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Kuwait welcomes Saudi Crown Prince; visit to bolster ties

See Page 9

Kuwait is blessed by the presence of His Royal Highness



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Photo of the Day



Japanese and Kuwaiti national flags are displayed on the Kuwait Towers to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Japan and Kuwait late Wednesday. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Urgent solutions needed for traffic jams in Kuwait



By Nawara Fattahova

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Complaints about traffic in Kuwait never end. Although traffic jams happen everywhere in the world, some people here see it as exceptional. Various restrictions were imposed in the past to limit the number of drivers on the road to ease congestions. This year, more restrictions were imposed on issuing driving licenses to expats.

These decisions and restrictions may relieve traffic by 10 percent at best, as the vast majority of those who have driving licenses and are not able to renew them due to the

new restrictions won't stay at home, quit their jobs, go back home or even use public transport. They will use taxis, arrange someone to drop them, or even drive without a license.

The real solution to the traffic problem is developing roads in the first place. The evidence of this solution is clear, with many examples, including the newly-constructed bridges on Jamal Abdul Nasser Road in Shuwaikh, the bridge at the United Nations roundabout on Fourth Ring Road, the bridge on Fifth Ring Road intersecting Airport Road, and many others. All of these made a huge difference.

Another powerful solution for the traffic crisis is having more collective transportation options that will attract passengers of all categories. In Kuwait, we only have buses for public transport. Talk about a metro in Kuwait started more than 10 years ago, but it hasn't been realized yet. The institutions in charge give many excuses, including that special

permissions are needed to check the ground for crude, among others.

I watched a documentary on a new means of public transport in Thailand that was launched this year - a cable car system. According to the interviewed passengers, it saved them over an hour of time spent daily in transportation to and from work. One of the passengers also expressed her appreciation over this means of transport, that not just saved her time, but also relieved her from standing in a crowded bus or train, in addition to enjoying traveling in the sky.

Why can't we have such transport in Kuwait? Building a cable car is definitely much easier and less costly than building a metro. It would only need building a tower at each station. And as the cable car is also considered a form of entertainment, most people will definitely be interested in using it, even those who never used public transport in Kuwait before.

Local

Only antibody therapy authorized in US for pre-exposure prophylaxis

Evusheld authorised for emergency use in US for pre-exposure prevention of COVID

Pivotal phase III data showed robust efficacy and long-term with one dose in high-risk population

AstraZeneca's Evusheld (tixagevimab co-packaged with cilgavimab), a long-acting antibody (LAAB) combination, has received emergency use authorization (EUA) in the US for the pre-exposure prophylaxis (prevention) of COVID-19, with first doses expected to become available very soon.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granted the EUA for Evusheld for pre-exposure prophylaxis of COVID-19 in adults and adolescents (aged 12 and older who weigh 40 kg or more) with moderate to severe immune compromise due to a medical condition or immunosuppressive medications and who may not mount an adequate immune response to COVID-19 vaccination, as well as those individuals for whom COVID-19 vaccination is not recommended. Recipients should not be currently infected with or had recent known exposure to a person infected with SARS-CoV-2.

Myron J Levin, MD, Professor of Pediatrics and Medicine, University of Colorado School of Medicine, US, and principal investigator on the PROVENT trial, said: "Millions of people in the US and around the world remain at serious risk for COVID-19 because their immune systems do not generate a sufficient immune response, even after receiving all recommended doses of vaccine. I am excited to offer my patients Evusheld as an easily-administered new option that provides long-lasting protection that could help them return to their everyday lives."

Mene Pangalos, Executive Vice President, BioPharmaceuticals R&D, AstraZeneca, said: "We are proud to play a leading role in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and, with Evusheld, we now have the first antibody therapy authorized in the US to prevent COVID-19 symptoms before virus exposure, while also providing long lasting protection with a single dose. Evusheld neutralizes all previous SARS-CoV-2 variants to date, and we are working quickly to establish its efficacy against the new Omicron variant. We thank our clinical trial participants, the investigators, scientists, and government agencies and our colleagues at AstraZeneca who have all contributed to the development of Evusheld."

Brian Koffman, MDCM (retired), MS Ed,

Co-Founder, Executive Vice President and Chief Medical Officer of the CLL (Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia) Society, US, said: "One of the primary questions I keep getting asked by patients is 'When can I hug my grandchildren again?' As a physician and person with a weakened immune system, I am filled with hope now that Evusheld will soon be available to those who can't count on vaccination alone to provide the protection they need."

Evusheld is a combination of two long-acting monoclonal antibodies and is the only antibody therapy authorized in the US for COVID-19 pre-exposure prophylaxis and the only COVID-19 antibody delivered as an intramuscular dose (150mg tixagevimab and 150mg cilgavimab).

About 2 percent of the global population is considered at increased risk of an inadequate response to a COVID-19 vaccine. This includes people with blood cancers or other cancers being treated with chemotherapy, patients on dialysis, and those taking medications after an organ transplant or who are taking immunosuppressive drugs for conditions including multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

The primary data supporting the Evusheld EUA are from the ongoing PROVENT Phase III pre-exposure prevention trial, which showed a statistically significant reduction (77 percent at primary analysis, 83 percent at median six-month analysis) in the risk of developing symptomatic COVID-19 compared to placebo, with protection from the virus continuing for at least six months. More follow-up is needed to establish the full duration of protection provided by Evusheld. Data from the Phase III STORM CHASER post-exposure trial and the Evusheld Phase I trial also supported the EUA. Evusheld was well-tolerated in the trials.

Evusheld and SARS-CoV-2 variants

Studies are underway to provide information on the impact of the new Omicron variant (B.1.1.529) on Evusheld. Of the Omicron binding site substitutions relevant to Evusheld that have been tested to date in preclinical assays, none have been associated with escape from Evusheld neutralization. In vitro findings demonstrate Evusheld



Sameh El Fangary — AstraZeneca CP GCC Cluster

neutralizes other recent emergent SARS-CoV-2 viral variants, including the Delta and Mu variants.

Evusheld is being developed with support from the US government, including federal funds from the Department of Health and Human Services; Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response; Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority in partnership with the Department of Defense; Joint Program Executive Office for Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defense, under Contract No. W911QY-21-9-0001.

Sameh El Fangary, Country President, GCC & Pakistan, AstraZeneca, "The US Food and Drug Administration's EUA of Evusheld (formerly AZD7442) for the prevention of COVID-19 is an important milestone globally. We welcome this news and the opportunity it provides to support the unmet needs of vulnerable patients."

AstraZeneca has agreed to supply the US government with 700,000 doses of Evusheld. These initial doses of Evusheld will be available at no cost to eligible patients as part of a government-funded program. The US government will be working with states to provide access to eligible people. AstraZeneca is progressing with filings around the globe for potential emergency use authorization or conditional approval of Evusheld in both COVID-19

prophylaxis and treatment.

Evusheld, formerly known as AZD7442 is a combination of two LAABs - tixagevimab (AZD8895) and cilgavimab (AZD1061) - derived from B-cells donated by convalescent patients after SARS-CoV-2 virus. Discovered by Vanderbilt University Medical Center and licensed to AstraZeneca in June 2020, the human monoclonal antibodies bind to distinct sites on the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein and were optimized by AstraZeneca with half-life extension and reduced Fc receptor and complement C1q binding.

The half-life extension more than triples the durability of its action compared to conventional antibodies and could afford up to 12 months of protection from COVID-19 following a single administration; data from the Phase III PROVENT trial show protection lasting at least six months. The reduced Fc receptor binding aims to minimize the risk of antibody-dependent enhancement of disease - a phenomenon in which virus-specific antibodies promote, rather than inhibit, infection and/or disease. Evusheld is delivered as an IM dose of 150mg tixagevimab and 150mg cilgavimab administered in two separate, consecutive injections.

In Aug 2021, AstraZeneca announced that Evusheld demonstrated a statistically significant reduction in the risk of developing symptomatic COVID-19 in the PROVENT trial; efficacy was 83 percent compared to placebo in a six-month analysis announced on Nov 18, 2021. In Oct 2021, AstraZeneca announced positive high-level results from the Evusheld TACKLE Phase III outpatient treatment trial. Evusheld is also being studied as a potential treatment for hospitalized COVID-19 patients as part of the National Institute of Health's ACTIV-3 trial and in an additional collaborator hospitalization treatment trial.

Under the terms of the licensing agreement with Vanderbilt, AstraZeneca will pay single-digit royalties on future net sales.

NOTE: Evusheld has received emergency use authorization in Bahrain. Please note that Evusheld is not currently approved for use in the UAE, KSA, Kuwait, Qatar or Oman.

Space

The final frontier



Exploring **ASCC**

Photos by Shakir Reshamwala

The Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Centre (ASCC) is the largest museum complex in the world. It comprises of six museums related to natural history, science and technology, Arab and Islamic science and space. The center is home to some 22 world-class galleries, with over 3,000 exhibits.



This week, our journey of exploration heads beyond our planet. The Space museum gives visitors an opportunity to explore the wonders of the wider universe. Visitors can observe galaxies and the vast cosmos and get a glimpse of some of the most important discoveries in the history of space exploration, while a model of the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva explains some of the key discoveries in particle physics.

Models of rovers, aircraft, satellites and rockets are on display, along with plenty of interactive exhibits. Visitors can also tour a replica of the International Space Station and witness how astronauts and cosmonauts live in this out-of-this world marvel of engineering and ingenuity. Educational films on astronomy and the night sky can be viewed at the planetarium, a domed theatre that can seat over a 100 people.





Photo shows the Kuwait City coastline and business district.

Kuwaitis and expats react as UAE shifts to Saturday-Sunday weekend

By Chidi Emmanuel

As the UAE moves to a Western-style Saturday-Sunday weekend, some Kuwaitis and expats shared their views over the recent development. Whereas some approved this shift, others voiced their strong objections to the Saturday-Sunday weekend.

In an attempt to maintain its edge over rising regional competitors, UAE on Tuesday shattered norms once again as it changed the Friday-Saturday weekend to Saturday-Sunday, in line with the rest of the world. With the latest move, UAE broke ranks with the rest of the GCC countries as it seeks to attract global investments and boost its tourism sector. As part of the reforms, the government also reduced its official working week to four-and-a-half days, so that government workers can finish at noon on Fridays.

The surprise announcement shocked many people, who feel it will definitely affect their Friday prayers. Although the changes were only mandated for those in the public sector and public schools, analysts expect private companies to follow suit. "This is a welcome development. It brings the United Arab Emirates in line with the rest of the world. I wish and hope Kuwait follows suit," Nasser Ahmed, a Kuwaiti student, told Kuwait Times.

In 2007, UAE was the first to move from a Thursday-Friday weekend, after which other Gulf countries followed suit. But for Mohammad, an Egyptian teacher, Friday is a "no-go area".

"Changing from Friday-Saturday to Saturday-Sunday will be hard because of our (Muslim) Friday prayers. UAE might do it because of the investment, trade and tourism sectors, but Kuwait might not," he said.

Abdulaziz, a sociology student at Kuwait University, explored the social aspect of it. "Changing to a Saturday-Sunday weekend might be unpopular here. Kuwaiti families prefer to gather on Fri-

days. It might affect the sociocultural fabric of our society," he argued, as his friends nodded in agreement.

While some weighed the economic calculations behind the Saturday-Sunday weekend, others explored the religious angle. "Emiratis have been setting the pace over the years. They started the Friday-Saturday weekend 14 years ago. It worked perfectly well for them and other GCC countries that followed; I think this Saturday-Sunday weekend will work fine too. The world is becoming a global village, so there is need for readjustments," Esther Eze, an expat teacher, told Kuwait Times.

Ashanti Shakria, an American business consultant, said the Saturday-Sunday weekend will have a hugely positive impact. "A Saturday-Sunday shift will align Kuwait to the rest of the world. Just like the other parts of the world, we will now have Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays as working days. This reform will definitely attract and bolster foreign investments. It will eliminate the weekend gap, thus allowing more business and exchange of trade with the world economy. More so, it will be a big relief for American kids, who are not used to going to school on Sundays," she said.

On the other hand, Chris Ode looked at it with a Christian point of view. "At least we will be privileged to comply and obey one of the 10 commandments - keep the Sabbath day (Sunday) holy. We really miss our Sunday church services. A Saturday-Sunday weekend will surely boost our Christian faith," he said as he entered a church in Kuwait City.



Kuwaitis chat near the entrance of the Kuwait stock exchange.

Local



Anfal Bo Hamad participates in several art competitions

By Ben Garcia

After almost two years without any activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Anfal Bo Hamad, a popular artist with Down syndrome, has participated in several events organized by different organizations. Anfal is thankful for taking part in the joint national policy event for empowering disabled persons at the United Nations House in Mishref, an expo of works by disabled persons at the Avenues Mall, and the biggest art competition organized by Al-Baghli Formative Arts.

"My daughter has always been invited by many organizations and groups and we are happy for that. We only stopped during the last two years because of the pandemic, but now we are on the go again. Anfal always wants to be part of any competition to display her work," said Najat Al-Reyahi, the ever-loving, caring and supportive mother of Anfal. "Before the pandemic we used to attend activities almost every day. We are now glad that we are back in action," she added.

The Al-Baghli arts competition is the biggest they have attended so far, while the event held for the disabled at The Avenues was huge as well. "The Al-Baghli Formative Arts competition was the biggest event we attended after the pandemic, and for the first time they included persons with disabilities in their categories. The winners will be announced soon, so we are excited," Reyahi said.

The painting expo at The Avenues was a display of works by persons with disabilities to celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD), which is marked on Dec 3 annually. The day promotes the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities at every level of society and development, and raises awareness of the situation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of political, social, economic and cultural life.

WHO joins the UN in observing this day each year, reinforcing the importance of securing the rights of people with disabilities, so they can participate fully, equally and effectively in society with others, and face no barriers in all aspects of their lives. "Anfal attended it and she displayed her artworks she made during the COVID-19 lockdown. Most of her drawings are related to family values and it was really amazing to display them at the venue," her mother said.

Anfal, 24, is very talented in many ways. She is a photographer, dancer and stage performer. Her mother calls her a girl with extraordinary talents, and many people in Kuwait admire her for being very active, organized and jovial. "She laughs and smiles with everyone at home and those she knows. She is cheerful, but moody as well. What I like about her is that she follows my orders and never lets me down," Najat said.

Reyahi was a fine arts teacher for several years, but retired early to concentrate on the needs of her daughter. During the pandemic, the duo participated in several art exhibitions outside Kuwait virtually,



including a virtual art competition organized by Saudi Arabia, three in Jordan, twice in Kuwait organized by a group related to persons with disabilities, and once in Qatar.



Local

British ambassador visits PAM labor shelter in Jleeb

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis along with officials from the British Embassy visited the Public Authority for Manpower's labor shelter in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh yesterday. They were welcomed by the director of the international relations department and other officials from PAM.

The delegation witnessed the procedures of accepting workers at the shelter and the role of governmental institutions at the center. The delegation also reviewed the services provided by the shelter to female workers, which include legal, health and psychological

services. During the visit, PAM officials provided all information and statistics of workers staying at the shelter, in addition to answering all questions of the visiting delegation.

The ambassador along with the delegation praised the rehabilitation services provided by the shelter and the efforts of the staff, who provide social protection and care to the residents of the shelter, in addition to legal protection. PAM officials explained this shelter is the first-of-its-kind in the region for expat workers in terms of services provided and capacity. The visiting delegation thanked the staff of the shelter for their great job.



KUWAIT: British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis visits the Public Authority for Manpower's labor shelter in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh yesterday.



KUWAIT: Firemen put out a huge fire in a packing material plant in Amghara. The material included plastics used in the packing industry. Tahreer, vocational Jahra, hazardous material centers, Istiqlal and back-up fire centers participated in putting out the blaze. No injuries were reported.

Ooredoo marks National Day of founder of Qatar

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, commemorates the National Day of the founder of Qatar, Sheikh Jassim Bin Mohammed Bin Thani, assuming the reins of power at a special celebration held on Tuesday, December 7, 2021 at ambassador's residence, in which thousands of high-profile people attended to congratulate Qatari citizens on this special day. The reception was held by the Qatari Embassy and the ambassador Plenipotentiary and Extraordinary of the State of Qatar to the State of Kuwait, Ali Bin Abdullah Al-Mahmoud.

Ooredoo is one of the largest leading Qatari communications companies in Kuwait delivering mobile, fixed, broadband Internet and corporate managed services. The reception was attended by Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain - Chief Executive Officer; Fadi Kawar - Chief Finance Officer; Mijbil Alayoub - Senior Director, Corporate Communications; Thamer Altahou - Director, Government and VIP Relations; Nazem Al-Ghabra - Manager, Corporate Communications; Abdullah Grace - Social Media Specialist; Sulaiman Al-Humoud - Senior Manager, Enterprise Value Management; Naser Al-Abdullah - Manager Advertising and Marketing Communications; Fahad AlKandari - Senior Manager Telesales, Customer Care; and Gannas Ali Al-Fajji - Social Media Specialist, Ooredoo Kuwait, where they all congratulated His Excellency the ambassador of Qatar in Kuwait, Ali Bin Abdullah Al-Mahmoud.



Ali-Babtain with Qatari ambassador to Kuwait Ali Bin Abdullah Al-Mahmoud.



Chief Finance Officer Fadi Kawar and Al-Babtain with American Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski.

The celebrations and atmosphere were charged with emotions of patriotism, pride, and national identity. Further, the celebration promoted loyalty, solidarity, unity and history of Qatar, in addition to commemorating the anniversary of the founding of the state and its renaissance and development under the wise leadership.



Ooredoo Kuwait team with CEO Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain.

Local

Kuwait Crown Prince welcomes Saudi Crown Prince today

Kuwaiti-Saudi relations: Unique model based on solid foundations

KUWAIT: HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is to welcome Saudi Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman today, based on firm fraternal relations between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia on both official and unofficial levels and in consolidation of amicable bonds between both countries' leaders and peoples. This was announced by HH the Crown Prince's Diwan Chief Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah in a statement on the occasion of the visit of the Saudi Crown Prince and his accompanying delegation to Kuwait.

During the visit, talks will include a host of issues and subjects of mutual interest and ways of promoting and bolstering bilateral relations between both countries and brotherly peoples, to fulfill their common expectations and hopes for a brighter and more prosperous future, in addition to the latest regional and international developments, he said. Sheikh Ahmad wished both nations progress and prosperity under the leadership of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud.

Kuwaiti-Saudi relations are an exceptional and unique model based on solid foundations built on historical brotherly ties between the two leaderships and the two peoples. Prince Mohammad bin Salman's visit is the third since he took over as crown prince, as the first visit was in May 2015 when he was Deputy Crown Prince, and his

second was in Sept 2018 after becoming the Crown Prince on June 21, 2017. Kuwaiti-Saudi relations are deep-rooted, extending for more than 130 years, bypassing the dimensions of international relations to the concept of brotherhood, social ties and the same destiny.

As part of continuing mutual visits, HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah visited the kingdom to head the Kuwaiti delegation in January to the Gulf Summit (in Al-Ula), after a visit by the Saudi king to Kuwait in Dec 2016. The visit of HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to the Kingdom on Oct 25 to attend the "Green Middle East Initiative" summit was a continuation of this approach, and it was the second visit of HH the Crown Prince following his first tour in June.

This exceptional relationship was manifested in its best form in the Saudi position in support of Kuwait and defending its legitimacy and independence during the brutal Iraqi invasion in 1990, the kingdom's reception of Kuwait's political leadership, the government and the people on its lands, providing assistance in all its forms and its active contribution to the establishment of the participating countries' coalition in liberating Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation in 1991.

Furthermore, Kuwait has spared no effort in supporting Saudi Arabia at all levels in full solidarity with it in every measure taken to maintain its security and stability. The cooperation be-



KUWAIT: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is welcomed by then Crown Prince and current Amir HH Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah during his previous visit to Kuwait on Sept 30, 2018. — KUNA

tween the two countries included all fields, leading to the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council on May 25, 1981, which accomplished many achievements for Gulf countries within the framework of joint action. The two countries signed several agreements that covered various fields, including media, scientific, cultural, economic, air transport services, facilitating citizens' movement of both countries, flow of goods across the borders, and exchange of scholarships for citizens of both countries.

They also inked memoranda of understanding

for cooperation in fields of Islamic affairs and providing facilities for pilgrims, which are always preceded by coordination and consultative meetings, positively reflecting on the two brotherly people. In pursuit of expanding cooperation in all fields, the two countries signed the minutes of the Saudi-Kuwaiti Coordination Council on July 18, 2018, which held its first meeting in Riyadh last June, and saw the signing of six agreements on cooperation in the field of youth, encouragement of direct investment, as well as education, scientific research and sports. — KUNA

Japan lauds ties with Kuwait

TOKYO: Japanese Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Taro Honda said Kuwait and Japan have built a more multi-layered relationship through cooperation not only in the energy sector, but also in a wide range of fields. In an exclusive interview with Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) on the sidelines of a photo exhibition that marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of Kuwait-Japan diplomatic ties, Honda also underscored a spirit of mutual aid that the two countries have maintained over the last 60 years.

"Japan and Kuwait have helped each other when both countries faced historical hardships. During and after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Japan provided a total amount of \$13 billion of financial aid and dispatched the Japan Self Defense Force to the Arabian Gulf," said Honda. In the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Kuwait provided swift and large-scale assistance to areas affected by the disaster by donating crude oil worth around JPY 40 billion (\$350 million) and assisted its recovery efforts, he noted.

In addition, the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah offered another \$3 million donation to tsunami-damaged Aquamarine Fukushima and \$2 million to the Japanese Red Cross Society during his state visit to Japan in 2012, he noted. Honda also expressed appreciation for the significant role of Kuwait as a major oil producing and exporting country.— KUNA

Kuwait marks Human Rights Day

KUWAIT: Kuwait today marks Human Rights Day, which is observed across the world on Dec 10 under the theme: Equality - Reducing inequalities, advancing human rights. Kuwait has always been interested in safeguarding human rights by adopting pieces of legislation aiming at promoting the values of human rights and joining relevant international conventions and charters.

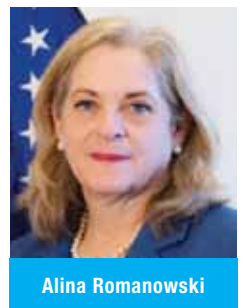
In this context, Chairman of the National Diwan for Human Rights Ambassador Jassem Al-Mubarki said the establishment of the country's national human rights agency unequivocally reflected Kuwait's commitment to human rights. Speaking to KUNA, he said the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was the first international document for safeguarding human dignity and rights against all types of discrimination.

Therefore, he maintained, Kuwait attached much significance to the declaration out of its keenness on developing an integrated societal system in line with relevant global criteria. Established under law (67/2015), the National Diwan of Human Rights is mainly intended to monitor Kuwait's international commitments bearing on human rights, and works with official and unofficial agencies to promote human values and ensure human dignity, rights and freedom, he noted. — KUNA

US ambassador to Kuwait nominated as envoy to Iraq

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden announced Wednesday his intent to nominate current US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Iraq. The White House said in a statement that Romanowski is "a career member of the Senior Executive Service and currently serves as the US Ambassador to Kuwait."

It added that "prior to this, she was the Department of State's Principal Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism". "During almost 40 years of service across various US government agencies, Romanowski has become expert on Middle East affairs," the statement noted. Romanowski joined the Department of State in 2003 to establish the Middle East Partnership Initiative Office and served as its first director, according to the statement. — KUNA



Alina Romanowski

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International

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Iraqi wars' deadly legacy

Unexploded ordnance: 100 children killed

HASSAN-JALAD: In the northern Iraqi hamlet of Hassan-Jalad, almost every family has a story to tell about a time when a child, nephew or brother was lost to wartime munitions. Located near Mosul, a former stronghold of the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group, the area is littered with unexploded ordnance, sometimes dubbed UXO. "We are afraid for the children," said one local man, Awad Qado. "We show them the routes to take, the places to avoid. We tell them not to pick up things they find on the ground." It was in 2017 that Qado's family was struck by a landmine explosion in the hamlet of about 50 homes.

Two of Qado's nephews were killed while tending to their herd. His son was injured and a fourth man's legs were severed in the blast that also killed some livestock. Across Iraq, about 100 children were killed or injured between January and September as a result of remnants of conflict, according to the UN. In a country that has one of the world's highest UXO "contamination rates", almost one in four people is exposed to risk from unexploded ordnance, say non-governmental groups.

Iraq's successive conflicts have left a deadly legacy, from the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, to the US-led invasion of 2003 and the defeat of IS in late 2017. In the area around Hassan-Jalad, more than 1,500 explosives were found within one

year, said Alaa Al-Din Moussa, head of operations for the private demining company GCS. "In this region, every house has a story," he added. "Many children are dead. Hundreds of animals have entered fields and triggered explosives."

'Contaminated urban zones'

Clearing the UXO is painstaking and dangerous work. Ordnance awaiting disposal is left in a desert area behind a banner that reads "STOP". The explosives are classed in several categories including: 107-millimetre rockets, 23-millimetre projectiles and VS500 mines. Both Mosul and the western province of Anbar are among the most affected areas, as are other former IS strongholds. "We see a lot of contamination in built-up urban areas," Pehr Lodhammar, program chief of the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) in Iraq, told AFP. "Explosive hazards and explosive contamination are making it much more difficult for people to return to their homes and to resume a normal life." More than 1.2 million people are displaced in the country as a result of the successive conflicts.

The fighting has left the borders with Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia littered with landmines and unexploded remnants of war, according to a report by the France-based group Humanity & Inclusion. "Iraq is one of the countries most heavily contaminated by explosive ord-



HASSAN-JALAD: Photo shows a view of 120mm projectiles recovered by the Global Clearance Solutions (GCS) private demining company in an area near the village of Hassan-Jalad, north of Iraq's northern city of Mosul. — AFP

nance on earth," the organization said in a report in October. "Explosive remnants of war affect more than 3,200 square kilometers of land - twice the area of London. "A staggering 8.5 million Iraqis live amid these deadly waste-products of war."

'I can do nothing'

A key challenge is raising awareness to allow people to change their behavior in the face of danger. As a

result of sessions held for children and adults, there have been "success stories", Ghaith Qassid Ali, who helps run GCS's awareness program in the Mosul area said. As a result of the sessions, children playing in a field "saw a projectile, remembered the photos a team had shown them and warned us", recounted Ali.

He said the UXO phenomenon poses major economic challenges: "The majority of inhabitants of this

village are farmers, but most of the land is contaminated by remnants of war." At just 21 years old, Abdallah Fathi is living proof of the tragedy wrought by wartime munitions. In 2014, he was tending to his herd when a mine exploded. He lost both his legs, his left hand and several fingers on his right hand. "Before, I used to work, but now I can do nothing, carry nothing, not even cement blocks," he lamented. "I stay at home all day, I don't go out." — AFP

International

Study: Facebook misidentified thousands of political adverts

Instagram boss faces US lawmakers over impact on kids

PARIS: Facebook misidentified tens of thousands of advertisements flagged under its political ads policy, according to a study released yesterday, which warned that the failure could lead to political manipulation. Researchers at Belgium's KU Leuven university and New York University examined 33.8 million Facebook ads that ran on the social media site between July 2020 and February 2021.

"This is the first known study to quantify the performance of Facebook's political ad policy enforcement system at a large and representative scale," the team said in a summary of their findings. Facebook imposes stricter conditions on paid advertisements that concern "social issues, elections or politics," including posts that promote particular candidates. Ads labeled as political appear on the site with a disclaimer that explains who paid for them. Ads that are found to be political, when they were not declared as such, are taken down.

But the researchers found that in 189,000 cases when Facebook reviewed an ad to check whether or not it should be treated as political, it was wrong 83 percent of the time. These included 117,000 cases when Facebook's detection system failed to flag up ads that should have been treated as political, and 40,000 ads that were mistakenly flagged as political when they were not. The researchers noted that Facebook's enforcement of the policy relies heavily on detecting keywords in ads under an automated system, although staff also play a role in moderating the content.

The period studied included elections in two large Facebook markets, the US and Brazil, and the researchers warned that mislabeling the ads created opportunities for manipulation. "When Facebook fails to identify advertisers who do not properly declare their ads as political, those who are malicious can spread disinformation," they warned. "Users who see ads without a political disclaimer may not be aware that their intent is to influence them," they added.

The team noted that the US social media giant missed a higher



WASHINGTON: Head of Instagram Adam Mosseri testifies during a Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee hearing titled *Protecting Kids Online: Instagram and Reforms for Young Users on Capitol Hill*. — AFP

proportion of undeclared political ads outside the United States. "The platform had the worst record in Malaysia, where it missed as much as 45 percent of ads from obviously political pages or advertisers," the research summary said. "In Macedonia, Argentina, Turkey, Portugal, France and Serbia, Facebook missed up to one out of four ads from such pages, which were sponsored by candidates or parties."

The study follows criticism of Facebook over a recent whistleblower scandal, including accusations that the site's ability to tamp down hate speech and misinformation has been seriously lacking outside the West. Within the US, Facebook introduced a moratorium on political ads around the 2020 presidential election, follow-

ing deep controversy over the platform's role leading up to the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Facebook nonetheless allowed more than 70,000 political ads to run during the 2020 moratorium, the researchers found. AFP has reached out to Facebook to request a comment on the study.

Instagram impact on kids

In another development, Instagram's boss faces a grilling Wednesday from US lawmakers after damning press reports based on leaked internal research showed the photo-sharing app could harm its young users. Adam Mosseri's testimony comes as the social media networks under Facebook parent Meta battle a crisis sparked by the company's own documents, and which have rekindled a years-old US push for regulation.

The documents leaked to reporters, lawmakers and regulators by Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen include research from 2019 that found Instagram makes body image issues worse for one in three teenage girls. Another report, from 2020, revealed that 32 percent of teenage girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made it worse. Facebook has pushed back fiercely against a string of Wall Street Journal reports based on the findings, and a subsequent series for a US media consortium, arguing its research was mischaracterized.

Senators Richard Blumenthal and Marsha Blackburn are leading the hearing, the latest in a series probing how social media could be making teens feel worse about themselves. "My conversations with parents have deeply moved me to fight for... reforms and demand answers that the whole nation is seeking," Blumenthal said Tuesday. Facebook has bounced back from other scandals like the one involving Cambridge Analytica, a British consulting firm that used the personal data of millions of Facebook users to target political ads. —AFP

Jihadist threat 'metastasising' beyond Sahel

DAKAR: Jihadist insurgents wreaking havoc in the Sahel are pressing ahead with a long-feared push toward the Gulf of Guinea, hitting Benin, Togo and Ivory Coast, experts say. Their campaign on the edge of the Sahara, starting in Mali in 2012 before spreading to Burkina Faso and Niger, has claimed thousands of lives, displaced two million from their homes and inflicted crippling economic damage.

But a string of border raids on countries to the south of the Sahel has confirmed suspicions the jihadists aim to advance toward the coast, said specialists at a two-day security forum that ended in Dakar on Tuesday. The push "has been visible for several months in the armed attacks in northern Ivory Coast and several days ago with the first attacks on the Benin armed forces," said General Michel Delpit, in charge of France's military contingent in Senegal.

"The risk that we are increasingly see-

ing is that what is happening in the Sahel will move to coastal countries," the UN's special envoy for West Africa and the Sahel, Annadif Mahamat Saleh said. "This is only the beginning," a top African official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "It will continue, and accelerate." Infiltrating coastal countries offers important advantages for the jihadists, the experts said. It helps create new supply lines for food and equipment and unlocks new sources of income from banditry and economic crimes.

'Metastasis'

Compared to the bloodshed to the north, which has sometimes seen scores of fatalities in hit-and-run raids, the attacks have been infrequent and the toll minor. Last Thursday, two soldiers in Benin were killed when a military post near the border with Burkina Faso came under attack.

Four members of the security forces have died in several attacks or roadmine blasts in northeastern Ivory Coast this year. Fourteen Ivorian soldiers were killed at Kafolo in the same region in June 2020. But there is near-certainty that the jihadists' infiltration in the region is already at an advanced stage, the experts said. "Violence is the final phase of the cycle," said Alain Antil,

head of the Sub-Saharan Africa Centre of the French International Relations Institute.

"When you see it (the violence) erupt, it is actually the outcome of them having been in the area for at least a year. "They've been looking for allies, studying the area, detecting weaknesses, resentments between certain ethnic groups or towards the state." "For example, to herders who do not feel protected by the authorities, they will offer protection against the use of their land by other communities which enjoy government protection," Antil said.

A European diplomat said: "The metastasis has begun and has probably spread more than we think—and more than the governments in these countries are ready to admit, at least publicly." Bakary Sambe of the Timbuktu Institute thinktank in Mali said the Gulf of Guinea countries initially felt safe from any such advance from the distant Sahel. "Unfortunately they are in a culture of denial," he said, noting the potential impact on their continuing ability to attract foreign investment and tourist dollars. The coastal states began organising a response four years ago with the so-called Accra Initiative, under which Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo agreed to step up security cooperation. — AFP

US-led anti-IS coalition ends combat mission

BAGHDAD: The US-led coalition against Islamic State group jihadists has finished its combat mission in Iraq and will shift to a training and advisory role, Iraq's national security adviser said yesterday. The change of the mission for around 2,500 US troops stationed in the war-battered country by the end of the year was first announced in July by President Joe Biden, during a Washington visit by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi.

The Iraqi government has been under pressure from powerful pro-Iranian political groups with armed wings that have vehemently demanded all US troops leave the country. "We are officially announcing the end of the coalition forces' combat mission," national security adviser Qassem al-Aaraji wrote on Twitter.

"The relationship with the international coalition continues in the areas of training, advising and capacity building" of Iraqi forces, he added. Aaraji was speaking after a meeting between the coalition and the Joint Operations commanders of the Iraqi security forces. In effect, the about 2,500 US and 1,000 coalition troops deployed in Iraq will remain there. They have been acting as advisers and trainers since mid-2020. — AFP

International

UK announces home-working, COVID-19 passports in England

Britain tightening restrictions as Omicron cases surge

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced the tightening of virus restrictions in England as Omicron variant cases surge, including guidance to work from home and mandatory COVID passports. Johnson said at a briefing that the rate of Omicron cases was doubling every two to three days, risking a “big rise in hospitalizations”.

“We must be humble in the face of this virus”, he said, adding that it was “the proportionate and the responsible thing to move to Plan B in England”. The UK has had more than 10 million confirmed cases and nearly 146,000 people have died from the virus, one of the highest tolls in Europe. Health Secretary Sajid Javid said Wednesday there have been 568 confirmed cases of the newly discovered Omicron variant, but the true figure is “probably closer to 10,000”.

Johnson said that it was becoming increasingly clear that Omicron is “growing much faster than the previously dominant Delta variant and “we can’t yet assume Omicron is less severe than previous variants”. “We just have to respond today in the way that we are,” he said, while insisting the new measures do not amount to a lockdown and people can continue with Christmas parties and children’s events such as Nativity plays as long as they “exercise due caution”.

Christmas party probe

Johnson announced the stringent measures

while facing public anger over video footage of his aides joking about an alleged illicit Christmas party at Downing Street during last year’s lockdown. The footage aired on national television showed aides laughing as they discussed how to respond if questioned about a “fictional party” at Downing Street, at a time last year when many families had to cancel long-awaited Christmas gatherings. Johnson on December 19, 2020, announced a strict “stay at home” alert level for London and southeastern England.

The prime minister has insisted that to his knowledge there was no party inside his Number 10 Downing Street office and no rules were broken. He has ordered an investigation into the incident. An advisor to Johnson, Allegra Stratton, who was his press secretary when she was featured in the footage, gave a tearful resignation speech on Wednesday. She offered “profound apologies”, saying she would “regret those remarks for the rest of my days”.

Passports for stadiums

As part of a raft of new measures, the government is reintroducing advice to work at home in England. “From Monday, you should work from home if you can - go to work if you must,” the prime minister said. He added that the government in a week’s time will make it compulsory to show COVID vaccine passports in England for



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gestures as he speaks during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the House of Commons in London. — AFP

the first time, while the devolved administrations of Scotland and Wales have already brought in similar measures.

The passes will be required “for entry into nightclubs and venues where large crowds gather”, Johnson said, specifying that this would mean indoor venues where more than 500 people

gather unseated. He also said that the passes will be required for any venue with more than 10,000 people present, such as sports stadiums. Four Premier League football matches will take place next Wednesday. People will have to show certification that they have received two vaccine doses or taken a negative lateral flow test. — AFP

UN urges full reopening of South Asian schools amid learning loss

KATHMANDU: India and its neighbors should fully reopen schools to address the interrupted education of more than 400 million children whose classrooms were shut by the coronavirus pandemic, UNICEF said yesterday, with a top official warning the consequences could last decades. Schools in Bangladesh were closed for almost 18 months, one of the longest closures in the world, the UN children’s agency said, while schools in other South Asian countries were shut for an average of 31.5 weeks between March 2020 and August this year.

“This happened in a region where there were no strong conditions for remote learning,” George Laryea-Adjei, UNICEF’s regional director for South Asia, told AFP. “Access to internet and devices was very uneven. And we see a severe learning deficiency, especially among poor communities and girls - because often boys are more trusted with technology.” One study in India, cited in the report, showed that the proportion of grade 3 children who could read a grade 1 level text fell from around 42 percent in 2018 to just 24 percent in 2020. Being out of school also led to students experiencing psychosocial distress, poor mental health and increased risk of violence. Girls were at a high risk of early marriage. The UNICEF report called on governments in South Asia to safely resume in-person learning and ensure that students catch up, as well as improving connectivity. — AFP

Inside the South Africa lab that discovered Omicron

JOHANNESBURG: Access to the laboratory is strictly limited, for the risk of accidental infection is just too high. Here, technicians at whirring machines analyse 18,000 PCR tests a day, looking for signatures of coronavirus. Their work is so precise that just a handful of samples helped the team to discover Omicron - the new virus variant that has triggered global fears of yet another surge in the deadly pandemic.

In a white lab coat and mask, Eftyxia Vardas oversees an army of technicians, biochemists, and fellow virologists in Johannesburg at one of the biggest facilities run by Lancet Laboratories, a private firm. As a clinical virologist, she has worked on diseases such as TB and AIDS for two decades. In early November, 22 positive tests - mostly around the capital Pretoria - captured her team’s attention. The PCR tests most commonly used to detect COVID-19 work by sifting through the genetic code to look for three specific genes. But the lab found that one of those genes - the S gene - had dramatically disappeared from positive test results. “We realized something was different in our PCR tests,” she told AFP, sketching her explanation on a notepad. “We weren’t entirely sure what it was, if it was an existing variant or a new variant.”

‘Night and day’

At the time, four COVID-19 variants had been previously discovered, all of them a deep source of concern: Delta,

which by then was behind most of the world’s cases, Alpha, Beta and Gamma. Vardas’s team worked patiently to make sure they wouldn’t sound a false alarm. “It took us about a week to accumulate the samples and then another week to do the sequencing,” she said. “Then we were pretty sure something was going on.” Sequencing is a costly and laborious process that allows scientists to reveal the virus’s genome. “It showed it was a completely different virus,” she said. “And that was the discovery of Omicron.”

There’s no joy in discovering the next phase of an epidemic that has infected more than three million South Africans, leaving 90,000 dead. She sent the samples to health authorities at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases and KRISP, the country’s world-class genetic research centre. As they dug deeper into the results, they confirmed the new variant, with an unusual number of mutations, had displaced Delta among new cases.

On November 25, the virologist who gained fame for identifying the Beta variant a year earlier, Tulio de Oliveira, confirmed at news conference that the new variant had been detected. That triggered a new wave of fear over the pandemic, which has already killed around 5.2 million people since the first case appeared in Wuhan, China, in late 2019.

Within hours, countries in Europe and elsewhere responded by immediately imposing travel restrictions on South Africa, prompting outraged protestations that the country had been made a scapegoat. Health Minister Joe Phaahla said many citizens felt that had South Africa “kept quiet, travel bans would not have happened.” “But that would have been detrimental, because our approach is for our citizens to not live in false security and false safety,” he said. — AFP

International

Life under rebel rule in an Ethiopian holy city

Worshippers to cry out 'God save our city'

LALIBELA: Father Tsige Mezgebu was leading an afternoon prayer service in August when a column of haggard-looking rebels entered Lalibela, prompting worshippers to cry out "God save our city!" He immediately feared the worst for the 11 mediaeval rock-hewn churches that make Lalibela, in northern Ethiopia's Amhara region, a holy site for the country's tens of millions of Orthodox Christians - as well as a top tourist magnet. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) insurgents have a fearsome reputation, with officials and human rights groups accusing them of indiscriminate killings and mass rape during an offensive in Amhara that began in July.

Yet Father Tsige, administrator of the Lalibela monastery, urged his flock to keep calm and stay home. "I believe in God, and I had faith that nothing would happen at this holy place," he told AFP. What followed were four months of deprivation and violence. Rebels looted homes and health facilities, while residents lost touch with the outside world due to cuts in transportation, electricity, banking and communications.

Doctors became so desperate they used donkeys to smuggle in medicine from government-held territory. The ordeal ended only last week when the army retook Lalibela as part of a lightning-fast counter-offensive - the latest dramatic shift in Ethiopia's unpredictable 13-month war. AFP was the first independent media outlet to reach the city, a UNESCO World Heritage site, where Father Tsige is now taking stock of the suffering while seeking solace in the fact that Lalibela's storied churches appear to have survived unscathed.

Praying and looting

Ethiopia's war was not supposed to last this long. Abiy, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, promised a speedy victory when he sent troops into Ethiopia's northernmost Tigray region to topple the TPLF in November 2020 - a decision he said came in response to rebel attacks on army camps. By late June however, the TPLF had staged a shock comeback, reclaiming most of Tigray before moving into neighboring Amhara and Afar. Lalibela was one of many Amhara localities where government soldiers chose to flee instead of fight.

Local officials followed, leaving church leaders to administer the rebel-controlled city as best they could. Their first act was to confront combatants who had placed heavy weapons near the churches. The TPLF fighters, many of them Orthodox Christians themselves, responded positively, removing the weapons and vowing to respect the site. They also began leaving their Kalashnikovs outside before descending to pray in the Church of

Saint George, an iconic excavation shaped like a cross.

But in the city itself, the rebels were less accommodating, knocking on homes at all hours and demanding mobile phones and food, residents told AFP. "You couldn't ask to get anything back. There were guns, they said they would kill us," said Belaynew Mengeshaw, a tour operator. "One of them asked me, 'Do you want Abiy to come save you?'" Residents said the rebels looted government offices and banks and ransacked the airport, leaving behind a mess of downed power lines, shattered glass and boarding passes strewn across the floor.

Drugs via donkey

But it was the city's hospital, which serves a population that pre-war was roughly 20,000, where the frightening humanitarian toll became increasingly clear. As food reserves ran low, the medical facility received 290 malnourished children, 90 of them severely affected. Six died. "We couldn't treat them because the supplements had been looted by the TPLF," said Temesgen Muche, a social worker at the hospital. Doctors did their best to improvise and keep services running. They arranged for donkeys to bring medicine from the town of Meket, 40 kilometers west.

At night, under cover of darkness to avoid detection, they administered the drugs to patients with chronic conditions like HIV and tuberculosis. Yet despite these successful hacks, spirits at the hospital flagged in recent weeks. Oxygen supplies were severely depleted, down to just enough for a single 30-minute procedure. With banks non-functional, doctors could not access their salaries and became dependent on handouts of food and money collected by Orthodox leaders. Some would return from overnight shifts to find their homes had been looted and their loved ones beaten by rebels.

The fight continues

The arrival of the army last week - along with members of the Amhara special forces and a militia known as Fano - brought immediate relief to many Lalibela residents. "The people were suffering and humiliated, and they lived under a burden," said Fano fighter Eshete Zewudru. Once again, the city fell without any actual fighting, though soldiers described fierce clashes nearby, including on the road leading north to Lalibela from the town of Gashena. TPLF leaders have dismissed the government's claims of a big win, saying they are merely making tactical withdrawals. At the hospital, meanwhile, there are plenty of reminders that it could have been much worse. — AFP



NEFAS MEWCH'A: Amhara militia fighters ride on a truck in Nifas Mewcha, Ethiopia. Residents of Lalibela, a city in northern Ethiopia home to storied mediaeval rock-hewn churches, are reeling from the recent occupation by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) insurgent group. — AFP

Ethiopia PM returns from the war front

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said Wednesday that he was returning to Addis Ababa from the battlefield after pro-government forces claimed major advances in their fight against Tigrayan rebels. The government on Monday said pro-Abiy forces had retaken the strategic towns of Dessie and Kombolcha, the latest turn in the 13-month-old war.

After the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebel group reported significant territorial gains as part of a march towards Addis Ababa, Abiy announced last month that he would head to the battlefield, handing over his regular duties to his deputy. Since then, state media has broadcast images of a uniformed Abiy, a former lieutenant colonel in the military, as fighting reportedly raged on at least three fronts. On Wednesday, the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner said: "I am returning to the office as I have completed the first phase" of the conflict.

But "the struggle isn't yet finished. We have areas that haven't been freed," he warned in a statement published on social media. "We should offer a long-lasting solution to make sure the enemy that has tested us doesn't become a danger to Ethiopia again." In recent days, the government has announced the recapture of several small

towns, including the UNESCO World Heritage site of Lalibela which is famed for its 12th-century rock-hewn churches.

Late Wednesday, the state-affiliated Fana Broadcasting Corporate reported pro-Abiy forces were marching on Mersa some 90 kilometers north of Dessie, having taken four other towns and other locations on a nearby front. The TPLF has dismissed the government's claims, saying the rebels were making strategic withdrawals and remained undefeated. Fears of a rebel march on Addis Ababa have prompted countries such as the United States, France and Britain to urge their citizens to leave Ethiopia as soon as possible, although Abiy's government says the city is secure.

Olusegun Obasanjo, the African Union's special envoy for the Horn of Africa, is leading a push to broker a ceasefire, but little progress has been reported so far. The surging conflict has fuelled fears of a potential spillover into the fragile East African region, with Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta last month urging both parties to lay down their arms. Obasanjo visited Kenya on Wednesday, Kenyatta's office announced, saying the two men "discussed several subjects of importance to Kenya, the region and the African continent", without offering further details. — AFP

International

Biden convenes more than 100 nations for democracy summit

Summit draws fire from China and Russia

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden, who took office amid the biggest US political crisis in decades, hosted representatives of more than 100 countries for a democracy summit yesterday that is drawing fire from China and Russia. The event, held by video link because of the coronavirus pandemic, is billed by the White House as US leadership in an existential struggle between democracies and powerful autocracies or dictatorships.

"Make no mistake, we're at a moment of democratic reckoning," said Uzra Zeya, the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. "It's no secret that democracies around the world are facing increasing challenges from new and novel threats. Countries in virtually every region of the world have experienced degrees of democratic backsliding."

The summit, running till today, will feature opening remarks from Biden at the White House and is set to gather representatives from some 100 governments, as well as NGOs, private businesses, philanthropical organizations and legislatures. But the fact that Biden continues to face a shocking challenge to US democratic norms from Donald Trump and his attempt to overturn the 2020 election provides a troubling backdrop for the summit.

And even before summit attendees could meet, tensions erupted simply over who should be on - and off - the list. China and

Russia, which Biden sees as champions of the autocracies camp, were pointedly left out, something they say is stoking an ideological "rift." "No country has the right to judge the world's vast and varied political landscape by a single yardstick," wrote ambassadors Anatoly Antonov of Russia and Qin Gang of China in a joint essay last month.

Further prickling Chinese sensibilities, the Biden administration has invited Taiwan - the democratically ruled island that mainland China considers part of its territory, albeit not yet under its control. On Monday, the Biden administration also announced it would not send US government officials to the Beijing Winter Olympics in February in protest at human rights abuses, including "genocide" against the Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang.

Australia, Britain and Canada have joined the diplomatic boycott, although the countries' athletes will still compete. Again, Russia joined China in criticizing the decision. Deciding when other countries should be excluded from the summit for human rights abuses or vote rigging hasn't been any less fraught. For example, Pakistan and the Philippines are in, while EU member Hungary's nationalist government is out. Brazil's right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro is invited, while the leader of NATO member Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has been shunned.



KANSAS CITY: US President Joe Biden speaks about the Infrastructure Law while visiting the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority in Missouri on December 8, 2021. — AFP

Democracy problem at home

The most awkward element to the summit, however, is the fact that Biden is struggling to restore faith in democracy at home, let alone on the other side of the world. Trump refuses to recognize the results of the

2020 election, in which Biden defeated him. With the help of sympathetic media outlets, including the powerful Fox News, the former Republican president continues to spread lies about fraud to his tens of millions of supporters. — AFP

US House votes to punish China over Uyghur treatment

WASHINGTON: The US House of Representatives on Wednesday passed legislation restricting imports from China's Xinjiang region over its treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority, as tensions continue to escalate between Washington and Beijing. Members of the House voted 428-1 to pass the "Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act," which requires corporations to prove "with clear and convincing evidence" that any goods imported from the region were not made using forced labor.

"Right now, Beijing is orchestrating a brutal and accelerating campaign of repression against the Uyghur people and other Muslim minorities," Speaker Nancy Pelosi told lawmakers ahead of the vote. "In Xinjiang, across China, millions are enduring outrageous human rights abuses: from mass surveillance and disciplinary policing; to mass torture including solitary confinement and forced sterilizations; intimidation of journalists and activists who have dared to expose the truth." She added: "And, the government of China's exploitation of forced labor reaches across the oceans to our shores and across the world." The US Senate has previously approved a similar meas-

ure and the two will now need reconciling. The bill will then need to be signed into law by President Joe Biden and it was unclear whether it had White House support.

The vote comes shortly after the White House announced a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics over what it termed China's "genocide" of the Uyghur minority and other human rights abuses, a move that drew a harsh rebuke from Beijing. Earlier this summer, the US government imposed similar restrictions on some Chinese imports, including solar panel materials, over Beijing's treatment of Uyghurs. China called those restrictions "bandit-like."

In a separate 428-0 vote, the House also passed a resolution stating that the International Olympic Committee "failed to adhere to its own human rights commitments" amid doubts about the safety of Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai, who has accused a top Communist Party leader of sexual assault. 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. — AFP



LOS ANGELES: Activists rally in front of the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles, California, calling for a boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics due to concerns over China's human rights record. — AFP

Pfizer study lifts mood over Omicron variant

3 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine appear effective

FRANKFURT: Three doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine appear effective against the Omicron variant, a lab test indicated-encouraging news, even as Denmark and Britain announced new restrictions to stem surging caseloads. In preliminary results published on Wednesday, the US and German companies behind one of the world's foremost shots to combat COVID-19 said a booster generated around the same level of potent antibodies against Omicron as is seen after a second dose with the initial strain.

But they warned that "the Omicron variant is probably not sufficiently neutralized after two doses." The announcement, which has not yet been peer reviewed, was called reassuring by experts, and came as the first independent data from labs around the world emerged, indicating the new mutations are better at evading immunity from infections and vaccines than those before them.

"We still need to be very measured and take a wait and see approach, but I think what we do have is at least encouraging," virologist Angela Rasmussen of Canada's Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization told AFP. Blood samples from around 20 people who had received two doses of the current vaccine showed on average a 25-fold reduction in neutralizing antibodies compared to the early strain of the virus, the companies said.

But they added that another part of the immune response-from T cells-were probably still effective against the new variant, meaning that people with two doses "may still be protected against severe forms of the disease". The vaccine-makers are developing an Omicron-specific version of the jab, which they hope will be ready by March, but say the decision whether to mass produce it would depend on the variant's spread.

Colombian Amazon: A casualty of peace

SAN JOSE DEL GUAVIARE: In just a few minutes, an enormous century-year-old tree is felled by an electric saw in the middle of a protected national park. The giant collapses, sending a shockwave through the Colombian Amazon. Its executioner is a 40-year-old man with a scarf bound around his face. The purpose of the crime: to plant coca, used to make cocaine - the only means of survival for many who dwell in the forests of Colombia's southern Guaviare region.

"We do it out of necessity," the man told AFP on condition of anonymity because logging in the Serrania de La Macarena national park is a crime, as is growing coca. "If not, we find ourselves without food." Ironically, the 2016 peace pact that ended near six decades of civil war in Colombia has boded ill for the Amazon. As FARC rebels disarmed and left the forest cover, land

New restrictions

In Europe, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced she would extend Christmas school holidays, curtail nightlife and urge citizens to work from home as the country fights off a sharp rise in infections. "The plan is not to have a long closure," she said, while acknowledging a return to home offices would also be unwelcome for many.

Her British counterpart Boris Johnson likewise brought back guidance to work from home and vaccine passports for venues such as nightclubs and stadiums. The new measures apply to England, and were already in place in Scotland and Wales. "We must be humble in the face of this virus", he said, adding that it was "the proportionate and the responsible thing to move to Plan B in England". Johnson announced the stringent measures while facing public anger over video footage of his aides joking about an alleged illicit Christmas party at Downing Street during last year's lockdown.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus meanwhile summed up what scientists have learned about Omicron since it was first reported in South Africa in late November. It evades prior immunity well, and it's possible it may cause milder disease, he said. But even if it's confirmed to be less severe, the variant's heightened transmissibility-thought to be greater even than the currently dominant Delta strain-mean it could sicken many people.

Three shots

Pfizer and BioNTech's news came after other preliminary results from a small study in South Africa suggested there was up to a 40-fold drop in the ability of the antibodies from the same vaccine to neutralize Omicron, compared to an early strain. Willem Hanekom, executive director of the Africa Health

grabbers moved into areas that were once no-go zones, chopping down trees and farming in this protected area famous for its unique biodiversity.

According to government data, 925,000 hectares of Colombian forest have been destroyed since 2016, an area about the size of Cyprus. As the guerillas left, land thieves moved in with hired men armed with chainsaws and machetes, carving out large expanses of land for themselves and erecting fences with the wood of the felled trees. One local told AFP he himself deforested about 200 hectares before giving up for fear of arrest. He was paid by a boss he never met. "I was able to cut down a hectare a day," he told AFP.

An aerial view offers a devastating panorama of the destruction in Guaviare: ever-expanding patches of freshly-cleared land, crops, pastures and cow herds amid shrinking tree cover. People caught cutting down trees in the protected reserve, or sponsoring such destruction, risk up to 15 years in prison. The government conducts anti-deforestation operations, but the area is vast, remote, and hard to police. Since 2019, authorities have detained 96 people in raids.



CAPE TOWN: A member of the Western Cape Metro EMS (Emergency Medical Services) prepares Pfizer vaccines from an ambulance which has been converted to facilitate vaccinations at a COVID-19 vaccination event in Manenberg in Cape Town. — AFP

Research Institute, which carried out the study, said it was important to be "extraordinarily careful" interpreting the results because they only reflect a laboratory setting, while real-world data was the true test.

Antibody reductions were also seen in studies by German and Swedish researchers, but they varied in magnitude. Omicron counts more than 30 mutations on the spike protein that dots the surface of the coronavirus and allows it to invade cells, and a high degree of immune evasion was widely anticipated. But the fact that a booster appears to restore high protection was welcomed by many experts,

and provides "strong support for the campaign to give three doses of vaccine," said Charles Bangham, an immunologist at Imperial College London.

While the positive initial assessments of Omicron have helped lift the mood, especially among global markets as fears of another economic downturn subsided, the variant's emergence has highlighted that the fight against the pandemic is far from over. COVID-19 has officially killed more than 5.2 million people around the world since it was first declared in late 2019, although the true toll is likely to be several times higher. — AFP

'The rich came to destroy everything'

Livestock herding is a major source of deforestation. In the so-called "Amazon deforestation arc" - stretching across the central regions of Meta, Guaviare, Caqueta and Putumayo - the livestock herd increased by 60 percent from 2016 to 2019, according to the Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development (FCDS). There has also been a recent explosion of illegal land tilling - ever-expanding plantations of corn, bananas and rice in what was until recently virgin forest. "Here, the worst deforestation started about five years ago," community leader Luis Calle told AFP, standing next to what he calls a "cemetery" of dead trees. Locals say the guerillas protected the forest, even if inadvertently.

They imposed their own laws and tightly controlled the activities of coca growers and traders - the illicit economy that financed the FARC's armed uprising. But "after they made peace, the rich came to destroy everything," said Edilberto Lozada, a 50-year-old small-scale farmer. Land-grabbers took advantage of the fact that locals were left "out of pocket" as their guerilla drug-handlers left, paying cheaply for patches of land on which the peasants held 10-year government leases, added Calle. — AFP

International

CPJ: A record number of journalists jailed in 2021

Journalist killed in the Philippines

NEW YORK: The number of journalists jailed around the world hit a new record in 2021, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said yesterday, with China and Myanmar having put a quarter of the 293 media workers behind bars. In its annual report, the CPJ listed 50 journalists imprisoned in China, 26 in Burma, 25 in Egypt, 23 in Vietnam and 19 in Belarus.

Adding those jailed in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Russia, Ethiopia and Eritrea, the CPJ said a total of 293 journalists were in prison worldwide as of December 1 - up from 280 the year before. "This is the sixth year in a row that CPJ has documented record numbers of journalists imprisoned around the world," said Joel Simon, executive director of the group. "Imprisoning journalists for reporting the news is the hallmark of an authoritarian regime," he said in a statement. For 40 years, the CPJ has denounced journalists being murdered, imprisoned, censored, physically hurt and threatened.

"It's distressing to see many countries on the list year after year, but it is especially horrifying that Myanmar and Ethiopia have so brutally slammed the door on press freedom." The association also counted 24 journalists killed around the world this year.

Mexico "remained the Western hemisphere's deadliest country for journalists, with three murdered for their reporting and the motives for six other killings under investigation," the CPJ said.

India was also high on the list, with four journalists killed this year. The CPJ said the number of journalists behind bars reflects "increasing intolerance for independent reporting around the world." The report noted restrictive environments for journalists around the world, including laws used to target reporters in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, the coup in Myanmar, the war in northern Ethiopia and the crackdown on the opposition in Belarus.

Journalist killed

In another development, a Philippine correspondent has died after being shot Wednesday, a press advocacy group said, becoming the latest in a long line of journalists killed in the country. The archipelago nation is one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists, and most of their killers go unpunished. Jesus Malabanan was killed in Calbayog City in the central province of Samar, according to a statement on the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines' (NUJP) Facebook page.

Malabanan was a correspondent for the Manila Standard in the Central Luzon region, north of the capital, the newspaper told AFP, confirming his death.

He also worked as a stringer for Reuters. The international news agency said it was "deeply saddened" to learn of the death of Malabanan, who had worked on its Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the drug crackdown in the Philippines in 2017. The NUJP's Pampanga provincial chapter on the main island of Luzon provided the "senseless killing". Police in Calbayog declined to provide details when contacted by AFP.

Malabanan's death comes less than two months after Orlando Dinoy, a reporter on the southern island of Mindanao, was shot dead in his apartment. At the time, Dinoy was the 21st journalist killed since President Rodrigo Duterte took power in 2016, the NUJP said previously. In a report issued in October before the latest killings, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists listed the Philippines at seventh place in its Global Impunity Index, with 13 murders of journalists still unsolved. The nation has been a mainstay in the annual index since it started in 2008. —AFP

France admits identity mistaken, frees Otaibi

PARIS: French authorities on Wednesday released a man arrested on suspicion of playing a role in the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul after determining he had been a victim of mistaken identity. The man, bearing a passport in the name of Khalid Al-Otaibi, was "quickly" able to head for Riyadh, the Saudi embassy in Paris said in a statement, adding that its diplomats had visited him during his detention.

French border police had arrested him at Paris's main airport on Tuesday as he prepared to board a flight to Riyadh. Police and judicial sources initially told French media that he was the Khalid Al-Otaibi wanted under an international arrest warrant for being part of the hit squad that carried out Khashoggi's murder at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

"In-depth verifications to determine the identity of this person have enabled us to establish that the warrant was not applicable to him," the chief prosecutor in Paris, Remy Heitz, said in a statement that admitted to the blunder. "He has been released," it added, dashing the hopes of campaigners and loved ones who thought the detention spelled a major breakthrough in their quest to bring the perpetrators to justice. "I only would like to say that I will continue to seek justice in any case," Khashoggi's fiancée Hatice Cengiz told AFP when asked for comment.

'Very common name'

Turkey has issued an Interpol Red Notice - which amounts to an international arrest warrant - for 26 people over the grisly assassination of the

former Washington Post contributor, while the US has also announced sanctions on the alleged killers. The Saudi embassy in Paris issued a statement late on Tuesday saying that the arrested man had "nothing to do with the case in question" and demanded his immediate release.

A security source in Saudi Arabia added that "Khalid Al-Otaibi" was a very common name in the kingdom, and that the Al-Otaibi the French thought they were holding was actually serving time in prison in Saudi Arabia along with "all the defendants in the case". Khashoggi's murder sparked international outrage that continues to reverberate, with Western intelligence agencies accusing the kingdom's de facto ruler of authorizing the killing.

French President Emmanuel Macron visited Saudi Arabia at the weekend, becoming one of the first Western leaders to meet the Saudi crown prince since the murder, in a move that was widely criticized by human rights groups. The executive director of the DAWN pro-democracy group founded by Khashoggi, Sarah Leah Whitson, called the mistaken arrest a "remarkable display of incompetence" by French police, but she stressed what she called the "good news." "Now MBS and his 18-20 sanctioned hit men know for sure they can't travel to France, most of Europe, or US, without facing arrest, complaints, asset freezes, travel bans," she wrote on Twitter.

'We remain mobilized'

Media rights body Reporters Without Borders had called Tuesday's arrest "excellent news" and said it would reactivate a previously filed legal complaint with Paris prosecutors against Al-Otaibi for murder, torture and enforced disappearance. The group's head Christophe Deloire took note of the mistake, adding: "We remain mobilized so that the killers of Jamal Khashoggi appear before an independent judicial authority." —AFP



MUMBAI: Police escort activist Sudha Bharadwaj (right) towards a van as she leaves jail to appear in a special court ahead of her release on the 2018 Bhima Koregaon case in Mumbai. —AFP

Lawyer bailed after three-year detention

MUMBAI: An activist lawyer detained for more than three years without trial was freed on bail in Mumbai yesterday, in the latest case to highlight the Indian government's use of contentious anti-terror laws. Sudha Bharadwaj, 60, was arrested in August 2018 on accusations of inciting violence between different Indian castes and claims she had links to Maoist militants.

A special court for India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) has set over a dozen bail conditions for her release, including banning her from talking to the press about the case. The court also directed her to stay in Mumbai and immediately inform it about her place of residence and contact numbers. Bharadwaj waved to reporters but gave no statement as she left the court. "We are really happy... we also hope that this case will die a natural death sooner than

later because it's a case based on fraudulent, inadmissible evidence," said Smita Gupta, a friend of Bharadwaj's.

Sixteen activists and academics have been arrested in the same case, with one of them - Indian rights activist and Jesuit priest Stan Swamy - dying in pre-trial detention in July. The United Nations said it was deeply disturbed by the 84-year-old's death and had called for the group's release. Bharadwaj, like Swamy, was detained under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), which allows people to be held without trial indefinitely.

Critics say the law - which makes it difficult for accused people to receive bail - has been used by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to silence dissent. India's top anti-terrorism investigation agency last month arrested a prominent human rights activist in Indian-administered Kashmir under the UAPA. The government said in February that almost 6,000 people had been arrested under the UAPA between 2016 and 2019, with 132 convicted. —AFP

As climate 'net-zero' plans grow, so is the concerns

Scientists and monitoring groups raise alarm

PARIS: Faced with the prospect that climate change will drive ever deadlier heat waves, rising seas and crop failures that will menace the global food system, countries, corporations and cities appear to have come up with a plan: net zero. The concept is simple: starting now, to ensure that by a certain date - usually 2050 - they absorb as much carbon dioxide as they emit, thereby achieving carbon neutrality. But scientists and monitoring groups are growing increasingly alarmed at the slew of vague net-zero pledges that appear to privilege offsets and future technological breakthroughs over short-term emissions cuts.

Which emissions?

"They're not fit for purpose, any of them," Myles Allen, director of Oxford Net Zero at the University of Oxford said of today's carbon neutrality plans. "You can't offset continued fossil fuel use by planting trees for very long. Nobody has even acknowledged that in their net-zero plans, even the really ambitious countries," he told AFP. Last month's COP26 climate summit in Glasgow saw major emitter India commit for the first time to work towards net-zero emissions, joining the likes of China, the United States and the European Union. According to Net Zero Tracker (NZT), 90 percent of global GDP is now covered by some sort of net-zero plan. But it said that the vast majority remain ill-defined. Take offsets. These are when countries or companies deploy measures - such as tree planting or direct CO2 capture - to compensate for the emissions they produce. NZT found that 91 percent of country targets, and 48 percent of public company targets, failed to even specify whether offsets feature in their net-zero plans.

What's more, it found that less than a third (32 percent) of

corporate net-zero targets cover what are known as "scope 3 emissions" - those from a company's product, which normally account for the vast majority of carbon pollution from a given business. Alberto Carrillo Pineda, co-founder of Science Based Targets initiative, which helps companies align their net-zero plans with what science says is needed to avoid catastrophic heating, said most decarbonization pledges "don't make sense" without including scope 3 emissions. "From a climate point of view it matters, the companies are driving emissions not only through their operations but also through what they buy and sell," he told AFP. "And that constitutes their business model. A company wouldn't exist without their product and so their product needs considering from an emissions point of view."

The UN climate change body, UNFCCC, analyzed the latest national emissions cutting plans during COP26. It found that they would see emissions increase 13.7 percent by 2030, when they must fall by roughly half to keep the Paris Agreement warming limit of 1.5C within reach. Of the 74 countries that have published detailed net-zero plans, the UNFCCC found that their emissions would fall 70-79 percent by 2050 - a significant drop, but still not net zero. Stuart Parkinson, executive director of Scientists for Global Responsibility (SGR), said governments had started to use net-zero pledges as a way of delaying the immediate action the atmosphere needs. "From our perspective, that's thoroughly irresponsible," he said. "It is kicking the problem into the long grass and relying on speculative efforts in technology when we know that we can change behavior right here and now and reduce emissions."

Over four decades of service, he commanded forces in Indian-administered Kashmir and along the Line of Actual Control bordering China. In 2015, he was in charge of an operation in Myanmar against separatists, India's first publicly acknowledged strike against an insurgent group on foreign territory. He survived a helicopter crash in Nagaland the same year with minor injuries, when his aircraft came down nose-first within seconds of take-off.

'Neither modernized nor westernized'

Rawat was the chief of 1.3 million-strong army from 2017 to 2019 before his elevation as the country's first chief of defense staff, a post created specifically for him. He ruffled Beijing's feathers by repeatedly questioning its actions at their disputed borders and warning Nepal about China's growing footprint. The Chinese military protested his recent public comments that China was the biggest security threat for India. Many predicted Rawat could have successfully run for public office after retirement.

His frontline actions on turbulent frontiers and unrelenting support for his troops, whatever their actions, made him hugely popular among Indian soldiers. The "armed forces find huge resonance in the conservative actions of our society", he said as army chief, decrying the prospect of gay people being allowed to serve. "The Army is conservative. We have neither modernized nor westernized." Rawat in 2017 lamented that protesters in Kashmir were only throwing stones at his forces, rather than using firearms. "Then I would have been happy," he told the Press Trust of India, as it would have allowed him to respond as he wanted. As army chief he awarded a prestigious commendation to an army Major who tied a Kashmiri civilian to the front of his military vehicle as a human shield to prevent protestors attacking his team. "This is a proxy war and proxy war is a dirty war," he said. "It is played in a dirty way." —AFP



MELBOURNE: An art piece depicting a burning koala is displayed during a climate change protest in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

Last month UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said an independent group would be established to monitor companies' net-zero progress.

Many countries and businesses plan to deploy mass reforestation as part of net-zero plans. Experts say this is problematic for two reasons. The first is simple science: Earth's plants and soil already absorb enormous amounts of manmade CO2 and there are signs that carbon sinks such as tropical forests are reaching saturation point. —AFP

India's Bipin Rawat: A soldier's general

NEW DELHI: India's Bipin Rawat was an outspoken, polarising but hugely popular "soldier's general" who was wounded in a border battle and survived an aircraft crash before dying in a helicopter accident Wednesday. The military in the world's largest democracy has traditionally stayed well clear of political debates, unlike neighboring Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, all of which have seen multiple coups. The 63-year-old Rawat - seen as close to Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi - upended that norm, openly speaking out on issues ranging from foreign policy and geopolitics to domestic political questions.

And as army chief he said that citizens should fear their own country's forces. "Adversaries must be afraid of you and at the same time your people must be afraid of you," he said in 2017. "We are a friendly Army, but when we are called to restore law and order, people have to be afraid of us." Two years later activists and opposition politicians accused him of violating the oath of his apolitical office after he condemned protests against a new citizenship law that critics said discriminated against Muslims.

Rawat came from a military family who have served in the Indian armed forces for generations. He joined the army as a second lieutenant in 1978 and was shot in a firefight with Pakistani forces when he was stationed at a remote border post in Kashmir. "We came under heavy cross-fire from Pakistan. A bullet hit me on my ankle and a piece of shrapnel grazed my right hand," he told the India Today magazine, requiring surgery and lengthy rehabilitation — and earning him India's Wound Medal.

Indian farmers end year-long mass protests

NEW DELHI: Indian farmers formally ended year-long mass protests yesterday after Prime Minister Narendra Modi abandoned his push for agricultural reforms, a protest leader said. Thousands of people have been camped on the outskirts of the capital New Delhi since last year to campaign against laws they said would have led to a corporate takeover of the sector.

Modi's Hindu-nationalist government rushed through a repeal of the laws last month in a rare backdown, and farmer representatives said yesterday they had agreed to stand down after further concessions. A victory march will be held Saturday to celebrate the campaign's victory against the reforms, protest leader Balbir Singh Rajewal said at a protest camp on the outskirts of New Delhi, news agency PTI reported.

Protests had carried on in smaller numbers after the repeal as farmers sought additional support measures, including compensation for the families of hundreds of farmers they say died during the protests. They also sought concessions on electricity prices and a government pledge not to prosecute them for clearing their fields by burning. Controlled fires are the cheapest way for farmers to clear their fields before the new growing season. But smoke from the fires regularly shrouds the capital New Delhi in smog each winter and the government banned the practice two years ago. —AFP

International

Hong Kong mandates COVID tracing app for most adults

The latest expansion of coronavirus tracing tech

HONG KONG: The Hong Kong government made its check-in app mandatory for most adults in bars and restaurants yesterday, the latest expansion of coronavirus tracing tech at a time of heightened privacy concerns in the city. The international finance hub has kept infections at bay thanks to mostly closed borders, some of the world's strictest quarantine rules and ongoing social distancing rules.

No local infections have been recorded in months, but the city is further ramping up virus measures, aligning with China's zero-COVID strategy as it seeks quarantine-free travel with the mainland. From yesterday, all adults under 65 must use the city government's COVID app, scanning QR codes to log their presence at 18 types of premises - including eateries, cinemas, gyms and karaoke venues. The logs can be used to trace infections if there is an outbreak. Children and the elderly were exempted at the last minute after a public backlash against the proposal to make the app mandatory for all.

The "Leave Home Safe" app has been in use since November 2020, but until yesterday, it was not mandatory and people could still fill out paper slips when entering venues. Chum Tak-shing, a local district councilor in Sham Shui Po, said many older residents who are not exempted in his working-class district do not own,

and cannot afford, a phone to run the app. "They are now having to spend nearly HK\$1,000 (US\$128) on a smartphone and a new SIM card they don't necessarily need," he said.

Febrile politics

Coronavirus contact tracing has got caught up in Hong Kong's febrile politics as China cracks down on dissent in the city. Despite assurances about data security from the authorities, concerns have swirled about how information collected by the app will be stored - and how it may be used. User information on Hong Kong's check-in app is currently linked to phone numbers, not names. Mainland China, however, uses a tracing app that is linked to people's identities.

Last week, Hong Kong announced anyone wishing to travel to the mainland would need to download a version of that app. Some restaurants and venues within Hong Kong's "yellow economy" - businesses that supported the city's now dismantled democracy movement - have often refused to use "Leave Home Safe" as a form of protest. A number of them are considering going takeout-only to avoid using the app. Oscar You, co-founder of local online delivery platform lingduck, told AFP that queries from eateries looking to sign on to his service had risen 30-40 percent ahead of the app mandate rollout. —AFP



HONG KONG: A man scans a QR code for the government's 'Leave Home Safe' app, used for contact tracing amid the COVID-19 pandemic, to enter Immigration Tower in Hong Kong yesterday. —AFP

Overseas Hong Kong activists urge boycott of 'patriots-only' polls

WASHINGTON: Prominent Hong Kong democracy activists who fled overseas are calling for residents to boycott upcoming legislature polls, defying a new law that criminalizes incitement - even for those based abroad. Hong Kong's political elite will select a 90-seat lawmaking body on December 19 under a new "patriots only" system imposed by Beijing after huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago. Only 20 seats will now be directly elected - down from half the last time polls were held - while all those standing for office must first be vetted for their patriotism and political loyalty. Most of the city's traditional pro-democracy opposition figures have been jailed, barred from standing, declined to take part or fled overseas. At least four prominent activists with large social media followings who left Hong Kong have recently begun openly advocating for a boycott.

"Hong Kongers should not endorse the autocratic regime and help the regime to pursue a pseudo-democratic veil," Sunny Cheung, a prominent 25-year-old activist currently seeking asylum in the United States said. "This is a deal with the devil," he added. "Under the reform and its stringent political screening, no authentic democrats can be elected without kowtowing to Beijing." Alex Chow, a well-known former student leader who served jail time for spearheading democracy rallies in 2014, said it was a "no-brainer" to stay home. "Hong Kong voters should boycott the election because it is a way to protest against the government," said Chow, who is also now in the United States. Scores of activists left Hong Kong after Beijing imposed a national security law last year that criminalized much dissent. —AFP

3 activists convicted over Tiananmen vigil

HONG KONG: Jailed Hong Kong media mogul Jimmy Lai was among three democracy campaigners convicted yesterday for taking part in a banned Tiananmen vigil as the prosecution of multiple activists came to a conclusion. Lai, the 74-year-old owner of the now-shuttered pro-democracy Apple Daily newspaper, was found guilty of unlawful assembly charges alongside former journalist Gwyneth Ho and prominent rights lawyer Chow Hang-tung. Authorities had charged more than two dozen pro-democracy politicians and activists over a vigil last year, which commemorated the victims of Beijing's deadly Tiananmen crackdown in 1989 despite a police ban.

The trio were the only ones to contest their charges in court, meaning they were the last to receive their verdict. They argued they went to light candles in a personal capacity and had not "incited" others to join an outlawed rally. At one point, Chow, a trained barrister who represented herself in court, likened her actions to "tank man" - the figure who famously stood in front of a Chinese tank during the Tiananmen crackdown and became an icon.

But District Court judge Amanda Woodcock dismissed those arguments as "frankly nonsensical" and convicted them of charges including inciting and taking part in an unauthorized assembly. "The reality was, any intention to come out and participate in the candlelight vigil in Victoria Park that night was an act of defiance and protest against the police," Woodcock ruled. Amnesty International described the verdicts as the latest "attack on the rights to freedom of expression and assembly" in Hong Kong and said authorities had criminalized a "peaceful, socially distanced vigil".

Ongoing crackdown

The convictions come as authorities crack down on dissent in Hong Kong and remould the once outspoken finance hub in the mainland's authoritarian image after huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago. In practical terms, the latest verdicts make minimal difference to the convicted. Lai, Chow and Ho are among dozens of activists already behind bars facing separate prosecutions under a strict national security law that Beijing imposed on Hong Kong last year.

But their prosecution illustrates how much the gap has narrowed between Hong Kong and the mainland, where authorities have long sought to scrub memories and official records of Tiananmen. For three decades, Hong Kong's annual June 4 candlelight vigil would attract tens of thousands of people, which-with its slogans for democracy and ending one-party rule in China-became a symbol for the political freedoms enjoyed in the city.

But Hong Kong authorities have banned the last two vigils citing both the coronavirus pandemic and security fears. This year, Beijing made it clear it will no longer tolerate Tiananmen commemorations in Hong Kong or Macau, the only two places within China where public remembrance could take place. Multiple organizers of the annual vigil-including Chow-were charged with the national security crime of subversion while a June 4 museum they ran was closed by authorities and its exhibits carted away.

Unlawful assembly prosecutions have been brought against activists who took part in both the 2020 and 2021 banned Tiananmen vigils. Previously, 16 politicians and activists-including prominent campaigner Joshua Wong-were sentenced to six to 10 months in jail over their roles in the vigil, with a few granted suspended sentences. Lai, Chow and Ho and the remaining activists who pleaded guilty-most of whom are also in custody-will be sentenced on Monday. —AFP

LIFESTYLE

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2021

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Revelers perform during the Myths and Legends parade in Medellin, Antioquia department, Colombia. —AFP

**Better watch out, better not bite:
Thai Santa divers feed sharks**

See Pages 22-23

Aussie couple plan private jet flight for dog stranded by COVID rules



This undated handout photo courtesy of Tash Corbin shows her dog Munchkin at an undisclosed location in New Zealand. — AFP

An Australian couple plans to shell out tens of thousands of dollars hiring a private jet to fly their stranded dog home from New Zealand in time for Christmas. Munchkin, a former Bali street dog, is stuck in New Zealand unable to travel to her owners' home on Australia's Sunshine Coast due to COVID border rules and flight disruptions. Owner Tash Corbin said after a five-month separation from Munchkin and her fiancé, David Daynes, she had decided to hire a private jet costing Aus\$45,000 (US\$32,000) for her pooch and partner's trip to Australia. "The money part is not the number one driver, it's about who can most certainly get them home before Christmas," she told AFP. "Christmas is a really big deal for us... I just want us all to be together."

Pandemic-related disruptions mean there are few flights operating between New Zealand's South Island and airports near the Sunshine Coast. And travelling via New Zealand's North Island, where there is currently a virus outbreak, would put Daynes in a two-week quarantine lasting through much of the festive season. The couple is hoping to split the costs by recruiting passengers, offering to foot half of the jet bill while selling four remaining seats to other travellers, or perhaps hitching a ride on another private charter. If their scheme is successful, it would be the final stage in a five-year journey to bring Munchkin from the Indonesian island of Bali, where she was adopted as a puppy.

Corbin said the canine spent three years in Singapore with various foster families after failing medical tests to enter Australia, which has strict rules around importing pets. She and Daynes eventually packed up and moved to New Zealand when the country accepted Munchkin in 2019, hoping to stay there temporarily until Australia approved the dog's entry. Corbin eventually returned home alone for medical reasons while Daynes waited for the green light from Australia. The entire process has cost so much money that Corbin has christened the dog "Million Dollar Munchkin" on social media. "We stopped counting about three years ago when it got to Aus\$40,000," she said. "We didn't ever at the start of this process expect that it would cost this much or take this long. We expected it to be Aus\$10,000 and six weeks." Corbin said she realized the couple was "in such a privileged position" to have the funds and there was "no way" she could ever leave Munchkin behind. "She's our family now and so I wouldn't change it for the world. I love her so much and she's such an amazing little creature." —AFP

Rothschilds offer Rembrandt to Dutch for 150 million euros

The Rothschild family signed a letter of intent on Wednesday to sell the Dutch government a Rembrandt self-portrait for 150 million euros (\$170 million), the culture ministry said. The Dutch master's "The Standard-Bearer" will be "in Dutch hands for the first time" if parliament backs the initiative, culture ministry spokesman Michiel Hendrikx told AFP, adding that he is confident of the support of MPs.

"It's a unique opportunity" to acquire a last Rembrandt of such calibre, he added, expressing satisfaction that the Netherlands had "managed to seize it". Paris had said Tuesday that it would allow a sale on the open market even though the work, which is valued at 165 million euros, is classed as a "national treasure" in France. If the Dutch parliament approves the 150 million euros of public cash, the Rembrandt Association would add 15 million euros to the pot and the Rijksmuseum fund 10 million.

"The Standard-Bearer" is one of Rembrandt's absolute masterpieces and inextricably tied to the history of the Netherlands," the culture ministry in The Hague said in a statement. The work "was in private hands for centuries, including the king of England and since 1844 the Rothschild family," it added. Rembrandt was 30 when he painted the work in 1636. "The Standard-Bearer" is coming home for good after a journey of several centuries,"

Netherlands culture minister Ingrid van Engelshoven said in the statement. Taco Dibbits, director of Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, which hosts 22 of Rembrandt's roughly 340 paintings, said that "we have been dreaming for generations of bringing 'The Standard-Bearer' to our country." "The quality and the fact that this painting marks Rembrandt's breakthrough as an artist make it an unmatched work from the master," he added. —AFP



MBC's Shahid Platform acquires the first series of a Kuwaiti production start-up

Founded by Sheikha Abrar Khaled Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, Abbey's Productions, a Kuwait-based production company that focuses on developing the caliber and enhancing the quality of Kuwaiti films and television content, launched its first series "Bi Tawqet Mecca" (In Mecca's Time) after being acquired by MBC's group streaming platform, Shahid.net. The platform launched the series on December 2, 2021 and it soon became ranked as the top viewed series in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

"Being ranked as the number one viewed series in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait on a prominent platform such as Shahid.net reflects the team's hard working efforts, especially the Managing Director Ahmed Buraiki's dedication to this project that have resulted in great success. This is only the beginning of Abbey's Production journey. Our commitment to produce international standard content that appeals to the Arab audience will lead us to position Kuwait in the regional film and television industry," stated Sheikha Abrar Al Sabah while praising the efforts of the fully fledged Kuwaiti team that have taken an active part in producing the widely viewed series.

She then stressed on the importance of producing international standards of film and television quality content that reflects the Arab culture, values, and heritage to attract the younger Arab generations who are continuously exposed to endless lists of series and films exhibited on the latterly social streaming platforms. Sheikha Abrar Al-Sabah then added: "Through Abbey's Productions, our goal is to produce entertainment content that reflects our country's image in the regional and global market while targeting the Arab audience, specifically the younger generations."

The seven episodes series brings together prominent Kuwaiti stars such as Hayat Al-Fahad and Saad Al-Faraj along with various Saudi celebrities and film professionals such as Shouq Mohammed (Saudi Arabia's famous social media influencer), Saeed Saleh, Hanneen Zayed, Abdelrahman Al-Zehem, and Abdelmenam Al-Ghazal. After 26 days of shooting, Bi Tawqet Mecca is considered to be the first produced series filmed at the Kabaa, the holiest site in Islam, located in Mecca.

"Bi Tawqet Mecca" is currently making its mark due to its high-quality produced content aiming to inspire the new generation of film and television production to create meaningful stories and content highlighting the Arab heritage, culture, and values. The series was written, directed, and produced by a fully-fledged team of Kuwaiti talented film professionals where the story of the widely watched series was initiated by Mohammed Hassan Ahmed, written by Abdulmohsen Al-Rodhan, directed by Manaf Abdal, and the production of the series was exclusively managed by Abbey's Productions Managing Director, Ahmed Al-Buraiki.





Women participate in a fashion show of the Mougna foundation (a NGO improving the living conditions and empowering young women with disabilities) as part of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, in Abidjan. —AFP photos

Disabled models breaking taboos on Ivory Coast catwalk

Twenty models with disabilities have taken to the catwalk in Ivory Coast in a ground-breaking assault on taboo and stigma. Decked out in a red suit, traditional Sahelian boubou robes, multi-coloured African bogolan prints and a blue tunic with printed motifs, the models showed off the latest creations of Abidjan designers in an event dubbed “Strong and Beautiful Together.” Grace Beho had her right forearm amputated after a road accident.

Six months ago, she created the Mougna Foundation, an organization set up to improve the quality of life for disabled Ivorian women. Its name means “moving forward despite difficulties” in the Guere language of western Ivory Coast. “I think that the women who are going to be watching us and who do not yet have confidence in themselves... are going to assert themselves and show themselves to the world as they are,” she said as she stepped off the stage. Leslie Antsere, who suffers from neurofibromatosis, a genetic disease which can cause disfiguring tumors, said she was delighted to take part in an event that had stopped her from “feeling ashamed.”

The MC at the fashion show, Nelly Aka, was sporting high heels despite a foot disability. “Even in a situation of disability, we can go beyond ourselves and do many things,” she said. “Over-

coming disability is about accepting yourself—the way people look at you and criticize you will not affect who you are,” she said. A model called Sylvia, dressed in a green-and-white dress, opened the show, coming down the catwalk on crutches by the side of a swimming pool in front of an enthusiastic audience in a hotel in the Ivorian economic capital. The event took place on December 3 — the UN’s International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

‘Marginalized’

Officially, Ivory Coast has 453,000 people who are disabled in some way, two percent of the population. For them such an event is unheard of. “Even mentioning a disabled person in the world of beauty is taboo in Ivory Coast,” said Ange Prisca Gnagbo, one of organizers for the special evening. “They are sidelined in all the beauty shows,” she added. But such practices are entrenched in Ivory Coast, where disabilities are often viewed-as elsewhere in Africa-as an affliction. “Many disabled women are very vulnerable, rejected and marginalized. So they hide away for fear of being judged,” said sociologist Yves Ouya.

For Dr Abdou Dramane Coulibaly, consultant at the World Health Organization and head of a disability NGO, the issue also faces a lack of political will. “Let’s suggest to able-bodied people



that they walk with crutches for a day — (that way) we will gain more understanding than with big speeches,” he suggested. “My dream is that in the coming decades I will see a handicapped person making a name for himself or herself in areas where the doors have been closed,” said Beho. —AFP



BETTER WATCH OUT, BETTER NOT BITE: THAI SANTA DIVERS FEED SHARKS



A diver dressed as Santa Claus waves from inside a tank full of sharks and rays.

It was beginning to look a lot like feeding time, as a diver dressed in a Santa suit hopped into an aquarium at a Bangkok mall to spread fish scraps and good cheer just in time for Christmas. Sea Life Bangkok Ocean World kicked off the holiday season this week with workers dressing in festive gear as they went through their daily feeding routine in the massive aquarium. For the sharks, stingrays, and schools of colorful fish, the diving duo—one dressed as Santa Claus and the other sporting reindeer antlers—brought joy to their world as they flung out food scraps.

On the other side of the glass, visitors took selfies with the Santa diver, who gamely waved when not forking out chunks to passing sharks. Stingrays floated ethereally across the massive tank, trying to catch gifted fish in their flat mouths. Children stared in awe as yellow-and-black damselfish swirled around Santa, who appeared suspended in mid-air like an angel. “I am very impressed (with the show),” said Emachana Piyasakulkaew, who visited the aquarium with her young son. “He is so excited and if he likes something, he will watch until the end. And today he watched it from start to finish.” The Christmas-themed feeds will be held daily from December 14 to 26 at the aquarium, which is located in Bangkok’s famed Siam Paragon mall.—AFP



Divers dressed as Santa Claus and a reindeer prepare to feed sharks and rays at the Sea Life Bangkok Ocean World aquarium in Bangkok.



A diver dresses as Santa Claus as he prepares to feed sharks and rays.



A diver dressed as Santa Claus carries a gift box of fish after feeding them to sharks and rays.



A diver dressed as Santa Claus interacts with sharks and rays.



A diver dresses as Santa Claus as he prepares to feed sharks and rays at the Sea Life Bangkok Ocean World aquarium.



A diver dressed as Santa Claus interacts with sharks and rays.



Wheelchair dancers from the Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower Handicapped Art Troupe take photos with staff members of Shanghai Disneyland the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. —AFP photos



Wheelchair dancers from the Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower Handicapped Art Troupe perform at Shanghai Disneyland.

Shanghai wheelchair dancers find their groove

When she lost a leg to cancer at the age of 10, Shao Yue never imagined she could learn to dance. Now, she's a national wheelchair-dancing champion who hopes her story can help change perceptions of the disabled in China. "People think we face a lot of difficulty going out... and need to rely entirely on others to survive," said the 34-year-old winner of multiple competitions. "But we actually don't need that much help. And we don't need everyone to look at us as outsiders," adds Shao, a mother who drives her daughter to school each day. Despite gradually modernizing

attitudes in China, people with disabilities say they are still treated as outsiders.

Shao trains in Shanghai with a dance troupe comprised of people with hearing or visual impairments, as well as dancers who use wheelchairs. The troupe aims to combat stigmas by giving disabled people a platform to express themselves through art. "Some disabled people often feel trapped," said Zhou Ziqiang, 38, a non-disabled dance instructor who started training artists with disabilities in 2006. "Once they join these groups, they can slowly open up and become closer to soci-

ety." In recent years, some local governments have worked to increase the number of fitness programs available to the disabled, and invested in building dedicated sporting facilities and training instructors.

Fighting spirit

Liu Huaiyu, 20, stayed near the back of the studio during a recent troupe practice session as he and his fellow dancers spun gracefully in their wheelchairs to pulsating Chinese pop music. Despite his shyness, he said dancing has helped bring



Wheelchair dancers practicing with the Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower Handicapped Art Troupe on the outskirts of Shanghai.



Wheelchair dancer Shao Yue of the Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower Handicapped Art Troupe performs at Shanghai Disneyland.

Lifestyle | Feature



Wheelchair dancers perform at Shanghai Disneyland.

him out of his shell. “I used to be quite self-loathing, I didn’t like talking to people,” said Liu, who lost a leg in a car accident when he was 10. “After dancing, I even go out sometimes for strolls now.” Another team in their troupe made up of dancers with hearing impairments watched conductors at the front and back of the stage count out the beats of the routines on their fingers.

“Even though we can’t hear the music, we can still follow the beat,” said Chen Cen, 34, who was born without hearing but has danced since she was six years

old. “We put in a lot more work than people who can hear in order to complete a routine like this,” she signed. She hopes more Chinese can recognize the “fighting spirit” required of disabled people—rather than viewing them as an “inconvenience”, as she puts it. For wheelchair dancer Shao, the most important thing is how she sees herself. “I don’t despair just because I have a disability,” she said. “I just have a different kind of life, and I can choose to live it in a more exciting way.”—AFP



This photo shows wheelchair dancer Shao Yue speaking during an interview with AFP as she practices with the Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower Handicapped Art Troupe on the outskirts of Shanghai.



Wheelchair dancer Shao Yue (left) practicing with the Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower Handicapped Art Troupe.



Wheelchair dancers practicing with the Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower Handicapped Art Troupe.



Wheelchair dancer Shao Yue (right) practicing with the Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower Handicapped Art Troupe on the outskirts of Shanghai.



Wheelchair dancer Shao Yue (center) practicing with the Shanghai Oriental Pearl TV Tower Handicapped Art Troupe.

Wetlands destruction driving 'sensitive' dragonflies to brink

The destruction of wetlands is driving a decline of dragonflies around the world, with one sixth of species of the magnificently colorful insects threatened with extinction, conservationists said yesterday. A report from the International Union for Conservation of Nature presented the first assessment of all 6,016 dragonfly and damselfly species globally, and found that at least 16 percent of them risked going extinct. Their decline was a symptom of widespread loss of the marshes, swamps and free-flowing rivers they breed in, driven mainly by the expansion of unsustainable agriculture and urbanization around the globe, IUCN said in the update of its "Red List" of threatened species.

"By revealing the global loss of dragonflies, today's Red List update underscores the urgent need to protect the world's wetlands and the rich tapestry of life they harbor," IUCN director general Bruno Oberle said in a statement. "Globally, these ecosystems are disappearing three times faster than forests," he warned. A report published three years ago by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands found that 35 percent of the world's wetlands — which include lakes, rivers, marshes and peatlands, as well as coastal and marine areas like lagoons, mangroves and coral reefs—were lost between 1970 and 2015. Wetlands are uniquely valuable. They store carbon, protect against floods, and offer habitats for one in 10 of the world's know species.

'Potentially much higher'

And the state of dragonfly species is an especially good indicator for how the wetlands they call home are doing.



In this file photo a dragonfly perches on a branch while waiting for a prey in a pond in Caracas. —AFP

"They're very, very sensitive to changes in the environment. And so that is an early warning signal to what's happening to wetland systems around the world," Craig Hilton-Taylor, who heads IUCN's Red List unit, told AFP. He said there had not been enough data to determine whether some of the dragonfly species evaluated were threatened, warning the true number teetering on the brink of extinction could be far higher than 16 percent.

"It is potentially much higher," he said, suggesting as many as 40 percent might be threatened. The situation is particularly dire in South and Southeast Asia, where more than a quarter of all dragonfly species are threatened, IUCN said. This is largely due to the clearing of wetland and rain-forest areas to make room for crops like palm oil, it

explained. Pesticides, other pollutants and climate change are also growing threats against dragonfly species worldwide, and constitute the biggest threat to the heavy-bodied insects in North America and Europe. "Climate change is a key factor," Hilton-Taylor said, pointing out that "with increasing frequency and intensity of droughts, wetlands dry up, and the dragonflies lose their habitat".

Over 40,000 endangered

With the latest update, the Red List now includes assessments of 142,577 species of animals and plants, including 40,084 considered to be threatened with extinction. This marks the first time that the number facing the highest risk has passed 40,000, IUCN said. "This is really a call to the world to step up and do much more," Hilton-Taylor said. Some species on the list seemed to be recovering, and were moved to less at-risk categories in the latest assessment, but more were seen as deteriorating. Among them was the Pyrenean desman, a small semiaquatic mammal with a long snout found only in rivers in Andorra, France, Portugal and Spain, which was moved from "vulnerable" to "endangered" on the Red List.

The unusual mole-like creature, which is one of only two remaining desman species in the world, has seen its population shrink by as much as 50 percent in the past decade alone. That is largely due to human impacts, like the disruption of river flow and reduced water levels as a result of hydropower plant, dam and reservoir construction. Water extraction for agriculture and to make artificial snow for the Pyrenean ski slopes has also made significant areas inhospitable to the desman, IUCN said. —AFP

Zendaya has 'always wanted to get into photography'

The 25-year-old star began her career as a child model and a back-up dancer, but Zendaya has always had a strong interest in photography. She shared: "I've always wanted to get into photography. My grandfather was a photographer - he was also a lawyer, but in the time that he wasn't being a lawyer, he was a photographer. And my great-grandfather was a photographer as well, in Hollywood, actually. So, I always admired their photos. My grandfather passed when I was 11, but have a lot of his photography in my home. And my mom would tell me stories about how he'd go out and use his light meter, sometimes spend all day taking photos of the same thing as the light changed."

Zendaya's understanding of photography has developed over time, and she now takes a hands-on role with her own photoshoots. Speaking to Interview Magazine, the Hollywood star explained: "As I got older, and with as many photoshoots as I've been on, I really started to understand and learn more about light - how it's reflected and what lights are being used. "I've now gotten



to the point where I love working with certain photographers that understand light and allow me to play with the lights, because I'm like, 'Okay, listen. Your girl likes to have her light from here.'" Meanwhile, Timothee Chalamet recently heaped praise on Zendaya, describing the actress as "one of the most grounded people" in the film business. He said: "It's just amazing she is so consistent. "It's a crazy business and Zendaya is one of the most grounded people I know doing this and it's reassuring to have a friend like that because it can be an absolute circus."—Bang Showbiz

KANYE WEST 'SET TO BECOME CREATIVE DIRECTOR AT LOUIS VUITTON'

Kanye West is reportedly set to become the creative director at Louis Vuitton. The 44-year-old rapper is said to be lined up to follow in the footsteps of his late friend Virgil Abloh - the brand's former artistic director for menswear - following his death last month aged 41. An insider told The Sun newspaper's Bizarre column: "Kanye is devastated about Virgil's death because they had been friends for years and worked together a lot. "They shared a similar vision and now Kanye feels he owes it to Virgil to continue his work at Louis Vuitton." It's said the pair had been talking about the new role for Kanye before Virgil lost his battle with cancer.

They first met at Fendi in 2009 as they started learning about fashion, and the following year Kanye's friend became creative director of his company Donda. Two years later, he worked as artistic director on Kanye and Jay-Z's 'Watch The Throne' tour. Last month, the rapper dedicated his Sunday Service to his late friend and longtime collaborator following his death after a private battle with a rare form of cancer. A message on the Sunday Service website from the star read: "In loving memory of Virgil Abloh, the creative director of Donda." Virgil was diagnosed in 2019 and, heroically, continued working in fashion while going through "numerous challenging treatments". He leaves behind his wife Shannon Abloh and their two children, Lowe Abloh and Grey Abloh.



A statement on Virgil's Instagram page read: "We are devastated to announce the passing of our beloved Virgil Abloh, a fiercely devoted father, husband, son, brother, and friend. "He is survived by his loving wife Shannon Abloh, his children Lowe Abloh and Grey Abloh, his sister Edwina Abloh, his parents Nee and Eunice Abloh, and numerous dear friends and colleagues. "For over two years, Virgil valiantly battled a rare, aggressive form of cancer, cardiac angiosarcoma. "He chose to endure his battle privately since his diagnosis in 2019, undergoing numerous challenging treatments, all while helming several significant institutions that span fashion, art, and culture. "Through it all, his work ethic, infinite curiosity, and optimism never wavered. Virgil was driven by his dedication to his craft and to his mission to open doors for others and create pathways for greater equality in art and design." —Bang Showbiz

KUWAITI VETERINARIAN TAMARA QABAZARD WINS ALMARAI VETERINARY MEDICINE AWARD



Kuwaiti veterinarian Tamara Qabazard

Kuwaiti veterinarian Tamara Qabazard wins Almarai Veterinary Medicine Award at its 13th session for the year 2021. This annual award honors veterinarians in Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries under the supervision and organization of the Saudi Veterinary Medical Association and the sponsorship of Almarai Company.

Cannon's partner Scott pays tribute to late son Zen

Alyssa Scott has opened up on her heartbreak after losing her son Zen. Nick Cannon's partner has penned an emotional tribute to their baby boy after he died aged five months earlier this year from a brain tumor and she described the silence as "deafening". Alongside a touching video, she wrote on Instagram: "Oh my sweet Zen. The soreness I felt in my arm from holding you is slowly fading away. It's a painful reminder that you are no longer here. "I caught myself looking in the backseat as I was driving only to see the mirror no longer reflecting your perfect face back at me. "When I close a door too loudly I hold my breath and wince knowing a soft cry will shortly follow. It doesn't come. The silence is deafening."

She added that her son "kept her going" and revealed how his smile filled her body with "a surge of energy" and "pure joy". She continued: "These last 5



Nick Cannon and Alyssa Scott

months we have been in this race together. We would hand the baton off to each other. You kept me going. "It would be the middle of the night and you would smile at me. A surge of energy would fill my body and pure joy would radiate from within me. "We were a team, both determined to see it through. It feels unbearable running without you now. I can't.

"And in this moment I feel myself being

carried. By your sister.. By God. By complete strangers encouraging me to not give up . It has been an honor and privilege being your mommy.. I will love you for eternity (sic)" Her comments come as Nick - who has children Moroccan and Monroe, 10, from his previous marriage to pop star Mariah Carey, as well as Golden, four and Powerful, one from a relationship with model Brittany Bell, and Zillion and Zion, five months, with Abby De La Rosa - defended his decision to return to work days after his son's death. On Wednesday's episode of 'The Nick Cannon Show', he said: "A lot of people keep asking me like, 'Man why are you even at work?' Especially my family members, 'Boy you need to go sit down somewhere, you got too many jobs already. Allow yourself to just be yourself'. "And I appreciate that, all of that advice and I know it comes from a place of care. But to me, this isn't work, this is love." —Bang Showbiz

First Oscar-nominated female director, Lina Wertmueller dies

Italian film director Lina Wertmueller, the first woman to be nominated for an Academy Award for directing, has died aged 93, local news media reported yesterday. Wertmueller, considered the country's most famous female director, began her career in movies as an assistant to Federico Fellini before going on to become the queen of Italian comedy with a series of films in the 1960s and 1970s. Immediately recognizable with her white spectacles and a vibrant sense of humor, Wertmueller's long list of films also explored political and social themes, from fascism and sexual violence to class struggle, often featuring a down-on-his-luck everyman character.

"Italy mourns the death of Lina Wertmueller, a director whose class and unmistakable style left an everlasting mark on Italian and world cinema," said Italian Culture Minister Dario Franceschini. In 1977, Wertmueller broke barriers by becoming the first woman to be nominated for a best directing Oscar, for her tragicomedy "Seven Beauties" about an army deserter during World War II trying to survive his time in a concentration camp. Another female director would not be nominated until 1994, when Jane Campion—who has called Wertmueller a "warrior" — was given the nod for "The Piano". —AFP

Kids Page

Word Search

Back to School

Z	G	N	S	T	U	D	E	N	T	L	V	Q
P	D	O	S	A	Y	U	A	J	E	I	G	U
Y	E	T	E	L	X	A	O	Y	G	L	U	E
Q	J	E	C	L	U	B	O	O	K	S	E	F
W	U	B	E	E	J	N	S	T	G	H	R	R
R	U	O	R	T	E	A	C	H	E	R	A	K
I	R	O	X	J	I	X	T	H	Q	P	S	R
T	P	K	O	W	J	P	B	M	B	E	E	E
I	M	A	M	D	E	Z	H	U	D	O	R	L
N	A	L	P	N	I	G	Z	T	M	R	X	U
G	T	K	C	E	R	M	L	B	N	L	G	R
R	H	I	L	G	R	G	N	I	D	A	E	R
P	L	A	Y	G	R	O	U	N	D	R	E	I

BOOKS
DESK
ERASER
GLUE
LUNCHBOX
MATH

NOTEBOOK
PAPER
PENCIL
PLAYGROUND
READING
RECESS

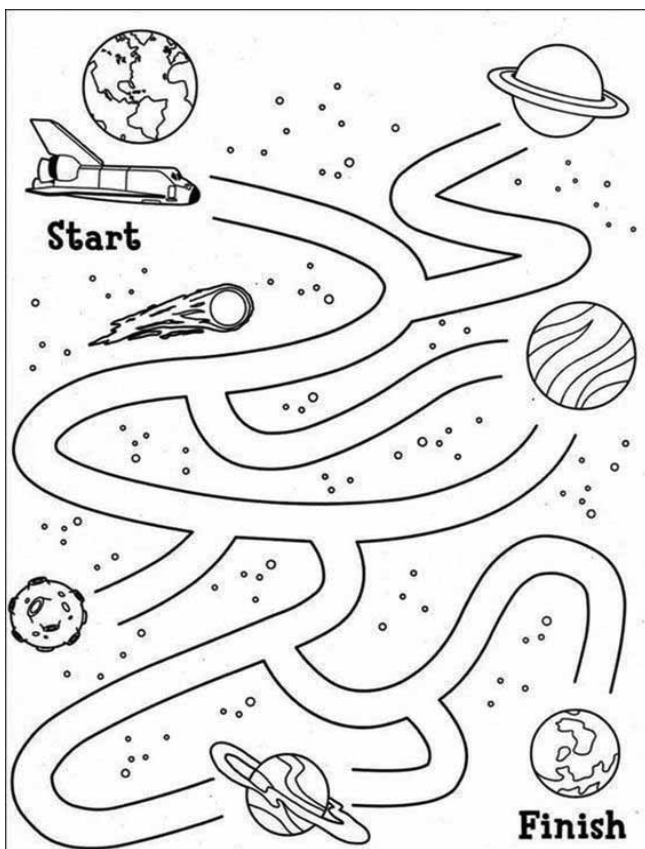
RULER
STUDENT
TEACHER
WRITING

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Color It



Kids Mazes



Find the objects



Can you find these hidden images?



Word Scramble

Fall Word Scramble

Unscramble the words and write the letters in the boxes. Use the letters in the shaded boxes to form a new word that answers the riddle.

ULQIT

LAVEES

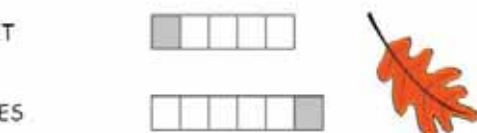
BEESTRMP

SVRTAEH

TECTHUNS

AUMUTN

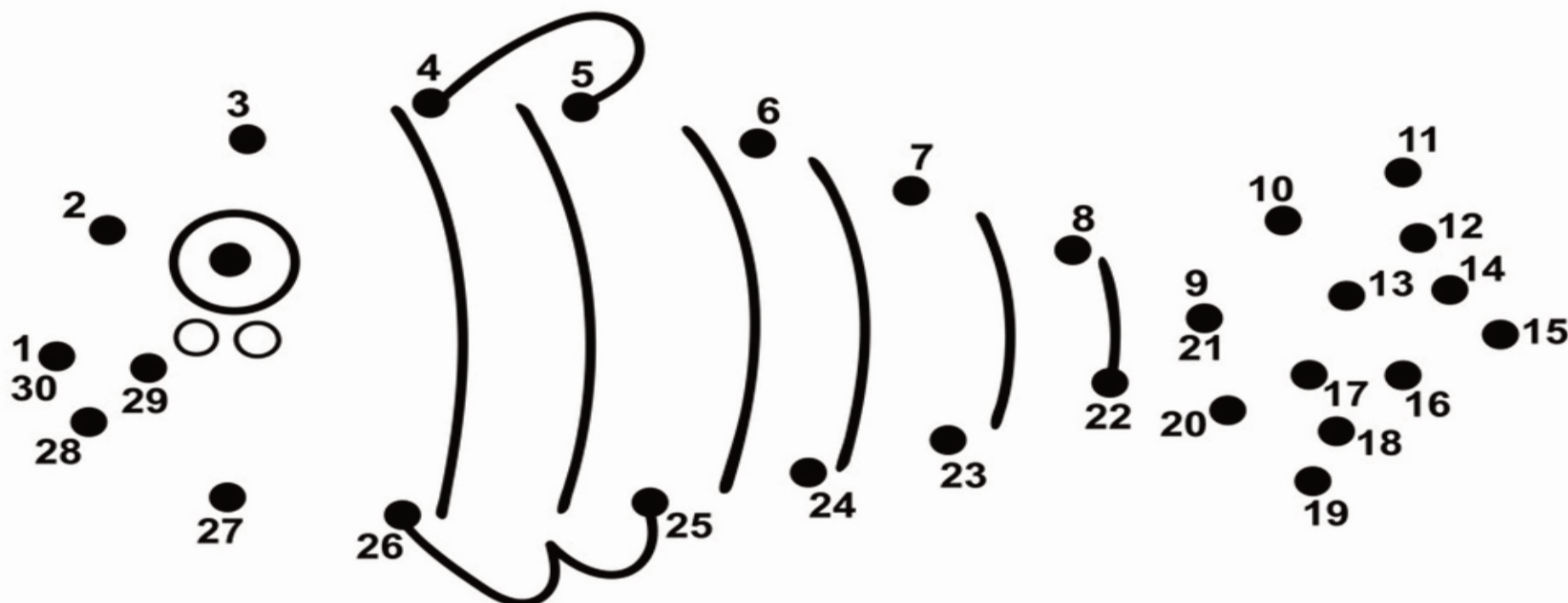
ATOLFLOB



Q. What do you get when you drop a pumpkin?

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Join the dots



Business

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EU eyes overhaul of app workers' status

Gig companies may have to reclassify workers as full-fledged employees

BRUSSELS: The European Union took aim at the business model of gig economy companies like Uber and Deliveroo yesterday with plans that could force them to reclassify their workers as fully-fledged employees. The plan is an effort to sort out once and for all the employment status of millions of drivers and delivery people that the major platforms insist are self-employed.

The debate has clogged up courts across Europe for almost a decade, with judges handing out more than a hundred decisions across the bloc's 27 member states, with hundreds more still pending. Those decisions can vary markedly, with Belgium on Wednesday denying a small group of Deliveroo workers the designation of employees, while Uber lost in court in non-EU Britain over its service in London.

"With more and more jobs created by digital labour platforms, we need to ensure decent working conditions for all those deriving their income from such work," EU executive vice president Margrethe Vestager said. The proposal from the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, "will help (the) false self-employed working for platforms to correctly determine their employment status and enjoy all the social rights that come with that," she added.

The potential for an EU-wide

redesignation of platform workers sent the share prices of Deliveroo and other platforms plummeting in recent days over fears that their business model was under threat.

If passed, the EU said its legislation could help reclassify about five million platform workers in the 27 member states as fully-fledged employees. This will be because they met two of the EU's five criteria for redesignation, forcing some platforms to treat workers as if they were bricks and mortar firms with labor laws to obey.

The criteria include whether an app determines pay levels for workers, makes demands on appearance such as the use of uniforms and equipment or restricts a worker's ability to refuse jobs. The designation would however be rebuttable by the platforms, with companies given a chance to prove the self-employment status of their workers, with national laws the final arbiter. Platform firms broadly criticized the plan, saying it would cut work for those who prefer the flexibility of self-employment.

Uber said the commission's proposal would put "thousands of jobs at risk, crippling small businesses in the wake of the pandemic and damaging vital services that consumers across Europe rely on". Delivery Platform Europe, which represents Uber Eats and Deliveroo among others, said the rules would bring "negative outcomes for couriers themselves as



PARIS: In this file photo, a man working for the food delivery company Deliveroo looks for his delivery address in an empty street in Paris. — AFP

well as for restaurants and customers".

The EU has little power over work-related policy in its member states and right now platforms face a wide array of national rules on their professional ties to workers.

In Spain, all workers who deliver food must be recognized as employees by the apps they use to

work, a situation that pushed Deliveroo to abandon the market. In other countries, courts have ordered apps to enter collective bargaining agreements even if the workers remain self-employed, a model that some platforms, including Uber, would prefer.

The tech companies lobbied hard against any EU-wide reclassi-

fication, citing a survey by Copenhagen Economics that 250,000 people would be forced out of delivery work if the decision applied for all.

They also worry that the criteria will be too vague, with different interpretations bringing on even more court cases instead of legal certainty. — AFP

PREMIER MARKET WEEKLY TECHNICAL BULLETIN

WEEK ENDED ON 09 DECEMBER 2021

No.	Ticker	Sector	Price Movement & Performance										Valuation Multiples *				
			Open Price	Close Price	Week High	Week Low	Range	Volume	WTD Change	WTD %	YTD %	Support Level	Resistance Level	P/E	P/B	Yield	Beta
101	National Bank of Kuwait	Banking	1000	990	1005	984	21	40,685,682	-9	-0.90%	17.86%	990	1011	21.4	2.07	1.9%	1.26
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	246	266	268	246	22	71,340,917	21	8.57%	21.46%	261	270	21.4	1.24	1.8%	1.13
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	207	210	214	207	7	22,232,851	3	1.45%	0.96%	209	212	73.8	0.92	0.0%	1.01
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	220	224	227	219	8	12,477,026	4	1.82%	5.16%	222	227	17.0	1.02	1.9%	1.05
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	808	835	847	808	39	38,720,094	25	3.09%	23.34%	833	842	32.7	3.65	1.1%	1.40
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	783	792	805	780	25	4,499,421	13	1.67%	39.44%	791	803	58.5	4.57	0.0%	1.05
204	National Investments	Financial Services	239	235	239	227	12	15,297,203	13	5.86%	74.07%	224	237	7.5	0.99	4.3%	1.25
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	140	136	142	132	10	45,394,604	-11	-7.48%	-14.47%	132	140	31.0	1.68	2.7%	0.59
252	Al Imtiaz Investment	Financial Services	118	122	125	118	7	6,755,323	4	3.39%	8.93%	112	123	NM	0.75	0.0%	1.00
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	176	177	183	176	7	44,224,312	0	0.00%	62.39%	174	178	27.3	1.28	0.0%	0.98
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	810	813	820	800	20	3,417,941	6	0.74%	23.74%	809	814	18.0	1.85	0.7%	1.10
501	National Industries	Financial Services	270	276	282	270	14	12,296,185	7	2.60%	56.82%	272	281	5.4	0.99	0.0%	1.45
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	890	922	931	890	41	1,324,491	9	0.99%	22.12%	914	950	32.5	0.93	5.4%	0.94
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	844	868	890	844	46	1,058,287	31	3.70%	35.63%	860	877	24.7	2.04	6.2%	0.73
526	Al Qurain	Basic Materials	335	352	360	335	25	3,130,710	17	5.07%	4.14%	333	357	NM	0.96	4.3%	0.75
603	Agility	Industrials	936	946	955	931	24	11,147,153	11	1.18%	39.94%	928	955	2.1	1.02	0.9%	1.48
605	Zain	Telecommunications	585	599	605	580	25	30,070,539	14	2.39%	-1.16%	596	605	13.7	2.18	3.3%	1.35
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,229	3,275	3,295	3,205	90	823,776	45	1.39%	-13.79%	3200	3286	7.1	3.58	12.2%	0.49
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	226	228	233	223	10	3,964,836	6	2.70%	5.56%	226	229	NM	0.73	0.0%	0.88
818	Ahli United Bank	Banking	287	282	290	281	9	148,845,867	-2	-0.70%	24.23%	282	287	19.4	2.18	1.3%	1.15
821	Warba Bank	Banking	269	274	278	267	11	9,652,584	7	2.62%	16.10%	273	278	20.9	2.71	0.0%	1.00
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	599	600	610	591	19	1,997,877	4	0.67%	-1.32%	593	601	18.7	1.69	2.9%	0.44
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	375	377	384	373	11	3,931,757	2	0.53%	3.01%	375	380	NM	1.58	0.0%	0.48
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	236	232	238	230	8	6,333,303	-3	-1.28%	-16.25%	231	238	19.7	4.11	3.9%	0.64
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	1,945	2,028	2,059	1,931	128	1,481,504	80	4.11%	84.36%	2000	2030	26.0	7.21	2.0%	0.66

* As of end of week closing

Business

NBK Economic Report

OPEC+ to boost supplies despite Omicron, SPR release pressures

Kuwait crude price edges up to \$72.9/bbl

KUWAIT: Oil prices edged lower last Friday, for a sixth week in a row, rattled by the spread of the Omicron variant, a US jobs report that missed expectations and as OPEC+ opted to continue hiking oil supplies. Earlier, comments by US Fed Chairman Powell that a stronger US economy could prompt the Fed to accelerate tapering of its asset purchase program led to an oil and financial markets sell-off. Tighter monetary policy is typically bearish for commodities.

International crude benchmark Brent closed down at \$69.9/bbl (-3.9 percent w/w; +35 percent ytd), while local crude marker Kuwait Export Crude (KEC) reached \$72.9/bbl (+44 percent ytd). Brent remains on the verge of entering bear market territory, having lost almost 19 percent of its value since its peak of \$86.4/bbl in late October. Brent dropped 16.4 percent in November, its worst monthly performance since March 2020, after the Omicron variant was identified against a backdrop of resurgent COVID-19 and amid moves by large oil consuming nations to coordinate a release from their strategic oil reserves (to lower domestic fuel prices).

About 85 mb of crude oil in total could be released by the end of

1Q22, from the US (50 mb), India (5 mb), China (20 mb) and others. OPEC+ held its ministerial meeting on 2 December amid speculation that it would react to the SPR releases and the emergence of the Omicron variant by pausing or even reversing the planned supply increase for January—a politically contentious move that would have irked the US especially. OPEC+ has consistently maintained that oil demand remains fragile while the virus continues to spread and that oil balances will swing into a heavy surplus as early as 1Q22. In the end, OPEC ministers opted to continue increasing supply at the monthly rate of 400 kb/d but also gave themselves the option of adjusting production on the fly should oil demand weaken—the OPEC communique referred to the meeting remaining “in session”. The OPEC+ move was welcomed by the US, and members keen to continue ramping up supply were also satisfied. Moreover, the actual supply increase may fall short of target due to supply outages and capacity constraints among some members.

OPEC's base case estimate of demand-supply balances in 2022 show stock builds every month and a hefty 3.8 mb/d gain in March. This sce-

nario does envisage, however, a significant q/q decline in oil demand in 1Q22 of 1.5 mb/d, which appears extreme even accounting for both pandemic-induced and seasonal demand weakness (it is also almost 1 mb/d below the International Energy Agency's estimate). The forecast also assumes all OPEC+ members fulfill their quotas, which is optimistic given the underperformance seen so far due to supply outages etc. In October, the aggregate OPEC-10 supply shortfall was almost 0.6 mb/d, according to OPEC secondary sources. Outside of OPEC, the main supply impetus is provided by the US, where, as of end-November, crude production had reached 11.6 mb/d, a rise of 500 kb/d in two months, according to Energy Information Administration data.

As 2021 draws to a close, the Omicron variant has introduced more volatility into the oil market, though it is too soon to gauge the impact on oil demand. In terms of supply, the impasse on Iran's nuclear program means the timeframe for the return of its oil has been pushed back, simplifying matters a little for OPEC+, which can focus on adjusting supply to demand-affecting events.

Huawei introduces five new products to Kuwait

KUWAIT: Huawei Tech Investment Kuwait announced yesterday the launch of its Super Device Smart Office new products in Kuwait, alongside Easa Husain Al-Yousifi as the partner. Huawei and Easa Husain Al-Yousifi's long-standing partnership has further developed, taking on the business world and entering into a new venture - commercial products. Huawei would like to officially introduce Easa Husain Al-Yousifi as the Partner of their new line of commercial products.

The devices consist of:

Huawei MateBook B series Business Laptop: we have 4 models: MateBook B3-420/520, B5-430, B7-410

- Huawei MateStation B series Business Desktop
- Huawei Business Printer
- Huawei MatePad C Series Business Tablet
- Huawei Smart Screen

All these new products fall under the Super Device umbrella from Huawei, offering seamless integration depicted by the Smart Office experience setup.

For the past couple of years, Huawei carried on their commitment to creating value for consumers through innovation, striving to deliver an intelligent experience across all scenarios driven by “1 + 8 + N” Seamless AI Life strategy. Which is more clearly seen in “Super Device” experience that enables different types of products to seamlessly share their capabilities and information, providing consumers with an intelligent experience across five key factor scenarios: smart office, fitness & health, smart home, easy travel, and entertainment. Pablo Ning, President of Huawei CBG, Middle East & Africa: “We have grown from an unknown player to a premium brand that is both loved and trusted by consumers and I feel immense pleasure to inform that Huawei ranked No 8 for the Top 50 Innovative Companies, Rank 44 in Fortune 500 and No. 50 for Brandz ranking in Year 2021.”

Huawei provides full-ecosystem product support, including powerful software and hardware collaboration capabilities, such as Super Device. Super Device give consumers access to a seamless and truly intelligent experience across multiple devices in all different types of scenarios.

Jason Jiang, General Manager of CBG Kuwait: “Huawei Super Device Smart Office is our solution to the new world by providing businesses with the capability to advantage of intelligent office experiences across many workspace scenarios. Huawei provides businesses and professionals with

tools they need to stimulate applied creativity and seamless communication.”

Smart Office all-scenario devices collaboration is one of the core capabilities of Huawei Super Device. In the modern office, there are still many systems and numerous connections brought by multiple devices and inconsistent interactions that result in fragmented experiences that prevents users from taking full advantage of the benefits different forms of technology can provide.

All-scenario device

In a typical Smart Office scenario, Huawei has designed several devices to function and work as one Super Device as well as to easily switch between wired and wireless connection and between work and personal mode.

Huawei MateBook B series business laptop

Solid performance, advanced security, elegance. This Business Laptop has Chip-level security protection. The TPM protect computer from attackers with logical access to low-level parts of the computer. It has a Comprehensive system security mechanism and privacy protection, allowing you to focus on your work and to avoid unauthorized access. The amazing Fingerprint power button has Secure login and quick power-on. Fingerprint sensor and a high sensitivity power button 2 in 1. Huawei Share: Multi-screen collaboration improves office work efficiency, there are 3 multi-screen settings that can be used, they are:

1. Dual-screen collaboration
2. Cross-screen audio and video flow Cross-screen file flow
3. Running Multiple APPs on PC

The laptop has a Recessed camera, you don't need to worry about your own privacy. Stay powered for all-day long, with Up to 56Wh large-capacity battery that can be used for 13.6 hours Daily in the office, 14.7 hours of watching 1080p videos, and 12 hours of Web Browsing.

Huawei Matestation B Series business desktop

With a 23.8 inches IPS screen that has FullView Display and 1920x1080 FHD. The desktop has a Space-efficient cooling system Dedicated air duct for the CPU with effective heat dissipation. It has Front USB-C port that Support 9V/2A fast charge. You can easily Tap-to-connect your phone with the computer, via built-in NFC. More interfaces mean More possibilities to build Powerful expansion capability.

Huawei business partner

With a floating design, the designs of the columns and the special color scheme create a floating visual effect. This unprecedented style makes the printer more of a futuristic technology product. Stylish and compact appearance, Simplified operation UI, Symmetrical aesthetics, futuristic floating de-



Pablo Ning, President of Huawei CBG, Middle East & Africa



Huawei MateBook B Series business laptop

sign. Powered with Harmony OS, the printer enables innovative interactions, in addition to:

- OneHop connection and printing
- Proximity connection and wireless printing for multiple types of devices
- Web page printing
- Smart ID card copying mode
- Distributed printing

Here are some simple operations that the printer handles:

- Proximity connection and wireless printing
- Huawei-designed independent print cartridge for easy replacement
- Smart ID card copy mode
- Copy, print, and scan three-in-one
- Easy app management

Huawei Matepad C Series business tablet

This 10.1-inch large HD screen brings every detail to life. The high screen-to-body ratio creates a cinematic effect. Display apps across dual windows that has 1920 x 1200 pixels resolution. Apps can be displayed in dual windows on the screen when in Landscape mode. You can then use the two screens separately. For example, you can browse reviews of products as you shop. With Huawei Share, users are able to Transfer faster with wireless sharing that goes as fast as 150 MB/s speed Content sharing can transfer over 500 images. With Huawei Share, you can easily transfer files between Huawei phones, laptops, tablets, and printers, without using mobile data. No matter how big the file is, you can transfer it in seconds. The tablet has Multi-layered eye protection that Filters out blue light, Automatic brightness adjustment, and e-Book mode.

Business

China's debt-crippled property giant Evergrande defaults: Fitch

Authorities scramble to avoid contagion throughout China

BEIJING: Debt-crippled Chinese property giant Evergrande has defaulted for the first time, Fitch Ratings agency said yesterday, as authorities scrambled to avoid contagion throughout the world's second biggest economy. The Chinese government sparked a crisis within the property industry when it launched a drive last year to curb excessive debt among real estate firms as well as rampant consumer speculation.

Companies that had accrued huge debt to expand suddenly found the taps turned off and began struggling to complete projects, pay contractors and meet both domestic and foreign repayments. Real estate behemoth Evergrande had been the highest-profile firm to become embroiled in the crisis, struggling for months to raise capital to pay off \$300 billion in debt.

Yesterday, Fitch confirmed the company had defaulted for the first time on more than \$1.2 billion worth of bond debt, as it downgraded the firm's status to a restricted default rating. Fitch also declared Kaisa, a smaller property company but one of China's most indebted, had defaulted on \$400 million of bonds.

More than 10 Chinese real estate firms have now defaulted in the second half of this year. But Ashley Alder, head of Hong Kong's Securities and Futures Commission, played down concerns that China's property sector woes could snowball into a something resembling the 2008 global crash. "It's a significant event, you can't possibly underplay it, but it's basically not that category of event for the financial system," he told Bloomberg Television.

Market to handle

China's property sector is one of the main drivers of the nation's economy and keys to the wealth of the booming middle class. Intent on maintaining "social stability", Beijing has been working to avoid a massive fallout from the collapse of Evergrande.

KFH announces winners of 'Win with Hesabi' draw

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) announced the winners of the 11th draw of "Win with Hesabi" campaign that offers three Jeep Wrangler Sport cars and cash prizes worth KD 250 for 10 winners each month. The draw was held at KFH Headquarters under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The winners are: Dana Al-Azmi, Fatima Al-Bannai, Sara Al-Azmi, Dana Al-Omar, Abdulwahab Al-Haddad, Aseel Al-Mutairi, Maha Al-Rukaibi, Sharifa Ershaid, Amani Al-Enezi, Salma Al-Dihany.

This campaign comes as part of KFH continuing efforts to add value to Hesabi customers including advantages, discounts, prizes, and exclusive rewards. Once the social allowance is transferred to Hesabi program, customers enter the monthly draw on 10 prizes of KD250 each, in addition to 3 special draws on Jeep

Wrangler Sport cars. KFH offers "Hesabi for Youth" with a variety of privileges as part of its continued endeavor to provide adequate customer care, innovate new products and services and fulfill the needs of all customers of various age categories and interests. Services and products are tailored to suit customers' needs and provide distinguished service as per global standards regarding quality, accuracy and speed. "Hesabi" program has been designed to meet the needs of youth and aspire for their active lifestyle. This program presents for youth many exclusive offers and a wide range of privileges including Hesabi ATM card with a unique design, eligibility to issue Hesabi prepaid card (as per credit regulations of KFH), distinguished offers and discounts etc.

KFH continues to launch marketing campaigns to reward youth customers. Hesabi for Youth represents the ambitions and expectations of youth category and copes with KFH aspirations to attract the largest portion of youth who represents the major part of Kuwaiti society. Also, the account represents KFH initiative to diversify banking services and products.

But it has eschewed a government bailout. Instead, a "risk management committee" stacked with officials from state entities was last week sent in to clean up the current mess. Yi Gang, governor of the People's Bank of China, said yesterday Beijing planned to handle Evergrande's future in a market-oriented way.

"The rights and interests of creditors and shareholders will be fully respected in accordance to their legal seniority," Chinese state media quoted Yi as saying in a pre-recorded video message to a top-level seminar in Hong Kong. But even with those assurances, investors remain in the dark about what the future holds and what Beijing's overall plan is. Neither Evergrande, nor Kaisa, have yet to make any comments on the default reports and what they plan to do next. "In the next step, I think all the creditors will sue Evergrande," Chen Long, a partner at research firm Plenum told AFP, adding Fitch's announcement formalized what investors already knew about the defaults. Evergrande will have "to enter a period of restructuring," he said, adding that while creditors will hope to secure assets on the mainland "I don't think it will be very successful".

Debt binge

Evergrande's troubles first surfaced this year when it detailed how heavily leveraged the firm had become. The eye-watering figures shook China's credit markets because of the sheer size of the company and the potential fallout should it collapse. Last month it missed its first foreign bond repayment but there was a 30-day grace period attached. That ran out on Tuesday with some bond owners complaining they had yet to be repaid.

Questions had swirled over whether Evergrande is simply too big to be allowed to fail, given its collapse could send shock waves through the wider Chinese economy. But it became increasingly clear in recent days that Beijing was willing to close the chapter

The rise and demise of China's property giant Evergrande

BEIJING: Chinese real estate behemoth Evergrande yesterday defaulted on its debt, said the Fitch Ratings agency, which cited the crisis-hit developer's failure to pay more than \$1.2 billion in bond repayments.

The default is the property empire's first since it became mired in a debt crisis that has rattled investors who fear a wider contagion. Another much smaller Chinese property firm, Kaisa, also defaulted on \$400 million of bonds yesterday, Fitch said.

Here is a timeline of Evergrande's rise to become one of China's biggest developers, demise into one of its worst debtors and, ultimately, default:

1996: The dream begins

Steel-factory worker Xu Jiayin starts Evergrande, targeting millions of middle-class Chinese climbing onto the property ladder across the rapidly urbanizing country.

2009-10: Start of expansion

After going public in 2009, Evergrande takes control of Chinese Super League club



GUANGZHOU, China: This file photo taken on September 17, 2021 shows a woman walking past a housing complex by Chinese property developer Evergrande in Guangzhou, China's southern Guangdong province. —AFP

on the 25-year-old real estate empire that has typified China's breakneck growth in recent decades.

After Evergrande said today it may not be able to meet its financial obligations, the government summoned the company's founder, Xu Jiayin, and the new risk management committee was announced. Financial media in Hong Kong have reported that Xu, a billionaire who is also known as Hui Ka Yan in Cantonese, has been selling some of his own luxury assets to raise funds.

According to Bloomberg News, before yesterday, at least 10 lower-rated real estate firms have now defaulted on onshore or offshore bonds since the summer. Before yesterday, Chinese borrowers had defaulted on a record \$10.2 billion of offshore bonds, Bloomberg had reported, with real estate firms accounting for 36 percent of those non-repayments. —AFP

Guangzhou, renaming it Guangzhou Evergrande, and spends billions of dollars on foreign players, helping it to win a succession of titles. The company also moves into the dairy, grain and oil businesses and later tries to build an electric car — kicking off a debt-fuelled spending spree.

2017: Richest man in Asia

Xu becomes the richest person in Asia with a net worth of \$43 billion.

2018: Central bank raises red flag

The first signs of trouble emerge when China's central bank adds Evergrande to its list of highly indebted conglomerates to watch, flagging that a potential collapse could cause systemic risks.

August 2020: 'Three red lines'

Regulators announce caps for three different debt ratios in a scheme dubbed "three red lines", which tightens lending to the real estate sector. Evergrande sells 28 percent of its property management unit for \$3 billion and starts offloading properties at increasingly steep discounts.

June 2021: Scrutiny on home deposits

As part of a crackdown on the property sector, local governments set a maximum cap on deposits, as well as hold and release funds to developers in batches after inspecting the progress of projects. —AFP

Business

Why global tech giants turn to Indian talent

Indians have the ability to 'navigate complex situations'

MUMBAI: Twitter's new CEO Parag Agrawal is the latest alumnus of India's prestigious technical universities appointed to head a multi-billion-dollar US tech firm, and Shivani Nandgaonkar wants to follow in his footsteps. The 22-year-old student at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay — Agrawal's alma mater—has already been recruited by Google to become one of the thousands of IIT graduates at major American tech companies.

"When I heard about Parag, I was so happy," she said. "One IITian is also CEO of Google, Sundar Pichai. So this is my (stepping) stone now." Twitter's Agrawal is the youngest chief executive in the S&P 500 at just 37. Like Google-parent Alphabet's 49-year-old CEO Sundar Pichai, he left India after his IIT degree to pursue a postgrad in the United States before working at several American companies.

Other Indians at the highest corporate tech echelons include IBM's Arvind Krishna and Palo Alto Networks' Nikesh Arora—both IIT alumni—along with Satya Nadella of Microsoft and Shantanu Narayen at Adobe. Executives and experts say that beyond the South Asian nation's sheer size, the phenomenon is due to multiple push-pull factors and skillsets including a culture of problem-solving, the English language, and relentless hard work. IIT graduate and Sun Microsystems co-founder Vinod Khosla believes that after growing up with multiple communities, customs and languages, Indians have the ability to "navigate complex situations". "Educational competition in India and societal chaos helps hone their skills in addition to the rigorous technical education at the IITs," the billionaire venture capitalist said.

Silicon Valley demands technical expertise, managing diverse communities, and entrepreneurship in the face of uncertainty from its top executives. "In innovation, you have to be able to break the rules, you're fearless. And... you can't survive a day in India without having to break one rule or the other or dealing with incompetent bureaucracy or corruption," said Indian-American academic Vivek Wadhwa.

"Those skills are very useful when you're innovating in Silicon Valley, because you have to constantly challenge authority." And they are valuable: ride-hailing giant Uber this month offered IIT

Bombay students first-year packages of \$274,000 for jobs in the United States.

The contest for such prizes begins early in a country of more than 1.3 billion people with a longstanding focus on education. —AFP

The IITs are seen as India's top universities, and more than one million pupils apply each year for just 16,000 places. For one-and-a-half years, Nandgaonkar studied up to 14 hours a day, seven days a week. Some other students started preparations at just 14 or 15, she added.

"Imagine having an entrance which is 10x more difficult than MIT and Harvard. That's what the IITs are," Wadhwa said. "So it's the creme de la creme of the country."

India's biggest export?

The IIT network was established in 1950 by the country's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who envisaged a pool of highly trained science and engineering graduates to help build India after the end of British rule in 1947. But the supply of engineers was not matched by sufficient domestic demand, so graduates looked further afield, particularly in the United States where there was hunger for highly skilled workers as the digital revolution took off.

"In the '60s '70s, and '80s, even into the '90s, Indian industry was not yet at the advanced (stages) and... a lot of those who wanted to do cutting-edge technology felt the need to go abroad," IIT Bombay Deputy Director S Sudarshan said. Agrawal, Pichai and Nadella spent



MUMBAI: Shivani Nandgaonkar, a student of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay, poses for a picture. —AFP



MUMBAI: In this photo, students walk inside the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay campus in Mumbai. —AFP

a decade or more working their way through the ranks of their respective companies, building up insider knowledge while gaining the trust of the firms' American founders.

And for years, more than half the applicants for US H1-B skilled immigrant visas have been from India, and mostly from the tech sector. In contrast, engineers from even more populous China had the option of finding jobs at home or returning after completing their US postgrads as their domestic economy boomed, said Johns Hopkins University professor Devesh Kapur, an IIT graduate himself.

The phenomenon may wane in time as India's own tech sector thrives, offering the country's best and brightest minds greater domestic opportunities, but for Nandgaonkar, becoming a tech boss like Agrawal or Pichai is not a far-fetched idea. —AFP

AUB congratulates Al-Hassad weekly draw winners

KUWAIT: Ahli United Bank (AUB) held the weekly draw on 8 December, 2021 of Al-Hassad Islamic account, the first Islamic prizes account in Kuwait which offers over 750 prizes over a 12-month period and provides numerous features. Such features include the simplest and easiest savings program, highest number of winners, largest prize value, loyalty multipliers, and unique account opening feature online with all ease with instant deposit option.

The bank announced 20 winners of KD 1,000 as follows: Hajar Edaj Al-Azmi, Mohammad Sulaiman Al-Busairi, Nasser Mashaan Al-Hajeri, Ahmad Mohammad Al-Ansari, Mohammad Hamad Al-Enezi, Mai Zeyad Mahmoud, Adel Nahabah Khalaf, Suad Ahmad Dashti, Naji Eissa Al-Khayat, Radhi Atab Nughaimesh, Ali Darwish Al-Jamal, Hussain Saleh Al-Shaikh, Abdulla Hassan Al-

Bbader, Dalal Habbas Al-Sehali, Saleha Mohammed Alrashid, Dalaal Zaid Al-Zaid, Hadeel Ali Al-Fares, Hussain Ali Al-Rasheedi, Bander Abdullah Ghanem And Hanan Mohammed Marafie.

The draws of Al-Hassad include several cash prizes, such as KD 100,000 each Eid and the grand quarterly draw of KD 250,000 prize which continues to be a key aspiration for customers who are wishing to fulfill their dreams. Al-Hassad offers also 20 weekly prizes of KD 1,000 for each winner. Furthermore, for the first time in Kuwait, the AUB Al-Hassad presents the "Privilege Draw", which is a quarterly draw of KD 25,000 exclusively for Al-Hassad customers who maintained their balances for more than one year and have not won a prize in the past five years. For all draws, the clients are eligible for one draw chance for each KD 50 deposited in their Al-Hassad account. In addition to this attractive package of rewards, Al-Hassad Islamic account incorporates a Wakala contract for projected annual profits, making this account unique and attractive to all society segments that are aspiring to build their short and long-term savings through a unique savings account with many advantages.

Italy hits Amazon with \$1.3 billion antitrust fine

ROME: Italian regulators hit Amazon with a 1.1-billion-euro (\$1.3-billion) antitrust fine yesterday for allegedly abusing its dominance in the market, the latest action against US Big Tech in the EU. US technology giants have been in the firing line in the European Union over their business practices. In the latest salvo, Italy's competition watchdog said Amazon abused its dominant position by promoting its own logistics service, which can ship and deliver packages, on its Italian platform to the detriment of third-party sellers who did not use it. "The abusive strategy adopted by Amazon is particularly serious, since it is likely to discourage, if not eliminate competition in the relevant markets," read the 250-page decision by the Italian Competition Authority.

Amazon said it "strongly" disagreed with the decision and would appeal. "The proposed fine and remedies are unjustified and disproportionate," the company said in a statement.

The move comes two weeks after the same authority imposed a 68.7-million-euro fine on Amazon for infringing EU laws through restrictions that penalized sellers of Apple and Beats products. In the same action, Apple was ordered to pay 134.5 million euros. As Europe powers ahead with antitrust litigation, US regulators are closely watching its approach to big tech firms, after Washington pledged to intensify scrutiny of the technology industry.

The Italian watchdog said Thursday that third-party sellers who do not use Amazon's logistics service are excluded from "a set of advantages essential for obtaining visibility and better sales prospects". Those included better access to Amazon's "most loyal and high-end customers" who use Amazon Prime, the e-commerce giant's loyalty program. Moreover, a tough performance measurement system is reserved for sellers who do not use Amazon's logistics system, which can lead, if failed, to suspension of the seller's account. "In doing so, Amazon has harmed competing e-commerce logistics providers by preventing them from presenting themselves to online sellers as service providers of comparable quality to Amazon's logistics," said the watchdog, adding that such conduct had "increased the gap between Amazon's power and that of its competitors". In its decision, the authority said it had imposed measures on Amazon subject to review by a monitor. —AFP

Verstappen: 'Natural' born heir to Hamilton's throne

PARIS: From the moment that Max Verstappen joined the Red Bull Junior Team in 2014, there was an inevitability that he would one day find himself battling it out to be Formula One world champion. He missed an opportunity in Saudi Arabia last weekend, first when he slammed into the wall during qualifying and then when his aggressive tactics against Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton during the race led to him having to give up the lead and take a five-second penalty.

But the 24-year-old has another chance this weekend in Abu Dhabi. The arch rivals head into the season finale level on points but Verstappen has a slight advantage, having won nine races to Hamilton's eight. If they both crash out of the race, Verstappen will become the first Dutchman to win the title. Such an outcome is not off the books given the way Verstappen has wrangled with Hamilton on the track.

At Silverstone, Verstappen ended up in the crash barriers; at Monza he crash-landed his Red Bull on top of the Mercedes. In Saudi Arabia, Hamilton crunched into the back of the Red Bull after Verstappen braked to let him pass.

The incidents on the track have led to a war of words off it. The Dutchman has labelled the seven-time world champion a "stupid idiot" while Hamilton accused the young pretender of being "over the limit" in Jeddah. Not once, though, has Verstappen taken a step back or wilted under the pressure. "He seems to deal with the pressure better than other people," said two-time world champion Fernando Alonso earlier in the season.

Racing pedigree

Verstappen is used to the spotlight, the pressure and, with already 20 years already on the track, is experienced beyond his years as a racing driver. According to his father Jos Verstappen, who raced in over a hundred Grand Prix

between 1994 and 2003, Max first clambered into a go-kart when he was four and a half years old.

"He was keen, watching all my races, he knew what was going on. He was brought up with racing," Jos told the official F1 podcast *Beyond the Grid* in 2019. "I never had to tell him racing lines, he knew." His father was not the only influence on his early racing career; his mother is Belgian ex-kart driver champion Sophie Kumpen. Her uncle competed in motocross and rally, and her cousin Anthony Kumpen raced NASCAR in the United States.

Titles followed and the teenage Verstappen made the step up to Formula Three, winning 10 races in his debut season when he finished third in the championship which was won by Esteban Ocon, a year his senior and now with the F1 Alpine team.

Verstappen would almost certainly have gone on to win the Formula Three title but after one season he made the step up to the biggest stage. After taking part in practice at the 2014 Japanese GP, he made his F1 debut for Toro Rosso at the Australian GP in 2015.

'Exciting driver'

Aged just 17 years, 166 days, he was the youngest ever driver in the sport—and still had not passed his regular driving test. "For me it was never about age," said Jos. "It was so natural what he was doing, he's much better than me."

That first season saw him take his first points and get involved in his first scrap. A shunt on Romain Grosjean in Monaco saw Verstappen labelled "dangerous" by Williams driver Felipe Massa but he went on to land the FIA's Rookie of the Year title. In May 2016, he was promoted to the Red Bull team, replacing Daniil Kvyat, and the results were



Max Verstappen

impressive and immediate. In his first race in Spain, he qualified fourth and then held off Ferrari's Kimi Raikkonen to become the youngest ever winner, aged 18, in F1.

Verstappen notched six top-five finishes, including four podiums, in his first eight races. The last two seasons he finished third in the championship behind the two Mercedes of Hamilton and Valtteri Bottas. This year, with a better engine and reliability, he has not just matched the Mercedes cars but on occasion he has eviscerated them.

"Max was, from go-karting till the first steps in the cars, always very special, very quick," his manager Raymond Vermeulen told AFP. "We see him still developing and I think we have yet to see the best." "Max was always very concentrated in this career and very focused. It was all about racing. The whole family was all about racing, so I think this is the natural outcome." — AFP

Woods to return from injury next week

MIAMI: Tiger Woods said Wednesday he will make his return to competitive golf at next week's PNC Championship in Florida. The former world number one, who has not played since suffering career-threatening leg injuries in a car crash 10 months ago, will play in the December 16-19 tournament alongside his son Charlie.

"Although it's been a long and challenging year, I am very excited to close it out by competing in the PNC Championship with my son Charlie," Woods announced on Twitter. "I'm playing as a Dad and couldn't be more excited and proud," added Woods, who suffered compound fractures in his right leg after the car he was driving in a Los Angeles suburb in February veered off the road and flipped several times.

The PNC Championship, part of the PGA Tour Champions series which is being staged at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Club in

Orlando, sees 20 major champions team up with a relative of their choice. Woods played in the 2020 event alongside son Charlie, 12, a tournament won by Justin Thomas and his father Mike.

"I am delighted to confirm that Tiger and Charlie Woods will be participating in the 2021 PNC Championship," tournament chairman Alastair Johnston said. "We have been liaising with Tiger and his team for some time and are delighted that he has now decided to make his return to competitive golf at the PNC Championship."

The PNC Championship offers Woods the prospect of a gentle return to tournament golf. The two-day event comprises two rounds of scramble golf, and Woods will be allowed to make use of a golf cart. Nevertheless, the speed of Woods' return comes sooner than expected for a player who revealed last week that amputation of his mangled leg had been "on the table" in the aftermath of February's crash. News of Woods' return was greeted with enthusiasm by fellow professionals.

"This is awesome. Welcome back," 2020 US Open champion Bryson DeChambeau tweeted to Woods under his announcement. Australian star Jason Day added: "I think it's



NASSAU: File photo shows Tiger Woods of the United States looks on during the trophy ceremony after the final round of the Hero World Challenge at Albany Golf Course on December 5, 2021 in Nassau. — AFP

very positive. I'm just as excited as everyone else when it comes to watching him swing a golf club." On Saturday, Woods gave no clue about his planned return when speaking on the sidelines of the Hero World Challenge, the 20-player invitational event he hosts in the Bahamas each year to benefit his charitable foundation. The 15-time major winner said while he was able to play "hit-and-gig-

gle golf", a return to a PGA Tour event remained some way in the distance.

"Playing tour golf and being prepared to play and trying to shoot scores against these best players on the toughest golf courses, that's a totally different deal," Woods said. "I'm a long way away from that. Don't expect me to be out there on the tour level for quite some time." — AFP

Sports

Rockets shoot down Nets, Bulls and NBA champion Bucks fall

LOS ANGELES: The Houston Rockets pushed their NBA winning streak to seven games on Wednesday with a 114-104 victory over the short-handed Brooklyn Nets as the top three Eastern Conference teams suffered setbacks. Eric Gordon scored 21 points before he was ejected in the fourth quarter and Garrison Matthews added 19 for the Rockets, who have their first seven-game winning streak since they won eight in a row in November of 2019.

James Harden, playing his second game in Houston since he was traded to the Nets in January, had 25 points for the Eastern Conference-leading Nets, who rested league scoring leader Kevin Durant and LaMarcus Aldridge.

In Cleveland, Darius Garland scored 24 points and rookie Evan Mobley added 16 with nine rebounds as the Cavaliers beat the depleted Bulls 115-92. The Cavs posted their biggest winning margin of the season against the Bulls, the second-ranked team in the East.

Earlier in the day the Bulls saw Matt Thomas become their fourth player to enter COVID-19 protocols after testing positive for coronavirus. Thomas had made the trip to Cleveland, but Bulls coach Billy Donovan received word early Wednesday morning that he would not be available. Donovan, however, said after the blowout defeat that the available players had to step up. "We're better than

that," Donovan said. "And we need to be better than that. I don't know when or who is coming back on what dates. My feeling is right now, we're going into Miami with the same group, and if we don't compete at a higher level, we're going to get the same result we got here tonight. ... It's not to say we're going to win, but we can do a better job than we did tonight."

The Heat will host the Bulls on Saturday coming off a 113-104 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks on Wednesday—just the second defeat in a dozen games for the reigning NBA champions who are lying third in the East. With Bam Adebayo and Jimmy Butler sidelined by injury, forward Caleb Martin led the heat with a career-high 28 points.

Martin, starting in place of Butler who was absent with a tailbone bruise, made a career-high six three-pointers in eight attempts. He pulled down eight rebounds, handed out three assists and blocked two shots. Heat guard Kyle Lowry scored 22 points and handed out 13 assists, sparking Miami's big third quarter with 16 points in the period on efficient six-of-10 shooting.

The Heat out-scored the Bucks 39-26 in the third period to erase a seven-point halftime deficit and take a six-point lead into the final quarter. Max Strus kept things going, scoring all of his 16 points in the final frame as the Heat held on.



HOUSTON: Christian Wood #35 of the Houston Rockets shoots a basket over Blake Griffin #2 of the Brooklyn Nets during the first half at Toyota Center in Houston, Texas. —AFP

Wizards win in overtime

Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 15 points as the Heat limited the two-time NBA Most Valuable Player to four-of-13 shooting from the field. Jrue Holiday led the Bucks with 27 points and Khris Middleton added 20, but the Bucks couldn't overcome the Heat's franchise record-equaling 22 three-pointers.

In Detroit, Washington forward Kyle Kuzma broke Pistons' hearts, draining a

three-pointer with six-tenths of a second left in overtime to lift the Wizards to a 119-116 victory. Kuzma scored 26 points and Bradley Beal added 25 for the Wizards, who held on after letting a late double-digit lead slip away and handed the Pistons a 10th straight defeat.

Jerami Grant scored 28 points for Detroit and Cade Cunningham scored eight straight in overtime to knot the score with 24.6 seconds. —AFP

IOC announces aid for athletes in Afghanistan

LAUSANNE: The International Olympic Committee, after orchestrating the evacuation of about 300 members of the Afghan sports community, on Wednesday announced \$560,000 of aid for the winter to those left behind. "Thanks to our discreet diplomacy, the Taliban accept and support the delivery by the IOC of humanitarian aid to members of the Olympic community who still live in Afghanistan," said Thomas Bach, the IOC president.

He was speaking after the second day of an Executive Board meeting at which the IOC earmarked \$560,000 (493,000 euros) in aid for about 2,000 Olympic and Paralympic athletes to be distributed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Following the return to power of the Taliban in mid-August, 300 Afghan athletes, coaches and officials were evacuated on humanitarian visas obtained by National Olympic Committees from their governments.

"This is a work in progress," Bach said. "It has become

more difficult to get a humanitarian visa for people from Afghanistan than at the very beginning of this evacuation, nevertheless we are in talks with a number of governments and we hope that one or the other will come to fruition. "Because this has slowed down we have reinforced the humanitarian community to overcome the very harsh winter in Afghanistan." On Tuesday, Bach said the IOC had begun discussions with the Taliban on November 18 in Qatar about those who remained behind, especially women and girls.

"We have clearly explained to them that free access to sport, without any gender, ethnic, religious or other discrimination, is fundamental for the respect of the Olympic Charter," he said.

The Afghan aid offers the IOC an opportunity to defend its "quiet diplomacy", a term recently coined to justify its controversial intervention in the case of the Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai, who was not seen for nearly three weeks after accusing a former top Communist Party politician of sexual assault.

Bach spoke to Peng for 30 minutes on November 21 in one of the first contacts that a Western organisation had with her. A second video call followed in early December, which allayed concerns about her physical well-being but not her degree of freedom.

Accused of serving Beijing's propaganda, the IOC has



Thomas Bach, IOC president

defended its "humane" approach, deeming it "more effective" to act behind the scenes to ensure the "well-being and safety" of the player, without mentioning the accusations she made. —AFP

Rapid-fire Head century puts Australia in firm command

BRISBANE: Travis Head blasted a rapid-fire century to crush England hopes on the second day of the opening Ashes Test at the Gabba yesterday. At the close of play Australia were 343-7, a lead of 196 on England's dismal first-innings total of 147. Head was on 112 from only 95 balls, alongside Mitchell Starc, who was not-out 10.

England had threatened a comeback after tea when Ollie Robinson took two wickets in consecutive balls, but Head's aggressive innings put paid to any hopes of a miracle recovery. Head came to the crease with Australia 189-3 after Steve Smith edged Mark Wood to keeper Jos Buttler just before tea.

He then watched David Warner (94) and Cameron Green depart to Robinson's accurate seamers after the break, with Australia still only 89 runs ahead. But the 27-year-old Head attacked from the outset and was particularly harsh on spinners Jack Leach and Joe Root.

He smashed two sixes and 12 boundaries in his century, his third overall and his first since the Boxing Day Test against New Zealand in 2019. Leach, 1-95 from 11 overs, failed to assert any control and with Ben Stokes also struggling for fitness, skipper Root had to rely heavily on his three-man seam attack. Earlier, Warner rode his luck in the first two sessions. The gritty opener was bowled by a no-ball by Stokes before lunch, then dropped by Rory Burns in the first over

after the break, before Haseeb Hameed bungled a simple run-out when Warner was on 60.

Warner's good fortune began in the opening session when Stokes bowled him when he was on 17, but the all-rounder had overstepped to give the Australian opening batsman a reprieve. It later transpired that technology issues were at the centre of the no-ball drama.

Television replays showed that Stokes had also overstepped on the first three balls of his over, but nothing was called. That led to suggestions that had he been called earlier by the umpires, he would have adjusted his run-up and Warner's prized wicket-on Stokes's fourth delivery-may have stood. Cricket Australia later said the technology that TV umpires use to help check no-balls was not working.

Dangerous pace

England needed to take all their chances to keep their hopes of salvaging anything from the first Test after their disastrous start on Wednesday, when they were bowled out in just 50.1 calamitous overs. They started well when Robinson claimed his first Ashes wicket, Marcus Harris, with the score on 10. England had gone into the Test without veteran seamers Jimmy Anderson and Stuart Broad, surprising many, including Australian captain Pat Cummins.

But the seam attack of Robinson, Chris



BRISBANE: England's Jack Leach (L) bowls next to Australia's Marnus Labuschagne during day two of the first Ashes cricket Test match between England and Australia at the Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. —AFP

Woakes and the outright pace of Wood were able to keep the Australian batters pinned down early on with some tight and accurate bowling. Robinson was particularly dangerous and made

the breakthrough when he enticed Harris to play forward to a ball that left him slightly, the Australian opener edging to second slip, where Dawid Malan took a good low catch. —AFP

Kohli's ODI 'sacking' inevitable, say Indian media

NEW DELHI: The Indian cricket board's removal of Virat Kohli as ODI captain was inevitable when he refused to step down after a dismal T20 World Cup, local media said yesterday. The star batsman had relinquished his leadership of a T20 side who were eliminated in the group stage of the World Cup-anathema to fans in a country obsessed by cricket.

But Kohli sought to hold on to the ODI captaincy—a plan that came to an unceremonious end when the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said late Wednesday that Rohit Sharma would captain the one-day team on its South Africa tour. "Virat Kohli refuses to step down, BCCI cracks whip," the Press Trust of India said in a headline. The BCCI had waited for the 33-year-old to leave voluntarily as ODI captain, but when he failed to, losing the position was "simply fait accompli", it said. Kohli was not informed about his "sacking" beforehand, the Indian Express said.

India went to the T20 World Cup as one of the favourites but crashed out after big losses to New Zealand and arch-rivals Pakistan. India's top-order failures in the two defeats—the loss to Pakistan was their first in a World Cup—raised questions about their preparation and leadership.

A terse line at the end of a BCCI statement announcing the Test squad for the upcoming tour confirmed that Sharma, 34, will now lead India in both white-ball formats. "However great a player Virat Kohli is... it is inevitable he will feel a sense of loss," tweeted cricket commentator Harsha Bhogle.

Sports writer Ayaz Memon said that Sharma "thoroughly deserved" his promotion. He will also be Kohli's deputy in Tests. But



AHMEDABAD: File photo shows India's captain Virat Kohli (R) speaks with teammate Rohit Sharma during the fifth and final Twenty20 international cricket match between India and England. —AFP

Memon warned that coach Rahul Dravid would need to be "buffer, bridge and big brother" between Kohli and Sharma because "dressing-room dynamics change" during a transition.

Indian sports author Boria Majumdar praised Sharma's elevation but said that it was important to take Kohli "into confidence" and ensure there was "clear communication". "For Indian cricket, it's needed," he added.

Fans online lamented the manner of Kohli's exit. "A captain who maintained win percentage of 68 percent in ODIs is surely not supposed to be bidden farewell via a press release with two sentences without even mentioning his name, no," wrote one.

Kohli has the best winning percentage for an Indian ODI skipper but has faced criticism over the team's inability to win major tournaments. He has also come under scrutiny as his form has dipped over the last two years. He will still lead India for a three-Test series in South Africa starting December 26. —AFP

Heavy security as WI give Pakistan cricket boost

KARACHI: The West Indies cricket team arrived in Pakistan yesterday for a visit which local officials hope will scotch bitter memories of a New Zealand tour abandoned on security grounds. The Windies will play three Twenty20 and three one-day internationals—all in the port city of Karachi—starting Monday, their first visit since 2018.

A Pakistan official said a 26-member party had flown to Karachi early yesterday before being escorted by heavy security to the team hotel. The series comes three months after New Zealand quit their first tour to the country in 18 years shortly before the opening match was due to start following a security alert. That was followed by England's decision to withdraw visits by their men's and women's teams scheduled for October. Pakistan officials were furious with the cancellations, arguing security measures were lock-tight.

The cricket-mad nation endured a long spell without a visit from an international team following a terror attack on a bus carrying the Sri Lankan team in Lahore in 2009. Pakistan were forced to play their home international matches abroad—mostly in the United Arab Emirates—until 2015, when normal service tentatively resumed. This West Indian squad is somewhat understrength, with regulars Evin Lewis, Shimron Hetmyer, Andre Russell and Lendl Simmons all opting out for personal reasons. Former skipper Jason Holder is being rested, while Fabian Allen and Obed McCoy are out because of injuries. —AFP

Sports

Barcelona exit Champions League after defeat at Bayern Munich

MUNICH: Barcelona crashed out of the Champions League on Wednesday as their 3-0 defeat at Bayern Munich saw the Spanish giants fail to reach the last 16 for the first time in 18 years. Goals by Thomas Mueller and Leroy Sané gave Bayern a 2-0 half-time cushion in falling snow at the Allianz Arena, which was devoid of spectators due to high numbers of Covid-19 cases in Bavaria.

Teenager Jamal Musiala grabbed Bayern's third in the second half to seal Barcelona's fate. Bayern, who also beat Barca 3-0 at the Camp Nou when the sides met last September, had already qualified for the knock-out stages as Group E winners.

They now join Liverpool and Ajax with a perfect six victories from six games in the group stage. However, for the first time since the 2003/04 season, Barcelona will not be in the draw for the last 16. Benfica's 2-0 win at home to Dynamo Kiev means Barcelona finish third and drop to the Europa League.

It was almost eight years to the day since Bayern lost a home Champions League game in the group phase and the Bundesliga leaders were in no mood to be generous. Xavi Hernandez, 41, who took charge of struggling Barcelona four weeks ago, has now suffered back-to-back defeats after his first loss as head coach against

Real Betis last weekend.

Bayern were not even at full strength. With Joshua Kimmich quarantining after a positive COVID test and Leon Goretzka injured, 18-year-old Musiala played out of position alongside Corentin Tolisso in defensive midfield. Barcelona made a bright start but faded after losing Jordi Alba to injury with half an hour gone, just before Mueller headed Bayern into the lead.

Robert Lewandowski found space on the left of the box and flicked a pass to Mueller whose looping header flew beyond the reach of Barcelona goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen. It was a double blow to the Barca bench who had just learnt Benfica were 2-0 up against Dynamo.

Things went from bad to worse for the Spanish visitors when Sané hit the net with a powerful long-range shot that deceived Ter Stegen. Sané should have put the result beyond doubt when Bayern attacked just after the break.

Instead of tapping the ball into the empty net, he poked the ball into Ter Stegen's grateful arms. Alphonso Davies, who also ran Barcelona ragged in Bayern's historic 8-2 drubbing in the 2020 quarter-finals, again caused havoc down the left flank. The fleet-footed Canadian created Bayern's third when he pulled the ball back for Musiala to tap home from close range on 62



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's French defender Benjamin Pavard (L) and Barcelona's French forward Ousmane Dembélé vie for the ball during the UEFA Champions League group E football match FC Bayern Munich v FC Barcelona in Munich. —AFP

minutes. With 20 minutes left and the contest effectively over, Bayern coach Julian Nagelsmann started taking off first-choice players. First to go were wingers Davies and Kingsley

Coman. Then followed star striker Lewandowski and centre-back Niklas Sule, yet still Barcelona could not threaten Manuel Neuer in the Bayern goal. — AFP

Pele hospitalized for tumor treatment

SAO PAULO: Brazilian football legend Pele has been hospitalized for treatment of a previously identified colon tumor, his doctors said Wednesday, the latest health issue for the 81-year-old icon. The three-time world champion was admitted to Albert Einstein Hospital in Sao Paulo "for follow-up treatment of the colon tumor identified in September this year," his medical team said in a statement.

"The patient is stable, and is expected to be released in the coming days." It did not say when Pele was hospitalized. Pele underwent surgery for the tumor on September 4, spending a month in the hospital before being released to continue chemotherapy. The star's public relations agency described the latest hospital stay as routine.

"He went in for chemo. He always has to go to the hospital for the treatment," it said in a note. "Papi is Great," said Pele's daughter Flavia Kurtz under a photo of him at the hospital after the procedure she posted to Instagram just after 7:00 pm (1000 GMT). Her sister Kely Nascimento, who has provided fans with updates on her father's condition, posted the same photo to Instagram.

"This was not a surprise. It was already scheduled and is part of the treatment," she said in the caption. "In two or three days he will be back home to enjoy Christmas." Considered by many the greatest footballer of all time, Edson Arantes do Nascimento-Pele's real name-has been in poor health in recent years, and has spent a number of stints in the hospital. — AFP

Arab Masters Tournament

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Tunisia's top tennis player Malek Jajiri continued his winning streak in the Arab Masters Tournament being held at Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdallah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah International Tennis Complex, as he defeated Syria's Rabei Sleem in his first match that was held on Wednesday night 6-1-6-1, then in his second match that was held yesterday morning he defeated Qatar's Mubarak Zayed 6-2-6-2. Syria's Mohammad Hazim defeated Saudi Arabia's Ammar Al-Haqbani 6-3-6-3.

Kuwait's National team players Abdulhameed Jumaa reached last 16 by defeating Saudi Arabia's Sulaiman Al-Qasem 6-3-6-1, while his compatriot Talal Antar defeated Libya's Mohammad Al-Mahdi 6-0-6-0.

Essa Qabazard lost to Algerian Toufik Sahtali 6-4-5-7-6-1, while Ali Al-Shatti lost to Egypt's Amr Mohamed 6-2-6-1, and Bader Antar lost to Jordan's Mousa Kotb 7-5-6-2.

Competitions of the Arab Masters will continue into the quarter finals today (Friday), while the semi finals will be tomorrow for singles and doubles. The finals will be played on Sunday evening.

Meanwhile, WTA's 7th ranked player Ons Jabeur will arrive tomorrow afternoon and will attend the finals on Sunday. Ons has the best world ranking for an Arab player at (7).

Kuwait Tennis Federation (KTF) Secretary General, Tournament Director Faleh Al-Otaibi said the organizing committee com-



Faleh Al-Otaibi



Malek Jajiri

pleted all preparations for the closing ceremony in cooperation with many government and private agencies adding "we are seeking a ceremony that will have many surprises that will match the game's stars and what Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdallah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah International Tennis Complex represents as it is among the best in the world".

Al-Otaibi lauded the levels the tournament had seen, adding that preliminaries of the masters had many competitive matches, and that the level is going higher and higher as those expected to win advanced. He said we hope Kuwait players to get good results in singles and doubles.

Deputy Chairman of Arab Tennis Federation, Chairman of Jordan's Federation Hazem Adas said Sheikh Jaber Tennis Complex is among the best in the world and will be a launching pad of Arab tennis. He said ATF has a development plan for tennis to enhance Arab player's levels through hosting tournaments in the future.

Chelsea blow bid for first place as Zenit snatch dramatic draw

SAINT PETERSBURG: Thomas Tuchel admitted Chelsea are struggling to protect their leads after the holders blew the chance to finish top of Champions League Group H in a dramatic 3-3 draw at Zenit Saint Petersburg on Wednesday.

Tuchel's side had already qualified for the last 16 and were hoping to take first place to theoretically secure an easier draw in the knockout stages. They were just seconds away from achieving their aim when Magomed Ozdoyev fired home to leave Chelsea two points behind group winners Juventus.

Timo Werner had put Chelsea ahead after 84 seconds with his club's fastest ever Champions League goal. Claudinho equalised and Sardar Azmoun handed Zenit the lead before half-time. Romelu Lukaku, making his first start since suffering an ankle injury against Malmö in October, equalised with his first goal in 11 club games since the Chelsea striker netted against Zenit in September. Werner looked to have won it with five minutes left, but Ozdoyev's last-gasp goal added to Tuchel's mounting problems. After Chelsea's damaging 3-2 defeat at West Ham knocked them off the top of the Premier League on Saturday, this was another setback for the Blues.

"My analysis is very clear: Our behaviour changes when we have a lead and this is something we never did and we should never do," Tuchel said. "Once we start managing results and changing our behaviour from what the score is, we get punished at the moment.

"Suddenly when we concede two goals we can show a reaction. But once we have the lead we give it away again. It happened to us at West Ham and it happened again today." A long flight

and temperatures well below zero made it a gruelling trip for a team already running on fumes and a return trip to Saint Petersburg for the Champions League final in May must seem a long way off for Tuchel's spluttering team at present. Asked for the solution to Chelsea's dip in form, Tuchel said: "You have to play through pain and you have to raise your level of concentration and you have to overcome adversity. "We need a higher level of sprints, a higher level of runs, a higher level of intensity and concentration. The basics need to be pushed onto a higher level while we are in the lead."

With N'Golo Kante still absent due to a knee injury, Jorginho unavailable because of a nagging back problem and Mateo Kovacic testing positive for the coronavirus this week, Chelsea's midfield was in tatters.

Sting in the tale

Saul Niguez has endured a difficult start following his loan switch from Atletico Madrid, but the Chelsea midfielder finally provided a positive contribution in the second minute. Making a lung-bursting run from his unfamiliar left wing-back role, Saul's shot was pushed away for a corner by Zenit keeper Mikhail Kerzhakov.

From Ross Barkley's resulting set-piece, Andreas Christensen flicked on to Werner and he had the simple task of poking home from virtually on the goal-line. So often this season, Chelsea have taken the lead without killing the game off and once again they were caught out in the 38th minute.

After Chelsea failed to clear their lines, Douglas Santos's cross found the visitors' defence



SAINT PETERSBURG: Zenit St Petersburg's Brazilian midfielder Claudinho, Chelsea's English midfielder Callum Hudson-Odoi, Zenit St Petersburg's Brazilian midfielder Wendel and Zenit St Petersburg's Brazilian defender Douglas Santos vie for the ball during the UEFA Champions League group H football match. —AFP

flat-footed and Claudinho took full advantage with a glancing header past Kepa Arrizabalaga. Three minutes later, Barkley surrendered possession too easily in midfield and Malcom's pass split the Chelsea defence, with Azmoun beating the flimsy offside trap and rounding Kepa before slotting into the empty net.

Lukaku grabbed Chelsea's equaliser in the

62nd minute, converting Werner's pass from close range. Chelsea kept plugging away and looked to have won it in the 85th minute when Werner took Christian Pulisic's pass and drilled a low finish past Kerzhakov from 12 yards.

But there was a sting in the tale as Ozdoyev lashed home from the edge of the area four minutes into stoppage time. —AFP

Gomes strike helps Lille to 'history' against Wolfsburg

WOLFSBURG: England Under-21 international Angel Gomes scored his first Champions League goal Wednesday as Lille cruised to a 3-1 win away to Wolfsburg to reach the last 16 for only the second time in their history. Gomes, 21, struck 12 minutes from time to seal a comfortable win for the reigning French champions and dump toothless Wolfsburg out of Europe. The win meant Lille finished top of Group G ahead of Red Bull Salzburg and progressed to the knockout stages for the first time since 2006/07.

"We're aware that we're making history and we want to make some more. We now want to focus in order to achieve something in the knockout stage," Jonathan Ikone told RMC Sport. Wolfsburg, meanwhile, are out of Europe after finishing bottom of the group. "It really hurts, I have to be honest," Wolfsburg midfielder Maximilian Arnold told DAZN. Lille took the lead through Burak Yilmaz on 11 minutes with a ruthless counter-attack directly from a Wolfsburg corner. Ikone tore down the right wing for the visitors and picked out Yilmaz on the box, who found the bottom corner with a first-touch finish. —AFP

Man Utd's youngsters held by Young Boys

MANCHESTER: Manchester United were held 1-1 by Young Boys on Wednesday as interim boss Ralf Rangnick blooded a host of youngsters in the Champions League. With United already assured of top spot in Group F, Rangnick rested all of his key players, making 11 changes from the side that beat Crystal Palace in the first game of his reign.

Mason Greenwood gave a disjointed United the perfect start, but Fabian Rieder's long-range strike just before half-time earned a point for the visitors, which was not enough to keep alive their chances of dropping into the Europa League. "I was fully aware before the game that with this team they hadn't played together," said Rangnick. "We could've score three or four goals but after we conceded the equaliser we were not defending high enough up, not proactive enough and we could also have conceded two or three goals."

Greenwood, 20, was the senior member of a front three also featuring 19-year-olds Amad Diallo and Anthony Elanga. Rangnick comes with a reputation for trusting youth. He got an early taste of Greenwood's predatory instincts as the striker acrobatically fired home Luke Shaw's low cross just nine minutes in.

Juan Mata, a Spanish veteran at the other end of his career, was handed just his second start of the season. Mata should have doubled United's lead when he fired too close to Guillaume Faivre after more excellent work by Greenwood. United fans have been clamouring for Donny Van de Beek to be given a regular run in the



MANCHESTER: Young Boys' Wilfried Kanga's (L) shot is blocked by Manchester United's English defender Teden Mengi during the UEFA Champions League Group F football match between Manchester United and Young Boys at Old Trafford stadium in Manchester, north west England. —AFP

starting line-up in recent weeks. The Dutchman was consistently overlooked by the sacked Ole Gunnar Solskjaer but he did little to force his way into Rangnick's plans with an error for the equaliser.

Van de Beek's intended pass for Aaron Wan-Bissaka was intercepted by Rieder, who then fired into the top corner. Young Boys' win over United on the opening night of the group had the Red Devils sweating over their progress. They needed a barrage of late goals to take 10 points from their games with Atalanta and Villarreal. —AFP



Barcelona exit Champions League after defeat at Bayern Munich

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