



2 Under Amir's direction,
3 authorities' heads meet



6 Germany vows to 'defend itself'
as police raid anti-vaxxers



11 Arabic calligraphy inscribed
into UNESCO heritage list



16 Stephen Curry sets
NBA 3-point record



Kuwait suspends expats' driving license transactions indefinitely

Interior ministry mulls raft of measures to control traffic

KUWAIT: All transactions related to foreign residents' driving licenses in Kuwait have been suspended until further notice as per the orders of Interior Ministry Undersecretary Lt Gen Sheikh Faisal Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah, Al-Jarida daily reported yesterday. Nearly 700,000 driving licenses are registered to expatriates in the interior ministry's database.

Al-Jarida daily has reported on Tuesday that the interior ministry has placed a block on around 247,000 driving licenses of expatriate residents as instructed by Sheikh Faisal Al-Nawaf, and tied their issuance to

meeting certain conditions. Security sources said the block prevents renewal of the license until after updating the applicant's data at the Public Authority for Manpower, especially with regards to salary, academic qualification and job description.

It is also expected the traffic department will ask all residents to replace their licenses at the start of the new year. Sheikh Faisal met senior officials and insisted on filtering the driving licenses of expats and make sure they meet the stipulations for issuance.

Meanwhile, another report raised concerns about whether the interior

ministry can face the challenge of renewing an estimated one million driving licenses if all holders of old licenses are asked to replace them with the new one (with the electronic chip). "Replacing this large number of licenses requires huge numbers of employees, in addition to large stocks of magnetic cards," sources quoted by Al-Rai daily said. The interior ministry refused to comment on the reports when contacted for confirmation by Kuwait Times.

These measures come as local authorities scramble to find quick solutions to the country's debilitating traffic

jams' problem. On Monday, MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji submitted a proposal to the National Assembly calling to restrict vehicle ownership by expatriates to only two and impose extra fees on any additional vehicles, saying the proposal aims at reducing traffic jams.

Turaiji's proposal calls on the interior ministry to take the necessary measures to restrict the number of vehicles foreign residents can own for personal use to only two "to counter the illegal trade in vehicles, reduce traffic jams" and "ensure there are enough spaces for the use of Kuwaiti citizens at commercial

malls, markets and public places".

The proposal states that if residents want to own more than two vehicles, they should apply to the traffic department, and if approved, they must pay extra fees for additional vehicles. The lawmaker said there are scores of dilapidated vehicles on Kuwaiti roads owned by expatriates, causing traffic jams, chaos and accidents. He added that these vehicles are normally parked in public squares and car parks of schools, mosques and commercial malls, and efforts by the Municipality have failed to resolve this problem.



Sheikh Faisal

News in brief

Modi to visit Kuwait in Jan

NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is planning a visit to Kuwait in the first week of January, the Economic Times reported. This will be first PM-level visit from India to Kuwait in 40 years, notwithstanding the fact Kuwait is one of India's key oil suppliers and hosts a big diaspora in the region. Approximately one million Indians are based in Kuwait - the largest expatriate community in Kuwait. (See Page 2)

Fjiri added to heritage list

DUBAI: The United Nations cultural agency yesterday added Bahrain's Fjiri musical performance, which commemorates the history of pearl diving, to its list of "intangible" heritage. "Dating back to the late 19th century, it was traditionally performed by pearl divers and pearling crews to express the hardships faced at sea," UNESCO said on its website. "The performers sit in a circle, singing and playing different types of drums, finger chimes and a jahl, a clay pot used as an instrument," it added. — AFP

Hamilton knighted after heartbreak

WINDSOR: Lewis Hamilton has been knighted in recognition of a glittering career in Formula 1 just days after he controversially lost out on a record eighth title. Hamilton was appointed a knight by the Prince of Wales during a Windsor Castle investiture ceremony yesterday, but he declined to speak to reporters afterwards. He was joined by his mother Carmen Lockhart and was all smiles as they posed for pictures in the castle's quadrangle.

Biggest global debt increase

WASHINGTON: Global debt rose to \$226 trillion in 2020 after seeing its biggest yearly increase since World War II, with richer nations doing most of the borrowing, the IMF said yesterday. Global debt now stands at 256 percent of GDP, a high level that countries across the world will have to consider as they seek to revitalize their economies from the COVID-19 downturn while dealing with new variants such as Omicron. — AFP

Queen meets Oman Sultan

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II yesterday made a rare public appearance, hosting Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tareq and his wife, Sayyida Ahad bint Abdullah, at Windsor Castle. The 95-year-old monarch has cut back on her engagements since an overnight hospital stay in October that raised fears for her health and prompted doctors to advise rest.

Buckingham Palace confirmed in a statement that she met the Sultan, 66, at her historic residence west of London, without giving further details. The two heads of state, and Sayyida Ahad, 51, were pictured smiling and shaking hands. The Gulf state ruler, a former culture and heritage minister who studied at Oxford University, came to power after the death of his cousin, Sultan Qaboos, last year. He had been the Arab world's longest-serving ruler.

Armed with drones, Turkey explores arms sales to Africa

ISTANBUL: Armed with battle-tested drones, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been deepening defense ties with African countries ahead of a major gathering of the continent's leaders in Istanbul. The two-day Turkey-Africa partnership summit starting Friday comes fast on the heels of a top-level business forum in October that focused on investment and trade. The next phase of this fast-blossoming relationship is security, experts say, with a host of African leaders looking to buy up

military hardware at cheaper prices and with fewer strings attached.

Leaders and top ministers from 39 countries - including 13 presidents - have confirmed attendance, with Erdogan set to make a speech on Saturday. Ankara already has a military base in Somalia, and Morocco and Tunisia reportedly took their first delivery of Turkish combat drones in September. Angola became the latest to express an interest in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) during Erdogan's first visit to the southern African country in October.

Turkey in August also signed a military cooperation pledge with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who has been embroiled in a war with Tigrayan rebels for the past year. "The most important sector is the defense sector because this is a new asset.

Continued on Page 2



WINDSOR: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II poses for a photograph with Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq and his wife Sayyida Ahad bint Abdullah during an audience at Windsor Castle yesterday. — AFP



ANKARA: This file photo taken on March 5, 2021 shows an unmanned Anka drone developed by Turkish Aerospace Industries. — AFP

In Bethlehem, Omicron ruins Xmas boom

BETHLEHEM: After collecting dust for nearly two years, the 228 rooms at Bethlehem's Ararat Hotel were scrubbed last month in anticipation of a post-lockdown Christmas boom, hopes that have again been dashed by the coronavirus. A large Christmas tree and decorations did little to brighten a deserted lobby. Like other hotels in Bethlehem, the Ararat has no guests, with the tree offering cheer to

no one but the seven out of 105 employees who have not been fired.

"We were expecting 70 percent occupancy for Christmas but all overseas reservations have been cancelled," said Augustine Shomali, a manager at the hotel. The people of Bethlehem - a Palestinian city in the occupied West Bank considered the place of Christ's birth according to Christian tradition - are used to welcoming an influx of tourists each December.

After a near-total pandemic lockdown last year, Bethlehem began to hope for a joyous Christmas when the Zionist entity, which controls all access points to the city,

Continued on Page 2



BETHLEHEM: Two men walk in the empty Manger Square outside the Church of the Nativity, as the square remains devoid of pilgrims less than two weeks before Christmas. — AFP

Local

French lawmaker to visit Kuwaiti parliament: Envoy

MP Amelia Lakrafi to meet Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem today

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Ambassador of France to Kuwait Claire Le Flecher announced the arrival of French MP Amelia Lakrafi, who will meet National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem today. "Today we are happy to receive our French MP Amelia Lakrafi to strengthen our parliamentary cooperation," she said during a press conference yesterday. "We believe Kuwait has strong parliamentary traditions and we value their traditions highly. With her visit, we are going to explore how the two parliaments can cooperate to strengthen our ties. Lakrafi is an advocate of women's rights and is scheduled to meet some Kuwaiti women. The Middle East region is her region of focus. She will also meet French school and institute officials," Le Flecher said.

"Within the framework of my mandate, I want to work on strengthening the attractiveness and influence of French companies in Kuwait. The upcoming signing of an MoU between French businesses and Kuwait Direct Investment Authority will promote investment between the two countries. We also wish to develop the working relationship with major Kuwaiti investors and financial players, both public and private," she said.

The ambassador also mentioned strengthening military cooperation between France and Kuwait, recalling the participation in the 1990-1991 Gulf War of 15,000 French troops to liberate Kuwait

from Iraqi occupation. "Our military ties continue, and I would like to reinforce and develop them further, especially over training and exercises with the national guard and national police. I will also focus on strengthening intelligence-sharing. In early 2022, we shall complete the delivery of Caracal helicopters, and have scheduled military exercises at the end of 2022," she said.



Agreement to promote investment

Strong friendship

The envoy, who was speaking in her first meeting with reports since assuming her post in Kuwait, also spoke about her encounter with HH the Crown Prince when she presented her credentials. "I presented my credentials to HH the Crown Prince recently. Now I can represent my country and the French people at any official function since I am

now fully recognized and authorized to do so. I was honored to present my credentials to HH the Crown Prince. I was the first ambassador he received (after HH the Amir delegated some of his powers to his deputy). We spoke about comprehensive cooperation between our two countries," Le Flecher said.

"He mentioned our strong friendship and cooperation and invited President Macron on a state visit to Kuwait. I went back to France recently to convey the message to our president. It was received by authorities in France positively and they'll be working on the schedule considering some factors, including the upcoming election in April and May, France taking the helm of the EU from Jan 2022 plus the current coronavirus situation in Europe. These factors may slow the process, but he is more than willing to come over," she emphasized.

The envoy highlighted her country's 2022 action plan, especially on celebrating 60 years of diplomatic ties with Kuwait. "I am lucky, because this year we are also celebrating our 60th year of friendship. This is a very special year for both of us. On August 28, 1961, France was one of the first countries in the world to recognize Kuwait. France has a multidisciplinary presence in Kuwait - we have the embassy, economic services, businesses and cultural and educational institutes. All these are just some of the tools which help strengthen bilateral relations between France and Kuwait," Le Flecher said.



KUWAIT: Ambassador of France to Kuwait Claire Le Flecher during a press conference yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

"I wish to continue the strategic dialogue in Kuwait that we started, this time on the ministerial level. I hope it will push through, but we are all aware of the current coronavirus situation all over the world and in Europe. We planned it in the first month of 2022 - the subcommittee has been working actively on this. Migration, security, health, defense, trade, investment and development, Francophone, education, and culture are all on the agenda. We are positive that after the dialogue, a number of agreements will be signed," she concluded.

Indian PM Modi to visit Kuwait in Jan: Report

NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is planning a visit to Kuwait in the first week of January, the Economic Times reported. This will be first PM level visit from India to Kuwait in 40 years, notwithstanding the fact Kuwait is one of India's key oil suppliers and hosts a big diaspora in the region. Enhancing Kuwaiti investments to India and putting in a place a defense partnership is on the cards for the visit. Modi had visited all other five Gulf states since 2015 except Kuwait, and the trip is expected to upgrade ties to the next level. Approximately one million Indians are based in Kuwait, the largest expatriate community in Kuwait. The year 2020-21 marked the 60th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between two countries. India has been a natural trading partner of Kuwait and until 1961, the Indian Rupee was the legal tender in Kuwait.

India has consistently been among the top ten trading partners of Kuwait and bilateral trade for FY 2020-2021 stood at \$ 6.27 billion. Kuwait remains a reliable supplier of crude oil and LPG to India, officials informed. So far, Kuwaiti investments in India are over \$ 5.5 billion, majority of which is by Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), which has been invested in companies like GMR Infrastructure Ltd, Interglobe Aviation's (Indigo Airlines) IPO, Bombay Stock Exchange and Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd. KIA wants to exponentially enhance its presence in India across sectors, officials indicated.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Ties received a boost when Kuwait emerged as the biggest supplier of liquid medical oxygen during the second COVID wave here in April-May. The Kuwaiti Cabinet issued a statement in support of India and sent liquid medical oxygen to India over many cycles of an air and sea bridge. Earlier, an Indian medical team travelled aboard a special aircraft from India to Kuwait in April 2020 to help fight COVID-19 in Kuwait.

In June, external affairs minister S Jaishankar visited Kuwait and called on the prime minister to deliver a letter from Modi to the Amir of Kuwait. During the visit a MoU for 'Cooperation in the Recruitment of Domestic Workers' was signed and it was decided to hold a joint Ministerial meet of Foreign and Commerce Ministers. Last year, then Indian petroleum and natural gas and steel minister Dharmendra Pradhan visited Kuwait to offer condolences on the demise of the late Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah — a trip that helped to upgrade ties.

Three authorities' heads meet under Amir's instructions



KUWAIT: At the behest of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, a meeting between National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and Chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council and the Court of Cassation Justice Ahmad Al-Ajeel was held at Bayan Palace yesterday. — KUNA

Armed with drones...

Continued from Page 1

Turkey has pushed this sector a lot, especially drones," Federico Donelli, an international relations researcher at the University of Genoa, told AFP.

Russia has been the dominant player on the African arms market, accounting for 49 percent of the continent's imports between 2015 and 2019, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). But interest in Turkish weaponry is peaking. The TB2 Bayraktar model is in high demand after it was credited with swinging the fate of conflicts in Libya and Azerbaijan's breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the past few years.

The drones are made by the private Baykar company, run by one of Erdogan's sons-in-law. "Everywhere I go in Africa, everyone asks about UAVs," Erdogan boasted after a visit to Angola, Nigeria and Togo in October. Some of the closest scrutiny has focused on Turkey's ties with Ethiopia, where a brutal conflict has killed thousands, displaced more than two million and driven hundreds of thousands into famine-like conditions, according to UN estimates.

A Western source said Turkey sent an undisclosed number of combat drones in support of Abiy's campaign earlier this year, but that Ankara has since responded to international pressure and halted the sales. "Ethiopia can buy these drones from whoever they want," Turkey's foreign ministry spokesman said in October, neither confirming or denying the sales.

Official Turkish data does not break down the details of military sales to

individual countries, only giving the total sales amount for each month. These have soared spectacularly in the past year. Turkish defense and aviation exports to Ethiopia rose to \$94.6 million between January and November from around \$235,000 in the same period last year, according to figures published by the Turkish Exporters Assembly. Sales to Angola, Chad and Morocco experienced similar jumps.

Turkey's drones first made international headlines after Ankara signed two deals with the UN-recognized Libyan government covering maritime and security in 2019. It then swarmed the conflict zone with drones, stalling an advance by rebel eastern forces backed by Turkey's regional rivals and paving the way for a truce. Turkey cemented its drones' reputation last year by helping Azerbaijan recapture most of the land it lost to separatist ethnic Armenian forces in disputed Nagorno-Karabakh nearly three decades ago.

"Now Turkey with drones has more cards to play when they have to bargain with other countries," researcher Donelli said. "This is a very good bargaining chip for Turkey." The head of Turkey's Foreign Economic Relations Board - the NGO that hosted the October forum in Istanbul - insisted the growing relationship was not just about weapons. "We care about the defense sector and our relations with Africa," the board's head Nail Olpak told AFP.

"But I would like to emphasize that if we see the defense sector only as weapons, rockets, guns, tanks and rifles, it would be wrong."

He highlighted Turkish mine-clearing vehicles in Togo, which qualify as defence industry sales. Donelli agreed, referring to Togo's plans to improve its army with the support of Turkey through training and armored vehicles, weapons and other kinds of equipment. — AFP

Europe ramps up COVID vaccine drive for children

MADRID: Several European nations started vaccinating children aged five to 11 against COVID-19 yesterday in an effort to contain a raging pandemic and keep schools open, as Germany launched raids over death threats against a pro-vaccine public official. The push to immunize children has gained fresh urgency from concerns over the rapid spread of the heavily mutated Omicron variant of the virus, which was first identified in southern Africa late last month. EU chief

Ursula von der Leyen warned yesterday that Omicron could become dominant in Europe by mid-January. Croatia, Germany, Spain, Greece and Hungary were among those opening up their inoculation drives to younger kids, with other nations still weighing their approach.

Spain, which has one of Europe's highest COVID-19 vaccination rates, launched its immunization campaign for five to 11-year-olds. The country has around 3.3 million children within that age group. Health Minister Carolina Darias called the start of child vaccination an "important milestone" in the fight against the pandemic. A survey published by Appinio found that 74 percent of Spanish parents of five to 11-year-olds wanted to get their kids jabbed.

Doctors elsewhere in Europe also

ernment is considering tightening restrictions, not loosening them.

While Zionist hotels have been compensated by the Zionist entity, Palestinian ones have received nothing, and Shomali's livelihood is hinging on the policies of a government in a country where he cannot vote. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than three million people visited Bethlehem each year. More than 20 percent of the city's population is employed in the tourism sector, but the jobless rate has risen from 23 percent to 35 percent through the pandemic.

The Palestinian Authority, the civil authority in parts of the West Bank, is mired in an economic crisis and has only offered affected workers in Bethlehem's hard-hit tourism sector a one-time stipend of 700 shekels (\$224).

Sitting outside his Armenian ceramics shop next to the Church of the Nativity, marked as the site of Christ's birth, Afram Shaheen told AFP "there is no work". "I open the shop, drink a cup of coffee, and go home," he said, smoking a cigarette.

Shaheen said that since Bethlehem became the first Palestinian city to go into lockdown in March 2020, he has had just

reported strong initial demand from parents. "As soon as we offered the vaccine appointments, they were pretty much all snapped up," said Jakob Maske, a Berlin-based doctor and spokesman for Germany's association of pediatricians. But he downplayed expectations of the kids' shots heralding a turning point in the fight against COVID-19, at a time when Germany is battling a fierce fourth wave.

"Five to 11-year-olds only make up around three percent of the German population," he told AFP, describing the immunization impact as "a small cog" in the effort. Germany's STIKO vaccine commission has officially only recommended the jab for children with pre-existing conditions, but even healthy children will be inoculated if the parents request it. —AFP

one customer, a French woman who bought \$23 worth of ceramics - his total sales revenue so far during the pandemic. "This used to be pocket money for me," he said, explaining that he smokes three packs of cigarettes a day, which cost him about \$27.

Like many tourist shops in Bethlehem, Shaheen is selling old merchandise. "I didn't order anything new, there is no market, no demand." In the shop next door, which sells olive wood icons, Nadia Hazboun said the city's handicraft shops specializing in woodwork and mother of pearl have stopped working entirely. "Many people sold their businesses," she said, adding that in the absence of any government assistance, owners and employees were facing debt and lawsuits.

"Two years ago, Bethlehem was a capital," said Hazboun, I used to close the shop at 9:00 pm. And now it's completely destroyed. This lockdown is a disaster." Bethlehem has survived past crises, notably waves of unrest during the Zionist aggression that have also dampened tourism, and Shomali said residents were surviving on hope. Asked if he has hope for next Christmas, Shomali answered "Next Christmas? I have hope for Easter." — AFP

Local

Kuwait's Amir receives Crown Prince after GCC Summit in Riyadh

Crown Prince thanks Saudi monarch for warm hospitality

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received yesterday His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah following the latter's return from Saudi Arabia, where he headed the Kuwaiti delegation to the 42nd GCC Summit in Riyadh. His Highness the Crown Prince briefed His Highness the Amir on the results of the summit that reflected the historical deep-rooted ties between the GCC countries and people, and keenness on boosting joint cooperation and unity between them to meet their mutual aspirations and enhance security and stability of the region.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince sent a letter of gratitude to Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud for the warm reception he and his accompanying delegation had experienced during his participation in the GCC Summit on Tuesday. He hailed the important decisions taken by the GCC leaders to cement joint action and achieve the aspirations of Gulf peoples. He also wished King Salman everlasting wellbeing and wished Saudi Arabia and its people more progress and prosperity. His Highness Sheikh Mishal sent a similar letter to Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud.

Joint march

The Riyadh Declaration, adopted by the 42nd Summit of the Supreme Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council on Tuesday, stressed the GCC leaders' resolve to press ahead with the march of joint action out of deep sense of responsibility towards the peoples of the GCC countries. In realization of the noble visions and aspirations for the

prosperity of the GCC member countries, the GCC leaders agreed on a number of principles and policies for upgrading the strategic cooperation and economic and developmental integration, according to the Declaration.

The consensus among the GCC leaders, stemming from the deep-rooted brotherly relationship, the joint, shared objective and common destiny, builds on the outcomes of Al-Ula GCC Summit, held in last January. Al-Ula Summit stressed commitment to collective action to promote coordination, collaboration and integration among the GCC states with a view to realizing the noble aims for which the GCC was founded in 1981 and the vision of Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz for implementation of the decisions made by the 36th GCC summit of December 2015. The GCC leaders highlighted the need to implement accurately the vision of Saudi King and further strengthen the pillars of economic unity and integrate the defense and security systems in order to promote stability of the GCC states and realize the aspirations of their peoples, the Declaration reads.

Aggression on all

The second article of the joint defense treaty provides that the GCC states consider aggression on any of them is tantamount to aggression on all of them, which requires collective response, the document reminds. The GCC leaders underscored the importance of concerted efforts and integrated policies to crystalize a joint foreign policy that could serve the common aspirations and interests of the GCC peoples and keep the GCC states away from regional or international conflicts. They agreed to coordinate the policies of the GCC states



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. —Amiri Diwan photo

towards sustainable development, mitigate the impacts of climate change on the GCC economies, and realize objectives of the initiative for recycling carbon dioxide unveiled by Saudi Arabia while pre-siding over G20 summit.

The leaders agreed to instruct the competent departments to work out the necessary mechanisms for employing the best practices for environment protection and draw on the Saudi Green Initiative and the Middle East Green Initiative, announced by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. They highlighted the need to follow up on the implementation of GCC strategy for diversified economy, maximize benefit from the economic potentials and double the volume of joint investments. They stressed the need to continue the combat against

the coronavirus pandemic through coordinated policies and joint action with a view to minimizing the impacts of the pandemic on the socio-economic development in the GCC countries.

They also stressed the importance of promoting the role of women in economic development and putting in full play the role of youth in the business and finance sectors. They urged promoting the joint action in the areas of digitalization, modern information technology and cybersecurity and encouraging the private sector, particularly the SMEs, to play greater role in economy, the Declaration went on. They instructed the relevant committees and departments to arrange the necessary programs to put into action the decision reached in the GCC summit, it added. —KUNA

GCC urges Iraq to complete borders' demarcation with Kuwait

RIYADH: The Gulf Cooperation Council called on Iraq to exert its utmost efforts, alongside the United Nations, in completing the demarcation of its maritime borders with Kuwait. In their final communique after the 42nd GCC Summit, Arab Gulf leaders reiterated support for Security Council Resolution number 2107, regarding the referral of the file of POWs and missing persons, Kuwait's property and national archives to the United Nations mission. They expressed hope for Iraq to continue to cooperate in order to ensure progress is achieved on these matters. Separately, they underlined the importance of preserving Iraq's territorial integrity, sovereignty, Arab-Islamic identity, social fabric and national unity and supporting its efforts to confront terrorist groups and armed militias in order to consolidate state sovereignty and the rule of law. Meanwhile, the GCC Cooperation Council reaffirmed commitment to its principled stance on Iran's continued occupation of the three UAE islands of Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa in the Arabian Gulf. The final communique stresses that the GCC leaders maintain their principled supportive stance of the UAE right to sovereignty over the three islands.

On relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the GCC Supreme Council reaffirms commitment to the basic principles of the UN Charter and the rules of international law, including neighborliness, respect to sovereignty of states, non-interference in the domestic affairs of one another, solving differences through peaceful means, discarding sectarianism, and refraining from using or threatening to use force. The Supreme Council is looking forward to Iran playing a positive role under its new administration so as to alleviate the tensions, build trust with the GCC member countries, according to the communique. The Supreme Council expresses worry about the escalation of Iranian moves to destabilize security in the region, and denounces Iran's continued interferences in the domestic affairs of the GCC counties and the region at large.

The Supreme Council reiterated denunciation of Iran's persistence in fomenting sectarianism and instability through provision of finances and arms, including ballistic missiles and drones, to terrorist groups and militias, which jeopardizes civilian lives and international navigation. Regarding the nuclear program of Iran, the communique says the GCC states stand ready to play an active and effective role in addressing this dossier in conformity with the common interests and in respect to sovereignty, neighborliness, the international legitimacy and the relevant UN resolutions. The communique stresses the need of GCC states' taking part in the multilateral talks on the Iranian nuclear program as well as any regional or international talks relating to security, safety and stability in the Gulf region. It urges closer cooperation and coordination with friendly countries to address Iran's behavior, which destabilizes the region and supports extremist sectarian groups, as well as Iran's drone and ballistic missile programs which pose risk to the international shipping routes and the safety of oil facilities in some sisterly countries.

The GCC Supreme Council condemns Iran for failure to meet its international obligations and exceeding the level of uranium enrichment to above the grade of peaceful uses. It urges Iran to back down on this stem and cooperate fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency. The communique stresses the importance of protecting the maritime safety and water corridors in the Gulf region and standing firm against any activities that could put in jeopardy the security and stability of the region, or international navigation or the oil facilities of the GCC states.

Meanwhile, the Gulf states meeting underlined the "centrality" of the Palestinian cause and support for Palestinian sovereignty over all territories occupied since June 1967 and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as a capital. The six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council bloc stressed the need to guarantee the rights of

refugees in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative and international legitimacy. They underlined the need for international community to resolve the conflict in a manner that ensures the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. The statement called on the international community to intervene, to put a stop to the Zionist entity's targeting of the Palestinian

presence in Jerusalem and its efforts to expel Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem. Also, the Zionist entity's attempts to change the legal nature and demographic structure of cities and Islamic holy places as well as to impose sovereignty over them, in clear violation of international law and United Nations resolutions. —KUNA

Kuwait FM touts Gulf Summit as promoting cooperation

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah Wednesday underlined the significance of the 42nd GCC Summit to promoting joint Gulf action and firmly looking forward to the bloc's fifth decade for sustainable accomplishments and promising future. Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nasser, in a tweet, thanked the leadership, government and people of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for warm welcome and proper arrangements and preparations for the summit.

Separately, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad received yesterday the outgoing Ambassador of Japan to Kuwait Takaoka Masato. The Foreign Minister, during his meeting with Masato, praised the diplomat's efforts and contributions to boosting the close ties between both friendly countries.

In other news, Sheikh Dr Ahmad has acclaimed the strong fraternal bonds that link Kuwait and Egypt, and their peoples. Addressing via videoconference a function held Tuesday by the Kuwaiti embassy in Cairo to mark the 60th anniversary of the Kuwaiti-Egyptian diplomatic relations, the minister said that relations between the two Arab nations, which date back to the 19th century, were based on mutual giving and sacrificing. He highlighted Egypt's contribu-



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets the outgoing Ambassador of Japan to Kuwait Takaoka Masato. —KUNA

tions to a variety of domains in Kuwait including education, culture and arts.

Sheikh Ahmad hailed relation with Egypt as a role model for successful international relations. He noted that the two countries agreed in 1995 on forming a joint committee to ameliorate cooperation in all domains. He recalled sacrifices of Kuwait and Egypt to defend the territories of each other. On economic cooperation, the Kuwaiti top diplomat estimated the trade exchange between the two countries at \$364 million in 2020. The investments of the Kuwaiti public sector in Egypt amount to \$5.4 billion whereas the private sector's investments exceed \$10 billion, he unveiled. —KUNA

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Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
Website: www.kuwaittimes.netKNPC inaugurates
new gas station
in Sabah Al-Ahmad

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti National Petroleum Company yesterday inaugurated a new gas station at the southern residential district of Sabah Al-Ahmad. It is the 18th and the last station in the first phase of a strategy to build up to 100 new ones. Ghanem Al-Otaibi, the company's Deputy Chief Executive Officer, said in a statement to the press that with the opening of the new station, the KNPC has finalized the first phase of the long-term plan. The KNPC is committed to the strategy, execution of which kicked off in December 2019, when it opened the first station.

Architectural designs of the second batch of planned stations have been finalized, he said, forecasting that their construction and operation would be in the 2025-2026 period. The current number of the gas stations is 61 spread in different locations around the country, in addition to three mobile stations set to be replaced with fixed ones. Out of the company's keenness on protecting the environment, he continued, the KNPC equipped the new stations with solar energy panels that generate 30 percent of the whole amount of the consumed electricity at the stations. Moreover, these stations are equipped with systems that cut harmful gases emitted from vehicles, another method to minimize air pollution at the locations. —KUNA

Two kg of shabu
found in lorry

KUWAIT: Abdaly land border customs officers foiled an attempt to smuggle nearly two kilograms of Shabu (methamphetamine) hidden in a lorry that arrived in Kuwait yesterday, the General Administration of Customs said. The discovery was made when the lorry passed through the x-ray system, which revealed a suspicious mass. Customs searched the truck and found the drugs hidden in tubes of its water tank. Legal action is underway.

VO Kuwait receives Arab Media
Forum's Impact Award

KUWAIT: Founded by Sheikhha Ohoud Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah in collaboration with Riham Al-Ayyar, VO, the first Kuwait-based integrated youth platform for incubating young talents, received the Arab Media Forum's Impact Award for its launching advertisement entitled 'Wejodkoom Haya' (your presence is our life, i.e. your talents is our nation's future). The famous socially driven advertisement was marked by the appearance of Sheikhha Ohoud Al-Sabah affirming Kuwaiti youth that their talents are Kuwait's future.

The 9th Arab Media Forum was held on December 12, 2021 and it awarded various institutions, corporations, and

prominent personalities who have contributed to Kuwait's creative productions through media content including advertisements. The forum assessed more than 240 advertisements and VO Kuwait was one of the winners for its socially driven advertisement that aimed to spark hope and success in Kuwaiti youth.

"We consider this award as one of the many great achievements that VO Kuwait has accomplished this year. In less than one year, we managed to impact many Kuwaiti youth and are currently taking their talents to the next level. This award goes to the fully fledged team of VO Kuwait that was dedicated from the very beginning to



Ahmed Suweilem

support, empower, and unleash Kuwaiti talents," stated Ahmed Suweilem, Public Relations Director of VO Kuwait.

In his statement, he explained that like all VO's produced media content, the winning advertisement aimed to generate a

message of hope to Kuwait's young talents. "Kuwaiti talents needed to be acknowledged, heard, and unleashed. Wejodkoom Haya marks the very start of VO Kuwait in providing a platform that offers Kuwaiti youth with all the pillars of success to nurture their talents. Our impact on Kuwaiti youth comes as part of our greater mission,



A group photo during the honoring ceremony.

which is to position Kuwait globally and diversify Kuwait's economy. Through this award, we can say that this was the start," stated Suweilem.

Founded in July 2020, VO nurtures and supports Kuwaiti talents and inspiring initiatives in various fields including entrepreneurship. The platform

launched its all-inclusive creative hub in May 2021 to empower and express their ideas, and is currently establishing an academic program for Kuwaiti youth and a 'smart' app to nurture their talents while promoting their creative productions on a seamless, high-tech and efficient digital platform.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Vehicles drive in the landmark Fahad Al-Salem Street in Kuwait City. —Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

stc honored during Kuwait Creativity
Award for media excellence

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced that it won several awards during the 9th edition of the Kuwait Creativity Award 2021 forum. The awards were presented by the Arab Media Forum in appreciation of stc's unique TVC productions, creative advertising concepts, as well as other initiatives introduced while implementing its effective CSR agenda and digital transformation strategy.

stc released a statement indicating that the awards were officially announced during the ceremony held by the forum's organizing committee. Held under the patronage of the Minister of Information and Culture, and Minister of State for Youth Affairs, Abd Al-Rahman Al-Mutairi, the League of Arab States, and in the presence of the Ministry of Information Undersecretary, Muneera Al Huwaidi, and Secretary-General of the Arab Media Forum, Madi Al-Khamees, creative individuals, sponsors, participants, and volunteers were honored, with stc amongst the top of the list.

stc added, "stc annually receives these awards in appreciation of its innovations in the technical and marketing fields, as well as its pioneering offerings line and continuous support towards the Kuwaiti community throughout 2021. The Company has further solidified its role as a pioneering leader in enabling digital transformation locally and throughout the region."

stc highlighted that the honorable recognition was received by Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications and her team at stc, on behalf of the Company. The award also served as a token of appreciation for the innovative and creative ideas implemented through the Company's CSR program, which included a range of sponsorship and community-based initiatives.

stc highlighted that the recognition reflects the years of hard work and

effort placed by the Company to launch a diverse range of products, services and solutions that exceed the expectations of its valued customer base, individuals and corporates. To achieve these goals, stc relied on the strength of its 5G infrastructure, which is the most widespread in Kuwait, as well as the experience and knowledge of its workforce in introducing the latest global technology in Kuwait's market.

It is worth mentioning that stc contributed to various causes in 2021 within the fields of health, education, sports, and the youth. One of which, for an example, was stc's continuation of its strategic partnership with the Kuwait Football Association for the eighth consecutive year. The Company is also a strong supporter of local SMEs and start-ups, reflected by various initiatives launched by stc such as the "Weyak" campaign. In a pioneering step, stc established a partnership with Virgin Mobile Middle East and Africa to launch the first mobile virtual network operator (MVNO). Additionally, stc launched campaigns targeting different causes such as its national and liberation day campaign "Ezhalha" and being the only telecom Company in Kuwait and the MENA region to offer the latest 5G Standalone technology dubbed 'FULL 5G'. In addition to its extensive activities, stc also received the award due to its strategic marketing and role in enabling digital transformation in Kuwait.

In her role, Danah Al-Jasem said, "This award come as a testament to the dedication and hard work placed forth by stc throughout the year, in addition to the steps taken to implement the digital transformation strategy and enhance the range of innovative offerings to both individual and corporate customers, as well as the Kuwaiti society as a whole."

Jasem added, "During 2021, we were keen to enhance our leadership role in the local market by offering an array of new-to-market and pioneering telecom services, leveraging the strong infrastructure and wide cover-



KUWAIT: Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications and her team as stc receives the awards.

age of stc's 5G network. Throughout this time, we did not overlook our vital role of supporting and giving back to the Kuwaiti community."

In relation to stc's CSR agenda, Jasem said, "In line with our CSR strategy, we focused, in our various activities, on the diversity and breadth of what we offer to the community, as well as the steps taken by stc to enable digital transformation. Our goal was to blend innovation in all that we do by collaborating with creative agencies. Having said that, we are keen to continue supporting our society, as well as various sectors, such as healthcare, sports, technology, education, and youth in addition to implementing our internal initiatives that engage the stc family."

In her concluding statement, Jasem extended her gratitude to the Arab Media Forum organizers, with a special thanks to Madi Al-Khamees, General Secretary of the Arab Media Forum. stc launched several community-based initiatives and awareness campaigns during 2021. These included joining the people of Kuwait in celebrating the national holidays, sponsoring the Kuwaiti Football Association in its various activities, and supporting the national 'Safe



The awards received by stc.

Education' campaign.

High-profile individuals, media representatives, local celebrities, influencers, and talented individuals within the fields of media and advertising attended the annual forum held this year. The awards were distributed after the judging panel, consisting of experts in the fields of media and cultural arts, evaluated the participants to select the winners based on the most creative concepts. The annual event aims to celebrate creative talent and recognize achievements whether on a corporate or individual level. The Arab Media Forum is considered one of the most influential award ceremonies in the region as it welcomes representatives from various sectors to recognize tremendous efforts in innovation and creativity.

Germany vows to ‘defend itself’ as police raid anti-vaxxers

11 Indonesians
dead in Malaysia
boat sinking



BERLIN: Process participants are pictured at the courtroom in Berlin where a trial took place yesterday against a Russian defendant accused of killing a Georgian man in a Berlin park. —AFP

Russia ordered killing on German soil

New Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock faces ‘her first major test’

BERLIN: The 2019 assassination of a former Chechen commander in a Berlin park was ordered by Russia, a German court ruled yesterday, in a verdict likely to escalate tensions with Moscow. Judges in a Berlin court sentenced Russian suspect Vadim Krasikov, alias Vadim Sokolov, to life in jail after finding him guilty of gunning down 40-year-old Georgian national Tornike Kavtarashvili in the Kleiner Tiergarten park in broad daylight on August 23, 2019.

“Russian state authorities ordered the accused to liquidate the victim,” presiding judge Olaf Arnoldi said, agreeing with prosecutors that the murder had been carefully planned. The murder was meant “as retaliation” for being a Kremlin opponent, the judge added. The ruling piles pressure on Germany’s new government, which has vowed a tougher stance towards Russia, and comes amid growing alarm in the West about Russian troop movements on the border with Ukraine.

“If the court should indeed assume a political contract killing, the German government would have to draw consequences,” Der Spiegel weekly wrote. New Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock now faces “her first major test”, it added.

Tit-for-tat

Shortly after the murder took place, Germany

under then-chancellor Angela Merkel expelled two Russian diplomats in protest at Moscow’s perceived lack of cooperation with the investigation. Russia, denying any connection to the killing, responded with a tit-for-tat move.

According to German prosecutors, the suspect



Moscow denied
any connection
to the killing

shot Kavtarashvili from behind on a bicycle and fired two shots from a Glock 26 pistol equipped with a silencer. After the victim fell to the ground, Krasikov is accused of then shooting him in the head, killing him on the spot, before getting back on his bicycle and fleeing. Police divers later recovered the Glock handgun, a wig and a bicycle from the nearby Spree river.

Calling for Krasikov to be jailed for life as they

summed up their case last week, prosecutors said they had identified him as a “commander of a special unit of Russian secret services FSB”. “He liquidated a political opponent,” prosecutor Lars Malkies told the court.

Tourist cover

But in an earlier hearing, the defendant had told the court through his lawyer Robert Unger that he should be identified only as Vadim Sokolov, who is “Russian, single and a construction engineer”.

He denied being known as Krasikov, saying “I know of no one by this name”. Prosecutors say the defendant travelled as a tourist in the days before the murder, arriving on August 17 in Paris where he visited sights before travelling to Warsaw. Photos of his tourist cover were found on a mobile phone in the Polish hotel where he stayed before heading to Berlin on August 22. Krasikov was arrested after the killing, which took place just minutes away from the German chancellery and parliament.

Ukraine tensions

The trial has spanned a period of particularly rocky ties between Berlin and Moscow over a series of espionage cases, as well as the poisoning and jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. The verdict also comes at a time of severe tensions

with Russia, which stands accused by the West of planning an invasion of Ukraine and massing tens of thousands of troops near its neighbour’s border. Germany’s new government has taken a sharp tone with Moscow, warning that it will not approve the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia in the event of any new “escalation” in Ukraine. Chancellor Olaf Scholz issued a fresh warning on Wednesday, saying Russia would pay “a high price” if it invaded Ukraine.

‘Very cruel’

Russian President Vladimir Putin has described the Tiergarten victim as a “fighter, very cruel and bloody” who had joined separatists against Russian forces in the Caucasus and also been involved in bombing attacks on the Moscow metro. Moscow also said it had been seeking his extradition. According to German media, the victim survived two assassination attempts in Georgia before seeking asylum in Germany, where he had been living for several years. In another recent incident, a Russian diplomat was found dead outside the country’s embassy in Berlin in October. Der Spiegel said the man was related to a high-ranking official of the FSB’s second directorate—a unit that Western secret services say was involved in the Tiergarten killing. —AFP



NEW YORK: Keechant Sewell, who is to be New York police commissioner, speaks during a press conference in New York yesterday. —AFP

Sewell appointed NY’s first woman police chief

NEW YORK: New York will appoint Keechant Sewell as its first-ever woman police chief to head the largest force in the country, mayor-elect Eric Adams said Tuesday, at a time when the city’s trust in law enforcement has been shattered.

Sewell will also be only the third black person in the post, and will have to restore faith in a police department that has faced accusations of harboring violent, racist and corrupt officers in its ranks. Adams, a Democrat and former police officer, will become New York’s second black mayor when he takes office on January 1.

With Sewell’s appointment, he fills a key post two weeks before his formal start, with security having been one of the main issues during his campaign. “Keechant Sewell is a proven crime fighter with the experience and emotional intelligence to deliver

both the safety New Yorkers need and the justice they deserve,” Adams told The New York Post.

“Chief Sewell will wake up every day laser-focused on keeping New Yorkers safe and improving our city, and I am thrilled to have her at the helm of the NYPD.” “Violent crime is the number one priority,” Sewell told the Post. “I want to actually take a look at what’s working in the city and what’s not working,” she added.

Commanding approximately 36,000 police officers in the largest city in the United States, 49-year-old Sewell will shoulder the tough task of maintaining security in New York at a time when a surge in crime has accompanied the coronavirus pandemic. “We welcome Chief Sewell to the second-toughest policing job in America. The toughest, of course, is being an NYPD cop on the street,” said Patrick Lynch, head of the main police union in the city, the Police Benevolent Association.

Sewell is currently chief investigator in Nassau County, east of New York City. The New York Times reported that she has served in the department for 23 years, working in the narcotics and major cases unit, and as a hostage negotiator. — AFP

US prepared to sell jet fighters to UAE: Blinken

DUBAI: Secretary of State Antony Blinken insisted yesterday the US was still prepared to sell F-35 fighter jets to the UAE, which has threatened to scrap the deal over stringent conditions. The \$23 billion arms package was pushed through by former president Donald Trump in what was seen as a reward for the United Arab Emirates’ recognition of Zionist entity, but his successor Joe Biden has pledged greater oversight over the planes.

The Gulf state threatened to dump the agreement Tuesday over the strict conditions, and it comes as Washington grows concerned about China’s involvement with the US ally. But Blinken said “we remain prepared to move forward... if that is what the Emiratis are interested in doing”, speaking during a visit to Malaysia.

Asked about the conditions the US has set, he did not give precise details, but said Washington wanted to ensure that the Zionist entity maintains its “military edge”. “We wanted to make sure that we could do a thorough review of any technologies that are sold or transferred to other partners in the region,” he said.

US ally Zionist entity historically objected to Arab states obtaining the F-35s, seeking to maintain its regional advantage, but gave its blessing after the UAE last year became the first new Arab country in decades to recognise the Jewish state. The Wall Street Journal, which first reported the impasse, said that the United States was insisting on conditions to make sure the F-35s would not be vulnerable to Chinese espionage. Lawmakers from Biden’s Democratic Party unsuccessfully sought to stop the sale, pointing in part to the Gulf state’s participation in the bloody Saudi-led offensive in Yemen and its support for Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar. The F-35s are prized for stealth capabilities and versatility with the capacity to gather intelligence, strike deep into enemy territory and engage in air duels. — AFP

Blinken cuts short Asia trip due to COVID case

KUALA LUMPUR: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday cut short a trip to Southeast Asia after a member of his delegation contracted the coronavirus, a spokesman for the US State Department said. The top US diplomat was due to meet Thai officials in Bangkok today after visiting Indonesia and Malaysia, but this final leg of the three-country tour has been cancelled.

Blinken told Thai foreign minister Don Pramudwina that he “would be returning to Washington DC, out of the abundance of caution,” the spokesman said. A journalist with the travelling

party tested positive for COVID on arrival in Malaysia on Tuesday night, he added.

No other members of the press or advisers close to Blinken returned a positive result, he said. The US embassy in Malaysia said in a statement that the person with Covid-19 did not participate in any of Blinken’s planned activities in Kuala Lumpur. The journalist is now in isolation in Kuala Lumpur, in line with local regulations.

The state department’s spokesman told reporters travelling with Blinken that the decision to end the tour was taken to “mitigate the risk of the spread of COVID-19 and to prioritise the health and safety of the US travelling party and those they would otherwise be in contact with”. The US embassy in Jakarta said on Twitter that all members of the group had tested negative in Indonesia. Blinken’s plane will make a short technical stopover in Thailand, with no official talks on the agenda, before he returns to the United States. — AFP

Germany vows to ‘defend itself’ as police raid anti-vaxxers

Scholz vows zero-tolerance policy against such extremist groups

BERLIN: Germany said yesterday it would “defend itself” against radicalised anti-vaccination groups after police launched raids in response to death threats against a top politician backing sweeping measures to fight the pandemic.

Police and special forces staged an operation in Saxony after an anti-vaccine group targeted the region’s state premier Michael Kretschmer, who has vocally supported curbs for the unvaccinated in one of the areas of the country with the lowest inoculation rates.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who took office last week, said Germany would “not allow a tiny minority of uninhibited extremists to try to impose its will on the whole of society”. The security forces launched the raids targeting five suspects in the eastern cities of Dresden and Heidenau, following threats from an anti-vaccine group against Kretschmer.

Threats against politicians and other public figures were “not acceptable”, Kretschmer said during a press conference, adding that “every effort” would be made to pursue any perpetrators. “Statements from certain members of the group suggested they might have real weapons and crossbows,” police said, without indicating if any arrests had been made. Audio messages called for members to oppose the restrictions in place and “if necessary with weapons”, targeting politicians — in particular, Kretschmer.

Authorities suspected “the preparation of a violent crime that threatens the state”, police later said on Twitter. The investigation was opened after journalists from public broadcaster ZDF infiltrated an

encrypted chat on the Telegram messaging app and reported on the death threats last week.

‘Bloody resistance’

ZDF revealed the contents of messages allegedly involving a hundred members of the chat group “linked by their opposition to vaccines, to the state and the current health policies”, police said. In his first speech to parliament as chancellor, Scholz vowed a zero-tolerance policy against such extremist groups. Germany will “use all the means of its democratic rule of law to defend itself against this tiny minority of the hateful attacking the rest of us”, he said.

The rise of violent far-right extremism in Germany was the “biggest threat to our democracy”, Scholz added. A large, partly radicalised movement has emerged in Germany against health restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

In the midst of a strong fourth wave of the virus, the national government

decided to strengthen restrictions on unvaccinated people, banning them from public venues, restaurants and non-essential commerce. Scholz has said parliament could vote on compulsory vaccination in the coming weeks, with the obligation to get the jab coming into force in February or March.

On Wednesday, police in Berlin confirmed they were investigating threats sent to several politicians across the country, which promised a “bloody resistance” against obligatory vaccines. One of the letters, of which there were “more than a dozen”, contained a piece of meat wrapped in aluminium foil.

Every effort would be made to pursue any perpetrators



LEIPZIG, Saxony, Germany: Saxony's State Premier Michael Kretschmer visits a vaccination centre in Leipzig, eastern Germany, yesterday, amid the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic. Germany said it would “defend itself” against radicalised anti-vaccination groups after police launched raids in response to death threats against Kretschmer backing sweeping measures to fight the pandemic. —AFP

‘Radicalised’

Opposition to health restrictions is particularly strong in Saxony, in former communist East Germany, one of the region’s worst hit by the resurgent coronavirus and where the vaccination rate is lower than the national average. At the beginning of December, protestors gathered outside the house of the Saxony state minister of health with torches and whistles, a demonstration that was condemned by politicians.

The anti-vaccination scene was “being radicalised, not just politically but also showing a readiness to use violence,” police union chief Rainer Wendt told local media. Between 15,000 and 20,000 people were currently implicated in the radical tendency, security expert Sebastian Fiedler of Scholz’s Social Democrats told the Bild daily on Tuesday. Germany has seen a rise in political violence in recent years, often attributed to far-right assailants. —AFP

Putin hails ‘model’ Russia-China relations in Xi Jinping call

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin yesterday hailed Russia’s “model” relations with China in a call with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and confirmed he would attend Beijing’s Olympics, as both countries face increasing criticism from the West. The video call came days after G7 foreign ministers discussed Moscow’s sabre-rattling against Ukraine and Beijing’s crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

The talks also came after both Russia and China were pointedly left out of US President Joe Biden’s democracy summit last week. “In February we will finally be able to meet in person in Beijing,” Putin said in a television broadcast of the conversation after he said he would attend the Games, calling Xi his “dear friend”.

“China-Russia relations have withstood all kinds of stern tests, and are showing new dynamism and vitality,” Chinese state news agency Xinhua reported Xi as saying. He also accused “international forces” of meddling in China and Russia in the name of democracy and human rights and “grossly trampling” on international law, according to a Chinese foreign ministry statement.

“China and Russia must develop more joint actions to more effectively safeguard both sides’ security and interests,” the statement added. The United States, Britain, Canada and

Australia are not sending political representatives to the Olympics over China’s abuse of Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang.

Beijing and Moscow denounced the diplomatic boycott and Putin on Wednesday said both leaders opposed “any attempt to politicise sport and the Olympic movement”, a criticism Russia has repeatedly levelled at the West. Russia was found to have used a state-backed doping programme at the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi and was banned from international competitions afterwards.

Russian athletes are allowed to compete as neutrals-without the Russian flag or anthem-if they can prove their doping record is clean.

‘Unprecedented’ relations

Russian officials including Putin are banned from attending international competitions unless invited by the head of state of the host country. Xi has invited Putin to attend. Both China and Russia have seen their relationship with Western nations deteriorate in recent years and have sought to project a more unified front.

Yesterday, Putin told Xi that “a new model of cooperation has been formed between our countries” that includes a “determination to turn our common border into a belt of eternal peace and good-neighbourliness”. “I consider these relations to be a real model for inter-state cooperation in the 21st



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin holds a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping via a video link at the Novo-Ogaryovo state residence outside Moscow yesterday. —AFP

century,” the Russian leader said.

After the call, the Kremlin’s top foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov said that the conversation between the “two great friendly states” had lasted 90 minutes and was “very positive”. “Both stated that the relationship had reached an unprecedented high level,” he told reporters. The US and its allies have for weeks accused Russia of planning an invasion of its ex-Soviet neighbour Ukraine, warning of massive coordinated sanctions should Putin launch an attack.

Tens of thousands of Russian troops are stationed near Ukraine, where the West has accused the Kremlin of backing pro-Moscow separatists since 2014. Russia rejects the allegations and blames the West for stoking tensions. In calls on Tuesday with the leaders of France and Finland, Putin said he wanted security talks with the United States and

NATO to begin without delay.

Russia’s demands included stopping NATO from expanding east and the deployment of weapons in neighbouring states, including Ukraine. China’s relationships with multiple Western allies have cratered in recent years over a host of issues—from trade and security to Beijing’s human rights record and vows to seize Taiwan, which it claims. China, an authoritarian one-party state, responded with fury to being left out of the Biden summit, branding US democracy a “weapon of mass destruction”. Beijing’s diplomats overseas and its state-controlled media ramped up a propaganda blitz criticising Western democracy as corrupt and a failure. Instead, they touted “whole-process people’s democracy”, aiming to shore up legitimacy for the ruling Communist Party, which has swung increasingly authoritarian under Xi. —AFP

Navalny daughter urges EU to confront Putin

STRASBOURG: Jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny’s daughter yesterday urged the EU to stand up to Russian President Vladimir Putin, as she collected a rights prize on behalf of her father. “Although coming here is amazing, it is also probably exactly how mine and my family’s worst nightmare looks like,” Daria Navalnaya told the European Parliament as she picked up its annual Sakharov Prize.

Navalny-Putin’s highest-profile domestic opponent has been behind bars since returning to Moscow in January from Germany, where he was recovering from a poisoning attack with a Novichok nerve agent that both he and the West blame on the Kremlin.

“I don’t understand why those who advocate for pragmatic relations with dictators can’t simply open some history books,” Navalnaya, a 20-year-old student at Stanford University in the United States, told lawmakers. “It’s very easy to understand the inescapable political law: the pacification of dictators and tyrants never works.”

Navalnaya attacked European politicians “who dream of getting a job on the board of directors of Putin’s state-owned companies or sailing on an oligarch’s yacht”. “It seems to me that the problem is that the desire to appease the dictator, again and again, to not anger him, to ignore his crimes as long as it’s possible is not a pragmatic approach at all,” she said. “It’s time to say it straight. Under the sign of pragmatism, there is cynicism, hypocrisy, and corruption.” —AFP

MPs fire warning shot at Johnson in COVID vote

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday faced intense pressure after nearly 100 MPs from his party broke ranks and voted against new coronavirus restrictions. Even though the measures were passed, the scale of the rebellion from all sections of Johnson’s ruling Conservatives was a very public shot across the bows.

“It was a very clear message that colleagues are not happy with how the government is operating at the moment,” Mark Harper, who served as a parliamentary enforcer for former Conservative PM Theresa May, told Times Radio. May faced an ever bigger rebellion-against her Brexit deal-that led to an internal vote of no confidence. She then quit.

Conservative MP Geoffrey Clifton-Brown said after Tuesday’s votes that Johnson had to be “in some danger”, despite securing the party an 80-seat majority in the last election. “He’s got to realise that, because if he doesn’t



LONDON: Pedestrians walk past an electronic billboard promoting Britain's National Health Service's (NHS) COVID-19 vaccine booster programme, in central London yesterday. —AFP

he’ll be in much bigger danger,” Clifton-Brown told Sky News, predicting that Johnson could face a leadership challenge in the new year if he failed to listen to his party more.

Mounting scandals

The popularity of Johnson and his party has taken a battering in recent weeks after a series of scandals. But it could get worse if the

Conservatives lose a by-election in a safe seat today. Many people in the North Shropshire constituency in central England said they would vote on Johnson’s recent record, just two years after his thumping general election victory on a pledge to “Get Brexit Done”. “This man is not fit to be prime minister,” Garry Churchill, 71, a voter in the constituency, told AFP. “I can’t imagine why people

would vote for the Conservative candidate in this by-election.”

The by-election was prompted by the resignation of Conservative MP Owen Paterson over breaches of parliamentary lobbying rules. Johnson caused outrage by trying to change parliament’s disciplinary procedure to prevent Paterson serving a 30-day suspension and was forced into an embarrassing U-turn. He is also facing claims of dodgy dealing after an electoral watchdog fined the Conservatives for failing to declare who paid for a lavish decoration of his flat. That compounded accusations of cronyism following reports that wealthy party donors were given plum seats in the upper House of Lords.

‘Cry of pain’

Johnson’s overall handling of the government’s response to the coronavirus pandemic, however, has come under the most scrutiny, with 146,000 deaths and high infection rates. Since the Omicron variant of the virus was first identified, Johnson has sought to prevent its spread and protect health services from being overwhelmed. But public health messaging and compliance have been undermined by claims government staff held parties last Christmas, despite telling the public to cancel theirs. —AFP

Macron in campaign mode as election looms

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron is yet to declare he will run for a second term in next year’s election, but his intentions are no longer in doubt and his unofficial campaigning is drawing fire. After Macron gave a rare two-hour press conference last week to outline his European ambitions, French television will broadcast late yesterday a prime-time TV interview on domestic policy with the 43-year-old head of state.

The one-and-a-half hour interview with TF1 was pre-recorded days in advance-but under live conditions according to the channel-and will be shown from 2000 GMT. For a leader who has always kept the media at arm’s length and once theorised his role as acting like Jupiter, the Roman god of the sky, the sudden burst of transparency has not gone unnoticed.

Neither have a string of visits to small-town and rural France where he has wandered through picturesque cobbled streets, stopping to chat to shopkeepers or visiting local cafes. When asked again by a reporter last week whether he would seek re-election, he initially employed humour, saying the question was “a sign of affection, a hidden desire, almost an appeal”. “In the time we are living through, the most important thing is that our institutions continue to function in the most stable way possible,” he continued, evading the question. —AFP

International

US threatens new measures against Myanmar junta

Brutal crackdown has left more than 1,300 people dead

KUALA LUMPUR: The United States is considering new measures to pressure the Myanmar junta to return to a “democratic trajectory”, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday, as alarm grows over an escalating crackdown on dissent. Myanmar has been in chaos since February when Aung San Suu Kyi’s civilian government was ousted by the military.

The United States has imposed some sanctions and regional bloc the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has drawn up a peace roadmap, but there are serious doubts about the generals’ commitment. Speaking during a visit to Malaysia-among several ASEAN states that have strongly criticised the coup-Blinken conceded that the “situation has not improved”.

“I think it is going to be very important in the weeks and months ahead to look at what additional steps and measures we can take-individually, collectively-to pressure the regime to put the country back on a democratic trajectory,” he said. “That is something that we are looking at,” he added, without saying what the measures might be.

The coup triggered nationwide protests but the junta has responded with a brutal crackdown that has left more than 1,300 people dead and seen thousands arrested, according to a local monitor. Blinken also said the United States was looking “very actively” at whether the treatment of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Buddhist-majority Myanmar might “constitute genocide”. The group faces widespread discrimination in Myanmar, and hundreds of thousands fled to neighbouring Bangladesh in 2017 following a military crackdown.

‘Alarming escalation’

Last week, the United Nations warned of an “alarming escalation” of human rights abuses in Myanmar as the military tried to crush dissent. They were responding to the reported killing of 11 villagers, including children. The United States said it was “outraged by credible and sickening reports” the military tied up and burned the victims alive.

The junta, locked in a bloody stalemate with militias fighting to overturn the coup, denied the claims. The generals have shown little sign of changing course despite sustained diplomatic pressure.

“**Outraged by credible and sickening reports**”

ASEAN took the unprecedented step of banning junta chief Min Aung Hlaing from its October summit after the generals refused to let the bloc’s envoy meet Suu Kyi.

But there are signs that Cambodia—which takes over ASEAN’s rotating chairmanship next year—is seeking to bring Myanmar back into the fold. Its strongman premier Hun Sen plans to travel to the



PUTRAJAYA, Malaysia: This handout photo taken and released yesterday by Malaysia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows Malaysia’s Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah (R) welcoming US Secretary of State Antony Blinken upon his arrival at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Putrajaya. — AFP

country for talks in January, becoming the first international leader to visit Myanmar since the coup. Last week, Suu Kyi was sentenced to two years’ detention for incitement against the military and breaching coronavirus rules, drawing fresh

condemnation from around the world.

The junta has justified the coup by alleging electoral fraud in last year’s poll, and Suu Kyi faces a raft of further charges that could see her jailed for decades if convicted. — AFP

11 Indonesians dead in Malaysia boat sinking

KUALA LUMPUR: At least 11 Indonesian migrants died and 27 are believed to be missing after a boat sank yesterday in stormy weather off southern Malaysia, authorities said. Indonesians looking for work sometimes try to enter neighbouring Malaysia illegally by making sea crossings in rickety boats, and accidents happen regularly.

The vessel, believed to be carrying 60 migrants, went down in the morning off Malaysia’s southern state of Johor, the coastguard said. Soldiers on patrol discovered the bodies of seven men and four women on the shore, coastguard chief Admiral Mohamad Zubil Mat Som told AFP. Another 20 men and two women were found alive following the voyage from a nearby Indonesian island, and have been taken into custody, he said.

Those missing are believed to have fled into hiding or drowned, and authorities have deployed boats and an aircraft to hunt for them. “We deeply



TANJUNG BALAU, Malaysia: This handout photo taken and released yesterday by the Malaysian Armed Forces shows a vessel being brought onto shore after capsizing near Tanjung Balau off the coast of Johor, in an accident that authorities said killed 11 Indonesian migrants and left 27 more missing. — AFP

regret this deadly tragedy,” Mohamad Zubil told AFP. “I urge migrants not to enter Malaysia illegally.” Relatively affluent Malaysia is home to millions

of migrants from poorer parts of Asia, many of them undocumented, and they work in industries including construction and agriculture. — AFP

Belgian trial opens over UK migrant truck deaths

BRUGES, Belgium: Two years after 39 Vietnamese migrants died aboard a truck that travelled to Britain, Belgium yesterday opened the trial of 23 people suspected of involvement in the human-smuggling ring responsible. The proceedings, in a courtroom in the city of Bruges, follow convictions handed down in Britain in January to seven men, several for manslaughter. They were given prison sentences ranging from three years to 27 years.

In Vietnam, in September last year, four men were sent to prison in connection with the case. Their sentences ranged from two-and-a-half years to seven-and-a-half years. The Bruges trial, expected to last two days, focuses on the fact that the truck left for Britain on October 22, 2019 from Anderlecht, a neighbourhood on Brussels’ western outskirts, where the gang allegedly had two safe houses to group migrants.

The bodies of the migrants, 31 men and eight women, aged 15 to 44 and all from Vietnam, were discovered the next day in Britain, when the container they were in was opened in Grays, an industrial area in Essex, just east of London. They had suffocated in extremely hot weather as the truck had crossed by sea. They had tried, without

success, to pierce the metal container’s roof with a pole. A Belgian prosecutor told the trial: “What stays with me the most is a bloody handprint on the door of the container.”

The macabre crime triggered police investigations on both sides of the Channel, and in Vietnam. On May 26, 2020 Belgian authorities raided several addresses, most in the Brussels region, to round up Vietnamese suspected of links to the people-smuggling outfit. A verdict in the trial of the 23 may take several weeks to be delivered. Prosecutors are seeking prison terms from 18 months to 15 years for the defendants.

Accused ringleader

The main defendant is a 45-year-old Vietnamese man charged with “running a criminal organisation” who faces up to 15 years in prison and confiscation of assets worth two million euros (\$2.3 million) if convicted. He denies all involvement. At least 17 of the others allegedly were members of the people-smuggling ring, with the remainder alleged accomplices used as safe-house guards and grocery shoppers.

Prosecutors said the “very well organised” gang was specialised in



BRUGES, Belgium: Defendants sit in a box at the opening of the trial of 23 people suspected of involvement in a human-smuggling ring, yesterday in Bruges, two years after 39 Vietnamese migrants died aboard a refrigerated truck that travelled to Britain. —AFP

clandestinely transporting people into Europe then Britain for a total fee of 24,000 euros (\$27,000) each. They said it used an Irish trucking company that regularly imported Vietnamese biscuits to get the migrants across the Channel, and that Vietnamese gang members took charge of them once they got to Britain.

Many of the dead migrants in the truck came from a poor region in the centre of Vietnam. Families there can rack up debts of thousands of dollars to have one member of their family smuggled into Britain in the hope they can secure a better life.

The Belgian investigation is not yet closed, with two more suspects still being sought according to prosecutors. Belgian authorities, who early last year conducted their investigation with counterparts in France—where 13 people were charged—established that the alleged ring daily transported dozens of migrants coming from Southeast Asia.

Prosecutors say the smugglers in Belgium had connections in France, the Netherlands and Germany, and that it was believed some of the defendants continued their illegal activities after the October 2019 tragedy. —AFP

said spokesman Zhao Lijian. Beijing claims self-ruled democratic Taiwan as part of its territory to be retaken one day, by force if necessary.

It has tried to keep Taiwan isolated on the world stage and seethes at the official use of the name Taiwan or any reference to it as a country. Since Tsai’s 2016 election win, Beijing has ramped up pressure on Taiwan and aggressively tried to dissuade politicians from visiting. China conducted military drills near the Taiwan Strait following a visit by a group of American lawmakers last month. Taiwan’s defence minister has warned that military tensions between the island and China were at their highest in four decades, after around 150 Chinese warplanes—a record number—made incursions into Taiwan’s air defence zone in October. — AFP

HK court orders Apple Daily parent firm to be wound up

HONG KONG: A Hong Kong court yesterday ordered the liquidation of the parent company of Apple Daily, delivering another blow to the pro-democracy newspaper after the local edition was shuttered in a crackdown on dissent. Apple Daily closed down in Hong Kong earlier this year after its assets were frozen using a national security law that China imposed on the city, but it continues to publish in Taiwan.

Its owner, media tycoon Jimmy Lai, and multiple executives have been detained and charged with collusion for outspoken articles and columns the paper published. In September, the Hong Kong government made the rare move of applying to dissolve the paper’s parent company, Next Digital Limited, saying it would be “expedient in the public interest”.

High Court judge Jack Wong yesterday Wednesday granted the government’s request after a brief hearing that was not contested by Next Digital. It is unclear how the court order will affect Apple Daily’s edition in Taiwan, which continues to operate as a financially independent subsidiary. Next Digital’s Taiwan offices did not respond to requests for comment.

But Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council — which deals with China relations — issued a statement saying it was concerned that the liquidation of the parent company in Hong Kong could lead to “improper use” of Taiwan Apple Daily employee and news databases. “If relevant parties try to stick their ‘black hands’ into Taiwan in an attempt to violate freedom and human rights, relevant agencies will take necessary actions in accordance with the law to protect public welfare and interests,” the statement said.

Taiwan’s government has criticised Beijing’s crackdown in Hong Kong and quietly allowed some residents, including a famous dissident book publisher, to resettle there.

National security charges

Lai, 74, and multiple Apple Daily executives face up to life in prison if they are convicted on charges of colluding with foreign forces for coming out in favour of sanctions against China. Lai is already serving jail sentences linked to his attendance at democracy protests in recent years. On Monday, he received an additional 13-month jail sentence for attending a vigil last year commemorating victims of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown — an event Hong Kong authorities banned on public health and security grounds.

Questions remain over the future of Apple Daily’s Taiwan edition, after Bloomberg reported that the operation was strapped for cash and will close before the end of the year. Apple Daily Taiwan dismissed the report as “speculation” and said it had no further comment. Taiwan media reported that the court-appointed provisional liquidator for Next Digital has approached Apple Daily’s Taiwanese unit to ask about its assets.

Authorities have moved to rein in press freedoms in Hong Kong as Beijing remoulds the city in its own image, following huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago. Earlier this month, the World Association of News Publishers awarded its annual press freedom prize to Apple Daily’s staff and its founder Lai.

The association lauded the paper as a “symbol of pro-democracy and public dissent” and said Lai was an outspoken critic of Beijing’s control over Hong Kong. The award recognises and reflects on “the jailing of a publisher, the arrest of an editor-in-chief and his senior colleagues, the shuttering of a newsroom, and the closure of a media title”, organisers said. —AFP

French lawmakers arrive in Taiwan for five-day visit

TAIPEI: A delegation of French lawmakers arrived in Taiwan yesterday in the latest sign of increasingly vocal Western support for Taipei having a place on the world stage despite threats from Beijing. It is the second time this year a delegation from France has visited the island and is the latest in a flurry of trips made by European and American politicians that have angered China.

The six-member delegation from the French National Assembly, led by Francois de Rugy, will meet with President Tsai Ing-wen and other top officials before leaving on Sunday, Taipei’s foreign ministry said. In October, China condemned a visit to Taiwan by a group of French senators led by Alain Richard, accusing the delegation of undermining relations between Paris and Beijing.

Richard’s group made the trip despite warnings from China and he called Taiwan a “country” repeatedly during his stay. Yesterday, China’s foreign ministry criticised the latest French visit, saying “relevant parties should... stop sending false signals to Taiwan independence separatist forces”.

“China firmly opposes any official and political exchanges between Taiwan and other countries,”

Business

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2021

Zain provides Kuwait Clearing Company with digital transformation solutions

Company offers most advanced telecom services and cybersecurity solutions

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced a collaboration with Kuwait Clearing Company (KCC), through which the operator is set to offer a wide range of the most advanced telecommunications services and digital transformation solutions built on world-class technologies.

The agreement aims at serving KCC's technical needs by utilizing advanced technology solutions to support many of the company's vital operational aspects.

Commenting on the partnership, Zain Kuwait's Chief Enterprise Business Officer Hamad Al-Marzouq said: "We are delighted to collaborate with our colleagues at KCC. At Zain, we are continuously committed to making our tech capabilities available to empower the digital transformation and IT corporate governance needs within the nation's institutions".

Al-Marzouq added: "The private sector has an active and fundamental role in supporting the country's various vital



sectors, and as KCC is an essential institution to our national economy, we were keen on powering its digital infrastructure and serving its technical needs."

Al-Marzouq further explained: "As part of this collaboration, Zain will offer KCC a bundle of telecom services and digital transformation solutions built on world-class innovations, in addition to many comprehensive cybersecurity services."

Al-Marzouq concluded: "Today's collaboration is yet another step for us to extend our efforts and offer more services and solutions to Kuwait's business community. We will continue to implement our digital transformation strategy to empower a more efficient business sector in the market."

Kuwait Clearing Company Acting CEO, Operation Sector Esam Al-Qaoud

commented: "We begin by thanking our brothers in Zain for their concrete cooperation, which will lead to similar relations in the future in line with our responsibilities towards both our clients and traders at Boursa Kuwait."

Al-Qaoud continued: "The Kuwait Clearing Company continues to expand its systems and services based on obvious developments on the Kuwaiti market side by side with our brothers from Boursa Kuwait. This has definitely become an attraction point for both local and international investors."

Zain continuously offers the latest and most advanced services and solutions to showcase its capabilities as an active partner in empowering a smart life, a safe community, and an efficient business sector. The company considers itself a main partner in the achievement of the goals of the Kuwait National Development Plan (New Kuwait 2035), which is based on five expected outcomes and seven key pillars.



Hamad Al-Marzouq:

Zain is committed to empowering digital transformation within Kuwait's private and public institutions.



Esam Al-Qaoud:

Maqasa always seeks to develop its services, enhance the service delivery mechanism to its clients, and enable digital transformation to keep pace with the developments of markets.

UK inflation spikes to decade-high on eve of BoE rate call

LONDON: British inflation has rocketed to its highest level for more than 10 years on broad-based price gains, data showed yesterday, sparking fears that wages will fail to keep pace on the eve of a Bank of England interest rate decision. The annual inflation rate surged to 5.1 percent in November after 4.2 percent in October, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement.

That marked the highest level since September 2011, with inflationary pressures driven by jumping fuel costs as the rate accelerated further above the BoE's official target. The news sparked an outcry from Britain's Unite trade union, which complained many workers faced an effective pay cut with the prospect of below-inflation annual wage increases.

The BoE, whose main task is to keep inflation close to 2.0 percent, is however expected to hold its record-low interest rate today due to turmoil over the Omicron coronavirus variant.

Central banks normally use interest rate hikes to try to damp high inflation, which is weighing on companies and consumers globally.

Wide range of price rises

"A wide range of price rises contributed to another steep rise in inflation, which now stands at its highest rate for over a decade," said ONS Chief Economist Grant Fitzner. "The price of fuel increased notably, pushing average petrol prices higher than we have seen before."

"Clothing costs—which increased after falling this time last year—along with price rises for food, second-hand cars and increased tobacco duty all helped drive up inflation this month." Inflationary pressures were also fuelled by the global supply crunch and jumping commodity prices. "The cost of goods produced by factories and the price of raw materials have continued to increase significantly to their highest rate for at least 12 years," Fitzner added.

After countries emerged from pandemic lockdowns earlier this year, companies struggled to



LONDON: A sign shows the price in pound sterling of goods displayed for sale on a stall at Whitechapel Market in east London. —AFP

meet demand for goods, energy and services, sending inflation soaring. However, the BoE will probably hold its key interest rate at 0.1 percent due to Omicron uncertainty, analysts say.

The Unite union meanwhile urged companies to grant pay hikes that preserve the buying power of workers' salaries. "Today's figures mean our members must fight for wage rises above the current rate of inflation," said Unite general secretary Sharon Graham.

'Hot and bothered'

Omicron, which emerged late last month, forced Britain to re-impose coronavirus restrictions that were passed by lawmakers late on Tuesday. BoE policymakers will also be mindful of news that UK unemployment has fallen again, despite the end of a scheme to keep millions of private-sector workers in their roles during the pandemic. "Faced with such a high inflation reading, and with forecasts that the

only way is up, the Bank of England would ordinarily be expected to call time on the cheap money party and raise interest rates," said Hargreaves Lansdown analyst Susannah Streeter.

"But with the recovery far from being in full swing and the omicron variant an unruly guest, set to knock back confidence further for many sectors, policymakers may be hot and bothered but are likely to stay in wait-and-see mode tomorrow." The UK economy was already struggling prior to the arrival of Omicron, growing by an anemic 0.1 percent in October from 0.6 percent in September.

The International Monetary Fund warned Tuesday that "new Covid-19 variants pose downside risks to the outlook" for Britain and urged the government to consider new emergency stimulus measures in the event of fresh lockdowns. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has warned of a looming "tidal wave" of Omicron that could overwhelm hospitals. —AFP

How Fed used bond buying to boost an economy in crisis

WASHINGTON: The US Federal Reserve is poised to end its bond buying stimulus program early to prepare to combat inflation with interest rate increases. Here is a look at the key dates in the so-called quantitative easing (QE) program:

- November 2008: At the height of the global financial crisis, and after cutting the benchmark interest rate to zero, the Federal Reserve announces it will buy debt held by government-sponsored mortgage lenders, as well as mortgage-backed securities (MBS).
- March 2009: The Fed expands QE to include purchases of longer-term Treasury debt, and would go on to increase the monthly purchases to \$45 billion for Treasuries, and \$40 billion for MBS.
- June 2013: Fed Chair Ben Bernanke announced the central bank was prepared to start to reduce its holdings, sparking the "taper tantrum" in financial markets, which delayed the actual taper until December, when QE was slowed by \$10 billion a month.
- June 2014: Fed ends QE, halting new asset purchases.
- October 2017: Fed begins "balance sheet normalization" to reduce the size of its securities holdings which had swelled to \$4.5 trillion by the end of 2017 from under \$900 billion before the crisis.
- March 15, 2020: After the COVID-19 pandemic hits the United States, the Fed cuts interest rates to zero and announces it will restart QE, purchasing Treasuries and MBS, eventually increasing asset purchases to \$120 billion a month.
- November 3, 2021: With the economy recovering and inflation picking up speed and hitting a 30-year high, the Fed announces it will reduce the pace of bond purchases by \$15 billion a month, meaning QE would end by mid-2022 and open the door for policymakers to consider rate hikes. —AFP

US averts credit default with 11th-hour debt limit hike

WASHINGTON: US lawmakers voted to raise the federal debt limit yesterday, eliminating the threat of a disastrous credit default with just hours to spare ahead of the deadline set by the Treasury.

The deeply divided Senate voted on Tuesday to raise the borrowing cap by \$2.5 trillion and the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of Congress, followed suit in the early hours of the following morning—staving off the next showdown until at least 2023. "No brinksmanship, no default on the debt, no risk of another recession: responsible governing has won on this exceedingly important issue," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on the floor ahead of the votes.

"The American people can breathe easy and rest assured there will not be a default." The vote in both chambers of Congress followed party lines, with

Republicans offering just one vote in the House to deliver the country from potential disaster, and no votes at all in the Senate. Both parties see raising the debt ceiling as politically toxic, although they acknowledge that failure to do so would plunge the US economy into a depression and roil world markets as the government missed debt repayments.

Republicans especially hope to weaponize the extension to campaign against Democratic "overspending" in the 2022 midterm legislative elections, although it would only cover commitments already made by both parties. The two sides agreed last week to create a one-off law allowing Democrats to lift the nation's borrowing authority without help from the opposition Republicans.

The legislative sleight-of-hand circumvented the "filibuster" rule, so that the required 60-40 margin could be

abandoned for this vote only, in favor of a simple majority—allowing Republicans essentially to stand on the sidelines.

'A basic responsibility'

The Bipartisan Policy Center, an independent Washington-based think tank, predicted the United States would no longer be able to service its debts sometime after December 21, although Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen set the deadline at the start of the business day yesterday. America spends more money than it collects through taxation, so it borrows money via the issuing of government bonds, seen as among the world's most reliable investments. Around 80 years ago, lawmakers introduced a limit on how much federal debt could be accrued.

The ceiling has been lifted dozens of times to allow the government to meet its spending commitments—usually without drama and with the support of both parties—and stands at around \$29 trillion.

The new borrowing cap will be \$31.5 trillion. Democratic leaders have spent weeks underlining the havoc that a default would have wrought, including



WASHINGTON: US Senate Minority leader Mitch McConnell (right) listens to Republican US Senator John Thune answer a question after a policy luncheon in Capitol Hill in Washington, DC on Tuesday. —AFP

the loss of an estimated six million jobs and \$15 trillion in household wealth, as well as increased costs for mortgages and other borrowing.

"Addressing the debt limit is a basic responsibility of the federal government," the White House said in a state-

ment. "Passage of this legislation will allow the Treasury to finance spending and tax cuts Congress has already authorized and to keep its commitments without causing disruption or harm to our economy and American families." —AFP

Business

Turkish lira slides ahead of likely interest rate cut

Policymakers bow to Erdogan's wishes to cut borrowing costs despite inflation

ISTANBUL: The Turkish lira yesterday extended its historic slide on the eve of a meeting at which the central bank was expected to lower interest rates for the fourth month in a row. The lira has shed half its value since the start of the year-and 30 percent in the last month alone-as policymakers bow to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's wishes to bring down borrowing costs despite soaring inflation.

A dollar could buy three liras in 2016 and 7.43 liras on January 1. It was worth 14.70 liras on Wednesday while the annual rate of consumer price increases stood at more than 20 percent. Erdogan has launched a self-declared "economic war of independence" that defies conventional market economics by fighting inflation through a reduction of borrowing costs. Central banks around the world are instead either raising or preparing to raise rates to combat consumer price jumps caused by factors related to the coronavirus pandemic. Analysts and diplomats believe Erdogan unleashed his pro-growth policy in a bid to revive sagging approval numbers ahead of a general election due within the next 18 months.

One senior Western official said Erdogan feels "unchained" after stacking the central bank with allies and ousting ministers who refused to subscribe to his unorthodox views.

Dropping support

Erdogan's public support levels have languished

near the low end of his 19-year rule for much of the past year. Most polls show him losing in a runoff against potential presidential rivals-a defeat that could leave his Islamic-rooted party in disarray.

Erdogan has cited China as an example as he pushes for economic growth at all costs. China brought down the value of its currency to boost exports and achieve spectacular rates of economic expansion over most of the past two decades.

This created a new middle class that helped China achieve more sustainable consumer-driven growth. Turkey's economy also expanded at an annual rate of 7.4 percent between July and September.

But most analysts believe Erdogan's attempts to boost jobs and propel economic expansion through cheap exports are likely to end in social turmoil.

'Heightening risk'

Turkey imports most of its raw materials and spends foreign currency to buy foreign oil and natural gas. The lira's steady depreciation makes these purchases more expensive. Economists estimate that Turkey's net hard currency reserves are running dangerously low-and are in negative territory when so-called "currency swap" agreements with allied countries' banks are taken out. The central bank has depleted its reserves further by intervening four times in the past month to help cushion the



ISTANBUL: The lira has shed half its value since the start of the year.

lira against more dramatic single-day falls.

But the losses continue as Turks buy up gold as well as dollars and euros in a bid to preserve their savings. S&P last week became the last major global ratings agency to switch Turkey's credit

outlook to negative.

Current policies have "further undermined the exchange rate of the lira and worsened the inflation outlook, heightening the risk of banking system distress." —AFP

Kuwait Airport: The new destination of Gulf Bank

KUWAIT: As part of its commitment to provide the best banking services that suit the needs of the increasing number of customers, Gulf Bank inaugurated a new branch at Kuwait International Airport, in the arrival hall - Terminal 1, bringing the number of its branches covering various regions of Kuwait to 53. The official opening of the branch took place in the presence of Gulf Bank's CEO, Tony Daher and Deputy CEO, Waleed Khaled Mandani, as well as a number of the Bank's executive leaders, and representatives from the Ministry of Interior and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation.

On this occasion, General Manager of Consumer Banking, Mohammed Al-Qattan, said that our presence at the airport comes to serve our customers throughout the day, especially travelers and those wishing to complete their transactions, after the end of the official working hours for other branches, in order to provide the best and easiest services, and the utmost comfort for customers during the completion of their transactions.

He pointed out that the bank's five-year strategy puts the customer at the center of its attention, and aims to provide a distinctive, easy and fast banking experience, through the implementation of an ambitious project for digital transformation of services and products, which consolidates Gulf Bank's leading position in Kuwait as a bank for the future. He also added: "The new branch is distinguished by its modern design and fast and advanced banking services, as we have been keen to apply the latest technology necessary to serve our customers, as we have always been accustomed to, and in line with the great developments witnessed by banking services globally."

Integrated Services

For his part, Assistant General Manager and Head of Branch Banking at Gulf Bank - Basel Al-Assad said that the airport branch is fully serviced, providing customers with all banking services from opening accounts, requesting loans, applying for credit cards, making with-



GBK's executive management with representatives from Ministry of Interior and Civil Aviation.



Gulf Bank's CEO Tony Daher, Deputy CEO Waleed Khaled Mandani and a number of executive leaders during the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

drawals and deposits, and transferring and exchanging currencies, and soon, we will provide a safe deposit box service around the clock for the first time in Kuwait, allowing travelers to keep their valuables and jewelry until their return to Kuwait, in addition to the instant issuance of credit cards.

He noted that the branch operates seven days a week from 8.30 am to 11.30 pm in the first phase, to become 24 hours in the second phase, as part of our continuous efforts to provide the best services to our customers in the place they want us to be and at the time they specify.

He pointed out that Gulf Bank has provided the airport branch with a distinguished elite of employees with long experience and known for their efficiency, to ensure the provision of the best and finest services to customers, stressing the bank's keenness and continuous endeavors to provide a distinguished experience to the cus-

tomers, by providing modern services and facilitating banking procedures and transactions, by providing solutions that are simple, efficient and transparent.

He noted that Gulf Bank provides its customers with the second largest local branch network among Kuwaiti banks, in addition to its advanced digital services, which witness the launch of new quality service products on an ongoing basis, to meet the requirements of different categories and segments of customers. He also pointed out that Gulf Bank's banking services are available 24 hours a day through the website and the Gulf Bank mobile application, SMS and WhatsApp services, as well as the Visit Gulf Bank application for mobile devices, which allows it to reserve its place in the queue at anytime and anywhere, as well as the ability to open an account "online" in one minute, which is the fastest time to open a bank account in Kuwait.

of the moon as it changes, ranging from new moon, full moon, quarter moon and more.

Reason 2

One of the biggest downsides of smartwatches is the short battery life. Most smartwatches on the market will only give you around two days of battery life. This means you have to remember to charge the watch every other day. In the midst of this, Huawei Watch GT 3 comes with an astounding battery life of 14 days for the 46mm model and 7 days for the 42mm model. Long battery life simply makes it more flexible to use. You can wear it for days on end, and even to bed, without taking it off the wrist to plug it in.

Reason 3

The Huawei Watch GT 3 received comprehensive upgrades to its hardware and software capabilities. These upgrades have helped it become an even better health management device. The watch can monitor continuous, real-time and accurate monitoring blood oxygen (SpO2), sleep, respiratory health, stress levels, etc. The Huawei TruSleep 2.0 used in the GT 3 is currently the industry-leading sleep monitoring technology. As you can synchronize all the health data with the Huawei Health App you can pay close attention to your family's health. The watch will remind you to complete health challenges, daily water intake, take medications, and daily mindfulness.

Reason 4

The watch has the advanced Huawei TruSeen 5.0+ heart rate monitoring technology. It is more accurate with a precision of 5bpm, consumes less



power, and is ergonomically designed for a comfortable wearing experience. Because of it, the watch now has industry-leading accuracy of sports heart rate monitoring. With the new Dual-Band Five-System GNSS positioning technology, the watch can precisely track your running and walking sessions.

Reason 5

The Huawei Watch GT 3 supports Bluetooth calls. In addition, you can receive, read and reply to SMS messages right from your wrist, thanks to the convenient message notifications. When you are busy training or working, you can answer calls, get notifications, and look up health data from the watch face. In daily life, this watch can be your smart assistant.

Jehad Al-Humaidhi wins the 'Banking CEO of the Year Kuwait 2021'

KUWAIT: Jehad Saud Al-Humaidhi received the "Banking CEO of the Year Kuwait 2021" by Global Banking and Finance Review magazine, in recognition of her resilient leadership, strategy and vision, which greatly contributed to the success of AUB business in a respectable work environment. Jehad presented the best CEO model, whereby she has worked in a manner features integrity, justice and humanity to create a distinguished work atmosphere. The development of an operational model at AUB under the leadership of Jehad Al-Humaidhi has resulted in enhancing the customer experience and maximizing costs-efficiencies.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, Jehad has been able through her strong leadership to support AUB to implement a strategic plan to protect the well-being of employees and customers' and to meet customers banking needs during these challenging conditions.

Jehad's clear orientation, which has helped achieve the bank's strong operational performance, and dedication to serving the interests of employees, shareholders and the community were key elements for selecting her to win this award for the year 2021. The award is granted on an annual basis by "Global Banking and Finance Review" magazine. This year, Jehad Al-Humaidhi received the highest votes as the Banking CEO of the Year Kuwait 2021. The magazine's global banking and financial research team evaluated the nominees for the award and ensured that they fulfill the criteria required to win in the chosen category. Then, the panel composed of the research team, the editor and the publisher, made the final evaluation.

Commenting on winning this prestigious award, Jehad Al-Humaidhi said, "I am very proud to have been chosen for this award by one of the most prestigious platforms in the banking services sector. This award came in honor and a reflection of the dedicated and continuous support provided by the Chairman and members of the Board of Directors and the efforts of all employees at AUB. I would also like to thank the Central Bank of Kuwait for their exceptional efforts in supporting the Kuwait banking sector during the pandemic. What makes me even more proud of this recognition, is that it came at a time when we did a great job as a team during a difficult period characterized by numerous challenges.

Al-Humaidhi added: I am pleased to dedicate this award to my colleagues at AUB, whose sincere efforts contributed to winning this award, which is a demonstration of our persistent efforts in pursuit of our vision to maintain the bank's unique and leading position. We consider this recognition as an incentive to continue our tireless efforts to achieve the progress we aspire. It should be noted that Jehad Al-Humaidhi is an experienced and distinguished Kuwaiti banking professional, with more than 36 years of wide experience in banking business. She has achieved great successes through her leadership and supervisory skills, in addition to her clear strategic vision in leading the bank's business, which contributed to attaining robust operational performance and good growth indicators in 2020 and H1 2021, despite the hard conditions posed by COVID-19 pandemic.



Jehad Saud Al-Humaidhi



Five reasons why we love new Huawei Watch GT 3

KUWAIT: Huawei had everyone bouncing off the walls with the announcement of the new Huawei Watch GT 3 Moon Phase Collection II. There is more than enough to be thrilled about this smartwatch. It brings elegance and luxury to smartwatches with the new Moon Phase Collection II and innovative design. The unbelievable battery life of up to 14 days made us giddy with excitement. Then there are the all-day health and the disciplined fitness features as well as the convenient life assistant. And, it can connect with Huawei devices as well as other Android and iOS devices. Anyway, in this article, we list out five of the top reasons we love the Huawei Watch GT 3.

Reason 1

Let us get this straight. A watch might have a million, and one tricks up its sleeve, but it is first and foremost a part of your outfit. That is why the polished aesthetics of the Huawei Watch GT 3 is significant. It has brought about considerable changes in the watch design and watch faces. Firstly, there is the upgrade Moon Phase Collection II. Displaying the phase of the moon on the watch face was something reserved mainly for the most premium and high-end watches. The Moon Phase Collection II in the Huawei Watch GT 3 allows you to observe the different phases

Business

China's consumer data adds to worries over economic rebound

China's retail sales growth eases, factory output picks up

BEIJING: Chinese consumer spending grew at a slower-than-expected pace in November, data released yesterday showed, with analysts warning that an uptick in coronavirus cases was dampening sentiment and adding to questions over a rebound in the world's second-largest economy.

China's economy bounced back quickly from the pandemic after authorities contained COVID-19 with strict border controls and targeted lockdowns, but the recovery has been losing steam this year. Economists said a current nationwide increase in Chinese coronavirus cases, and resulting containment measures, appear to have led to cautious consumer behavior just as a property market slump worsens.

Retail sales rose 3.9 percent on-year, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), coming in below expectations and markedly slower than October's 4.9 percent. "The international environment has become more complex and severe, and there are still many constraints on domestic economic recovery," NBS spokesman Fu Linghui told reporters.

Fu added that China's economy faced the "triple pressures" of shrinking demand, supply shocks and weakening expectations, but that it was still expected to steadily improve. Economists Sheana Yue and Mark Williams of Capital Economics said in a research note that the pandemic "remained the key reason holding back a full recovery," blaming it for "weakness in the labor market."

The urban unemployment rate ticked up to five percent last month, from 4.9 percent. Williams had said earlier that recent data indicated that consumers were choosing to travel less as virus cases

rise, while warning of other "downbeat signals" such as slowing growth in sales during the annual November 1-11 shopping festival—China's answer to the US "Black Friday" consumer spree.

Power crisis fades

NBS spokesman Fu had told reporters previously that "current international environment uncertainties are mounting and the domestic economic recovery is still unstable and uneven." The economy grew only 0.2 percent from the previous three months in the third quarter, the weakest since a historic contraction in the first quarter last year.

On the positive side, industrial production grew 3.8 percent on-year in November, in line with expectations of a pick-up as disruptions from power shortages eased. Outages in recent months, which were linked to emission reduction targets, surging coal prices and supply shortages, had hit some factory production.

"Even though power supply shortages have eased recently, elevated input prices will linger... and sluggish domestic demand could be a longer-term drag," Moody's Analytics warned. Fixed-asset investment growth slowed to 5.2 percent in the first 11 months, with property investment rising six percent-down from the January-October period—amid falling home sales and tight financing rules.

"Wage arrears in property-related sectors, especially the construction sector, could also weigh on consumption," said Lu Ting, chief China economist at Nomura.

The Chinese property sector has been thrown into uncertainty as major developers such as the giant Evergrande Group struggle to dig out of



BEIJING: Singles' Day, the biggest shopping day of the year in China, saw disappointing sales. —AFP

crushing debt burdens. China's economic growth rate came in below expectations at 4.9 percent in the July-September third quarter on the property sector woes and energy crisis. Policy makers have been grappling with a long-term slowdown in recent years, which follows decades of hyper-fast growth. Lu said consumer spending was likely to

"remain subdued" in coming months, including the upcoming Lunar New Year holidays, as authorities in some areas have encouraged consumers to avoid unnecessary travel. The extended holiday period, which falls at the beginning of February next year, is normally an important time for the travel and retail sectors. —AFP

KFH the first local bank to be classified on Twitter

KUWAIT: Senior Manager Social Media and PR Services Center at Kuwait Finance House (KFH), Abdullah Al-Saif, said that KFH activated the new feature launched by Twitter, to classify the user's category. This is to require that KFH's page on Twitter with the name "Bank" include the bank's identity and its activity, and thus KFH will be the first local bank to activate the category classification on Twitter. This will have several advantages, including ensuring that content is consistent with profile, facilitating search and recall operations, increasing the effectiveness and privacy of content through arrangement and presentation within a specific scope in a way that adds speed and extension to the media and advertising content of KFH on Twitter, where the number of the bank's followers is about 350 thousand.

Al-Saif added in a press release that the total number of followers registered on KFH pages and channels on social media is more than one million people, while millions visit KFH pages on



Abdullah Al-Saif

various electronic means and channels. They follow up and interact with their contents, which vary between Informative material, advertising, competitions, products and services, with clarification of the legal aspects and controls as well as supervisory instructions associated with the provision of the service.

He said that KFH serves thousands of its customers daily by receiving their inquiries and questions and responding to them through social media channels, achieving the best levels of communication between the bank and customers. Al-Saif pointed out that the important role of the main electronic channels in marketing KFH services and products is increasing by day, in light of increase and demands of customers of different age groups to interact with social media. Customers can be obtain services, assistance and information from KFH at any place or time, as KFH is always keen to provide assistance to its customers in all circumstances.

Al-Saif pointed out that KFH pages on the various communication channels have gained great trust from customers and visitors, due to the excellence of the presented media, the quick access of, and progress in, search operations, the constant material and content updating and the accurate follow-up around-the-clock through a specialized and professional work team.

It is noteworthy that KFH is the first bank in Kuwait to activate the "Guide" feature that was recently added to the "Instagram" application. That was a continuation of its excellence in keeping abreast of the latest updates offered by digital platforms, and within the framework of adopting digitization in various operations and communication tools and enhancing communication and constructive interaction with customers by facilitating access to KFH content on its social media channels, and getting to know more about the bank's services and products as well as launching awareness campaigns and various offers.

KFH is keen to be present in various electronic channels and social media. This is in line with the bank's strategy of always being close to customers and the public, learning more about their interests and interacting with them, as well as encouraging their participation in events of interest to various segments of the community.

KIB honored in 2021 as 'Best Islamic Bank for Employee Development'

KUWAIT: In a testament to the bank's dedicated and robust human capital development program, Kuwait International Bank (KIB) was recently honored with the "Best Islamic Bank for Employee Development and Empowerment in Kuwait" award for the year 2021 by UK-based World Finance (WF) magazine. Coming as part of the magazine's annual global awards program to honor the best Islamic financial institutions, WF presented KIB with the award in recognitions of its methodology of developing its human capital as an integral part of its business model.

For about 14 years now, World Finance Magazine has been organizing the Islamic Finance Awards program annually to host and honor the largest Islamic banks and financial institutions from all over the globe, including KIB. The bank has been chosen over other candidates to win the title for its excellence in the field of human capital development in Kuwait, having met the set of criteria which included investing in apprenticeships and development programs, the innovative development program and strategy, the organization's culture of employee trust and empowerment, the impact of staff's skills development on bank overall performance, in addition to the staff training approaches taken to control COVID-related conditions.

According to WF, throughout the years, KIB has developed a culture of employee learning, trust and empowerment that enhances its involvement, engagement, and commitment in working towards the bank success. This learning and empowering culture, which became part of KIB values, has not



Raed Jawad Bukhamseen

Feras Al-Darmi

only taken the bank's needs into consideration, but also the employee experience - by encouraging feedback, improving performance, and more importantly making the bank a place where people feel respected and offered opportunities for development and where they can contribute to the best of their ability. Moreover, WF noted that KIB took proactive measures to protect its people and contain the spread of COVID-19 including restricting travel, emphasizing workplace hygiene, offering alternative ways of working, and initiating health-care guidance communication.

Speaking on the occasion of receiving this award, KIB Vice Chairman and CEO, Raed Jawad Bukhamseen, said: "First of all, we would like to thank the World Finance jury for this award, which is a new and important addition to our long list of awards and accolades. It also places more responsibility on us to maintain our performance when it comes to our strategic, multi-layered human capital development program, as we continuously seek to expand the scope of its activities to include more training and upskilling initiatives and internal activities across various fields. We also remain dedicated to developing our policy to restructure the work team periodically with the aim of always ensuring the right person is in the right position at the right time."

On his part, Deputy General Manager of the Human Resources Department at KIB, Feras Al-Darmi, pointed to the bank's commitment to investing first and foremost in its human capital. "Our goal

is to fully enable, empower and equip our teams to provide a comprehensive and next-level suite of services in a way that reflects the identity, vision, caliber and position of KIB. Moreover, we are always looking to ensure our team is receptive to new ways of working in order to keep pace with the latest developments and changes in the financial and banking sector, as well as preparing our employees to be able to deal with any challenges and work under any circumstances," noted Al-Darmi adding: "This is how KIB is able to maintain its competitive capabilities in the market; by ensuring that the KIB team is always at the highest degree of expertise and agility, with top-level professionalism and industry know-how, in line with the industry's top international best practice standards."

On the other hand, Al-Darmi underscored KIB's eagerness to provide all means of support and care to its team members of all segments, pointing out that this win does not only honor the Bank's efforts in honing the skills and capabilities of its employees, but also for its constant efforts to safeguard their safety and well-being on personal levels. Here Al-Darmi pointed to KIB's adoption of internal activities and initiatives that aim to enhance its staff's physical and mental health.

In conclusion, both Bukhamseen and Al-Darmi reaffirmed KIB's belief in fostering a strong, collaborative and healthy internal culture as a key component of its success. Therefore, KIB strives to place its human cadres, and national ones in particular, at the forefront of its priorities, in order to improve their performance, which contributes significantly to providing an exceptional and efficient experience for a more satisfied and happier customer.

It serves to note that the World Finance magazine, based in the capital city of London, is one of the leading and most prominent global media platforms specializing in financial and economic news coverage. Its esteemed awards program continues to represent a standard of success and set a benchmark for best practices in the world of finance and business on an international level.

NBK headquarters wins MEED Award

KUWAIT: The headquarters building of National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) was named "Commercial Property Project of the Year", in MEED's Project Awards for the MENA region for 2021.

In this competition, participating projects are assessed by a panel of recognized industry experts and specialists, who compare the submitted projects in the region in terms of the high standard of work, adherence to budget and client satisfaction in a healthy and safe working environment. The evaluation also considers the value and quality of a project throughout its entire life cycle, from the design concept through to engineering and construction and its wider contribution to society and to the environment.

Other criteria also include the project's ability to create jobs, provide training, support local businesses support consumer and business spending, enable knowledge transfer and foster innovation. NBK's new headquarters, which rises 981 feet tall divided into 63 floors, with a total area of 1.36 million sq. ft, has become one of the new landmarks of the financial district in the heart of Kuwait City.

The building's exterior design shows innovative ways to use structure as part of controlling the environment, with 28 fins used for shielding the building from individual direct solar gain in the offices, with its blades soaring to the sky making it actually feel quite solid and prominent.

In building its new headquarters, NBK did not aim to compete to be the tallest and most glamorous, but rather focused on creating a sustainable and green headquarters the bank, bringing all employees under one roof to provide them with a



work environment promoting innovation and excellence.

The building symbolizes a long history of excellence, a present of development and leading institutional work that provides a role model for modern banking entities, and also reflecting a futuristic vision to strengthen the bank's leading position and maintain the course towards sustainable growth.

The new headquarters also represents a cornerstone in NBK's integrated strategy to achieve sustainable development, a beacon for all in the field of modern architecture, and a role model for green buildings, as the building was fully designed and implemented in line with LEED Gold requirements,

the leading green buildings standards. Thanks to this, one year after the employees moved to the bank's new headquarters, all energy and water consumption ratios and GHG emissions have improved. It is worth mentioning that NBK's unwavering strides in the sustainability area over the past years were appreciated by FTSE Russell by selecting the bank to be a constituent of its FTSE4Good Index Series, as the only Kuwaiti bank to be included in this reputable sustainability index. NBK was also listed on Refinitiv AFE Low Carbon Select Index in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) launched in cooperation with the Arab Federation of Exchanges (AFE).

Lifestyle | Features

ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY INSCRIBED INTO THE UNESCO HERITAGE LIST



Saudi workers sew Islamic Arabic calligraphy in gold thread on a drape to cover the Kaaba at the Kiswa factory in the holy city of Makkah. UNESCO has added Arabic calligraphy, a key tradition in the Arab and Islamic worlds, to its Intangible Cultural Heritage list. —AFP photos



ABU DHABI : (From left to right) Russia's tennis player Andrey Rublev, Austria's World number five Dominic Thiem, South Africa's Kevin Anderson, Spain's US Open semi-finalist Pablo Carreno Busta and Roberto Bautista Agut hold signs bearing their names, reportedly written by them, in Arabic calligraphy ahead of the championship.

UNESCO on Tuesday added Arabic calligraphy, a key tradition in the Arab and Islamic worlds, to its Intangible Cultural Heritage list. A total of 16 Muslim-majority countries, led by Saudi Arabia, presented the nomination to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which announced the listing on Twitter. "Arabic calligraphy is the artistic practice of handwriting Arabic script in a fluid manner to convey harmony, grace and beauty," UNESCO said on its website. "The fluidity of Arabic script offers infinite possibilities, even within a single word, as letters can be stretched and transformed in numerous ways to create different motifs." Saudi Culture Minister

Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Farhan Al-Saud welcomed the decision and said it would "contribute to developing this cultural heritage", in a statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency. Abdelmajid Mahboub from the Saudi Heritage Preservation Society, which was involved in the proposal, said calligraphy "has always served as a symbol of the Arab-Muslim world". But he lamented that "many people no longer write by hand due to technological advances", adding that the number of specialized Arab calligraphic artists had dropped sharply. The UNESCO listing "will certainly have a positive impact" on preserving the tradition, he added. According to the UNESCO website,

intangible cultural heritage "is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization". Its importance "is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next".

Congolese dance

Also, the United Nations' cultural agency UNESCO on Tuesday added the Congolese rumba dance to its intangible cultural heritage list, sparking delight in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Congo-Brazzaville. A UNESCO summit approved the two countries' joint application to add rumba to its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list, where it joins Cuban rumba, the Central African Republic's polyphonic pygmy music and the drums of Burundi. DRC President Felix Tshisekedi welcomed the news "with joy and happiness" as citizens from both nations celebrated on social media. "This cultural jewel unique to the two Congos is recognized for its universal value," Tshisekedi wrote on Twitter. "Rumba is our identity! Its international recognition is a source of pride and a treasure," said DRC culture minister Catherine Furaha. Specialists have located rumba's origins in the ancient central African kingdom of Kongo, where people practiced a dance called "Nkumba". The word means navel as performances involved a man and woman dancing with their navel opposite the other person's.

'National life'

Africans brought their music and culture across the Atlantic through the slave trade, eventually giving birth to jazz in



DUBAI: Photo shows a view of the Arabic-calligraphy decorated exterior of the Museum of the Future and the Sheikh Zayed Road in the gulf emirate of Dubai.

North America and rumba in South America. Traders then brought the music back to Africa through records and guitars in more recent times. The modern version of rumba is 100 years old and symbolizes cities and bars, Andre Yoka Lye, a director at the DRC's national arts institute in the capital Kinshasa, told AFP. Rumba has been marked by the political history of the two Congos before and after independence and is "present in all areas of national life", he added. It draws on nostalgia, cultural exchange, resistance, resilience and the sharing of pleasure through its flamboyant "sape" dress code, said Lye. "These treasures from Congo and exported throughout the

world are part of our pride," DRC government spokesman Patrick Muyaya tweeted last week in anticipation of the announcement. Rumba stars are occasionally controversial or mired in scandals. A French court on Monday convicted high-profile DRC performer Koffi Olomide of holding four of his former dancers against their will during tours. But the people of both countries say the dance lives on and hope its addition to UNESCO's list will give it greater fame even among Congolese. "It is our common duty to promote rumba," said the DRC's communications minister Muyaya. "We are the country of rumba, what will we make of it?" he asked. —AFP



Palestinian artist Bilal Khaled draws Arabic calligraphy on the body of a bodybuilder exercising at a gym in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza strip.

Rapper shot Megan Thee Stallion after telling her to dance

Rapper who allegedly told Megan Thee Stallion to "Dance, b***h" before shooting at the singer's feet after a Hollywood party was ordered to stand trial in California on Tuesday. The "Savage" singer was in an SUV with Tory Lanez driving away from a party hosted by Kylie Jenner when the pair got into an argument in June last year, a court in Los Angeles heard. A bikini-clad Megan Thee Stallion demanded to be let out of the Cadillac and then heard Lanez shout "Dance, b***h" as he opened fire with a handgun, Los Angeles Police Department Detective Ryan Stogner told a judge. The "Hot Girl Summer" singer told police she was "bleeding profusely" from her feet and that she fell to the ground and crawled to a nearby driveway. Lanez then "emphatically apologized for what he did" and offered to drive her home, the court heard, with the rapper later telling officers he had offered her money not to say anything about the shooting. Police responding to reports of a shooting later stopped the vehicle and took Megan Thee Stallion to hospital, where she initially told doctors she had hurt her feet on broken glass. Several bullet fragments were removed from her feet, but some remain and she told the detective that she had difficulty walking in certain shoes. She told Stogner she was "scared (Lanez) was going to get in trouble," but later alleged that he had shot her. Investigating officers found four spent bullet casings at the scene of the alleged shooting. Megan Thee Stallion subsequently posted a video to Instagram Live in which she said "Tory shot me. You shot me and you got your publicist and your people... lying... Stop lying." Lanez, a 29-year-old Canadian whose real name is Daystar Peterson, has denied wrongdoing. "I have all faith in God to show that ... love to all my fans and people that have stayed true to me & know my heart ... a charge is not a conviction," he wrote on Twitter last year. He also addressed the claims on his fifth album, "Daystar," wondering how someone could get "shot in your foot... don't hit no bones or tendons?" Lanez was charged in October 2020 with one count each of assault with a semi-automatic firearm and carrying a loaded, unregistered firearm in a vehicle. He faces more than 22 years in jail if convicted. At Tuesday's hearing a judge refused a defense application to dismiss the charges. Lanez is on bail, and set to be arraigned on January 13. —AFP

ESTONIA'S WOOD PELLET INDUSTRY STOKES CONTROVERSY

Estonia's thriving wood pellet industry is pitting environmentalists who warn it increases logging and harms biodiversity against supporters who say it makes good use of wood that would otherwise go to waste. The subject is particularly sensitive in the tiny Baltic state once ruled by Moscow, whose forests cover more than half the surface area and are very much part of the national identity. But, at a plant belonging to Europe's biggest wood pellet producer, Estonia's Graanul Invest, the company's head of quality and certification systems defended the industry. "Wood only comes to us when sawmill or plywood factories reject it," Mihkel Jugaste told AFP over the sounds of machinery turning logs into sawdust and compacting them into pellets. Wood pellets are a type of biofuel that can be used in special pellet stoves or central heating furnaces for homes. They are also used on a larger scale. The former coal-fired power station of Drax in Britain now runs partially on wood pellets, including some from Estonia.

Logging intensity 'too high'

Environmentalists say biomass demand in western Europe is causing an intensification of logging in places like Estonia, including in protected areas and using techniques such as clearcutting in which entire areas of forest are destroyed. They warn that bird species like black grouse and woodlark are under threat from the logging, pointing out that woodland bird numbers have fallen by around a quarter over the past two decades. Their warnings have been heard in Brussels and the European Commission earlier this year initiated infringement proceedings against Estonia for failing to ensure environmental impact assessments before issuing logging permits in these areas. "The intensity of Estonian forest management is too high and pellet production within the forestry industry plays an important role," said Siim Kuresoo, forest program coordinator at the Estonian Fund for Nature. "The initial idea of allowing wood to be



Forest owner Taavi Ehripais, head of the forest management organisation Vardi Metsauhistu, is seen in a forest near Kernu in Harju county in northern Estonia. —AFP photos



Wood pellets are seen at a plant belonging to Graanul Invest, Europe's biggest wood pellet producer, in Imavere in Jarva county in central Estonia.



Logs are stapled and wood chips are seen at a plant belonging to Graanul Invest, Europe's biggest wood pellet producer, in Imavere in Jarva county in central Estonia.

burned as renewable energy was only to lessen the waste of the industry. Now it has grown into a big industry by itself," he said. Wood and wood product exports make up around 10 percent of Estonia's total and the value rose by 48 percent to 165 million euros (\$186 million) for the 12 months until August 2021 compared to August 2020, according to official figures. Graanul has also reported its revenues rose to 438.9 million euros in 2020 compared to 401.7 million euros in 2019. Jugaste said his company respects and will continue to abide by any environmental protection regulation but emphasized that sometimes stakeholders disagree on what the rules should be. "We, as a wood processor, cannot really decide for them," he said. "As long as experts make a decision about the protection status or the protection territory and that list is given to us, then we can protect it 100 percent," he added.

'An unbelievable myth'

An article in Nature Research in 2020 found that there had been an 85-percent increase in logged areas in Estonia between 2016 and 2018 compared to the period 2004-2015 - one of the largest expansions in the European Union. At the same time, thanks to natural reforestation and planting, the overall forested area in Estonia has increased to 2.3 million hectares in 2020 from 2.2 million hectares in 2001. The issue in Estonia is part of a wider European debate over whether wood pellets can be considered a carbon-neutral energy source as long as there is replanting of trees. Many argue they cannot because burning wood is as dirty as coal and trees take many years to grow back. Taavi Ehripais, a forest owner in northwest Estonia, said only about 10 percent of his timber - the lowest quality pieces - would end up in a pellet factory. Ehripais, who is also the head of Vardi Metsauhistu, a forest management organization, said it was "an unbelievable myth" that the wood pellet industry was leading to an increase in logging. Ehripais also defended logging laws, saying they were "very strict" and guaranteed biodiversity. —AFP

SOUTH AFRICA SNIPS LIONS TO MANAGE SPECIES IN SMALL RESERVES



A lion rests under a tree at the Rietspruit Game Reserve in Hoedspruit. Conservationists and small reserve managers in 2010 set up a forum to manage their wild lions as a 'meta population'. —AFP photos



An elephant walks between trees at the Rietspruit Game Reserve in Hoedspruit.

On the cusp of sexual maturity, a young lioness is about to be sterilized. It's to prevent mating with her father and uncles, the only three wild males on this small South African reserve. Such parks protect about 700 lions in South Africa alone, but the prides must be carefully managed to avoid overpopulation and in-breeding. "Under natural circumstances, this would not happen because the males would have been displaced by other males," said manager Kevin Leo-Smith, hands on the wheel of an open-topped safari vehicle.

In large reserves, lions roam vast swathes of land, up to 12,000 hectares. Only the strongest survive, as prides fight for territory and compete against other predators for food. Smaller carnivores prey on cubs, and males can maul each other to death. But the nine lions of Rietspruit game reserve have very little to fear. Antelope abound on its 5,500-hectares near Kruger National Park, and there are too few hyenas, leopards or cheetahs to pose a threat.

The only three males are inseparable brothers who happily take turns with the females. "The biggest prob-

lem is genetic diversity," said Leo-Smith. "Lions breed very fast." Left to their own in such a plentiful setting, they would rapidly multiply, eat through the reserve and then move on to nearby cattle farms. Nine is all the reserve can accommodate for now. The lion mother is on birth control, and her four teenage daughters have to be spayed. The remaining older female has already been snipped.

'She's big!'

Wildlife veterinarian Peter Rogers cocks his dart rifle and aims it at the four young lionesses elegantly strewn with their mother in the shade of a tree, bellies bulging with a zebra killed overnight. He settles on his target and pulls the trigger. The startled pride grunts and disperses as a red-topped syringe filled with anaesthetic shoots into her neck. One of her sisters pounces over and swats it to the ground. Ten minutes later she's fast asleep, unresponsive to her peers' nudges. Rogers drives up to the tree, shoos away the others and sets to work. The team moves swiftly, blindfolding the animal to protect her eyes and fitting her with a drip. They keep an eye on the horizon,

as other lions lurk nearby, and heave the 140-kilogramme (300-pound) beast into a white four-wheel drive. "She's big!" says one vet, huffing as she slams the boot shut and jumps into the front seat, barely glancing at the sleeping killer behind her. The vehicle speeds through the reserve, lifting clouds of red dust and unsettling a tower of giraffe browsing treetops. Two ostriches trail along for a few meters before it turns out the gate and takes the main asphalt road into town.

'Meta' population

The surgery takes almost four hours, complicated by the lioness's swollen intestines. "They had just eaten a zebra so... she had a full stomach. It just made the (operation) a lot more difficult," said Rogers, standing by the enclosure where the animal woke up retching and groggy from the anaesthetic. "It's a very invasive technique," he conceded. "But as soon as you have got four fences around a place you have to manage it." Conservationists and small reserve managers in 2010 set up a forum to manage their wild lions as a "meta

population". The Lion Management Forum South Africa (LiMF) oversees around 700 lions among 59 reserves.

They mimic natural processes by controlling reproduction rates and swapping males. Careful management has allowed the meta population to grow at a sustainable two percent per year. "If we didn't do the management... the population would be increasing at 22 percent per year," LiMF chair Sam Ferreira said. "Now that sounds really nice, but the trouble is we don't have lots of space for that in South Africa." Globally, wild lions are disappearing fast, but South Africa has an abundant and growing population of around 3,500 - about 17 percent of the world's total.

"Smaller reserves have increased the lion range in the last 30 years probably by 50 percent," said Leo-Smith. Rietspruit's males will be replaced with younger lions when they age, and then some females will be taken off contraception. They remain king until then, golden manes framing their faces. Other reserves will probably still take them when they grow old, said Leo-Smith. "They will be very desirable for photographic reasons." —AFP

After months on the run, 2 zebras caught

Two zebras that had been on the run for months in the countryside outside Washington, DC, have finally been caught, an official said Tuesday. The pair had escaped from an exotic animal farm in Maryland at the end of August and eluded numerous attempts to capture them, their escapade enthralling local residents and media.

But after repeatedly thwarting the authorities, the quadrupeds have been snagged, said Richard Bell of the US Department of Agriculture, without providing any further details. Prince George's County, where the pair had been running free, announced several weeks ago that it planned to use "food and other zebras" to try to lure the striped fugitives back to the exotic animal farm.

The affair had been documented on social media by bemused residents, but the saga took a sad turn when a third zebra that had escaped with the others died after being caught in an illegal snare. Their owner, Jerry Holly, owns a large farm with a herd of around 30 zebras. He is facing charges of cruelty to animals after yet another zebra was found dead on his property in October, local media said. The possession of exotic animals, a phenomenon highlighted in the hit Netflix series "Tiger King," is allowed in some US states. —AFP



Wildlife veterinarian Dr Peter Rogers (right) prepares to dart a lioness at the Rietspruit Game Reserve in Hoedspruit, before being transported to the Provett Wildlife Services & Animal Hospital to be sterilized. —AFP



Lionesses lay under a tree at the Rietspruit Game Reserve in Hoedspruit.



A lioness (left) reacts after being hit by a dart shot by wildlife veterinarian Dr. Peter Rogers (not seen) at the Rietspruit Game Reserve in Hoedspruit, before being transported to the Provett Wildlife Services & Animal Hospital to be sterilized.

HK'S YOUNG 'NEON NOMADS' KEEP DYING TRADE FLICKERING

Hong Kong (HK) was once world famous for its neon-light shop signs but many old masters took their secrets to the grave - now a generation of tech-savvy, globally connected young artists are trying to keep the trade alive. Karen Chan describes herself as a "neon nomad". Better known by her professional artistic name Chankalun, she had long been fascinated by the kaleidoscopic neon lights that bathed Hong Kong streets in a warm glow.

But finding someone who might teach her was far from easy. The trade has long been dominated by masters - "si fu" in Cantonese - who guarded their knowledge even as neon gave way to cheaper, more efficient LED lights and city officials began clamping down on unsafe hoardings. "The si fu will not pass on all the knowledge, especially if there are no guidelines or manuals, they will only pass on their skills to their own descendants," Chan said. Few family members wanted to take up a skill that was becoming redundant so many masters died without passing on their knowledge. "If you have very valuable skill or knowledge, you should be spreading it around so that it could live as well," the 33-year-old artist lamented. "Overprotection can be a cause for a lot of crafts to die."

Secret trade

Undeterred, Chan turned to the internet and travelled to places such as Amsterdam and New York to learn from artists there. There she discovered a global community of neon fans and professionals willing to trade tips. "There is an open sourcing culture appearing in the new generation of artists," she said. "Everyone is posting their experiments or their new finds on Instagram or Facebook, and everyone is very happy to share... this kind of knowledge," she explained.

"The old generations see it as a secret trade," Chan, the only Hong Kong woman currently working within a traditionally male-dominated trade, operates out of a studio run by Jive Lau, a 38-year-old artist who also represents the new breed of younger neon light benders. Together they work glass to near melting point, bending and blowing the tubes



Neon artist Karen Chan, better known by her professional artistic name Chankalun, works on a piece of hollow glass as she shapes a neon light in a studio in Hong Kong. —AFP photos

into remarkable shapes over blue flame burners that can reach 1,000 degrees Celsius (1,800 degrees Fahrenheit).

Lau was introduced to neon bending in Taiwan, where he said masters were more willing to share their knowledge with strangers. But he too has found the internet a huge help. "I keep learning from online resources and from watching videos," he explained. Today, he offers workshops to a growing number of neon enthusiasts. "The education can actually help... (in) promoting the neon culture, keeping it alive," he said.

The last light benders

Chan's current project is called "The Neon Girl" and involves her working with half a dozen neon light masters around the world to create six distinctive pieces. They are a far cry from the huge flashing signs that used to protrude horizontally from the sides of Hong Kong buildings, advertising everything from restaurants to mahjong parlors. Instead they have a modern, but still local vibe. "For neon to live... it needs



Neon artist Karen Chan in the process of making a neon sign in a studio in Hong Kong.

some other elements to inject into it, and this is what I'm doing as a new generation of neon artist," she explained.

She hopes the pieces will "break the boundaries or the perspective of how the people think of neon, that it can be expanded so that it can really live on a new form". She compares neon glass bending to an Olympic sport that requires strength, precision, and flexibility. And her stubborn perseverance has paid off in that she eventually found a si fu - known as Master Wong - willing to take her on. "Because I fell in love with this medium, I tried to do it myself, so I begged Master Wong and other neon benders in Hong Kong but they refused teaching me," she recalled. In 2018, she then decided to learn on her own and enlisted the help of a glass sculptor who watched the neon creation process on YouTube to explain the technique to her. After creating an art piece in a week, she returned. Master Wong, who is now 80 years-old and eschews publicity, was impressed with her work and agreed to take her on as an apprentice. "I think the neon masters in Hong Kong will never accept me as a real neon master," she said, "but maybe as a neon artist, which is fine with me." —AFP

Baboons can reproduce social conventions to problem solve

French researchers have observed non-human primates developing social conventions to work

together to obtain a reward, in an experiment set up with a group of baboons. About twenty baboons raised at a primatology centre were given the task in pairs of making the same choice when each presented with a set of two images on touch screens. If both animals made the same choice, they were rewarded with a treat. It took the baboons about three days to establish a system for choosing the same image, even when they could not see their partners' choices, says the report, published Monday in the journal Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B.

While previous research had shown that primates were capable of social conventions like grooming, this is the first to show a new behavior appearing spontaneously in a group, without human intervention. The experiment was conducted by French national research institute CNRS and Aix-Marseille University. Over the course of tens of thousands of tests the baboons developed a hierarchy for the images presented, the researchers noted.

At first the baboons could see what was happening on other animals' screens, but in the second phase of the experiment that visual cue was taken away. "The group's performance didn't budge," the study's main author, cognitive psychology researcher Anthony Formaux told AFP. "It surprised us when they continued to choose the same image without being able to imitate each other." Researchers ruled out the possibility of a simple shared affinity for certain colors by repeating the experiment with black and white designs. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

PHOENIX, COLMAN MOVIES AMONG THE INDIE SPIRIT AWARDS NOMINEES

Joaquin Phoenix's "C'mon C'mon" and Olivia Colman's "The Lost Daughter" were among this year's indie films to earn Spirit Award nominations on Tuesday, boosting their chances for Hollywood's upcoming prize-giving season culminating with the Oscars. The Spirit Awards, which only consider low- and mid-budget movies, named five best feature contenders including Phoenix's black-and-white family drama, and Colman's adaptation of an Elena Ferrante novel about motherhood. "Zola," a black comedy based

on a viral Twitter thread about a part-time stripper's disastrous trip to Florida, led the overall nominations with seven. Rounding out the best feature category were Italian-language family drama "A Chiara" and college rowing thriller "The Novice." The Film Independent Spirit Awards are an important early marker for indie Oscar contenders. Only films made for less than \$22.5 million can compete. They are typically held the day before the Academy Awards, although the Oscars' delay this year

means indie stars will gather at a beach outside Los Angeles three weeks earlier, on March 6. That means the winners will be revealed before voting has ended for the Oscars, which will take place on March 27. Each year, the Spirit Awards also gives the prestigious Robert Altman Award to a film's director, casting director and cast. This year's winner, "Mass," is the harrowing tale of the fallout of a school mass shooting, in which a victim's parents attempt to find closure through sitting down with the moth-

er and father of the attacker. Four of the five directors nominated were women, including Maggie Gyllenhaal for "The Lost Daughter." Like many Hollywood ceremonies, last year's Spirit Awards were forced online by the pandemic. A virtual ceremony also honored indie television for the first time. "After being away for more than a year, IFC is ready to bring audiences back to the beach celebrating the best of film and television," said Blake Callaway, general manager of the ceremony's broadcast channel. —AFP



A man dressed as Saint Nicholas (Father Christmas or Santa Claus) hands out candy to attract customers outside a shop in the popular market of the Burj Hammoud neighborhood of Lebanon's capital Beirut. —AFP photos



A man hangs an inflatable doll of Saint Nicholas (Father Christmas or Santa Claus) at the entrance of his shop in the popular market of the Burj Hammoud neighborhood of Beirut.



Photo shows a view of a statue of Saint Nicholas (Father Christmas or Santa Claus) outside the entrance of a toy shop in the popular market of the Burj Hammoud neighborhood of Beirut.

Santa closed: In Beirut, crisis snuffs out Christmas spirit

Beirut in December was once a shopping extravaganza, where day-long traffic jams clogged streets decked out with flashing Christmas lights and building-sized billboards advertising champagne and jewelry. In barely two years of a brutal economic collapse, the lights have gone out on Beirut's commercial heyday and power shortages have left the city's streets shrouded in gloom. This year, the roadside billboards tell a different, more frugal story: one that reflects the worst financial crisis to ever hit the once free-spending Middle Eastern country. Steel safes, banknote counters, discounts on money transfers - the offers plastered on the bridges straddling the main highway into Beirut aren't your typical Christmas pleasers. "Sales of safes and vaults have increased by 35 to 50 percent since the start of the economic crisis in 2019," a sales rep-

resentative at Smartsecurity LB, one of the main retailers in Lebanon, told AFP. Alarms and CCTV systems are also selling like hot cakes. The lack of trust in banks that are widely blamed for the worst financial crisis in Lebanon's history has raised the estimated amount of cash stashed away in Lebanese homes to a whopping \$10 billion. "We're at minus 90 percent compared to pre-2019 crisis levels," said Antonio Vincenti, chairman of the Pikasso out-of-home advertising company, a market leader in Lebanon.

'Last Christmas'

The banks, whose campaigns were once ubiquitous on his billboards, are insolvent, sometimes replaced by money transfer companies offering to funnel the diaspora's precious dollars into the coun-

try. "Digital screens remain switched off, mostly because of the problems we face in electricity supply," Vincenti said. The government provides barely two hours a day of mains electricity and the cost of powering the screens with newly non-subsidized diesel would out-strip the income from clients. In Beirut's long-deserted downtown area, where luxury brands used to be concentrated, one apologetic Christmas sign still flashes at night with the words: "Despite it all". On Hamra, a main thoroughfare in central Beirut, there is little left of the high street Christmas shopping vibe and the mood echoes the popular hashtag "Santa bala shanta" (Santa without a sack). Municipality budgets cannot keep traffic lights switched on, let alone the miles of string lights that used to canopy the street throughout December. Even Wham's usually unescapable seasonal hit "Last Christmas" is nowhere to be heard, a relief to some perhaps, but a sure sign that something has changed. On shop windows, Christmas sale posters are outnumbered by "We're Closed" signs - and beggars have replaced Santa impersonators on the street outside.

'No joy left'

The busiest shops are foreign exchange booths, which now provide free black plastic bags in which to carry out bulging wads of the ever depreciating Lebanese pound. Four out of five Lebanese are now considered poor, according to the UN income threshold of \$2 a day. At a supermarket in an upscale neighborhood of the capital, a half-bottle of the cheapest champagne costs 900,000 Lebanese pounds, substantially more than the minimum monthly wage, now worth less than \$25 on the black market. In previous years, gigantic pyramids of panettone and Christmas hampers overflowing with foie gras and cognac obstructed the aisles. "This year there's an offer on detergent! Buy one, get one free," Christine Kreidy said, laughing, as she pushed her empty trolley past the welcome displays and into the silent store. "I suppose it's an opportunity to focus on the real meaning of Christmas but I have to admit I used to enjoy Christmas shopping," the 49-year-old said. "That's the thing though in Lebanon now: whether it's Christmas or any other day, there's no joy left." —AFP



Archaeologists work at an archaeological site right next to a coal mine and a power plant, in central Serbia's Stari Kostolac. —AFP photos



Archaeologists work at an archaeological site right next to a coal mine and a power plant, in central Serbia's Stari Kostolac. —AFP photos

Held up by history: Roman ruins offer building blocks for Serbian village

Amid the devastation after World War I, Verica Ivanovic's grandfather used whatever construction materials he could find to build the family's home including, unbeknown to him, bricks from the Roman Empire. The house and its ancient foundation are still used by the family in central Serbia's Stari Kostolac on the outskirts of what was once a major Roman settlement and military garrison then known as Viminacium. It was only years later that the family realized the bricks were cobbled together from the ruins belonging to structures from the once powerful empire. Emilija Nikolic, a research associate from the Belgrade Institute of Archaeology, estimates that the bricks found on Ivanovic's house likely originate from the third or fourth century AD. "It's kind of awkward, I know it's Roman. But everyone was doing it," Ivanovic, 82, told AFP. The fields around Viminacium remain an archaeological gold mine teeming with ancient coins, jewelry, and other artefacts. In an abandoned backyard near Ivanovic's home lies the remnants of an ancient Roman wall. "We were ploughing potatoes in a field. I looked down and saw a cameo... When I turned it with my hoe, I saw a beautiful female face," said Ivanovic. "It's in a museum now."

Buried treasure

For centuries, residents near Stari Kostolac have used the bricks and mosaic tiles and other pieces from antiquity that were found in abundance in the area to fill everyday needs. "Historians in the 19th century noted that a peasant from a nearby village used a sarcophagus as a pig feeder," Nikolic told AFP. Today, the sarcophagus-which features images from the ancient Greek myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece-resides in a museum. According to archaeologists, Viminacium was once the provincial capital of Rome's Moesia region and supported a population of about 30,000 inhabitants during

its heyday. Tens of thousands of artefacts have been unearthed from the area so far, including a Roman bath with heated floors and walls, a fleet of ships, and hundreds of sculptures. The ancient city is also believed to have been home to one of the largest necropolises discovered in territory belonging to the former Roman empire, with about 14,000 tombs unearthed. Viminacium started to decline following the Hun inva-



Archaeologists work at an archaeological site right next to a coal mine and a power plant, in central Serbia's Stari Kostolac.

sion in the mid-fifth century AD and was completely abandoned by the time Slavs arrived in the region at the beginning of the seventh century.

What lies beneath

The archaeological site is also the only major Roman settlement that has no modern city built on top of it, according to experts. "You can't see Londinium anymore because modern London is there. No Lutetia nor Singidunum-Paris and Belgrade are built on top of

it," said Miomir Korac, director of the Belgrade Institute of Archaeology. Sprawling underneath Stari Kostolac's corn fields are the remnants of the entire ancient city-including temples, an amphitheatre, a hippodrome, a mint and an imperial palace, according to extensive scannings, Korac said. Just two to three percent of the area has been excavated and explored by experts to date.



Emilija Nikolic, a research associate from Belgrade Institute of Archaeology, takes a photo of a pile of bricks with Roman stamps on, in central Serbia's Stari Kostolac.

But centuries after its fall, the ancient garrison city is under siege again. For more than four decades, nearby mining projects, including the recent expansion of a coal project and a power plant, have increasingly encroached into the area. Last year, miners unearthed several ancient ships during a dig, with archaeologists dating the oldest vessel to the first century BC. "It has definitely put (the site) in danger, as many ancient buildings have already been destroyed by building the mine," Nikolic said. "We have saved what we could." —AFP

OJ Simpson a free man as parole ends: Police

OJ Simpson, the professional football player-turned-movie-star whose double murder trial gripped and divided the United States, is a free man after finishing his parole, police said Tuesday. Simpson, who is now 74, was released from jail in Nevada in 2017, where he had served nine years for armed robbery in a case revolving around sports memorabilia. He had been due to finish parole in February. "The Nevada Board of Parole Commissioners conducted an early discharge hearing for Mr. Simpson," Nevada Police spokesman Kim Yoko Smith said.

"A decision to grant early discharge from parole was ratified on December 6, 2021. The Board awarded credits in an amount equal to the time remaining on the sentence to reduce the sentence to time served." Simpson's soap opera public life began as a stand-out running back in college football, winning the coveted Heisman Trophy for the best player in the nation, before a stellar career in the NFL. It morphed into lucrative success in movies and commercials.

Then in 1994, millions of Americans watched wall-to-wall TV coverage of Simpson traveling in a white Bronco driven by a friend, leading a police convoy along the highways of southern California as he fled over the suspected double murder of his ex-wife and her male friend. Simpson was famously acquitted in 1995 by a Los Angeles jury in a case derided by many as a media circus that became known as the "Trial of the Century," with a cast of larger-than-life lawyers and drama over whether or not a glove found at the scene would fit him.

The verdict was greeted with disbelief by many Americans, with opinion on the Black athlete's guilt divided sharply along racial lines. The case was turned into the Emmy-winning FX television series, "The People vs OJ Simpson: American Crime Story," which aired in 2016. Simpson was found liable for the deaths in a 1997 civil suit and ordered to pay \$33.5 million damages to the family of Ron Goldman - who was stabbed to death alongside Simpson's ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson.

Simpson maintains his innocence and has always denied he was trying to flee during the famous chase, even though he ignored a police deadline to turn himself in. He told an LAPD detective over the phone during the slow-speed pursuit to "let them all know I wasn't running," but rather visiting Nicole's grave. A duffel bag containing Simpson's passport and cash - as well as a gun - found by police in the car led many to question this, but was never submitted as evidence by the prosecution. He later authored a book entitled "If I Did It," which proffered a hypothetical description of the murders. —AFP

Sports

US sport on alert as COVID cases surge in NFL, NBA, NHL

Professional sports leagues on red alert

LOS ANGELES: Professional sports leagues across North America were on alert Tuesday as a surge of COVID-19 cases left dozens of players sidelined, prompted teams to shutter facilities and forced the postponement of more fixtures. The NFL, NBA and National Hockey League were scrambling to counter a sharp uptick in coronavirus cases as the Geneva-based World Health Organization warned the new Omicron variant was spreading at an unprecedented rate.

After a relatively untroubled opening three months of the American football season, COVID-19 has returned to stalk the NFL with a vengeance in the past week. A day after the NFL reported a sharp spike in COVID-19 cases—with 37 recorded in a single day on Monday—the Los Angeles Rams and Cleveland Browns became the latest teams to be hit by the virus. The Rams closed their practice facility and entered the NFL's intensive safety protocols after nine players were placed on the reserve/COVID-19 list.

Affected Rams players included star wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. Four other Rams players were already on the COVID-19 list. Rams staff will work remotely on Tuesday and Wednesday and more cases are expected in what head coach Sean McVay said was a “uniquely challenging” situation. In Cleveland meanwhile, the Browns announced the team had also entered the NFL's enhanced COVID-19 protocols after eight players were put on the reserve list.

The Washington Football Team reported two more players on the team's COVID-19 list, taking

the tally to 10. On Monday, US reports said a Washington employee—not directly involved with the playing or coaching staff—had tested positive for Omicron, the first known case of the variant in the NFL. As of November 17, more than 94% of NFL players have been vaccinated, while nearly 100% of NFL personnel have also been vaccinated.

NBA, NHL hit

In the NBA meanwhile, the Los Angeles Lakers cancelled a scheduled practice session on Tuesday after Talen Horton-Tucker tested positive. In a separate development, the Brooklyn Nets confirmed that starters James Harden, LaMarcus Aldridge and DeAndre Bembry would miss Tuesday's home game against the Toronto Raptors after entering COVID-19 protocols.

Jevon Carter and James Johnson were also added to the COVID-19 list on Tuesday, joining the Nets Paul Millsap, who entered the protocols on Monday.

On Monday, the NBA said Chicago's games against the Detroit Pistons on Tuesday and Toronto Raptors on Thursday had both been called off, the first games of the season to be postponed due to COVID-19. Ice hockey was also facing a COVID resurgence. On Monday, the NHL postponed Calgary Flames games through to December 16 after six players and a member of staff entered the COVID protocols.

Seven NHL teams reported new COVID cases on Tuesday, and the Carolina Hurricanes were forced to postpone their game with the Minnesota Wild on Tuesday after an outbreak. COVID-19 con-

Dozens of players sidelined



DURHAM: Fans of the Duke Blue Devils try to distract Latawan Lawrence #4 of the South Carolina State Bulldogs during the second half at Cameron Indoor Stadium on December 14, 2021 in Durham, North Carolina. — AFP

cerns have also placed a question mark over the participation of NHL stars at next February's Winter Olympics in Beijing. NHL Players Association executive director Don Fehr said on Saturday that a lack of “concrete answers” from Beijing Games officials about COVID-19 protocols, including quarantine rules, was creating uncertainty among players.

Speaking on a video conference call on Tuesday, USA Hockey executive director Pat Kelleher said

that, although officials received fresh guidelines on Monday, they were still awaiting clarity on quarantine rules for any player testing positive for COVID-19 in China. “We are certainly hopeful that all systems will be go by the time we get ready to go to Beijing,” Kelleher said. “But there's certainly work to be done. There are a lot of moving parts, a lot of things to be discussed and hopefully answered so that everybody can feel the best about sending the best players from the NHL.” — AFP

F1 rivalry to set sail as Red Bull enters America's Cup

AUCKLAND: Red Bull announced yesterday it was entering a team in the America's Cup yacht race, in a move that will take its bitter Formula One rivalry with Mercedes onto the water. Red Bull Racing principal Christian Horner said the team will partner with two-time America's Cup winner Alinghi to challenge for yachting's most prestigious trophy.

“Our F1 team is looking forward to helping this new member of our family to succeed... we will share our experiences, engineering tips, etc. It is a two-way cooperation,” he said in a statement. Rival syndicate Ineos Britannia already has close ties to Mercedes, which has been involved in a furious tussle with Red Bull during the F1 season.

It culminated in Red Bull's flying Dutchman Max Verstappen being controversially crowned world champion over Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton of Britain this week, in a result the German team looks set to appeal. Both yachting teams will bring F1 technology to the spectacular 23-metre (75-foot) AC75 foiling monohulls used during the last America's Cup, won by Team New Zealand off Auckland in March. Alinghi, owned by Swiss billionaire Ernesto Bertarelli, won the America's Cup in 2003 and 2007 but has not competed since 2010.

Team New Zealand chief executive Grant Dalton said applying more F1 expertise to the foiling yachts promised to make the next edition of the America's Cup one of the most exciting ever. “We are seeing the merging of two of the most technologically advanced sports in the world on land and on the water, which is only going to be a good thing for the competition and the growth of the sport and its audiences,” he said. The venue of the next America's Cup in 2024 is yet to be determined, although Dalton has said it is unlikely to return to Auckland for financial reasons. — AFP

India's Kohli says given 90 minutes notice of sacking

NEW DELHI: Virat Kohli said yesterday he was told only 90 minutes before the official announcement that he had been sacked as India's one-day captain. Kohli quit as T20 skipper after the recent World Cup and last week lost the ODI job too, with India's cricket board saying it wanted Rohit Sharma to lead in both white-ball formats.

The surprise announcement came in one line at the bottom of a press release by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) about the Test squad for the upcoming tour of South Africa. “I was contacted one and a half hours before the selection meeting on the 8th for the Test series and there was no prior communication to me at all,” Kohli told reporters yesterday ahead of the team's departure for South Africa, where they will play three Tests and three ODIs.

“Before ending the call I was told that the five selectors had decided that I would not be the ODI captain, to which I replied, ‘ok fine,’” the 33-year-old said. Kohli will still captain India in the Tests in South Africa but press reports suggested that he had decided to skip the subsequent ODI series in a huff. But Kohli denied this, telling reporters that



India's cricket team captain Virat Kohli

he “was and am available for selection” and hit out at sections of the media for “writing lies”.

“Nothing can derail me from being motivated to play for India,” he said. “I am very focused and mentally prepared and very excited to go to South Africa and do the best that I can for my team.” Kohli said he would support “100 percent” Rohit and new manager Rahul Dravid, calling him a “very balanced coach” and a “great man-manager”. “Rohit is a very able captain and very, very tactically sound. We have seen that in the games that he captained for India and in the IPL as well,” Kohli said.

Sergio Aguero - Impish striker who became a Manchester City icon

BARCELONA: Sergio Aguero ended his career with Barcelona but will forever be associated with Manchester City and in particular with the goal that won them the Premier League title in 2012. Aguero, who announced his retirement aged 33 on Wednesday because of a heart condition, spent a decade at the English club before departing at the end of last season as their all-time top scorer with 260 goals in just under 400 appearances.

One goal stands out above all the others. On May 13, 2012, Roberto Mancini's City came into the final day of the Premier League season ahead of rivals Manchester United at the top of the table only on goal difference. With United winning 1-0 at Sunderland and City losing 2-1 at home to Queens Park Rangers going into the 90th minute, it looked like a first league title since the Abu Dhabi takeover of 2008 would escape them.

But Edin Dzeko headed in the equalizer before Mario Balotelli pushed the ball into the path of Aguero to score the most dramatic of winners. “I swear you'll never see anything like this ever again,” said Sky Sports commentator Martin Tyler, and the goal has gone down as arguably the most iconic moment in the history of modern English football.

There is even a 93:20 lounge at City's Etihad Stadium in a nod to the timing of Aguero's dramatic title-

clinching winner. Aguero, who joined City from Atletico Madrid in 2011, won five Premier League titles in total in his time at the club, as well as one FA Cup and six League Cups. He came off the bench in last season's Champions League final defeat against Chelsea, having fallen from favor under Pep Guardiola towards the end of his time at the Etihad Stadium.

Aguero scored 20 league goals or more in six seasons with City and is the highest overseas goal-scorer in Premier League history. He is also the fourth-highest scorer of all time in the division with 184 goals, behind Alan Shearer, Wayne Rooney and Andrew Cole. City announced that they would build a statue to honor the Argentinean striker. “A huge sense of satisfaction and pride remains in me for having played with Manchester City for a whole 10 seasons - unusual for a professional player in this day and age,” Aguero wrote in March when revealing his departure.

Maradona connection

Aguero then helped Argentina win the Copa America in Brazil in July, their first major international trophy since 1993. He won his 100th cap in a 4-1 win over Bolivia in the group stage but played just one minute in the knockout phase and was an unused substitute in the final. It was

'Toughest conditions'

India have never won a Test series in South Africa, but Kohli said the visitors were motivated by the fact that the last Test they played there, in Johannesburg in 2018, they won. “We probably won in the toughest conditions in that tour, so that should give us a lot of confidence that if we have the right mindset and we start out the series with a lot of confidence, we can definitely stand up to any challenge that comes our way,” Kohli said.

“South Africa is one place where we have not won a series yet. We are very motivated to do that and the mindset is always (to) go out there and win a series in any country that we play. We don't anymore just think of winning a Test match in India,” he added.

This year India beat Australia 2-1 Down Under - albeit in Kohli's absence apart from the first Test - and were 2-1 up in England before the tour was called off because of the pandemic.

Last week in India, they thrashed New Zealand by 372 runs to win the series 1-0, avenging their loss to the Black Caps in the inaugural World Test Championship final in England in June. “South Africa presents a different kind of challenge. The wickets present a lot of pace and bounce and you need to be at your absolute best to be able to perform there and get runs,” Kohli said. “I think we are very well placed in terms of experience and belief and confidence that this time around we can do something special and get the results that we want as a team.” — AFP



BARCELONA: Barcelona's Argentinean forward Kun Aguero reacts as he addresses a press conference to announce his retirement from football yesterday. — AFP

the second medal of his international career, though, as he also helped his country win Olympic gold alongside the likes of Lionel Messi and Angel Di Maria in Beijing in 2008.

Aguero signed a two-year deal with Barcelona in May, attracted by the prospect of teaming up with his friend Messi. They never played together, however. With the Catalan club in crisis, Messi departed for Paris Saint-Germain in August. Because of injury, Aguero didn't appear in a Barcelona shirt until October. He played just five matches, once from the start, before being taken to hospital with breathing problems after a match against Alaves on October 30 and being diagnosed with a heart condition.

Before joining Barcelona, Aguero - whose nickname ‘Kun’ was inspired by a Japanese cartoon character - had been targeted by Argentine club

Independiente. The record seven-time Copa Libertadores winners are one of Argentina's traditional giants and the club where he broke through as a youngster. Aguero made his debut in the red shirt of Independiente aged just 15 in 2003 and thus surpassed the late, great Diego Maradona as the youngest player to play in the Argentine top division.

The impish forward was sold to Atletico in 2006 for a reported club record fee of over 20 million euros. He was just 18 when he first appeared for Atletico, coming off the bench to make his La Liga debut up front with Fernando Torres. He scored 74 La Liga goals for them, winning the Europa League and UEFA Super Cup in 2010. Off the field, Aguero married Maradona's daughter Gianinna, although the relationship, which produced a son, lasted only four years. — AFP

Stade Francais lose Nayacalevu but Naivalu stays

PARIS: Fiji international Waisea Nayacalevu is to leave Stade Francais at the end of the season to join Top 14 rivals Toulon, the Mediterranean club announced on Tuesday. “One of the greatest talents of the Fijian team and the Top 14, the three-quarter Waisea Nayacalevu, is joining Toulon for the next two seasons (+ one option-al)”, the club said in a statement.

The versatile back joined Stade Francais in 2012, helping them to win the Top 14 in 2015 and the European Challenge Cup two years later. “This player with exceptional athletic qualities combines the speed, creativity and unparalleled technique of Fijian artists with defensive solidity and a tactical brain recognized and feared at every ground,” said Toulon.

The 31-year-old, who has 26 Fiji caps, has played 10 matches for the Parisian club this season, scoring four tries. Stade Francais, who are currently 10th in the Top 14, just ahead of Toulon, have been bouyed, however, by news that Australian three-quarter Sefanaia Naivalu has extended his contract for an extra two years until 2024. “Soon to return and for two more seasons. Sefanaia Naivalu extends (his stay) in the capital,” tweeted Stade Francais. — AFP

Sports

Gnabry hits hat-trick as Bayern crush strugglers Stuttgart 5-0

Bayern go nine-points clear in Bundesliga

BERLIN: Bayern Munich opened a nine-point lead at the top of the Bundesliga on Tuesday as Serge Gnabry claimed a hat-trick and Robert Lewandowski scored twice in a 5-0 rout at strugglers Stuttgart. Gnabry scored either side of half-time before the flood gates opened with three goals in a devastating five-minute spell including two by Lewandowski in quick succession.

Bayern head coach Julian Nagelsmann promised to supply beers for the ride home - "we always have a crate on the bus" - then poured praise on Gnabry - "an outstanding player" - who had a role in all five goals, including two assists for Lewandowski. The Poland striker took his tally to 18 goals in 16 league games this season as Bayern earned a 10th straight Bundesliga win at Stuttgart dating back to 2009. "Bayern can dismantle teams. Not only in Germany, but also internationally," said Stuttgart sports director Sven Mislintat.

"We were taught a lesson after they went 3-0 up - they've incredible quality." The Bavarian giants remain on course to win a 10th consecutive Bundesliga title, but second-placed Borussia Dortmund can trim the lead when they host bottom side Greuther Fuerth on Wednesday. Injuries and illness meant Bayern again fielded Jamal Musiala, 18, out of position in the defensive midfield along-

side Marc Roca. They then lost winger Kingsley Coman to a leg knock in the opening half hour.

Coman's replacement Leroy Sane set up Gnabry's opening goal by charging through a gaping hole, which grew wider when Stuttgart centre-back Waldemar Anton lost his footing. Sane squared to Stuttgart-born Gnabry who curled his shot around home goalkeeper Florian Mueller to make it 1-0 at the break. Stuttgart raised the tempo at the start of the second half as strikers Philipp Foerster and Omar Marmoush both had chances, but it was virtually one-way traffic from Bayern thereafter.

The visitors doubled their lead when Marmoush yielded possession and the ball was moved to Gnabry who again curled his shot around the diving Mueller. Stuttgart's defence capitulated as Bayern scored three goals in five devastating minutes. It started when Gnabry's long-range pass picked out Lewandowski who chipped Mueller. Moments later, Gnabry dribbled into the box and set up Lewandowski who tapped home with a well-timed slide. Bayern were now in full flow.

Gnabry claimed the second Bundesliga hat-trick of his career when he slotted home after Thomas Mueller's shot had been parried by Stuttgart's luckless goalkeeper. Later, South Korean forward Lee



STUTTGART: Bayern Munich's German midfielder Leroy Sane (center) fights for the ball with Stuttgart's players during the German first division Bundesliga football match between VfB Stuttgart and FC Bayern Munich on December 14, 2021. —AFP

Jae-sung scored the opening goal as Mainz climbed to sixth and into the European places with a 4-0 romp at home to Hertha Berlin, who remain just two points from the bottom three. Wolfsburg

twice threw away the lead in crashing to a sixth straight defeat in all competitions as French veteran striker Anthony Modeste headed in a late winner to seal Cologne's 3-2 away victory.—AFP

Premier League increases COVID testing

LONDON: Premier League players and staff must take a lateral flow test every time they enter their club's training ground as part of strict new measures to curb the threat of the coronavirus. The protocols were agreed after Manchester United's Premier League match at Brentford on Tuesday and Tottenham's trip to Brighton last Sunday were postponed due to COVID-19 outbreaks. United, Tottenham, Brighton, Leicester, Norwich and Aston Villa have all been hit by the virus over the last week as the new Omicron strain threatens to cause havoc in England's top-flight.

Twice-weekly PCR testing is also reported to have been introduced after a clubs' shareholders' meeting on Tuesday. The increased testing will sit alongside the other recently introduced emergency measures, including face coverings, limiting time in the treatment

room and observing social distancing. The Omicron variant has become the dominant strain of the coronavirus in Britain and the Premier League has not been immune to it.

Premier League officials announced on Monday there had been 42 positive COVID cases among Premier League players and staff last week - the most recorded by the top-flight in any seven-day period since testing began during the 2019-20 season. The most positive tests returned in a week this season was 16 from August 16-22. The league's clubs discussed the Government's COVID Plan B measures at their meeting on Tuesday, which are set to come into force in England on Wednesday.

The measures require spectators to provide proof of full vaccination or a recent negative lateral flow test in order to enter venues holding more than 10,000 people. Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston said on Tuesday the measures were "proportionate" to the situation the country faced at this moment, but refused to rule out even stricter measures such as forcing clubs to reduce capacity at matches.

"What we are doing is focusing on the situation at the moment and that we're carefully monitoring the situation," he said. "The Prime Minister said yesterday



MANCHESTER: Stewards check fans' COVID passports or negative lateral flow test results, as they queue to enter the stadium ahead of the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Leeds on December 14, 2021. —AFP

that we will have to deal with this COVID situation as the facts tell us, so I can't rule anything out. But we need to deal with the situation as it is at the moment and we believe the measures brought in place now are proportionate." —AFP

Boca beat Barcelona in inaugural Maradona Cup

RIYADH: Boca Juniors beat Barcelona on penalties on Tuesday in Riyadh, in a friendly match in honor of Diego Maradona, marked by the return of Brazilian Dani Alves to the Spanish club. Ferran Jutga gave Barca the lead in the 50th minute but Exequiel Zeballos leveled mid-way through the second half and the match finished 1-1.

The Argentines then won the inaugural 'Maradona Cup' 4-2 in a penalty shootout.

Alves, 38, has rejoined Barcelona where he played between 2008-2016 and won three Champions League titles and La Liga six times; but is ineligible to appear in competitive matches until the transfer window opens early next year. He was a free agent after leaving Sao Paulo in September following a dispute over unpaid wages. Right-back Alves was busy and dangerous, and converted his penalty in the shootout.—AFP



RIYADH: Argentina's Boca Juniors Marcelo Weigandt (left) holds the Maradona Cup trophy following a friendly football match between Spain's Barcelona and Argentina's Boca Juniors part of the Maradona Cup at the Mrsool Park Stadium in the Saudi capital. —AFP

Shevchenko gets first Genoa win

MILAN: Andriy Shevchenko got his first win as Genoa coach on Tuesday with a 1-0 success over Salernitana booking an Italian Cup last 16 clash against his former club AC Milan. Ghana international Caleb Ekuban's 76th-minute header lifted the north-western port side to their first home win this season. Former AC Milan and Chelsea player Shevchenko took over in early November, replacing Davide Ballardini after a miserable start to the campaign.

It was the Ukraine forward's first club management role after coaching his national side for five years. Shevchenko's Genoa desperately needed a result with their only success in the league back mid-September against fellow strugglers Cagliari. "I'm really very happy, the squad suffered a lot today and it was important for us to get back winning," said Shevchenko whose side play Milan in January.

The 45-year-old scored 175 goals in 324 matches in two spells with Milan, twice emerging as Serie A's top scorer and winning a league title and the 2003 Champions League. Promoted Salernitana crashed out of the competition as they also sit bottom of Serie A with a seven-match winless run in the league. Elsewhere, Udinese and Venezia also advanced to the last 16 with wins over Crotone (4-0) and Ternana (3-1) respectively. —AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Khalidiya	24848075
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Kaifan	24849807
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shamiya	24848913
Mubarak Al-Kabir		Shuwaikh	24814507
Hospital	25312700	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Chest Hospital	24849400	Nuzha	22526804
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Adan Hospital	23940620	Qadsiya	22515088
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Dasmah	22532265
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Shaab	22518752
		Ayoun Al-Qibla	22459381
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NEW YORK: Nic Claxton #33 of the Brooklyn Nets dunks the ball as Malachi Flynn #22 of the Toronto Raptors looks on during the first half at Barclays Center on December 14, 2021. —AFP

COVID-depleted Nets stun Raptors

‘That’s greatness!’ Stephen Curry sets NBA three-point record

LOS ANGELES: A Brooklyn Nets team rocked by the absence of seven players because of coronavirus clawed out an unlikely 131-129 overtime victory over the Toronto Raptors on Tuesday. The Nets had the league-minimum eight players available at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, where star James Harden and Bruce Brown were late scratches. The Nets had announced earlier in the day that starters LaMarcus Aldridge and DeAndre Bembry would miss the game.

Jevon Carter and James Johnson were also added to the virus list, joining Paul Millsap, who entered the NBA’s COVID-19 protocols on Monday. “It’s unfortunate, for sure,” Nets coach Steve Nash said shortly before the contest tipped off. “Fortunately for us they’re predominantly asymptomatic, but there will be a period of time required for them to test negative and have our full group together.”

Kevin Durant helped the Nets pull through with a triple-double of 34 points, 13 rebounds and 11 assists. Durant, who had been listed as “questionable” to play because of a sore ankle, played a game-high 48:11 minutes. Patty Mills added a season-high 30 points and forced overtime with a three-pointer with 13.1 seconds remaining in regulation.

All of the Nets players in the COVID protocol had to provide proof of vaccination in order to play in Brooklyn, under New York City’s coronavirus rules. Under NBA guidelines, vaccinated players are placed in COVID protocols when they test positive or have an inconclusive result. They must quarantine for 10 days or until they have two negative tests within 24 hours. “It’s a new normal, but it’s scary because I don’t know that there’s an end in sight,” Nash said of the pandemic. “This is kind of the world we may live in for indefinitely.”

The Nets aren’t the only NBA team grappling with an uptick in COVID cases. The Los Angeles Lakers cancelled their last practice before they were due to travel to Dallas on

Tuesday after Talen Horton-Tucker tested positive for COVID-19. That came a day after the NBA postponed games for the first time this season due to COVID-19 with Chicago’s game against the Detroit Pistons on Tuesday and Thursday’s clash with the Toronto Raptors both called off.

The league said 10 Bulls players were currently unavailable after entering COVID-19 health and safety protocols, while “additional staff members” were also unavailable. Thirty-one games were postponed during the 2020-2021 season. Later Tuesday, the Milwaukee Bucks said that Giannis Antetokounmpo would miss the game against the Indiana Pacers after being placed in the COVID protocols. Newly signed guard Wesley Matthews Jr had already been placed in the health and safety protocols earlier this week.

NBA three-point record

Golden State Warriors star Stephen Curry eclipsed Ray Allen’s all-time record for NBA three-pointers on Tuesday, savoring a “beautiful moment” at storied Madison Square Garden. Curry, whose remarkable shooting range has revolutionized the NBA in his 13-year tenure, matched Allen’s record with his 2,973rd career three-pointer. It came on his first shot of the clash with the New York Knicks, less than two minutes into the contest, and had the crowd on its feet.

He then missed a chance at breaking the record, but with 7:33 remaining in the opening period, Anthony Wiggins kicked the ball to him from the paint and he swished in number 2,974, letting out a yell as teammates celebrated with him and the New York crowd cheered. “I can’t say it enough, I appreciate so much the way the fans embraced the moment with me and let me just get kind of lost in it,” Curry, 33, said. “Hell yeah!” teammate Draymond Green shouted as the Warriors called a timeout and photographers gathered around Curry. “That’s greatness!” Curry has been scorching

towards overtaking Allen’s record for years. He finally surpassed the milestone in his 789th career game; Allen achieved his old benchmark in 1,300 appearances. Curry exchanged an emotional hug with coach Steve Kerr, who corralled the ball used in the record-setting shot. Curry then embraced his father, former NBA player Dell Curry, as well as Allen, who was court-side.

“There was a lot of emotion for sure because I know how much work has gone into this, dreaming big from the time I first picked up a basketball,” Curry said. Kerr said the moment was “more emotional” than he had expected. “It was just an outpouring of love and support for Steph from seemingly everybody in the building,” Kerr said. “Beautiful, beautiful moment.” Curry is on pace to make well over 400 three-pointers this season, which would put him at more than 3,200 for his career. He finished the night with five three-pointers as the Warriors pulled away late to beat the Knicks 105-96 and improve their league-leading record to 23-5. Curry’s long-range prowess is such that there was real belief he could break the record with a single-game mark of 16 in a home game against the Portland Trail Blazers last Wednesday. That didn’t happen, but he did not have to wait too much longer.

Electric atmosphere

Curry’s 54-point performance against the Knicks on February 27, 2013 at Madison Square Garden was a harbinger of a career that now includes three NBA titles and two Most Valuable Player awards. “It’s been a long week since our last home game, where everybody was talking about 16,” he said. “(It) seemed like every shot I took there was another level of anticipation and anxiousness around it.

“I was just trying to play my game. Tonight it kind of set up perfectly, made that first one, get that one out of the way and then just let the record-breaker come to me.” The



NEW YORK: Stephen Curry #30 of the Golden State Warriors celebrates after making a three point basket to break Ray Allen’s record for the most all-time against the New York Knicks during their game at Madison Square Garden. —AFP

atmosphere was electric even before the game, with Allen courtside and Reggie Miller, who held the three-point record at 2,560 before Allen broke it in 2011, on duty as a television commentator. Both chatted and shared a hug with Curry before the game, with filmmaker and Knicks super-fan Spike Lee catching the moment on his phone camera.

After the game, Allen and Miller presented Curry with a jersey with the number 2,974 emblazoned on it. “Basketball history, this is pretty special,” Curry said. “These two, legends. I watched them growing up and understood what it meant to shoot the ball because of them and my dad. “Full-circle moment, man. I’m blessed, blessed for sure.”—AFP

Man City demolish Leeds 7-0 as virus fears mount

LONDON: Manchester City powered four points clear at the top of the Premier League as Kevin De Bruyne inspired a 7-0 rout of Leeds just hours after clubs were given strict new measures to curb the threat of the coronavirus on Tuesday. De Bruyne delivered an imperious display including two goals on his first league start since November 6 after the Belgian star recovered from a bout of COVID-19.

Phil Foden, Jack Grealish, Riyad Mahrez, John Stones and Nathan Ake were also on target as Pep Guardiola’s side ran riot at the Etihad Stadium. City’s seventh successive league victory put pressure on second placed Liverpool and third placed Chelsea, who face Newcastle and Everton respectively today. The champions’ biggest win this season equaled Liverpool’s 1982 top-flight record of 33 victories in a

calendar year. “We’re proud of the way we’re playing. When you get these results it is because individually they are brilliant,” Guardiola said.

“Kevin, in these type of games like it is open up and down, is devastating as he can do what he wants. He’s so important for us.” It was the joint biggest league defeat in Leeds’ history and shell-shocked boss Marcelo Bielsa said: “We’ve never had a performance like this. There is no justification. I have to take responsibility.”

City took the lead in the eighth minute when Foden’s shot was deflected in via Stuart Dallas’s miscued attempt to clear off the line. It was City’s 500th Premier League goal in 207 matches under Guardiola, setting a new record that surpassed the previous fastest mark by Jurgen Klopp’s Liverpool. Grealish had managed just two goals for City since his British record £100 million (\$132 million) transfer from Aston Villa.

In the 13th minute, the 26-year-old headed in Mahrez’s cross to score for the first time since September. De Bruyne marked his return with his first goal since October, converting Rodri’s defense-splitting pass in the 32nd minute. Mahrez added

City’s fourth in the 49th minute when his strike deflected in off Junior Firpo. De Bruyne made it five in the 62nd minute with a thunderous 20-yard drive into the roof of the net. Stones blasted home in the 74th minute and Ake headed City’s seventh four minutes later.

‘Tough few days’

Whether City’s determined title defense survives without a brush with COVID remains to be seen as the new Omicron strain wrecks havoc. The Premier League announced on Monday there had been 42 positive COVID cases among top-flight players and staff last week - the most recorded in any seven-day period since testing began during the 2019-20 season.

Manchester United’s match at Brentford on Tuesday and Tottenham’s trip to Brighton last Sunday were both postponed due to virus outbreaks. United and Tottenham had several unnamed players test positive, while Brighton, Leicester, Norwich and Aston Villa were also hit by the virus over the last week. Now all top-flight players and staff will have to take a lateral flow

test every time they enter their club’s training ground as part of the protocols. Twice-weekly PCR testing will also be introduced after a meeting of the 20 clubs on Tuesday.

The increased testing sits alongside the other recently introduced emergency measures, including face coverings, limiting time in the treatment room and observing social distancing. Norwich manager Dean Smith revealed his club had asked the Premier League for guidance over his bottom of the table team’s COVID issues prior to Tuesday’s 2-0 defeat against Aston Villa. “It’s been a tough few days. We’ve had a few COVID-related drop outs,” Smith said before kick-off at Carrow Road.

Villa were also hit by COVID but they kept their focus to make it four wins from six games under new boss Steven Gerrard. Smith had hoped for revenge on Villa just 38 days after his sacking. But Jacob Ramsey ran from the halfway line to fire home in the 35th minute and Ollie Watkins tapped in after 87 minutes. “It’s been a challenging week,” Gerrard said. “We have to make sure we’re very diligent with the guidelines. Nobody wants to see the situation deteriorate.”—AFP