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8 Saudi Aramco, BlackRock sign \$15.5bn pipeline deal



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16 Beijing warns US will 'pay the price' for Olympics boycott



Saudi, Oman sign \$30bn deals as Prince Mohammed visits

Qatar, Turkey sign cooperation agreements during Erdogan's visit



MUSCAT: Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tareq meets Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman yesterday. — KUNA



DOHA: Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani meets Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday. — AFP

MUSCAT: Saudi Arabia signed deals with Oman valued at \$30 billion, state media said yesterday, as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman began a tour of Gulf Arab countries, including former rival Qatar. Saudi and Omani companies "signed 13 memoranda of understanding worth \$30 billion", the official Saudi Press Agency reported.

The MoUs between the two countries, which seek to diversify their economies away from oil, range from cooperation in the energy and tourism sectors to finance and technology. Prince Mohammed arrived in Muscat on Monday night, the first stop in a regional tour ahead a Gulf Arab summit in mid-December. He met with Sultan Haitham bin Tareq, who ascended the throne in January last year, after the death of his cousin Sultan Qaboos.

Yesterday, Sultan Haitham honored Prince Mohammed with the Oman First-Degree Order, one of the country's top medals. The official Oman News Agency said the sultanate grants the award to kings, heads of states, crown princes and heads of

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News in brief

WHO against plasma treatment

PARIS: COVID treatments using plasma taken from the blood of recovered coronavirus patients should not be given to people with mild or moderate illness, the World Health Organization said Tuesday. It made a "strong recommendation" against the use of blood plasma in people who do not have serious COVID-19 symptoms and said that even for patients with severe and critical illness, the treatment should only be given as part of a clinical trial. — AFP

Motorcycle bomb kills 4 in Iraq

BASRA: At least four civilians were killed and four more wounded yesterday in a motorcycle bombing near a hospital in southern Iraq's Basra city, security forces said. Referring to "the explosion of a motorcycle", they said in a statement that "four citizens were killed and four others injured while two vehicles near the motorcycle caught fire". The blast hit at a crossroads in central Basra, near a hospital and a popular market. — AFP

Rohingya refugees sue Facebook

LOS ANGELES: Rohingya refugees sued Facebook on Monday for \$150 billion over claims the social network is failing to stem hate speech on its platform, exacerbating violence against the vulnerable minority. The complaint, lodged in a California court, says the algorithms that power the US-based company promote disinformation and extremist thought that translates to real-world violence. — AFP (See Page 5)

Egypt court frees researcher

CAIRO: An Egyptian court ordered the release yesterday of researcher Patrick Zaki, whose detention in February last year sparked international condemnation, particularly in Italy where he had been studying, his family said. Zaki still faces charges of "spreading false news", "harming national security" and "incitement to overthrow the state", among others. Italy's senate in April voted to grant Zaki Italian citizenship, allowing him to receive consular support. — AFP (See Page 5)

MP proposes cap on rent in 'model' areas

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MP Marzouq Al-Khalifa yesterday submitted a draft law calling to put a cap on rents in so-called modern areas in a bid to prevent a rapid rise in rents. The bill proposes that rents in the Capital and Hawalli governorates must not be more than KD 2.5 per square meter, and not more than

KD 2 per square meter in the governorates of Farwaniya, Jahra, Ahmadi and Mubarak Al-Kabeer.

The proposed rates apply only to private homes in model areas, which are mostly inhabited by Kuwaiti families, some of whom lease out part of their homes. The bill does not include so-called investment or commercial buildings spread out in many areas and rented out mainly to expatriates.

The lawmaker said the current law has failed to stop a sharp increase in rents of private homes, which has become a business, strongly affecting the income of Kuwaiti families renting apartments in model areas. The bill must be approved by the National Assembly and accepted by the government to become law.

Meanwhile, the National Assembly's legal and leg-

islative committee yesterday approved a draft law calling for the establishment of a public shareholding company under the name Kuwait Solar Energy Company. The legislation comes as part of Kuwait's drive to expand renewable energy projects, mainly existing solar energy plants in the western Kuwaiti desert.

In other developments, Prime Minister-designate HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah yesterday held talks with parliamentary groups and lawmakers in his bid to form the new Cabinet. Sheikh Sabah submitted the resignation of his Cabinet last month and was asked to form the new government. Sheikh Sabah met with lawmakers from the Mutairi and Awazem tribes and several Shiite MPs. He is expected to continue his consultations before announcing the new Cabinet.

UAE moves to Sat-Sun weekend

DUBAI: The United Arab Emirates is slashing its official working week to four-and-a-half days and moving its weekend to Saturday and Sunday in a major shift aimed at improving competitiveness, officials said yesterday. The "national working week" is mandatory for government bodies from Jan 1 and bucks the regional norm of a full day off on Friday for Muslim prayers. Scott Livermore, chief economist at

Oxford Economics Middle East, an advisory firm, said businesses could choose their working week but were likely to align with the public sector. While becoming the only Gulf country not to have a Friday-Saturday weekend, the resource-rich and ambitious UAE now comes into line with the non-Arab world.

Under the new timetable, the public-sector weekend starts at noon on Fridays and ends on Sunday. Friday prayers at mosques will be held after 1:15 pm. The move, which also includes schools, is intended to "better align the UAE with global markets", said state news agency WAM, calling the new working week the world's shortest.

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Ancient tablet back in Iraq after 30 years

BAGHDAD: A 3,500-year-old tablet featuring the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh has been returned to Iraq three decades after it was stolen and illegally imported to the US. The tablet was exhibited to the media in Iraq yesterday by the authorities who welcomed its return as a "victory" over those who stole the country's "history". The clay tablet features characters in cuneiform and is believed to have been stolen from an Iraqi museum in 1991 while the country was caught up

in the first Gulf War.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is considered one of the oldest pieces of literature in the world, telling the story of a Mesopotamian king on a quest for immortality. In a press conference yesterday in Baghdad, the Iraqi foreign minister delivered to the culture minister three artefacts recovered from the US and the UK: The tablet of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian ram's head and a Sumerian tablet.

The tablet of Gilgamesh "is of great importance, it is one of the oldest literary texts of Iraq's history," Minister of Culture and Antiquities Hassan Nazim told AFP. During the press conference, he stressed the "message sent to all those who smuggle our antiquities and have sold them at international

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DUBAI: A sign marking the UAE's 50th jubilee is lit up along the side of Sheikh Zayed Road on Dec 1, 2021. — AFP



BAGHDAD: The tablet of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian tablet and a Sumerian ram's head are displayed yesterday after their repatriation. — AFP

Local

Kuwait Crown Prince receives credentials of new ambassadors

Amir expresses condolences over Iraq blast victims



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of France Claire Le Flecher. — Amiri Diwan photos



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of Egypt Osama Abdul-Moneim.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of Djibouti Abdulqader Omar.



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of Ghana Haji Abu Bakr Sadiq Abdullah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday at Bayan palace the credentials of newly appointed ambassadors to Kuwait. The new envoys were Ambassador Claire Le Flecher of France, Ambassador Osama Abdul-Moneim of Egypt, Ambassador Abdulqader Omar of Djibouti, and Ambassador Haji Abu Bakr Sadiq Abdullah of Ghana. Senior state officials attended the ceremony.

In other news, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah offered his condolences yesterday over the victims of an explosion in Iraq's southern city of Basra, which left scores of people either dead or injured. His Highness the Amir expressed his sympathies in cables he sent to Iraq's political leaders, including President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, wishing a speedy recovery for those wounded in the blast. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah both sent similar cables to the Iraqi leaders.

Kuwait's foreign ministry strongly denounced and condemned the bomb explosion that occurred in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. In a statement, the ministry affirmed its firm stance against violence, expressed deepest condolences to families and wished fast recovery for the injured. GCC Secretary General Dr Nayef Al-Hajraf also condemned the deadly blast that happened in Basra. Hajraf in a statement expressed solidarity with Iraq in the fight against terrorism, manifesting support for Baghdad's efforts to solidify security and stability on the country's territories. He expressed condolences to the victims' loved ones and re-affirmed the GCC unwavering stance against terrorism and radicalism.

Meanwhile, the general consulate of the State of Kuwait in Basra urged citizens currently present in the city to take precautions, in the aftermath of the deadly blast. The diplomatic mission urges Kuwaitis in the city to heed local authorities' safety instructions and contact it for any inquiry or need for help. The Kuwaiti Consulate in Basra is reachable on the following phone numbers: 964782844666 - 9652225540 - 9652225541. — KUNA

China willing to help Kuwait on port development

BEIJING: A Chinese official yesterday said his country is willing to assist Kuwait on developing its ports given the significance of such facilities towards international maritime trade. The remarks by Shanghai International Port Group chief Gu Jinshan came during talks with Kuwait's Consul General in the business hub Chinese city Mishal Al-Shamali, which focused on plans to bolster bilateral cooperation. Kuwait stands to gain from China's expertise on port development and management, said the diplomat, citing Shanghai port as among the world's busiest and most connected, even as global shipments were brought to a standstill during the COVID pandemic. He praised Shanghai port's use



BEIJING: Kuwait's Consul General in Shanghai Mishal Al-Shamali (left) meets Shanghai International Port Group chief Gu Jinshan. — KUNA

of smart technology to better manage day-to-day operations at the facility, saying that Kuwait looks to benefit from China's knowledge on the matter. — KUNA

Amiri Diwan minister hosts Iraqi ambassador



KUWAIT: Minister of the Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah meets Iraqi Ambassador to Kuwait Al-Manhal Hussein Al-Safi. — Amiri Diwan photo

KUWAIT: Minister of the Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday Iraqi Ambassador to the State of Kuwait Al-Manhal Hussein Al-Safi. Amiri Diwan Undersecretary and Director of the Amiri Bureau, Ahmad Fahad Al-Fahad and Advisor at the Amiri Diwan Mohammad Abdullah Abulhassan attended the meeting. — KUNA

Saudi, Oman sign \$30bn deals...

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governments of countries with which Muscat has distinguished relations.

According to SPA, Prince Mohammed will also visit the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. His trip to Doha will mark the first visit since Saudi Arabia and Qatar severed ties four years ago. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain cut all links with Qatar in June 2017, alleging it backed radical Islamist groups and was too close to Riyadh's rival Tehran - allegations Doha denied. They restored full relations with Qatar in January after a landmark summit.

The prince's tour comes amid a flurry of diplomacy to resolve regional disputes, especially with Iran and Turkey. There have been signs of a thaw between Saudi Arabia and Iran in recent weeks, with Tehran and Riyadh holding several rounds of talks since April aimed at improving ties. Meanwhile, Turkey has sought to rebuild relations with former rivals in the Gulf, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Simmering tensions between Ankara and Riyadh escalated after the 2018 killing of Saudi jour-

nalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's Istanbul consulate.

Prince Mohammed's tour coincides with a visit to Doha by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday, although Qatar's foreign minister has said it was coincidental. Erdogan, whose country is reeling from a fresh economic crisis and is searching for foreign investment and trade, met with Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani yesterday.

The two discussed enhancing their countries' cooperation in various fields, including the economy, defense and security, and sports, the Qatar News Agency said. During the meeting, Qatar and Turkey signed a number of cooperation agreements and MoUs. The two countries signed a protocol on organizing major events and crises management. The two sides also signed a letter of intent on partnership between Doha Forum and Antalya Diplomatic Forum, as well as MoUs on sports and youth, health and medical science.

An MoU on religious affairs was also inked, in addition to cooperation agreements on standardization, culture and tourism, and investment. Sheikh Tamim and Erdogan expressed hope the agreements would further cement cooperation and take it to new heights. The Gulf states are seeking to diversify their economies away from oil, investing heavily in recent years in the tourism, entertainment and sports sectors. — Agencies

UAE moves to Sat-Sun...

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"The UAE is the first nation in the world to introduce a national working week shorter than the global five-day week," it said.

The Western-style weekend, rumored for years, was announced less than a week after the former British protectorate celebrated the 50th anniversary of its formation. The UAE observed a Thursday-Friday weekend until 2006, when it moved to Fridays and Saturdays. "The extended weekend comes as part of the UAE government's efforts to boost work-life balance and enhance social wellbeing, while increasing performance to advance the UAE's economic competitiveness," the WAM report said. It added that the change "will better align the UAE with global markets, reflecting the country's strategic status on the global economic map."

The new arrangement is another bold step for the UAE, which last year broke with decades of Arab consensus by normalizing relations with the Zionist entity, unlocking hundreds of millions of dollars in trade. It gives the UAE the jump on regional com-

petitors including neighboring Saudi Arabia, the Arab world's largest economy which is seeking a greater international presence as it diversifies its economy away from oil.

The changed week was generally welcomed on social media, where the subject was trending and the official announcements were widely retweeted. Manoj, an IT worker in Dubai's Business Bay district, said the Friday-Saturday weekend had long caused problems when working with clients in different countries. "I think it's a great step because collaborating with different clients overseas always provides a problem, because we are not working on Fridays and they are not working on Sundays," he said. "So there is a gap of like three days before we actually sync up."

Monica, a financial sector worker, said: "I think it's good from an international point of view that we are in line with the world, with the globe. "And in terms of having the extra half-day on Friday, I think it works well because it will give us more time with family."

Livemore, of Oxford Economics Middle East, told AFP the alignment with Europe and Asia "will help internationally orientated business that are an important pillar of the economy and could attract investment." At the same time, "a shorter working week does present some challenges in terms of managing output costs, although there is some evidence that a shorter working week can boost productivity of the workforce," he added. — AFP

Ancient tablet back in Iraq...

Continued from Page 1

uctions: ultimately, the fate of such operations is restitution".

In one year, Iraq has recovered nearly 18,000 artefacts, including 17,899 pieces returned from the US in the summer. About

4,000 years old, the artefacts were returned in late July aboard a plane carrying Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi from a trip to Washington where he met US President Joe Biden. "This day represent a victory in the face of the desperate attempts of those who try to steal our great history and our ancient civilization," Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said Tuesday.

The tablet reappeared in Britain in 2001. An American art dealer bought it from a London-based Jordanian family in 2003, before sending the piece to the United States without declaring its true nature to customs. It

was then sold to antique dealers in 2007 for \$50,000 under a false certificate of origin. The tablet was sold once again in 2014 for \$1.67 million to the owners of craft chain Hobby Lobby, the Green family, fundamentalist Christians who wanted to display it at their Museum of the Bible in Washington.

A museum curator became concerned about the tablet's origins in 2017, feeling that its documentation was incomplete. It was finally seized in 2019. Iraq has seen its historical artefacts looted for decades, including since the US invasion in 2003 and the rise of the Islamic State militant group 10 years later. — AFP



The Gilgamesh Tablet is displayed in Baghdad yesterday. — AFP

Local

Border closures prevent dialogue, sharing peace: Kuwaiti diplomat

Kuwait supports holding conference for 'future and youth'

NEW YORK: A Kuwaiti diplomat said that policies leading to the closure of borders as part of measures to contain the Omicron variant may prevent dialogue and efforts to share peace between all nations. Advisor at the Kuwaiti permanent delegation to the UN headquarters in New York Faisal Al-Enezi called on all countries to reinforce cooperation and face challenges together, commending UN efforts to hold a meeting in January to formulate a plan to distribute, in a just manner, the COVID-19 vaccines globally. His statements came in a speech to a UN General Assembly session on the culture of peace late Monday.



NEW YORK: Kuwaiti permanent delegation to the UN headquarters in New York Faisal Al-Enezi delivers a speech to a UN General Assembly session on the culture of peace late Monday. — KUNA

“ Kuwait supports culture of peace worldwide ”

At the beginning of his speech, Enezi indicated that Kuwait supports the proliferation of the culture of peace worldwide. He further called for eliminating extremism, hate, and violence, stressing that all UN member states should work together to promote peace in the world and teach future generations about this noble concept.

Enezi also renewed Kuwait's support to all initiatives and efforts to bolster international cooperation under the umbrella of the UN. Kuwait supports the

UN Secretariat's efforts to achieve sustainable goals for future generations, he said, adding that his country was in favor of holding a conference for the future and youth of the world at the nearest possible opportunity. He noted that Kuwait always supported dialogue and understanding amongst religions and ideologies, affirming that the constitution of Kuwait guaranteed freedom of religion and expression.

The State of Kuwait had established a high committee to bolster understanding in society and fight extremism in all its forums, the diplomat affirmed, saying that even during the pandemic, forums, sessions, and meetings were held on social media platform to counter extremism and boost peace and understanding. — KUNA

Kuwait has set up solid anti-corruption system: Official

KUWAIT: The Anti-Corruption Authority (Nazaha) yesterday affirmed the State of Kuwait has set up a robust and solid system to fight the scourge. These state-level efforts have been capped with Kuwait's joining the UN Convention against Corruption and the Arab anti-Corruption Convention, said Nazaha's chairman Abdul Aziz Al-Ibrahim while addressing the third international conference for the Palestinian anti-Corruption Authority, themed, 'Precautions against corruption in the public sector: Governance, efficiency and adherence.' Nazaha has also exerted efforts for enacting a package of legislations designed to bolster national action to prohibit and combat corruption and boost accountability, he added. Moreover, Ibrahim alluded to the establishment of the auditing apparatuses and the Central Agency for Public Tenders. Nazaha has been granted a prime role in the endeavors to attain objectives of the inter-



Nazaha's Chairman Abdul Aziz Al-Ibrahim

national sustainable development, 2030. Governance, he has added, has become a prime means for combating corruption and boosting transparency and regulating auditing in various state sectors. —KUNA

Kuwait oil price down 67 cents to \$72.27 pb

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went down by 67 cents to \$72.27 per barrel on Monday after being at \$72.94 per barrel last Friday, said Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. At the global level, the price of the Brent crude went up by \$3.20 to \$73.08 per barrel, the same case with the West Texas Intermediate, which went up by \$3.23 to \$69.49 pb.

The OPEC daily basket price fell by 20 cents to \$71.41 a barrel Monday, compared with \$71.61 the previous Friday, the cartel said yesterday. The

Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) said on its bulletin that the average annual rate of the basket last year hit \$41.47 pd. The OPEC+ alliance decided, at its 23rd ministerial meeting on December 2, to maintain the current output plan, designed to increase the oil production gradually, with the conferees having decided to pursue increasing oil supplies by some 400,000 barrels per day.

The conferees had also underlined the paramount significance of utter compliance and compensation mechanism for the alliance's member states. The oil-producing countries of OPEC+ are expected to continue changing the production until amending the current level of 5.8 million bpd. They will re-examine market conditions and performance of the stakeholders at the 24th ministerial meeting, due to be held virtually on January 2. — KUNA

Palestine embassy honors Kuwait University professor

KUWAIT: Ambassador of the State of Palestine Rami Tahboub, on behalf of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, honored political science professor at Kuwait University Dr Haila Al-Mukaimi, who won the President Mahmoud Abbas for Academic Diplomacy Prize that is granted to scientists, researchers and supporters of the Palestinian cause. Ambassador Rami Tahboub congratulated Dr Mukaimi on behalf of the President for her achievement "that has a major role at the international level in supporting the Palestinian cause, especially at the academic arenas, by documenting the history of the Palestinian struggle." Dr Mukaimi thanked President Abbas for the honoring, adding that she would continue working in support of efforts to help end the oppression on the Palestinian people and fulfill their wishes to have their own independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.



KUWAIT: Ambassador of the State of Palestine Rami Tahboub (left) honors political science professor at Kuwait University Dr Haila Al-Mukaimi.

sake of Kuwait, he added. The office also highlights the most significant charitable and humanitarian projects done outside Kuwait, including religious centers, schools, clinics, orphanages, and others, Owfan explained.

During the presentation, the office reviewed the social, educational, health, housing, legal aspects, and responsibilities carried by the office toward the families of 1,308 Kuwaiti martyrs. In a similar statement, Director of Public Relations and Activities at the Office Thekaryat Al-Hamdan said that the office represented its contributions and various works, by displaying large television screens showing short films on the accomplishments and achievements of the Martyrs Office. The office will participate again in Kuwait Pavilion in the near future, Hamdan added, the next participation will be on Kuwait's National Day and the other will be related to the role of women and Kuwaiti martyrs. The participation of the Martyr's Office, which comes under the slogan "Leadership in Humanitarian Work", coincides with the "Humanitarian and Volunteer Work" week, which was allocated by Expo 2020 Dubai during this period. —KUNA

Martyr's Office participates in Expo 2020 Dubai

DUBAI: As part of its participation in Expo 2020 Dubai, Kuwaiti Martyr's Office displayed on Monday its national activities in caring for the families of the nation's martyrs, its humanitarian projects and charitable initiatives in Arab and Asian countries. In a statement to the press, Assistant Undersecretary at the Amiri Diwan, Director-General of the Kuwaiti Martyr's Office, Saleh Al-Owfan, said that the participation aims to highlight humanitarian work in Kuwait and its honorable record in giving and supporting people in the most difficult circumstances. The office reveals, through this participation inside the Kuwait Pavilion, the care provided for the families of 94 non-Kuwaiti martyrs representing 14 Gulf, Arab and Asian countries, residents and expatriates who sacrificed their lives for the



DUBAI: The Kuwait Martyr's Office team participating in Expo 2020 Dubai. — KUNA

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News in brief

Cardiac operation on 102-year-old patient

KUWAIT: A team from Sabah Al-Ahmad Cardiac Center carried out a successful transcatheter aortic valve implantation (TAVI) operation on a 102-year-old patient; the first operation of its kind to be carried out on a patient in this age, the center announced yesterday. The procedure was carried out by heart and catheterization consultant Dr Nader Al-Asousi and senior cardiologist Dr Ahmad Saeed Taha. The Kuwaiti woman was suffering from narrowing aortic valve; the part of the heart that allows for oxygenated blood to leave the heart and move towards various organs of the body. The procedure was a success and the patient is expected to return to a normal life in few days, the center said in a statement to the press.

Kuwait underlines tourism cooperation

CAIRO: A Kuwaiti official stressed yesterday the Gulf state's openness to enhance cooperation among members of Arab League States. Adhari Al-Saleh, Kuwait's Representative to the 29th Session of the Executive Arab Bureau of the Arab Ministerial Tourism Council and Research Supervisor at the Ministry of Information, made the affirmation at end of the session. Saleh stated that the Executive Office discussed many topics that would serve the tourism sector in the Arab countries, including training programs and setting general principles to standardize procedures for registration and approval of vaccines and their use. Moreover, Saleh said the conferees discussed the issue of choosing the capital of Arab tourism for the year 2022, as well as supporting the Palestinian economy in the field of tourism and a guide for people with special needs. Saleh noted that the talks also dealt with a draft agenda for the 24th session of the Arab Ministerial Council for Tourism, scheduled in Cairo today. — KUNA

Kuwait condemns Houthi ballistic missile attack

KUWAIT: Kuwait condemned and denounced, in the strongest terms, the continuous acts by Houthi militia in targeting Saudi Arabia, including attacking Riyadh city with a ballistic missile, the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry said in a statement Monday. "The continuation of these hostile practices and escalation against civilians, the residential areas, Saudi Arabia's security and the region's stability constitutes a flagrant violation of the principles of international law and international humanitarian law," it added. This requires a rapid and decisive action by the international community to deter these threats and hold the perpetrators accountable, according to the statement. The Ministry concluded its statement with an affirmation that Kuwait stands in support with Saudi Arabia in all measures it takes to preserve its security, stability and sovereignty. — KUNA

stc joins Battle of the East as main sponsor of Kuwait's premier fitness festival

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced that it will be joining this year's 'Battle of the East' fitness festival as a main sponsor. The sponsorship comes as a continuation of the various local initiatives the Company has participated in throughout the year under its corporate social responsibility framework, which focuses on the key areas of health, education, entrepreneurship and the environment.

stc released a statement indicating that as part of its sponsorship role, led by Ahmad Al-Nowaibet, Manager of Public Relations and Social Media at stc, the company will be hosting a variety of activities and competitions at the event. The competitions will take place at the stc village located on the fitness festival's grounds, which will be open to both guests and participants for a chance to win one of stc's valuable prizes. Additionally, stc employees will be participating in the Saracen Race, a 5k obstacle race designed to test endurance and push

the boundaries of competitors.

The GIG Battle Fitness Festival is an all-encompassing fitness festival held in Kuwait that was created in 2013 by Circuit+ Fitness. The initiative began with the objective of creating an annual competition that would unite the excitement of a healthy competitive environment with the thriving athletic communities in the Middle East to foster a unique adrenaline driven experience. The fitness festival consists of several attractions including CrossFit, Powerlifting, and Calisthenics competitions, as well as a Saracen Race for adults and children. The festival will also feature an activity corner where guests can participate in numerous engaging fitness activities throughout the festival's duration. Over the years, the annual festival has attracted over 2,500 athletes from all over the globe who are eager to participate in the different competitions for a chance to win one of the festival's titles.

Commenting on the sponsorship, Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc, said, "Physical activity and body



awareness are essential attributes in maintaining a well-balanced and healthy lifestyle. Our participation in this initiative not only coincides with our CSR agenda, but it also falls in line with stc's internal culture encourages employees to adopt a healthier lifestyle to achieve higher productivity levels. We believe that this a crucial factor that will aid in achieving a successful career by taking charge of your life and feeling good about the choices you make along the way. stc is a keen supporter of initiatives organized by SMEs, especially companies that add value to the local community and have the potential for future growth, which is why the Company decided to sponsor Battle of the East."

Jasem added, "By participating in these events, we also aim to set an example for the younger generation as they challenge their mental and physical abilities. Working in teams and collaborating to overcome obstacles and achieve the ultimate goal shares similar values to what stc employees experience in their day-to-day duties. stc will continue to participate in similar initiatives that support the local athletic community in Kuwait, while expanding the range of initiatives held under its extensive CSR program. We strive to become a source of inspiration for the younger generation by encouraging them to adopt a healthier lifestyle that can pave the way for a brighter future ahead."



KUWAIT: Ambassador of India to Kuwait Sibi George met Ghanem Suleiman Al-Ghenaiman, Managing Director and Board Member of Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) yesterday. They discussed KIA's investments in India and ways to increase the mutually beneficial investment relationship, the Indian Embassy said in a statement.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A picture taken yesterday from Al-Hamra Tower shows a view of Kuwait City under heavy fog. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait participates in Int'l meeting on air transport

KUWAIT: Kuwait's participation in the annual meeting of the International Commission for Air Navigation (ICAN) is in line with keenness of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) on boosting relations with foreign countries in the aviation realm, a ranking official said. Abdullah Al-Rajhi, the director of air transports at the DGCA, said in a statement to the press yesterday that the meeting, involving the Kuwaiti authority represented by the DGCA Chairman Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ali Al-Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, is currently proceeding in the Colombian capital, Bogota.

The gathering constitutes an opportunity for the stakeholders to ink agreements for regulating air navigation, he said. It is also an opportunity to update previously inked MoUs regarding operational matters, Rajhi elaborated. The meeting, scheduled on December 5-10, is sponsored by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). It groups representatives of civilian aviation authorities from various countries.

Meanwhile, Kuwaiti aviation body's chief said yesterday that his country does its utmost to pursue the best international practices in the civil aviation industry based on its geographical advantages, and seeks to use the open-skies policy in order to become a regional aviation hub. Director-General of Kuwait's Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) Yousef Al-Fawzan made those remarks during an event thrown by the directorate marking the International Civil Aviation Day, which falls on December 7.

He added that the strategic blueprint for developing Kuwait International Airport is part of the expected air movement growth, noting that Kuwait is interested in overhauling the civil aviation sector as one of the key entities that would contribute to putting Kuwait's 2030 development vision in place. The International Civil Aviation Day is mainly meant



BOGOTA: DGCA Chairman Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ali Al-Sabah and his delegation participating in the annual meeting of the International Commission for Air Navigation (ICAN). — KUNA

to help boost public global awareness of the importance of international civil aviation to countries' social and economic development, he pointed out.

Fawzan added that the celebrations of the International Civil Aviation Day come a couple of years following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which posed a major challenge to global civil aviation. The purpose of International Civil Aviation Day is to help generate and reinforce worldwide awareness of the importance of international civil aviation to the social and economic development of countries, and of the unique role of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) in helping states to cooperate and realize a truly global rapid transit network at the service of all mankind.

As the UN and world nations have now adopted Agenda 2030 and embarked on a new era in global sustainable development, the importance of aviation as an engine of global connectivity has never been more relevant to the Chicago Convention's objectives to look to international flight as a fundamental enabler of global peace and prosperity.

Every five years, coinciding with ICAO anniversaries (2014/2019/2024/2029/etc.), the ICAO Council establishes a special anniversary theme for International Civil Aviation Day. Between these anniversary years, Council representatives select a single theme for the full four-year intervening period. The Council has decided that from now until 2023, the theme will be: "Advancing Innovation for Global Aviation Development". — KUNA



Girls with chance to study under Taliban rule dare to dream

High stakes for Ukraine in Putin-Biden virtual summit

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LUDWIGSBURG, Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany: People stand in a queue as they wait for their COVID 19 vaccination in a vaccination bus, a mobile vaccination center in Hemmingen near Ludwigsburg, southern Germany, yesterday. — AFP

COVID vaccine mandates should be 'last resort'

Regional health bloc noted a number of cases increased across all age groups

COPENHAGEN: The World Health Organization (WHO) in Europe yesterday cautioned against making COVID vaccines mandatory, while urging better protection of children among whom cases are high. Europe is battling a fierce surge in the pandemic, with the WHO registering 120,000 COVID-related deaths on the continent since November 23 when it warned of up to 500,000 more deaths by March 2022.

Regional director Hans Kluge said compulsory vaccines should be "an absolute last resort and only applicable when all other feasible options to improve vaccination uptake have been exhausted". Noting that mandates have increased vaccine

uptake in some cases, Kluge said these were "context specific", and added that the effect mandates may have on "public confidence and public trust" must also be considered.

The regional health bloc also noted that the number of cases had increased "across all age groups, with the highest rates currently observed in the five to 14 years age group." "It is not unusual today to see two to three times higher incidence among young children than in the average population," Kluge told a press conference.

"The health risks extend beyond the children themselves," Kluge added, noting that children risk passing the infection to parents and grandparents

in the home. Improved ventilation and the use of masks should be a standard at all primary schools as part of a safe learning environment, while avoiding school closures and remote learning, the regional director said.

"Vaccinating children should be discussed and considered nationally," Kluge added. The WHO's European region comprises 53 countries and territories, and includes several in Central Asia. The organisation also expressed concern about rising cases of the recently discovered Omicron variant of the virus, but stressed that the fight should still be focused on the currently dominant Delta variant.

"The problem now is Delta and however we succeed against Delta today is a win over Omicron tomorrow, before it eventually surges," Kluge said. Meanwhile in Norway, where 29 cases of the Omicron variant have been confirmed, health authorities warned that the new variant would likely add to the stress on health services to a "significant degree".

"The variant will probably establish itself in Norway and become dominant in a matter of weeks," department director Line Vold at The Norwegian Institute of Public Health said in a statement. The Nordic country's government is expected to announce new measures later. — AFP

Egypt court frees man whose case strained Italy ties

CAIRO: An Egyptian court ordered the release yesterday of researcher Patrick Zaki, whose detention last year sparked international condemnation and further strained ties with Italy where he had been studying, his family said. "I'm jumping for joy!" his mother Hala Sobhi told AFP. "We're now on our way to the police station in Mansoura," Zaki's home city in Egypt's Nile Delta.

Zaki still faces charges of "spreading false news", "harming national security" and "incitement to overthrow the state", among others. His trial has been postponed to February, according to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), an NGO with which he worked. In September, Zaki was referred to trial before an exceptional state security court for an article containing excerpts from his personal diary recounting the discrimination faced by the country's Coptic Christian minority.

Coptic Christians make up about 10-15 percent of the country's population of more than 100 million. Amnesty International previously said Zaki had allegedly been tortured while being interrogated by national security officers, including using electric shocks and beating. In June, his mother told AFP: "When I imagine his confinement, I feel like I'm suf-

focating... We thought he'd be jailed for a few weeks, but it has gone on for over a year."

'First goal achieved'

Zaki's detention in February 2020 drew condemnation, particularly in Italy, where he had been a student at the University of Bologna. Tensions between Cairo and Rome have continued to simmer over the killing of Italian PhD candidate Giulio Regeni in Egypt in 2016. Regeni's dead body was found dumped on the outskirts of Cairo bearing signs of torture, days after he went missing on the fifth anniversary of the January 25 uprising.

In October, the trial of four Egyptian security officers in Rome for the murder of the Cambridge University graduate was thrown out. The judges ruled the officials could not be tried in absentia because prosecutors had been unable to officially inform them of the judicial process against them.

An Italian parliamentary commission report recently blamed his torture and death on Egypt's state security apparatus. Thousands in Italy had signed petitions calling for Zaki's release, and the country's senate in April voted to grant him Italian citizenship, allowing him to receive consular support.

Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi said in a statement yesterday he was pleased "with the release of Patrick Zaki, whose case has been and will be followed with the utmost attention by the Italian government". Shortly after the court's decision, Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio tweeted: "First goal achieved: Patrick Zaki is no longer in prison..."

Vice President Prosper Bazombanza, who visited the scene of the tragedy with several senior ministers, told reporters that 38 people were killed and 69 seriously hurt. The blaze broke out at about 4:00 am (0200 GMT). The interior ministry said on Twitter it was caused by an electrical short-circuit.

"We started shouting that we were going to be burned alive when we saw the flames rising very high, but the police refused to open the doors of our quarters, saying 'these are the orders we have received'," one inmate reached by phone told AFP.

"I don't know how I escaped, but there are prisoners who were burned completely," he said. Those with the most serious burns were taken to hospital, some ferried in police



Patrick Zaki

A dutiful thanks to our diplomatic corps."

Egypt's space for dissent has been severely restricted since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took office in 2014, with an estimated 60,000 political prisoners in jail according to rights groups. Authorities have particularly targeted EIPR in recent years.

Hossam Bahgat, who founded the rights group and was fined by a court last month for an "insulting" tweet, welcomed the news of Zaki's release, writing "Thank God" on social media. Three EIPR staff were jailed last year, sparking an international campaign supported by celebrities including Hollywood star Scarlett Johansson that resulted in their release. Several other researchers have been jailed, including Ahmed Samir, a postgraduate student at the Central European University in Vienna, and Kholoud Amer, head of the translation unit at the Library of Alexandria. —AFP

pick-up trucks, while others with milder cases were treated at the scene, witnesses said.

Teams from the Red Cross in Burundi were at the scene to tend to victims, and the flames had now been brought under control, witnesses said. The nearly 100-year-old facility, the third largest in Burundi, housed a number of political prisoners in a high-security compound, and there was also a women's wing.

In all, there were more than 1,500 inmates at the end of November, according to prison authority figures, far higher than its designed capacity of 400. A large contingent of police and soldiers were surrounding the site and preventing journalists from approaching or taking pictures, the witnesses said. —AFP

Rohingya refugees sue Facebook for \$150bn over hate speech

LOS ANGELES: Rohingya refugees sued Facebook on Monday for \$150 billion over claims the social network is failing to stem hate speech on its platform, exacerbating violence against the vulnerable minority. The complaint, lodged in a California court, says the algorithms that power the US-based company promote disinformation and extremist thought that translates to real-world violence.

"Facebook is like a robot programmed with a singular mission: To grow," the court document states. "The undeniable reality is that Facebook's growth, fueled by hate, division, and misinformation, has left hundreds of thousands of devastated Rohingya lives in its wake."

The mainly Muslim group faces widespread discrimination in Myanmar, where they are despised as interlopers despite having lived in the country for generations. A military-backed campaign that the United Nations said amounted to genocide saw hundreds of thousands of Rohingya driven across the border into Bangladesh in 2017, where they have since lived in sprawling refugee camps.

Many others remain in Myanmar, where they are not permitted citizenship and are subject to communal violence, as well as official discrimination by the ruling military junta. The legal complaint argues that Facebook's algorithms drive susceptible users to join ever-more extreme groups, a situation that is "open to exploitation by autocratic politicians and regimes."

Rights groups have long charged

that Facebook does not do enough to prevent the spread of disinformation and misinformation online. Critics say even when alerted to hate speech on its platform, the company fails to act.

They charge that the social media giant allows falsehoods to proliferate, affecting the lives of minorities and skewing elections in democracies such as the United States, where unfounded charges of fraud circulate and intensify among like-minded friends.

This year, a huge leak by a company insider sparked articles arguing Facebook, whose parent company is now called Meta, knew its sites could harm some of their billions of users—but executives chose growth over safety. Whistleblower Frances Haugen told the US Congress in October that Facebook is "fanning ethnic violence" in some countries.

Under US law, Facebook is largely protected from liability over content posted by its users. The Rohingya lawsuit, anticipating this defense, argues that where applicable, the law of Myanmar—which has no such protections—should prevail in the case. Facebook, which did not immediately respond to questions about the lawsuit, has been under pressure in the United States and Europe to clamp down on false information, particularly over elections and the coronavirus.

The company has forged partnerships with several media companies, including AFP, intended to verify online posts and remove those that are untrue. —AFP

38 perish in huge Burundi prison fire

NAIROBI: A massive fire ripped through an overcrowded prison in Burundi before dawn yesterday, killing dozens of inmates and seriously injuring many more, the country's vice president said. Many inmates were still sleeping at the time of the blaze that destroyed several parts of the facility in Burundi's political capital Gitega, witnesses said.

International

High stakes for Ukraine in Putin-Biden virtual summit

Any Russian military action against Ukraine would be met with harsh economic penalties

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin will face off in a high-stakes video call yesterday, with the US president aiming to convince his Russian counterpart to refrain from attacking Ukraine. Washington and its European allies are uncertain if the tens of thousands of ground forces that Moscow has moved to Ukraine's borders are a genuine invasion threat or a bluff by the Russian leader.

The presidents—who met in person in Geneva this summer—will speak at 1500 GMT (18:00 pm Moscow time). “Our president is ready to convey his concerns to his American colleague, listen to his concerns and give appropriate explanations,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said yesterday.

“Russia has never planned to attack anyone,” he said. “But we have our own ‘red lines’”. Moscow—which annexed Kiev’s Crimea peninsula in 2014 and backs pro-Russia rebels in eastern Ukraine—has described Western accusations of an imminent invasion as “hysteria.”

It has also spent weeks decrying US-led military exercises in the Black Sea and Putin wants a promise from the West that Ukraine will not join NATO. If he decides to attack Ukraine, Putin risks a coordinated Western response that could aim to cripple Russia’s economy.

A senior Biden administration official said Monday that the US and its allies are prepared to punish Moscow with “substantial economic countermeasures” if it launches an attack. On the eve of his virtual meeting, Biden spoke with the leaders of France, Germany, Italy and Britain, with the Western powers expressing their “determination” that Ukraine’s sovereignty be respected.

Tensions ‘off the charts’
The Kremlin said the conversation will take place in a “difficult period” when “the escalation of tensions in Europe is off the charts.” “This requires a personal discussion at the highest level,” Peskov said. In their first direct conversation since July, the two presidents will have to negotiate a history of mutual suspicion.

Both want to put on a show of strength, which could leave little room for compromise during the talk. Biden said Friday he would make it “very, very difficult” for Russia to launch an invasion. A senior official said that any Russian military action against Ukraine would be met with harsh economic penalties and a buildup of US forces in Eastern Europe.

But the official stopped short of threatening direct intervention of American military force. Such talk, the official added, “would be precipitous conflict saber-rattling, and we’d prefer to keep those communications with the Russians private.” Biden will make clear that there “will be genuine and meaningful and enduring costs to choosing to go forward should (Russia) choose to go forward with a military escalation,” the official said.

‘Window of opportunity’
Biden and Putin have a full list of topics to discuss, from mutual talks on reducing strategic and nuclear threats, to the rise in cyberattacks that Washington says Moscow encourages, to persuading Iran to halt its nuclear program. But Russia’s massing of troops to the Ukraine border region—estimated by Kiev at 100,000—has forced the vir-



SOCHI, Russia: Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a meeting with US President Joe Biden via a video call in the Black Sea resort of Sochi yesterday. —AFP

tual summit to focus on that one issue.

Putin has said Russia was “taking adequate military-technical measures,” claiming NATO military infrastructure was moving “close” to Russia’s borders. He said Moscow seeks “legal guarantees” that Ukraine will not become a part of NATO, the transatlantic alliance created to confront the former Soviet Union. US State Department spokesman Ned Price indicated Monday that Washington wants Russia to back down and return to the 2015 Minsk Agreement aimed at halting the fighting inside Ukraine. “We believe there is an opportunity, a window before us to resolve this diplomatically,” Price said.

Zelensky to the front
Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky on Monday visited troops fighting pro-Moscow separatists in the country’s east on Monday. The conflict has claimed over 13,000 lives. “Thank you for protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine,” Zelensky, wearing a military helmet and body armour, told the soldiers according to a statement released by Kiev.

On Monday he spoke with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, writing on Twitter after that he was “grateful” to the US and allies for supporting Ukraine. —AFP

Benin court sentences oppn leader to 10 years

PORTO-NOVO, Benin: A special court in Benin yesterday sentenced one of the country’s opposition figures, Joel Aivo, to 10 years in prison after a treason trial critics dismissed as a politically-motivated sham. Several opposition leaders were detained before or just after an April election that saw President Patrice Talon win a second term with more than 86 percent of the vote.

Another opposition leader, Reckya Madougou, who was detained just before that election, will go on trial on Friday, accused of plotting to prevent the ballot and destabilise the country. Aivo, an academic who had been held for eight months, had pleaded not guilty to the charges of plotting against the state and money laundering. “It is not for criminal justice to arbitrate on political differences,” Aivo told the judge before he was sentenced.

“I have decided to give myself to this country. You are also children of this country. Do as you will with me.” When the verdict was given at around 3 am on Tuesday after a 16-hour trial, a few Aivo supporters were still in the court, wearing T-shirts that read, “Professor Aivo, the people of Benin are with you.” It was “a sham of a trial, to sideline him from politics,” Sosthene Armel Gbetchehou, a former student of the condemned opponent, told AFP.

Slipping away

Once praised for its thriving multi-party democracy, critics say Benin has slipped steadily into authoritarian rule under Talon, a 63-year-old cotton magnate first elected in 2016. Some opposition figures have fled the country while others were disqualified from running in elections, or targeted for investigation.

Aivo was among the opposition figures who had been barred from running in the presidential election. Aivo was arrested on April 15, four days after the elections that saw Talon returned to power. He was tried at a special tribunal, the Economic Crime and Terrorism Court (CRIET), in the West African country’s administrative capital, Porto-Novo.

The CRIET, set up in 2016, has often been accused by critics of being used by Talon’s regime to crack down on the opposition. “Given the overall trends of this court, this (sentence) was expected. But we did have a glimmer of hope in what we saw in the facts and substance of the case,” said Robert Dossou, one of Aivo’s attorneys.

He said they would discuss details of any appeal later. Government officials dismiss charges the CRIET is a political tool and say the country’s justice system is independent. “More proof of the judicial persecutions going on in Benin against the political opposition,” tweeted Julien Bensimhon, a French lawyer to another Benin opposition leader convicted by the court. “CRIET has once more been used to politically kill off anyone who opposes Patrice Talon.” —AFP

Zionist strike targets Iran weapons in Syria

BEIRUT: An Zionist air strike hit a shipment of Iranian weapons in the Syrian port of Latakia yesterday, in the first such attack on the key facility, a war monitor said. The Zionist raid “directly targeted an Iranian weapons shipment in the container yard,” the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Syrian state media reported the strike on the container yard at Latakia port without specifying what was targeted. The Observatory, a UK-based organisation with a wide network of sources on the ground across Syria, said the raid triggered a series of explosions.

It reported “huge material losses” but added there were no immediate reports of casualties. According to the Syrian state news agency SANA, the strike occurred at 1:23 am (2323 GMT Monday).

“Our air defences repelled the Zionist entity’s aggression in Latakia,” it said, adding that a number of containers caught fire in the strike.

Latakia is the northernmost of

Syria’s main ports, and lies around 230 kilometres (140 miles) north of Damascus.

Photos and footage published by SANA showed a fire in the yard but state television said later that fire-fighters had brought the blaze under control.

Jews rarely comments on the air strikes it carries out in Syria but has said repeatedly it will not allow its archfoe Iran to extend its footprint in Syria.

Syria FM in Tehran

Since civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, Zionists has carried out hundreds of air strikes on Syrian territory, targeting government positions as well as allied Iran-backed forces and Hezbollah fighters.

On November 24, Zionist missile strikes in the west of Homs province killed five people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

In two separate Zionist attacks in October, five pro-Iranian militiamen were killed near the Syrian capital Damascus while nine pro-government fighters were killed near the T4 air-base east of Palmyra in central Syria, the Observatory said.

Iran has been a key supporter of the Syrian government in the decade-old conflict. It finances, arms and



LATAKIA, Syria: An image grab from a handout picture released by the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) yesterday shows a forklift moving containers during a fire at the Syrian port of Latakia. A Zionist air strike hit a shipment of Iranian weapons in the Syrian port of Latakia yesterday, in the first such attack on the key facility, a war monitor said. —AFP

commands a number of Syrian and foreign militia groups fighting alongside the regular armed forces, chief among them Lebanon’s powerful Hezbollah group.

Yesterday’s strike came as Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad wrapped up a visit to Tehran, where he met with top officials to discuss deepening ties.

In 2019, Syria announced it was

planning to turn over the container terminal at Latakia port to Iran.

Earlier this year, Iran said it was planning to establish a direct shipping line between Latakia and one of its southern ports.

The war in Syria is estimated to have killed nearly half a million people and displaced millions more since it began with a brutal crackdown on anti-government protests in 2011. —AFP

UN chief taps US diplomat as Libya advisor ahead of vote

UNITED NATIONS, United States: American diplomat Stephanie Williams was appointed Monday as the UN secretary-general’s special advisor on Libya, after the sudden resignation of the current envoy Jan Kubis one month ahead of a critical presidential election.

An Arabic-speaker, Williams served in 2020 as acting director of the UN’s Geneva-based Libya mission, after being its deputy director from 2018-2020. In her new role, she will reside in Tripoli, Libya. Her nomination by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as “special advisor” instead of “envoy” sidesteps the 15 member Security Council, and avoids an embarrassing vacancy before Libya’s presidential election on December 24,

On the web and on the streets, COVID protests get nasty

BERLIN: A call is out on Telegram for people opposing COVID restrictions to share private addresses of German “local MPs, politicians and other personalities” who they believe are “seeking to destroy” them through pandemic curbs.

Those on the list should no longer be allowed to “live a carefree life,” wrote the group called “Coronavirus-Information” in the message that was put online late November. Since then it has been viewed by 25,000 people.

which aims to turn the page on 10 years of war.

“This appointment of Mrs. Williams as a special advisor ensures that we will have the leadership in place during this very critical month of December,” noted UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric. “She will be based in Tripoli and will start in the coming days,” he added, confirming that the secretary general had rejected a proposal by Kubis, who will vacate his post December 10, to continue working through the elections.

Kubis, an ex-Slovakian minister and UN veteran who took up the post of Libya envoy in January, transmitted his resignation to Guterres on November 17 — although it was only disclosed once accepted a week later, and never fully explained by the UN.

According to diplomats, Kubis had been refusing for his post to be transferred from Geneva to Tripoli, as was scheduled to happen in 2022. According to one diplomat, his relationship with Guterres had deteriorated to a point of “breakdown” and “they could no longer work together.” —AFP

On Friday evening, a group of corona-sceptics armed with flaming torches massed outside the house of Petra Koepping, the health minister of Saxony state. The scenes in the stronghold of Germany’s far-right, accompanied by thumping drum beats, were reminiscent of Nazi-era marches, drawing condemnation from mainstream politicians.

Olaf Scholz, who is due to take office on Wednesday as Germany’s new chancellor, urged society “not to be infected” by such “aggressive” behaviour. “When such flaming torch processions take place in front of the house of a health minister, that is meant as a threat — that is not just an expression of opinion, and we as democrats strongly reject that,” he said. Not only in Germany, but also in the Netherlands and Austria, security services have warned of growing radicalisation among coronavirus-sceptics.

And the Telegram list is just one in a multitude of



GENEVA: File photo shows, then deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Political Affairs in Libya Stephanie Williams speaking during a press conference in Geneva following the election of a new interim government for Libya during the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. —AFP

such examples flourishing on social networks in Germany, attracting opponents of coronavirus curbs from mask-wearing to vaccinations.

The incoming German government’s recent call for compulsory vaccinations has fired up another wave of rage. Thomas Strobl, who heads the conference of regional interior ministers, warned that mandatory jabs will only “further harden the attitudes of opponents”. Strobl also accused Internet regulators of falling short in clamping down on such threatening calls online. But Simone Rafael of the anti-racism Amadeu Antonio foundation said that policing the online sphere was easier said than done.

“German politicians are confronted with a dilemma when it comes to networks like Telegram,” said the expert on online radicalisation. The only solution would be to completely shut it down. But in democratic Germany, no one wants that.” —AFPv

International

Indonesia's Mount Semeru volcano rains destruction on village

Many homes destroyed, streets full of debris and trees felled like matchsticks

CURAH KOBOKAN, Indonesia: Three days after Indonesia's Mount Semeru erupted and rained burning mud and ash on it, the village closest to the volcano was shrouded in grey—many of its homes destroyed, streets full of debris and trees felled like matchsticks.

Fewer than 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the crater of Java island's tallest mountain, Curah Kobokan was largely deserted yesterday as emergency crews combed through husks of buildings with tools and rescue dogs, hoping to find survivors—or bodies.

As the hot ash spewed by Semeru on Saturday descended on the village, thatch roofs were ripped off weaker structures. The volcanic debris even tore through corrugated metal. Only a handful of homes appeared to have been spared the worst. "My family house here in Curah Kobokan is destroyed," said sand miner Marzuki Suganda, who lives and works in a nearby village.

"I'm traumatised. I asked my relatives if they were brave enough to go back to Curah Kobokan and they all said no, they'd rather sleep under a tree." Inside the living room of one home, volcanic dust stained everything—including the coffee table and couch next to it.

The family photos on the walls were hidden

behind layers of ash. The shattered remains of the roof filled all the rooms of the house. Through one destroyed door, some clothes and a backpack hung covered with dark grey dust.

Outside in the muddy and ash-covered streets, a search and rescue operation was under way, with crews going house to house while taking care to avoid uneven, dangerous surfaces and unstable structures. A small pickup truck was seen loaded with salvaged household items.

'We have no solution'

The village was home to an estimated 50 families before the eruption, many of whom worked at the sand mines that pepper Semeru's slopes. The volcanic deposits in the area are rich for sand extraction, but they expose the mines and the settlements around them to the constant danger of an eruption.

"It's a dilemma... working in a sand mine guarantees stable income," said miner Siyadi, who goes by one name like many Indonesians. "We have needs. I know the risk is high but what else can we do?" Indonesian President Joko Widodo said during a trip to the affected area that around 2,000 homes may need to be relocated after the eruption, which has killed at least 34 people and displaced thousands.

Only a handful of homes appeared to have been spared the worst



LUMAJANG, East Java, Indonesia: Family members wait for news as rescuers search for victims at the buried homes in Sumber Wuluh village in Lumajang yesterday, following the Mount Semeru eruption that killed at least 34 people. —AFP

But for many who depend on the sand mines in the shadow of Semeru, there are few other options. "If the government shut down sand mines, would they provide for us? Would there be another job?" asked Siyadi. "We have no choice, no solution."

The latest eruption of Semeru was the turning

point for Marzuki Suganda, however. "If I were told to live here again, I wouldn't dare," the 30-year-old said. "I'd think 1,000 times about going back to work as a sand miner. 'This place will become a ghost town. No one wants to come back here... It is very dangerous living here.'" —AFP

Suu Kyi down but Myanmar democracy movement not out

BANGKOK: Myanmar's military hopes jailing Aung San Suu Kyi will be the "closing chapter" for its longtime nemesis and her party, but resistance to junta rule has already moved out from under her shadow, analysts say. Massive protests and a bloody crackdown on dissent followed Suu Kyi's detention in the early hours of the February 1 putsch that ended the Southeast Asian country's democratic interlude.

While the junta has since brought a catalogue of charges against the 76-year-old Nobel laureate, and slapped her with a first sentence on Monday of two years in jail for incitement against the military and breaching coronavirus rules, pro-democracy demonstrators are moving beyond the movement she led decades ago.

Many protesters believe the current struggle must permanently root out military dominance of the country's politics and economy. But for the junta, crushing Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) party she founded is seen as an end to a major source of anti-military resistance. "These are the soft charges which the regime could have spared her, but chose not to," said independent analyst Soe Myint Aung of Monday's ruling, which drew swift international condemnation.

"The military seems to have doubled down on its highly oppressive approach" towards Suu Kyi the NLD, he added. She faces a raft of other

indictments in the closed-door junta court, including multiple charges of corruption—each carrying a possible sentence of 15 years in prison.

The next verdict is expected on December 14 on another charge that she breached coronavirus rules during 2020 elections won by the NLD, according to a source familiar with the case. In recent weeks, junta-appointed judges have sentenced other senior members of the NLD to long periods in jail. A former chief minister was sentenced to 75 years in prison, while a close Suu Kyi aide and NLD speaker received 20 for treason.

"This period seems like the closing chapter, totally sidelining Suu Kyi and rupturing the party for good," independent analyst David Mathieson told AFP.

New force

Suu Kyi remains hugely popular in Myanmar, even if her international image has been tainted by her previous power-sharing deal with the generals and failure to speak up for the persecuted Rohingya minority. After Monday's verdict, residents in Yangon banged pots and pans—a practice traditionally associated with driving out evil spirits but which has been used since February to voice defiance. Flash mob rallies and adoption of the three-finger pro-democracy salute have become prominent symbols since the coup, showing younger activists share more in common with contemporaries in Hong Kong and



NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar: File photo shows, Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing (L) and National League for Democracy (NLD) party leader Aung San Suu Kyi shaking hands after their meeting at the Commander-in-Chief's office in Naypyidaw. —AFP

Thailand than the elderly veterans of their own country's political struggles.

Analysts also say hundreds have trekked to rebel-held areas for combat training or joined "people's defence forces" to fight back against the military—shunning Suu Kyi's core principle of non-violence. A shadow government dominated by ousted lawmakers from Suu Kyi's party has sought to fan the flames, declaring a "people's defensive war" against the junta.

The months of bloodshed have left a shrinking space for the kind of compromise between the NLD and the military that characterised Suu Kyi's government, even as the junta says it wants to hold fresh polls. "Being involved in any future elections will

likely be dangerous... former NLD members will be branded as turncoats and could be targeted by the resistance," Mathieson said.

It is more likely the party will continue to exist as a vehicle working to overturn the putsch, he added, but will be made up of disparate elements working to mobilise civil and armed resistance against the generals. In seeking to remove Suu Kyi and the NLD from the field, the State Administration Council—as the junta calls itself—may have opened up space for a new unknown, he added.

"Perhaps the SAC have created a political force of a different stripe that could prove even more determined than Suu Kyi to end military rule?" Mathieson said. —AFP

Bangladesh minister quits after sexist tirade, rape threat

DHAKA: An influential Bangladeshi politician resigned yesterday after a sexist tirade against the granddaughter of the country's ailing opposition leader and claims he threatened a prominent actress with rape. State minister of information Murad Hassan launched into a diatribe against Khaleda Zia, a former prime minister later jailed by her archrival and current premier Sheikh Hasina, during a talk show appearance broadcast on a pro-government Facebook page last week.

He then turned his attention to Zia's granddaughter, who lives in exile in London, telling his audience that the 26-year-old "can't sleep at night without sleeping with". Footage of the broadcast garnered more than five million views in three days and was widely condemned, with a student group burning his effigy at the elite Dhaka University.

Protests intensified after the online publication of a phone conversation purporting to contain a recording of the minister threatening to drag popular film actress Mahia Mahi into a five-star hotel and rape her. Mahi said the recording was authentic in a video published to her Facebook page.

"I was very embarrassed that day... And today I'm embarrassed again. It has belittled me in front of my countrymen," she said. Hassan announced his resignation in a letter yesterday "citing personal causes", information ministry spokesman Mohammad Gias Uddin told AFP by phone. —AFP

Girls with chance to study under Taliban rule dare to dream

NAWABAD: When the Taliban overran Nawabad village in central Afghanistan, lessons carried on at the local girls' secondary school — in stark contrast to most of the country where older girls have been barred from secondary education.

The school has remained open to teenage pupils because it is run by an NGO, exposing the contradictions emerging across Afghanistan as its new rulers' orders are implemented. "The (Taliban) came and saw the students and classes and they were happy because we all had our hijab," Forozan, one of the young teachers, told AFP, referring to the Islamic head covering.

Since taking control in August, the Taliban have imposed severe restrictions on women and girls, despite pledging a softer rule compared with their first stint in power in the 1990s.

In several provinces, local Taliban authorities have been persuaded to reopen schools — but millions of girls still remain cut off. In Nawabad, the school is run by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), an organisation active in the country for four decades. It is in Ghazni province, which the Taliban have long controlled part of, and where they have largely tolerated girls' schooling.

University dreams

In Langar, another village in the district, the only class for girls and young women at another SCA-run project is continuing. "When the Taliban took Kabul we had no hope that they would let the school continue — but they did," said 18-year-old



NAWABAD, Afghanistan: Picture taken on November 14, 2021 shows female students sitting inside a classroom of grade 12 at a school in Langar village, in the Qarabagh district, some 56 km south-west of Ghazni, in Ghazni province. — AFP

Mahida. Her class is made up of 18-26 year-olds who missed out on education and are now gearing up for end-of-year exams. "We were afraid to go to school. We couldn't get out of our home because of the war," Mahida said.

All of the girls in Langar hope to continue their studies, to become teachers, doctors or engineers. But they don't even know if they will be able to sit university entrance exams.

Even before August, many girls in Ghazni province were deprived of any secondary education at all because of distance, poverty, early marriage and conflict.

Some six kilometres (four miles) away in the remote village of Jangalak, 19-year-old Zahra, an aspiring engineer, attends an SCA-run class for stu-

dents who have gaps in their education.

"The Taliban approved her and others' schooling, though classes on civic pride and patriotism were replaced by religious instruction. "I see the Taliban every day when I come to school," Zahra said. "(They) have no problem with us." But in the same building, other female students who were previously enrolled in state-run classes have been stuck at home since the takeover. Education ministry data for 2016 indicates less than one in five Afghan women can read and write, compared with more than 60 percent of men. Sat at a restaurant in the city of Ghazni, the Taliban's deputy provincial head of culture sought to justify the suspension of schooling. "We have to find money to pay salaries for the teachers," Mansoor Afghan told AFP. —AFP

Sporadic violence in Gambia after opposition election defeat

BANJUL, Gambia: Sporadic clashes broke out near the Gambian capital Banjul late Monday between police and supporters of opposition leader Ousainou Darboe, who contested his defeat in presidential elections at the weekend, AFP reporters saw.

Police used tear gas against several dozen supporters of Darboe, hours after he had appealed for calm and said he would pursue his grievances in court if needed. Red Cross workers helped people who had been affected by the tear gas.

The reason for the police intervention was not immediately clear. Darboe's spokesman, Amadou Scattered Janneh, attacked the action as an "unnecessary provocation". The crowd had gathered outside Darboe's home and had been "largely in a celebratory mood", he said.

"At least 15 people suffered serious injuries and had to be evacuated by urgent medical attention," he added. Scattered incidents were also reported around Banjul. AFP did not receive a reply from authorities for comment. Barrow was returned to office in Saturday's vote after a first five-year term that ended the 22-year dictatorship of Yahya Jammeh. According to official results, the former property developer secured 53 percent of the vote, far ahead of Darboe's 27.7 percent. The turnout was very high, at 87 percent. How the six candidates and their supporters respond to defeat or victory are crucial factors in the immediate future of this young democracy. —AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2021

Saudi Aramco, BlackRock sign \$15.5 billion gas pipeline deal

Major deal expected to help Kingdom diversify its oil-reliant economy

RIYADH: Saudi Aramco said it has signed a \$15.5 billion lease and leaseback agreement for its gas pipeline network with a consortium led by BlackRock Real Assets and Hassana Investment Company in its second major infrastructure deal this year.

The deal signed on Monday underscores how Aramco—the kingdom's cash cow—is seeking to monetize its once-untouchable assets to generate revenue for the Saudi government as it accelerates efforts to diversify the oil-reliant economy.

In June, Aramco sold a 49 percent stake in its oil pipeline business to a consortium led by US-based EIG Global Energy Partners for \$12.4 billion. Under the new deal, a newly-formed subsidiary, Aramco Gas Pipelines Company, will lease usage rights in Aramco's gas pipeline network and lease them back to Aramco for a 20-year period, the Saudi oil firm said in a statement. In return, Aramco Gas Pipelines Company will receive a tariff payable by Aramco for the gas products that flow through the network, backed by minimum commitments on throughput.

Aramco will hold a 51 percent stake in Aramco Gas Pipeline Company and sell a 49 percent stake to investors led by BlackRock and Hassana, a Saudi state-backed investment management firm.

"With gas expected to play a key role in the global transition to a more sustainable energy future, our partners will benefit from a deal tied to a world-class gas infrastructure asset," Aramco president and CEO Amin Nasser said in a statement. "BlackRock is pleased to work with Saudi Aramco

and Hassana on this landmark transaction for Saudi Arabia's infrastructure," BlackRock chairman and CEO Larry Fink said.

"Aramco and Saudi Arabia are taking meaningful, forward-looking steps to transition the Saudi economy toward renewables, clean hydrogen and a net zero future." Aramco, the world's biggest oil producer, has pledged to achieve net zero carbon emissions in its operations by 2050.

Maintaining the 'status quo'

Saudi Arabia, one of the world's biggest polluters as well as the top oil exporter, has also pledged to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2060. "Saudi Arabia is restructuring Aramco by exiting sectors and focusing on and investing in others, such as hydrogen production," Cairo-based independent analyst Mahmoud Negm told AFP.

"The shift is happening in a non-abrupt manner, with Aramco maintaining 51 percent stake and clear agreements that no restrictions can be placed on it." According to Ibrahim Al-Ghitani, from the Abu Dhabi-based Future for Advanced Research and Studies, the kingdom is restructuring to generate liquidity and attract foreign investments.

"Saudi Arabia is not completely abandoning these assets... but continues to maintain the status quo of control," Ghitani said. "It is trying to change the local economy's image... with messages and signs that it continues to open the economy for the private sector and foreign investors."

Long seen as the kingdom's "crown jewel",



JUBAIL, Saudi Arabia: Saudi Aramco's Fadhili Gas Plant Project, located 30 km west of the city of Jubail in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. —AFP

Aramco and its assets were once under tight government control and considered off-limits to outside investment. But with the rise of de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is pushing to implement his "Vision 2030" reform

program, the kingdom has shown readiness to cede some control. Aramco sold a sliver of its shares on the Saudi bourse in December 2019, generating \$29.4 billion in the world's biggest initial public offering. —AFP

Afghan currency slides on bank collapse fears

KABUL: Afghanistan's currency hit 100 to the US dollar yesterday, losing five percent of its value in one day in a panic triggered by fears that one of the country's biggest banks could collapse, traders said. Afghanistan has been hit by an enormous shortage of dollars since the Taliban marched into Kabul and seized power on August 15, as international donors suspended billions in aid provided annually to the previous regime.

Since the Taliban takeover, the US has frozen around \$10 billion in reserves that Afghanistan's central bank had parked in the US Federal Reserve.

The crisis looked set to deepen overnight and this morning when news circulated that Maiwand Bank — among the country's five biggest lenders — had collapsed. "That was false," said Haji Sher Shah Ahmadzai, who heads the dispute resolution committee at Kabul's Money



KABUL: Afghan money changers in Sarayee Shahzada market in Kabul. — AFP

Exchange Commission.

But "trust has been eroded," he said, as Maiwand has in recent weeks failed to return funds owed to the commission, which has some eight million dollars deposited in the bank, Ahmadzai said. One financially insolvent trader among the hundreds at Kabul's open air exchange held his

head in his hands, repeatedly crying out: "I have drowned!"

The Afghani stood at 104.5 to the greenback in late Tuesday trade, compared to around 80 in early August. One trader said that the market is being hit by fears of a much wider collapse of the country's financial system.

"There are rumors about the collapse of all Afghanistan's banks," said Bilal Khan as he counted batches of Afghanis. "There is no money in the banks. The banks are refusing to pay your own money to you."

Khan also cited a dawning realization in the market that the Taliban will not be recognized by the international community any time soon.

Traders had initially expected that "the new government would be recognized," he said. But consequent disappointment "is causing heavy devaluation of the Afghani against the dollar, Pakistani rupee and the Euro".

The Taliban last week announced a ban on using foreign currencies in Afghanistan. But the rules are not being enforced, according to traders.

The country's cash crunch has fed into an economic collapse that has left it facing a deepening humanitarian crisis. More than half of Afghanistan's 38 million people face "acute" food shortages, according to the United Nations, with the impending winter forcing millions to choose between migration and starvation. The new government is pressing for the US to release the frozen central bank reserves. — AFP



NEW YORK: Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Global stock markets rallied yesterday on fading fears over dangers arising from the new Omicron COVID variant. — AFP

World stocks fizz as Omicron fears fizzle

NEW YORK: Global stock markets rallied yesterday on fading fears over dangers arising from the new Omicron COVID variant. London stocks won 1.2 percent in late morning deals, while Frankfurt and Paris fizzed more than two percent higher at midday in the eurozone.

The dollar trod higher, while oil extended gains on dimming energy demand concerns. Asian equities climbed despite renewed worries over potential debt defaults in China's troubled property sector.

'Less damaging than feared'

"Markets flushed out at the first sign of Omicron, but now are more confident it won't be as bad as first feared," said Markets.com analyst Neil Wilson. "Risk appetite is improving as evidence incrementally supports the case that the Omicron variant will be less damaging to the economy than was supposed at the end of November."

World stocks and oil had tanked on November 26 when news of the new variant first flashed across traders' screens. After a rollercoaster ride since then, investors are now optimistic over the outlook in the run-up to Christmas. "European markets are continuing their upward trajectory, with traders feeling increasingly confidence that the Omicron variant will not ruin Christmas," added IG analyst Joshua Mahony.

Omicron has been detected across the globe but no deaths have yet been reported. Authorities worldwide are racing to determine how contagious it is and how effective existing vaccines are. Top US pandemic adviser Anthony Fauci said over the weekend that, while more information was needed, preliminary data on the variant's severity was "a bit encouraging".

Sentiment was also buoyed yesterday by moves from China's central bank to limit the economic fallout from debt crises in its troubled property sector. Hong Kong stocks jumped 2.7 percent and Tokyo won 1.9 percent, but Shanghai was only marginally higher. Reports meanwhile surfaced yesterday that Evergrande was planning what could become China's biggest debt restructuring, wrapping in all its offshore obligations as it faced default on a key payment. — AFP

S Africa economy shrinks after riots, COVID measures

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's economy shrank for the first time in a year in the third quarter as the country was hit by riots and tighter COVID restrictions, official statistics showed yesterday.

After four consecutive quarters of growth, the economy of Africa's most industrialized country contracted by 1.5 percent between July and September compared to the previous three-month period, the Stats SA agency said. The contraction eroded "some of the economic gains the country has made since the severe impact of COVID-19 in the second quarter of 2020," Stats SA said in a statement.

The economy underperformed "under the twin pressures of tighter COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and a spate of civil disorder in July, as well as several other headwinds", the agency said. A spree of arson and looting rocked parts of South Africa in July following the jailing of ex-president Jacob Zuma for contempt after he refused to appear before graft investigators.

The unrest in the two most populous provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal killed more than 300 people and caused damage worth more than \$1.7 billion (1.5 billion euros). The country worst-hit by COVID in Africa also tightened coronavirus restrictions in July to tackle a third wave of infections.

South Africa is also entering a fourth wave of infections fuelled by a highly-mutated virus variant known as Omicron. Dozens of countries have blacklisted South Africa, the first country to officially announce the detection of the variant, dealing

another blow to its struggling tourist industry ahead of the summer high season.

GDP in the third quarter of 2021 was on par with the first quarter of 2016, it added. Six of South Africa's 10 main industries recorded a decline in production during third quarter. Trade, catering and accommodation industries fell by 5.5 percent.

Manufacturing shrank by 4.2 percent, while agricultural activity plunged by 13.6 percent, its biggest drop in five years. Household expenditure also decreased by 2.4 percent, with less spending reported on both durable and non-durable goods. "The looting and closure of retailers in KwaZulu-Natal during the civil disorder resulted in food shortages. Many consumers struggled to buy basic supplies," said the data collector. South Africa was in recession when the pandemic hit. A hard lockdown imposed in March last year brought many industries to a standstill, and rolling restrictions have continued to stifle business. —AFP



A queue of cars is seen at the Maseru Bridge border post between Lesotho and South Africa. — AFP

NGO awards triple-A climate rating to 14 firms

PARIS: Only 14 companies are making top-grade efforts on the climate, the organization that scores environmental efforts by companies for investors said yesterday. The NGO Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) said only 14 out of nearly 12,000 firms that it scores received A marks in all the three areas of climate change, forests and water security in 2021.

Among those were consumer goods firm Unilever, food group Danone, cosmetics maker L'Oreal and tobacco giant Philip Morris International. A total of 272 companies out of nearly 12,000 firms with \$12 trillion in market capitalization—or just 2 percent—received at least one A rating.

The CDP ranks firms after sending them a questionnaire, and the results are used by asset managers seeking to make their portfolios more green. A majority of the ranked firms received scores between C and D-, which means they are only beginning to recognize their environmental impact. "It is also concerning that 16,870 companies worth \$21 trillion in market cap—including Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Glencore and Berkshire Hathaway—failed to respond to the request for information from their investors and clients, or provide sufficient information in their response," said CDP. — AFP

Business

Stalling growth creates headache for next German government

Shortages hit French and German industrial output

FRANKFURT: Global supply chain bottlenecks forced the German government to downgrade its 2021 growth forecast yesterday as it prepares to hand over the reins of a spluttering economy to the country's next coalition.

Supply chain disruptions and shortages of raw materials, including plastics, metals and paper, have choked off the recovery from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe's top economy. As a result, the government yesterday lowered its forecast for economic growth to 2.6 percent this year from 3.5 percent previously. "Bottlenecks and high energy prices are both equally slowing the progress of the economy in Europe and worldwide," German Economy Minister Peter Altmaier said in a press conference.

The economic recovery is expected to be pushed into next year, with the government forecasting growth of 4.1 percent, up from its previous estimate of 3.6 percent. In 2023, growth would then fall back to 1.6 percent. A scarcity of components has had a particularly hard impact on the country's manufacturing-driven economy, with production lines grinding to a halt in Germany's important automotive sector.

Rapid growth in 2022 would depend on "how quickly chipmakers can increase production of semiconductors", Altmaier said, noting that demand for the components would continue to be strong. Though the minister said he did not expect there to be another coronavirus lockdown over the coming winter months in Germany, but that rising case rates could still have "negative economic consequences". The German economy would reach its pre-crisis level at the "end of the first quarter" in 2022, "one quarter later than originally thought", Altmaier said.

Difficult climate

The new forecast comes against the backdrop of

a raft of tough news for the German economy. The German Ifo institute's closely watched business climate indicator fell for the fourth consecutive month in October, according to figures published earlier this week. "Supply problems are giving businesses headaches," Ifo president Clemens Fuest said in a statement, describing the bottlenecks as "sand in the wheels of the German economy".

As supplies have dried up, costs have risen, with the prices faced by industry rising by 14.2 percent year on year in September, a rate not seen since the 1970s. Meanwhile, other indicators are turning downwards: German exports fell in August for the first time since April 2020, near the start of the pandemic.

Coalition mission

The question of how to get the economy rolling again will be at the top of the agenda as the parties seeking to form the next German government pick up talks yesterday. In their initial agreement, the Social Democrats, Greens and Free Democrats (FDP) pledged massive investments and less red tape to prepare Germany for a greener and more digital future.

The September drop confounded some analysts who had been expecting a gain and on an annual basis output is now down 1.0 percent from last year, having been higher in previous months. Industrial production was also 9.5 percent below the pre-pandemic February 2020 level, in seasonally and calendar-adjusted terms.

"The main problem is well known: it's persistent supply chain disruptions," said LBBW economist Elmar Voelker. Germany's auto industry has been particularly hard hit due to a shortage of semiconductors, with production way below pre-pandemic levels.

Meanwhile, other indicators are turning downwards: German exports fell in August for the first



FRANKFURT: Germany's industrial output slumped by four percent in August while new orders fell 7.7 percent.

time since April 2020, near the start of the pandemic. Industrial output slumped by four percent in August, too, while new orders fell 7.7 percent.

Meanwhile in France, industrial output recorded its first fall in several months in September, dropping by 1.3 percent from August, according to the French statistics agency INSEE. Automobile manufacturing suffered a 14.6 percent monthly drop. If third quarter output was up 2.8 percent from last year, French industrial production remains 5.2 percent below its pre-pandemic level, said Insee.

Separately, aircraft manufacturer Airbus said

that it delivered 36 planes in October, down from 40 in September, as it reported that some of its suppliers are having trouble increasing parts production after more than a year of working at a slower pace. Such supply difficulties as economies reopen plus new COVID lockdowns elsewhere and transport delays have hindered many businesses and helped fuel a surge in inflation along with worries about the future of the global economic recovery. In Spain, industrial output edged 0.3 percent higher after three months of drops, the INE statistics agency said. —AFP

Evergrande misses debt repayment, looks to restructure

BEIJING: Debt-laden Chinese property developer Evergrande has for the first time missed a deadline to repay some of its overseas creditors, a report said yesterday, raising the prospect of it defaulting as it prepares for a government-backed mega-restructure. As a 30-day grace period on \$82.5 million in overdue coupon payments ended yesterday, Bloomberg News reported some bondholders had yet to receive payment, citing sources.

The coupons were initially due on November 6 with a one-month grace period with Evergrande's initial default exacerbating already swirling concerns over its future and the wider Chinese property market.

The Chinese government sparked a crisis within the property sector when it launched a drive last year to curb excessive debt among Evergrande and other real estate firms. Companies that had accrued huge debt to expand suddenly found the taps turned off and began struggling to complete projects, pay contractors and meet repayments.

Evergrande, with a debt pile of over \$300 billion, is the most prominent firm to have buckled under the crackdown, but others have also suffered. The real estate industry is a top growth driver for the world's second-biggest economy and the debt crisis has raised fears of a spillover into other key sectors.

Evergrande has yet to comment on the bond repayments. As it scrambles to contain the fallout, the Chinese government is poised to take a leading role in the restructure, analysts told AFP.

After Evergrande said on Friday it may not be able to meet its financial obligations, the government summoned the company's founder and announced several moves that have given the clearest picture yet of Beijing's plans to end the crisis. "Evergrande's disclosures and the ensuing government statements were well coordinated, pointing to formal beginning of Evergrande's debt restructuring," Nomura's chief China economist Lu Ting said in a note.

He added the regulators' comments suggest "global investors should take responsibility for their own decisions to invest in Evergrande's dollar bonds and the Chinese government will not provide a hard guarantee to indebted companies like Evergrande." Evergrande announced Monday a new seven-



strong "risk management committee" that would involve only two executives from the company, with others including officials from state entities.

'Potential takeover'

Guangdong's provincial government is also sending a working team to the company, which analysts at Jefferies said indicated a "potential takeover of Evergrande". The working group is a clear sign of increased government control in the future of Evergrande, agreed Chen Long, partner at research firm Plenum.

"(Founder) Hui Ka Yan actually will not be making the final decisions," he told AFP.

"From an operational perspective... that working group will be in charge and will be making the most important decisions." Bloomberg News reported that Evergrande was planning to include all its off-shore public bonds and private debt obligations in a restructuring, citing people familiar with the matter.

The restructuring—which has yet to start—could cover public bonds sold by Evergrande and unit Scenery Journey, as well as \$260 million of notes issued by joint venture Jumbo Fortune Enterprises, Bloomberg said. There have been signs the government is starting to ease property curbs.

The central bank said Monday it would cut the reserve requirement ratio by 0.5 percentage points for most banks effective December 15, reducing the amount of cash they must hold in reserve and injecting 1.2 trillion yuan (\$188 billion) into the economy. Top leaders also agreed to "promote the construction of affordable housing, support the commercial housing market and better meet the reasonable housing needs of buyers", state news agency Xinhua said. —AFP

Libya collapsed into years of violence after the 2011 fall and killing of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed revolt. A string of state institutions including the central bank split in two during the escalation in 2014 that divided the country, broadly speaking, into eastern and western camps.

The existence of two central banks has complicated the handling of Libya's vital oil revenues and control over monetary policy, contributing to runaway inflation and a liquidity crisis despite its vast crude reserves. But a ceasefire in mid-2020 allowed for reunification efforts to begin, and even before the truce was formalized, Deloitte International was charged with auditing the institutions.

United Nations envoy Jan Kubic delivered the completed audit report to interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah in July this year. The division has caused major financial losses and a spike in public debt to more than \$100 billion, according to the bank. The reunification deal comes before Libya is set to hold elections on December 24 aimed at moving past the decade of violence. —AFP

Huawei launches Watch GT 3 Moon Phase Collection II in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Huawei announced the launch of the Huawei Watch GT 3 Moon Phase Collection II, the health and fitness watch with the longest battery life in Kuwait. It comes with an all-new Moon Phase Collection II, an elegant design, up to 14-day battery life, all-day health management, disciplined and scientific workouts, and a host of convenient life assistant features that will make your life a whole lot easier. The Huawei Watch GT 3 Moon Phase Collection II is compatible with Huawei devices as well as other Android and iOS devices.

The Huawei Watch GT 3 will be up for grabs in Kuwait on 16th December 2021 with pre-orders starting on 9th December 2021 at price starting from KD 74.900 with free gifts worth KD 34.800.

Moon Phase Collection II

The Huawei Watch GT 3 comes with the new Moon Phase Collection II, a feature that was exclusively found in classic luxury watches. This function brings you unique watch faces from which you can observe the different phases of the moon as it changes. This includes all 8 moon phases. Displaying the phase of the moon on the watch face was something reserved mainly for the high-end watches.

There are some notable improvements in the design of the watch. The Huawei Watch GT 3 brings a more fashionable appearance and comprehensive hardware upgrades in an ultra-clear 1.43-inch screen, premium materials and different colors and styles of watch straps. The watch now supports an always-on dial clock display. The minimalist lugs, large lenses, and lightweight design give the 46mm model a modern look. Without a strap, the Huawei Watch GT 3 46mm weighs just 42.6g with an overall thickness of 11mm. The 42mm model is lighter at 35g with an overall thickness of 10.2mm. The design overhaul extends to the watch interface, as well. The Huawei Watch GT 3 has a rotating crown with tactile feedback. It is easy to navigate the watch menu using the new chessboard design of the launcher. The watch comes in colorful styles and can be customized with a variety of straps.

Extended battery life

The battery life of Huawei Watch GT 3 46mm is 14 days, and that of the smaller 42mm is 7 days. Having a long battery life makes it possible for you to wear it all day and use it even during sleep.

All-day health management

The watch has upgraded hardware and software capabilities that enhance its health management features, making it an all-day health management device. The watch can accurately and continuously monitor SpO2, heart rate, sleep, and stress levels in real-time. You will also receive personalized reminders for daily water intake, daily mindfulness, sleep time, and exercise volume.

Disciplined and scientific training

The watch features the new and upgraded Huawei TruSeen 5.0+ heart rate monitoring technology, which can measure the heart rate with a precision of 5bpm. It lowers power consumption and offers a higher signal-to-noise ratio. The technology combines special ergonomic design and optimized motion interference noise reduction algorithm to effectively avoid interference in run-



ning, walking, cycling and other sports.

The dual-frequency GPS enables precise tracking of your running and walking sessions. Furthermore, you can synchronize training plans, and the watch will provide training guidance in different stages. During the training, the watch provides real-time voice reminders of the training goals and training status. This improves your training efficiency. To check how well you are doing, you can use the HUAWEI Health App to view the workout data. It will show you the historical running plans and other fitness-related metrics. You can use the app to view your training results. Also, you get updated training plans every week, depending on your past performance. Huawei Watch GT 3 offers an upgraded workout monitoring feature, providing over 100 workout modes. These include 18 professional workout modes, 12 outdoor workouts and 7 indoor workouts. So, there is something for everyone.

Convenient life assistant features

It supports Bluetooth calls. Furthermore, you can receive, read, and reply to SMS messages right from your wrist, thanks to the convenient message notifications. You can also control music playback using the watch. The Huawei Watch GT 3 has enhanced life assistant features, as well. It supports remote shutter, reminders, weather, alarm clock, stopwatch, timer, find my phone, voice assistant, etc.



Libya's central banks to reunite after 7-year split

TRIPOLI: Libya's rival central banks said on Monday they had reached a reunification deal, seven years after they divided as conflict tore the country apart. The original bank, which manages the North African state's vast oil revenues, had been severed in 2014 when a complex civil war gave rise to rival administrations in the east and west.

But on Monday, the governor of the internationally recognized body in the western capital Tripoli, Seddik Al-Kabir and his eastern-based counterpart Ali Al-Hebri "agreed a detailed plan to launch the unification process", the Tripoli body said in a statement. The meeting was attended by consultants from Deloitte, which in July completed an audit of the two branches.

China has a key role to play in global economy: Georgieva

IMF sees China's economic growth 'slowing notably'

WASHINGTON/BEIJING: China has an important part to play in the global economy as it recovers from COVID-19, but its growth is slowing, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said Monday.

The head of the Washington-based crisis lender held a virtual meeting with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and discussed topics ranging from inflation to the recovery from the pandemic, according to a statement released by the IMF. "China achieved a truly remarkable recovery, but its growth momentum has been slowing notably. As China is a vital engine for global growth, taking strong actions to support high-quality growth will help not only China, but the world," Georgieva said.

In October, the IMF lowered its forecasts for China's growth due to an accelerating pullback in public spending, predicting an eight percent expansion this year and 5.6 percent growth in 2022. While the 2021 figure is Beijing's strongest rate of growth since 2011, analysts warn China is facing a painful fallout from real estate weakness and shocks from surging coal prices and shortages.

Georgieva added that Beijing had made "important contributions" to expanding vaccine access so the world can achieve the IMF's goal of inoculating 40 percent of the population of each country against Covid-19 by the end of this year and 70 percent by the middle of next. With China embroiled in an ongoing spat with the United States, Georgieva said countries need "to cooperate to reduce trade tensions and strengthen the multilateral trading system, which is a key engine for growth and jobs."

The IMF is pushing the G20 group of the world's richest countries, including China, to extend and

improve their debt relief initiative, warning last week that many countries face a dire crisis without the help. The group's Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) expires at the end of the year, and Georgieva said she "welcome continued engagement with China on" the G20's Common Framework that continues some of the relief.

China's export growth

Export growth in China lost some steam in November as holiday demand from abroad faded, official data showed yesterday, but demand for overseas fuel pushed up imports to spike above expectations.

Strong exports have helped to boost growth in the world's second-largest economy since mid-2020, with China containing domestic outbreaks through tough lockdowns and mass testing after the coronavirus was first detected in the central city of Wuhan. Despite recent power outages caused by emissions-reduction targets, the surging price of coal, and supply shortages, factories kept the goods flowing and the power crisis has been winding down. But experts have warned that the export boom is likely to fade as the world gradually returns to normalcy. In November, exports rose 22 percent on-year, better than analysts expected but below the 27.1 percent growth clocked in October, according to the latest customs data.

A recent report by ING said Chinese exports likely slowed "given that most orders for western holiday demand have been fulfilled". Imports, however, rose an unexpected 31.7 percent-well above the 21.5 percent increase tipped by a Bloomberg consensus poll.



Aerial photo taken on December 6, 2021 shows large lifting equipment hoisting containers onto a train at the railway Logistics base in Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China.

"The surprisingly high number comes from contributions of coal, natural gas and crude oil imports... it's basically to meet the domestic demand for energy," said Zhaopeng Xing, senior China strategist at ANZ Research. Given that China still has limited energy capacity and will need time to build it up, energy-related imports will continue in the coming months, Xing told AFP.

With most other countries opting for a strategy of living with COVID-19 and reopening economies, demand for protective gear and work-from-home products could shift to services, Nomura chief China economist Lu Ting earlier said. Yesterday, official data showed that China's total trade surplus was \$71.7 billion in November, down from \$84.5 billion the month before. —AFP



Mazda is now close to Al-Jahra residents

KUWAIT: Kuwait Automotive Imports Company, Kaico Al Shaya & Al Sagar, the exclusive distributor of Mazda cars in Kuwait, is delighted to be the first automobile company to exhibit its cars in the newly opened Zone showroom in Al-Jahra. The concept of displaying Mazda cars in the Zone showroom was to make the distance shorter between Mazda cars and the Residents of Al-Jahra. Visit the Zone showroom today to discover the latest offers and enjoy test drive of the Mazda cars.

Mazda is the only 100 percent Japanese car that offers some of the best driving dynamics of mainstream vehicles, as it uses SKYACTIV technology.



The entire car, from the body to the engine, to the transmission and chassis, is designed for optimal efficiency and handling. Mazda's SKYACTIV-Drive 6-speed automatic transmission ensures precision, responsiveness, and efficiency, while its smart engine pushes the limits of internal combustion to generate better gas mileage. In addition to Smart City Brake Support and Adaptive Front Lighting, all Mazda vehicles had been rated Top Safety Pick Plus by the IIHS. With the available i-ACTIVSENSE technology, using millimeter-wave radars and cameras to keep you in tune with your surroundings, makes Mazda cars safer.

In addition to all these advantages, every car in our product range appeals to the senses with high-quality craftsmanship, high-tech innovation and outstanding design. Driving a car should be fun, which is why Mazda aims to make driving better.

Ashish Tandon, General Manager of KAICO (Kuwait Automotive Imports Co WLL - Al Shaya & Al Sagar) stated, "We at KAICO are thrilled to be the first automotive dealer in Kuwait to showcase the Mazda vehicles in the Zone showroom in Slayil Al-Jahra".

Waleed Alqahtani, Mazda Brand Manager stated, "The ability to serve our customers at Al-Jahra has brought us great happiness, and we are very happy to be able to do this in cooperation with friends from Zone. Our new pop-up showroom gives customers the opportunity not only to view our latest models, but also to test drive them". Issa Abdallah, Marketing Manager of KAICO stated, "Mazda is 100 percent Japanese, in addition to luxury and practicality, it also has high value and quality. We have provided 3 of the most successful models in Al-Jahra, which are also available for test drives".

LuLu Hypermarket launches mega US food promotion

KUWAIT: LuLu Hypermarket, the market-leader in hypermarket retailing in the region, showcased the best of American foods with the mega-promotion titled 'Discover America with a Fork & Road 2021' that opened on 6 December at all outlets of the hypermarket in Kuwait.

The week-long promotion was inaugurated at the Al-Qurain branch of LuLu Hypermarket by Patrick L. Chow, Counselor for Economic Affairs, US Embassy to Kuwait, in the presence of LuLu Hypermarket management in Kuwait and a gathering of shoppers and patrons of the hypermarket. A spectacular cultural program that highlighted traditional and modern aspects of American culture and art, also accompanied the striking opening ceremony.

The inaugural event and the cultural activities that followed, as well as the subsequent seven-day long promotion are being held in full adherence to prevailing health and safety protocols. The promotion presents shoppers with the unique opportunity to avail of food products from popular well-known US brands, as well as discover products and food lines of other American brands. Special food counters and sampling stations that allow shoppers to taste, and buy, freshly prepared well-known US delicacies, are also an enticing addition to the promotion.

The 'Discover America with a Fork & Road 2021', which celebrates the best of American foods available in Kuwait, also highlights the history, tradition and culture of this vast country through several large cutout replicas and images of historical, cultural and tourism-related sites in the United States that are prominently displayed across the hypermarket's outlets.

Visitors and shoppers to the US food festival can also avail the occasion to click selfies of themselves or their loved ones against backdrop images of iconic sites and monuments in the United States.

Special offers on all US-branded products are a



KUWAIT: Patrick L. Chow inaugurates the week-long promotion at the Al-Qurain branch of LuLu Hypermarket in the presence of LuLu Hypermarket management in Kuwait.

major draw of the promotion, with special prices on popular branded products such as: Alexia, Bolthouse, Bragg, Duncan Hines, General Mills, Gerber, Heinz Imp, Herrs, Jif, Kellogg's Imp, Kraft Imp, Nestle Imp, Pillsbury, Post, Quaker Imp, Ragu, Sargento, Shullsburg, and Walden Farms, to name a few.

The 'Discover America with a Fork & Road

2021' promotion, is a continuation of LuLu Hypermarket's endeavor to bring the best the world has to offer in food products and other goods to shoppers in Kuwait, at some of the most competitive prices. It is no wonder then that the hypermarket continues to live up to its slogan of 'Where the world comes to shop'.

Mohammed Dashti wins ABK's Alfouz prize of KD 10,000

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) announced Mohammed Mahmoud Dashti as the winner of KD 10,000 in the Alfouz weekly draw. The draw was held under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and

announced live on Q8 Pulse Station FM88.8 on Monday 6th December, 2021.

The Alfouz draw account offers ABK customers the chance to win life-changing rewards. With Alfouz, ABK customers will get a chance to win KD10,000 in Kuwait's highest single weekly draw and the ultimate grand prize of KD5,000 monthly additional income for 10 years. Both new and existing ABK customers can benefit from this opportunity, with a minimum account balance of KD 100 only.

The next draw winner announcement will be on 13 December, 2021.

Ooredoo Kuwait wins two awards at MENA Effie Awards 2021

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, won the silver award in the "New Product and Service Introduction" category, and the bronze award in the "Omni-Channel Shopper Solution" category, for the successful advertising campaign "Inconsistent Internet Connection, unstable Mood". Ooredoo Kuwait was awarded during the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Effie Awards 2021.

Winning bronze in the "Omni-channel shopper solution" mirrors Ooredoo Kuwait's efforts in connecting the dots in their engagement strategies to ensure simple, seamless, effective experiences across shoppers' path to purchase. While winning silver in the New Product and Service Introduction" highlights Ooredoo's leading position in the telecom sector in introducing new innovative products and services. Winning these awards is a reflection of the company's efforts and commitment to develop more sophisticated products and services that give the customers a great value, along with granting them an efficient integrated purchasing journey; either through shopping from stores, online, mobile phone applications, delivery or social media applications. Ooredoo Kuwait's vision of enriching the added value of its packages and services to suit all changing needs of its customers, Ooredoo is constantly seeking to upgrade its clients through its distinctive offers and plans.

Launched by Ooredoo, the campaign highlights the power of high internet speeds of optical fibers, which offer customers stable and fast internet connection. Further, it advertises FASTelco's products and services, and characterized an out-of-the-box and creative style that reflects our team's creative goals and values, which led to the campaign's success and made it one of the best advertising campaigns for the year 2021.

The awards were received by Mijbil Al-Ayoub, Senior Director, Corporate Communications at Ooredoo Kuwait, where he expressed his pride in this recognition and said: "We are beyond happy of winning these prestigious awards which is only an embodiment of Ooredoo's commitment to continue innovating, inspiring and achieving excellence through the products and services offered to our customers along with the constant creative marketing campaigns."

Effie Worldwide stands for effectiveness in marketing, spotlighting ideas that work and encouraging thoughtful dialogue about the drivers of marketing effectiveness. The awards now honor all forms of effective marketing and the companies and individuals creating effective work across the globe. The Effie Awards are the only awards to truly celebrate marketing excellence by looking at all facets of a marketing campaign from the objective to the execution right down to the impact.



Mijbil Al-Ayoub

Lifestyle | Feature

STARS SHINE ON THE RED SEA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL RED CARPET



A handout picture released by the Red Sea Film Festival shows Saudi movie maker Haifa Al-Mansour holding an honorary award during the opening of the first edition of the Red Sea Film Festival in the Saudi city of Jeddah.



A handout picture released by the Red Sea Film Festival shows Egyptian actresses Elham Shahin and Laila Eloui and Tunisian actress Henda Sabry on the red carpet.



Egyptian actress Nelly Karim. —AFP photos

Cinematic masterpieces and their creators flocked to Jeddah for the long-awaited Red Sea International Film Festival. After nearly two years on hold, the star-studded event finally rolled out the red carpet in the Kingdom's beating cultural heart: Jeddah's historic downtown area known as Al-Balad. With homes dating back at least three centuries in the backdrop, the scene was shining with international, Arab, and Saudi film stars, filmmakers, directors, and producers; a beautiful mix of the old and new as history was being made.

The event, set to run until December 15, will feature world premieres of selected films made by the Kingdom's up-and-coming talent, with 138 films from over 60 countries in total. The historical event, dubbed "a landmark moment," by RSIFF Chairman Mohammed Al-Turki, will "serve (as) a launchpad for young Saudi and Arab talent and support the development of our flourishing industry."

Less than 24 hours ago, residents of the city watched the closing ceremony of the first Saudi Arabian Formula One Grand Prix, another historic moment for the Kingdom and the city of Jeddah as it bore witness to one of the biggest sports events in the world. The celebrations continue at RSIFF as it aims to bring the global film industry "to network, share knowledge and forge partnerships" and will gather local film lovers, filmmakers, and international industry leaders at one event.

The red carpet witnessed some of the Kingdom's most prominent names in film and television. Speaking to Arab News, Saudi actress Sumaya Rida, who starred in the Saudi film "Rupture," said how much of an honor it was to represent the Kingdom in the film industry, with "Rupture" the only Saudi feature com-



French actress Catherine Deneuve receiving a career achievement award during the opening of the first edition of the festival in Saudi city of Jeddah.



Chairman Mohammed Al-Turki welcoming US actress Hillary Swank upon her arrival.



US actor Anthony Mackie posing on the red carpet.

peting on an international scale as part of the festival.

"I had the opportunity to be part of two films for the festival. 'Rupture' is directed by Hamzah Jamjoom and produced by Aymen Khoja. I starred with the American actor Billy Zane. I also had the pleasure to co-star in the short film 'Junoon,' a horror short appealing to the new wave of Saudi cinema. There are many other great Saudi films and I am honestly very excited to watch these works," said Rida.

One of the most significant cinematic figures in the Kingdom, Haifaa Al-Mansour, an internationally acclaimed filmmaker, will be honored at the RSIFF and told Arab News that the support filmmakers have received in the past few years had produced great talents with fresh ideas, especially female members of the film industry, who have received unprecedented support. "This is a beautiful beginning and I'm proud to be at such an event in Saudi Arabia celebrating cinema and

celebrating women in cinema. As a Saudi director, this is a big deal and I'm proud to see a film directed and produced by Saudi female directors. This is a major leap for women in the Kingdom," she told Arab News.

"I'm so happy to be here in Jeddah. I'm so proud to see all of this happening and I'm so happy to see a festival at this scale in the Arab world, and (am) hoping for many more festivals," Lebanese fashion entrepreneur and digital influencer Karen Wazen told Arab News. The festival's movies are divided into 11 sections: Competition, Short Film Competition, International Spectacular, Arab Spectacular, Festival Favorites, New Saudi/ New Cinema (Feature), New Saudi/ New Cinema (Shorts), Treasures, Next Generation, Immersive and Episodic.

"It's a great honor because this is the first movie festival here and it's a symbol, it's a sign of developing, and I really love this because cinema and all kinds of art open the mind. It's beautiful," Italian actor Michele Morrone told Arab News.

The Saudi films that will screen include: "Junoon" by directors Maan B and Yaser B Khalid, "Route 10" by Omar Naim, "Quareer" by Ragheed Al-Nahdi, Norah Almowald, Ruba Khafagy, Fatma Alhazmi, and Noor Alameer, "Fay's Palette" by Anas Ba-Tahaf, "Becoming" by Sara Mesfer, Jawaher Alamri, Noor Alameer, Hind Alfahhad, and Fatima Al-Banawi, "Kayan" by Hakeem Jomaah and "Cinema Al-Hara" by Faizah Ambah.

The lineup is interspersed with high-profile international films such as Maggie Gyllenhaal's Elena Ferrante adaptation "The Lost Daughter," "Memory Box" by Beirut-born director duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "Huda's Salon" by Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad, and India's "Paka" directed



A handout picture released by the Red Sea Film Festival shows Saudi actress Mila Al Zahrani and producer and Chairman of the Festival Mohammed Al-Turki and actress Fay Fouad on the red carpet.

by Nithin Lukose.

The festival will host several initiatives aimed at improving the Saudi film industry and enriching the Kingdom's cinematic scene and talent development,

and host a plethora of screenings, talks, workshops, and a masterclass by no other than famous Egyptian actress Yousra, tribute talks with Laila Eloui, and many more activities. —www.arabnews.com



Egyptian actress Yousra



Karen Wazen and Elias Bakhaazi



Egyptian actress Lebleba

KIDMAN FEARED 'I LOVE LUCY' CASTING IN 'BEING THE RICARDOS'

Landing a top A-lister should be welcome news for any movie, but "Being the Ricardos" producers faced a furious backlash when Nicole Kidman was unveiled as the star who would play legendary comedian Lucille Ball. Fans of the seminal 1950s sitcom "I Love Lucy" railed against the Australian Oscar-winner's casting as the US national treasure with such venom that Ball's daughter even posted a video imploring them to "stop arguing." "She doesn't look like her. Her nose isn't the same. She isn't as funny. Blah blah blah blah," said Lucie Arnaz in January. "Just trust us. It's going to be a nice film."

Kidman and director Aaron Sorkin stuck to their guns, and audiences will soon make up their own minds as the film—which had its premiere in Los Angeles Monday—hits US theaters Friday. The original "I Love Lucy" followed the wacky exploits of the Ricardos, a young interracial couple living in New York City, and was watched by up to 60 million viewers at its peak. "Being the Ricardos" takes place largely behind the scenes during one week of production on the sitcom in 1952, during which Ball's lead actress was very publicly accused of being a Communist.

Javier Bardem plays Desi Arnaz, Ball's husband both in real life and on-screen in their hugely successful series. While the casting of a 52-year-old Spaniard to play a more youthful Cuban stoked further controversy among devotees, Sorkin told his actors that he had no interest in replicating the hugely influential sitcom itself.



Australian actress Nicole Kidman (left) and Spanish actor Javier Bardem arrive for the premiere of "Being The Ricardos" at the Academy Museum in Los Angeles. —AFP photos

"He was just so not interested in the carbon copy impersonation—and that's bold," said Kidman at a recent preview screening. "I had massive trepidation about a month prior, and Aaron had to get on the phone and send me some emails saying 'you got this'... it was frightening but incredibly exciting," she said.

'Terrifying'

Ball, who died in 1989, appeared regularly on US television for nearly three decades. After "I Love Lucy," which ran from 1951 to 1957, she went on to star in

"The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour," "The Lucy Show" and "Here's Lucy." She also appeared in more than 70 movies. The film highlights her trailblazing work as a female star who called the shots on set, and Arnaz's impressive influence over suited executives and sponsors despite his previous status as a bongo-playing bandleader from Cuba. As the week unfurls, tensions also bubble in the real-world couple's frequently tempestuous marriage.

While the focus is on the real people behind the show, Kidman is occasionally

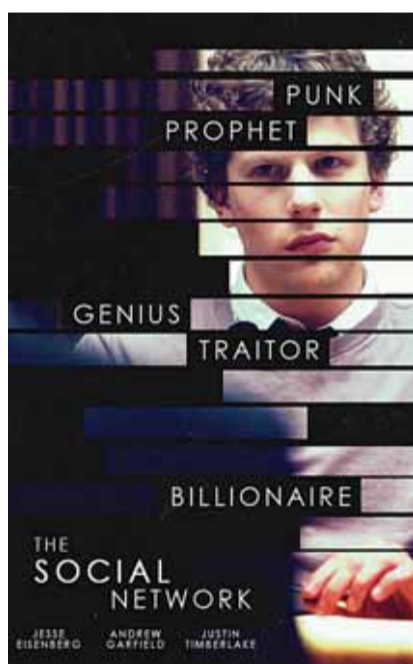


(From left) Javier Bardem, Nicole Kidman, Nina Arianda, JK Simmons, and Aaron Sorkin attend the premiere of Amazon Studios' "Being The Ricardos".

called on to recreate moments from the series, including a famous comedy set-piece in which Lucy stomps grapes in an Italian vineyard. "It was my obsession to get it absolutely accurate," recalled Kidman. "It was (Sorkin's) obsession to have the human beings portrayed." The original "I Love Lucy" remains popular on US television reruns even today, although Bardem and Kidman admitted it was "not as well known" to them growing up in Spain and Australia. But Lucille and Desi's daughter Lucie was a regular and "terrifying" presence on set, said

Kidman, with Sorkin and his cast "on the receiving end" of her advice about her parents' depiction. "I emphasized to each of them that I am not looking for an impersonation of these characters... 'Play the characters in the script. You're fully equipped to do this,'" recalled Sorkin.

"I didn't want either of these two to freak out, to feel that burden that it's an impersonation. The impersonation is just smaller than what we were doing." After its debut in theaters, "Being the Ricardos" will be available to stream on Amazon Prime from December 21. —AFP



Drake withdraws his two Grammy nominations

Canadian rap superstar Drake asked for his two Grammy nominations to be withdrawn this year and the Recording Academy has honored his request, multiple sources told AFP Monday. Drake had been up for two rap awards at January's ceremony, but his mega-hit album "Certified Lover Boy" was conspicuously left out of the general field categories last month, and the artist has clashed with the Academy multiple times. The singer is also currently facing multiple lawsuits over a rap concert in Texas last month during which ten fans were killed by a lethal crowd surge. No explanation was provided by Drake's representatives for his request.

A source close to the artist said the decision had been made by Drake and his management, and had been honored by the Grammys. A Recording Academy source familiar with the request confirmed those details to AFP, and Drake's nominations have been removed from the official Grammy website, just as final-round ballot voting began. Drake, one of the world's top-selling and most influential musicians, has won four Grammys. In a 2017 interview, he accused the Grammys of pigeonholing him as a rapper because he is Black. "The only category that they can manage to fit me in is in a rap category, maybe because I've rapped in the past or because I'm Black," he said on Apple's Beats 1 radio. At the 2019 Grammys, Drake again vented his frustration that Black hip-hop artists are not always given their due.

"We play in an opinion-based sport, not a factual-based sport," Drake said as he accepted his lone award for Best Rap Song for "God's Plan." "This is a business where sometimes it is up to a bunch of people that might not understand what a mixed-race kid from Canada has to say." Other top Black artists



In this file photo Canadian rapper Drake accepts the award for Best Rap Song for "Gods Plan" during the 61st Annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. —AFP

including The Weeknd, Frank Ocean and Jay-Z have all slammed the Grammys as irrelevant in recent years, especially citing its failure to recognize Black artists. Last month, Drake was sued for having "incited mayhem" after he participated in the closing 15 minutes of Travis Scott's headline set at the Astroworld festival—well after authorities had declared an emergency. The 64th Grammy Awards ceremony is due to take place in Los Angeles on January 31. —AFP

IWG HOLDS FESTIVE SEASONAL DINNER TO CELEBRATE THE COMING NEW YEAR

To celebrate the spirit of the season and the coming New Year, the International Women's Group-Kuwait, held its annual seasonal dinner for members and guests on December 5, 2021.

The ladies of the IWG Board greeted members as they entered the seasonally decorated Al-Jawahara Ballroom at the Crowne Plaza where Santa was waiting to give out gifts and take pictures with the attendees.

Laila Boulos, public relations coordinator, introduced Cristiana Baldocci, wife of the Italian Ambassador and President of the International Women's Group in Kuwait.

Baldocci welcomed members and guests, including the ambassadors of Kenya,

Argentina, Tanzania, Canada and the United States, and wished everyone the best for the season and the New Year. As always, she expressed her gratitude to Sheikha Hanouf Badr Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah, Honorary President of IWG, for her continued support of the group. She also thanked the IWG board for their help in organizing the event. To commence the festivities, a beautiful video of Christmas in Bethlehem, provided by Rima Khalidi, the wife of the Palestinian Ambassador was shown; the guests were then treated to a musical performance by the scouts from the Orthodox Church in Kuwait, followed by Santa leading Christmas games and lucky draws.

A raffle was conducted with many won-

derful items which also included special prizes kindly offered by the Palestinian and Armenian Embassy. Shireen Hattar, an IWG member delighted her fellow members with a medley of seasonal songs.

A magnificent dinner was prepared by the chefs of the Crowne Plaza and in closing special prizes were drawn for the attendees, and a stunning Lebanese Dabke performance.

In closing Baldocci thanked the IWG Board for their fabulous work in organizing the event, generous sponsors, all the talented performers who provided entertainment for the evening and, of course, the staff of the Crowne Plaza for their impeccable attention to every detail.



MOVIE WRITERS UNVEIL BEST SCREENPLAYS OF 21ST CENTURY

The women and men who write the movies have spoken: "Get Out" is the best screenplay of the century. So far, at least. Members of the Writers Guild of America voted the 2017 racially-charged thriller from Jordan Peele the best bit of film writing of the last 21 years, placing it atop a list of 101 movies. The Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet romance "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" came in second, while third and fourth spots are taken by Facebook backstory "The Social Network" and Korean genre-hopper "Parasite."

The eclectic collection gives nods to titles as varied as animated action adventure "The Incredibles," crime caper "Ocean's Eleven," mockumentary "Borat" and Christopher Nolan's dream-delving "Inception." "The very concept of 'writing for the screen' is in existential crisis," an

article on the Writers Guild of America website says.

"The studio system has given way to the streaming system, where everything, no matter the source, competes for eyeballs. This ... democratization of content has also changed a lot of hard-and-fast rules. "Depth of character, once strictly the province of the drama, or the issue film, is not out of place in a superhero movie or one starring a badly behaving bridesmaid.

"And formerly individuated genres like sci-fi, horror, comedy, and drama intersect freely, sometimes all in the same screenplay." The list follows a poll of members 15 years ago that crowned wartime spy-thriller "Casablanca" the greatest screenplay of all time, followed by mobster flick "The Godfather." —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

ARAB WOMEN LEAD 'NEW GENERATION' IN DOCUMENTARY FILM-MAKING



Iraqi actress and director Zahraa Ghandour poses for a photo during an interview on the sidelines of the 5th edition of the Gouna Film Festival in Egypt's Red Sea resort of El-Gouna.



Independent Palestinian film producer Rafia Oraidi poses for a photo. —AFP photos



Tunisian screenwriter and director Fatma Riahi talks during an interview.

Alongside celebrities gracing the red carpet at film festivals in Egypt, the traditional powerhouse of regional cinema, young Arab women directors are making their mark with documentaries tackling subjects ranging from femicide to revolution. Taking a break from networking at the El-Gouna Film Festival on the Red Sea in October, Iraqi actress and director Zahraa Ghandour, 30, discussed her feature documentary "Women of my Life". "The main theme is the life and death of young women and girls in Iraq. It explores how Iraqi society deals with femicide as if it's normal," she told AFP.

Ghandour said that "in the last few years, a new generation has come to the fore born in the 90s and 2000s with a new direction", especially after October 2019 protests calling for the toppling of the rul-

ing class in Iraq. "We want to break free from the stereotypes that world cinema boxes us into," she said. "It's like there are trends and they (international backers) want us to fit into these funding guidelines," said Ghandour. "What if I want to make a horror movie? I want to make what I want as long as it's of high quality." "Women of My Life", in which she plays one of the main characters, follows the gruesome death of a young woman suspected to have been carried out by male relatives. "As Iraqis in general, our lives are unstable but the targeted killing of women in particular... cannot be trivialized," she said.

Rich tableau

For Rafia Oraidi, an independent Palestinian producer, the fractured landscape of life under Israeli occupation pro-

vides a rich tableau for narratives. Working with Palestinian-American filmmaker Hind Shoufani on "They Planted Strange Trees", the international crew has been adding final touches in post-production. "It's a meditative journey set in Galilee that tracks the daily life of residents of the village where the director hails from," said Oraidi. Oraidi points to independent Palestinian directors such as Hany Abu-Assad and Elia Suleiman whose films have won Oscar nominations and prizes at Cannes.

"Without the personal attention of film-makers, patience and persistence... despite the conditions we're living under, we wouldn't have a single film on screen," she said. "We want to show there are lots of other stories in Palestine besides war, destruction and the occupation," Oraidi

said. She said the biggest challenge for independent Arab film-makers was a lack of facilities such as custom-made studios. This "balloons the budget and we're forced to partner up with other co-producers to get funding", she said.

Faring better than Hollywood

Tunisian screenwriter and director Fatma Riahi is in the early stages of a long feature, "My Father Killed Bourguiba", that attempts "to tell the history of Tunisia in the last 30 years through a biographical and personal narrative". Focused on her father, the documentary follows his role in a plan to overthrow Habib Bourguiba's regime in a 1987 military coup and its current reverberations after the 2011 revolution that toppled his successor Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. "I hope the film... gives an

alternative reading... of Tunisian history... from coups to revolutions to what we're currently experiencing under (President) Kais Saied," the director in her mid-thirties said.

Saied himself sacked the government and seized wide-ranging powers on July 25 citing an "imminent threat" to the country. "For women in Arab cinema, the number of directors for example is always less than men. It's not just a regional phenomenon but also global," Riahi told AFP. But Arab cinema appears to be faring better than Hollywood, where out of the 250 biggest films released last year only 18 percent were directed by women. A 2019 study by Northwestern University in Doha, for example, found that around 50 percent of all film-makers in the Arab world were women. —AFP

From art shows to theatre, Baghdad sees cultural revival



A visitor attends the opening of an exhibition by plastic artist Riyad Ghania in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.



Pianist Ahmed Mahmoud (left) and Cellist Sofia Nitti perform in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.



Visitors attend the opening of an exhibition by plastic artist Riyad Ghania in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.



A visitor is reflected on a mirror between portraits of Iraqi poets Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri (left) and Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab (right) during the eighth edition of an annual book festival in the capital Baghdad's Abu Nawas street, known for its bookshops and book stalls, along the banks of the Tigris.

Art exhibitions, book fairs on the Tigris and Godot in Baghdad—after decades of conflict and strife, the Iraqi capital is experiencing an artistic renaissance. "People need art, they want to develop their artistic taste—it's an escape route," said Noor Alaa al-Din, director of art space The Gallery. "We are like any country, we have the right to art to entertain us." The Iraqi capital often makes grim headlines for violence and geopolitical rivalry. But behind the conflict, tensions and recently the pandemic, a fledgling cultural renaissance has emerged in recent years, recalling a golden age when Baghdad was considered one of the Arab world's cultural capitals.

Galleries have opened and festivals have blossomed, attracting crowds eager to make up for lost time. The Gallery opened its doors barely a month ago, but visitors queue around the corner on opening night of any show. In a recent show, Iraqi-Canadian artist Riyadh Ghenea paid tribute to his late mother with a series of brightly coloured abstract compositions. She "suffered all the phases that Iraq has been through," said the artist, who came back to Baghdad in 2011. Upon his return, "I found neither my mother nor the country that I had left behind," he said.

'Alleviate stress'

Years of sectarian violence followed the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Iraq's former dictator Saddam Hussein. The rise of the Islamic State militant group in 2014 saw more brutality and bloodshed. Amir, a 25-year-old pharmacist, acknowledges that his entire childhood was accompanied by conflict. "Art allows us to alleviate the stress of our daily lives," he told AFP from outside The Gallery. Normality hangs by a thread in the Iraqi capital, where rocket and drone attacks sometimes target its highly fortified Green Zone, and where a July suicide attack on a market killed more than 30 people.



Iraqi artists paint during an annual cultural festival in the capital Baghdad's Abu Nawas street, along the Tigris River. —AFP photos

It was also the site of massive youth-led anti-government protests in 2019, and an ensuing bloody crackdown.

But on a balmy November afternoon, thousands of visitors gathered along the banks of the Tigris for the eighth edition of a book festival. Organizers of the "I am an Iraqi, I read" event were distributing 30,000 books for free, from fiction to philosophy and foreign languages. An old Arab adage goes that books are written in Cairo, printed in Beirut and read in Baghdad. A singer accompanied by traditional instruments performed local folk music as the fashionably dressed youth, couples with small children and senior citizens enjoyed the event.

'Goosebumps and tears'

Individuals and foreign institutes have largely driven Baghdad's cultural rebirth in the oil-rich country. Last month however, the city hosted the second edition of an international theatre festival, organized by the culture ministry. "The audience overflowed from the hall" in the opening days, said host venue director Ali Abbas. "Iraqis used to be afraid to go out into the streets," he said. "The situation has changed dramatically." Troupes hailing from Egypt, Tunisia, Germany and Italy performed for free, and Iraqis too had a chance to shine. Among them was director Anas Abdel Samad, who staged a performance of his piece "Yes Godot".

German actor Hanno Friedrich, on his first trip to Baghdad, was among the foreigners performing at the festival with his play "Tyll", adapted from a novel mixing European folklore and the Thirty Years War religious conflict that was fought primarily in central Europe during the 17th century. "They told us 'don't go, it's dangerous,'" the 55-year-old said—but his experience shattered those stereotypes. "People climbed on stage and hugged us. They told us they had never seen anything like that," he said. "We had goosebumps, and tears in our eyes." —AFP



Actors perform at the Al-Rasheed Theater during the Baghdad International Theater Festival in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.



A visitor attends the opening of an exhibition by plastic artist Riyad Ghania in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.



Actors perform at the Al-Rasheed Theater during the Baghdad International Theater Festival in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.

Sports

F1 holds its breath; Hamilton, Verstappen go neck and neck

Hamilton accuses Verstappen of 'brake-testing' him

PARIS: Formula One's annus mirabilis has the ending it deserves with Lewis Hamilton and Max Verstappen on exactly the same number of points ahead of the weekend's winner-takes-all showdown in Abu Dhabi. Back in July Verstappen had built up a cosy 32-point lead but the momentum is now back at Mercedes with Hamilton driving like a man with an unprecedented eighth world championship in his sights.

The Briton's against-all-odds win in Brazil, Qatar cruise and Sunday's Saudi stunner means that for the first time since Emerson Fittipaldi and Clay Regazzoni in 1974 the title protagonists go into the closing race level on points. Hamilton produced what three-time former world champion Jackie Stewart suggested "might be the best race he's ever driven" to emerge triumphant from the chaos of a hot and sticky night in Jeddah. The 36-year-old Briton and his Dutch rival, who is 12 years younger, have for the large part treated each other with respect. But after 20 races, the equivalent of driving from New York to London, the pair head to Yas Marina with their relationship seemingly at its lowest point.



Winner-takes-all showdown in Abu Dhabi

'Crazy man'

Not for the first time in 2021 their cars touched on Sunday, with Hamilton accusing Verstappen of "brake-testing" him. "That guy is crazy man...It was just dangerous driving, dude," he snapped over the team radio, adding later: "He's over the limit for sure". Verstappen denied underhand tactics, saying he had been trying to give the lead back as directed after cutting across him illegally as the Briton tried

to overtake. Hamilton has not got to where he is this week standing at the door of F1 history without a cool head on his shoulders.

He noted: "I've avoided collision on so many occasions with the guy and I don't always mind being the one that does that because you love to fight another day, which I obviously did." Mindful of the high stakes at play his Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff expressed hope that the drivers' crown would be decided by a clean fight on the track next Sunday. "You've seen incidents today that were pretty much Brazil at slower speeds. And we don't want to have that in Abu Dhabi."

"The quicker car with the quicker driver should win the championship, and not by taking each other off." "And I don't think that the championship has deserved a result which was influenced by a collision," he added, evoking the notorious rivalry between Ayrton Senna and Alain Prost. The feud between Senna and Prost came to a head in Japan in 1990 when Senna barged down the inside of the Frenchman at the start, taking both cars out, with the championship going to the Brazilian.

While title deciders are uncharted water for Verstappen, Hamilton has been here before, many times. In 2007 he lost out to Kimi Raikkonen by one point, before securing the first of his seven titles 12 months later in dramatic circumstances. Felipe Massa, trailing Hamilton by seven points, needed to win his home race and Hamilton to finish no higher than sixth. And that was the situation when Massa took the chequered flag.



JEDDAH: Second-placed Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen poses with his trophy on the podium after the Formula One Saudi Arabian Grand Prix at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit in Jeddah. —AFP

'One shot'

For a few seconds the crown was his, only for Hamilton to overtake Timo Glock on the final bend to cross the line in fifth and take the championship by a whisker. If he does manage to pull it off and draw clear of Michael Schumacher with eight F1 titles Hamilton believes it would be "the most significant" one of all. The stage is set then with the crown awaiting either the man who has rewritten his

sport's record books or the fearless young Dutch pretender who has pushed the champion like no one before him. "It's all going down to the wire, that's how the sport should be and we love it," said Wolff. For his counterpart at Red Bull, Christian Horner, "it's a straight-out fight as it has been for the entire year. "For the fans it is fantastic, it keeps the championship dream alive and we have one shot and it's time to take it." —AFP

Djokovic slated to play in Australia's ATP Cup

SYDNEY: After months of speculation that Novak Djokovic may miss the Australian Open over tough COVID vaccination requirements, the world number one was yesterday named to play in a Sydney tournament weeks before. The 20-time Grand Slam champion had cast doubt on whether he would defend his title at Melbourne Park next month, refusing to reveal whether he was inoculated against coronavirus.

However, he was listed as part of the five-man Serbia team when the draw was made for the ATP Cup in Sydney that will precede the opening major of the year. Rafael Nadal was missing, with the Spanish fellow 20-time Grand Slam winner last month suggesting he would play an exhibition in Abu Dhabi this month, then another tournament before arriving in Melbourne for the Australian Open. The only other absent top 20 player for the 16-team ATP Cup was injured Swiss great Roger Federer.

"The playing group enjoy representing their countries and to see 18 of the world's top 20 players commit to the event is testament to that," said tournament director Tom Lerner. "The event shows off the passion the playing group have for this format." An ATP statement accompanying the draw noted that top seed Serbia was "headlined by world number one Novak Djokovic", who won three of the season's four Grand Slams. The 34-year-old ended his rollercoaster season with a Davis Cup defeat last week and then promised to make a decision on his Australian Open participation "very soon".

Organizers of the Australian Open have insisted only fully-vaccinated players will be allowed into the country, which saw Djokovic's father Srdjan last month suggest his son "probably won't" play. "Of course he would want to go with all his heart," he told Serbian television. "But I really don't know if that will happen. Probably not under these conditions, with this blackmail and when it's done that way." Djokovic contracted COVID-19 during the ill-fated Adria Tour event he organized in the Balkans in June 2020, but said he did not suffer from any symptoms.

Russia are the defending ATP Cup champions after their team spearheaded by Daniil Medvedev and Andrey Rublev swept past a Matteo Berrettini-led Italy in the final. Djokovic's Serbia won the inaugural event in 2020, overpowering the Nadal-led Spain. The teams in next year's US\$10 million event, from January 1-9, are divided into four groups of four, playing across two Sydney venues - the Ken Rosewall Arena and Qudos Bank Arena - with each tie comprising two singles matches and one doubles.

Top seeds Serbia were grouped with Spain, Norway and Chile, while Russia will face Italy, Austria and home nation Australia. Germany, led by reigning ATP Finals champion Alexander Zverev, headline Group C against Canada, Great Britain and the United States, while Greece, featuring world number four Stefanos Tsitsipas, are in Group D with Poland, Argentina and Georgia. It kicks off a bumper series of ATP and WTA tournaments in the lead-up to the Australian Open, beginning on January 17, with events across Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne. —AFP

Peng Shuai to Xinjiang: Issues overshadowing the Beijing Olympics

BEIJING: From human rights to coronavirus and tennis star Peng Shuai, February's Beijing Olympics have been overshadowed by several controversies. With under two months until the Games begin, the United States on Monday reacted by announcing a diplomatic boycott. AFP Sports looks at the issues hanging over the Olympics:

Peng Shuai

There was grave international concern for former world number one doubles player Peng after she made sexual assault accusations on social media against a former top Communist Party politician. The 35-year-old-a three-time Olympian-was not heard from for nearly three weeks and her claims were rapidly censored. The United Nations, US and Peng's fellow tennis stars all voiced fears for her whereabouts. The Women's Tennis Association suspended tournaments in China. Peng later appeared on state media in several videos and held a video call with IOC president Thomas Bach in which she said she was safe and well, however concerns remain.

Xinjiang

Campaigners say that at least one million Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking, mostly Muslim minorities have been incarcerated in camps in China's northwestern region of Xinjiang. Human rights groups and foreign governments have found evidence of what they say is mass detentions, forced labor, political indoctrination, torture and forced sterilization. Washington has described it as genocide. After initially denying the existence of the Xinjiang camps, China later defended them as vocational training centers aimed at reducing the appeal of Islamic extremism. China has also consistently railed against what it calls the "politicization of sport".



MELBOURNE: China's Peng Shuai serves during a practice session in Melbourne. Tennis stars threw their support behind the WTA's move to suspend its tournaments in China over concern for Peng Shuai, as calls grew for other sports to follow suit. —AFP

Tibet, Hong Kong

Human rights campaigners and exiles have accused Beijing of religious repression and massively curtailing rights in Tibet. Activists unfurled a Tibetan flag at the Olympic flame-lighting ceremony in Greece. Tibet has alternated over the centuries between independence and control by China, which says it "peacefully liberated" the rugged plateau in 1951 and brought infrastructure and education to the previously underdeveloped region.

But many exiled Tibetans accuse the Beijing government of religious repression, torture and eroding their culture-part of broader fears for human rights in China. There has also been international concern about a clampdown in Hong Kong, which China is remoulding in its own authoritarian image after huge and often violent democracy protests in the city two years ago.

Coronavirus

The coronavirus has loomed large over the build-up to the Beijing Olympics, which take place just six months after the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Summer Games. China has managed to restrict domestic infections to small clusters through aggressive lockdowns and mass testing, but Beijing organizers have admitted that protecting the Games from the coronavirus is their "biggest challenge". The Winter Olympics will be held in a "closed loop"-a strict bubble insulating athletes from the outside world for the whole Games. Only people living in China will be allowed to attend as spectators. The estimated 2,900 athletes must be fully vaccinated or face 21 days in quarantine upon arrival. They, along with media and others in the bubble, will also be tested daily. Entry into the Chinese capital has already been tightened. —AFP

Arab Masters Tennis event



KUWAIT: (From left) Faleh Al-Otaibi, Ibrahim Al-Khulaifi, Abdelraouf Abdelsalam, Abdelsamad Al-Aryan, Ahmad Al-Hajari and Ali Al-Mutairi are pictured during a press conference yesterday.

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Preliminaries of the Arab Masters Tennis Tournament will start today at the Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdallah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah International Tennis complex courts. The draw for the single matches took place yesterday at Kuwait Tennis Federation premises in the presence of Deputy Chairman of the Board Abdelsamad Al-Aryan, Secretary General and Tournament Director Faleh Al-Otaibi, member of the Board of Arab Tennis Federation Ahmad Al-Hajari from Oman and head of Qatar delegation Ibrahim Al-Khulaifi. The draw was held under the supervision of tournament referee Abdelraouf Abdelsalam.

The tournament will be the best of three sets, and all three will have a tie break - while the doubles will be in two sets and in case of a tie, a 10 point tie break will be enforced. The draw had Oman's Abdalla Al-Barwani facing Syria's Rabeel Sleem; Somalia's Zakaria Aweis facing Mauritania's Mohamed Said; Oman's Muneer Alrawahi facing Saudi Arabia's Sulaiman Al-Qasem; Lebanon's Hassan Ibrahim facing Libya's Ahmad Mouhan and Somalia's Mahdi Ahmad facing Jordan's Seif Adas.

The winners of the preliminaries will join the main draw, while Kuwait players will start their competitions in the main draw of the Arab Masters. Essa Qabazard will play Algeria's Toufik Sahtali,

while Abdulhameed Joma will wait for the winner of Alrawahi and Al-Qasem's match. Bader Antar will face Jordan's Mousa Alkotop; Talal Antar will face Libya's Mohamed Al-Mehdi and Ali Al-Shatti will face Egypt's Amr Mohamed.

Saudi player Sulaiman Al-Qasem lauded the organizers of the Masters tournament. "We hope the tournament will see high technical standards. Such tournament will always strengthen brotherly relations between participants. Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdallah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah International Tennis Complex is state-of-the-art and will be an important destination for the best players of the world in few years," he said.



Sulaiman Al-Qasem

US boycotts Beijing Winter Olympics

China warns US will 'pay the price' for diplomatic boycott



BEIJING: People walk past a statue with the Olympic Rings titled 'Dating With the Winter Olympics' by Huang Jian, near the headquarters of the Beijing Organizing Committee in Shougang Park, one of the sites for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics yesterday. — AFP

BEIJING: China warned yesterday the United States would "pay the price" for a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics over human rights concerns. The US move - which stopped short of preventing athletes from attending - comes after Washington spent months wrangling over what position to take on the Games, beginning in February next year, over what it has termed China's "genocide" of the Uyghur minority.

The move drew fiery opposition from Beijing, which threatened unspecified countermeasures, warning the US would "pay the price for its wrongdoing". "Stay tuned," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters at a daily press briefing. "The US attempt to interfere with the Beijing Winter Olympics out of ideological prejudice, based on lies and rumors, will only expose (its) sinister intentions," Zhao said.

"The Winter Olympics are not a stage for political shows and political manipulation," he added, accusing the US of "actions that interfere in and undermine the Beijing Winter Olympics." But Washington's move was broadly welcomed by rights groups and politicians in the US, where President Joe Biden has been under pressure to

speak out against Chinese rights abuses. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the administration would send no diplomatic or official representation to the Games given China's "ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses."

Sending official representation would signal that the Games were "business as usual," Psaki said. "And we simply can't do that." "The athletes on Team USA have our full support. We will be behind them 100 percent as we cheer them on from home," she added. The International Olympic Committee called it a "purely political decision for each government, which the IOC in its political neutrality fully respects."

The announcement "also makes it clear that the Olympic Games and the participation of the athletes are beyond politics and we welcome this," an IOC spokesperson said. Russia - whose predecessor state the USSR was subject to a full boycott of the Olympics by the United States in 1980 following its invasion of Afghanistan - slammed the decision. "Our position is that the Olympic Games should be free of politics," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, but said it was positive that participants

were not impacted by the decision.

US-China relations hit a low point under Biden's predecessor Donald Trump, with a massive trade war and incendiary debate over how the Covid-19 virus emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Biden has sought to re-engage with Beijing while at the same time focused on strengthening traditional US alliances to counter China's growing economic clout and military presence across the Indo-Pacific region.

His administration has left Trump-era trade tariffs on China in place and continues to order naval patrols through sensitive international sea lanes that Beijing is accused of trying to bring under its control. But with Biden also emphasizing the need for dialogue, critics on the right say he is being too soft, making the looming Olympic Games a political flashpoint. Members of Team USA, their coaches, trainers and other staff will still receive consular and diplomatic security assistance, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

Campaigners say that at least one million Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking, mostly Muslim minorities have been incarcerated in camps in Xinjiang, where China is also accused of forcibly sterilizing women and imposing forced labor. Bob

Menendez, chair of the powerful US Senate foreign relations committee, welcomed the diplomatic boycott as "a powerful rebuke" of the "genocide in Xinjiang."

Human Rights Watch called the Biden administration's decision "crucial" but urged more accountability "for those responsible for these crimes and justice for the survivors." The Beijing Olympics have also been overshadowed by sexual assault accusations made by former tennis star Peng Shuai against a retired top Communist Party politician. The three-time Olympian was not heard from for nearly three weeks before re-emerging, after her claims were rapidly censored.

Coming just six months after the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Summer Games, the Winter Olympics will be held from February 4 to 20 in a "closed loop" bubble because of COVID-19 restrictions. On the streets of Beijing, residents told AFP that they didn't agree with the US move. "Sports is sports. How is it connected to politics? Besides, should political standards be set by the US? Does whatever standard you say become the de facto standard?" said a 72-year-old retired teacher, who gave her surname as Wang — AFP

Embiid guides 76ers to win over Hornets as Giannis shines

PHILADELPHIA: Four-time NBA all-star Joel Embiid scored 43 points and grabbed 15 rebounds as the Philadelphia 76ers slipped past the Charlotte Hornets 127-124 in overtime on Monday. Embiid shot 15-of-20 from the field, sank 12-of-14 free throws and scored six points in the extra session in front of a crowd of 14,400 in North Carolina. Embiid contributed on each of the eight points the Sixers scored in overtime, scoring all but one basket and assisting on another.

"It's what I have to do," Embiid said. "Coaches trust me to put me in those situations. Sometimes I make mistakes, but I feel like I'm getting better and better in those situations. I just made the right plays and made some shots." Tobias Harris added 21 points and Shake Milton had 16 points in the win. "He's so dominant out there, especially when he is able to get his position on the floor," Harris said of Embiid. "He's able to punish a team. They threw different guys at him, but he's so much bigger and stronger."

Kelly Oubre delivered 35 points, shooting 13-of-24 shots from the field, including six threes for the Hornets. PJ Washington and Miles Bridges both had 16 points and Cody Martin scored 14 points in the loss. Charlotte played short-handed for the second night in a row. LaMelo Ball, Terry Rozier, Jalen McDaniels, and Mason Plumlee are in COVID-19 protocol. In Milwaukee, Giannis Antetokounmpo, who turned 27 on Monday, finished with 27 points and 12 rebounds as the Bucks held on to beat the Cleveland Cavaliers 112-104.

Antetokounmpo returned after missing two games with a right calf injury. He played 27 minutes overall and scored 15 points in the final quarter for the Bucks, who have won 10 of their past 11. Jarrett Allen had 25 points and nine rebounds to lead Cleveland. Elsewhere, Zach LaVine scored a team-high 32 points to lead five players in double figures as the Chicago Bulls beat the Denver Nuggets 109-97 for their fourth victory in the past five contests. —AFP

Patriots win 7th straight game

LOS ANGELES: The New England Patriots kept the ball on the ground and used a stingy defense to win their seventh straight game with a 14-10 victory over the Buffalo Bills on Monday. With wind gusts buffeting Buffalo's Highmark Stadium and light snow falling, the Patriots showed why they are the hottest team in the NFL as the showdown between two of the top teams in the American Football Conference turned into a defensive battle. The Patriots shunned the passing game and turned to their running attack, gaining 222 yards on the ground compared to just 19 in the air.

Rookie quarterback Mac Jones threw just three passes all night, completing two, as he ran more times than he threw it. He was one of seven Patriots players who ran the ball, carrying it five times. "That was a crazy game to be part of," Jones said. "We knew if we didn't turn the ball over that we would win." Quarterback Josh Allen completed 15 of 30 passes for 145 yards and one touchdown for the Bills, who failed to close the gap on the Patriots atop the AFC East Division.

Jones' light passing game Monday follows his best statistical passing game in last Sunday's 36-13 rout of then AFC top seed Tennessee, when he threw for a career-high 310 yards. His first completed pass on Monday came on a wobbling ball to Jonnu Smith for a 12-yard gain late in the first quarter. The Patriots ran 32 consecutive running plays before Jones attempted his next pass in



FOXBOROUGH: Jakobi Meyers #16 of the New England Patriots scores a touchdown at Gillette Stadium in this file photo in Foxborough, Massachusetts. — AFP

the fourth quarter. Jones' three attempts were the fewest in any NFL game since Bills quarterback Joe Ferguson went 0-for-2 in a game in 1974.

New England have now held an opponent to 13 or fewer points for the sixth time in seven games during their win streak. They have also held teams to an NFL-best 15 points a game. "We played the way we felt we needed to win. I give the players credit for being tough and disciplined in conditions that were somewhat challenging," said Patriots coach Bill Belichick. Much of New England's success during their winning streak has come via the ground game, and it showed Monday as Damien Harris rushed for 111 yards,

including a career-long 64-yard touchdown in the first quarter.

On the fifth of his 10 carries, Harris took a pitch to the left from Jones and cut back inside through the gap before rushing up the middle untouched into the end zone with 5:18 remaining in the opening quarter. It was the Patriots' longest run since Curtis Martin rushed for a 70-yard touchdown on September 21, 1997 against Chicago. Buffalo dropped to 7-5 on the season. They were coming off a 31-6 win over New Orleans. "We have got to win the close ones," said Allen. "We didn't play good enough. I take that personally. I got to be better for this team." —AFP