million to the

Director of WFP's New York office Koko Yoshiyama. He also made a Kuwaiti contribution of \$100,000 to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

In a statement to the press, Otaibi noted that this package of Kuwaiti contributions of \$9.1 million, which was delivered to the UN specialized agencies in New York, aim to alleviate the human suffering in Syria and improve the humanitarian and living conditions of Syrian refugees through specialized programs of the UN. He affirmed that Kuwait plays a pivotal role in the international humanitarian work, especially through UN specialized agencies, stressing in that regard that the partnership between Kuwait and the UN is solid and historic. — KUNA



NEW YORK: Kuwait's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi hands over financial contributions from Kuwait to support UN programs. — KUNA

Kuwait FM sends letter to ICRC chief

GENEVA: Kuwait's permanent representative at the UN and other international organizations Jamal Al-Ghuneim on Friday handed a letter from Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah to International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) President Peter Maurer. The letter

has something to do with the mechanisms of tackling worldwide humanitarian crises, along with preparations for Kuwait-ICRC strategic dialogue, the Kuwaiti diplomat said. He added that he had also delivered a cheque worth \$3 million to the ICRC chief in order to support his organization's programs for Syrian refugees amid severe cold weather conditions in the region. Meanwhile, the ICRC chief said following the meeting with the Kuwaiti diplomat that the imminent strategic dialogue between the ICRC and Kuwait is of paramount significance to humanitarian cooperation in the region's countries. — KUNA



GENEVA: Kuwait's permanent representative at the UN Jamal Al-Ghuneim meets with International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) President Peter Maurer. — KUNA

Kuwait delivers 8 tons of food in northern Iraq

IRBIL: Kuwait's Consulate General in Irbil has delivered some eight tons of food to internally displaced persons in Ashti camp in Sulaymaniyah governorate of Iraqi Kurdistan. The food is provided by Kuwait Society for Relief as part of 'Kuwait is by Your Side' campaign, and as an implementation of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's generous humanitarian initiative. Kuwait's Consul General in Irbil Dr Omar Al-Kandari said on Friday. Kuwait will continue to support Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs) in all around the country, particularly during winter season, Kandari said, noting the Ashti IDP Camp houses a large number of displaced families. He also pointed out that his meeting with Sulaymaniyah Governor Dr Hafal Abu Baker, earlier, addressed ways to



IRBIL: Food aid delivered by Kuwait to internally displaced persons in northern Iraq. — KUNA

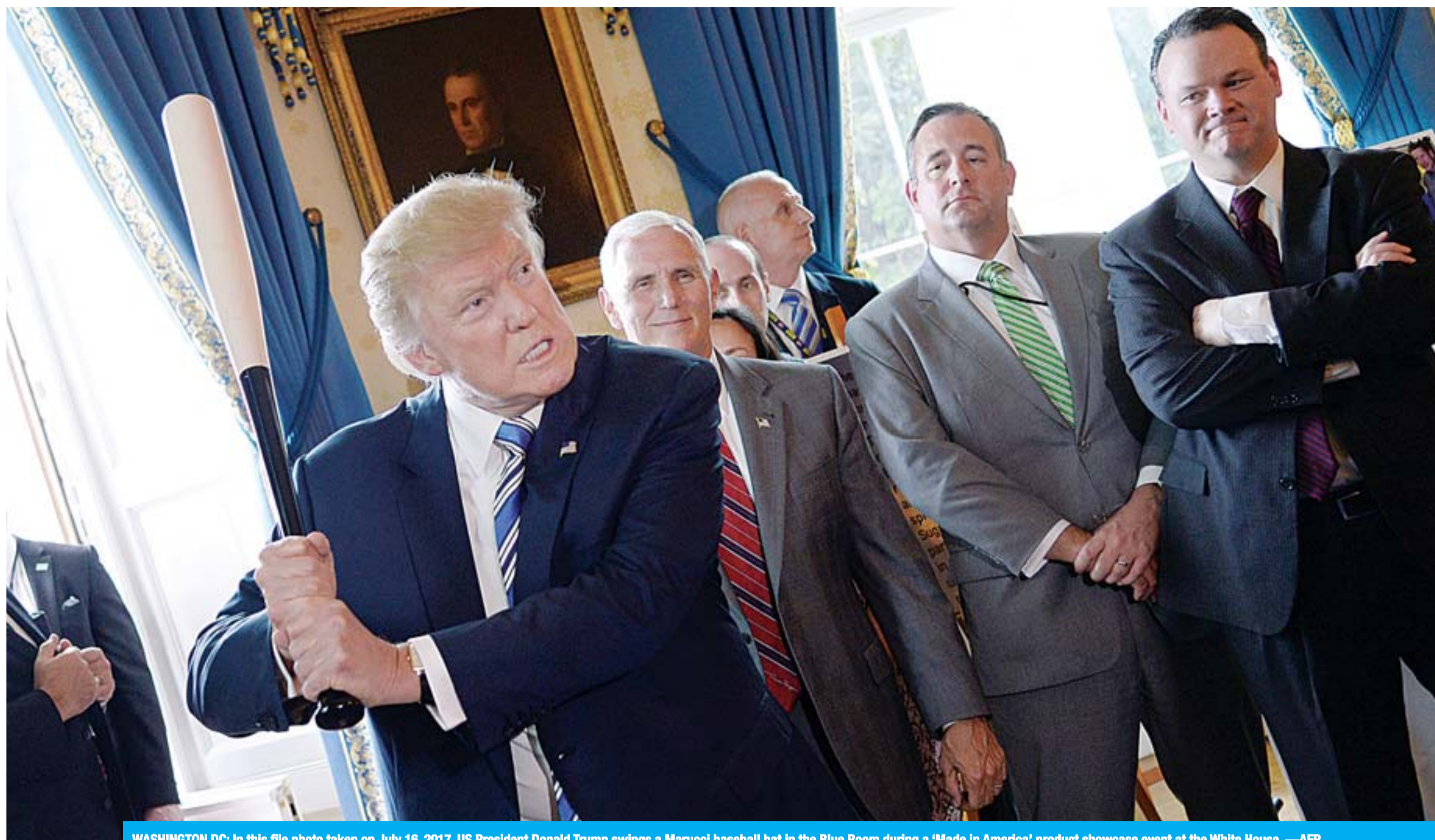
secure the delivery of Kuwaiti aid to IDPs in the province. Furthermore, Kandari wished the

displaced ones safe and swift return to their homelands. — KUNA



Half a million attend protest against India's Modi: Police

No serious injuries to Prince Philip after car crash



WASHINGTON DC: In this file photo taken on July 16, 2017, US President Donald Trump swings a Marucci baseball bat in the Blue Room during a 'Made in America' product showcase event at the White House. —AFP

Mueller disputes explosive Trump report

Buzzfeed report considered 'inaccurate' as President celebrates victory over shoddy journalism

WASHINGTON: Special Counsel Robert Mueller's office took the rare step Friday of disputing a news report on his Russia investigation, saying a BuzzFeed article alleging that US President Donald Trump directed his former lawyer to lie to Congress is "not accurate." Trump's lieutenants had already strongly pushed back against the report, which said that the president ordered Michael Cohen to lie about a Russian skyscraper project they pursued during the 2016 election.

"BuzzFeed's description of specific statements to the Special Counsel's Office, and characterization of documents and testimony obtained by this office, regarding Michael Cohen's Congressional testimony are not accurate," spokesman Peter Carr said in a statement. Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 vote and possible collusion between Trump's campaign and Moscow is the subject of frequent articles and even more frequent speculation. But it is extremely rare — if not unprecedented — for Mueller's office to issue such a statement.

BuzzFeed's editor-in-chief however said the news organization stood by its work. "We stand by our reporting and the sources who informed it, and we urge the Special Counsel to make clear what he's disputing," Ben Smith tweeted. The statement was nevertheless a cause for celebration for the president, who retweeted

numerous supporters slamming BuzzFeed and later wrote it was "A very sad day for journalism, but a great day for our Country!"

"Fake News is truly the ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE!" he added, a now familiar refrain when talking about critical media. Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani had earlier called the allegation in the BuzzFeed report "categorically false" in a comment sent to several White House reporters, while Deputy White House Spokesman Hogan Gidley labeled the report "ridiculous." He said Cohen is someone "who now quite frankly has been proven to be a liar."

Democrats in Congress had pledged to investigate the report to see if the president had committed an impeachable felony. "These allegations may prove unfounded, but, if true, they would constitute both the subornation of perjury as well as obstruction of justice," said Adam Schiff, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee. BuzzFeed reported late Thursday that Cohen, who worked for Trump for more than a decade, has told investigators that the president personally instructed him to lie about the Moscow Trump Tower plan in testimony in 2017 to the House and Senate Intelligence Committees.

The BuzzFeed article was based on interviews with two anonymous "federal law enforcement officials" who

are familiar with Cohen's testimony to the investigation led by Mueller. "Any suggestion — from any source — that the president counseled Michael Cohen to lie is categorically false. Michael Cohen is a convicted criminal and a liar," Giuliani said in a statement quoted by New York Times reporter Maggie Haberman. "Lying to reduce his jail time!" Trump said on Twitter of Cohen, who was convicted last year of fraud and perjury.

A plea deal

No other media have confirmed BuzzFeed's reporting. It came two months after Cohen pleaded guilty in a New York court to making "false, fictitious and fraudulent" written testimony to the House and Senate intelligence committees in August 2017 in connection with the Moscow project. A statement of the facts in his November 29 plea deal with Mueller's prosecutors suggested that his testimony had been prepared in consultation with unnamed people in the White House.

Cohen had told the two committees that the Moscow project talks ended in January 2016, when in fact, as he later admitted, they went on at least six months longer, to June 2016 when Trump had already secured the Republican nomination for president. Cohen had also testified that others in the campaign, including Trump, were not informed about the project. But in the

November plea deal, Cohen also admitted the project had been discussed with Trump — designated "Individual 1" in court documents — several times in early 2016. "Cohen made the false statements to minimize links between the Moscow project and Individual 1... in hopes of limiting the ongoing Russia investigations," prosecutors wrote.

Trump's right-hand man

Cohen was the president's right-hand man for years at the Trump Organization, the umbrella company, often relied upon to quietly fix difficult problems and negotiate deals for the real estate mogul. But he turned on his former boss after he was charged with giving hush money to women alleging affairs with Trump ahead of the 2016 election — payments that violated campaign finance laws. Cohen, who has been sentenced to three years in jail, said Trump ordered him to make the payments, and now says he regrets his work for the president.

While Democrats could not confirm the BuzzFeed report, they said they were poised to further probe the allegations. "Our committee is already working to secure additional witness testimony and documents related to the Trump Tower Moscow deal and other investigative matters," said Intelligence Committee chairman Schiff. —AFP

Top Republican urges slow US pullout until IS 'truly defeated'

ANKARA: A senior Republican senator yesterday urged President Donald Trump to slow down the withdrawal of US ground troops from Syria until jihadists were defeated to avoid a "nightmare" for Washington's allies. "I would hope that President Trump would slow the withdrawal until we truly destroy ISIS," Lindsey Graham told a press conference in Ankara, using an acronym for the Islamic State extremist group.

He warned any hasty pullout could lead to a "nightmare" scenario for Israel because of increasing Iranian influence in the war-torn country and for Turkey because of its national security concerns. The South Carolina lawmaker was in Turkey from Friday for a two-day visit during which he met Turkish officials including President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. His talks with Erdogan lasted for over two hours after which he was invited by the Turkish leader to a concert on Friday night by pianist Fazil Say.

Ankara welcomed Trump's announcement last month that the US would pull out its 2,000 military personnel from Syria but

American officials and security experts have been more cautious, worried about withdrawing too early. Graham, who as a member of the Senate Armed Services committee has frequently visited US troops in combat zones, said he believed the "goal of destroying ISIS is not yet accomplished". Their defeat had been "accomplished territorially" but there were "thousands of ISIS fighters that lurk in Syria", Graham warned.

Four Americans, including two service personnel, were among those killed in a suicide attack this week claimed by the group in the key city of Manbij in Syria's north. Washington has also expressed concern over Turkey's plans to launch a cross-border military operation against the US-backed Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia. Trump last weekend warned of devastating economic consequences for Turkey over any attack on Kurdish forces.

US support for the YPG has caused tension with Ankara which views the militia as a "terrorist offshoot" of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK, which has waged an insurgency inside Turkey since 1984, is blacklisted as a terrorist organization by Ankara, the US and the European Union. Graham previously warned that "Kurds will get slaughtered" if the US withdrew immediately. But yesterday, the senator said the YPG's political branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), "is interlinked with the PKK" as he acknowledged Turkey's concerns over the militia. —AFP

Houthi finance war with fuel from Iran: UN

UNITED NATIONS: Fuel loaded from ports in Iran has generated revenue to finance the Yemen Houthi rebel war effort against the Saudi-backed government, according to a report by a UN panel of experts seen by AFP. The findings are expected to again raise questions about Iran's support for the Houthis in the war that has pushed Yemen to the brink of humanitarian catastrophe.

In its final report for 2018, the panel said it had "identified a small number of companies, both within Yemen and outside, which operated as front companies," using fake documents to conceal fuel donations. The fuel was "for the benefit of a listed individual" who is on a UN sanctions blacklist, it added. "The revenue from the sale of this fuel was used to finance the Houthi war effort," said the 85-page report sent to the Security Council.

The panel found that the "fuel was

loaded from ports in the Islamic Republic of Iran under false documentation" to avoid UN inspections of the cargo, it added. The experts have in past reports pointed to a possible Iranian link to missiles fired by Houthi rebels at Saudi Arabia, after they traveled to Riyadh to examine weapons debris.

In a previous report, the experts said they were investigating monthly fuel donations from Iran valued at \$30 million. Iran has repeatedly denied that it is providing military support to the Houthis, who seized the capital Sanaa in 2014, prompting the Saudi-led coalition to intervene a year later to push back the rebels.

Saudi coalition bombings

The Houthis control the city and key port of Hodeida, a main entry point for imports to Yemen that pro-government forces had planned to capture in a new offensive launched in June. A ceasefire in Hodeida was agreed during UN-brokered talks last month in Sweden and UN monitors are on the ground to oversee a pull-back of forces from the port.

"Throughout the reporting period of 2018, Yemen continued its slide

toward humanitarian and economic catastrophe," said the panel, which described the country as "deeply fractured" with a broken economy. The war in Yemen continues to appear unwinnable. Government forces and the coalition have made "significant progress" on the ground against the Houthis, but "the aim of restoring the authority of the government throughout Yemen is far from being realized," said the report. The panel reported on its investigations of five airstrikes in Houthi-controlled areas, including the August 9 bombing of a bus carrying children and a shelling attack.

It found that the Saudi-led coalition was responsible in four cases, including the bus bombing that killed 43 people and wounded 63 others, the majority of whom were children. The panel said the coalition was "likely responsible" in another incident in April 2018 involving the bombing of a building in Hodeida that killed 14 civilians, including seven children. The coalition has admitted mistakes were made in two cases and has acknowledged that legal procedures could be taken in the case of the bus bombing, but the panel said it was unaware of any prosecution by any state. —AFP

International

New massive migrant caravan enters Mexico, legally or not

Migrants took to make-shift rafts to cross the Suchiate River

CIUDAD HIDALGO: Hundreds of Central Americans entered Mexico illegally as the latest migrant caravan trying to reach the United States began crossing the Mexican-Guatemalan border en masse Friday. Not content to wait five days for the humanitarian visas Mexico is offering them, several hundred migrants took to make-shift rafts to cross the Suchiate River, which forms the frontier, or snuck across the loosely guarded border bridge overnight, AFP correspondents said.

Their advance could trigger a new Twitter firestorm from US President Donald Trump, who has urged Mexico to halt such caravans, and who tweeted early Friday: "Another big Caravan heading our way. Very hard to stop without a Wall!" Hundreds more of the 2,000 migrants in the caravan gathered patiently on the border bridge, trickling into Mexico as the authorities processed them. The authorities will set up checkpoints in southern Mexico to make migrants who snuck into the country register for visas, said Alejandro Encinas, under-secretary for migration. "We are informing all of them that they must comply with our country's laws," he said.

Fuel for wall debate

Caravans of migrants seeking safety in numbers have taken center stage in the raging debate in the United States over Trump's proposed border wall, which has led to a government shutdown that is now the longest in history. The latest caravan is smaller than the one that swelled to 7,000 migrants late last year, leading Trump to warn of an "invasion" by "hardened criminals" and send thousands of troops to the US-Mexican border.

Mexican authorities are urging the migrants to arrive legally and offering expedited "visitor cards" that let them work and access basic health care in Mexico. So far, 969 migrants from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua have registered

under the program, receiving bracelets that they can exchange for visitor cards in five days. But hundreds more ignored the offer. "A lot of us aren't interested in waiting five days. Our goal is to reach the United States," said Alma Mendoza, a nurse and single mother making the trip with her three children. "We don't have food, much less money. We want to reach our destination," she told AFP. Other migrants said they would consider staying in Mexico. "My goal is to reach the United States, but if I can't I'll stay in Mexico and work. They're giving us an opportunity," said Christian Medrano, 33, an industrial technician.

Mexico meanwhile announced a fresh policy under which Central Americans fleeing poverty and violence with the intention of reaching the United States may remain in Mexico for a year. The decision "recognizes the importance of our relationship with Central America," especially El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, said Tonatiuh Guillen, commissioner of the Mexican National Institute of Migration.

'AMLO' walking fine line

The caravan set out Tuesday from San Pedro Sula, in northwestern Honduras, and has grown along the way. The migrants are mostly fleeing poverty and crime in Central America's "Northern Triangle" of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Brutal street gangs have made the three countries among the most violent in the world.

Another caravan of about 200 migrants set out Wednesday from El Salvador and is now in southern Mexico, possibly poised to join up with the first. Many of the migrants are traveling in families, often with small children. They have covered about 700 kilometers (435 miles) so far, and have roughly 4,000 kms to go if they take the same route as the last caravan, to Tijuana, across from San Diego, California. When that caravan reached Mexico in October, the authorities tried to stop it with riot police. But the migrants



CIUDAD TECUN UMAN: Honduran migrants heading to the United States with a second caravan reach the town of Ciudad Tecun Uman, Guatemala along the border with Mexico. —AFP

stormed in anyway, tearing down border fences and crossing the river illegally when police refused to let them through.

Since then, Mexico has gotten a new government, led by President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, an anti-establishment leftist. "AMLO," as the new president is widely known, has promised to treat migrants more humanely than previous administrations. But he has also sought to stay on Trump's good side with talk

of reducing migrant flows. The October caravan largely dispersed after reaching Tijuana.

US Border Patrol agents fought back two attempts by the migrants to rush the border, firing tear gas to disperse them. Some have since found work in Mexico, some crossed the border and filed asylum claims, and many returned home. About 400 remain in a shelter set up for them in Tijuana that is slated to be closed on Wednesday. —AFP

Trump-Pelosi rancor over Democrat's scrapped trip

WASHINGTON: US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Friday excoriated her political nemesis, President Donald Trump, for "outing" her commercial trip to Afghanistan after he barred her from using a military aircraft, forcing her to scrap it entirely over security concerns. The brawl between the no-nonsense Republican leader and the take-no-prisoners Democrat is the latest round in their showdown, which could take a new turn with Trump announcing he will be making a "major announcement" Saturday regarding the partial government shutdown and the situation on the US-Mexico border.

The federal government has been shuttered for four weeks over Trump's insistence that a wider federal budget measure include billions of dollars for a border wall — and Pelosi's refusal to go along. Their spat spilled into the diplomatic arena Thursday when, after Pelosi suggested Trump postpone his State of the Union address until government reopens, the president grounded the military plane set to transport her delegation. Pelosi accused Trump of being "very irresponsible" in breaching security protocol.

"We had a report from Afghanistan that the president outing our trip had

made the scene on the ground much more dangerous because it's just a signal to the bad actors that we're coming," she told reporters. The administration strongly denies that it "leaked" any plans about the trip to a war zone. "The idea we would leak anything that would put the safety and security of any American at risk is a flat-out lie," a senior White House official said.

Tit-for-tat

The US government shutdown, which has left about 800,000 federal workers without a paycheck, is now the longest in the country's history — and there is no sign of a compromise. The Office of Management and Budget reportedly issued a memorandum saying that "under no circumstance during a government shutdown" can a congressional delegation use government aircraft for travel.

However, Republican Representative Lee Zeldin led a delegation to Iraq and other countries since the shutdown began. With the two sides showing no sign of a breakthrough, some cash-strapped federal workers — many working without pay, others forced to stay home — are tapping life savings, selling possessions or taking advantage of food pantries to help make ends meet. Amid the bickering, a former president called for a truce.

"It's time for leaders on both sides to put politics aside, come together, and end this shutdown," George W Bush said on Instagram, where a photograph shows him handing pizzas to members of his Secret Service detail who are protecting him without pay. Pelosi's office sounded off on the administration's han-



WASHINGTONDC: US Speaker of the House Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) speaks during a weekly news conference. —AFP

dling of her trip, which had not been announced for security reasons. The State Department released an updated assessment stressing that Trump's announcement of the Pelosi travel "had significantly increased the danger to the delegation and to the troops," her spokesman Drew Hammill said.

"This morning, we learned that the administration had leaked the commercial travel plans as well." Democratic lawmakers have expressed outrage. "Disclosing ANY Members' travel into a war zone is disgraceful and dangerous," tweeted congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, who has traveled to Afghanistan and Iraq as a lawmaker. Republicans have spoken out too,

including Senator Rob Portman who criticized the Pelosi-Trump back and forth. "They're both making it more difficult, not easier, for us to find a resolution to this impasse," he said. Trump harangued Pelosi on Twitter, asking why she and other Democrats would leave the country "on a seven day excursion when 800,000 great people are not getting paid." His re-election campaign team then released a tongue-in-cheek shutdown-related campaign fundraising request. For a contribution of \$20.20, a reference to the next election year, the campaign told supporters it would send a fake red brick to Pelosi and Democratic Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer — to build a wall. —AFP

Indigenous people protest for their rights in Washington

WASHINGTON: Hundreds of members of indigenous communities protested in Washington on Friday, denouncing injustices they are facing and demanding that their rights be respected. They gathered on Washington's snowy National Mall, some wearing traditional dress, carrying signs with messages including: "Justice For Missing Murdered Indigenous Women" and "We Will Not Be Silenced."

"Currently, many indigenous people are victims of voter suppression, divided families by walls and borders, an environmental holocaust, sex and human trafficking, and police/military brutality with little or no resources and awareness of this injustice," a post on the Indigenous People's March Facebook page said.

"I came here for the future generations of my people. I came here for environmental injustices that are happening on our reservations. Our waters are being polluted. Nothing is being done," said Malia Simon, a

20-year-old member of the Navajo tribe, which is located in four southwestern US states. Indigenous communities have also denounced restrictions on their freedom of movement and boundaries they did not draw. "The border was created by settlers, it's not something that we recognize. Indigenous people migrate North to South, since we've been here, since the beginning of time," said Joey Morales, a member of the Pijao people of Colombia.

In the United States, Native Americans are among the poorest communities and have particularly suffered during the partial closure of the federal government, which has now stretched on for nearly a month. Often they are torn between living on reservations — which try to preserve group culture and languages — and life in cities elsewhere. "A lot of people aren't getting their (US) benefits, aren't getting their money, aren't getting a lot of money for grants," said Cante Heart, a Winnebago tribe member.

Several tribes are also locked in a struggle with Canadian and US authorities over the route of an oil pipeline crossing their reservations. Jack Gifted by Eagles noted that the Dakota Access pipeline "has already leaked," and could do so again. US President Donald Trump suffered a setback in December when a judge suspended construction of the giant Keystone XL pipeline to connect Canadian oilfields to



WASHINGTON DC: An activist demonstrates in the Lincoln Memorial during the Indigenous People's March on the National Mall. —AFP

Gulf of Mexico refineries. Vanessa Pastrana, a native of Puerto Rico and the Taino people, who lived in the Caribbean before being virtually wiped out, said that

there is a need to "fight back and be strong." "These marches are good but you got to put work behind these marches," Pastrana said. —AFP

Zimbabwe police erect road blocks to hunt protesters

HARARE: Zimbabwe police manned checkpoints on many main roads yesterday, searching vehicles for protesters allegedly involved in recent anti-government demonstrations. A crackdown by security forces has been fiercely criticised by the UN human rights office, with allegations of shootings, beatings and abductions of opposition figures, activists and ordinary residents.

Police roadblocks were a notorious feature of daily life under former president Robert Mugabe. But they largely disappeared after he was ousted by the military in November 2017 and succeeded by his former deputy Emmerson Mnangagwa. "We want to tell members of the public that... we have already set up security checkpoints where police officers and other security institutions will be checking," police spokeswoman Charity Charamba told Saturday's state-owned Herald newspaper.

She said the checkpoints were to catch suspected looters and recover property stolen during protests that erupted after Mnangagwa last weekend announced a 150-percent increase in petrol prices. The Herald said 700 people had been arrested after the violent protests, which it blamed on the opposition MDC party and trade unions.

Police armed with assault rifles

Police checkpoints were in action yesterday in the capital Harare and the second city Bulawayo, AFP reporters witnessed. In Bulawayo, police officers armed with assault rifles manned roadblocks on every major route, conducting "stop and search" operations. In both cities, customers seeking to stock up on basic goods tentatively returned to shops that opened for the first time since the protests started on Monday.

Long queues formed to buy bread and petrol, which are both in short supply due to Zimbabwe's long-burning economic crisis. "Nothing has changed after the fuel price increase," said one motorist in a queue who identified himself only as Sonny. Social media has been blocked by the government in an apparent attempt to suppress information about the security operation and alleged abuses.

The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum said it had recorded at least 12 deaths, 78 gunshot injuries and more than 240 incidents of assault and torture. The United Nations human rights office on Friday urged Harare to "stop the crackdown", voicing alarm over the security forces' "excessive use of force" which included reports of them using live ammunition. And it called on Zimbabwe's government "to find ways of engaging with the population about their legitimate grievances". —AFP

International

In tears and shock, Poland bids farewell to its murdered mayor

Stabbed in the heart in front of hundreds of people

GDANSK: Poles gathered yesterday in the Baltic port city of Gdansk to bid an emotional farewell to murdered liberal mayor Pawel Adamowicz, whose public stabbing has raised questions about hate speech in politics in the country. Around 3,500 people, including President Andrzej Duda and EU Council President Donald Tusk, a longtime friend of Adamowicz, attended the ceremony at St Mary's Church, one of the largest brick churches in the world, where his casket will be permanently located.

Polish Nobel Peace laureate Lech Walesa also attended the ceremony, being held on what Duda has declared a day of national mourning. Adamowicz, 53, was stabbed in the heart in front of hundreds of people at a charity fundraiser last weekend by an ex-convict wielding a knife.

"It's a sad day for the people of Gdansk. We feel we have lost a father," said Tomasz Ceglinski. "I am 24 years old and he was in power for all of my life," he said. "Every year, we saw changes in the city: investments, new roads, shopping centers and cultural institutions all thanks to him. It's my duty to be here," he told AFP.

The mayor's 27-year-old attacker, who reportedly has a history of mental illness, had previously been sentenced to more than five years in jail for armed robbery. Recently released, the man claimed he was wrongly imprisoned by the previous government — led by the centrist Civic Platform (PO) party, to which Adamowicz once belonged. For many Poles, the mayor's murder was fuelled by online hate speech and toxic divisions between the main political parties.

"It's hatred that killed Pawel," PO leader Grzegorz Schetyna told lawmakers on Wednesday. "A well-

organized, crazy hatred directed at a man who with the help of thousands of Gdansk residents was building this great, proud and free city," he added. Politicians from PO and the ruling conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party have traded barbs for years, as have their supporters online, with critics accusing the government of tacitly condoning the atmosphere of hostility. Numerous media outlets have compared Adamowicz's murder to the 1922 assassination of president Gabriel Narutowicz by a fanatical nationalist at a time of rampant hatred. Since Adamowicz's death, police have detained several individuals for uttering or writing threats against other politicians.

Political violence

Scores of mayors from across Poland and abroad attended the funeral. Giant screens around the church allowed city residents to watch the funeral. Tens of thousands of people have already queued for hours to see the late mayor's casket, covered in white flowers and the city's red flag, and to sign a book of condolence at the city's European Solidarity Centre.

Gdansk, a city of around half a million people, was the cradle of Poland's anti-communist Solidarity movement in the 1980s. Adamowicz, mayor of Gdansk for two decades, was backed by the PO party in 2018 municipal polls and won re-election with 64 percent of the vote. The capital Warsaw has named Adamowicz an honorary citizen. The attack on Adamowicz is unusual as political violence is rare in Poland. The last attack on a political figure was in 2010 when a man fatally shot an aide at a regional PiS office before stabbing another employee, who survived. —AFP



GDANSK: (Row R, L to R) President of the European Council Donald Tusk and his wife Malgorzata, former Polish president Lech Walesa, his wife Danuta Walesa, former Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski and his wife Jolanta Kwasniewska attend the funeral ceremony of the late mayor of Gdansk Pawel Adamowicz in St Mary's Basilica. —AFP

From Westgate to Dusit, Kenyan response praised

NAIROBI: Kenya's security response to the Islamist assault on the Dusit hotel complex in Nairobi shows the numerous lessons learned since a chaotic intervention when the Westgate mall was attacked in 2013, according to analysts. The swift reaction, under a single chain of command, with the site rapidly cordoned off and procedures put in place to deal with survivors, has received widespread praise in the aftermath of the assault which left 21 dead, 28 injured and saw some 700 people rescued. "It was an operation which appeared well-executed," said a regional security analyst, requesting anonymity.

"From a purely operational point of view, if the toll remains as it is, it is almost a miracle. We know how complicated it is, even with exceptionally well-trained people," he added, highlighting the tricky layout of the Dusit complex with its numerous buildings and parking lots. "Across the spectrum, we've seen greater seriousness in all aspects of counterterrorism, both prevention and response," since Westgate, said Matt Bryden, director of the Sahar think-tank in Nairobi.

AFP journalists covered both attacks from the inside and while the first hours of the operation against Somali Islamist group Al-Shabaab in Westgate were marked by total confusion, the deployment of police forces and sealing off of the DusitD2 complex were done in an ordered and rapid manner. In both cases, it was plainclothes police officers and armed civilians — mostly from the Indian community — who were the first to intervene and help rescue those caught inside. At DusitD2 a number of heavily armed westerners, from private security companies and members of diplomatic security, were also present from the start.

More efficient, better tactics

Very quickly, elite Kenyan police units took over, while officers attached to the presidency also rapidly showed up. Black-clad members of the anti-terrorist unit and members of the paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU) with their red berets quickly deployed as did a bomb squad. "It was much more efficient, and it seems to have been better coordinated and the tactics they employed were better practiced, they had better equipment so all in all, a much better performance," said Bryden. The perimeter was quickly cordoned off and secured, in contrast to Westgate where it took until nightfall to seal off the area after the attack which began at lunchtime. —AFP

Italy still hunting 30 'terrorists' abroad

ROME: Italian authorities are still hunting 30 "terrorists" on the run abroad, the interior ministry said yesterday, days after far-left activist Cesare Battisti was jailed ending 37 years as a fugitive. "Thirty terrorists on the run, 27 from the left, three from the right: the names are on Interior Minister Matteo Salvini's desk," said a ministry statement. Fourteen of those being sought were believed to be in France, but the ministry said it would not be releasing the list or any names.

The updated list was compiled by the police and security services after the arrest of Battisti, said the ministry. Former communist militant Cesare Battisti, wanted in Italy for four murders in the 1970s, began serving a life sentence in a Sardinian prison on Monday. An international police squad tracked him down and arrested him in Bolivia earlier this month. Salvini, Italy's far-right interior minister, celebrated his capture in comments earlier this week. "Finally, after 37 years, a killer, a delinquent, an infamous person, a coward who has never asked for forgiveness, will finish up where he deserves," he said on Monday. —AFP

No serious injuries to Prince Philip after car crash

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II's 97-year-old husband Prince Philip visited hospital for "a precautionary check-up" on Friday that found "no injuries of concern" after a car crash the previous day that rolled the Land Rover he was driving. "On doctor's advice the Duke of Edinburgh visited the Queen Elizabeth hospital... this morning for a precautionary check-up," a Buckingham Palace spokeswoman told AFP. "This confirmed his royal highness had no injuries of concern," she added, without specifying the extent of any minor injuries.

This contrasted with a statement from Buckingham Palace on Thursday that stated the prince "was not injured". The queen has issued no public comment about the crash. The accident occurred near the queen's Sandringham Estate in south east England, where the couple spend much of the winter. A nine-month-old baby who was in the back seat of the other car, a Kia hatchback, was also uninjured, while one woman in the vehicle broke her wrist and the other cut her knee, local police said, stirring a debate in Britain Friday about old age and driving.

"We are aware of the public interest in this case, however, as with any other investigation it would be inappropriate to speculate on the causes of the colli-

sion until an investigation is carried out," a police statement said. Images published by the British media showed a dark Land Rover on its side by the curb, driver's side down, its windshield smashed, glass and metal debris scattered across a road running by a leafy park. "I was driving home and I saw a car, a black (Land) Rover come out from a side road and it rolled," witness Roy Warne told BBC Radio on Friday.

The Land Rover "was turning on its side over and over," he told The Sun newspaper in a separate interview. He said one of the two women in the Kia "was the mother of the child and she was quite upset". Philip and the other driver were given breath tests, which is standard police procedure. No alcohol was detected. The accident made the headlines in most British papers. "MY LEGS! MY LEGS!" The Sun splashed on its front page — the words Prince Philip reportedly "yelled" as he was pulled from the wreckage. "I was blinded by the sun," the paper quoted him as saying.

Love for speed

Philip, known for his forthright manner and off-color jokes, retired from public life in 2017 and underwent a hip replacement operation last April. Tall, slim and built like a retired serviceman, the former navy officer spends most of his time driving, gardening and enjoying family life at royal estates, according to Buckingham Palace. He was last seen in public with the queen at Princess Eugenie's wedding in October. But he missed the royal family's annual Christmas Day church service.

Macron's debate put to test as 'yellow vests' stage tenth protest

PARIS: France's "yellow vests" took to the streets yesterday for a 10th straight weekend of anti-government protests, defying attempts by President Emmanuel Macron to channel their anger into a series of town hall debates. A police source said the authorities expected the protests to be "at least as big as last week" when over 80,000 people demonstrated over inequality, the privileges enjoyed by senior public servants and the governing style of a president accused of arrogance.

Last week's turnout confirmed that, after a lull at the end of the year, the protesters behind the biggest crisis in Macron's presidency remain fully mobilized. The centrist leader is hoping that the launch this week of a "grand national debate" on policy will mark a turning point. One of the yellow vests' top demands is that ordinary citizens be given a greater say in policy-making. Macron this week kickstarted two months of public con-

sultations on issues ranging from taxation to public services, spending over 12 hours in total debating with mayors at two separate gatherings in the north and south-west of the country.

The debates mark a return to form for the 41-year-old president who won election at the head of a grass-roots movement that went door-to-door asking the French what kind of changes were needed. A prodigious debater he appeared this week to relish the return to campaign-style politics. But many yellow vests have announced plans to boycott the discussions scheduled in dozens of towns and villages, seeing them as an attempt to drain support from a movement that erupted in mid-November over fuel taxes and quickly broadened into a campaign of weekly protests that have regularly ended in clashes with police and destruction of property.

The growing number of demonstrators to suffer serious injuries at the hands of the police has compounded their anger towards the state. The "Disarm" collective, a local group that campaigns against police violence, has counted 98 cases of serious injuries, including 15 cases of people losing an eye, mostly after being hit by rubber bullets. Yesterday, protesters plan to march from Invalides war museum in Paris through the left bank of the Seine. Some 80,000 security force members are on duty again nationwide, 5,000 of them in Paris.



WINDSOR: In this file photo taken on October 12, 2018 Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (L) and Britain's Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh (R) wait for the carriage carrying Princess Eugenie of York and her husband Jack Brooksbank to pass at the start of the procession after their wedding ceremony at St George's Chapel. —AFP

Known as the Duke of Edinburgh in Britain, Philip is also well-known for his love for speed. The royal family website says the duke "learned to fly all type of aircraft", passing a Royal Air Force test in 1953. In 2016, alongside the queen, he drove former US President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle around Windsor Castle after they landed nearby in the presidential helicopter.

'Age old debate'

The accident stirred up what The Sun described as Britain's "age-old debate" about whether and when the elderly should give up driving. The issue is especially sensitive in the case

of the royals, with the Daily Mail noting: "There's only one person who can tell him to stop driving. But will she dare?" Official figures from November show 3,136 people in Great Britain aged 97 and over still hold driving licences. The oldest were four people aged 107.

In Britain, licenses expire when a person turns 70 and have to be renewed through a simple self-assessment test every three years. The Daily Mail asked whether the duke would now "sacrifice one of his last indulgences". The BBC's Jonny Dymond suggested that he might. "It might be that the duke is about to be persuaded to give up the wheel." —AFP



PARIS: Protesters take part in an anti-government demonstration called by the "Yellow vest" movement. —AFP

Warning against debate 'bluff'

Macron is pinning his hopes on the debate to quash the image of a leader out-of-touch with the concerns of people in rural France. Polls show mixed feelings among the French, with around 40 percent saying they would like to take part but around two-thirds saying they do not believe the consultations will end the protests. "I'm warning you, Mr President. This debate must not become a big bluff," the mayor of the south-central village of Saint-Cirgues, Christian Venries, warned Macron at a public meeting Friday in his region.

To fend off accusations that his policies favor rich urbanites the most, former investment banker Macron has already scrapped a controversial fuel tax hike that would have squeezed car-dependent rural-dwellers. He has also unveiled a 10-billion-euro (\$11.5-billion) package of wage increases and tax relief for low earners and retirees that threw off France's deficit targets. The measures fell short of the mark for the protesters, who are demanding a radical policy shift in favor of low earners, buoyed by polls that show widespread sympathy for their cause. —AFP

International

Half a million attend protest against India's Modi: Police

Discontentment over unemployment and economic inequality

KOLKATA: India's opposition parties drew half a million supporters to Kolkata's streets yesterday for the largest show of force yet against Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a national election looms. Police in the eastern city said 500,000 people turned out for the massive "Unite India" rally, which saw leaders from across the opposition spectrum rail against Modi and his ruling Hindu nationalist party.

Speeches were beamed on 20 giant screens to a sea of spectators waving the national tricolour flag and the banners of India's myriad opposition movements. Police said 5,000 officers were on standby for security. "The Modi government is past its expiry date," said Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal state, from an enormous raised platform. Her government, which organised the rally, had suggested four million would attend but Kolkata Police Chief Rajeev Kumar said 500,000 showed up.

'It's against India'

Modi, who was inspecting military hardware in Gujarat state yesterday, accused the opposition of acting in self interest. "The alliance is not against me, it's against India," he said, as quoted by the Hindustan Times newspaper. The rally comes as hundreds of millions of Indians prepare to go to polls expected in April and May, the world's largest demo-

cratic exercise. Modi — the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader who won a landslide victory in 2014 — is seeking another term, and remains hugely popular.

But he faces rising discontentment over unemployment and economic inequality. The BJP suffered a rare reverse in December when it lost three key state elections to Congress, the main opposition party. Its leader, Rahul Gandhi, did not attend the rally but sent party representatives. His mother Sonia Gandhi, the party's former president, said it was "an important attempt to galvanise leaders to fight the Modi government".

Speakers from India's myriad state, regional and caste-based parties urged voters from the pulpit to unite against the prime minister and his BJP. "Narendra Modi is a publicity PM, we need a performing PM," said Chandrababu Naidu, chief minister of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. HD Deve Gowda, who was briefly prime minister in the 1990s, said regional parties were powerful but "cannot save India without uniting". The opposition has not allied in a formal bloc, but some state outfits have joined forces as the election draws nearer. This month two regional parties that were former bitter rivals in Uttar Pradesh — India's most populous state — announced an unlikely alliance to challenge Modi. — AFP



NEW DELHI: Indian protestors hold placards as they shout slogans against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and northeastern Assam state's chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal during a protest against the controversial Citizenship Amendment bill. — AFP

Abe, Putin on collision course over islands

TOKYO: The leaders of Japan and Russia hold crunch summit talks on Tuesday, with the two countries locked in an undiplomatic war of words over a set of disputed islands. Simmering tension between Moscow and Tokyo over the islands has ramped up in recent weeks, with Russia angrily accusing Japan of whipping up tension ahead of the summit and failing to accept it lost World War II. Setting the tone for the talks, Putin's foreign policy advisor Yuri Ushakov admitted the meeting would "not be easy."

The Russian army claimed the four islands in the closing days of World War II and a dispute over their sovereignty prevented the two countries signing a peace treaty — a situation both countries have vowed to rectify. The islands, off the northern coast of Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido, are known as the southern Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan.

During a New Year address,

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sparked outrage in Moscow when he spoke of the need to help Russian residents on the disputed islands "accept and understand that the sovereignty of their homes will change." A furious Russia summoned the Japanese ambassador to complain that Abe's statements were an "attempt to artificially stir up the atmosphere" over the issue of a possible peace treaty.

Moscow also fumed Japan was trying to "disorientate" the public and that the Japanese leader's statements "flagrantly distort the essence of the agreements" reached by Putin and Abe in Singapore in November, where they vowed to accelerate efforts towards peace. Talks lasting several hours between the two foreign ministers on Monday failed to improve the situation, with Taro Kono and Sergei Lavrov not even appearing together for a joint press conference. And at his own New Year's news conference, Lavrov let rip at Tokyo, saying the two countries were "still far from being partners in international relations."

"Why is Japan the only country in the world that cannot accept the results of World War II in their entirety?" he asked. He also lashed out at the pro-Western bias of Japan — the key US ally in the region. "Japan votes not with us but against us on all the resolutions that interest Russia in the U.N," Moscow's veteran top diplomat said. — AFP

Two monks shot dead as violence flares in Thailand's deep south

BANGKOK: Gunmen in Thailand's deep south shot dead two Buddhist monks and wounded two others inside a temple, police said yesterday, capping a week of deadly violence as the prime minister vowed to "punish" those responsible. Black-clad assailants carrying rifles crept into Rattanaupap temple in Narathiwat province near Malaysia's border on Friday evening and started firing, local superintendent Pakdi Preechachon told AFP.

"The attack took place around 7:30 pm when an unknown number of gunmen dressed in black entered the temple through a rear area via a creek," Pakdi said. "Two monks were shot dead at the temple while two others were wounded." Since 2004 clashes between ethnic Malay-Muslim rebels and the Buddhist-majority Thai state that annexed the region a century ago have killed nearly 7,000 people, mostly civilians of both faiths.

The death toll in the south dropped to a record low last year as Thailand's junta tightened its security web but violence has boiled over in recent days, raising concerns about soft targets at schools and religious institutions. In the past, Buddhist monks have been targeted only infrequently. But they have been told to suspend morning alms collection starting from Saturday in three southern provinces and the southern army commander has instructed security officials to step up safeguards of Islamic



NARATHIWAT: A Buddhist monk and a Muslim village leader sit together to express sympathy and support during a gathering in Rattanaupap temple in Narathiwat province yesterday following an attack by black-clad gunmen that killed two Buddhist monks. — AFP

leaders who could also be at risk.

Junta leader and prime minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha condemned the temple shootings. "The prime minister denounced such a brazen attack and instructed officials to investigate and find the assailants to punish them," said government spokesman Buddhpongse Punnakanta. Human Rights Watch, which said in a statement that at least 23 monks had been killed since the outbreak of the insurgency in 2004, called the assault "ghastly" and a war crime because gunmen went after civilians and a place of worship.

The Sheikhul Islam Office, a national representative of Muslim communities in Thailand, denounced the violence against the monks and expressed sorrow over the inci-

dent. "There are no religions that teach people to kill innocent people, it's the work of some group of people who want to create divisiveness," it said in a statement yesterday. Pictures taken in the aftermath show monks standing next to heavily armed Thai soldiers and an alms bowl inside the temple compound with bullet holes in it.

No one has claimed responsibility, but that is not unusual for the conflict. Last week, an imam in the same province was shot dead but it was unclear if the temple attack was related. Friday's shooting came the same day as four security officials were wounded by two separate roadside bombs and an insurgent was shot dead in a clash near a school that sent students home for the day. — AFP

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Despite Brexit, I'm proud to be a Brit

By John Lloyd

This is a fine time to be British. Indeed, to be proud to be British. You would not, to be sure, think so from this past week in London - as the House of Commons humiliated Prime Minister Theresa May by throwing out her plan for Brexit in Tuesday by 432 votes to 202 - an unprecedented rejection. On Wednesday, the Labour Party moved that her government had lost the confidence of the House - a maneuver defeated only narrowly, by 325 votes to 306.

The British, and foreign, news media would guide you to seeing the events as pure, destructive chaos. In an article for CNN, Stephen Collinson writes of the United States and the UK that it's "hard to believe that two such robust democracies, long seen by the rest of the world as beacons of stability, have dissolved into such bitter civic dysfunction." Hard to believe only if you see democracy as the smooth management of affairs by an elite. This is what democracy looks like when a citizenry is grappling with fundamental issues - or should.

A nationwide debate is under way on the nature of British - and by extension European - governance, which has rumbled and grumbled under the surface for decades. The decision by then Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, to hold a referendum on European Union membership in 2016 - a decision he now says he does not regret - was one for which he believed he could win easy assent.

This was in part a question of internal party management, but it had support from influential voices in Labour too, and addressed a threat of widespread desertion from both major parties to the quickly growing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The politicians, especially those from the bulk of England outside of the rich, cosmopolitan south-east, heard the growing clamor of men and women whose living standards had stagnated, as well as from those who called for more democratic control from a political center they could understand and influence - the Westminster parliament.

Like any such wide and deep civic disruption, the vote for Brexit exacts the price of economic instability and likely future reduction in national GDP. Fear of this prompted me - and others - to vote to remain in the EU. That fear has spread: a poll this week showed that Remainers could outvote Brexiters by as much as ten percent: a poll last month showed the gap at 18 percent. Indications like these encourage Remainers to call for a second referendum, a proposal which could cleave British politics into two warring camps, but may also be the only way out of a parliamentary logjam, where no single strategy commands a majority. Uncertainty attends every move: such is the nature of a popular surge seeking - peacefully - a different relationship with political power.

Democratic turmoil has also come to Europe - but not to the European Union. The two national leaders most committed to reviving a movement to greater EU integration - French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel - have themselves been drawn into democratic maelstroms, which have meant they are both much weakened at home.

The Brussels leadership of the EU - Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and European Council President Donald Tusk - have not had the same popular drubbing. They seem not to have grasped that Brexit, and the surge of France's "gilets jaunes" protesters, are hugely consequential movements not just for Britain and France, but for the Union as a whole. The EU presently faces its own, increasing strains and the strengthening possibility of recession - prompted by Italy's rising debt and its reluctance to be bound by EU financial restraints, the end of a long period of quantitative easing which kept interest rates rock bottom - and Brexit itself.

Herein lies the central problem of the EU now. It has chosen to present itself as an adamant front of 27 states wholly united against the renegade 28th, the UK. They have entrusted the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, to set out the hard facts of a deal which lays down a two-year withdrawal period in which most EU rules would continue to apply, with a severance payment of £39bn (\$50 billion). It's a divorce agreement which may not rival that of Jeff and Mackenzie Bezos, since that could come out at \$66bn. But it would take a sizable morsel out of the UK's GDP (at \$2.6 trillion in 2017).

Yet the hard front is an illusion. The Central European states - Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia - want continued EU subsidies but recoil from its policies, especially taking a share of the immigrants within Europe. Italy now has a populist government which defies the EU on its spending limits. The country's rising debt and falling industrial output, together with that of the other main members, now helps to pull the Union towards recession. The "Hanseatic League" of small northern states, under Dutch leadership, explicitly defies any efforts to bring the Union "ever closer" - the strategy to which Juncker and Tusk, as well as Macron, are bound.

This is not a band of brotherly states marching towards a Federal Europe. It is a group of countries of differing political traditions and cultures, with enough in common to have a single market and a growing tradition of cooperation - but with only selective, and minority, appetite to create more than that.

NOTE: John Lloyd co-founded the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. The opinions expressed here are his own. — Reuters



In this file photo taken on June 30, 2018, people hold placards during a 'Familles Belong Together' march and rally in Los Angeles. — AFP

Immigrants pay big for basics at ICE lockups

Detained in a California lockup with hundreds of other immigrants seeking asylum, Douglas Cruz faced a choice. He could content himself with a jailhouse diet that he said left him perpetually hungry. Or he could labor in the prison's kitchen to earn money to buy extra food at the commissary. Cruz went to work. But his \$1-a-day salary at the privately run Adelanto Detention Facility did not stretch far.

A can of commissary tuna sold for \$3.25. That is more than four times the price at a Target store near the small desert town of Adelanto, about two hours northeast of Los Angeles. Cruz stuck with ramen noodles at 58 cents a package, double the Target price. A miniature deodorant stick, at \$3.35 and more than three days' wages, was an impossible luxury, he said. "If I bought that there wouldn't be enough money for food," Cruz said.

Tuna and deodorant would seem minor worries for detainees such as Cruz. Now 25, he sought asylum after fleeing gangs trying to recruit him in his native Honduras, a place where saying "no" can mean execution. But immigration attorneys say the pricey commissary goods are part of a broader strategy by private prisons to harness cheap inmate labor to lower operating costs and boost profits.

Immigrants and activists say facilities such as Adelanto, owned by Boca Raton, Florida-based Geo Group Inc, the nation's largest for-profit corrections company, deliberately skimp on essentials, even food, to coerce detainees to labor for pennies an hour to supplement meager rations. Geo Group spokesperson Pablo Paez called those allegations "completely false." He said detainees are given meals approved by dietitians, the labor program is strictly voluntary, and wage rates are federally mandated.

The company said Geo Group contracts with outside vendors to run its commissaries, whose prices "are in line with comparable local markets." It also said Geo Group makes a "minimal commission" on commissary items, most of which goes into a "welfare fund" to purchase recreational equipment and other items for detainees. Relatives can send money electronically to fund their loved ones' commissary accounts, for fees that can reach as high as 10 percent of the amount deposited, some families report. But for many immigrant detainees, scrubbing toilets or mopping floors is the only way they say they can earn enough to

stay clean and fed. You "either work for a few cents an hour or live without basic things like soap, shampoo, deodorant and food," detainee Wilhen Hill Barrientos, 67, said in a class-action lawsuit filed last year by the Southern Poverty Law Center against Nashville-based CoreCivic Inc, the nation's second-largest for-profit prison operator. In the complaint, Barrientos said guards told him to "use his fingers" when he asked for toilet paper at the Stewart Detention Center, located in rural Lumpkin, Georgia.

Detainees are challenging what they say is an oppressive business model in which the companies deprive them of essentials to force them to work for sub-minimum wages, money that is soon recaptured in the firms' own commissaries. "These private prison companies are profiting off of what is essentially a company-store scenario," said the SPLC's Meredith Stewart, a lead attorney on the class action.

Immigrant rights groups have filed similar lawsuits against CoreCivic and Geo Group in California, Colorado, Texas and Washington. Government watchdogs and lawmakers are taking notice too. In November, 11 US senators, including 2020 presidential hopeful Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, sent letters to Geo Group and CoreCivic lambasting the "perverse profit incentive at the core of the private prison business", which has benefited from a crackdown on illegal immigrants under US President Donald Trump.

The senators cited a December 2017 report from the US Office of the Inspector General documenting problems at lockups contracted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The inspector general found spoiled, moldy and expired food, and cited detainees' complaints that hygiene products were "not provided promptly or at all", the report said. The lawmakers have demanded Geo Group and CoreCivic respond to allegations of detainee mistreatment.

Geo Group said a comprehensive, detailed response is underway. The company told Reuters that Geo Group has "already taken steps to remedy areas where our processes fell short of our commitment to high-quality care". CoreCivic spokeswoman Amanda Gilchrist said the company disagrees with the senators' assertions, and that it provides "all daily needs" of detainees. She said CoreCivic

follows all federal standards for ICE-contracted facilities, including management of the outside vendors that run its commissaries, prices for commissary products, and fees charged to families for depositing funds into detainees' commissary accounts.

Bull market in immigrant detention

The US for-profit prison industry has exploded over the past two decades. In 2016, 128,300 people - roughly 1 in 12 US prisoners - were incarcerated in private lockups. That is an increase of 47 percent from 2000, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Geo Group and CoreCivic together manage over half of US private prison contracts, with combined revenues of nearly \$4 billion in 2017. ICE is the No. 1 customer by revenue for both companies.

Trump's immigration policies have been a boon for the industry, which spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on his election and inauguration. In fiscal 2019, the number of people in ICE detention has averaged 45,200 daily, according to agency spokesman Vincent Picard. That is up nearly 19 percent from fiscal 2017. Both Geo Group and CoreCivic have added hundreds of immigration detention beds over the past year. Stock prices for the two companies are up about 30 percent since Trump's election.

The government pays private prison companies fees ranging from roughly \$60 to \$130 daily for the care and feeding of each detainee. At CoreCivic's Stewart Detention Center in Georgia, which houses about 1,700 undocumented immigrants, ICE pays a per diem of \$62.03 for each detainee housed there. CoreCivic's revenue from Stewart alone was \$38 million last year, court records show.

Detainee Barrientos, the lead lawsuit plaintiff, said in court documents he worked seven days a week at the facility in order to purchase hygiene products and phone cards to call family members in Guatemala. Those basics can add up. Reuters viewed a copy of the center's commissary price list. It shows detainees are charged \$11.02 for a 4 oz tube of Sensodyne toothpaste, available on Amazon.com for \$5.20. Dove soap priced at \$2.44 at the commissary is available for just over a dollar at Target. A 2.5 oz tube of Effergrip denture cream that sells for \$4.99 at Walmart is \$7.12 at the commissary. — Reuters

EU patience with Iran wearing thin

In Tehran on Jan 8 during a meeting with European envoys, Iranian officials abruptly stood up, walked out and slammed the door in an extraordinary break with protocol. The French, British, German, Danish, Dutch, and Belgian diplomats in the Iranian foreign ministry room had incensed the officials with a message that Europe could no longer tolerate ballistic missile tests in Iran and assassination plots on European soil, according to four EU diplomats.

"There was a lot of drama, they didn't like it, but we felt we had to convey our serious concerns," one of the diplomats said. "It shows the relationship is becoming more tense," a second said. An Iranian official declined to comment on the meeting. The next day, the European Union imposed its first sanctions on Iran since world powers agreed the 2015 Vienna nuclear arms control deal with Tehran.

The sanctions were largely symbolic but the stormy meeting encapsulated the unexpected shift in European diplomacy since the end of last year. Smaller, more dovish EU countries have joined France and Britain in a harder stance on Tehran, including considering new economic sanctions, diplomats say. Those could include asset freezes and travel bans on Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Iranians developing the Islamic Republic's ballistic missile program, three diplomats said.

The new approach moves Europe closer to US President Donald Trump's policy of isolating Iran with tough sanctions even though European governments still support the 2015 Vienna deal from which he withdrew in May. Although there are diverging views in Europe, the shift could have consequences for President Hassan Rouhani's government as it looks to European capitals to salvage that deal. It could also strengthen anti-Western sentiment in Iran and lead to more aggressive Iranian moves around the Middle East, where the Islamic Republic is involved in proxy wars with its main regional

rival Saudi Arabia. Iran's firing of short-range ballistic missiles into Syria on Sept 30, missile tests and a satellite launch this month have niggled Western powers. For Europe, alleged assassination plots by Iran on French and Danish soil in 2018 were the last straw, diplomats say. Tehran denies the plots and says the missile tests are purely defensive. "The accusations against Iran over the past few months have awoken a few countries in Europe that were against a tougher line on Iran," a European-based Middle East diplomat said.

The same day as the meeting, the Netherlands publicly blamed Iran for killings on its soil in 2015 and 2017. Tehran denies any involvement. Then on Jan 9, the EU designated a unit of Iran's intelligence ministry a terrorist organization, froze its assets and those of two men. "Take the Dutch for example. They had kept very quiet until the Danish attack and now they are more hawkish than the French," said the diplomat.

Alarmed by Trump's "America First" policy, Europe considered his May 8 decision to pull out of the Iran accord a severe setback but Iran's international ambitions appear to offer Brussels and Washington a chance to work more closely. A US State Department official said there was now "a growing international consensus" on the range of Iranian threats. "The US welcomes Europe's efforts to counter Iranian terrorism on European soil, its missile launches, human rights abuses, and other threats," the official said.

Dialogue falters

As the Trump administration accused Iran last year of harboring nuclear ambitions and fomenting instability in the Middle East through its support for militant groups in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, the EU sought dialogue with Tehran. At meetings between European and Iranian diplomats last year, Britain, France, Germany and Italy, pressed for gestures on Iran's role in Syria's war and for help to end the conflict in Yemen.

But multiple bilateral talks on the ballistic missile program have yielded no results. The EU tried to show Iran that compliance with the nuclear accord would still mean economic benefits despite Trump's decision to reimpose US sanctions and choke off Iranian oil exports by pres-

suring US allies. The European Union is set to officially launch a mechanism, the special purpose vehicle (SPV) to trade with Iran later this month but it will not be operational for several months. It will be registered in France, run by a German and likely to include Britain as a shareholder.

"There's a feeling of frustration among Britain, France and Germany, and others, after the first phase of diplomacy with Iran," another senior EU diplomat said. "We thought we could get some effort from the Iranians in several areas." Iran says Europe may not be able to safeguard the nuclear deal anyway and accused European officials of dragging their feet.

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister and senior nuclear negotiator Abbas Araqchi said last week "operational steps" were needed from Europe as political support not enough. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of Iran's powerful Assembly of Experts said on Thursday Europe "would do nothing in our interest". "The Europeans are worse than the Americans. If not, they are not any better," he said, state TV reported.

Last March, as part of efforts to convince Trump to stick to the nuclear deal, France, Britain and Germany proposed asset freezes and travel bans on the IRGC and Iranian companies and groups developing the missile program, according to a document seen by Reuters. Now, a similar set of measures is being prepared, three diplomats say. "We'd prefer not to take these measures, but they need to stop trying to kill people on our territory and over the last three years they have beefed up their ballistic program," said one senior European diplomat.

The diplomats say getting all 28 EU members to agree will take time. The EU's top diplomat Federica Mogherini, who helped seal the 2015 deal, is wary of moving too fast for fear of provoking a complete collapse of the accord, four diplomats said. EU foreign ministers planned to issue a rare joint statement on Jan 21 about what they say is Iran's interference in the region and calling for an end to missile tests. Diplomats said Mogherini wants to see the SPV established first. An EU official denied any split in policy between Mogherini and EU governments, saying the statement will be published as soon as the SPV is launched. — Reuters

Business

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12 Tesla to cut 7% of workforce amid tough profit outlook**13** Boubyan Bank records net profit of KD 56.1 million for year 2018**14** Zain launches 'All Zainers are Winners' campaign for prepaid, postpaid customers

DUBLIN: Examples of gold bullion are on show at Merrion vaults in Dublin. In a vault under the streets of Dublin, a pot of gold owned by anxious investors is growing every day as Britain edges closer to leaving the EU without a deal. — AFP

NBK reports FY net profit of KD 370.7m

Net profit increases by 15.0% on previous year • Total assets reach KD 27.4 billion

KUWAIT: The National Bank of Kuwait ("NBK", the "Bank" or the "Group") has announced its financial results for the 12-month period ended 31 December 2018. NBK reported a net profit of KD 370.7 million (\$1.2 billion), which increased by 15.0 percent on 2017, with total assets increasing by 5.4 percent to reach KD 27.4 billion (\$90.4 billion). Customer loans and advances increased by 6.9 percent to KD 15.5 billion (\$51.1 billion), while customer deposits increased by 4.4 percent to reach KD 14.4 billion (\$47.4 billion). The Group's Board of Directors has proposed a cash dividend distribution of 35 fils per share, representing 35.0 percent of the nominal share value in addition to 5 percent bonus shares, all subject to approval by shareholders at the AGM.

NBK maintained a conservative approach to risk, reflected in the confirmation of strong long-term credit ratings. The Bank's robust asset quality metrics held steady, with the NPL/gross loans ratio at 1.38 percent and an NPL coverage ratio of 228.1 percent. The Group maintained a high level of capitalization, with a capital adequacy ratio of 17.2 percent, comfortably in excess of the Central Bank of Kuwait's requirement.

Commenting on the results, NBK Group Chairman, Nasser Al-Sayer, said: "We are pleased to report another year of solid performance. The Bank has continued to benefit from Kuwait's strong fiscal position, which largely protected the country from regional economic volatility during the year. GDP growth is projected to reach 2.2 percent, and the pipeline of scheduled project awards remains strong. The role that NBK will play in supporting economic growth and the agenda of 'New Kuwait 2035' is assured, as it remains the bank of choice for financing public and private projects.

Having increased the scale and contribution of our international operations, while consolidating our leadership position in Kuwait, we achieved considerable progress in pursuit of our diversification strategy. Our diversification extends to the product and service offering, growth in existing geographies, our approach to new business opportunities, and our commitment to a digital transformation that will position the Bank for future growth."

Group net operating income grew by 7.4 percent year-on-year to reach KD 883.2 million (\$2.9 billion), with improved earnings driven by an increasingly diverse range of income generators from across business units. Non-interest income accounted for 22 percent of net operating income in 2018 with robust fee generation across units, as



Nasser Musaed
Abdulla Al-Sayer



Isam J Al-Sager

the Bank continues to seek opportunities for improving non-interest income. International banking operations accounted for 29 percent of the Group's net profit, increasing from a contribution of 28 percent in 2017. Islamic Banking, through subsidiary Boubyan Bank, provided further diversity to the income profile, with a growing contribution to Group net profit.

NBK Group CEO, Isam Al-Sager, commented: "While the local and regional banking sector faced challenges due to a high level of liquidity putting pressure on credit growth, NBK recorded another set of exceptional results, as the breadth of its operations and the scale of our international footprint mitigated risk. Earnings from our core banking activities clearly reflect NBK's underlying institutional strength, which is supported by a strategy that hedges risk by diversifying income across products, customer types and geographies, while maintaining a competitive advantage in the domestic market through both a conventional and Islamic offer. NBK remains a safe haven, in light of its high credit ratings and recognition of its prudent risk management approach - as borne out by another year of inclusion in Global Finance's list of the World's 50 Safest Banks.

A core component of the diversification theme in 2018 was the considerable effort made by the Bank towards its digital transformation. The program is cross-segment and cross-geography, impacting internal processes and systems as well as the experience and opportunities of our customers." Effective cost management policies saw cost growth of just 4.1 percent, compared with 5.3 percent in 2017, resulting in a cost-to-income ratio of 31.3 percent

compared with 32.3 percent in the previous year. The Bank's profitability metrics delivered positive results, with return on average assets of 1.38 percent compared with 1.28 percent in 2017 and return on average equity of 12.0 percent compared with 10.8 percent for the previous year. Basic earnings per share (EPS) were 58 fils at year-end (50 fils in 2017), with equity attributable to shareholders increasing by 3.3 percent to KD 2.9 billion (\$9.7 billion).

Al-Sager concluded: "Our strategic pathway remains essentially unchanged. Our primary objective is to deliver superior returns to shareholders, which we will achieve by

defending our leadership of core businesses, maintaining our dominant share of the domestic Kuwaiti market, achieving growth in target segments and exploiting our international presence. Having achieved particularly robust performance in Egypt, we will look to consolidate and build upon recent growth in that market; while in Saudi Arabia we will seek to grow the client-base and AuMs of the recently launched Al-Watani Wealth Management Company. We look forward to maintaining our commitment to both customers and shareholders, as we build a more diverse and sophisticated banking offer."

A month into US shutdown, the economy blinks first

WASHINGTON: After four weeks, the partial shutdown of the US government has begun to rattle the world's largest economy, particularly hitting consumer sentiment, a mainstay of growth.

A closely-watched monthly consumer survey on Friday touched its lowest level since President Donald Trump's election in 2016, suffering its biggest one-month drop in more than six years, according to University of Michigan economists. Americans have less confidence in the economy's strength in 2019, while 800,000 government workers are furloughed or work without pay as Trump battles on Democratic lawmakers over funding for a wall on the Mexican border.

The shutdown, which began December 22, directly affects only 0.5 percent of the labor force, but indirectly, it is beginning to hit morale for more than half of US consumers, according to the report.

When government operations resume, federal workers should ordinarily get back pay. But this may not be true for contractors, who could have to eat the loss.

As the work stoppage continues, economists have progressively raised their estimates for its cost to GDP growth. White House economists doubled their estimate early this week, determining that after a month, the shut-

down would shave a half percentage point off the first quarter. Influential central banker John Williams, president of the New York Federal Reserve Bank, upped the ante on Friday, saying the first quarter could lose a full percentage point. "It is going to be a drag on consumer spending and the economy in the first quarter directly, enough to pull growth down by up to a half percentage, or maybe even a percentage point, if it continues," he told a local banking conference, according to Bloomberg.

Fundamentals are solid

Nevertheless, Williams said there could be a post-shutdown rebound, as had been the case in the past.

The battle over wall funding coincides with other clouds on the horizon, as a recent Fed survey showed. The US-China trade war, sharp volatility on stock markets that left the major Wall Street indices in correction for a month, and fumbled public statements from the central bank also made investors shudder.

With a slowing global economy and trade uncertainties, the Fed for now expects 2.3 percent growth in 2019, down sharply from the growth of about three percent expected for 2018.

Forecasts for the first quarter of this year are not yet available. The fundamentals of the economy remain sound, analysts say, even if much economic data-including home and retail sales or the trade deficit-is not being produced during the shutdown. Gregory Daco, chief US economist at Oxford Economics, said in an analytical note on Friday that some were sure to claim the Michigan survey "signals an imminent recession." But he said the index had already been too high in recent months, meaning it was due to fall. — AFP

Business

Tesla to cut 7% of workforce amid tough profit outlook

Move to keep the Model 3 affordable for middle-income customers

NEW YORK: Elon Musk's electric car manufacturer Tesla Motors announced Friday it was cutting its workforce by about seven percent in a push to keep the Model 3 affordable for middle-income consumers. Shares plunged following the announcement, which also signaled a tough profit road ahead for Tesla.

The round of job cuts—which follow an earlier downsizing announced in June—comes as the envelope-pushing company faces pressure in its home market on prices from the phasing-out of a tax credit for electric car purchases.

Musk did not release an estimate of the employment hit but the company had 45,000 employees in October, suggesting about 3,150 would be cut.

Musk, who originally conceived of the Model 3 as a reasonably priced option for consumers who could not pay the lofty prices of its first two vehicles, said action was needed if the company was to succeed in its mission of challenging conventional autos. "While we have made great progress, our products are still too expensive for most people," Musk said in a blog post announcing the layoffs.

"We need to continue making progress towards lower priced variants of Model 3."

Loss of US subsidy

Tesla's most affordable offering is currently a less-endowed version of the Model 3 at \$44,000, a car that sells for as much as \$59,000 with more features. Tesla originally discussed a price-tag of \$35,000 for the car. Selling the Model 3 at the higher price has enhanced profitability at the expense of access to the vehicles' intended market.

Complicating matters further is the phasing down from \$7,500 per vehicle of a US tax credit to encourage more sales of the environmentally friendly cars. The need for "lower-priced variants of Model 3 becomes even greater on July 1," when a US tax credit drops by half, making the car \$1,875 more expensive, and again at the end of the year when it goes away

entirely, said the flamboyant Musk, who also heads SpaceX. Rival automakers such as General Motors and Volkswagen are introducing more electric models that are priced competitively, a dynamic made possible by their fleets of conventional autos, including sport utility vehicles and pickup trucks, which have wide profit margins.

Tesla shares sank 13.0 percent to \$302.26. "Tesla probably increased its employee base by more than it needed to last year and is laying off some of those workers to bring down costs," said CFRA Research analyst Garrett Nelson.

"For most auto manufacturers, the cost-cutting would be received positively but in Tesla's case, investors start to second guess whether the real issue is demand."

Grim profit outlook

The job cuts announced Friday follow Tesla's move in June to trim its workforce by about nine percent. Musk described that round of belt-tightening as necessary to enhance profitability, a goal that he said was essential to demonstrate that environmentally friendly autos could be a viable business.

In October, Tesla reported third-quarter profits of \$312 million. In Friday's blog post, Musk said preliminary results indicated that fourth-quarter profits would be smaller than in the prior quarter and that the outlook was tougher still for the first quarter of 2019 as it delivers its first Model 3 sales in Asia and Europe at higher price points.

Musk hopes for a "tiny profit" in the current quarter, something that will require "great difficulty, effort and some luck," he said. "Musk is right to say in the memo that Tesla's products are 'still too expensive for most people,'" said Morningstar analyst David Whiston, who predicted the company would face more "growing pains" and competition.

"If it can stay viable, we think (Tesla) can enjoy strong momentum with the Model 3 for a while because



This file photo shows the US automotive and energy company Tesla showroom and service center in Amsterdam. Elon Musk's electric car manufacturer Tesla announced Friday, it is cutting its workforce by about seven percent as it works to meet its timetable for producing the Model 3. —AFP

the vehicle is just now being sold in foreign markets and the entry-level version is not available anywhere," Whiston said. Tesla last month named two independent directors, Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison and Walgreens Boots Alliance Executive Vice President Kathleen Wilson-Thompson, as part of an agreement with the US Securities and Exchange Commission to settle fraud charges against Musk after his quickly

aborted effort last summer to take Tesla private.

Musk has been a polarizing figure in corporate America over the last couple of years, winning praise from many over his trailblazing entrepreneurship but frequently turning heads over his unconventional and sometimes bizarre behavior, as when he appeared to be smoking marijuana during an interview that was webcast. —AFP

Zimbabwe public workers reject latest wage offer after protests

HARARE: Zimbabwe's public workers have rejected a second offer to raise their salaries and demanded to be paid in dollars, days after at least three people died in violent anti-government protests.

Hundreds of Zimbabweans were detained on public order charges on Friday, as the United Nations urged an end to a security crackdown and an internet blackout.

Zimbabweans, who have seen their purchasing power eroded by soaring inflation despite adopting the dollar in 2009, say President Emmerson Mnangagwa has not delivered on pre-election pledges to kick-start growth after the exit of Robert Mugabe. Mnangagwa has promised a clean break from the 37-year era of Mugabe, who was forced out in a de facto coup in November 2017 but the economy is afflicted by a severe shortage of dollars which has led to shortages of fuel and medicines.

The government has offered to pay 305,000 civil servants, including the security forces, \$300 million for the period between April and December, a monthly average rise of \$109 each. But workers rejected this latest offer, the second in two weeks at a meeting on Friday, Thomas Muzondo, deputy chairman of the Apex Council, a grouping of all civil service unions, said, adding that a third round of talks was scheduled for next week.

"We insisted on US dollar salaries but the government totally rejected this, saying they do not manufacture dollars. We are now consulting our membership but we told the government that their offer is nowhere near our expectations," he said.

Civil servants, who gave Mnangagwa's government a 14-day notice to strike on January 8, want to be paid in dollars or have the monthly salary of the lowest paid worker increased from \$414 to \$1,700, Muzondo said. Supplies of dollars have dried up and Zimbabweans have seen their deposits in the electronic banking system losing value, raising fears that the southern African nation might be heading for its second financial collapse in a decade. —Reuters

Tunisian union calls new nationwide strike to press wage demands

TUNIS: Tunisia's powerful UGTT union called yesterday for another national strike for two days next

Global stocks surge on China-US trade breakthrough hopes

NEW YORK: Stock markets across the globe powered higher Friday, buoyed by hopes of a breakthrough in efforts to defuse a US-China trade war. European and Asian indices bounced back strongly on Thursday after The Wall Street Journal reported Washington was considering lifting tariffs on China as officials look to hammer out a trade deal.

Wall Street joined the party later Friday, with major indices rising one percent or more to close out the fourth day in a row of gains. The Dow has risen more than 13 percent since December 24.

Bloomberg also reported Friday that Beijing had offered to eliminate its soaring trade surplus with the United States in five years. "Global markets are enjoying an overwhelmingly bullish end to the week, with hopes of a potential breakthrough in US-China trade talks helping drive optimism," said Joshua Mahony, senior market analyst at traders IG.

There's "definitely rising optimism" of a trade deal, said LBBW's Karl Haeling. "There are kind of smoke signals and when there is smoke there is fire," Haeling said. "It seems that Trump sees the weakening of the economy and the shutdown situation. He seems to be doing something to get a win here."

However, there was also skepticism among some analysts, with the two sides still far apart on a number of issues, particularly regarding intellectual property. On currency markets the pound edged lower, giving up earlier gains seen as dealers bet that Britain would not leave the European Union without a deal. After her grand Brexit plan was soundly rebuffed by MPs this week, British Prime Minister Theresa May has called cross-party talks to put

Barcelona taxis go on strike, block key street

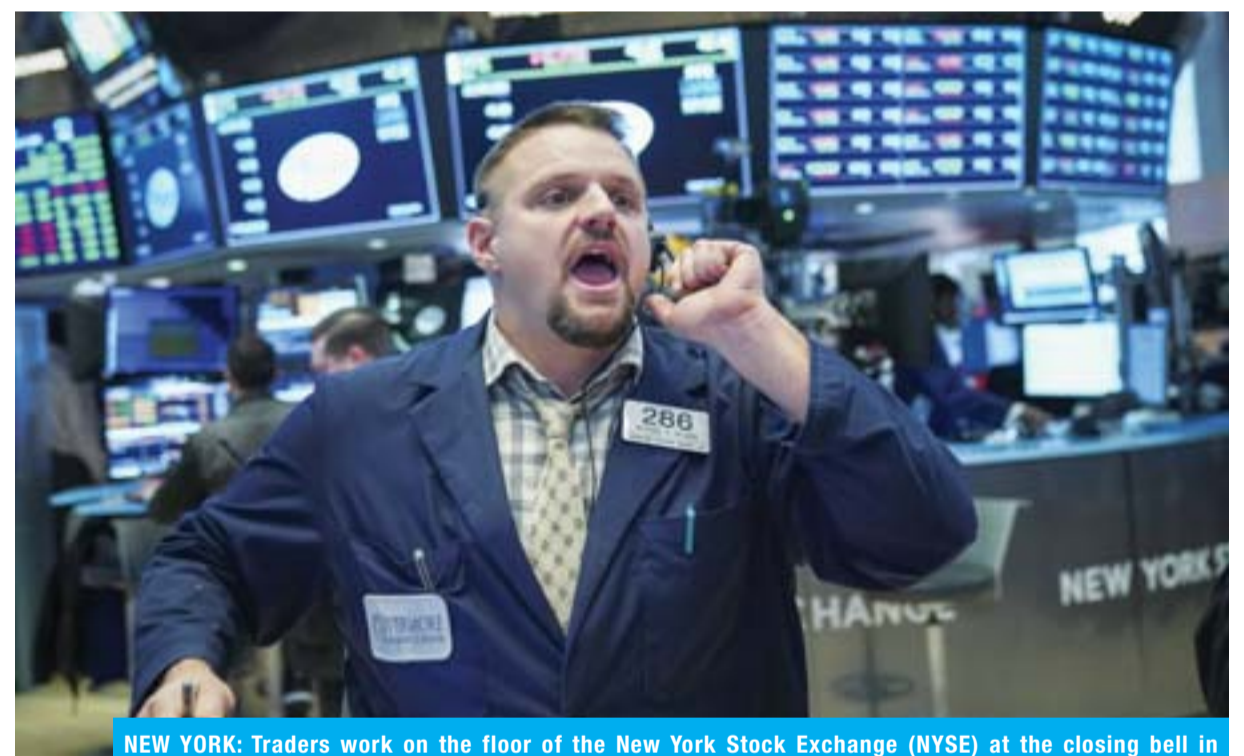
BARCELONA: Dozens of taxis in Barcelona went on indefinite strike on Friday, blocking a major thoroughfare in protest against online ride-hailing services like Uber. The protest comes ahead of a similar work stoppage due on Monday in Madrid just two days before the Fitur international tourism fair, one of the world's largest, in the Spanish capital.

The strike follows new regulations unveiled Friday by Catalonia's regional government forcing clients to book VTCs (Tourism Vehicles with Chauffeur) like Uber or Cabify at least 15 minutes before the actual time they are needed - a measure criticized as unfair by taxi drivers.

month to press its demand for higher wages for 670,000 public servants, the UGTT chief said.

Rail, bus and air traffic and all services stopped in Tunisia and street protests drew thousands on Thursday in a one-day nationwide strike to challenge the government's refusal to raise salaries.

"As negotiations with the government failed and the purchasing power has deteriorated significantly, UGTT decided to approve a nationwide strike on Feb. 20 and 21," UGTT chief Nourredine Taboubi told reporters. The decision will raise the pressure on



NEW YORK: Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) at the closing bell in New York City. —AFP

together a "Plan B" by Monday.

If that does not work, there is a growing expectation that the March 29 exit deadline will be pushed back to give May more time to reach another deal or possibly call another referendum.

Oil prices rise

Oil prices meanwhile rose on the China-US tariffs report and after OPEC said it had cut output in December before a new agreement to limit supply took effect. Both main contracts are up around a fifth since the end of December, thanks to an agreement to cut

output by OPEC and other key producers including Russia. That followed almost three months of losses that wiped around 40 percent off prices amid concerns supply was running ahead of demand.

Shares of US companies with significant China operations gained, including Dow member Boeing, Caterpillar and Nike. But Tesla Motors dived 13 percent after the electric car maker announced plans to cut seven percent of its workforce and forecast lean profits.

Netflix fell 4.0 percent as its profits topped analyst expectations but analysts worried that subscriber growth was slowing. —AFP



BARCELONA: Taxi drivers block a roundabout by the Gran Via street during a strike in Barcelona on Friday to protest against regulations proposed by the authorities for VTCs (Tourism Vehicles with Chauffeur). —AFP

the government which is struggling to revive the faltering economy.

The government is also under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to freeze public sector wages, the bill for which doubled to about 16 billion dinars (\$5.5 billion) in 2018 from 7.6 billion in 2010, as part of measures to reduce its budget deficit.

But the UGTT says the monthly average wage of about \$250 is one of the lowest in the world, while the state Institute of Strategic Studies says real purchasing power has fallen by 40 percent since 2014.

The government had said it does not have the money to pay for the increases strikers want, worth about \$850 million in total. Government spokesman Iyad Dahmani said that increase would lift annual inflation to 10 percent from 7.4 percent.

An economic crisis has eroded living standards for Tunisians and unemployment is high as political turmoil and lack of reforms have deterred investment needed to create jobs. That has forced the government to launch austerity measures to please donors and lenders including the IMF. —Reuters

Business

Zain launches 'All Zainers are Winners' campaign for prepaid, postpaid customers

All-new campaign on the occasion of Kuwait's national celebrations in February

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced the launch of its latest promotional campaign entitled "All Zainers are Winners" on the occasion of Kuwait's national celebrations in February. During the all-new campaign, Zain offers all its postpaid and prepaid customers with instant prizes throughout the campaign period, in addition to a chance to win mega prizes in the final draw to be held at the end of the campaign.

Before February of every year, Zain is keen on sharing the joys of Kuwait's national festivities with all its customers through launching the biggest promotional campaigns refreshed with the most wonderful offerings. At this celebrated time of year, the company is always committed to launching unique promotional campaigns with the best offerings to celebrate this much cherished occasion along with its customer base, considered the biggest in Kuwait.

Zain's new campaign, which starts from the 20th of January and continues until the 28th of February, offers valuable instant prizes to all prepaid and postpaid customers throughout the campaign period, including free minutes, free Internet GBs, free bonus credit, and many more. To be eligible for one of the instant prizes, prepaid customers can simply recharge their lines with KD 5 or more, while postpaid customers can simply pay their bills through one of Zain's digital channels (Zain's website, Zain app, or Zain Connect portal) with KD 5 or more. Customers will receive their gift instantly as soon as they pay/recharge.

The surprises of Zain's new campaign are not limited to the instant prizes only, but will extend to offer-

ing a chance to all Zain prepaid and postpaid customers to win many mega prizes during the final draw to be held at the end of the campaign. Every customer will receive one point for each KD 1 paid/recharged during the campaign period, and they can simply check their current accumulated points/chances balance by dialing *2526#. The more points a customer has, the more chances they will have for winning one of the mega prizes, which will be revealed soon during the campaign.

Zain has long considered itself a key partner of the Kuwaiti society, especially in such national celebrations. The company launched this exciting campaign to show its commitment in sharing the joys of Kuwait as a leading national company, and will spare no efforts in being an integral part of the many occasions that are of interest to the local community.

By launching this exciting limited time promotional campaign, Zain continues to reinforce its leadership position and its pledge in offering the best services and offers to meet customers' professional and personal telecommunications needs.

Zain always aspires to new levels of excellence in all services it offers to its customers. Through the launch of this new campaign, Zain affirms its continuous efforts in meeting customers' needs and aspirations, and deliver its promise to offering the best services and latest technologies. The company constantly looks at ways to improve the experience of its customers, including providing them with the latest solutions to better serve their needs through the biggest and most advanced network in Kuwait.



Kizhakkumury Gopi wins KD 4000 in Burgan Bank's value account draw

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank today announced Mohith Kizhakkumury Gopi as the winner of the Value Account KD 4000 draw. The winner expressed his excitement of winning the cash prize of KD 4,000.

Dedicated to offer the best in-class services, Burgan Bank's Value Account presents customers with exceptional features which were specifically designed to suit the needs of expatriates living in Kuwait. Account holders will be able to enjoy matchless benefits that include receiving a free credit card for one year, application for a loan, in addition to a chance to enter the quarterly draw to win KD 4000 as well as other discounts from selected merchant stores.

Burgan Bank will continue presenting exclusive services and draws with an aim of exceeding customers' expectations while offering them chances to win valuable cash prizes all year round.

Opening a Value account is simple, interested Individuals with salaries starting from KD 150 and above are eligible to open a Value Account.

UK shoppers rein in spending as Brexit nears

LONDON: British shoppers cut back on spending in the three months to December for the first time since last spring, adding to evidence of a consumer slowdown as Brexit approaches, data showed on Friday.

Retail sales volumes fell 0.2 percent in the fourth quarter after a 0.2 percent rise in the three months to November, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said. Friday's data chimed with other signs that consumer spending is cooling after a strong summer. Businesses are also cutting investment before Britain's scheduled departure from the European Union in late March, leaving the overall economy growing at a snail's pace. In December alone, retail sales fell 0.9 percent, recoiling after November's Black Friday splurge, but were 3.0 percent higher than a year earlier. Both readings were below economists' forecasts in a Reuters poll. "A major concern for retailers will be that already cautious consumers further limit their spending in the near term at least due to the heightened uncertainties over Brexit," economist Howard Archer from the EY ITEM Club consultancy said.

Sterling and British government bonds were little changed after the data. The ONS said the value of sales fell for the first time in three years in the three months to December, underlining a squeeze on retailers' profit margins as they battle for customers. A survey last week from the British Retail Consortium showed retailers failed to increase Christmas sales for the first time since the depths of the global financial crisis a decade ago. Supermarkets Sainsbury's and Morrison missed Christmas sales forecasts though Tesco beat them. Clothing retailer Next and department store John Lewis reported a late surge in demand.

The ONS data showed a drop in sales of carpets and floor coverings, possibly reflecting a stalling housing market. While disarray over Brexit has weighed on consumer confidence, there has been some comfort for households recently with the fastest underlying pay growth since 2008 and inflation falling to an almost two-year low of 2.1 percent. Highlighting the easing of inflation pressures, the ONS's measure of annual price increases in stores cooled to 0.6 percent in December from 1.3 percent in November, the smallest uptick in more than two years. —Reuters

KFH moving forward in further embracing FinTech, AI

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) achieved paradigm shift in digital banking through embracing the latest financial technology FinTech and the Artificial Intelligence AI, in accordance with highest levels of security, quality and professionalism.

During 2018, KFH rolled out a wide range of innovative digital banking services, and upgraded its systems and infrastructure as part of its digital transformation journey. The Bank succeeded in providing a plethora of high-tech banking services, most of which are unique in Kuwait, and has established a competitive position in the banking sector. KFH operated its first fully-automated 24/7 e-branch with an advanced and wide range of technical devices and self-service tools under the theme "KFH-Go". The e-branch provides more than 30 services representing about 80% of the services provided by the traditional branch. Also, KFH launched Chatbot service in cooperation with Microsoft, to improve interaction with customers who can use this service through different KFH e-services such as KFH.com and mobile app KFHonline. KFH upgraded a centralized SWIFT network system for global payments at the group level.

Moreover, the Bank offered "KFH-Go", the first-of-its-kind digital self-banking branch in Kuwait. The new e-branch is not staffed and contains state-of-the-art XTMs and ATMs as well as two cash deposit machines (Bulk Deposit) each capable of accepting 300 notes in a single transaction with the capability of communicating directly with the telephone service personnel in audio and video calls via XTM machines. Customers can access more than 30 services, including cash withdrawals without a card "cardless" through the mobile phone using the "QR code", IDs or phone number, as well as conducting "Murabaha" business transactions, requesting credit cards and prepaid cards, updating data and phone numbers, activating bank cards, opening deposits and accounts and a host of banking and financing services, therefore dispensing with the need to visit the branch or deal directly with the staff.

The Bank introduced a fast cross-border transfer service (KFH Xpress). KFH launched "Apply for finance



online" service that enables all KFH customers to apply for finance request through KFH Online, without the need to visit any of Bank's branches.

KFH has started operating an instant cross-border remittance service "Instant International Transfer" using Ripple's blockchain technology.

Turkey

KFH-Turkey expanded its XTM presence and now has 51 XTMs in 9 cities. KFH-Turkey developed a new service that aids those with hearing impairment in society through providing sign language feature in XTMs. Customers can easily carry out many banking transactions ranging from money transfer to precious metal trading. This makes experience easier for more than 3 million hearing-impaired citizens with sign language banking.

Bahrain

KFH-Bahrain unveiled Jazeel, a digital account opening and community-based platform in Bahrain and GCC countries. Jazeel enables customers to open an account within minutes, without having to visit a branch.

Jazeel allows customers across Bahrain, and eventually in the GCC, to open a mudaraba (trust financing) based savings account and libshara (investment savings) account. With Jazeel, the Bank introduces a digitized electronic know-your-customer (E-KYC) process where all customer information validation will be done online via video conferencing through the application. The platform provides a number of features including forensic documents analysis, digital documents scanning including signature, facial recognition, selfie checks and create digital identity. These features allow for the "gen-



uine verification" of the documents scanned by the customer, via the application, in the real-time mode and can alert the bank of any tampering. Jazeel is currently available in Google Play Store and Apple App Store.

Malaysia

KFH Malaysia won Best Corporate Website from "Islamic Business and Finance" Magazine. To make the services easier, more convenient, and safer, the website kfh.com has recently undergone significant updates and improvements, including the highest standard specifications of global websites in design and content. As a key corporate interface, KFH invested heavily in upgrading its website www.kfh.com.my to be in line with fast-changing banking industry, digital transformation and reliance on technology in the first place.

The smartphone that has killer technology

KUWAIT: A smartphone is one of the mainstays in the modern-day personal and working human being's arsenal; it seems that everyone has got a smartphone. They have changed our lives dramatically and become an integral part and tools we use to manage and enjoy our daily lives: chat with family and friends, play online games or capture moments on camera.

Consumer expectations are ever-rising and in the race to bring the best smartphones to market, Huawei name emerges as one of the brands leading the rapid development of technologies that help improve device performance to satisfy those needs. The HUAWEI Mate 20 Pro is comprised of technologies and capabilities that are far more advanced, and would be approved by any smartphone enthusiast who is interested in owning the most exclusive technology.

The HUAWEI Mate 20 Pro offers consumers a greater photography and videography experience through its 40MP Leica Triple Camera which incorporates a 20MP Ultra-Wide Angle Lens to bring a wider perspective to users. This wider perspective creates a sense of spaciousness and a three dimensional effect. It's easy to capture ultra-

wide angle images-users need to zoom out to capture beautiful landscapes, portraits or group photos with the new perspective.

The phone also houses a massive 4,200mAh high-density battery that can sustain a full day's worth of work or play without needing to be recharged. It also features all-new 40W HUAWEI SuperCharge technology, which tops the battery up to approximately 70 percent in 30 minutes.

Moreover, the HUAWEI Mate 20 Pro supports 15W HUAWEI wireless fast charge, offering the fastest wireless charging in the industry and the world's first wireless reverse charging which lets users double the role of HUAWEI Mate 20 Pro as a power bank for other devices that are Qi-enabled.

Any phone is deemed useless without an advanced security. This phone presents an improved in-screen fingerprint sensor that achieves better speed and success rates. The device displays a prompt whenever it detects a finger is hovering above the sensor. Once the authentication process is complete, the unobtrusive prompt quickly disappears into the background.

Powered by its own in-house designed Kirin 980 AI chip, this advanced chip is fabricated with leading 7nm process technology, packing 6.9 billion transistors into a form factor the size of a fingernail. Running at a high clock speed, Kirin 980 enables quicker app launch times, better multi-tasking and a generally smoother user experience.

The Mali-G76 GPU that debuts in the Kirin 980 delivers unparalleled gaming



experiences. It utilizes AI to intelligently identify gaming workloads and adjust resource allocation for optimal gaming performance. Even when in intensive scenarios, the solution enables the devices to run lag-free. Furthermore, the AI optimization for touch responsiveness lowers touch response delay by 36 percent. A quicker response time lets players always be the one who shoots first in games. Through AI technology, HUAWEI Mate 20 Pro is making life even better. Huawei's HiVision is the ideal travel companion. By pointing the camera to an object, users are connected to descriptions and backgrounds sourced from a connected cloud of landmarks from 15 countries around the world. HiVision can also be used to pair items with retail outlets.

Using HiVision, users can use the camera to scan items and buy them online, on the spot. This works in concert with HiTouch to

help users utilize AI to shop online. Currently these two features are connected to more than 200 global eCommerce platforms and about 100 brands' official online stores, giving users more than 120 million items to choose from. For users that are monitoring their diet, especially while traveling and sampling local foods, pointing the camera to a particular item will automatically prompt the estimated number of calories to appear, based on the AI-perceived weight of their dish. Currently the calorie counter feature on HiVision recognizes more than 100 different food items.

The HUAWEI Mate 20 Pro is a stunning flagship that offers a lot of new features and innovations that rank among the top in the phone industry. It is a powerful device with a leading camera, longer battery life, advanced security and fascinating AI capabilities that will power the next generation of phones.

Health & Technology

ASUS Republic of Gamers launches new Nvidia GeForce RTX notebook lineup



DUBAI: Asus Republic of Gamers (ROG), the world's leading gaming brand, launched its new Nvidia GeForce RTX notebook lineup yesterday. It features two new flagship products, Mothership (GZ700) and the Zephyrus S (GX701). The latest additions to the ROG arsenal of the world's best gaming gear, the ultra-versatile ROG Mothership (GZ700), a 17.3-inch Full HD detachable gaming laptop equipped with up to a factory-overclocked Intel Core i9 processor and NVIDIA GeForce RTX 2080 graphics card and ROG Zephyrus S (GX701), the world's slimmest gaming laptop with an up to 8th Gen Intel Core processor and NVIDIA GeForce RTX 2080 with Max-Q Design graphics.

"Launching the products here in the Middle East first after their unveiling at CES 2019, is a reflection of how important the Middle East is to ROG. Consumers here have shown that they want the latest innovations that ROG brings to gaming, and we appreciate their support and faith in our products," said Jeff Lo, Asus MENA Regional Head.

He added further, "eSports appears to become an important dimension of the future of sports in MENA region. With the announcement of Dubai X-stadium earlier last year, Dubai is soon to become a regional and global hub for hosting video gaming events. This gives us an opportunity to attract millions of esports gamers, spectators and enthusiasts from across the globe. And as a brand, we align ourselves to the visions of the leaders and provide best of innovations for the esports industry"

Asus launches frameless notebooks for the ultimate viewing experience

Asus is also showcasing the Zenbook 14 (UX431), Zenbook S13 (392), Vivobook 15 & 14 (X512 / X412), which were announced at CES 2019. Asus has completely eliminated the bezels from this lineup, highlighted by the Zenbook S13 with a 97 percent screen-to-body ratio and NVIDIA GeForce MX150 discrete graphics. The latest ASUS notebooks are tailored to provide truly unique experiences that unleash users' creative power and reinvigorate their tech lifestyles.

With regards to the Asus lineup Jeff Lo commented, "We have noticed a shift in customer demand in the Middle East, moving from HDD's to SSD's and preferring notebooks with thinner bezels. The thinner bezels allow us to fit bigger screens into smaller form factors and gives consumers a more immersive experience. Our newest lineup including the premium Zenbook & the vibrant Vivobook X415 and 512 reflect our belief that narrow bezels can be had by all customers."

Availability

Mothership & Zephyrus S will be available across retailers in the Middle East from Q2. Zenbook 14 will be available at all leading retailers in the Middle East from Q2. Zenbook S13 will be available at all leading retailers in the Middle East from January. VivoBook X412 / 512 will be available at all leading retailers in the Middle East from February.



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What's On

Ooredoo Kuwait visits its Jahra branches and strategic partners



Ooredoo Kuwait's executive management recently visited the company's branches and strategic partners in Jahra Governorate, which aims to enrich customers' experience and providing them with higher quality of service. The management visit stems from Ooredoo's values of caring, connecting, and challenging.

The main purpose of the visit was to connect with the customers and dealers and to receive personal feedback from them. This included experiencing the agents' day to day operations and providing the team with recommendations on how to better address challenges and concerns and hence: improve overall performance. This initiative comes in line with the company's customer centric strategy in which executive management were able to meet and interact with customers and partners in order to discuss ways to ensure continued success.

Commenting on the visit, Ooredoo Chief

Executive Officer, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah Al Thani said: This important visit comes as part of the company's ongoing efforts to ensure the best possible experience for our customers and to yield a positive impact on enhancing the experience and relationship of both our customers' and dealers. We look forward to the outcome of this tour and we are confident that it will have a positive impact on our approach moving forward". Ooredoo Kuwait is now serving customers in 62 branches around Kuwait, with 8 branches located in lively areas in Jahra, including the only drive through branch in Kuwait as part of its commitment to providing the biggest number of customers with the best services. This is engrained within Ooredoo's strategy based on saving the time and efforts of our customers which will yield a positive customer. Ooredoo branches are located in strategic locations which include Al Manshar Mall,

located on the coast road in Fahaheel in addition to several branches in key locations such as Farwaniya Co-Op, Ishbelya Co-Op, Hateen Co-Op, and Ardiya Luxury Center, 360 Mall, Sabah Al-Salem, Jahra, and Mahboula.

Ooredoo emphasized its commitment to expanding its footprint across all the key areas in Kuwait in order to serve its customers better and provide them with products that enrich their experience, with its plans and bundles that are tailored for individuals and businesses. Ooredoo is planning on opening more than 20 new branches nationwide during quarter one of this year. Customers can avail from the My Ooredoo smartphone app which provides a map of all the company's branches across Kuwait with their locations and operating hours. The app is available for free on the AppStore for devices that use the iOS operating system, and on the Google Play Store for devices that use the Android operating system.



ACK internship program hosted by Al-Futtaim Group

In an ongoing cooperative program between the Australian College of Kuwait (ACK) and Al-Futtaim Group, 10 ACK School of Business students took part in an internship program at several stores owned by Al-Futtaim Group, noting that the internship program has been active over the past five years.

Three of the students were given an internship opportunity at BCBGMAXAZRIA. During the internship, the students were instructed on the retail cycle by the manager of BCBGMAXAZRIA, Ms Jennifer. The students were also allowed to conduct customer surveys, market analyses and merchandise placement. Another group consisting of three students was hosted by Guess stores. While there, they received hands-on experience in different aspects of maintaining a retail store including laying out merchandise, helping customers and performing competitor analyses.

The final group, which consisted of four students, was trained at Marks and Spencer. The students were taught how to properly present merchandise, assist customers, packing and unpacking process and learnt about pricing



the merchandises. The selected students reported a positive experience from the program, and expressed gratitude for both ACK and Al-Futtaim Group for making the experience possible. From its end, ACK is very grateful to Al-Futtaim Group and their stores for the assistance that they've given to their students over the years.

The winners of Malabar's promo campaign felicitated

Malabar Gold & Diamonds, one of the largest jewelry retailers globally, recently awarded Krishna Prashanth, Robert Lapis and Rajinder Kumar with 100gm gold as the winners of its 'Win up to 2 kilos of Gold' campaign. The winners of the raffle draw received the prizes and were congratulated by Afsal Khan, Zonal Head, Malabar Gold & Diamonds in the presence of management of Malabar Gold & Diamonds.

The 8th edition of the 'Malabar Gold & Diamonds Festival' campaign, which is slated to end on 26 January, offers a variety of exciting promotions. During the promotional period, customers shopping at any Malabar Gold & Diamonds outlet are entitled to a ticket on their jewelry purchases that enters them into a raffle draw to win up to 2 kilos of gold. In another promotion, every purchase of gold and diamond jewelry worth KD40 allows buyers a chance to win a 100 gram of gold bar each in 10 raffle draws. Buyers of diamond and precious gem jewelry purchases worth KD 250 will each receive a 1gm free gold coin. Customers also get free gold coins on every purchase of 18k gold jewelry worth KD 80.

The Malabar Gold & Diamonds Festival is a true shopper's delight with an assortment of eye-catching designs in

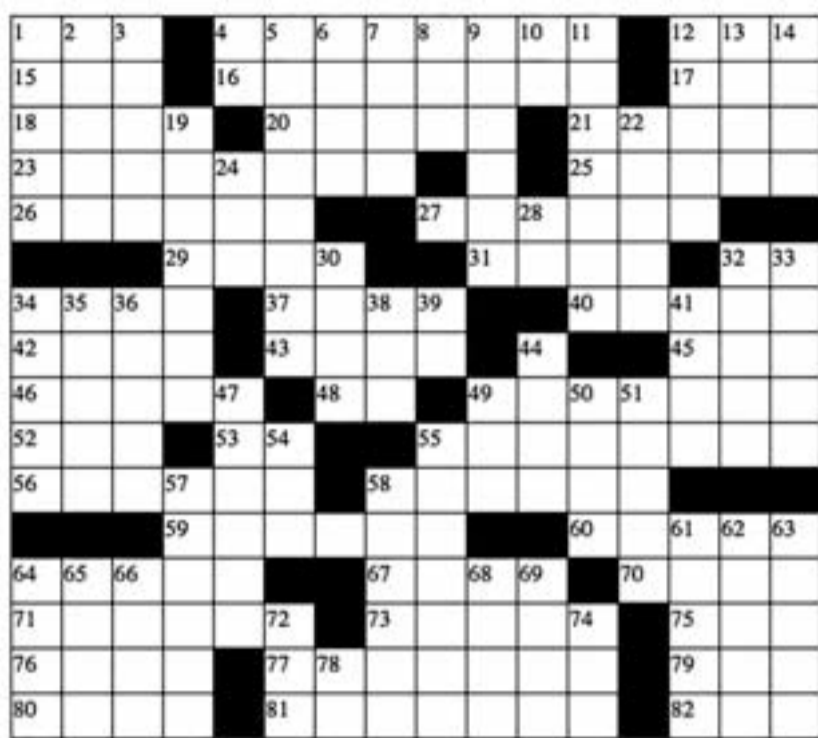


Krishna Prashanth

gold, diamonds, platinum, and precious gems from different parts of the world. There is also the latest and most vibrant collection of jewelry to suit the tastes of the brand's multicultural and multinational customers. Malabar Gold & Diamonds features a range of designs namely Ethnix - Handcrafted Designer Jewelry, Era - Uncut Diamond Jewelry, Mine - Diamonds Unlimited, Divine-Indian Heritage Jewelry and Precia - Gem Jewelry. This season, Malabar Gold & Diamonds showcases the latest collection of gold, diamond and precious gems jewelry in their outlets, to celebrate this festive period.

Stars

CROSSWORD 2114



ACROSS

- The ratio of the distance traveled (in kilometers) to the time spent traveling (in hours).
- A naval battle in the Russo-Japanese War (1905).
- Type genus of the Muridae.
- A unit of surface area equal to 100 square meters.
- Guaranteed to bring a profit.
- The address of a web page on the world wide web.
- Lacking or deprive of the sense of hearing wholly or in part.
- An Indian side dish of yogurt and chopped cucumbers and spices.
- Follower of Rastafarianism.
- Someone who operates an aircraft.
- Unable to relax or be still.
- Large short-tailed lemur of Madagascar having thick silky fur in black and white and fawn.
- The opening into the stomach and that part of the stomach connected to the esophagus.
- Very dark black.
- French physicist noted for research on magnetism (born in 1904).
- Wading birds of warm regions having long slender down-curved bills.
- The basic unit of money in Western Samoa.
- Rock star and drummer for the Beatles (born in 1940).
- Mentally healthy.
- In bed.
- Any of various long-tailed rodents similar to but larger than a mouse.
- A member of the Nahuatl people who established an empire in Mexico that was overthrown by Cortes in 1519.
- A monarchy in northwestern Europe occupying most of the British Isles.
- A river in north central Switzerland that runs northeast into the Rhine.
- A highly unstable radioactive element (the heaviest of the halogen series).
- United States singer and film actor (1904-1977).
- Of or relating to or near the tarsus of the foot.
- The Mongol people living the central and eastern parts of Outer Mongolia.
- Especially of a ship's lines etc.
- Make high-pitched, whiney noises.
- A branch of the Tai languages.
- In the Arabian Nights a hero who tells of the fantastic adventures he had in his voyages.
- (Greek mythology) A Titan who was forced by Zeus to bear the sky on his shoulders.
- A master's degree in business.
- A team of professional baseball players who play and travel together.
- A member of a North American Indian people of southwestern Oregon.
- Tag the base runner to get him out.
- English pianist (1890-1965).
- Deeply affected or marked by mental or physical pain or injury.
- A loose sleeveless outer garment made from aba cloth.

DOWN

- A family of Sino-Tibetan languages spoken in southeastern Asia.
- Clean with one's bill, of birds.
- Detected or perceived by the sense of hearing.
- A metallic element of the rare earth group.
- A town in west central Florida on the Gulf of Mexico.
- Relatively small fast-moving sloth.
- A short theatrical episode.
- Headress that protects the head from bad weather.
- A large Yoruba city in southwestern Nigeria.
- A metric unit of volume equal to one thousandth of a liter.
- Any orchid of the genus *Aerides*.
- A small constellation in the polar region of the southern hemisphere near the Southern Cross and Chamaeleon.
- Goddess of fate.
- Kill intentionally and with premeditation.
- Replete beforehand.
- Departing or being caused to depart from the true vertical or horizontal.
- Horny projecting mouth of a bird.
- A rare heavy polyvalent metallic element that resembles manganese chemically and is used in some alloys.
- (Babylonian) God of wisdom and agriculture and patron of scribes and schools.
- Remove from memory or existence.
- An honorary arts degree.
- A street of small shops (especially in Orient).
- Formally making a person known to another or to the public.
- The basic unit of money in Albania.
- A public promotion of some product or service.
- (Greek mythology) Greek god of war.
- (quantifier used with mass nouns) Great in quantity or degree or extent.
- An esoteric or occult matter that is traditionally secret.
- The last (12th) month of the year.
- An accidental hole that allows something (fluid or light etc.) to enter or escape.
- Sole genus of the family Naiadaceae.
- (Norse mythology) God of war and strife and son of Odin.
- A surgical instrument that is used to dilate or distend an opening or an organ.
- English historian noted for his constitutional history of medieval England (1825-1901).
- New Zealand timber tree resembling the cypress.
- A genus of Lamnidae.
- Cubes of meat marinated and cooked on a skewer usually with vegetables.
- Jordan's port.
- A set of related records (either written or electronic) kept together.
- An onerous or difficult concern.
- (Norse mythology) One of the Aesir known for his beauty and skill with bow and skis.
- Pathetically lacking in force or effectiveness.
- Acute delirium caused by alcohol poisoning.
- Experiencing or showing sorrow or unhappiness.
- A radioactive element of the actinide series.

Friday's Solution



STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

Don't be surprised if someone younger turns to you for guidance today. Their admiration of you may be revealed. You may find you have had an impact on their life you didn't even realize. You never know who is watching and living by the example you set. You are an inspiration to others. You have overcome obstacles in your life and others truly admire you for this.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

Today may find you in a very serious mood dismissing all that you find trivial in this world. You have a no-nonsense attitude and a strong desire to succeed. You may find yourself in an extremely strict and disciplined mode and very ambitious. You are driven and passionate about your career and this is being noticed in the workplace to the point you may be approached to take on a special project. You are an excellent manager of yourself and your time and this may lead to an opportunity to excel as a manager of others. Taurus, you are on a prosperous and successful path. This is a great time for you to surround yourself with friends and family. This may lead to a more relaxed environment for you.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

A friend will seek your advice today. What she really wants is your approval for what she has decided to do. If you tell her what to do, it may lead to a rift in your friendship. You can give your opinion, but make it clear that she has to make the decision for herself. You might offer some options and point out the possible consequences of each. That mean she takes responsibility for her action. Regardless of how her decision turns out, your friendship will be strengthened. Being the friend to others that you desire a friend to be to you is the key to happiness in your world.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

You have a special place in your heart for those close to you. You seem to be the one the younger generation in your life look up to and admire. Your advice and guidance maybe sought from someone who looks to you as a mentor. You may feel as if your greatest growth comes when you are helping others. Today may be one of those days you are spinning your wheels getting physical tasks accomplished. Before frustration takes hold, stop and realize your shoulder to lean on and your listening ear and wonderful advice may be a much greater accomplishment than a completing a simple chore. Cancer, be proud of who you are and what you mean to others.



Leo (July 23-August 22)

You crave all that is new and different. What has been great motivation to you in the past may seem meaningless. You have been a creature of habit as long as your friends can remember. This new you and the new path you have chosen may catch others off guard. Follow your heart. This is your journey and your journey alone. Do what makes you happy and put yourself first for a change. You can not change the way others see you. Chase your dreams and do what sets your soul on fire.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

You have become a more emotional person. Being more in touch with your emotions has led you to nurture and care for those surrounding you. You may find yourself especially drawn to those younger and children. This is mostly driven by an 'if I knew then, what I know now' type of attitude. You feel as if you could help so many others and wish someone would have been around to mentor and guide you. You may find yourself signing up to volunteer to work with children or find some other role to step in where your knowledge may be beneficial to others. You will benefit in many ways from helping those close to you.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

If you have been debating on a new business approach, today is the day to make it happen. Much success will come your way. Make the pitch, present the proposal. Today is a day you will get the results you have been dreaming of. You are convincing and have a way with your words today. You will be able to make others see things your way. By the time you are through, those involved will see things your way and have the exact desires you do. Stay on top of news about money matters. This is a very profitable time for you.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

You may be faced with a career opportunity that goes against what you value. You have always prided yourself for clearly seeing things in life in black and white. There is no room for a grey area. If an opportunity that presents itself to you seems to good to be true, it probably is. Be sure you are able to lay your head down at night and sleep peacefully. You know right from wrong and this is a time for you to make the right choice. Actions have consequences and these consequences will have a lasting effect on your world. Do what satisfies your soul.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

You may be feeling a need for change. A deep desire for emotional security takes hold now and you feel your most content when surrounded by family and those closest to you. Relationships are a priority in your world now. You feel as if things in your life are monotonous and you are ready to spice things up. This may mean a shiny new car purchase, a vacation, or simply surrounding yourself with a new group of friends. Any direction you choose, this will be a time of excitement and give you a fresh start and a more focused outlook. We all need a bit of change from time to time. Keep life interesting and exciting.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

You may find this a great time to reflect and gain understanding of your own situation. How did you get to this point in your life? You know that everything happens for a reason and you have learned to have a positive outlook on adversity. You have learned lessons from obstacles that have been place in your path in the past. This a great time for you to gain a sense of understanding for those around you. A deeper connection is possible for your relationships. This is a good time for you to spend with a loved one. Capricorn, you may find yourself at peace today.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

Far from reality is where you may find your thoughts today. Dreaming of what the future holds can lead to peace and clarity in your life. Set a goal. Picture yourself accomplishing this goal. Imagine how you will feel once your dream becomes a reality. Make a list of everything you need to do to accomplish this. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Make it happen. Dedication and determination can lead you to the position in life you wish to be. Love to learn and learn to love. The world has much more to offer you. Know this and own it!



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

You may find yourself in a bit of a conflict when it comes to balancing your Home Life and work life. You may find yourself passing an opportunity by at work because it will interfere with time with your family. This may be a hard decision to make at this time, but the payoff with your family will be well worth it. In a time for you to make sure your priorities are straight. You have a strong appreciation of your past. You are able to reflect and realize the obstacles and problems of your past talk to the lessons that made you and you are today. You are able to appreciate hardships and look at them in a more positive manner knowing you will come at a stronger person in the end.

Wordsearch Puzzle

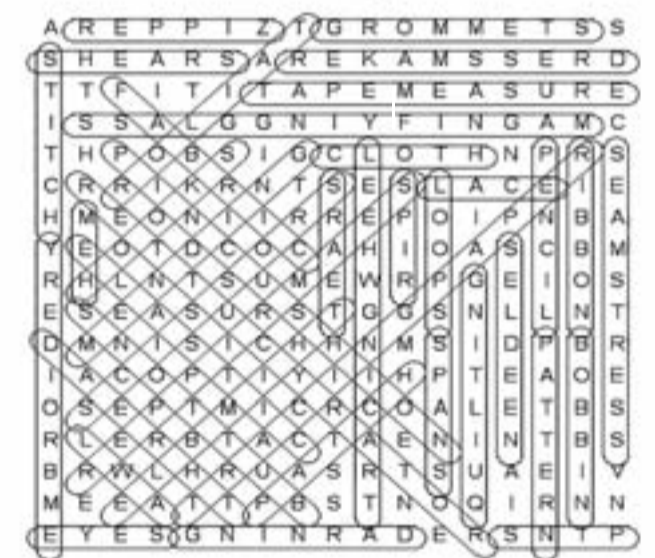
Shakespeare: Hamlet

Find and circle all of the words relating to Hamlet that are hidden in the grid. The remaining letters spell a secret message - a Hamlet quotation.



- | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|------------|-------------|
| AMBASSADORS | FRANCISCO | MARCELLUS | REGICIDE |
| BARNARDO | GERTRUDE | MELANCHOLY | REVENGE |
| CASTLE | GHOST | MESSENGER | REYNALDO |
| CHALICE | GRAVEDIGGERS | MURDER | ROSENCRANTZ |
| CLAUDIUS | GUILDENSTERN | OPHELIA | SKULL |
| CORNELIUS | HAMLET | OSRIC | SWORD |
| DEATH | HAUTBOYS | POISON | THE PLAYERS |
| DENMARK | HORATIO | POLONIUS | TRAGEDY |
| DUEL | KING | PRIEST | VOLTEMAND |
| ELSENORE | LAERTES | PRINCE | WINE |
| FORTINBRAS | MADNESS | QUEEN | YORICK |

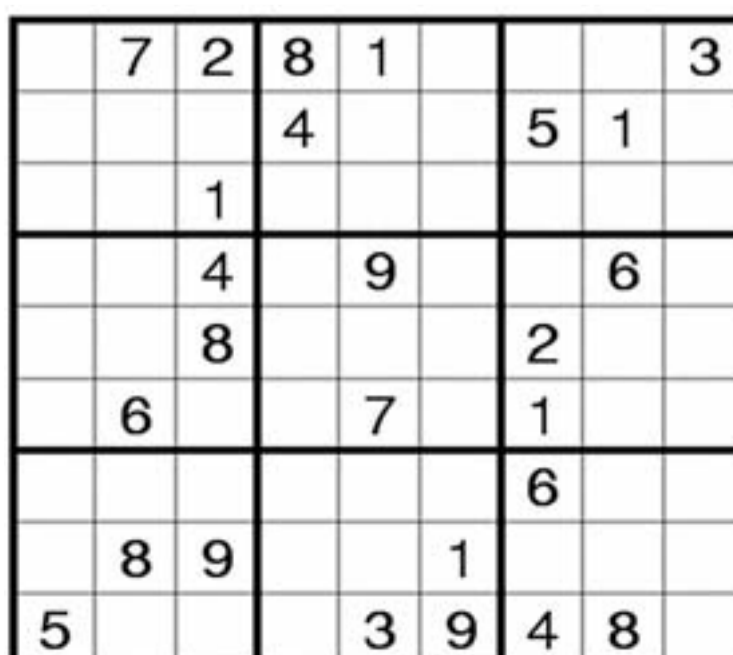
Sewing



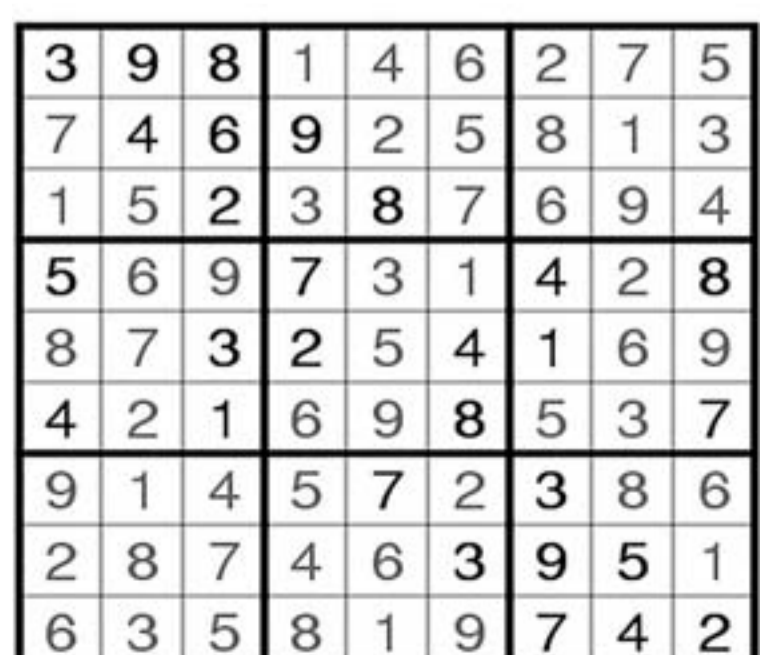
- | | | | |
|------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|
| AWL | HEM | PINS | SPOOL |
| BOBBIN | HOOKS | QUILTING | STITCH |
| BUTTONS | LACE | RIBBON | TAILOR |
| CLOTH | MAGNIFYING GLASS | RIPS | TAPE MEASURE |
| DARNING | MENDING | ROTARY CUTTER | TEARS |
| DRESSMAKER | NEEDLES | SCISSORS | THIMBLE |
| ELASTIC | PATCH | SEAM RIPPER | THREAD |
| EMBROIDERY | PATTERN | SEAMSTRESS | TRACING PAPER |
| EYES | PENCIL | SHEARS | TRACING WHEEL |
| FABRIC | PINCUSHION | SNAPS | ZIPPER |
| GROMMETS | | | |

The hidden sentence is: A STITCH IN TIME SAVES NINE

Daily SuDoku



Friday's Solution



Lifestyle

SUNDAY, JANUARY 20, 2019



A visitor watches an installation made by the New York artist Daniel Arsham during the solo exhibition "Connecting Time" in the Modern Contemporary Museum (Moco) in Amsterdam on January 18, 2019. New York artist Daniel Arsham incorporates various disciplines into his work: architecture, design, sculpture, film and fine art. His solo exhibition at the Moco Museum runs from January 18 until September 30, 2019. — AFP

Sony Music drops **Erdogan** attends famed Turkish pianist's concert

US singer R Kelly

Sony Music has called it quits with embattled singer R Kelly, ending his contract with subsidiary RCA after a documentary aired accusing him of repeated cases of sexual abuse, media reports said Friday. While Variety and Billboard reported the breakup, Sony Music did not immediately confirm it when contacted by AFP. One woman who sued R Kelly, accusing him of sexual battery, knowingly infecting her with a sexually transmitted disease and false imprisonment, also says he has threatened her.

Women's rights attorney Gloria Allred told reporters on Monday that her client Faith Rodgers, 20, faced "efforts to intimidate and retaliate" from Kelly after she filed the lawsuit now pending in New York's Supreme Court. And just after Rodgers testified in the documentary "Surviving R Kelly" that aired this month, her lawyers say Kelly and his team created a Facebook page—which the social media giant removed within hours—seeking to discredit accusers including Rodgers, posting "private" photos of her.

But the singer of "I Believe I Can Fly" fame—who recently announced a new album—has seen his reputation more and more seriously hit. Calls for a boycott gathered pace in some measure thanks to the #MeToo and Time's Up movements and via the #MuteRKelly hashtag on Twitter. Spotify announced in May it would drop the singer from its curated "playlists." The last straw was the broadcast in early January of "Surviving R Kelly," a documentary in which several women accused the singer and producer, 52, of having sex with girls under the age of 16, and of having surrounded themselves with women whom he made sex slaves. — AFP



In this file photo R Kelly performs onstage at Which Stage during day 3 of the 2013 Bonnaroo Music & Arts Festival in Manchester, Tennessee. — AFP



This handout picture taken and released by the Turkish presidential press service, shows Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) shaking hands with Turkish pianist and composer Fazil Say at the end of his "Trojan Sonata" concert in Ankara. — AFP



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) presents a gift to Turkish pianist and composer Fazil Say at the end of his "Trojan Sonata" concert in Ankara. — AFP

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday attended a concert by world-renowned Turkish pianist Fazil Say who formerly accused him of being behind a blasphemy case which resulted in the pianist's acquittal. Erdogan, whose broad support base is made up of conservative Muslims, appeared in Say's concert "Trojan Sonata" in the Turkish capital Ankara, a presidential source said. Pictures from the concert revealed Erdogan attended the event with his headscarf-wearing wife Emine. The invitation to Erdogan came after the Turkish leader called the pianist over his mother's death.

Say, an atheist, is not so popular in conservative quarters. In 2016, a Turkish court acquitted him of blasphemy four years after he was prosecuted for Twitter posts that allegedly attacked Muslims. One of which was a retweet which said: "I am not sure if you have also realized it, but all the pricks, low-lives, buffoons, thieves, jesters, they are all Allahists. Is this a paradox?" The case against the charismatic pianist—who is also a renowned composer—set off alarm bells over freedom of expression under the reign of Erdogan's Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP).

The government critic also previously accused Erdogan of being behind the case against him and in 2013 he called the charges "politically motivated". Say, 49, has played with orchestras across the world including in Berlin, New York, Tokyo and Israel and regularly gives sold-out solo recitals that often mix Mozart with Turkish traditional sounds. — AFP

Rising French rap star **MHD** charged with murder over deadly gang brawl

French rapper MHD, who shot to fame with a catchy blend of west African music and southern US-style hip-hop, has been charged with murder over a brawl that led to a youth's death, in the latest case to rock the French rap scene. The 24-year-old Parisian, who rose from delivering pizzas to become one of the hottest new rap talents in just three years, denies any involvement in the death of the 23-year-old man, who was stabbed and beaten on July 6. A police source

described the fight involving around a dozen youths as a "settling of scores" between gangs from Paris' 19th district, where Sylla grew up, and the adjacent 10th district.

MHD, whose real name is Mohamed Sylla, "denies any involvement in this brawl," his lawyer Elise Arfi said in a statement sent to AFP after he was charged on Thursday. "His presence at the scene of the incident remains to be proven." MHD, a contraction of Mohamed, is the self-proclaimed inventor of "afro-trap" music. The football-mad performer, who was born in France to Guinean and Senegalese parents, is best known for "Afro Trap Part 3 (Champions League)", a song in praise of Paris Saint-Germain football club, which has been viewed over 100 million times on YouTube.

Most of his music videos are relatively low-budget affairs, shot among the high-rises of the 19th district-of which he sees himself as a youth ambassador—and feature local youths in football jerseys dancing in the street. One of his albums is called "19" and the cover shows him pictured from behind wearing a football jersey marked MHD 19. Sylla prides himself on injecting African sounds and

slang into his lyrics. "I was listening to French rappers who peppered their lyrics with English words because they were inspired by American rappers," he told the Guardian newspaper in 2017. "I did the opposite. I thought, 'Wait a minute, I know Africa more!'" — AFP



In this file photo French band MHD performs in Carhaix-Plouguer, western France, during the second day of the 26th edition of the "Vieilles Charrues" music festival. — AFP



Models present creations by Louis Vuitton during the men's Fall/Winter 2019/2020 collection fashion show in Paris. — AFP photos



VUITTON'S ABLOH CELEBRATES MICHAEL JACKSON IN PARIS MENSWEAR



Models present creations by Rick Owens during men's Fashion Week for the Fall/Winter 2019/2020 collection in Paris.

Louis Vuitton's designer Virgil Abloh transported celebrity guests at Paris Fashion Week to the graffiti-streets of New York in a dramatic menswear ode to Michael Jackson. Abloh, the first African-American to head a major European fashion house, used his unique platform Thursday to celebrate one of America's most globally recognized and celebrated black performers. Here are some highlights of Thursday's fall-winter shows.

Vuitton's Abloh revisits Jackson

It was the flamboyance of Michael Jackson as seen through the classical prism of Louis Vuitton. The silhouettes of some of the late star's most eye-popping looks were taken by Abloh and revisited in a slightly more pared-down style. A military jacket and large sash - that might have come across overly showy - were designed in a tasteful pearl-gray monochrome cashmere. Elsewhere, a giant cropped jacket with stiff padded lapels was saved from excess with soft charcoal flannel twill. The signature layering of the singer, who died in 2009, was ubiquitous in the 64-piece parade that went from the subtle to the not so subtle toward the end.

An overlaid silver parka coat in aluminum foil leather and a silver safety vest were among the most literal of the Jackson odes and recalled some of his most spectacular concert performances, as did the models who wore jeweled gloves. Later in the show, Abloh made a series of prints based on a cartoon in Jackson's 1978 film "The Wiz" that became a cult classic among black audiences.

Abloh called his hero, Jackson, "the universal symbol of unity on the planet." Though touching, the collection could have perhaps done without the scarf shirts fashioned out of global flags that came across as a tad busy and somewhat obvious.

Rick Owens blows a kiss

A brooding and saucy mood overtook lauded American designer Rick Owens in a 70s-style collection

Thursday. The show was entitled "Larry," after US designer Larry LeGaspi, whose silver and black space looks were worn by rock groups such as Kiss. The fall-winter show was very much an homage to the bombastic styles of LeGaspi, about whom Owens has written a book. Tan, sienna, deep vermilion and lashings of black in the clothes were highlighted by sensually dappled lighting. Excess was simply everywhere.

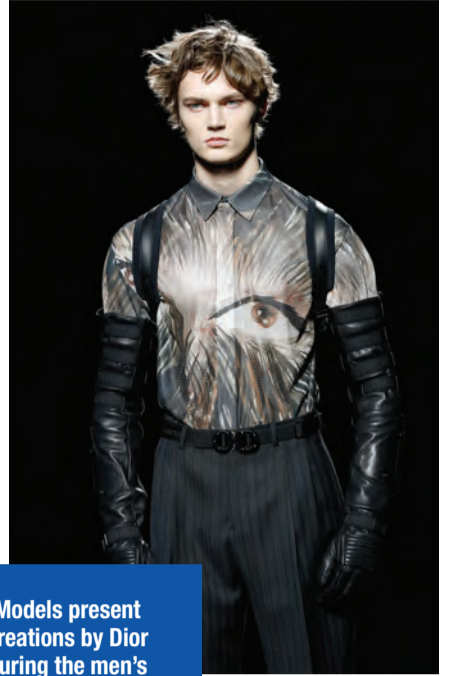
Enveloping retro shades, peaked shoulders, oversized sleeves, flares and David Bowie-style tight waists set the time-dial very much to the era of Glam Rock. As if that weren't enough, Owens pushed the envelope further with painted white faces and inset leather appliques that resembled women's genitals. They contrasted purity with provocation. LeGaspi "helped set a lot of kids like me free with his mix of art-deco sexual ambiguity," Owens said.



Models present creations by Issey Miyake Men during the men's Fall/Winter 2019/2020 collection fashion show.



Lifestyle | Fashion



Models present creations by Dior during the men's Fall/Winter 2019/2020 collection fashion show in Paris.



Issey Miyake brings the wind

The Franco-Japanese house of Issey Miyake put on a collection in homage to the wind. In the fall-winter silhouettes, it was not the wind of an angry storm at work, but more a gentle breeze that served to curve and soften the clothes' shapes. The result was a low-key affair by designer Yoshiyuki Miyamae. A welcome sharpness did appear in the collection via its print detailing, but its power was diluted by the rounded shapes. For instance, some jagged yellow diagonal motifs evoked the strong movement of wind - but the looseness of the suits and coats on which they appeared lessened the effect.

The prints were conceived by an Asian wax resistant dyeing technique called batik that the house frequently uses. Issey Miyake is one house that cannot be faulted for its use of cutting-edge fashion-making methods. Elsewhere, another Asian technique, ikat - a sort of tie-dye - was employed to produce the collection's strongest pieces. A silk-wool series sported beautifully defused white horizontal bands across icy blue-gray pants and shimmering coats.



Dior declares men's fashion future to be suited and booted

Dior set out to redefine 21st-century tailoring on Friday in a show which summed up a Paris men's fashion week in which the suit has made a surprising comeback. British-born designer Kim Jones drew inspiration from the French capital's heroic statuary to suggest that there was no better armor for the modern man than well-cut clothes. His spectacular show in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower had models standing still like statues on a moving conveyor belt catwalk.

The mesmerizing effect made it look as if they were gliding or skateboarding to a techno disco beat. Jones, in only his second Paris show for the mythic French label since leaving Louis Vuitton, sent out a sleek, dark-hued riposte to the oversized trend that has dominated men's fashion for several seasons.

Big on blacks, greys and burnished silky browns, his suits and trousers were cut close to the body, with some given added panache with long scarves worn like the sashes so beloved of 17th-century cavaliers. Stylised utility vests worn over suits like bulletproof jackets gave some of his models the air of postmodern hussars.

"For me the suit and the tailored jacket are the key things which say Dior," Jones told AFP. "It is elegance, tailoring and couture. We have made the black suits cooler and a bit more fashion with new boots... and the scarves are inspired by a dress by Christian Dior (the label's founder) from 1952," he said.

Streetwise luxury

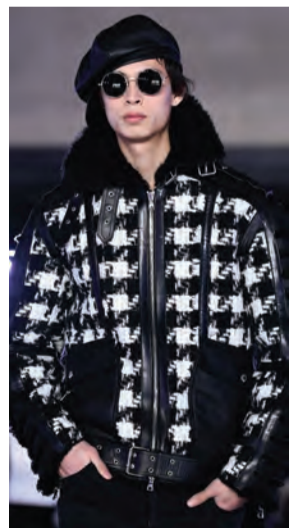
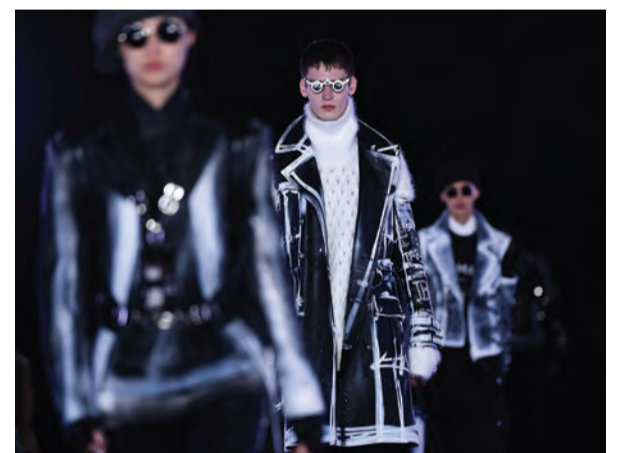
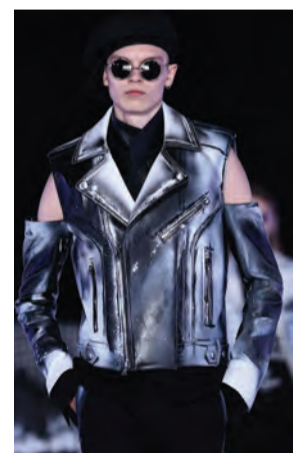
Leather trousers and mink and plasticized silk bomber jackets gave the whole thing a sheen of unapologetic streetwise luxury. "We are taking utilitarian things and making them in fine fabrics," the designer added. Jones also dotted his winter Dior Homme line with leopard print in another nod to the legacy of the house's founder, the feline, feminine feel softening the collection's hard edges.

But artworks commissioned from the cult Los Angeles punk artist Raymond Pettibon were the collection's main print motifs, principally his pouty, Lauren Bacall-esque rendering of the "Mona Lisa". Despite their punk provenance, Jones called the images "quite romantic". And like the dog-loving Dior he also referenced his own Pomeranian pooch, Cookie, in his redesign of the label's classic saddlebags.

Dior had moved its show from Saturday to Friday to avoid the weekly "yellow vests" protests which have plagued the French capital most weekends for nearly two months. The anti-government demonstrations often turn violent and Dior's flagship shop on the Champs Elysees was looted after a rally in November. Other protesters scrawled "The people want (to wear) Dior" on its nearby headquarters. Several other luxury brands have been targeted by the "yellow vests" activists, with boarded-up boutiques regularly scrawled with graffiti denouncing the rich.-AP/AFP agencies



Fashion designer for Balmain, Olivier Rousteing gestures at the end of the show during the men's Fall/Winter 2019/2020 collection fashion show in Paris.



Models present creations by Balmain's Homme during the men's Fall/Winter 2019/2020 collection fashion show.



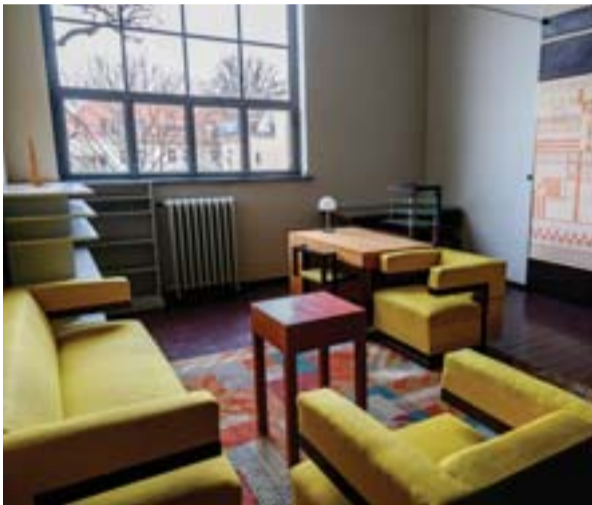


View of the 'Haus am Horn', designed by Georg Muche for the major Bauhaus Exhibition of 1923, taken on January 14, 2019 in Weimar, eastern Germany. — AFP photos



View of the "Haus am Horn", designed by Georg Muche for the major Bauhaus Exhibition of 1923.

Bauhaus design turns 100 as disputes over its legacy churn



View of the reconstructed office of Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus University.



Students at the Bauhaus University work on their project in the ceramics workshop in Weimar.



View of a Bauhaus cradle designed by Peter Keler on display in a depot for the city's museums, in Weimar.

Bauhaus, the design school that left its mark on everything from teapots to tower blocks and iPhones to Ikea, marks its centenary this year, touching off a politically charged debate about its lasting impact. The influence of Bauhaus, created during the turbulent period between the world wars and finally chased out of Germany by the Nazis, can hardly be overstated. Its radical "form follows function" and "less is more" tenets have become so commonplace that the aesthetics of the modern world are unthinkable without them.

Weimar, with its winding cobblestone alleys and primly restored historical buildings, might seem like an unlikely ground zero for the bombshell launched by Walter Gropius with the school's founding on April 1, 1919. But the small city 250 kilometers (150 miles) southwest of Berlin has been an intellectual hive for centuries and is now at the center of Bauhaus commemorations around the country and spanning the globe. "Bauhaus is among our country's most globally influential cultural exports," President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said as he kicked off the celebrations this week.

He noted that when the movement was run out of Germany after Hitler rose to power in 1933, it touched off a diaspora that would end up spreading Bauhaus's gospel far and wide. The clean lines of the UN headquarters building in New York, Tel Aviv's "White City" of 4,000 apartment blocks with pearly facades, mass-market home furnishings and most smartphones owe a large debt to the Bauhaus vision.

'Unbelievably devastating consequences'

The design school, which also counts among its disciples Russian abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky and Swiss-born surrealist Paul Klee, had at its core the idea of making beautiful design accessible to all social classes. The reformist vision of the international group of men and women who practiced it was rooted in modernist thought and inspired by leaps in technological development after World War I.

"There was of course great suffering and horror after this mendacious war, which had such unbelievably devastating consequences," said Anke Bluemm, a curator with the Bauhaus Foundation in Weimar. "The artists came together to create a new forum for art with very utopian, idealistic ideas." Winfried Speitkamp, head of Weimar's Bauhaus University—which still uses the original campus to teach the school's hands-on principles to new generations—said the aim was nothing less than to build a new democratic society from the rubble of the kaiser's empire.

"They wanted to break with a very authoritarian, very military-oriented monarchy. But what should that look like?" Flat roofs, little ornamentation—the minimalist approach was intended to be more affordable and less steeped in dusty German tradition.

'Explosive debate'

Bauhaus's birth dovetailed in time and place with the start of the inter-war Weimar Republic, and it was their shared revolutionary spirit that made them targets of the



Students at the Bauhaus University work on their project in the ceramics workshop in Weimar.

Nazis. "It is typical for the far right that anything that challenges the homogeneity of the people and propagates openness and diversity is seen as dangerous," Speitkamp said. He said "only five years ago" the Bauhaus jubilee might have been just another staid anniversary. But at a time when Europe and countries around the world were again caught between clashing visions of cultural identity, the discussion around it had become "explosive".

"Do we want to continue going down the path of globalization, of free movement and cultural exchange? Or, as some nations are saying, do we need to make our borders stronger and define a nation by ethnicity?" "That is what the Bauhaus debate is also

really about." Speitkamp cited a controversy in the run-up to the anniversary in which leftist punk band Feine Sahne Fischfilet was meant to give a concert on the Bauhaus campus in Dessau, where the school was forced to move in 1925.

The gig by the group was hastily cancelled in October by the Bauhaus Foundation, citing "far-right threats" and a desire to steer clear of "political extremism—whether from the right, the left or elsewhere". The move was widely slammed as cowardly and blind to the movement's roots. Instead a Dessau theatre held the event, which passed off without incident, and the foundation later pledged to remain an "international, open and transparent place for societal debates in the spirit of the historical Bauhaus".

New openings

The Bauhaus year will be marked by the openings of grand new museums in April in Weimar and in September in Dessau—both cities in the ex-communist east, which has seen a surge in support for the far-right AfD party. A major expansion of Berlin's Bauhaus Archive, which holds the movement's largest collection, is due for completion in 2021. This week Weimar offered a sneak preview to a small group of journalists of the Haus am Horn, the first single-family home designed according to Bauhaus principles. The squat, boxy structure with innovations such as a prefabricated kitchen was completed in 1923. It is undergoing a thorough restoration and will open to the public in May, furnished with Bauhaus classics. — AFP



View of a Bauhaus teapot designed by Marianne Brandt on display in a depot for the city's museums, in Weimar.

'Better than ever,' Paris Jackson dismisses treatment report

Paris Jackson, the only daughter of late singer Michael Jackson, on Wednesday played down reports that she is undergoing treatment, saying she is "happy, healthy, and better than ever." Jackson, 20, said in an Instagram post that she had taken a break from work and social media. But she said, "The media is exaggerating" when it reported earlier this week that she had checked herself into a treatment facility for her "emotional and physical

health." "Yes I've taken a break from work and social media and my phone because it can be too much sometimes, and everyone deserves a break, but I am happy and healthy and feeling better than ever!" she wrote.

Jackson, who was just 11 years old when her father died suddenly in 2009, has spoken in the past of struggles with depression. In a 2017 interview, she said she slashed her wrists in a 2013 sui-

cide attempt. In the past two years, Jackson has forged a modeling career and made her feature film acting debut in the dark comedy "Gringo." Last year she formed a band called The Soundflowers. Her mother is Debbie Rowe, who was married to Michael Jackson for about three years. — Reuters



Paris Jackson



Banksy 'snow' pollution mural sold for over \$130,000

A mural by elusive British street artist Banksy depicting a child enjoying falling snow that is in fact pollution from a burning bin has been sold for over 100,000 pounds (\$130,000) to a British art dealer. From one side, the "Season's Greetings" mural on a concrete block garage in Wales shows a small boy with his tongue out to catch snow that, when viewed from another side, turns out to be ash from an industrial bin. "I bought it and it cost me a six-figure sum," John Brandler of Brandler Galleries, told Reuters by telephone. "I am lending it to Port Talbot for a minimum of two or three years. I want to use it as a center for an art hub that would bring in internationally famous artists to Port Talbot."

The mural appeared last month in the town on the edge of Swansea Bay, home to one of the biggest steelworks in the world. Brandler, 63, said the entire mural - on the corner of a garage - had to be moved in one piece. He

declined to give a specific price for the piece. When asked how he could afford such luxuries, he said: "I am an art dealer. I own several Banksies, I also own (John) Constable, (Thomas) Gainsborough, (Joseph Mallord William) Turner, I've got (urban artist) Pure Evil - I've got all sorts of art." "My hobby is my business. The last time I went to work was when I was 18," Brandler said.

Banksy, who keeps his real name private, has become the most famous street artist in the world by poking fun at the excesses of modern capitalism and lampooning hollow icons, slogans and opinions. Previous works include "Mobile Lovers" which shows an embrace between lovers who stare over each other's shoulders at their mobile phones and an abrupt warning near Canary Wharf in London that reads "Sorry! The lifestyle you ordered is currently out of stock." — Reuters



Diver Ocean Ramsey swims next to a female great white shark off the coast of Oahu, Hawaii on Jan 15, 2019. — AFP

Women march in US cities for...

Continued from Page 1

Sarah Sportman, a 40-year-old archeologist from Connecticut, said she came to Washington to protest Trump's presidency and march for protecting the environment and immigration rights. "I just don't like the direction our country is going in and I think that we can do a lot better," she said. Activists say the marches were also a chance to celebrate the gains made in the 2018 elections, which saw more women elected to the US Congress than ever before. The newly elected women - nearly all Democrats - include the first Muslim women and first Native American women in

Congress, as well as the first black women to represent their states in New England. Many cited Trump's presidency among the reasons they decided to run for office.

As the political movement that grew out of hundreds of loosely affiliated marches in 2017 has grown, divisions have emerged. In some cities, like New York and Washington, there were more than one march or demonstration due to criticism that some Women's March leaders are anti-Semitic - a charge those leaders have sought to dispel in recent interviews and statements.

The marches also have been criticized as being unwelcoming to conservative women, who may support Trump's presidency and oppose abortion rights. The "March for Life" by anti-abortion campaigners was in Washington on Friday, attended by Vice President Mike Pence. Leaders of Women's March and March On say there is a role for everyone. "We are all part of the same movement, regardless of any divisiveness or any drama that goes on," Sanchez said. — Reuters

Standard & Poor's forecasts...

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"According to high frequency official data, output grew by 0.6 percent over the first nine months of 2018 year-on-year. We have accordingly revised our growth estimate for the year down to 1 percent from 2 percent previously. We estimate that growth picked up in the second half of the year following OPEC's decision to increase oil production in the summer. However, we expect this pick-up in economic activity to prove temporary given OPEC's Dec 2018 agreement to once again cut production for an initial period of six months starting January 2019.

"According to the agreement, production will reduce by 0.8 million barrels per day (mb/d) from October 2018 levels of around 32 mb/d, which represents a roughly 2.5 percent decrease. Although the exact allocation of cuts between various member countries is not clear, we assume that for full-year 2019 Kuwait's production will decline by 1.5 percent based on our expectation that the cuts will be discontinued at some point before year-end. "Importantly, we don't expect a repeat of the outright contraction in output that happened in 2017 during the previous round of cuts. This is mainly due to the firming of non-oil GDP growth alongside a gradual increase in gas production, which is not subject to OPEC agreement. Overall, we expect real GDP growth of 1 percent in 2019, compared to our previous forecast of 3.2 percent.

"Beyond 2019, we expect growth rates to accelerate to an average 2.5 percent over 2020-2022. This is due to: Gradually increasing oil production capacity. Kuwait intends to increase the maximum oil production capacity toward 4 mb/d over the medium term from about 2.7 mb/d currently. This should be achieved through both new oil site discoveries as well as enhancing output at the already existing mature fields.

"An additional boost could come from restarting production within the so-called Partitioned Neutral Zone (PNZ) between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which was previously halted due to a number of disagreements between the two countries. We understand that restarting the PNZ production could add around 0.3 mb/d to daily output. Although it remains to be seen whether the 4 mb/d target is realistic, our baseline forecast assumes a steady increase in production levels over 2020-2022.

"Several investment projects are planned by the government. These target an expansion of Kuwait's refining capacities including the completion of the large Al-Zour refinery as well as the so-called Clean Fuels Project aimed at modernizing existing refineries. Nevertheless, in line

with trends in recent years, we believe Kuwait's economic growth on a per capita basis will remain below peer sovereigns at a comparable level of economic development.

"We estimate Kuwait's net general government assets at 400 percent of GDP as of end-2018, which is the highest ratio of all the sovereigns we rate. Despite our projection of lower oil prices, the general government budget will post surpluses underpinned by investment returns on accumulated sovereign wealth fund assets. We expect the Kuwaiti dinar (KWD) will remain pegged to a USD-dominated currency basket and that the Central Bank of Kuwait's (CBK) monetary policy will continue to be closely aligned with that of the US Federal Reserve. We forecast that as oil prices reduce from 2018 levels, Kuwait's central government deficit will rise from 6.5 percent of GDP last year to an average of 19.5 percent over the next four years.

"The general government budget (which excludes mandatory annual transfers to the FGF and includes the estimates for investment returns on existing stock of KIA assets) will remain in surplus, averaging 7 percent of GDP over the same period. This mostly reflects investment returns from managing the KIA. Despite the surplus general government budget, the authorities still plan to borrow to cover deficits at the central government level. We estimate that future central government deficits will be financed via both asset drawdowns from the GRF as well as debt issuance.

"Accordingly, we project general government debt will rise above 50 percent of GDP in 2022 from less than 20 percent in 2017 reflecting a combination of both domestic and international issuance. This is based on our expectation that the government will pass the new debt law soon, raising the debt ceiling and authorizing extra borrowing. Largely mirroring its fiscal position, Kuwait's external balance sheet also remains very strong. We note that despite the detailed public data on Kuwait's balance of payments performance, there is no official international investment position statistics. This hampers our full assessment of external risks.

"Nevertheless, based on available data, we estimate that the country is in an external asset position of around 450 percent of GDP. With the exception of 2016, Kuwait has consistently run current account surpluses - reflecting large volumes of oil exports, favorable prices, and low production costs. We estimate the current account surplus was 14 percent of GDP in 2018. Taking into account our projections of oil prices staying at \$55/bbl on average over the medium term, we anticipate that current account surpluses will moderate, reaching balance toward 2022 as the import bill continues to grow.

"We believe there is upside potential to this forecast - say if oil production grows faster than we currently anticipate. Despite the challenging operating environment, the Kuwaiti banking sector remains resilient with stable profitability and improved asset quality. In our view, concentration in the commercial real estate segment remains a key credit risk for banks." — KUNA

Mexico fuel pipeline blast...

Continued from Page 1

The tragedy comes during a highly publicized federal government war on fuel theft, a problem that cost Mexico an estimated \$3 billion in 2017. President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador traveled to the scene early yesterday. "I am deeply saddened by the suffering in Tlahuelilpan caused by the explosion of a pipeline," the leftist leader wrote on Twitter. "I call on the whole government to assist people there."

Federal and state firefighters and ambulances run by state oil company Pemex rushed to help victims with burns and take the injured to hospitals. Local medical facilities struggled to cope with the flood of arriving victims, said AFP correspondents at the scene. By around midnight Friday the fire had been brought under control, the security ministry said. Pemex said it was also responding to another fire at a botched pipeline tap in the central state of Queretaro, though in that case there were no victims.

Mexico is regularly rocked by deadly explosions at illegal pipeline taps, a dangerous but lucrative business whose players include powerful drug cartels and corrupt Pemex insiders. Fayad said that, two hours after the pipeline was punctured, "we were informed that there had been an explosion" and the flames "were consuming everything around." About 15 oil pipeline explosions and fires causing more than

Real progress needed at new...

Continued from Page 1

Vietnam's cooperation with the United States has been growing for years as Hanoi - much unlike Pyongyang - sets aside memories of war.

"Now the hard work begins," said Harry Kazianis of the Center for the National Interest in Washington. "Both nations must now show at least some tangible benefits from their diplomatic efforts during a second summit, or risk their efforts being panned as nothing more than reality TV." The North has carried out six nuclear tests and launched missiles capable of reaching the entire US mainland, but the exact size of its atomic armory remains unconfirmed.

"All efforts should be poured into having the North come to the table with a complete list of its nuclear arsenal," Kim Sung-han, professor of international relations at Korea University, told AFP. The declaration would be a tangible step in itself, he said, adding Trump should not lift sanctions or agree to formally end the 1950-53 Korean War - when hostilities stopped in a ceasefire rather than a peace treaty - for "anything other than the list". When South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who has sought to engage the North as he brokered the talks process, went to Pyongyang in September for his third summit with Kim, his host offered to shutter a missile-testing site and the Yongbyon nuclear complex if the US takes unspecified "corresponding measures". Washington has repeatedly said it expects the North to give up its nuclear arsenal, doggedly developed over decades by the Kim dynasty, at a vast cost in resources and isolation, and multiple sets of international sanctions.

50 fatalities each have occurred around the world since 1993. Most were in Nigeria, where in 1998 more than 1,000 people died in such a blast. A fire after a pipeline rupture in Brazil killed more than 500 people in 1984.

The tragedy comes as anti-corruption crusader Lopez Obrador presses implementation of a controversial fuel theft prevention plan. The government has shut off major pipelines until they can be fully secured and deployed the army to guard Pemex production facilities. But the strategy to fight the problem led to severe gasoline and diesel shortages across much of the country, including Mexico City, forcing people to queue for hours - sometimes days - to fill up their vehicles.

The president, who took office on Dec 1, has vowed to keep up the fight and asked Mexicans to be patient. At the scene, some locals blamed the shortages for the tragedy. "A lot of people arrived with their jerrycans, because of the gasoline shortages we've had," said Martin Trejo, 55, who was searching for his son, one of those who had gone to collect the leaking fuel. He also lashed out at the army for failing to stop the looters. "These lives would have been saved if they had done their jobs to remove people and not let them get close. They never did anything." Tanker trucks are being used to deliver fuel, but experts say there are not nearly enough of them. Mexican bank Citibanamex estimated Wednesday that the shortages would cost Latin America's second-largest economy around \$2 billion, "if conditions return to normal in the coming days." The roots of the fuel theft problem run deep in Mexico, where the practice - known locally as "huachicoleo," or moonshining - is big business for some communities. — AFP

But the North sees denuclearization more broadly, seeking an end to the sanctions and what it sees as US threats against it - sometimes referencing Washington's military deployments in the wider region, such as Japan and Guam. An absence of a clearly-worded agreement will raise skepticism over Pyongyang's sincerity, pointed out Lim Eul-chul, professor of North Korean studies at Kyungnam University. "If the wording of a second summit agreement is similar to the June 12 statement, it will make it very difficult for Trump to defend his North Korea policy," he said.

Pyongyang might agree to shut down the Yongbyon complex and a missile test center in the presence of international inspectors, Lim said, but "only if Washington eases sanctions and agrees to the end-of-war declaration". And some analysts have raised concerns about recent Trump administration comments about removing the threat to the US, suggesting that could imply the North giving up its intercontinental ballistic missiles while retaining its bombs and the ability to threaten its near neighbors.

The issues are complex and the details will be key. But unlike other such diplomatic processes, there have not been repeated rounds of lower-level talks to prepare for the second Kim-Trump summit. Stephen Biegun, the US special representative on North Korea, was to attend a conference in Sweden starting yesterday that will involve Pyongyang officials. He was expected to sit down with Choe Son Hui, a top North Korean diplomat intimately involved in the US-North Korean relationship.

For the next summit to go well, Biegun and Choe "need to spend scores of hours talking in the next weeks", tweeted Ankit Panda of the Federation of American Scientists. But there was a "fundamental tension" between the two sides. MIT professor Vipin Narang responded: "For the summit to be worthwhile for the US, the working level talks have to make a lot of progress. But for the summit to be worthwhile for NK, they want to make as little progress as possible". — AFP

Sports

Halep sets up Serena showdown as Djokovic relentlessly marches on

Seventh seed Pliskova pushes through to Open last 16

MELBOURNE: World number one Simona Halep set up a headline last 16 showdown with Serena Williams by beating her sister Venus yesterday as Novak Djokovic's relentless drive towards more Australian Open glory cranked up another gear.

On day six at Melbourne Park, the Romanian finally hit form to pull off her best win of the year and cruise past the veteran American 6-2, 6-3. "I was super-motivated today," she said after being taken to three sets in both her opening two matches as she bounces back from a herniated disc that ended her 2018 season early.

"I have nothing to lose," she added, looking ahead to Monday's clash against 23-time Grand Slam winner Serena. "I playing against a great champion. It's going to be a bigger challenge but I'm ready to face it."

Williams crushed Ukrainian Dayana Yastremska 6-2, 6-1 before consoling her at the net as the teenager burst into tears. The ominous 37-year-old, seeded 16, has dropped just nine games in her three matches so far on her first return to the tournament since winning it in 2017 while pregnant. "I just play each match at a time, play as hard as I can and do the best I can. That really is all you can do," she said as she zeroes in on an eighth Australian title and a record-equalling 24th Slam crown.

Fourteen-time Grand Slam winner and top seed Djokovic is gunning for a record seventh Australian title. He dropped a set for the first time this year against fast-rising Canadian Denis Shapovalov, before demolishing him in the fourth stanza to win 6-3, 6-4, 4-6, 6-0.

"I just tried to be in the moment and weather the storm," said the Serb, who was unsettled when the lights were switched on in Rod Laver Arena for television reasons, despite it still being daylight.

"Completely unnecessary to turn on the lights," he said in roasting the organisers. Djokovic's victory means he is guaranteed to stay world number one when the new rankings are released after the tournament.

He next plays another up-and-coming star, Russia's

15th seed Daniil Medvedev, who eased past David Goffin and has yet to drop a set. Another young gun Alexander Zverev made the last 16 for the first time when he swatted aside Australian Alex Bolt in three sets and will play former world number three Milos Raonic for a place in the quarter-finals. Fourth seed Naomi Osaka looked down and out against Taiwanese veteran Hsieh Su-wei before battling back to win 7-5, 4-6, 6-1 and set up meeting with Latvia's Anastasija Sevastova.

'DIE OR WIN'

Osaka's win equals the 21-year-old's best performance at the Australian Open, where she reached the last 16 in 2018 but lost to Halep.

But she looked headed for the exit when she conceded the first set and was down 4-1 in the second, before winning five straight games to force a decider.

"I just didn't want to give up," said the Japanese, who received a code violation after throwing her racquet. Sixth seed Elina Svitolina struggled with a painful shoulder complaint that required treatment at every changeover, and medical timeouts, before she somehow beat China's Zhang Shuai 4-6, 6-4, 7-5 as the temperature rose in the centre court sunshine.

"I just told myself 'you're going to die or win,'" said Svitolina, who scored her biggest career win by clinching the WTA Finals in Singapore last October. She will next meet 17th-seeded American Madison Keys, while Czech seventh seed Karolina Pliskova battled through to the Australian Open last 16 yesterday with a tough three-set win over Italy's Camila Giorgi.

Pliskova downed the 27th seeded Italian 6-4, 3-6, 6-2 after a 131 minute arm wrestle to set up a fourth round meeting with Spanish 18th seed Garbine Muguruza. Former world number one Pliskova took the first set at a canter and appeared to be cruising until Giorgi lifted in the second and forced a decider.

The Czech took a decisive break early in the final set



MELBOURNE: Czech Republic's Karolina Pliskova hits a return against Italy's Camila Giorgi during their women's singles match on day six of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. — AFP

after a marathon game that went for 13 minutes and went to deuce five times. Eighth seed Kei Nishikori made it back-to-back victories for Japan, following Osaka on court by beating Portugal's 44th-ranked Joao Sousa in three sets. The 29-year-old has won all three of his first

week matches on Margaret Court Arena to reach the last 16 for the seventh time in nine appearances.

"I love to play this court," said the 2014 US Open finalist after delighting a large contingent of Japanese fans. He next plays Spain's 23rd seed Pablo Carreno Busta.—AFP

Rough return as speed queen Vonn battles for winning form

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO: US speed queen Lindsey Vonn conceded it's a daily battle to regain her winning form after trailing home joint-ninth in yesterday's World Cup downhill in Cortina d'Ampezzo, her second race after a two-month knee injury layoff.

The 34-year-old American, wearing knee braces, improved on her 15th place in Friday's race in the Italian Dolomites, but remains far from the lightning form that has reaped 82 World Cup wins. "It's a little bit rougher than I expected, but today was a step in the right direction," said Vonn. Her final chance in Cortina where she has won a record 12 times—six downhill and six Super-G—will be in today's Super-G for which US teammate Mikaela Shiffrin is the hot favourite. But for Vonn the challenge is how to become competitive as she targets Swedish great Ingemar Stenmark's all-time record of 86 World Cup wins before retiring at Lake Louise next December.

"I always hope to win races, but when you come down and you're 0.2sec off the lead it's not really a

positive experience," said a disappointed Vonn. "I know it's not going to get better, it's trying to figure out how best to deal with it."

"I just have to try and get the swelling out of my knee and keep the muscles going. "It's a pretty extensive process." The former Olympic downhill champion refuses to be discouraged. After Cortina she heads to the World Cup in Garmisch, Germany, where she has won nine times and then on to the world championships in Sweden from February 5.

"I still have a lot more races this season, it's taking me a bit longer to be up and running," she continued. "Garmisch is always a good track for me. There's not much I can do, it's mostly figuring out how I can create power on the leg."

"Swimming helps, at 9.30 last night I was in the pool by myself. I'm working to put myself in as good a position as I can to win races." Vonn has battled back in the past from broken bones and torn ligaments, but her final season is the most challenging.

"I think I have had worse injuries that I have come back from but last year was a tough year. "Right now it's just building my confidence back up and hopefully my knee will be better for the world championship."

Ramona Siebenhofer made it two downhill wins in as many days, leading an Austrian 1-2 ahead of Nicole Schmidhofer. Siebenhofer, 27, chalked up just the second World Cup win of her career and finished four hundredths of a second ahead of Schmidhofer, who retains



CORTINA D'AMPEZZO: US skier Lindsey Vonn holds a press conference with her dog Lucy ahead of the Women's World Cup downhill, in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italian Alps. — AFP

the lead in the World Cup downhill standings.

Ilka Stuhec of Slovenia rounded out the placings at 0.51sec. The Slovenian, the 2017 World Cup downhill crystal globe champion, followed up her second place from Friday, as she also recently returned from a knee injury that sidelined her for 20 months.—AFP

Bevin hangs on to tour lead after crash

ADELAIDE: Race leader Patrick Bevin crashed and fifth stage winner Caleb Ewan was disqualified on a dramatic penultimate day of Australia's Tour Down Under outside of Adelaide yesterday. New Zealander Bevin's ochre leader's jersey hopes were in the balance after he was taken to hospital with a suspected rib and collarbone injury from a crash nine kilometres (5.5 miles) from the finish at Strathalbyn.

Bevin hopped back on his bike while his CCC teammates waited for him and he was able to rejoin the peloton to not lose any time. Bevin will take a seven-second lead over South Africa's defending champion Daryl Impey into today's final stage.

There was further drama when Australia's 'pocket rocket' sprinter Caleb Ewan was disqualified after he was first across the finish line for what race commissaires said was an "irregular sprint". Ewan appeared to headbutt Belgian Jasper Philipsen as he attempted to take his spot on the wheel in front of him and Ewan was relegated to last and Philipsen declared the winner.

Bevin looked a forlorn sight as he dismounted from his bike and sought medical attention clutching his right side, bleeding from his leg and elbow and with the back of his jersey shredded. The CCC Team was hopeful Bevin would take his place at the start of today's final stage, featuring a gruelling hilltop finish to Willunga.

"We knew there was a crash and you see the race leader on the ground with three of our jerseys standing around." Team CCC owner Jim Ochowicz said. "We had to get a bike change because his bike was broken."

"It was so close to the finish that yeah, it's hard to get that back. But the whole team stopped and got him back in the game, now we've just got to wait and see." Canadian rider Mike Woods said that Impey had sportingly called for the peloton to slow after Bevin's crash.

Impey tweeted after the stage: "Another great team performance today. Happy to grab 5 seconds more but I hope @PaddyBevin is going to be ok and can race tomorrow. He has had an amazing race so far. "One mustn't try prosper off someone else's misfortune. I feel sorry for Bevin."

Ewan was relegated to last place in the group,



ADELAIDE: Race leader New Zealand's Patrick Bevin from the CCC Team celebrates after he retains the leader's jersey after narrowly missing the win during stage four of the Tour Down Under cycling race in Adelaide. — AFP

deducted 15 points from his place in the points classification and imposed a 30-second penalty on his overall race time. Consequently, the 20-year-old Philipsen recorded just his second career win and first on a UCI WorldTour stage.

The Sprint and King of the Mountain classifications are also set to be decided on the final stage today. With Peter Sagan (BORA-hansgrohe) promoted to second in the bunch sprint in the official results, the stage is set for a close finish.

Sagan sits six points behind Bevin in the sprint points classification, with Italian national road champion Elia Viviani (Deceuninck-Quick-Step) third a further five points back. Jason Lea (UniSA-Australia) continues to lead the King of the Mountains classification after collecting more points during the fifth stage and leads New Zealand's George Bennett (Jumbo Visma) by 14 points. With a maximum of 16 points up for grabs on each of the Willunga Hill climbs on Sunday, that lead is by no means secure. Today's final over 151.5 kilometres begins in McLaren Vale and finishes atop the notorious Willunga Hill, which will favour the climbers in the peloton.—AFP

RUSADA pleads case ahead of WADA meeting

MOSCOW: The head of the Russian doping agency, RUSADA, has written to WADA before the global body's executive committee meets on Tuesday when recommendations on Russia's compliance in the long-running doping saga are set to be discussed.

In the letter dated January 18, a copy of which was issued to the media yesterday, director Yuri Ganus said it was not his agency's fault that a key deadline was missed to hand over data from a drug-tainted Moscow lab to WADA investigators.

"I assure you that although RUSADA has no authority and rights to provide access (to the lab's data)... the agency made and is making efforts to ensure fulfilment of the WADA Executive Committee requirements under September 20, 2018 by the deadline," it says.

WADA had demanded in September that the data be handed over by the end of 2018. But the transfer did not happen as planned last month due to Russian authorities raising objections to the WADA experts' equipment. WADA said Friday its representatives had finally "successfully retrieved" the data during a visit earlier this week. It will be examined in a bid to shed light on which Russian competitors were guilty of doping and who can be cleared to compete.

Richard McLaren, the Canadian lawyer whose 2016 report exposed state-sponsored doping in Russia, said the December data hold-up was "puzzling" and suggested it was caused by a "power struggle" within the country. In his letter, Ganus listed the various strides his agency made to be fully reinstated following its suspension in 2016 over McLaren's findings. "The agency underwent substantial, full and profound transformation... having replaced more than 90 percent of its staff and dismissed 100 percent of doping control officers," the letter said.—AFP

Badminton star Chen sets up Malaysia final against Son

KUALA LUMPUR: Chinese badminton star Chen Long powered into the Malaysia Masters final after easily beating defending champion Viktor Axelsen 21-13, 21-18 yesterday to set up a showdown against South Korea's Son Wan-ho.

Chen, seeded third in the tournament, was dominant from the outset, forcing his Danish opponent into deep pockets of the court as he dominated in the first game.

Axelsen tried to comeback in the second game, but was clearly troubled by a left knee injury that he suffered in his quarter-final win Friday, leaving Chen to cruise to victory. "I can see that he was clearly struggling on court. After the win, I asked him if he was alright and he told me he needs to get his knee checked," Chen said.

"I'm happy to have made my first final of the year. Today's affair against Son will be a 50/50 encounter. I know his game well as we are both from the same generation." Son checked into the final in Kuala Lumpur after his opponent Liew Daren conceded a walkover due to a foot injury.

"I tried all I could until the last minute hoping that I can still compete today, but in the end I had no choice but to get a walkover as the pain is unbearable," the Malaysian said in a message posted on Instagram.

The women's singles saw Thai defending champion Ratchanok Intanon set up a tantalising final against Spaniard Carolina Marin. Ratchanok dominated in her 21-16, 21-16 triumph over young Malaysian Goh Jin Wei, while Marin had little problem dispatching India's Saina Nehwal 21-16, 21-13.

The men's doubles saw world number one pair Marcus Fernaldi Gideon and Kevin Sanjaya Sukamuljo of Indonesia overcome Malaysians Goh V. Shem and Tan Wee Kiong 21-18, 24-22 to set up a final against Ong Yew Sin and Teo Ee Yi.

Results (x denotes seeding)

Men's singles
Chen Long (CHNx3) bt Viktor Axelsen (DENx5) 21-13, 21-18
Son Wan-ho (KORx4) walkover Liew Daren (MAS)

Women's singles
Ratchanok Intanon (THAx6) bt Goh Jin Wei (MAS) 21-16, 21-16
Carolina Marin (ESPx4) bt Saina Nehwal (INDx7) 21-16, 21-13

Men's doubles
Marcus Fernaldi Gideon/Kevin Sanjaya Sukamuljo (INAx1) bt Goh V. Shem/Tan Wee Kiong (MAS) 21-18, 24-22
Ong Yew Sin/Teo Ee Yi (MAS) bt Aaron Chia/Soh Wooi Yik (MAS) 21-6, 18-21, 21-19

Women's doubles
Greysia Polii/Apriyani Rahayu (INAx4) bt Misaki Matsutomo/Ayaka Takahashi (JPNx2) 20-22, 21-13, 21-19
Yuki Fukushima/Sayaka Hirota (JPNx1) bt Mayu Matsumoto/Wakana Nagahara (JPNx3) 21-13, 21-14. —AFP

Sports

Jota treble fires Wolves to leave Puel under fire

Third successive defeat for Leicester

LONDON: Diogo Jota's hat-trick piled pressure on Leicester manager Claude Puel as the Wolves midfielder's last-gasp strike secured a thrilling 4-3 win yesterday. Nuno Espirito Santo's side blew a two-goal lead and then wasted a 3-2 advantage, but still finished with all three points in one of the Premier League's games of the season at Molineux.

Jota was Wolves' hero with his winner deep into stoppage-time, capping a dramatic finale that left Puel holding his head in disbelief at the final whistle. This was a third successive defeat for Leicester, including an embarrassing FA Cup exit at minnows Newport, leaving Puel facing a fight to hold onto his job.

The Frenchman had already endured numerous reports that he was on borrowed time at the King Power Stadium amid reports of player and fan unrest. Wolves were quickly into their stride and took the lead in the fourth minute when Joao Moutinho's cross picked out Jota and the Portuguese midfielder guided a close-range volley past Leicester keeper Kasper Schmeichel.

Jamie Vardy almost snatched an equaliser when Wolves goalkeeper Rui Patrício got his feet in a tangle, gifting possession to the Leicester forward before scrambling back to save at the last moment.

Ryan Bennett doubled Wolves' lead in the 12th minute, the defender rising above Harry Maguire to meet Moutinho's corner with a bullet header for his first goal of the season. Leicester pulled a goal back two minutes after the break as Vardy found Demarai Gray, who skipped past a challenge and fired home with a blistering strike.

Harvey Barnes, on his first Premier League start for Leicester, played the crucial role in the 52nd minute equaliser when the young midfielder's shot deflected in off Wolves defender Conor Coady for an own goal.

Wolves regained the lead in the 64th minute when Ruben Neves's pass sent Jota clear on goal and he chested down before drilling a shot that Schmeichel could only push into the net. In the 87th minute, Wes Morgan charged onto James Maddison's free-kick and climbed above three Wolves defenders to thump a close-range header past Patrício.

But Jota had the last word in the third minute of stoppage-time as he raced onto Raul Jimenez's pass and slotted home with the Leicester defence completely out of position. Jota's winner sparked wild celebrations from Santo, who ran onto the pitch to join his jubilant players, earning a dismissal in the process. — AFP



WOLVERHAMPTON: Wolverhampton Wanderers' Portuguese midfielder Diogo Jota (C) vies with Leicester City's Northern Irish defender Jonny Evans (L) and Leicester City's Portuguese defender Ricardo Pereira (R) during the English Premier League football match between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Leicester City at the Molineux stadium in Wolverhampton, central England yesterday. — AFP

Jamie Vardy almost snatched an equaliser



Ambitious Oman eye Iran upset in Asian Cup

ABU DHABI: Coach Pim Verbeek says Oman are by no means satisfied with reaching the last 16 of the Asian Cup for the first time and will be going all out to forge another historic breakthrough when they take on Iran today.

The Omanis will be rank outsiders when they face three-times champions Iran at the Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi but the always upbeat Dutchman said there was no sense of mission accomplished in his squad.

"I agree that our first target was always to be in the final 16 but there was always a second target and that was to get into the next round," Verbeek told reporters yesterday.

"We do not sit in the hotel and say that we have achieved everything we wanted to achieve and let it go. This could be an historic game if we reach the last eight.

"This is not enough. We will do everything we can to get to the next round of this Asian Cup."

Oman lost to Uzbekistan and Japan in the group stage but beat Turkmenistan 3-1 in their final match to qualify for their knockout stage clash with Iran, the 29th best team in the world according to the FIFA rankings.

Asked about the gulf between Iran's standing and 82nd ranked Oman, Verbeek was dismissive. "I have no idea about the FIFA rankings," he scoffed. "I think in big tournaments, this doesn't matter. This is the start of the knockout stage. Everybody will be excited to play one of the best teams in Asia at the moment.

"These are fantastic games to play. We know that it will not be easy, we know the strength of the Iran team and the Iranian players. It is up to the team to play good football and, if necessary, fight to the last second.

"These are the games you want to play." Oman struggled to convert their chances in their group games and Verbeek said it was vital that they were clinical at one end and focused at the other on Sunday.

"My team are not as experienced in big leagues or competitions as other teams at the Asian Cup so we still have to learn that if you lose concentration for five seconds, that's a goal," he added.

"We will get chances, I'm not worried about that. Of course we have to play our best football (but) when we get those chances, we have to take them. "We'll try to score as many goals as possible, but let's start with one." — Reuters

Kyrgyz heartthrob Lux - the Asian Cup's reluctant sex symbol

ABU DHABI: Kyrgyzstan ace Vitalij Lux claims he would rather sit in his hotel room alone than be a sex symbol after his Asian Cup hat-trick sent female fans into a spin. The 29-year-old hunk with the James Dean film-star looks and a name that sounds like a designer shampoo, plundered a midweek treble against the Philippines to fire the White Falcons into the last 16 on their tournament debut.

"This is new for me," hat-trick hero Lux told AFP in an interview yesterday. "I can't believe it. I have a lot more Instagram followers suddenly." Lux admits he is footloose and fancy-free, but the Kyrgyz heartthrob insists he's finding it hard to come to terms with his new-found fame.

"I'm still single, I'm searching for the right one," he blushed. "But I'm a very shy person. I prefer to sit in my room and just work hard at training." Lux's Instagram followers jumped by some 6,000 overnight to just over 9,000 — after his sharp-shooting swept Kyrgyzstan into the next round.

"I'm proud that I have so many followers," said the blond bomber, whose feed shows pictures of him training or lounging bare-chested by the pool. "It's definitely an unusual situation for me but I feel proud the fans believe in me.

"I get goosebumps just thinking about the hat-trick," added Lux, who plays his club football in Germany with SSV Ulm. "It was a fantastic feeling—awesome, amazing.

Asian Cup last 16, game by game guide

AL-AIN: AFP Sport looks at the Asian Cup round of 16 games, which starts today:

JORDAN V VIETNAM
Jordan look a well-oiled machine under ex-Belgium assistant coach Vital Borkelmans, and after a tactically astute 1-0 upset of defending champions Australia, they became the first team to qualify for the knockout rounds. Southeast Asian champions Vietnam, by contrast, were the last team through and have probably met their match here.

THAILAND V CHINA
Injury doubts over star man Wu Lei lurk over Marcello Lippi's China, and they will be wary of an upset against a Thai team with no shortage of attacking threat. "Thai Messi" Chanathip Songkrasin is the

main danger that the Chinese will want to keep quiet in midfield.

IRAN V OMAN
Iran's position as Asia's top-ranked team doesn't lie and Carlos Queiroz's powerful, direct team should have a big say in the title. Oman are unlikely to pose a major problem.

JAPAN V SAUDI ARABIA
Saudi Arabia's slip-up against political foes Qatar in their final group game set up the tastiest of the last 16 ties, against four-time winners Japan. A hard one to call—the Saudis, with near home advantage, bullied easy-beats North Korea and Lebanon, while Japan have quality but are yet to hit form.

AUSTRALIA V UZBEKISTAN
After their defeat to Jordan, defending champions Australia scored six in their next two games. Uzbekistan have quality in attack but the Socceroos are starting to click up front and they should have the edge.



DUBAI: Kyrgyzstan's forward Vitalij Lux (C) celebrates with his teammates after scoring a goal during the 2019 AFC Asian Cup group C match between Kyrgyzstan and Philippines at Maktoum Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Stadium in Dubai. — AFP

It's given me more self-belief. I feel stronger, bigger. I didn't expect it, it was just a perfect day."

'GIRLS LOVE HIM'

Lux still has some way to go to catch Cristiano Ronaldo's 152 million Instagram followers but a Kyrgyzstan official whispered conspiratorially: "girls love him back home." The player himself hastily turned the conversation to Kyrgyzstan's clash with Asian Cups hosts the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi tomorrow.

"It will be a tough game but they have the pressure, we don't," said Lux, who revealed that Kyrgyzstan president Sooronbai Jeenbekov had delivered a rousing pep talk over the phone before their last game.

"We can just play our football. We have nothing to lose." For Kyrgyzstan—hitherto better known for horseback wrestling, eagle hunting and dead goat polo—simply reaching the Asian Cup was an astonishing achievement, given the parlous state of football in the former Soviet state. —AFP

UAE V KYRGYZSTAN

A soporific start by Alberto Zaccheroni's side has muted home hopes but as luck would have it, they are up against minnows Kyrgyzstan in the last 16. However, the debutants have been adventurous and inventive going forward and will ask serious questions of the Emiratis.

SOUTH KOREA V SAUDI ARABIA

The arrival of Tottenham Hotspur star Son Heung-min for their final group game transformed South Korea as they convincingly beat China. On that form, Bahrain will not get a look-in.

QATAR V IRAQ

Almoez Ali's seven goals have made him the revelation of the tournament and Felix Sanchez Bas's slick outfit look favourites against Iraq. However, the 2007 champions have tactical nous thanks to their coach Srecko Katanec, a seasoned campaigner who took Slovenia to the 2002 World Cup. This one could be close. — AFP



Matches on TV (Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE		
Huddersfield Town v Manchester City	16:30	beIN SPORTS HD 2
Fulham FC v Tottenham Hotspur	19:00	beIN SPORTS HD 2
SPANISH LEAGUE		
Real Betis v Girona	14:00	beIN SPORTS HD 3
Villarreal CF v Athletic de Bilbao	18:15	beIN SPORTS HD 3
Rayo Vallecano v Real Sociedad	20:30	beIN SPORTS HD 1
Levante v Real Valladolid	20:30	beIN SPORTS HD 3
FC Barcelona v CD Leganes	22:45	beIN SPORTS HD 3
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE		
Frosinone Calcio v Atalanta	14:30	beIN SPORTS HD 4
ACF Fiorentina v UC Sampdoria	17:00	beIN SPORTS HD 1
spal v Bologna FC	17:00	beIN SPORTS HD 1
Cagliari Calcio v Empoli	20:00	beIN SPORTS HD 4
SSC Napoli v SS Lazio	22:30	beIN SPORTS HD 4
GERMAN BUNDESLIGA		
FC Nuremberg v Hertha Berlin	17:30	beIN SPORTS HD 5
Schalke 04 v VfL Wolfsburg	20:00	beIN SPORTS HD 5
FRENCH LEAGUE		
Caen v Olympique Marseille	19:00	beIN SPORTS HD 6
Saint Etienne v Olympique Lyonnais	23:00	beIN SPORTS HD 6
ASIAN NATIONS CUP 2019		
Jordan v Vietnam	14:00	beIN SPORTS
Thailand v China	17:00	beIN SPORTS
Iran v Oman	20:00	beIN SPORTS

Australia women's coach sacked

MELBOURNE: Australia's women's football coach Alen Stajcic was sacked yesterday just months out from the World Cup amid concerns over "workplace" and "player welfare" issues.

The move comes despite guiding the Matildas to as high as fourth in the FIFA world rankings in one of their most successful eras since being appointed in 2014.

Football Federation Australia chief David Gallop said

he had lost faith in Stajcic. "The ultimate responsibility for driving change and leading a high-performance environment that puts the team in the best possible position to achieve what they are capable of, rests with the head coach," he said.

"We no longer have confidence that Alen is the right person to lead the team and staff."

The women's World Cup takes place in France in June and July, while Australia are due to play New Zealand, South Korea and Argentina on home soil in the Tournament of Nations from February 8.

Gallop cited two recently conducted confidential FFA surveys to evaluate the standard of the team envi-

ronment and culture. This included a "wellbeing audit" as well as a "gender equality culture survey".

He said the results, along with interviews with players and staff, had led FFA to determine that the team environment was "unsatisfactory" and change was needed. No specific details of the problems were given.

"FFA is committed to providing the best possible environment for the Matildas and this change is being made with that objective in mind," he said. "We will continue to review other aspects of the team set-up and monitor the Matildas environment in the coming weeks and months as we build for the FIFA Women's World Cup in France." — AFP

25 Halep sets up Serena showdown as Djokovic relentlessly marches on

25 Rough return as speed queen Vonn battles for winning form

27 Kyrgyz heartthrob Lux - the Asian Cup's reluctant sex symbol



MANCHESTER: Brighton's English midfielder Dale Stephens (R) and Manchester United's English midfielder Jesse Lingard (L) jump as Brighton's English goalkeeper David Button (C) claims the ball during the English Premier League football match between Manchester United and Brighton and Hove Albion at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, yesterday. — AFP

Liverpool defeat Palace in thriller

Man United revival continues with 2-1 win over Brighton

ANFIELD: Premier League leaders Liverpool recovered from a poor first-half display as they came from behind to beat battling Crystal Palace 4-3 in a thrilling goalfest at Anfield yesterday.

The win, secured by late goals from Mo Salah and Sadio Mane, moves Juergen Klopp's side seven points clear of Manchester City, who face bottom club Huddersfield Town on Sunday.

Palace took a shock 34th minute lead, against the run of play, when Andros Townsend slotted home a fine pull-back from Wilfried Zaha.

Liverpool equalised 47 seconds after the interval when the ball looped high into the area where Salah skilfully converted with the outside of his left foot after Virgil van Dijk's long-range effort was blocked.

Suddenly Liverpool were buzzing and it was no surprise when Brazilian Roberto Firmino put them ahead, collecting a pass from Naby Keita and beating veteran Palace keeper Julian Speroni with a slightly deflected

low shot. But Palace were not about to roll over and they fought back to level at 2-2 in the 65th when James Tomkins was left unattended to head in a Luka Milivojevic corner.

Speroni, Palace's 39-year-old third-choice, then gifted Liverpool a goal when his one-handed waft at a harmless-looking James Milner cross fell for Salah to tap in after 75 minutes.

Milner was sent off in the 89th for a second yellow card after a late challenge on Zaha before Mane added the fourth for the hosts with a solo strike in stoppage time.

There was still time for Palace to strike again with Max Meyer beating Alisson Becker with a low shot which the Brazilian keeper would have expected to save.

Meanwhile, Manchester United stretched their perfect run under caretaker manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer to seven wins from as many games in all competitions

with a 2-1 home defeat of Brighton & Hove Albion in the Premier League yesterday.

The result provisionally lifted United one place up to fifth on 44 points from 23 games, three more than sixth-placed Arsenal who were playing fourth-placed Chelsea in the 1730 GMT fixture.

United stormed into a two-goal lead through Paul Pogba and Marcus Rashford in the first half but faded in the second and served up a nervy finish to their fans after Pascal Gross pulled one back for battling Brighton.

Pogba opened the scoring with a 27th-minute penalty and Rashford made it 2-0 in the 42nd with a superb individual goal, beating his marker with dazzling footwork before hitting the top corner from a tight angle on his 150th appearance for United.

Gross reduced the arrears out of the blue in the 72nd minute, drilling in a close-range shot off the underside of the bar after Davy Propper floated in an

inch-perfect cross with the outside of his foot.

Southampton earned a crucial 2-1 win over Everton at St Mary's yesterday but had to endure a nervy finish as they boosted their battle against Premier League relegation under galvanising new manager Ralph Hasenhuetl.

James Ward-Prowse scored a superb individual goal just after the break before a Lucas Digne own goal looked to have comfortably sealed a deserved win for the Saints in the 64th minute.

Yet a goal at the start of stoppage time from Gylfi Sigurdsson gave the home fans a nervous finish as eight minutes was added on, much to Hasenhuetl's consternation, while Everton pushed for the equaliser.

The win pushed Southampton into 15th place on 22 points, three clear of the relegation zone, as they won only their second home match of the season — both coming under their new Austrian boss' stewardship. — Reuters

Lowry wins see-saw Abu Dhabi battle

ABU DHABI: Ireland's Shane Lowry won a see-saw battle with Richard Sterne, needing a birdie on the last hole to win the \$7 million Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship yesterday.

Lowry held his nerves on the back nine to make up a deficit of four shots after losing a three-shot advantage early in the final round. He closed with a one-under par-71 round for a one-shot win over Sterne, who shot a final round of 69.

It was Lowry's first win since the World Golf Championship-Bridgestone Invitational in August 2015 and he is expected to rise to number 40 in the world

ranking from his current 75. Netherland's Joost Luiten made two eagles in his round-including a hole-out second shot on the par-four ninth hole—to shoot a 65 on a windy Abu Dhabi Golf Club course to finish solo third at 15-under 273, one better than South African Louis Oosthuizen (66).

World number two Brooks Koepka (70) finished tied ninth on 277, which meant that England's Justin Rose will remain the world number one irrespective of his finish this week on the US PGA Tour's Desert Classic.

"It was an emotional roller-coaster today. I obviously went out with the lead by a few and before I knew it, I was four behind. I was brave out there today. I grounded out well and I'm over the moon," said Lowry, who received \$1.16 million for his fourth European Tour title but the first in which he led wire-to-wire.

"People looking from the outside probably thought I was gone, but I holed a couple of great putts on 12 and 13 and I knew I was in it then. "I said to my caddie

walking down 16 that (if I got) three fours on the last three holes we could have a shout here.

He said he had talked in depth with his coach Neil Manchip before the tournament "about hanging in and staying in there no matter what I do and no matter what I shoot and what shots I hit".

He added: "It definitely helped me out there today." Sterne was quick off the blocks and caught up with Lowry with birdies on his first three holes. The Irishman had also started with a birdie on the opening hole, but dropped a shot on the par-four third and found his three-shot advantage at the start of the day soon vanished.

Lowry regained the lead when he birdied his 10th par-three hole of the tournament on the fourth, but the South African chipped in for a birdie on the difficult par-four fifth hole playing into stiff headwind.

However, he did not enjoy the cushion for long and missed a par putt from a couple of feet on the sixth to

tie again with Lowry on 17-under. The tournament looked like becoming a two-horse race, with their closest rivals five shots behind at that stage, but the next two holes changed the equations completely.

Sterne birdied the par-five eighth hole to go one ahead. Lowry then hooked his tee shot straight into the water on the par-four ninth and wound up with a bogey, while Sterne made another impressive 15-foot birdie putt to go ahead by three at the turn.

The drama continued on the back nine. A bogey by Lowry on the 11th hole gave Sterne a four-shot advantage, but the burly Irishman bounced right back with back-to-back birdies on the 12th and 13th holes.

Sterne then dropped shots on the 14th and 16th and the duo headed to the 18th hole tied on 17-under par. Both found the fairway, but the South African pushed his second shot into the cart path on the right. He failed to get his up-and-down from there, while Lowry, on the green in two, two-putted for the decisive birdie. — AFP